

## Coronavirus in New York: Lunar New Year Events Canceled Over Fears

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### Body

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No confirmed case of the virus has been found in the state. But anxiety is growing in New York City's Chinese community.

The Lunar New Year Chinese Temple Bazaar in Queens typically attracts hundreds of spectators who come to watch an array of dancers and artists.

But this year, before the event, a paper cutting artist who had recently returned from Wuhan, China, told the organizers she was quarantining herself at home, as a precaution against the new coronavirus. A hand puppet company also pulled out, the organizers said in an interview.

After a series of conversations, the organizers this week canceled the event — scheduled to take place this weekend in Flushing — amid mounting anxiety over the coronavirus.

While isolated cases have cropped up in other states, so far state public health authorities are unaware of a single case of the illness in New York. But that has not stopped a vigorous debate within the city's Chinatowns about whether to proceed with Lunar New Year celebrations.

The Temple Bazaar party, which its organizers say attracted between 700 and 1,000 people last year, appears to be the highest-profile event yet canceled in the city. But other smaller local Lunar New Year celebrations and gala dinners have been canceled or postponed, as well.

The cancellations are just one sign of rising anxiety across the city over the coronavirus. In recent days, for instance, the sight of people wearing surgical masks in the subway has become more common. Around the city, some students have shown up to school wearing masks.

City health officials have urged New Yorkers to go about their lives. They say there is no reason for healthy people to shy away from public gatherings — even those who recently returned from Wuhan, where the virus is believed to have originated.

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This week, health officials across New York have sent samples — taken by means of an oral swab, nasal swab and by asking the patient to spit — from at least 10 people to the C.D.C. in Atlanta to be tested for the virus. The results that have come back have all been negative. A few were still pending as of the last update.

Some people on the last direct flights from Wuhan to Kennedy International Airport — before they were canceled last week — have been in self-imposed quarantine at their homes, limiting their contact with their own families.

With more than 6,000 confirmed cases of the virus in China, many local Chinese-American civic and cultural leaders fear that their community will be blamed or face stigma should the illness land in New York.

“I think the Chinese community also doesn’t want to be scapegoated,” said Amy Chin, a genealogist and cultural activist. “Those of us who know our history, there is a sensitivity.” Ms. Chin was referring to a quarantine of San Francisco’s Chinatown more than a century ago amid fears over the plague.

Ms. Chin recalled how in 2003, fear over SARS, another coronavirus, led a New Jersey school to cancel a Chinese cultural program amid concerns from parents that the dancers performing at the event might have the illness.

“There is a lot of anxiety about how we need to work together as a community, and that we need to lower the risk,” said Ya Yun Teng, who was involved in organizing the canceled Temple Bazaar event in Flushing.

This weekend, Wu Hongguang, chairman of the Wenzhou Association, canceled his group’s Lunar New Year celebration at the Royal Queen restaurant in Flushing because of the virus.

“We’re afraid!” Mr. Wu exclaimed, in Mandarin, from the association’s headquarters on Northern Boulevard. “A lot of our members are older and we’re afraid many could get sick.”

The Royal Queen is a spacious banquet hall — located on the top floor of the New World Mall in the center of Flushing — that can accommodate more than a thousand people.

On any given evening in the days surrounding the Lunar New Year it’s usually packed with Chinese revelers from large associations. There are festive scenes, sumptuous platters of Chinese delicacies, and the clanking of plates and glasses over the din of people shouting out their toasts and well wishes.

But the scene was different on Tuesday night. The escalator led onto a floor of empty banquet tables.

The manager, Connie Zhang, sat at a table against the wall. Ms. Zhang acknowledged that there were many cancellations. She had returned all the deposits that groups had paid to secure the space.

But, she said, weddings were still being booked.

“You can’t cancel weddings,” she said.

At SkyFoods, a Chinese supermarket on Main Street in Flushing, Mark Zhao, 36, the night manager, said the store had planned to hold their annual New Year’s celebration on Tuesday. As always, they had invited wholesalers, management and members of the staff from both of the store’s locations.

But last week they canceled the event, which was supposed to be at the Royal Queen. Hundreds were expected to attend.

“We couldn’t go on and have a party while there is still so much happening in China,” Mr. Zhao, who was wearing a mask, said in Mandarin. “At least for now.”

He added: “When things start to settle down we’ll consider it. Maybe next month.”

Councilman Peter Koo, who attends many of these events every year, said he understood the concern since the parties are large and people often end up sitting with people they don’t know. But he urged caution.

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“We don’t want people to be overly alarmed because there are no confirmed cases,” he said. “We just want everybody to be careful and practice basic hygiene — wash your hands and sneeze into your elbows — and don’t believe everything you see on social media, including Chinese social media. There’s a lot that’s inaccurate.”

Despite the many cancellations, several high-profile Lunar New Year events have occurred as planned. Flushing’s largest Lunar New Year parade happened this past weekend.

“People are tough,” said John Choe, the executive director of the Greater Flushing Chamber of Commerce. “We are going to keep doing what we do.”

He acknowledged that parade turnout was lower this year, but noted that it had rained. “There was lower attendance,” he said, “but we don’t know if it was rain or fear of coronavirus.”

PHOTOS: The sight of people wearing masks in the city has become more common. Chinese-American civic and cultural leaders fear that their community will be blamed or face stigma over the illness.; Empty shelves and no face masks left at a Duane Reade store in Flushing, Queens, on Wednesday. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHANG W. LEE/THE NEW YORK TIMES); Last year, the Lunar New Year Chinese Temple Bazaar in Queens drew between 700 and 1,000 people. (PHOTOGRAPH BY FLUSHING TOWN HALL)

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