

**CHINA'S HEALTH CODE:
TECHNOLOGY AND
GOVERNANCE**

ZHAO Litao

EAI Background Brief No. 1637

Date of Publication: 10 March 2022

Executive Summary

1. China has harnessed the power of technology in its fight against COVID-19. By mid-February 2020, Hangzhou and Shenzhen had rolled out health code apps. With some local variations, a green QR code allows people to move around, a yellow code requires a seven-day home quarantine and a red code a 14-day home quarantine.
2. Hailed as one of the biggest innovations for China's pursuit of the "Zero COVID" policy, the health code marks a departure from traditional pen and paper-based health declaration and printed permission for work and travel to a digital way of epidemic prevention and control.
3. Tech giants Alibaba and Tencent have played a critical role in developing the "Ali version" and "Tencent version" of health code respectively. They also sent teams to promote their health code nationwide, a mission largely accomplished by end March 2020.
4. Through the health code, Alibaba and Tencent have expanded their footing in health governance. Due to their digital platforms of Alipay and WeChat and unrivalled capacity in cloud computing and big data analytics, they have been deeply involved in the local and national standard setting for the health code.
5. To varying extents, provincial and city governments are another driver in launching the health code. Relying on data from different sources, the health code has helped local governments address the problem of "information silos", particularly empowering their big data bureau (大数据管理局) or similar agencies in the pursuit of data-driven governance.
6. In contrast, the empowering effect of the health code has been much less for the central government, which issued national standards for the health code in late April 2020 and established a national health code platform. However, such

centralising effort did not go very far. Provinces continued to resist data sharing as much as possible with the central government.

7. Overall, China's use of the health code for pandemic control and work/production resumption has illustrated the potential of digital technologies in the 21st century. Along the line of "technological empowerment", the more optimistic are talking about the promising future of digital technologies for private businesses, public management and social governance.
8. Meanwhile, there are also concerns about the opaque nature of algorithm, the growing intrusion of digital surveillance and the problem of data leakage. As evidenced in the case of the health code, digital technologies are likely to empower the state and tech giants, while leaving citizens in a vulnerable position.
9. The largely positive experience of using the health code has strengthened the Chinese government's commitment to data-driven governance. A challenge lying ahead is how a proper balance can be maintained between the tech power of big corporations/digital platforms, the administrative/regulatory power of the state, and the interests and rights of the public.