

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

AFFECTIVE LOGISTICS AND LOGISTICAL AFFECT:
TRANSNATIONAL CIRCULATION OF CHINESE MEDICINE LIANHUAQINGWEN
(LHQW)

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Abstract: Amidst a global pandemic that disrupted supply chains and heightened geopolitical tensions between China and the US, a particular flow of Chinese government-approved medicine—Lianhua Qingwen (LHQW)—persisted between Chinese parents and their migrant children in the US. Despite controversies and formidable challenges in sourcing, shipping, and distributing this medicine, transnational Chinese families undertook creative and labor-intensive logistical projects to ensure its timely delivery. Drawing from ethnographic interviews with young Chinese migrants in the US, as well as material and audiovisual artifacts of their COVID-19 pandemic experiences, the study shows how the transnational logistics of LHQW constituted a “system of systems” involving digital technologies, informal economies, and translocal sociality. Situated in a precarious pandemic milieu, LHQW logistics was both vulnerable to intense affect and contingent on phatic labor. By tracing the difficult trajectories of LHQW, this study highlights the material and affective dimensions of transnational circulation, illustrating how logistics became a lens for understanding kinship, healing, and resilience during times of crisis.

Introduction

On a morning in March 2020 in Atlanta, USA, at the height of the novel coronavirus pandemic, I woke up to a string of voice messages sent by my mom who was quarantined in China at the time:

“Your father said the parcel should arrive later today. Note the delivery.”

“It says on the system that it should’ve arrived. Did you see it?”

“Does your apartment collect parcels for you? Have you gotten it?”

According to her, a crucial package had been shipped to me a few days earlier. It contained critical personal preventive equipment (PPE) as well as an important Chinese medicine of *LianHuaQingWen* (LHQW). My mother, a native Chinese woman in her 40s who had always exuded a carefree innocence, now spoke with an unfamiliar sobriety and urgency. Compelled by her increasingly anxious and exhortative messages, I ran outside in search of this “package that had arrived,” but it was nowhere to be found. There was no sign of any package. Panicked, I called her immediately and investigated the whereabouts of the missing parcel. “Your father said it arrived in London two days ago...” she, her voice filled with worry. “Wait, but I’m in Atlanta! I am in the US now!” I exclaimed.

To her credit, I had been in England before. At the start of 2020, I traveled to the University of Oxford for an exchange program with Hertford College. However, in just two months, my trajectory—like those of millions of migrant Chinese—was upended by the onset of a global pandemic. On March 11th, 2020, I terminated my residential lease in Oxford and withdrew from the academic program abruptly. The next morning, I took a taxi straight to London Heathrow Airport and boarded the earliest flight to Atlanta, Georgia.

The plane was full. In my white N-95 mask and blue latex gloves, I stood out against all the light-hearted Europeans and white American passengers. For the seven-hour flight, I sat nervously, abstaining from food and drink while my unmasked neighbors cracked jokes with flight attendants, shared snacks, or dozed on their partners’ laps. Inside this aircraft cabin, life seemed business as usual, but international travel had descended into chaos. This was the day after then-President Trump announced a travel ban prohibiting foreign nationals from entering the US from the Schengen Area, which included most European countries except the UK. It had been a month since the Department of Homeland Security issued its first directive on February 2nd, barring entry to foreign nationals who had traveled to China within 14 days of their arrival in the US (see Department of Homeland Security, 2020).

For many Chinese living abroad, the reality was even grimmer. Ever since the Wuhan lockdown on January 23, 2020—the epicenter of coronavirus in China—disquieting and poignant news overwhelmed those concerned for their friends and families back home. Rising death tolls in Wuhan, the decimated livelihoods of citizens under lockdowns, acute shortages of supplies, and the heroic efforts of medical personnel portended an imminent, global health crisis the world had yet to realize. When the first dozen diagnosed COVID-19 cases were reported in the small college town of Oxford, my family and I knew it was just a matter of time before the ill-prepared community succumbed to the virus. My parents, who had been planning to visit me in Oxford, canceled their trip and chose to shelter at home in Jiangsu province. Keeping a close eye on the COVID cases in the UK, they urged me to evacuate as soon as possible from this foreign land where I had little medical resources or social connections. With virtually no viable route back to China, I decided to relocate to the US.

This context sets the stage for the logistical fiasco and emotional turmoil surrounding my family’s critically urgent medicinal delivery: a gross miscommunication left the package unclaimed in England, sparking a spasm of anxiety. Transporting LHQW transnationally during 2020-2023 was no simple task, even for relatively wealthy and resourceful Chinese families. Far from the common experience of next-day Amazon deliveries, this was a complex, prolonged project involving procurement, packaging, shipment, distribution, delivery, and reception, each stage fraught with unique challenges and ramifications in a world disrupted by the pandemic. Behind every successful delivery of LHQW lay questions about the tremendous resourcefulness and human finessing required for the logistics. For example, given the medical supply shortages in China and the consequent regulation of LHQW sales, how did parents secure this medicine? And with the closure of the international postal service and inconsistent legal frameworks targeting LHQW, how did the medicine cross highly surveilled borders to reach the US? How did this urgently needed, “life-saving” medicine arrive in time—or did it make it at all?

These questions form the basis of the central inquiry in this thesis: How did a package of LHQW travel transnationally during a global pandemic? Specifically, I explore the forces behind such movements and ask: What kinds of infrastructural, technoscientific, affective, filial, labor, and social-material power were mobilized to enable medicinal logistics in times of crisis? What and how were the new intensities produced through movements of such exceptional scale, distance, importance, and exigency? Through ethnographic research, I examine the various vulnerabilities and

entanglements of global medical circulation, highlighting the sociality and materiality underpinning the transnational transportation of LHQW during the COVID-19 pandemic¹.

LHQW: A Drug Born with Controversy and Used in Crisis

In order to answer the questions posed above, we must first understand one of the central protagonists in this complex dynamics: *LianHuaQingWen*. Contrary to a commonplace misspelling—published, for example, in a New York Times op-ed piece (Cheng 2020)—that confuses lotus (*lianhua*) with the homophonous weeping forsythia (*lianqiao*), LHQW in its native Chinese name reflects its main ingredients—weeping suspensa (*lian*) and honeysuckle (*hua*)—as well as its intended effect: to repel epidemic disease (*qingwen*). Developed in 2003 to treat severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), LHQW is a Chinese patent medicine² that became one of the most well-known government-approved drugs for COVID-19 in China. According to the General Office of the National Health Commission and the Office of the State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine, LHQW capsules are “recommended for the treatment during the medical observation period” (He, 2020). From the perspective of traditional Chinese medicine (TCM), COVID-19, with clinical manifestations such as fever, dry cough, and fatigue, could be classified as an “epidemic disease” (*yibing*), its etiology attributed to the invasion of “pathogenic factors” (*yilizhiqi*) (ibid).

With its official endorsement, LHQW became the most accessible medicine for Chinese residents during the pandemic, as the government ramped up production and distribution to curb surges in COVID-19 cases (Ma 2022). This endorsement extended to Chinese migrant communities abroad, where LHQW was included alongside masks and disinfectant wipes in their coronavirus care packages sent by Chinese embassies and consulates to Chinese students overseas (Cheng 2020).

Despite its official endorsement, LHQW has remained a topic of heated controversy. During the 2022 Shanghai lockdown, the telemedicine platform DYX.com published an article opposing the use of LHQW as a COVID-19 prophylaxis. The article criticized its mass distribution, which consumed significant logistical capacity at the expense of other urgently needed supplies, such as fresh produce (2022). Outside China, LHQW also faced inconsistent regulations and inspections. The US Food and Drug Administration, for example, issued warning letters to firms for selling LHQW as “fraudulent products” and “making false or misleading claims about COVID-19 prevention and treatment”

¹ For this thesis, the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic is demarcated based on the epidemic status in Mainland China from the first lockdown of Wuhan in January 2020 to the official border reopening in December 2023.

² Chinese patent medicine is defined as “ready-made medicine made from a variety of herbal medicines according to specific prescriptions and production specifications under the guidance of Chinese traditional medical theory” (Geng et al. 2022, 2).

(2023). In May 2020, local Chicago news reported that “a total of three parcels were seized [at the International Mail Facility at O’Hare International Airport], with each box containing 9,600 capsules of [LHQW capsules] - a total of 28,800 capsules” (See U.S. Customs and Border Protection 2021). A photo released by the Customs and Border Protection office showed the unboxed capsules, piled together as an exhibit from the seized parcels (see Figure 1).



Fig. 1 LHQW capsules seized at Chicago O’Hare airport by US Customs and Border Protection Office

This reported border confiscation in June 2020 occurred at a time when the US was deep in the throes of the coronavirus pandemic, with medical resources stretched thin and new cases spreading unchecked across all states. In stark contrast, China was recovering from the aftermath of its first COVID-19 wave and making promising progress toward its zero-COVID goal (See the Xinhua News Agency 2020). Against this contrasting backdrop of escalating public health tensions in the US and the reopening of Chinese cities, the seizure dramatized the transnational flow of medication and the inherent risks faced by Chinese subjects and objects at US border crossings during a period marked by both geopolitical conflicts and epidemic crises. Situated in such tensions, the transnational movement of LHQW was fraught with danger and uncertainty, commanding attention from all stakeholders.

These controversies remind us that LHQW, like many other non-Western medical treatments, is not simply a biochemical drug in an epidemiological setting. Rather, it is a culturally mediated, politically charged medical practice situated in transnational contexts (Kleimann 1981). In this

research, LHQW cannot be reduced to its inert substance; rather, it reveals what Deleuze & Guattari (2004) call “a life proper to matter,” a process through which matter “carry on, undergoing continual modulation as they do so” (Ingold 2012, 435). My thesis, thus, centers on LHQW as a mobile object with multiplicity and dynamic sociality throughout its transnational circulation.

The arduous journey of LHQW during the pandemic was familiar to eight interlocutors I interviewed in 2024. These interviews focused on their experiences from early 2020, when the virus was first reported in China, to late 2023, when China abandoned its zero-covid policy and reopened its borders. These interlocutors, Chinese migrants aged 19 to 26, all resided in the US without parental accompaniment for some or all of the pandemic and had encountered LHQW through various purchasing, carrying, distributing, or applying efforts. The ethnographic data includes not only their personal accounts garnered through interviews but also a wealth of archival, visual, textual, and material evidence that they generously shared. Digitally archived chat history records, time-stamped and location-marked photos, unused or expired LHQW capsules, screenshots of shipping waybills and receipts, and functional or defunct web links collectively provide nuanced and accurate information that complements pandemic oral histories which are often nebulous or incomplete. This material history, combined with their embodied experience with LHQW logistics, helps demonstrate the messy, non-linear processes of logistics and reveals how this complexity unfolds alongside ambiguous feelings, dynamic social relations, and unstable technologies.

LHQW Systemacity in a Milieu:

LHQW is a “boundary object” (Star and Griesemer 1989). It moves across multiple boundaries: the geopolitical boundaries of nations, the spatiotemporal boundaries of logistics, and the affective boundaries of social relations.

LHQW is also a “vibrant matter” (Bennett 2010). It is agential and ontologically multiple: critical prophylaxis or political hoax, affectionate filial care and persistent intergenerational drama, as well as a promise of health or a source of anxiety about illness.

Examining its trajectory—how it moved across countries during the pandemic—LHQW logistics represents a “system of systems” (Olson 2018). It encompasses a transnational relay between parents in China and migrant children in the US; a multimodal alignment of kinship, digital technology, (in)formal economies, and transportation; a translocal social network shaped by reciprocity and indebtedness; and a culmination of care and love enacted by family labor. This effort is translocal, transnational, and transpersonal—material, social, corporeal, multimodal, and intersubjective. From procuring the medicine amidst the dire shortages to securing reliable logistical

pathways that circumvented Chinese and US border controls, arranging prompt delivery and pick-up, and facilitating redistribution among local communities, LHQW logistics shows immense interconnection. Systems of infrastructures, labor, sociality, and affect coalesce into a metasystem of medicinal circulation.

In this research, I do not reduce the transnational logistics of LHQW to a mere temporal lapse or spatial displacement of an object. Rather, it is processual mobility articulated by heterogeneous actors—both commercial and informal, human and non-human, deliberate and indeterminate.

At the same time, these multifaceted systems themselves are embedded within a particular historical and geopolitical milieu: China and the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the security dramas of LHQW at the US borders illustrate, the intensities arising from these logistics must be understood within a specific epidemiological and sociopolitical context. The years 2020-23 were fraught with precarity. The viral bodies driving the pandemic were invisible yet potent actants, aggressively shaping the mobility landscape. In response to the challenges posed by the virus, border control and inspections intensified (Shachar and Mahmood 2021; Intawong et al 2020). International and even domestic flights were canceled, and logistical routines collapsed (Flaherty et al 2022; Kwon 2020; Park & Kim 2021). Most significantly, more than seven million lives were lost to this virus (WHO COVID-19 Dashboard 2024).

Geopolitically, the US-China relationship reached a new nadir in 2020, following a decade of mounting military confrontations, trade conflicts, and a technological arms race (Moore 2019). The initial report of, and subsequent government cover-up of, the coronavirus in Wuhan in January 2020 made China a target of US criticism (Wang 2020). By spring 2020, while China's draconian lockdowns—despite their great cost—curbed domestic viral spread, the US government faced a grim public health crisis as COVID-19 cases surged with hundreds of thousands of new daily cases (CDC 2020). This epidemiological crisis triggered a political storm. In March, then-President Donald Trump referred to this new disease as the “Chinese virus” in a tweet, a racially charged remark reverberated deeply across both China and the US. In China, anti-Western and anti-US sentiment soared high, as government authorities and citizens protested Sinophobia and misinformation campaigns in the US (PRC Embassy 2021). Meanwhile, in the US, rising anti-Asian sentiment and violence terrorized Chinese nationals and Chinese Americans alike (Gover et al. 2020): hate speech, verbal harassment, and even physical assaults were frequently reported, targeting Asians—especially those of Chinese descent (Anti-Defamation League 2020). These political hardships compounded by a rampant supply shortage in the US, constituted a challenging socio-material reality that many Chinese migrant children and their parents had to navigate daily.

It was under such circumstances that the persistent fragility of global supply chains and transnational filial affect were made more legible. Within this precarious milieu, transnational families in separation confronted various intensities and negotiated—often involuntarily—complex dynamics of sociality.

The theoretical aim of this research is twofold. First, building on the theorization of modern logistics that elucidates the space-time standardization and military root of the supply chain (Cowen 2014), this research argues for a global system of logistics that is vulnerable and open to affective sensibilities and sociality. I problematize the “wholesale prevailing view of logistical regimes as efficient, rational, streamlined systems” (Chua et al. 2016, 625) and complicate the ruthless neoliberal flow of commodities, by attending to the embodied intensities of love and care, labor and exhaustion, as well as hope and apprehension. Second, drawing from affect theory, which explores how embodied intensities such as feeling and emotions constitute sociality (Parrenas 2013), I focus on the everyday experiences of Chinese families—especially migrant children—embedded in transnational medicinal logistics. The complex affect, both negative and positive, shed light on tenacious Chinese filial ties and creative transnational sociality. In the case of LHQW circulation, I see affect emerging as a particularly powerful element in reshaping pandemic space-time configurations and capitalist supply chains, while logistics provides a crucial lens for analyzing filial connections and social emotions in times of crisis.

In the remainder of this thesis, I first look at the embodied intensities of anticipation experienced by migrant families as they awaited their LHQW parcels. By analyzing their various affective encounters with packages via logistical systems, I argue that this particular human-technology interface highlights a sense of intersubjectivity and affective intensities. These intense anticipation affect demonstrate how the global supply chain is vulnerable to and constitutive of affect and kinship ties—and vice versa. Next, I focus on the generative and burdensome sociality emerging from the circulation of LHQW. The translocally thickened sociality in China and the US for parents and children, respectively, reveals how various forms of manual, organizational, affective, and phatic labor fundamentally enabled this otherwise impossible logistical project. In this light, with great values, LHQW traveled against many obstacles and finally prevailed—as an act of care, a material of healing, and a symbol of kinship affect.

Anticipation and Tracking: Affective Logistics

As the opening vignette illustrates, transnational LHQW shipment represents a multi-step process fraught with potential misalignment, miscommunication, and errors. To avoid a fiasco like

mine, both parents in China and their migrant children in the US actively engage in measures to ensure the shipment's success. From the creation of a shipping label to its final reception in the US, this difficult journey is marked by constant collaborative efforts of monitoring and anticipating.

I highlight the two forms of intensity, affective-embodied and techno-systematized, that are interwoven into the LHQW circulation. Scholars have examined how transportation and mobility infrastructures create, modify, and transfigure human sensoria and embodied experiences (Sadana 2021; Harris 2021; Ferguson 2014). Specific spatiotemporal and technological configurations in transit and of the moving systems allow certain material-semiotic renderings, such as feelings of intimacy or comfort, impressions of modernity, or sensations of precarity. As Gillian Fuller (2019) notes in the context of aeromobilities, the specific design and installation of informatics technological systems in airports foster an anticipatory architecture that constantly “probabilizes what could happen and reacts preemptively” (68). Anticipation, in this way, becomes an affective outcome of these systems. However, this theorization runs the risk of falling into reductive techno-determinism—a unilinear causality whereby the embodied experience is prefigured by technoscientific materiality a priori.

To challenge this dyadic human-technology relationship, scholars have increasingly emphasized dynamic human-machine ensembles that foreground contingencies and underdetermined structures. Michael Fisch (2018), in his ethnography of Tokyo's commuter train systems, argues for a partnership between passengers and technology, where humans' corporeal sensibilities work closely with the machine's operation to create a sociality that normalizes the otherwise “unbearable and unsustainable” techno-social reality (51). In this interactive logic, anticipation becomes “not just a reaction, but a way of actively orienting oneself temporally” (Adams et al. 2009, 247). It is both an epistemic and affective orientation in normative modernity—that is, the future ought to be known and rationalized with actuarial precision. This imperative also propels technoscientific interventions, evident in modern logistics through innovations like real-time tracking and tracing systems, which reflect a modernist desire to prognosticate and manage future uncertainties (Shamsuzzoha and Helo 2012).

Meanwhile, despite this profound influence of technoscience, logistical systems remain deeply dependent on human labor, which underpins their smooth operation. Alex Blanchette (2020), in his analysis of capitalist meat production, argues that while factory farms appear to operate as a totalizing technoscientific (dys)utopia, their functioning relies on human labor at every level. From executive managers to sow workers, nursery clinicians, and truck drivers, these laborers are not mere overseers but are enmeshed in systems that refashion their temporality and sociality through

algorithms and human-system interfaces. Similarly, in logistics, temporality shapes and is shaped by human labor, including both formal logistical workers and various stakeholders who assist in maintaining the flow of goods. Dissipating the illusion of a “smooth-flowing, automated” logistical system, Debbie Hopkins (2022) develops the concept of “buffer” to highlight the embodied experience of truck drivers who “absorb the spatial-temporal burden to keep the system moving” (52). This research foregrounds the often-overlooked human labor—from delivery workers to receptionists of shipping companies, friends, and family members—who sustain logistics.

Focusing on the LHQW shipping experiences of Chinese transnational families, I point to this affect-technology potential wherein migrants’ anticipation and technology are mutually constitutive, co-becoming within the interrelations between the embodied feelings and the operations of tracking and communication systems. Acts of monitoring and sharing shipment updates, coupled with the intersubjective affect of anticipation, do not simply come as an a priori cause of or a posteriori product of logistics. Rather, they emerge *with* technoscientific engagement. This intersubjectivity—the collective finessing of logistical systems—is crucial to understanding the affective dimensions of awaiting LHQW.

In what follows, I discuss how different anticipatory modes and human-logistics interfaces mollified or perturbed the Chinese families in separation. These emerging positive and negative feelings demonstrate that the logistics of LHQW circulation were fundamentally open to human affect and family relations—sensorily linked to the well-being of migrants during the pandemic.

“Note the Tracking Number:” Controlled Co-Anticipation

On February 28, 2020, Yuesi received a WeChat message from his father in China:

My love, baba [dad] has shipped 100 masks to you. Its estimated time of arrival to your school is March, 3rd Eastern Standard Time. I left your phone number, please note the incoming call and the delivery.

This 20-year-old Chinese migrant, residing in rural Pennsylvania at that time, was expecting a large shipment of PPEs in the coming days. Attached to her father’s brief notification in their chat was a string of alphanumeric characters beginning with some capitalized letters—“UPS No.: V,” indicating the shipping company handling the parcel—and a high-resolution snapshot of the shipping waybill, complete with a barcode at the upper right corner (see Figure 2). One minute later, the chat record shows, her father sent another photo—a close-up of the barcode, prominently displaying the

tracking numbers. Yuesi’s response was swift and concise yet warm: a simple “Ok” followed by an affirming adverb “meiwenti’ne (no problem)” sent three minutes later.

The image shows a UPS Waybill form with the following sections and highlighted areas:

- SHIPPER'S UPS ACCOUNT NO.** (A) and **SHIPPER'S IDENTIFICATION NO. FOR CUSTOMS PURPOSES (V.A.T. No., etc.)** (B)
- NAME OF SENDER** (C) and **TELEPHONE NO. (VERY IMPORTANT)** (D)
- COMPANY NAME AND ADDRESS (Include Postal Code)** (E)
- POSTAL CODE** (4) and **COUNTRY** (5)
- RECEIVER'S UPS ACCOUNT NO.** (A) and **RECEIVER'S IDENTIFICATION NO. FOR CUSTOMS PURPOSES (E.I.N., V.A.T., Importer's No., R.F.C. No., etc.)** (B)
- NAME OF CONTACT PERSON** (C) and **TELEPHONE NO. (VERY IMPORTANT)** (D)
- COMPANY NAME AND ADDRESS (Include Postal/ZIP Code)** (E)
- POSTAL CODE** (4) and **COUNTRY** (5)
- PAYMENT OF CHARGES** (3)
 - BILL SHIPPING CHARGES TO:** (6)
 - SHIPPER (S) RECEIVER (R) THIRD PARTY (T)
 - CREDIT CARD CHECK
- BILL DUTIES AND TAXES TO (DUTIABLE SHIPMENTS ONLY):**
 - SHIPPER (S) RECEIVER (R) THIRD PARTY (T)

- SERVICE LEVEL** (4): EXPRESS PLUS (1+), EXPRESS (1), EXPRESS SAVER (1P), EXPEDITED (2)
- SHIPMENT INFORMATION** (5):
- NO. OF PACKAGES IN SHIPMENT (A)
- TOTAL ACTUAL WEIGHT OF SHIPMENT (B)
- TOTAL DIMENSIONAL WEIGHT OF SHIPMENT (C)
- ZONE (D)
- DESCRIPTION OF GOODS (7)
- DECLARED VALUE OF SHIPMENT FOR CARRIAGE ONLY (Specify Currency) (H)
- DECLARED VALUE OF SHIPMENT FOR CUSTOMS ONLY (Specify Currency) (I)
- CURRENCY (J)
- REFERENCE NO. 1 (K)
- REFERENCE NO. 2 (L)
- SPECIAL OFFER CODE (M)
- COUNTRY OF ORIGIN (MANUFACTURE) OF GOODS (N)
- SHIPPING CHARGES** (6): TRANSPORTATION, DECLARED VALUE, OTHER, OTHER, TOTAL CHARGES
- DATE OF SHIPMENT** (8) and **SHIPPER'S SIGNATURE** (9)
- RECEIVED FOR UPS BY:** (DATE, TIME)

Fig. 2 Sample UPS waybill

These tracking numbers, provided by her father in China at the onset of the shipment, signified more than just technological access to logistics tracking and knowledge about the status of a parcel. More importantly, this exchange of information functioned as an invitation for Yuesi to actively participate in this logistical undertaking, sharing the techno-affective capabilities and responsibilities of ensuring successful delivery. Through this, the scope of participation expanded: Yuesi was no longer a passive recipient of aid but became an active co-agent in this enterprise, her ownership heightened by her renewed access to tracking information. Rather than idly awaiting LHQW in a rural American town, Yuesi spearheaded this logistical project by closely monitoring its trajectory.

In engaging with logistical technological systems, Yuesi and her father collectively entered a dynamic entanglement with informational systems, marked by their purported accuracy and frequent malfunctions. This collaboration opens up an affective terrain wherein migrants and their parents could cultivate a sense of temporal intimacy—a shared intersubjectivity of the time despite the distance. By looking at the same logistics timeline, they coordinated and managed their temporal and emotional expectations. With the tracking numbers in hand, Yuesi began estimating the parcel’s arrival by monitoring changes in its locations. “I knew when [the parcel] had made it to the US,” she

recalled, adding, “So I wasn’t worried. Everything went well.” The relative ease of the process stemmed, in part, from the certainty and predictability afforded by the reliable status updates of the UPS tracking system, which offered Yuesi a sense of control of spatiotemporality.

As Yuesi and her father attended to the tracking together, they constructed and shared anticipation for the parcel. On March 4th, 2029, her father, whose words in the chat remained measured and composed, sent a reminder: “My love, dad [baba] has seen from the UPS website that [the parcel] has been delivered to your school. Remember to pick it up when you have time.” The package arrived on time, with only a one-day margin of error from the estimated date of delivery. Unfazed, Yuesi replied, “Yeah, dad. I’ve just been notified by [the school].” Their conversation ended with the father’s reflection, “[it’s] rather fast, kind of convenient!”

The perceived seamlessness of Yuesi’s logistical experience owed not only to a reliable commercial carrier company but also to the successful navigation of “last mile logistics,” the final stage of distribution and transport ensuring the recipient’s access to the parcel (Silva et al. 2023). Once delivered to the postal address (i.e. Yuesi’s school), the parcel would be collected, identified, and sorted out by the school. Although UPS’s service technically ended upon delivery to the waybill destination, there remained an informal logistic gap between the LHQW and the migrants. The mailroom functioned as a final infrastructure tackling such last-mile logistics. The school’s mailroom notified the arrival of her package promptly, completing this transnational relay. Through the alignment of these multi-systems, both formal and informal, commercial and institutional, Yuesi’s shipping experience was largely painless.

In this case, Yuesi and her family stayed informed about their parcel’s real-time spatiotemporal status, thereby maintaining their sanity amidst the uncertainties of a global pandemic. A particular form of affect, what I call *controlled co-anticipation*, emerged with Yuesi and her father’s attentive collective monitoring of the system. This form of anticipation is “controlled” in that both parties’ spatiotemporal expectations are mediated through the “speculative forecast” of logistics technologies (Adams et al., 2009), and grounded in infrastructural reliability. Yuesi and her father were able to attune themselves to the indeterminacy of the shipping process, approximating its trajectory based on accurate tracking updates. Thus, their anticipation was securely anchored in predictability—a sense of control amidst spatiotemporal indeterminacy.

However, the accuracy and reliability of complex logistic systems, as well as the smooth collaboration between family members, are never guaranteed. Although Yuesi appeared to take her smooth-flowing logistics and mailing system as a given, this infrastructure grabbed more attention

when it failed. Many more Chinese migrants, like Zhiqiao and Xinxing, navigated a much more treacherous affective terrain where logistical mishaps were met with opaque communication.

“The Tracking Numbers Don’t Exist:” Epistemological Uncertainty

Zhiqiao’s package of LHQW came to him much later than expected. On October 12th, 2021, his father secured a detailed postal address of Zhiqiao in Virginia. And on the 14th, his father confirmed that the parcel had been picked up by DHL and en route to the US by air. Similar to Yuesi’s father, he also attached a photo of the shipping label and a series of tracking numbers, which started with “FEISH.” “It was supposed to arrive in like 3 to 4 days, according to my dad,” said this southern Chinese migrant whose father works in the shipping business.

Despite the assumed experience and expertise of his father, Zhiqiao had not yet seen the traces of his parcel for 6 days since its shipment. On October 20th, 2021, Zhiqiao and his father initiated an investigation into this package through WeChat:

Zhiqiao: Which shipping company did you use? The tracking numbers don’t even exist.

Father: Let me ask [someone]. [two minutes later] It’s DHL.

Zhiqiao: But [the tracking numbers] don’t show anything in DHL. And I saw the shipping label said Fedex.

Father: Let me ask again tomorrow. [this conversation ended at 10:18 pm]

Roughly 13 hours later, Zhiqiao’s father sent him a link, <https://www.17track.net/zh-cn>, which leads to an online platform 17TRACK (see Figure 3).

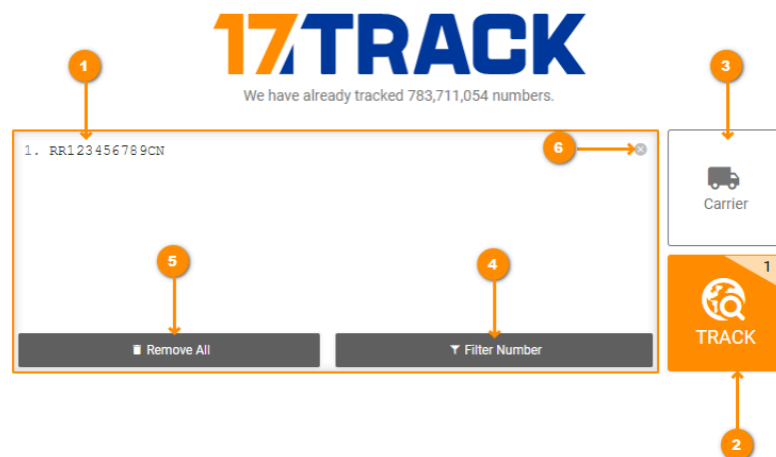


Fig. 3 Front page of 17TRACK

One can enter a single string of tracking numbers to inquire about the status of the parcel in question. When I asked Zhiqiao if he ever managed to track the package, he hesitated to give his answer:

Zhiqiao: Honestly, I can't say for sure if I checked it. But I don't think I knew exactly when [the package] would come. [Because] I was bothered by this a lot in the middle of a busy semester, I wasn't obsessed with it. I kinda tried to go with the wind and let it go. But my dad was still on it. He asked me a few weeks later to check the status of [17TRACK] using the tracking numbers. But that's when I'd already gotten the package, and the package had been there for like a week.

Yifan: You didn't get a notice when it arrived?

Zhiqiao: No. That's the rubbish mailing system to be blamed. It never worked. The parcel had just been lying on the ground for quite some time, while my dad was still asking around where it was.

Zhiqiao's frustration with the delayed delivery lies in two levels of system malfunctions that are both human and material-technical. The first was that series of tracking numbers: the repeated failure to access shipment updates left Zhiqiao and his father with a sense of resignation. Although I cannot identify the root cause of this issue with tracking, the chat record implies that Zhiqiao's father, with his business connections in the logistics industry, might delegate the task of shipping LHQW to a third party—a colleague or friend working in US-China logistics. Through an information transmission process from this unknown individual to Zhiqiao's father and then to Zhiqiao, the correct tracking numbers were lost.

The second malfunction was, however, beyond Zhiqiao's control: a mailing system in “infrastructural disrepair” (Chu 2014) represents not just a material breakdown but also a consequence of human neglect. Unlike Yuesi's success, the last-mile logistics failed Zhiqiao as the mailing system remained completely unresponsive. This error-prone last-mile delivery accentuates the role of human labor even in commercial logistics. Zhiqiao complained that the authority (i.e. his undergraduate school) had kept postponing an overhaul repair of the system and instead “putting patches (da buding)” on the recurring errors. While Zhiqiao's family was anxiously awaiting its arrival, the medication in urgent need had been ironically waiting to be picked up in an unattended mailing room. As highlighted by the outsourcing to an unknown “father's friend” or a slow-moving mailing system, this logistical system is as labor-intensive as material-based. Whether a glitch in the algorithm or mismanagement of a worker, problems arose and demanded immediate and concerted actions from Zhiqiao and his father.

To get a hold of this enigmatic parcel that “disappeared,” they worked closely together: they investigated which shipping company was used, repeatedly confirmed the tracking numbers, and verified with the unknown third-party assistant, but to no avail. This specific human-technology entanglement and frictional assemblage cast a pall of epistemological uncertainty and unpredictability over an already unbearable techno-social reality Zhiqiao and his father inhabited. The anticipation devolved into anticipatory anxiety when their imagined spatiotemporal smoothness and reliability were contradicted by disappointing reality. Zhiqiao’s case represents another form of human attunement to the logistical system. Negative affect emerges precisely with the unsuccessful alignments of different modalities (human assistance, mailing systems, and tracking), the inability to reason and prognosticate spatiotemporality, and uneven encounters with infrastructures. This affective encounter with LHQW logistics is not individualist but rather social. It further sheds light on transnational family affect and relations—the ways in which migrants and their parents cared for each other in precarity.

“We Were in This Together:” Multi-system Alignment and Care

As the exchange between Zhiqiao and his father indicated, the anxiety confronted both the child and the parent. It points to a formation of intersubjective affect; that is, a relational intensity arising between bodies. Affect and its production, Juno Salazar Parreñas (2012) argues, do not “reside within a human individual’s body and mind” nor do they “solely reside within the interface of human bodies” (682). Rather, the bodily intensities are “produced between bodies,” when the interactions give rise to new surges of sensation, complex sensoria, and subjects (ibid). Furthermore, affect has spatiality and can flow through different bodies and sites. Sara Luna (2018) notes that affect of terror spreads and travels on the US-Mexico border through the circulating rumors of violence. For many Chinese migrant children and their parents, affect also flow between them; across the Pacific; and through devices, cables, and wires.

“I was on my phone with my mother all the time,” said Xinxing, a 20-year-old Chinese migrant in New Jersey in 2020. Without a commercial logistical system or even tracking numbers to start with, Xinxing felt she was “completely in the dark.” Her affective conditions were not only relational and spatial, but it is also entangled in technoscientific management and human-machine interfaces. The concept of “seams” and “seamfulness,” as developed by Janet Vertesi (2014), draws attention to the heterogeneous, incoherent possibilities of multi-systems that these “infrastructures often collide” and many possibilities “to patch multiple systems together into local alignment” (269). In these numerous collisions and nodes of patching, emerge creative interfaces that incorporate online and offline

interactions as well as embodied and digital activities. Xinxing recalled her routines during the helpless waiting days:

After I checked and found that the package hadn't arrived, [my mom and I] would talk over the phone and check on each other to see how we were doing. I would tell her my situation [in the US], and she would console me and keep reminding me to stay healthy. She would also share what's going on [in Beijing].

The routinization of the anticipatory practices entails a multi-step, multimodal alignment of embodied orientations, affects, and digital infrastructures. First, Xinxing physically mobilized her body attempting to ascertain the current status of the package (i.e. opening the door and checking). Then, the absence of the package was perceived sensorily by her body, inducing frustration and further intensifying the anticipation. Finally, she called her mother in China via WeChat, imparting this bad news, and communicating her feelings through the visual-audio infrastructure.

The audiovisual communication played an integral role in configuring migrant families' co-anticipation: photos were taken about the content of the package and sent to the parents (see Figure 4).



Fig. 4 The photos of a medical gaggle taken by Xinxing

Many interlocutors shared that they would FaceTime their parents the whole time while going to the pick-up locations for their package, or at least update their parents as soon as they confirmed the receipt of packages. Yuesi did so immediately after she retrieved the parcel from the school

mailroom, and Xinxing took multiple shots to indicate that all items were correctly delivered without damage. Here, the affect is neither produced by the communication infrastructure; nor does it precede the use of technologies. Rather, borrowing from Karen Barad's (2007) idea of "intra-action," this affective circuit between migrant children and their Chinese parents comes into being with inorganic apparatuses, which are "open-ended" and "socially constituted" (146). In this way, a sensation first emerged and worked on a migrant's corporeal body, then traveled a great distance across the Pacific through telecommunication infrastructures, and finally was received and embodied by their kin in China. This affective process—involving heterogeneous actors, sensoriums, and modalities—tied family members closer sensorily, in spite of their physical separation and immobility.

Such techno-mediated intimacy also directs attention to familial mutual aid and care. In collectively investigating and anticipating an important parcel, the migrant children and their parents vicariously felt each others' anxiety and hopes, apprehension and solace, during an exceptionally trying time. As many migrants navigated their lives in lockdowns since March 2020, they resorted to virtual communication with their families in China as a means of relief or catharsis. Here I contend that the LHQW packages were affectively ambivalent: they symbolize a source of anxiety but also optimism—a better life ahead once the LHQW arrives. In constant conversations with their families in China regarding the packages, these Chinese migrants stranded in the US found some comfort and sanity. Xinxing, for example, told me how she navigated this difficult interval:

I was talking with my mom a lot those days; I appreciated [these conversations] a lot. I was home the whole day, can't go out much at all, so all I could do was just to check with my family in China, to talk about [the package], how long it would take to get here, how I was going to go with my days [in New Jersey] and to see how they're doing... You also know that disinfectant wipes, alcohol, and masks, nothing was left. I couldn't get any of these from anywhere. My auntie [whom I was staying with at that time] was old, so I also had a bit of extra concern for her. *Those days were so dark*. So talking to [my mom] was some good things I had. Looking back I would say [these phone conversations] meant something to me, like *a light amidst the darkness*. I felt we were in this together.

Note the contrast of "darkness" and "light." Xinxing's account evinces an equivocal reading of her lockdown experience in the US. On the one hand, the memory of material and mental hardships was far from faded. She vividly recalled her concern for the physical well-being of her older relative and her distress about the material shortages. On the other hand, Xinxing cherished her family communication as a critical form of therapy and care. The conversational details of Xinxing and her mother were nowhere to be found, but the general content Xinxing believed was no different from a regular call they would usually have during a weekend. Similarly, Zhiqiao's chat with his father was

nothing but ordinary: it started with some sharing of the weather and the father's reminder to "get out more and exercise (duo chuqu duanlian)" and then moved to various quotidian topics such as running errands.

These chats might not appear therapeutic as they were not directly concerned with tackling negative emotions or practical difficulties. Nonetheless, they were therapeutic because they re-situated the otherwise isolated migrants into an affective circuit of interconnections. The anticipation of Xinxing and Zhiqiao is not a singular emotion but represents a dazzling array of often contradictory affect, including apprehension, hope, confidence, and unease. The ambiguity is immanent in this flowing intensity, oscillating between the positive and negative. The about-to-arrive package was a poison—paralyzing those in anticipation with feelings of disappointment, anxiety, or frustration. But it also was a remedy—palliating pain by signaling possible hope. An upcoming parcel with medicines thus became a trope in a number of affective exchanges of the families, where the migrants and their parents casually talked about the expected arrival of LHQW. The healing potential lies less in the content of the parcel than in the continuous communication about it. Despite the disparate epidemiological and political realities in China and the US, the transnational families entered a co-temporality through these seemingly pointless exchanges. They conjured up what Xinxing called a sense of "togetherness." It helped these physically immobile children become momentarily deterritorialized—abstracted from their depressing reality—strengthening potentially therapeutic kinship ties.

Through these ethnographic cases of Yuesi, Zhiqiao, and Xinxing, I have shown how anticipation—as a particular spatiotemporal affect—emerges with, circulates through, and formulates diaspora subjects in conjunction with logistics technologies and labor. The affect of these Chinese migrant families is inextricably linked with a moving parcel. Specifically, anticipation flows and shifts *in conjunction with* dynamic logistical systems that probabilize the spatiotemporal configurations of LHQW and undergird transnational human collaboration. Despite many variations in the ways in which anticipation affected these migrants in the US, these novel intensities became pivotal forces overdetermining transnational family bonds and care during the pandemic. Beyond innovative real-time tracking and spatiotemporal precision, global logistics with all its contingency and indeterminacy is also socially mediated and corporeally felt.

But where would the affect go? In this affective logistical process, what would happen after the LHQW capsules were correctly delivered and properly received? Moving forward, I explore the variegated forces behind a successful LHQW delivery—that is, how unexpected sociality and intangible labor transformed this controversial medication into a salient symbol of familial care.

LHQW Hoarders: Logistical Affect

38.7 °C. Two striking red lines on the COVID-19 test. I got COVID. In December 2024, in New York, I finally contracted the infamous virus after the chaos of the pandemic had seemed to have receded into memory. With moderate symptoms of sore throat and fever, my thoughts turned to LHQW. Having never stored any medicine myself, I reached out to a few Chinese neighbors for help, though I kept my expectations low; after all, the pandemic was over, and no one was sourcing LHQW from China anymore. To my surprise, many offered their stock of LHQW: “Take as many as you want. I still got too many from the pandemic.” This neighborly generosity moved me, but I was more intrigued by the startling surplus of a medication that once was considered “strategic material” and in critically short supply in China. This anachronistic abundance of LHQW also struck me during a visit to Weiqi, one of the interviewees, who showed me her medical storage.

Sitting on her couch, I could not help but notice a stack of three clear latch boxes, their tops scattered with dirty dog toys, suggesting they had been there for quite some time. Through the stained plastic, I saw numerous blue packets resembling those of LHQW, hundreds of them, neatly organized and sealed inside, consigned to an oblivious corner. Curious, I asked Weiqi what was inside. She paused for a moment, seemingly caught off guard, then scurried to the corner.

“They are ... Let me check really quick... Wow, there’s so much left!” There were hundreds of packets of unused, even unboxed LHQW in pristine condition.

“How long have they been here?” I asked.

“Hmmm, I’m not sure, to be honest.” She picked up one packet and looked at its back for dates. “I guess at least three years or even more. Many of us come and go and just leave what they had not used here. So, some are... expired. Okay, they are all expired now!” She chuckled as she dug deeper into the boxes and checked more packets.

I laughed with her, “So it used to be an LHQW armory, but now it’s an LHQW graveyard.”

From a scarce sine qua non to an overlooked excess, LHQW has undergone a major transformation since the height of the pandemic. Echoed by many migrant children, the apathy and dwindling importance of LHQW contrast sharply with the frenzy surrounding this coveted COVID-19 elixir just a few years ago. An intriguing paradox arises: despite families’ admirable effort to move LHQW across the world, many Chinese migrant children confessed that they “don’t actually count on it” to prevent or cure this disease. After this much work, did LHQW only matter for its formality? Weiqi, for instance, seemed to have forgotten the medical significance of hundreds of packets of LHQW in her home, long after they expired. When asked why she insisted on keeping

such an excessive amount, the 26-year-old, US-educated Chinese financier answered simply, “Placebo effect.”

This apparent contradiction—or ambivalence—reveals as much as it puzzles, exposing the vicissitudes of affective transnational encounters between LHQW and migrants, as well as their families. At stake in the transnational circulation of LHQW was not only biomedical health but also intergenerational affect and care. I argue that the laborious processes by which LHQW reached migrant children affectively shaped their perception of it as a testament to transnational care. The hidden logistical labor enabling the flow of LHQW was central to pandemic sociality and transnational Chinese parent-children relationship. The creative mobilization of social and human capital materialized Chinese kinship bonds, figuring into the affective dynamics between migrant children and their parents.

In the sections that follow, I trace a map of Xinxing’s demanding LHQW journey to show a peculiar translocal sociality and transnational reciprocity that traversed nuclear family boundaries, fostering socialized pandemic intensities. Then, turning attention to Kailin and Weiqi, who valued LHQW beyond its medical utility, I highlight the formal and informal labor families deployed to ensure its successful transnational delivery. It was these human efforts and the pandemic obstacles they overcame that dramatized and signified the ambiguous affect of LHQW logistic, crystallizing it as a self-evident expression of care and filial love.

Sociality Grows as LHQW Flows

Once Xinxing eventually saw her long-awaited package from Beijing arriving in New Jersey in 2020, she knew it was time for her to “run the last relay.” This was a package of critical supplies sent *to* her—but *for* a group of young Chinese migrants in the New Jersey and New York area. Xinxing explained how this package was a collective enterprise from the very beginning:

Basically, my mom got very close with some other parents in her residential complex whose children were also in the US. Because back at the very start of the pandemic in China, Beijing had implemented a series of lockdowns that restricted the come-and-go of a residential complex (xiaoqu), these residents started to self-organize themselves and formed an HOA (Home Owner Association) thing in their community to administer anti-pandemic policies or negotiate with the local government. That’s when my mom got involved in community politics and got to know some other families in this neighborhood whose kids were just like me in the US. Their kids were also on the East Coast: New Jersey and New York. When she wanted to send me things in April, she thought: why not ask these parents so that they could just make one shipment altogether?

Xinxing was amused by how her mother, a middle-aged professor in China who was apathetic to community politics, suddenly devoted herself to civic engagement and local activism. She commented jokingly, “By this, she seemed to get herself some new middle-aged besties (zhongnian guimi).” Xinxing was not aware of these newly formed friendships among parents. Xinxing’s mother was able or willing to do so due to the accidental emergence of a close-knit residential community and on the grounds of their shared vested interest in their US-residing children’s well-being. Their common interests and social, and physical proximity opened up Chinese family sociality and made collective shipping possible among multiple transnational families.

Far from an exceptional experience of Xinxing, many migrants attested to this surprising, grass-root logistical effort. Zhiqiao’s shipping expert father joined forces with two or three other fathers when strategizing the logistical plan. Although the collaboration between the dads was hot, the son seemed to have little knowledge of how this “father alliance” was formed exactly. Zhiqiao said:

I think [my dad and these other two dads] got together because I hang out a lot with one of their kids. So my dad knew of his dad through me, I guess? And others, I don’t know... Maybe they lived close to each other in China? I really don’t know how [my dad] did it. He is not that kind of parent. He [is] always busy with his job.

The details of their parents’ emerging social networks remained opaque to Zhiqiao and Xinxing, who did not expect this unusual sociality of their near-retired parents—namely, befriending neighbors or socializing with other parents. Without much involvement of their US-educated children, these worried parents departed from the conventional wisdom of atomistic nuclear family agency and instead coalesced into a team that shared one common objective: to help their far-away children in the US. In response to the unprecedented crisis, sociality grew across families in China as LHQW started to flow. And it would continue to expand when LHQW reached these migrant children in the US.

Return to the tasks Xinxing had in hand. After receiving the package from China, she now needed to make sure each child of her mother’s friends would get their portion correctly. To do so, she unboxed the parcel, itemized all the content, and recategorized them in terms of each person’s designated quantities. When I asked how she managed to distribute the LHQW to these Chinese migrants whom she had not yet met, Xinxing credited her mother for this team effort:

[My mom] gave me a list of contacts, not in serious legal names, more like WeChat contacts... My mom gave me the details like “this gege (brother) needs this much of this medicine”, or “this portion goes to this jiejie (sister).” It seemed that my mom sorted

everything out with these aunties back in Beijing, and I just took the next step, to get the [LHQW] to New York.

This process detailed by Xinxing involved *multi-staged* collaborations between *multiple* agents situated in *multiple* locales. It started, spatiotemporally, from the parents' communication in Beijing in early April when they secured and determined the share of the medicine. Then, Xinxing's mother managed to find a logistical solution by sidestepping the Chinese embargo to send the package to Xinxing. Finally, Xinxing herself took care of the last-mile logistics by distributing the medicine via domestic commercial carriers to other Chinese migrant children—those “gege” and “jiejie”—none of whom she knew before this LHQW logistics. It appeared that the packages of LHQW followed a prolonged yet clear-cut path from China to the US (see Figure 5).

Nonetheless, the sociality emerged defies any linear progression or unidirectionality. It shows unexpected translocality, interconnectedness, and reciprocity. Xinxing lightheartedly described how these other migrants thanked her and her mother for their labor—that is their courageous initiative and meticulous organization. More importantly, she noted how this sociality grew beyond the one-way flow of LHQW and endured after the pandemic:

Amazingly, we're still in touch, we and those [migrant children]. We had a group chat on WeChat, and I even came to know one of the sisters (jiejie) personally. In 2023 when I graduated, my mom came to visit me. That sister invited my mom to her place in New York, to thank my mom, and she treated us to dinner. Also, when we got back to Beijing, those aunties, whose children got the delivery from me, invited us to banquets [qingke].

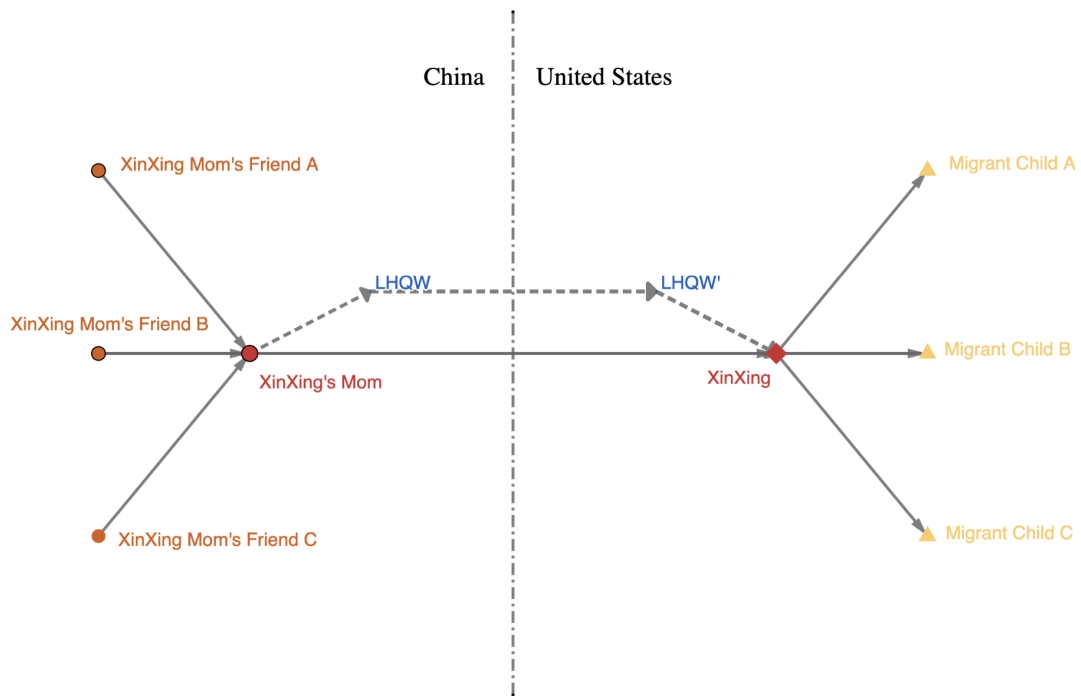


Fig 5. Illustration of the trajectory of the LHQW package in Xinxing's case

In contrast to the package's linear spatiotemporal trajectory from China to the US, or from the parents to children, the sociality is much messier. Bilateral relationships of reciprocity grew from a singular material flow. New friendships, allyship, and social ties were formed among the parents in Beijing, between Xinxing's mother and the beneficiary of this logistical project, between the parents and Xinxing, and among the migrant children in the US.

This emergent sociality illustrates a new configuration of transnational family relations during the pandemic. Two distinct yet interrelated social groups (one for the parents and the other for their children) took shape in China and the US. Through long-distance collaborations between these two groups, emerged a kind of LHQW sociality that was translocal and motivated by transnational kinship. As shown by Xinxing's and Zhiqiao's examples, neither the migrants nor their parents were directly involved in each others' mobilization across the Pacific. Some were even largely ignorant of the existence of such sociality before the logistics projects concerned them. Xinxing and Zhiqiao, for example, were surprised by their parents' unusual expansion of social connections. However, children's and parents' respective social networks were mutually constitutive in this transnational enterprise. The Chinese parents came together for their children in the US; the young migrants were,

in turn, bonded by such parental coalitions in China. In other words, this thickening of translocal sociality would not be possible without the transpacific kinship or the local friendship formed in China and the US.

Moreover, this thickened sociality temporarily blurred the family boundaries, making LHQW logistics no longer a private family business or personal affect but a communal priority and public emergency. Packages of LHQW were not moved in the unit of an individual family but *with* a rich social network of multiple parents and children. If the previous discussion about anticipation showcases how affect emerging with logistical systems could become a sense of care, then Xinxing's LHQW trajectory demonstrates that affect was socially grounded and communicated as extended social connections socialized the intensities of LHQW logistics in a larger community. The inter-family coalition enlarged the sociality beyond singular parent-child relations, magnifying the intense pandemic affect, such as apprehension and appreciation, that flowed between children and parents and linked these otherwise unconnected Chinese families.

Reciprocity was the moral principle under which the affective circuit of LHQW logistics operated. Like a Maussian gift for which reciprocation is expected (2016), LHQW in transnational circulation was imbued with indebtedness and reciprocity. Instead of a medical commodity, LHQW was understood more as a materialization of care, morally separated from the economic and monetary sphere (Buch 2014). Xinxing did not mention the monetary value of the medicine she distributed, nor did any of the recipients repay this gift in money. She said explicitly that her mother “took care of all of the fees in the logistics” without asking other families to contribute financially. LHQW, then, was a gift from Xinxing's family. What they returned was banquets—treating Xinxing and her mothers to feasts, a typical ritualized gesture in China deployed to demonstrate solidarity and affinity (Oxfeld 2019). Less about pecuniary compensation, these appreciation banquets are important moral and affective sites for Chinese migrant families to celebrate these fateful connections (*yuanfen*) and uphold the principle of reciprocity. Hence, sociality is mediated and thickened through this circuit of LHQW.

However, unlike the classical Maussian formation, the valuables of LHQW did not travel in a social vacuum but rather were processually moved by human intermediaries—many people like Xinxing who laboriously unboxed, repackaged, organized, and delivered these “gifts.” Human labor in between logistics journey, in this case, was no longer “normalized, rationalized and invisibilized” (Hopkins 2022, 52). The manual labor and intellectual contributions of the intermediaries (e.g., Xinxing and her mother) were foregrounded and recognized as being as valuable as the medicine itself, or perhaps even more so, in this gift exchange. Malinowski's Kula ring (1922) presumes a

smooth flow of valuables among different islands, thus erasing the labor it takes for such gifts to move. Yet, what this LHQW circulation underscores is the overlooked labor of gift-giving—the conceiving, planning, executing, and coordinating efforts devoted to the flow of this medicinal gift. The beneficiary families are well aware of who, at which stage, and in what capacity, contribute to the movement of this valuable object. It was due to such acknowledgment of sociality and labor behind LHQW logistics, that the circulation of gifts and affect was sustained. Next, I show an affective nexus of labor and care, by examining how families’ phatic labor of utilizing social connections dramatized the logistics and articulated a sense of filial care.

Logistics Labor: Guanxi, Trouble, and Filial Care

This complex sociality and heightened labor make LHQW a loaded, affective gift, signifying not just care and intimacy but also tribulation and ordeal. These hardships did not require mere individual manual efforts but also revealed a web of intangible phatic labor—the exploitation of social and human capital to ensure LHQW’s procurement and transportation. I argue that this mobilization of social resources, or *guanxi* (Hutchings & Weir 2005; Kipnis 1997), acted as a dramatic catalyst in crystallizing transnational care within Chinese filial relationships. It transformed the abstracted, unspecific affect of kinship into a particular, embodied intensity grounded in legible sociality. By perceiving and receiving this indisputable act of care, Chinese migrants came to view LHQW not as a simple commodity but as an immeasurable filial debt—rich in its unique historicity and sociality.

All the labor-intensive processes of boxing, unboxing, and re-boxing—alongside the convoluted trajectory—“lionized” this medicine, as Kailin described it, “making it an emblem” of Chinese filial sacrifice and devotion. Kailin, a 25-year-old migrant in South Carolina, received a medical parcel containing LHQW and many more supplies—not directly from her parents in China, but from an unfamiliar name in California. Further investigation of Kailin’s package unveils a grand logistical project of impressive scale and complexity. She recounted her family’s hustle in 2020:

An aunt working at a hospital in Wuhan at the time told us “Things were about to go bad quickly.” So they started hoarding supplies and sending them to me. They knew [the virus] would be out of China and across the world just in a matter of time ... It was hard to get this medicine in mainland China. But they got it from Hainan³. It was isolated from what was going on on the mainland. There weren’t many cases back there even in March, so the regulations [of

³ Hainan was an island province at China’s southernmost point, known for its tropical climate and as a popular vacation destination. In 2021, the province only reported two local symptomatic COVID-19 cases thanks to its relative physical distance with the mainland.

LHQW] were loose. They bought it there and shipped it to my grandpa’s [yeye] place in Suzhou. My uncle [shushu] rode the Suzhou-Shanghai subway to deliver the medicine to the airport. They asked a friend of theirs working on a Shanghai-LA flight to carrier it to the US. So it got to a relative in LA. They took what they needed, and then [LHQW] finally got to me via UPS.

It was an exceptionally complex logistical relay. The parcel traveled across Mainland China from Hainan to Suzhou and then Shanghai, then crossed the Pacific to Los Angeles before finally arriving in South Carolina. It passed through multiple hands, involving family members, trusted friends, and intermediaries, and moved via ground and air transportation using both formal services and interpersonal networks (see Figure 6).

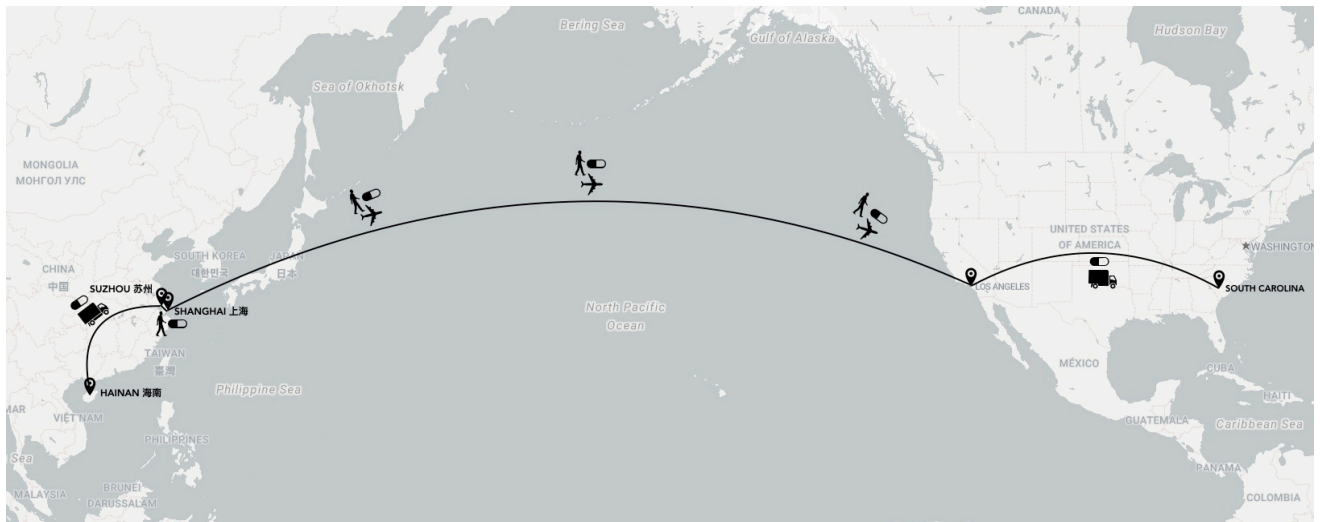


Fig. 6 Illustration of Kailin’s LHQW trajectory: from Hainan to Suzhou via commercial carriers, from Suzhou to Shanghai via human carriers and ground transportation, from Shanghai to Los Anglos via a commercial flight, and then to South Carolina via domestic shipping service.

Kailin’s package exemplifies the contingent and heterogeneous nature of ambitious LHQW logistics, with its successful movement predicated on an infrastructure of intense human labor and thick sociality. Regarding water infrastructure in Mumbai, Nikhil Anand (2017) examines how human engagements—bureaucratic and technocratic—shape the everyday operations of city pipes. Similarly, Julia Elyachar (2010), in her study of Cairo’s informal political economy, highlights “phatic labor” that sustains communicative channels as social infrastructure, emphasizing how seemingly mundane acts like visiting, chatting, and maintaining friendships forge economically meaningful connections. In LHQW logistics, the phatic labor of mobilizing the existing social relations, or the “guanxi” in China, plays a paramount role. Kailin’s account implies a diverse array of social capital and privileges: purchasing medical supplies in advance required a reliable social

connection with insiders willing to risk their political safety; asking a relative to move the package with such precision needed trust and collaboration; arranging for a flight crew member to “smuggle” LHW discreetly tapped into her parents’ resources in the Chinese airline industry. All of these achievements involved not only the preexisting privileged *guanxi*. But more importantly, they were contingent on the parents’ continual maintenance and proactive utilization of these networks. Kailin’s parents had exerted their phatic labor. Even for a wealthy middle-class family, it was no small feat.

Despite such remarkable maneuvering, Kailin expressed frustration with the logistics, partly because she “felt bad for [her] parents to lose their chill and making a fuss about it.” She lamented their tendency to overreact, “going out of their way to use ‘*guanxi*’” (dadong gan’ge) and “troubling” (mafan) many people to achieve their goals. Organizational studies have noted that *guanxi* can confer competitive advantages (Chen et al. 2013), but it requires sustained “phatic labor” to function (Elyachar 2010). Even if Kailin did not recount all the minutiae of their parents’ visiting, chatting with, or gifting these useful people, the way she emphasized “use” and “trouble” implies that the favors were not granted automatically but rather premised on the affective yet invisible work her parents performed. Visiting, chatting, and gifting to build goodwill were necessary in maintaining and activating these communicative channels. Such labor constituted another form of logistical labor beyond manual boxing and unboxing. In these quotidian but consequential ways, Chinese parents strived to “pull all the strings” they had.

This was far from an exceptional instance of nepotism. Nearly all interlocutors referenced similar forms of “phatic labor.” For example, Yuesi’s father sent medical supplies, including a large quantity of disposable masks which were nowhere to be found in China in early 2020, from Vietnam. He was able to do so because the company he worked for had a foreign division in Ho Chi Minh City. “He made a call with a former colleague [in Vietnam], and [that person] did him a favor,” said Yuesi. She was surprised that her father even got connections there. Intrigued by the Vietnamese letters on the masks she received from her father, she took a picture (see Figure 7).



Fig. 7 Photo of medical masks received by Yuesi showing the language printed on the cover was Vietnamese

Similarly, Weiqi’s father in Jiangsu province relied on a surgeon friend from Beijing to bypass regulations and acquire large quantities of LHQW without alerting authorities in his local province. Xinxing recounted her father’s informal methods of obtaining LHQW through “certain channels” (*tongguo yixie qudao*). Certainly, these connections were not made overnight. The seemingly easy maneuvers of LHQW were done through strong and enduring social connections, which were a result of their long-term cultivation and maintenance of “guanxi.”

Though effective, this labor was demanding and dramatic. The value of LHQW seemed to rise as more strings were pulled and more people were troubled. For many migrants stranded in the US, the medicine was less significant for its potential to alleviate symptoms than for the ardent care and love it embodied. It was these specific affective intensities that mattered and cured the migrants during the pandemic. Kailin did not count on LHQW to help her with COVID. She appeared indifferent, even dismissive, of those capsules received. “I do not for a split second believe in

[LHQW],” this young Chinese woman said. When asked about the reasons, she denounced this medication and its propaganda:

If it really worked like it was advertised in China, then why didn't the Chinese government use it to save lives in Wuhan in the first place? LHQW isn't like a new drug; it's been developed for a decade. So it's a sham, for sure! I don't believe in it, I have never taken it, not even for once, and I will not give it a try in the future, either.

However, despite their skepticism, she never threw the capsules away. Kailin reasoned:

It's just my personal opinion, but it's none of my business when others want to use it or even genuinely believe in its efficacy. [LHQW] isn't useful for me, but may be helpful for others. I hated when my parents just made a huge scene, you know, troubling this many people [mafan zhemeduo ren], just for such a pointless drug that wouldn't help at all. But still, I appreciated how much they'd done and the [LHQW] they sent.

Kailin's remark appeared to be inconsistent or even self-contradictory. She rejected the medical values of LHQW yet empathized with other's approval. As Kailin acquiesced in an alternative understanding of efficacy, it points to the ontological plurality and plasticity of LHQW: a biomedical drug or a token of signification. In other words, LHQW's significance straddles between the material and symbolic fields. Many migrant children, even their parents, agreed with Kailin that the proclaimed clinical efficaciousness of LHQW is questionable, despite repeated affirmation and endorsement from the Chinese government. Weiqi, for example, eagerly showed me all the different types of LHQW she had: from the classic capsules to granules and oral liquid. Of these forms in which LHQW exists, she said the granules worked the best on her since these granular micro-particles of herbal ingredients could accelerate bodily metabolism and absorption. But when I asked why there were only a few packets of LHQW granules among other countless capsules, she replied, “It doesn't matter. Regardless of its forms, it's not gonna save your life or anything. So it's fine as long as it's here.” Weiqi's acute awareness of and simultaneously indifference to the efficacy nuance betrays how migrant children value LHQW as something beyond its medical use.

The prevalent medical agnosticism does not mar families' perception of this medication, which derives its cultural legitimacy from another ontological plain as a symbol of affect, care, and love. When I pressed this question of “Why not discard these LHQW capsules” to Kailin, our conversation paused with unusual silence. This young eloquent woman stared blankly into the camera and said in her native Chinese, “*youdian shebude* (it just brings me great pain to do so).” This notoriously hard-to-translate “*shebude* (hard to part with)” in Mandarin Chinese implies a profound sense of attachment and belongingness to this object she claimed to despise. Although Kailin made little

reference to her parents, her detailed recounts of the hard work and convoluted procedures of the LHQW journey belied her offhanded derision. She took all the “troubles” into her evaluation of this medication. These “troubles” prevented her, and other migrant interlocutors like Weiqi, from discarding their expired medicine.

The romanticization of LHQW lies in its logistical labor, or precisely—the migrants’ fetishization of the dramas arising from the tension between pandemic hardships and family endeavors. From regulatory hurdles in China to postal suspensions and domestic lockdowns, the emotional turmoil of lost parcels, and the meticulous coordination required, this LHQW logistics might just be one of the most formidable logistical tasks undertaken by families like Zhiqiao’s, Xinxing’s, and Kailin’s. As I have shown, migrant children knew all the intellectual, affective, and manual labor enlisted for and exploited throughout this project. In fetishizing these dramatized challenges and efforts uniquely situated in the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants encounter LHQW—not in its static material form—but rather affectively with its dynamic semiosis entangled with pandemic intensities and embedded in a milieu of precarity. Recall the excess of LHQW among my Chinese migrants even after the pandemic. Rather than a specific anti-COVID formula, this medication heals people as an affective testimonial for transnational care.

Medicine may expire, and the pandemic has ended. But the love conveyed through such efforts shall never be forgotten. When Xinxing looks at the blue packaging of LHQW (see Figure 8), she revisits that precarious history with all those intensities: the empty doorstep where she waited for the package, the encouraging voice of her mother from the phone, and the toxic anticipation and remedial relief. Either positive or negative, this affective dimension of LHQW outlasts the crisis, evolving nebulous feelings into a tangible sense of care: An unmistakable love for family.



Fig. 8 LianhuaQingwen capsules

This dynamic materiality of LHQW resonates with the recent philosophical turn of new materialism which emphasizes agency immanent in the nonhuman world. Jane Bennett (2010) argues that all things are agential to not only “impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (viii). Yet, this new materialist formulation tends to assume a universalist construction of nonhuman agency, leaving little room for conceptualizing the differences and relations of power (Lettow 2016). The ethnography of LHQW logistics challenges this ahistorical view, by highlighting how LHQW’s affective agency is historically situated, shaped by social relations, and tied to human labor. I argue that the agency stems from LHQW’s idiosyncratic logistical history of arduous transnational circulation and from its creative sociality underwritten by intense labor, affect, and determination. With its historical multiplicities and affectivities, LHQW is at once a vibrant material, with which transnational families communicate their care and love, and a material vestige, through which various actions and expressions of parental care are laminated and immortalized.

Conclusion

The logistics of LHQW’s transnational circulation in this thesis presents multiple narratives simultaneously. First, it is a story about a global supply chain nightmare at a specific historical juncture, when an epidemic disrupted the logistical flow of goods, disenchanting us with an

anthropocentric hubris of a totalizing global capitalist circulation. Through various instances of technoscientific failures, infrastructural breakdowns, and human-machine misalignments, it has become evident that transnational logistics is inherently vulnerable and radically open to human affective intensities and labor interventions. Instead of an error-free, frictionless system with immaculate operations, LHQW logistics was affective—grounded in communication, collaboration, and co-labor between parents and children. The recalcitrant malfunctions were not merely exceptional nuisances but crucial sites for creative engagement within everyday reality. Even in 2024, when the pandemic appears to be behind us, this story reminds us that the quotidian logistical smoothness is saturated with contingent affect rather than characterized by positivist scientific precision. The various anticipation and intersubjective connections between parents and migrant children through LHQW circulation are powerful manifestations of how new intensities, sociality, and possibilities of healing and care can emerge from ruination when the capitalist and geopolitical systems fall into disarray. A permeable system and a vulnerable construction—this is an affective logistics, indeed.

Second, this research also serves as an ode to human labor in logistics, or more broadly, to the sociality often overlooked by the obsessions of capitalist modernity. I wish to acknowledge the painstaking efforts, obscured sacrifice, and unexpected social networks that enabled the movement of commodities. Thinking with “agential assemblages” (Bennett 2010, 107), this vast array of heterogeneous agents—from LHQW itself to shipping companies, packages, delivery people, telecommunication systems, and family members—and their varied labors underscores the social and material basis required for animating the ambition of global space-time compression. Imagine an intricate infrastructure organizing and sorting affect across time and space. In times like the COVID-19 pandemic when crumpled capitalist infrastructures—never able to achieve an idealized global logistics system—failed migrant families, this research has shown how kinship, informal sociality, and phatic labor stepped in to sustain transnational care. Without those laboring parents, relatives, friends, acquaintances, and even strangers, none of the LHQW capsules would have moved or been delivered—nor would the help and the sense of healing. Flowing sentiments and socialized intensities—this is a logistical affect, indeed.

Finally, dovetailing the two threads above, the circulation of LHQW pays tribute to a formidable force of love and care that persists—in spite of, and precisely because of, an emergent crisis. The dramatics of mobilizing social networks and overcoming logistical challenges, as experienced by transnational families like Kailin’s, is not merely a social backdrop against which gift-giving care unfolds. Instead, these complications are affect-laden, constitutive elements that make LHQW a

cultural artifact. To most Chinese children, Chinese kinship is not known for its emotive expressiveness. Accustomed to the Confucian tradition of filial piety and reticence within the family, I echo many interlocutors' reflections that the pandemic ironically seemed to be a time when their "blood was thicker" than ever before. Family members were not shy from expressing concerns for each other or sharing intense embodied experiences like anxiety, anticipation, and apprehension. The logistics of LHW circulation provided a pragmatic pretext or compelling condition for the parents and children to communicate their love openly. The precarity and labor in this logistical endeavor not only necessitate parental care but also crystallize it—dramatizing it and making it legible for their loved ones to perceive despite physical separation. In other words, the pandemic intensities give shape to "anticipation" and "trouble," otherwise ambiguous logistical affects, translating them into unequivocal expressions of love. Amidst fear and uncertainty in a global pandemic, LHW logistics—with its sociality and affectivities—charted a path of love and certainty. The perceived difficulties surrounding LHW logistics point to how specific historical developments and social relations with an object can refashion its material agency, transform its ontology, and remake human-object relations. To understand this historically situated formation of agential LHW medication, we might then consider anew: How are transnational subjects connected through various flows of intensities and matters? How are translocal intimacies unsettled and reproduced in this interconnected yet fragmented globalized modernity?

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