

Wuhan keen to shake off pandemic label five years on

AFP- Built in just days as Covid-19 cases spiked in Wuhan in early 2020, the Huoshenshan Hospital was once celebrated as a symbol of the Chinese city's fight against the virus that first emerged there.

The hospital now stands empty, hidden behind more recently built walls – faded like most traces of the pandemic as locals move on and officials discourage discussion of it.

On January 23, 2020, with the then-unknown virus spreading, Wuhan sealed itself off for 76 days, ushering in China's zero-Covid era of strict travel and health controls and foreshadowing the global disruption yet to come.

Today, the city's bustling shopping districts and gridlocked traffic are a far cry from the empty streets and crammed emergency rooms that marked the world's first Covid lockdown.

"People are moving forward, these memories are getting fuzzier and fuzzier," Jack He, a 20-year-old university student and Wuhan local, told AFP.

He was in high school when the lockdown was imposed, and he spent much of his sophomore year taking online classes from home.

"We still feel like those few years were especially tough... but a new life has started," He said.

– Official silence –

At the former site of the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, where scientists believe the virus may have crossed over from animals to humans, a light blue wall has been built to shield the market's closed-down stalls from view.

When AFP visited, workers were putting up Chinese New Year decorations on the windows of the market's second floor, where a warren of opticians' shops still operates.

There is nothing to mark the location's significance – in fact, there are no major memorials to the lives lost to the virus anywhere in the city.

Official commemorations of Wuhan's lockdown ordeal focus on the heroism of doctors and the efficiency with which the city responded to the outbreak, despite international criticism of the local government's censorship of early cases in December 2019.

The market's old produce stalls have been moved to a new development outside the city centre, where it was clear that the city was still on edge about its reputation as the cradle of the pandemic.

Over a dozen vendors at the aptly named New Huanan Seafood Market refused to speak about the market's past.

The owner of one stall told AFP on condition of anonymity that “business here is not what it was before”.

Another worker said the market's managers had sent security camera footage of AFP journalists out to a mass WeChat group of stall owners and warned them against speaking to the reporters.

At least one black car followed AFP journalists across the city, including to the new market.

– ‘City of heroes’ -

One of the few remaining public commemorations of the lockdown is next door to the abandoned Huoshenshan hospital – an unassuming petrol station that doubles as an “anti-Covid-19 pandemic educational base”.

One wall of the station was dedicated to a timeline of the lockdown, complete with discoloured photographs of President Xi Jinping visiting Wuhan in March 2020.

An employee told AFP that a small building behind the facility's convenience store housed another exhibit, but it was only open "when leaders come to visit".

But days before the fifth anniversary of the lockdown, those memories seemed far away, the city now a hive of activity.

Locals thronged the Shanhaiguan Road breakfast market, munching on bowls of noodles and deep-fried pastries.

In the upmarket Chuhe Hanjie shopping street, people walked dogs and promenaded in designer outfits while others queued to pick up bubble tea orders.

Chen Ziyi, a 40-year-old Wuhan local, said she believed the city's increased prominence has actually had a positive impact, with more tourists visiting.

"Now everyone pays more attention to Wuhan," she said. "They say Wuhan is the city of heroes."

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