

China fully reopens borders amid devastating COVID-19 surge

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11 January 2023

On Sunday, China fully reopened its borders to international travel after three years of border restrictions that formed a key component of the Zero-COVID policy. Going forward, travelers will no longer undergo quarantine, although a negative COVID-19 test within 48 hours of one's flight will still be enforced.

The ditching of these final restrictions takes place two weeks before the Lunar New Year holiday begins on January 21, in what is historically the largest annual human migration. Approximately 2.1 billion domestic journeys are expected to take place during the 40-day travel season, according to Chinese government estimates. It is widely known that this mass travel will deepen the dire surge of COVID-19 infections and deaths across China.

Many of the press reports on the resumption of travel to China have a jubilant tone, thrilled to see the lifting of the country's final public health constraints. They universally claim that Zero-COVID was sheer folly that only harmed China's economic standing and its population.

Tickets to vacation destinations like Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia are selling fast. Ctrip, a Chinese travel booking platform, reported that visas for Singapore are up 30-fold from December 27. Hotel reservations at resorts in Malaysia and Thailand by Chinese vacationers have more than doubled. Other major destinations include Australia and Japan.

Japanese financial firm Nomura reported, "The Tourism Authority of Thailand recently raised its full-year target to 25 million inbound tourist arrivals [five million passengers from China], driven by the earlier than expected reopening after Beijing's recent border rules relaxation."

Considering these economic windfalls for Thailand's tourist industry, on Monday the health ministry revoked the rule requiring foreign travelers to carry proof of COVID-19 vaccination after protests from business

leaders. Last year, Thailand, Southeast Asia's second largest economy, had only 11.5 million foreign visitors. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, that figure stood at 40 million, with a quarter of those from China.

Bloomberg News recently observed, "[The] influx of travelers heading into the country is unlikely to be matched by a surge in demand for overseas trips. The flow of Chinese tourists, previously a \$280 billion spending force in global holiday hotspots from Paris to Tokyo, will take months if not years to recover to its pre-pandemic level."

Not one report mentions the calamity that befell Hong Kong last February when Omicron decimated the elderly and, for a few weeks, produced one of the highest death tolls among any country throughout the pandemic. Nor do they raise the important fact that the maintenance of Zero-COVID in Shanghai last March eliminated Omicron and kept deaths to around 500. Such public health successes are meaningless in terms of profit margins and quarterly earning figures that financial institutions pore over.

According to health officials in China, many of the country's most populous regions are now passing or have passed through the peaks of COVID-19 infections. Kan Quancheng, director of the provincial health commission, noted that Henan Province in central China, home to 100 million residents, had an infection rate of 89 percent. Similar estimates have been provided by health officials for Guangdong, Jiangsu and the capital city of Beijing.

UK-based health data firm Airfinity has estimated that cumulative deaths across China due to COVID-19 from December 1 to the end of the year had likely reached 100,000, with the death toll reaching a peak of 9,000 per day. They also modeled that a peak in daily new infections would reach 3.7 million cases per day on January 13. Given the lag in deaths, this would translate to 25,000 fatalities per day by January 23, with a cumulative death toll of around 584,000 by the end of this

month. Absurdly, Chinese official figures place COVID-19 deaths at fewer than 40 since December 7.

With the arrival of the Lunar New Year holidays, many epidemiologists have warned of a second major peak in infections and deaths as the pandemic in China finds its way into poorly resourced rural regions of the country. Testing has essentially stopped and the elderly infected wait at home, with very few able to procure oxygen tanks for breathing support.

Given the complete obscurity in statistical terms on the state of the health crisis, the *Washington Post* published a report on Monday on the use of satellite imagery that show crowds gathering at crematoriums and newly expanded parking lots to accommodate mourners.

In collaboration with imagery captured by Maxar Technologies, the *Post* wrote that they have seen a significant uptick in “activity at funeral homes across six different cities, from Beijing in the north to Nanjing in the east, to Chengdu and Kunming in the southwest.”

A receptionist at the Jiangnan Funeral Home in Chongqing, speaking under conditions of anonymity, told the *Post*, “I have worked here for six years, and it has never been this busy. The phone has basically not stopped ringing.” She added that since the Christmas holidays, the line of cars has continued, the freezers have been packed full and the incinerators have operated non-stop. Many funeral homes have stopped accepting the deceased except to perform only the briefest of services and are offering only storage or cremation.

In a particularly cynical and hypocritical photo report on the state of the pandemic in Shanghai published in the *New York Times* yesterday, they wrote that around 70 percent of the city’s 26 million people have recently been infected, health systems remain inundated with older people and funeral homes are at capacity.

In opening their report, the *Times* wrote, “Infections soared across China late last year, and the government abruptly lifted its strict, but ultimately futile, COVID restrictions in early December. Shanghai endured one of China’s most grueling lockdowns last spring, with residents confined to their homes for more than two months.”

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) must be held accountable for the public health travesty that has befallen their population. But a significant share of the criminal responsibility also falls on the shoulders of the bourgeois press and the *Times* in particular, which repeatedly demanded that China abandon Zero-COVID, which they portrayed as cruel and inhuman, and lift all obstacles to

the production of profits.

During the two-month lockdown in Shanghai, which successfully suppressed the largest outbreak until then, the *Times* brayed for the lifting of Zero-COVID, knowing full well the catastrophe that would unfold, which they are now presenting as inevitable.

The truth is that Zero-COVID was a highly effective policy based on the deployment of all available public health measures, which kept fatalities in China to an enviable low level after the initial wave of infections and deaths in the first few months of 2020.

Furthermore, for the vast majority of the pandemic, the entire Chinese population was mobile and free to interact in public due to the suppression of viral transmission. Indeed, when opened its doors once more at the end of May in 2022, having conquered Omicron, this was a triumph of public health.

The CCP lifted Zero-COVID under economic pressures from global finance capital, which would not tolerate further restrictions placed on them by public health inconveniences. Their threats of moving production out of China were the decisive factor in the CCP abandoning Zero COVID.

Given the emergence of the XBB.1.5 “Kraken” sublineage of the Omicron subvariant, alongside the mass infection of the Chinese population, viral evolution will continue unhindered, with the possibility that an even more concerning and horrific pathogen could evolve at any time.

Rather than taking a proper accounting of the dangers posed by these evolutionary leaps made by SARS-CoV-2, the corporate media and capitalist politicians throughout the world instead celebrate these reckless policies.



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