IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC TO THE ASIAN AND ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

Persistent History, Collective Resistance, and Intersectional Solidarity

Abstract
The impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic to American communities extends beyond physical health problems to include political, economic, education, business, mental health, and social relation impacts. This essay, based on a summer and fall 2020 place-based research project collaboration between Purdue Honors College students and the Purdue Asian American and Asian Resource and Cultural Center, examines impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic to the Asian and Asian American communities. The research asks what the impacts of COVID-19 are to Asian/American communities, how COVID-19 anti-Asian racism is unique or not unique, how the Asian American communities have collectively responded to the racism connected to the pandemic, and how Asian American communities displayed solidarity with other communities during this difficult time in public health and racial justice.

The essay connects extensive media and archival research to detail COVID-19 impacts in the areas of health and wellness, job security, and social/racial justice. The essay then documents the persistent history of stereotyping and racism to Asian/American communities particularly in the midst of larger changes in political, national security, or public health situations. The next part of the essay provides an analysis of the rising number of reporting centers utilizing different platforms to counter the experience of racism. Finally, with the tragic deaths of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd that sparked forms of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, the essay examines specific online and offline efforts in regard to Asian and Asian American solidarity.

Keywords
Asian, Asian American, COVID-19, anti-Asian, #StopAsianHate, pandemic, #BlackLivesMatter, racism, solidarity, Purdue

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INTRODUCTION

The impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic to American communities extends beyond physical health problems to include political, economic, education, business, mental health, and social relation impacts. The COVID-19 pandemic has also brought a new wave of racism, xenophobia, and violence. According to Stop AAPI Hate, between March 19 and August 5, 2020, there were 2,583 instances of hate and bias reported to the organization (Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council, 2020b). This essay, based on a summer and fall 2020 place-based research project collaboration between Purdue Honors College students and the Purdue Asian American and Asian Resource and Cultural Center (AAARCC), examines impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic to the Asian and Asian American communities. The research asks the following questions: What are the impacts of COVID-19 to Asian/American communities? How is COVID-19 anti-Asian racism unique or not unique? How did the Asian American communities collectively respond to the racism connected to the pandemic? How did Asian American communities display solidarity with other communities during this difficult time in public health and racial justice?

Through connecting extensive media and archival research with Asian American studies literature, the first part details COVID-19 impacts in the areas of health and wellness, job security, and social/racial justice and then documents the persistent history of stereotyping and racism to Asian/American communities particularly in relation to larger changes in political, national security, or public health situations. The next part of the essay provides an analysis on the rising number of reporting centers utilizing different platforms to counter the experience of racism. Finally, with the tragic deaths of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd that sparked forms of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, the essay examines specific online and offline efforts in regard to Asian and Asian American solidarity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the mid to late 1800s, millions of Asians have immigrated to America and have put down roots. Though Asian/Americans have strong historical roots in
this country, this population has struggled because of discrimination and bias. Many of them still feel as though they are perceived as foreigners (Lee, Wong, & Alvarez, 2009). In addition, the model minority myth stereotype has become a more common and subtle form of anti-Asian bias. The model minority myth is the perception that Asian Americans are essentially well-off hardworking people who tend to succeed financially and academically. Though this myth may seem positive, this form of anti-Asian bias can also have negative effects on this population, especially for developing students. Positive stereotypes are essentially the “favorable” beliefs that are held toward a social group. Though one may think that endorsing these stereotypes is better than endorsing negative stereotypes, this is not always the case. Social psychological research indicates that positive stereotypes can impact the targets of these stereotypes (Asians) in that they may feel depersonalized and that they are being lumped into a social group (Siy & Cheryan, 2013). Positive stereotypes can also create tensions and barriers within interracial interactions and create negative perceptions of those who endorse positive stereotypes by those who are targets of those stereotypes (Czopp, 2008; Siy & Cheryan, 2016). Model minority myth as a positive stereotype can have negative implications in terms of funding and support in education for students (Museus & Kiang, 2019; Museus, 2014).

ANALYSIS
COVID-19 Impacts in the Area of Health and Wellness, Job Security, and Social/Racial Justice

The toll that COVID-19 brings into hospital capacity and personnel and the history of immigration and inequality marks our current global world, including in the United States. Currently there is a high number of Fillipino Americans working in the American health care system. This has stemmed from the colonialism of the Philippines by America in the 1960s. The health care system in the Philippines is modeled after the one in America, so when there was a shortage of nurses in America, nurses were recruited from the Philippines because they had already learned nursing the American way. Dr. Maria Rosario Araneta, a Filipino American professor at the University of California, San Diego, School of Medicine, stated that “it’s a colonial relationship that reinforces the U.S. dependence on foreign labor” (Wong, 2020). A Business Insider article stated that “Filipinos make up 4% of nurses in the US, but 31.5% of nurse deaths from COVID-19” (Akhtar, 2020). Filipinos have made up the largest portion of nonwhite ethnic groups to die from the pandemic.

Since the start of COVID-19, there has been increased anti-Asian bias and racism in the United States. Through different testimonials, many Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) individuals have been spat on, punched, attacked, and even stabbed due to people associating the origins of the virus with China. According to a testimonial by Tracy Wen Liu on BBC, “When I first came here five years ago, my goal was to adapt to American culture as soon as possible. . . . Then the pandemic made me realise that because I am Asian, and because of how I look like or where I was born, I could never become one of them” (Cheung, Feng, & Deng, 2020). Many AAPI persons have also suffered from racial profiling. Asian and Asian American health care professionals are risking their lives to work in hospitals just like other races, but some people are refusing care from them because of their ethnicity. Many AAPI doctors are saddened by the irony they face. For example, Dr. Lucy Li has faced a lot of prejudice since the start of the pandemic: “I’m risking my own personal health, and then to be vilified just because of what I look like” (Jan, 2020). This bitter reality shows how elusive the model minority myth is. It is only at certain times that Asians and Asian Americans are considered the model minority. If there are any negative events surrounding AAPI persons in general that are broadcast on the news, they are no longer considered the model minority.

Since the start of the pandemic, many individuals have suffered unemployment and have started to find alternative ways to work. In a CBS analysis of the U.S. Labor Department September 2020 report, “the jobless rate for Asian Americans was 10.7%—higher than both that of white workers (7.3%) and workers overall (8.4%)” (Gandel, 2020). Many small businesses run by AAPI individuals were greatly affected because people were wary of purchasing from them. Places such as Chinatown have suffered greatly since the pandemic started and racial bias incidents increased. A larger percentage of restaurants and stores have closed due to the mandated state shutdowns and lack of business from consumers, “turn[ing] the American Dream into a
nightmare for many Asian Americans” (Jiang, 2020). YouTube channels and content creators have done features about the situation in Chinatown to bring more awareness to the restaurants. Another way that people have helped is to “collect funds to pay restaurants for bulk meal orders that will be donated to essential workers” (Erway, 2020).

Persistent History of Stereotyping and Racism to Asian and Asian American Communities

When assessing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic to Asian and Asian American communities, particularly in regard to the increased racism and violence, it might be easy to think that this is a recent or unique phenomenon. Unfortunately, history speaks otherwise. According to World Health Organization director general Tedros Ghebreyesus, “Stigma is more dangerous than the virus itself” (Chen, 2020). This has shown to be true as many AAPI individuals have been harassed and assaulted since governmental power has labeled COVID-19 as the “Chinese Virus” and “Kung Flu.” What follows is the continued occurrence of the persistent history of stereotyping of and racism toward Asian and Asian American communities in both official and legal policies as well as collective responses.

In 1848 the California Gold Rush began, and the first Chinese miners arrived in the United States in pursuit of riches. However, in 1850 the Foreign Miners Tax was passed and affected many of these foreign miners’ ability to pay the tax; some left the country, while others retaliated, forcing the government to repeal the tax. However, the tax was reinstated in 1852, this time at a lower amount (National Asian American Telecommunication Association, 2020). Here we see anti-Asian bias through the unfair treatment of these immigrants. It is also worth mentioning that also in 1852, the first Asian contract laborers were brought to Hawaii to work on plantations. This was the beginning of using Asian labor, particularly Chinese labor, in the United States. In 1865 the Central Pacific Railroad Company began work on the first transcontinental railroad, recruiting 10,000 Chinese migrant workers. These workers were primarily paid less than the white workers and also received harsh treatment such as beatings. In 1867, some of these workers went on strike to demand equal treatment; however, the railroad company responded by cutting off food supplies for these workers, forcing them to break the strike. In 1869, the year the railroad was complete, more than 1,000 Chinese workers lost their lives due to an avalanche and other environmental hardships (National Asian American Telecommunication Association, 2020).

During this anti-Chinese movement came the rhetoric of “yellow peril,” painting Chinese people as perpetual foreigners. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1982 banned the immigration of Chinese laborers and prevented any naturalization of Chinese immigrants as U.S. citizens. However, many of the children of these immigrants who were born in America fought in courts to be considered citizens of the United States. Even though this law was designed for those of Chinese descent, many other Asians were impacted. The law was enforced for 60 years and was repealed in 1943 during World War II when China was an ally. However, there were still quotas that each Asian group had to figure out (National Asian American Telecommunication Association, 2020).

World War II was perhaps one of the most challenging times for Asian Americans, particularly Japanese Americans, in this country. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created Executive Order 9066, internning Japanese Americans and forcing them to move from their homes along the West Coast. After the war, later administrations signed into law the Japanese American Evacuation Claims Act of 1948 and the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 to apologize to Japanese Americans. However, the resentment was still there and was still present even 50 years after the war.

The last major event that created foreign tension with Asia was the 9/11 attack. After this attack many Asians were impacted, and hate crimes increased toward South Asians, even South Asians who were not Muslim. For instance, the first victim post-9/11 was a Sikh man named Balbir Singh Sodhi who was killed at a gas station (Lewin, 2001). He was killed because he “looked” Muslim, having a beard and a turban.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased violence and bias toward the Asian/American community. According to the Pew Research Center, “Beyond the personal experiences of various groups, about four-in-ten U.S. adults (39%) say it is more common for people to express
racist or racially insensitive views about people who are Asian than it was before the coronavirus outbreak” (Ruiz, Horowitz, & Tamir, 2020). In addition, increased microaggressions and racist phrases such as “Kung Flu” and “China Virus” have contributed to putting Asian Americans in a negative light. Asian Americans were further stigmatized and portrayed when many leaders in the United States began using this terminology, painting Asian Americans in a negative way. Now more than ever, Asian Americans fear discrimination and violence. The Pew Research Center found that 26% of the people identifying as Asian American in the survey fear that someone might threaten or physically attack them.

Nonprofit Organizations’ Responses and Reporting Centers

Nonprofit organizations and national groups have assembled reporting centers for minority communities to help combat bias incidents and give a voice to victims and witnesses. In a National Public Radio interview, Dr. Russell Jeung, a professor of Asian American studies at San Francisco State University, talks about the spike in AAPI hate reports (Mullis & Glenn, 2020). He helped launch Stop AAPI Hate to help track these attacks. These reporting centers, some of which are summarized below, stand as a foothold for Asian Americans to fight the stereotype that Asians must remain silent in the face of discrimination, harassment, and hate crimes.

Stop AAPI Hate

Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center was launched by the Asian American Pacific Policy and Planning Council, Chinese for Affirmative Action, and San Francisco State University’s Asian American Studies Department on March 19, 2020 (Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council, 2020a). The reporting center emerged after unsuccessful attempts to create a reporting center through the State of California after a physical assault on an Asian American teenage boy by a person who believed that the boy had coronavirus because of his Asian descent.

The “Coronavirus Anti-AAPI Racism Incident Report” is available in a number of different languages, allowing accessibility to a greater number of people. According to the Stop AAPI Hate website, the information will be used for assistance, education, and advocacy for policies and programs dedicated to curtailing racial profiling (Asian Pacific Policy & Planning Council, n.d.). Through this center, individuals who have been directly impacted by or witnessed firsthand this issue have the ability to share their stories. In an article from AsAm News, Cynthia Choi, the co–executive director of Chinese for affirmative action, states that “first and foremost, we want community members to know they are not alone; they can speak out and help stop the spread of bigotry. Secondly, the collected data will allow us to assess the extent and magnitude of these incidents and to develop strategic interventions” (Chow, 2020).

Stand Against Hatred

Another reporting center available to the public is Stand Against Hatred. The Asian Americans Advancing Justice is a national affiliation of five leading organizations advocating for the civil and human rights of Asian Americans and other underserved communities. The organization was founded in 1991 in Washington, D.C (Asian American Advancing Justice, 2020). The Stand Against Hate website was created on June 19, 2017, for an awareness campaign to commemorate the 35th anniversary of Vincent Chin's murder. Together, Asian Americans Advancing Justice and Communities Against Hate partnered to create this website to report and track hate crimes. The website is available to document hate and to educate about the environment of hate around the country (Asian Americans Advancing Justice, n.d.). Stories of different personal cases are available on the website, which also has bystander intervention virtual training to stop anti-Asian/American and xenophobic harassment.

OCA

The Organization of Chinese Americans—Asian Pacific American Advocates, commonly known as OCA, is a national nonprofit, membership-driven organization based in Washington, D.C. (OCA, n.d.a). The OCA has been dedicated to advancing the social, political, and economic well-being of AAPIs since 1973. Similar to Asian Americans Advancing Justice, OCA’s work with
hate crimes took fire after the murder of Vincent Chin. OCA National’s policy department is asking for video testimonies of coronavirus-related hate crimes to expand coverage into multimedia formats (OCA, n.d.b). The OCA also makes available the “AAPI Hate Incident Reporting Form.” Filing a report with the OCA helps advocacy organizations nationwide fight for AAPIs’ civil rights. In a press release on March 24, 2020, it was announced that the OCA and over 180 organizations petitioned the White House and others for swift action on anti-AAPI hate crimes (OCA, 2020).

**DISCUSSIONS ON SOLIDARITY: #STOPASIANHATE AND THE #BLACKLIVESMATTER MOVEMENT**

There have been many instances throughout history where Asian Americans and Black Americans have advocated for the other in the face of discrimination and pressure from White authority. Even as early as the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Black poet and activist Frederick Douglass spoke out against nativist policies on behalf of the immigrant Asian community, emphasizing that “migratory rights . . . are human rights” (Blight, 2019). These accounts often go unheard, though, and the predominant narrative in our culture is one of friction and stratification. Asian Americans are held up as examples of fiscal “success” despite the challenges they face as minorities. This attitude simultaneously dismisses the barriers that exist for Black Americans and reinforces the generalization that Asian America is a singular wealthy, respected monolith.

A notable example of 20th-century Afro-Asian collaboration lies in the Bandung Conference of 1955 (Office of the Historian, n.d.), held in Bandung, Indonesia. Representatives from governments across both Asia and Africa came together for the conference with the intent to discuss how third world countries would navigate international relations in the time of the Cold War and decolonization. Asian Americans also played an active though relatively unsung role in the American civil rights era. One of the most prominent of these was Grace Lee Boggs, a Chinese American activist who fought for racial equality throughout the civil rights movement alongside Malcolm X and the Black liberation movement, particularly in her Detroit community (Ward, 2016). Beyond her political action, Boggs also focused on cultivating grassroots efforts for effecting change on a community level (seen later in the founding of Detroit Summer, a youth collective for the folks of that inner-city community). Another close friend and associate of Malcolm X—who was in fact present at the moment of his death—was Yuri Kochiyama, a Japanese American activist who advocated for both Black liberation and Puerto Rican independence later. The San Francisco State University strike in 1968 also saw a great wave of political involvement across many Asian communities, particularly with the Third World Liberation Front that brought the formation of the first School of Ethnic Area Studies.

When it comes to policing and rioting, the spring of 1992 saw one of the most salient examples of the complex race and systemic power dynamics at play between the Black and Asian communities. The Los Angeles riots, triggered by the brutal beating of Rodney King by four white police officers, resulted in the looting and burning of many Korean American businesses in Koreatown. In the context of this investigation, what is particularly telling about this story is its subsequent portrayal. Coverage and analysis of the events, as discussed by King-Kok Cheung in *Misinterpretations and Injustice*, leaned into the Korean versus Black narrative rather than the narrative that called for accountability of White policemen and officials in power (Cheung, 2005). Ultimately a reinforcement of the model minority myth and the fragmentation of minority groups emerges from such interpretations. Even now, the Los Angeles riots are often cited in the media to discredit of following the murder of George Floyd as “proof” that demonstrations are unproductive. While it is true that feelings of frustration did arise from this incident within both communities, the issue is that this moment should not become what defines the whole of Black-Asian relations in the United States.

During the COVID-19 pandemic there have been many incidents of anti-Asian discrimination since March 2020 that have been shared over social media, and there have been multiple individuals who expressed their frustration and support through artwork that has been commented on and shared by many people. Artist Rei Lo (2020) posted artwork speaking out against anti-Asian discrimination with statements such as “hate is a virus”
in the Facebook group Subtle Asian Traits, with approximately 1.8 million users who are predominantly Asian. Organizations such as the National Queer Pacific Islander Alliance collected stories of COVID anti-Asian violence, and the Asian American Feminist Collective hosted the Black and Asian American Feminist Solidarities Workshop and compiled a web page with resources and books about the collective’s history. Biana Mabute-Louie is an Instagram activist and PhD student who makes infographics with the “Asian Americans & the 4 I’s of Anti-Blackness,” “Anti-Racist Anxiety,” and stories of “Black & Asian Solidarity” (Figure 1). She also encourages the importance of ethnic studies and refers to more resources as documentaries for Instagram viewers. All of these examples show a great method of being able to provide information, an explanation, and/or something that catches one’s interest and refer to other sources for viewers to become more educated about antiracism for both the perceptions of Asian and Asian Americans affected by COVID-19 and African Americans affected by the history of their oppression.

COVID-19 has made large gatherings more difficult; however, there are ways to gather in large groups to continue the movement online. Korean pop’s influence has significantly spread throughout the world, meaning that many people are part of fan bases that regularly communicate with each other. The hashtag #WhiteLivesMatter and other anti-Black hashtags were trending on TikTok and Instagram, and k-pop fans came together to post memes and fancams of Korean idols to prevent the antidiscriminating posts from appearing so often (Lee, 2020) (Figure 2).

![Figure 1](https://www.instagram.com/p/CAisvc9hx8R/)


![Figure 2](https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/04/us/kpop-blackpink-fans-black-lives-matter-trnd/index.html)

**FIGURE 2.** K-pop fans’ hashtag activism as a form of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement (Lee, 2020).
CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic impacts the Asian American and Asian communities particularly in the areas of health and wellness, job security, and social/racial justice. This analysis and discussion of anti-Asian bias within the United States indicates that anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic is not unique. From the beginning of the first Asian Americans in this country to now, there is a need to educate people about Asian American history and experiences. The model minority myth is dangerous and distracts from the narrative of Asian American struggles in this country along with the struggles of other minorities.

Reporting centers provide an important method for providing information about bias, harassment, and discrimination. Reporting centers also serve as sources for becoming more educated about antiracism movements. There is a lot of convergence in this time of COVID-19 to amplify responses to both anti-Asian racism and racial turmoil that affect especially Black communities. Antiracism efforts are important for encouraging change. These creative organizations bring attention to racism in a unique way and provide more methods to support to those who are affected and provide resources and methods for people to advocate for antiracism in their communities. This must be done to address the systemic racism that still exists today in the hope of ending microaggressions and discrimination. This study hopes to encourage other groups that are marginalized to provide support when different groups need it in light of the past history of marginalized groups coming together to implement change.

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