

COVID-19 and Asian Phobia: Anti-Asian Racism and Model Minority Myth

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As co-editors of the 2021 special issue of *Educational Research and Development Journal*, we developed this issue with commentaries and research articles addressing the issue theme, *Dismantling Systems of Racism Against Asians and Asian-Americans*. We use the word “system” in the issue theme title for the following considerations. The recently intensified racial discrimination events against Asians and Asian Americans are not simply sporadic and senseless events or even crimes against Asian and Asian Americans fueled by the pandemic and the tensions between China and the United States. These racist events have their roots in the systemic anti-Asian sentiments and behaviors in history to the present date because of their looks, cultural traditions, and languages in the mainstream culture. These anti-Asian sentiments and behaviors were often reinforced and even driven by governmental policies and laws. Thus, it is essential to understand these events and phenomena and their historical roots to address them appropriately and effectively.

Anti-Asian Racism in the United States

Like most other ethnic minorities, Asians came to North America for a better life, and they have made a significant contribution to the development of North America over the years. Using Chinese Americans in the United States as an example, over 70,000 Chinese Americans work in the construction, utilities, and agriculture sectors, that is 2.6% of all the U.S. civil engineering professionals considering Chinese Americans only count less than 1.5 percent of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018).

This situation is not surprising for people familiar with the history of Chinese Americans. From 1865 to 1869, over 20,000 Chinese laborers were recruited to construct the first transcontinental railway, Central Pacific Railroad (Carson, 2005). They assumed 90% of the heavy labor work in constructing the western half of the railroads, including blacksmithing, carpentry, tunneling, leveling roadbeds, laying tracks, and so on (Thematic Report on Chinese American Contributions: Infrastructure, 2021). While playing an unparalleled role and making tremendous sacrifices in building the country’s railroad networks shaping the economic prosperity and development in the following centuries, Chinese workers rarely appeared in news reports, photo documents, or commemorations on completing the project (Chang, 2019). The media’s negligence of Chinese workers’ contribution was one of the earlier examples of how Chinese Americans were excluded as part of the U.S. population fabric regardless of what they did. Later in 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was enacted to intentionally prohibit Chinese immigrants from entering the United States to work in construction, farming, and mining despite the need for hard labor (Chen, 2015).

Such a racial exclusion was not merely for the Chinese Americans. All Asian Americans encountered multiple waves of discrimination in U.S. history. Japanese Americans lost freedom because they were assumed to be spies for Japan during the Second World War. After Japanese troops attacked Pearl Harbour, U.S. Congress declared war on Japan. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 to empower the military commanders to exclude “any and all” Japanese Americans from military zones. This order was claimed for national security purposes. Yet, it resulted in over 110,000 massive internments of Japanese Americans living in

the western United States in the camps where they had no freedom to come and go (Ng, 2001). They were “forcibly relocated and interned in barely inhabitable camps” (Yates et al., 2007, p.111) and went through traumatic experiences of losing their properties, freedom, and civil rights.

Moreover, the governmental discourse further reinforced and fueled the anti-Asian sentiment in the United States during the Second World War (Thiesmeyer, 1995). Besides the deprivation of Asian Americans’ political rights and freedom, their commercial activities were also restricted. One representative example is the Alien Land Law enacted in 1913 by California authorities, which officially stated that Asian immigrants were not eligible for citizenship or owning land (Kim & Kim, 1977). In the following decades, a series of discriminatory laws on restricting Asians’ property rights swept across over ten states in the United States. While the U.S. Supreme Court finally defined the California Alien Land Laws as unconstitutional in 1952 in the case of *Sei Fuji v. California* after decades of struggling (Lyon, 2012), it took some states much longer to abolish similar Alien Land Laws. For example, Kansas and New Mexico did not repeal these laws until 2002 and 2006, respectively (Bronstein, 2012). Florida’s state constitution contained this provision until 2018, when voters passed a ballot to repeal it (Emmanuel, 2020). The decades of Asian Americans’ struggle for property rights manifested the difficulty of eliminating anti-Asian discrimination at the government level.

While the discriminatory property laws were gradually repealed, Asian Americans still faced political labels and repressions in the late 1940s through the 1950s. During this period, U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy proposed a series of practices and policies, so-called McCarthyism, to wipe out the communist infiltration in the various parts of the U.S. government by accusing the people suspected as communists of menace and treason (Schrecker, 1999). After the People’s Republic of China entered the Korean War in the 1950s on the side of North Korea, Chinese American communities became the targets of McCarthyism (Brooks, 2019). Chinese Americans were in terror and even “wrestled with the sense that being Chinese is itself a crime,” according to journalist Gilbert Woo’s scripts. To avoid being incarcerated like Japanese Americans during the Second World War, many Chinese Americans were forced to distance themselves from the propaganda potentially associated with communism. Instead, they displayed their loyalty to the U.S. government by participating in anti-communist parades, carrying American flags, and publically denouncing those banners and slogans connected with the ideas of communism.

Even in the 21st century, Asian Americans still could not gain the deserved respect and recognition from the U.S. authorities. Of several similar cases was the arrest of Dr. Xi Xiaoxing, a Chinese physics professor at Temple University accused of stealing and selling American secrets to China, which ended with the U.S. Department of Justice dropping the charge in 2015 (Matt Apuzzo, 2015). During President Trump’s administration, more Asian scholars were accused of espionage or stealing techniques and information from U.S. laboratories. The acting director of the National Counterintelligence and Security Center, Michael Orlando, claimed that China stole between \$200 to \$600 billion worth of American intellectual property per year implying Chinese American scholars as the suspects (Morell, 2021). Many Chinese universities were on the black lists for collaborations with U.S. institutions (Chen, 2021). Most Chinese scholars in U.S. universities were afraid of working with colleagues in China for fear of being investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Feng, 2019). The anti-Asian movement was only intensified as COVID-19 broke out at the end of 2019 and became a pandemic in 2020.

Four Commentaries

In this issue, we first bring you four commentaries from the scholars who have developed solid expertise and experiences on various issues related to anti-Asian and Asian Americans. Using three vignettes, Dr. Aubrey Wang described her teaching, research, and leadership transformation from the unconscious and invulnerable to conscious and vulnerable in the first commentary. In particular, she shared with us how she transformed from a primarily quantitative researcher to a researcher with mixed methods and adopted testimonial-critical qualitative research methodology as a Chinese American immigrant in the 1980s. Following her mother's advice, Dr. Wang worked hard at school, kept her head down, and assimilated herself into the American White society by adopting the dominant White values and behaviors as her own. The massacre of six Asian women in Atlanta and many other anti-Asian events during the COVID-19 pandemic awoke her. It made her realize that she was a typical Asian woman—defenseless and helpless. She questioned her identity as an American citizen and experienced disbelief and fear because her profile matched that of the typical victim. Dr. Wang walked out of her comfort zone, gained new insights from critical theories used mainly by Black and Latino scholars, and started to reshape her identity as a Chinese American. With her emerging new identity, she took a leadership role and launched a new program concentration on diversity, equity, and inclusion in her university.

Dr. Zhang-Wu mystified the misconception of Chinese international students as raceless and linguistically deficient. Using her own experiences as a former member of the Chinese international student community, she pointed out that Chinese international students were often lumped together with students from other countries and regions and were categorized as “non-resident aliens.” However, they are the largest ethnic group of the entire international student enrollment. They were often misconceived as learners with limited English language proficiency. Dr. Zhang-Wu called for asset-based approaches to value Chinese international students' multilingual identities and capacity to understand people from various cultures. In addition, she noted that the intense political relationship between China and the United States significantly damaged the academic exchange between the two countries for fear of heavy scrutiny and potential threats to national security.

Dr. Sharon Lee focused on the stereotypes of Asian American students as the model minority and challenged this stereotype based on statistical measures of academic achievement. She argued that Asian American students became the first racialized non-White group to reach and exceed parity and became “over-represented” on U.S. campuses due to their quiet hard work and high grade-point-average. However, they have been marginalized from discussions about racism, diversity, minority student needs, and racial equity. Further, this colorblind racism deprived Asian American students' right to racially relevant curriculum and support services. Dr. Lee showed us how Asian American students have been racialized as yellow peril foreigners and how anti-Asian racism has persisted on campuses. It is especially the cases in how they were blamed for the coronavirus and Zoom bombed with racial slurs and verbally and physically assaulted.

In addition to the sharp increase in anti-Asian discrimination and violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Guofang Li presented three additional pandemics that Asian Americans face: Anti-Asian racism, Sinophobia, and the model minority myth. She pointed out that this intersectional harm of multiple pandemics has spread from streets to schools. Many K–12 Asian students chose remote learning because they did not feel safe in school due to the anti-Asian racism. In higher education, Asian students were harassed, and Asian scholars were scrutinized. She argued that the model minority myth prevents teachers and counselors from seeing Asians as having various talents in non-academic areas and paying attention to their diverse needs.

Moreover, the model minority stereotype negatively impacts Asian students, such as mental health issues, stress, depression, and anxiety, and harms their relationship with the other ethnic groups. For example, the myth divides Asians from Black, Latinos, and the Indigenous people, making it hard to form alliances to fight against racism and discrimination. Although positive actions to address anti-Asian racism during pandemics have been taken in Canada and the United States, Dr. Li urged to build a solid alliance among people of diverse backgrounds. Such an alliance is necessary to effectively address anti-Asian discriminations, including those rooted in Asian American/Canadian history and those in the curriculum for K-12 education.

Three Articles

In addition to the four commentaries, we also present three research articles criticizing xenophobia or discrimination against East Asian descent in the United States. In the first article, Dr. Nobuko Adachi reports how East Asian Americans were assaulted or harassed during the COVID-19 pandemic using her own experience and the relevant empirical studies with statistics as a base. Dr. Adachi compared East Asian restaurants with Mexican/Italian restaurants and East Asian Americans with other minorities focusing on the religion and language. She explained why most East Asian American restaurants were “closed” during the pandemic and why the voice of this minority failed to reach the mainstream using these comparisons as a base. Dr. Adachi further analyzed the U.S. politician’s use of language and metaphors for the East Asian community during the COVID-19 pandemic and concluded that the language and metaphors, such as Chinese virus, Kung Flu, Communist China, revitalized the pre-existing discrimination against East Asian minorities. In particular, Dr. Adachi argued that Donald Trump, former U.S. President, used social media to disseminate fake news and contributed to the fear of exotic diseases and a Communist plot to take away American individualism and freedom. Finally, by reviewing the history of anti-Asian racism in the United States during various periods, Dr. Adachi discussed the “forever foreigner” status of Asian Americans and posit that the fear of a Yellow Peril, which started in the 19th and 20th centuries, had continued and remains in the United States in a different form.

In the second article, Dr. Jingshun Zhang and Ms. Halpern described a Chinese immigrant family’s experience during the COVID-19 pandemic when schools transitioned to online learning. Their interviews with the mother and her two children in a middle school in California suggested challenges in engaging students in online learning. These challenges included but were not limited to interactions with classmates and teachers, family’s coping mechanisms to deal with discrimination, and prejudice against Chinese immigrants. The study showed how the family’s Chinese cultural tradition focusing on academic success and prosperity helped the children cope with incidents of anti-Chinese bias and called for educators to fight against prejudice, discrimination, and microaggressions that Asian Americans experienced during the pandemic.

In the third article, Dr. Lei Chen and Huijing Wen examined Chinese international students’ experiences in a U.S. university before and during the COVID-19 pandemic drawing on interview data from 34 undergraduate students and 10 of their faculty members. Through the lenses of neo-racism and model minority theoretical frameworks, this study reported that Chinese international students were labeled with positive attributes aligned with the model minority stereotypes. For example, under the model minority stereotype was the bias that Chinese international students lacked higher-level cognitive thinking skills and intellectual capacity. Such a bias often led to the feeling of these students that they were excluded from their deserved academic experience. Therefore, the authors argue that U.S. universities should provide more support to international

students in general and Chinese international students, in particular, to make the campus more welcoming and inclusive.

In conclusion, we sincerely hope this special issue with a collection of commentaries and research articles is valuable in three ways: a) Enrich our thinking about discrimination issues and unjust challenges that Asians and Asian Americans face; b) Enhance our articulation about the historical and social reasons for these problems and challenges; and c) Inspire our efforts in challenging and fighting against these discriminations and unjustness. We also would like to take this opportunity to thank every reviewer for this special issue. Their thorough and constructive suggestions and comments enhanced the quality of this issue and made it possible. We and all members of the Chinese American Educational Research and Development Association greatly appreciate their efforts.

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