



Caring for the self and others: a reflection on everyday commoning amid the COVID-19 pandemic

Chun Zheng¹

Received: 11 July 2020 / Accepted: 13 August 2020
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Abstract

In this essay, I share my experiences and reflection on fighting the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of a Chinese student residing in Pittsburgh, USA. Three examples of “commoning”—acts of managing shared resources by a group of people—reveal the importance of care and collaboration in the time of uncertainty. First, when COVID-19 posed a threat to the food supply chain, community gardens and home gardening ensured food security and enhanced mutual support. Second, the emergence of online activities of teaching, learning, and collaborating presented an opportunity of having more collective, equitable, and diverse formats of virtual communities. Lastly, volunteering in the distribution of “Healthy Packs,” I witnessed the nurture of a sense of belonging and a connection with home in the student community. These examples suggest that facing the crisis, care-driven commoning activities at the individual, everyday level lay the foundation for large-scale collaborative systems.

Keywords COVID-19 · Everyday commoning · Care · Pittsburgh · Food supply chain · Online sharing · Healthy packs

1 Commoning in a crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic is sweeping the planet. We, as individuals in the extended human family, are living through a crisis together. Within the vast and daunting global crisis are changes to every person’s daily life. These changes reveal the normally hidden human needs of care and collaboration and force us to re-invest in ourselves and our communities. In this essay, I share my personal experiences since the beginning of the pandemic and my observations of care-based everyday commoning activities over this period from the perspective of a Chinese student residing in Pittsburgh, USA (Fig. 1). Commoning, as defined by Gibson-Graham et al. (2013), takes place when a group of people is motivated by an ethic of care for a flourishing and sustainable common future and decides to manage shared resources in a collective manner. After discussing three examples of everyday commoning: gardening as commoning, online sharing as commoning, and volunteering as commoning, I reflect on the potential of expanding the sentiment of care for ourselves and others into larger-scale collaborative networks.

✉ Chun Zheng
czheng1@andrew.cmu.edu

¹ Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, USA

2 From one epicenter to another

January 23rd, the day before the Chinese Lunar New Year’s Eve, the news that Wuhan and three other surrounding cities were going into lockdown¹ struck all TV channels in China. While words of the spread of a new type of pneumonia had been circulating for days (Wee and Wang 2020), Wuhan’s lockdown marked the start of an unprecedented national struggle and later, a global crisis.

Although physically stranded overseas, I could hear the worry in my family and friends’ voices over the phone. The anticipated joy of the annual family reunion was completely overwhelmed. In the following month, tracking the number of confirmed cases and the death toll became my daily routine. Watching more and more cities turn into darker colors² on the color-coded live COVID-19 tracking map put me into fear and homesickness.

Subsequently, I observed, in Pittsburgh, USA, personal protective equipment (PPE) in nearby pharmacies were

¹ Coverage on Wuhan lockdown can further be found on South China Morning Post (<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/3047278/wuhan-goes-shutdown-china-tries-contain-deadly-coronavirus>).

² Larger numbers of confirmed cases are presented in darker colors in most COVID-19 live tracking maps, for instance, Baidu COVID-19 live data (<https://voice.baidu.com/act/newpneumonia/newpneumonia>) and Sina News COVID-19 live tracking (https://news.sina.cn/zt_d/yiqin_g0121).

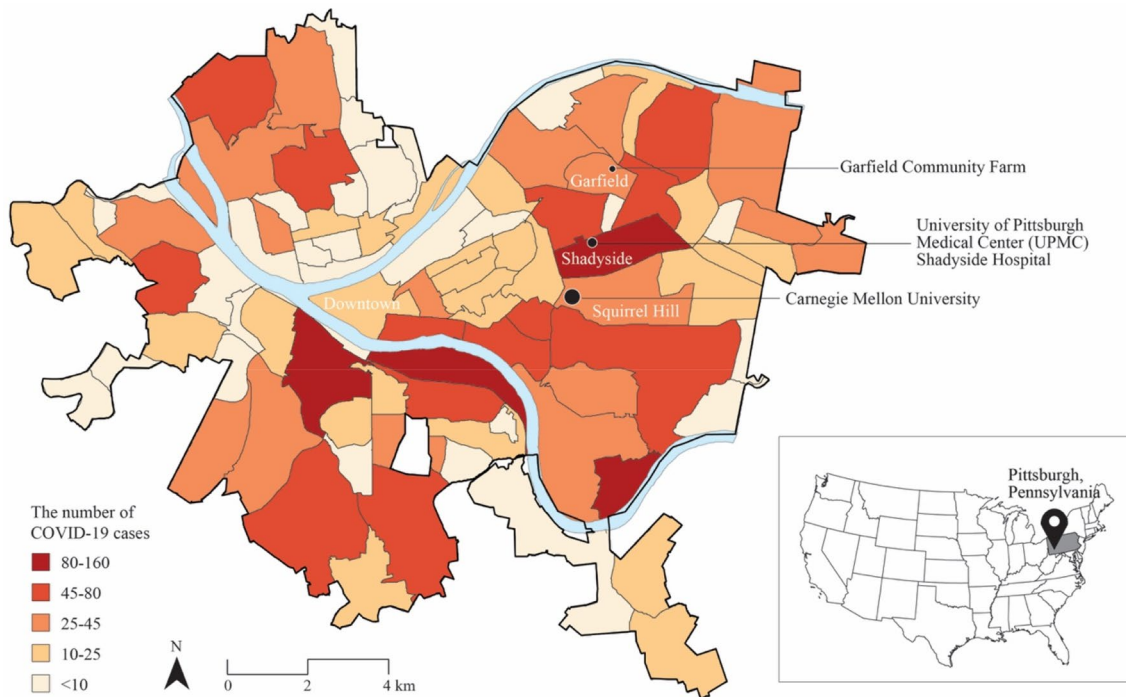


Fig. 1 Spatial pattern of COVID-19 cases in Pittsburgh neighborhoods. Locations mentioned in this paper are highlighted. The map was created by the author based on the open data accessed on July 28 from Allegheny County Public Health Department (<https://www.alleg>

[henycounty.us/Health-Department/Resources/COVID-19/COVID-19.aspx](https://www.alleghenycounty.us/Health-Department/Resources/COVID-19/COVID-19.aspx)) and Esri ArcGIS Database (<https://www.esri.com/en-us/arcgis/products/arcgis-online/resources>)

Fig. 2 Last of N95 masks left in a Home Depot, 13 miles away from central Pittsburgh (February 2, 2020. Photography provided by the author)



almost sold out by February (Fig. 2). I collected 80 masks from over 10 shops in our region, most of which were the last bundles left for sale, to mail to a police friend working at the frontline in China. By the time I was ready to mail out the package, all flights to and from China had been banned (Corkery and Karni 2020). The travel ban not only

meant the package would not have guaranteed delivery in the foreseeable future, but also put me into the mentality of being cut off from my homeland. Throughout February,

via WeChat,³ family and friends shared stay-home updates, cheered up each other, and even guided me to prepare for a potential COVID-19 outbreak in Pittsburgh. Geographical separations and time differences didn't prevent us from caring for and supporting each other.

On March 16, when most students were in the spring break, Pittsburgh officially reported its first two cases,⁴ which meant educational entities had to make different decisions. Pittsburgh heavily relies on its education industry. The student population takes up 27% of the total population of the city.⁵ Therefore, schools, preceding other public and private sectors in the city, responded to the outbreak first by switching to online classes, which lowered the risk of infection and spreading of the virus in the city that might be caused by students' domestic and international travel. Still, I believe more earlier actions could have been implemented citywide and nationwide, including social distancing, encouragement to wear masks, and cancellations of large gatherings, to name a few. Nonetheless, what seemed so obvious to me, or to any Chinese citizen living in the USA, turned out to be invisible to most Americans, especially politicians and decision makers. The US government was overly optimistic about the epidemic and focused its resources on political rivalries, thus missing early opportunities to contain the outbreak. Compared with the constant and rolling media coverage of self-help prevention measures in China, the American people were given confusing and sometimes contradictory information, which blurred the severity of the pandemic. The rest of the story is well known. The malfunction of the government, the partisan differences, the sacrifices of healthcare workers, the hoarding of living essentials and weapons, etc., have become new abnormal norms in the USA. In these selfish, divisive and confusing situations, it is inevitable for many to find alternatives to self-help.

The duality of my experiences in two epicenters—the USA and China—has inspired me to recognize and cherish the spirit of mutual support and sentiment of care from others, as well as rethink where we can individually begin to act upon and contribute to forming a more collaborative and interconnected world. It took a long time for the majority of the world to realize that “the well-being of the group is endangered by indifferent individuals, and that community means originally simply a pooling of duties” (Jones 2020, para 9). As individuals, we are incapable of changing the

irreversible crisis; our duties lie simply in small everyday commoning actions.

3 Care and commoning

Commoning is the act of managing and sharing material and non-material resources, of creating things together, and of cooperating to meet shared goals among a group of people (Bollier and Helfrich 2015, p. 17; Džokić and Neelen 2015, p. 15; Bollier 2014, p. 15). The participants in commoning processes are people who prioritize care for one another. Volunteering, altruism, selflessness, peer-assistance, mutual support, and so on can all be considered synonyms of commoning (Bollier 2020, para 10). Prior to the pandemic, the logic of commoning can be found in cooperatively managed forests, social currencies, open-source software, citizen-managed urban spaces, community gardens, cooperative housings, and more. Commoning has been and is prevalent around the world as an essential survival strategy, especially in challenging times (Troncoso 2020; Baibarac and Petrescu 2017, p. 229). We can, moreover, note that when governmental or market systems fail in the crisis, more people are finding their ways to support others through commoning—for instance, in the USA, crowdsourcing masks and ventilators, and mobilizing food bank resources for the elderly living alone amid the COVID-19 pandemic. A critical emotional motivation behind these commoning activities is care.

Our perception of care often draws on the traditional imaginaries of the parents' domestic responsibility of taking care of children and the housework, or the healthcare workers' job of providing service in the medical sphere. On the one hand, the ongoing pandemic has brought these traditional imaginaries of care into the spotlight. Healthcare workers who haven't been paid enough appreciation are now deemed essential and thus regarded with greater value than before (Fig. 3). Households are forced to devote increasing time in domestic caregiving during physical distancing. On the other hand, the current crisis also triggers our rethink of alternative ways of caring beyond these formats (Morrow and Parker 2020; Thackara 2015; Petrescu and Trogal 2017). Here, I argue that care, manifesting in ways of verbal encouragement, physical gestures like waving and hugging, a sense of responsibility, commoning activities, etc., is a more inclusive concept than the traditional perception of care. It is a deep-rooted ability of human beings to resonate and connect with others. As Sennett claims, “Buried in all of us is the infantile experience of relating and connecting to the others who took care of us” (Sennett 2012, p. 9). The pandemic is a catalyst for awakening people's innate ability to care. We can all find ways to care for the self and others. The following examples aim at sharing my encounters of care-driven everyday commoning activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

³ WeChat is the most widely used multi-purpose messaging, social media and mobile payment app in China.

⁴ The information of Pittsburgh's first two COVID-19 cases is available on TribLIVE (<https://triblive.com/local/pittsburgh-alleggheny/alleggheny-county-to-announce-1st-coronavirus-cases/>).

⁵ Student population percentage is calculated based on data provided by the US Census Bureau (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/pittsburghcitypennsylvania>).



Fig. 3 “Heroes at work” slogans were displayed in the garden and on the building façade of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (UPMC) Shadyside Hospital in Pittsburgh, USA (May 5, 2020. Photography provided by the author)

They manifest that commoning is one of the most efficient ways of caregiving and is essential for not only our current survival but also a collective caring future.

4 Gardening as commoning

The top priority for individuals in quarantine is food. The food supply chain, including food production, processing, distribution, consumption, and disposal, needs to be operational for all of us to survive. However, the current food supply chain is severely compromised by COVID-19. According to the Washington Post (Telford and Kindy 2020), over 30 meat plants across the country owned by major American meat processing companies reported coronavirus outbreaks in their factories. The plants were forced to shut down because of growing numbers of confirmed cases and lack of PPE. Meanwhile, the transportation and distribution links on the supply chain also face unprecedented challenges. High demands for food delivery services put drivers and distributors at risk, as the virus can stay viable on cardboard boxes or plastic bags for a few days.⁶ Both the processing and distribution links on the food supply chain are weakened, which has turned tons of milk, vegetables, and meat into waste.

Recognizing the vulnerability of a long food supply chain, many individuals and nonprofit organizations, such as community gardens, community farms, and home gardeners, have made contributions to shorten the food supply chain. By securing their own and local food supplies, they reduce the reliance on processing and transportation links on the

chain (Fig. 4). In the Pittsburgh neighborhood of Garfield, the Garfield Community Farm, despite suffering from a large loss of financial income and voluntary labor during COVID-19, decided to donate all their sales to restaurants to the poor and healthcare workers in the neighborhood (Fig. 5). On the other side of the globe, the Knowledge and Innovation



Fig. 4 Food supply chain infographic (Source: Sandia Seed Company. <https://www.sandiaseed.com/blogs/news/shorten-your-food-chain-infographic>. Accessed by the author on May 5, 2020)

⁶ The information is acquired from the study of coronavirus survival time on surfaces by US National Institutes of Health (<https://www.nih.gov/news-events/nih-research-matters/study-suggests-new-coronavirus-may-remain-surfaces-days>).



Fig. 5 On March 25, the first donation was made by Garfield Farm since the stay-at-home order was placed in Pittsburgh (Source: Garfield Community Farm Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/GarfieldCommunityFarm>. Accessed by the author on April 25, 2020)

Fig. 6 The author's home planting project on the windowsill (June 26, 2020. Photography provided by the author)



Community (KIC) Garden in Shanghai initiated a SEEDING campaign to facilitate community trust-building amid the pandemic (Jian 2020). The campaign encouraged people to develop a self-sufficient lifestyle at home and to share their home-grown produce and seeds with neighbors in non-contact ways. Many creative participants designed, modeled, and built small exchange stations in their local communities. Conversations among neighbors were triggered upon the implementation of these stations. Several weeks ago, I joined the SEEDING group and started to share the progress of my own home seeding project. Quick growing herbs, like basil and oregano, are optimal for apartment dwellers like

me. My project is still gradually expanding with handmade hydroponics of onions, green onions, and garlic (Fig. 6).

Gardening as a commoning practice has both ecological and social benefits. Growing and eating locally reduces the energy consumed in processing and transportation and rebuilds the connection between people and nature, which is a way to care for the environment. At the same time, less consumption of processed food lowers the risk of exposure for workers in food processing and transportation industries. Gardening also brings people together, either by engaging people in the farm work or by allowing people to share their gardening knowledge with others. When sharing updates of my home gardening project in the SEEDING group, I

Fig. 7 Virtual alumni reunion (April 10, 2020. Screenshot provided by the author)



received detailed guidance and encouragement from other home gardeners. The communication, care, and enlightenment from others in this turbulent time have become an indispensable source of life motivation. That is to say, gardening as a commoning activity is also a way to care for our social well-being. It creates connections among people with diverse social and cultural backgrounds in the time of physical separation.

5 Online sharing as commoning

Currently, the majority of family networks, businesses, and schools depend on online video communication technology. Many online activities of working, teaching, learning, collaborating, and sharing have emerged. The heavy reliance on the online video conference platforms (e.g., Zoom, one of the most widely used Apps) raises the question of how technology might contribute to a more inclusive and equitable future for knowledge exchange and socialization.

Even when the world comes to a halt, intellectual flows and simulations do not. Professor Jeffrey Hou from the University of Washington, Seattle, initiated a platform named disCO-commons: Distance Collaboration Commons in

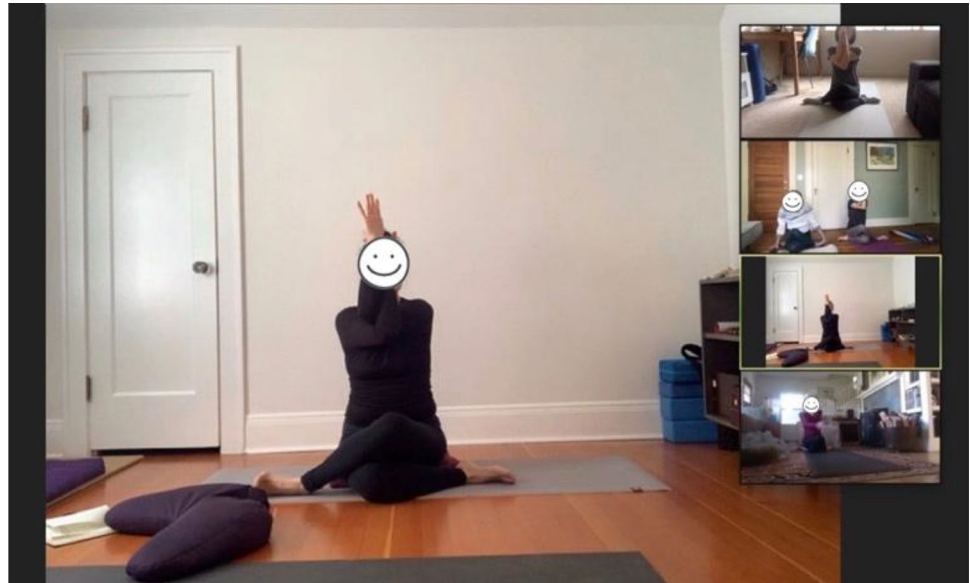
Support of Design for Social Change,⁷ on which scholars, students, educators, and practitioners in architecture, design, and planning could contribute to a collection of academic resources. Discussions and debates around design thinking are also continued with Design Baithak,⁸ a weekly Zoom event organized by Ahmed Ansari, an assistant professor at New York University. The discussants come from all parts of the country and across continents. Besides, many international conferences in academia have also switched to free online formats. Distance, time, and financial concerns are no longer barriers. In pre-pandemic times, academic collaborations at such scales would take months to plan and coordinate. COVID-19 and technology have miraculously pushed the progress of remote knowledge sharing and collaborations.

Concurrently, online social activities are taking place exponentially. Figure 7 shows a screenshot of our 2018 Carnegie Mellon Master of Urban Design alumni reunion, held on Zoom. Two years after graduation, friends from five different countries, across three continents, managed to meet virtually. Some of us are foreigners staying in the USA, some traveled home before the outbreak, and some are in their homeland but separated from the family. The

⁷ More information on the Distance Collaboration Commons in Support of Design for Social Change can be found on their Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/880415052397554>).

⁸ The time, guests and topics of Design Baithak can be found on the website (<https://sites.google.com/view/designbaithak/>).

Fig. 8 Remote yoga class (April 26, 2020. Screenshot provided by the author)



moment we saw each other, memories of us being physically together were recalled. Technology shortened the geographical distance between us. Figure 8 shows an online yoga class that I joined. The teacher just completed her yoga training in Portland, Oregon, and kindly provided free online classes. In such a time of uncertainty, spending some time each day doing yoga, meditation, or stretching is a good way to relieve the anxiety and despair that the mainstream social media is trying to render. When the body is relaxed, the mind becomes composed.

Despite the challenge of video bombs and internet interferences, online sharing has brought genuine excitement for the possibilities afforded by unique forms of information caregiving. With careful application and management of new technology, virtual communication has shown outstanding efficiency in (re)connecting people and promoting more accessible ways of education and socialization. Now that we have a firmer grasp on the planning, coordination, and execution of these online activities, we may start to imagine a network of virtual commoning.

6 Volunteering as commoning

It seems that our hands are tied because of the limitation of face-to-face contact with others. However, challenges always prelude opportunities. Coronavirus interrupts our normal socialization but offers unique volunteering opportunities that call for reciprocity among strangers. In April, the Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) were planning to distribute packs of personal protective supplies sent by the Consulate General of PR China in New York to CMU Chinese

students. I signed up to be the volunteer and was assigned to be the driver and distributor for our apartment building and several surrounding blocks (Fig. 9). Myself and 20 other volunteers collectively coordinated the transportation and distribution of over a thousand “Health Packs” with the assistance of CSSA staff, brainstorming and deciding the best timing, location, and method of distribution. The quick reaction and organization were all from the bottom-up. Two other volunteers and I took advantage of the fact that the foyer of my apartment building is separated from the lobby by a glass door. We placed the bags in the foyer and waited in the lobby (Fig. 10). Remaining mindful of social distancing rules, recipients came and lined up on the sidewalk outside the foyer. Each person who entered the foyer showed



Fig. 9 The author picking up two boxes of “Health Packs” from the post office (April 17, 2020. Photography provided by the author)



Fig. 10 A box packed with 24 “Health Packs” to distribute to Chinese students (April 17, 2020. Photography provided by the author)

us their student ID against the glass door to confirm the pickup. For residents in the building, a digital signup sheet was circulated for them to fill in their apartment numbers. Based on the signup sheet, we left the bags directly in front of their apartment doors. Volunteering in this distribution, I witnessed the nurture of a sense of belonging and a connection with home in the Chinese student community.

Recent anti-Chinese rhetoric in the USA and around the world has put many Chinese citizens overseas in trepidation. Incidents of racism are on the rise, as President Donald Trump “continues to stoke xenophobia by using a racist name for the virus and associating it with Asian Americans” (Zhou 2020, para 6). Now more than ever, Chinese students are questioning our identities and trying to find a sense of belonging, both physically and mentally. Physical isolations have also worsened the situation as the feelings of uncertainty and fear are internalized. Apart from providing material security, more importantly, “Health Packs” sent a signal of being cared for by others and were catalysts for commoning practices. In this case, each one of the volunteers and recipients was fulfilling his/her duty in connecting these worried and isolated individuals. Volunteering as a way of commoning demonstrates that, by carrying out small acts of care for others, we, regardless of ethnicity, religion, gender, or age, have the agency to overcome physical isolation and dismantle the difficulties posed by the crisis.

7 From a current me to a future we

As I put this paper together, the death toll of COVID-19 across the world has surpassed 650,000,⁹ casting an even larger shadow of uncertainty over the future. The harder the crisis hits us, the more we have to look for the positive changes that it facilitates. The above-mentioned experiences and examples are personal and quotidian. However, what is personal and present allows us to imagine what is collective and future.

The three commoning examples that I have discussed are all manifestations of how care has connected us, which forms the premise for systematic changes. Because of care for the Earth, home gardeners and community farmers will contribute to building more sustainable food production and consumption systems. Because of care for our minds, online sharing will connect into global knowledge systems. Because of care for ourselves and each other, volunteering activities and mutual support will continue building more supportive, inclusive, and equitable social systems. We need to recognize that the scaling from individual commoning activities to larger neighborhood, local, and regional collaborative systems may require much more efforts, education, and time. Nonetheless, we can still continue fulfilling our own duties as connecting dots in the systems, weaving the collective networks.

The COVID-19 pandemic can be the most effective moment in which we disrupt unhealthy norms and validate new possibilities. Care-based commoning can be one of these possibilities. The emphasis on giving rather than taking, on solidarity rather than individuality, on care rather than indifference is what I would like to reflect on when engaging in and discussing everyday commoning experiences. Taking everyday commoning practices as the starting point, it is necessary to start imagining a new collaborative future that is no longer constrained by geospatial boundaries and physical contacts. In fact, since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, care has been ubiquitous; we have all sensed it in the formats “of responsibility, of sharing, of reciprocity, of democratic organization, and of welfare” (Petrescu and Trogal 2017, p. 194). As we remain physically apart, let us see this as an opportunity to practice our muscles of commoning and build the strength to care for ourselves and others.

⁹ The COVID-19 death toll number is acquired from the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center (<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>).

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Chun Zheng is a Ph.D. student in the School of Design at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), USA. She holds a master's degree in Urban Design from the School of Architecture, CMU. Her doctoral research around the resilience of shared urban spaces is supported by the China Scholarship Council Doctoral Fellowship.