

New normal in virus-hit China: High-tech tracking and fever checks

March 4 2020



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Constant temperature checks, a "no mask, no service" ethos, and high-tech people-tracking: welcome to the new normal in China, where reminders of the country's national mobilisation against the coronavirus

lurk around every corner.

China appears to be coming to grips with the virus, which emerged late last year and has infected more than 80,000 people and killed nearly 3,000 in the country, but has slowed markedly in recent weeks.

But that has come at the cost of new preventive policies that have turned life upside down and are not likely to be swiftly abandoned.

The changes wrought by a contagion spread by humans and their travels is particularly felt when trying to move around within China, as AFP journalists discovered during recent trips from Shanghai up to the borders of the viral epicentre of Hubei province.

Reminders of the virus begin as soon as one leaves home, with masked cab drivers in white gloves quick to admonish any passengers who forget to wear masks.

Some drivers are going even further. In the city of Wenzhou, about four hours by train from Shanghai, AFP reporters jumped into car called via Didi Chuxing—China's answer to Uber—in which a clear plastic barrier was stretched over a makeshift frame to separate driver and passengers.

Didi Chuxing piloted the project in a handful of hard-hit cities and plans to spend 100 million yuan (\$14 million) to expand it.

'Sold-out' trains

Travellers booking tickets aboard the country's efficient high-speed rail network lately are surprised to find that, despite travel being depressed by virus fears, popular booking apps like Ctrip invariably list most trains as "sold out" or with only a handful of seats left.

But one such Wenzhou-bound train was full of empty seats. That is because only a fraction of tickets are being made available to prevent travellers sitting too close to each other.

"We are sorry for the confusion, but China's high-speed rail systems are contributing to the patriotic hygiene campaign. We hope you find this convenient," said a young female train attendant.

With the government calling for an all-out "People's War" against the virus, tech champions like Alibaba and Tencent have rolled out digital mobile-phone apps that use [big data](#) to track a traveller's movements going back as far as a month.

Users are rated as green, yellow or red based on whether they visited any high-risk zones.

Showing one's code to [security personnel](#) is now compulsory in a number of cities to exit train stations, or use public transport.

In Wenzhou, cab drivers, hotels, and virtually any business will ask to see the colour code before letting someone pass.

The system has fuelled new grumbling on China's internet over previous accusations that the big tech firms were doing the Communist Party's surveillance work.

But most complaints seem to involve "green" ratings inexplicably turning "red", which can result in mandatory 14-day home quarantine.

The pervasive measures attest to the one-party state's ability to marshal huge resources—financial, material, and human—for mass campaigns couched in 1950s Communist rhetoric.

Red banners hang throughout now largely shut-down cities like Wenzhou, lauding the "War of Resistance Against Pneumonia", and declaring that "Everyone Must Contribute to the Patriotic Hygiene Campaign."

Elbow bump

Hotel check-ins have become mini health inspections by masked staff who measure guests' temperatures by aiming hand-held sensors at foreheads and forearms and record the result.

"Have you experienced any fever, felt unwell or visited Hubei recently?" a Wenzhou front-desk clerk asked.

The temperature obsession can be taken to absurd lengths, with some hotels re-measuring guests who had stepped out only minutes earlier.

On one day, an AFP reporter moving around Wenzhou had his temperature taken a dozen times, including by cab drivers, restaurant owners, convenience-store clerks, hotel security, front-desk staff and a final late-night knock on the door by a female hotel employee.

"Do not walk forward! Be still please," she snapped, before a light beep announced the result.

"It's normal. Enjoy your evening."

Beijing is pushing a long-term fight and [local governments](#) will no doubt be fearful of letting up even slightly anytime soon and being blamed for a new outbreak.

That means even some of society's most time-honoured practices are on hold.

When an AFP reporter presented a [business card](#) to a government liaison officer in Wenzhou, she recoiled and asked that it be placed on a table.

And when it came time to shake another official's hand, the man refused, laughing nervously.

"For safety, we don't really shake hands at the current time," he said, instead sticking forward the crook of his arm for an "elbow bump."

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Citation: New normal in virus-hit China: High-tech tracking and fever checks (2020, March 4)
retrieved 27 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-03-virus-hit-china-high-tech-tracking-fever.html>

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