'Opening the Blind Box'

A multimodal account of access to the restricted field China during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT | The COVID-19 pandemic returned the politics of 'access' to the forefront of anthropological discussion. This article offers a multimodal, autoethnographic account of 'access' across axes, foregrounding the biomedical, digital, bureaucratic and citizenship contingencies of arriving in China, a process which was for two of the authors, a process also of returning 'home'. We employ the metaphor of the 'blind box', colloquially and commercially meaning a box containing mysterious toys, to unfold questions of power and uncertainty over one's fate during pandemic travel. The article's co-created comics, read alongside written narratives, convey affective environments, and aid our analysis of the changed and charged conditions of access. We therefore frame access through shifts in technological affordances, the affects they produce, and the risks and responsibilities that fieldworkers carry. We argue that in these stories, access becomes an experience to be lived through, saturated with the contingencies of technology as researchers find themselves subject to the fluid landscape of policy, shifting perceptions of 'home' and newly resonant parallels with earlier eras of ethnographic research in China.

Keywords: access; autoethnography; China; COVID-19; multimodal.

In May 2022, fifteen researchers holding grants premised on ethnographic fieldwork across China sat despondently in a meeting room at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. The meeting was taking place after three long days of vibrant conference presentations, which, for many junior scholars, was the first in-person conference of their PhD. But while there had been a wonderful atmosphere, with many sharing stories of interrupted fieldwork, still-hoped-for plans, and accounts of online research, China's borders remained strictly closed. Long periods of quarantine awaited travellers, and city-wide lockdowns could be announced suddenly, lasting for weeks or months. In the Copenhagen meeting, conversations amongst the less junior turned towards questions of access: what was fieldwork in China going to look like over the coming years? Would it 'go back to how it had been "before"?'

As the group discussed in Copenhagen, researchers within the research project from which this paper springs, were on the move. One of the postdocs (co-author Hailing) had already reached China, the other was weeks from departing (co-author Han). Listening to the conversation in the room, co-author Rachel realized that ethnography was being positioned as a newly optional supplement to other skills developed – out of necessity – during prior periods when social researchers could not enter China. This was the time which, in the meeting, was termed the 'before'; not a 'before' of pre-pandemic, but a 'before' in the longer history of China, a country where research 'access' has long had complex and nuanced meaning. As we subsequently searched the literature for how prior challenges to access might inform our current one, we found that they lay in the background of ethnographic work done throughout the mid to latter part of the twentieth century: sometimes scholars omitted discussions of access, counting on readers to know that that physical inaccessibility was, at the time, a given. At other times, inaccessibility could be read through what was done *instead* – ethnographies were taking place in Taiwan or Hong Kong, places open to research when mainland China was not. Today, discussions about access and admissions of the challenges of fieldwork (of all kinds) are more widespread and do not constitute an admission of failure. Following the call to 'continue and revise conversations about fieldwork as an inherited practice, site of contested significance and [one] productive of anthropological norms' (Douglas-Jones et al. 2020: 92), in this article, we pursue multimodal storytelling to consider the inheritances, practicalities and logistics around what has constituted 'access' in 2021-2022, under the conditions of COVID-19.

The stories we share in this article emerged from our own troubled experiences as not only ethnographers obtaining access to the field but also, for authors Hailing and Han, as Chinese citizens coming back 'home.' Following Okely's argument that 'in an academic context the personal is theoretical' (1992: 9), we position our experiences and embodied knowledge as a necessary part of accounting for how access to the field can be a strongly emotional experience. By allowing the ethnographer's selves in, we aim to connect our experiences with broader ethnographic knowledge – and theorization – of access. Field diaries document how we planned for, travelled to, and entered a restricted field. We preface each ethnographic excerpt with a comic commissioned from Indonesia-based illustrator Nadiyah Rizki Suyatna, with whom colleagues had previously worked (Sandbukt 2021). The collaboration formed around constituting a shared

visual language for conveying these experiences, a reflective process detailed below. If, as Jain argues, 'articles in anthropology tend to derive their authority by reiterating a standard form' (2021: 55), we root our authority to speak in both image and word. We are inspired by Jain's invitation to 'ope[n] spaces for different registers of investigation' (2021: 55), and by the increasing number of ethnographic approaches that engage image in storytelling (Theodossopoulos 2022, Gugganig and Douglas-Jones 2021). However, before introducing this approach, we provide some backdrop to the significance of 'access' as an idea, framing our account through histories of fieldwork in China, and the flourishing of literature emerging on fieldwork – and access – under pandemic conditions.

1. Historicising, Contextualising and Re-encountering Experiences of Access

Access is always a question of power and is thus a term in need of nuance. Even when planes are flying, borders are open, visas are issued, and quarantine applies only to imported pets not people, access to the field is always more than an arrival story. It is a recurring process that never ends and should never be taken for granted (Bruni 2006, Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). In her 'crippling concepts' editorial, disabilities scholar Kelly Fritsch offers an historical reading of the meaning of access, to identify the etymological tension that lives within it. Today, we have a word that carries a 'dual inflection' (Fritsch 2016: 1) 'between "access" as a kind of attack and 'access' as an opportunity enabling contact. The former, she tells us, is 'fourteenth-century Old French '"acces", 'signalling both the "coming on" or "attack" of an illness of emotion', and the latter 'from the Latin "accessus", 'a coming to, an approach' (Fritsch 2016: 1). The 'boundary work' she describes resonates with the tensions arising for fieldwork under COVID-19, as co-presence became risky and, as Fritsch reminds us, boundaries may have been constructed for a particular purpose (2016: 3). For China, As L.G. notes, '[c]onfinement, quarantine, and biopolitical lockdown are practices that govern mobility; they are forms of selective inclusion and exclusion, a disciplining of how we traverse physical and symbolic spaces' (2022: np). In what follows, we historicise 'access' in China, to which we add an analysis of how contemporary discussions in anthropology and adjacent disciplines are reshaping assumptions about ethnographic norms of presence and travel.

1.1. Historicizing and Contextualising Access in China

It matters that our fieldwork during COVID-19 was planned for mainland China. While a full account of the history and politics of access for ethnographers in China is beyond our scope, our brief review on the turbulence of the twentieth century for the Chinese nation state shows how access has long been complex. When the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power on October 1st, 1949, it meant an almost immediate stop to fieldwork-based research in mainland China. Prior to that date, social investigations in China were predominantly conducted internally as part of China's internal imperialism (Hoestelter 2001), and later led by Western missionaries, whose wider aim was to convert the Chinese to Christianity (Wong 1979). After 1949, prohibited from doing meaningful research within the PRC, foreign social scientists, particularly sociologists and political scientists, turned to refugees and emigrants in Hong Kong for their stories, using 'the peripheries of Sinic' worlds as 'surrogates' for their work (Harrell 2001: 149).

Two North American political scientists, A. Doak Barnett (1964) and Ezra Vogel (1969), are recognised as pioneering an international understanding of what was happening in Maoist China in terms of social control, land reform, and economic systems, through their interviews with PRC migrants and refugees, who arrived in Hong Kong predominantly from the nearby province of Canton in the 1960s and 1970s (Walder 1986: 260). In the 1980s then-premier Deng Xiaoping's policy of 'opening up' to the outside world gave foreign researchers opportunities for doing fieldwork for the first time in 30 years.

In the decades since, scholars have been testing the limits of the new rules governing their fieldwork; most rules were open to local interpretation and therefore negotiable, but negotiations were often cumbersome and tended to absorb much time and mental energy on both sides (e.g., see Pieke 1996: 4–6, Wolf 1985: 28–55). The violent suppression of demonstrators in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 was, in some ways, a watershed in the history of Western fieldwork in China, with ethnographic accounts on demonstrations far beyond Beijing showing how foreign scholars by this time had spread into the provinces (Unger 1991). However, feared setbacks for ethnographers turned out to be temporary: as the 1990s rolled on, ethnographic fieldwork in China became highly multifaceted (Harrell 2001, Pieke 2014), leading to the diverse landscape we see today. Access shapes what *can* be researched, but with each area of study, from Chinese arctic interests (Andersson *et al.* 2018) and low carbon experiments (Shin 2018) to state dispossession and social re-engineering (Byler 2022) LGBTQIA+ relationships (Tao 2023), data workers (Zhao and Douglas-Jones 2022) or deepfakes (de Seta 2021) novel questions of access and protection of research subjects arise. Work remains challenging: walled, gated or surveilled communities make literal and social gatekeepers crucial (Zhang 2018), and the presence of the party-state in researchers' daily work means that many researchers work carefully and closely with Chinese academic partners and assistants (Chan et al. 1992). Within the scholarly community conversations continue about access and repression (Greitens and Truex 2019), conversations which are intensified today, particularly under chilled research conditions in Europe (Myklebust 2022).

1.2. Contemporary Politics of Access

Against this backdrop, and in the wake of #MeToo through anthropology, a feminist lens has turned again on fieldwork (King et al. 2020). From embodiment to negotiation, the contemporary politics of access means continuing to recognise the inheritances that come with fieldwork norms (Walters 2020: 34). Of the contemporary politics around access – conditions which feed into pandemic concerns – two speak particularly to the stories we share below.

First is the challenge of gaining physical access, whether, as in our case putting one's body within the borders of a nation state or entering an otherwise restricted facility. Prior to COVID-19, this was more commonly discussed as a challenge for a specific environment of study: the more private, or gated a setting, such as hospitals, prisons, and ghettos, the more long-term negotiations over presence are acknowledged (Bruni 2006, Gaborit 2019, Long et al. 2008). 'Access' here may take official form – letters, visas – but is often about cultivating good relations with 'gatekeepers', relations which may be complex and long lasting. Ethnographers writing about their experiences in China have fore-

grounded questions of negotiation and rapport with gatekeepers (Yang 2022) as well as personal safety (Xu 2022) in pursing research in such settings. Much as the ethnographer may have research designs, gatekeepers may also have their own ambitions for the ethnographer's presence. They may seek ownership over the researcher and their project – or indeed their movement – (Berry et al. 2017), there may be expectations about the ethnographer's identity and intentions (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019) or a desire to steer the avenues of research (Simpson 2006). A feminist lens makes the power dynamics and gendered considerations of bodies in space tangible, teachable and pertinent for the kind of ethnographic study that can take place.

Second, it remains the case that fieldwork as a concept and practice embeds assumptions and entitlements, of which 'access' is a key part. In her 2022 intervention, geographer Anna Guasco draws on scholarship from disabled activists to think fieldwork access and accessibility together, noting that 'fieldwork' has always been differentially available to different bodies. Guasco's article questions the 'norm' in geography – which we here extend to anthropology – of 'going there', departing from the heroic figure, who, as she notes, is already subject to decades of thorough feminist critique. She offers instead an 'ethic of not going there' which relativizes travel and co-location as 'the supposedly neutral standard option' for research (Guasco 2022: 472). This ethic was suddenly widely shared during the COVID-19 pandemic, a moment Guasco takes to extend reflection on Max Liboiron's (2021) critique of access as assumed, an entitlement rooted in colonial violence. Access as assumed is still a topic anthropology must grapple with in its doctoral training, and Guasco's intervention reads the disability studies 'access is love' argument alongside Liboiron's anticolonial 'access is violence' (cited in Guasco 2022), suggesting that 'going there' is not *only* a matter of individual researchers' risks, but the meaning of putting one's 'body into other peoples' places and spaces' (Guasco 2022: 472). In the ethnography below, we build on her arguments to include fieldwork that also constitutes a return home.

1.3. Re-encountering Questions of Access during COVID-19
As Guasco observes, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged the given-ness of 'going there', with rapid and uncertain border closures, persons as biomedical infection vectors and vaccine inequality casting ethnographic co-presence as dangerous and unethical (Marino et al. 2020). In the first few months of 2020, there were streams of op-eds, articles, and online debates on how to conduct fieldwork 'remotely', 'from home' or 'in lockdown'. The American Anthro-pological Association's CASTAC blog, *Platypus*, ran a five-week series from ethnographers who were still in – or stuck in – the field (Ciribassi 2020). Indeed, co-author Rachel (2020) led the course 'Research, Interrupted' aimed at PhD students whose plans had been thrown into the air. Speaking for many, Alondra Nelson (2020), chair of the Social Sciences Research council in the US wondered aloud how we 'do social research' in times of 'social distancing', worrying about significant absences in material, 'gestures like toes tapping and nervous hands'? Faced with their own immobility, some argued that ethnography needed to be 'reinvented' (Lems 2020), that hands-off modes need to be found to 'replace' face-to-face research (Howlett 2021), or that ethnographers need to 'reskill' as they shift their research away from in-person interactions (DeHart 2020,

Hjalmarson et al. 2020). Across the discipline, many found ways of 'adapting' qualitative research projects to COVID conditions (Rahman et al. 2021, Tremblay et al. 2021) and using technologies – conferencing software such as Zoom (Howlett 2021), mobile instant messaging apps (Kaufmann et al. 2021) or remote participatory methods (Hall et al. 2021) – to answer their research questions. However, these approaches have come with access issues of their own, not least the ethics of qualitative research study design in response to COVID conditions, particularly the privacy implications of conducting research digitally in people's homes during lockdown (Hall *et al.* 2021, Lupton 2021, Roberts *et al.* 2021).

Three years into the pandemic, PhD students and ethnographers at all career stages are now offering varying answers to Nelson's question. For those with research plans in China, the situation has been shaped by the nation's COVID-19 policies, in particular the closure of the border to all but returning Chinese citizens until early 2023. This has created a novel divide in conditions of physical access, meaning that some scholars have been able to return throughout the pandemic, as we describe below, while others have not.

2. A Multimodal Account of Access

As the collaborating authors of the Paper Boat Collective have put it, 'stories give us hints as to how they need to be written' (2017: 11). We chose a combination of vignettes and cartoons to bring forward the visual as a 'communicative form that captures the sometimes less visible elements of fieldwork' (Brackenbury 2015: np). These less visible elements include the embodied experiences that troubled Alondra Nelson at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and that Berry et al. identify as 'lacking' (2017: 539) in traditional accounts of being in the field. We also chose to combine formats because of the affective charge of the topic. After a year of online research, our research project discussions uneasily circled the question of 'going to the field', each meeting touching on tensions, updates, flight prices, changing policies, rumours, feelings, and the research ethics of presence during the pandemic, overlaid with the knowledge that for Hailing and Han, this was also a return 'home'. Both Hailing and Han kept detailed field-notes of their respective departures and arrivals, and in discussion, the range of techniques, affects and technologies involved in what had, pre-pandemic, been a process of just buying a ticket, became evident. These processes were themselves so multimodal – replete with social media messages, emails, apps, notifications, agents – that they too became something we wanted to document and reflect on.

As a result, the vignettes appear side-by-side with images, for the temporal and affective dimensions of these experiences to be heightened for readers. As Brackenbury notes, when a text alternates between visual and textual narrative, each can 'work to support one another, and often against each other, in a productive way' (2015: np). As an account that is led by vignettes, it was important to us that they not only documented the *chronological* stages of entering China during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also that they communicated what that experience *felt* like. As Pigg notes, in our heads we might have 'ideas about how places feel' (2022: np) and from the desk in Denmark to the queue for a bus in Guangzhou, mundane places became saturated with uncertainty.

Working with the illustrator Nadiyah Rizki Suyatna began with Zoom discussions between Copenhagen, Oslo, Shenzhen and Bandung, during which we shared and talked through the ethnographic vignettes. In conversations not dissimilar from those described by Sopranzetti, Fabbri and Natalucci, as they observe 'not exclusively about representing reality graphically but also to set a mood and a feeling' (2022: 1049). Hailing and Han shared not only their field diaries and photos with Nadiyah, but also described how they felt at the moments we intended to depict. They provided reference images for key buildings, material artifacts, fabrics, or spaces, and uploaded additional images to the shared online folder we worked from. Nadiyah developed initial sketches which we met up to discuss, make comments and edit together. In these editing processes, we finessed details: for instance, in the draft sketches, Nadiyah had drawn unmasked police-men in the hotel, while wearing a mask had been required: the policemen and health workers working with quarantined arrivals were equally afraid of being tested positive. The comic captions in the next section specify the process of joint creation.

These stories make evident the labour of journeys which is difficult to make wholly intelligible in written descriptions 'no Green Code, no flight' is a succinct summary, but the process of acquiring that digital green code, the small screen and the late-night waiting is made more powerfully present as we follow Hailing through her day. The places of these fieldnotes – waiting at a screen for updates from an agent, sitting on a bench tapping a tiny smartphone screen, wait-ing in a queue for a bus to an unknown destination – are far from glamorous venues. With McPike, Graizbord and LeBer we invite 'the reader to participate and grapple with the setting, the emotions of the process, the visual feel and mood of a place' (2020: 19), which for us, is an arrival at once a newly complex right of citizenship, and the commencement of a period of field research.

3. Vignettes of Return

The vignettes are chronological. Hailing and Han narrate four moments in their arcs of return, from the uncertainties of being beyond China's borders trying to enter, to the process of transit, the unknowns of quarantine, and the eventual situation of everyday living with COVID-19 testing within China's borders. While the stories are drawn directly from first person fieldnotes, we predominantly use the third person to narrate, with moments of first-person plural where Hailing and Han's experiences overlap and they/we speak together. It is from the third vignette that we draw our title of the 'blind box' (盲盒, *manghe*). The blind box is 'collo-quially understood as a product containing randomized rewards' (Xiao 2022: 256), whether cardboard or virtual, the contents unknown until the box is opened, rare goods keeping consumers buying, keep them gambling. Within our research, passengers arriving on international flights into China explicitly discussed being moved to hotels in buses of unknown destination as like 'opening a blind box', not knowing what kind of room they were about to get. Would it be a five-star hotel or local no-star? Would there be air conditioning? Would it be possible to order food from external vendors and have it delivered? These questions meant arrival was replete with not only uncertainty but also hope and no small amount of luck, affects that also saturate this reflection on conditions of 'access' to China under COVID-19.

3.1. Being Outside
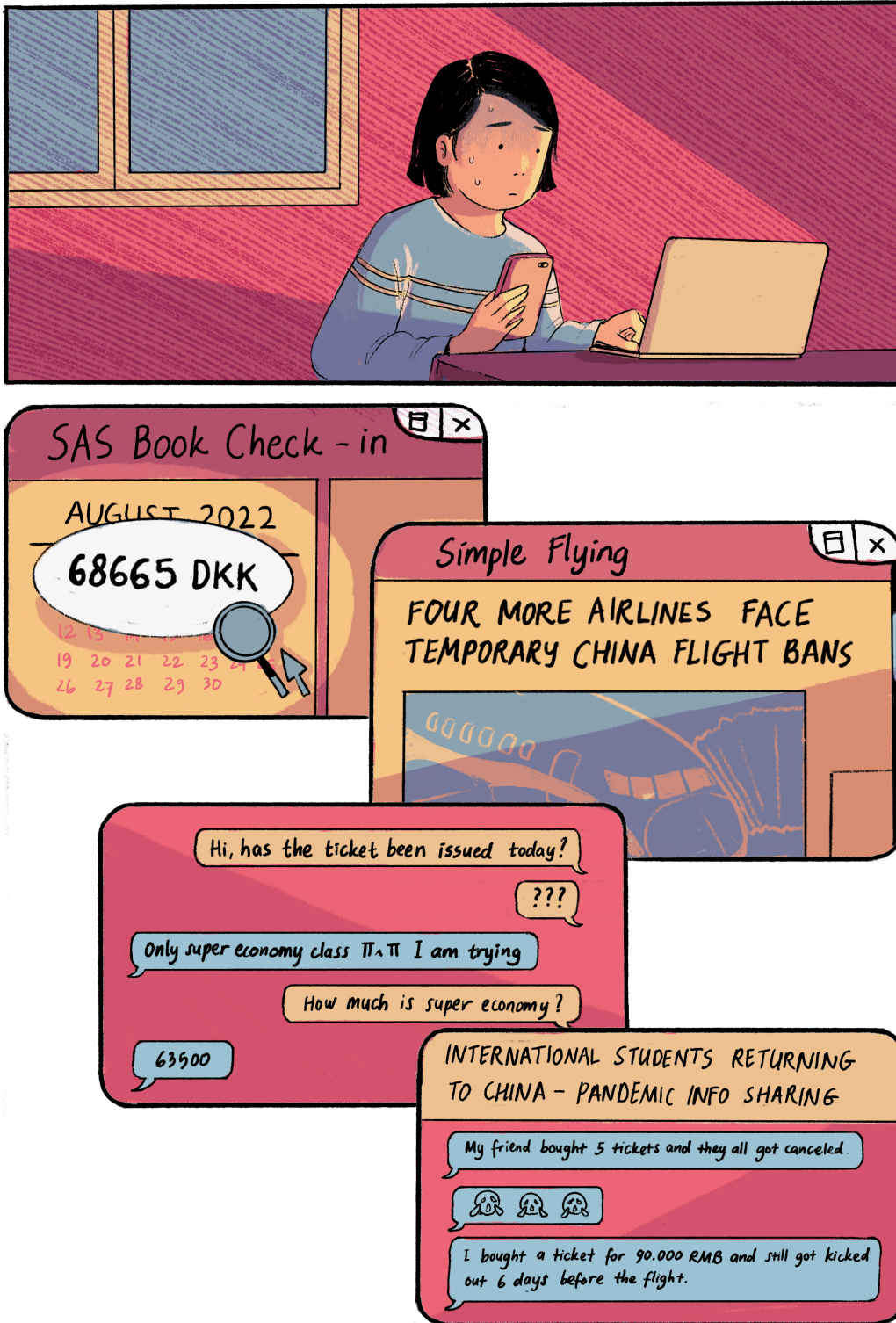
Han trying to secure a flight ticket from Denmark to China, comics by Nadiyah Rizki Suyatna. Han shared some screenshots of flight prices, international flight news, and WeChat chat history with Nadiyah, who turned her (and fellow overseas returnees') frustrations into illustrations.

Over the course of the project, Hailing and Han, like many around the world, became very familiar with government COVID policy, following its twists and turns over the months between beginning their research positions and their planned field research. The Civil Aviation Administration of China's policy, following China's 2021 'dynamic COVID-zero' policy, launched in March 2022 a so-called 'five one' policy. This meant that in any given week, for any given airline company, there was only one return flight allowed between China and that other country. From June 2020, a system of 'flight fusing' was added to the 'five one' policy: for any flights landing in China with more than five positive COVID-19 cases in three weeks, the flight from that destination would be suspended for two weeks. For those with more than 10 cases found after landing, the flight would be suspended for four weeks. In most cases, cross-continental transit was not allowed because it 'could increase the risk of getting the virus.' As a result, international flights to and from China during 2022 have been cut by 80-90%, and prices were five to ten times higher than usual.

Flying to China became one of the biggest uncertainties for our research project. Expecting to start her fieldwork in the summer of 2022, Han started to check the airline information from Denmark to China in February of that year. At that time, Air China and Scandinavian Airlines were operating direct flights from Copenhagen to Beijing and Shanghai, costing around 18,000-33,000RMB (2668 USD-4893 USD). Two years after the pandemic outbreak, many overseas Chinese netizens predicted that flight restrictions would be lifted or eased after the Beijing Winter Olympics in February 2022. However, in early March, flight CA878 from Copenhagen to Beijing was 'fused' and Air China stopped ticket sales entirely. Han realized that the only flight she could book was SAS997 from Copenhagen to Shanghai even though the price had been steadily rising.

In the run up to their departures in 2021 and 2022, Han and Hailing both joined several 'fly-mate' WeChat group chats. The group 'International Students Returning China Pandemic Information Sharing' had more than 300 members, located all around the world with one shared hope: that China would reopen its border. Back in October 2021, many members believed that they would hear 'good news' soon. However, there was none. Each day, members shared COVID-related news, discussed policy changes, and updated each other with flight schedules. Many overseas Chinese said that they purchased several tickets and they all got cancelled. Such discussions are often followed by disappointments and complaints, as the group witnessed only the tightening of travel rules, not their relaxing.

Cost was not the only issue. Where could tickets be purchased? When Han checked the ticket availability in March, the official Scandinavian Airlines website showed that the earliest available flight was in August, at a cost of 68,665 DKK. Having no other options, Han turned to a ticket agency (票代, *piaodai*) recommended by a friend. 'This *piaodai* has some connections with the Chinese embassy in the UK', the friend told her. Is it the reason that the ticket agency claims they still have plenty of available tickets for the SAS997 flight from April onwards? Two years after the international flight restriction, an increasing number of travel agencies and individuals sensed the enormous opportunity for high-

demand flight tickets and become ticket touts. Usually claiming to have 'friends' working in the airline companies or even state authorities, they buy all the flight tickets and resell them to desperate overseas Chinese. Not every *piaodai* is reliable. Many changed the price constantly and some gave fake ticket numbers to their customers.

The agent Han contacted proposed 43,000 RMB (6375.85 USD) for an economy seat in June, and the next day it rose to 50,000 RMB (7413.78 USD). 'You may get the ticket tomorrow', the agent promised. Han transferred a 10,000 RMB (1482.76 USD) deposit to this agent through Alipay. The agent stated that if the flight were cancelled due to the 'air fuse' policy, the passenger would get a refund, albeit with a 1000 RMB (148.27 USD) deduction. If the passenger tested positive and therefore couldn't board the plane, they would be able to claim a half-refund.

However, the booking confirmation didn't come on the next day. All Han could do was message the agent every day. On the 12th day after receiving the deposit, the agent said there were only super economy tickets left for the June flights which would cost 63,500 RMB (9415.50 USD). Meanwhile, the official Scandinavian Airlines website showed they only had tickets from 4 October onwards. Han asked other *piaodai*, which all said that the occupancy rate for all international flights entering Shanghai was decreased to 40%, making the price even higher. Han called her agent again, agreed with the price and asked her to proceed with the super economy ticket as soon as possible. Two weeks after paying the deposit, Han finally got a flight ticket, at far greater financial and energy cost than expected. After she transferred the remaining 53500 RMB (7932.74 USD) to the agent, she could only hope that the flight she booked would not be 'fused' and her two PCR test results within 48 hours before the departure would be negative.

3.2. Transit

Hailing and her partner checking the health code before boarding, comics by Nadiyah Rizki Suyatna. Hailing shared her 33 pages of diaries and described her feelings in the meetings when she found out she was given a red health code.

While Han could only book direct flights from Denmark, Hailing travelled from the UK to China in September 2021, before her fieldwork started. As a result, Hailing's experience was impacted by the outbreak of the Delta variant in the UK. At that point, direct flights between the UK and China ceased, and all travellers needed a connecting flight back home. But not every connecting flight would work, due to the need for a valid 'Green Code' via China's Health Code App. As Liang wrote shortly after the Health Code was introduced in February 2020, Health Code is a tracing app that 'can assess people's contagion risks based on factors like travel history, duration of time spent in risky areas, and relationships to potential carriers' (2020: 1). This code is the basis of all access, and the source of considerable logistical and administrative pain.

To board planes bound for China, each passenger first needed three different negative tests: a PCR test, an antibody test, and an N-Protein test. These were used to apply for a 'Green Code' at the local Chinese Embassy, 24 hours before departure. Only with this 'Green Code' could travellers board their first flight. For the second flight, travellers needed to do tests at the transit airport and apply for another 'Green Code' online again to the local Chinese Embassy. This need for a second code necessitated a transit time of 12 to 30 hours. With all these requirements, few feasible flights were left, at very high prices. Prior to COVID-19, travellers only spent around 3000 RMB (444.83 USD) for a connecting flight from a Chinese city to London. But now, just like Han, Hailing had to book an expensive ticket for 30th Sep, with 22000 RMB (3262.08 USD). The flight she selected started from London, transited at Amsterdam airport for 25 hours, and finally landed in Guangzhou, China.

Hailing left her home with her partner in East England on 28th September 2021. She had booked the required pre-departure tests (PCR, antibody, and an N-Protein) in a designated private clinic in London for that afternoon. If everything went smoothly, they would have their test results in the afternoon of the 29th, apply for a Green Code, and seek approval for departure from the Chinese Embassy in London. No Green Code, no check-in. The flight from London City Airport to Amsterdam was scheduled for the 30th at 10 am.

Expecting their results for the PCR, antibody and N-Protein tests the next afternoon, Hailing and her partner visited a museum on the morning of the 29th. To her surprise, by 11:00 am, Hailing found the test results in her email box. Inside the museum, they found a bench and started the Green Code application online. Instead of a website, where people can sit down and finish the paperwork in front of a bigger screen, Hailing, her partner, and all other returning Chinese citizens were required to use a mini program within WeChat, on their smartphones.[1] The application required the upload of many documents:

1. A health monitoring form created by the Chinese Embassy, with the traveller's body temperature in the last 7 days (recorded by oneself)
2. A self-statement with signature, declaring the traveller has not never been to other countries except for the UK in the past 28 days
3. The recent travel records from China to the UK in the passport
4. A statement of vaccination doses taken in the UK, with an NHS proof
5. The resident permit in the UK and utility bills to prove that one has stayed in the country for more than 28 days

6. A photo of oneself holding the last page of one's own passport
7. Test results of PCR (7 days & 48 hours before departure), IgM, and N-Protein
8. Itinerary

Before the application, Hailing had researched and prepared her documents. She was confident that she could handle the application. But Hailing seriously underestimated the un-friendliness of the mini program in WeChat. The mini program was co-designed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Tencent during the pandemic, with all Chinese embassies worldwide using the same system. However, the documents required vary by embassy. Consequently, it was hard to see which documents should be uploaded under which section. As Hailing sat on the bench in the museum, the small screen of the smartphone made the situation even worse. She repeatedly hand-typed her personal information, attaching the legal documents simultaneously. She and her partner submitted their applications before noon and waited.

15:30: Hailing's partner found his Green Code in his WeChat account. Hailing's was still waiting for approval.

17:00: no progress on Hailing's application. The customer service of the clinic, very nicely, told them that the workers at the Chinese Embassy would continue to work until very late; so, if they had submitted the applications before 21:00, they would catch the flight the next day.

18:00: Still no progress. Hailing felt something had gone wrong. Being so panicked, she tried to call the embassy in London, but no one answered. She emailed them, and just got an automatic reply that they would reply within two working days.

18:30: no progress. Seven hours had passed. Hailing called the 24-hour hotline of consular protection for Chinese nationals, which led her to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing. The staff member who answered seemed to be quite familiar with such calls from the UK recently, telling her that he could not contact anyone in any Chinese Embassies. Then Hailing suddenly realized where the application could possibly be wrong. Before the call, she had checked all the documents uploaded many times, quite sure they were correct. But now, she found a form asking her to type her passport number, she missed an 'H' (though uploaded her whole passport).

18:40: Hailing restarted her application. The second application finished just before 19:00.

23:00: no progress. Hailing felt tired, took a shower, and went to bed, planning to call the Embassy again in the early morning. They had to go to the city airport anyway and would wait there. Hailing's mother, following the complicated process from China, was happy when Hailing's partner received his

code that afternoon. But when she did not hear from Hailing again, she became worried for her daughter. At 2am, Hailing's mother sent a message, suggesting Hailing call the embassy.

Trying to sleep in bed, Hailing cried quietly. She felt everything was unreal: Why should I suffer all these obstacles? she asked herself. She had paid so much for the tickets, done all the tests, got the reports, followed all the guidelines and requirements, did not even say goodbye properly to friends in the UK for fear of infection…but without the Green Code she would not be able to board. Exhausted from crying, she fell asleep, and dreamed of happily getting the Green Code. Almost every hour through the night, she woke, checked her phone, and closed her eyes again with disappointment.

04:10 am Hailing's phone suddenly vibrated. It was a RED CODE. Hailing made a hand-typing mistake again. This time she had typed the departure place as Amsterdam rather than London. Hailing almost fainted, having not even the energy to speak. Her hands were shaking.

She turned to her partner. 'Could you apply for me, please? I don't feel like today is my day', she said.

'Sure, I will do it on my phone', he replied.

Hailing's partner did the work very carefully and slowly. When he submitted for the third time, it was 4:40 am. Hailing's green code appeared on the partner's phone shortly after. It was 5:06 am. After 18 hours, Hailing finally got her 'Green Code'.

3.3. Quarantine
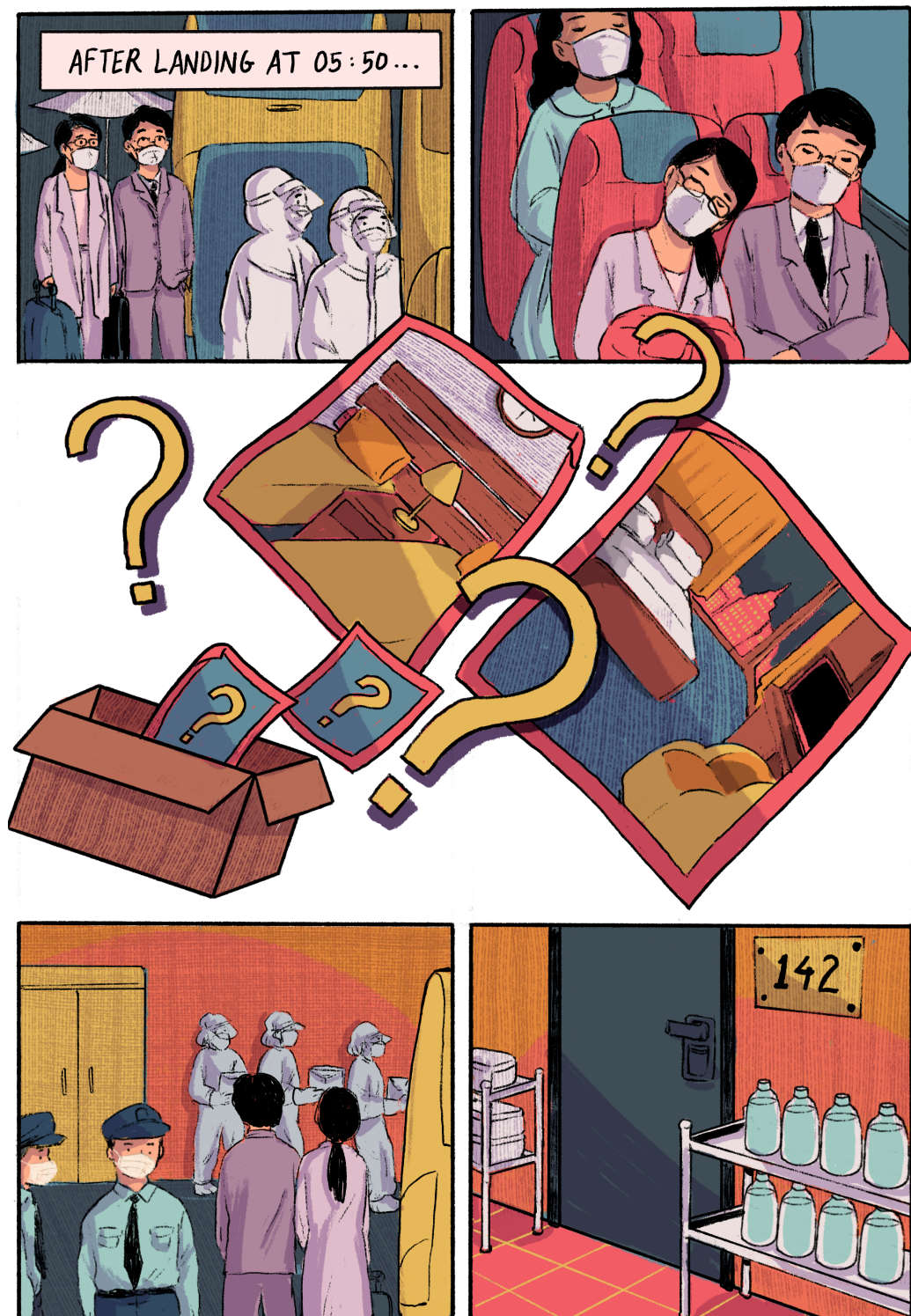
Hailing and her partner taking bus from Guangzhou airport to the quarantine hotel, comics by Nadiyah Rizki Suyatna. We explained the meanings of 'blind box' to Nadiyah; Hailing shared photos of her hotel room and health workers.

Hailing and Han arrived at two different Chinese airports, Hailing in Guangzhou and Han in Shanghai. Given Guangzhou's tropical latitude, it was 36 degrees Celsius when Hailing arrived. Han was met by 73% humidity upon her arrival in Shanghai, in July 2022. Nonetheless, every person we encountered, from the departure in Amsterdam to the hotel, was fully wrapped in protective suits – hair to feet. They could not see even an inch of skin. The account below combines Hailing and Han's experience and the narrative voice shifts here into first person plural.

Our arrival to-do lists were similar: First, we needed to complete several application forms via our smartphones to get the codes for border control and COVID prevention. After the border control and getting new Health Codes, there were still more measurements of bodily health to go: a further PCR test and body temperature check. Second, we had to wait for our baggage claim, which took a long time. Every suitcase emerged soaking wet and accompanied by the smell of disinfectant on every surface. Third, we had to register for the quarantine hotel and find the bus that would take us there. Although the airports we passed through, like most Chinese airports at the time, were quite empty, it took both of us more than five hours to move through to the stage where we were registering and reaching the quarantine hotels.

We both found registering for a quarantine hotel to be the most exciting part. As noted above, it has been described as 'opening a blind box (开盲盒 *kaimanghe*)' among Chinese travellers. In the interests of fairness (we supposed), workers at the bus stops were strictly forbidden from informing travellers about which bus led to which quarantine hotel. It was a test of one's luck. In Hailing's case, things were straightforward. Travellers do nothing; they just wait for their allocation. Many hotels were used as quarantine hotels under the supervision of the Guangzhou government, all self-paid. When Hailing arrived in October 2021, except for very special cases, people could not move hotels during their 14 days of hotel quarantine. As there were not enough quarantine hotels in Guangzhou to cope with demand, more hotels in nearby cities joined the 'quarantining industry'.

After two hours' drive from the airport in Guangzhou, Hailing finally arrived at her quarantine hotel located in Nanhai District, Foshan City. It was a long journey from the airport to the hotel, and no one on the bus knew where they were going. Passengers were only allowed to sit from the 4th row seats to keep distance from the bus driver. A big transparent screen completely enclosed the first three rows and the driver, who was also wearing a protective suit. There were about 20 passengers on Hailing's bus, all from the same flight; no communication was allowed with the bus driver. When Hailing arrived at her hotel, almost six hours had passed since her early morning landing. Later she was told that around 130 passengers from the same flight were sent to this hotel. As they disembarked from the bus, passengers moved to a small shed set up outside the main building as the reception. There were also two policemen keeping order there.

Inside, four floors of the hotel were given over to quarantine, each with a designated worker welcoming the passengers. They would also be doing the PCR and temperature checks over the next 14 days. The information leaflets on the room desk said that all these workers, indeed anyone who would have contact with

passengers, were doctors and nurses sent from the local hospitals rather than hotel workers.

Hailing's hotel room was not bad: she was provided with a 24 box of bottled water, 10 toilet rolls, 20 tea bags, a kettle, a medium-sized toothpaste, two disposable toothbrushes, a comb, soap, shampoo, shower gel, and two towels. To reduce the chances of close contact with any workers, there would be no room service at all in the two-week period. Otherwise, everything was normal for a three-star hotel: a big flat-screen TV, a decent bed and mattress, air-conditioner, a big windowsill wide enough to sleep on, and a desk. The room was clean and spacious too, for 308 RMB (45.67 USD) per night. The hotel offered three hot meals a day for 100 RMB (14.83 USD). As the days passed, Hailing found that lunch and dinner were much better than breakfast: each came with rice, two veggie dishes and two meat dishes. For dinner, there was also fruit or a small dessert. They could order food online, but only if it came in full packages with complete nutrition information. Leaflets informed quarantiners that this was to avoid the risk of food poisoning from unknown restaurants, which would further strain quarantine resources by requiring treatment at local hospitals. The leaflets also informed us that government workers checked the hygiene conditions of the hotel kitchen every week.

Arriving in Shanghai, passengers from Han's flight passed through passport control and baggage claim and were then sorted according to final destination. Travellers had to scan a QR code as they exited the baggage claim, which took them to a form asking for personal information and a specific home address as their final destinations. Those who planned to stay in Shanghai after hotel quarantine turned left, into what travellers informally referred to as 'the local channel;' those travelling beyond Shanghai went right, informally called 'the out-of-province channel.'

In her arrival code application form, Han wrote her sister's rental address in Yangpu district, Shanghai. Although all were told that quarantine hotels are random, rumour had it that travellers through 'the local channel' were more likely to be taken to better, more central quarantine hotels than 'the out-of-province channel,' who would perhaps be taken to hotels in rural areas outside Shanghai city. Han decided to give the 'local channel' a try. Each district in Shanghai had its own stand, staffed by two officials to register and verify the passengers' residence. When Han walked to the stand with the 'Yangpu district' sign, she saw the 'Xuhui district' officials send a girl back to the 'out-of-province' crew because she couldn't provide a house address owned by her.

Han told the quarantine officials in the Yangpu district' stand that she would stay at the address she provided. Luckily, the quarantine officials only asked which street office was responsible for the address and didn't check if she *owned* the flat. Han waited with another passenger until 6pm (four hours after landing) when the Yangpu district officials said, 'No other passengers to Yangpu, now we go to the car park!' After a half-hour bus drive, they arrived at the hotel in the Yangpu district. Han entered through the hotel's back door and her luggage and handbags were 'sanitized' again. After seeing other people's 'blind box' hotel rooms, Han thought her hotel room was relatively nice: it had central air conditioning and a big window.

These accounts of 'opening blind box' ended well for the authors. But a process with such an unknown outcome does lead to occasional conflicts. From a WeChat discussion group, Hailing found out that her flight's passengers were sent to at least three different hotels. One, a four-star chain hotel at 400 RMB (59.31 USD) per night, allowed all deliveries and takeaway food, and provided a delivery robot on each floor to avoid human contact. Another was more like a hostel, at 180 RMB per night (26.69 USD). Passengers on the first bus to stop there soon regretted getting off, suggesting to others on the following two buses that they stay on their bus. This 'non-cooperation resistance' lasted for more than an hour. Given the heat, hunger, and with some persuasion, all the bus passengers eventually disembarked. In the following days, however, the WeChat group filled with tips on how to complain to a higher government department, asking all the residents to call the government hotlines in different departments, and the passengers kept posting on different social media platforms. On Day Five, the residents were finally told that they would be all moved to a new hotel in Guangzhou.

3.4. Testing Out

Once in China, a new question arose for Hailing and Han: how many PCR tests suffice to exit quarantine? During the time of travel, not only did the national pandemic policy change frequently, but local authorities also interpreted and implemented quarantine rules differently. These changes often led to 'over-implementation' (加码 *jiama*). Few knew how many PCR tests Hailing and Han would have when they arrived in quarantine, or how many days they would end up staying.

When Hailing arrived in Guangzhou in 2021, most Chinese cities were following the '14+7' policy. This meant that international incoming passengers must be quarantined in a designated hotel room for 14 days and then quarantined at home for 7 days. During the hotel room stay, every morning and afternoon, a fully equipped healthcare worker knocked on the door, checking body temperature and blood pressure. These same workers delivered daily meals and issued PCR tests six times over the 14 days: on days 1, 2, 3, 7, 12, and 14. On Day 3, a young woman sent a surprising message to Hailing's flight WeChat group: 'I have been notified that there is a positive case nearby my seat on our flight, and I will be moved to a new hotel today. A bus will take me there at 3:30 pm. Anyone else in the same situation as me? My seat number is 49K'. Hailing froze. Her seat number had been 50K, F's 50J. Right behind the young woman. Hailing scoured social media, which suggested that the three rows ahead of and three rows behind a positive case would be identified as 'close contact'. After a tense couple of hours, Hailing called the reception: 'Have you finished the moving work of close contacts today?'

Reception: 'Close contacts, what do you mean?'

Hailing: 'I mean close contacts of the confirmed cases in our flight, we should have been notified as close contacts too, right?'

Reception: 'We haven't heard anything about confirmed cases or people moving out today. Nothing is happening in our hotel, or you would have heard an ambulance coming.'
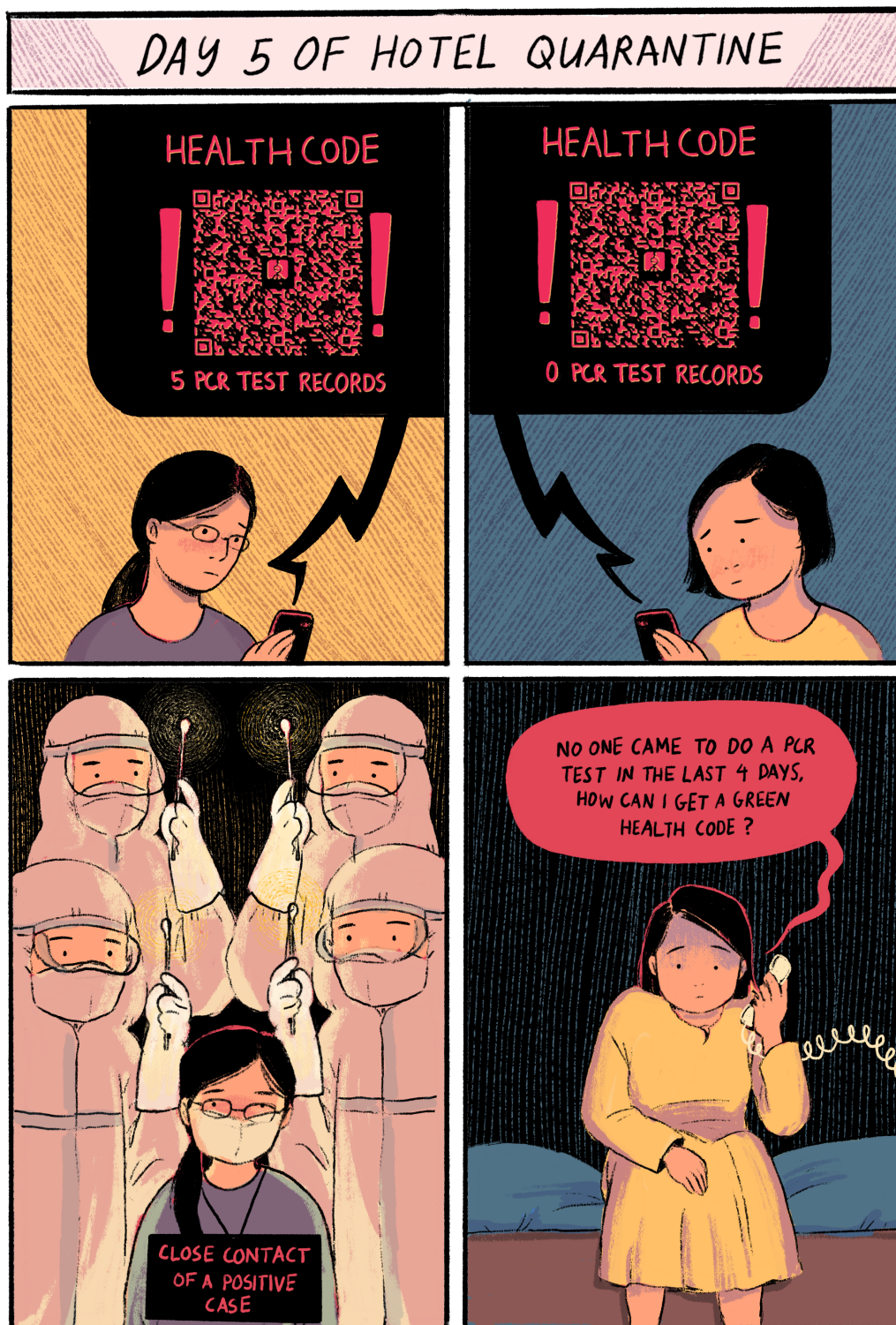
Hailing (left) and Han(right) staying in the quarantine hotel, comics by Nadiyah Rizki Suyatna. While Hailing took several PCR tests during her hotel quarantine, Han had no tests. Both were anxious about whether they met the test requirements to exit quarantine. Hailing and Han shared screenshots of their PCR test records with Nadiyah.

While reassured they were not about to be moved, Hailing and her partner nonetheless later found themselves identified as 'close contacts' through the Health Code app. As Hailing had not fully recovered from her nightmare in the London hotel room, the Health Code returned to assume a central place in her thoughts.[2] On Day 2, given that she was in quarantine, her Health Code was red. The holder of a red code cannot go anywhere. In the first two days, it showed that Hailing was an individual in 'centralized isolation'. By the early morning of Day 3, the 'centralized isolation' shown in her Health Code changed into 'close contact'. As a result, Hailing needed to do an extra PCR test on Day 4. It was her 5th test since landing and came with risks: Hailing heard stories about how long the medical treatments and quarantine could take if one was confirmed positive once in China. It might take up to two months before one gets 'full freedom'. Fortunately, all ten of her PCR test results were negative, so Hailing's hotel quarantine was not extended beyond the standard 14+7.

Han expected a similar quarantine experience: 14 days in the hotel room and frequent PCR tests. However, the intervening months between Hailing's departure and Han's meant that Han arrived under a different policy. On June 29th, 2022, just after Han landed in Shanghai, the National Health Commission officially announced the 9th COVID-19 Prevention and Control Plan, meaning that travellers coming from outside the country would be required to stay in a quarantine hotel for seven days, followed by three days of home quarantine ('7+3'). International incoming passengers would have PCR tests on Day 1, 2, 3, 5, and 7.

When Han arrived at the hotel at 6:30 pm, she was told that her quarantine was going to be 14 days, as it was understood that the new policy would only apply to people entering China from 1 July. Han and her flight mates were frustrated and angry. The next day, many called the Local Government Service Convenience Hotline and the district-level Centre for Disease Control and Prevention. The officials who picked up the phone didn't give any clear information; instead, they said they hadn't received any official document about how to implement the new policy. On the afternoon of 1 July, Day 3 of her hotel quarantine, Han finally received a call from the district official who said he could confirm that she was in fact under the new '7+3' policy. Han felt partly relieved but wondered why the hotel hadn't notified her and why she hadn't had *any* PCR tests since she arrived at the hotel. According to the '7+3' policy, she would need at least 5 negative PCR test results to be allowed to end her hotel quarantine.

On Day 4, Han called the hotel front desk again to ask about the quarantine days and PCR tests. The reception said yes, it would be seven days in the hotel, but they didn't know about the PCR test scheme because it was managed by the 'medical group'. Han was nervous – how could her Shanghai Health Code (随申码 *suishen ma*) turn from red to green without the required negative test results? On Day 5, the receptionist called Han to confirm the address she intended to stay in Shanghai for at-home quarantine. Han asked the healthcare worker who came to check her body temperature in the afternoon, 'Aren't I supposed to have a PCR test?' The healthcare worker went through her notes quickly and said, 'you are not on the PCR test list.'

Eventually, Han had a PCR test on the morning of Day 7. The healthcare worker took two 'surface swaps' from her cell phone and baggage and two oropharynx swabs. At midnight, Han's Shanghai Health Code changed to green, showing 'negative PCR test result within 24 hours.' At 9 am on Day 8, reception called Han and said, 'Pack your stuff, the bus is here!' Again, Han left the hotel through its backdoor, with her newly 'sanitized' luggage.

While Hailing had 10 PCR tests during her 14-day hotel quarantine in Guangzhou, Han had only 1 PCR test during her 7-day hotel quarantine in Shanghai. For Hailing and Han and many others, the PCR tests also became a 'blind box'. Under the vague, differentially implemented and changing quarantine policy, both having too many PCR tests and too few caused anxiety.

4. Discussion: Theorising Access through Multimodal Methods

For some readers, aspects of these experiences may be familiar. Whether through our own lockdowns, travel challenges, waiting for results or struggles with the technologies of proof that constituted the COVID-19 era of governance, there is no doubt that thinking and doing anthropological scholarship during the pandemic has shifted the basis for discussions of access. While Hailing and Han were bound for southern China to do research on creditworthiness, it became immediately evident that the journey itself was ethnographically salient for the way it made 'access' differently tangible. How then, do Hailing and Han's stories of return contribute to contemporary understandings of conditions of ethnographic access? Which dimensions are valuable in their own right for their capacity to convey how bordering was being done a particular moment in time, and which speak back to the existing literature on the meaning of access now, and for scholars wanting to work ethnographically in China in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Throughout our ethnography, we see and feel the presence of assemblages of human-technological gatekeepers. If literature on field access has described access as an art of cultivating good relations with key people (Yang 2022), Hailing and Han's stories of their journeys through the conditions of COVID-travel illustrate how technology and access were tied together in this moment, through biomedical proof. The 'Green Code' may superficially appear as a technological artefact – a complex digital infrastructure taking in data from tests and resulting in a colour on a mobile phone screen serving as a novel form of passport – but the challenges both Hailing and Han had in securing their 'Green Code' demonstrate the human layers of these technological achievements. From the test administrators to those government workers on call until the early hours of the morning in the London Embassy, physical access here was gatekept by policies, technologies, and workers, operating in tandem to ensure only those with a 'Green Code' could board planes or pass out of quarantine. Where they could be contacted, a 'good relationship' was a less feasible outcome than a corrected test time, or, as in Hailing's case, edited passport number.

From the perspective of access as conceived through disability studies literature such as Fritsch (2016) and Guasco (2022) above, 'access' to China during this time *did* mean a breach of an exclusion, a bordering, that was deliberate, even if its necessity was widely contested. National border policies were accompanied, as we saw in Hailing and Han's accounts, by adjustments,

waiting periods, hope and anxiety. To extend the observation that access is and should be an ongoing concern for ethnographers, for Hailing and Han experiences of the technological border and its advance into their uncertain bodies (see also L.G. 2022) shifted their perceptions of the possibility fieldwork 'at home' in these 'post' pandemic years. While for literature on anthropology 'at home' discussions of access hinge on one's positionality and ongoing responsibilities in and to the field, pandemic writing on 'home' and 'field' demonstrated how 'home' itself was altered by novel conditions: novel state bureaucracy, novel management of arrivals, novel strict management of mobility. During the pandemic, scholars expressed concern that measures introduced in China under COVID-19 might remain indefinitely. Knight and Creemers offered the conjecture that as 'individuals are increasingly habituated to digital governance' they might be more readily primed to accept other forms of strong state action, with the caveat that this receptiveness might not be long lasting beyond times of crisis (2021: 23). However, with the end of China's 'Zero Covid' policy on the 7th of December 2022, stricter testing regimes were rescinded, and movement within China – within and between cities, regions, and towns – was no longer subject to the everyday administration of testing and checking (Cowling 2023), although, in 2023 at the time of writing, the Health Code remains in use for entry into the country.

Access as bureaucracy has always been part of fieldwork departures, from ethics review processes to institutional risk management. It takes time, energy, and money to reduce or mitigate risks. If prior critiques of university risk management have foregrounded institutional self-protection (Hedgecoe 2016), these stories illustrate how the subject of risk – the would-be ethnographer – must also carry the risks of testing failure, of not being able to board, of infection. As Han's account of booking tickets showed, when the would-be ethnographer was outside China, looking to return, the information environment was one of rumour. Captured in Nadiyah's images is the sense of what cascading browser windows and notification from WeChat groups *feel* like. With silences from travel agencies, anxiety grows; as time passes, the prices rise and rise. Whether booking flights or corresponding with friends also attempting to return, Han experienced conflicting information and difficulty in knowing what information to trust and carried the risk of losing her tickets. The information environment was fluid: processes and requirements changed, often at short notice. As the second vignette makes evident, the process of embarking on the journey is also time pressured and in need of the continuous production of evidence: codes that must be valid within a given timeframe, flights that must be direct. Arrival may be planned for, but only so much may be prepared in advance. Some processes – PCR tests and QR codes, unknown hotels and quarantine – must be lived through. As we have aimed to demonstrate, this living through is saturated with the contingencies of technology and the fluid landscape of policy.

Responsibilities for risk containment, however, shift during the ethnographic narrative. Outside the nation state, one must follow requirements for return. By the time Hailing and Han sought to travel, citizens could 'return', and when they did state systems took responsibility' for managing the risk they posed: the highly managed hotel quarantine was the first step of what Hailing and Han

went on to experience as the labour of keeping their Health Code green. In their work on responsibilization, Trnka and Trundle observe that it has become necessary to examine 'responsibilisation in and amongst competing modes of responsibility' (2014: 136), and the shifting landscape of COVID policies around health are a key contemporary site of responsibilisation. When China abruptly ended its Zero Covid policy, widely circulated images showed a health worker, dressed in the full white protection suits (*Dabai* 大白) repeatedly visible in our comics, walking away from the viewer. In their right hand, they trailed a suitcase with the words 'the end', the dates of their service (2019.12–2022.12) across their back. The text above noted: 'The era of three years' PCR testing has now ended. The state protected us before, now we should take responsibility for ourselves. We are the first responsible person for our own health' (see also Xinhua Times 2022). Seeking access during COVID meant navigating the relationships between *personal* responsibility, a 'care for the other' and the shifting social contract ideologies of the State (Trnka and Trundle 2017).

What, then, do we suggest these multimodal accounts can contribute to theorisations of access? Since 2017, multimodal approaches to anthropological work have sought to expand from the visual to incorporate 'changes in the media ecologies we engage as anthropologists' (Collins, Duringto and Gill 2017: 142). To the literature on access, a multimodal account of access demonstrates both the technologically mediated character of *this moment* of anthropological access to the field, but also conveys the affect and strain of access as it is lived through. In section 3.2, where we see Hailing struggling to fill in the tiny form on her phone, we make tangible the otherwise often-ephemeral aspects of technological mediation, *especially* when they do not quite work as planned. In their response to Collins, Durington and Gill's 2017 invitation towards multimodality, Takaragawa et al. argue that there is 'nothing inherently liberatory about multimodal approaches in anthropology' (2019:517), while recognising they may 'challenge dominant paradigms of authorship, expertise, capacity and language'. We would agree: one of Takaragawa et al.'s key critiques asks that anthropologists care about the technologies used in the service of multimodal anthropologies. While they are thinking as much of the technologies anthropologists use in their accounts to tell stories otherwise (Rumsby 2022), in our account, the technological has become entwined as a core *means* of access. Returning to the longer view of access in China throughout the twentieth century, we might connect access and technology through the successful use and generation of QR codes. As Hailing's account of filling in MiniApps in WeChat in incongruous places shows, digitalizing access in this way required the capacity to work document uploads and small typeface on the screen of a smartphone. Beyond introducing differential access between passport holders and not, the QR code regime put strain on those for whom digital technologies are – for whatever reason – challenging. Queuing for flights, Hailing and Han both observed younger family members helping parents and grandparents secure and display the necessary QR codes on their phones, without whose help it might have been impossible for them to travel independently. Multimodal ethnography is well placed to convey how 'access' to a country is made inaccessible through technologies of access themselves.

The blind box of our title came to stand for navigating the unknown and exerting agency in a situation of changing information. The analogy, created by travellers on their way through China's quarantine management system, has its limits: yes, as Hailing and Han board their buses there is a gamble, but it does not invite the repetition of the blind box, where consumers repeatedly purchase boxes, hoping to get the more elusive, rare toys. Nonetheless, it illuminates the dimension of feeling one's way forward, in uncertainty. To tell stories of the COVID-19 era has called upon Hailing and Han's ethnographic skills in describing and making sense of rapidly changing environments. As recently observed, 'good' auto-ethnography foregrounds stories, fieldnotes and the personal in a way that does not 'downplay the fact that people are emotional beings [who] experience love, anger, despair, joy, bliss, disgust and all the other feelings that comprise the range of human emotions' (Adams and Herrmann 2023: 2). Their storytelling became a means of processing an emotionally straining experience, the complexity of which would have been unintelligible to ethnographers as recently as 2019. Keeping auto-ethnographic fieldnotes provided insight into the shifting power dynamics of access, and opened up a too easy binary (to enter the country or not) through descriptions of what access meant and felt like when it was also part of returning 'home'.

Returning to the conference with which we opened, the 'before' of prior restricted field access in China was not saturated in digital communications, WeChat groups or Health Codes, which we argue deploy digital bureaucracies on newly biomedicalized citizenship. The sporadic lockdowns in China during COVID-19 marked the once accessible public setting of the nation as gated – or entirely unfeasible without the right passport. Even with it, access to the home field for insider ethnographers was rendered newly problematic, not least for the newly heavy burdens of proof that lay with the traveller. By sharing tense hours and months across different stages, we have sought to lend an ethnographic eye to the process of navigating the ethics and unease of pandemic fieldwork in 'opening' environments (Guasco 2022). Our analysis contributes to this growing literature through a multimodal account of 'access' across axes: the biomedical, digital, bureaucratic and citizenship contingencies of arriving in China. As we inherit fieldwork's norms and expectations about 'going there' (Guasco 2022), such a moment of intertwined uncertainty and contingency allows a critical look at the norms that made this period of research revealing of both the ease of old assumptions, and the challenges of new conditions.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. A Web-version existed for foreigners.

2. Upon arrival in China, a different Health Code app, Guangdong Health Code (粤康码 *Yuekang Ma*), was used as a green code for travel within Guangdong Province. Once in China, Hailing logged in to Yuekang Ma and the information she had previously submitted – passport number, flight records, date of birth, contact number, home address – would be linked to the *Yuekang Ma*. Given that the Chinese government has not recognised any foreign vaccines, there is no record of vaccination for Han or Hailing.

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