Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was detected in China during the 2019–2020 seasonal influenza epidemic. Non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) and behavioral changes to mitigate COVID-19 could have affected transmission dynamics of influenza and other respiratory diseases. By comparing 2019–2020 seasonal influenza activity through March 29, 2020 with the 2011–2019 seasons, we found that COVID-19 outbreaks and related NPIs may have reduced influenza in Southern and Northern China and the United States by 79.2% (lower and upper bounds: 48.8%–87.2%), 79.4% (44.9%–87.4%) and 67.2% (11.5%–80.5%). Decreases in influenza virus infection were also associated with the timing of NPIs. Without COVID-19 NPIs, influenza activity in China and the United States would likely have remained high during the 2019–2020 season. Our findings provide evidence that NPIs can partially mitigate seasonal and, potentially, pandemic influenza.
Wuhan Municipal Health Commission reported a cluster of cases of pneumonia on December 31, 2019. A novel coronavirus, later named SARS-CoV-2, was identified on January 7, 2020 as the cause of the cluster. In the United States (the US), the first case was reported on January 20, 2020. World Health Organization named the disease coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and characterized it as a pandemic in March 2020. COVID-19 is the first pandemic known to be caused by a coronavirus, it spread rapidly worldwide, causing great health and socioeconomic damage due to its clinical severity and ease of transmission. In the absence of readily available, effective pharmaceutical agents against the emerging virus, countries implemented non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) to contain or slow SARS-CoV-2 transmission. These measures included social distancing and restrictions of personal movement (e.g., canceling mass gatherings, closing public entertainment venues, closing schools, restricting domestic and international travel, and issuing stay-at-home orders); use of individual protection (e.g., wearing masks, practicing good hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette); and social mobilization (e.g., publicity, education, and risk communication). People may have adopted more hygienic lifestyles to avoid COVID-19 infection.

Wuhan city was “locked down” on January 23, 2020 by sharply curtailing in and out traffic. Soon afterward, all provinces in mainland China initiated first-level (highest) emergency responses and adopted stringent NPIs—especially inter-city traffic controls, wearing face masks, and issuing stay-at-home orders. The COVID-19 epidemic was controlled and sustained local SARS-CoV-2 transmission stopped in mainland China by April 2020 with NPIs alone. In the US, following a national emergency declaration issued on March 13, 2020, state governments used NPIs to reduce COVID-19 transmission. By April 1, four US metropolitan areas—Seattle, San Francisco, New York City, and New Orleans—documented significant reductions of new COVID-19 cases after implementing COVID-19 mitigation measures.

Influenza and COVID-19 have similar clinical symptoms and transmission routes. Influenza activity is carefully monitored in the US and China through sensitive, laboratory-based surveillance systems. In most provinces of China and in the US, rates of influenza laboratory test positivity declined sharply during the winter–spring season of 2019–2020. For example, the percent of influenza-positive tests among US respiratory specimens decreased from >20% between January 20, 2020 and March 13, 2020 to 2.3% during the week of March 22, 2020, and remained at historically low inter-seasonal levels after April. In contrast, during the same epidemic weeks of the eight influenza seasons during 2011–2019, influenza activity had maintained at a moderate or high level.

NPI-based prevention and control of COVID-19 provided an opportunity to observe the real-world effectiveness of NPIs at mitigating seasonal influenza virus transmission using a comparison study design. Preliminary studies have reported that COVID-19 NPIs may have reduced the spread of influenza viruses, but the evidence was obtained largely from observational modeling studies. Comparative studies of the impact of COVID-19 outbreaks and interventions on the intensity of influenza activity are needed to augment current understanding.

In our study, we extracted national sentinel surveillance data on influenza-like illness (ILI) and virological testing results of respiratory specimens across the 31 provinces of mainland China from 2011 to 2020. We also used publicly available data on influenza test results from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). To quantify the impact of COVID-19 NPIs on influenza, we built time-series models to fit historical influenza data and compared observed influenza activity in the 2019–2020 season with predicted influenza epidemic levels under a counterfactual scenario of no COVID-19 pandemic and related NPIs. The findings of this study improve our understanding of the efficacy of COVID-19 NPIs at mitigating other respiratory diseases and provide evidence for tailoring control strategies for a future epidemic or pandemic influenza.
and low (<20%) average test positivity rates for all epidemic weeks within a monitoring year from 2011 to 2019, while that of was two levels (high and moderate) in the US under the same classification standard. The fitted curve for each intensity level is presented with lower and upper bounds (shaded color). The pink vertical line indicates when China (a, b) first identified SARS-CoV-2 and the United States (c) first reported COVID-19 cases. The red vertical dashed lines indicate the start of the Wuhan lockdown. The orange vertical line indicates the national emergency declaration by the US. The abscissa represents the epidemic week of winter-spring seasons. The influenza test positivity rates = the number of positive samples of influenza virus test/the number of test samples × 100%.

Impact of NPIs and timing on influenza in the US. We used ARIMA models to analyze variation in influenza activity in the US during the same epidemic weeks that we used in our Southern China analysis. Prior to March 13, 2020—the US declaration of a state of emergency (epidemic week 17), there were no significant changes in the intensity of influenza activity in the 2019–2020 winter–spring season when compared to the seasonal levels of influenza determined from the US historical data (Fig. 1c and 4c). Influenza test positivity during the 3 weeks following epidemic week 17 decreased by 67.2% (lower and upper bounds: 11.5–80.5%) from predicted levels under the counterfactual scenario, and declined by only 6.0% (0–23.9%) during epidemic weeks 10–16 (Figs. 2c, 3c, f and Table 1).

Model validation. To evaluate the accuracy and reliability of our model predictions, we used the data of test positivity rates from 2011 through the 2017–2018 season to predict seasonal influenza activity in the 2018–2019 season—the actual situation, and prior to COVID-19. Based on variation between observed and predicted values, we found that ARIMA models had good predictive performances for test positivity rates in Southern China (mean absolute percentage error: 19.5%), Northern China (mean absolute percentage error: 37.7%), and the US (mean absolute percentage error: 16.9%) (Supplementary Fig. 2).

Discussion
Our study found that decreases in influenza infections were associated with the implementation and timing of COVID-19-related NPIs in China and the US. The model accurately and reliably predicted the 2011–2018 season, lending confidence to our findings. Influenza activity decreased by 67.2 to 79.4% compared with pre-COVID-19 influenza seasons. Had NPIs against COVID-19 not been implemented, influenza activity in China would likely have remained high during the entire 2019–2020 season, as shown in Fig. 2. US virologic surveillance15 and similar surveillance in the Northern Hemisphere19 showed a consistent, seasonal pattern of influenza before COVID-19. In the absence of readily available and effective pharmaceutical interventions, the adoption of NPIs may be a feasible and effective method to mitigate transmission of emerging respiratory infections, including pandemic influenza21.
Identification of a novel coronavirus (Jan 7, 2020) Wuhan lockdown (Jan 23, 2020)

Fig. 2 Observed seasonal influenza activity in mainland China and the US in 2019–2020, compared to estimates by ARIMA models under a counterfactual scenario of no COVID-19 and related interventions. a Positive rate of influenza tests in Southern China. b Positive rate of influenza tests in Northern China. c Positive rate of influenza tests in the US. d Number (No.) of influenza-like cases reported in Southern China. e No. of influenza-like cases reported in Northern China. f Number of influenza-like cases reported in the US. Lower and upper bounds of estimates are provided. The pink vertical dashed lines indicate when China (a, b and d, e) first identified SARS-CoV-2 and the US (f) first reported case of COVID-19. The red vertical dashed lines indicate the start of the lockdown in Wuhan, January 23, 2020. The orange vertical dashed line indicates the declaration of a national emergency by the US on March 13, 2020.

Fig. 3 Potential impact of COVID-19 outbreaks and interventions on seasonal influenza intensities in mainland China and the US, 2019–2020. a–c Comparisons of observed influenza activities with the upper bounds predicted with 2011–2019 expectations under a counterfactual scenario of no COVID-19 outbreaks and related interventions in Southern China (a), Northern China (b), and the US (c). d–f Comparisons of observed influenza activities with the upper bounds of estimates under the counterfactual scenario in Southern China (d), Northern China (e), and the US (f). The pink vertical dashed lines indicate when China identified SARS-CoV-2 and the US first reported cases of COVID-19. The red vertical dashed lines indicate the start of the lockdown in Wuhan, January 23, 2020. The orange vertical dashed lines indicate the declaration of a national emergency by the US on March 13, 2020. Potentially prevented influenza activity = (area under the predicted epidemic curve without COVID-19 outbreaks and NPIs − area under the observed epidemic curve)/area under the predicted epidemic curve without COVID-19 outbreaks and NPIs × 100%.
The rapid decrease and sustained low level of influenza in China during the COVID-19 outbreak could largely be attributed to widespread implementation of NPIs during and after the Wuhan lockdown that started January 23, 2020 (epidemic week 10 in Southern China and epidemic week 8 in Northern China). Influenza activity decreased in a similar fashion in the US after epidemic week 17, and the decrease may be related to the adoption of NPIs after the national emergency declaration on March 13, 2020. It is also plausible that people began to use self-protective behaviors and improved personal hygiene to avoid COVID-19, and that these habits may have contributed to the observed reduction of influenza activities—especially before government-driven NPIs. For example, the gradual decline of influenza activities during weeks 2 to 3 in 2020, before the Wuhan lockdown, might be related to changes in personal behavior—wearing masks, for example—based on government guidelines and recommendations. In addition, COVID-19 first occurred in Southern China, and COVID-19 NPIs were implemented earliest there. The peak of season influenza epidemic usually arrives earlier in Southern China than in Northern China (Supplementary Fig. 1), providing another plausible reason for the coincidence of the decline in influenza with the rise in NPIs in China.

Other COVID-19 research can help illuminate the relation between NPIs and virus transmission. Several interventions have been shown to reduce the spread of COVID-19 by substantially mitigating the spread of the coronavirus. Human mobility may have played a critical role in the transmission dynamics of COVID-19, while strict restrictions on international travel have substantially reduced the spread of the coronavirus. Physical distancing, such as canceling mass gatherings, and closing schools, as implemented in China during the outbreak, appeared to have a major impact on containment of the first wave of COVID-19. Proactive school closures reduced the peak incidence of COVID-19 by 40–60% and slowed the pace of the epidemic. Combinations of interventions, implemented early, achieved the strongest and most rapid effect, demonstrating a synergistic effect among stringent NPIs to lower the effective reproduction number of the coronavirus.

Studies in Asia, the US, and Europe have shown that influenza activity declined in 2020 after the first set of measures to fight COVID-19 were implemented. The number of ILI cases in China decreased with implementation of NPIs and further declined with increased intensity of intervention measures. Reduction of symptom-based ILI could also be due to decreases in the clinic and hospital visits during the COVID-19 outbreak. Compared with China, the somewhat smaller apparent impact of COVID-19 NPIs on influenza seen in the US data may be due to differences in implementation of COVID-19 interventions between the two countries; to the later arrival of COVID-19 in the US so that a smaller proportion of the seasonal influenza epidemic (weeks 17–19) overlapped with COVID-19, thus weakening the observed NPI–influenza relationship during the 2019–2020 influenza season; to the inclusion of data from public health laboratories, which are often used for influenza confirmation and may artificially increase the percent positive for influenza; or that a larger proportion of the US population

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**Table 1 Potential impact of COVID-19 outbreaks and non-pharmaceutical interventions on seasonal influenza activities.**

| Time Period | Southern China | Northern China | The United States |
|-------------|----------------|----------------|------------------|
| Period Ia   | 8.1 (0–21.3)   | 21.7 (6.3–32.8) | 6.0 (0–23.9)     |
| Period Iib  | 79.2 (48.8–87.2) | 79.4 (44.9–87.4) | 67.2 (11.5–80.5) |
| Overall     | 63.5 (30.4–76.0) | 66.4 (29.6–78.0) | 18.0 (1.5–40.8)  |

Note: The numbers presented here are the decreases in the positive rate of influenza tests (%), to reflect the impact of COVID-19 outbreaks and interventions on influenza activities. The numbers within brackets represent the lower and upper bounds of estimates.

*Period I: for China, it was the time period from the week when Wuhan was locked down on January 23, 2020; for the United States (US), it was the time period from the week when the first COVID-19 case in the US was reported on January 20 to the week before the national emergency declared on March 13, 2020.

*Period II: for China, it was the time period from the week when Wuhan was “locked down” on January 23 to the week ending on March 29, 2020; for the US, it was the time period from the week when the national emergency was declared on March 13 to the week ending on March 29, 2020.*
receives seasonal influenza vaccine than the China population, thus lessening influenza more in the US than China and therefore lowering the potential impact of NPIs. Further study is indicated. There are several limitations of our study. First, virological surveillance was affected by factors such as specimen collection rates and case selection biases, and symptom-based surveillance of ILL could have been affected by circulating virus strains, clinical diagnosis, and healthcare-seeking behaviors, unpredictably changing the observed test positivity rate. Second, our study was limited to the 2019–2020 influenza season through March 29, 2020. Longer inter-seasonal virological and ILL influenza data during COVID-19 outbreaks could be used to further explore the COVID-19 NPI-influenza relationship. Third, the genetic diversity of influenza viruses and their antigenic characteristics were not considered in this study. For example, the influenza virus that circulated in the Northern Hemisphere from October 2018 to May 2019 was dominated by influenza A(H1N1), but the proportion of A(H3N2) viruses increased over time. Fourth, although ARIMA, as used to forecast infectious disease, is a mature and applicable technology, infectious diseases transmission factors such as the type of influenza strain, genetic factors, control measures, and personal activities and behaviors cannot be separately distinguished. ARIMA may not be optimal for a long-term prediction, limiting our confidence beyond short-term predictions. Evidence from our study improves the understanding of the impact of COVID-19 and COVID-19-related NPIs on the transmission of the influenza virus. It will be critically important to assess the independent and synergistic impact of specific NPI measures on influenza activity, especially since some NPIs have great socioeconomic costs and may not be acceptable to the public or government for mitigating seasonal or pandemic influenza.

Methods

Case and epidemic period definitions. Individuals considered to have ILL had a temperature ≥ 38.0 °C and either cough or sore throat. The average weekly test positive rate was calculated as the number of samples positive for influenza divided by the total number of samples tested during the week. Our study defined influenza epidemic and nonepidemic periods using the same thresholds as previous sentinel surveillance, are systematically collected as a proxy of inpatient activity levels in 2011 and 2018 as a training set to build models and test the prediction of influenza activity by intensity level under a counterfactual scenario of no COVID-19 and NPIs. We investigated influenza infections based on key dates for NPIs in China and the US: January 23, 2020—Wuhan’s lockdown—as the start of strict and combined NPIs in China; March 13, 2020—when a state of national emergency was declared by the US—as the start of NPIs in the US.

Time-series models. The ARIMA (p, d, q) model is a time-series forecasting method that extends the autoregressive (AR), moving average (MA), and ARMA model. It aims to solve two problems: one is to decompose randomness, stationarity, and seasonality of time series; the other is to select an appropriate model for forecasting based on analysis of time series. ARIMA has been widely used to forecast short-term trends and seasonal changes in infectious diseases over time. The parameters p, d, and q represent the order of AR, the degree of differencing of the original time series, and the order of the MA, respectively. Due to the seasonality of influenza, we utilized a seasonal ARIMA (SARIMA) model. In SARIMA, p, D, Q, and s refer to seasonal autoregression, seasonal integration, seasonal moving average, and seasonal period length. (a) Sequence stationarity: time sequences (test positivity rates in Southern and Northern China and the US, and the number of ILL cases in Southern and Northern China) were nonstationary (Supplementary Fig. 3). Sequence stationarity was tested with the augmented Dickey-Fuller test. If lags were outside the confidence intervals after the first three lags, the time sequence was considered nonstationary. After 1-time difference and 1-time seasonal difference, the data sequence is stable with the mean value fluctuating around the indication. (Supplementary Fig. 4). (b) Sequence randomness: according to the Box–Jenkins statistical test results (p < 0.05), the hypotheses of independence of the 3-time sequences were all rejected. (c) Identification: depending on the seasonal decomposition, SAF (seasonal adjustment factors), referring to factors of the seasonal cycle that affect the sequence (Supplementary Fig. 5). ERF (error sequence), referring to the sequence remaining after removing seasonal factors, long-term trends, and cyclic changes from the time series, was ~0 (within 5) and distributed as white noise (Supplementary Fig. 6). Through observing the autocorrelation function (ACF) and partial ACF (PACF) (Supplementary Fig. 8) to recognize and analyze the characteristics of the sequence, we first listed the parameters that met the characteristic of ACF and PACF, and then optimized the parameters in accordance with Akaika information criterion and R². In addition, AR model describes the relationship between the dependent value and the historical value. Since the positive rate of influenza is related to the characteristics of the virus in the epidemic season and the serial interval of influenza is 2–3 days, AR was selected as order 1. Generally, as the duration of influenza immunity antibody is <1 year, it may affect the intensity of influenza activity in the next year. We chose 0–1 for seasonal autocorrelation, but we only presented the top three candidate models in Supplementary Table 2. Estimation and validation: rationality of the model was assessed by examination of standard model fitting residuals. If fitting residuals of a model for sequences of this study were normally distributed with zero as the mean and the lag orders of AR, PACF, and ACF were within the confidence intervals (Supplementary Fig. 9), the model was regarded as qualified. To further validate the predictive ability of the model, we also used the influenza data from 2011 to 2018 as a training set to build models and predict the influenza activities for the 2018–2019 season. Results were assessed by comparing the test dataset of observed values in 2018–2019 and the mean absolute percentage errors (Supplementary Fig. 2). (d) Application forecasting: we used these models with data from 2011 to 2019 to estimate the weekly influenza positivity rate for the winter–spring season in 2019–2020 under a counterfactual scenario with no COVID-19 outbreaks and no COVID-19 NPIs. For China, forecasting was from the 1st week of January 7, 2020 when the SARS-CoV-2 was first identified, corresponding to epidemic week 8 in Southern China and epidemic week 6 in Northern China. For the US, the first week for estimating was the week beginning on January 20, 2020, corresponding to epidemic week 10 in the US. The overall impact of COVID-19 on influenza was defined as the difference in the area between the observed epidemic curve and the model-predicted curve. The upper/lower bounds of estimates were defined as the difference between the observed curve and the model-predicted curve.
upper/lower bound curve of confidence intervals. We also assessed the effectiveness of COVID-19 outbreaks and interventions by time period (Table 1), according to the timings of the first identification of SARS-CoV-2 and the implementation of strict NPIs in China, and the dates of the first COVID-19 confirmed case reported and the national emergency declared in the US. Descriptive statistics and time-series analyses were conducted using SAS JMP Pro 14 and SPSS 23.0. The 2019–2020 curve area difference for assessing the NPIs effectiveness used Graphpad prism 8.0. R version 3.6.1 (R Foundation and Origin 2019 for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria) was used to plot figures.

**Reporting summary** Further information on research design is available in the Nature Research Reporting Summary linked to this article.

**Data availability** The influenza virological surveillance data in the US used in this study are publicly available at: https://www.cdc.gov/flu/weekly/fluactivitysurv.htm. All other data associated with this work are available at https://zenodo.org/record/4573183#.YD5JWGgZkdg. All relevant data are available from the authors.

**Code availability** R code for plotting figures in this study is available at https://zenodo.org/record/4573183#.YD5JWGgZkdg

Received: 6 July 2020; Accepted: 28 April 2021; Published online: 31 May 2021

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**Acknowledgements**

We thank staff members at the COVID-19 Emergency Response Strategy Team of China CDC. We would extend our thanks to Lance Rodewald for his comments and English language editing. We also thank the CDC and CAMS colleagues, Jiansheng Wang, Zhihang Peng, Xiaokun Yang, Peixi Dai, and Jin Yang, for their technical support. This study was supported by the following funding: National Science and Technology Major Project (2018ZX10713001-005 and 2016ZX10004222-009); National Natural Science Foundation of China (91846502 and 81773948); the China–US Collaborative Program on Emerging and Re-emerging Infectious Diseases (NU2UG009016–05); Emergency Response Mechanism Operation Program (13103100100020001); Beijing Natural Science Foundation (7192316); the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (OPP1134976 and INV-024911); The Public Health System Construction Project, Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (131031001000190045).

**Author contributions**

Z.L., G.F.G., Z.F., L.F., and S.L. designed research, T.Z. and Q.W. built the model, Y.X., Q.W., and Z.P. contributed data, S.L., T.Z., Q.W., and Z.P. wrote the manuscript.

**Competing interests**

The authors declare no competing interests.
Additional information
Supplementary information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-021-23440-1.

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Peer review information Nature Communications thanks Swapnil Mishra, Yang Yang, and the other, anonymous reviewer(s) for their contribution to the peer review of this work.

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