

China travel restrictions in COVID-19 – what you need to know

7 May 2020

China has placed stringent travel and quarantine restrictions on people entering the country and moving from one part of the country to another as part of the effort to contain the COVID-19 outbreak. Corporations with operations and staff in China – or wanting to get back into the country to resume their roles – need to pay close attention to official announcements to make sure they are not caught out in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

Entry and visa restrictions

All foreign nationals – even those with valid visas issued prior to 28 March 2020, residence permits, or Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) cards – are presently barred from entering China.¹ The only exceptions to this are those with visas issued on or after 28 March 2020 and those with diplomatic, service, courtesy, or 'C visas'.²

There is also an exemption for foreign nationals coming to China for necessary economic, trade, scientific, or technological activities, and those arriving for emergency humanitarian needs. They may apply for visas at Chinese embassies, consulates, and visa application centers such as [those in Hong Kong](#).

There are additional entry restrictions that apply in Sanya and Haikou, where passengers travelling on China ID cards or People's Republic of China passports that show Hubei province as the place of issue, or where passengers have visited Hubei province in the previous 14 days, will be denied entry.

The visa restrictions have caused issues for many multinationals since some work and residence permits are expiring while the employee is out of the country and so unable to reapply for an extension.

The limitation on numbers is also reflected in the much reduced airline flight schedule into China. Since 29 March 2020 foreign airlines have limited to operating a single flight per week on

¹ 'C' visas are issued to international train attendants, airline crew, crew members of ships on international voyages, and accompanying family members as well as drivers transporting crew members into China.

² Announcement on temporarily suspending entry of foreigners holding valid Chinese visa and residence permit, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, National Immigration Administration, 26 March 2020.

a single route.³ Passengers are no longer permitted to transit through Beijing Capital International Airport and Xiamen airport.

Chinese nationals who have purchased tickets for one of these flights need to provide certain personal, travel, and health information before boarding in advance by using the international version of the Epidemic Health Code, issued by WeChat Mini. This is available by searching for "防疫健康码国际版" or by scanning the QR code at the end of this article. This must be done every day starting two weeks before the date of travel until the date of travel itself.

Quarantine restrictions

All passengers, regardless of their nationality, are subject to the latest quarantine policies.

Travelers entering China who are a confirmed or suspected case, have had personal contact with a confirmed or suspected case, or who exhibit fever or other symptoms, are immediately sent to designated medical facilities for supervised monitoring for at least 14 days. Such facilities are usually converted hotels located far from centers of population. If abnormal symptoms appear during this time, they are also referred onwards for further investigation and treatment.⁴

Travelers falling outside these categories are immediately isolated at their first port of entry and are required to undergo 14 days' supervised quarantine. This period can be shortened if they opt to undergo testing at their own expense on the third and fifth day of their quarantine. If these tests return negative, they can choose to return home after seven days to complete the rest of their quarantine.

Those who are determined by medical practitioners to be carriers of the virus, but who are not showing any symptoms, also receive 14 days of closely supervised monitoring in a designated medical facility. They can be discharged if they submit two negative tests, separated by a 24-hour period.

Travel within China

China has taken steps to relax curbs on travel within the country itself in the lead up to the National People's Congress which will meet on 22 May 2020. Beijing has said that travelers to Beijing from areas classified as low-risk will no longer be subject to a 14-day quarantine restriction. Others, from high risk areas such as Wuhan, will still be placed under quarantine.

It is thought that 90 million domestic trips may have taken place across the whole of the five-day annual May holiday, with the Chinese government now having reopened almost 8,500 tourist attractions, including national parks and parts of the Great Wall of China.

Quarantine measures and a person's right to travel are enforced by means of color coded QR codes which display as either green, yellow, or red dependent on the person's health status, travel history, and relationships with carriers of the virus. Only those in possession of a green code are allowed to enter a city. Those with yellow codes have to quarantine themselves at home whilst those with red codes must undergo supervised quarantine at designated medical facilities.

The codes, which refresh at midnight each day, had previously been issued by private app providers such as WeChat and Alipay. With more than 100 in use, there had been issues over compatibility, with some regions refusing to recognize codes issued by other provinces, and

³ Notice on continued reduction of international passenger traffic during epidemic prevention and control, Civil Aviation Administration of China, 26 March, Civil Aviation [2020] No.12.

⁴ Classification and isolation of immigrants for health reasons, Press Conference of the Joint Defense and Joint Control Mechanism of the State Council, 13 April 2020.

people from high-risk provinces, who had been issued with a green color code, still put under mandatory quarantine in other cities.

National authorities have announced a new set of national standards that will assist provinces to recognize each other's health codes and so make internal travel easier.

Employer obligations

Employers are obliged to pay employee remuneration for employees, and close contacts of those infected for the period of their quarantine or medical observation. They are encouraged not to implement layoffs as far as possible, even if the epidemic causes difficulties in productions and operations. This is because the Chinese labor law system is generally pro-employee and does not support termination without just cause. Unilateral termination usually has to be supported by evidence of misconduct in accordance with Articles 40 and 41 of the Labor Contract Law.⁵ This creates a delicate situation that requires employers to carefully consider before implementing mass redundancies or even salary reductions.

The official guidance says that employers may try to stabilize work positions through consultations with employees, such as reducing salaries, staff rotation, and rest breaks.⁶ Employers are encouraged to negotiate with unions or employee representatives should they need to postpone the payment of wages.

Data privacy

There is strict guidance about the amount and types of personal information that may be collected from employees as they return to work.⁷

Personal data collected for epidemic prevention and control must not be used for other purposes. Organizations and individuals must not disclose personal information such as name, age, ID card number, telephone number, home address etc., without the consent of the person concerned, except for the purposes of epidemic prevention and control.

Any organization holding personal data is responsible for the security and protection of the data and must adopt strict management and technical measures to prevent it from being stolen or disclosed.

Any organization or individual who discovers any illegal behavior in terms of collecting, using, or disclosing personal data is encouraged to report it to the network information department.

QR code for the Wechat mini program of the international version of the Epidemic Health Code, "防疫健康码国际版"

⁵ Notice on the Proper Handling of Labor Relations During the Prevention and Control of Pneumonia Outbreaks Caused by COVID, Office of Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, 24 January 2020.

⁶ Opinions on Stabilizing Labor Relations During the Prevention and Control of COVID-19 and Supporting Enterprises to Resume Work and Production, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and the China Federation of Trade Unions, 7 February 2020.

⁷ Notice on the Protection of Personal Information and the Use of Big Data to Support the Joint Prevention and Control Work, Office of the Central Cybersecurity and Informatization Committee, 4 February 2020.



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