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The crisis-events and reassembled ethnolinguistic-cum-environmentalist subjects in Inner Mongolia

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the emergence of ethnolinguistic-cum-environmentalist subjects in two crisis events as they are animated by the polarized qualia of darkness versus luminosity and of silence versus sonorousness. I combine an analysis of artistic works by Mongols with ethnographic evidence to show how the two critical laments of nationalism, the Mongolian language and grasslands, are interlocked and fused as the qualia of darkness and silence or their opposite sensuous qualities imposed onto a number of objects ranging from animals, rivers, future time-space, a fearless hero to a sudden gap in everyday conversations. That is, I draw on the concept of qualia to account for the formation of an intensified and maximally-existing subject as crisis-events unfold in the context of environmental destruction and language assimilation in Inner Mongolia.

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Introduction

This article explores two crisis-events, namely, the 2020 bilingual education reform and a drought that took place in 2022, and how these two crises reinforce nationalist subjects and fuse linguistic and environmental concerns of Mongols into one. The two crisis-events' unfolding in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and China's stringent zero COVID policy further intensify uncertainty and fear and give rise to apocalyptic discourses such as '*chüviin chag*' (a time when dharma vanishes), or '*tesch üldeh*' (surviving until the arrival of a new cycle of time). This cyclical time of Buddhist eschatology made itself present in everyday life and coexists with and, at times, takes over a linear time of modernity and nation-states. As such, the discourse of extinction, which has been circulating for decades, resurfaces and began to saturate everyday conversations. A herder in his late fifties said in the summer of 2022, 'We will be extinct soon' as he was recounting his two grandchildren' declining spoken Mongolian as well as the shortage of hay for his animals due to triple factors of an extended duration of grazing ban during the pandemic, the sky-rocketing price of animal's feeds and frequent natural disasters. Or a bank clerk in her mid-thirties felt that her hair suddenly turned grey after what she dubbed 'the event of that

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autumn' (*ter namariin uchir*), referring to the education reform implemented in Inner Mongolia in August 2020 (Leibold 2021). Or a poem circulated online portrays a group of Mongolian language teachers puffing cigarettes in the corner silently and a group of parents toasting freedom while gulping down the tears of their children on the first of September – the first day of school. How do we account for such subjects who are overcome with particular sentiments during or after these linguistic and environmental crisis events? To what extent are the twin forces charging Mongolian nationalism interlocked and inseparable? Below, by discussing Alain Badiou's notion of event and faithful subject together with the polarized qualia of darkness versus luminosity, and of silence and sonorousness, I attempt to illuminate the refocused ethnolinguistic-cum-environmentalist subjects during and after the crisis events.

Crisis events and qualia

Anthropological orientations to events, following post-structural development in the philosophy of social science and humanities, increasingly shifted away from the event as a mere illustration or reflection of the world around it to the event as becoming a creative and generative nexus (Kapferer 2010). The latter approach resonates with how the philosopher Alain Badiou conceptualizes events. In Alain Badiou's reading, an event is an interval, a disruption which disjoins the previous state of an object from its subsequent state (Badiou 2019, 328). What particularly pertains to this study is his argument that the consequences of events entails 'an active body adequate to the new present' (Badiou 2019, 318). By this, Badiou is pointing to the emergence of what he termed 'a faithful subject'. 'Such a subject realizes itself in the production of consequences, which is why it can be called faithful – faithful to ε and thus to that vanished event of which ε is the trace … We could also say that it is the subject in the present' (Badiou 2019, 11). In relation to this subject in the present, Simon Critchley (2001, 101) explains that an incident 'is an event for the subject that pledges itself to the event'. Humphrey (2008, 359) also suggests that events and what she termed decision-events shake up and focus the cloudy concatenation of possibilities into a definite, action-oriented subject. And it is this process of shaking up or *re-focusing* the faithful subjects that I try to elucidate by viewing the crisis-events through the prism of Badiou's events. In other words, I focus on the fidelity of (re)focused subjects to crisis-events and the language's, or more precisely, semiotics' mediation of such fidelity. This aligns with Christos Lynteris's argument that (2014, 65), when we examine an incident as an event 'we need to operate ethnographically from the vantage point of a subjective fidelity to it and, at the same time, from within the language of this subjective fidelity'.

While I find Badiou's emphasis on inter-constitution of evental consequences and faithful subject is useful for my analysis of *maximally-existing* desperate nationalist subjects as crises took place one after another, I use Badiou's notion of events with certain qualifications in this study. The linguistic-cum-environmental crisis to be discussed in this study constitutes Badiouan events in the weak sense. This is because the subjects emerged during the evental consequences in the case of this study is not a subject who experiences the two crisis events as a radical rupture in the sense of, say, how awakened slaves in Spartacus felt about the event of revolt or a new class of workers in Paris acclaimed revolution-event on 18 March 1871, which Badiou cited as examples of

events. In other words, the crisis-events in this study do not force a new subject-formation nor do they challenge existing regimes. Rather, these crisis-events refocus and reassemble the pre-existing (diffuse) nationalist subjects situated in the specific social and historical conditions to be mentioned below.

Insofar as we acknowledge the crisis-events' potential to reassemble the existing nationalist subjects, it is important to analyse how language or semiotics play central roles in potentiating and sustaining maximally existing ethnolinguistic-environmentalist subjects. I suggest that the concept of qualia offers a theoretical way for this. Qualia, or indexes that materialize phenomenally as sensuous qualities (Harkness 2015, 574) have been central to the studies that look at how the experience of an abstract quality, such as elite-ness, hardness or softness, is made concrete by the cultural-semiotic renderings (Thurlow 2020), produces values and ideologies (Gal 2013; Graber 2023) and generates intersubjective spaces (Munn 1992). Perhaps in Mongolian we can render qualia as *meder-ekhuin chanar* – to underline how culturally-conceptualised qualities (e.g., greenness, darkness, sonority) are analogically applied to things out there and felt inside.

My materials suggest that the two crisis-events of language and land and their traces are filled with semiotics infused with polarized sensuous quality clusters such as greenness (luminosity)/sonorousness versus darkness/dead silence. For instance, the grassland appeared in dream and the Mongolian language class room are briming with life iconically indexed by multiple layers of sound and colours while darkness and silence envelop the drought-stricken homeland and the language-less future time-space. In poems and films to be discussed below, people discursively produce qualities such as greenness and darkness, and in producing these qualities, they construct positive or negative associations and values. I analyse how sensuous qualities (qualia) like greenness and darkness, sonorousness and silence are conferred onto lands, human bodies, animals and temporality. These material signs undergo appraisals and are endowed with certain positive or negative qualities which in turn register effects on subjects, constitute evental traces and may pass through, outlive the maximally-existing subject and eventually give rise to and shape other events of less or more significance. In short, only via centring on qualia that produce values and register intersubjective spacetime wherein either desperate or hopeful subjects reside can we understand how ethnolinguistic-environmentalist subjects materializes themselves and, specifically, how feelings such as anticipation or anxiety about future, and laments about the losses are mediated through semiotics and endure beyond subject and events transcending spatial and temporal constraints.

Sensations are conditioned by and regimented in politically and socioculturally inflected experiences. To project and experience silence as the triple death of animals, language and grassland, one must learn or be repeatedly 'indoctrinated' to do so. As Harkness (2013, 14) argues the intersubjectively ratified qualitative sameness is achieved through the regimentation of qualic relations, i.e., through habituation and representation of qualia as forms of Peircean *thirdness* in different contexts and at various levels. The literature on nationalist sentiments of Mongols presents cases of the intertwinement of animal (by extension grasslands) and nationalism as illustrated in the animalification of nationalist sentiments in Mongolia (Bumochir 2023) and ethno-environmentalism in Inner Mongolia (Baranovitch 2016). And there is no shortage of studies discussing how the Mongolian language animates nationalist sentiments (Atwood 2020; Baioud and Khuanuud 2022; Bulag 2003). I aim to extend these works

by examining the ways in which the two key laments framing nationalist imaginaries in Inner Mongolia for decades: Mongolian language and grasslands, come to be intimately intertwined and together reassemble subjects as crisis unfolds. Specifically, I examine the role of habituated and unremarkable qualia (e.g., greenness, sonorousness) in sustaining and animating nationalist sentiments centring on grasslands and language. Before I proceed further, let me situate the regimentation of indexical linkages between distinct qualia and nationalist laments in the context of evolving Mongolian nationalism.

Grasslands and Mongolian language

In Mongolian nationalist discourses *khel* (language), *khil* (border/land) and *mal* (animal/pastoralism) are the most important elements that unites Mongolian identity (Marzluf 2018, 149). Particularly for ethnic minority Mongols of China, the Mongolian language, together with pastoralism/grasslands as key symbols of Mongolian identity, are loaded with intense feelings (Baranovitch 2016; Bulag 2003). This section demonstrates the crucial role of history in shaping the Inner Mongolian nationalist subjects by describing how and why the grasslands and Mongolian language came to assume a central position in nationalist struggles from the early twentieth century till today.

In Inner Mongolia, since the closing decade of the Qing empire (1636–1912), the Mongols' loss of pasturelands to Chinese agricultural colonization is one of the most important catalysts for Inner Mongolian nationalist movements. The Qing Court's implementation of New Policies in 1902 marked a dramatic shift away from the previous Qing policy of isolating the Mongol banners and towards a heavy-handed programme of colonization and administrative integration of the empire's Mongolian lands with China proper (Atwood 2002). Following the collapse of the Qing, in the Republican era, the reclaimed 'wasteland' (pasture) was settled by an increasing influx of Chinese farmers, while eastern Inner Mongolia later fell under the rule of the Japanese puppet state Manchukuo (Bulag 2004). By 1947, the Chinese had become the overwhelming majority in Inner Mongolia, constituting over 85 per cent of the total population of 5,617,000 people, while Mongols numbered only 832,000 (Bulag 2004). It is within the settler colonial context that the modern Mongolian nationalist struggles in Inner Mongolia centred on protecting the land rights of Mongols, amongst other issues, as shown in the 1926 manifesto of the Inner Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party led predominantly by intellectual nationalists of eastern Inner Mongolia in the first half of twentieth century. It states that 'The party would … destroy all domestic and foreign reactionaries, who, by force or by guile, had occupied Inner Mongolia's land' (Atwood 2002, 708). Similarly, during the 1910s and 1920s, the resistance organization *duguilang* in the Ordos region of western Inner Mongolia where land grabbing by Han Chinese settlers in collusion with Mongol aristocrats was rampant, declared that one of their fourfold aims is: to protect our land from the enemy (Atwood 2002, 199). Even after the failure of the early Inner Mongolian nationalists' effort to gain independence or unification with Mongolian People's Republic, which was foreclosed by the 1945 Sino-Soviet treaty, the future unification of fragmented Inner Mongolia has remained the top agenda of Inner Mongolian nationalists. As Bulag (2002, 200) points out, 'modern Inner Mongolian nationalism has been punctuated by a response to the loss of Inner Mongolia as an autonomous territorial administrative zone'. By the end of World War II, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), who

needed the support of Mongols during the Civil War, inserted themselves as allies to the Mongol nationalist regimes and eventually secured territorial control over central and eastern Inner Mongolia (Atwood 2002). In 1947, the Chinese Communists felt their control to be secure enough to create an Inner Mongolian Autonomous Government, with a high level of autonomy. In 1949, it was reorganized into the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region (IMAR), expanding westward to today's westernmost Alasha league of IMAR until 1956.

However, the territorial-administrative demarcation of the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region was never able to solve the demographic disparity. Ironically, as Bulag points out, it was Mongols' ambition to 'recover' Inner Mongolian territory that resulted in their closer integration into the Chinese state and further minoritization in their homeland (Bulag 2004, 90). A severe reduction in autonomous rights and a new wave of massive influx of Han Chinese workers and farmers soon followed the territorial recovery of Inner Mongolia as the CCP's programmes of land reform, collectivization and the nationalization of industry proceeded throughout China (Bulag 2004, 92).

It is this history of loss of pasturelands to Chinese colonization that further mapped the dichotomy of Han Chinese vs. Mongols onto that of agriculture vs. pastoralism, which in turn consolidates the primordial link between Mongolian identity and pastoralism (Khan 1996). That pastoralism or grasslands is the key signifier of Mongolian identity to a certain degree also explains Mongol cadres' resistance to pastureland reclamation in the early socialist times. For instance, as the CCP rolled out its land reform policy across the nation in the early 1950s, Ulanhu – the then chairman and party secretary of Inner Mongolia – managed to create a kind of pastoral exception to CCP policies formulated for agricultural regions of China: there would be no property distribution, no class labelling and no class struggle in pastoral regions of the IMAR (White 2021). In the Reform-and-Opening-Up periods (since 1980s), that the remaining pockets of pastoral areas is perceived as the key signifier of Mongolian identity has also found expression in numerous artistic works, including songs, paintings and poems, which have already been discussed in many studies examining minority representation and identity policies in the post-reform China (Baioud 2021; Baranovitch 2003; Baranovitch 2016). It is noteworthy that the indexical association of pastoral grasslands with Mongolian linguistic-cultural reservoir was initially established and regimented, to a great extent, by the agriculturalized and urbanized Mongols whose ethnic consciousness was shaped in part by their loss of Mongolian language and alienation from pastoral lifestyles (Bulag 2003).

Nevertheless, this attachment to the land is not merely the expression of an abstract nationalist feeling or romantic inclinations but a physical attachment to the grassland or pastoralism (Marzluf 2018). It connects Mongolians back to their 'birthplace', 'homeland', 'pasture-land' or 'Motherland' (Kaplonski 2004, 19). From the late 1980s, in Inner Mongolia, this physical connection to the homeland has been increasingly disrupted by environmental degradation. Some urban intellectuals who tend to romanticize grasslands or return to their homelands during holidays have begun to experience ecological grief and articulated it through literary works. Ecological grief is defined by Cunsolo and Landman (2017) as 'the grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change'. But the pastoralists have to live with such grief and their livelihoods face daunting challenges due to grassland degradation

caused by multiple factors in the second half of the twentieth century, ranging from the periodic reclaiming of pasturelands during the high socialist periods of the 1960s and 70s, industrialization (coal mining) and urbanization. Compounding these factors is the Chinese state's intervention to simultaneously 'green' the land and 'modernize' 'backward' herders, in that the state traced the probable causes of rangeland degradation to overgrazing and overstocking and lack of knowledge (or even 'backwardness') among pastoralists who fail to adopt modern management techniques (Kolas 2014; Williams 2000). Hence, in pastoral regions, the state environmental project (also known as ecological civilization) essentially aims to transform pastoralists into ranchers, which covers two phases: privatization and the decline of mobility (for grassland enclosures see Williams 1996); and intensification and marketization (Zhang, Yeh, and Tan 2021). Both ways of grassland governance, contrary to the state's aim to improve the environment and increase herders' income in a mutually virtuous cycle, in fact, further exacerbated land degradation and marginalized herders economically and politically in Inner Mongolia in the last few decades (Williams 1996, 2000; Zhang, Yeh, and Tan 2021). Drawing on political ecology theory, Yeh (2009, 886) points out, 'The greening of China must be understood as more than an environmental project; it is also a political project that creates new rationalities of rule, new forms of subjectivity and new economic and ecological practices'. There is much to be done about the outcome of green governmentality in its specific locales, especially from anthropological perspectives (but see White 2024).

As described by White (2021, 231) many Mongols see the state's environmental policies as a thinly disguised form of land grabbing, as pastureland vacated by herders is turned over to nature reserves, large-scale intensive agriculture or feedlots, mining concerns, military bases, or highly polluting factories unable to operate in more densely populated parts of China. Critiquing the environmental policies such as 'Retire Livestock, Restore Grasslands'(*tuimu huancao*) and the associated grazing ban, the Inner Mongolian writer B. Tümenülji in his 2002 Mongolian language essay titled: 'My Homeland, My Goats' (*mini nutag, mini yamaad*) writes: 'If the desertification in Mongolian lands is caused by hoofed animals it would have become Sahara one thousand years ago or even long before that … they say grassland degradation took place in recent years (boiling down the crime committed for the duration of one hundred years to ten years is truly a magic (*ubdis*)!)'. Other Mongol intellectuals co-opting the official discourses of green governmentality expressed their own ethno-environmentalist concerns. This dimension is illustrated by Baranovitch (2016) in his studies focusing on Mongolian intellectuals, artistic productions and Mongolian protests against the collusion of mining companies and local governments. In his ethnographic research on the conservation of Alasha Bactrian camels in west Inner Mongolia, Thomas White (2024) also notes how the Mongolian elite enlist environmentalism as yet another tool to maintain and strengthen their identity. Considering the important role that the grasslands and pastoralism in maintaining Mongolian identity and given the history of Chinese agricultural expansion in the Mongolian frontiers over the last century, it is not surprising that the discourse of 'greening Inner Mongolia' and environmentalism is being intermarried strategically with nationalist sentiments in Inner Mongolia. In short, conditioned by the multiple events of losses and ruptures throughout the last century, the grasslands and its co-occurring symbols experience objectualization (Cetina 1997, 9) – an increasing orientation towards objects as sources of the self, of relational intimacy, of shared subjectivity and of social integration. In

other words, these historical events invested the grasslands as well as its qualitative features (greenness or barrenness) with particular ideology and sentiments. Thus, the crisis events to be explored in this study, including the 2022 drought event and the 2020 bilingual education reform event and the sharpened subjects therein, have to be read against this backdrop of colonization and (ecological-) modernization taking place in Inner Mongolia.

Apart from as well as being intertwined with grasslands, Mongolian schools act as another powerful symbolic mediation of affect for Mongols. To be sure, the Mongolian language, or more precisely, receiving education through the medium of Mongolian, has long driven Mongolian ethno-nationalist movements since the early twentieth century. In what Atwood (2002) named the 'educationalist movement' promoted by Mongolian intelligentsia a century ago, national awakening and revival largely hinge on the development of Mongolian education. Similarly, discussing the emergence of large numbers of Mongolian schools and their systemization during the rule of the Japanese puppet state Manchukuo (1932–1945) in Inner Mongolia, Narangoa (2001) also argues, 'the spread of modern education and raising the 'educational level' of the Mongols were the aspirations of Mongol nationalist intellectuals'. If developing education in one's own language was used to be one of the key components of nationalist agendas amongst early Mongolian intellectual nationalists alongside realizing territorial, economic and political autonomy/independence, at least until the mid-twentieth century, now following several decades' incorporation into the modern state of China, one of the few objects that discharge nationalist sentiments and to be invested with intense feelings alongside grasslands is Mongolian language.

The discourse of language extinction, which often assumes the form such as: 'In fifty years or so of time, no Mongolian speakers will be left, or the language will die out in Inner Mongolia', has been in circulation in informal communications, on some Mongolian language media platforms and in magazines from at least the 1980s. Here, I am not so much interested in the truth value and ideological baggage of such statements and discourses as in the sentiments they arouse (see also Baioud and Khuanuud 2022). Now, as we enter the year 2023, this process of 'extinction' in the minds of Mongols takes on a new incredible velocity. One of my informants – a worker in a logistics firm in his thirties – said, gesturing with his chin at his ten-year-old daughter playing outside the house: 'The children currently attending schools will be the last generation of Mongolian speakers'. What prompted such sentiments and the feeling that the long-feared language death or 'extinction' descended upon Mongols in China unexpectedly early is the 2020 bilingual education reform which swept through Mongolian schools in Inner Mongolia. The education reform in 2020 initially proposed that the three core subjects (Chinese language and literature, politics and ideology, and history) at Mongolian schools fully transition to Chinese-medium instruction (Atwood 2020).

Yet within the span of the last three years, the scope of the reform has expanded, and other subjects such as mathematics from grade one in primary schools has shifted from Mongolian to Mandarin Chinese as a teaching medium in some schools. The reform that took place and has been continuing on Mongolian school campuses is at its roots interrelated with China's re-envisioning of its national identity as one based on common language, culture and history from the 1980s, jettisoning its former communist and political ideology-based identity (Hao 2000). This shift in China's national self-identity set the

stage for the rising Chinese nationalism and assimilation-oriented ethnic policies and concurrently heightened the national minority's sense of existential anxiety (Bilik 2007; Zhou 2021). But Mongolian linguistic anxiety is often overlaid with other anxieties. Laments about the loss or deterioration of grasslands and pains at seeing the rapid transformation taking place in pastoral areas, such as urbanization and state environmentalism, aggravate linguistic anxiety. That cultural and environmental crisis drives Mongolian nationalist sentiments and movements in Inner Mongolia has been well explored in the past few decades (Baranovitch 2021; Bulag 2004; Jankowiak 1988). But the indexical process in which these two crises are interlocked have not been explored in detail so far.

The crisis events and reassembled subjects to be analysed below must be read against the above context of land loss and language crisis faced by Mongols since the turn of the twentieth century. Below, through exploring the crisis-events of a drought and education reform, I not only show how the events stir the politically-conditioned and historically-specific nationalist feelings but also how the polarized qualia of lightness (greenness) vs. darkness, sonorousness vs. silence are transposed onto a number of objects and reanimate the pre-existing nationalist subject whose subjectivity is essentially shaped by the history delineated above.

The drought and donations from young Mongol students

June 2022 was supposed to be the month for lifting the grazing ban in pastoral regions. But the herders faced the draconian COVID-19 lockdown and they and their animals were left in limbo. The fodder prepared for the winter and spring seasons was running out while they were stuck in either their houses or quarantine centres in banner centres. To make it worse, there was not a single drop of rain, and sandstorms were wreaking havoc on their livelihood. Those who had remained in their homes in the countryside had no way to find any animal feed due to the disruption in transport and at the same time had to take care of the animals of those herders who were bused away and quarantined in banner centres. It was in such a dire situation that a young man from Üjemchin left banner asked people on the Mongolian social media site *Bainu* to help and make donations to herders in the drought and lockdown-stricken Sünid left banner. Within four days, monies were raised not only through *Bainu* but also through WeChat groups. The herders who had an extra store of fodder from the previous year voluntarily arranged for trucks and transported fodder and hay to various locales in Sünid left banner.

It is very much a continuation of the traditional mutual assistance system developed in the pastoral economy. But how grasslands and schools are interlocked deserves to be scrutinized. First, those who took part in the event were not only herders in the Shilingol region but also students across Inner Mongolia. Second, those who played leading roles in mobilizing the public were Mongolian language and cultural workers. In other words, Mongolian intelligentsia played significant roles. The students at Inner Mongolia university and high school students raised money for herders on campus. To understand what really mobilized these students we have to first start from how particular sensorial experiences are invoked. For instance, the Mongolian literature club *Uyanga* in Inner Mongolia University, in one of their digital pamphlets asking for donations, presented several heart-rending images of suffering animals, sandstorms and barren grasslands (Figure 1). Similar distressing clips and pictures of drought-stricken herders and animals living under pandemic control and

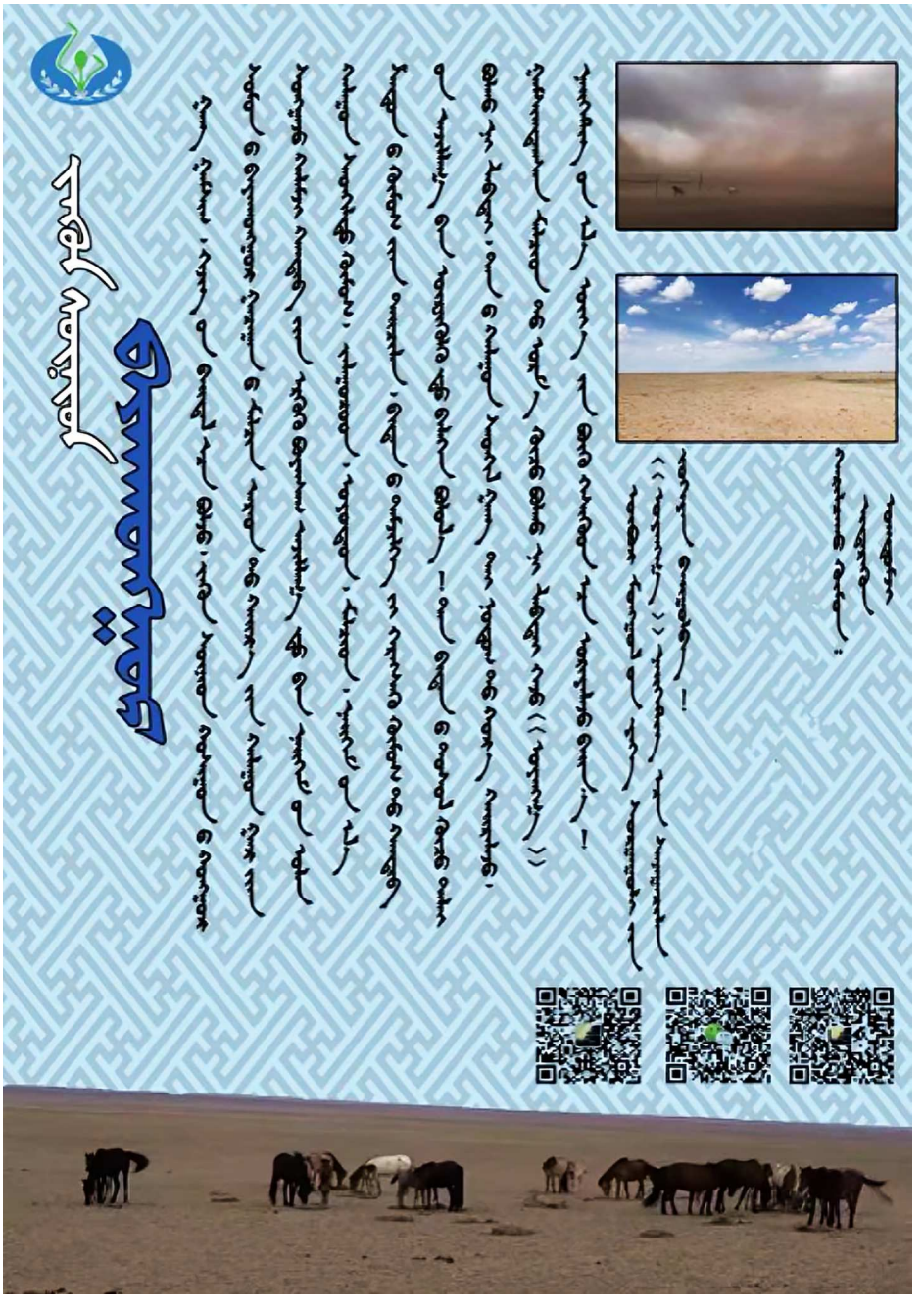

Figure 1. A poster made by the literature club *Uyanga* at Inner Mongolia university to raise money for the herders. Source: WeChat postings. Published with permission.

a barren land blanketed by a wall of dust in circulation – an apocalypse-like scene manipulating the qualia of darkness and silence – during an otherwise green summery time touched the nerve of numerous online spectators and stirred them into action.

Those responding to the mobilization included Mongols from different walks of life: the Mongol-run companies and organizations including the Mongolian language training centre '*tsetsen khüükhed*' (smart kids), dairy product shops, wrestlers'clubs, racehorse-s'clubs, as well as Buddhist lamas and ordinary herders and of course students. Amongst them, the one who played a leading role in mobilizing the public is a Mongol currently living in Beijing, Dulaan. He used to be a popular Mongolian TV host and has been actively involved in organizing the summer school '*shin ernii morin nuruun deereh surgalt*' (education on horseback in the new era) for several years. The summer school exposes children to pastoral culture by bringing them into a close connection with the countryside and herders, as described in one of the advertisement flyers of the summer school. The fact that Dulaan's – a language worker's – mobilization of the Mongolian public online as well as the fund-raising activity by one of the university literature clubs, turned out successfully and that students from primary schools to universities, amongst others involved in assisting herders in June 2022 illustrates how grasslands and schools act as a locus of affect, act upon subjects and reinforce Mongolian nationalist imaginaries. In that sense, the aftermath of the drought event reassembles subjects (I use it as both individual and collective subjects) in whom the persona of students and herders and the symbols of the Mongolian language and grasslands fuse into one. Most significantly, this fusion only becomes possible when the abstract quality of darkness, silence and stillness is transposed onto various modalities ranging from sandstorm-engulfed grasslands, dried-up rivers and dying animals to immobile quarantined herders. Reversely, the qualitative experience of noises and life generated by collective actions of online and offline donations and rumbling trucks loaded with hay invokes different sensorium and animates the subjects in times of crisis. However, the crisis-event of drought and the concentrated subjects therein have to be understood against the education reform which preceded the 2022 drought. That is to say, the linguistic crisis – the 2020 bilingual education reform – acts as a catalyst for the emergence of recrystalized subjects fusing the persona of students and herders.

The 2020 bilingual education reform and desperate nationalist subjects

Let me present an ethnographic vignette first to show how a sudden silence in conversations or a sudden greying of hair sometimes flashes into view the depressed post-reform subjects. This summer (2023), while I was having dinner with some friends in Hohhot (the capital city of Inner Mongolia), one of them started to recount how he and his wife, both of whom are civil servants, were constantly phoned and threatened by various offices including the local police bureau as they refuse to send their daughter to school. It was high time when the education reform was initiated and implemented by the government in late August 2020, sparking a two-week protest (Leibold 2021). They kept their child away from school and withstood the pressure in the beginning, but incessant threats from the authorities in concert with mounting desperation, anguish, helplessness and hopelessness almost pushed his wife to her last resort: suicide, as he related. His eyes reddened, then with a trembling voice, he added: 'This topic … whenever it emerges, makes me drunk in an instant'. Silence descended and hovered over the room in an instant. The drunken state, regardless of its literal or metaphorical sense, functions as a divide, a disruption and a shock that focuses and crystalizes subjects. Such metaphors of being drunk,

on the other hand, are an inadequate linguistic representation of a rupture that has never been formally and properly expressed or mourned and that refuses to let go of subjects. In everyday life, this un-mourned loss and depression can suddenly knock someone into self-withdrawal, a hallucinatory drunken state, or charge the space with an uncanny silence. The reform event, or what some Mongols called the Event of That Autumn (*ter namariin uchir*), is a rupture not just for institutions or history but for the make-up of subjectivity and individual psyche. A significant precursor to this rupture is the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), which, as pointed out by Cheng, Bulag, and Selden (2023, 346), constitutes a politicide by destroying the capacity and will of the Mongols to organize themselves politically in opposition to the Chinese state. With the politicide died the '"idea," "institutional expression," and "physical base" that officially inscribed Mongols as a nationality with an autonomous region in their name' (Cheng, Bulag, and Selden 2023, 334). It is this politicide that took place more than five decades ago combined with today's coercive assimilation, lurks beneath the melancholic and depressed nationalists and sensorial experience of stifling silence described above and to be elaborated further in the final section of this article. But for now, let me continue to illustrate the regimentation of the indexical linkage between the failure to transmit or learn one's mother tongue and the qualia of silence beyond everyday conversations.

A short film made by several young Mongols who are known as the team Ananda in May 2020 is a case in point. In brief, the short film centres on a nightmarish dream of one high school student who fell asleep during his Mongolian language and literature class. In his dream, he landed in a language-less future and from there, he returned via time machine to the grasslands to relearn and reclaim his language. What pertains to the focus of this study is how the Mongolian language and grasslands are interlocked as the qualia of darkness and silence or their opposite sensuous qualities imposed onto a number of objects ranging from animals, rivers, the language-less future year 3220 to a Mongolian language classroom. The film's opening scene, for instance, presented a dark and eerie future year 3220. There, an unnamed and language-less man numbered 002 lies in an about-to-be-launched coffin-like incubator or time capsule. This future world is not just deprived of languages but also of names, life, colours, feelings and light. It is a post-apocalyptic, distant and laboratory-like scene where death looms large. Then the shot left the future man and switched to a scene almost exploding with colour and sound: lush green grassland dotted with white yurts, neighing horses, bleating sheep and goats, and chirping birds – a stereotypical and dreamy Mongolian homeland. Then we overhear a mother and a son talking with each other jokingly and warmly in Mongolian. At this point, the qualia of vibrancy (greenness) and sonorousness exuded by the grasslands and herders form a striking contrast to the qualia of darkness and silence projected in the year 3220 (see Figure 2).

In the next shot, we are led into the yurt and see the language-less, voice-less and name-less man from the dark future is finally awake from coma and he is being fed, clothed and taken care of by the herding family. In between the hustle and bustle in the yurt, a doctor and a local cadre visited the family upon hearing the news about the arrival of a strange and mute man. The former examined the man and said to the head of the family: 'he, after all, has a tongue, so maybe try to teach him the language', as if the language is a panacea. Taking the doctor's diagnosis seriously, the family, in the end, bestowed a name – *khel* (language or tongue) – upon the nameless and

Figure 2. A striking contrast is drawn between a dark and language-less future in the year 3220 and the green and vibrant grasslands. Source: Ananda Team. Published with permission.

language-less man to quicken his recovery. In Mongolian, *khel* means both tongue and language. This double meaning of *khel* confers flesh and blood upon the language and renders the language an in-built, inseparable and tactile body part. For instance, during the event of the bilingual education reform in 2020, a widely-circulated cartoon in which the tongue of a kid is being cut by scissors is visceral in showing the intimate embodied relation between tongue and language (Figure 3). Here, how the qualia of silence is transferred from an unconscious man living in a future time-space to a severed body part is at its most striking. A cut-off tongue as a semiotic medium for experiencing the quality of (forced) silence functions as a qualisign (Pierce 1897), indexing one's permanent removal from his or her own community of speech.

Figure 3. A widely-circulated cartoon symbolizing the impact of the 2020 bilingual education reform. Source: WeChat postings. Published with permission.

In the final scene, the future man collapsed into the arms of a man sitting next to him and spilt his tilted bowl of tea while the family was chatting casually over tea. Before losing consciousness and while everyone is hunching over him, he stutters his first and last Mongolian words in the film: 'you revived my language … … I am from the future … there, there … the Mongolian language is extinct … you should love and cherish your language … … '. This dreadful final revelation in the film shakes one person – a student – out of his dream. Thus, at the instant of his being jolted out of a nightmare, we are brought back to a classroom situated in the year 2020. The one who gave a gentle tap and awakened the dreaming student was none other than his Mongolian language teacher. The student stood up and recited the classic poem *My Mongolian Language* by the famous Mongolian scholar B. Rinchin, and his eyes were sparkling with a new-found determination and pride – a faithful refocused nationalist subject emerges who acclaims rather than rejects the dream and makes a switch as a result. What is noteworthy is that this switch in self-perception involves an equally dramatic shift in semiotic quality experienced by both the protagonist and the viewers. The transformation of the sleeping (hence unawakened) subject of the future time-space into the awakened subject of the present time-space is realized through the transformation of the acoustic and visual quality of silence/darkness into sonorousness/greenness or luminosity (recall the grassland and classroom).

Radical hope in the crisis events

The dark future depicted in the aforementioned film made in May 2020 viscerally materializes itself three months later in the form of a misnomer 'bilingual' education reform across Mongolian schools in Inner Mongolia on 26 August 2020. This last section focuses on the how the crystallisation of depressed yet hopeful subjects and their radical hope are inseparable from attribution of sensuous qualities to material objects and time cycles.

A poem written by one of the editors of the Mongolian language publishing houses on February 2023, which is titled: On the Old Bridge (*khuuchin güür deer*), depicts how the traces of the 2020 bilingual education reform event reassemble and sharpen subjects who incorporate themselves into a bracketed time disjoined from past and future, while anxiously waiting for the arrival of a resounding and world-reshaping deluge. In the poem, the post-reform time is represented as an abandoned, dead and silent stage (cf. silence during the conversations in the post-reform time-space). Below, I translate some segments of the poem (see Figure 4 and Excerpt 1).

Excerpt 1: The English translation of the poem: On the Old Bridge (*khuuchin güür deer*)

… Although I was pressed down by sadness to refresh and soothe my mind, I came to the old bridge and looked down at the dried-up and barren river.

There is no sign of water winding its way down here; the riverbed is cracked; the fish are extinct; and the birds are startled and fly away. Its bank is eaten away by dirty mud, resembling the dark abyss of extinction.

Scorching sun, dirty foam, buzzing flies, wriggling worms and insects … looking at this hellish scene, I as if glimpsed a flash of strong light from a distant place cutting through the darkness,

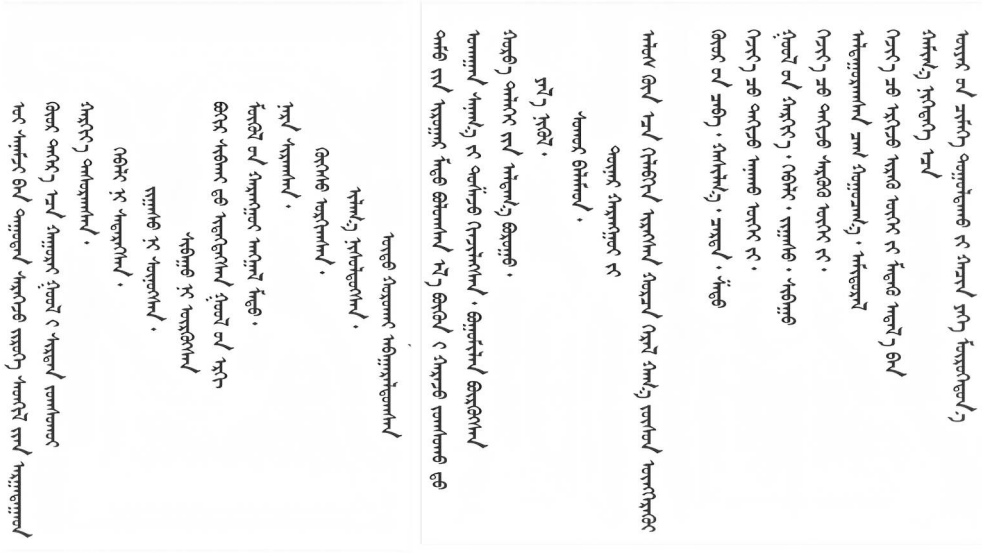

Figure 4. The Mongolian poem: On the Old Bridge (*khuuchin güür deer*) written in the classical Mongolian script. Source: the poet MJ. Published with permission.

> blindness, cruelty, sin and crime, injustice of the world that strangled, blanketed and chained my mind … . I know the cracks and scars of the bridge will never be healed, and I know the water, birds, fish and riverbed will never come to life again. I also know the lost time and life can never be recovered, but strangely, I wait anxiously for the sound of a flood that might come from somewhere. (My translation; the poem-essay On the Old Bridge)

The abyss of extinction, hellish scene and death characterizing the old, abandoned bridge in the poem resonate with the depiction of the language-less future (year 3220) in the film and the crisis-laden and stagnant grasslands waiting for salvation. To the same extent, the profound sense of loss, resignation and cultural depression looming over the text is mediated by the sensorial quality of dead silence and darkness. In other words, the qualia of silence and darkness now are transposed onto other modalities ranging from barren river and deserted bridge to disappeared fish and birds. Beneath the stifling weight of discontinuity and loss and heightened anxiety, an alternative new world filled with light and sound embodied by the roaring flood or the time of Maitreya Buddha (evoked in yet another poem I collected) must be envisioned. Maitreya presently rules as a Buddha-in-waiting in the Tusita Heaven, where he enjoys his penultimate life preaching the Dharma. At some time in the future, in a period of chaos and suffering, when the Dharma has disappeared, he will take rebirth as human being, attain enlightenment, and preach Buddhism (Charleux 2020).

A similar mode of waiting was featured in the poem *Waiting for the Hero* (*baatarii khüleekhüi*), written by a teacher living in north-eastern Inner Mongolia, which was posted on 10 October 2022, on a Mongolian social media page. It has seven stanzas and contains the refrain 'the time of your coming should be close now, my great fearless hero' throwing attention decisively into another future. The epigraph to the poem also tells us that the poem was written when the Omicron variant began to spread uncontrollably in Inner Mongolia in October 2022. It writes: 'The monster-*Mangas* (which is a half-human

creature in Mongolian mythology) of the virus has become more cunning, yet the dark night is still continuing'. This implies that the pandemic and periodic physical confinement without a clear end date during China's stringent zero COVID control intertwine with the 'dark time' experienced by Mongols since the 2020 education reform. The sense of living in the last days must be accentuated as both the drought event and the education reform took place in the context of the then-surging COVID-19 pandemic and the presence of the overbearing biopolitical state (Baioud and Khuanuud 2024). Perhaps there is a remnant of what Jonathan Lear (2006) dubbed 'radical hope' intermixed with depression and loss, without which the coming-together of students and herders during the 2022 drought event may not have taken place. But more importantly, the radical hope of Mongols embodied by an erstwhile hero, Maitreya Buddha, or a resounding flood may have to be read against the co-joined influence of Buddhist eschatology, communist messianism, as well as heroic epics upon the Mongols' conception of time. As is known, apocalyptic events in Buddhist eschatology are not set in a linear time. Rather, the end of dharma (*chüviin chag*, disappearance of true teachings) which is marked by apocalyptic scenarios, ranging from epidemics, wars, moral decline, corruption, to oppression, are placed in a cosmological context of cyclical decline and renewal. It is believed that after an unimageable long period of darkness following the end of dharma, the much-envisaged time of Maitreya Buddha (who embodies the qualia of luminosity as the king of light) will arrive and people will enjoy a pure life in the new world thanks to the reappearance of true teachings (Seiwert 2000).

Most notably, the concept of cyclical time structures epic cycles. In the epic Jangar, for instance, each cycle (outside of linear time) revolves around a repeated scenario of how the dark time wrought about by *Mangas* is replaced with the time of peace and bliss inaugurated by heroes and indexed by 'rattling and shining *Bumba* Khanate'. In other words, the advent of the new time both in Buddhist eschatology and epics is inaugurated by the appearance of a figure who can be called saviour. And this cyclical concept of time with its shifting qualia of luminosity and darkness deeply influences the poems under discussion here and underwrites the radical hope of Mongols. Finally, these poems' anticipation of saviour figures operates under the shadow of Marxist messianism (Bocean 2023). This is especially salient in the poem: On the Old Bridge' (*khuuchin güür deer*). There, 'a flash of strong light cutting through the darkness', a much-anticipated 'resounding flood' or a scene of death in a dried-up riverbed are intertextual with the motifs of a flash, a storm, a thunderbolt, groaning masses or dark clouds in Maxim Gorky's well-known revolutionary poem 'The Song of the Stormy Petrel' (Gorky 1901). Its Mongolian version titled: *salkhich shuvuuni duun*, translated by the Mongolian scholar B. Rinchin was known to many Mongols since it was introduced into school curricula in Inner Mongolia. In short, the radical hope rests on a cyclical concept of time and the depressed yet hopeful ethnonationalist subject is someone who feels the cycles of times as either filled with darkness and silence or exuding light and sound. For them, the different times have different feelable qualities just as the grasslands, rivers, tongue or classroom can be felt differently with or without crisis.

Discussion and conclusion

By focusing on the process of reassembling nationalist subjects during or after the crisis-events, I have tried to show the particularities of nationalist subjects in the shifting

political and historical contexts. I have shown that sensuous semiosis is central in ethnographically studying the subjects faithful to eventual consequences. The qualia of silence and darkness or its opposites, such as lightness and sonorousness associated with a number of material objects across different modalities, facilitates the formation of either depressed, energized or hopeful subjects. We have seen how the emergence of animated subjects is always mediated by a shift in palpable semiotic quality. That is, the transitions from a dark and ominous laboratory to a life-giving green countryside, from a cut-off tongue/a language-less future man to poem-reciting students in the classroom, from the rotten riverbed to the imaginary resounding flood, or from the death of animals and the drought-stricken and sandstorm-engulfed grasslands to the noisy scene of life-giving donations by students and herders, are indispensable in crystalizing and refocusing the nationalist subject during and after the crisis-events. Eventually, it is the qualia of darkness and silence or its opposites, imposed onto a number of objects that made possible the fusion of the two existing nationalist laments of Mongols: language and grasslands. In other words, by teasing out the sensuous qualities such as darkness, greenness, silence or sonorousness embodied and made palpable by various beings, I have attempted to show the entanglement of linguistic and environmental crisis in Inner Mongolia. Commenting on the language loss and climate change experienced by Indigenous peoples in North America, Fine, Love-Nichols, and Perley (2023) likewise underline how colonial disruption of Indigenous language and land work in concert. Waves of development and environmental projects initiated by the Chinese state in concert with assimilationist language policies exacerbate the interlocked linguistic and environmental crisis in Inner Mongolia. I have argued in this study that a sensorial-semiotic perspective could best demonstrate how these twin crises are intimately interlinked and sustain ethnolinguistic-cum-environmental nationalist sentiments of minority Mongols.

In addition, the study has attempted to show how the interlocked crises of language and land are accrued an extra sense of emergency in the context of the life-enervating COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the responses to the crisis-events of drought and the discourse of 'the end of dharma' are inseparable from the pandemic's capacity to generate certain subjective experiences of time and place. The study has also shown that (sub-)discursive strategies tapping into cultural and psychological materials are conditioned by sociocultural and political settings. In a sense, the two crisis-events that formed the focus of this study are not unique in mobilizing linguistic-cum-environmentalist nationalist subjects nor are the sensuous qualities invested therein. The unity and a far-reaching dialogue between herders and educated elites has been noted in several studies examining crisis events that took place in the past (e.g., Baranovitch 2016; Jankowiak 1988). What I have tried to show is the ways in which the taken-for-granted and habituated nationalist concerns about language and grasslands are sustained and animated by sensuous semiosis structuring crisis-events. I suggest that as situations and time become precarious for the existence of national minorities in a nation-state where 'nationalizing nationalism' (Brubaker 1996, 44) is on the rise, an ethnographic focus on micro-level events becomes crucial to understand the emotions and aspirations that withdraw to the backstage or are set aside by historical actors including Mongols themselves due to practical concerns. After all, it is the qualitative traces of crisis-events that register either melancholic or energized nationalist subjects.

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

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