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## Fear of SARS hurting Chinatown, Islands' tourism

By [Timothy Hurley](#)  
Advertiser Staff Writer

Not one of Hawaii's handful of suspected cases of severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS, has been confirmed, but the disease is taking a toll here.

Take Theresa Sim. The Hong Kong native is the owner of a Honolulu travel agency that specializes in Far East travel. Bookings to that part of the world have virtually ceased, and overall business is off 40 percent to 50 percent.

For safety reasons, Sim canceled a personal vacation to Hong Kong last month. The trip was aimed at introducing her daughter, an 18-year-old Punahou School senior, to the city and family members.

Sim also admits to rarely going to Honolulu's Chinatown anymore for fear of coming into contact with an infected Asian tourist who might have unknowingly brought SARS to Hawaii.

"I try not to go down there," she said. "When (the tourists) arrive, the first thing they do is go to Chinatown. They know where the good food is."

While the specter of SARS doesn't loom quite as large for most Hawaii residents, the disease is making its mark here — in canceled travel, in rumors that have hurt Chinese-owned business and in an increased level of anxiety.

"It's scary," said Johnson W.K. Choi, tax consultant and president of the Hong Kong China Hawaii Chamber of Commerce. "A lot of people are very, very concerned."

Rampant rumors about Chinatown restaurants being tainted with SARS prompted Gov. Linda Lingle and her staff to dine in the district to demonstrate that the fears are unfounded.

But Choi said it's more than just restaurants that are losing out because of fears and unsubstantiated rumors.

"Some people have the impression that the disease can be shipped over here in products," he said. "Some customers are asking (importers and shop owners) where their products come from before they buy."

Many are canceling trips to Asia — not for fear of catching the disease, but to avoid the backlash from colleagues, clients, friends and family when they return, Choi said.

When Kate Zhou, an associate professor of political science at the University of

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Hawai'i, returned from a recent trip to China, half of her students didn't show up for class. Attendance went back up only after she produced a doctor's note showing proof of her health.

Choi said many employers are strongly discouraging travel to Asia. One of his clients recently came back from a trip and was asked by his boss to either put on a surgical mask or, better yet, to stay away for a couple of weeks.

"Not everyone can afford to put themselves in quarantine that long," he said.

Choi said Hawai'i companies that do business in China are holding fewer face-to-face meetings and instead arranging video conferences and doing as much work as possible via e-mail and the Web.

The World Health Organization has counted nearly 4,600 cases of the disease worldwide, with more than 290 deaths. In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 41 probable cases and no fatalities.

Hawai'i has had no confirmed cases of SARS. Of seven suspected cases, four have been ruled out, but two are considered "probable" because the patients have developed pneumonia.

Growing worries over SARS here have prompted many delegations to cancel or postpone overseas trips to trade shows and conferences. Among them is a state House committee that was scheduled to visit Japan and possibly other countries in hopes of urging Asians to visit Hawai'i despite global terrorism fears and the Iraq conflict.

The Chinese Chamber of Commerce of Hawai'i indefinitely postponed its annual Narcissus Queen Goodwill Tour in June, when more than 60 people were scheduled to accompany the queen on a three-week tour of Hong Kong and China, and the University of Hawai'i has canceled all university-sponsored trips this summer to areas affected by SARS.

Meanwhile, UH-Manoa's Study Abroad Program is monitoring the SARS epidemic on a daily basis to determine whether a language study program on the Chinese island of Hainan will be held this summer. So far no cases of SARS has been reported on the island, and the program is still on, but that is subject to change, said adviser Vanessa Chong.

Despite no reported cases of SARS in South Korea, safety concerns prompted the Hawai'i-based Pacific Basin Economic Council to cancel its annual general meeting in Seoul in May.

The Hawai'i Korean Chamber of Commerce also canceled a trip to a conference in Seoul in June, in part because of SARS.

Daniel Pyun, chamber president, explained there's a fear that Korean students studying in China will bring the disease back home with them after the semester ends.

"Maybe there's nothing to it, but it's spreading quickly and you just don't know," Pyun said.

The East-West Center, meanwhile, is not restricting travel, though two researchers have postponed trips — to Beijing and Guangdong Province — and two traveling journalism programs to Asia have been canceled.

Nancy Lewis, East-West Center director of research and specialist on the geography of health and disease, said the center is still welcoming anyone from Asia, and there are a large number of groups scheduled to study there this summer.

Lewis said that while Hawai'i needs to remain vigilant in watching out for the

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disease, people also have to be reasonable, because the health risk here is "very low."

"There's no cause for panic," she said. "I take any number of phone calls from people asking if Hawai'i is safe. First of all, I tell them I'm not qualified to give medical advice. But I do say the risk is very low."

Relatively few people are affected by SARS on a global scale, she pointed out, and the effect on Hawai'i has been "miniscule."

Still, Chinatown is suffering, even after the governor's visit, said David Chui, co-owner of Seafood Legends Restaurant, though perhaps not quite as much as it once was.

Chui remains exasperated by those who would stay away from Chinatown, believing they might catch SARS.

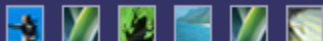
Waikiki has many more Asian visitors, he said, but Chinatown is taking the biggest hit.

"These people need to be told, 'Life is too short,'" Chui said. "In America, so many people die of the flu. With SARS, not one person in the U.S. has died."

Chui paused and said: "Hopefully, this will go away soon."

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