

Wuhan's favorite noodles are back as virus-hit city recovers

WUHAN, China (AP) — The noodles smothered in peanut sauce are as much a trademark of Wuhan as deep-dish pizza in Chicago or spaghetti in Rome. Zhou Guoqiong still isn't allowed to serve customers inside her shop, but the stream of eager customers now lining up outside to take away those noodles testifies to the powerful desire to savor the familiar again after the easing of months of strict lockdown.

Despite radically falling numbers of coronavirus infections, officials emphasize that Wuhan and the rest of China still have a long way to go. But the reappearance of Wuhan's favorite breakfast noodles is a tasty sign that life is slowly beginning to transition to normal in the Chinese city that served as the original epicenter of the global outbreak, first detected in December.

Five days after reopening, Zhou and her husband now sell several hundred bags of *reganmian*, or "hot dry noodles," every day — less than before the outbreak, but more than enough to keep them busy.

"I'm happy as long as there is business," Zhou said.

Wuhan recorded more than 2,500 deaths from the coronavirus and reported more than 50,000 cases, and the city essentially shut down starting January 23.

The head of the National Health Commission, Ma Xiaowei, said the "most dangerous, most critical stage" of the domestic outbreak appears to have passed.



But he was insistent that strict quarantines on travellers and other restrictions such as school closures will be lifted only gradually and very, very carefully.

"At present, the epidemic situation in China is not over," foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said at a daily briefing.

China says almost all of its coronavirus cases are now brought into the country by travellers from abroad, and Wuhan has not recorded any new confirmed or suspected cases in more than a week. Officials have said it must go a full 14

consecutive days without new cases before they lift draconian travel restrictions and social-distancing demands.

That can't come soon enough for Mr. Xiao, who runs a small butcher shop and tries to be guardedly optimistic about the future. He said his stock can last 10 days at the most and he needs to see a big jump in business.

"I estimate in the next several months, I can sell half a cow every day," said Xiao, who declined to give his full name.

Much still hangs in the balance: Will his three partners rejoin the business? And with no other work skills, what will he do if

SLOW PATH TO NORMALCY. A storeowner sells to-go orders of *reganmian*, or "hot dry noodles," in Wuhan, China on March 31, 2020. The reappearance of Wuhan's favorite noodles is a tasty sign that life is slowly returning to normal in the Chinese city at the epicenter of the global coronavirus outbreak. The steady stream of customers buying bags of noodles smothered in peanut sauce testifies to a powerful desire to enjoy the familiar again after months of strict lockdown. (AP Photo/Olivia Zhang)

sales don't pick up?

Along Yanzhi Road in Wuhan's Wuchang district, shops are doing a brisk business in staples such as meat and noodles, their loudspeakers blaring to attract customers.

Outside a food market, a long line formed of mostly elderly customers, all keeping their distance from each other and wearing the required masks, with some adding rubber gloves and hats.

The market operates from only 9:00am to 5:00pm and admits just 30 customers at a time, for a maximum of 20 minutes each. One of those in line, 70-year-old retired civil servant Xiao Yuxia, said she lives by herself and planned to eat fish for the first time in two months.

While many Chinese ordered what they needed using phone apps, 75-year-old retired worker Wang Haitao said he found that too confusing, and he and his wife are finding fewer choices on the list of options provided by community volunteers.

Along with meat, fresh vegetables appeared to be in good supply, though not

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Tokyo Olympics rescheduled for July 23 to August 8 in 2021

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international federations (IF)," organizing committee CEO Toshiro Muto said. "I believe the IFs have accepted the games being held in the summer."

Muto said the decision was made and the IOC said it was supported by all the international sports federations and was based on three main considerations: to protect the health of athletes, to safeguard the interests of the athletes and Olympic sport, and the international sports calendar.

"These new dates give the health authorities and all involved in the organization of the games the maximum time to deal with the constantly changing landscape and the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic," the IOC said. "The new dates ... also have the added benefit that any disruption that the postponement will cause to the international sports calendar can be kept to a minimum, in the interests of the athletes and the IFs."

Both Mori and Muto have said the cost of rescheduling the Olympics will be "massive" — local reports estimate billions of dollars — with most of the expenses borne by Japanese taxpayers.

Muto promised transparency in calculating the costs and testing times deciding how they are divided up.

"Since it (the Olympics) were scheduled for this summer, all the venues had given up hosting any other events during this time, so how do we approach that?" Muto asked. "In addition, there will need to be guarantees when we book the new dates, and there is a possibility this

will incur rent payments. So there will be costs incurred and we will need to consider them one by one. I think that will be the tougher process."

Katsuhiko Miyamoto, an emeritus professor of sports economics at Kansai University, puts the costs as high as \$4 billion. That would cover the price of maintaining stadiums, refitting them, paying rentals, penalties, and other expenses.

Japan is officially spending \$12.6 billion to organize the Olympics. However, an audit bureau of the Japanese government says the costs are twice that much. All of the spending is public money except \$5.6 billion from a privately funded operating budget.

The Switzerland-based International Olympic

Committee is contributing \$1.3 billion, according to organizing committee documents. The IOC's contribution goes into the operating budget.

IOC president Thomas Bach has repeatedly called the Tokyo Olympics the best prepared in history. However, Deputy Prime Minister Taro Aso also termed them "cursed." Aso competed in shooting in the 1976 Olympics, and was born in 1940.

The Olympics planned for 1940 in Tokyo were cancelled because of Japan's war with China.

The run-up to the Olympics also saw IOC member Tsunekazu Takeda, who also headed the Japanese Olympic Committee, forced to resign last year amid a bribery scandal.

Garment workers going unpaid as fashion labels cancel orders

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due to the virus outbreak.

Bangladesh, a nation of 160 million, deployed soldiers and police to enforce a nationwide 10-day shutdown to slow the spread of the coronavirus in the densely populated country. But in an indication of the importance of the garment sector, which provides 80% of the country's export earnings, those factories have been deemed an essential industry.

Kalpona Akter, executive director of the Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity group, blasted buyers for cancelling orders. "The workers are panicked," she told The Associated Press.

"We have a cruel reality here. Simply, they will go hungry, their families will suffer, their children, their parents will suffer for lack of food, medicine. The global brands will lose a fraction of their profit, the owners will also lose their share, but the workers will be left without food and medicine," Akter said.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association said that as of late March, orders worth about \$2.7 billion had been cancelled or suspended, directly affecting nearly 2 million workers.

In a video message, its president, Rubana Huq, urged global buyers including H&M and Wal-Mart to not cancel orders and to accept those already finished or under production.

"We will have 4.1 million workers literally going hungry if we don't all step up to a commitment to the welfare of the workers," Huq said.

"One thing is very clear, our foremost responsibility was towards our workers. We are a manufacturing country, our reality and your reality is totally different, but it is not a time to point out differences, it's a time through which we need to work together," she said.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced a 50 billion taka (more than \$600 million) support package



POOR OUTCOME. Bangladeshis work at the Snowtex garment factory in Dhamrai, near Dhaka, Bangladesh, in this April 19, 2018 file photo. A report released by Mark Anner, director of Pennsylvania State University's Center for Global Workers' Rights, says the coronavirus crisis has resulted in millions of factory workers, mostly women from rural areas, being sent home without the wages or severance pay they are owed. (AP Photo/A.M. Ahad, File)

for export-oriented manufacturers, mainly apparel makers, to help pay workers. But factory owners say it will only provide about one month's salary.

"We appreciate the announcement of the prime minister. This is a very good gesture, but I want to say very humbly that it's very tiny, very small," said S.M. Khaled, managing director of Snowtex Group.

Khaled said his main factory, which employs nearly 10,000 workers, is still running but might have to stop if more orders are cancelled.

"Our buyers are suspending orders, the workers are confused, the owners are confused, this is really a very bad time," he said.

"We have imported fabrics and other necessary products for making garments. Now there is a huge backlog," Khaled said. "How will we survive?"

AP Asia Business Editor Kurtenbach reported from Bangkok.

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