

Why China's Deadly Viral Outbreak Couldn't Have Come at a Worse Time

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The new respiratory virus sweeping China is hard to spot, potentially deadly and couldn't have broken out at a worse time.

This week marks the peak of the [biggest human migration](#) in the world, as hundreds of millions of Chinese travel for Lunar New Year festivities. To reunite with family, they'll spend long hours on cramped buses, overnight trains and airtight planes, sharing recirculated air -- and germs -- with hundreds of fellow travelers.

"The Spring Festival travel period is long and trains can be crowded. Some people are already sick and on the road so there might not be a very effective way to control them," said Zhong Nanshan, a respiratory disease expert who led the research into a treatment for SARS, a similar viral outbreak that swept China in 2003.

It's hard to imagine a bigger challenge for public health workers in China and, as [cases spread](#), around the world. In 2019, Chinese travelers made nearly 3 billion trips during the 40-day spring travel period, roughly comparable to 25 consecutive Thanksgiving travel nightmares.

Threat Widens

Coronavirus has spread from China to at least seven other locations

Sources: National and municipal health authorities

To try to contain the contagion, airports, train stations and long-haul bus depots in China, as well as airports around the world, have installed temperature monitoring for travelers, though experts acknowledge that fever is only one symptom of the pneumonia-like virus.



A staff member screens arriving passengers with thermal scanners at Hankou railway station in Wuhan.

Photographer: -/AFP via Getty Images

China took dramatic measures Thursday to stop the spread of the virus by halting

travel from Wuhan, the city of 11 million at the center of the outbreak. Outbound flights and rail service from the city have been suspended, as well as travel by bus, subway and ferry. Public gatherings through the holiday period have been forbidden.

Across the nation, office buildings, shopping malls and casinos starting screening individuals for a fever before allowing them to enter.

Where the Mystery Illness Started

The first novel coronavirus case was reported in central China

Source: World Health Organization

Fears of contagion -- and

[memories of SARS](#)

, which claimed 800 lives before it was contained -- have colored the joyful holiday with tension and paranoia. "We want to go home, but we don't dare," said Huang Ceyu, who works at an information technology company in Beijing. He and his wife had already canceled their plans to take an overnight train to Wuhan, where his parents live, before the travel ban.

"As an ordinary family, we don't know how to prevent this infection," he said. "There's no way for people to know if they have the virus or not. Even medical staff are infected. We worry that if my parents get infected, we won't know how to treat them."

Huang returned their train tickets. The

[China State Railway Group](#)

has agreed to refund tickets to or from Wuhan. The government is encouraging airlines to do the same;

[Cathay Pacific](#)

and several domestic airlines have agreed to

[waive charges](#)

for passengers who have to reschedule or cancel travel there.

More on the Outbreak

- [Masks and Hand Sanitizer Sell Out as Virus Grips China](#)
- [New Virus Spreads to U.S., Sparking Rush to Contain](#)
- [HSBC, Tencent Among Firms Curbing China Travel](#)
- [As Coronavirus Spreads, Economists Run the Numbers](#)
- [Opinion: How We Should Prepare for the Next Pandemic](#)

Right now, government officials acknowledge that it's far too early to say how bad the outbreak will be or how fast it will spread. Almost everyone, though, is thinking about the SARS epidemic. The government came under fire for downplaying the severity of the virus and letting it spread, unchecked, for far too long.



Travelers wear protective masks while waiting for transport at Hongqiao railway station in Shanghai on Jan. 22.

Photographer: Qilai Shen/Bloomberg

Beyond the sick, SARS affected almost every facet of Chinese life. Schools closed and students were sent home. People stopped traveling, going out to eat and shopping -- public places became health risks. At the height of the outbreak, China's [quarterly growth](#) dropped by 2 percentage points, dragged down by transportation and hotels and catering. Retail sales growth sank to a historic low.

As of now, the current outbreak seems less lethal than SARS. Whether the effects are the same depends on how quickly it spreads and how long it lasts.

"If we use SARS as a reference, if the new pneumonia lasts a long time, it could lead to a drop in tourism," said Tommy Xie, an economist at [Oversea-Chinese Banking Corp.](#) "It will also affect the movie box office, restaurants and other consumption. The first quarter may be the hardest hit."

Toll of Asia's Viruses

The most deadly viruses emerged from human contact with live animals

Sources: World Health Organization, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

It's too early to say how serious the outbreak will be, but it's clear that anything that blunts consumption and travel will sting. Travel to and from Wuhan will take a hit, but whether that spreads depends on how bad the virus situation gets, said Zeng Fanzhe, a Beijing-based transport analyst at

[Tianfeng Securities](#)

The Lunar New Year is also one of China's most important movie-going seasons -- last year, the seven-day stretch accounted for almost 10% of annual ticket sales. Now, aware that moviegoers might be wary of confined spaces, some online ticketing platforms have promised unconditional refunds for those who have bought movie tickets in Wuhan.



A passenger passes a notice offering guidance to travelers from Wuhan at a quarantine station at Narita Airport in Japan.

Photographer: Kiyoshi Ota/Bloomberg

Still, some travelers can't be persuaded to stay home. Wuhan native Bu Shi made his plans for an 11-day road trip down the California coast way back in September, and on Jan. 21, he went to the airport. The terminal seemed quiet, and the airline employees who checked him in wore surgical masks. Before he could board his China Southern flight to San Francisco, he had to pass through a temperature checkpoint. There was another check for fever before boarding.

"I was a bit worried that I might be blocked from entering the States," he said. "My friend also joked that I could be repatriated the moment I land in America."

When his flight landed safely in San Francisco, he got a bright yellow card from the Centers for Disease Control alerting passengers to the outbreak. "If you have been in Wuhan within the past 2 weeks and develop a fever, cough or have difficulty breathing, seek medical care right away," it read.

Huang Ceyu, the IT worker who canceled his trip home, considered briefly bringing his parents from Wuhan to celebrate with them in the capital. In the end, he decided it wasn't worth the risk.

"We weren't sure if they'd carry the virus to Beijing," he said. He bought them masks, and said their lives haven't actually been disrupted that much. "Sometimes the weather is the finest at the eye of the typhoon."

— *With assistance by Dong Lyu, Miao Han, Allen K Wan, Shirley Zhao, and James Mayger*

(Updates with Wuhan travel ban in sixth paragraph)