

Back in China after 15 months, Chairman Mao gives way to QR codes

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Australian Financial Review, 11 June 2021

Link:

<https://www.afr.com/world/asia/back-in-china-after-15-months-chairman-mao-gives-way-to-qr-codes-20210610-p57zx1>

Returning to China after 15 months of COVID-19-induced absence was smooth and efficient, if a little strange. From the time my partner and I boarded the China Eastern flight in Sydney to landing in Shanghai, we did not see a single crew member outside of full hazmat suits. That meant almost no service in business class and certainly no alcohol.

Being released into Shanghai after two weeks of hotel quarantine was also something of a shock – my partner and I had separate rooms to prevent a homicide investigation being inflicted on the local police.

It had been at least two years since I last visited Shanghai, and I was stunned by just how big, crowded, busy, expensive, youthful and rich the city was. Masks are widely worn but not compulsory.

And cash is now hardly ever used. When last in China, debit cards and smartphones were increasingly common but banknotes all bearing Chairman Mao's face – he was never one to share the limelight – still witnessed most transactions. It took some time to relearn the different payment options, how to load the phone with cash, and remember PINs. And unlike in Australia where cashless transactions are completed with tap-and-go cards, in China it's all about the smartphones and QR codes.

Embarrassingly, I had reacquainted myself with how to present my QR code to pay, but not how to zap a service provider's QR. That meant I only had half the required knowhow for transacting. When buying anything in China these days, the question is always asked: 'You zap me, or I zap you?' I had mastered the former, but not the latter.

After a recent taxi ride, with the assistance of the driver, I eventually zapped him. But then I had forgotten the PIN for my linked account. Thankfully my dinner hosts eventually extricated me from an increasingly tense situation: I had no cash.

As a side note, even the beggars have given up on cash and now happily accept a cashless payment via the ubiquitous QR code.

The designer shops are busy. It is amazing how many Rolex, Audemars Piguet, and Franck Muller watch shops can be squeezed into a few hundred metres along Shanghai's Nanjing Road West, let alone all the other global luxury brands. China has just put on its annual Luxury Brands of the World Import Expo on Hainan Island.

Thousands of foreign brands were represented there, but despite the mainland being their biggest market, they were apparently unaware that Beijing's latest mantra is 'designed in China, not made in China'. This is President Xi Jinping's awkward-sounding economic model of 'dual circulation', which we once called 'import substitution'.

For China's policymakers, it means 'bring on decoupling, we're ready for it'. As the Luxury Brands Expo was being mopped up, state media reported that China had landed a vehicle on Mars, the second nation to do so. The following week, a new stage in constructing China's space station was completed.

Back on earth, people say they are increasingly comfortable consuming local dairy products, health supplements and cosmetics made in China. Clean, green marketing campaigns from Australia and New Zealand may be less appealing when put against elevated nationalist sentiments. It wasn't like this 15 months ago.

And yet there is anxiety. Apart from the relentless pressure on people's everyday lives – work, conspicuous consumption, housing, marriage, children, education and ageing parents – the shadow of COVID-19 remains and people are concerned about the future. Even successful people are worried about the future. The 'hostile' international environment China faces is also frequently mentioned. Some feel China has been too abrasive in its international relations. Others worry the economic recovery at home and abroad is weaker than portrayed.

The Australia-China bilateral relationship comes up frequently. People seem sad rather than angry about it. A common view is that on both sides, leaders' positions are too hard. No one seems to think it needs to be like this, but no one seems to think it will change anytime soon.

Fifteen months on, China feels less confident and more resigned to difficult times that may be approaching. But then again, it is early days and, as everyone knows, China is a big country.

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