

Covid-19 Care Circuits:

The Chinese Transnational State, Its Diaspora, and Beyond

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the notions, politics, and practice of care that have characterised the transnational Chinese state during the Covid-19 pandemic. Drawing on policy and media analyses, participant observation, and qualitative interviews with 21 Chinese people in the Netherlands, the paper maps out three care circuits: from the diaspora to China, from China to the diaspora, and from China to the world. The findings show how the pandemic has offered a stage for emotional ties, patriotism, and moral responsibility to be played out, cultivated, and contested. These in turn have an impact on the economic and political agendas of the transnational Chinese state.

KEYWORDS: care, China, transnational state, diaspora-homeland relationship, Covid-19, the Netherlands.

Introduction

“The Chinese Community in Zimbabwe Actively Make Donations to Wuhan.”¹

“Chinese Embassy Provides Health Packs to Chinese Students in Britain.”²

“Spotlight: As China Recovers from Covid-19 Blow, Chinese Rush to Europe’s Rescue.”³

The three news headlines above illustrate some of the care flows that marked the changing contours of the transnational Chinese state in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic.⁴ When the pandemic began in Wuhan, Overseas Chinese, voluntarily or mobilised by the Chinese state, crowdfunded to send medical supplies to the vulnerable homeland. As the pandemic panned out globally, the Chinese state, assuming the role of a benevolent motherland, evolved to become a source of care for its diaspora. “Corona care” was also quickly built into China’s international cooperation agenda. The Chinese practised “coronavirus diplomacy” through delivering health care materials and personnel to friendship states in need. The shifting nature and directionality of care offers an analytical lens through which the relationships between the Chinese transnational state, the Chinese diaspora, and China’s partner states can be examined.

This paper offers a timely account of the three aforementioned intersecting care circuits, with the aim of analysing China’s politics and practice of care and control during the extraordinary time of the pandemic. Conceptually, the paper engages with the evolving debate on diaspora-homeland relationships, with a focus on the geographies of care. As illustrated in the following, the pandemic has

offered a stage for emotional ties, patriotism, and moral responsibility to be played out, cultivated, and contested in different temporal-spatial contexts. These reflect and in turn redraw the economic and political agendas and practices of the transnational Chinese state. Furthermore, by elaborating on the three corona care circuits, I link two academic debates that are commonly treated in isolation, namely that on homeland state and the diaspora, and that on geopolitics and diplomacy.

The remainder of the paper is organised into four sections. It begins with a conceptual discussion of care in diaspora-homeland relationships, with a focus on the Chinese case. A description of the research methodology then follows. The third section maps out and analyses the three care circuits. Finally, the paper concludes with some implications of this study.

Care in diaspora-homeland relationships

This paper builds on a long-standing scholarship on the complex relationships between diaspora and the homeland.⁵ In the last two

1. Chinese embassy in Zimbabwe, “The Chinese Community in Zimbabwe Actively Make Donations to Wuhan,” 12 March 2020, http://zw.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwdt/202003/t20200312_6426529.htm (accessed on 10 December 2021).
2. “Chinese Embassy Provides Health Packs to Chinese Students in Britain,” *Xinhuanet.com* (新華網), 25 March 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/25/c_138914720.htm (accessed on 10 December 2021).
3. “Spotlight: As China Recovers from Covid-19 Blow, Chinese Rush to Europe’s Rescue,” *Xinhuanet.com* (新華網), 26 March 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/26/c_138916938.htm (accessed on 10 December 2021).
4. This paper was drafted at the end of 2021. The Covid-19 pandemic has taken different turns across the world since then. These developments are not part of our analysis.
5. Some classic works include those of Safran (1991), Tölölian (1991), Gilroy (1993), and Brah (1996).

decades, the notions of “diaspora for development” and “diaspora strategies” have gained currency in politics, policies, and academia (Ragazzi 2014; Leung 2015; Boyle, Kitchin, and Ancien 2016; Njikang 2020). Diaspora strategies refer to the calculated efforts the homeland state makes to create and maintain connections with its diaspora for development and nation-building purposes. While these state strategies have become more common and intensified in the last two decades, it should be stressed that contributions by diasporas to their homeland through, among others, remittances, philanthropy, and volunteerism have always characterised diaspora-homeland relationships.

In his review paper, Cohen (2017) offers his analysis of the expanding scholarship on diaspora strategies in recent years. Among other observations, he underlines the common instrumental and utilitarian nature of the strategies. That is, the diaspora is predominantly targeted by their homeland state for the economic, political, and/or cultural resources that they can potentially contribute. Indeed, remittances, diaspora investments, and trade links have become a lifeline for many “home” economies. Beyond money, the diaspora is also a source of knowledge, skills, and networks. Politically, diaspora populations are solicited for their contribution in nation-building by the homeland states and opposition parties (Waterbury 2010). Globally, diaspora populations are also tapped to strengthen the homeland states’ “soft power,” which denotes the ability of a state to influence and lead other states and non-state actors without exercising hard force (Nye 2008). Here, diasporas can serve as cultural ambassadors, creating a cultural presence and upholding national pride away from the homeland (Dickinson 2017). As the utilitarian perspective in homeland-diaspora engagement has been promoted widely in national and international policy circles, it has met criticism. Ho, Boyle, and Yeoh (2015) caution against state-centred exploitative and selective diaspora strategies (Mullings 2011; Hickey 2015), which could eventually damage their relationships with the diaspora. They advocate instead “diaspora economies of care” in which resource transfers should be multidirectional practices in the pursuit of reciprocity and mutual interest sustained by emotional, moral, and service aspirations.

Homeland-diaspora engagements in the contemporary Chinese case reflect, to a large extent, the utilitarian approach. China’s success in harnessing the diaspora has often been considered best practice for other diaspora states.⁶ Different segments of the diaspora have been courted by the Chinese state since the implementation of the Open Door Policy in 1978. While the diaspora was initially lured mainly for investment and industrial knowhow to push industrialisation in the 1970s and 1980s (Smart and Hsu 2004), the state moved its target to highly-skilled, scientific, and professional Overseas Chinese in the 1990s (Leung 2015; Liu and van Dongen 2016). The knowledge diaspora is considered a key ingredient for the development of innovative industries, novel technologies, and new industrial structures needed to realise the “China Dream.” Not only is the diaspora lured to bring resources back to China, it can also play a role in strengthening China’s soft power overseas, which is also needed to realise this ambitious “Dream.” The Chinese state engages in diplomacy through the diaspora (Ho and McConnell 2019) intensively in order to advance its political agenda in the international realm. Thunø (2020) asserts that the diaspora, as “public

diplomats,” is “socialised” to support and promote China’s foreign affairs, political system, and national image.

While it is clear that the Chinese state has strategically nurtured, governed, enticed, and harvested selective segments of its diaspora (Leung 2015), scholars have underlined the active role of the diaspora. Far from being passive subjects to be leveraged by the almighty motherland, members of a diaspora, as a heterogeneous group, have their own agendas while engaging (or not) with the homeland state (Ho 2020; Chen 2021). Members of a diaspora can engage out of patriotism, or for a wider range of changing and unevenly distributed socioeconomic resources or political rights assigned by the homeland state. Such benefits can take forms ranging from repatriation in times of crises (such as wars or the pandemic), political citizenship, voting rights, labour market access, and investment opportunities, to support for diaspora educational, cultural, political, and business organisations.

Further to linking utilitarianism and care – rather than seeing them as opposites, the intersection between care and control should also be underlined while examining Chinese state-diaspora relationships. In their recent work, Ceccagno and Thunø (2022) provide a deeper and updated conceptualisation of the Chinese state in exercising control over its diaspora populations via institutional, economic, and technological means. Focusing on the situation in Italy, the authors offer a critical analysis on the way the Chinese state transformed the Covid-19 pandemic health crisis into a “geo-political opportunity for transnational nation-building” by way of controlling and caring for its diaspora through extensive use of social media technologies. Beyond the digital sphere, recent evidence has shown that the Chinese diaspora state has increased its “on the ground” presence overseas. “Overseas service centres” have been set up in dozens of countries to provide services to Chinese abroad. Covid-19-related travel restrictions were named by the Chinese state as the reason for such establishments. They should provide care to Chinese citizens abroad such as free eyesight, hearing, and physical examinations that are necessary, for instance, for renewal of their Chinese driver’s license. These centres are, however, suspected or accused of performing control, crackdown, or dispersion work for the Chinese state.⁷

By mapping out the evolving circuits of care that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic, this paper offers empirical updates to this evolving conceptual debate about the Chinese state-diaspora relationship. It problematises seemingly dichotomous notions such as “making use of” and “taking care of,” care vis-à-vis control, care-giver vis-à-vis care-receiver. In turn, it contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the logic, nature, and workings of the Chinese transnational state.

Methodology

This paper is based on qualitative research that examined the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Chinese people in the Netherlands. Our analysis draws on (i) content analyses of Chinese

6. International Organization for Migration, “Global Best Practices in Diaspora Engagement: Lessons for Armenia,” 2021, <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/global-best-practices-in-diaspora-engagement.pdf> (accessed on 25 November 2022).

7. Safeguard Defenders, “110 Overseas: Chinese Transnational Policing Gone Wild,” 29 October 2022, <https://safeguarddefenders.com/en/110-overseas> (accessed on 25 November 2022).

official speeches and policy documents, major Chinese and global news reports, and user-generated social media posts, (ii) semi-structured interviews, (iii) participant (online) observation, and (iv) secondary data on transfers of Covid-related aid. Together with my research assistant, who is a Chinese recent graduate from a Dutch university, I checked for narratives and practices of care, both in material (such as the flows of hygiene and medical materials) and symbolic terms (as in how care is being narrated and mobilised in a sentimental way).

In total, we conducted interviews with 21 (12 female and 9 male, self-identified) Chinese people. They ranged between 21 and 29 years old. Fourteen participants were students, three recent graduates and four working in the Netherlands. Most participants (19 out of 21) were living in culturally diverse cities such as Utrecht, Rotterdam, and Amsterdam. The first research participants were approached through the researchers' personal networks and then extended with a snowball sampling method by which research participants recommended other potential respondents. Most interviews were conducted online via Zoom or WeChat (conforming to Dutch Covid-19 regulations), with three conducted face-to-face. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and transcribed, with selected quotes translated into English for this paper. To further gain insights into the lived experiences among Chinese beyond our sample and to situate their perspectives in the broader field, we examined narratives shared by diaspora Chinese users on news and social media. We also conducted intensive online (participant) observation on WeChat. While utmost efforts were made to collect diverse views, our findings are highly contextualised. They cannot be interpreted as a generalisation for the whole Chinese diaspora, or even a representation of all Chinese students and recent graduates, in the Netherlands.

Our data collection was conducted in three phases – (i) May and June 2020, (ii) October 2020, and (iii) June 2021 – in the course of the Covid-19 pandemic. By following the development of the pandemic with our research participants, our data capture their lived experiences in changing positionalities, namely as donors, care receivers, and diaspora Chinese in the “Global China” era.

Care circuit I: Donations from the diaspora to China

In the early phase of the Covid-19 outbreak in China, the country witnessed an unprecedented shortage of medical supplies (Kokudo and Sugiyama 2020). While the Chinese state made every effort to restore and enhance the productive capacity of medical supplies, support from overseas played a significant role in the alleviation of the sudden crisis. According to the State Council Information Office (*guowuyuan xinwenban* 國務院新聞辦), 62 countries and seven international organisations had made donations to China by 2 March 2020.⁸

Besides international aid from other countries, the Chinese diaspora also sent in emergency medical supplies. While it is not unique for the Chinese diaspora to support its motherland in times of crises – there have been, for instance, numerous incidents of (natural) disaster relief – the role of the Chinese state in motivating these care flows deserves attention. In January 2020, the Wuhan

municipal government issued an official notice implying the acceptance of overseas donations. The notice explained the procedures and necessary documents for charitable medical supply donations from abroad.⁹ One day later, the All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (*Zhonghua quanguo guiguo Huaqiao lianhehui* 中華全國歸國華僑聯合會, hereinafter *Zhongguo qiaolian* 中國僑聯) published a proposal to mobilise the diaspora to “dedicate their love and strength” to combat the Covid-19 pandemic.¹⁰ The appeal called for donations of money and materials, especially medical face masks, protective clothing, goggles, and disposable gloves. It explained relevant policies and important contact details to optimise the transport of medical material, which was complicated due to the lockdown and complex control procedures. By the end of January 2020, China Customs and major Chinese courier companies implemented special practices to prioritise the shipment and transfer of overseas medical supplies. China Customs set up channels dedicated to medical supplies, where simplified procedures of customs release were implemented to speed up customs clearance.¹¹ Courier companies chartered additional international cargo flights and reduced shipment costs for donations to Wuhan.¹² This infrastructure facilitated the diaspora's delivery of care to their homeland.

There were three types of diaspora donors: (i) transnational companies, (ii) not-for-profit diaspora organisations, and (iii) private individuals. Chinese transnational corporations leveraged their business connections with medical producers and along the supply chains to procure and transport medical materials speedily to the Covid-19 hotspots in China.¹³ Not-for-profit organisations such as chambers of commerce and hometown associations

8. The State Council Information Office 國務院新聞辦, “國新辦舉行抗擊疫情國際合作有關情況發佈會” (*Guoxinban juxing kangji yiqing guoji hezuo youguan qingkuang fabuhui*, Press conference on international cooperation to fight Covid-19), 5 March 2020, www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/xwfbfh/wqfbh/42311/42642/index.htm (accessed on 10 October 2021).
9. “關於用於新型冠狀病毒肺炎疫情防控和治療的進口捐贈物資辦理通關手續的公告” (*Guanyu yongyu xinxing guanzhuang bingdu feiyang yiqing fangkong he zhiliao de jinkou juanzeng wuzi banli tongguan shouxu de gonggao*, Notice on customs clearance procedures for imported materials donated for the prevention and control of novel coronavirus), *Gov.cn* (中國政府網), 25 January 2020, www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-01/25/content_5472123.htm (accessed on 10 October 2021).
10. All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese 中國僑聯, “中國僑聯關於號召海內外僑胞為打贏‘新型冠狀病毒感染的肺炎’防控阻擊戰捐贈款物的倡議書” (*Zhongguo qiaolian guanyu haozhao hainei waiqiaobao wei daying ‘xinxing guanzhuang bingdu ganran de feiyang’ fangkong juzhuan juanzeng kuanwu de changyishu*, Calling on Chinese diaspora for donations to win the combat against Covid-19), 26 January 2020, www.chinaqi.org/n1/2020/0126/c419643-31562524.html (accessed on 10 October 2021).
11. “海關總署發出通知要求全國海關全力保障疫情物資快速通關” (*Haiguan zongshu fachu tongzhi yaoqiu quanguo haiguan quanli baozhang yiqing fangkong wuzi kuaisu tongguan*, The General Administration of Customs issued a notice requiring China Customs to ensure the rapid customs clearance of pandemic prevention and control materials), *Gov.cn* (中國政府網), 28 January 2020, https://china.gov.cn.admin.kyber.vip/xinwen/2020-01/28/content_5472655.htm (accessed on 10 October 2021).
12. “海外僑胞同心‘戰疫’,快遞企業打通捐助物資運輸通道” (*Haiwai qiaobao tongxin ‘zhanyi’, kuaidi qiye datong juanzhu wuzi yunshu tongdao*, Overseas Chinese work together to “fight the pandemic,” and express delivery enterprises open up transportation channels for donated materials), *Gov.cn* (中國政府網), 29 January 2020, www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-01/29/content_5472987.htm (accessed on 10 October 2021).
13. GongmaFay244962 (拱媽Fay244962), “ABM捐獻500萬物資給武漢” (*ABM juanxian 500 wan wuzi gei Wuhan*, ABM donated 5 million medical materials to Wuhan), *Xiaohongshu* (小紅書), 1 February 2020, <https://www.xiaohongshu.com/web-login/canvas?redirectPath=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.xiaohongshu.com%2Fdiscover%2Fitem%2F5e357cd0000000001002b26> (accessed on 10 October 2021).

collected donations (mostly) for their hometowns to help their kinship communities and local medical institutions. Individual donors varied from wealthier migrants, who made huge donations (e.g., 100,000 face masks)¹⁴ to ordinary migrants, such as students, who contributed small amounts. When the shortage of medical supplies in China became a heated topic in the Chinese and international media, the caring Chinese diaspora quickly exhausted such supplies worldwide.¹⁵ Lin (27, female) shared the challenges she encountered in getting masks:

Lin: I had money but it was no use. The most difficult thing was to find masks. When the initial outbreak emerged in China, the Chinese here rushed to buy masks to assist their families back home or prepare for the possible pandemic in Europe. Not to mention medical face masks, even normal ones were not available on the market-shops, pharmacies, online shopping sites, anywhere. So, I accessed many WeChat groups developed for face mask donations. First, I joined one founded by students in Utrecht and then someone in the group invited me to other groups. I remember I was in five or six groups dedicated to donations of face masks and other supplies back then and the notifications never stopped.

Researcher: What did you talk about in these WeChat groups?

Lin: Updates on possible sources. We also discussed the specific quality a face mask or other supplies should have to be accepted by hospitals in Wuhan. So we would be all on the same page while searching. Also updates on relevant policies the government announced so that we could donate in the right and efficient way. (June 2021, Utrecht)

Besides scouting and donating medical supplies, the Chinese diaspora was also engaged in voluntary work in administrating the donations, inspecting the quality of the supplies, and organising transportation. We asked our interviewees why they engaged in this care circuit. Lin said:

Because I'm Chinese. I couldn't feel sadder when watching the tragic videos in Wuhan. I cried a lot. A donation was the only help we could give to the motherland from abroad. (...) Also seeing the groups' enthusiasm and faith in carrying out the donations, I felt very moved and also motivated. I haven't felt such strong togetherness since I came to the Netherlands. (June 2021, Utrecht)

Lin's sentiment was extensively shared among our research participants. Her story illustrates how small donors teamed up to fulfil their philanthropic and patriotic duties collectively, and in turn strengthened solidarity among themselves. The health crisis in the distant homeland created a context for the diaspora to network and to care for each other. Our finding is in line with Wang and Tao's (2021) argument that the global pandemic has given China an opportunity to stimulate patriotism and nationalism. Receiving the rapid and generous diaspora aid, institutions and organisations at the central and local levels in China publicly expressed their gratitude and pride.¹⁶ This, in turn, fuelled a sense of patriotism and moral responsibility among many in the diaspora. The diaspora community did not only support each other in performing their care duties as compatriots in

diaspora; they also shared support and solidarity at times when Covid-19-related racialisation became a stress factor as experienced by many of our research participants (Leung et al. 2023).¹⁷

Diaspora philanthropy is neither new nor uniquely Chinese. The power of digital social media has, however, added a new dimension. In particular, the multifunctional WeChat app played a crucial role in facilitating communication among potential donors, publicising donation initiatives, and coordinating online services such as payments, aid tracking, and Q&As. While the links between WeChat and the Chinese state, and the power of the app in commerce and surveillance in China have drawn scholarly attention (Harwit 2017; Plantin 2019), less reflection has been made on its role in advancing the reach of the Chinese transnational state to its diaspora. The pandemic has shown that digital practices among diaspora Chinese with, for instance, WeChat can nurture solidarity, cultivate a sense of belonging, and inspire collaboration. While not a given, a heightened sense of Chineseness can strengthen diaspora-homeland relationships (Wang and Tao 2021; Leung et al. 2023). The diverse and convenient features of these social media apps bridge physical distances enjoyably. It seems only logical that such digital services will, or have already, become a strategic tool for the Chinese state to court and influence its diasporic populations.

Care circuit II: From the Chinese state to the diaspora

The tide of the pandemic changed quickly. In March 2020, the Covid-19 virus began spreading rapidly worldwide while the situation in China appeared to be under control – until the surge of the Omicron variant in March 2022. The Chinese state began to assume a benevolent role, providing aid to its diaspora populations. In the spring of 2020, the Chinese government sent chartered flights to repatriate Chinese citizens from countries severely hit by the pandemic. These actions were organised by the vulnerable-first principle. Minors aged under 18 who did not have guardians in the host country and other needy individuals such as older people were prioritised. In March 2020, nine chartered flights were sent to pick up 1,457 Chinese citizens,¹⁸ children,

14. All-China Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese 中國僑聯, “赤子丹心, 風雨同路: 海外華人華僑捐資助物同抗疫” (*Chizi danxin, fengyu tonglu: Haiwai Huaren Huaqiao juanzi juanwu tong kangyi*, Overseas Chinese donate money and materials to fight the pandemic), 6 February 2020, www.chinaql.org/n1/2020/0206/c431599-31574737.html (accessed on 10 October 2021).

15. “歐洲疫情下的中國留學生: 曾捐口罩的人現最缺口罩” (*Ouzhou yiqing xia de Zhongguo liuxuesheng: Cengjuan kouzhao de ren xian zuique kouzhao*, Chinese students under the pandemic in Europe: Those who have donated masks are the most in need of masks), *Uhomes.com*, 5 March 2020, <https://m.uhomes.com/news/8382.html> (accessed on 10 October 2021).

16. “海外華僑華人: 攜手互助, 共抗疫情” (*Haiwai Huaqiao Huaren: Xieshou huzhu, gongkang yiqing*, Overseas Chinese: Together, we fight against the pandemic), *China Today* (今日中國), 28 April 2020, www.chinatoday.com.cn/zw2018/bktg/202004/t20200428_800202467.html (accessed on 10 December 2021).

17. In order to reach a broader audience, a short film was produced, in collaboration with Shaker Productions and Common Frames: <https://youtu.be/RceZVuzPpIM> (accessed on 10 November 2022).

18. “國務院新聞辦就疫情期間中國海外留學人員安全問題舉行發佈會” (*Guowuyuan xinwenban jiu yiqing qijian Zhongguo haiwai liuxue ren yuan anquan wenti juxing fabuhui*, The State Council Information Office held a press conference on the safety of Chinese overseas students during the pandemic), *Gov.cn* (中國政府網), 2 April 2020, www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-04/02/content_5498179.htm (accessed on 10 October 2021).

and older people.¹⁹ Although the number repatriated was low in proportion to the huge number of Chinese nationals overseas, the Chinese state media covered these few incidents of care sensationally.

It was not realistic for China to respond to the high demand for repatriation. Air traffic restrictions and the risk of returnees importing new Covid cases to China were important hindering factors. In order to care for those who could not and chose not to return to China, the Chinese state sent “health kits,” first to Chinese international students. The health kits contained, with some variation across receiving countries, surgical face masks, N95 face masks, hand sanitiser, anti-Covid-19 handbook, and Lianhua Qingwen capsules.²⁰ Next to these medical supplies, the health kits usually also included something “for the soul,” such as a letter and ancient Chinese poetry that conveyed the care and love of the benevolent motherland from afar. This care was particularly appreciated as medical supplies were in dire shortage globally. By mid-April, the first batch (500,000) of health kits had arrived at 59 Chinese diplomatic and consular missions in 20 countries such as Italy, South Korea, Japan, and the Netherlands.²¹ With the assistance of Chinese student associations, the health kits were distributed. Responding to the changing pandemic situation in receiving countries, batches of health kits were sent to the neediest Chinese students. In early February 2021, before the Chinese New Year, Chinese diplomatic and consular missions sent “New Year kits” to Chinese students and, for the first time in many countries, also to non-student Chinese citizens. Apart from medical supplies, New Year kits contained festive content such as snacks and New Year greeting cards and letters,²² passing warmth to the diaspora subjects who could not unite with their family.

The extensive aid from the Chinese state could be interpreted as both a benevolent act out of moral responsibility towards its nationals residing abroad and a return of kindness. Ma Zhaoxu 馬朝旭, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, made the latter explicit:

At the beginning of the Covid-19 outbreak in China, our overseas students showed their love for their motherland. They actively donated money and materials, cared for and supported the fight against Covid-19, which reflects their extremely valuable patriotism. At present, the pandemic is spreading in many places around the world. The Chinese Communist Party has always been concerned about the health and safety of Overseas Chinese students, thereby taking a series of major actions.²³

This official speech, like many others in circulation, points to the reciprocal and mutual nature of the diaspora-homeland relationship. Hence, the two care circuits that we have discussed thus far feed into each other and should be seen as mutually reinforcing.

This care circuit not only reinforced diaspora-homeland relationships, it also nurtured nation-building within China. As posts and short videos about the health kits and health consultation webinars (to be discussed below) went viral on Chinese and international social media, China’s image as a transnational benevolent motherland grew. We have observed in our online observation that China as a caring global figure stimulated national pride, sense of belonging, and patriotic sentiment among the domestic Chinese population. This strengthens the political legitimacy of the Chinese state. As Hague maintains, the Chinese state’s “domestic legitimacy rests in part on its capacity to defend Chinese

nationals abroad” (2021: 256).

Furthermore, this care act served a “higher” political purpose as far as nation-building is concerned. Demonstrating China’s policy agenda of “peaceful reunification; one country, two systems,” the health kits and New Year kits were also accessible to students from Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan. While it was not known how many students from these regions received the packages, this care act successfully pushed forward understanding and support among mainland Chinese students. He (25, male) elaborated:

What I find good about health kits is that Taiwanese can also apply for them. In the days Taiwan experienced face mask-purchasing restrictions on the island, the Mainland was willing to help Overseas Taiwanese. It shows our care about Taiwan compatriots and that we are taking up the responsibilities of a big country to all its nationals. (October 2020, Utrecht)

The capacity of the Chinese transnational state to enact care reaches beyond its daughters and sons overseas. Our research participants spoke about their pride in sharing the health kits with their infected non-Chinese friends and neighbours in the Netherlands. Acting as “care diplomats,” diaspora Chinese were proud to help others on an individual level while the transnational Chinese state made its effort to combat Covid-19 worldwide. This reflects the Chinese diaspora’s role as “public diplomats” in promoting China’s political agenda, national image (Thunø 2020), and (medical) science and culture. Corona care for “foreign friends” was practised on different geographical scales. I will examine the care circuit at the diplomatic level in the next section. Here, it is worth noting that Chinese organisations, such as hometown organisations and chambers of commerce, were also engaged in donating to medical institutions and welfare organisations in their host countries.²⁴ Through such extension of the corona care circuit, non-Chinese people and organisations have been incorporated into the practice and narrative of the benevolent transnational Chinese state. This in turn can improve the positions of the diaspora in their “host” societies.

Yet, we should also pay attention to friction in this care circuit. The fact that the health kits only benefitted students upset some

19. “意大利米蘭至浙江溫州的臨時航班開通” (*Yidali Milan zhi Zhejiang Wenzhou de lishi hangban kaitong*, Additional flights from Milan, Italy to Wenzhou, Zhejiang have opened), *Chinanews.com* (中國新聞網), 16 March 2020, www.chinanews.com/sh/2020/03-16/9127360.shtml (accessed on 10 October 2021).

20. Lianhua Qingwen capsules are traditional Chinese medicine approved to be effective for Covid-19 symptom treatment in China.

21. “民航局：首批50萬份留學生健康包將在4月15日前運輸完成” (*Minhangju: Shoupi 50 wanfen liuxuesheng jiankangbao jiangzai 4 yue 15 ri qian yunshu wancheng*, Civil aviation administration: The first batch of 500 thousand overseas students’ health kits will be transported before April 15), *CCTV* (央視網), 13 April 2020, <http://news.cctv.com/2020/04/13/ARTIMBJjKfMxnxzUadY9ycj200413.shtml> (accessed on 10 October 2021).

22. Chinese embassy in the Netherlands, “‘山川異域，風月同天’：駐荷蘭使館舉行‘春節包’發放儀式” (*Shanchuan yiyu, fengyue tongtian*: Zhu Helan shiguan juxing “chunjiebao” fafang yishi, “Mountains and rivers are exotic, wind and moon share the same sky”: The Chinese embassy in the Netherlands held the “New Year kits” distribution ceremony), 4 February 2021, <http://nl.china-embassy.org/chn/xwd/t1850972.htm> (accessed on 10 October 2021).

23. See footnote 18.

24. “英國中國商會積極捐物捐款助力英國抗疫” (*Yingguo Zhongguo shanghui jiji juanwu juankuan zhuli Yingguo kangyi*, The British Chinese chamber of commerce donated materials to help Britain fight the pandemic), *Xinhuanet.com* (新華網), 24 April 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/world/2020-04/24/c_1125902563.htm (accessed on 10 October 2021).

migrants of other status. On a Chinese-language social platform popularly used by Chinese overseas in the Netherlands, some netizens criticised the policy for being unfair to workers, with postings such as: “Are only students a credit to the motherland? What about the workers?”²⁵ No official reasons were given for the Chinese state’s priority, but it is not far-fetched to think of two. From a humanitarian perspective, the selection can be justified by the youth of the students, who are often in a foreign country alone, and hence are considered more vulnerable. From a utilitarian perspective, the priority might reflect the high value that the Chinese state attaches to these embodiments of highly valuable human resources for the nation’s future. Some interviewees link this selectiveness to the elitist Chinese state’s diaspora strategies. As exemplified by the “One Thousand Talents Scheme” (*qianren jihua* 千人計畫) implemented in 2008 (Constant and Zimmermann 2016; Liu and van Dongen 2016), the Chinese state laid out impressive sums of money and prestige to lure global top Chinese talent “back home,” while excluding other groups of Overseas Chinese. Feeling neglected in the corona care act, some non-student migrants distanced themselves from the diaspora state, resonating Ho, Boyle, and Yeoh’s (2015) criticism of uneven distributions of care. As the production of medical supplies increased, these “other” migrants were allowed to apply for Chinese New Year health kits in 2021. As such, the Chinese state was quick to level out the hierarchy projected in the initial care circuit.

Besides its selective nature, the level of surveillance associated with the care packages also raised scepticism. Chun (27, male) explained to us the procedure, which involved detailed private data collection:

They asked for applicants’ real names, contact information, and email address, and asked whether you are self-funded, your city of residence, and your education and so on. I was a little surprised, because I learned that in the US, philanthropic enterprises only needed a student number when receiving masks. The student number is unique. Therefore, they can identify the students [who have received the masks]. In this way, masks were distributed without additional information needed. So, what is asked for the health kits is quite a lot. I wonder if the embassy has any other intention to investigate the situation of students. I don’t know. Some people also had doubts. Later, the Student Association clarified that the data would only be entered into the embassy database. But the more they said so, the more I doubted. Why do you have to have a database for masks? (May 2020, Utrecht)

Chun’s narrative points to the exertion of control that the Chinese transnational state was seen to practise on its diaspora subjects (Ceccagno and Thunø 2022). The diaspora is a heterogenous group. While some Chinese overseas did not mind the level of surveillance, some chose to keep a safe distance from this perceived space of “control via care.” Also interesting is Chun’s reflection on his transnational reach, reflected by his interest and ability to compare the procedures practised by US philanthropy. While the focus in this paper and special feature is on the changing nature and role of the transnational Chinese state, it is as important to recognise that the diaspora is also transnational in different ways. As such, the Chinese diaspora-homeland relationship is linked to and positioned vis-à-vis

other sources of influence. The Chinese transnational state, therefore, cannot always exert its soft power without friction, or at least not in an unquestioned way.

Lastly, the role of the digital spaces deserves attention. The transnational Chinese caring state, at both the central and local government levels, has reached out to the diaspora through many online activities. In March 2020, the United Front Work Department of the Beijing Municipal Party Committee (*Beijing shiwei tongzhanbu* 北京市委統戰部) collaborated with four universities in Beijing to operate four free counselling call lines for Overseas Chinese. They disseminated Covid-19-related scientific knowledge and addressed psychological pressure among Chinese compatriots abroad. This project involved more than six hundred experts who had first-hand experience with the pandemic in Beijing and had overseas study and/or work experience.²⁶ As such, they were recognised as comrades who could stand in the callers’ shoes and offer professional advice and empathetic conversation. An iconic figure in this digital care circuit was Professor Zhang Wenhong 張文宏, the head of Shanghai’s Covid-19 expert team and one of the most highly reputed experts in the field. He was invited by the Chinese embassy in the US to give a webinar on 26 March 2020 to Chinese nationals in the country. The livestream reached more than 100 million viewers over major Chinese media worldwide, far beyond the Chinese communities in the US.²⁷

This digital care circuit is not only a state-diaspora link. The National Health Commission of the PRC (*guojia weijianwei* 國家衛健委) set up a free digital health inquiry platform for Chinese abroad through Chinese diplomatic or consular missions in April 2020. The platform was developed by the government in collaboration with medical and public health institutions as well as Internet companies.²⁸ Beyond disseminating knowledge to tackle Covid-19, the platform provided one-on-one online consultation for Overseas Chinese with participating medical institutions and third-party Internet health consulting services. Here, we are reminded that the transnational care infrastructure involved more than state and diasporic actors, but also an array of for-profit and not-for-profit actors. The involvement of the business sector is also an important aspect of the third care circuit, through which the Chinese state provides care to the wider world.

25. HelloMingTian Hello明天, “中國駐荷蘭使館為留學人員發放健康包” (*Zhongguo zhu Helan shiguan wei liuxue renyuan tafang jiankangbao*, The Chinese embassy in the Netherlands distributed health kits to overseas students), *Dutchcn.com*, 18 April 2020, <https://www.dutchcn.com/thread-30199-1-1.html> (accessed on 10 October 2021).

26. “北京市委統戰部為海外華人華僑開設免費心理諮詢專線” (*Beijing shiwei tongzhanbu wei haiwai Huaren Huaqiao kaishe mianfei xinli zixun zhuanxian*, The United Front Work Department of the Beijing Municipal Party Committee has opened a free psychological counselling line for Overseas Chinese), *RMZXB* (人民政協網), 24 March 2020, www.rmzxb.com.cn/c/2020-03-24/2542985.shtml (accessed on 10 October 2021).

27. Chinese embassy in the United States, “張文宏教授應我館邀請為留美學生及華人華僑在線答疑解惑” (*Zhang Wenhong jiaoshou ying woguan yaoqing wei liu Mei xuesheng ji Huaren Huaqiao zaixian dayi jiehuo*, Professor Zhang Wenhong answered questions online for students studying in the United States and Overseas Chinese at the invitation of our embassy), 27 March 2020, http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/sgzc/202003/t20200327_4545067.htm (accessed on 10 October 2022).

28. National Health Commission 國家衛健委, “新”新冠肺炎疫情防控海外華人華僑互聯網諮詢平台啟動” (*Xinguan feiyang yiqing fangkong haiwai Huaren Huaqiao hulianwang zixun pingtai qidong*, Covid-19 prevention and control: Overseas Chinese Internet consultation platform starts), 8 April 2020, www.nhc.gov.cn/xcs/fkdt/202004/925ad5afc3b442f89331553f3362c779.shtml (accessed on 10 October 2021).

Care circuit III: Chinese aid to friends in the world

Finally, we extend our analytical scope beyond China and the Chinese diaspora. Since the Covid-19 pandemic raged across the world, China has provided medical aid to friends in need worldwide. These aid activities signify the growing soft power of Global China. They have not only enhanced China's position as a "benevolent leader" in the global Covid-19 combat, but have also shaped the image of the motherland among Chinese overseas and thus refined the diaspora-homeland sentiment. In this circuit, care has also been transferred in different forms. It began with non-material donations. The Chinese state shared its experience and achievements in pandemic crisis management and presented related expertise to the world with a series of reports and webinars. For instance, on 12 March 2020, the Chinese National Health Commission and WHO organised the Briefing on China's Experience on Covid-19 Response, which was attended by 77 countries and seven international organisations.²⁹

Subsequently, a large volume of material care items and medical experts were sent to needy friends. On 10 April 2020, China reported that its foreign aid had reached 127 countries and four international organisations. By October 2021, the care circuit had put in motion 3.86 billion face masks, 3.75 million items of protective clothing, 160,000 ventilators, 2.84 million testing kits, and 8.41 million goggles.³⁰ "Mask diplomacy" (Verma 2020b) or "vaccine diplomacy"³¹ (Modak 2021) became popular terms. At the end of November 2021, President Xi Jinping 习近平 once again pledged to deliver another one billion doses of Covid-19 vaccines to Africa, on top of the nearly 200 million doses sent earlier, and encouraged Chinese companies to invest no less than USD 10 billion on the continent over the next three years.³² Indeed, philanthropic foundations (e.g., Alibaba Foundation and the Jack Ma Foundation) and companies (e.g., Huawei) also played a big role in these transnational care endeavours (Verma 2020a; Gauttam, Singh, and Kaur 2020). A number of scholarly and journalistic reports have mapped out China's foreign-aid allocation and discussed recipient countries' responses: Kowalski (2021) on Europe, Gauttam, Singh, and Kaur (2020) on the United States, and Zoubir and Tran (2022) on the Middle East and North Africa. These care practices are interpreted to be partly in reciprocity for the generosity of donors during the initial outbreak in China (Verma 2020a) and to extend China's global partnership (Telias and Urdinez 2021). Despite the different standpoints of scholars on China's aid provision, it is agreed that the action has advanced the "Health Silk Road" project and therefore also Chinese geopolitical influence across the world (Gauttam, Singh, and Kaur 2020).

How does this global care circuit affect the Chinese diaspora? We found that our research participants generally took pride in China's achievement in managing the pandemic and its generosity in dispatching foreign aid. Their appreciation of China being a caring and capable motherland was particularly strong when they found themselves at risk. Many Chinese overseas felt unsafe being confronted with the rapidly rising number of positive Covid-19 cases while having to live with very different approaches European countries had taken to managing the pandemic. In an interview conducted in May 2020, Wang (27, male), a master's student in the Netherlands, expressed how the arrival of Chinese aid to Italy comforted him:

We [he and his friends in the Netherlands] were very scared when the number of Covid-19 cases rose rapidly in Europe. We were hoping for chartered flights picking us up, until China sent a medical team to Italy. We felt like, "finally, the motherland comes to save us!" (May 2020, Utrecht)

At that time, Italy was the worst hit country in Europe. China flew a team of seven experts and 31 tons of medical supplies, including intensive care equipment and personal protective materials, to Italy on 12 March 2020. The announced, or even rumoured, subsequent aid delivery to be sent to different continents gave some members of the diaspora high hope and relief from their mental stress (Hu and Umeda 2021). Despite differences in the medical systems and medical practice standards from country to country, Chinese medical products and experience were well sought. Some of our interviewees considered the high level of trust worldwide a proof of China's capacity to care for them and the vulnerable world.

The pandemic has set the stage for China to show its diaspora and the world its capability in emergency response, disease control, manufacturing, research, and development.³³ These achievements and generosity in helping its allies globally have also motivated some in the diaspora to rethink their migration plans. Xin (25, female) was a recent graduate in the Netherlands. Her company failed to survive the pandemic's economic blow. Instead of a renewed job search in the Netherlands, she decided to return to China and gave up the years she had accumulated to qualify for permanent residence.

I had not realised China is this powerful now. We can build a hospital in a few days. We contain a virus troubling the developed world for a year in two months. The economy recovered very fast. We have also advanced in medical research and helped the world. These facts signal that the word centre is shifting to China. So, I feel very happy to continue my career back home. (June 2021, Rotterdam)

29. "與世界共戰疫情中國主動分享防治新冠肺炎的寶貴經驗" (Yu shijie gongzhan yiqing Zhongguo zhudong fenxiang fangzhi xinguan feiyang de baogui jingyan, Battle against the novel coronavirus with the world: China actively shares experience in fighting the virus), *Xinhuanet.com* (新華網), 3 April 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-04/03/c_1125811794.htm (accessed on 10 October 2021).
30. "外交部: 中國政府已經或正在向127個國家和4個國際組織提供物資援助" (Waijiaobu: Zhongguo zhengfu yijing huo zhengzai xiang 127 ge guojia he 4 ge guoji zuzhi tigong wuzi yuanzhu, Ministry of Foreign Affairs: The Chinese government has provided or is providing medical assistance to 127 countries and 4 international organisations), *Xinhuanet.com* (新華網), 10 April 2020, www.xinhuanet.com/world/2020-04/10/c_1125840160.htm (accessed on 10 October 2021).
31. Purvaja Modak, "China's Vaccine Diplomacy, the 'Health Silk Road' and a Global Pledge," *Future Directions International*, 15 July 2021, <https://www.futuredirections.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Chinas-Vaccine-Diplomacy-the-Health-Silk-Road-and-a-Global-Pledge.pdf> (accessed on 12 December 2021).
32. Edward McAllister and Tom Daly, "China's Xi Pledges Another 1 Billion Covid-19 Vaccine Doses for Africa," *Reuters*, 30 November 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/chinas-xi-pledges-10-blm-credit-line-african-financial-institutions-2021-11-29> (accessed on 17 December 2021).
33. After the paper was drafted, more scepticism has emerged in China and internationally toward China's flagship draconian zero-Covid strategy. In May 2022, the World Health Organisation commented that China's strategy to defeat the pandemic was unsustainable. See Kerry Cullinan, "China's Zero-Covid Strategy is 'Unsustainable,' says Tedros After Six-week Shanghai Lockdown," *Health Policy Watch*, 10 May 2022, <https://healthpolicy-watch.news/chinas-zero-covid-strategy-is-unsustainable> (accessed on 25 November 2022).

The spotlight on China during the pandemic has revived some dormant links between the diaspora and the motherland. This renewed connection caused a longing for home to germinate in Xin. Xin's sentiment is by no means representative. The hard lockdown approach implemented by the Chinese state has also inspired some Chinese to remain overseas, as revealed in our ongoing research.³⁴ Yet, Xin's narrative underlines the intersections between the care circuits we examine in this paper. In indirect ways, China's care to the wider world energises the long-term and diverse efforts the Chinese state has made, with preferential treatment and economic privileges, in luring the return of diasporic talent (Thunø 2020).

Conclusions

Written two years after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, this paper takes stock of some of the impact of a crisis that seems to have turned our world upside down. Focusing on Chinese diaspora-homeland relationships, we have learned that things have not really been thrown out of sync. Rather, we detect many continuities in the way the Chinese transnational state has developed, in relation to its diaspora and the wider world, in the past few decades.

Advancing the scholarship on diaspora-homeland relationships, this paper has illustrated how utilitarianism and care, contradictory as they might seem at first sight, intersect in intriguing and contextualised ways. The Covid-19 pandemic offers a dynamic temporal-spatial context for us to detect continuities and changes in the relationships between the Chinese state and its diaspora, and the wider world. Through mobilising, in multiple directions, material and non-material care along and across the three circuits, the Chinese transnational state has, at least up to the time when our research was conducted, solidified its material and emotional ties with its diaspora and the rest of the world. In turn, these narratives and practices of care can effectively contribute to building Global China's soft power vis-à-vis its diaspora and in diplomacy. By charting these entwining care practices, this paper has highlighted the networked and networking mode of governance of the Chinese transnational state. Rather than governing with hard power, the Chinese state operates relationally with its diaspora (individuals and organisations), Chinese and international businesses, international organisations, partner states, etc. in extending and deepening its influence worldwide.

Our research findings have shown how care and control are often two sides of the same coin. By extending care to its diaspora and friendship states abroad, the Chinese transnational state also practises

control in forms of surveillance and expectation of allegiance. The effectiveness of this mode of Chinese transnational governance can't, however, be taken for granted. As the narratives of our research participants have shown, members of the diaspora often share ambiguous or even contested relationships with the Chinese state. These diaspora subjects to be cared for and controlled are far from docile. Rather, they exercise agency in building, negotiating, and leveraging their relationships vis-à-vis their homeland state, and in turn advance their own agendas, may these be a quest for a successful career, symbolic capital, or a sense of belonging in China or where they are. Similarly, (diaspora) Chinese businesses engaged in these circuits of care (and control) also pursue their interests in expanding their reach in the global market. Exemplifying the meaning of crisis in Chinese “危機” (*weiji*) – with the first character 危 meaning crisis or danger and the second character 機 meaning opportunity – the Covid-19 crisis has also opened opportunities for the Chinese state, businesses, diaspora subjects, and organisations to reconfigure their ambitions in our turbulent world.

Underlining the agency and agendas of the diaspora and Chinese business does not contradict our collective efforts in this special feature in exploring the strategies of the Chinese state in engendering transnational governing spaces. As we observe the rise of Global China, it is important not to assume that the Chinese state, however powerful and ubiquitous, is fully and irrevocably in control. The pandemic reminds us that a giant can also trip and fall. While such abrupt changes of course do not automatically mean that the power map would be fundamentally redrawn, they can open spaces for new relationships and reorder power hierarchies within the Chinese diaspora space and beyond.

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34. This intention has been heard more often since the implementation of long-term hard lockdowns in Shanghai and elsewhere in China in response to the spread of the Omicron variant in March 2022.

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