

Tens of thousands of Chinese citizens stranded overseas

By Lily Zhao
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Due to restrictions implemented by the Chinese government since late March to limit the number of international flights, tens if not hundreds of thousands of Chinese students, scholars, and tourists are stranded overseas.

Since the beginning of March, the spread of the coronavirus has been largely contained in China with the number of new daily cases dropped below 100 by March 6. At the same time, a sharp increase in the number of infected cases was seen in the United States and among West European countries like Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

Within this context, the Civil Aviation Administration of China (CAAC) announced on March 26 a “Notice on Further Reducing International Passenger Flights during the Epidemic Prevention and Control Period.” This so-called “Five-One” policy is aimed at capping the number of international flights coming into China. According to this notice, “each Chinese airline is only allowed to maintain one route to any specific country with no more than one flight per week” and “each foreign airline is only allowed to maintain one route to China with no more than one weekly flight.” The notice also required each flight’s passenger load to be no more than 75 percent. This policy led to mass cancellations of flights back to China.

According to statistics from China’s Ministry of Education, about 1.6 million Chinese students and scholars are currently studying or working overseas. Among them are a large number of students who are about to graduate and many short-term visiting scholars whose exchange programs are ending. All of them will face visa expirations and the risk of unlawful overstay. The “Five-One” policy went into effect during the same period when many universities announced their

plans to transition to online classes and evacuate school dormitories. Students who had already packed all their belongings and moved out from their dorms and apartments, but could not board flights back to China, were suddenly forced to find lodging for another indefinite period of time.

Right after the policy was implemented, several students posted that they were stranded at an airport in Ethiopia where their layover was. Only after arriving in Ethiopia on March 28, they were told their next flight to Guangzhou, China was cancelled due to the Five-One policy. Ethiopian Airlines helped them rebook another flight to Shanghai a day later, but that flight was soon cancelled as well. They were forced to stay at the airport for days, uncertain of whether they could get home and fearful of contracting the virus in the airport. The students also lacked personal essentials since they had no access to their checked luggage. Eventually, the Chinese Embassy in Ethiopia arranged a special flight to return them to China. Their experience was not unique. Reports and posts on social media revealed similar experiences of students, scholars, and tourists who were stranded in places like Switzerland and Vancouver due to the cancellation of their return trip.

The number of available flights dropped sharply from the end of March. Including flights from all over the world to all cities in China, there are only about 100 flights a week still operating according to the *People’s Daily*. As a result, the price of plane tickets has soared. It is not uncommon to have to pay \$10,000 or more for a single ticket, many times higher than previous prices.

The situation has been made even worse as major airlines have sought to profiteer from the desperation of students and scholars by deliberately overbooking flights. Passengers waiting to board a flight were told

hours before its take-off that no seats were available.

The only option is to pay far more for a first-class seat.

Tourists with medical emergencies stranded overseas face a dire situation. It was reported that an elderly man with Parkinson's disease and terminal cancer visited his niece in Hawaii in early February, before the pandemic broke out in the United States. While he originally planned to return to China on March 28, this flight, along with other flights booked in April and May, were all cancelled due to the "Five-One" policy. At the beginning of May, he experienced a cancer metastasis and was in a very critical condition. Having no health insurance in the US, the expenses for his emergency treatments in Hawaii quickly went beyond what his family could afford. In desperation, his children turned to social media for help, hoping to find a way to return him to China where his family could take care of him. By mid-June, he was still stranded in Hawaii.

Compounding the difficulties facing Chinese citizens overseas, the CAAC announced on May 19 that the "Five-One" policy would be extended to October. Then, on June 4, after the Trump administration announced plans to bar Chinese airlines from flying to the US due to China's restrictions on American airlines, the CAAC published an updated guideline that slightly eased the flight restrictions.

Under the new CAAC guideline, an airline whose passengers all tested negative for the virus for three weeks in a row will be allowed to have one more additional flight every week. If more than five passengers on the flights of a certain airline test positive, all flights will be shut down for a week. If 10 tested positive, flights will be shut down for four weeks. The new measure only added to the confusion and chaos as it is unpredictable if flights will be cancelled after people had already prepared to move out of their housing and leave the country.

On June 23, the Chinese embassy in the United Kingdom announced anyone who boards a temporarily-scheduled commercial flight back to China needs to have a negative COVID-19 test result that was completed no more than 120 hours before the departure of the flight. This is virtually impossible since the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK does not provide coronavirus tests to those who exhibit no symptoms or have no close contact with a confirmed

case. Moreover, even if tested, it usually takes 2-5 days to obtain a test result, making it difficult to meet the 120-hour limit.

These bureaucratic measures have caused widespread anger, particularly among young people both inside China and overseas. There are still tens of thousands of Chinese students and scholars who are refreshing airline websites many times every day to get a ticket. Some have four, five, or even more tickets at hand—in case of cancellations—despite the huge financial burden. They move from one temporary lodging to another because no one knows when the next available flight will be.

These stranded individuals have been left to fend for themselves. The Chinese government has bureaucratically imposed restrictions and offered little or nothing in the way of aid to its citizens. At the same time, the governments of the countries in which they are residing or travelling through have denied any responsibility and also provided no assistance. Most countries have stopped their shore pass program, nullified most types of visas they handed out before the pandemic, or even completely shut their borders for international transiting flights.

The plight that Chinese students, scholars, and tourists face is not unique. Hundreds and thousands of travellers from all parts of the world are also stranded in foreign countries due to the lockdown measures imposed by many governments. Each of them preoccupied with the national interests of their own capitalist class not the needs of workers and youth.

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