

Forever Foreigner: The Growing Anti Asian-American Sentiment During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: A global pandemic that began in Wuhan, China has led many people around the world to treat Asians as scapegoats for the catastrophic outcomes of the COVID-19 virus. Extreme xenophobic attitudes towards Asians has been steadily on the rise and in countries like the United States, physical attacks against Asian-Americans were reported in Oakland, California targeting senior citizens. Although Asian-Americans have contributed to American society and economic growth since the late 1800s, Asians are treated as “forever foreigners” whose “Americanness” is often questioned simply because of physical appearances. Research articles regarding racism against Asians in America were collected and explored to show how past treatment of Asians and the current treatment of Asians align in one significant way: Asians are not viewed as Americans.

The media, in particular, reinforced the ideas of “foreignness” of Asian-Americans in the public eye (ie. athletes, entertainers, etc) who are constantly categorized as “other” when asked, “So what country are you from?” Now more than ever, social media outlets such as Tiktok and Instagram show just how rampant racism is against Asians, grouping all Asians as one group despite the unique heritage that many come from. History does not fail to repeat itself in times of outbreaks and pandemics, as the Irish and the Jews were once blamed for bringing tuberculosis to America. In an already dire and stressful situation, the minority group under attack may experience discrimination-related depression and anxiety. In this unique time in history, it is important to document and understand how minority groups may be under attack in an increased effort to educate future generations about discriminatory behavior in times of crisis.

Keywords: Asian-Americans, Racism, Anti-Asian Hate, Covid-19.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, racism against Asian-Americans has heightened in the United States. According to NBC news, there have been 3,800 incidents of racist attacks against Asian-Americans as of March 2021. Attacks can be both verbal and physical, which include racial slurs, shunning, theft, and even murder. A number of Asian elderly were physically assaulted in places like Oakland, California, where one 75-year-old man was murdered during a robbery (Barmann 12). One Asian woman was hit on the face on San Francisco’s Market Street. The woman hit the man in self-defense yelling, “You bum, why did you bully me?” The escalating violence was then met with yet another incident; this time, a mass shooting at a massage parlour in Atlanta, Georgia in which a majority of the people killed were Asian women. The shooter, Robert Aaron Long, expressed that his goal was to eradicate any temptation that affected his sexual addiction (Barmann 12). Long’s motive may not have targeted Asian women overtly but the sexualization of Asian women by Long posed an underlying hate crime.

The racist attacks against Asian-Americans has led the greater public to highlight the ongoing racism through the hashtags #stopAsianhate and #stopAAPIhate across several social media platforms. The blatant incidents of racism seems to be an inevitable phenomenon given the “forever foreigner” status of Asian-Americans in the United States. Therefore, this paper will examine how deep-rooted stereotypes and constant misportrayal of Asians by the media have contributed to the treatment of Asian-Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic.

II. THE ASIAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

To thoroughly understand the heightened racial attacks on Asian-Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to understand how racism has impacted Asian-Americans long before the pandemic ever occurred. Many Asians who are born and raised in the United States are treated as “forever foreigners”, seen as outsiders and not true American in comparison to White Americans. In 2018, Korean-American Olympian Chloe Kim made the news when the interviewer asked her a question regarding her cultural identification (Trieu 2). Kim states, “I always get that question. It’s never my first answer to say that I’m from Korea or, like, ‘I’m Korean.’” After this, she declared, “I am American,” and described herself as a “twinkie” and “banana” which depicts her Asian appearance on the outside and white on the inside.

Before Chloe Kim’s spotlight in the media, the “forever foreigner” trope affected other Asian-American athletes who came before her. During the 1988 Winter Olympics, MSNBC wrote “American beats out Kwan” referring to Tara Lipinski as American even though Michelle Kwan is American herself (Trieu 2). The implication is that Kwan does not “appear” to be American. Then, in another racist portrayal by the media during the 2002 Winter Olympics, Kwan was once again deemed a foreigner when *The Seattle Times* wrote, “American outshines Kwan, Slutskaya in Skating Surprise?” referring to Sarah Hughes as the American while Michelle Kwan is seen as the ‘other’ (Trieu 2). The media’s dialogue and reporting reflects the colonial relationship between White Americans and Asian-Americans. The notion that America belongs to White Americans is reflective of the ways in which many Asian countries have been colonized by Europe throughout history. Some examples include Spain and the Philippines, Great Britain and India, and the Netherlands and Indonesia. With these systems, the ideas of white supremacy over indigenous cultures and immigrative groups from Asia and the Pacific Islands have been reinforced throughout history.

Even in schools today, many young Asian-American students who were born and raised in the United States lack representation in the classroom. The 2006 California U.S. History Standards have pointed out the eurocentric perspective of history books in which many minority groups are mere background characters behind White historical figures (Trieu 3). Although some high schools have begun to offer Asian American history courses, this only occurs at the special request of the student body or faculty members. Therefore, from their early years in elementary school all the way to college, Asian students are once again treated as “forever foreigners”.

The invisible status of Asians in America has led many Asian Americans to internalize racism in many ways. Living with a “double consciousness”, Asians are often in a constant state of awareness of how they are viewed in the eyes of White Americans.

III. ASIANS AS SCAPEGOATS

Wuhan, China is a city that is over 7,000 miles from America, and yet, many Americans have been pointing their fingers at Asian Americans and Asian immigrants living in the United States for the pandemic in an act of blatant racism. Many blamed all Chinese citizens, who had little to do with the virus. To associate all Asians around the world as scapegoats of the pandemic is of grave concern because it has exacerbated the already existing racism that many Asian Americans have faced for over a century in the United States.

Throughout history, immigrants and foreigners have been the target of scapegoating in times of an epidemic. Before these ethnicities were accepted under the general categorization of “white” it was believed that the Irish and Jews brought tuberculosis to America which coined the term the “Jewish disease.” Similarly in the 1930s, when syphilis spread across America, it was referred to as the “French pox” or the “Chinese disease” in an attempt to shift blame away from the actual issues and place blame on the “out-group” as if their perceived “immorality” or cultural norms were the reasons for the illness (Li 1).

Cultural practices from many Asians lately gave the common stereotype “yellow peril.” Yellow peril is a metaphor towards East Asians who are foreign and a threat to the Western world. The term “yellow peril” became a popular term in the mid-1900s when a group of Chinese people immigrated into the United States to work in the mining, agriculture, and railroad industries. From the start of the early industrialization era, there was a growing hatred for overall immigrants because many settlers and colonists felt that their jobs were being taken away. Not only this, overpopulation became an issue in specific areas which led to the overflowing of tenement houses (Sharp 1).

In particular, at moments of crisis or competition, the yellow peril discourse frequently comes to the forefront. When

Japan was blamed for US economic difficulties in the 1980s and early 1990s, the perceived threat of this Asian country was quickly linked to Asian Americans and triggered a spike of anti-Asian aggression in the United States (Sharp 1). One case in point is the brutal killing of Chinese American Vincent Chin in Detroit in 1982 by two White auto workers who called Vincent a “Jap” (Li 3). The quick association to group Asians and confer competition with an Asian nation (Japan) to anti-Asian violence exemplifies that Asian Americans were regarded as outsiders and potential foes to America. This conspicuous anti-Asian racism reflects Whites’ sense of entitlement to ‘defend’ what they assume ‘belongs’ to them and to fight against groups who deemed a threat to Whites’ privilege and well-being.

IV. ANTI-ASIAN RACISM DURING COVID-19

In the case of COVID-19, social media has exacerbated the problem by spurring on the most hateful comments towards Asians. An example of this was from a PhD candidate who stated on a Facebook comment, “There is a special place in hell reserved for the f--king Chinese and their archaic culture...I wish it had wiped the whole country off the planet...China will learn nothing and will continue to consume wildlife into extinction. What a horrible, backwards culture and way of thinking.” These stereotypes which have always been around are especially mentioned during times of crisis- for example blaming “unhygienic” Chinese cultural habits for the emergence of severe acute respiratory syndrome (Kapiriri & Ross 1). As we have seen with the exponential increase in Asian American hate crimes during this pandemic has shown the real life dangers and consequences of this type of baseless stereotyping. The COVID-19 pandemic has recently spurred a resurgence of many of these racist tropes such as Chinese people eating strange and potentially contaminated food under the guise of health related fears. It is clear that how the media portrayed the outbreak during the onset of the pandemic,

A recent study which surveyed Chinese-Americans and their experiences with racism during the pandemic revealed that 1 in 4 participants regardless of age personally experienced or witnessed racial discrimination against Asian Americans as a result of the virus (Cheah 2). Social and popular media as a whole especially in this day and age have a huge effect on how the general population perceive and discuss issues. Whether intentional or not, the misportrayal of the Corona virus in the media has had and will continue to have a wide and lasting effect on society. For instance President Trump refers to COVID-19 as the “Kung Flu” or the “Wuhan Virus” implicating that the virus somehow is intrinsically linked to Asian culture. Referring to the outbreak in this way encourages xenophobia and clearly goes against the recommendations of the World Health Organization, which released a statement in 2015 discouraging the practice of naming diseases after geographical locations, individuals, culture, population, industry, or occupation (Wang et al. 3688).

V. RACISM AND MENTAL HEALTH

In addition to racism in the media, a survey of 9,654 American adults revealed about four-in-ten say it is more common for people to express racist views about people who are Asian than before COVID-19, and about four-in-ten Asian adults say people have acted as if they were uncomfortable around them because of their race or ethnicity since the beginning of the outbreak (Ruiz 8). Racial discrimination has long been linked to negative mental health outcomes and we can see how the impact of the pandemic reaches past just financial and medical concerns as Asian Americans continue to get targeted for the spread of the virus. Another study of 400 Asian Americans which surveyed participants on whether, “(a) Asians and Asian Americans experienced significant racial discrimination (both overt and microaggressions) during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic; (b) Asians and Asian Americans experienced significant mental, physical, and sleep health problems during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic; (c) Asians and Asian Americans who experienced more racial discrimination will also have experienced more mental, physical, and sleep health problems” (Lee 2), the results of which showed that most of the participants felt that the pandemic fueled anti-Asian sentiment and that there is a direct mental and social consequence that Asian Americans are experiencing due to this increase in tensions. As revealed through the study the increase in anxiety and depression symptoms during the first months of the pandemic and the elevated symptoms in those who experienced discrimination. Asian Americans would benefit from increased mental health services to help cope with the lasting effects of increased racism during a time of global crisis. For example, the findings suggested that “intergroup contact, cultural competency trainings, and anti-racism efforts that explicitly address and debunk anti-Asian sentiment are necessary” (Lee 1), in order to help offset the current climate of discrimination and could help prevent poorer health outcomes among vulnerable Asian American communities. As the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are still ongoing it is yet to be seen to what extent the media and general society will continue to perpetuate racism towards the Asian American community. However, based on the current data the mental and interpersonal stress from the outbreak will most likely continue to have consequences even if we are able to return to a state of normalcy.

VI. CONCLUSION

Even in modern times, approximately 98% of racism study participants experienced some form of microaggression (Alvarez & Liang 2). It can be argued that the severity and lengthened duration of the pandemic has led to increasingly negative stereotypical portrayals of Asian-Americans in the media. It is also important to consider that even though Asian-Americans would benefit from a variety of mental health services they are less likely to seek treatment compared to other minorities (Lee and Waters 77). Given this, it would be especially pertinent to see the psychological impact that anti-Asian hate has had on Asian-American students already dealing with the added stress of online learning amidst a global pandemic.

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