

Memory Meets Change

AS TWO PHOTOGRAPHERS COVER EARTH'S EIGHT BILLION, THEY GATHER IMAGES AND INSIGHTS FROM LANDS THEY KNOW WELL.

BY JUSTIN JIN AND YAGAZIE EMEZI

CHINA: He saw COVID policy appeal to 'the greater good' as family size limits once did.

Boarding a flight to China from Europe, where I live, I usually feel excited. But heading out on an assignment last year, passing a phalanx of airport crews in PPE gear, I felt some dread.

The jet cabin had become an air lock, separating a then largely COVID-free China from the rest of the world it deemed contagious.

In 2022, as I set out to spend five weeks shooting this issue's "Eight Billion" story, China's strict "COVID zero" rules allowed the government to lock down cities and isolate anyone infected. As a result, my flight to Beijing was diverted to Xian, a far less strategic city 750 miles away, where I started my 10-day isolation in a room with a camera watching my door and a loudspeaker that boomed a warning if I opened it.

After release, I roamed freely but had to make sure the health code on my phone stayed green. This was determined by almost daily PCR tests and tracking apps that logged whether I had been near an infected person. I traveled swiftly across China at any hint of an outbreak, for fear of getting grounded.

In the 1990s, when I began as a journalist, train tickets took hours to queue for, and a ride from Beijing to Shanghai took 24 hours; today you order a ticket in seconds on your phone, and the high-speed train makes the trip in about four hours. But COVID controls put a brake on that, causing huge delays and disruptions. When I finally arrived, I often found my photo shoots canceled because of sudden lockdowns.

Friends and colleagues from Chongqing to Hangzhou kept me updated in real time about which neighborhoods had outbreaks so I could avoid getting stuck. I had always tested negative—but one day my code inexplicably turned red, and I was unable to go anywhere or do anything. Within two days, the code changed back to green without giving a reason.

Some 1.4 billion Chinese lived with these controls every day. Yet most I met tolerated them, believing the sacrifice was for the greater good. Perhaps it's not unlike an earlier generation's stoic acceptance of the one-child policy to jump-start economic growth.

I finished my work and returned to Europe. Within weeks, it was clear that people's patience had worn thin. China responded to widespread discontent over its COVID measures by getting rid of the PCR booths, color codes, and quarantine centers. After three years of national isolation, Beijing pivoted to herd immunity. When I called the persons I'd photographed to update their stories, I found many of them sick or caring for sick relatives.

I scrambled to get my elderly father in Shanghai out of harm's way but was too late: He got infected. Fortunately, he has since recovered. —JJ

NIGERIA: She returned to discover that her hometown had 'never stopped growing.'

It's a bitter feeling to realize that home doesn't always remain in one place. I left home not old enough to know that my parents were renters. In my head, our house was ours forever. I still have dreams that I'm in Aba, in our three-bedroom bungalow where white lace curtains brush against glass louvers. I dream of our yard: the pawpaw tree that never produced enough fruit, the mango tree we'd run to in rainy season and load fallen mangoes into our shirts. In the dreams, I see the patch of farmland, the cassava and maize we grew—and in the center of it all, our large frangipani tree, always in bloom.

The Aba where I grew up, in southeastern Nigeria, was a commercial hub rowdy with crowded market spaces, bad roads, and people yelling and smiling at the same time. It was also violent—but when you're in slow-boiling water, you don't feel the heat at first. In my memories, down my street, one man is beaten by others, his cries unheeded. My father tells me to stay indoors as the riots spread. Stench rises from burnt bodies left in the open, and young boys dangle off passing trucks, waving machetes and vowing to fight crime. These were the signs of a Nigeria I didn't understand.

But woven into the grimness were peaceful streets