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Linguistic Hauntings at the Margins of China

Gegentuul Baioud

Department of History, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

Correspondence: Gegentuul Baioud (gegentuul.bai@uu.se)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines emotional and material traces lingering in the aftermath of forced linguistic landscape transformations in Inner Mongolia following the implementation of a new assimilationist national language policy in 2022. Drawing on ethnographic and linguistic landscape data, the study specifically examines how the multilingual signs that have undergone invisibilization or changes in their layouts are accompanied by marginalized senses and excluded voices—linguistic hauntings—in the multilingual Mongolian borderlands. In this study, linguistic hauntings are animated by Mongolian linguistic anxiety and conditioned by the Chinese state's intensified language oppression in transitioning from a multinational and multilingual state to a unified Chinese nation with one singular language. The article suggests that linguistic haunting is a powerful lens for analysing the interlinked political, affective and temporal dimensions in drastically reconfiguring landscapes. The study contributes to the sociolinguistics of the specters, borderlands multilingualism, nationalism and its linguistic entailments.

Хураангуй

Энэхүү судалгаанд Хятад улсад "цөөн тоот үндэстний хэлийг уусган ижилсүүлэх тухай" үндэстний хэлний шинэ бодлогыг 2022 оноос эхлэн хэрэгжүүлснээр Өвөрмонголын хэлний хэрэглээний бодит орчин (linguistic landscape) дахь албадмал өөрчлөлтөөс үүдэн шалтгаалж Өвөрмонголчуудын оюун санаанд болон материаллаг орчин нөхцөлд ямар ул мөрийг үлдээж буйг судалсан болно. Уг судалгаанд Өвөрмонголд байшин барилга, дэлгүүр хоршоо, албан байгууллагын монгол, хятадаар бичсэн хаяг, шошго зэрэг хэлний тэмдгийн бодит хэрэглээг үгүй болгосон, аль эсвэл хувирган өөрчилсөн байдал нь монголчуудын сэтгэл санаанд хэлнийхээ хувьд гадуурхагдсан, хавчигдсан мэдрэмжийг хэрхэн буй болгож байгааг хээрийн судалгааны болон хэлний хэрэглээний бодит орчны жишээ баримт, материалд тулгуурлан судалсан болно. Энэхүү судалгааны үр дүнд, Өвөрмонгол дахь монголчуудын эх хэлнийхээ тухай санаашран зовниж байгаа байдал буюу *хэлнийхээ хувьд гадуурхагдан хавчигдсан мэдрэмж* (linguistic hauntings) нь өөр өөрийнхөө эх хэлийг эзэмшин хэрэглэдэг олон үндэстэн угсаатныг нэгтгэсэн Хятад улс байсныг больж, зөвхөн нэг хэлтэй (хятад хэлтэй) нэгдмэл Хятад үндэстэн болгон хувиргах гэсэн Хятадын төрийн хэлний түрэмгий бодлого эрчимжсэнтэй холбоотой болохыг тогтоосон болно. Уг өгүүлэлд *хэлнийхээ хувьд гадуурхагдан хавчигдсан мэдрэмж* (linguistic hauntings) бол эрчимтэй өөрчлөгдөн шинэчлэгдэж буй *олон хэлний бодит хэрэглээний орчин* (multilingual landscape) дахь улс төр, хүмүүсийн оюун санаа, өнгөрсөн-одоо-ирээдүй цагийн хэлхээ холбоог шинжлэн судлах чухал хэрэглэгдэхүүн болохыг үзүүлж байна. Энэхүү судалгаа нь нийгэм хэл шинжлэл дэх *хэлнийхээ хувьд гадуурхагдан хавчигдсан мэдрэмж*, хил орчмын олон хэлт байдал, үндэсний үзэл болон түүний хэлний хэрэглээг судлахад чухал хувь нэмэр оруулах болно.

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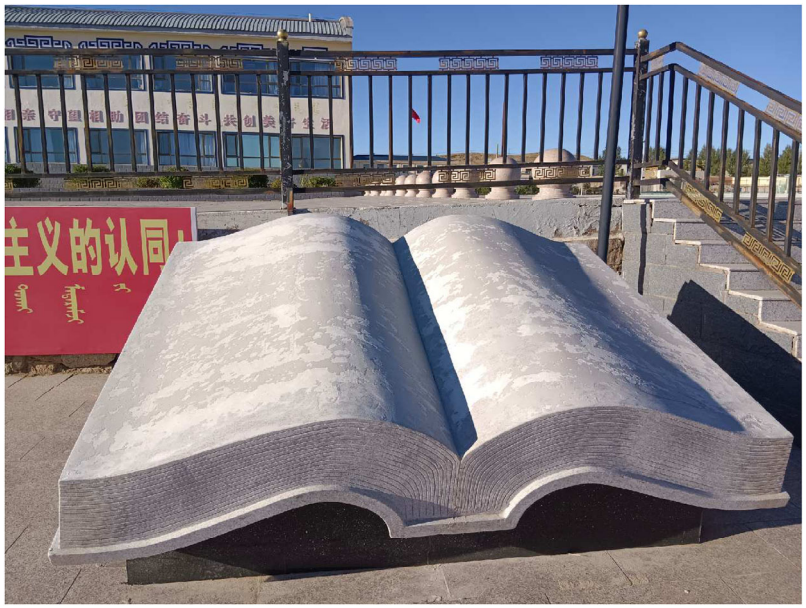

FIGURE 1 | The inscribed Mongolian excerpt from *The Secret History of the Mongols* was scraped off from the face of an open book art piece, and the Mongolian script was removed from the wall of a two-story building in the background leaving the Chinese script intact. Dörböd banner, October 2022. Photo Credit: Anonymous.

1 | Introduction

Reengineering public spaces has long been one of the most avidly pursued projects by state builders and colonizers worldwide (Navaro-Yashin 2012). Present-day China has initiated its own public space remaking project targeting ethnic and religious groups in recent years (Thum 2022; Yusupov 2024). In Inner Mongolia, which is an ethnic autonomous region in the northern part of China, the state-orchestrated spatial reconfiguration revolves around reinscribing the hegemony of the national common language—Mandarin Chinese—in built environments while further marginalizing Mongolian from public spaces. The ongoing state-led linguistic/semiotic landscape alteration following the drastic reduction of Mongolian-medium instruction in schools in 2020 heightened long-existing Mongolian linguistic anxiety. Witnessing the moment of erasure of Mongolian from public signage, or waking up in the morning only to discover new monolingual Chinese signs standing in the place of old bilingual signs in one's neighbourhood, triggers grief, anger, frustration, satire or awakens historical memories amongst some Mongols. Perhaps the following picture of an open-book sculpture in central Inner Mongolia (see Figure 1) captures in microcosm the changes currently taking place in the multilingual spaces of Inner Mongolia. These changes have included removing salient Mongolian identity markers. In this example, an excerpt from the 13th-century chronicle, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, written in Mongolian script, has been physically scraped off the face of the stone book sculpture, and the Mongolian language has been removed from its first line position on the façade of the two-story building behind the sculpture, while the Chinese text has been left intact; you can faintly see traces of Mongolian writing in gray on the façade. Beside the changed book sculpture and building façade, the photo captures a red banner showing the new official format of bilingual signage with Chinese now in the first line and Mongolian in the second line.

It is important to note that the emerging new linguistic landscape elements that either privilege Mandarin Chinese over Mongolian or completely exclude Mongolian from public spaces while attempting to claim spaces for themselves coinhabit the same space with the remaining old bilingual signs. Nor is the disappearance of formerly existing linguistic landscape (LL) the end of the story. Instead, the traces of erased signs linger and stir people. And at times, the vanished old LL—including erased Mongolian place names or removed sculptures—are resurrected and remembered through other semiotic modalities such as bumper stickers. How do we account for these fleeting material and emotional traces that straddle the fine line between the visible and the invisible that exceed linear temporality and that continue to linger in national peripheries despite being repressed by an increasingly assimilationist state? This article draws on the metaphor and concept of "linguistic haunting" to answer this question. In this study, I explore linguistic hauntings as "a whole realm of elusive, contingent, fantastic, and barely-there experiences" (Gordon 2013) produced by "language oppression" (Roche 2024). This framing draws on hauntings as political, affective-sensorial, and temporal experiences.

2 | Linguistic Hauntings: The Intersection of Ideology, Sense, and Temporality

"[H]aunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony," writes Derrida (1994, 46). Linguistic hegemony is no exception. The very process of creating Mandarin Chinese hegemony by the state is spectral in that this process is always haunted by those languages that it seeks to repress but which continue to linger. The notion of linguistic haunting denotes a conceptual repertoire for listening to and speaking about those politically suppressed linguistic experiences that have "a seething presence" (Gordon 2008, 8). As such, linguistic haunting makes known the system of language

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oppression of modern nation-states, which attempt to impose a totalizing vision of particular nation-ness on multilingual populations. This political dimension of haunting is closely linked with the affective (Good et al. 2022). To understand denied and marginalized experiences, that is, the specificity of haunting, requires "a shift of attention from the haunter end of the haunter–haunted relationship to that of the haunted, and to the highly dynamic ways in which people manage their emotional and perceptual states of awareness" (Hollan 2019). This is to say, emotional or affective experiences lie at the heart of haunting. By using the metaphor of linguistic haunting, this article attempts to show how the affective-sensorial characteristics of the experience of being haunted are mediated *linguistically* by attending to the ways in which the disappearing or re-emerging multilingual signs (recall Figure 1) give rise to murmurs in private spaces, awaken historical memories, conjure specific future imaginaries, and evoke sensorial experiences.

Finally, hauntings as political and affective-sensorial experiences desynchronize time. Gunn (2006, 82) aptly points out, "Hauntology as a politics of 'temporal disjuncture' resists the closure of the past and future in terms of the present." In the case of this study, linguistic haunting is not just about the spectral presence of past assimilationist language policy or present violent LL reconfiguration; the imagined future where the language is extinct haunts people too (Baioud 2025). Temporal boundaries wobble and waver for the being haunted. In short, the political, affective and temporal dimensions of linguistic haunting make it a powerful lens for analyzing how political (linguistic) ideology, sensorial experiences, and time intertwine during the state-orchestrated landscape transformations in the multilingual borderlands.

Writing about the long effects of language oppression and assimilation in postcolonial or (post-)imperial settings through the prisms of traces, specters, and ghosts is relatively new for sociolinguistics (Deumert 2022; Pavlenko 2023). Recent studies have, for instance, explored ghostly semiosis in Rio de Janeiro and its existence outside and against the racialized time of linearity and development (Borba et al. 2022); employed the figure of the zombie (the undead) to interrogate people's sense of place in relation to historical traces and remnants from South Africa's apartheid era (Bock and Stroud 2019), and looked at the traces of erased Ukrainian language signs following Russia's 2014 occupation of Crimea (Volvach 2024). But haunting is not necessarily always about long shadow cast by certain historical past on the present. In the context of the radical spatial reconfiguration, the present structures can be turned into the debris of the past instantaneously (recall Figure 1), and haunting is precisely unleashed at the moments of destruction. Moreover, the disappearance of the Mongolian language haunts people as a terrible future possibility too. In such a place undergoing seismic shifts, haunting structures everyday life and shapes subjectivities.

While acknowledging the critical purchase offered by the metaphor of linguistic haunting in exposing how erased or changed public signs exert affective-political forces on people, it is important to note that a substantial number of sociolinguistic studies to date has underlined sensorial dimensions in LL analysis (Pennycook and Otsuji 2015; Wee and Goh 2020), and Grey (2021b) "lived landscape approach" recognized the ideological and sociopolitical content within landscapes, and others adopted detailed ethnographic approaches to foreground the voices of locals and places (Blommaert 2013; Leeman and Modan 2009). In addition, sociolinguists' recent turn to temporality in their analysis of spaces (see Lazar 2022) and especially the use of "chronotopes" in linguistic landscape analysis to underline the temporalization of spaces (Dong 2021) to a certain extent resonates with hauntology's concern with multiple temporalities. This study extends the above works by focusing on the intersection of the temporal, sensorial, and ideological dimensions in shifting LLs in national peripheries undergoing intensified nation-building.

In this article, my analyses focus on different forms of linguistic discrepancies (gaps or erasures) and recurrences (repetitions or overlaps), taking place in the public space of Inner Mongolia. I first explore the interanimation of the coexisting yet starkly different multilingual signs. These include the juxtapositions of signs from different historical periods in the same locales including the signs from before and after 2022 when the new national language policy took effect, and the signs from the time of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). By doing so, this section underlines not only the fraught process of imposing Mandarin Chinese as a national common language in the multilingual spaces of the borderlands but also the re-emergence of unspeakable past characterized with violent assimilations and painful memories. The second section examines the perception of Mongols who witness the process of erasure and who creatively revive the removed place-name signs. In this section, I highlight multisensorial experiences of subjects and the mediating power of multilingual signs. All these cases together show how erased or emerging signs (and their materialities) mediate sensorial experiences, disrupt linear temporalties, and embody changing ideologies. In this article, by sensorium or (multi-)sensorial experiences I refer to the interrelations of the senses, and following Howes (2019), I emphasize how the senses, such as the senses of sight and hearing, are made rather than being given. In other words, sensorial experiences are social and structured by ideologies.

The power of absent or recurrent signs to haunt places and disturb people is constantly enlivened by the joint forces and dialectics of the Chinese state's past (e.g., Cultural Revolution) and present assimilation policies and the Mongols' anxiety about the future of language. Hence, it is vital to engage with the psychological anthropologist Good (2019) provocation to ask: *Why at some moments in history and in particular locales is there an upwelling of the spectral?* In the following, I turn to historical background, the assimilationist language policies and deep linguistic anxiety in Inner Mongolia to contextualize the linguistic hauntings to be examined in this study.

2.1 | Inner Mongolia

The emergence of Inner Mongolia as a territorial entity largely took place under the rule of the multinational and multi-cultural Qing Empire (1644–1912). During this period, Mongols were ruled in the autonomous administrative units known as banners (*khushuu*), separately from the Han Chinese who were governed through the units of provinces and counties in inland China (Bulag 2016). Chinese learning was banned in Mongolian areas,

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while Tibetan and Manchu language instruction was allowed (He 2017). Although the insulation of Mongols from the Chinese in reality did not work as perfectly as planned by the Manchu emperors of the Qing Empire, the Mongol banners' autonomy was largely maintained until the end of the 19th century when the Manchu rulers began to identify with Han Chinese interests. Eventually, in 1902, the Qing new administration (*xinzheng*) initiated the conversion of Mongolian pastures into cultivated land, partly to increase revenue to save the impoverished and crumbling state after wars with Western and Japanese powers and the Boxer Rebellions (Bulag 2016). From this point onward, the state-backed settler colonization of Inner Mongolia started, while the area further north known as Outer Mongolia, fearful of the same fate, declared independence on December 29, 1911 (Bulag 2016).

During the first half of the 20th century, Inner Mongolia gradually changed from a homeland of the Mongols to a Chinese settler colony. In 1945, the Yalta deal negotiated by Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill, and Chiang Kai-shek's decision to recognize the Mongolian People's Republic's (MPR) independence through a plebiscite in exchange for Soviet recognition of Chinese control of Manchuria and Inner Mongolia, ensured that Inner Mongolia would remain part of China and be excluded from the MPR (Cheng et al. 2023, 323). In October 1949, it was integrated into the newly founded People's Republic of China (PRC) and became a multiethnic "nationality regional autonomy" with the Mongols as the titular nationality (*zhuti minzu*, literally "core nationality") and the Han Chinese as the majority nationality (Bulag 2004). The Mongolian and Mandarin Chinese became co-official languages in the region. Today as a minoritized people on their own land, Mongols number around 4.2 million, constituting around 17% of the total population of Inner Mongolia. Decades after being absorbed into the PRC, the initially promised autonomous rights of Mongols have been increasingly curtailed, and the right to education in one's mother tongue was arguably one of the few remaining rights of self-governance until 2020 when even this limited right was weakened (Cheng et al. 2023, 346).

2.2 | Intensified Assimilation and Mandarin Chinese Hegemony

Inheriting an imperial patrimony of numerous ethnic groups and their territories, the PRC has long been grappling with two competing institutional forms—a state that comprises multiple nationalities and an ethnically monolithic nation-state (Bulag 2021, 46). In these two competing national forms, minorities are either viewed as strangers within which the Han Chinese must learn to live with while waiting for their slow integration or perceived as threatening "monsters" (Kearney 2003) to be destroyed and fused rapidly into the Chinese nation. Correspondingly, the minority language policy has shifted back and forth between a willingness to accommodate minority languages and a determination to promote the Chinese language in their stead (Zhou 2012). Multilingual landscapes, more than anything, embody such shifts in language policy and state ideology, as shown in many other contexts (Lamarre 2014). In recent years, the irrepressible desire to absorb the minorities, into the Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu*) has returned forcefully and is ultimately materialized through the new ethnic policy since the 2010s, which emphasizes coercive assimilation—a strategy that last peaked during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The post-2010 new ethnic policy is marked by its call to depoliticize ethnicity (Ma 2007) and assimilate minorities into one, shared Chinese national consciousness through ethnic "interaction, exchange and intermingling." Thereby, the policy shifts drastically away from a "multicultural" vision of Chineseness toward a more explicitly Han-centric, assimilatory one. The impact of the new ethnic policy is felt intensely in the linguistic realm as evidenced by the successive waves of bilingual education reforms in ethnic minority regions in the last decade (Roche and Leibold 2020).

In the context of Inner Mongolia, the bilingual education reform initiated in August 2020 replaced Mongolian-medium instruction with Chinese-medium instruction over a three-year period (2020-2023), relegating Mongolian language to the status of a language subject. Some Mongols in private obliquely refer to the bilingual education reform event as *ter namuryn uchir* (the event of that Autumn) as if the mere utterance of "bilingual education reform" will summon the state and bring its apparatus to life in carefully curtained-off private murmurs. This avoidance of certain words, apart from being a symptom of heightened linguistic sensitivity one is compelled to develop in today's China (Yang 2021), is closely tied to the Chinese state's repression of the Mongolian protest against the bilingual education reform (Leibold 2021).

While certain words move underground and lead furtive lives, others move to the center of the stage. The term "national common language" (*guojia tongyong yuyan*) has gained new prominence and is desperate to escape the haunting presence of its particularity. By this, I mean that the former name, "Han Chinese language" (*Hanyu*) associated with the majority Han ethnicity, began to be replaced with the new transcendent "national common language" in official and vernacular discourses of Inner Mongolia from 2020 onward (Baioud 2023). Indeed, the terminology shift, which immediately followed the bilingual education reform, is buttressed by a host of retrospective legal revisions. Most significantly, in January 2021, the Legislative Affairs Commission of the National People's Congress Standing Committee declared "unconstitutional" certain local regulations that required the use and development of the spoken and written languages of ethnic minorities in schools (Grey 2025). As such, the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Mongolian Spoken and Written Language Work Regulation (hereafter, the Mongolian Language Regulation) was abolished while the region (re)implemented the PRC National Common Language and Script Law from January 2022. This repeal deprived the Mongolian language of its common and official language status in the region and invalidated downstream the direct derivation of the Mongolian Language Regulation, namely, the 1996 Management Measures for Social Marketplace Usage of Mongolian and Chinese languages and scripts (hereafter, the Measures).

Notably, the Measures encompassed highly detailed rules governing bilingual public and official texts. These rules spanned from guidelines on using identical materials and colors for both Mongolian and Chinese scripts to specifying their respective positions. Article 3 of the Measures is particularly relevant here. It mandated that written Mongolian should be in the first-line position (on top in a horizontal text, or on the left in a vertical text, or in the left half of a circular text) and Chinese in the second-line

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position (at bottom in a horizontal text, or on the right in a vertical text, or in the right half of a circular text). Clearly, as a derivative of the Mongolian Language Regulation, the Measures' major goal is to promote the use of the titular nation's language—Mongolian—on signs alongside Mandarin Chinese because of the fact that Mongolian language is increasingly marginalized in the region. Now, with the disappearance of local language regulations, the National Common Language law solely dictates public language usage in the region. In short, the new assimilatory ethnic policy underwrites the regulatory revisions (Grey 2025). These educational language and public language reforms attempt to eradicate anything that stands in the way of making Mandarin Chinese a hegemonic and sole official language in multiethnic and multilingual Mongolian borderlands. Clearly, this eradication disturbs people, enlivens historical memories, and animates politics around place, semiotics, and people.

2.3 | Mongolian Linguistic Crisis and Anxiety

The decline of the Mongolian language following the promotion of Mandarin Chinese by the PRC government after 1949 has long aggravated Mongol intellectuals and cadres. In fact, the aforementioned Mongolian Language Regulation's predecessor—a document titled "Criticism against neglecting Mongolian Nationality Language and order on further strengthening Mongolian Language Work" released on July 1, 1953—to a large extent was the outcome of Mongol cadres' anxious response to the devaluation of the language in the then newly formed local governments. Yet, despite the efforts of Mongol cadres and intellectuals to preserve and promote Mongolian through legislation, despite the development of Mongolian education from the 1950s (Borchigud 1995), and despite the guarantee of minority language rights in the Chinese Constitution (for its limited manifestation on the ground, see Grey 2021a), the decline of Mongolian is irreversible.

In particular, the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), characterized by Han Chinese nationalism and accelerated assimilation, dealt a devastating blow to the Mongols and their language. In their recent study, Cheng et al. 2023, 346) underline how the Cultural Revolution in Inner Mongolia initiated and carried out by the Chinese Communist Party, which they call an "ethnic pogrom," constituted a "politicide" in that it destroyed the capacity of the Mongols to organize themselves politically. This historical event acts as a significant precursor to today's coercive assimilation carried out by the state, and many even compared the current political and linguistic atmosphere to that of the Cultural Revolution. Perhaps it is the eerie similarity between the 2020 attacks on Mongolian-medium education and the ongoing erasure of salient ethnic markers on the one hand, and the forced closure of Mongolian schools and suppression of Mongolian identity during the Cultural Revolution, on the other, that dawned upon people who began to frame the present through the ghosts of the past.

However, it is not just the oscillating language policies, which resumed a diversity-tolerant approach after the Cultural Revolution, that affect the fate of minority languages. The covert political-economic structures distributing resources unevenly condition the slow death of non-dominant languages. In the case of Inner Mongolia, the national market, needless to say, confers added value to Mandarin Chinese and leads to further devaluation of the Mongolian language. The informal statistics circulated amongst Mongols show that out of about 4.2 million Mongols, half of them are bilingual and biliterate, most of whom attended Mongolian schools, while the rest have become either semi-speakers of Mongolian or monolingual Chinese speakers. And the discourse of language loss or extinction has been in circulation in Mongolian public spaces for decades (Baioud and Khuanuud 2022). Against this, abrupt shifts in language policies only sharpen the sense that the marginalized Mongolian language is indeed on the edge of disappearance. One of my interlocutors—a worker in a logistics firm—said, gesturing with his chin toward his 10-year-old daughter playing outside the house: "The children currently attending schools will be the last generation of Mongolian speakers." The feeling that the long-feared language "extinction" is now descending upon Mongols is a way of experiencing the future in the present. This "future past" (Koselleck 2004)—interpreting the present in relation to imaginaries of a future lost—lends force and meaning to linguistic hauntings.

What has added another twist to this linguistic anxiety is the Mongols' "script nationalism." By this, I refer to the investment of the classical Mongolian script with strong emotion and ideology especially by Inner Mongols who regard themselves as the "sole guardians" of the script. This is because today the script continues to be in use in Inner Mongolia, whereas in the independent country, Mongolia, the transition from classical Mongolian to Cyrillic script was put into effect from 1946 onward. For decades, Mongolian poets on both sides of the border have endowed the script with various tangible and intangible qualities, reinforcing its ideological association with the history and spirit of the Mongol nation. Taken together, in the contexts of language loss, anxiety and linguistic (script-)nationalism, it is unsurprising that the multilingual landscapes of Inner Mongolia prompt sensory and active responses from Mongols. I have, for instance, written elsewhere about how the missing Mongolian announcement from an airport's audio-scape was added following Mongols' successful petitions in 2016 marshaling the then-effective Mongolian Language Regulations (Baioud 2018). Other Mongols, although disengaged from such language activism, post photos online of shop signs that have strange or even hilarious Mongolian. Nevertheless, despite the existence of aforementioned deviant and "funny" signs targeted by activists, public signage in general adhered to the local Mongolian language regulations prior to 2022.

Now in the post-2022 era, the publicly visible language activism, driven by Mongolian language anxiety, has come to a sudden halt. Voices that once spoke withhold their speech in the present. This has followed the 2020 bilingual education reform, the 2021 (re)implementation of the National Common Language Law, and a series of ideological "rectification" campaigns following the Mongols' protests against the education reform (Baioud and Khuanuud 2023; Leibold 2021). However, traces of discontent, frustrations, a sense of hopelessness or messianism linger, most of the time fleetingly, in the forms of oblique comments in online spaces and in private conversations as well as in artistic works (Baioud 2025). This article uses the metaphor of linguistic haunting to register and acknowledge these politically suppressed experiences rather than to assimilate them or sublimate them into resistance.

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2.4 | Methodology and Data

The linguistic landscapes of Inner Mongolia have long been part of my own embodied experience as I was born and spent a significant part of my life there. But for me, a systematic collection of landscape data in Inner Mongolia began in 2014. In the beginning, my corpus mainly consisted of photographic data captured from streets, but gradually it was expanded to encompass a diverse range of sources including public signs appearing in digital realms such as WeChat public accounts as well as kin-based, village-based, classmates-based chat groups. Beyond these data collected via my own field trips and social media, I have also been a close observer of signage-related discussions taking place in public media such as local news. Of course, these active discussions, which often escalated into discussions of language rights, disappeared from public media platforms in the last 3 to 4 years.

For the analyses in this study, I mainly draw on the dataset collected since the PRC National Common Language law came into force in January 2022. This post-2022 dataset, in addition to public signage photographs and social media data, includes an ethnographic sketch of the after-effect felt in local societies following the implementation of the new language policy. A few words on this set of ethnographic data are needed here. As a Western-based researcher, I had to limit my communications to my relatives, my former teachers, and friends when I was in Inner Mongolia in 2023 due to the political sensibility of these times. They were aware of my personal and academic interest in understanding the changing linguistic situation. This task requires extra self-reflexivity about how to balance the use of my own subjective impressions of witnessing the impact of the changes in education systems and public landscapes on the life of people I know, while trying to maintain a double vision that combines both. Below, when I reproduce the comments of my interlocutors, I provide only a rough English translation of what they said in Mongolian. They agreed to my use of our conversations in my study as long as they remained anonymous. For videos and pictures circulated in online spaces, I have limited my selection to those not associated with any identifiable individual authors, such as bumper stickers sold by online shops. When using images or video clips shared by my close circle of friends, I obtained the owners' consent.

2.5 | The Polyphonous Linguistic Landscapes

Since January 2022 when the new National Common Language law took effect stripping the Mongolian language of its common and co-official language status from Inner Mongolia, the old bilingual signs privileging Mongolian over Chinese did not vanish from public signs instantly. Rather the old and the new bespeaking contrasting language policies began to coinhabit the same space for different durations of time in different places. This is because the implementation of new policies on the ground always takes considerable time and above all financial resources, which is further complicated by varying local conditions. In the context of uneven policy implementation, frequently, the brand-new and shiny bilingual signs privileging Mandarin Chinese on the storefronts of recently established businesses form a sharp contrast to the weather-worn old bilingual signs of longer-term dwellers who have not yet been able to update their old signs as shown in Figure 2. The businesses featured are located in Lubei town, the administrative center of Jarud Banner in eastern Inner Mongolia. In this banner, Mongols comprise 50.06% (126,059) of the population, while Han Chinese make up approximately 47.04% (118,442; 2020 Census). On the streets of this urbanized county town, as with many urban centers in Inner Mongolia, Chinese is more commonly heard than Mongolian. However, this varies depending on specific businesses one visits. The Mongolian language can play a dominant role in the soundscapes of, say, Mongolian restaurants, Mongolian costume studios, or Mongolian traditional medicine and healing centers. The businesses featured in Figure 2 are not explicitly ethnic Mongolian; both Chinese and Mongolian are present in their soundscapes, with Chinese being more dominant.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the bilingual names printed in yellow on a red panel, which reads "simple breakfast," showcase the Chinese name (*jiandan zaocan*) at the top and Mongolian one (*dökhöm öglöögiin khool*) at the bottom. Apart from the fresh and bright red and yellow paints, the four red Chinese characters *kaiye daji* ("conveying good wishes for the new business") stuck on the door serve as an announcement of its recent establishment. Conversely, the weather-worn signage of relatively longstanding businesses, such as the "hairdressers for the elderly" (M: *nas-taichuudyn üs jasah gajar*; Ch: *laonian lifa dian*) and the "Linxi liquor shop" (M: *Linxi arkhin üils*; Ch: *Linxi jiuye*) on the right-hand side still maintain the first-line position (top and left) for Mongolian and the secondary position (bottom and right) for Chinese despite the fact that Chinese is bigger than Mongolian in most cases.

Such coexisting signs indexing different temporalities and policies render spaces potent sites of contested voices. First, the disappeared old bilingual signs, in whose place the fresh new bilingual sign stands now, do not simply vanish without a trace. Rather, these being-replaced bilingual signs continue to live through their not-yet-changed neighbors. In other words, the remaining old signs bear witness to what has disappeared and begin to live a double life—a life of its own and a residue of its neighboring signs that recently underwent "upgrading" in accordance with new policies. Hence, the new bilingual sign' forced co-inhabitation of the same space, albeit temporally, with the old signs continues to perturb it as the traces of its former counterparts either "wink at" (Lamarre 2014) them from across the street or cast a sideway glance, in the case of Figure 2. Second, the new signs are constantly disturbed by their own hypervisibility indexed by fresh red and yellow paint in the example of Figure 2. Hypervisibility is inextricably wedded to the co-joined mechanisms that systematically render one unvisible (Gordon 2013, 114). In other words, it is none other than the hyper-visibility of new signs, wedded to the mechanism of Mandarin Chinese hegemony, that hints at the shadows of what was rendered invisible.

Furthermore, the hyper-visibility of these signs does not just act as an alibi for what has disappeared, it also awakens historical parallels with the Cultural Revolution. These parallels across a yawning gap of more than five decades' time reinforces or offer us, what Roman Jakobson (1966, 402) called "a binocular vision," of the Chinese nation-state's inherent drive to fuse minorities

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FIGURE 2 | The coexistence of bilingual signages deriving from divergent language policies and representing two different temporalities, 2023. Lefthand red sign: Mandarin above Mongolian; center black sign: Mongolian above Mandarin; righthand blue and maroon signs: Mongolian to left and Mandarin to right. The seat of Jarud Banner: Lubei town. Photo Credit: Author.

FIGURE 3 | A bilingual "big character poster" from the time of Cultural Revolution in the Five Pagoda Temple in Inner Mongolia. 2023. Photo Credit: Author.

into the envisioned linguistically unified Han-centric national body. And it is this meeting of the present with the past through "interdiscursive renvoi" (Silverstein 2005, 11) that obliterates time, inserts additional layers of multivocality into landscapes and, more importantly, looms over the sensorial experiences explored in the latter sections of this article. Let me illustrate this through the bilingual slogan-signs from the time of Cultural Revolution (1966–1976; see Figure 3).

In the summer of 2023, I visited several tourist attractions in Hohhot, the capital of Inner Mongolia. It was during one of those excursions, in a narrow back alley of the Five Pagoda Temple first built in 1727, that I encountered the bilingual slogans from the Cultural Revolution era (1966–1976; see Figure 3). These slogans are displayed on one of the once-ubiquitous "big character posters" of the Cultural Revolution era (1966–1976), which were mounted on walls in public spaces to communicate propaganda. In the bilingual slogan placed at the center of Figure 3, the Chinese version writes: *women bixu zunzhong zijide lishi, juebuneng geduan zijide lishi*我们必须尊重自己的历史, 绝不能割断自己的历史. Beneath it is its Mongolian translation: *bid erkhevsh ööryn tükheen khündetgeh kheregtei, tüükheen taslan üjej yaasanch bolkhüi*. Both mean, "We must respect our own history and must never sever it." This centrally placed bilingual slogan is flanked on both sides by another pair of slogans, in English meaning "Hold high the great red banner of Mao Zedong thought and march!" The Chinese version was printed on the left side, whereas its Mongolian translation was placed on the right. The slogan "Hold high the great red banner of Mao Zedong thought" was the rallying call of the time (Cheng et al. 2023).

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This material remnant of the Cultural Revolution immediately caught my attention as its layout of the two languages in placing the Chinese in primary positions, that is, either on the top or at the left of its Mongolian counterparts, coincides seamlessly with the new bilingual signs popping up every day across the city since 2022.

The parallel between these weather-beaten bilingual slogans and the emerging shiny new bilingual signs (Figure 2) or more precisely their intertext of an identical language order privileging Chinese over local languages creates "semiotically frozen time" in a structure of likeness and hence iconicity (Silverstein 2005, 9). Thereby, this intertext creates an out-of-time tunnel or echo within which the events, values, and qualities associated and bundled with the events of the Cultural Revolution and those associated with the events of today feed each other and freely flow back and forth between the two "events" forming iconic-indexical relations. By qualities characterizing the Cultural Revolution era, I refer to brutalness, darkness, and sorrowfulness, oppressiveness, as well as ideological values of Han centrism and assimilation. These qualities and values are clearly sociopolitical evaluations from the situated perspective of some subjects (e.g., a minority subject) and belong to what Silverstein (2005) termed "characterizability conditions" of this particular event. Furthermore, the aforementioned qualitative features characterizing the Cultural Revolution are made explicit and substantiated by some concrete sub-events, including massive casualties suffered by Mongols (11.5 deaths per thousand Mongols), the closure of Mongolian schools, hollowing-out of ethnic autonomy, the destruction of Mongolian ethnic markers, physical wounds, deep psychological trauma left to survivors, and so forth (Cheng et al. 2023; Sneath 1994).

The qualities of that particular historical event clearly extend to and infuse the materialities of that specific era (including the decaying bilingual slogans), and the subjects who come into contact with these slogans risk being overcome by these qualities. In this sense, what matters is not the reversed order of Mongolian and Chinese per se nor simply the Mandarin dominant ideology undergirding such linguistic order (e.g., Scollon and Scollon 2003). Much more is going on here. The materiality of the signs, including the reversed language order, the curling flakes of paints at the edges, streaks of old, worn-out paint, and the content of the slogans on the wall, points to (indexes) its various other co-texts, or co-occurring members characterizing the Cultural Revolution, especially for those who has indirect knowledge about it through books or intergenerational memory transmissions. It is important therefore to remember that it is none other than the above-mentioned qualities or characterizability conditions indexed by the linguistic-material traces left in the temple that lurk beneath the bilingual slogan-signs of the 1966–1976 era and vivify its intertextual counterparts: the newly emerging and hyper-visible bilingual signs beyond the temples' surrounds since 2022.

Further, similar interdiscursivity bespeaking likeness of certain qualities of this time with those of that time structures everyday narratives. This shows that the analysis of changing signs and their impact on *sensing* passerby has to consider the historical precursor of today's new ethnic and language policy. For instance, when talking about what they call "the event of that autumn," referring to 2020 education reform, some of my acquaintances console themselves by expressing that Mongols revived Mongolian schools following the 10-years turmoil of Cultural Revolution. That is why they should be able to revive it this time too when the policy takes a different turn in a few years' time. This parallelism between *this time* and *that time* is not limited to private conversations. It is also drawn in a blog post by the Mongolian writer-activist B. Tümenüljii—the former editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Inner Mongolian Education* (*Övör mongolyn surgaan khümüjil setgül*), who currently lives in the United States. The blog is titled: "If the fate cannot be changed, it is meaningless to wait for the arrival of a better time." Setting aside the author-activist's ethnonationalism suffusing the blog, what is particularly pertinent here is the discursive opposition between his father's *höörhön* ("cute") hope in the future—when the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 and the past wrongs were righted—and the author's own bleak view toward the future of Mongols in the post-education reform era. Such everyday poetic parallelism, as the anthropologist Stephanie Love (2024) suggests in the postcolonial context of Algeria, raises the possibility of sociopolitical parallelism and reconfigures the relationship between the unspeakable past and the oppressive present. Similarly, in the context of this study, the unspeakable past characterized with certain tangible and intangible qualities is carried along into the present through visual and verbal parallelisms. This past and its residue linger in material environments and consciousnesses which shape, to some extent, sensorial experiences to be explored in the next sections. To sum up, in this section, I have mainly focused on how the changing multilingual landscapes of Inner Mongolia are riven with signs that straddle the visible and the invisible, the in-coming and the out-going, that bespeak recent ideologies contrasting each other and echoing older ones. They semiotically freeze the time-space of independently occurring past and present events.

2.6 | The Disturbed Senses

Beneath the surface of multivocality, dialectics of visibility and invisibility seethe the irony, frustration, fury as well as creativity of *sensing* passerby. By sensing subjects, I refer to some Mongols who take the stance of a person who values Mongolian linguistic and cultural heritage and who is haunted by the disappearing public signs (for multifaceted Mongolian identities, see Khuanuud 2024). In this section, my analyses focus on two different examples to demonstrate how some Mongols perceive the ongoing linguistic landscape transformation. My first example concerns sensorial experiences of witnessing the erasure of Mongolian scripts from rock-hard surfaces and encountering post-erasure signs.

Let me start with the change that took place in the famous heritage site Xanadu (Figures 4 and 5). Xanadu is one of the capitals of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty founded by Khublai Khan. In the summer of 2022, when one of my friends visited the site, the former trilingual name of the place had been erased and a freshly inscribed trilingual sign privileging Chinese over other languages had been superimposed. Yet, the residue of the erased signs remains there as you can see in the uneven whitish tone on the stone in Figure 5, and slashes and cuts are still visible on the surface of the stone. These traces are akin to the holes left by

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FIGURE 4 | The former trilingual signs of Xanadu before 2022. *Source:* Shilingol League Cultural Heritage Protection and Study Center WeChat page.

FIGURE 5 | The heritage site Xanadu's current form of multilingual names with visible traces of its obliterated former signs, July 2022. Photo Credit: Anonymous.

the removal of Ukrainian-language plaques on walls in Crimea following the Russian occupation (Volvach 2024). Yet, unlike the "shouting" absences investigated in the case of Crimea (Volvach 2024), in my case, the capacity of these traces to haunt people first and foremost resides in their potential to invoke viewing subjects' "prickling" multi-sensorial experiences.

Nothing captures the multi-sensorial and visceral experience of witnessing the very process of erasure better than a 16-s-long video taken from a moving car in 2023 and made available to me via my friends in WeChat groups. The video captures the moment of remaking the bilingual name plaques of one of the legal institutions in Hohhot. There, two staff members of the building are violently scraping off the Mongolian script from the top position with axes while the third one overseeing the process. The short video is edited with eerie background music often played at the height of intensity and suspense in movies as if the footage itself captures what Benjamin (2025[1931]) dubbed "a crime scene." A perceiving subject's mediated encounter with the moment of erasing the script from a rock-hard surface by an axe involves sensorium of visual hearing and visual touching (Lauwrens 2019; Pentimalli and Gobo 2023). Both underline the real integration and intertwinement, instead of mere collaboration, of the sensory means of sight and touch or sight and hearing. In the case under discussion, I suggest that the video activates a hybrid and prickling sense of vision-tactility-hearing in the perceiving subjects. The moment of seeing a hand raising an axe followed by a constant clashing of the metal axe head with the stone inscribed with Mongolian script or the moment of forcefully scraping off colored gravel from the slab with dust flowing in the air evokes in the viewers not only the hybrid senses of sight and hearing but also what Toikkanen (2020, 71) called "imagined touch perception." For instance, the flow of energy from the staff member's arm is transduced to the axe and then to the inscription and shuddering and noise resulted from which reterritorialize not only the hands holding axes but also the body of viewing subjects. This imagined haptic experience can be all the more powerful precisely because it was imagined (Toikkanen 2020). The viewers' comments under this video expressing discomfort and irritation such as "*nüd khalirna*"—meaning it is so unbearable to watch that one has to look away—are the result of a tactile encounter with destruction. It is this multisensory experience that becomes a means of remembering and recovering the forgotten and erased experiences making up the violent state-led linguistic landscape alterations. And it is in these fleeting moments of sensorially experiencing the erasure that people relive the past and live the dreaded future in the present.

If hauntings are unleashed at the moment of hearing, seeing and feeling axes removing the Mongolian scripts from the rock-hard surfaces, the post-erased signs continue to exert influences on everyday life. For instance, looking at the newly emerging

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FIGURE 6 | The place name-sculpture *Avag* before its removal, Avag banner. Photo Credit: Anonymous.

linguistic landscapes in her city, one of my acquaintances said: "You see, now the Mongolian is placed right in the middle in trilingual Chinese-Mongolian-English signages, which means the Party cherishes us Mongols most," producing a burst of laughter at the irony during a dinner. Apart from these seemingly lighthearted jokes intermixed with sarcasm, fury is not an uncommon reaction especially when people encounter increasing monolingual Chinese signs in their neighborhoods as bilingualism is no longer legally enforced for private businesses. In a video circulated in WeChat groups, a Mongolian woman storms in a privately run parcel service point and confronts the Chinese-speaking staff member sorting the parcels. She asks furiously: "How come the Mongolian is gone? Who told you to change the bilingual one to the Chinese-only one?" The staff member mumbled: "They said it is not necessary to write both now." Another man in his forties declared in Mongolian on his social media page: "From now on I will only enter those shops that keep bilingual signs with Mongolian at the top." Mongols who are well aware of the lost battle in Mongolian-medium education and those whose consciousness is imprinted with the memories of past oppression (e.g., Cultural Revolution) are especially sensitized to shifts in visual language orders or the exclusion of Mongolian. Their daily encounter with such changes acts as a constant reminder of lost rights and weakened political position and calls forth a visceral experience of disconnection and estrangement from their own places. At times, fury and frustration can spur people into creative semiotic practices to overcome "the uncanny" (Freud 2003 [1919]) and to bring forth an alternative future.

Around 600 km northeast of the capital city of Hohhot lies the Avag banner and one of its landmarks—the Mongolian name of the banner made into a sculpture—vanished at some point in 2023 (see Figure 6). The place name Avag is in fact also the name of a Mongolian sub-ethnic group dwelling and living in this locale for centuries. Hence, the removal of the place name at the same

FIGURE 7 | The trilingual bumper sticker modeled on the disappeared place-name sculpture of Avag banner. Photo Credit: Author.

time constitutes an erasure of the local Avag Mongolian identity. This removal of the sculpture indexing the local Mongolian banner and place is one of the numerous projects aiming to de-ethnicize Inner Mongolia. However, in the case under discussion, the removal of salient markers of local Mongolian-ness to de-politicize and dilute ethnicity paradoxically enlivens it. Some made a miniaturized replica of the once-standing giant sculpture and took pictures while holding it against a backdrop that reveals the absence of its full-sized counterpart. Others began to sell online a picture of the sculpture on a multilingual bumper sticker on which the revived Mongolian place-name-sculpture stands tall above its English and Chinese counterparts as if to declare its triumphant return (see Figure 7). Yet others declared that the

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sculpture has now relocated "into their heart" following its forced disappearance.

In all these cases of the return, by latching onto smaller yet highly mobile forms, the disappeared sculpture takes on a completely new life of its own and reenters and repossesses the present and tethers the severed social relations between people and place. The semiotic movement from visibility to invisibility then to visibility, from phenomenal world to non-phenomenal world then back to phenomenal world is no small feat. Keane (2013) argues that the very capacity to alter or move among semiotic modalities—semiotic transduction—is itself a source of efficacy. In this case, the triple movements of semiotics animate politics of identity and place. But I want to add that semiotic transduction has temporal dimensions as well. The reemerged sculptures in different forms are spectral kinds of materialization, which not only mediate our feeling that the disappeared is very much alive and present but also potentiate an alternative future. This counter-future offers a glimpse of what could have been.

Nevertheless, the capacity of these recreated signs, which are "covert semiosis" in the words of Bhatt (2023, 10), purposefully designed to be *noticed* by a segment of the social world while navigating censorship, should not be overrated. The fact that the metamorphoses of the prominently placed sculpture made of steel into either a mini-replica of its original version to be safely placed in one's home or a mobile yet vulnerable plastic bumper sticker assuming a fleeting existence speaks to the reality of the banishment of the local Mongolian symbol from public spaces to private or liminal spaces. The semiotic demotion, or what Thurlow et al. (2022) call "discursive suppression," mirrors the similar forced retreat of the Mongolian language from public spaces to private ones since 2020 in Inner Mongolia. Above all, the void, or to be more precise, the concrete foundation left by the removed sculpture, reasserts powerfully the state's vision of public spaces cleared of certain undesirable ethnic signifiers.

3 | Conclusion

The study has explored the material and sensorial consequences of the state-led spatial and linguistic reengineering in multilingual regions. The metaphor of linguistic hauntings can register the disavowed and marginalized lives led by the polyphonous multilingual signs in which the flow of time, senses, and ideologies intersect and converge. To adopt a hauntological approach to linguistic landscape study is to place the affective-sensorial and temporal structure of haunting at the center of the analysis while attending to how shifting multilingual signs underwritten by particular linguistic and political ideologies mediate such structure. In this study, I have presented disappearing and reappearing multilingual signs, including the new ones emerging since 2022, the old ones prior to 2022, or oldest ones from 1960s and 70s, or the one in the process of being erased, or the resurrected place-name signs. I have analyzed them in the context of a return of the specter of an assimilatory Chinese state; the LL is a vital and ideal site to explore the interconnection of the temporal, ideological, and sensorial dimensions in space. Analyzing this interconnection in LL studies, first, requires attention to multiple forms of *doubles* manifesting in visual and verbal parallelisms and discrepancies. "The quality of uncanniness can only come from the circumstance of the 'double'" Freud (2003 [1919], 10) writes. The doubles (e.g., the signs echoing or contrasting each other) break down temporal boundaries and mediate the visceral experience of being haunted. The doubles also render visible what is hidden and push what takes place at the margin of societies to the center of our analytical gaze. Most important, the doubles and the language of hauntings provide scholars with a way to represent parallel ontological worlds and to embrace the losses suffered by others. Second, understanding how time, sense, and ideology inextricably intertwine in haunted LLs also requires attention to ironies, jokes, a fleeting sense of pain invoked by multisensory experiences, memories that flash up, imaginations about different futures, and semiotics traversing different ontological worlds.

Finally, the multivocality and contestations embodied by the changing signs—in concert with sensorial experiences and murmurs circulating in online and private spaces—in fact are the phantoms that constitute the very process of the state-led multilingual landscape transformations. The rapidly changing yet polyphonous LL, on the one hand, shows the state's determination to firmly entrench Mandarin hegemony in its borderlands. Yet, on the other hand, the multivocality of the changing LL and its capacity to converse with history and to animate people creates discrepancy that disturbs and cracks the imaginary picture of Mandarin-only or Mandarin-dominant borderlands spaces envisioned by the state. In short, the tangible and intangible residues lingering in the national periphery shows that the Chinese state's project of making Mandarin Chinese the national common language is an ongoing and contested endeavour, especially in its multilingual borderlands (Bulag 2022). And this national language making project, when viewed within shifting multilingual landscapes of ethnic minority regions, is intertwined with the state's effort to dilute and depoliticize ethnicity—for instance, by removing certain semiotics of Mongolian-ness from public spaces. In short, the material and sensorial residues persisting in the aftermath of violent LL transformation show the linguistically (semiotically) and politically fraught process of China's transition from a multiethnic multilingual state to a homogenous and unified Chinese nation. And this transition itself is spectral as the suppressed signs and voices from the past and future imaginaries all act on the present and demand attention. As such, it is imperative to attend to and interrogate ambiguous, protracted, contested process of (un)making Mandarin Chinese in the borderlands.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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