

# The Novel Strain of Anti-Asian Discrimination

by Anavi Jalan

*My essay is important to me both because of its relevance to our increasingly chaotic, epidemic-stricken world, and because it taught me a lot about the perception and position of Asian Americans within our society. While writing it, I delved into the history of APA immigration and learned about various microaggressions and misconceptions surrounding Asians at large, and I was able to come out of the research process with an interesting realization about how the coronavirus has affected these perceptions. The essay also tackles the idea of racial hierarchies being used to preserve white supremacy in the US, which is another significantly relevant concept to consider in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. Though the tides of social discourse are always changing, history never fails to repeat itself, and my essay highlights the essentiality of historical understanding when analyzing social injustices. I hope that anyone who reads my piece feels equally educated and empowered to create change and advocate for racial and social equality.*

*When drafting this piece, which served as the final essay for my “Writing in Community” Expository Writing course, I created a new process for myself, which prior to the course had consisted of frantically typing out a single draft the night before the deadline. Through writing this paper, I learned the importance of getting out a not-so-great first draft, following it up with a mostly-complete-yet-slightly-imperfect second draft, and lastly creating a refined final version that I’m entirely proud of. My first draft was 5 pages, and while it could’ve been considered an acceptable or complete essay, it didn’t include all the ideas that I wanted to express, and my argument and conclusion weren’t fully articulated. I attempted to flesh these out in my second draft, and ended up adding 2 more pages to better explain the central idea of my paper and supply more evidence for my argument. Both drafts were shared with a few other students for peer-review, and my peers commented that, while I had thoroughly elaborated on the model minority myth, I hadn’t given equal weight to the concept of the yellow peril. So in my final draft, I researched more extensively and added a page on the yellow peril, as well as a slightly more refined conclusion.*

—Anavi Jalan

---

In early December 2019, COVID-19, or the disease caused by the new coronavirus strain SARS-CoV-2, emerged in Wuhan, China and has since become a pandemic, causing over 320,000 deaths globally as of May 2020 (Brewis). As the disease moved into European and

American populations, xenophobia and anti-Asian discrimination began spreading just as rapidly. Though the virus knows no ethnicity, Asians and people of Asian descent were often collectively viewed as carriers of the disease, and consequently face racially-driven verbal and physical abuse all over the world. Korean American writer Cathy Park Hong describes some of these attacks in “The Slur I Never Expected to Hear in 2020”: a group of teenagers in London attacked a young Singaporean man while “shouting about the coronavirus,” a man in Texas stabbed and cut a Burmese-American family that included two young children, and a man in an elevator told an Asian woman, “Don’t bring that Chink virus here” (Hong).

In the United States, racial targeting during a crisis is nothing new; however, the response from the government is significantly different from what we’ve observed in the past. *New York Times* correspondents Sabrina Tavernise and Richard Opiel Jr. note that unlike after the September 11 attacks, when President George W. Bush pushed for tolerance toward American Muslims in the wake of Islamophobic hate crimes, President Trump and his Republican allies chose to use rhetoric that seemed to condone racial attacks, with an unnamed White House official even allegedly calling the virus the “Kung-Flu” (@weijia). Interestingly, this isn’t the first case of Asian Americans being viewed as carriers of disease. Associate Professor of History and Asian American Studies Eiichiro Azuma notes that in 1899, Honolulu’s Chinatown was burned down due to the “perception of Chinese Americans carrying bubonic plague.” A year later, San Francisco officials also targeted Chinese and Japanese populations, ordering a Chinatown lockdown and forcing those communities to get immunized (Baker). Even today, Chinese food is often viewed as ‘dirty’ and ‘dangerous’ despite contrary scientific evidence. The name “Chinese Restaurant Syndrome” first appeared in a letter in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 1968 and was used to diagnose reported headaches and dizziness rumored to be caused by MSG (“Chinese Restaurant Syndrome”). According to Krishnendu Ray, a professor of Food Studies at New York University, such xenophobic, pseudo-scientific thinking reflects an “inverse relationship between migration of poor people from any region in the world and our respect for their culture,” which extends to cuisine as well (qtd. in Mekouar).

In 2015, following the emergence of illnesses with the names “swine flu” and “Middle East Respiratory Syndrome,” the World Health Organization announced new guidelines for naming infectious diseases, stating that “disease names should not focus in on geographic locations, the names of people or animals or particular cultural traits” (Carlson). Dr. Keiji Fukada, assistant director-general for health security at the WHO, warned against the tying of diseases to specific locations due to the “unintended negative impacts” it may have by “stigmatizing certain communities or economic sectors” (qtd. in Carlson). Despite these guidelines, President Trump insists on referring to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus,” a term that only seems to exacerbate the racial tensions already ignited by the disease’s reported origin. After President Trump first used this terminology in March, the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council reported more than 650 incidents of anti-Asian discrimination within a single week (Hong). Yuh-Line Niou, a member of the New York assembly, expressed her concern and stated that the language is “fueling the xenophobia we’re seeing all over our districts” (qtd. in Carlson).

The President’s targeted language is seen by many as another move in the global competition between commercial leaders US and China. University of Pennsylvania Professor of English

Josephine Park places the term “Chinese virus” within the “larger context of foreign policy and imperial contest,” proposing that this language is a highly deliberate tactic used in the US’s “trade war” and “cyberwar” with China. She believes that anti-Asian racism is not merely tolerated but *accepted* in part “because it’s so instrumental” to the “terrain of warfare that’s really active right now” (qtd. in Baker). In December 2017, the White House issued a National Security Strategy to tackle a new “era of great power competition” with China and Russia, who White House officials believe “want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests” (qtd. in Wong). Kiron Skinner, head of policy planning at the State Department, differentiates between the conflicts with China and Russia, claiming that the rivalry with China “is a fight with a really different civilization and a different ideology” that is not “within the Western family.” She continues on to say that this is “the first time that we will have a great power competitor that is not Caucasian” (qtd. in Wong). Because of this evolving relationship, over the last few years, anti-Chinese sentiments have been strategically woven into political conversation. To political science professor Paul Musgrave, Skinner’s choice of words is striking in that it reflects the Trump administration’s “belief that culture and identity are fundamental to whether great-power relations will be cooperative or conflictual.” The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the issue, and what was once a political power-play has turned into hostile anti-Asian discrimination.

The direct, overtly aggressive display of racism against Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) in particular has drastically shifted that population’s position in American society. Prior to COVID-19, APAs often experienced ethnic discrimination in subtler forms, such as through microaggressions. A study conducted by researchers at Columbia University highlights some of these common microaggressions, such as the exoticization of Asian women and feminization of Asian men. The participants in the study, who identified as Asian American, reported that these stereotypes caused them to feel foreign or “alien” in their own land and invalidated and invisible due to the minimization of interethnic differences between different Asian communities. Many participants additionally experienced a “denial of racial reality” or dismissal of anti-Asian racism (Sue et al. 98). Non-Asian Americans often believe Asian Americans have relative privilege with respect to other minority groups, and as a result, anti-Asian racism is more often overlooked and tolerated than other forms of discrimination. The ‘model minority’ myth in particular enables this artificial perception of Asian superiority.

This myth may seem benign at first, as it attributes various positive qualities, such as work ethic, mathematical and musical intelligence, and economic prosperity, to the Asian population at large. It typically characterizes Asian Americans as a “polite, law-abiding group who have achieved a higher level of success than the general population” (Blackburn). But when the perceived monolith of Asian Americans is broken down into the diverse ethnicities it comprises, a different story emerges: the poverty rate among Nepalese Americans is 21% higher than that of the population at large, and Hmong Americans are 20% less likely than the average American to have a bachelor’s degree (Khan and Li). Between 1995 and 2013, Asian Americans saw the lowest acceptance rate of any racial group that applied to Harvard (Avi-Yonah and McCafferty). Finally, 30% of APAs have reportedly faced workplace discrimination, the highest of any racial group, and national data from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission show that white-collar Asian Americans are the least likely group to be promoted to management positions (Starkey, Gee and Peck).

In the 1960s, a conservative white majority created the model minority myth “to oppose the activism of the civil rights movement” (Lee). According to Sarah-Soonling Blackburn of the educational nonprofit Teaching Tolerance, it is rooted in anti-Blackness, and was used as “evidence to deny or downplay the impact of racism and discrimination on people of color” in the US. Today, the myth is used both to minimize the struggles of other racial minorities and to gloss over the discrimination and oppression faced within the Asian American population. Not only does the model minority myth ignore diverse ethnicities and cultures by lumping all Asians into a singular group, it diverts attention from the current discrimination APAs face within the workplace, academic institutions, and other social settings. As Hong says, “the model-minority myth is a lie that silences the structural economic racism Asian-Americans have endured and the intergenerational traumas our families have experienced from years of Western colonialism, wars and invasions.” The persistence of this so-called ‘positive’ stereotype may be part of the reason why many Americans continue to believe that Asian Americans are exempt from racial discrimination.

Historical context paints a darker picture: in 1849 and 1850, Chinese immigrants entered the United States, fleeing conflicts at home. American citizens were initially grateful for these new “industrious members of the community,” but this sentiment soon turned into resentment amongst lower-class whites, who saw them as labor competition. This racism was soon codified into law: in 1854 Asians were prohibited from testifying in court and were excluded from the Naturalization Act of 1870 (Starkey). The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act went as far as to suspend all immigration of Chinese workers (Lee).

The threat posed by Chinese immigrants soon led to the emergence of a racist ideology called “yellow peril.” The propaganda campaign took form in 1895, when German Emperor Wilhelm II presented to other European monarchs an allegorical painting of Archangel Michael standing on a cliffside, warning Christian warrior-goddesses against the ‘danger from the East,’ represented by a glowing, mysterious Buddha in the distance (Ziyi). Zeng Ziyi, writer for Chinese news outlet *CGTN*, propounds that by characterizing East Asians as an imminent threat, the painting served to “justify Germany’s entry into the West’s colonial conquest in China.”

Existential fear of Asians gaining power over Western nations has since persisted in subtler ways and has embedded itself into political and cultural discourse. Today, with the coronavirus, we see a resurgence in yellow peril sentiments. Ziyi claims that the conspiracy theory that SARS-CoV-2 was manufactured in a Wuhan lab and intentionally released to harm the US has been supported by members of the Trump administration in order to invoke the same psycho-cultural fear as the yellow peril campaign. In an article for *NBC News*, health researcher Matthew Lee highlights the irony of anti-Asian racism, noting the duality between views of the Asian community as both a “model minority” among people of color and “perpetual foreigners” who pose a threat to stability and order. The sentiments that drive these two contradicting stereotypes—the model minority myth and yellow peril—come from the same place of intolerance and xenophobia, demonstrating that both negative and positive stereotypes can be detrimental to minority communities.

Cathy Park Hong describes how reactions to the coronavirus have “burned away any illusions that East Asians are almost white,” and revealed the dynamics of systemic racism toward Asian

Americans. While Black and Latinx individuals in New York are dying in higher proportions due to lack of access to healthcare resources and other factors, many continue to blame Asians for the virus rather than holding our broken systems responsible (Hong). She explains that “White supremacy ensures that once the pressure of persecution is lifted even a little from one group, *that* group will then fall upon the newly targeted group out of relief and out of a frustrated misplaced rage that can never touch, let alone topple, the real enemy” (Hong). Systemic racism, according to Hong, aims to keep minority groups separated. The model minority myth and other racist stereotypes have therefore served as tools to preserve racial hierarchies, while appearing to allow for equal access and societal progression.

Through the model minority myth, Asians in the US are often viewed as having achieved more academic and professional success than other minority populations. This positive stereotyping allows for anti-Asian racism to seem like “punching up,” or attacking those in positions of privilege or power, often in the name of comedic effect (Labacz). In reality, this veil of superiority serves only to preserve white supremacy. The rise and spread of the coronavirus has torn down this veil and revealed underlying biases and prejudice in the form of overtly racist physical and verbal attacks. By deconstructing the model minority myth and revealing hidden yellow peril sentiments, COVID-19 has shown us that racism can take a variety of nuanced forms, and that tackling societal disparities requires not just a bridging of social and economic gaps, but also a greater understanding of ethnic diversity and respect for different cultures. Asian Americans are not a disease. Racism, on the other hand, most definitely is.

## Works Cited

Avi-Yonah, Shera S., and Molly C. McCafferty. “Asian-American Harvard Applicants Saw Lowest Admit Rate of Any Racial Group From 1995 to 2013.” *The Harvard Crimson*, 19 Oct. 2018, [www.thecrimson.com/article/2018/10/19/acceptance-rates-by-race](http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2018/10/19/acceptance-rates-by-race).

Baker, Brandon. “Why Asian-American racism is rampant during the coronavirus.” *Penn Today*, 31 Mar. 2020, [penntoday.upenn.edu/news/why-asian-american-racism-rampant-during-coronavirus](http://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/why-asian-american-racism-rampant-during-coronavirus).

Blackburn, Sarah-Soonling. “What Is the Model-Minority Myth?” *Teaching Tolerance*, 21 Mar. 2019, [www.tolerance.org/magazine/what-is-the-model-minority-myth](http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/what-is-the-model-minority-myth).

Brewis, Harriet. “Global coronavirus cases hit 5million with more than 320,000 confirmed Covid-19 deaths.” *The Evening Standard*, 21 May 2020, [www.standard.co.uk/news/world/coronavirus-cases-five-million-deaths-covid19-worldometer-a4446791.html](http://www.standard.co.uk/news/world/coronavirus-cases-five-million-deaths-covid19-worldometer-a4446791.html).

Carlson, Adam. "Why You Shouldn't Call Coronavirus the 'Chinese Virus' & Why Trump Faces Backlash for Doing it Anyway." *People*, 19 Mar. 2020, [people.com/politics/why-you-should-call-coronavirus-covid-19](https://people.com/politics/why-you-should-call-coronavirus-covid-19).

"'Chinese Restaurant Syndrome' – what is it and is it racist?" *BBC News*, 16 Jan. 2020, [www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51139005](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-51139005).

Gee, Buck, and Denise Peck. "Asian-Americans Are the Least Likely Group in the U.S. to Be Promoted to Management." *Harvard Business Review*, 31 May 2018, [hbr.org/2018/05/asian-americans-are-the-least-likely-group-in-the-u-s-to-be-promoted-to-management](https://hbr.org/2018/05/asian-americans-are-the-least-likely-group-in-the-u-s-to-be-promoted-to-management).

Hong, Cathy Park. "The Slur I Never Expected to Hear in 2020." *The New York Times Magazine*, 12 Apr. 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/04/12/magazine/asian-american-discrimination-coronavirus.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/12/magazine/asian-american-discrimination-coronavirus.html).

Khan, Sophie, and Huixian Li. "Stop Pointing at Asian Americans to Downplay Racism at Universities." *The Leadership Conference Education Fund*, 17 Jan. 2018, [civilrights.org/edfund/resource/stop-pointing-asian-americans-downplay-racism-universities](https://civilrights.org/edfund/resource/stop-pointing-asian-americans-downplay-racism-universities).

Labacz, Liz. "Punching Up and the 'Rules' of Comedy." *Thought Catalog*, 3 July 2014, [thoughtcatalog.com/liz-labacz/2014/07/punching-up-and-the-rules-of-comedy](https://thoughtcatalog.com/liz-labacz/2014/07/punching-up-and-the-rules-of-comedy).

Lee, Matthew. "Coronavirus fears show how 'model minority' Asian Americans become the 'yellow peril.'" *NBC News*, 9 Mar. 2020, [www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/coronavirus-fears-show-how-model-minority-asian-americans-become-yellow-ncna1151671](https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/coronavirus-fears-show-how-model-minority-asian-americans-become-yellow-ncna1151671).

Mekouar, Dora. "Does Bias Impact the Price of US Ethnic Food?" *Voice of America*, 13 Apr. 2016, [blogs.voanews.com/all-about-america/2016/04/13/why-americans-will-pay-more-for-french-food-than-chinese-cuisine](https://blogs.voanews.com/all-about-america/2016/04/13/why-americans-will-pay-more-for-french-food-than-chinese-cuisine).

Musgrave, Paul. "The Slip That Revealed the Real Trump Doctrine." *Foreign Policy*, 2 May 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/02/the-slip-that-revealed-the-real-trump-doctrine/>

Starkey, Brando S. "Why We Must Talk About the Asian American Story Too." *The Undeclared*, 3 Nov. 2016, [theundefeated.com/features/why-we-must-talk-about-the-asian-american-story-too](https://theundefeated.com/features/why-we-must-talk-about-the-asian-american-story-too).

Sue, D.W., et al. "Racial Microaggressions and the Asian American Experience." *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2007, pp 72-81. *APA PsycNet*, [psycnet-apa-org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/fulltext/2009-10744-008.html](https://psycnet.apa.org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/fulltext/2009-10744-008.html).

Tavernise, Sabrina, and Richard Opiel Jr. "Spit On, Yelled At, Attacked: Chinese-Americans Fear for Their Safety." *The New York Times*, 23 Mar. 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/us/chinese-coronavirus-racist-attacks.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/us/chinese-coronavirus-racist-attacks.html).

@weijia. "This morning a White House official referred to #Coronavirus as the 'Kung-Flu' to my face. Makes me wonder what they're calling it behind my back." *Twitter*, 17 Mar. 2020, 10:35 a.m., [twitter.com/weijia/status/1239923246801334283](https://twitter.com/weijia/status/1239923246801334283).

Wong, Edward. "U.S. Versus China: A New Era of Great Power Competition, but Without Boundaries." *The New York Times*, 26 Jun. 2019, [www.nytimes.com/2019/06/26/world/asia/united-states-china-conflict.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/26/world/asia/united-states-china-conflict.html).

Ziyi, Zeng. "The new 'yellow peril': Behind U.S. coronavirus propaganda." *CGTN*, 4 May 2020, [news.cgtn.com/news/2020-05-03/The-new-yellow-peril-Behind-U-S-coronavirus-propaganda-QcbUbJG5u8/index.html](http://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-05-03/The-new-yellow-peril-Behind-U-S-coronavirus-propaganda-QcbUbJG5u8/index.html).