

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Care as Critique of Care: Public Services, Social Security and Ritual Responsiveness

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Abstract

Socialist governance and popular sovereignty require state administration of care. In the People's Republic of China (PRC) today, such state care is provided in the form of public services and in the guarantee of social security. Ideally, different levels of government should foster relations of care in local communities and remain responsive to “the people.” Local self-government, relations of mutual support and ritual communities, however, reveal the deficits of state care. Much like general philosophies of care, such local ethics of care propose universal benchmarks against which social practice can be measured. This article outlines the main contours of state care in the post-Mao Zedong PRC, and contrasts its findings with empirical research on public services, social security and ritual responsiveness. Mutual help, neighbourhood communities and ritual practice, in particular, provide alternative models of care. As such, they can be extended and universalized, and offer possibilities for a critique of care.

摘要

社会主义治理和人民主权需要一种国家对照护的管理。在今天的中华人民共和国，公共服务和社会保障提供了这种国家照护。理想情况下，不同级别的政府应培养地方社区的照护关系，并保持对“人民”的回应。然而，地方自治、相互支持的关系和仪式性社区显示了国家照护的不足。与一般的照护哲学相似，这种地方性的照护伦理提出了可以衡量社会实践的普遍基准。本文概述了自毛泽东时代以来中国国家照护的主要轮廓，并与关于公共服务、社会保障和仪式的回应性的实证研究进行了对比。其中，互助、邻里社区和仪式性实践提供了替代的照护模式。鉴于此，这些模式得以扩展和普及，并为照护的批判提供可能性。

Keywords: China; abandonment; attention; accountability; indifference; responsiveness

关键词: 中国; 遗弃; 关注; 责任感; 冷漠; 回应

Philosophers have argued that experiences of care and indifference can be a universal basis for ethics.¹ Such an “ethics of care” counteracts the ethics of rights and obligations based on universal principles of justice.² Radically different from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, here equality and freedom start instead from the fact that human life begins as dependency and nurture and never ceases to be interdependent and vulnerable. The feminist philosophers who spearheaded the discussion of the “ethics of care” thus focused on the fragility of personal relations specifically through the lens of gender, and on that basis produced a general critique of care which inverts the hierarchy of concrete and abstract with radical political and economic consequences.³

1 For his comments on earlier drafts of this article I am deeply indebted to Hans Steinmüller. Whatever sense it now makes is entirely due to his editorial care.

2 See, for instance, Gilligan 1982; Tronto 1993.

3 For an example in the UK, see The Care Collective 2020.

Care, as Hans Steinmüller summarises it in the introduction to this special section, is attention to or from another and co-growth recognized by a third party. That third party would be an internalized model of an ethics of care. Care so described is on an interpersonal scale. The problem of scaling it up, with which he and all of the contributors to this special section are concerned, is making this attentive relation of giving and receiving occur in all settings, including those that occur in large-scale organizations and administrations of care. Indeed, all work relations could and should be attentive to co-growth. Where care and work live up to this definition and to internalized ideals of care we can say that they are exemplars and offer a critique of their lack, or of the creation of conditions that prevent their occurrence. Scaling up would also involve watchful attention to the neglect of others and their needs, necessarily strangers to those noticing them.

On this basis, one critique would be to project what an economy, a whole economy, prioritizing care would like.⁴ Its principle of care as interdependence could well be “from each according to their capacity to each according to their need,” the same as that of the Communist Manifesto, but its economic and political vision long predates Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and is not that of a command economy or of standardized economic units, but just inclusive and mutually supportive and participatory work relations.⁵

For the French historian and sociologist Jacques Donzelot, the politics of what we are calling care became in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries what he called the “psy complex,” in which state institutions of social work and counselling recruited mothers in families into a governmental project of nurturing a population of self-regulating and self-governing subjects.⁶ Donzelot writes later that the welfare state, including the psy complex, was an attempt to resolve the contradiction between the sovereignty of individual rights, including property rights, and the sovereignty of the state that embodies the general will.⁷ That contradiction is true of any state of popular sovereignty, including China’s. The provisional resolution of this contradiction in Europe turned the state into a provider for society of the welfare that the economy of property rights and freedom could not provide. The economy of freedom in fact creates and cannot encompass the situations of ill health, injury, schooling, training and education, unemployment and retirement that the state stepped in to cope with.

Donzelot makes the important point that the conceptual and ideological ideas from which the welfare state emerged in Europe were generated by the concept of organic solidarity through economic and occupational interdependence. Such a concept finds its opposite in the anomie of the alienated individual and the mechanical solidarities of competing identities. Nationalism and ideological education of a common sense of belonging are therefore required for solidarity of care for the common good. We need to add here that movements of people for their liberation from colonized and semi-colonized status share a concern for the strategic unity of the people formed by a shared culture and thereafter to be unified under and crucially also *by* an independent state, if not yet by having the means to provide welfare through taxation. The state, then, if not yet a provider, is a defender against risks to life and the means of maintaining social cohesion – which we could understand as a responsibility of care.

In its liberal as well as its autocratic form, the modern state is responsible for managing the economy. In the case of China’s socialist state the economy itself is managed through state-owned enterprises and regulatory commissions, and planning for growth of production. In both, there remains the challenging task of reconceiving economics itself to include the long-term costs of its benefits, which are the costs of care for those who are out of work, those who are in school or tertiary education and training, those who are placed in conditions that make them ill or which result in their injury, those who become economically inactive in old age, and most of all costs entailed in the destruction of the environment and the generation of pandemic diseases like COVID-19.

4 For a British example, see Women’s Budget Group 2020.

5 Armytage 1961.

6 Donzelot 1979.

7 Donzelot 1991.

Let us consider simply the general category of those in danger of poverty, neglect and being forgotten. Countermeasures in the People's Republic of China (PRC) have long included the following: Designation of poverty areas eligible for state aid and low-interest credit cooperatives, medical insurance cooperatives, primary and secondary boarding schools for migrant and rural children, and the expansion of vocational colleges to provide qualifications for the new kinds of job being created in the "knowledge economy."

The problem is that such countermeasures depend on local governments funding them from constrained resources and that central resources have been exploited by local officials for their personal benefit and for achieving high scores in assessments of mandated cost efficiency, for instance in creating "ghost colleges" and in the cost-cutting miseries imposed on boarding schools.⁸ A basic constraint, and a basic administrative cause, of persistent inequality is the household registration (*hukou*) system that forces rural-registered workers in cities to rely on the welfare provisions in their home villages and their own families, blocking access to education (in urban schools, colleges and universities) and medical services. Seeking urban employment and trying to save to start a business, as well as sending remittance to relieve poverty at home, breaks up precisely the foundation of care in the family. Stigmatization and discrimination in urban China persists and so does relative, though not absolute, rural poverty.

This article considers the state organization and administration of care in the PRC at the level of the household, popular religion and neighbourhood communities. I discuss each of them in turn: (1) Extensive research on social support and local self-government since the 1980s has shown that the household remains the central unit of care for most Chinese people. (2) Care in interpersonal relations requires a fundamental responsiveness, which can be seen clearly in the ritual enactment of care relations in popular religion. (3) Local models of care complicate the government project of encouraging and encompassing care relations, which can be seen clearly in residents' representative committees (RCs) in urban China. In households, in ritual and in RCs we observe specific relations and experiences of care that partly rely on state support and partly supplement it where it is lacking. But beyond that, they can become bases of measuring state care, and possibly even models of a universal ethics of care.

Domestic and Local Relations of Care

To situate local relations of care within the historical changes since the 1980s, consider ethnographic and sociological data on social support. Between 1988 and 1991, I organized and led a study including both observation and sample surveys of five pairs of richer and poorer villages in counties, themselves richer and poorer, in regions of five provinces: southern Fujian, southern Jiangsu, Dabieshan 大别山 in Anhui, northern Yunnan and southern Gansu. We wanted to know what relations of social support had emerged after decollectivization.⁹ Under collectives, production and welfare were jointly organized by households through the teams and brigades of which they were members, both as individual workers receiving incomes and as household budgets. We should recall here the mutual care and the associations among women and men as co-workers, both on their own account and fostered as the "greater I" (*da wo* 大我) of co-workers, in both rural teams, that were formerly and became again neighbourhoods, and urban work units. Recall also that the collectives started from agricultural and industrial cooperatives and that the cooperative movement has a long history in Europe from which industrial cooperatives were taken up in China¹⁰ and the rest of the world, just as mutual aid among neighbours has a very long history in China.

At that time (1988–1991), the household responsibility system had re-divided social relations and organization from the Party-led state. The researchers in our ten-village project asked randomly

8 For details of all of these, see Roberts 2020

9 Some conclusions and statistical summary tables from this research are to be found in Chang and Feuchtwang 1996. See also Feuchtwang 1994.

10 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_Industrial_Cooperatives.

sampled households in each village to provide details of the sources of three resources for three types of event. The three resources were labour, information and finance. The three types of event were family (mainly weddings), emergency (mainly illnesses) and investment (mainly house building) events. It was still relatively uncommon in those years for paid labour to be employed for building by village households and for savings or loans to be based in bank accounts. House-building materials were accumulated in instalments, stacked in yards over ten or more years. For all three resources, most of the human sources were reached by means of personal contacts. By far the most were from within each household, then from neighbours who might also be lineal kin, then from non-agnatic kin (family relations through women), which merged with friendship networks further afield. In some cases, such as Kaixian'gong 开弦弓 village in Jiangsu province, these networks of friends and non-agnates generally remained within the administrative village, because of the tradition in this area to form sisterhoods and brotherhoods, core membership of which was transmitted from parents to children. Elsewhere, the networks of friendship spread further, often including classmates from school, co-workers and colleagues, as well as business associates.

I draw from these findings that pre- as well post-collectivization most relations of care are, as you might expect, family and kin based, and in these first years after decollectivization they were territorially situated largely within village neighbourhoods and village clusters. Most illustrative was the great occasion of coming together in mutual aid to help a neighbour build a new house. It was a festive occasion since it also involved collectively eating meals provided by the household who would live in the new house. Relations of reciprocity and friendship are also relationships of mutual obligation. And they were gendered, not just sisterhoods and brotherhoods, but also the norm that heads and managers of households and of local lineages were male. This does not make them any the less caring of family and lineage members. But we should also note, as Charles Stafford (2008) observed, that there is an internal matriarchy within Chinese patriarchy, namely the inheritance from mothers to daughters and mothers-in-law to daughters-in-law of duties of care for ancestors and gods and maintenance of reciprocal social relations and the establishing of local groups of female friends.

Much of this was changing as we did our research and has continued to change quite dramatically due to three large processes. One is the reduction in births, both voluntary and due to state-led campaigns of fertility control, and the consequent reduction in the number of siblings among young and middle-aged adults. Another is the urbanization of social life, in the countryside as well as in the city, including in terms of house building and its materials, as concrete apartment blocks and villas have replaced courtyard and compound complexes. The third is the rise of migrant work furthering the individualizing of income for both women and men, but now at far greater distances from home. The main effects on family and kinship have been that young women and men often find their partners in cities far from their rural homes, that couples leave their children in the care of the children's grandparents, and that family relationships are extended over more than one household, often at a great geographic distance from each other. Care for the left-behind rural aged puts particularly high strains on their daughters and daughters-in-law in these families of joint but distanced households still upholding their filial obligations, but with highly gendered divisions of responsibility.

To this we should add far greater use of paid services, for building, repair and refurbishment, and for the care of the elderly. Financial relations, too, are changing; for instance, recourse to bank loans to supplement wage savings to start small businesses has increased, with a consequent decline in loans from family, kin and friends.¹¹ The creation of trust by personalizing business relations¹² has also extended the range and variety of mutual relations of care. But even though they continue

11 Most of these changes are already evident in Hans Steinmüller's ethnography of villages in Enshi, Hubei province, in 2005–2006. Steinmüller 2013.

12 See Wank 1999.

to be important, reliance on them has been both extended and re-ordered by access to digital micro-finance loans through mobile phones. Migrant factory workers in Shenzhen use the Ant Credit Pay (*Mayi huabei* 蚂蚁花呗) system for loans to shop, but also to help friends, while even relishing the anonymity this personal financial empowerment affords. At the same time many of them attribute to clever Jack Ma 马云, the founder of the overall system, personal responsibility for assessing their credit rating. For them, Jack Ma's charisma is a scaled-up figure of financial care, which the migrant workers said they were denied by state banks, including rural credit cooperatives.¹³

As for urban-registered households, a reliance on reciprocity is evident, starting from close domestic and familial relations but extending then to a few neighbours and more distant friends, defined by knowing that they are willing to help as well as receiving the help offered, as Friederike Fleischer found in Guangzhou city. She makes the essential point that all these are relations that are made, not given, and that, as in the countryside, what had been a wide range of fixed and known close neighbours has now been much reduced by commercialization of housing, far fewer births, migration and dislocation.¹⁴

In a more recent research project on urban neighbourhood communities in the cities of Shanghai, Chongqing, Kunming and Huangshan 黄山 between 2011 and 2015,¹⁵ another team of researchers that I led found that familial relations among the urban-registered are not as geographically dispersed as for rural-registered households maintaining relations across great distances of migration, but they are dispersed among sometimes quite widely separated locations within a city, whose residents have been relocated by commercial development and by better-off children moving to apartments of superior quality in other, suburban neighbourhoods.

In sum, reciprocal and interpersonal relations of care, such as the sharing of food and offering of help in emergencies, are essential at the level of the household and the local community. They have remained the main models of care that people experience in their immediate local environments in China.

Responsiveness and Ritual

Care is attention to others in interpersonal relations. That attention is manifest in responsiveness to their needs for care. In this section I will introduce models of responsiveness epitomized in a deity revered in rituals performed in the post-Mao Zedong PRC. Ritualized care and charitable care inspired by religious models are potentially critical counterpoints to state administration and fostering of voluntary care.

Guanyin 观音 is one of the most popular gods in China; she is the Chinese version of the male bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. She became a Daoist as well as a Buddhist ideal of compassion and of filial self-sacrifice. She combines both aspects of the Confucian gendered ethic cited by Steinmüller in the introduction to this special section: *yan fu ci mu* 严父慈母 – fierce father, compassionate mother. Guanyin is a saviour deity, saving souls from purgatory. Her iconography of many arms and eyes indicates that she sees, hears and attends to all. Her most feminine aspect is that she helps women give birth and nurture children. But she also has in her iconography a fierce side – often depicted stamping on a demonic sea monster, she is a protector from the wildly violent, which is more often the preserve of male and demonically fierce and dangerous local territorial protectors. Both are the hierarchical objects of the key rite of presenting offerings, which is itself nurturance.¹⁶

Besides the Buddhist conception of compassion, Confucius's conception of humanity (*ren* 仁) is also universal: a response of self to other or of the resonance of bodily and emotional circuits of *qi*

¹³ McDonald and Dan 2020.

¹⁴ Fleischer 2018.

¹⁵ Feuchtwang 2015.

¹⁶ Feuchtwang 2019.

气 energies to their circuits outside the body in others and in the rest of the universe. The key term here is *ganying* 感应, the affect of response, and to respond with *efficacy* is *ling gan* 灵感, but note that it is applied to response from gods or from orphan souls, in a hierarchy of spiritual beings.

Care as attentive co-growth can with meaningful emphasis be redefined as attention to the continuation of life and well-being together. Charlotte Bruckermann in her article in this special section has scaled this up through the villagers she lived with in the “coal province” of Shanxi, finding their acute concerns and difficulties in nurturing their children while having to gain a livelihood in an environment that threatened their health, even though they also took meticulous precautions to avoid pollution and regretted working in polluting industries.

Another reminder of an ethic of care that is ultimately universal is that of Buddhist compassion for all, including strangers. It is epitomized in Guanyin, whether her presence is in a local shrine or a large city temple. Reminders of the Confucian ideal of humanity are a reminder of the responsiveness that is not just interpersonal but cosmological. Groups of devout Buddhist women cooking vegetarian meals for one another and learning to chant sutras together, as we found in Yunnan and elsewhere, also perform charitable acts for one another, such as mourning at the funerals of one another’s loved ones, and extending such charity to strangers.¹⁷

The same is true of the women and men who join in Christian devotions, as in Guangzhou city.¹⁸ But the most poignant and dramatic sisterhoods of mutual care I have come across are the so-called butterfly sisterhoods (they bore butterfly tattoos) of the young 10-to-12-year-olds betrothed to fishermen in Xiaozuo village 小乍村 on the coast of Hui’an 惠安 county in the region of Quanzhou 泉州 until the 1960s. Only in their late twenties did they live permanently in their husband’s home, but they would have visited before, when their husbands came home from their long trips at sea; they became pregnant and then joined his household to bear the child, all the while remaining in their sisterhoods, led by an older sister-member. If a sister were mistreated in her husband’s household she could resort, as young women could everywhere in China, to shaming his family by committing suicide. As a member of a sisterhood, she could beforehand tell the leader. If the leading sister agreed that the matter was serious enough, the whole sisterhood jumped off a rock together into the ocean. When their bodies washed up on shore they were not named or commemorated in an ancestral shrine, nor properly buried. Their bodies were gathered and marked in small shrines to orphan souls, which in this place were called “human guests” (*renke* 人客). They remained resentful (*yuannu* 怨怒), wrongly driven to death; this haunting critique of a lack of care is preserved in these shrines into the present day.¹⁹

Rituals of domestic and communal occasions of rites of passage and the turning of the seasons and years, whether they be of religious orders and scriptural traditions or not, are a transmission of such model ideals of care and the consequences of neglect, starting from death rituals. All these rituals include the basic relation of nurturing and of hospitality, by feasting and before that by the offering of food among other objects to gods, ancestors, ghosts and demons. They are not just figurative, they are practical models of care.

As I have found in research on rituals in Taiwan and in southern Fujian, funerals are rituals for the care of the soul of a recently deceased household member. On death a soul is in danger of being forgotten and becoming an anonymous member of the mass of orphan souls (*gu hun* 孤魂) and hungry ghosts (*e gui* 饿鬼). If and when the household, whether urban or rural, can afford it, the full set of death rituals is undertaken for the rescue of the soul (*zhao hun* 招魂), to raise it to the luxurious celestial realm of saved souls.²⁰ Other rites turn physical remains into a well-aligned

17 I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers reviewing this article for adding examples of compassionate Buddhist women who offer spiritual comfort and dignity to patients in terminal care.

18 Fleischer 2018, Part II.

19 The suicide pacts ended in the 1960s. For the recent history of sisterhoods among the Hui’an women of Xiaozuo and Dazuo 大乍, who worked in stone-breaking and stone masonry and other heavy manual-work gangs, see Friedman 2006.

20 On ghosts and *zhao hun* see Feuchtwang 2010, 130–135.

and regularly honoured tomb or urn of ashes in an auspiciously sited and aligned urn house or yard, and an ancestral name on the domestic altar shelf of the household. From there the name is entered into a genealogy and often, after a number of generations, to an ancestral hall. Renewal of offerings both to ancestors and to protector or saviour deities at their incense burners on domestic altars is usually done by women. Genealogies and halls are kept by men. Ritual care and hospitality evince a gendered division of labour.

At funerals, on the days in the ritual calendar for the maintenance of ancestors, at the festivals for local protector gods, but most particularly in the seventh lunar month, the souls that have not had descendants or have been abandoned by descendants are invited into the neighbourhood or village and to just outside the threshold of its households to be fed and clothed before being expelled back to the borderlands where they are stranded. The care taken, it is hoped, will provide some of them passage to the Pure Land. The rest, it is hoped, will have been appeased and thus dissuaded from doing harm. Small shrines for found bones are, in Taiwan and southern Fujian, euphemistically inscribed *You Ying Gong* 有应公, “the shrines of those who are sure to respond.” Their “responses” may be benign, but the fear persists that they will be malign.²¹

The gods that protect home territories defend them from the possibly malign acts of such souls and of more powerful demons. They are revered for the care they take of homes and their territories. For instance, in the 1990s, the farmers in a village in northern Shaanxi province experienced increasingly frequent drought and so revived their temple for the Dragon King, a guardian of their village, as well as having the reputed power to relieve drought by responding to pleas for rain. This village was famous for its cave dwellings in which Mao and his revolutionary base government had resided. A tour of black cars facilitating an official’s pilgrimage to one of them passed a procession up to the mountain temple to plead for rain. The village’s Party secretary as host stopped the cars and asked the villagers what they were doing. It was a polite exchange. But later the villagers told the anthropologist that “when we farmers seek a bit of rain, the cadres are useless. They cannot give us any [irrigation-engineered water for crops], so we victims have as our chief the Dragon King. He is very effective (*tebie ling* 特别灵).”²² The care of making offerings to a protector that responds was thus presented as an epitome of the contrast with subservience to cadres.

The responsiveness of gods that save and protect, locally and generally, is a model. They are figures of righteous virtue, whose legends are those of exemplary lives and deaths. Offerings to them of food, spirit money and incense are gifts, like those described by Yunxiang Yan.²³ The protective patronage of gods is similarly but even more steeply hierarchical in the inclusive scale to which it reaches. Likewise, the risk of offence and abandonment is greater. Abandonment is absence of care, whether suffered by the orphan dead or the subjects of a demonically powerful and dangerous protector.²⁴

State provision of local rural and state care for the elderly without descendants is a close equivalent of the feeding of orphan souls and of forgotten ancestors. Indeed it is written into the PRC constitution that families bear the duty of care for the elderly. If that fails, the village provides the “five guarantees” (*wubao* 五保) of shelter, food, clothing, medical care and a proper burial to households of the elderly who have no family to support and look after them or a place in a state-funded elderly care home. In the absence of these provisions the Ministry of Civil Affairs provides a minimum livelihood guarantee (*dibao* 低保) allowance.

As Christof Lammer points out in his article in this special section, the *dibao* is awarded after assessments of claimants by people who know them well as neighbours, village group members and representatives, and urban community representatives. Out of a set quota, each locality had

21 Feuchtwang 2019, 145.

22 Guo Yuhua, personal communication, London 1999.

23 Yan 1996.

24 Feuchtwang 2019.

in the past awarded it to those individuals deemed most needy, but in a standardization conducted nationally in 2015 the Ministry of Civil Affairs restricted it to those who have no family to support them. In this case, the state's provision of care is a generalized deliverance from the lack of family care. It matches the ritual care of orphan souls, which is the (Buddhist) ritual model of compassion.

Government Care and RCs

Relations of patronage and the factions formed by them in the PRC are the internal politics of the party-state, whether under Mao²⁵ or since, when a non-governmental organization (NGO) or a not-for-profit private organization providing care needs an official enabler, or a facilitator of bank loans and licenses. They are one version of a politics of care. Another, more overt, one is the likening of the state to a family and the head of state to a paternal carer authorized by the pairing in the Confucian classics of obedience and gratitude to seniors (*xiao* 孝) with loyalty (*zhong* 忠) to political superiors.²⁶ Here I will outline secular versions of ritualized care under and supplementary to the state's administration of care in the PRC. They operate alongside religiously inspired NGOs.

Besides administrative provisions of care for the elderly without descendants, the PRC state encourages charitable and philanthropic organizations that support the infirm and the elderly and other objects of care. Such organizations, along with volunteering, for instance through the Communist Youth League, are flexible supplements to its administration of care.²⁷ Through urbanization, meaning the expansion and redevelopment of cities and the turning of rural hinterlands into urban administrative levels below their lowest level, the street office, units of self-government are also fostered. This was the topic of my city neighbourhood research.²⁸ The promotion of self-government through RCs is conducted through the designation of *shequ* 社区 and *xiaoqu* 小区, usually translated as "communities," in both urban neighbourhoods and in villages.²⁹ They function through nominated stair, floor or building representatives and voluntary neighbourhood activists, most frequently retired men and women, as well as paid staff trained in counselling. In villages, those who have been elected village or neighbourhood group representatives form the equivalent to RCs.

Though they are units of self-government or self-management, the communities, rural and urban, encouraged by the central state and Party are also where the care provisions of the Ministry of Civil Affairs are administered and where support for police surveillance and demographic control is provided. RCs administer unemployment, injury and basic income support. They also provide counselling in cases of grievance, understood as stress or anxiety. RCs are closely linked to local medical clinics, which are first stops on the way to more distant and larger hospital facilities. Medical care is financed through insurance schemes and private fees. The insurance companies in urban areas are large private or public corporations, while in poor rural areas they are medical cooperatives, parallel to rural credit cooperatives, state supported but locally shared. In the PRC since the end of the collectives and the command economy, unlike basic social security that is administered by a ministry, medical care is typically a highly regulated market. But most of all, we must add to this the mobilization of volunteer RC representatives. They are, among other things, public health agents for maintaining hygiene and fertility controls.

The times of the COVID-19 lockdowns were their heyday. In many cities, including Beijing and Wuhan, shelves were erected at the borders of each RC community, where deliveries of food and medicine were placed for residents within to collect. The surveillance conducted by RC representatives and volunteers in support of the local police station was heightened to safeguard the health of

25 Gao 2008.

26 Steinmüller 2015.

27 Fleischer 2018, Part III.

28 Feuchtwang, Hui and Morais 2015.

29 Meyer-Clement and Zeuthen 2020.

residents and to place those suspected of infection in quarantine and to isolate their neighbours.³⁰ The stigmatized migrant-labourer tenants who were the main objects of surveillance reports had to return to the villages of their formal registration.

We found that RC representatives and volunteers, often mobilized by resident veterans of the Party and local members of the Communist Youth League, performed crucial acts of care, such as looking after the children of workers, who were not home because they were working late hours, and helping them with their schoolwork, or they visited isolated residents who were ill or injured or too infirm to go out. Another instance of care was the organization of retired people to cook for one another in joint meals in a rota in the community centre of the RC. And in general we can also include under the concept of care the making available of rooms, whether in RC activity and recreation centres or in local temples, if they had not been destroyed, for elderly residents to meet and play card games or mahjong, hear lectures about maintaining their health and participate in lessons in music and other subjects. The retired also formed loose but regular associations for formation dancing, tai-chi or other forms of exercise and music-making in open spaces.³¹ Such activities would have taken place with or without RC cultural centres. So these relations of more horizontal and local mutual care encouraged by the Party are to some extent spontaneous within the top-down institutions of authoritarian governance. They are not critiques of state-administered care. But the Party cadres at the heads of RCs regularly complained to us that they could not give as much time as they wanted to fostering these activities and to getting to know the residents because of their having to fulfil statistical task targets set by the street office, the state administrative body to which they were responsible. And residents and their representatives complained that the paid “representatives” counselling them were not locally resident and did not pass up their grievances as previous RC staff had done.

The gods that save and protect, from an epidemic or a drought or from the great dangers of sea travel, are said by their proponents to be more responsive than are officials of the state. But they can still fail and abandon us if we do not attend to them with proper abundance at their festivals. Indeed, the souls of the abandoned are the ultimate reminders of a politics of care. At its best the state provision for the old without descendants and the volunteer community activists of Chinese cities live up to this model.

Extending the Critique of Care

This article has argued that the hierarchical rituals of care of gods, ancestors and orphan or hungry souls are versions of responsiveness and responsibility imagined and enacted as ritual realities of care.

Identifying themselves as scientific mobilizers of the people, Party members could of course seek to abolish superstitious practices out of care for the people’s advancement. But this is not a relationship of responsiveness to people. It is a pedagogic project. In any case, in the countryside more than in cities, kinship loyalties, gods and ghosts, and their – albeit, compared to pre-Liberation days – attenuated rituals are as often left alone as they are attacked by local officials and Party cadres. Ritual models of care are therefore enacted alongside state provision and secular enactments of care.

I have also highlighted Party-led volunteers at the local community level who are exemplary of the self-government that the PRC state is trying to foster. They too reach toward a realizable ideal of care. The opposite of these ideals are abandonment and demonic violence, shown by state and corporate administrators obeying the rules of their organizations in relation to their clients, treated as objects for reaching targets for the assessment of their performance, their mandates, by their

³⁰ Ling 2020.

³¹ Fleischer 2018, Part I points out well that these self-organized activities are the socialities of urban residents beyond neighbours and family.

superiors³² or in applying rules strictly to the generality while favouring those who have cultivated a special relationship with them.³³

This implicit critique adds a new dimension to the critical impulse of the philosophies of care with which this article began – and the local relations discussed here can become general critiques. In this way, the universalizing potential of rituals of compassion and their secular extension complements the general philosophy of care. The negative of care is also exemplified in Chinese models of abandonment from protection and the harm threatened by the needy.

A scaling up of care would take as exemplary the Chinese encouragement of volunteer organizations and self-organized charitable and philanthropic organizations, which are so frequently also religious. It should also be backed up by the provision, through shorter working hours, of time to engage in these activities. But here I would single out the self-organization of the elderly and note how active they are because of the early ages of retirement (50 for women and 60 for men, but rising over the next two decades) in China. The administration of care should reduce the tasks of box-ticking accountability upwards that RC heads in China complained about and that have altogether supplanted real care by reducing the time for care in residential communities in China; a phenomenon which has also been identified in some institutions of care in the UK, for example.³⁴

Equally exemplary are institutions of accountability and of grievance for lack of responsiveness and care. There is the long tradition of literal accountability in the building of public goods as acts of patronage, in temples, bridges and flood-control measures, in which donations that financed them are inscribed on walls and on stone steles. Even better is the public notice of donations and expenditures for festivals managed by a local committee. Couple this accountability with the abandonment of a god that has proved unresponsive or ineffective in favour of another that has proven to be more efficacious.

To this old tradition we can add the remainders of the “mass line” instituted by the government of Mao Zedong. The main such institution is that of the channel for grievance that starts with representatives of RCs, but can then be taken up through the channel of letters and petitions that is officially available through every level of state and ministry, but which can only be made effective when it is accompanied by officially illegal mass gatherings.³⁵ Accountability is obviously a principle in RCs, whose notice boards list not only their activities, the names and phone numbers of representatives and staff, but also the most local departments of government and their phone numbers in order to deflect complaints from the RC.

Indifference and avoidance of responsibility through privatization of care homes and medical care in China as elsewhere is a major obstacle. But the fact that there are overarching institutions of state and Party in China gives on the one hand purchase for demands of accountability and responsiveness, while on the other hand it enables the fiercest of central control and sanctions against protest. The carceral complex looms next to the remaining institutions of the mass line. Perhaps that is unavoidable. The critique of state care would demand accountability and responsiveness of the power and force to protect. But instead that power is used to suppress grievances and protests.

State-organized care, even when it is local and partially voluntary, addresses those in need who are defined by their need. The need may be lack of human company or some more medically defined or quantifiable need. But the need defines a person as having that need, not as a neighbour, a relative or a friend. Like a beggar or a homeless person, or like a refugee, the needy are anonymous, like hungry ghosts or orphan souls they are not the known, named. Hospitality to the anonymous

³² Birney 2014.

³³ Herzfeld 1993.

³⁴ Bunting 2020.

³⁵ Li 2008.

needy in the Chinese seventh-month rituals of feeding and clothing them can for many who care for them be tinged with the fear that these aggrieved ghosts can “bite back,” as the aggrieved sisters of Xiaozuo in Hui’an county could. Care here mixes generosity with self-protection. On the other hand, groups of sutra-reciting women care for the dead of families that are not their own.³⁶ They are motivated by Buddhist compassion that is at once a self-cultivation for their own salvation and an act of deliverance, redeeming from the courts of purgatory these ghosts who are to them strangers, for an afterlife of reincarnation or entry into the Pure Land with the help of the Bodhisattvas Amithaba and Guanyin (Avalokitesvara).

A politics more aligned to the fostering of care would have to be less standardized, less oriented to accountability but also more able to allow for such self-organized activities. A not-quite secular equivalent of Buddhist compassion is the convention or law of rescue at sea: an emergency SOS – “Save Our Souls” – mobilizes every nearby ship to change course for the location of the ship in danger, whomever its passengers and crew are. Many ambulance and fire services in continental European countries are voluntary, as is the British Royal National Lifeboat Institution. These are relations of care that stand as a critique of the lack of care or of the box-ticking and dealing with needs that a state’s addressing of the anonymous and feared is prone to dispensing. The critique says that, instead, a state should provide time, adequate pay and respect for providing the personal care that vocational care workers give, becoming familiar and giving dignity as well as providing for needs. It should in addition take its own examples of volunteering in self-governing communities and make further provision for local governments to support voluntary organizations.

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