

## Tampa Bay's Asian restaurants face racism and backlash from coronavirus spin; Local restaurants are taking a hit as the coronavirus pandemic sparks racist rhetoric. Advocates warn of harmful consequences.

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### Body

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In an Oval Office address, the president called it a "foreign virus." The secretary of state referred to it as the "Wuhan virus." Sen. Rick Scott has repeatedly referred to it as the "Chinese coronavirus."

Coronavirus, also known as COVID-19, was first identified in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. As the virus infiltrates Tampa Bay, some members of the Asian community say they are feeling the impacts of such rhetoric.

Chinese restaurants, in particular, have suffered financial hits. Many Chinese-owned restaurants in the Tampa Bay area reported a sudden and steep drop in sales while other restaurants said they were still experiencing a steady flow of customers.

Similar backlashes against Chinese and Asian-owned restaurants have been reported across the country, most notably in New York City and San Francisco, both places with burgeoning historic Chinatowns. The events have spurred catastrophic hits in sales, prompting dozens of restaurants to resort to takeout only or shutter completely.

Peter Chen, who owns China Yuan in Tampa, said his business began dropping about 10 days ago, a few days after the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was reported in Florida.

"All the business at Asian restaurants is dropping," Chen said. "The last ten days we've dropped 30 to 40 percent."

Chen's family has run the Cantonese-style restaurant on N Armenia Avenue for the last 15 years. While the recent dip in sales has hurt, Chen said he and his family members will take a pay cut if necessary to float the business.

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"We just have to make enough to pay our employees," he said. "I have some money saved, but when your (sales) drop 50 percent or more, you can make it maybe one month more. Longer? No way. People have to realize this isn't just in China anymore - it's the world."

At Liang's Bistro in New Tampa, general manager Jason David said business began declining the same day the first positive case of the coronavirus was reported.

"The owners are Chinese," he said. "The cooks are Chinese. We have a lot of regulars that know this and there were a lot of phone calls that day asking if we were getting our meats and seafood from China," David said. "I think I got maybe 12 calls in one day."

David said that while the restaurant's in-house business has dropped 10 to 20 percent, the takeout business has stayed about the same.

"We haven't hit pandemonium yet, and hopefully we won't."

Beyond the immediate business impact, Sam Obeid, program director for Community Tampa Bay, said the rhetoric could have a harmful impact on perpetuating stereotypes. It's especially true under the guidance of social distancing, a term used by public health officials to discourage close contact between people in an effort to curb the spread of disease.

"Choosing to add stereotypes to an already stereotyped community is breeding new racism or adding to existing racism," Obeid said. "We need to be living and surviving this in the spirit of community more than anything else."

In the weeks following the initial outbreak, accounts of racist comments were shared on Twitter and the hashtag #IAmNotAVirus and #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus in France began trending. Reports of a Singaporean man attacked on a London subway and accounts of racial profiling were shared on social media.

Michelle Phan, a makeup artist, YouTube personality and founder of Ipsy who grew up in Tampa and is of Vietnamese heritage, responded on Twitter to the racist comments on her Instagram account and YouTube videos. People told her to "to go back to eating bats" and accused Asians of "starting diseases."

"I'd like remind the people who've been racist towards Asians because of the coronavirus," she wrote. "90% of everything you own was made in China including your phone. Bye."

A letter from a member of the Greater Orlando Chinese Professional Society to Scott calling his words "offensive and discriminative" made its way through WeChat circles, dividing many in the Tampa Chinese community who did not support the message or wish to sign the letter.

Wei Xue, A Chinese-American Tampa resident, said protesting terminology only served to further divide people.

"At this critical moment, I think it's unacceptable to confuse or cause fights just between parties or for political reasons," she said. "The majority of us come here, we work hard, we know this country gave us opportunities and freedom, so we love this country."

Xue, who has lived in the U.S. for the last 27 years, considers herself American but still has family in China and was filled with worry when she first heard about the outbreak in Wuhan. The response she found from her community here was uplifting. The downturn in Chinese restaurant business isn't racist, Xue said, but a byproduct of people not wishing to go into any crowded public space.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advises fighting stigma by "communicating the facts that viruses do not target specific racial or ethnic groups."

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The United Nations Human Rights Council has called for a fight against racism and the director general of the World Health Organization advised against discrimination and stigma. Centers for Disease Control director Robert Redfield said it was wrong to refer to COVID-19 as "Chinese coronavirus."

Scott's office said the senator, who has been self-quarantined after coming into contact with Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro's press secretary Fabio Wajngarten, stands by his terminology and called it a "sad propaganda campaign from the Chinese Community Party" to call it otherwise.

"The virus originated in China," Chris Hartline, Scott's communications director, said in an email statement. "The Chinese Communist Party lied about the virus. They lied about the numbers. They silenced critics and doctors who were raising red flags (one of the first doctors to warn about the virus subsequently died from it). They sacrificed their own people to try to prevent a PR problem. And the result was that the virus was allowed to spread further and quicker around the world."

Donna McGill, executive director of the Lealman and Asian Neighborhood Family Center in Lealman, which has the highest Asian population by percentage in Florida, said she has not heard any concerns.

"We have worked so hard in this community to bridge that gap over the last 15 years," she said. "I really don't hear it here. Maybe 15 years ago, but it's a very different story now."

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## **Graphic**

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Restaurant owner Peter Chen has felt a significant decline in diners at China Yuan Seafood Restaurant in Tampa, Florida on Saturday, March 14, 2020.

**Load-Date:** March 16, 2020