

Smithsonian abruptly cancels Asian American literary festival

In a move that stunned the institution’s event partners and writers who value its sense of community, the program was canceled just weeks before it was to take place in August



By [Sophia Nguyen](#)

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This year’s Asian American Literature Festival — the first since 2019 — seemed destined to feel special.

“Coming off of everything that has happened to the Asian American community in these last few years, it was a completely different feeling. We’ve experienced so much loss, increased violence, discrimination,” said Neelanjana Banerjee, managing editor of Kaya Press, one of the organizers of the event. “This festival is more important than ever.”

The biannual event, produced by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center (APAC), was relatively new. But it had already gained a loyal following for its intimate feel and experimental bent, hosting themed escape rooms and calligraphy tutorials alongside the more standard literary fare of readings by best-selling authors. The 2023 iteration was expected to draw thousands of attendees to Washington in early August.

But just weeks before writers from across the world were due to land, the Smithsonian abruptly canceled the event, citing “unforeseen circumstances.” Internal correspondence shared with The Washington Post indicated that the event had been under routine review for controversial content just before the cancellation, though it is not clear whether or to what extent that may have contributed to the decision.

“We regret deeply the situation and sincerely apologize for any inconvenience this may cause,” APAC’s acting director, Yao-Fen You, wrote in an email to some of the festival’s partners on July 5. “APAC’s project team members will be reaching out to you directly to handle close out. If you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact me directly.”

Leah Jing McIntosh and Rosabel Tan, leaders of a delegation of 10 writers from Australia and New Zealand, received You’s email while on a planning call for the festival. Tan said her immediate reaction was, “Honestly, who is this person?” In the months they had been working on the program, she said, this was their first interaction with APAC’s director.

“We had just been talking to the festival team, hours earlier, about really very specific logistics,” Tan said. “And it just seemed like it had come out of nowhere.”

The governments of Australia and New Zealand had invested \$63,600 in funds for programs they had organized at and around the festival, which included a 10-day residency, a reading with New Zealand’s poet laureate and events at the New Zealand Embassy. Tan and McIntosh asked the Smithsonian for reimbursement of nearly \$24,000 they had spent on flights, visas and other costs, as well as a clear explanation that they could provide to their funders. Tan shared an email with The Post in which You responded by offering her an honorarium of \$750 and McIntosh \$250.

Organizations that had been partners with the Smithsonian on this and previous festivals also were stunned by the announcement. Kaya Press had expected \$22,000 in income for producing several festival events, according to Banerjee, and the small nonprofit publisher had built its budget for the next fiscal year around it. Kundiman, a literary nonprofit, had expected \$10,000 in Smithsonian funds for its programming work. Planning seemed to be unfolding smoothly, said Cathy Linh Che, Kundiman’s executive director. Compared with the 2017 and 2019 festivals, Che said, “we were in a similar place, if not further ahead of schedule.”

Multiple writers told The Post that the Smithsonian never notified them about the cancellation. Ching-In Chen, a poet who was curating a festival event featuring books by trans and nonbinary writers, said they learned the news only when colleagues shared You’s email with them. “It was really upsetting,” said Chen, who described “rage, surprise and bewilderment” at the decision and the Smithsonian’s stated reasoning.

Linda St. Thomas, the Smithsonian’s chief spokesperson, wrote in an email to The Post that You canceled the festival “after thorough analysis of the program status,” citing several concerns. Though the program needed to be fully confirmed by June 2, it was still in draft form by early July, said St. Thomas, adding, “The base setup and av/technical requirements of the numerous, concurrent programs also remained uncertain at this late date.”

She also wrote, “The festival was scheduled to undergo standard review by Smithsonian senior staff, conducted by the Office of the Under Secretary for Museums and Culture, on July 19th. The festival organizers were unable to prepare a full packet of confirmed materials for this review of the program and its content. As the festival could not be executed to the high-level standards required by the Smithsonian, the decision was made to cancel.”

In a follow-up, St. Thomas wrote: “Simply put, the program was cancelled a full month in advance. The program was still in a development stage and we made an administrative decision to cancel rather than present a festival that did not meet Smithsonian standards. No publicity had been done and participants were notified immediately. It was a free event and so there was no issue of refunding tickets. We have nothing further on this.”

Lawrence-Minh Bui Davis, the festival’s director since its founding in 2017 and a curator at the Smithsonian, declined to comment, saying that any press inquiries should be directed to APAC’s director. You and the undersecretary, Kevin Gover, declined to offer additional comment.

Kate Hao, a program coordinator on contract with the Smithsonian for the festival, disputed its timeline. According to emails shared with The Post, festival organizers sent

Smithsonian operations staff a comprehensive list of audiovisual needs in June and a full schedule of programs on May 3. Any changes since then were minor, Hao said, and to be expected while planning a large, complex event. “None of those tweaks would have changed the core character of the festival or its scale,” she said.

“As someone working closely in the core planning team, if there were serious concerns about timeliness, about progress, and how on track we were — I did not receive any of that concern prior to the decision,” Hao said. “I also didn’t receive any requests for information on where we were at that would be needed to assess our progress.”

According to emails shared with The Post, You notified Davis and his team on June 28 that “due to the current political climate,” Smithsonian leadership had requested that all upcoming exhibitions and multiday programs be reviewed under a policy known as Smithsonian Directive 603, which is meant to help identify any potentially sensitive or controversial content and prepare for potential responses from the public. You instructed Davis to work with operations staff to submit a draft memo for her approval by July 3, writing, “As I understand, APAC has a lot of experience with completing this process for past events so none of this should feel new.” Davis submitted the draft to operations staff on July 2, and it was sent to You for review on July 5.

That evening, You sent the email canceling the festival.

Reached again for comment closer to time of publication, the Smithsonian Office of Public Affairs said, “We don’t have anything else on this.”

Sally Wen Mao, a poet who had planned to launch her new book, “The Kingdom of Surfaces,” at this year’s event, said there was “an electricity in the air” at the two previous festivals. It provided, Mao said, “this space where people come together and show their care for one another.” The Smithsonian’s handling of the cancellation and its “cursory” explanation, she said, felt like “the opposite of the ethos of care” that festival organizers had cultivated over the years.

“Beyond the material cost,” Chen said, “I feel really deeply that this is a big loss in terms of our community.”

California poet laureate Lee Herrick, who had been scheduled to host a salon for Asian American adoptee writers and give a reading at the festival, expressed hope that it might return at some point: “These books, these writers, these cultures, are too important to have it be just eliminated.”

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