



Life in lockdown: Diary of a Pakistani student in Beijing

By Azmat Khan

I have been living in Beijing since 2018 as a student, majoring in Inter-Cultural Communication. On December 21, 2019, the news of a deadly virus engulfing Wuhan left everyone shaken. By then, universities were closing for winter vacations and we were planning our trips to different parts of China. Beijing has a population of [21 million people](#), majority job-migrants from other provinces or rural areas. The biggest Chinese cultural event “Spring Festival” was taking place on January 24, 2020 and people had started setting-off for their hometowns.

The corona epidemic shattered our plans. My friends immediately booked flights to their home-countries but I decided to stay in Beijing. The reasons were many; I lacked financial resources, had to work on my research thesis as internet facility is not available in my village in the ex-FATA, and only few months were left for my graduation. Also I believed China was a developed country and would successfully defeat the virus.

But Beijing, a highly busy city, went emptied within hours. The streets, bustling with life, stood deserted. Perhaps Beijing's hundreds of factories and [six million cars](#) also stopped emitting smoke because for the first time, I could see the hills around the city from our dormitory's 10th floor. These are the mountains upon which some portions of the Great Wall rest.

Food prices soared 3-5 times. Masks and sanitizers disappeared from the markets as well as from the e-shopping service Taobao. Our university enacted strict rules. Our travel data was immediately collected. Now we could only leave the campus for two hours every week, wearing a special pass, to bring food and other items. Daily, the staff twice checks our body temperature. Entering markets, restaurants or printing café, a person will greet you with a thermal gun. While undergoing the 'greetings', we fear too much because even if we have seasonal fever, they will pick up and land in a hospital. There, even if we don't have corona, we will catch it.

One day, walking to the market, I was 'greeted' 10 times at suddenly mushroomed check-posts. I told myself these obnoxious checkpoints even traveled behind me to China from FATA. The only difference is: In FATA, the Pak-Army's cops check our "patriotic temperature". Our dormitory staff efficiently dose disinfectory spray five times a day. We are not sure whether it is effective, as we yet don't know whether corona is an airborne disease or not.

Meanwhile, besides the virus, disinformation also raged across the world. Both Western and Pakistani society's response was more hubristic and racist. Pakistanis boasted their divine hygiene while the West bragged its superior health system. The virus exposed both.

To externalize peoples' attention and anger from domestic reasons of the epidemic such as earlier repression of information about corona by a doctor and the unlawful and extremely dangerous wild animal trade in China, the Chinese state and media picked up on Western media's 'sinophobia'. Specifically, their target was a cartoon published in a Danish newspaper in which the five stars on China's flag were replaced with coronavirus. While racist association of the virus with China is an extremely reprehensible act, but due to China's own worse record of treating its minorities (Uighurs, Tibetans,) and brutal suppression of Hongkongers, the world did not heed China's protests. Also cartoon is a trivial issues but the state used it to stave off a vigorous internal debate about the weaknesses of China Communist Party, its accountability and transparency.

But besides politics, the virus and the consequent social isolation also affected our personal lives. We suddenly developed strange new habits. Social distancing threatened our entire sense – and training – of proximity. No handshakes, just waving

from a distance, opening doors with feet, pressing the buttons of elevator with elbow, and repeatedly washing hands and mouths like OCD maniacs.

Pakistan's embassy in Beijing is just a few minutes' drive from my dorm. However it didn't ask about our condition. Knowing the hard times China was passing through, we requested our friends in Pakistan to donate us masks so that we may be of some help to Chinese people. They bought 500 masks, came to Chinese embassy in Islamabad and asked them if they could deliver, as regular flights had by then halted. But the embassy excused.

After a month, however our university started regularly providing us masks. Some departments of our university even sent food and other items to their students. My department did not.

China finally curbed inland virus spread but foreigners are bringing it back. So our university further fastened restriction on us. Now we are in complete quarantine since March 10. No more we can step out of the campus. A truck brings vegetables every week and we buy through the fence-wall of our university. The school authorities daily inundate us with rules/instructions of what not to do. Those students who are in their home countries are asked not to come to China.

We have to pass this boring and dangerous time. I published a paper, read dozens of books and papers and cooked/burned many delicious foods. My friends are glued to Netflix. When order, or “meaning” suddenly disappears from daily routine, one feels disoriented. Our old machine has yet not absorbed the new software.

I hope the entire world, so steeped in wars, populist tribalism and deadening consumerism, will finally come together against the common enemy, and with the help of Science, will overcome the pandemic.

Staring the serene moon from the window on a silent night over the eerily silent city of Beijing at 4 AM, I wonder whether the residents of big cities, in Pakistan and elsewhere, will now feel how the citizens of Pakistan’s ex-FATA, Kashmir, Ghaza and other precarious dark places live in lockdowns for many years? Also whether the voters will realize what is more essential: hospitals or tanks and missiles?

