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Deliver poison? The stigmatisation of return and the making of a brutal diaspora in pandemic China

*Wanjing (Kelly) Chen*¹

Abstract

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Chinese citizens returning from abroad were popularly criticised as “*delivering poison*” to China. This narrative evaluates inbound mobility on its implications for public health and national strength, rather than the personal life of returnees. It is also a moralised discourse that encourages emotional attack instead of rational discussion about return. The paradigm of (un)seeing intrinsic to the “*deliver poison*” trope fostered widespread apathy and disregard for the plight of returnees caused by state-imposed travel restrictions between 2020 and 2022. The situation disheartened overseas Chinese and profoundly damaged social relations between diaspora and homeland.

Theme

Shock (Im)mobilities

Keywords

Transnational mobility governance, diaspora-homeland relation, Covid-19 pandemic, China

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¹ Wanjing (Kelly) Chen. Research Fellow. Department ‘Anthropology of Economic Experimentation’ Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germany. wchen@eth.mpg.de

They Deserve it

Imagine someone on your social media crying out for help. Not a random contact, but a former classmate. Would you feel shocked, concerned, or empathetic? For Julie, a Beijinger who first moved to Germany for education a decade ago and is now a professional in the country, it was none of the above. She took pleasure reading about the sufferings of her acquaintances. She felt she was getting revenge on people who had wronged her. “*They deserve it.*”, She said, while scrolling down the chat history of a WeChat group comprised of her middle-school classmates, trying to locate those SOS messages for me when we met in Hamburg in October 2022.

Julie’s classmates are mostly middle-class Beijingers like her. They lived in a metropolis that in 2022 experienced the most restrictive Covid containment measures since the beginning of the pandemic. Residents of the city were either “*in lockdown or preparation for lockdown*” until Zero Covid was radically removed in early December 2022.

Through her social media, Julie witnessed the human tolls of a stringent Zero Covid policy. A family with a two-month-old baby had their water and electricity cut off because they refused to be relocated to a quarantine facility. One acquaintance’s relative died in front of the hospital gate while waiting for a negative test result. One classmate attempted suicide. Many more suffered mentally from isolation. Julie would have seen the tsunami of sufferings earlier if her social circle in Beijing had included more working-class people. Regardless, she was callous about these miseries.

She was not always so indifferent to covid-related sufferings in China. When the pandemic started three years ago, Julie was among the many overseas Chinese who scrambled for masks for frontline medical workers in Wuhan. It showed how deeply concerned she was for the wellbeing of people in China. Yet, three years later, even the tragedies of friends and families who constituted part of her personal life could no longer invoke a feeling of empathy in her. Clearly, Julie’s social relation with her community back home, in both a substantial and an imaginative sense, had broken down. She grew resentful and antagonistic towards the named and unnamed people she once cared for.

I was hardly surprised by the brutalisation of Julie’s emotional state of mind toward domestic Chinese over the past three years. As a Chinese in diaspora myself, my personal experience since 2020 has resonated with hers. So did the experiences of many more out there. On Twitter and YouTube, overseas Chinese users responded fervently to anti-empathy campaigns waged against domestic Chinese by dissident influencers abroad². They openly regretted their participation in the global hunt for medical supplies for China during the Wuhan outbreak, and left harsh comments beneath items related to a string of high-profile tragedies caused by Zero Covid in 2022, suggesting that domestic Chinese deserved to suffer under circumstances of their own making. Many now extend their care only to the most immediate family members back home. How did the diaspora grow socially brutal towards the homeland so quickly? Julie was upfront about the reason behind her anti-empathy stance, “*They accused me of delivering poison to China before*”, she said with a disturbed look and rolling her eyes.

² An example of dissident influencers waging anti-empathy campaign on domestic Chinese suffering from Zero-Covid can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oviUmHRIxc>. Last accessed 28 February 2023.

The Origin of the “Deliver Poison” Narrative (投毒论)

In pandemic China, the phrase “*deliver poison*” was widely used to label the movement of objects and people that presented a high risk of spreading the virus. It was first applied to the act of traveling to China from abroad in March 2020, a moment when China was re-opening domestically after a nationwide lockdown. Overseas Chinese, stuck in new centres of the outbreak, began to rush to China to take refuge. The increasing number of transnational arrivals tested the country’s previous domestic-focused pandemic governance regime. A few incidents, in which returnees posed a challenge to governing efforts, came to public attention.



Figure 1: Overseas Chinese at the airport trying to return to China. Photo by the author.

Some of these incidents were made known to the public through official outlets. This was the case of “Li X”, a Boston Biogen employee who had already been diagnosed with Covid in the United States, yet took antipyretics and flew to Beijing for treatment on March 13th. The Beijing CDC described her as an imported case and released details of how she hid her symptoms and infection history at a press conference³. The publicity was partly intended to deter individuals who wanted to lie their way into the country as she had done. It also reflected the local government’s attempt to shirk responsibility. Throughout the pandemic, local governments had been pressured by the central state to clear Covid within their jurisdictions, which incentivised them to distinguish imported cases from local cases. An imported case meant an individual who, though found Covid-positive in one jurisdiction, had contracted the virus elsewhere. Thus, the government of that jurisdiction took no blame for the case because it did not reflect the efficiency of its Covid control efforts.

Other incidents were recorded and posted on social media mostly by nonstate actors recruited to implement Covid control on the ground. The “Australian Jogging Woman” was such an example. On March 15th, a video surfaced online, featuring a woman jogging in a neighbourhood without

³ Chinese state media Xinhua News reported on “Li X” case with details released by the Beijing CDC. Available online at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-03/14/c_1125712909.htm. Last accessed 28 February 2023.

mask⁴. She was stopped by the person who filmed her, a community worker in that area. The woman, who had just returned from Australia, was told to go home for breaking quarantine requirement. She then entered a lengthy argument with multiple community workers, as well as policemen brought in by the community workers, as she refused to obey the rule. An important reason the first community worker filmed and shared her behaviour on the social media was that he and his colleagues lacked the power to force compliance upon the woman. In the video, she was seen repeatedly challenging their legitimacy to impose regulation. The community worker therefore resorted to enlisting the public to shame her and further, to provoke a response from more powerful state actors. The strategy worked: the woman, an Australian citizen, was quickly deported. This example indicates how nonstate actors recruited to conduct covid control often had to be creative to get their job done, due to the questionable legitimacy of their power.

For a variety of immediate reasons, the controversial behaviour of a few returnees entered the spotlight and garnered attention nationwide. The public responded with a deluge of resentment, branding them amoral. The perceived amorality had two dimensions. First, returnees like “Li X” and the “Australian Jogging Woman” undermined public health for personal interests. Second, they were seen as unpatriotic for draining China’s medical resources and undermining the country’s hard-fought victory over Covid. Mid-March 2020 saw a sudden surge of nationalism in China because western politicians and media intensified the blame on China for Covid⁵. The public, once critical of the state for its early Covid response, turned to defend it and derived national pride from China’s comparative success in curbing Covid. Against this backdrop, the few spotlighted returnees were already seen as politically suspicious for their life in diaspora, now doubly so for the threat they posed to Covid control in China. The nationalist backlash was manifested in the number of hate comments online regarding the jogging woman’s Australian citizenship, which was interpreted as a solid proof of her disloyalty to China.

The public uproar against the few controversial returnees also demonstrated evident agitation about their socio-economic privilege. Even though many of those who go abroad today are from middle- and working-class backgrounds, the imagination of transnational mobility as the preserve of the elite still lingers in Chinese society. The spotlighted returnees happened to embody this impression—they were professionals and students sojourning in the global North or tourists who could afford to travel overseas for leisure. These figures irritated ordinary people struggling to cope with great inequalities and social stratification in China. One of them, a student who was filmed quarrelling with staff at her quarantine hotel as she requested bottled water, was ridiculed as “*mineral water princess*”⁶. The nickname crystallised the extent to which people were infuriated by her refusal to drink boiled tap water like ordinary Chinese.

The public’s intensively emotional reactions to these returnees were articulated by an anchor from Lhasa TV in a news program on March 16th, 2020⁷. He accused them of “*being absent during the development of the homeland*”⁸, *unparalleled in delivering poison by travelling thousands of*

⁴ The original video featuring the “Australian Jogging Woman”. Available online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WTqOgaRewA&t=407s>. Last accessed 28 February 2023.

⁵ Yang, Guobin. The Wuhan Lockdown. Columbia University Press, 2022.

⁶ Reports in Chinese on the “mineral water princess” Available online at: <https://news.sina.cn/sh/2020-03-19/detail-iimxxsth0065705.d.html>. Last accessed 28 February 2023.

⁷ Video of the Lhasa TV anchor’s original speech can be found here: https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1K7411o7fG/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click. Last accessed 28 February 2023.

⁸ Base on my interpretation of the anchor’s full speech, “being absent during the development of the homeland” was a critique of diaspora living comfortably elsewhere and making no contribution to China.

miles.” (建设祖国你不在, 千里投毒你最快). The catchy saying immediately went viral on the Internet. Netizens used its condensed version, “*deliver poison*”, to comment indiscriminately on all content related to overseas Chinese who travelled or expressed the desire to travel to China. In short, the anchor’s words ignited a hate campaign against returnees, real or potential. How to make sense of this phenomenon? The public, consumed by emotions, had already lost any sense of nuance, and broadened their resentments from specific individuals to all returnees. But it was the anchor that gave them the precise vocabulary to launch the attack.

The rapid stigmatisation of inbound mobility that occurred in March 2020 was not orchestrated by the state, but was allowed to gain momentum under its censorship regime. It popularised views that supported policies introduced around the same time to suppress inbound mobility. The period witnessed the government banning foreign citizens from entering, slashing the number of flights to China, closing land borders and escalating requirements for pre-entry health screening and post-entry quarantine. These regulations only grew more complicated until mid-2022, before they were gradually loosened and then completely removed in January 2023. As a result, for roughly two and a half years, Chinese citizens abroad were faced with enormous difficulties if they wanted to return. Issues like costly and unpredictable flights, limited quotas for overland entry, stringent testing requirements and a long post-arrival quarantine period blocked people’s way home⁹.

Problems created by regulations opened space for commercial intermediaries to tap in, from travel agents selling flight tickets, to testing centres catering specifically to China’s ever-changing health screening requirements, to tech-savvy entrepreneurs grabbing digitally distributed quotas for overland entry for clients. While they stood ready to bridge gaps, these mobility businesses also made return more expensive to achieve and more difficult to navigate for DIY travellers.

When combined, the regulatory and commercial dimensions of the infrastructure that mediated the movement of people into China during the pandemic disabled that movement for the vast majority. The situation led many in diaspora to vent their frustration and cry out for help. Their voices, however, were often met with callousness, if not hostility, from the home front. This way of public reaction was structured by the ideological dimension of the mobility infrastructure, with “*deliver poison*” as its central and lasting tenet.

“Deliver Poison” as a Paradigm of (Un)seeing

As a Chinese in diaspora struggling to travel to China since 2020, I have been following discussions about return on social media platforms like Weibo (equivalent of Twitter), Little Red Book (similar to Instagram), and Bili Bili (similar to YouTube). At the height of the cyberbullying against transnational returnees, the phrase “*deliver poison*” was everywhere to be seen. As time went by, most agreed that it was too harsh an accusation to make of someone, even strangers. Thus, except for moments when new controversial behaviours of individual returnees were publicised, netizens gradually refrained from using this term. However, the ghost of “*deliver poison*” continued to haunt discussions on return.

⁹ Zhang, Wanqing, 2022. Returning to China Is Like Buying a Lottery Ticket’ Dozens of international flights have been canceled as the country reports a surge in COVID-19 infections among inbound passengers. *Sixth Tone*. 17 January 2022. Available online at: <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1009463/returning-to-china-is-like-buying-a-lottery-ticket->. Last accessed 28 February 2023.

I saw its spirit at work, for instance, when scrolling content on the Little Red Book in recent months. One mundane exchange went like this: “*It has been almost three years. When on earth can I go back to China?*”, said an original post, to which one replied, “*Why do you want to go back to China?*”. It was followed by a response: “*Of course for visiting parents. Why is this even a question?*”

Exchange of this sort shows that there are people out there who could not relate to returnees’ personal struggles, a pre-condition for empathy. Family separation and reunion are common in contemporary Chinese life. Not everyone experiences it personally, but almost everyone sees it happening in daily life. Thus, it takes little effort for one to imagine that an individual in diaspora, known, or unknown, needs and desires to visit family back home once in a while, besides having other personal or professional matters to attend to. Clearly, some lacked this vision. But why? An important reason is that, ever since transnational return became a subject of public debate, it has been evaluated by its implications for public health and national strength. The “*deliver poison*” trope criticised it precisely for undermining both. The meaning of return for particular returnees’ personal lives was sidelined and ignored. From the outset, the direction of public discussions led people away from seeing returnees as human beings with substantive social lives to live.

“*Deliver poison*” as a paradigm of seeing also guides people away from examining the substance of measures applied to securitise inbound mobility. This is manifested in the typical way netizens defend returnees, with its core exposed in comments like “*What mistakes do the Chinese international students make? They only go abroad temporarily for study.*”, and “*What is wrong with overseas Chinese who want to go home?*”. These arguments are echoed by returnees’ common self-defence statements, such as “*I am patriotic.*”, and “*We are expatriates sent by the state*”. All such arguments are essentially saying that returnees harbour no condemnable intention in attempting a journey to China. People felt obliged to make this point clear as they reacted against the “*deliver poison*” narrative that accused returnees of being morally corrupted. These dynamics gave way to a vibrant, binary debate on the moral right/ wrong of returnees. Many public debates on pandemic governance in China fell into the same either/or trap, with the “Zero Covid”/“Lying Flat”¹⁰ being the most pronounced example.

Though calling stigma into question, the moralised, binary debate on return does not probe how the *de facto* processes of return were mediated. During the pandemic, regulators across the world introduced emergency regulations to securitise transnational mobility. The Chinese government was no exception to this global trend. The problem is that its regulations and style of governance yielded many stringent and absurd outcomes that returnees were required to bear, like extremely high flight irregularity (eg. In the first half of 2022, my booked flight from Hong Kong to mainland was cancelled 6 times.) and prolonged quarantine period (eg. an acquaintance went through 2-month quarantine post arrival in mid-2022). Public discussions on the issue of return would be more meaningful to returnees if there were more focus on the design of policies and their concrete implications for people directly affected. However, such rational and substantively nuanced exchanges were often pushed aside and distracted by the more sentimental and abstract battle over the morality of returnees.

Returnees always blame both the state and mobility businesses for their struggles to return. But they direct the blame at the society when it (un)sees their struggles through the lens of “*deliver*

¹⁰ In China’s pandemic governance, “lying flat” took on the meaning of a complete removal of all control measures, which is the opposite of “Zero Covid”.

poison". The blame takes on emotionally intensive forms especially when the set of beliefs encapsulated in the "*deliver poison*" narrative is expressed by someone familiar. This explains why Julie's negative feeling swelled when talking about her middle-school cohorts, among whom at least a dozen studied abroad like her before settling back to Beijing. Julie often used to chat with quite a number of them because she had few friends in Germany. It was no secret in the group that she had been working an average clerical job for 4 years, and that her parents, in the meantime, had experienced financial difficulties in Beijing. Thus, Julie was hurt to the extent that she became outright brutal in her attitude toward these acquaintances, when a few criticised her for her intention to "*deliver poison*" after she complained about the price of flight tickets. It was a moment of massive disbelief and disappointment, followed by outrage: how can they not see her fragility? In return, she refused to see their fragility. She even admitted to me that she read their SOS messages over and over for the pleasure of *schadenfreude*, after I shared similar personal experiences with her.

As a paradigm of (un)seeing, "*deliver poison*" is most destructive to returnees' social nearby, where a high expectation for mutual understanding exists. On January 8th, 2023, shortly after a domestic U-turn from Zero Covid, China lifted all restrictions for international travel to the country.¹¹ Julie welcomed the change but was not excited, because there remained few people she would like to hang out with upon a return. Apparently, the material barriers keeping her from China were easy to remove, but the mental barrier with the domestic society, as erected by the stigmatisation of return over the past three years, would persist. China's pandemic governance has left many invisible wounds to the hearts of ordinary people like Julie. It is worth keeping an eye on the profound social damage and see whether and how it will affect the course of future events.

¹¹ Lei Tu. 2022. Anti-COVID restrictions on international flights to end from January 8: CAAC. *Global Times*. 28 December 2022. Available online at: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202212/1282849.shtml>. Last accessed 28 February 2023.