

A Tale of Two Cities

With legendary coughs and voices deep cracked like Tom Waits vibrating into the chair, people began testing positive the week the restrictions lifted December 13 2022. A hell of a sickness came to every home and household. At the bare minimum a week fighting high fever and vivid nightmares, joint pain, stomach problems. Medication was already in short supply, but that first week nothing of note left on the pharmacy shelves could help anyone.

The mind goes adrift with high fever. By the second week, everyone speaks of having contact with it. Head cold, maddening degenerative cough, running nose, blocked ears, stupid sense of things, covid brain, throat on fire, amplified sounds. Meat smells of wet dog and is off the menu for now. the kettle boils and sounds like a roaring subway train.

Shenzhen, a city of 22 million people in southern China, known for tech startups and warm weather, is never ever this quiet. A few kilometers from downtown Hong Kong, this city is not sleeping though.

Like a ghost ship found floating in still waters, the whole city fell deathly quiet once restrictions were lifted. At first people were too afraid to step outside then covid spread like water seeping through the floorboards, contaminating every available inch and people caught it, and carried it home, gave it to everyone there, without knowing it. Now people are too sick to move from home, except to stretch their legs and catch some sun.

Foreign newspapers write that millions of people a day have been affected. Here, news reports offer nothing in the way of hope. Nothing for people to cling to. Social media posts reveal grainy photos of hospital beds outdoors, and mile long queues for crematoriums to bury elderly and sick relatives. Before the posts are removed from social media by authorities that is.

Having endured nearly three years of restrictions, it's quite literally unbelievable.

Outside the window these days coughing sounds echo about the place. Less than a month ago, if you were found to have had a fever let alone covid, you would be taken against your will to centralized quarantine. Now, everyone is sick and there is no visible presence of the authorities anywhere. People are rightly furious but at least they are free they say.

Gone the irritating sounds of children enjoying themselves by the swings. Instead, old folks hook over mobile phones, catching sun rays in the hope of miraculous improvements, coughing incessantly. It is a recognizable cough, like an almighty good time has just been had, a session that might well have been had in Christmases past. At Starbucks, small groups laze in the sun, and look like they are in search of the cure the morning after. But nearby, there is no such frivolity.

In the Shanghai Hospital emergency room, every corner is filled, one doctor for every 20 people, every one already sick and hoarse. Hospitals know the peak has not yet been reached. As medical supplies dwindle demand continues to climb. Everyone feels it. At the end of their shift, doctors face the whole family fighting sickness at home. Patients are struggling, waiting, giving up. The night shift doctor balances the patient charts from waist to chin in handover. Anxious families, exhausted doctors, already limited supply of nurses. In a few square meters of hospital space, a dozen people crammed. A 99-year old mother with her two daughters in their 70s. In a crowded noisy waiting hall, three old men huddle in a corner. A 90-year old man lies close to the ground, surrounded by a towering dense line of people

Report from China Radio Show 3 Minutes

queueing for medicine. One radiology depart reviews 900 people in 24 hours, the radiology nurse numb from preparing reports. A doctor's social media post circulates on January 2, startling those lucky enough not to have had to visit the ER. A family searches for a quiet bed in the hospital, some dignified space for an elderly member's last moments. The doctor says those facing death do so. Some struggle. Some wait. Some just give up. The floor inside the ER has not been seen for weeks. Long has it been obscured by crowds on stretchers, a black gray sky of sickness.

On New Year's Eve, at that Shanghai Hospital 1987 people are brought to the ER by 175 ambulances and 241 people are currently under critical observation.

This battle has been going on for over two weeks. Infected doctors have to return to work. We know the peak is coming the doctor says but every day the numbers are refreshed and the peak moves further away. Every day the doctor must deal with polite inquiries, queries, rants, complaints and threats. Family come to the hospital confused and insecure and anxious and panicked and angry and even hostile. The doctor writes this devastation of normal life is as devastating as war. The doctor concludes.

"There is so much helplessness and despair every day. These mortals, who live in every corner of the city, see the hospital as a last resort, because their greatest wish is to live. The ER is described as a "man-eating cave."

Outside the roads are still quiet and the pavements bare. No fireworks bring in the New Year.