

Addressing Xenophobia in Asian communities

By Gaonoucci Belle Vang

One of the social effects currently taking place due to the outbreak of the pandemic is the skyrocketing level of hate crimes towards Asian communities across the nation.

According to the [Washington Post](#), hate crimes have spiked from 1.8 percent of America's total reported hate crimes in 2017 to a similar extremity faced by Asian communities after the event of 9/11.

Quickly labeled as the "Chinese Virus" by elected officials due to its origination in Wuhan, China, the outburst of prejudice against people from other countries, also known as "xenophobia," has many community members fearing for the safety of their loved ones.

Vanna Nauk, Asian American studies (ASAM) graduate student, shares a story of a friend whose father's car was recently tagged with anti-Asian slurs.

"These sentiments reduced us to a virus," Nauk said. "It was alarming to see the photos of her father's car on social media because it could have been my father or any of my Asian friends or relatives or me."

Matthew Vang, biology undergraduate and Queer Hmong Intersectional Pride (QHIP) member, says that the directed attacks towards Asian Americans are inexcusable.

Deeply rooted in American history and dating as far back as the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, Vang says it is extremely important to address the xenophobia Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities face from this country's structural oppression towards people of color.

"Speaking out on these violent actions and holding culprits accountable is of utmost importance in demolishing harmful stereotypes contributing to subjugation of AAPI folks," Vang said. "Individuals should be held accountable for their xenophobic actions against others."

Dr. Varaxy Yi, Higher Education Administration and Leadership (HEAL) assistant professor, agrees that there is a long history of xenophobia in our country embedded in behaviors, laws, and policies.

"During difficult times, we often look for scapegoats to blame," Dr. Yi said. "It is so important that we make space to talk through the history of xenophobia in this country, and exclusion is never the answer."

An example of normalized microaggression is asking "Where are you from?" and not being satisfied with answers that are within U.S. borderlines.

It becomes important and crucial for AAPI community members to combat the compliance towards suppression as a result of the social norm.

Students like Jaiab Lee, communicative science and deaf studies (CSDS) undergraduate and ASAM scholar, challenge normative AAPI stereotypes and highlight the ways these issues stem from the clichés of being submissive or ignorant to social injustices.

"It is especially important for the AAPI community to address these issues by resisting harmful stereotypes," Lee said. "It allows ignorant, xenophobic people to destroy people's livelihoods."

Many community activists like David Bouttavong, Fresno Barrios Unidos health education program manager, and Professor Gena Gong, Asian American studies lecturer, have been hypervigilant with their approaches in addressing these stereotypes to denounce all forms of hate.

"People are unpredictable, and the xenophobia hurts and is unfortunate," Bouttavong said. "However, it is necessary to recognize it, affirm our AAPI community, and stand in solidarity."

Gong takes a different approach in her activism and shares her experience as a community member and mother.

Repulsed by the actions of local elected officials bandwagoning the inaccurate and inappropriate racial labels of the virus, Gong published a shortened op-ed piece in [The Fresno Bee](#) alongside airing her daughter's encounter of xenophobic bullying on the Valley Public Radio.

"Popularizing and normalizing these terms inevitably leads to racial stereotyping, and what follows is the trickle-down effect of racially-motivated acts of aggression targeting anyone who looks Asian," Gong said. "My daughter's friend, a Vietnamese American boy, was taunted on the playground by some other boys for having 'the coronavirus.'"

Concerned for her family's safety beyond the virus, Gong says she finds herself grateful to be homebound with her daughter to avoid the worries of her being victimized and subjected to bullying, aggression, or physical attack.

Also as a fourth-generation American, Gong's experience emphasizes that there is an irrational sense of outcasting communities to be targeted based solely on their appearance.

For example, Dr. Yi says she has been told to go back to China even though she is a Khmer American.

"These statements really highlight the fact that people do not think I belong because I could not possibly truly be from this country," Dr. Yi said. "And yet, this is my country."

This reflects the ignorance and lack of knowledge towards the various ethnicities within the Asian race.

Asians make up more than half of the world's population at nearly 4.5 billion people, and more than [18.2 million](#) are Asian Americans recorded to be living in the U.S in 2017.

Accounting for [5.6 percent](#) of the nation's population, there are over 19 Asian ethnic groups such as Cambodian, Hmong, Vietnamese, Japanese, Laotian, and Thai to name a few.

Recklessly spewing racial slurs and antagonizing terms towards all Asian communities correlates to the failed system for people of color who are forced to endure racism as a result.

This does not suggest that solely the Chinese community deserves to be attacked as the reason behind the coronavirus; xenophobic actions are inexcusable and should never be promoted or tolerated.

However, the uneducated perspective of all Asians being the same also expresses social illiteracy.

Elected officials who are supposed to be properly representing their communities are blatantly discriminating against the Asian population.

Arkansas' [Senator Tom Cotton](#) publicly stated that he wants Chinese students to be banned from studying advanced sciences and tech in fear that these very students may be a part of the Chinese intelligence service who are attempting to steal America's intellectual property.

Texas' [Senator John Cornyn](#) supports the usage of the term "Chinese virus" and said China is to blame for the development of the current pandemic based on their cultural meals of bats, snakes, and dogs even though science has not supported this statement.

In light of the current political climate, Asian politicians are more important than ever and should be using their platforms to encourage solidarity rather than assimilating to the expectation of being a “real American” and supporting the white-supremacist dialogue of blaming minorities.

In the efforts to resist xenophobia through declaring one’s “American-ness,” former presidential candidate Andrew Yang who is Taiwanese suggested a [short-term solution](#) of Asians proving their patriotic values by wearing the American colors of red, white, and blue.

Being a popular political figure in the Asian community, many supporters were very disturbed and disappointed with Yang’s suggestion because it continues to relay the idea that the AAPI population will never be “American” enough to be acknowledged in the country they were born in.

The idea of never truly belonging is synonymous with the constant tenuous forms of discrimination the AAPI community has historically encountered.

In her [research](#) and teaching, Dr. Yi addresses enhanced fears and anxieties built on the realities of ongoing racial violence and subtle forms of racism through microaggressions.

"My students are emerging leaders who will be working with students, staff, and faculty, and they need to be aware of all forms of injustice," Dr. Yi said. "We need to be sensitive to these fears and anxieties while also upholding safety for all our community members."

As a student of higher education, Jackie Rasaphone, social work graduate student and Asian Pacific Islander Programs lead student coordinator, opened discussions on xenophobic events in the AAPI community prior to the virus outbreak.

Formerly held on Wednesdays on Fresno State’s campus, Shimel Her Saychou and Tommy Mak, Cross Cultural and Gender Center (CCGC) team, have since taken Rasaphone’s [API Hangouts](#) to an online platform, and Rasaphone continues to assist in spreading awareness of students' experiences.

"People feel like they can use this current situation as an excuse to be racist, and that is not okay," Rasaphone said. "I am more cautious than ever when I leave the house for essentials, and I call my friends and family to do a buddy system."

Rasaphone says it is a scary time to be Asian because the AAPI community does not know if or when they will be attacked either verbally or physically.

Several stories have gone viral through social media platforms and show AAPI community members of all ages and ethnic backgrounds being violently harassed or harmed.

"I came across a video of a man verbally abusing an elderly Asian man, and it was so hard for me to watch that video," Rasaphone said. "He did absolutely nothing wrong and was minding his own business."

The exposure to these viral stories seem less impersonable on a national scale, but several of these narratives also tie close to home.

Vang came across videos and posts of the coronavirus being referred to as the "[Kung-flu](#)" by local restaurants as well as committed bigotry in telling AAPI community members to "go back to their country."

As frustrating as these stories are, Vang says he finds himself more infuriated when other people of color are initiating these violent, xenophobic acts.

"Although Asian Americans have not always been the most supportive of racial justice historically, it does not excuse the rampant xenophobia plaguing AAPI folks," Vang said. "In this time, we should be standing together in solidarity by recognizing the ways America has failed to incorporate education and values that uplift communities of color."

AAPI community-benefit organizations such as [Freedom, Inc.](#) address these concerns and have released statements criticizing AAPI folks for submitting to the stereotype of anti-blackness when addressing hate crimes.

By failing to reach unanimity when sharing videos of violence perpetrated by Black individuals towards Asian individuals, Freedom, Inc. says the pitting against Black and Asian communities redirects the flow of outrage away from institutional failures and racist leaders and upholds white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism.

Recognizing that misplaced anger is systematic, Vang says it does not discredit the AAPI folks' experiences of encountering violence nor dismiss the neglect of cracking down on hate crimes.

The constant fear of being attacked has resulted in culminating extreme levels of anxieties for AAPI individuals who are simply trying to practice every day activities such as going to grocery stores to purchase essentials or taking a neighborhood walk.

This has affected community members like Vang who says he is constantly aware of the eyes locked onto him, instilling insecurity for his safety.

"This is exasperated even more when I think about my older family members who cannot protect themselves but still need resources or are still working," Vang said. "I can only hope that the proper measures are enforced to counter xenophobic retaliation."

Also at the peak of his life's anxiety, Bouttavong agrees that stories like these are unacceptable and says they make him feel disappointed and saddened that people find it tolerable.

Alongside Bouttavong, all participants mutually agree that they constantly worry and fear for the safety of their loved ones.

In addition to the fear of catching the virus, Dr. Yi says it is terrible that the AAPI community not only has to worry about their health in the context of COVID-19 as a virus but also as a trigger for xenophobia.

Attributing to the intersectional factors of being first-generation, children of refugees, minorities of color, and survivors of war, Southeast Asians statistically have higher rates of mental health issues including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and [suicide](#).

[Research](#) has historically proven that high levels of anxiety is independently associated with suicide; therefore, the immeasurable fear the AAPI population is currently facing due to the effects of coronavirus' xenophobia may result in higher death rates due to hate crimes.

In the nation's current state, there is no vaccine for the uncontrollable and highly deadly virus, and this has resulted in national and local orders of shelter-in-place for the safety of all communities, including AAPIs.

Unlike the virus which is not yet under control, community member's actions towards hate crimes are not random but speculated on the ignorant terms of flagrant racism.

It is society's civic duty to hold one another accountable for hate crimes and bring the community together in solidarity during these difficult times.

"We need to document all incidents of anti-Asian hate crimes," Dr. Yi said. "If you or anyone you know has been the victim of xenophobia, please submit an incident report to the [Stop AAPI Hate](#) database."

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