



Shanghai locals queue at a Covid-19 testing site. The city began a two-phase lockdown of all 26mn of its residents on Monday © Qilai Shen/Bloomberg

**Eleanor Olcott** in London and **Andy Lin** and **Primrose Riordan** in Hong Kong  
YESTERDAY

China's patchy vaccination campaign has left half of its elderly population exposed to a higher risk of severe Covid-19, just as the country tackles surging outbreaks of the infectious Omicron variant in Shanghai and other regions.

Shanghai on Monday began a [two-phase lockdown](#) of all 26mn of its residents to combat a wave of largely asymptomatic cases that have been rapidly multiplying in the community.

Hong Kong [lost control](#) of a similar surge in January, in which more than 1mn of its 7.4mn residents were infected. But while the territory has a closed border with the rest of China, Shanghai does not, meaning it is more likely that cases will spread beyond the city, with potentially devastating consequences for the elderly.

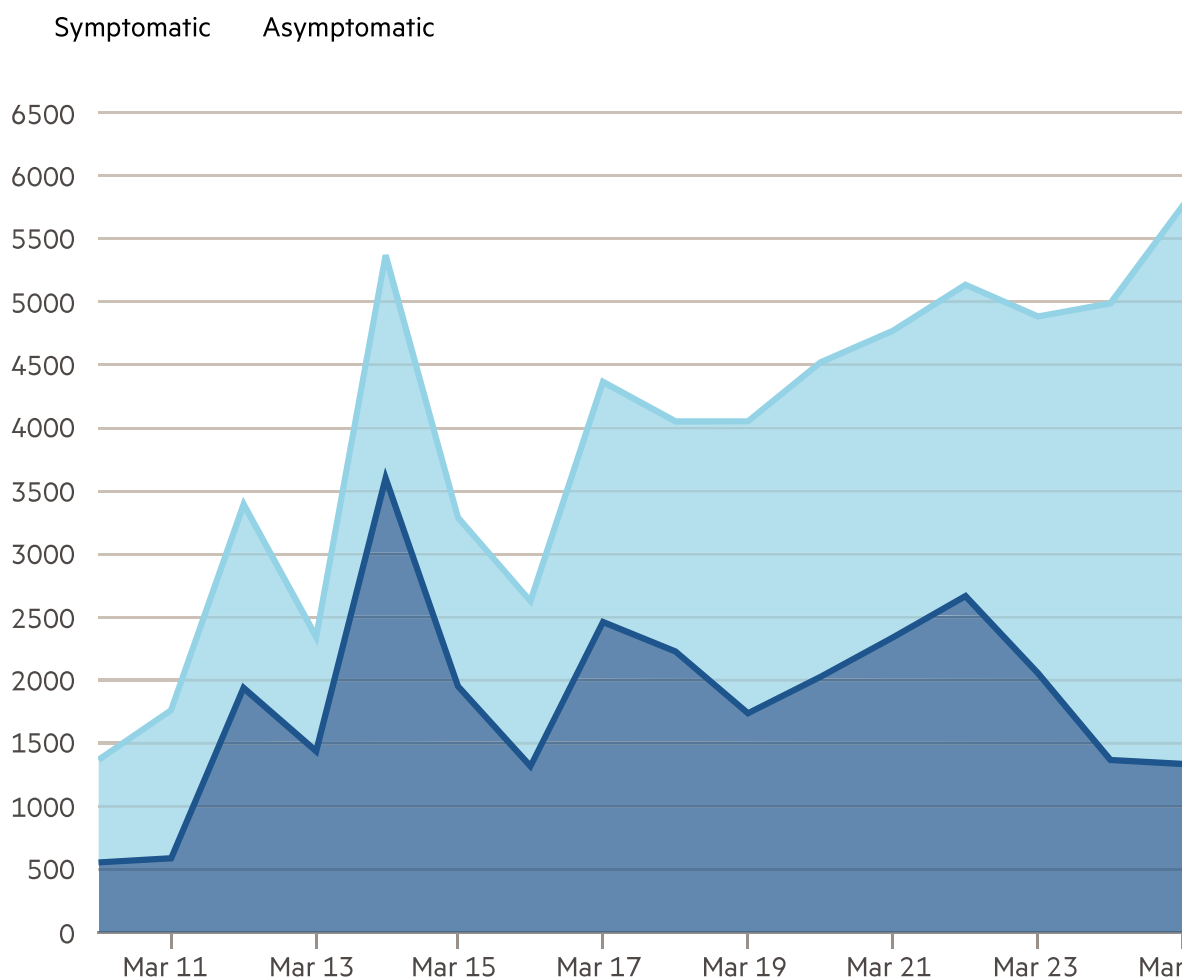
More than 130mn Chinese aged 60 and above are either unvaccinated or have received fewer than three doses, which, according to a University of Hong Kong study, puts them in greater danger of developing severe Covid symptoms or dying if they contract the virus.

China's homegrown Sinovac jab was found to be [less effective](#) at preventing death from Covid among the elderly than the internationally developed BioNTech/Pfizer inoculation, unless they received three shots. The vast majority of the Chinese

population has been jabbed with either Sinovac or Sinopharm vaccine, which researchers said also required a triple dose.

## China's asymptomatic cases have increased fivefold in 11 days

Daily confirmed Covid-19 cases



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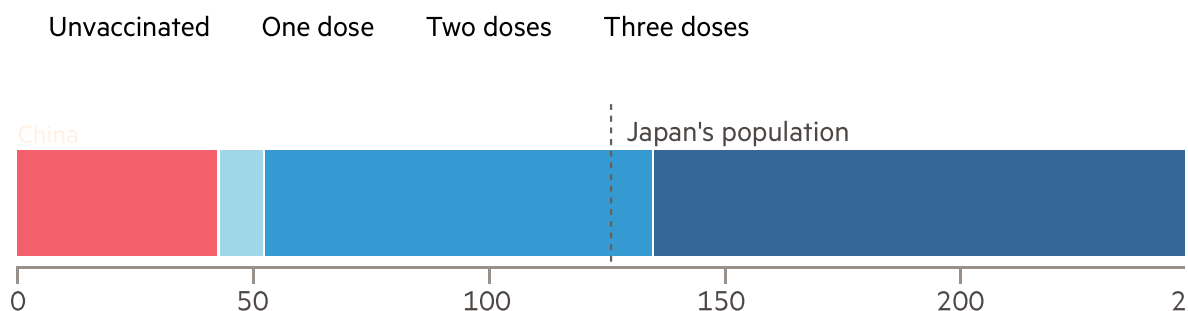
Source: [China National Health Commission](#)

The HKU study, published last week, found that administering three doses of Sinovac was 98 per cent effective at preventing severe illness in people older than 60 — a similar rate to the BioNTech vaccine. But two jabs proved only 72 per cent effective at preventing severe cases and 77 per cent effective against death, lower than BioNTech.

That vast scale of China's exposed elderly population — greater than the entire population of Japan — has prompted officials to enforce localised lockdown measures in a push to stamp out outbreaks across multiple cities including [Jilin and Shenzhen](#).

## China's under-vaccinated elderly population is larger than the total population of Japan

Elderly population (aged 60 and above) by vaccination status (mn)

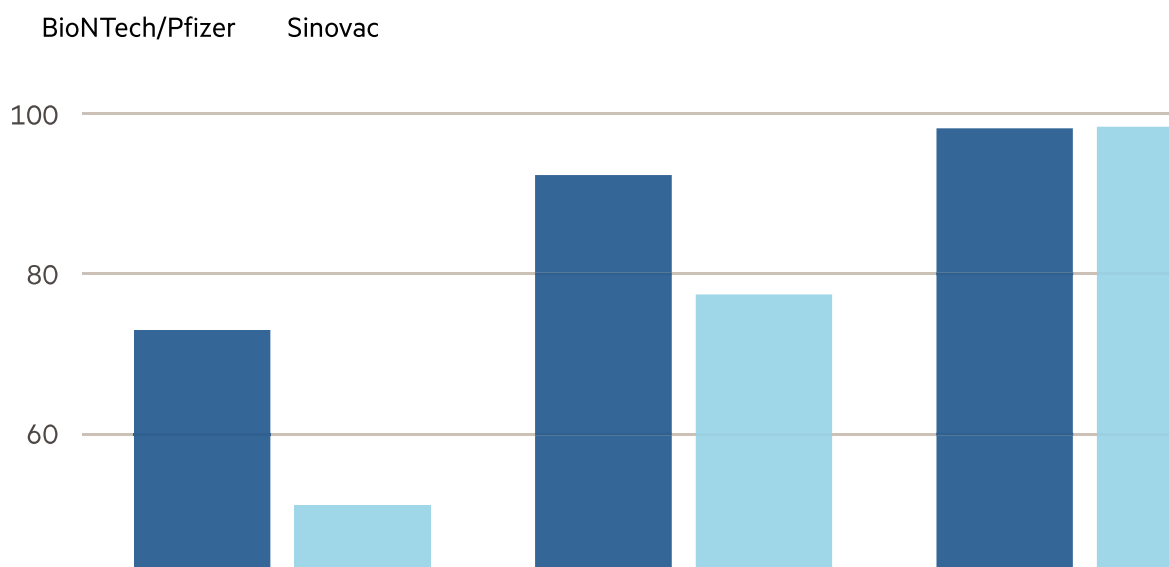


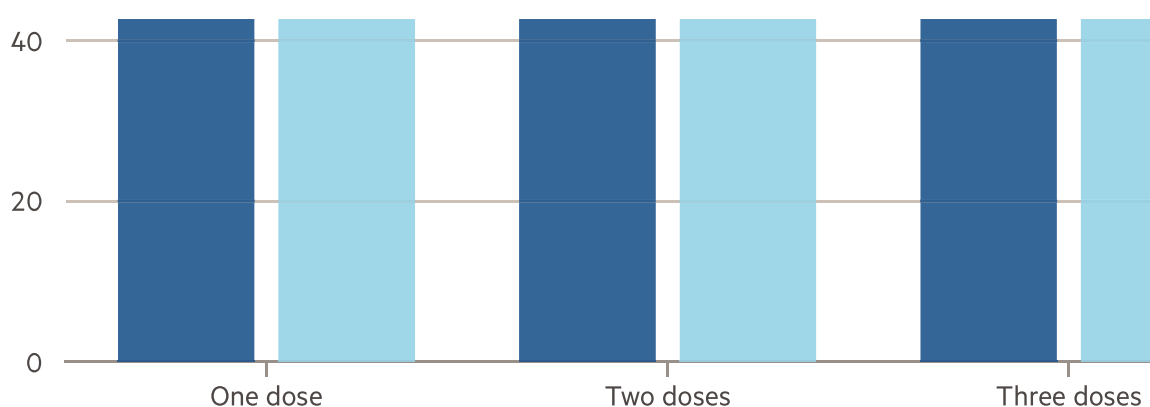
FINANCIAL TIMES Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China, China National Health Commission,

Ben Cowling, an epidemiologist at HKU and one of the study's authors, said three jabs of inactivated inoculation "gives a very high level of protection". This conclusion, even though it highlighted the efficacy of domestic vaccines against Omicron, will worry public health officials in China, where only 20 per cent of those aged 80 and above have received three doses.

## Sinovac matches Pfizer's effectiveness only after three doses

Reduction in risk of mortality conferred by vaccination in patients over 60 (%)





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Source: University of Hong Kong

Beijing increased its efforts to administer a third inoculation to the elderly towards the end of 2021, when Covid evaded its strict border controls. But experts said the country's success in containing the virus, coupled with the older population's suspicion of western medicine, had [undermined the vaccination drive](#).

"The early success of the zero-Covid policy created a false sense of security among the elderly," said Yanzhong Huang, a public health policy expert at the Council on Foreign Relations in New York.

"Many older people thought, 'There is no virus, why bother getting vaccinated and risk suffering from the side-effects?'," he added. This view was echoed by several people interviewed by the Financial Times whose elderly family members had resisted the vaccine.

"My parents and grandparents refuse to get vaccinated," said a tech employee in her 20s in Guangdong who did not want to be named. "They don't listen to government scientific advice. They don't trust the vaccines and prefer traditional Chinese medicine remedies," she added.

### Fewer than 20% of people aged 80 and above have had three doses

Vaccination status by age group as of March 17 (%)

