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Repetition and Ambivalence in COVID-19-Related Chinese Political Jokes

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How do political jokes circulate on China's tightly controlled social media? Studying online political humor as a participatory practice, this article shows that political jokes become viral through a dynamic process of digital meaning making, which I call the repetition of ambivalence. In this process, a joke with ambiguous meanings is repeatedly shared on social media, resulting in not only the viral circulation of ambivalent affect but also the creation of new meanings. While previous research has acknowledged humor's ambiguity, this study theorizes three distinct forms of ambiguity and ambivalence in political jokes: semantic ambiguity, which destabilizes meaning and invites remixing; discursive boundary trespassing, which challenges the normative boundary of politics; and affective ambivalence, which allows jokes to resonate through mixed and contradictory emotions. I argue that ambivalence emerging from ambiguity is what makes political jokes socially vital, as users continue to engage in jokes to resolve ambivalence, but often end up sustaining it because repetition both repeats and recreates meanings. By foregrounding repetition as a key mechanism in joke circulation, this study provides new insights into how political humor operates in digital environments. These arguments are developed through a case study of COVID-19-related jokes on Chinese social media.

Keywords: satire, political humor, ambivalence, repetition, affective community

In November 2022, protest activities broke out at Urumqi Middle Road in Shanghai as citizens mourned victims who died in a fire in a high-rise apartment under COVID-19 lockdown in the city of Urumqi. In the middle of these protests, someone posted on social media a photograph of government contractors removing the signage of "Urumqi Middle Road" with the comment "nominated for best joke of the year" (see Figure 1). In response to this post, one user reposted with the comment "knocking down (拆哪)," which is a homophonic pun for "China," referring to both the action of knocking down the signage and the prevalence of such irony in China. As users copied and reposted this comment on social media, a complex process of digital meaning making unfolded, which I will call the repetition of ambivalence. In this process, a joke with ambiguous meanings is repeatedly shared on social media, resulting in both the viral circulation of ambivalent affect and the creation of new meanings. Not only are political jokes ambivalent, but also repetition itself is an ambivalent act: Repetition both repeats and recreates.

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Figure 1. Knocking down (personal communication, November 27, 2022).

Humor transcends mere laughter. Political humor as a cultural phenomenon occupies a critical intersection between politics and culture, revealing intricate power structures and societal norms (Bakhtin, 1981; Benton, 1988; Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009). Ambiguity, vagueness, and uncertainty in humor all contribute to the potency of political jokes, allowing them to challenge binary contradictions (Anderson, 2013; Petrović, 2018; Schutz, 1977). While studies use the professional cultural industry in the West to explain the importance of ambiguity in producing political humor (Petrović, 2018), this article shifts the focus to ordinary people as both consumers and creators of political humor in authoritarian digital environments. How do ordinary people produce and engage with this ambiguity of political humor, specifically on the Internet? How does ambivalence, emerging from ambiguous political humor, shape the creation, circulation, and transformation of political jokes?

Political humor on the Chinese Internet has drawn research interest in the semantic meanings and subversive effects of parody situated in the intense political climate (Gong & Yang, 2010; Luqiu, 2017; Meng, 2011; Zou, 2020). However, the mechanisms through which political jokes invite participation and become viral in the digital space remain underexplored. Existing studies highlight how digital networks enable counternormative discourses and alternative publics (Marzouki, 2015; Zhang, 2020), but less attention has been given to the dynamic, reiterative nature of political jokes as networked practices. Rather than treating jokes as static texts, I conceptualize them as participatory, affective performances in which users co-construct meaning and communities through repetition (Yang & Jiang, 2015; Yates & Hasmath, 2017; Zink, 2019). Social media platforms provide a unique opportunity to analyze the reception of and responses to political jokes from general users and can better unveil political humor as a social process. By

focusing on COVID-19-related political jokes, this article investigates how different forms of ambiguity and ambivalence emerge through the repetition of political jokes and contribute to joke virality.

The concept of repetition helps to unpack the multiple layers of ambiguity and ambivalence nested in political jokes. Digital technologies have transformed humor by amplifying reiterations with algorithms that, by design, facilitate and encourage repetition (Foster & Zhang, 2022). Digital repetition, such as often seen in the remix culture (Taylor, 2022), enables the continuous recreation of new and potentially subversive meanings, reinforcing political jokes as sites of ambiguity. Digital repetition that sustains political jokes shares the same ambiguity that defines political humor itself. Repetition both repeats and recreates meanings in an ambiguous way. Viewed from the perspective of repetition, political humor is not a two-stage process of creation and dissemination but rather a reiterative cycle of repetition, recreation, and transformation. Therefore, this article explores how the ambivalence of jokes interacts with continuous repetition and how repetition, in turn, deepens the ambivalence.

Embracing the tensions emerging from the ambiguity of political jokes (Bauman, 1990; Hemmings, 2018), I identify three key features in the digital repetition of political jokes: semantic ambiguity, discursive boundary trespassing, and affective ambivalence. First, semantic ambiguity embedded in the digital environment blurs meanings through repetition and remixing. The iterative process of copying and modifying jokes through shared cultural symbols does not resolve ambiguity but sustains it, continuously generating collectively constructed meanings. Second, by complicating the discursive boundaries through semantic ambivalence, political jokes challenge the binary separation between political and apolitical to deconstruct the normative boundary of politics. Political jokes invoke liminality that resonates with the pandemic living experiences as both political and apolitical. Finally, political jokes become viral through the audience's ambivalent feelings. Because political jokes evoke mixed and often contradictory emotions through semantic ambiguity and discursive trespassing, users experience jokes not through clearly stated interpretations and emotions, but through ambivalent affect that highlights uncertainty. The difficulty of articulating these ambivalent responses invites more engagement and repetition that shape and change the meanings of jokes in return.

Together, these three forms of ambiguity and ambivalence sustain the networked practice of political jokes, reinforcing affective communities. The networked repetition of jokes serves as a space of collective resonance over ambivalence, enabling users to connect with people who share similar experiences, attitudes, and ambivalence. Therefore, repetition accumulates affect that fosters affective networks and communities as a form of collective care and healing during pandemic isolation (Hou, 2023; Yu, Zhang, & Hjorth, 2023; Zhang, 2006). By highlighting the interplay between repetition and ambivalence, this article demonstrates that ambivalence is both the catalyst for and the product of digital repetition, as ambiguity invites continued recirculation, and repetition, in turn, amplifies the very ambivalence that sustains political jokes as a vital, participatory practice.

The Ambivalence of Political Jokes

Political jokes are a form of political satire at the critical intersection of politics and culture. Examining this liminal space between sensitive political topics and folklore practices of humor, Petrović

(2018) highlights the ambiguity, vagueness, and uncertainty embedded in political parody. Humor, especially folk humor, is ambivalent in its multifold roles and all-encompassing subjectivity (Bakhtin, 1984). Political humor particularly relies on ambiguity in interpretation, reception, and circulation to challenge binary classifications between the political and nonpolitical, authentic and fake, and sincere and parodic (Petrović, 2018; Schutz, 1977). The ambiguity in political satire creates ambivalent laughter.

Existing literature has developed two approaches to studying the impacts of political satire, one focusing on its political potential and the other on the cultural practice. The first approach views satire as a site of alternative discourses and studies its potential subversive power (Day, 2011; Hart, 2007; Marzouki, 2015; Tang & Bhattacharya, 2011). The alternative approach conceptualizes political satire as a networked practice operating between ritual and resistance (Luqiu, 2017; Yang & Jiang, 2015; Yates & Hasmath, 2017). Yang and Jiang (2015) argue that online political satire is a form of networked social and cultural practice (p. 216). Similarly, Yates and Hasmath (2017) show that the true function of egao, a form of humor in Chinese cyberspace, lies more in the networked practice than the isolated content because egao develops connections among netizens. With the focus on the social aspect of satire, the alternative approach does not reject the political implications arising from satire.

Conceptualizing political satire as a networked practice, this article argues that repetition in the form of digital sharing enables the circulation of online political jokes. Foster and Zhang (2022) emphasize that the logic of repetition is embedded in social media algorithms, which by design work to structure and influence repeated data. The algorithms themselves are based on the repetition of loops and aim to predict and encourage repetition in various forms of clicks, likes, reposts, and other acts of digital performance. Repetition as an analytical concept does not preclude changes. Deleuze (1994) identifies two kinds of repetition: static repetition repeats the exact same thing, and dynamic repetition repeats by adding something new to the citation (p. 24). Taylor (2022) argues that repetition generates the remix culture, where digital artifacts are continuously copied, altered, and recirculated in iterative and reiterative processes. Each iteration builds on and transforms previous versions through repetition. While remix culture predates the Internet (Lessig, 2008), digital technologies have made remix a distinct feature of popular culture (Campanelli, 2014; Navas, 2014). The proliferation of digital repetition thus creates the sociotechnical environment for the flourishing of remix culture. The ubiquity of computing in digital society further embeds repetition into the mundane of digital usage (Liu, 2017).

Digital repetition that sustains the networked circulation of political jokes is embedded in the same ambiguity that defines political jokes. Ambiguity increases with the proliferation of repetition in the digital world. With the diffusion of digital media, repetition becomes extremely powerful when what matters is not what is true, but what gets repeated (Foster & Zhang, 2022). The signification through digital repetition often amplifies the ambiguity. On humor specifically, Taylor (2022) illustrates the paradox of authenticity: Remix culture seeks authenticity through repetition, yet each iteration erases the possibility of an original or stable meaning. Therefore, digital memes become successful precisely because of the tension between ambiguous meanings and the concise affect (Taylor, 2022; Zittrain, 2014). Similarly, with the example of socialist memes on the Chinese Internet, Zhang (2020) argues that the practice of repeating memes does not simply reinforce the orthodox discourse of the party. Rather, socialist memes produce "interpretive ambiguities around official language" and redirect the persuasion power of socialist symbols toward a

liberalized end (Zhang, 2020, p. 2094). Through digital sharing and remixing, the meanings of reiterated content remain ambiguous, leading the audience to engage with the content in an ambivalent manner. However, ambivalence can be multiple. How does the audience experience and navigate these different types of ambiguity and ambivalence in the social process of meaning making?

The networked practice of political jokes takes the form of affective engagement that leads to the formation of affective networks and communities. Papacharissi (2014) considers digital discourses related to online activism as affective publics that allow people to "feel their way into politics" by expressing sentiments in networked publics (p. 118). Highlighting that social media fosters feelings of engagement, Papacharissi (2014) explores the role of affect rather than rational deliberation in shaping how people experience and situate themselves within political events. Affect is about the intensity of experiencing events or issues rather than specific emotions (Massumi, 2002, 2015). Scholars of affect emphasize its presubjective and nondiscursive character in contrast to "subjective" emotions (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. xvi; Massumi, 2002). In comparison with emotions that can be named, affect is less articulated and often ambivalent. In affective publics, people connect around common feelings through self-organizing networks sustained by digital platforms. Affective communities relying on such loose affective networks thus have a fluid character. As Zink (2019) puts it, affective communities move away from an understanding of "social forms as the product of pre-established rules, hegemonic norms, and imposed structures" and embrace "sensual infrastructures of social encounters" and "modes of affective exchange" (p. 289). Affective communities emerge through these encounters and exchanges that are spontaneous, transient, and sensory-driven, with mutual affectability to generate a temporary sense of unity. The fluidity of affective communities means they are not fixed or homogeneous. Similarly, Papacharisssi (2015) views affective publics as "connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment" (p. 126). The possibility of being either connected or disconnected implies internal differentiation and conflict. Indeed, social media platforms in China can be as polarized as those elsewhere, with a growing amount of hate speech, racism, and alt-right extremist discourse (Miao, 2020; Yang & Fang, 2021). This is the broad context within which political jokes occur in the digital age.

Political Jokes in Epidemics: The Chinese Case

The Chinese Internet culture has long developed a novel style of expression characterized by its playfulness. In contrast to the hypernormalized discourse of state-owned media, the everyday online discourse in China is full of humor, parody, and satire (Yang, 2012; Yang & Jiang, 2015; Zou, 2020). One notable practice that emerged from this style of expression is egao, the Chinese term for online spoofing. Zou (2020) defines egao as "a user-generated, participatory cultural practice" that reorders and juxtaposes source texts (p. 132). Examining egao as a new mode of communication by mixing multimedia material, Meng (2011) emphasizes the role of Internet users who "easily integrate multi-media materials from various sources and make direct changes to these, hence achieving more radical recontextualization and reinterpretation" (p. 36). In other words, egao is a cultural form of remix parody enabled by and circulated on digital technologies. Situated in the Chinese media ecology, this playful culture is a creative response to Internet censorship and government control (Esarey & Qiang, 2008; Han, 2018; Lee, 2016; Meng, 2011; Nordin & Richaud, 2014; Tang, 2013; Zou, 2020).

Humor and parody, which are central to Chinese cyberculture, remain prevalent during epidemics. In fact, jokes and satires tend to proliferate in response to pandemics, from the SARS outbreak in 2002 to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Existing literature in the Western context suggests that humor served as a useful coping mechanism for people living through the COVID-19 pandemic (Lenggogeni, Ashton, & Scott, 2022; Meder, 2021; Trummer, 2022). Memes and jokes help people make sense of the stressful uncertainty during epidemics. The ambiguity and liminality of political jokes as a specific form of humor extend the affective experience beyond simply coping, especially in the context of authoritarian China. Zhang (2006) documents SARS jokes on the early Internet in digital spaces such as chat rooms, Bulletin Board System (BBS), Short Message Service (SMS), and e-mails. Drawing from public sphere theory, Zhang (2006) argues that political jokes during SARS are an example of new forms of sociality among cyberspace publics. Kong (2023) theorizes "small humor" during SARS as enactments of pandemic microagency that bring people together in a shared sense of everyday life amid ongoing, but manageable, hardships. While the Chinese Internet had a much-limited scope at the time of SARS, digital technologies have drastically changed the Chinese media landscape and discourses during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Yu (2024) writes on satirical activism and youth culture in COVID-19 China, the narratives include both "memories and records of suffering and anger" and "various forms of humor, mockery, and wry laughter" (p. 2). Through political jokes, people cope with the pandemic, voice their feelings, and sometimes perform civil disobedience as a form of activism and citizenship (Choy, 2024; Guo, 2024; Yu, 2024). Yu (2024) defines this practice as "satirical activism": a youth-led and youth-centered activism that uses satire and humor to express dissent and foster resistance to the state-sanctioned discourse in China.

The political and emotional power of humor in times of crisis can hardly be separated. The absurdity in satirical parody is exactly the mechanism for surviving censorship and building communities (Lee, 2016). The political and emotional duality of humor during COVID-19 warns against a simplification of political jokes toward either end as purely political resistance or safety valve for coping. As Yang (2022) suggests with the satirical feminist backfire against mainstream Chinese propaganda during COVID-19, satire and ambiguity associated with humor limit the influence of jokes as activism in catalyzing online and offline changes, yet the limits of jokes in initiating changes do not undermine the importance of humor. To understand the proliferation of political jokes during epidemics requires embracing this duality of political jokes both as a coping strategy and as a discursive space where people engage in political contestations and form publics. Rather than assessing which political goals political jokes achieve or fail to do so, this article explores the social implications of political jokes during crises by unpacking how ambivalence is created, maintained, and transformed through digital repetition.

Methods

My case study focuses on COVID-19-related jokes during the pandemic time in China. I collected 55 political jokes posted on two Chinese social media platforms, Weibo and QQ Space, between 2020 and the end of 2022. To collect jokes, I monitored social media feeds appearing on my personal accounts during the latter half of 2022 and archived previous posts up to 2020. I then snowballed the sample of jokes by tracing the networks around users who frequently engage with political jokes and reviewing the content on their social media up to 2020. To document jokes, I took screenshots of posts that fall into the broad

category of political jokes. I also asked active users to share with me, in screenshot format, political jokes they encountered on these two platforms.

During the five-month data collection period, China went through several important political events, including the 20th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, the white paper protest against the COVID-19 lockdown policy, and the death of former president Jiang Zemin. As a result of these events, there was both a proliferation of political jokes on the Internet and an intensification of censorship. The unique time provides great opportunities for collecting and analyzing political jokes, but may also skew the signification of jokes toward a more politically radical end. Among the 55 jokes collected, this article selected 36 jokes that make direct reference to the COVID-19 pandemic. The analytical focus on COVID-19 jokes delves deep into the meanings of symbolic representations in relation to human experiences rooted in the pandemic. The selected jokes are not representative of political jokes in China but were widely circulated. This article does not attempt to generalize but aims to analyze the ambivalence in digital repetition and joke making, which is critical for understanding the cultural practice of political jokes.

Given the ambiguity in the definition of humor, the identification of jokes in this case study is based on personal perceptions of jokes with satirical or parodic elements that target social or political issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic in China, as well as the audience's response to jokes. While various digital acts, such as likes, also engage with political jokes, this project focuses on repetition in posting, reposting, and comments, as copying and pasting the same comment is a common Internet culture, especially for QQ Space. The differences in platform affordances shape the forms of repetition. While Weibo automatically generates threads of reposts, QQ Space does not have a built-in thread function and cannot show previous reposts. The common user practice on QQ Space is to type the symbol of repost (//:) and copy and paste previous reposts after the symbol to manually generate threads. Due to the lack of the thread function, manually generating threads is a deliberate decision that users only employ when they believe the previous reposts are worthy of preservation and circulation.

I conducted a close reading to open code the jokes with a focus on emotions and repetition. Because of the extensive use of homophonic words, metaphors, and other semantic treatments in political jokes, the coding of jokes is based on my interpretation mediated by my positionality and knowledge of the existing discourse. Jokes are coded in Chinese and then translated into English by the author. Rather than looking at the original posts first and responses separately, I look at the process of joke making and dissemination as a whole, with multiple layers of repetition. Informed by Deleuze's (1994) differentiation between static repetition that repeats the exact same content and dynamic repetition that transforms the content, I first coded jokes based on the forms of repetition with subcodes about the structures of repetition including reposting, commenting, and screenshotting. To assess the meanings of jokes, I coded for historical and cultural allusions, discursive practices such as censorship circumvention techniques, and the online contexts in which jokes appeared. This two-level coding approach from both structural and interpretive sides allowed for a systematic analysis of both the mechanisms and sociocultural significance of political jokes.

Ambiguity and Ambivalence in Political Jokes

Political jokes create an affective experience for the audience to feel politics in networks with other participants in joke making and circulation (Papacharissi, 2014). This affective experience of political jokes is ambivalent. Both political humor and digital repetition that sustain the networked circulation of political humor are embedded in ambiguity (Foster & Zhang, 2022; Petrović, 2018). The networked practice of political jokes translates this ambiguity into ambivalence in repetition that, in turn, amplifies ambiguity. As existing literature emphasizes ambivalence as the core characteristic of political humor (Anderson, 2013; Petrović, 2018), this article shifts the focus from ambivalence within the jokes as static content to jokes as a networked practice. I examine how ambivalence both drives and is reinforced by viral digital repetition, shaping the way political jokes circulate and evolve online. Taking a closer look at how jokes emerge through digital repetition, I identify three features in political jokes: semantic ambiguity, discursive boundary trespassing, and affective ambivalence. These interdependent and intersecting features encourage more digital repetition that circulates affect among users.

Semantic Ambiguity

Political jokes on the Internet play with semantic ambiguity to create a fluctuating reading of content and transform texts into jokes. Digital technology provides a space where ambiguity proliferates and opens up the possibility of variation through remixes (Campanelli, 2014; Navas, 2014; Taylor, 2022). This semantic ambiguity benefits from the collapsed context of digital space, where repetition brings together seemingly unrelated discourses (Zhang, 2020). For example, the original text in Figure 2 is a college online test asking which option was not a common type of campus crisis, and the correct answer was marked as biochemical crisis. The post includes a vague caption, "Do you even know what you're asking," that remains ambiguous in both semantic meaning and attitude (personal communication, October 31, 2022). This ambiguity invites various interpretations of who "you" is in the text and why this question is problematic. In response, a user reposted with the comment "I don't think so," implying that biochemical crises like COVID-19 lockdowns are indeed frequent on college campuses; as the following comment says, "It happens many times a month" (personal communication, October 31, 2022). The creation of political jokes depends on ambiguity based on platform affordances, where multiple discourses coexist on one large platform, and contexts become blurred in the digital space (Hogan, 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2011). As texts are open to interpretation, users employ this ambiguity to add new layers of meaning and create uncertain experiences through repetition.

Figure 2. Biochemical crisis in the college (personal communication, October 31, 2022).

The semantic ambiguity often invites ongoing reposting and remixing that add more layers of meaning. For example, Figure 3 shows how digital sharing adds multiple layers of parody to one joke. The original post features a screenshot of a user's classmate using online gaming terminology to describe the abrupt end of China's zero-COVID policy. Terms like "closed beta test" and "open beta test" point out the irony in the zero-COVID policy, which never truly made COVID-19 disappear, and express a sense of helplessness at the hasty shift in policy. The original post alone contains semantic ambiguity that bridges the discourse of COVID-19 and the language of gaming. Building on this, a repost adds a second layer of parody by comparing "the Chinese service agent" to "the international server" and frames pandemic management as a customer experience in a global game. This repost expands the scope of the original joke from a domestic critique to a broader commentary on global pandemic responses to critique the superiority of the zero-COVID policy. The echoing in later responses of "please bring me to the international

server" indicates that semantic ambivalence has created new meanings for this joke regarding global comparison (personal communication, December 15, 2022). The original post and its reposts together form a playful, evolving practice in which each iteration amplifies semantic ambiguity and sustains engagement through digital circulation.

Figure 3. COVID as a game. Biochemical crisis joke (personal communication, December 15, 2022).

To resolve the ambiguity in meanings, repetition takes and modifies existing cultural references in a meaning-making game in which users collectively transform meanings attached to digital content (Taylor, 2022). To join this game requires shared knowledge that creates the foundation for affective networks and communities. The ability to appreciate political jokes comes from shared experiences, shared familiarity with hypertext, and shared attitudes toward the subject of the joke. In Figure 4, an original post equates the trends of college students crawling on the ground under COVID-19 lockdown with Wei-Jin's historical fashion of loose demeanors: Famous scholars in ancient China screamed, cried, and imitated donkey braying as a form of liberation from conventional rituals. The original post leaves room to interpret the semantic ambivalence in the comparison of COVID-19 and the Wei-Jin period. In response, the punch line repost says, "You tell me why Wei-Jin famous scholars behaved like that for I don't even dare to say," highlighting a parodic meaning (personal communication, November 13, 2022). To comprehend the repost as a joke that offers a specific interpretation among multiple meanings, the audience must be familiar with the historical context of Wei-Jin's demeanor: a reactive response to the fatuous emperor and elite oppression in ancient China. The combination of the original post and repost would fail to become a joke without the shared knowledge of Chinese history, the shared living experience under the COVID-19 lockdown, or the shared attitude that condemns President Xi Jinping's role as a de facto emperor. The classical allusions to Wei-Jin's demeanor further suggest that semantic ambiguity invokes digital repetition based on shared cultural references to navigate through ambiguity.

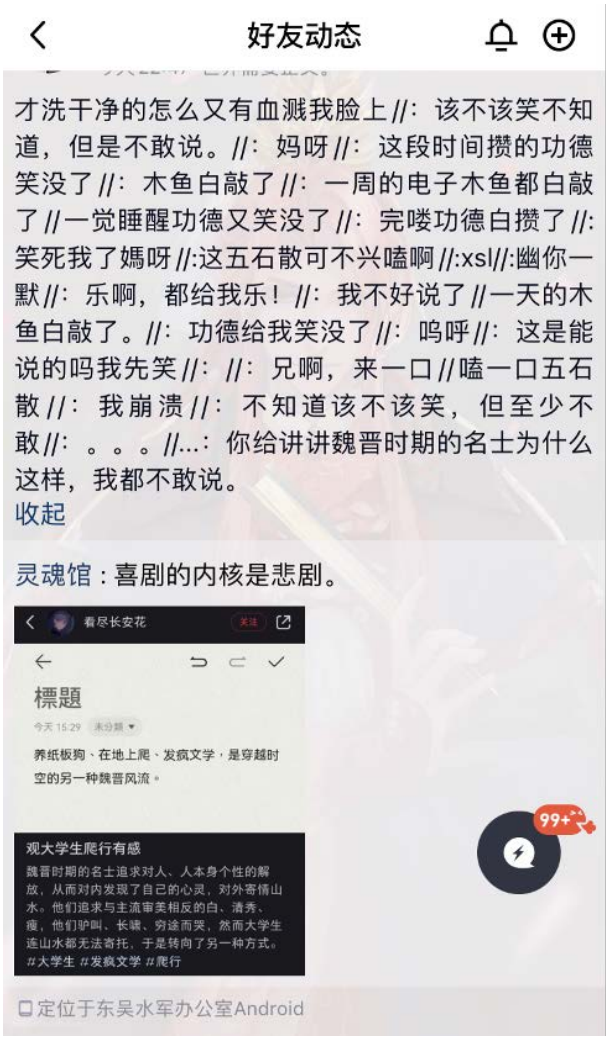

Figure 4. Wei-Jin demeanor joke (personal communication, November 13, 2022).

Discursive Boundary Trespassing

Immersed in semantic ambiguity, political jokes bridge seemingly nonpolitical everyday life with the hyperpolitical COVID-19 policies to trespass the discursive boundaries and challenge the binary contradiction between political and apolitical (Petrović, 2018). As digital repetition remixes cultural symbols from different discourses, the clash between political and seemingly nonpolitical meanings creates a trespassed space that affects the audience by displacing discursive experiences. The original text in Figure 5 bemoans the long-lasting pandemic and does not refer to state policies, yet the first repost satirically answers the apolitical question "Which one will end first, my youth or the pandemic?" with "Please wait for the notice," a phrase commonly used by the government in response to public requests during the

pandemic (personal communication, October 22, 2022). This repost shifts the focus to the political actor, the government, within an originally apolitical conversation. Through discursive disjuncture in repetition, jokes blur the boundary between personal life and politics, collapsing the opposition between the hyperpolitical discourse of COVID-19 policies and apolitical everyday life. The discursive trespassing creates a sense of uncertainty, as users are unsure of what is a joke for fun and what is real life, as reflected in comments like "OMG why can this be so funny" and "feeling angry now." One user even calls the content a "hell joke," suggesting that satire cannot be expressed within "normal" political discourse (personal communication, October 22, 2022).

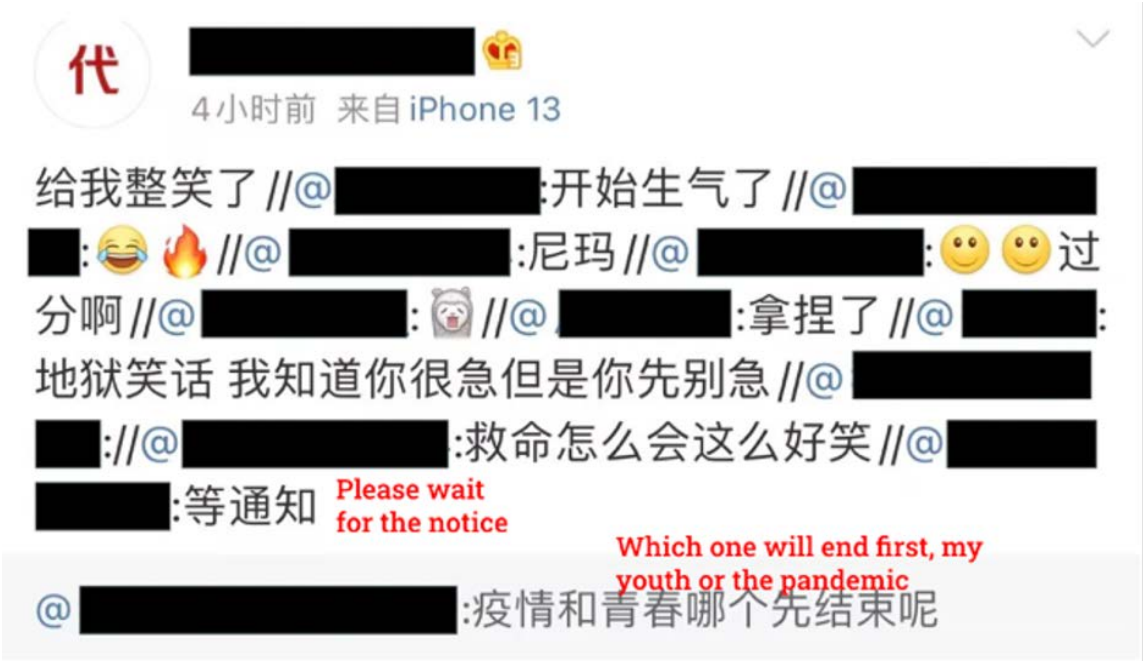

Figure 5. Please wait for the notice (personal communication, October 22, 2022).

Political jokes also trespass the normative boundary of official politics by repeating the political to the point of mockery. Mocking the political tone has long been a strategy to highlight the absurdity of politics, to reveal its constitutive nature, and to challenge the unquestioned hegemony of the political (Benton, 1988; Butler, 1990; Tang, 2013). Digital repetition allows ordinary users, not just professional comedians, to trespass these boundaries. In the original post of Figure 6, an official news report praised doctors who conducted multiple polymerase chain reaction tests before performing surgery on a patient whose health code suggested exposure to COVID-19. The repost summarized the news into a headline––"Man had a sudden myocardial infarction; doctors spared no efforts to save his health code"––that uses the tone of the official news report yet parodically points out the absurdity: Instead of saving the patient's life, doctors were more concerned about the health code (personal communication, November 2, 2022). This mimetic version of the original news highlights the constructed nature of the official narrative. Revealing its absurdity through repetition, the joke deconstructs the authority of the official political discourse.

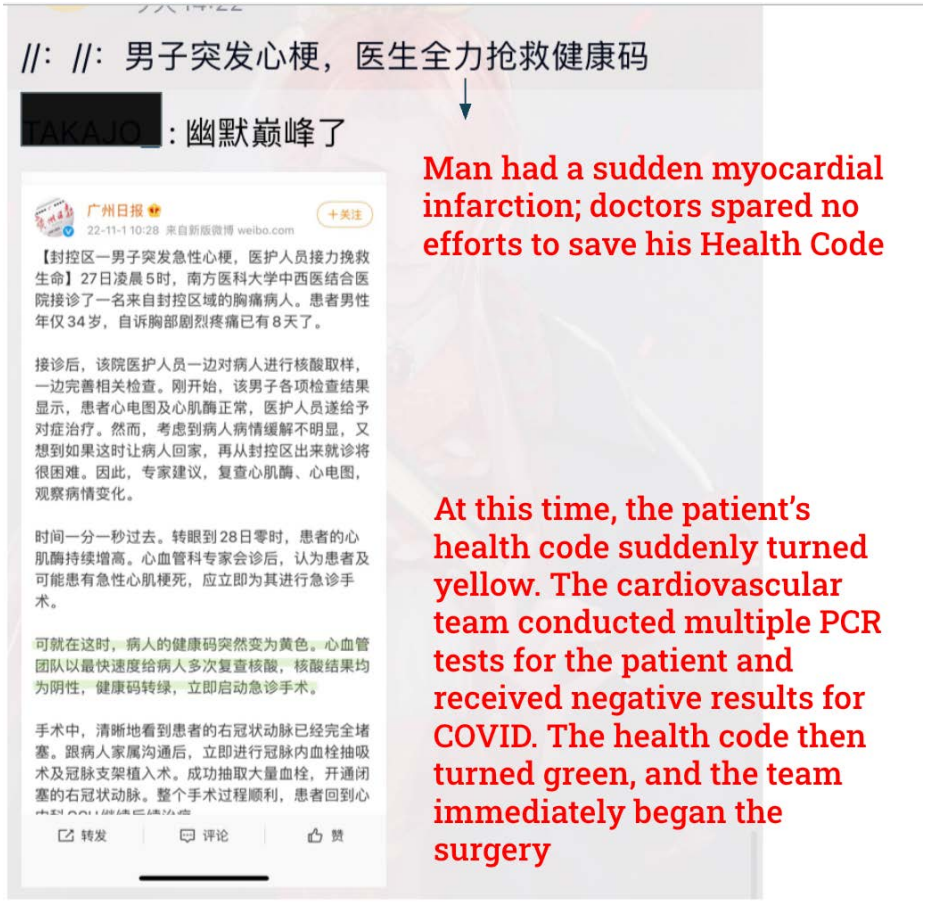

Figure 6. Doctor saving health code (personal communication, November 2, 2022).

Boundary trespassing often ends in ambivalence rather than resistance. Political jokes subvert the meaning of official politics but continue the language itself. As in Figure 6, jokes do not indicate action plans beyond the renegotiation of meanings. As repetition creates and transforms meanings of politics, political jokes turn both politics and everyday life into an ambiguous stage of neither political nor apolitical. Through political jokes that reject the separation of the political from the everyday and challenge the sanctity of politics, users trespass discursive boundaries to acknowledge that COVID-19 experiences are both political and apolitical.

Affective Ambivalence

The semantic and discursive ambiguity embedded in joke repetition diverts the participation in political humor from a political act of resistance to a networked affective experience. Because jokes are neither political nor apolitical, the creation, dissemination, and transformation of political jokes gain wide popularity not solely from the discussion and subversion of politics but also from other aspects of joking as

a ritual (Petrović, 2018; Yang & Jiang, 2015). Turning to user responses that constitute the networked practice in digital repetition, I find that political jokes become viral through the audience's ambivalent feelings that propel more repetition.

Users often express confused and sometimes contradictory emotions in political jokes. Returning to the joke on Wei-Jin's demeanor in Figure 4, users respond with mixed and hesitant emotions, saying, "I don't know whether I should laugh or not, but at least I don't dare to laugh" (personal communication, November 13, 2022). Not being sure what to feel is a common response to political jokes; the reposts expressing this uncertainty appear twice in the thread of Figure 4, among other reposts suggesting uncertainty, such as "I don't know what to say" and "I fall apart" (personal communication, November 13, 2022). Because of semantic ambiguity and discursive trespassing that disturb the audience members from what they expect to encounter, users have a difficult time clearly understanding their feelings toward ambiguous political jokes. Furthermore, political jokes pack laughter with other emotions such as grievances, fears, and meltdowns that users often mention in their responses to jokes to create this affective ambivalence. The unidentifiable emotions indeed capture the ambivalent reality that users were living through the pandemic.

In response to ambiguous political jokes, users express ambivalent affect that emphasizes the intensity of feelings rather than categorizing specific emotions. Responses to jokes demonstrate how affect allows participants to "feel their way into politics" beyond deliberative reasoning (Papacharissi, 2014, p. 118). In Figure 7, the original post started with "You are a Chinese who doesn't love your country, get the fuck out of here," followed by praise for the zero-COVID policy as well as the People's Republic of China regime (personal communication, October 18, 2022). Taken at face value, the post could be interpreted as either sincere nationalism or irony. This ambiguity stems from the lack of contextual information and the fact that political jokes often repeat and exaggerate state propaganda to the point of mockery. Regardless of the intent, the post conveys intense affect that draws others in to interpret, remix, and respond. One user reposted, "Well said, you shall be rewarded with a tour to the 1989 Tiananmen Square," referring to the brutal aftermath of the 1989 student protest (personal communication, October 18, 2022). This repost leverages the semantic ambiguity and, more importantly, the already intense tone of the original post to create a subversive reading, turning the whole thread into a political joke through repetition.

Under the thread of this repost, users reposted with intense comments such as "deserving execution by shooting," "this is so in hell," and "this one has reached the execution tier" (personal communication, October 18, 2022). The literal meanings can lead to an oversimplified conclusion that users oppose the subversive reading. However, the intensity of the responses is more important here because responses to political jokes usually continue the playful tone of joking. User responses neither affirm nor deny agreement with the supposedly nationalist post and zero-COVID policy; instead, they reflect the intensity of feeling the post provokes. These hyperbolic responses perform dissociation from the joke, such as advocating for executing the joke maker or stating, "Don't splash blood over me," yet, paradoxically, they deepen the affective engagement with the joke and continue the networked practice of political humor. The user responses are affective attunement to political jokes rather than clearly articulated expressions (Zhang, 2020). The intense comments showcase the embodied experience of political jokes: the ambivalence that

users feel strongly but cannot quite name. Through this affectively charged and semantically ambiguous repetition, political jokes circulate not through clarity but through affective ambivalence.

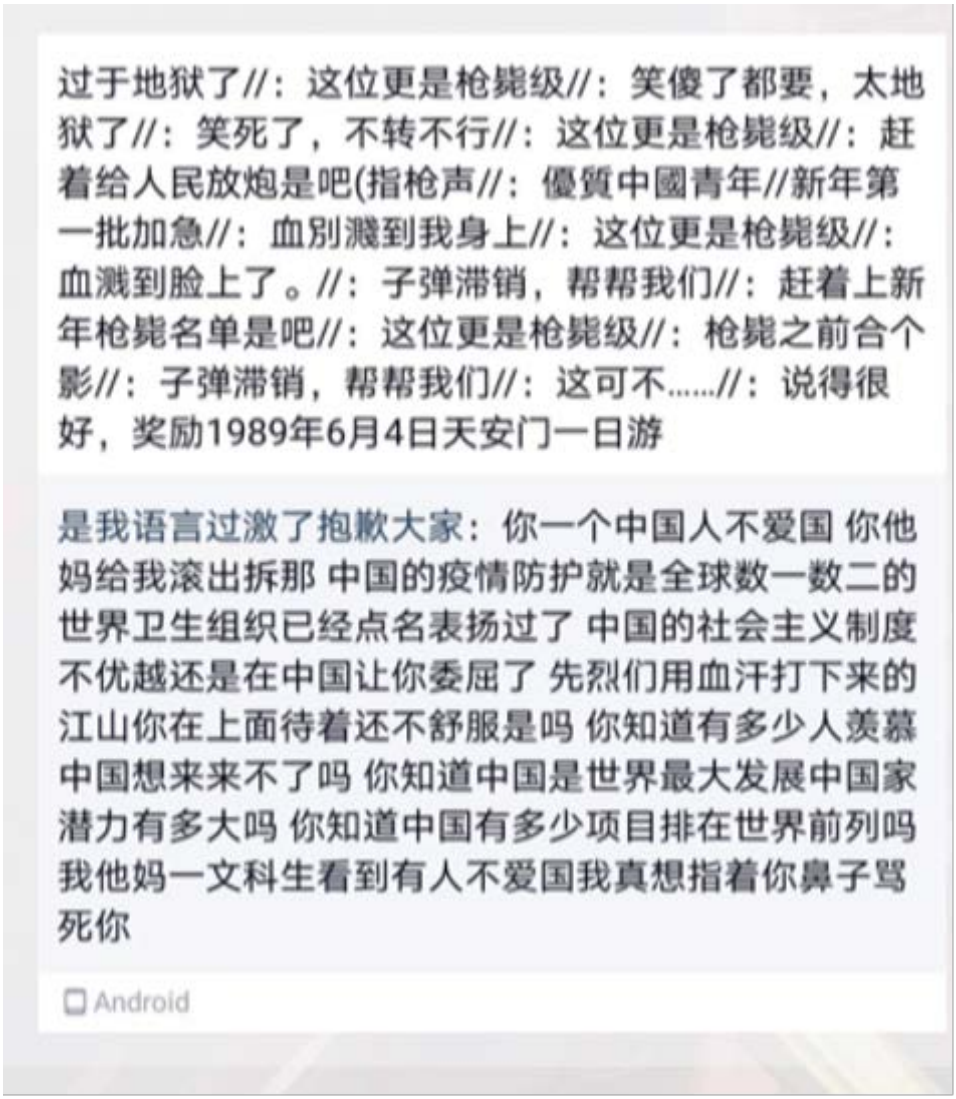

Figure 7. 1989 Tiananmen joke (personal communication, October 18, 2022).

Mixed emotions in user responses allow users to bond with people who share the ambivalence about how they should feel. While the audience may draw on similar cultural references to read jokes, their interpretations can vary. What some see as humorous remixing, others may find offensive or overly prescriptive, and some might experience multiple, conflicting reactions. This shared ambivalence forms the basis of affective communities, particularly in environments of heavy censorship, where jokes rely on subtlety and require active decoding. After the death of the former Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader

Jiang Zemin during the peak of the white-paper protest against the zero-COVID policy in November 2022, someone wrote a one-sentence post: "It's all set off by peers (全靠同行衬托)" (see Figure 8). This sentence means that the excellence of something is only a result of the mediocrity of the peers. As with all political jokes, this sentence is full of ambiguity in meaning. Even with knowledge of Jiang's recent death, interpreting this sentence as a joke requires connecting "peers" with the current CCP leader, Xi Jinping, and realizing that the excellence of Jiang was set off by the mediocrity of Xi. This one-sentence joke indicates that the state propaganda that praises Jiang is an ironic denunciation of Xi. The semantic ambiguity and political sensitivity raise the threshold for interpretation, and those who make the subversive connection experience a sense of connection with others who do the same.

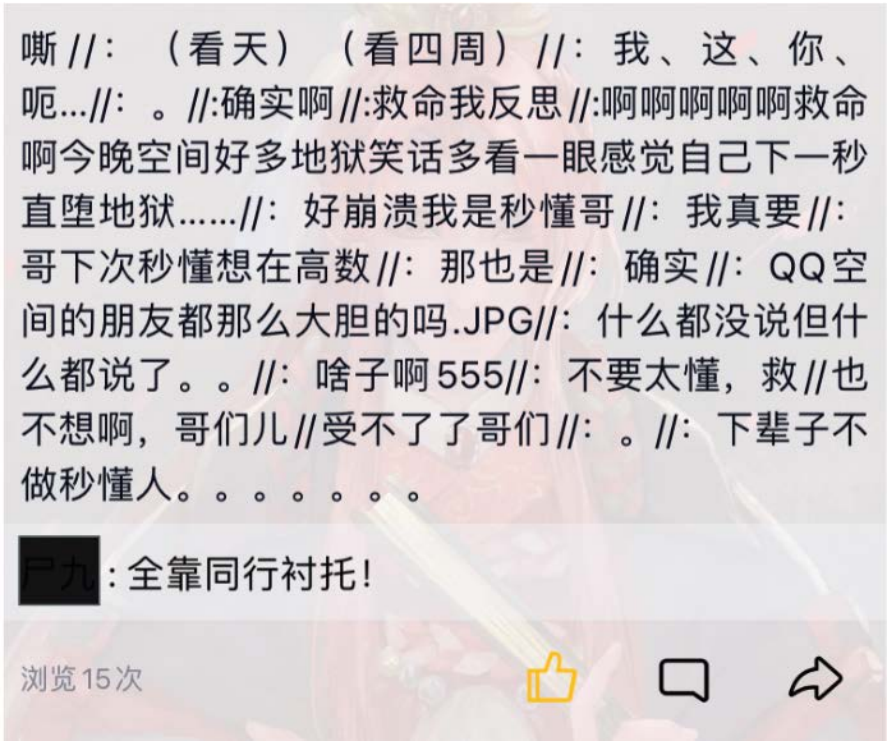

Figure 8. It's all set off by peers (personal communication, November 30, 2022).

Importantly, users connect not only through shared interpretation but also through shared affective ambivalence. Reposts to the sentence in Figure 8 express complicated discomfort and even regret around one's ability to "get the joke" by commenting, "I don't want to instantly get it," and "So collapsed that I instantly get it" (personal communication, November 30, 2022). Again, reposts such as "(look at the sky) (look around)" perform detachment through a gesture of nonengagement, while they paradoxically also signal recognition by showing they get the joke. The ambivalent responses distinguish people who are unsure about the joke from those who overtly support or condemn the CCP, thereby creating a feeling of connection among the former group. Through repeated and emotionally ambivalent engagement, political jokes become a means of recognizing shared uncertainty and cultivating affective communities. Fragmented

reposts like "me, this, you, eh" highlight the difficulty of articulating responses while repetitively reinforcing the shared feeling of being unsettled. In this way, participants create and sustain affective publics that recognize and validate their emotional ambivalence about how to respond (Papacharissi, 2015; Zhang, 2020; Zink, 2019; Zou, 2020).

In other cases, users display affective ambivalence through plain repetition. By literally repeating the same content through reposting or commenting, users accumulate affect in reiteration to create and expand affective networks. For instance, the user in Figure 1 reposts the political joke of Urumqi Middle Road that this article begins with by not only including the punch line of "knocking down" in their repost but also repeating the exact same punch line again. Unlike remixing, this repetition adds no new symbols or meanings. It simply reiterates the punch line twice in a repost, yet the number of repetitions demonstrates a stronger effect, especially for platforms like QQ Space, which does not automatically generate threads that show the number of shares. Repetition provides a way of explicitly showing the incrementation of affective intensity. Beyond reiterating the texts in reposts, users spontaneously typed the symbol of repost (//:) in their own reposts without adding any comments to show how many people have reposted the punch line repost. Repetition is an intentional way of displaying intensity, and the format of manual reposting further implies an incrementation of affect that sediments over the repetition. What gets repeated through networks is then less of the political meaning of jokes and more of the affect accumulating over jokes (Zhang, 2020). While this simple repetition might not create new meanings, repeating the same content enables users to bond through political jokes by showing in a more visible manner how many people consume the jokes.

Through the display of affect in repetition, political jokes raise the visibility of the affective communities that engage in and sustain jokes. Repetition draws the attention of broader audiences who may encounter the jokes in their everyday digital routines. These audiences might become disturbed, intrigued, or moved to join the affective public. As a continued act, repetition of jokes responds to not only the joke but also other people's responses. For instance, a user in Figure 8 reposted with "Are all friends on QQ Space this daring.jpg," referencing the collective subversive reading (personal communication, November 30, 2022). This repost points to QQ Space as the platform that hosts the affective community, a space where users can more safely express ambivalence toward both the jokes themselves and the sensitive topic at their center: the pandemic. Given the heavy censorship in China and the tight control under the zero-COVID policy, bonding through affective ambivalence creates a sense of togetherness, a form of sociality, that offers care and healing during the physical and emotional isolation of the pandemic (Baioud & Khuanuud, 2024; Hou, 2023; Yu et al., 2023; Zhang, 2006). While political jokes may not directly contribute to political action, the affective connections they foster allow users to recognize that their complicated, contradictory feelings about the pandemic are shared and that they are not alone in this shared uncertainty.

Discussion

Through the case study of COVID-19-related political jokes on the Chinese Internet, I have examined how political humor functions as a dynamic, participatory, and affective practice beyond static content. This article highlights that virality emerges from affect accumulated in repetition through

continuous engagement, recreation, and transformation in digital spaces. Centering on ordinary users rather than professional producers, this study expands existing scholarship on political humor beyond the semantic meanings and subversive potentials to discuss how political jokes create ambivalent affective experiences for participants.

By analyzing how jokes get repeated online, this article highlights ambivalence as a key driver of political joke virality. While existing research recognizes that political jokes are ambiguous and thus invoke ambivalent responses (Petrović, 2018), I have shown that repetition as the key mechanism amplifies ambiguity and creates affective ambivalence. The semantic ambiguity of digital texts opens up the liminal space for destabilizing conventional meanings. The reiterative process to resolve semantic ambivalence collectively constructs meanings, allowing jokes to remain open-ended and adaptable in continuous digital sharing. Because of the semantic ambiguity in meanings, political jokes trespass the discursive boundary to reject the separation of the political from the everyday and challenge the sanctity of politics. Political jokes become both political and apolitical, resonating with the ambivalent living experience under COVID-19. Finally, affective ambivalence explains how jokes gain traction not through clear interpretations or singular emotions, but through their capacity to evoke mixed, layered, and sometimes contradictory responses. The affective ambivalence that cannot be easily articulated invites further repetition to engage with political jokes and to accumulate affect that forms a sense of connection.

These three features of ambiguity and ambivalence support the iterative cycles of political jokes, as users tend to interact with jokes more to express and explore ambivalence. Digital repetition thus sustains and expands affective communities (Zink, 2019), where political jokes operate as a way for users to negotiate meanings in the uncertain pandemic time and to connect with people who share ambivalence. In times of pandemic isolation and heavy censorship, bonding through affective ambivalence provides a form of collective care and healing (Hou, 2023; Yu et al., 2023; Zhang, 2006). The affective communities developed through jokes provide a space for sociopolitical commentary and can become latent work that cultivates networks and collective identities for future organizing (Baioud & Khuanuud, 2024; Ferrari, 2022). Through this framework, this article moves beyond conventional understandings of digital political humor as either subversive or trivial, instead arguing that ambiguity and consequential ambivalence are precisely what make it socially vital.

Ultimately, the findings challenge the idea that political humor operates as a straightforward form of protest or opposition. Instead, this article shows how ordinary people engage with political jokes in ways that embrace contradiction, fluidity, and ambiguity. By foregrounding the process of repetition of ambivalence in shaping political humor's affective and participatory dimensions, this study offers a perspective on how political jokes gain popularity in an authoritarian digital space. Moving forward, future research could explore how similar dynamics of ambiguity and repetition function in other highly mediated environments, further unpacking the ways ambivalence in humor shapes both contemporary political discourse and people's everyday lives in political moments.

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