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Situated impoliteness revisited: Blunt anti-epidemic slogans and conflicting comments during the coronavirus outbreak in China

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Abstract
In this paper, blunt slogans used in China’s health campaign against coronavirus are closely examined and the public’s conflicting comments on them are analyzed. These slogans, due to their extreme effectiveness in making the public comply with the health preventive measures suggested by the government, are called Yinghe or “hardcore” slogans by the Chinese people. Containing harsh and taboo language, they convey threats of death and disease, insults or negative evaluation, and harsh demands. Despite their impolite nature, “hardcore” slogans have received significantly more positive judgment than negative judgment, especially when they made their debut in rural areas in Henan, an agricultural province in China. Criticism towards these blunt slogans then gradually increased after their initial appearance. Plausible factors contributing to the change of judgment are analyzed. The public’s conflicting judgment regarding the impoliteness of the slogans may be related to the public’s different positioning across time and space. This study shows that impoliteness is a practice situated not only in discourse, genres, and institutions, but also in social, cultural, and political contexts. More attention should be paid to impoliteness in special social configurations (e.g., rural areas) and social emergencies, which not only contextualize a discourse event but also define it.

1. Introduction
Propaganda posters have attracted a wide range of attention from researchers around the world (Barnes, 2020; S. Landsberger, 1995; Landsberger, 2013; Li, 2018; Nowakowska et al., 2014; Powell and Wong, 1997; Pretorius, 2019; Ranta, 2020; Seidman, 2008). China has had a long history of employing propaganda posters. This practice was very prominent during the Great Leap Forward (1958) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) (Hanson, 2008), as a way to get political messages across, particularly to people in countryside. Although propaganda posters have subsided since the 1980s, the practice is still being used in China, not only in rural areas but also in urban centers outside of major cities. Some researchers have explored the propaganda posters in health campaigns in China, e.g., the epidemic prevention between 1962 and 1964 (Fang, 2014) and the health campaign against severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) in 2003 (Hanson, 2008). Despite the frequent study of these propaganda posters’ historical backgrounds, distinct features, implications, and artistic value, not much has been written about the situatedness of the posters and civilians’ reactions to them.

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In this study, I look into the situatedness and pragmatic features of a specific type of posters or banners in China’s health campaign against the coronavirus in 2020 and study civilians’ response to anti-epidemic slogans printed on the banners. These anti-epidemic slogans have distinct features from what Atkin (2001) termed “catchy slogans” in other health campaigns. Called 硬核标语 (yinghe biaoyu, literally translated as “hardcore slogans”) by the public, with 硬核 (yinghe) meaning “very powerful”, “sturdy”, and “very rigid” in Chinese contexts, this type of slogans was first observed in small towns and villages in Henan, an agricultural province in China, right after the shutdown of Wuhan city on Jan. 23, 2020. A large proportion of middle-aged and elderly residents were initially reluctant or uncooperative regarding the health preventive measure of wearing masks (Chen, 2020). For one reason, the seriousness of the coronavirus was not yet fully apprehended at this initial stage. For another reason, the effectiveness of masks to filter out a virus had been questioned earlier during SARS (Sin, 2016). It was under these circumstances that the blunt slogans were created to persuade the public to wear masks and stay home. Owing to their effectiveness, the use of these slogans quickly spread to many other places across China.

The blunt slogans were often phrased in language that was noteworthy due to the level of ‘relational work’ (Locher, 2008, 2013). For instance, one slogan that reads 不戴口罩就出门, 这个物种不是人(Going out without a mask makes you a bastard instead of a human being) displays severe criticism towards those failing to wear face masks in public. It can be understood as seriously face-aggravating to those readers who have not complied with the government’s suggestion. Another slogan that reads 烧不发说的话的人, 都是潜在在人民群众中的阶级敌人(Those hiding their fever are class enemies lurking among the people) contains a face-threatening act, since it directly downplays those people trying to hide their fever symptoms and addresses them with the term ‘class enemy’. This term was once heavily employed during the Cultural Revolution. With their impolite or face-aggravating features, the blunt slogans observed in rural areas differ significantly from other anti-epidemic slogans seen in large cities like Beijing and Guangzhou during the same period, which displayed courtesy and polite suggestions regarding preventive measures. They attracted tremendous attention from the public and brought about contentious discussion.

Throughout the analysis, I focus on the situatedness of impoliteness, i.e., the processing and evaluating of impolite meanings in discourse, genres, settings, and socio-political contexts. It aims to show that (im)politeness is situated not only culturally and socially, but also temporarily and spatially.

2. Situated impoliteness

Impoliteness, a thriving line of inquiry, has been the topic of extensive research (Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 1996, 2011; Culpeper and Hardaker, 2017; Kadar, 2017; Locher, 2011; Locher and Watts, 2008). According to Terkourafi (2008:70), impoliteness implies a face-threatening act, a violation of the conventionality relative to the context of occurrence, and the hearer’s attribution of the face-threatening intention to the speaker.2 The essential feature of impoliteness lies in its face-aggravating and offensive nature (Bousfield, 2010). Extant research primarily examines instances of impoliteness as speaker-oriented strategies (Bousfield, 2008), with insufficient attention to the recipient’s perspective, i.e. the hearer’s situated judgment of speakers’ utterances.

Impoliteness is situated. First, it is situated in socio-cultural contexts. The impact of socio-cultural contexts on impoliteness has been explored in a number of studies (Haugh, 2010; House, 2010; Kecskes, 2015, 2017; Mugford, 2018). An utterance or structure is neither inherently polite nor impolite, and judgment of its (im)politeness depends on the socio-cultural contexts and perception of the intention (Schnurr et al., 2007). Participants’ judgments of face-aggravating linguistic behaviors or the relevant inappropriateness are impacted by the cultural norms and social practices. Then, (im)politeness is situated through time and across cultural space, as has been argued by Watts (2003, 2005). However, it should be made clear that time doesn’t necessarily have to refer to time over generations or centuries, and space doesn’t have to refer to cultural space. Time can be as short as an event setting and space can encompass social and virtual spaces.

Furthermore, impoliteness is also situated in interactional contexts. Although impoliteness studies have examined both face-to-face or offline interaction (Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 1996, 2011) and online interaction (Blitvich, 2018; Fedriani, 2019; Locher, 2011; Parvaresh and Tayebi, 2018; Perelmutter, 2018; Vladimirou and House, 2018), the interplay between these two interactional contexts and participants’ situated judgment of impoliteness acts in the two interactional contexts is rarely discussed in literature. The online interaction is not completely isolated from or independent of offline interaction, in that the online interaction can sometimes be evoked by impoliteness in offline interaction and it is a continuum of the discussion and debate in offline interaction. Under such circumstances, building connections between the interpretation of impoliteness in online interaction and that in offline interaction is essential to understanding the situatedness of impoliteness.

The understanding of the notion “situated impoliteness” in this study builds on Davies, Haugh, and Merrison’s (2011) work on “situated politeness” and Locher’s (2011) preliminary use of the term “situated impoliteness.” Davies et al. (2011) use the notion “situated politeness” to disentangle the factors that are represented in and influence social actors’ behavior and

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1 硬核 (Yinghe) is a recent network buzzword deriving from the English word “hardcore”. In this sense, 硬核标语 can be translated as “hardcore slogan”. However, given the possible ambiguity of “hardcore slogan” in English, I decide to address 硬核标语 as “blunt slogans” or “blunt anti-epidemic slogans” in this study. However, I have to admit that “blunt” fails to capture the power of the word Yinghe (hardcore) in the Chinese context.

2 If the hearer recognizes the speaker’s face-threatening intention, it becomes rudeness, as has been argued by Terkourafi (2008).
judgment of politeness in a given social context. On the other hand, Locher (2011) employs the notion “situated impoliteness” to show the situated judgements by interactants with respect to the (in)appropriateness of relational work.

As to situated impoliteness, “(f)urther research is needed here to establish what linguistic behaviour is judged in what way by different social groups in situated interaction” (Locher, 2011: 193). This statement foregrounds the necessity of studying impoliteness in a particular situated social practice and the attention to the discursive clues of impoliteness out of the norms and expectations of different social groups. Different groups can have a different perception or interpretation of face-threatening acts. Swearing might be inappropriate in family contexts, especially in front of one’s grandmother or mother, but it might go unnoticed in the changing room of a hockey team (Locher 2011). Such situated interaction can be explained with Fairclough’s (1989) conceptualization of the three levels of social organization, i.e. situational, institutional, and societal. It indicates that the relevant situational contexts, institutional contexts and societal contexts all have an impact on impoliteness judgement.

Studies of situated impoliteness can be informed by an approach to identity and a discursive approach to (im)politeness, since both of them highlight the importance of practice and situatedness (Locher, 2011). Previous studies have shown that impoliteness can inform and be informed by interactants’ positioning/identity (Badarneh and Migdadi, 2018; Kim, 2011). Positioning/identity analyses look into participants’ interactional behaviors in relation to one another in the here-and-now interaction. They shed light on the cause and reasoning of an addresser’s impolite behaviors that threaten or damage the addressee’s face. Similarly, the addressee’s interpretation of impoliteness can be affected by their positioning/identity. The interplay between the addresser’s positioning/identity and the addressee’s positioning/identity also indicates the situatedness of impoliteness.

3. Data and procedure

In this study, data regarding the blunt slogans and the public’s comments on them were collected. All the data were open-access and available on the social networking site, Weibo. Relying on the Weibo search engine and using the key words “硬核标语” (“hardcore slogans”), I found 710 posts published between Jan. 24 and Feb. 12, 2020, i.e., twenty days within the first appearance of the blunt slogans. During this period, the blunt slogans were initially judged positively, but a change of judgment was observed near the end of this period, including criticism over the impolite and brutal nature of the blunt slogans. With the open criticism of the blunt slogans published in Reference News (a newspaper) on Feb. 14, the public’s shift of attitude from positive to negative became more apparent. Data from before Feb. 14 were free of the influence of the newspaper.

By going through these posts, I identified the twenty-two most frequently mentioned “hardcore” slogans3 that contained language with the potential to aggravate the face of addressees or cause damage to interpersonal relationships, such as threats or dirty talk. These blunt slogans, initially observed in rural areas in Henan province but quickly spread to other places outside the province, were all used by local governments to remind people of the importance of taking preventive health measures during the coronavirus outbreak in China. By examining the impoliteness strategies exhibited in these slogans, I then classified them into different categories and explored how each category of impoliteness is situated in various contexts.

As for the public’s reaction to the blunt slogans, I collected the comments below the posts in relation to the blunt slogans. Most posts displayed readers’ comments at the bottom. These comments generally suggested the social media users’ judg-

4. Blunt slogans and the public’s reaction

This section will start with a brief introduction of the twenty-two blunt slogans, and will consider to what extent these blunt slogans are impolite and situated in social, cultural, and political contexts. People’s conflicting comments on these slogans will then be presented to demonstrate the public’s judgment of impoliteness across time and space.

3 “Hardcore” slogans being presented or discussed by over three different posts are considered to be frequently mentioned.

4 https://www.sohu.com/a/369587772_99957125.
4.1. Blunt slogans with threats

A threat can be conceived as a speech act that “instills a belief that action detrimental to the other will occur” (Culpeper, 1996: 358). Speech acts such as threats, insults, and name-calling are considered conventionalized impolite ways of achieving offense (Culpeper, 2011; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2013). In the case of the blunt slogans, the explicitly mentioned detrimental action to occur includes death and serious disease. The blunt slogans with threats are practically strong orders and requests commanding people to stay home, quarantine, and wear masks; they run the risk of threatening the negative face of the hearers/readers. They strike a close association between personal emotion and public horror towards the coronavirus.

4.1.1. Blunt slogans with threats

These eleven slogans required the public to take actions such as wearing face masks (E01, E09, E10), paying no visits to friends and relatives (E02, E04, E05, E08), not concealing any symptoms of illness (E09, E10, E11), eating no game or wild animals5 (E06), and quarantining (E11). They threatened that if these actions were not properly taken, this would definitively lead to the death of the whole family and the survival only of a single dog in the household the following day.

| Slogan | English Translation |
|--------|---------------------|
| E01    | It is better to wear a mask than a ventilator. It is better to stay home than in the ICU (intensive care unit). |
| E02    | Returnees not kept in quarantine incur either the death of their loved ones or serious trouble. |
| E03    | Friends and relatives (E02, E04, E05, E08), not concealing any symptoms of illness (E03, E07), eating no game or wild animals (E06), and quarantining (E11). They threatened that if these actions were not properly taken, this would definitively lead to the death of the whole family and the survival only of a single dog in the household the following day. |
| E04    | Intentional concealment and taking no active precaution to quarantine oneself lead to dying without descendants. |
| E05    | Day exaggerated both the death rate of coronavirus and the progression of the illness. |
| E06    | Gathering together without masks results in your family’s crying over your death. |
| E07    | Returnees not kept in quarantine incur either the death of their loved ones or serious trouble. |
| E08    | Party happily today, and then wander joyfully in your cinerary casket. |
| E09    | Death and serious disease. The blunt slogans with threats are practically strong orders and requests commanding people to stay home, quarantine, and wear masks; they run the risk of threatening the negative face of the hearers/readers. They strike a close association between personal emotion and public horror towards the coronavirus. |

These eleven slogans required the public to take actions such as wearing face masks (E01, E09, E10), paying no visits to friends and relatives (E02, E04, E05, E08), not concealing any symptoms of illness (E03, E07), eating no game or wild animals5 (E06), and quarantining (E11). They threatened that if these actions were not properly taken, this would definitively bring about detrimental consequences, such as the death of the addressee (E01, E02, E03, E05, E06, E08), death of the addressee’s whole family (E04, E07), and serious illness or trouble (E09, E10, E11). Many of the slogans contained exaggeration in addition. The claim that visiting to friends and family today would lead to the death of the whole family and the survival only of a single dog in the household the following day exaggerated both the death rate of coronavirus and the progression of the illness.

The blunt slogans with threats were situated in not only Chinese culture, but also the coronavirus pandemic, both of which have had tremendous impact on subsequent evaluation of the blunt slogans. I will start with the cultural situatedness. If these slogans had not shown up during Chinese people’s most important cultural celebration of the year, i.e., the Spring Festival, some of them might have been seen as humorous or mock impoliteness. Humor is an important strategy in advertising and can also be used in public health campaigns (Schumacher, 2017). However, as these hardcore banners were hung alongside roads or in public areas on long pieces of red cloth, often with the signature of the local government in the bottom right corner (Figs. 1 and 2), they looked very formal and serious, leaving little room for humor. More importantly, it is extremely ominous to speak about death or disease during the Spring Festival in Chinese culture, as the Spring Festival is perceived as a time of blessing and an auspicious beginning of the year. Explicit mention of death is taboo and can present...
serious offense to the addressees in Chinese culture, since Chinese people tend to avoid talking about death or even pronouncing the sound of the word ‘death’. Therefore, situated in a culture in which public talk of death is avoided, the blunt slogans’ threats could instill feelings of uneasiness, ominousness, and even horror. Threats are thus powerful and manipulating linguistic devices (Limberg, 2008).

Second, these blunt slogans, with their unique linguistic features, were situated in the context of the coronavirus pandemic outbreak in China. As impolite or harsh as they may have seemed, they also elegantly displayed features of rhyming, conciseness, and poetic patterns. For instance, the slogan “今天聚会图热闹, 骨灰盒中乐逍遥” (Party happily today, and then wander joyfully in your cinerary casket) is divided into two parts by the comma, with each part containing seven characters and the end rhyming. This makes the slogan seem poetic in form, since it resembles the Seven-character Poetry of the Tang Dynasty. This slogan was only one of the many examples that were made creatively. Impoliteness is often seen in the literature as a “rhetorical strategy” (Ardila, 2019) or “discursive strategy” (Ladegaard, 2012), since it is repeatedly used in a similar pattern to achieve an intended function. Similarly, the threatening language or impoliteness in the blunt slogans could have been a rhetorical strategy adopted by the government to optimize their effectiveness or fulfill the health prevention function, if viewed from the perspective of the creators of the blunt slogans. This assumption was confirmed by an online comment refuting others’ criticism of the blunt slogans and remarking that villagers in rural areas would not have complied if the village cadre had talked in a more polite manner. Furthermore, those with experience of village life in China agreed with the remark by suggesting that villagers in rural areas, most of whom are poorly educated, would not have comprehended the seriousness of the issue unless they were yelled at. Politeness, therefore, seems to be the most minor concern in

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Some buildings in China purposely avoid the mention of fourth floor by referring to the fourth floor as 3A floor, since the number 4 is pronounced exactly the same as the character 死 (death).
communication in rural villages as long as the meaning is successfully conveyed. Appearing during the outbreak of coronavirus, a social emergency requiring an immediate response from society at all levels, the blunt slogans were not generally judged unfavorably, especially in the initial stages when fear of the coronavirus superseded concerns about (im)politeness.

Being situated in Chinese culture makes the blunt slogans with death threats look extremely unpleasant, whereas being situated in the coronavirus pandemic makes them attractive and appealing in terms of their effectiveness in persuading the public to take preventive measures. The government’s use of threats is not sanctioned, and threats are not considered appropriate in modern Chinese contexts, which makes them impolite in nature. However, the fear and horror instilled at the heart of the public by the blunt slogans encouraged the public to follow the required actions that were deemed extremely important by both the government and the majority of the public. The situativeness, in fact, made it difficult for the public to judge the (in)appropriateness or (im)politeness of the blunt slogans. “Threats are not impolite per se” (Limberg, 2008: 167); it is the evaluation by the recipients that matters. However, evaluation of threats may vary in social groups. Ruggiero and Lattin (2008) have shown that verbal aggressiveness such as threats, insults, and name-calling in the cultural context of competitive sports training is positively evaluated, owing to its effectiveness in driving athletes to perform. Similarly, positive evaluation of the blunt slogans was largely derived from their effectiveness. However, these positive values may be taken as negative values by others. I will return to the issue of conflicting evaluation in the next few sections.

4.1.2. Blunt slogans with insults and negative evaluation

Insults are offensive and abusive expressions that express disrespect and scorn, while negative evaluation is verbal aggressiveness that conveys strong disapproval of others’ behavior or character. Both the insults and negative evaluation displayed in the following blunt slogans can cause serious offense to addressees in the Chinese context.

E12 不戴口罩就出门，这个杂种不是人
Budai kouchao jiu chumen, zhege zazhong bu shi ren.
Going out without a mask makes you a bastard instead of a human being.

E13 带病回家，不孝子孙
Daibing huixiang, buxiao zisu.
Those who return to the village with illness are unfilial children.

E14 带病回家，不孝儿郎，传染病疫，要死天良
Daibing huixiang, buxiao erlang, chuanran bingyi, yao si tianliang.
Returning home with the virus is not filially piety, and those who infect their parents with the virus are utterly devoid of conscience.

E15 聚餐就是我死，拜年就是害人
Jucan jiushi zao si, baiyuan jiushi hai ren.
Having dinner together is courting death, and paying New Year’s visits is killing people.

E16 出来聚会的是无耻之辈，一起打麻将的是亡命之徒
Chulai jiuhui de shi wuchi zhi bei, yi qi da majiang de shi wangming zhi tu.
Those coming out for parties are shameless, and those playing mahjong together are desperate.

E17 串门就是自相残杀，聚会就是自寻短见
Chuanmen jiushi zi xiang cansha, juhui jiushi zi xun duanjian.
Going around is killing each other, and partying together is seeking one’s own destruction.

E18 现在请吃的饭都是鸿门宴
Xianzai qing de fan doushi hongmenyan.
The meals you are eating now are banquets at Hongmen where treachery is planned.

E19 湖北回来不报告的人都是定时炸弹
Hubei huilai bu baogao de ren doushi dingzhi zhandan.
People returning from Hubei province and not reporting (to the government) are time bombs.

E20 今年过年不串门，来串门的是敌人，敌人来了不开门
Jinnian guo nian bu chuanmen, lai chuanmen de shi dieren, dieren laile bu kaimen.
No visits during the Spring Festival. Those paying visits are enemies. Do not open the door when the enemies come.

E21 发烧不报的人，都是潜在人民群众中的阶级敌人
Fashao bushuo de ren, doushi qianzai renmin qunzhong de jijie dieren.
Those hiding their fever are class enemies lurking among the people.

E12 displays an insult, since it uses “bastard” to address civilians not wearing face masks in public. Calling someone a bastard in the slogan is intended to damage the face of civilians or to humiliate them. The name-calling in this example is different from a jocular insult or mock impoliteness discussed in other studies (Haugh and Bousfield, 2012; Ladegaard, 2012). Along with insults and name-calling, negative evaluation of others as unfilial (E13, E14) also seriously aggravates others’ face, since filial piety is highly valued in the Chinese context. In addition, negative evaluation of others’ behaviors as harmful and stupid (E15, E16, E17, E18, E19) is also a face-threatening act. The first eight of these ten slogans display insults towards or negative evaluation of a single individual.

The remaining two slogans (E20, E21) present a very negative evaluation of a collective body of people, regarding those paying New-Year’s visits and concealing their fever symptoms as class enemies. Calling others class enemies is a very serious offense in China. The terms “敌人” (enemy) in E20 and “阶级敌人” (class enemy) in E21 purposely classify those people failing to comply with government commands as enemies of the general population of civilians, and are reminiscent of another well-known slogan, “千万不要忘记阶级斗争” (never ever forget the class struggle), proposed in 1962 by Chairman Mao, the

8 Source: http://www.people.com.cn/GB/historic/0924/3144.html.
founding father of the People’s Republic of China. That slogan later led to the Cultural Revolution, the political movement that caused catastrophic results to the Chinese nation between 1966 and 1976. With the ending of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the Opening and Reform Policy in 1978, class struggle has rarely been mentioned since then. The cruel class struggle and hatred among different groups has been left behind as a fading memory for the majority of Chinese people. Class struggle has been said to have been substituted by disagreement among the Chinese people. Harmony has become the central theme in contemporary China. Situated in this socio-historical context, these two slogans, which run the risk of causing hatred and fissure among people, may result in a serious face-threat to the target addressees.

4.1.3. Blunt slogans with harsh demands

Requests can be delivered in a polite way by mitigating or redressing the possible face-threat. Requests become harsh demands when no mitigating or redressing effort is made and they are delivered in a rude way. This can result in a possible face threat to the target addressees.

E22 老实在家防感染，丈人来了也得撵
Laoshi zaijia fang ganran, zhangren laile ye de nian.

Behave yourself and stay home to prevent infection. Banish your father-in-law when he comes.

In Slogan E22, the words “老实在家” (behave yourself and stay home) tell the addressees to strictly follow the government request and stay home. Anyone who violates this request is considered to be “不老实” (ill-behaved), indicating the potential of cheating and lying. The word “撵” means ‘to banish’. The sentence “丈人来了也得撵” (banish your father-in-law when he comes) expresses the necessity, relentlessness, and harshness of driving out one’s father-in-law. Under normal conditions, special respect and hospitality should be shown to one’s father-in-law; however, in light of the coronavirus, courtesy or politeness became far less important than taking preventive health measures. The harsh demands in the blunt slogans reveal the urgency of the situation and the government’s intense need to restrict the movement of civilians so as to contain the pandemic. Civilians were expected to show complete compliance to the government demands and violate no orders even when their relationships with their family were at stake.

Blunt slogans with threats, insults, negative evaluation, and harsh demands as a whole represent a special form of risk or health communication used during the coronavirus pandemic in China. The urgency of the event and the seriousness of the coronavirus demanded that the village cadre come up with something easy enough for the poorly educated villagers to understand and something that could overwhelm the local villagers into taking action. The blunt slogans proved themselves to be very effective, with the villagers starting to stay home during the Spring Festival and wearing masks when leaving home. From this perspective, impoliteness in the blunt slogans has positive value in the prevention of the pandemic in China. The effectiveness of the blunt slogans can be largely ascribed to the fear of the coronavirus that they instilled, their invoking of traditional Chinese virtues such as filial piety, and their recollection of the memory of class struggle, i.e., noncompliance leading to one’s isolation and making one into an enemy of the public.

4.2. Conflicting comments about the blunt slogans

The 219 comments written at the end of the twenty randomly selected posts and articles are classified into positive comments (comments in general support of the blunt slogans), negative comments (comments generally against the blunt slogans) and unrelated/unclear comments (comments not relevant to the slogans or without clear evaluation of the slogans). Being a native speaker of Chinese and being familiar with Chinese culture, I was able to easily determine if a comment was positive or negative in most circumstances. On a few occasions when I was not certain due to either a lack of information or the paradoxical nature of a comment, I classified the comments as unclear. The proportion of each category is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Overall proportion of positive and negative comments on Weibo.

|                | Positive comments | Negative comments | Unrelated/unclear comments | Total |
|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|-------|
| Number         | 146               | 38                | 35                         | 219   |
| Proportion     | 66.7%             | 17.3%             | 16.0%                      | 100%  |

As shown in Table 1, about two-thirds of the comments (66.7%) were positive about the blunt slogans. There were significantly fewer negative comments. It is true that censorship is an important issue in China and that negative comments about the governments or institutions might be censored or removed. However, in the case of blunt slogans used in the health campaign against coronavirus, little or no censorship has been observed. No social media users posting comments mentioned that their previous comments or others’ comments had been removed. In addition, the overall positive attitudes towards the
blunt slogans were rather obvious, judging from the number of social media users who re-posted the related posts with a positive description. Many social media users might have recognized the harsh and inhumane nature of the blunt slogans, but they still eulogized them for being essential and effective. For example, QSW\(^9\) wrote the comment “简单粗暴，但有效” (simple and rude, but very effective).

The identities and positioning of the social media users posting the comments were usually revealed in the discourse. They could be broadly classified into two groups: those who saw the blunt slogans in the villages or towns where they were staying and those who didn’t, but saw pictures of the blunt slogans on social media. The first group of people, essentially the target addressees of the blunt slogans, had firsthand experience of the slogans. They positioned themselves as the informers and eyewitnesses of the blunt slogans and felt proud to share the great effects of the slogans. For instance, DTE remarked that “河南硬核封村，村里的标语。我们村的村民，今天开始不出门了” (Henan province shuts down the village in a hardcore way. These are the slogans in our village. Villagers are staying home without going out starting today).

The second group of people posting comments on social media were not eyewitnesses of the blunt slogans. After seeing pictures of blunt slogans posted by other witnesses, they generally expressed admiration and appreciation for their effectiveness in generating the desired actions to prevent the spread of coronavirus (see the following comments of Kris, DWX, and YBD). Their admiration for the blunt slogans was intensified by their own disappointment with the local preventive measures in their own cities or areas. Some of them wrote in the comments suggesting that their own cities should also use such blunt slogans. With rapid proliferation of the yinghe (hardcore) slogans in more and more places, the second group could later become eyewitnesses, also acquiring firsthand experience with the “hardcore” slogans.

Kris: 河南真是厉害啊！我们这啥时候能向河南学学哇。

_Henan province has done a very good job. I wonder when we can learn from Henan province._

DWX: 求求南京也赶紧这样搞吧……亲戚朋友还是该聚聚。

_I am begging Nanjing city to do the same (to erect “hardcore” banners) immediately. Relatives and friends are still gathering (in my city)._

YBD: 建议推广。

_I am suggesting that they (the “hardcore” slogans) should be promoted (in other places)._

In contrast to the widespread appreciation, 17.3% of the collected comments express criticism or strong dissatisfaction with these blunt slogans. Since the comments came from ten posts published between Jan. 24—30 (first period) and ten other posts published between Feb. 6—12 (second period), I calculated the number of positive and negative comments respectively in these two periods. As is shown in Table 2, the proportion of negative comments made in the second period is three times higher (28.6%) than that in the first period (7.0%). In other words, people gradually became more critical of the blunt slogans as time went on. The initial success of the health campaign in rural areas in late January after the yinghe (hardcore) slogans first appeared attracted ample praise. However, with the ending of the Spring Festival on Feb. 1, people slowly resumed work. By then, they had developed awareness about wearing masks whenever leaving home; therefore, the blunt slogans persuading people to stay home and wear masks were not as essential as they appeared to be in the initial stages.

**Table 2**

| Publication date of posts | Positive comments | Negative comments | Unrelated/unclear comments | Total |
|---------------------------|-------------------|------------------|---------------------------|-------|
| January 24—30             | 85 (74.6%)        | 8 (7.0%)         | 21 (18.4%)                | 114 (100%) |
| February 6—12             | 61 (58.1%)        | 30 (28.6%)       | 14 (13.3%)                | 105 (100%) |

Apart from the change in the state of emergency, another factor resulting in the change of the public's attitude may have been the public’s comparison between the blunt slogans used in China and the poetic inscriptions on items donated by Japan in early February. Inscribed on boxes were beautiful ancient Chinese poems, whose grace and elegance was compared by the public with the harshness and coarse nature of the blunt slogans. For instance, MDS made a comment on Feb. 11, saying:

日本人给人上了一堂又一堂的中国文化课，对照国内粗暴的标语和所谓硬核的口号，恐怕我们自己都不好意思说礼失求诸野，牛失求诸夷了吧。我们本身就已变成了野和夷！

_The Japanese have taught us many lessons about Chinese culture (with the poetic inscriptions). Compared with the rude and so-called hardcore slogans in China, I’m afraid that we’re all embarrassed to quote from ancient sayings that the loss of propriety and ceremonies in the court should be sought again in the countryside, whereas the loss of Chinese manners should be sought again in foreign countries. We Chinese have become wild and barbarian!_  

MDS’s remark about “the rude and so-called hardcore slogans in China” indicates his introspection on the blunt slogans as a result of a comparison between the harshness of Chinese blunt slogans and the elegance of inscriptions sent from Japan. He believes that the blunt slogans have made the Chinese people seem uncivilized and barbarian. Such introspection was largely

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\(^9\) All names of the social media users are pseudo names.
missing at the beginning of the health campaign. Owing to the emergency nature of the epidemic at that time, the public cared more about the effectiveness of the slogans instead of the politeness issues. When the majority of Chinese people had adopted the suggested preventive measures, an increasing number of people began to be concerned about the blunt and rude slogans becoming widespread in many places, criticizing the local governments for coming up with these harsh slogans:

AZB：要把这群土匪的头按在马桶里好好洗洗，让他们知道应该怎么和人民说话。

HYD：水平低是可以的，但肯定不是个例，悲哀的执行者。

HYH：阶级敌人，文革风火一点就着。

Class enemy! The fire of the Cultural Revolution can easily be lit up.

The above three comments were made on Feb. 9, Feb. 10, and Feb. 11, respectively. AZB, HYD, and HYH were strongly against the impolite and inappropriate language use of the yinghe (hardcore) slogans. AZB strongly criticized the staff working in the government and referred to them with the name ‘bandits’. HYD criticized the poor administration of the government. HYH implied that the term “class enemy” was really inappropriate, since it might cause another “Cultural Revolution” to “light up.” Similar reflection on the possible consequence of another “Cultural Revolution” was also found in a few other comments in the data. These comments displayed strong disapproval and disdain for the creators or designers of the blunt slogans.

Furthermore, social media users’ remarks about the connection between the blunt slogans and the “Cultural Revolution” demonstrate their worry and concern about the spread of the blunt slogans. When the yinghe (hardcore) slogans were first created, they were admired for their power of persuasion. However, as the number of yinghe slogans quickly multiplied in many places, these slogans were perceived to run the risk of instilling hatred and rudeness towards those failing to comply with the health preventive measures suggested by the authorities. If the collective memory of the Cultural Revolution were kindled, the impoliteness seen in these blunt slogans would become a political issue. These worries and concerns about the authorities’ harsh attitude towards civilians were intensified by the death of a doctor named Wenliang Li on Feb. 7, who was a whistle blower about the coronavirus in China but was silenced by the authorities. In addition to concern about the previously mentioned factors, those making negative comments were concerned about the legality of these blunt slogans. For instance, after seeing a banner that read “出门打断腿，还嘴打掉牙” (Break your legs if you go out, and break your teeth if you dare say no), LY criticized those creating and hanging the banner as “法盲” (a legal illiterate). These people making negative evaluations of the blunt slogans positioned themselves as the moral referees or intellectuals in Chinese society. They had expected a smaller “power distance” (Hofstede et al., 2010: 31) between the authorities and civilians and more harmony in society.

People’s conflicting judgments towards the blunt slogans indicates that impoliteness is temporarily and spatially situated. When the blunt slogans were first used to fight against the coronavirus outbreak in China, a much higher proportion of people made positive comments about them. With the passage of the time and the spread of these blunt slogans across China, people started to be more concerned about their rude and harsh nature as well as the potential political consequences of another Cultural Revolution. Time has thus had an impact on people’s evaluations. In addition, one’s evaluation of the slogans as appropriate or inappropriate (rude or uncivilized) was also related to one’s positioning in space, i.e. being in the villages and towns or being in cities. The blunt slogans used in China’s health campaign against the coronavirus originated from rural areas in Henan province, one of the largest agricultural provinces in China and a neighboring province close to Wuhan. Many people leaving Wuhan before the city shutdown returned to these rural areas in Henan. The impending risks of spreading the coronavirus in the rural villages were immense. Online users living in these rural areas and who were familiar with the local culture of the areas were in strong support of the blunt slogans. For example, Mr0Shan commented that “有必要，在农村不说点狠的这帮人觉得你小题大做” (Highly necessary. If you don’t speak in a very tough and serious way, these people in the villages will think that you are merely making a fuss). This remark asserts that speaking in a polite way or a soft tone is ineffective in the countryside. However, it might have been difficult for those living in cities far away from Wuhan and not perceiving any impending risks of infection to comprehend the harshness and impoliteness of the “hardcore” slogans. The different positioning of interactants from many spaces and places collide, resulting in chaos, misunderstanding and misinterpretation.

5. Discussion

Current literature has emphasized the importance of addressers’ intentions (Bousfield, 2008) and addressees’ evaluations (Locher, 2011) in impoliteness studies. However, the present study has demonstrated the insufficiency of these two variables in (im)politeness studies. In the case of the blunt slogans, despite their harsh and rude language, the authorities largely meant well, with the good intention of containing the coronavirus and protecting the health of the general public. The direct addressees of these blunt slogans, i.e., people living in the rural areas, had a very positive evaluation of these slogans, or at least in the initial stages. The question arises as to the (im)polite nature of these blunt slogans. Terkourafi (2008) argues that expressions or utterances that are face-threatening to interactants and are not conventionalized relative to their occurrence can be perceived as impolite or rude. These blunt slogans were definitely not conventionalized and they ran the risk of threatening both the positive face and negative face of target addressees, or even causing serious offense. As has been argued by Bousfield (2010), impoliteness is of a face-aggravating and offensive nature. The blunt slogans did cause serious offense to a number of Chinese people, especially in later stages. In this sense, they are impolite.
However, the impoliteness in these blunt slogans was positive in some aspects. Situated in an urgent situation, i.e., the coronavirus outbreak in China, the blunt slogans effectively helped with China’s fight against the coronavirus. They displayed rhyming, conciseness, and poetic patterns. These blunt slogans, largely situated in remote areas and small towns, constituted the local authorities’ special way of communicating health risks to the villagers and civilians who had little education. They were blunt, sensational, and easy to understand. From this perspective, impoliteness might be viewed as an active and positive reaction, e.g., to urgent health situations. This resonates with Parvaresh and Tayebi’s (2018) argument, which views impoliteness in a more positive way, i.e., as a reaction against social action that is deemed undesirable.

The present study has examined (im)politeness as a cultural phenomenon and considered the distinction between rural and urban settings. The blunt slogans discussed in this study were closely related to the cultural practices of rural areas. Related studies have demonstrated that there are cultural-specific judgments of impoliteness (Spencer-Oatey and Kadar, 2016; Zhao and Ran, 2019). In addition, there is heterogeneity within cultural groups (Mills, 2009). As the analysis in the previous section has shown, judgment of impoliteness varies among social media users in rural areas and those in urban settings. They have different expectations for (in)appropriateness.

The present study has also demonstrated the importance of interaction and dynamic perspectives in impoliteness studies. As Culpeper and Hardaker (2017) have argued, impoliteness is constructed in the interaction. Interactions are made up of different participants. Participants’ evaluation or judgment can be influenced by their positioning and identity. Taking a discursive approach and positioning approach to impoliteness can generate insightful findings. Many studies have looked into the impact of socio-cultural contexts on impoliteness (Haugh, 2010; House, 2010; Kecskes, 2015, 2017; Mugford, 2018). However, as has been shown in this study, participants from the same culture can have the opposite evaluation and judgment regarding impoliteness, in this case of the blunt slogans. A more dynamic and nuanced approach to impoliteness is therefore required.

As this study has demonstrated, impoliteness is situated culturally, socially, historically and politically. The slogans, with their harsh language, were perceived to be a different genre of slogans, i.e., yinghe (hardcore) slogans. Employed by local governments in the health campaign against the coronavirus, they could be perceived as one component of the institutional discourse. They would thus not have appeared if it had not been for the social and health emergency of the pandemic. This study shows how multiple levels of impoliteness derive from “situational, institutional, and societal levels” (Fairclough, 1989: 166). The explicit mention of death and disease during such an important festival as the Spring Festival and in a culture so hesitant to talk about death made the yinghe (hardcore) slogans very abnormal. The threats, insults and negative evaluation all had connections to Chinese culture, society, and history and had unique Chinese characteristics. The impoliteness of the blunt slogans was also politically situated. China is said to be a country of large power distance (Hofstede et al., 2010). Both the slogans’ impoliteness and their success reflect the power distance between the authorities and civilians. The positive comments as well as the welcoming gestures in general indicate people’s acceptance of the autocratic leadership to a certain extent. However, the absence of these blunt slogans in large cities might also indicate that a more equalitarian relationship is expected between the authorities and citizens in cities.

Furthermore, impoliteness is fluidly situated across time and space. Just as Blommaert (2010: 34) argues, all social acts or events “develop simultaneously in space and time.” The impoliteness in blunt slogans was initially perceived to be used strategically, creatively, and appropriately by not only those in Henan province but also many others in other provinces anxiously waiting for the local authorities to take actions to fight against the coronavirus. However, with the spread of blunt slogans in various places and the alleviation of the coronavirus pandemic in most parts of the country, the impoliteness of the slogans became a problem. The impoliteness in these blunt slogans should not be perceived as mock or ludic impoliteness, since mock impoliteness is superficially impolite behavior that does not result in an intentional face threat to interactants (Culpeper, 1996; Schnurr et al., 2007). However, in this case, a portion of the public in the present study did feel the intentional face threat with the use of the slogans. People’s different positioning, resulting in conflicting judgments also indicates the situatedness of impoliteness. Impoliteness is situated on a continuum of appropriateness and inappropriateness, affected by both time and space.

The present study has thus also raised some questions for studies of moral orders and impoliteness (Haugh, 2013, 2015; Parvaresh and Tayebi, 2018; Zhao and Ran, 2019). Moral orders are conceived to be associated with (im)politeness evaluation. In that respect, the explicit mention of death and the cursing of people in the blunt slogans go against the moral orders in China. Nevertheless, the blunt slogans received a large amount of praise. The failure of moral orders in the case of blunt slogans might be due to the urgent nature of the pandemic as a social emergency. It is also possible that some moral orders in China are changing, leaving young social media users less frightened of openly discussing death. The diachronic study of moral orders in relation to (im)politeness is necessary to provide further insights.

Finally, the advent of the internet has made possible interactions across time and space, posing new challenges for the study of (im)politeness and demanding more attention to the online contexts. Extant research has generally examined impoliteness either in offline interaction (Bousfield, 2008; Culpeper, 1996, 2011) or online interaction (Blitzvich, 2018; Fedriani, 2019; Locher, 2011; Parvaresh and Tayebi, 2018; Perelmutter, 2018; Vladimiroiu and House, 2018). The interplay between these two interactional contexts and participants’ situated judgment of (im)politeness has not received much attention. As is shown in the present study, participants coming from different spaces and making judgments at different times can interact on social media, resulting in dynamic views and drastic debates.
6. Conclusion

The present study, by analyzing twenty-two blunt slogans with harsh and impolite language and over two hundred comments from twenty posts in relation to the blunt slogans, has demonstrated the situatedness of the impoliteness in the blunt slogans. The blunt slogans, widely used in many small towns and rural areas in China during the health campaign against the coronavirus, displayed threats, insults, negative evaluation and harsh demands that were situated in the cultural, social, historical and political contexts. Moreover, the analysis suggests that about two-thirds of the comments were positive and that the blunt slogans were largely welcome. The public’s general welcoming gesture of the impoliteness in the blunt slogans can be ascribed to not only the slogans’ effectiveness in the prevention of the spread of the coronavirus, but also people’s acceptance of the autocratic leadership and high power distance to a certain extent. Furthermore, people’s evaluation was affected by both their positioning in time and in space. The positioning of oneself as a moral referee or intellectual may have led to viewing the blunt slogans as very rude and inappropriate, whereas the positioning of oneself as a common citizen anxiously waiting effective actions to be taken would have led to reaching the opposite judgment.

This provides support to Kim’s (2009) argument that the dyadic, synchronic, and cross-sectional model of (im)politeness might be too simplistic and idealized. Spencer-Oatey (2005: 97) notes that “(im)politeness is an evaluative label that people attach to behavior, as a result of their subjective judgments about social appropriateness.” This remark says nothing about diachronic change in the subjective judgments. A diachronic perspective toward impoliteness is an important complement to examining synchronic judgments. Impoliteness is fluid instead of static. The subjective judgments of impoliteness can vary among people from the same culture, depending on how they position themselves.

This study has only been able to explore the blunt anti-epidemic slogans and comments about them on social media. There were no interviews with local residents of the areas where the blunt slogans were used. Quite a few comments about the blunt slogans asserted that it was more effective to get things done using rudeness and impoliteness than politeness in the rural areas in China. More research is needed to explore impoliteness in these areas. In addition, more attention needs to be paid to social emergencies and their interaction with situational, social, cultural, and political contexts. This resonates with Ladegaard’s (2012) argument that the socio-pragmatic norms of the micro- and macro-context may account for why subordinates accept impoliteness and why demeaning discourses are not directly challenged.

Declaration of competing interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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