Article

To Trust or Not to Trust? COVID-19 Facemasks in China–Europe Relations: Lessons from France and the United Kingdom

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Abstract: At the crossroads of sociology and international relations, this interdisciplinary and comparative research article explores how the COVID-19 outbreak has impacted China–Europe relations. Unfolding the critical moments of the COVID-19 outbreak, this article characterizes the evolution of China–Europe relations with regard to the facemask. This simple object of self-protection against the coronavirus strikingly became a source of contention between peoples and states. In the face of this situation, we argue that the facemask is the prism through which to illustrate (1) the transnational links between China and its overseas population, (2) the changing social perceptions of China and Chinese-looking people in European societies, and (3) the advent of China's health diplomacy and its reception in Europe. Comparing two European settings—France and the United Kingdom (UK)—the common denominator appears to be the reduced trust, if not outright distrust, between individuals and communities in the French and British contexts, and in Sino–French and Sino–British relations at the transnational level. Combining critical juncture theory and (dis)trust in international relations as our analytical framework, this article examines how the facemask became a politicized object, both between states and between Mainland China and its overseas population, as the epidemic unfolded throughout Europe. Adopting a qualitative approach, our dataset comprises the analysis of official speeches and statements; press releases; traditional and social media content (especially through hashtags such as #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus, #IAmNotAVirus, #CoronaRacism, etc.); and interviews with Chinese, French, and British community members.

Keywords: COVID-19; critical juncture; (dis)trust; health diplomacy; facemasks; racism

1. Introduction

Along with climate change, the rise of China is arguably one of the most important developments in the current century. Some claim that the China–US rivalry could be *the* defining feature of 21st century global politics, as it "may lead to escalation to cold war or even hot war" (Zhao 2022, p. 2). Therefore, scholars and policy pundits have analysed how China's rise has been transforming the world order, and the potential consequences for the other players of the international system. This article examines how China's rise has effectively affected China–Europe relations in the COVID-19 era.

Having previously contended that COVID-19 created a critical juncture in China–Europe relations, and China–France relations in particular (Tran 2022), the present article further elaborates on the processes at work in this critical juncture. Introduced by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) in their seminal work, a critical juncture is a turning point that is triggered by one kind of cause; the latter alters the state of affairs with persistent effects. In this article, we contend that China's health diplomacy campaign against COVID-19 is the straw that broke the camel's back, or the critical juncture in China–Europe relations. Since Beijing adopted its reform and opening-up policy in the late 1970s, Europe has been a key stakeholder in

China's rise in the global economy. The crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in June 1989 only momentarily shattered the China–Europe partnership. Since the second half of the 2010s, however, President Xi Jinping's multibillion infrastructure plan to connect Asia to Europe, aka the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has been a real test for Europe's cohesion, and has contributed to the change in attitude of the West towards China. At the 2017 inaugural Belt and Road Forum, the EU delegates startled their Chinese hosts by refusing to endorse the BRI. In September 2018, the EU issued its own response to China's plan, in the form of an alternative development project titled, "Connecting Europe and Asia—Building Blocks for an EU Strategy" (European Commission 2018). Additionally, in March 2019, the EU unveiled its document, "EU-China—A Strategic Outlook", which concomitantly calls China a partner, a competitor, and systemic rival (European Commission 2019). In Spring 2020, whereas the Europeans went into lockdown amidst their first COVID-19 outbreak, China, which had just recovered from the first wave, delivered surgical masks, protective gear, respirators, and ventilators worldwide, in addition to providing loans and medical assistance (Zhao 2020; Zoubir and Tran 2021). The Chinese Communist Party-State tried to enact a new role (Harnisch et al. 2015), showing a caring outlook, not only towards its nationals living overseas, i.e., the Chinese diaspora, but also to the world at large. In its special report titled, *COVID-19 and Europe-China Relations: A country-level analysis* (Seaman and French Institute of International Relations 2020), the consortium of the European think Tank Network on China found that the health crisis has served as "a catalyst for a number of trends that have been shaping Europe–China relations in recent years, while in other ways it has turned the tables" (Seaman and French Institute of International Relations 2020, p. 7), thus effectively ending the "age of "naiveté" towards China" (ibid, p. 10). Qi et al. (2021) argue that Beijing's medical aid revived Orientalist discourses and the fear of a Yellow Peril, in their framing analysis of China's mask diplomacy in Europe early on in the COVID-19 pandemic. As a matter of fact, in 2020–2021, Europeans across the continent expressed an exceptionally high level of unfavourable sentiment towards China (Silver et al. 2020, 2021).

Therefore, the core question that this article seeks to answer is: why did China's medical aid and health diplomacy campaign fail to win the hearts and minds of the people in Europe? We break down our core research question into three sub-questions. Firstly, what was the state of China–Europe relations prior to the pandemic? Secondly, how did the Europeans and the Chinese react during the pandemic? Thirdly, what were the consequences of the Europeans' and Chinese (re)actions?

We address the above questions by arguing that the answers lie in the question of trust. Contributing to the recently revived literature on trust in international relations, this article aims to disentangle the intricate transnational relations between China and Europe in the first half of 2020.

This article outlines the different phases of the COVID-19 critical juncture in two European countries, namely France and the United Kingdom. These countries are the focus of the article for two reasons. Firstly, among Western European powers, France and the UK have had the longest and most eventful relationship with China: from former colonial powers to strategic partners. Due to their historical relations, France and the UK are also the two European countries that have the largest community of Chinese immigrants and their descendants (Statista 2022).

Intersecting critical juncture theory with the concept of trust in the international relations literature, this article adopts a comparative approach to show how (dis)trust effectively shapes transnational relationships by analysing it in a two-level approach: at the government and community levels in France and the UK, respectively. Following the presentation of our Theoretical Framework (Section 2) and Materials and Research Methods (Section 3), the remainder of the article analyses our Findings (Section 4).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Critical Juncture

Collier and Munck (2017) have defined five stages in framing a critical juncture analysis: (1) the antecedent conditions, (2) the cleavage or shock, leading to (3) the critical juncture itself, (4) the mechanisms of the production of the critical juncture's legacy, and (5) the legacy itself, in the form of durable, stable institutions. Applying Collier and Munck's stages, we contend that the critical juncture in China–Europe relations consists of the following five stages (Figure 1). First, amid the mounting distrust towards China (Section 4.1: *Antecedent Conditions*), Europe also showed solidarity with China as the latter battled against the outbreak in winter 2020, despite concerns about the origin of the SARS-Cov-2 virus (Section 4.2: *Cleavage*). When COVID-19 hit Europe, forcing it into lockdown, China politicised its medical aid and health diplomacy campaign to which France and the UK reacted in a "battle of narratives" (Section 4.3: *Critical Juncture*). At the community level, recalling a Chinese idiom "offering fuel in snowy weather (雪中送炭)", the Chinese state offered transnational support to the overseas Chinese living in the UK and France, which effectively led to the production of the critical juncture legacy (Section 4.4: *Production of the legacy*). Lastly, the *legacy* (Section 4.5) consisted of heightened discrimination and mounting distrust against Asian-looking people and China.
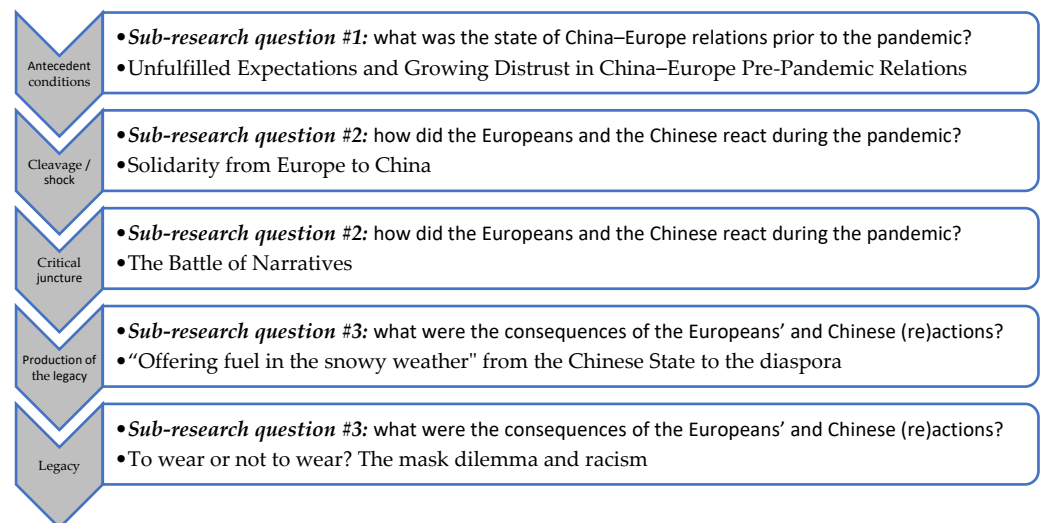
Antecedent conditions	• *Sub-research question #1:* what was the state of China–Europe relations prior to the pandemic? • Unfulfilled Expectations and Growing Distrust in China–Europe Pre-Pandemic Relations
Cleavage / shock	• *Sub-research question #2:* how did the Europeans and the Chinese react during the pandemic? • Solidarity from Europe to China
Critical juncture	• *Sub-research question #2:* how did the Europeans and the Chinese react during the pandemic? • The Battle of Narratives
Production of the legacy	• *Sub-research question #3:* what were the consequences of the Europeans' and Chinese (re)actions? • "Offering fuel in the snowy weather" from the Chinese State to the diaspora
Legacy	• *Sub-research question #3:* what were the consequences of the Europeans' and Chinese (re)actions? • To wear or not to wear? The mask dilemma and racism

Figure 1. Critical juncture-framed research questions.

2.2. Trust

Trust (and its antonym, distrust) is identified as one of the backbones of social, economic, and political life. This concept has long been discussed in management studies focusing on trust as rational prediction and calculation or seeing it as an affect-based belief in moral character (Wicks et al. 1999). Trust in each other, in public institutions, and trust between states are all essential for the functioning of any society. Particularly during public health emergencies such as COVID-19, governments rely on public trust from their people to achieve successful COVID-19 responses (Saechang et al. 2021; Pak et al. 2021). While Cole et al. (2021), in this Special Issue, point out the role of transparency in building up trust through analysing trust in the crisis of trust, the present article looks at trust through the prism of facemask provision in two dimensions, at the international relations level (state to state), and between the state and its overseas population, against the background of COVID-19. For this purpose, the authors discuss three levels of trust.

First, trust is defined in its most basic form as an analysis of the relationship between a subject (the one who trusts) and an object (the one who is trusted). Trust has a moralistic variant, faith in a generalized other. Having trust in those who are not like 'us', rather than trusting only the familiar ones and excluding others, is what serves as the foundation of a

better society (Uslaner 2002). On the contrary, a lack of trust in others can take an extreme form, such as COVID-19 related hate crimes against Asian-looking people, which will be discussed later in the article.

Second, in the field of international relations (IR), trust is an underemphasised concept that appears only occasionally in the IR scholarship (Booth and Wheeler 2010). Most often, when applied, it takes the form of an epiphenomenal by-product of cooperation among sovereign actors in the international system (Torsten 2016; Ruzicka and Wheeler 2010, pp. 69–85; Leach and Sabatier 2005, pp. 491–503; McGillivray and Smith 2000, pp. 809–24). As Axelrod (1990) pointed out, trust has seldom been considered a central variable for cooperation in the past. More recently, the concepts of trust and trust-building have re-emerged in the IR literature, for they provide an additional way not only to comprehend but also to influence international politics (Hoffman 2002, pp. 375–401). Kydd (2005) differentiates between trust and being trustworthy and concludes that strong states can promote cooperation if they are relatively trustworthy, and even if states strongly mistrust each other, they can still reassure each other and cooperate, provided that they are trustworthy. In this sense, Hoffman's idea of trust, "a willingness to take risks on the behaviour of others based on the belief that potential trustees will 'do what is right'", is more similar to trustworthiness (Hoffman 2002). Lieberthal and Wang (2012) and Chan (2017) argue that strategic distrust has underpinned the rivalry between China and the West. Since the mid-2010s, Chinese and European officials have reiterated the importance of restoring trust in their respective speeches (Tran and Zoubir 2022).

Third, this article examines trust at a level that has been overlooked, i.e., the transnational relationship between the Chinese state in the homeland and its overseas population during the pandemic. In China, the level of trust among the people in their government increased from 76% to 91% from 2016 to 2021, but underwent a significant decline in 2020 (82%), which was most likely related to the government's responses to COVID-19 (Statista 2021). The clear reduction in trust in the government reminded Beijing of the importance of trust-building among its nationals, including those abroad, who Xi described as the "magic weapons" and the public diplomats (Thunø 2018) of China's global influence making. However, the trust of the overseas population in their native country has not been sufficiently researched. Does emigration influence people's level of trust in government? How does a government maintain or enhance trust among its overseas population? This paper seeks to approach these questions by looking at the transnational mobilisation of masks between China and Europe in the context of the pandemic.

Through the case of the mobilization of help from Europe to China and the return of help in France and the UK, we examine the ways in which the regimes exercise external power transnationally through networked structures, such as embassies and associations of fellow provincials or occupations, which regulate access to the home country for the overseas population and function as "an extension and in the service of the authoritarian state at home"(Brand 2008, p. 111).

Consulting these ideas of trust, we inquire about the nature of trust and the aggravated mistrust in China–Europe relations and examine how this brought the China–Europe relations to a critical juncture. Figure 2 in the Conclusion summarises our findings on how trust plays out in a multilevel approach to China–Europe relations.

3. Materials and Research Methods

This article is based on qualitative research carried out through desktop data collection. Qualitative data offer a rich portrayal and explanation of this study's subjects, especially the evolution of inter-state and infra-state relationships, providing first-hand insights into the transnational mobilisation of medical aid between China and Europe, and the lived experiences of people. The materials for our study consist of:

(i) Chinese and European governmental statements, press conferences, and announcements from 2018 to April 2020.

(ii) Chinese, French, and British media reports and web contents from January to April 2020, including but not limited to *The Global Times*, Xinhua, *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro*, *The Guardian*, CGTN, France Television, LCI, and the BBC.

(iii) Posts on social media and discussion forums from December 2019 to May 2020.

(iv) A total of 21 in-depth interviews with overseas Chinese in Europe, conducted in March–April–May 2020.

Applying a frame analysis to materials (i) and (ii)[1], we studied the language used by government officials and journalists in China, France, and the UK to refer to the other party, from the first COVID-19 outbreak in winter 2020 to the end of April 2020 as China deployed its high-profile mask diplomacy. A constructivist method devised by Erving Goffman (1974), frame analysis is particularly appropriate in our study to understand a given situation (the pandemic) and activities (China's health diplomacy campaign and the ensuing battle of narratives between China and Europe).

In addition, using digital ethnography techniques, we followed campaigners on Twitter[2] and WeChat. The latter is the most popular social media among the Chinese. We observed chat groups' discussion forums as well as the official WeChat pages of Chinese associations, such as the local branches of the Overseas Chinese Federation and the Chinese Students and Scholars Association. Digital ethnography is an online research method used to study the communities created through ICT-based social interactions: "communication and situations mediated through digital platforms become a significant part of what actors do, of their interactions and practices, the ethnographer needs to have part in them" (Hine 2015, pp. 8–9). The collection of digital ethnographic data allowed us to delve into the activities, actions and reactions of the Chinese living in France in winter and spring 2020.

Last but not least, we conducted interviews by phone and videoconference calls. Recruited via snowball samplings, the respondents were students from Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan in academic mobility in Europe at the time of the interview. In a safe and comfortable environment, the respondents provided an actor-based elaboration of the situations experienced. All 21 respondents offered valuable insights that led to a deeper understanding of transnational solidarity, discrimination, and identity struggle.

4. Findings

4.1. Antecedent Conditions: Unfulfilled Expectations and Growing Distrust in China–Europe Pre-Pandemic Relations

The assumption of Western governments had long been that, as China grew economically and became more intertwined with global trade, it would transform inexorably into a liberal democracy. This Hegelian outlook, popularized by Francis Fukuyama's book, *The End of History* (Fukuyama 1992), assumed that the world moved inevitably towards democracy and free-market economics. Yet, after the so-called 'lost-decade' under President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao, his successor Xi Jinping has led China authoritatively and unfolded the 'Third Revolution' (Economy 2018), in stark contrast to Deng Xiaoping's 'Second Revolution' of the 1970s–1980s, which was characterized by greater political and economic opening, and a low-profile foreign policy [韜光養晦, 有所作為] or [韬光养晦]. Having pursued the reform of state-owned enterprises, improved the country's innovation capacity, and enhanced air quality, China has become an economic powerhouse and a global trade partner. However, its domestic market remains limited to foreign companies, and illegal intellectual appropriation and forced technology transfers have not ended. Socially, the State imposes social control and limits public criticism from civil rights lawyers, independent journalists, and ethnic and religious minorities (Human Rights Watch 2020). On top of that, there are contending issues regarding the South China Sea, industrial and scientific espionage (Hvistendahl 2020), and influential politics in Western democracies that erode trust in China in many ways (Hamilton 2018; Diamond and Schell 2019; Lulu 2019). Thus, not surprisingly, the evolution of China has not followed the trajectory that Westerners had anticipated, despite Western pressures, especially since 9/11 (Börzel 2015; Carothers and Ottaway 2010).

Against this background, the West's distrust in China has grown considerably in different places in the world (Tran and Zoubir 2022). Unquestionably, COVID-19 exacerbated the US–China rivalry (Wang 2019). Indeed, the United States emphasized that China challenges "American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity" (The White House 2017) by "contesting [US] geopolitical advantages and trying to change the international order in [its] favor" and by "investing billions of dollars in infrastructure across the globe", which will "reinforce its geopolitical aspirations" (The White House 2017). If in the Middle East and Africa China's economic policies and infrastructure diplomacy are seen as South–South development cooperation, the West perceives them as Beijing's geopolitical gains, confirming its strategic mistrust towards China.

Although Chinese and European senior leaders meet regularly and maintain steady government-to-government dialogue, the EU has grown wary of Beijing's global influence. China's multi-billion infrastructure plans, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and other foreign policy programmes have generated distrust regarding China's actual intentions. This distrust has become a major impediment to the BRI and a challenge to Europe's unity, as well as a strain on Europe's relations with China. Consequently, EU delegates refused to endorse, as a bloc, China's BRI (European Parliament 2018; Phillips 2017). In 2018, the EU issued its own response (adopted in 2019) to China's BRI in the form of an alternative development project (European Commission 2018). In 2019, the EU unveiled a new and unequivocal criticism of Beijing, depicting China as "an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance" (European Commission 2019). This marked a sharp change in the Sino–European relationship, a view which was not limited to the policymakers but also extended to EU citizens. Surveys demonstrated that most Europeans held a negative view of China (European Commission 2016).

In March 2019, European leaders reiterated that "Europe must be united and have a coherent message" towards China (France24 2019), to which President Xi responded by first acknowledging the trust deficit in global affairs, before adding that "We cannot let mutual suspicion get the better of us", calling all parties to cooperatively lay the foundations of mutual trust (France24 2019). On 23 July 2020, US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo emphasized that the new US policy towards China would rest on "distrust" (US Department of State 2020).

Against this backdrop of mounting tensions between China and the West, this article argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has created a critical juncture in China–Europe relations, where the trust deficit has translated into outright distrust.

4.2. Cleavage: Solidarity from Europe to China

Our research has uncovered that China has enacted two seemingly opposite roles: on the one hand, it appears to be a suspicious international actor, accused of covering up information with regard to the origin of the outbreak and the actual figures of COVID-19 cases; on the other hand, it promotes itself as a benevolent global health actor, providing aid where needed, and supporting its aid with a forceful and at times aggressive global communication campaign. These two roles of China created wariness, distrust, and condemnation among certain European recipient countries of China's health diplomacy, especially in the UK and France. In this section, we examine the critical juncture in China–Europe relations, focusing on the cases of France and the UK, to exhibit the ways in which the relations with China evolved over the pandemic and China's pursuit of a new role.

In the first quarter of 2020, when China was struggling with the new coronavirus, Europe and other countries worldwide stepped in to show solidarity with China by providing medical provisions and personal protective equipment. We observe that the solidarity from Europe came at both the state level and meso level organized by individuals or associations.

At the state level, following the outbreak in Wuhan, China received massive donations of masks and medical equipment from a dozen international organizations and many countries, including not so wealthy and developing countries (Zoubir and Tran 2021), and

the US, amid the Sino–US trade war (Zhao 2020). The objective was to help China contain the coronavirus. The EU alone donated more than 50 tons of equipment in January 2020, as the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, recalled (European Commission 2020). Having reached out to his Chinese counterpart through two phone calls (20 January and 18 February), President Macron ordered the delivery of 17 tons of medical supplies (protective suits, gloves, hydro-alcoholic gels and 560,000 face masks) from France's strategic stocks. In an event organized by the Chinese ambassador to the UK, Liu Xiaoming, the Chinese residing in the UK shipped almost GBP 400,000 worth of medical supplies to the doctors fighting coronavirus in Wuhan on 1 February 2020 (Jia 2020). The European Think Tank Network on China issued a report that detailed the actual assistance sent by European states, country by country, to China (Seaman and French Institute of International Relations 2020).

Our digital ethnographic observations show that solidarity support at the non-state level, such as from the UK to China, by regional associations of fellow provincials (同乡会 tong xiang hui), business associations (商会 shang hui), and student associations, was mainly organized between January and February 2020. These associations represent the three main groups of Chinese people living in the UK. Solidarity with China was shown mainly through shipping much needed medical supplies to the country. At the community level, many *tong xiang hui* and business associations, such as the UK Henan Chinese Association, the UK Tianjin Business Association, and the London Chinatown Chinese Association (Tianjin Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese 2020; Sohu 2020; Oushinet 2020), just to name a few, organized donations to help regions they had ties within China. The Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA-UK), as well as donations to hospitals in China, provided cultural solidarity by organizing Chinese students studying in the UK to compose and produce a music video to show solidarity with Wuhan. The CCSA-UK was established in 1988 and is supervised by the Education Section of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United Kingdom. It is one of the largest Chinese associations in the UK with around 220,000 members. It showed strong organizational capacity and also played a crucial role in organizing the solidarity activities at a later stage.

The Chinese authorities acknowledged this show of solidarity from the international community. On 1 February 2020, CGTN ran a headline: "China thanks EU donations to assist relief efforts during coronavirus outbreak". (CGTN 2020a; Xinhua 2020b). On 20 March 2020, one could read "Xinhua Headlines: China returns solidarity with Europe in COVID-19 battle" (Xinhua 2020c), which emphasized the fact that Europe had made the first gesture of solidarity.

4.3. Critical Juncture: The Battle of Narratives

As COVID-19 cases were brought under control in China, Beijing immediately started to "fight back" against the repeated accusations from foreign countries, and those in the West in particular, of having covered up information regarding the virus since late 2019. Against this background, in February 2020, in a meeting of the Politburo Standing Committee, Xi indicated the importance of telling a good anti-epidemic story of China to display the solidarity of the Chinese people domestically and internationally (The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2020b). In March, it was emphasised by Wang Yi, the Vice Foreign Minister, that his diplomatic work would actively take part in anti-pandemic diplomacy to gain international support, to promote international collaborations, to safeguard Chinese citizens' rights abroad, and to vigorously engage in propaganda to *tell good anti-pandemic stories* (好中国抗疫故事 jiang hao zhongguo kangyi gushi) (The State Council of the People's Republic of China 2020a). Thus, as the pandemic started to seriously hit Europe, where some countries had some of the largest numbers of coronavirus cases in the world in March 2020 and struggled to contain the spread of the virus, Beijing seized the chance to emerge as a partner that was eager to provide much needed aid. China provided help to European countries as an experienced fighter against the virus and a benevolent international friend, repeatedly using the term "offering fuel in the snowy weather".

Health diplomacy has been part of Chinese diplomacy since the early days of the People's Republic of China, and all the more so in the 21st century. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Chinese Party-State sought to promote it at a time when many countries were struggling to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. This time, China also activated its BRI networks to carry out its mask diplomacy to supply aid and act as a "responsible great power" (Rudolf and Stiftung Wissenschaft Und Politik 2021). What started as a massive health crisis actually turned into a political opportunity for China: at last, Beijing could take on a role traditionally played by the great Western powers. Moreover, mask diplomacy served a dual role: to sweep its failure in not containing the virus at the early stages of the outbreak under the carpet, and to gain domestic public support (Kowalski 2021).

However, in order to presume the role of a global health promoter, China needed a new narrative to combat the prevailing distrust in the international community, mainly the doubts over the reporting and origins of COVID-19, and to enhance trust among overseas Chinese, who are "magic weapons" (法宝 fabao) of Beijing's influence diplomacy, according to Xi (Brady 2017).

As China had presumably won its battle, even though the exact figures of infected and deceased patients were and continue to be questionable, China was ahead of other countries in terms of medical staff experience, having treated more than 80,000 patients with COVID-19. China also considerably increased its production capacity of protective equipment (including face masks) and ventilators, much needed items that other countries had already been relying on Chinese companies to provide. On 26 March 2020, *The Global Times* published an infographic presenting the various initiatives of Chinese health diplomacy in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic (Global Times 2020). By providing its assistance, particularly technical, China sought to convince its partners of its exemplary nature, and to make people forget its errors and responsibilities in the initial management of the crisis. Indeed, Beijing, having apparently been aware of the risk of human-to-human transmission from the end of December 2019, failed to notify the WHO in due course, whereas Taiwan had been trying to alert the WHO about that risk, even though China has forbidden it from joining the WHO. This likely aggravated the pre-existing distrust based on China's past mishandling of outbreak reporting and lack of transparency and cooperation.

China's attempt to change the narrative can be seen in a column published on 24 March 2020, in *The People's Daily* which, in addition to urging all countries to join the Health Silk Road, stated that "China has, in an open and transparent manner, and responsible, informed all parties of the epidemic in a timely manner and worked closely with WHO and affected countries" (People's Daily 2020). China tried to convince developing countries, but also many European countries, that it, alone, was a trustworthy partner able to help them in this unprecedented health crisis and that its system of governance was the one that was most able to cope with it. Within the broader framework of the Sino–American competition, its objectives were to present itself with a better posture than the United States, while discrediting the Western democracies (Ambassade de Chine en France 2020):

> *Since the Republic of Korea, Japan and Singapore, which are Asian democracies, are succeeding in controlling the epidemic, why are old democracies like Europe and the United States not succeeding?*
>
> *[. . .]*
>
> *Asian countries, including China, have been particularly successful in their fight against COVID-19 because they have that sense of community and civility that Western democracies lack.* (Ambassade de Chine en France 2020)

This attempt escalated online. A case in point is the unprecedented offensive by the PRC's embassy in France that actively promoted Beijing's narrative on social media, on its website, and in French media. As illustrated by our research projects, "Chinese Twitter" (in 2020) and "China's Twitter Diplomacy: Content and Impact" (in 2021–2022) (Thunø 2021, 2022), the Chinese embassy and, to a lesser extent, the Consulate of China in Strasbourg

and the Consulate of China in Lyon became very active on Twitter in August 2019, and February and March 2020, respectively. Although the Chinese embassy in Paris created its Twitter account in August 2019 when the new ambassador, Lu Shaye, took office, it suddenly became active on 4 February 2020, retweeting the WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. It subsequently tweeted several times a day, mostly about COVID-19-related issues. Then, the tweets began to spread rumours and conspiracy theories, which were not conducive to trust, suggesting that COVID-19 had originated in the United States and was brought to China by the US military—a story supported by other Chinese officials. In March–April 2020, the embassy also published several anonymous editorial-style articles on its website, which aimed at "restoring the distorted facts" presented by Western media, politicians and experts" who intended to slander China. Titled «Rétablir des faits distordus—Observations d'un diplomate chinois en poste à Paris» [Restoring distorted facts—Observations of a Chinese diplomat stationed in Paris], the articles mixed real facts with false or unfounded allegations, denigrated Western democracies' handling of the crisis, and advanced the official narrative of the PRC's success. The most aggressive article, for example, published on 12 April, promoted the theory that the virus could have originated in the United States, accused French members of Parliament of supporting a declaration by Taiwan that called Tedros a "nigger", and blamed the personnel of retirement homes for "having abandoned their positions overnight, collectively deserting and leaving their inhabitants to die of hunger and disease." The French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, summoned Lu Shaye on April 14 to express his disapproval of the embassy's criticisms towards the Western response to the coronavirus pandemic (Le Monde 2020). The Chinese embassy tried to explain the situation as a misunderstanding, blaming the media for having distorted its intended meaning (Ambassade de la République Populaire de Chine en République Française 2020). Nonetheless, on 24 May, the embassy's Twitter account published a cartoon with the comment "Qui est le prochain?" [Who's next?]. The polemical drawing accused the United States of being responsible for the conflicts in Iraq, Libya, Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela and, ultimately, Hong Kong. Although the embassy claimed that its Twitter account had been hacked and deleted the controversial post, netizens doubted the embassy's word (LCI 2020). Lu also made multiple appearances in the French media to defend the Chinese narrative. The Chinese embassy in France reflected Beijing's then diplomatic approach to public diplomacy, one that is more proactive and aggressive, and dubbed "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy after the Chinese blockbuster movie *Wolf Warrior 2*, released in 2018. This new approach has been observed in many countries since then, especially in Europe.

Anglo–Chinese relations, or to be more precise, UK–China business relations, have been hit severely by COVID-19 as well as the online battle of narratives. Some even predict that the pandemic will spell the end of what a former British finance minister called the "golden era", since 2013, when Huawei confirmed a 1.3 billion investment in the UK and the Prime Minister David Cameron promised that the UK and China would have a long-term relationship during his visit to China. Furthermore, the UK was the first major Western country to join the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). In October 2015, Xi paid a State Visit to the UK shortly after the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, spoke of "a golden era" for the UK–China relationship in September. The Golden Era was mentioned again to mark the visit of the Prime Minister Theresa May to China in early 2018. Yet, when the Hong Kong issue started to become salient in 2019, the UK politicians started to show dissent towards China; eventually, the government openly expressed its concern about the imposing of the national security law in HK and set out plans for British national (overseas) status holders. Meanwhile, in July 2020, the UK Government committed to the removal of Huawei equipment from the UK's 5G network by 2027.

In response to the rapid souring of the UK–China relationship from a trusted business partner to a distrusted opponent, China's narrative has also become more and more aggressive. This can be observed from a series of statements made by China's ambassador Liu Xiaoming (Seaman and French Institute of International Relations 2020). He is one of the

Wolf Warriors, a prominent defender of China on social media with over 100,000 followers on Twitter. He once fully denied any abuse of Uighurs in Xinjiang in a BBC interview and firmly defended China's imposition of the National Security Law in Hong Kong. With the UK's opening to the Hong Kong British National (Overseas) visa, the UK–China relationship continues to ebb, and China's aggressive stance will also be continued by Liu's successor, Zheng Zuguang, who has already been banned from entering Parliament.

4.4. Production of the Legacy: "Offering Fuel in the Snowy Weather" from the Chinese State to the Diaspora

On a par with the solidarity shown by the UK to China in early 2020, the "help" from China to the UK was also twofold, at the government level and the local level, and they were usually inseparable from each other (LCI 2020). At the local level, the help from China mainly came from Chinese people living in the UK and UK business partners. In terms of Chinese people living in the UK, there are long-term migrants, overseas Chinese who have lived abroad for a longer period and established a life abroad, and temporary migrants who currently live in the UK. The latter might become long-term migrants in the future, but to date they live only temporarily in the UK; they usually came to the UK with a clear purpose, such as to work or study.

At the state level, on 28 March 2020, the Joint Working Group from the Shandong province arrived in the UK. This trip brought to the UK not only medical supplies but also doctors and Shandong local government officials, including the Deputy Director of the Standing Committee of the People's Congress of Shandong and the Secretary of the Provincial Party Committee (Xinhua 2020a). It was indicated that the purpose of this visit was to assist Chinese citizens in the UK, following Xi's instruction to strengthen China's care for overseas Chinese citizens in the Politburo meeting. Xi also had a telephone conversation with the Prime Minister Boris Johnson in late March to emphasize the importance of protecting the health and safety of Chinese citizens overseas, and expressed his hope that Britain would take measures in safeguarding the health, safety, and legitimate rights of Chinese nationals, in particular those studying in the UK (CGTN 2020b). From late March to May 2020, the Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese (侨联 qiaolian) and overseas friendship associations (海外联谊会 haiwai lianyihui) in China, especially the ones in the emigration regions, released news about how many medical supplies they had organized to send to Chinese citizens living abroad in return for the favour they had received earlier. It was constantly emphasized that the natal China always cared about the safety and wellbeing of the overseas Chinese (China United Front News Network 2020). Apart from allocating medical supplies to Chinese students in cooperation with local associations of fellow provincials, the Chinese Students and Scholars Association in the United Kingdom (CSSA-UK) provided mental health support to students by organizing over three hundred mutual aid groups to include over 100,000 students. Furthermore, in corporation with medical schools in Shandong, the CSSA-UK also organized an Advising Plan (抗疫輔導計畫 kangyi fudao jihua) to match students in need with experts in Shandong for online mental health consulting and medical inquiry services (Chinese Students and Scholars Association UK 2020). This was much needed support that students usually had difficulty accessing after the lockdown. They named this series of solidarity actions "hand in hand, heart connected to heart" (手牵手, 心连心 shou qian shou xin lian xin). Later, providing medical inquiry and consulting services through WeChat groups became a common practice of other provincial associations as well. These solidarity events built trust between the state and its overseas population.

Based on the observations mentioned from our fieldwork, we argue that "health" is at the heart of both China's diplomacy and the solidarity mobilization of the Chinese overseas community in the UK. Moreover, the aim is to convey the message of a "caring homeland", and at the international level to foster international solidarity as well as trust.

4.5. Legacy: To Wear or Not to Wear? The Mask Dilemma and Racism

The last aspect of our analysis on facemasks is the undesirable impacts of mask-wearing in the French and UK societies. In France, and particularly in Paris, which concentrates the Chinese diaspora, we have shown in our previous work that the overseas Chinese had already endured discrimination for many years (Chuang et al. 2021; Tran and Chuang 2019). Therefore, when they started, as early as in December 2019, to buy face masks and gloves in pharmacies in order to ship them back to mainland China, either to friends and families back home or through e-commerce channels, this only added to their stigma. By January 2020, several pharmacies in neighbourhoods where overseas Chinese lived reported to Asian-looking clients that they had run out of stock, saying that they were out of stock due to frantic buying in December by Asians (Interviews with local pharmacies 2020). The Chinese in France continued to source and purchase protective gear and ship it to the mainland in January and February.

However, starting in February 2020, the Chinese in France, fearing the imminent arrival of the epidemic in Europe, started to source protective gear for their own use on the Internet. As they started to wear facemasks, they also became prone to hardened stigmatizing speeches and racist attacks. They had to face the dilemma between health safety and discrimination (Interview with ethnic Chinese 2020). Indeed, as the first cases of COVID-19 appeared in metropolitan France on 24 January, people of Asian origin started to be stigmatized in public places and became the victims of disrespectful behaviour and even racist insults. They were associated with the virus, as if the simple fact of having an Asian face meant being a carrier of COVID-19. On 26 January 2020, the front page of the daily newspaper, *Courrier Picard*, read "Yellow Alert" [*Alerte Jaune*]. The ensuing article was entitled "New yellow peril" [Le nouveau péril jaune], reviving a racist metaphor of the 19th century. Although the daily paper published a letter of apology justifying its editorial choices, eventually the editor had to apologize personally, and the article was eventually withdrawn from the newspaper's website. Nonetheless, the damage had been done as the clumsy and tendentious wording of certain media, along with the comments of Internet users on social media, had created a climate of psychosis in France, which led to amalgamations against the community of Chinese origin, and more generally speaking to people of Asian origin, regardless of their actual nationality. The hashtag #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus was born in response to this phenomenon and quickly relayed on social media. Faced with the recurrence of discriminatory incidents, the Chinese started to share their personal ordeals on social media and dedicated channels. Clients boycotted Chinese restaurants and businesses. However, an even larger number of these incidents took place within school premises: children and youths were stigmatized or harassed due to their origins. Chinese associations, and in particular the Association des Jeunes Chinois de France [Association of the Young Chinese in France] (Association des Jeunes Chinois de France 2020), created in 2009, were instrumental in collecting those reports and liaising with the French authorities and the civil sector to find solutions.

Meanwhile, while donations and medical supplies were being arranged at the community level to support the fight against the virus in China, Chinese people in the UK were facing hostile situations in their everyday life (Murphy 2020). As the UK has the largest number of Chinese students in Europe (120,385 engaged in higher education and 15,000 under 17 years old), it also reported many COVID-19 related incidents of hate crime against Chinese people in the UK. They were well-documented in the run up to and during the lockdown period. The assaults reported in the media, and in our own interviews, included stone throwing, individuals being spat on and assaulted, coronavirus related derogatory words being shouted, and even individuals being refused entry onto the bus due to their mask wearing. The Home Office minister told the Commons committee that Anti-Asian hate crimes went up 21% during the coronavirus crisis (Grierson 2020). At least 267 offences against Chinese people were recorded in the first three months of 2020, which was nearly three times that of the previous two years (Mercer 2020). This increased Anti-Asian hate crime was aimed at individuals, but it only shows the growing distrust towards China and

anyone seemingly from and related to China. The provision of masks embodied solidarity with China on the one hand, and mask-wearing, on the other hand, marked and spurred distrust against China with regard to coronavirus.

5. Conclusions

The Introduction set out our core research question (*Why did China's medical aid and health diplomacy campaign failed to win the hearts and minds of the peoples in Europe?*) and the three sub-questions, as follows: (1) What was the state of China–Europe relations prior to the pandemic? (2) How did the Europeans and the Chinese react during the pandemic? (3) What were the consequences of the (re)actions of the Europeans and Chinese? Applying the framework of a critical juncture, this article identifies the antecedent conditions of Sino–French and Sino–British relations, the cleavage created by the outbreak of COVID-19, the battle of narratives as a critical juncture, the legacies of Beijing's mobilization of overseas Chinese in Europe, and the rampant racism targeting Asian-looking mask-wearers in Europe.

This article has shown that Sino–French and Sino–British relations prior to the pandemic had been going through a state of affairs comprising enduring concerns and issues but were certainly not confrontational or aggressive. In Spring 2020, the rift in China–Europe relations was largely widened against the background of COVID-19. China–Europe relations were then centred around a simple yet life-saving object, the medical facemask, which became a point of attention and contention, crystalizing transnational (dis)trust at the government and individual levels. Through conducting interviews, digital ethnography, and media analysis, the authors conclude that the critical juncture in China–Europe relations can be attributed to not only China's promotion of its medical aid and health diplomacy campaign, but also its engagement of aggressive Twitter diplomacy. Solidarity with China during its difficult time and the help returned by China with its experiences and resources—the mutual "offering of fuel in the snowy weather"—could have deepened their mutual trust. However, the extremely assertive discourse by their most vocal diplomats made the Chinese authorities become unpopular in both France and the UK and lose their edge and credibility, not to mention the doubts over the quality of Chinese-made medical equipment in many countries (BBC News 2020). Eventually, Beijing's diplomatic offensive in Spring 2020 proved counterproductive at the intra-state level. While distrust grew at the state level, the Chinese in Europe faced extensive racist ordeals. The distrust in China took the form of attacks on ethnic Asians wearing facemasks. Last but not least, the authors observed in the fieldwork that Beijing's campaign of telling good anti-pandemic stories of solidarity and mobilization to "offer fuel in snowy weather" to "return the help" to Europe have strengthened the transnational ties between the state and its overseas population in France and the UK.

To sum up, this article has contributed to showing that the pandemic provided China with the opportunity to stage a global political campaign, defining new forms of public diplomacy. This article's findings are threefold: (1) at the individual level, hostility towards the ethnic Asians from the host French and British societies was witnessed; (2) at the state-to-state level, China's aggressive Twitter diplomacy and the flawed health diplomacy increased the lingering distrust in China–France and China–UK relations; and, (3) the mobilization of medical aid strengthened the engagement and connection between China and the overseas Chinese in these two countries. These findings echo the three levels of trust discussed in Section 2.2, and, based on the findings, the authors have identified three levels of (dis)trust in China–Europe relations, as shown in Figure 2.

Drawing from this article's findings, the authors are now inquiring further into China's adoption of digital diplomacy, including Twitter diplomacy, as the world is recovering from the pandemic amidst a climate of enhanced tension and the war in Ukraine. More than ever, trust amongst state leaders and nations is the most important factor in regard to dialogue and peace.

Figure 2. Multilevel (dis)trust in China–Europe relations in the early COVID-19 pandemic.

Notes

1. The frame analysis of British and French media was made possible thanks to the research project titled *China's Twitter Diplomacy: Content and Impact*, funded by Aarhus University Research Foundation—AUFF NOVA, and led by Dr Mette Thunø and in which the two authors are Co-Investigators.

2. The Twitter data and analysis derive from the above research project.

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