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Building the Image of China as a ‘Responsible Major Country’ in Advanced Economies

Did Beijing’s Covid-19 Aid Campaign Work?

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Abstract

Drawing on a novel dataset collecting China’s Covid-19-related donations of personal protection equipment, and PEW survey data from 2019 to 2021, this paper argues that despite the historically unprecedented scale of China’s Covid-19 humanitarian aid to advanced economies in 2020, its country image effects appear in retrospect both mixed and short-lived. The findings help us to better understand the limits of Chinese humanitarian aid and disaster relief efforts as a form of soft power projection of making China appear as a ‘responsible great power’.

Keywords

China – Covid-19 – humanitarian aid – mask diplomacy – public attitudes – country image-building – soft power – public diplomacy – industrial countries – Europe

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1 Introduction

In November 2021, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) issued an authoritative ‘Third Resolution’ on the history of the CCP since the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. The Resolution contained the official assessment of the global Covid-19 humanitarian aid campaign that the PRC launched in the early spring of 2020 and which was often dubbed as a ‘mask diplomacy’ campaign in Western media:

In combating Covid-19, China has engaged in international cooperation and launched the largest *global emergency humanitarian operation* since the founding of the People’s Republic, providing supplies, medical support, and vaccine assistance for many countries, especially developing countries, and engaging in vaccine cooperation with a number of them. China has thus *built its image as a responsible major country*.

State Council of the People’s Republic of China 2021, emphases added

The resolution shows how the Chinese leaders framed their Covid-19 aid campaign from the perspective of soft power and improving China’s national image. But how can we assess whether the Chinese Covid-19 aid (CCA) campaign actually did what the Resolution claimed it had done? Did it help China to build its image as a responsible major country? How did people actually react to China’s aid in recipient countries? And what can the outcomes of the campaign tell us about the relations between humanitarian aid and country images? In this article we approach these questions from the perspective of the industrial west, which for the first time in its history became a target of a Chinese disaster diplomacy campaign.

The central puzzle of this paper is to answer the questions by examining public attitudes toward China in twelve Western and East Asian advanced economies¹—namely, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States—that represent about twelve per cent of the world’s population. We do so by using survey data collected between 2019 and 2021 by the Pew Research Centre (Pew Research Center 2019, 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2025), and a novel dataset on China’s state and non-state donations during 2020. Based on our

1 While the notion ‘advanced economies’ is not strictly defined, the International Monetary Fund uses it to identify countries with high per capita income level, diverse exports of goods and services, and good integration in the global financial system. In 2020, the IMF (2020) included 30 countries and Hong Kong in this group.

analysis, we find that although China's country-image went generally down in 2020, it did so less in the countries that received more Covid-19-related aid. In 2021 China's country image enjoyed an overall rebound from 2020, but the rebound did not correlate with China's Covid-19 aid in 2020. It appears that China's Covid-19 aid may have had a positive effect in 2020 on public attitudes toward China, but it was short-lived and limited to countries that were not engaged in other conflicts with it. Although not conclusive, these findings are helpful in theorising the role of humanitarian aid and disaster diplomacy in building soft power and improving country images.

This article will examine the possible effects of China's Covid-19 aid on public attitudes toward China in advanced economies. After the literature review, we present our method and criteria for data collection, and then analyse the characteristics of our dataset on China's Covid-19 aid. We conclude by discussing the implications and relevance of our findings to the understanding of China's external image-building efforts and to the study of disaster diplomacy in general.

2 Existing Research on Humanitarian Aid and Public Diplomacy

Country image-building through public diplomacy is considered important because it is assumed that the better a country's image is, the more a government can increase its international political influence (Stock 2009), and have an impact on international rules (S. Ding 2011). Promoting a positive country image is most often conceptualised under 'nation branding' (Kahraman 2016; Lee 2023), which can be seen as an aspect of more generally generating 'soft power' (Kobierecka and Kobierecki 2021; Repnikova 2022). Typically, a government's image-building activities happen through planned and continuous 'persuasive communicative acts [...] directed at foreign audiences' (Kunczik 1997). For example, in early 2020 Secretary General Xi Jinping urged the CCP's Propaganda Department and Chinese international media to 'take the initiative to lead and effectively influence international public opinion' by 'telling China's anti-pandemic story well' (Jacob 2020).

Offering humanitarian aid in times of crisis has to be also seen as such a communicative act, as it conveys a concrete and visible message of how much the donor government cares about the well-being of people in the recipient country. Indeed, high media visibility of crisis-related aid is seen as an effective tool for public diplomacy (Pamment and Wilkins 2018), where caring is communicated through performative gestures with theatrical functions (Chouliaraki 2012), such as China's donation handover ceremonies during the Covid-19 pan-

demic. In 2020, Chinese embassies were further instructed to provide humanitarian aid to local populations while propagating how China had managed to control its own Corona epidemic so successfully (Colley and van Noort 2022, 211–263)—as it appeared at the time.

To date, research on humanitarian aid diplomacy has mostly focused on intra-state or inter-state disaster diplomacy during conflicts (Kelman 2016; J. Zhang 2011). Another research strand has examined the determinants of Overseas Development Aid (ODA) where Humanitarian Aid and Disaster Relief (HADR) is often subsumed, but often only as a footnote (e.g. Ali, Banks, and Parsons 2015; Drury, Olson, and Van Belle 2005; Fink and Redaelli 2011; Kevlihan, DeRouen Jr, and Biglaiser 2014). Therefore, while China's ODA-like 'foreign aid' (外援 *waiyuan*) has received growing attention especially in relation to the rapidly expanding 'Belt and Road Initiative' (Bräutigam 2011; Broich 2017; Dreher et al. 2022), the specificities of China's HADR and their effects have remained largely understudied (Hirono 2018; 2020). In this paper, we contend that conflating ODA and HADR tends to obscure the specific effects of HADR allocation in China's broader foreign aid and public diplomacy and that offering humanitarian aid therefore deserves to be studied on its own as a form of public diplomacy. Indeed, as we all witnessed China's 'mask diplomacy' campaign in 2020, we doubt that anyone should regard or study it only as a part of China's regular ODA activity.

One factor conducive to treating China's HADR as part of its ODA-like foreign aid is that it is mainly administered by the same agencies, namely, in order of importance: the Ministry of Commerce, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA) founded in 2018 (Hirono 2020). However, in contrast with more long-term ODA, humanitarian aid in protracted crises, and Development Assistance for Health (DAH), all of which require multi-year planning and agreements, sudden natural disasters or public health emergencies typically create an urgent *ad hoc* need for HADR where donor governments face a much shorter time-frame to decide who to aid or protect, how much and for how long, in situations that may also include complex political conflicts, military interventions (Crossley 2022), or aid refusal by recipient governments (Nelson 2010). Due to its emergency nature, health aid is also known to be less vulnerable to criticism and politicisation than other types of aid, as well as an effective policy tool for donors to cultivate or improve relations with recipients that have divergent foreign policy preferences from donors (Hwang and Hwang 2023).

Nowadays, donation of medical goods to other countries in crisis has become a common gesture of goodwill in public diplomacy (Lee and Kim 2021). Moreover, because HADR is ideally about saving lives out of solidarity and a

shared human condition in the face of sudden crises, it is expected to be more impartial or less selective than ODA (Barnett 2011; Slim 2015). The public diplomacy effect of HADR can arguably also be more noticeable than with ODA thanks to the wider publicity and emotional aspects of emergency aid giving. When sudden natural disasters or health emergencies attract wide attention from international media, they often create dramatic and emotional spectacles due to the scale of destruction and loss of human lives, which governments can then use to project desired national images to wider audiences. Governments also respond to publicity. For example, disasters that received most media attention in the past often translated into more generous amounts of the U.S. government's HADR donations to victims (Drury, Olson, and Van Belle 2005). Asking how governments can leverage disasters and humanitarian emergencies in their public diplomacy to generate a more positive country image through donations to show that it cares and can save lives has therefore attracted academic attention (Müller, Brazys, and Dukalskis 2021), and our article also belongs to this category concerning China.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, a number of studies have sought to clarify the relations between China's aid and public diplomacy from a variety of perspectives. One study argues that China's Covid-19 aid was motivated by a will to display its aid as reciprocation of the help it had received from other countries in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, and to present China as a responsible great power (Kobierecka and Kobierecki 2021). Another study points out how the CCP primarily used its Covid-19 aid to secure domestic stability and foreign expressions of gratitude from both government and society (Kowalski 2021). A third study observed that the apparent contradiction between the CCP's Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) donations and disinformation campaign on the origins of Covid-19 can be explained by the fact that they targeted different audiences (Loh and Loke 2024); while others argue that both Chinese international media and non-media actors worked together to strengthen external propaganda for the purpose of enhancing China's global discourse power and national image in the pandemic (Kurlantzick 2023). These observations relate to studies referring to the party-state's role as a 'performing state' (I. Ding 2022) whose 'politics of appearance' reveal the CCP's growing concern to project an image of control (Yang 2022) and 'moral performance' in times of disasters (B. Xu 2016) both domestically and overseas. The attempt to influence overseas public attitudes toward China is probably motivated also by public opinion's ability to create pressure on governments (Gilboa 2008), and the need to boost domestic stability and the CCP's legitimacy by foreign expressions of gratitude (Holbig 2011), as well as obtaining praise for the CCP's policies by foreign elites (Fang 2021).

Disaster-related diplomacy can be seen as much as a type of government-to-government diplomacy (Kelman 2016) as public diplomacy. In the latter, diplomatic activities target the public rather than only governments in order to make the audiences more favourable towards other countries' messages (Cao 2016; Nye 2008). In this article, we therefore focus on the public diplomacy aspect of disaster aid. More specifically, based on a novel dataset representing the most systematic collection of China's Covid-19 medical donations to date, we examine how China's aid affected public attitudes toward itself in twelve Western and East Asian industrial countries. As argued above, there is a scarcity of studies on how HADR actually works as an instrument of public diplomacy. Considering the distinctively performative and emotional functions of health-related HADR in public diplomacy, this question needs to be addressed.

3 China's Approach to HADR and the Covid-19 'Mask Diplomacy' Campaign

As the citation at the beginning of this article from the 2021 'Third Resolution' on Party History by the CCP Central Committee shows, Chinese leaders saw China's Covid-19 aid campaign mainly in terms of country image-building and soft power. This can be seen as a direct consequence of the 'soft power turn' in China's wider foreign politics starting around the late 2000s and early 2010s, whereby soft power and the provision of 'international public goods' became central elements of the CCP's foreign policy, while China simultaneously raised its funding for overseas propaganda to boost its country image (S. Ding 2011; K. Zhao 2017).

For example, the CCP's 2011 White Paper on 'China's Peaceful Development' directly connected China's engagements in disaster aid to its rise on the international scene as a way to reassure the world of the CCP's peaceful intentions. Concurrently, Chinese researchers started to highlight the importance of humanitarian aid in building China's soft power (e.g. He and Cao 2013; X. Li [李小瑞] 2012; Mao and Qun 2005; Zhong 2015). Such a view materialised most notably through China's then largest ever epidemic-related medical aid campaign during the 2013–2015 West African Ebola epidemic where China also learned valuable lessons on how to organise a multiple recipient HADR campaign (Cabestan 2020; Huang 2017). As a result, when the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in early 2020, the CCP was conceptually and practically ready to deploy an overseas medical aid campaign, although it had never organised anything on this scale before.

When the Covid-19 pandemic started from China in early 2020, the need for a ‘mask diplomacy’ campaign was accentuated by the Western media narrative portraying China as responsible for the pandemic due to the CCP’s initial cover-up of the human-to-human transmissibility of the virus (Huang 2022) and the silencing of whistle-blowers (Nie and Elliott 2020). Consequently, the CCP’s global communication strategy sought to shift the negative Covid-19 narrative by highlighting China’s donations and deliveries of PPE (J. Xu and Gong 2024), and later also vaccinations to the rest of the world. Through a global media campaign seeking to portray China more positively, the CCP amplified the visibility of recurring PPE handover ceremonies and the work of Chinese overseas medical teams, while at the same time criticising the handling of the Covid-19 by Western countries (Soula et al. 2020). Simultaneously, China’s large-scale PPE supply was reframed in Western media as ‘mask diplomacy’, a term originally employed to describe Japan’s PPE donations to China in the earliest days of the Covid-19 outbreak (C. Li and McElveen 2020), and then applied to China’s PPE supply to highlight its public diplomacy dimension despite CCP’s claims of providing PPE based on humanitarian needs (Del Álamo and Lim 2021) and reciprocity (Rudyak 2023).

By combining PPE supply with a global media campaign, notably through a further expansion of aid delivery channels from state actors to China’s private sector actors and citizens (H. Li and Musiitwa 2020), the CCP tried to influence global attitudes toward China, but did it work? Arguably, China’s unprecedented role in the global anti-pandemic response was made more visible by the retreat of the US and the UK governments from their usual global health leadership (Gostin, Friedman, and Wetter 2021; Wenham 2020), as well as the limited ability of the EU and its member-states to fight the pandemic (Nestoras and Cirju 2021). Everybody who lived through the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 can remember how it caused panicky fear and a frantic search for personal protective equipment by governments and individuals alike. It was in this context in which we all came across the images and broadcasts of planeloads of Chinese aid as well as dispatched Chinese doctors and nurses fighting the virus.

Previous studies on the impact of China’s aid on media and public opinions present mixed results. Müller et al. (2021) argue that the tone of media coverage of China turned more positive at least during the first months of the pandemic when China’s donation drive to industrial countries was at its peak. Based on a sample including the twelve countries also included in our study and social media posts about the vaccine phase of the CCP’s Covid-19 campaign in 2021, another study found a similar effect with about 75 per cent of favourable sentiments toward China when China’s donations were discussed

(Lee 2023). In contrast, other studies observed how the CCP's Covid-19 media campaign sought to promote a mix of defensive and offensive narratives that largely ignored the local contexts of its targeted audiences (Cabestan 2020; S. Zhao 2021), and sometimes even reinforced negative attitudes toward China in the case of Central and Eastern Europe (Kavalski 2021; Wang et al. 2023). One study shows that any potential strategic use of the Chinese government's Covid-19 aid to strengthen China's global influence was undermined by the fragmentation and under-preparedness of the policy makers in charge of aid (Sun and Yu 2023). Two other survey reports also observed an overall decline of positive attitudes toward China across Europe for the months that followed the 2020 Pew Survey results used in this study (Dams, Martin, and Kranenburg 2021; Jerdén et al. 2021).

Relatedly, revelations about the CCP's repeated information manipulation operations and paid advertisement campaigns on global social media platforms seeking to convince audiences that the pandemic originated from the USA or any other part of the world than China (Charon and Vilmer Jeangène 2021; Molter and DiResta 2020) partly generated a hardening of the China policy among OECD governments with a growing focus on the CCP's information manipulation.

4 Method and Data

In our study, we outline quantitatively the Chinese aid and compare the amounts of Chinese aid to the changes in the Pew score in the previously defined advanced economies. For this we use 'Opinion on China' survey scores collected by the Pew Research Center (2019; 2020; 2021a; 2021b) in between 2019 and 2021. The surveys asked its respondents whether they had a favourable or unfavourable view of China. The scores, in turn, indicated the percentage of both aggregate categories of all replies in a given country.² We measured the annual *change* in favourable scores for each sample country between 2019 and 2021 for our analysis. The outcome of this simple measurement during the

2 The exact survey question reads: 'Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable opinion of China.' Pew has then aggregated the replies into the general categories of favourable and unfavourable, the former comprising somewhat positive and very positive replies, and the latter somewhat negative and very negative replies. Sample size for each country is at least 1,000 respondents. Full description of Pew's international survey methods and country-specific details are available under the 'Methods' section in Pew Research Center (2025).

three-year period was then compared to the amounts of China's Covid-19 aid in 2020. It is good to note that we were not interested in why China is more popular in some countries than in others, as examined by previous research (e.g. Xie and Page 2013).

The reason for our sample is purely data-driven. For the time period of interest there are Pew survey scores available only for the twelve advanced economies in our sample. Although our data otherwise would have allowed using much larger datasets, no systematic diachronic data on how public opinion on China changed during this time in other countries is available. Our sample is less than half of the 30 economies that the International Monetary Fund (2020) considered advanced in 2020, and even less of all the countries (181) that, to our knowledge, received CCA in 2020. Yet, expanding survey data so that it satisfies our temporal (2019–2021) and thematic (public opinion on China) criteria is impossible. The small sample size further means that we cannot use more sophisticated statistical tools in our analysis, but have to resort to descriptive statistical analysis only. This caveat is good to keep in mind as to the interpretation of the results, which are meant to give us insights into the ways humanitarian aid can be used as a tool of public diplomacy. They also give us clues as to the possible future research questions and hypotheses on the topic. Table 1 and the figures in the next section present the contents of the data in detail.

China does not systematically report data on the composition and amounts of its humanitarian aid, which also applied to its Covid-19 aid. Therefore, we have assembled a novel dataset that is based on manually collected open-source information. The data collection process included a review of news archives and social media posts of the Chinese embassy for each country, as well as from the websites of China's most relevant aid agencies and main media. The search was also extended to local news media in aid recipient countries to supplement and to further validate the information provided by the aforementioned sources. Ultimately, we assembled more than two thousand sources in about twenty languages. Overall, the dataset comprises 2,547 donations to 181 countries, international organisations and non-sovereign entities in 2020. The estimated total value of Chinese donations and medical teams, which we have also tracked for 2020, reached almost USD 1.2 billion in this period. The present study draws its sample from this broader dataset.

The dataset includes an estimate of the monetary value in USD of each donation for which we have sufficient information (about 94 per cent of all the donations). The estimates are based either on the source(s) directly, or our own calculations. The latter rely on the quantification of ten PPE items and medical equipment, and a list of reference prices used in a previous dataset focusing

on CCA to Latin America and the Caribbean region in 2020 (Telias and Urdinez 2022).³ However, about fifteen per cent of the donations in the dataset came without a value estimate or the number of donated items.

To impute the missing values, we relied on a more experimental method: we used photographs from the Chinese donation ceremonies displaying some of the donated items, often in stacks of boxes, to estimate the approximate number of donated items. Briefly put, we first counted the number of boxes, and then conservatively estimated their sizes and how many donated items would fit in them—this was possible since in these cases news articles often indicated the general content of the donations (such as masks, gloves, and protective goggles) but did not disclose the exact quantities. This allowed us to push the number of missing values down to about six per cent.⁴ In the present study, this method concerns five donations to four countries—namely, Italy, Japan, South Korea, and Spain—with a combined value of circa 355,000 US dollars.

These calculations come with caveats. For example, we had to generalise the reference prices over each item category, regardless of variance in price between different manufacturers and models, because the information provided by donors was often too vague. Furthermore, our reference prices are fixed, and thus do not reflect currency or price fluctuation. The counting of the container boxes, in turn, suffered from the limited availability of quality photographs. Moreover, much like the reference prices, we had to generalise the box size estimates into three fixed box categories to allow calculations because information on how items were packed exactly is not available. As a precaution, we pushed the median value estimate of box contents toward the median value of the donations whose monetary value is known. Despite these limitations, we maintain that these evidence-based estimates, however approximate, still allow us to better ascertain the amounts of CCA than would otherwise have been possible.

Chinese Covid-19 aid has also been studied using other databases. For example, Fuchs et al. (2020; 2022) and Telias and Urdinez (2022) use China Customs

3 The ten medical items are regular face masks, N95 masks, protective clothing, goggles, gloves, shoe covers, thermometers, visors, tests, and ventilators. The reference price list comprises the average prices of twenty-six separate items on Alibaba.com in May 2020. Telias and Urdinez also re-validated the reference prices in early 2021. We have augmented the list with information from Hospital District of Southwest Finland (TYKS) and online sources—namely Alibaba.com and Global Sources—for laboratory equipment.

4 For an idea of the size of the boxes and cartons in which medical supplies are typically transported, we consulted online sources (see previous note 3) as well as a nursing science doctoral researcher, Reetta Mustonen, and the Procurement and Logistics services of Hospital District of Southwest Finland (TYKS).

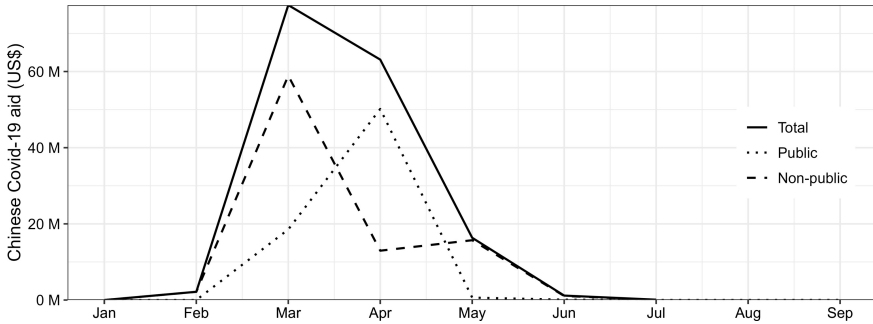


FIGURE 1 Combined monthly CCA in the sample countries ($n = 12$)
Note: Public aid refers to the party-state organs, state-owned companies, and institutions at the state, provincial, and municipal levels. Non-public aid comprises donations from the private and third sectors, as well as private individuals.

Database to estimate the quantities of aid. Such data has its weaknesses, however. The customs data does not necessarily indicate the final recipients of such aid, only the first destination, as using different distribution hubs is typical in international logistics. Our data is also more comprehensive, as it includes the monetary donations (not relevant in the case of industrial countries), and value of Chinese medical teams sent to different countries (in our case Italy) during the pandemic. Further, the data is recipient-end data, and using the open media sources tracking these donations also means that we tracked the publicity of aid in recipient countries, which is important for our analysis. Indeed, there was a notable positive correlation ($r = .640^*$) between the amounts of Chinese aid and the number of news articles in aid recipient countries' media that mentioned Chinese aid in our data.

5 Analysis

In total, the sample countries received a little over USD 160 million worth of CCA during 2020. Figure 1 presents the monthly evolution of the CCA campaign in the sample countries. We can see that in 2020, the campaign was at its most active in March and April and then faded away quite rapidly toward July. The first donation with known monetary value we have recorded was made on 20 February to the United States by Jack Ma / Alibaba Foundations and the last on 10 September to Spain by Yulin municipality. The value of donations ranged from 80 dollars to USD 45 million, while the average donation was valued at USD 42,000 (median at USD 26,000).

TABLE 1 Recipient countries, CCA in 2020, favourable Pew scores 2019–2021 and their changes

Country	All CCA	Public CCA	Non-public CCA	CCA pc	PEW 2019	PEW 2020	PEW 2021	PEW change 2019–2020	PEW change 2020–2021	PEW change 2019–2021
United States	92.99	46.76	46.22	0.28	26	22	20	-4	-2	-6
Italy	20.95	8.71	12.24	0.35	37	38	38	1	0	1
United Kingdom	11.04	1.66	9.38	0.16	38	22	27	-16	5	-11
Spain	7.9	2.63	5.27	0.17	39	36	39	-3	3	0
Canada	7	0.25	6.75	0.18	27	23	23	-4	0	-4
Japan	5.94	3.89	2.06	0.05	14	9	10	-5	1	-4
South Korea	5.51	3.92	1.59	0.11	34	24	22	-10	-2	-12
France	4.26	1.11	3.15	0.06	33	26	29	-7	3	-4
Australia	2.5	0.03	2.48	0.1	36	15	21	-21	6	-15
Germany	1.38	0.54	0.84	0.02	34	25	21	-9	-4	-13
Netherlands	0.62	0.01	0.62	0.04	36	25	24	-11	-1	-12
Sweden	0.09		0.09	0.01	25	14	18	-11	4	-7
Total	160.18	69.5	90.69							
Mean	24.64	11.58	13.95	0.13	31.58	23.25	24.33	-8.33	1.08	-7.25

Notes: All Chinese Covid-19 aid (CCA) is measured in millions of United States dollars, CCA pc = USD per capita. Public and non-public aid are the same as in Figure 1. Pew scores indicate the combined share of 'very favorable' and 'somewhat favorable' replies of all replies. Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The opinions expressed herein, including any implications for policy, are those of the authors and not of Pew Research Center.

SOURCE: AID FIGURES OWN ELABORATION; PEW SCORES ARE FROM PEW RESEARCH CENTER (2019, QUESTION Q8B; 2020, Q8B; 2021A, GAP21Q4B; 2021B, Q4B).

Among the sample countries, the United States, Italy, and the United Kingdom rank as top recipients. Notably, of all the CCA that the sample countries received, some 57 per cent (or USD 90.7 million) came from the private sector. The three largest private sector donors were the Jack Ma and Alibaba Foundations with USD 51.8 million, Zhang Yiming (ByteDance/TikTok) with a one-time donation of USD ten million to the US-based charity Gates Philanthropy Partners (Au-Yeung 2020), and Tencent Foundation (USD 5.4 million). Indeed, the biggest non-public donors were enterprises and their foundations.

The USD 69.5 million coming from the public sector consisted primarily of donations made by the central government and party-state organs (52 million) at the national level. Another active group were the provincial and municipal governments, notably the Beijing and Shanghai municipalities, and the provinces of Guangdong, Fujian, and Liaoning, that together accounted for almost seven million dollars. Part of the public CCA were the medical teams

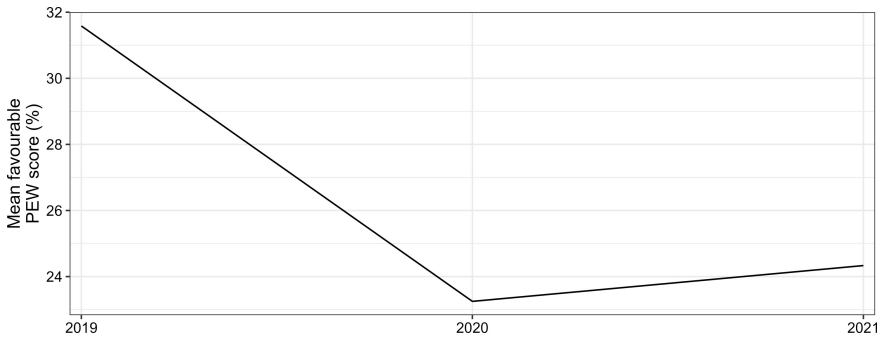


FIGURE 2 Mean favourable Pew Score in the sample countries 2019–2021 (n = 12)

Note: Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The opinions expressed herein, including any implications for policy, are those of the authors and not of Pew Research Center. *SOURCE:* PEW RESEARCH CENTER (2019, QUESTION Q8B; 2020, Q8B; 2021A, GAP21Q4B; 2021B, Q4B)

China deployed as part of its CCA campaign. Italy was the only sample country to host Chinese medical teams. Three teams with a total of 35 persons were deployed between 12 March and 9 April 2020, spending a total of 43 person-workdays in the country. Using an estimate of the average annual salary of a Chinese physician in 2015 (see C. Zhang and Liu 2018), we estimate their combined value to be a little over nineteen thousand US dollars. The first team was organised by the National Health Commission but the organiser(s) of the other two teams are unknown. Most of the teams were organised by either national or provincial level public agencies so we have included the aid in public aid (and total).

This brief breakdown highlights how the CCA campaign included not only the CCP or the central government and provinces, which were made to ‘pair’ up with designated recipient countries for donations (Economy 2024), but also other Chinese actors from the private sector and civil society.

At first, it seems that China’s aid campaign failed to deliver positive results in the industrial countries in terms of favourable public opinion: from 2019 to 2020, favourable Pew scores for China declined on average by eight percentage points. This was followed by a minor rebound of one percentage point from 2020 to 2021. However, favourable Pew scores declined on average seven percentage points between 2019 and 2021. Attitudes became therefore generally more unfavourable towards China in the twelve countries during the pandemic. This evolution of attitudes is illustrated in Figure 1. However, in a closer look, there was also some variation between countries. For example, the attitudes improved in Italy, even though just slightly, while they declined a dra-

matic twenty-one percentage points in Australia. A question arises: was this variation somehow associated with China's aid campaign?

When the whole dataset was analysed for correlations, Chinese public aid measured on a per capita basis of recipient country population did not have a statistically significant positive correlation with Pew scores change ($r = .324$). Therefore, initially there seems to have been no gratitude effect for CCA in 2020 in the advanced sample economies. Testing whether CCA received in 2020 had any residual effects in 2021 returned similar results. Neither did other variations of aid (per capita, total aid) have statistically significant correlations with Pew scores.

However, the results changed dramatically when a suspected outlier was removed from the data. This was the USA, which is arguably a *sui generis* case in the sample, with aid to it amounting to 58 per cent of all CCA in the sample. The case of the USA is also theoretically interesting, considering that in 2020 the USA had an ongoing and salient Covid-19-related dispute in its relations with the PRC and the background of growing great power antagonism and an ongoing trade war since 2018 (Christensen 2020; Jeong and Lee 2021). The Trump administration even blamed the pandemic directly on the Chinese government, and briefly named the virus the 'China virus' (Viala-Gaudefroy and Lindaman 2020). In response, the PRC government officials and state media engaged in an influence campaign seeking to discredit the USA and its efforts in epidemic control and reframe the USA as the origin of the virus (Molter and DiResta 2020). The pandemic therefore added fuel to the growing global competition between the two superpowers. Cao (2016) argues that bad inter-governmental relations are usually reflected in public attitudes as well, while Wang et al. (2023) maintain that a perception of insincerity about aid can actually affect country attitudes negatively. Theoretically, the situation therefore allows us to test the impact of a salient conflict in the popular opinion effect of humanitarian aid.

When the correlations were computed after removing the US, a positive and statistically significant zero-order ($r = .645^*$) correlation between public CCA and Pew score changes between 2019 and 2020 was found in the sample. This can also be seen in Figure 3, where declining favourable views on China (B) are for the most part followed by declining CCA (A). Although the low number of the countries allows only for descriptive analysis, and the power of explanation of these correlations as such is low, the results suggest that countries where the Chinese government donated more aid generally experienced less decline in favourable views of China. Interestingly, when the same analysis was conducted for 2021, all these correlations were notably weaker. This indicates a possible short lifespan of the positive effect of aid. There appears to have been no residual gratitude for the Chinese aid donated in 2020.

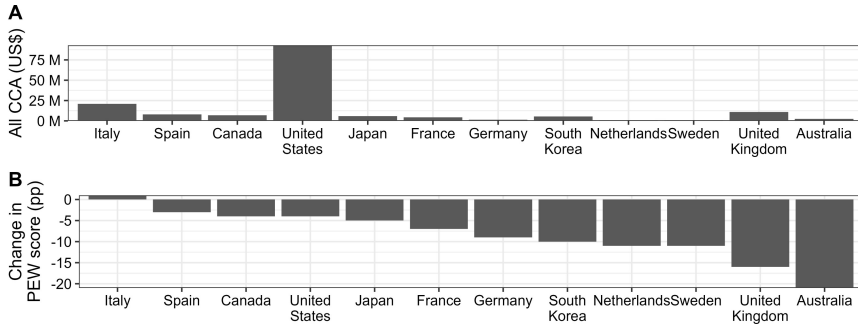


FIGURE 3 A) All CCA by recipient country in 2020 and B) the change in the favourable Pew scores 2019–2020 ($n = 12$)

Note: X-axes ordered by change in favourable Pew scores in descending order. Pew Research Center bears no responsibility for the analyses or interpretations of the data presented here. The opinions expressed herein, including any implications for policy, are those of the authors and not of Pew Research Center.

6 Discussion

As discussed in the introduction, with a ‘soft power turn’ in China’s foreign policy in the 2010s, the CCP has begun to see humanitarian aid as an instrument in projecting China as a ‘responsible major country’ to dispel the global uneasiness created by its rapid rise. Historically, the Global South has received the bulk of Chinese humanitarian aid and public opinion on China tends to be more positive in these countries (Paltmaa 2019). Nevertheless, the global nature of the pandemic presented an opportunity, and created pressure, to extend China’s HADR to countries in the Global North. These countries still have a strong clout in international politics but, with some exceptions, China’s image had been in decline in them already before Covid-19. Therefore, for China, using the Covid-19 aid campaign to turn public opinion around in the industrial world would indeed have made the pandemic an opportunity to turn a ‘bad thing into a good one’, which is the common expression the party-state uses in domestic natural disasters when it is propagating the efficiency and largesse of its aid towards disaster victims (Paltmaa 2016). However, based on our findings, one can say that this mostly did not happen with the aid given to the industrial countries.

Looking closer at the key findings of this study one can see that, first, in 2020, there was a positive correlation between the amount of public CCA and the changes in China’s country-image in the majority of surveyed countries, but only under specific conditions. Second, this impact was short-lived. Although China’s country-image enjoyed an overall rebound in 2021, there was no sta-

tistically significant correlation with CCA from 2020 on public attitudes from 2021. This finding is in line with Cao's (2016) observation that the impact of single public diplomacy activities tends to be short-lived. Third, the findings also suggest that when there is a conflict between the donor and the recipient that is related to the disaster itself, it can dampen the effect of aid, as was the case in the Sino-American relations in 2020. Focusing on government-to-government disaster diplomacy, Kelman (2020) has argued that China's Covid-19 aid diplomacy did not disrupt the growing geopolitical tensions between Beijing and Washington that preceded the crisis.

Related to this finding, the two countries where the Pew score went down most in our sample were the UK and Australia, which also had their salient disputes with China. The UK had a dispute over democracy in its former colony of Hong Kong, which China was curbing against the 'one country two systems' of the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration (Lim 2022). In the spring of 2020 Australia and China further developed a serious diplomatic dispute over the origins of the Covid-19 virus. After the Australian government called for an international investigation into the origins of the virus, China placed *de facto* trade sanctions in the form of import restrictions on a number of Australian products (Zhou and Laurenceson 2022).

Fourth, our results and qualitative studies discussed in the literature review show that it is also important to examine other variables to understand the CCP's varying level of influence on foreign public attitudes, such as how it was acting on the China-related Covid-19 debates in recipient countries. In the case of Italy, for example, although public attitudes toward China did not decline there in 2020, qualitative research shows how Chinese external propaganda in Italy backfired through domestic media reports (Ferraresi 2020), and how the expansion of Italy's relations with China by populist Eurosceptics proved short-lived and symbolic, and eventually led to a hardening of Italy's China policy from 2020 onwards (Pugliese, Ghiretti, and Insisa 2022). To assess the level of influence or soft power the CCP may exert on public attitudes in any given country, it is therefore important to combine the capturing of statistical trends with the variety of context-sensitive factors at play under the period of interest.

Fifth, there were a number of other factors that most likely also affected China's country image in 2020–2021. These involved some of the factors that we have discussed above including the suppression of the Hong Kong democratic movement, and China's trade war on Australia, both of which were also widely condemned in the other Western countries. However, during the period there were also other salient issues about China that did not target any single country in the sample as such but their effects were shared by all, including China's severe human rights violations in Xinjiang and Tibet, as well as China's

assertive foreign policies in the South China Sea and on Taiwan. Combined, these factors probably created a general downward pressure on China's country image in our sample countries, but unlike with the Covid-19 humanitarian aid, most of the other factors did not have a similar country-specific impact as Chinese bilateral aid had, therefore their impact can be assumed to have been similar in all of the sample countries.

7 Conclusion

We began this article by asking if China's Covid-19 aid campaign in 2020 helped to improve its country image in the selected twelve countries. Based on our analysis above, we can say that, while it may have had a short-lived positive impact in most of the cases, China's mask diplomacy appears to have been only a partial success. For the estimated aid worth 162 million USD (not all of which was public money), the general decline of public attitudes towards China was at best only moderated somewhat.

Whether such a result was worth the cost is up to the PRC government to decide. At least officially, it was satisfied with results (see the 'Third Resolution'). Nevertheless, the aid campaign did give China a future reference point of how it turned its talk about being a responsible great power into real action. And action, as Anholt (2011) has argued, is essential in country image building. However, as this and other studies on public diplomacy show, overseas disaster aid is only one factor that can influence country image. Indeed, when a government seeks to mobilise a humanitarian aid diplomacy campaign in times of an unprecedented global public health crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic, its ability to influence public attitudes toward itself faces a variety of complex and dynamic variables that often defy attempts to determine the aid campaign's outcome in terms of success or failure. Therefore, in order to effectively assess the Chinese image-building efforts, quantitative analyses must be in conversation with qualitative studies that focus on specific national contexts and audiences in countries which accept China's humanitarian aid.

There are also some obvious caveats related to the data we have used. For example, as of writing this, we do not know how China's country image has evolved in the Global South, which received the largest part of China's Covid-19 aid. Further studies would be needed to establish whether industrial countries with often more open and critical media environments are more difficult targets to influence through humanitarian aid than developing countries. Indeed, the role of media as the origin and conduit of aid imagery and reporting should

be studied further in terms of the soft power impact of aid. Further, the effect of donating humanitarian aid repeatedly cannot be estimated in this sample, as only Japan and Italy had received earlier disaster-related humanitarian aid from China in recent years. In contrast, dozens of developing countries received disaster aid from China repeatedly in the 2010s (Paltemaa 2019), and this kind of clientele relationship may make humanitarian aid more conducive to improving China's country image in these countries.

What is clear, is that China's disaster-related humanitarian aid activities have expanded in the past decade and their role has become conceptually clearer as an instrument of developing China's soft power. Arguably, the 'mask diplomacy' campaign in 2020 and China's related vaccine diplomacy campaign that followed further consolidated the place of HADR diplomacy in Chinese foreign policy repertoire. The emphasis on country image, however, tells us that the CCP's motives to aid are not humanitarian only.

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