

Who Says It's Not Safe to Travel to China?

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The coronavirus outbreak seems defined by two opposing forces: the astonishing efficiency with which the travel industry connects the world and a political moment dominated by xenophobic rhetoric and the building of walls.

Respiratory infections, however, know no borders. The virus has spread regardless of extreme measures taken by governments around the world, which include the cancellation of flights, the shutting down of borders and the issuance of travel advisories usually reserved for conflict zones.

Time and time again, destinations perceived as “Western” benefit from a kind of cultural familiarity and presumption of safety that so-called foreign or exotic places do not. When we, as travelers, decide what places are too unsafe to travel, those decisions are determined not just by actual conditions on the ground but also by perceptions shaped by the media, the travel industry and the foreign offices of governments. Whether travelers realize it or not, that is subtly informed by the same power structures that underlie much unfairness in the world.

Valid arguments may exist for shutting down the world to travelers originating in China — and shutting down China to the world — as a reasonable public health response. But the World Health Organization explicitly did not advise that any restriction of trade or travel was

necessary when it declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern last week, and it still doesn't. Instead, it has called for exit screening in international airports and domestic hubs in China.

The United States State Department is denying entry to foreign nationals who have recently been to China, is screening American citizens who arrive home from China as well as asking them to self-quarantine for 14 days. It has told American citizens not to visit the country at all. Major airlines including British Airways, Lufthansa and all three major American carriers have halted all flights to China, while the cruise line Royal Caribbean is denying boarding to any person who has traveled to, from or through China or Hong Kong in the past 15 days. Travel companies such as those airlines are motivated both by pressure from employees and by the falling demand for flights. Flying empty planes to and from China is, after all, not profitable.

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But what has motivated the response from governments? It doesn't appear to be evidence. Measures like screening at airports, quarantining cruise ships or flights with confirmed cases and isolating communities at the center of an outbreak can be effective, said Erin Sorrell, an assistant research professor at Georgetown University who studies emerging infectious diseases. However, she and other experts say the available evidence suggests that total border shutdowns are not an effective means of containment of respiratory viruses. Resources are better used, she argued, treating sick patients and developing vaccines and other countermeasures.

Sadly, one doesn't have to look far for evidence of these top-down decisions morphing into outright racism within the general population, a trend that has a long history in the narrative of outbreaks such as this one.

Coronavirus shares something in common with other kinds of civil disruption, natural disasters or emergencies that affect localized travel industries: Its destructive power lies not in the actual risk but in the perception of that risk. Numerous experts have said that the majority of people who contract coronavirus will experience it as a respiratory infection they will fully recover from. But the extreme reactions — the canceling of flights, closing of borders and level-four travel warnings — seem more appropriate for something much worse.

Therein lies a familiar unfairness. When it comes to travel, the perception of risk is rarely meted out objectively. Consider the level-two travel warning imposed by the State Department last month in the wake of the continuing Australian wildfires. It advised travelers to consider postponing their trips because of extremely poor air quality and the threat of evacuation in the monthslong fires. Just a few days later, it was reduced to level one, reportedly in response to the direct appeal of Prime Minister Scott Morrison to the Trump

administration. Similarly, in the 2017-18 flu season, when the United States had a particularly bad outbreak, the respiratory virus resulted in an estimated 61,000 deaths and 45 million symptomatic cases — but no travel warnings.

Coronavirus is different from other tourism disruptions in a significant way: The potential loss of tourism revenue and gross domestic product will hurt not only China but also other countries. In the decade and a half since the SARS crisis, Chinese travelers have become the most powerful source market in the world, surpassing all other nations in its volume of outbound travelers in 2012. In 2017, Chinese citizens took more than 143 million trips abroad; in 2029, Skift Research predicts that figure will be 286 million. Luxury retailers all over the world rely on Chinese travelers for their consistent trip spending, and destinations develop and target sophisticated marketing strategies to cater to them.

The world often thinks of travel and tourism as being a collection of different industries, operating separately yet alongside one another. But in reality, it's a web of economically interconnected parts. While it is subject to the political environment it operates in, it also has a chance to stand up to the political norms of the day, especially when policy goes against best practices recommended by international agencies.

With the rhetoric surrounding coronavirus, however, it appears the astonishing growth of the Chinese travel market in the past 15 years did little to rid the industry of the impulse to treat Chinese travelers as “others” in the face of doubt and uncertainty. Canceling flights, cruises and locking down borders when it's not advised by international agencies will be not only an act of economic self-harm but also a wasted opportunity to learn from the mistakes of the past.

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