

AJC LOCAL IN-DEPTH CORONAVIRUS; ; Although far from outbreak, Chinese here shaken by virus

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Highlight: Local residents fear contact with travelers from their homeland.

Body

Organizers have temporarily shut down some weekend Chinese language classes and moved them online for hundreds of children in metro Atlanta.

At several local Asian restaurants and groceries, customers have noticed fewer patrons than normal. And Chinese American coordinators have canceled or indefinitely postponed some community events.

Worries about the international coronavirus outbreak are widespread. But in metro Atlanta, nearly 8,000 miles from Wuhan, China, where the virus was first detected, Chinese-born immigrants and their families have been particularly rattled about the chances of encountering travelers who may have been in China recently and could have been exposed to the virus.

There have been no confirmed cases of the virus in Georgia, and only a dozen in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says the immediate health risk is low for the general American public. Yet there is worry.

Local Chinese Americans describe a new calculus of risk and emotion at play in their communities. Wear a mask in public? Avoid certain restaurants? Allow the kids to go to birthday parties?

More than 27,000 people in metro Atlanta were born in mainland China, according to federal figures. Some have closely followed news and messages from friends and family in that country, where the toll has been far greater.

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Chinese language classes are still being held weekly in East Cobb. Students are squirted with hand sanitizer before entering classrooms. Teachers ask whether they have anyone in their homes who has traveled to China recently. Most haven't. Those who have are told to stay away for two weeks. Still, that hasn't eliminated concerns.

On a recent Sunday, more than a third of the enrolled students were no shows. And two sister campuses of the Atlanta Contemporary Chinese Academy in DeKalb and north Fulton counties shifted all classes online for hundreds of weekend students.

"Some people in the Chinese community might be on panic mode," said Su Su, a Chinese-born East Cobb parent who, years ago, attended Wuhan University and now is a political science professor at the University of South Carolina.

She said she doesn't feel panic herself, but social media has crackled with talk about the coronavirus, some of it true and some perhaps not, she said. "A rumor has its own magical power."

While she said she is very comfortable being around other Chinese Americans she knows, she is careful about broader interactions.

She said she has imposed a rule on her family to temporarily avoid some Asian businesses, including grocers.

They have limited their visits to some Chinese restaurants for now, Su said. And she said she limits which birthday parties her kids can attend. "It's a tough decision because it hurts friendships."

Others don't go that far. Ming Hua, who serves on a campus board for the Atlanta Contemporary Chinese Academy, said he believes few families locally have been to China in recent weeks or hosted visitors from there. He said he sees avoiding Chinese businesses as an overreaction.

Azure Duane, who grew up in China and performs acupuncture locally, said one of her kids has been particularly concerned about coronavirus and recently refused to go to an after-hours public school gathering because of it. But she volunteered at the same event and continues to patronize Chinese businesses.

Her family is sticking with the basics she stressed long before the coronavirus outbreak: wash your hands often, get plenty of sleep, drink lots of water, eat foods rich in Vitamin C.

In Chinese cultures, there's always an emphasis on avoiding contagious diseases and staying healthy, said Bing Zeng, who chairs the Atlanta-based Association of Chinese Professionals.

But this year, concerns about the flu season were compounded by worries about the coronavirus, she said. Community leaders have advised against big public gatherings.

"Just to play it safe," Zeng said, the ACP decided to postpone last week's scheduled 20th anniversary of its big spring show celebrating the Chinese New Year.

Nearly 800 people had been expected at the Infinite Energy Center event in Gwinnett County. Many of the scheduled performers are based in China, but were being discouraged from traveling, Zeng said. Ticket prices will be refunded, she said. No new date has been set yet for the show.

Some other local events tied to the Chinese New Year were also put off, including annual gatherings typically held in local restaurants, according to Zeng and others.

Jian Leung said he's seen far fewer diners than normal at the Oriental Pearl restaurant he co-owns in the Chinatown shopping center in Chamblee. Both Chinese and non-Chinese patrons have stayed away, he said, because of broad fears about coronavirus.

"People won't come out to eat," Leung said. "Everything is crazy."

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At a nearby Chinese grocery, an Asian American man, who gave only one name, Yong, wore what looked like a surgical mask while shopping. He said he is completely avoiding any Asian restaurants for the time being.

On a recent afternoon in Duluth, most shoppers were maskless while strolling the aisles at the Great Wall, a grocery store chain.

But Jing Chun said she regretted not having a mask handy for the visit. Chun, a nurse, said friends have talked about eating at Korean restaurants instead of Chinese ones because of the coronavirus.

Sadi Balgobin, who isn't from China, loaded up on fruits and vegetables at Great Wall, a regular stop for her. But she said she was careful to only select produce grown in the United States.

Meanwhile, several local Chinese Americans interviewed said they haven't witnessed any increase in bias against Chinese Americans since the virus' outbreak.

(Box)

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|China's daily death toll from the coronavirus virus has topped 100 for first time. Another 108 deaths were reported over the previous 24 hours, the National Health Commission said. |That increased the total to 1,016 deaths, well beyond the toll taken by the 2002-2003 outbreak of SARS, which comes from the same family of coronaviruses as the current deadly pathogen. |Newly confirmed cases fell slightly to 2,478 from 3,062 the day before, bringing the total to 42,638 on the mainland, some of whom have since been cured and released from hospital. |More than 440 cases have been confirmed outside mainland China, including two deaths in Hong Kong and the Philippines. |Of those, 135 are from a cruise ship quarantined in Yokohama, near Tokyo. Japan's Health Minister Katsunobu Kato said the government was considering testing everyone remaining on board of the Diamond Princess: 3,711 passengers and crew. |Britain declared the virus a "serious and imminent threat to public health"and said it would forcibly detain infected people if necessary.

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