

The Story of Inequality: Xenophobia and Racial Discrimination Against Asian Americans During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic is a catastrophic global human rights crisis, and it has aggravated the racism experienced by racial minorities around the world. This article explores the serious discrimination against Asian Americans within the US society during the pandemic from the political and historical perspectives. It finds that the inappropriate practices of conservative politicians, led by Donald Trump, to link the virus to Asian groups have triggered the deep-rooted anti-Asian discrimination among the American public in the US history, which has adversely affected the well-being of Asian Americans during the COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19, Racism, Xenophobia, Asian American.

1. Introduction

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is a serious and influential global public health crisis since the beginning of 2020. With the spread of COVID-19 all over the world, the academic literature about its impact on various fields has soared, and human rights scholars are no exception. It is apparent that this pandemic is also a human rights disaster which threatens almost every human right protected by the international human rights law (whether economic, social, cultural, civil or political). According to Elshobake, the human rights violations during COVID-19 can be divided into five prominent aspects: violations of the right to life and health, the right to freedom of opinion and expression, the right to access information, discrimination (inequality) and failure to protect detailed people [1]. Clay argues that there are three main themes about the impacts of COVID-19 on human rights: the interconnectedness of all types of human rights, the inequality of vulnerable groups and the tension between the protection of public health and the fulfillment of human rights [2]. Hence it can be seen that the phenomenon of discrimination or inequality is an important part of the research that linking COVID-19 to human rights.

Equality and non-discrimination are crucial principles of many United Nations (UN) human rights instruments. First, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), everyone has equal rights regardless of any factors such as sex and race, and everyone is equally protected by the law without any discrimination [3]. Second, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) both stipulate that states should respect and ensure that the rights of all individuals within their territory and jurisdiction, without distinction based on any kind such as sex and race [4][5]. Third, International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) states that racial discrimination is an obstacle to peace and security and states should adopt policies to eliminate racial discrimination without delay [6]. However, COVID-19 has greatly destroyed these principles. As all countries have taken

reconstruction and response measures to deal with COVID-19, inequality and discrimination must be the core of related policies and research [7]. According to Chiozza and King, COVID-19 has led to serious inequality for 7 main vulnerable groups: women, immigrants, racial minorities, prisoners, children, the elderly and the disabled [8]. This essay chooses to investigate the discrimination against racial minorities in the United States (US) with the focus on Asian Americans (AsAms).

The devastating effect of COVID-19 in the US is staggering. By 2022, the cumulative number of confirmed cases exceeded 54 million with more than 820000 deaths [9]. The death toll from this pandemic is even higher than any military engagements in American history [10]. In addition, COVID-19 has had a disproportionate effect on different groups of American population: compared with Whites, racial minorities (such as Blacks, AsAms and Native Americans) tend to have higher rates of infection and mortality [10]. For AsAms, anti-Asian discrimination has significantly increased during COVID-19 with AsAms being scapegoated and experiencing prejudice, verbal attack and physical violence, all of which have created a fast contagion of American racism [10]. Therefore, the purpose of my project is to comprehensively explore the deep reason and mechanism behind this serious anti-Asian discrimination during COVID-19 and analyze its outcomes and impacts. The central argument is: the inappropriate racialization of COVID-19 (linking the coronavirus to AsAms) by the US conservative elites especially Donald Trump has activated the deep-rooted anti-Asian prejudices and attitudes in American history, thus shaping the public's racist understandings and responses to this pandemic, which have greatly influenced the wellbeing of the AsAm community and also has led to a large wave of the AsAm activism actions to combat COVID-19 racism. This essay hence takes the political and historical perspectives to do the analysis and it also uses the theory of "othering" (which will be explained in the next part). For the significance, most of the current literature about COVID-19 and American racism are focusing on the community of African Americans (such as the intersection of COVID-19 and Black Lives

Matter movement) and paying relatively less attention to the experiences of AsAms. This is the reason why I want to investigate the deep mechanism behind anti-Asian racial discrimination during COVID-19. Hopefully my project could fill this gap to some extent and be of interest to the relevant scholars.

This essay will include 4 different parts: Firstly, it will provide a general overview of the AsAms' COVID-19 racism experiences and define several key terms such as "discrimination" and "racism". In the second and third part, this article will investigate the anti-Asian discrimination during COVID-19 from the political and historical lens respectively. Finally, this essay will analyze how racism has affected the health and wellbeing of AsAms and how activists have responded anti-Asian racism through activism actions.

2. Key Definitions and General Overview of Anti-Asian Racial Discrimination During COVID-19

As of 2019, the number of AsAms was about 22.2 million, accounted for around 6% of the US population [11]. AsAms are the fastest growing racial group in the US and had risen by 72% from 2000 to 2015, their proportion is also expected to reach 14% by 2065 and become the largest immigrant group in the US [11]. Moreover, recently AsAms are playing a more influential role in American politics: voters from the AsAm community are wielding a significant voice on the battlefield of key electoral districts, and the number of the AsAm political candidates and elected officials has also sharply increased [12]. Nevertheless, AsAms are still always the target of American racial discrimination.

In March 2020, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Civil Rights Organizations established a project called "STOP AAPI HATE" to track the racist incidents against AsAms during COVID-19. It reported 6603 cases within one year since the establishment and summed up five general trends and patterns of anti-Asian discrimination: Firstly, verbal attacks are rampant including racist abuse, profanity and harassment; Secondly, civil rights have been severely violated including prohibited access to transportation and workplace discrimination; Thirdly, there are frequent incidents in public spaces such as businesses, parks, streets, and even online; Fourthly, there is a gender gap for the incidents, with women suffer nearly 2.5 times more racial discrimination than men; Fifthly, incidents involve all age groups - elderly, youth and adults [13].

To fully understand these AsAms' COVID-19 racism experiences, it is necessary to consider and define the key concepts including "discrimination" and "racism". For discrimination, it refers to prejudicial or biased thoughts, attitudes and behaviors that can lead to the marginalization of targets and make them less capable to control the environment [14]. Hence racial discrimination means the differential and prejudiced treatment of racial minorities by individuals and society [14]. But racism extends far beyond prejudice or bias and its core is to maintain and normalize a race-based hierarchical system, which creates the racial inequality and strengthens the superior status of one race over another [14]. Therefore, the increase in racial discrimination against AsAms during COVID-19 reveals the tenuous and fragile position of this group in the White-dominated privilege system of the US.

As mentioned before, this essay will use the "othering"

theory. This refers to the process by which the dominant group in society labels other groups, this process will reinforce the sense of "belonging" and "normality" of the dominant group and position other groups as "deviant" through the way of exclusion and disempowerment [12]. Hence it can be seen that racism is a specific type of othering process. In this project, the othering process is reflected in the fact that American society links anti-Asian xenophobia to concerns about COVID-19 and then labels AsAms as the spreader of coronavirus.

In next two parts, this essay will explain and analyze this AsAms-involved othering process during COVID-19 from the political and historical perspective respectively.

3. Political Analysis of Anti-Asian Racial Discrimination During COVID-19:

American politicians' improper name calling and rhetoric about COVID-19 is the starting point and important trigger of the AsAms' COVID-19 racism experiences.

World Health Organization (WHO) stipulates that the names of new human infectious disease should not specify any individuals, groups of people, animals and geographical locations as it can be inaccurate and stigmatizing [15]. This was the reason why WHO officially named the coronavirus as "COVID-19". But former US President Donald Trump disregarded this official nomenclature and used racist terms such as "China virus" and "Kung-flu" in many of his tweets and news conferences [16]. During a White House press conference in March 2020, he bluntly said that the virus comes from China and "China virus" is more accurate [16]. Other American politicians including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Representative Paul Gosar and Senator Tom Cotton also followed suit by using the terms like "Chinese virus" and "Wuhan virus" in public [17]. Senator of Texas John Cornyn even said that the virus originates from Chinese culture of eating snakes, bats and dogs [17]. But none of these discourses are true because existing studies show that the first wave of confirmed cases in the US were imported from Europe [18].

The inappropriate labeling of these American politicians against COVID-19 has greatly affected the public's discourse and understanding of the virus. For example, after Pompeo referred to COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus" on Fox News on March 7, 2020, the online usage of this term rose by 800% [19]. Insulting jokes and memes about Chinese people eating bats were also full of social media such as Twitter and Facebook [19]. This increase in erroneous racist discourses about COVID-19 has been finally accompanied by physical and verbal racist discrimination and attacks, not only against Chinese Americans but also the entire AsAm community.

The racialization of COVID-19 can be perceived as Trump's political strategy and instinct. He rose to power partially by utilizing the deep vein of White's racial resentment and nostalgia, scapegoating racial minorities and foreigners for the ill of the American society [20]. In the case of COVID-19, Trump knew that the racist climate is distracting and can divert public attention to avoid criticism towards his COVID-19 policies. Hence he described COVID-19 as an Asian threat. American political elites have long attempted to shape public opinion by linking political issues to specific social groups. For instance, attitudes towards African Americans played an important role in shaping the

public support or opposition on issues of welfare, crime, affirmative action, and the role of government [20]. Additionally, Trump's racist discourses about COVID-19 also related to the tension in Sino-US political relations at that time. Since taking office, Trump had maintained a tough attitude towards China and regarded it as a serious challenge to the US. He therefore launched a series of containment actions against China, the most famous and influential one was the trade war between two countries, which kept Sino-US bilateral relations relatively hostile during his term of office. This was why after the outbreak of COVID-19 around the world, both two countries carried out diplomatic blows and accused each other of using the conspiracy theories to cause the spread of this pandemic [21].

Although Trump stopped using the term "China virus", the change was so late that AsAms had already been forced into the othering process [22]. However, anti-Asian COVID-19 racism is not a "natural" and direct reaction to the leaders' political discourses and threat of the virus; rather, it is rooted in the historically entrenched context of discrimination against AsAms. Politicians' improper rhetoric has activated this deep-rooted anti-Asian attitude in American history. Therefore, it is vital to review and analyze the racial dynamics of Asian hate in the historical context.

4. Historical Analysis of Anti-Asian Racial Discrimination During COVID-19

4.1. Overview of the History of AsAms' Racism Experiences

Racial discrimination against AsAms has a long history. In the US, the Whites with civic belonging have always been dissatisfied with new immigrants to some extent, which has led to the fact that all non-White immigrant groups have endured huge difficulty and suspicion in the struggle for their place in American culture [23]. This nativist attitude and xenophobia have created the structural racism in various forms and are deeply rooted in American society over time.

The California Gold Rush in the mid-19th century attracted the first large wave of Asian immigrants to the US with the majority on Chinese. During this period, Chinese workers experienced many racist policies such as heavy tax burdens and obstacles to obtaining citizenship [12]. When Chinese immigrants arrived in the US, they brought large amounts of opium and set up many opium shops, which caused a national drug panic [12]. All these events eventually resulted in the signing of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, this was the first law to exclude an entire racial group and mainly driven by the xenophobic fear of the White group [12]. In the early 1890s, another wave of new Asian immigrants poured into the US, primarily from Japan, to worked in agriculture, mining and fishing [24]. Soon grievance from Whites ensued, the US and Japan reached "the Gentleman's Agreement" in 1908 which required Japanese government to prevent its citizens from emigrating to America [24]. In 1924, the US government amended the Chinese Exclusion Act and extended the restrictions to citizens from all Asian countries. These laws remained until 1943. At the turn of 20th century, after Japan's victories in the First Sino-Japanese War and Russo-Japanese War, a stereotype called "Yellow Peril" emerged in the US, which described all Asians as evil, greedy, dirty and untrustworthy individuals [25]. The "yellow peril" prejudice

laid the foundation for the US to continue to discriminate against Asians during the World War II [25].

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, former US President Franklin Roosevelt ordered the forced eviction of 120000 Japanese (about 60% of them were American citizens) on the American West coast and imprisoned them in concentration camps guarded by armed troops, where they stayed throughout the whole period of the war [12] This is one of the most notorious violations of human rights in American history [12]. Ironically, despite the widespread hate towards AsAms within the US at that time, thousands of the AsAm soldiers actively joined the army and made great contributions to the American victory of the World War II [12].

The turning point came in 1965, when the Immigration Act was passed. It removed race as the barrier to immigration. As a result, a new wave of Asian immigrants arrived in the US. As these new racial groups settled in American society, another stereotype against AsAms proliferated: the "Model Minority", which argues that AsAms are a monolithic and successful group with natural wisdom and strong work ethic, they also emphasize the importance of education and family culture [25]. Although the term "model minority" seems to praise AsAms, it is intended to confirm a wrong notion: there is no racial discrimination in the US and all racial groups operate on a same level playing field [25]. They have equal rights and do not experience any forms of injustice [25]. In addition, this stereotype finally promotes dissatisfaction and suspicion against AsAms [25].

Furthermore, the eruptions of American racism are always during the pandemics. Infectious diseases have been extremely devastating in human history and have caused more deaths than any other medical cause, hence when deadly epidemics spread in the US, the public tends to blame marginalized groups (othering) because of fear [26]. Racial minorities often find themselves accused of being sickly and dirty, there are many examples of this: Jewish immigrants held responsible for tuberculosis, Italian immigrants blamed for polio, and Irish immigrants for yellow fever [26]. For AsAms, COVID-19 is not the first pandemic they are unequally treated and forced into the othering process. When the bubonic plague raged in 1900, the American government imposed some improper racist measures against Asians such as quarantining and burning down the entire Chinatown; AsAms also experienced serious discrimination and were perceived as bloodthirsty immigrants during Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 [26].

Therefore, through summarizing the history of anti-Asian discrimination in the US, it is clear that AsAms are always in an inferior position and experiencing inappropriate prejudice: they are othered as model minority in times of peace and security, and treated as yellow peril in times of crisis.

4.2. Another Two Typical Anti-Asian Stereotypes During COVID-19

In addition to "yellow peril" and "model minority", there are two more types of historical biases against AsAms that have been expressed and strengthened during COVID-19 – "invalidation of interethnic differences" and "perpetual foreigners".

Firstly, Asia comprises of nearly 50 countries, hence the AsAm population is correspondingly heterogeneous on race, culture, language and immigration history [15]. However, this internal diversity is often overlooked in the US and many

AsAms have been uniformly assumed to be Chinese and Japanese [15]. AsAms always hear these questions: “Are you Chinese or Japanese” and “Why do all Asians look alike?” [15]. A social-psychologist Derald Sue raised a term called “invalidation of interethnic differences” to describe this phenomenon that the erasure of visibility within the AsAm community [27]. Many anti-Asian discriminatory incidents during COVID-19 occurred in the context of this concept. For instance, two children from a Burmese American family were stabbed at a Sam’s Club store in Midland, Texas because the attacker thought they were from China and carried the coronavirus [28].

Secondly, “perpetual foreigners” is another stereotype against AsAms that has been reinforced during COVID-19. No matter where they were born and how long they lived in the US, AsAms are always regarded as “others” in American society, and they are not fully worthy of the American identity [15]. One reason for this stereotype is that AsAms are considered unwilling to assimilate. This view has been promoted by sociologist Paul Siu since 1952, who described Asian immigrants as “sojourners who cling to their own culture” [20]. AsAms thus have been stereotyped as “not Americans”. The prejudice of “perpetual foreigners” has been a great threat to the establishment the AsAms’ national identity and American interracial relations. In a race-based facial recognition experiment, the faces of AsAms were considered to be the least American [29]. Americans of other racial backgrounds such as Whites, Hispanics and Blacks all believed that they are least likely to have friendships with AsAms [29]. To deal with the issues of social marginalization and lack of the national identity, AsAms have to frequently show their knowledge about American culture and claim their extensive participation in practices of American traditions [29]. This “perpetual foreigners” stereotype has intensified during COVID-19. Due to AsAms have been seen as the physical embodiment of the coronavirus, even the AsAms health care works were treated as dangerous foreigners and were subject to racist attacks. An AsAm nurse in a children’s hospital was spit while delivering medicine to a White patient because of the Asian appearance [30].

4.3. The Connection between Anti-Asian Discrimination and US Imperialism

All the racial stereotypes or discriminations against AsAms mentioned above are actually a part and structure of American settler colonialism and capitalism.

Anti-Asian racism is an inherent feature of American settler society, which is on the basis of indigenous dispossession and freedom of property ownership. We already know that racial discrimination against AsAms always occurs in times of crisis and insecurity. Those are the periods when the capitalist mode of production (based on seizure of native lands and exploitation of resources and labor) fails to generate profits and then leads to the sense of non-safety [31]. This sense is finally expressed through the resentment and discrimination against racial minorities (AsAms) [31]. Therefore, anti-Asian discrimination is not only a negative reaction, but also an important force in stabilizing structural inequality and giving rise to a sense of belonging that supports the capitalism and the belief of White supremacy.

Since the moment Asians came to the US in the 19th century, they had been only treated as “migrant labors”, this term means that the sole function of Asians in the American capitalist economy was being labor and their value mainly

came from their ability to make profits, they hence should not be naturalized as citizens [31]. This is the reason why the laws represented by the Chinese Exclusion Act were passed [31]. Another example was happened in 1854, the California Supreme Court ruled that the race of the Chinese was not White, they thus did not have the right to testify against Whites in legal proceedings, this made it possible for them from racist violence [31]. All these legal stipulations ensured that mobility and replaceability of Asians and maximization of their labor, these also gave supreme value to Whites and defended them in the process of subsequent colonial expansion [31]. Hence anti-Asian racism during this period was essentially a tool to protect the White identity and establish the capitalist tradition of color line.

As mentioned before, the Immigration Act removed the racial restrictions on immigrants, and Asians entered the US on an unprecedented scale, but this did not mean the end of anti-Asian racism. The two world wars and the Cold War brought a “war economy” to American capitalism [31]. War was no longer just a mean to seize the markets, but a profitable enterprise itself [31]. In the eyes of American Whites, Asians do not value the life as they do, and the AsAms’ lives can be sacrificed [31]. Therefore, the value of Asians during this period was to participate in the war economy.

In the 1970s, the US experienced a severe recession, and the government responded by adopting a serious of neoliberal austerity measures such as slashing and privatizing public services to disintegrate the welfare state, it also strengthened the police force to protect the propertied class and target marginalized groups such as Asians. All these policies made AsAms become the victim of the neoliberalism capitalist economy and increased their racism experiences [31]. In addition, the anti-Asian discrimination during this period was also reflected in the racist attacks on Vietnamese Americans because of the US defeat in the Vietnam War [31].

After all historical analysis of anti-Asian discrimination above in this part, we can see that AsAms’ COVID-19 racism experience is not a new phenomenon created by the racist discourses of American politicians represented by Donald Trump, it is rather deeply rooted in the US racial history and closely connected with American imperialism and capitalism.

5. The Devastating Effects of COVID-19 Racism on the Wellbeing of AsAms and Their Activism Responses

Many studies have evidenced that racism is a chronic source of stress that could have a significant negative impact on the wellbeing of targeted individuals [14]. Historical precedents have also shown that COVID-19 racial discrimination must have harmful effects on the health of AsAms. First, Japanese Americans imprisoned in concentration camps during World War II had the double rates of suicides and cardiovascular diseases compared with other Japanese Americans who were not imprisoned [32]. Second, the increased anti-Muslim discourses, Islamophobia and hate crimes after the 9/11 attack were highly linked to both psychological and physical problems of Arab and Muslim Americans [15]. Although the stereotype against Arab and Muslim Americans (terrorists) is different from that of AsAms (carriers of the disease), these examples support the possibility of COVID-19 racism causing health harm to AsAms [15]. For mental health, a relevant study suggests that

about 45% of AsAms thought they were more anxious and depressed than they were before the COVID-19 pandemic, and nearly 20% of AsAms said they had considered suicide during COVID-19 [15]. For physical health, findings of a study proved that COVID-19 racial discrimination exacerbates many chronic health conditions such as heart disease, pain and respiratory diseases among AsAms [14]. Moreover, the harmful effects of COVID-19 racism may extend beyond Asians and involve other racial groups [14]. After 9/11, racial discrimination was increased not only among Arab and Muslim Americans but also among other racial minorities, showing that racism could spread and affect each vulnerable group [14]. This suggests the importance of cross-racial alliances and solidarity to combat racism because the wellbeing of one marginalized group reflects the wellbeing of all other marginalized groups.

Although COVID-19 has presented many challenges for AsAms, there are also reasons to be optimistic. Social psychological studies explain that COVID-19 racism could help to facilitate AsAms' structural awareness of their marginalized social status and the harmful effects of racial inequality, eventually leading to the increased activism responses and civic mobilizations [33].

AsAms' activism has begun to emerge in the 1970s to resist racial discrimination and violence against Asians during that period, this emergence was also the embodiment of the Third World consciousness created by the global anti-colonial movement in the late 1960s, which linked anti-racist struggle and anti-capitalist struggle around the world [31]. One of the most famous and influential activism actions of AsAms at that time was the establishment of Coalition Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAA AV) [31]. In the 1990s, its function shifted from anti-Asian violence to fighting for the safe housing and affordable healthcare for AsAms [31]. During COVID-19, organizers of CAA AV launched an effort to aid AsAm elderly and help clean and disinfect AsAm communities [31]. In addition, to combat COVID-19 racism, many other AsAm activists and advocacy groups have taken joint actions to implement relief and provide resources for AsAms to deal with discrimination (such as the COVID-19 resource guide made by AsAm Federation and the STOP AAPI HATE project established by AAPI Civil Rights Organizations, which was mentioned before). It is also worth noting that social media has always been a key arena for AsAms and activists to launch counter movements. For instance, the Facebook group "Subtle Asian Traits" is one of the largest online AsAm communities with more than 1.7 million members, it posts about 1200 new messages to promote mutual care and collect actions during COVID-19 [34]. Moreover, scholars argue that although the stereotype of "model minority" had always limited the ability of AsAms to cooperate with other racial minorities in fighting the racial inequality, COVID-19 racism experiences could facilitate the cross-racial engagement among AsAm communities [33]. The best manifestation is that AsAms mobilized to help combat anti-Blacks racism in the Black Lives Matter movement after the death of George Floyd [33].

6. Conclusion

Overall, this essay has investigated the serious racial discrimination against AsAms during COVID-19 from the political and historical perspectives. Although the population and political influence are continuously increasing in today's America, AsAms have always experienced the recurring

process and dynamic of "othering" throughout the US history. The racist rhetoric of the conservative political elites represented by Donald Trump in the early stage of COVID-19 has activated the historically entrenched anti-Asian attitudes in the US and made the othering process against AsAms emerge again. Then the devastating effects of COVID-19 racism on the health and wellbeing of AsAms have intensified this process. But it is optimistic to witness the rise and expansion of AsAms' activism responses and civic mobilizations to fight for their own rights.

The state or government should be the most important force to eliminate anti-Asian racism. But so far, the responses of the federal and related agencies to solve the racial inequality have been limited. Although President Joe Biden signed the "COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act" in May 2021, both the Justice Department and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have not announced specific goals and measures to prevent racial discrimination against AsAms [35]. The two agencies took quick actions in similar situations: the CDC during the SARS pandemic and the Justice Department after the 9/11 incident [35]. Therefore, if the law enforcement, federal government and relevant institutions do not work together to make a robust response, all forms of racism and "othering" dilemma in the US will not be mitigated and addressed.

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