



Residents queue up for nucleic acid test in Xi'an, capital of northwest China's Shaanxi Province, as part of efforts to curb the spread of the latest COVID-19 resurgence. China has stuck firmly to its COVID-zero strategy. — Xinhua



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Editor's note:

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Kissing goodbye to 2021: the year in review

As the lyrics of a popular Chinese pop song go: 时间都去哪儿了 (Where has the time gone)?!

It's the end of 2021, so it's time, again, for me to try and round up the year by looking back at what I talked about here over the past 12 months. This year has been filled with COVID-19 news, "draconian" crackdowns and natural disasters — let's briefly cast our eyes back.

Another year of COVID-19

2021 will be another year that goes down in history as one besieged by COVID-19. Many around the world had hoped that 2020 was the worst of it, but in many ways that just wasn't the case.

China has stuck firmly to its COVID-zero strategy, whereby absolute elimination is the goal, much to the chagrin of Western powers who have been pushing for China to "live with" the virus. With 800,000 already dead in the United States alone, it's not so

much "live with the virus" as it is "die with the virus."

New Zealand was the last Western nation to give up its COVID-zero strategy, but it gave a huge fight.

We've had to accept that vaccines, initially hoped to stop transmission, are now just keeping the vaccinated out of hospital. In many Western nations, vaccine hesitancy is high — in the US, for example, only 61.7 percent of the population are fully vaccinated. In New Zealand, it's just over 75 percent, while Canada has achieved 77.2 percent.

In East Asia, the vaccine situation is much better. South Korea has fully vaccinated about 81.5 percent of its population, and China has fully vaccinated nearly 1.2 billion of its 1.4 billion citizens.

China's crackdowns

This year, China enforced huge crackdowns that caught the eyes of Western media. One of the most

discussed was the crackdown on what they called "idol worship," which especially gained momentum after A-list pop star and actor Kris Wu was arrested for allegedly taking advantage of young fans sexually. The regulations pushed for content creators to engage with more "moral" artists and avoid promoting people with questionable characteristics.

Officials told online platforms to clean up fan circles, which were known to be toxic spaces where young fans would often waste money just to boost their idols in competitions. One such competition saw viewers having to buy a special brand of milk and scan the QR code inside in order to vote for their favorite performer on a talent show. This led to thousands of liters of milk being bought and tipped down drains, irking authorities.

The biggest target of the Western mainstream media, though, was the new rules for children

under 18 playing online games. Now they're only allowed to play for three hours a week, and only on weekends and national holidays. Western media called the move "draconian," which has since become a meme for China reporting.

... but at what cost?

Another meme of Western media reports on China that has gained popularity with China supporters this year is the hilarious "... but at what cost?" headline. Western media outlets will mention positive news from China, but make it negative by adding "... but at what cost?" at the end.

Here are some examples: "China invests in environment, but at what cost?," "Wuhan one year on: The city that appears safe from COVID — but at what cost?," "China is getting smarter, but at what cost?," "Green transition in China: At what cost?," "China's economy looks to be stabilizing, but at what cost?," "Clean air at

what cost?" and "China invests in Ethiopia, but at what cost?."

Henan floods

Massive flooding hit Henan Province in July, even crippling capital city Zhengzhou. Terrifying images of hundreds stuck inside a flooding subway train were beamed around the world. I headed there just days later, spending a few days documenting the recovery effort, especially in the area of Xinxiang and its surrounding villages.

Looking forward ...

We're all hoping, again, that the new year will bring some major respite from COVID-19.

We're also looking forward to the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics in February. Let's hope we can stick to the Olympic spirit and use it as an excuse to cast our differences aside and come together as one: humanity.

Have a safe New Year, all.