

China's Covid-19 health code system is ripe for abuse and must not outlast the pandemic

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- **Health QR codes are one of the most powerful tools in China's antivirus arsenal, but a recent scandal in Henan province shows how open they are to misuse**
- **Authorities should waste no time putting more safeguards in place - and offer their unequivocal assurances that the system will not become a permanent feature**

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Few things in life are truly indispensable, but in pandemic-era China the national health QR code system known as jiankang ma is an innovation that no ordinary citizen can live life without.

The ubiquitous health QR codes, which people are required to scan before taking public transport or entering public spaces, have proved to be one of the most powerful tools in China's antivirus arsenal - allowing the authorities to effectively track and control people's movements to help curb the spread of the virus.

Only the very young and very old are exempt because of their unfamiliarity with smartphones, which are used to run an accompanying app that displays a person's Covid-19 status after a health code is scanned.

Since the system's introduction in early 2020, however, there have been consistent concerns that it could be abused for political control or the violation of privacy, as the code also contains a vast trove of other data the authorities have on individuals - including their personal information, travel history, health records, location and recent contacts.

That helps explain the national uproar that began on Monday when reports emerged of local authorities in Henan province tampering with the system to bar certain residents from visiting Zhengzhou, the provincial capital. Some of the people had wanted to voice their complaints and demand justice after losing their deposits in a major banking scandal, while others were unhappy about the delayed delivery of residential units.

On top of concerns about blatant privacy violations, the Henan saga is likely to arouse further suspicions that the health QR code could become a permanent feature of China's already pervasive and oppressive system of surveillance, even after Covid-19 fades away.

Green means go

The health code app was pioneered in the tech hub of Hangzhou, capital of Zhejiang province, where it enabled authorities to quickly isolate people diagnosed with Covid-19 during the early days of the pandemic, allowing others to get on with their lives.

Since then, it has been copied and promoted by local authorities across the country, with the central government's strong endorsement.

The health code imitates a traffic light system, with green indicating that a person has been recently tested and is safe; yellow for those who may have been exposed to at-risk cases or areas who should be tested immediately; and red for a person already diagnosed with Covid-19, or who is deemed to be a close contact or from a high-risk area who should be quarantined. Anyone showing a yellow or red code is barred from taking public transport or entering most venues.

Different versions of the code, containing different pieces of data, are promoted in different provinces because the system is run as a series of local initiatives.

In general, though, data from the police, transport department, civil aviation, hospitals, telecoms operators, banks and other financial institutions is linked to the health code system.

Social control

In December 2020, the central government released detailed national guidelines to promote uniform standards and mutual recognition of the different health codes while promising to strengthen data security management and privacy protection. But there were no clear provisions on how to guard against malpractice, such as using the health code for social control and other purposes.

This appears to be what happened in Henan, where officials allegedly manipulated the health code system to prevent protesters reaching Zhengzhou by issuing them with bogus red codes.

Such was the uproar at the Henan scandal that even major state media outlets joined in the condemnation in surprisingly strong terms. In a commentary headlined "Tampering with health code is crossing the red line", China Daily described it as "one of the worst forms of abuse of power" and said those responsible should be punished according to the law if the allegations were found to be true.

Interestingly, ever since the news started to trend online on Monday, officials from the various departments in Henan that should have a say over the provincial health code's management have all claimed ignorance.

At the time of writing, provincial authorities had still not offered any official explanation for the snowballing scandal.

But failing to offer any justification at all will only make matters worse.

Excessive data collection

In the rush to beat the virus, protection of personal privacy seems to have been the very last thing on Chinese officials' minds.

Despite official regulations promising data security and privacy protection, excessive data collection occurs daily in ordinary people's lives.

If a resident of Beijing, for instance, wants to visit a museum or watch a film they must first register using their ID card or passport before they can buy tickets – even though the health code already contains this information.

Such an open-ended approach not only increases the risk of information being leaked or misused, it also raises concerns about the government's intentions.

Chinese officials should need no reminder of the international flak they received when promoting the social credit system.

This set of databases and initiatives that monitor and assess the trustworthiness of individuals, companies and government entities first emerged in the early 2000s and was inspired by Western credit scoring practices, only applied to many more elements of a person's life than just their finances.

It has since generated fears both at home and abroad that it will be used to bolster state surveillance and limit personal freedoms.

In this context, the scandal in Henan will add to concerns about privacy violations and abuse of power. The Chinese authorities have a lot of explaining to do, and should waste no time in putting more safeguards in place to prevent further abuse of the health code system.

Moreover, China's leaders should offer their unequivocal assurances that the health code will be discarded for good once the pandemic is over.

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P.S.

- South China Morning Post. Published: 9:00am, 18 Jun, 2022:
<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3182072/chinas-covid-19-health-code-system-ripe-a-buse-and-must-not>
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