

# The Roots of Anti-Asian Racism in the U.S.: The Pandemic and ‘Yellow Peril’

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COVID-19 has exacerbated anti-Asian racism—the demonization of a group of people based on their perceived social value—in the United States in the cultural and political life. Offering strategies for inclusion during and after the pandemic, this article analyzes the history and language of racism, including the notion of yellow peril. Racialized thinking and racial discourses are institutionalized as power relations, take the form of political marginalization of minority groups, and cause emotional distress and physical harm.

## 1. Introduction

The outbreak of the global pandemic of COVID-19 caused by SARS-CoV-2 (severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus) in early 2020 has exacerbated anti-Asian racism in the United States that was already brewing in previous years during the Trump administration. Social distancing—a practice to help slow down the spread of the disease—furthered the misunderstanding between dominant and marginalized racial groups. By late April 2020, 54% of the global population (4.2 billion people) were subject to complete or partial lockdowns (WHO, 2020). The stay-at-home orders have accelerated anonymous hate

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speech online. The lockdown has slowed down time, slowed down the spread of virus, and turned back the clock on human rights by inadvertently curtailing the rights of minority groups.

Due to the stay-at-home order, more people found time to tune into social media to connect with like-minded individuals for socialization and venting. By the end of May, 2020, there were more than four hundred COVID-related subreddits on Reddit.com, among them the anti-Asian group /r/China\_flu. Anti-Asian sentiments rose with Donald J. Trump's use of the term "Chinese virus." There are 72,000 active users in this group who, compared to the 542,000 users in the official /r/Coronavirus group, overlap more frequently with extreme communities. These users demonstrated anti-Asian, and more specifically Sinophobic behaviors, on Reddit, Twitter, and 4chan during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic(Zhang, Keegan, Lv, & Tan, 2020).

Hate speech on social media fueled violence in real life. In Los Angeles County alone, 245 incidents of hate crime were reported, between March 20-October 28, 2020, to Asian Pacific Planning and Policy Council, the leading aggregator of COVID-19-related hate incidents against Asian Americans in the U.S. 90% of individuals believed they were discriminated against due to their race, and Chinese-Americans experienced the highest rates of hate (35%). Nationwide, by late April, more than 1,500 incidents of racism (125 of which were physical attacks) were reported to the Asian Pacific Planning and Policy Council(Stop AAPI Hate, 2020). Not surprisingly, 58% of the incidents took place in New York and California, regions with large Asian-American populations(Fang, 2020). The increase in anti-Asian racist incidents is evident when we consider that hate crimes against Asian-Americans actually dropped 30.8% from 2014-2018, according to the FBI's Uniform Crime Report(University of Colorado Denver, 2020).

## **2. COVID-19 and racism in the U.S.**

There is a long history behind racism. To better understand the current toxic sentiments,

we need to take stock of the history of race in the United States. First, historically there were many incidents linking perception of people of East Asian descent to deceases, forming precedents to the current wave of pandemic-induced anti-Asian racism. Since the first Chinese immigrants and railroad workers arrived in the U.S. in the nineteenth century, there has been anti-Asian racism that, over time, has taken multiple forms, many of which are precedents to the current demonization of people of East Asian descent. Historically, Chinese-Americans were accused of eating vermin and associated with disease and unhygienic practices. During COVID-19, wearing face masks—validated by the latest scientific research—is used widely as a measure to contain the pandemic. However, in spring, 2020, ironically, Asian-Americans were vilified when they wore face masks to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus. A good hygienic practice during the pandemic was used in hate speech to frame Asian-Americans as the source of the disease.

COVID-19 does not discriminate, but racial discrimination adds undue stress to the society as a whole. This global public health emergency threatens our ability to concentrate and our cognitive resources for important information. To combat anti-Asian racism in the wake of COVID-19, rather than serving up a harangue or diatribe, I propose we can increase our cognitive bandwidth by learning more about histories of racism.

In contemporary American culture, race has multiple and contradictory meanings. On the one hand, race commonly refers to heritable traits of skin color and hair type. On the other hand, race is associated with culturally inflected mannerisms, such as what one eats, how one speaks, and how one carries herself or himself. In current American cultural discourses, race often brings to mind people who are not white, while whiteness remains unmarked and serves as a benchmark category—as if white is not a race. The second feature in American racial discourses is the alignment of a race-based social group with innate or inner qualities rather than class. Third, the focus on black and white sometimes obscures other groups within the United States, such that Hispanics, Latinos, Chicanos, and Native Americans often fall under the rubric of ethnicities rather than “race.”

### 3. Racial discourse: *Yellow Danger*

At the core of racial discourses lie the metaphors of illness, which is ideologically linked to the current forms of racism fueled by COVID-19. These metaphors often describe an entire people, because “the body [is seen as] a model for political community” in the

Figure 1. “The magic washer, manufactured by Geo. Dee, Dixon, Illinois. The Chinese must go”



Source: Chicago: Shober and Carqueville Lith Co., 1886. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

metonymic frame of understanding race (Rojas, 2013). One thing we notice in our current climate is that the language of disease is intimately connected to racism. This is not a new phenomenon. An example is this advertisement from 1886. The cartoon shows Uncle Sam holding a proclamation and a can of Magic Washer (a soap) while kicking Chinese out of the U.S. The caption reads “The Chinese must go.” The implications are that the Chinese are the origin and carriers of virus and germs.

In 1895, after China’s defeat in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895), both Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and the Chinese scholar Yan Fu used the phrase yellow peril and the metaphor of a “sick man” (*die gelbe Gefahr and bingfu*) to describe East Asian and particularly Chinese people. In 1898, the concept became the title of British novelist M.P. Shiel’s short story *Yellow Danger*(Rojas, 2013). Resistance of this metaphor of an ill race took center stage in an anonymous poem in Chinese that was very widely circulated over the Internet in the months leading up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Entitled “To the West,” the poem self-consciously comments on the contradiction behind the image of a threatening sickman: “When we were called the Sick Man of Asia, we were also called the yellow peril. Now when we are billed as the next super power, we are called a threat.”<sup>1)</sup> The biopolitics and the colonial history of the metaphor continue to inform modern day encounters between Asian and Western epistemologies of race.

#### 4. Yellow peril and yellow fever

There is a long legal and institutional history behind the idea of yellow peril. The United States’s often self-contradictory, love-hate relationship with female Asian immigrants can be traced back to the era of the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was in force from 1882 to 1943, a time when whiteness became the dominant racial norm in the United States. It was also a time when, as Frank Dikköter observes, the country’s “Anglo-Saxon foundation

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1) <http://blog.renren.com/share/247670697/4666114019>, accessed February 1, 2018, Alexa Alice Joubin’s translation.

coalesced with other ‘assimilable’ European immigrant ethnicities”(Dikötter, 2015). Chinese immigrants were both the desirable other in service of the United States and a codified threat. For example, female Chinese immigrants were assumed to be sex workers unless proven otherwise under the Page Act(1875) which was enacted under the guise of anti-trafficking laws. Similar restrictions were imposed on Indian women in British colonial Caribbean(Kempadoo, Sanghera & Pattanaik, 2015). At work here are both the “yellow peril” discourse and an imperial civilizing rescue mission. Before 1922, if a female U.S. citizen married a foreign man, she would assume the citizenship of her husband and lose her U.S. citizenship. The Cable Act of 1922 partially amended the situation by allowing married women to retain their U.S. citizenship if their husbands were “aliens eligible to naturalization.” Asians were not eligible for U.S. citizenship, and American women who married Asian men would not be protected by the Cable Act.

The idea of yellow peril intersects with the gender stereotype known as yellow fever. The racialized myth about Asian women provides a partial explanation of the baffling phenomenon of white supremacists in the U.S. exclusively dating Asian women. The exceptionalism that white nationalists have granted to Asian-Americans falls neatly along a gendered fault line. While Asian-Americans are often seen as the hard-working model minority who assimilate well into North American society, it is specifically, and only, Asian women who the white nationalists embrace. These cases show that the discourse of Asian-Americans as a model minority only go so far; they disproportionately bear the brunt of racism in times of national crisis.

Punning on the disease of the same name, David Henry Hwang uses yellow fever in his play *M. Butterfly* (1988) to describe white men with a sexual fetish for East Asian women who are imagined to be subservient, dainty, and more feminine than their Western counterparts. In contemporary American media and popular discourse on dating, the term is used to identify and sometimes to critique the social phenomenon of white men exclusively preferring East Asian women. This Orientalist tendency is captured in Debbie

Lum's 2012 documentary film, *Seeking Asian Female*, in which the director interviews white men who exhibit "yellow fever" in San Francisco. The fetish makes Asian women interchangeable. East Asian women are seen as erotic because they are perceived to be exotic in physique and manners. The interviewees pointed to East Asian women's facial features: "it's the long black hair that is really eye catching." They also mentioned their love interests' perceived submissive personalities: "they are kind of subtle and kind of quiet," as reasons for their dating preference. The intersecting racial and sexual discourses turn Asian identities from colonial subjects to consumable, Asian female bodies.

As is often the case, without contact with or the threat from other groups, there is generally no perceived need for self-definition. Is one born "yellow," or does one become Asian? In pre-modern China, peoples of many ethnicities and cultural origins "became" black in the Chinese consciousness. Increased cross-cultural contacts seemed to have only broadened the idea of blackness. Numerous peoples were given the label "black." Initially the Nam-Viet peoples and Malaysians, China's Southeast Asian neighbors, were designated black in the Tang dynasty, but with China's increased encounters with slaves from Africa (modern-day Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania) from the seventh to the seventeenth centuries, the "blacks" in Chinese consciousness expanded to include peoples from various parts of the world, including Bengali peoples of the Indian subcontinent, who were deemed different from the local population (Wyatt, 2010).

Likewise East Asians became "yellow" after the eighteenth century physician Johann Friedrich Blumenbach categorized them as such. The pseudo-scientific classification of human features during the enlightenment and epistemologies of race derived from them formed a mutually validating and energizing synergy. The system of knowledge that emerges from this combination is then put to political use. As Michael Keevak observes, "there was something dangerous, exotic, and threatening about East Asia that yellow ... helped to reinforce, [as the term is] symbiotically linked to the cultural memory of a series of invasions from that part of the world" (Keevak, 2011). In many contemporary societies

across the globe, skin color “as a biological concept,” as K. Anthony Appiah notes, is short hand for racial identification along with “a few visible features of the face and the head”(Appiah & Gutmann, 1998).

However, linguistically constructed epistemologies of race play an important role among strategies of racialization both for the purpose of solidarity, of binding groups together, and alienation or the exclusion of individuals or groups from the mechanisms of power. As we have seen, race is profoundly constituted by language. It’s all about the words we choose to use.

Living in a time of hate, Asian-Americans experience a duality of racialized existence between two communities, which has been articulated by various critics, most notably by W.E.B. Du Bois. In 1897, Du Bois used the term “double consciousness,” or a double life, to describe the black experience in the United States a “peculiar sensation … of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” He speaks of the black community’s two irreconcilable strivings and compares the “history of the American Negro” to a history of the struggle between “two souls, two thoughts, two warring ideals in one dark body … [as one attempts to be] both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows”(Du Bois, 1903)<sup>2</sup>). The repression of black identity in the United States has made it difficult for African-Americans to unify their black and American identities(Du Bois, 1977).

The double-consciousness of the Asian-American community is sometimes captured in code switching and choices between the dominant language and one’s native tongue. For people in the diaspora, in exile, and in minority communities, language is both a unifying force and an unbearable burden as they oscillate between the imperialist tradition and a

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2) W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, New York: Dover, 1903, 2-3. The term was first used in an Atlantic Monthly article titled “Strivings of the Negro People” in 1897.



resistance tradition(Lippi-Green, 2012). Asian accents are depicted as interchangeable and can be consolidated into one unifying identity, as in the film *Falling Down* (dir. Joel Schumacher, 1993). The white-collar worker William “D-Fens” Foster lashes out at a Korean shopkeeper:

D-Fens: You give me seventy “fie” cents back for the phone. What is a fie? There is a “V” in the word. Fie-vuh. Don’t they have “v”s in China?

Shopkeeper: Not Chinese. I am Korean.

D-Fens: Whatever. What differences does that make? You come over here and take my money and you don’t even have the grace to learn to speak my language.

Accents, particularly those that distort the predominant language in a community, are intimately connected to racial thinking, and identities become collapsible. As this scene shows, the burden of communication is typically placed on the non-native speaking diasporic subject who exists between two accents and two cultural realms. The protagonist has been unemployed, and his family has disintegrated. His life story is a snapshot of the breakdown of society. The final shoot-out on the pier enacts a perverse fantasy of the American dream, the kind of death-wish that is there at the end of Willy Loman’s life in *Death of a Salesman*.

## 5. Conclusion: Strategies for Inclusion

These case studies reveal that we need cognitive abilities to survive the global pandemic, and yet racism depletes our bandwidth for cognition. An example of the perils of losing one’s bandwidth for cognition during a crisis would be the people who run in the wrong direction when the house is on fire. In high stress situations people rely more on their intuition rather than analytical reasoning. However, our intuition is influenced by our implicit biases that hinder deep thinking about issues.

Moving forward, in addition to developing and safeguarding our bandwidth for cognition by learning more about history, political coalition and legislation could contribute to decreasing racist sentiments. Such terms as the “Chinese flu” should be outlawed as much as words such as negro. In the U.S., the House of Representatives passed, in September, 2020, a resolution condemning “all forms of anti-Asian sentiment as related to COVID-19” in a 243-164 vote. This is the House’s first measure to address anti-Asian discrimination related to the pandemic.

Race, like many identity markers, is social shorthand for articulating differences. Thinking through race estranges what is taken for granted. We study race historically not only to find roots of modern racism, but also to discover other views that may have been obscured by more dominant ideologies such as colonialism. Reading histories of race may be a passive act, but if it leads to recognition of one’s self in others, then it is an important step forward for our society as a whole.

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