

Special effects, virtual guests: China weddings go online

BEIJING: Like many couples in the era of social distancing, Ma Jialun and Zhang Yitong held their wedding ceremony online - but they added a twist by livestreaming the event to more than 100,000 strangers. Coronavirus lockdowns and travel restrictions have forced people around the world to delay their nuptials or adapt to the unusual times by celebrating via web link. But in China - where livestreaming is extremely popular - some young couples are allowing anyone to watch their big day and even send them gifts.

Creative entrepreneurs are also cashing in, offering people the option to spice up their ceremony with special effects. When groom Ma and his bride Zhang got married in the eastern city of Hangzhou on May 1, more than 100,000 impromptu guests watched it live on video-streaming site Bilibili, leaving likes, comments and virtual coins and gifts. Just a dozen people were able to join in person. The pair were originally planning to have the ceremony in January but were left trapped in different cities as the virus outbreak brought the country to a halt. Public gatherings including wedding parties were banned.

Wedding preparations are now restarting since all provinces in China have lifted their top-level state of emergency and life is beginning to show some return to normality. However, banquets and big gatherings are still not allowed, leaving an online celebration as a preferred option. Ma joined Zhang just one day before their wedding as Beijing lifted quarantine measures on all returnees after the couple's three-month separation. "This epidemic has made us feel that we could become each other's strength," said Ma. The pair said they wanted to share their big day online to do something meaningful during the epidemic. "It's good to share our happiness with more people, even unknown netizens," said Ma.

Millions of guests

Liu Wenchao, an online teacher, was one of the first to make livestreamed weddings popular in China. In accordance with tradition, his parents selected March 20 for his wedding eight months before the date, believing it was lucky based on Liu and his partner's birthdays. But the carefully-laid plans were disrupted by the virus outbreak. Because of the restrictions on travel and gatherings, Liu's parents in northern China were not able to attend their son's big day, and nor could the couple's friends and relatives.

Thanks to his online teaching experience, Liu had the idea of livestreaming their wedding ceremony. "I have used livestreaming for online courses for nearly a year. I thought, if we livestream our wedding, my family and students can join the wedding too," he said. Liu and his bride had a very simple ceremony



HANGZHOU, China: This handout photo taken on May 1, 2020 shows bridegroom Ma Jialun and bride Zhang Yitong during their livestreamed wedding ceremony. — AFP

in front of the camera - they exchanged rings, made a toast and ate wedding candy in their bridal chamber all by themselves.

As is common in China, the legal registration of the marriage had already been completed. The video of the ceremony posted on Bilibili has become a hit, with more than five million views and over 860,000 likes. "I didn't expect so many people would love our wedding video," Liu said. "Maybe people are in need of watching good news

during this long epidemic."

While many couples are content with a simple ceremony, livestreaming platform Huajiao has used special effects to give one of its employees their dream wedding. "When we were designing the wedding, the bride told us that her dream wedding would be held in a hot-air balloon in front of a castle, so we used the special effects to make her dream come true," said Huajiao's online wedding event organizer Liu Qi.

He thinks these special effects and the chance to share the fun on social media will appeal to young Chinese people. "It may be difficult to realize in the real world, but there are endless possibilities online," Liu said. More than 50 couples have already signed up for an online wedding package. "Young couples have more and more diverse demands," said Liu. "But this kind of online wedding may become a new option for couples in the future even when the epidemic ends." — AFP



TUNIS: A Tunisian man wearing protective gear amid the COVID-19 pandemic looks on as he chats with another person on a street in the Kram area of the capital on May 8, 2020. — AFP

Tunisians get food aid via...

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population were in need of financial assistance during that time. In March and April, the government

made emergency handouts of 200 dinars to vulnerable families.

Tunisia, which has officially declared 1,000 cases of the novel coronavirus including 45 deaths, began easing its lockdown on May 4. In the early days of the containment measures, several hundred Tunisians had demonstrated in working class districts of the capital demanding government support and protesting the lockdown. — AFP

Fear in Iran as infections...

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thousands of workers from other provinces. The government moved to ease restrictions even as Tehran remained at red on its color graded risk model - white denoting low risk, yellow medium and red high risk. Schools, universities, cinemas and stadiums remain closed to contain the spread of the virus.

"People being careful made infections drop, but as soon as the disease was deemed less of a concern, we saw cases grow," said Masoud Mardani, an infectious disease expert at the health ministry. The rise is "partly due to the reopening (of businesses) and people going out shopping," he told the semi-official ISNA news agency, while also citing an increase in travel in Tehran province. Health officials have vowed to re-impose stringent measures if the number of cases continues to climb.

But many Iranians remain adamant that they have to work to avoid financial ruin. "Life costs money," said Hamed. "People have to go to work since this

virus has been with us for about three months now." The 22-year-old was among those out on the streets without a mask, deeming such protection "largely ineffective." He had travelled over 150 km from Qom to Tehran for banking business for the private firm that employs him. It is a trip he has to undertake every few days and says he cannot refuse for fear of losing his job.

A few streets away, pedestrians were shopping for fresh vegetables and dried fruit - mostly women or older men, but this time, mainly in masks. "I think maybe only half the people follow health protocols" across the capital as a whole, said Zahra, a 30-year-old accountant. "Either people don't care or don't have the patience" to wear a mask, she said.

Mohammad, a former building contractor, complained that masks were expensive and in short supply. A disposable surgical mask can cost from 49,000 rials (30 US cents, using the unofficial rate) to 10 or 15 times that amount for the better quality durable coverings. "They should have given them to people for free," said the mask-less 58-year-old. But Mohammad's biggest gripe was overcrowding on buses, where red crosses marked on half of the seats to maintain social distancing are routinely ignored. He said he was outraged to see a bus with "40 people on it" during his morning commute and urged authorities to increase services. — AFP

Obama slams Trump handling...

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through one of its worst crises in a century, leaving states on their own to grapple with the pandemic and even bid against each other to obtain critical medical equipment on the open market or abroad. Critics say Trump, after first downplaying the threat posed by the virus, squandered precious time in February as the pathogen spread in America and his administration did little to stock up on testing kits and other medical gear or to develop a cohesive national strategy.

With an eye to re-election, the president has also been blasted as putting his own political interests before human life by aggressively pushing states to reopen their devastated economies without a clear blueprint for how to do it safely. "What we're fighting against is these long-term trends in which being selfish, being tribal, being divided, and seeing others as an enemy - that has become a stronger impulse in American life," Obama told his former staffers.

"It's part of the reason why the response to this global crisis has been so anemic and spotty," Obama said. "It would have been bad even with

the best of governments. It has been an absolute chaotic disaster when that mindset - of 'what's in it for me' and 'to heck with everybody else' - when that mindset is operationalized in our government," he said.

Obama said that the dropping of charges against Flynn was ominous. "That's the kind of stuff where you begin to get worried that basic - not just institutional norms - but our basic understanding of rule of law is at risk," he said. Obama endorsed Biden's candidacy last month and has said he would be deeply involved in his campaign against Trump. He told the Obama Alumni Association: "I am hoping that all of you feel the same sense of urgency that I do."

White House spokeswoman Kayleigh McEnany said Trump's response to the coronavirus "has been unprecedented" and has saved American lives. She harked back to the Ukraine inquiry launched by Democrats in the US House of Representatives last year that led to House passage of articles of impeachment against Trump. The Republican-led Senate acquitted Trump early this year. "While Democrats were pursuing a sham witch hunt against President Trump, President Trump was shutting down travel from China. While Democrats encouraged mass gatherings, President Trump was deploying PPE, ventilators, and testing across the country," she said. — Agencies

Digital voice tech gets fresh...

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handles and more," said analyst Jonathan Collins of ABI Research. The pandemic is likely to provide "additional motivation and incentive for voice control in the home that will help drive awareness and adoption for a range of additional smart home devices and applications," Collins said.

ABI estimates that voice control device shipments for smart home devices hit 141 million last year, and in 2020 will grow globally by close to 30 percent. For the broader market of voice assistants, Juniper Research estimates 4.2 billion devices in use this year, growing to 8.4 billion by 2024, with much of the interactions on smartphones.

Collins said he expected to see growing interest in smart locks and doorbells, along with other smart home systems, to eliminate the need for personal contact and face-to-face interaction as a result of the pandemic. Avi Greengart, a technology analyst and consultant with Techspontential, said data is not yet available but that "anecdotally, voice assistant usage is way up" as a result of lockdowns.

Greengart said he expects a wider range of business applications for voice technologies in response to health and safety concerns. "Looking forward, office spaces will need move towards more touch-free controls: voice can be a solution, although motion triggers for lighting is often easier and more

friction-free," he said. "However, I do expect smart speakers - along with an emailed list of commands - to be a common feature at hotels and other rental properties. The fewer touch points, the better."

Julian Issa of Futuresource Consulting said there appears to be "an uptick in the use of voice assistants since the virus outbreak" during the pandemic. "Whilst avoiding touching surfaces may play a small part in this, it is mainly due to consumers spending far more time at home with their devices," Issa said.

Chris Pennell, another Futuresource analyst, said he expects adoption of digital assistants is likely to accelerate, "especially in client facing areas such as healthcare, retail and entertainment". One example of this already in use is a Mayo Clinic tool using Amazon Alexa which allows people to assess their symptoms and access information on the virus. Other medical applications are also in the works for voice technologies.

Veton Kepuska, a Florida Tech computer engineering professor who specializes in speech recognition technologies, is seeking to develop voice-activated medical robots that can help limit physical contact and contagion. "If we had this infrastructure in place, we would have been better off today," said Kepuska, who was spurred by the COVID-19 outbreak to seek funding for the research effort. Kepuska said this effort could lead to a "humanoid" medical robot which can take over many tasks from doctors or nurses with voice interaction. "The pandemic has created a situation where we need to think about how to deliver services to people who need our help without putting ourselves in danger," he said. — AFP