

'Very homesick' Wuhan residents trickle back to stricken city

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

The young couple stepped from a Chinese bullet train onto the deserted platform of Wuhan Station and into the epicentre of the coronavirus epidemic, home at last after more than 40 days in limbo.

Wuhan has been largely cut off from the outside world since January 23, when China's government imposed an unprecedented lockdown of central Hubei province that affected tens of millions of people.

But with the spread of the virus slowing in China while gaining pace elsewhere, some Hubei residents trapped outside the province by the containment measures are slowly trickling back to their sequestered families, believing that home is now as safe as anywhere.

"Some people coming (to China) from overseas could create a new eruption of the epidemic, so being in Wuhan could now be the safest choice," said one half of the Wuhan couple, a 30-year-old woman surnamed Zhao.

She and her husband, whose family name is Gao, declined to give their full names, fearing potential repercussions from speaking to foreign media.

When the city was placed under quarantine, they were visiting other relatives in the distant northeast city of Changchun, where they fretted for family in Wuhan and endured occasionally frosty treatment due to their Wuhan origins.

Attempts to get home were repeatedly foiled by virus-induced transportation curbs.

"We tried three times but our train tickets were always cancelled," said Zhao, a project manager for a philanthropic foundation.

"We had no way to get back."

One-way trip

Despite continuing restrictions on entering and leaving Hubei, high-speed trains still zip along lines running through the province and stop in Wuhan, a major transport hub in central China.

But only a handful of passengers dare disembark at Wuhan for what is essentially a one-way trip.

The vast majority of Hubei residents are still forbidden from leaving the province or even their own towns.

But under a system launched in early February, private citizens can enter if they are local residents and have passed health checks.

"Our family is in Wuhan, so I'm feeling very homesick," 13-year-old Zhao Bojian, said as he disembarked at Wuhan Station with his father.

They were on a trip to Japan when the virus first struck, and spent time in Shanghai waiting out the evolving situation.

"We have been looking for a way to get back. We've been away so long and all we want is to come back," he said.

One woman, disembarking at Wuhan in full-body white hazmat suit and protective goggles, was more succinct.

"I just want to get home safely. Leave me alone," she snapped at a journalist.

No fear

With Wuhan so closely associated with the epidemic, reports have emerged of people from the city encountering ostracism elsewhere in China.

"We worried that we would be discriminated against," Zhao, the foundation employee, told an AFP journalist aboard a bullet train as an attendant repeatedly tried to break up the conversation, amid anxiety over people gathering closely together.

She and her husband were required to complete a 14-day quarantine in Changchun, and were later occasionally prevented from entering grocery stores there when asked where they were from.

"We understand why people felt that way. They need to protect themselves. But they generally respected our feelings," she said.

A family reunion in Wuhan will have to wait—the couple must first undergo yet another 14-day quarantine at home.

Wuhan remains an object of fear and fascination in China.

Passengers on high-speed trains cruising through Hubei—a rolling landscape of terraced fields sprinkled with the bright lemon-yellow hue of rapeseed flowers—stood and gawked through the window as they pulled into Wuhan, muttering among themselves over its eerily empty thoroughfares.

"Look, someone's getting off here!" one man exclaimed with surprise as the doors opened and a passenger stepped out.

Now she is home, Zhao will join her foundation's efforts to bring in necessary supplies to Hubei.

Gao, who works in property management, returns to projects that include one of two field hospitals that China knocked together in just over a week to treat [coronavirus](#) patients.

His parents are healthy, but the virus is never far—some family friends have been infected.

Still, he said more of Wuhan's people are beginning to head back.

"The period of greatest fear is already passed," Gao said.

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