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Yellow Peril and COVID-19, Historically and Politically Contextualizing Anti- Asian Racism

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# Yellow Peril and COVID-19, Historically and Politically

## Contextualizing Anti-Asian Racism

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From its onset, the COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by racist rhetoric targeting the Chinese state, Chinese Americans, and the larger Asian American community. In addition to online hate speech, xenophobic headlines in the media, and racist statements from politicians across the aisle,<sup>1</sup> the past few years have also seen an increase in reported violence against Asian Americans.<sup>2</sup>

While news outlets and politicians have devoted newfound attention to this violence, the targeting of Asian Americans is by no means a new phenomenon, or one solely driven by the pandemic. It is important to understand the roots of the racism we see affecting Asian American communities today in order to better address ongoing violence and prevent such attacks in the future.

BIMI-affiliate, and Associate Professor of Ethnic Studies, Dr. Lok Siu, and UC Berkeley PhD student Claire Chun, explore this history in their October 2020 article, “Yellow Peril and Techno-orientalism in the Time of COVID-19: Racialized Contagion, Scientific Espionage, and Techno-Economic Warfare.” In addition to the pandemic, the authors argue that the escalating U.S.-China trade war, and

<sup>1</sup> Caputo, Mark. 2020. “Anti-China sentiment is on the rise.” *Politico*, May 20.

<sup>2</sup> Yam, Mimmy. 2022. “Anti-Asian hate crimes increased 339 percent nationwide last year, report says.” *NBC News*, January 31.

*“It is important to understand the roots of the racism we see affecting Asian American communities today in order to better address ongoing violence and prevent such attacks in the future.”*

the issue of cyber security, have also contributed to the rise in anti-Asian violence. In order to better understand today’s climate, Siu and Chun trace the origins of the “Yellow Peril” ideology and its role in driving Sinophobic and anti-Asian sentiment throughout history.

### Contextualizing COVID19 and Anti-Asian Racism

As the authors discuss, the COVID pandemic emerged at a time in which tensions between the U.S. and China were already high. Their article outlines the many sanctions and tariffs imposed in the name of national security against China and Chinese corporations in the years leading up to the COVID outbreak.

Siu and Chun write, “One may argue that President Trump’s insistence on blaming China for the spread of the deadly virus is yet another tactic in his administration’s sustained attempt to quell China’s economic power at the same time that it provides a foil to distract from—and a scapegoat to blame for—the economic and public health crisis in which we find ourselves.”<sup>3</sup> While the COVID outbreak certainly fueled the anti-Chinese rhetoric being spread, a deeper examination of the political

<sup>3</sup> Siu, Lok, and Claire Chun. 2020. “Yellow Peril and Techno-orientalism in the Time of Covid-19: Racialized Contagion, Scientific Espionage, and Techno-Economic Warfare.” *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 23(3): 424.



context reveals that this villainization of China served another purpose - to distract from the US government's failures and undermine China's economic power. This fear of China's growing power and influence over the West is an example of the enduring ideology of Yellow Peril.

#### **Timeline: U.S.-China Relations Leading up to COVID Discovery.<sup>4</sup>**

**March 2018:** Trump implements tariffs on over \$50 billion worth of Chinese imports, responding to alleged intellectual property theft.

**July 2018:** New 25% import tax introduced on \$34 billion worth of Chinese goods. China responds with comparable tariffs targeting items such as beef, dairy, seafood, and soybeans.

**October 2018:** Mike Pence delivers a speech condemning economic and military aggression and claims China is stealing intellectual property and interfering with elections in the United States. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs calls the accusations "groundless."

**May 2019:** Trump administration more than doubles tariffs on \$200 billion worth of Chinese imports. U.S. bans companies from using foreign telecommunications equipment deemed threatening to national security, Commerce department blacklists Huawei.

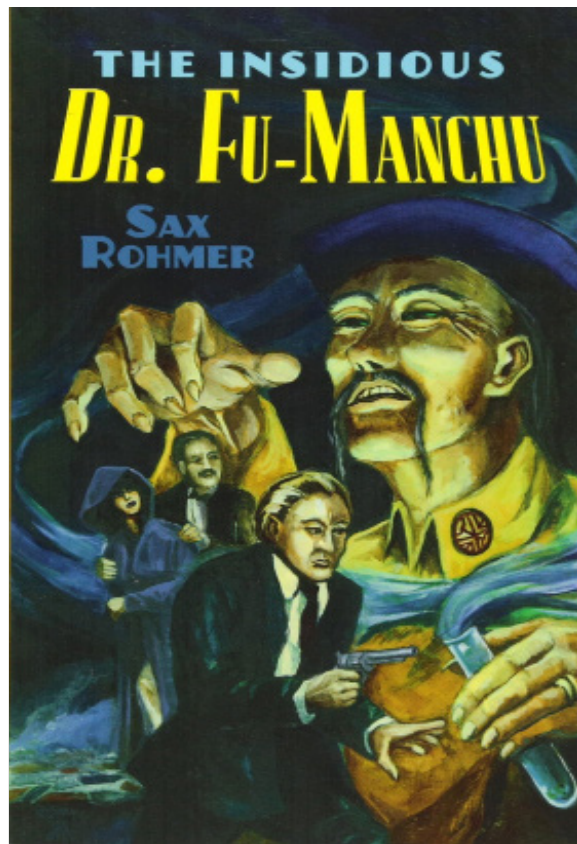
#### **What is Yellow Peril?**

As defined by the authors, the idea of "Yellow Peril" originated in the late 1800s in response to the perception of the growing threat of Japan's military and industrial power in the eyes of Western governments. Historically, "Yellow" has been used as a dehumanizing and racist term encompassing and homogenizing Asian people of multiple ethnicities by the color of their skin.<sup>5</sup> The fear of "Yellow Peril," or the threat of Asian countries - and by extension Asian people - to the Western way of life, is visible in a number of prevailing narratives, media representations, and political decisions throughout US history. The authors point to Japanese internment, restrictive immigration policies based in racist tropes about Asian women,

<sup>4</sup> Council on Foreign Relations. 2022. "Timeline: U.S. relations with China 1949-2022." Retrieved May 13, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Kevak, Michael. 2011. *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

and Asian caricatures in media, as examples of the manifestation and perpetuation of this ideology.



The Insidious Dr Fu Manchu, an "evil criminal genius" who threatens national security, one of 18 Manchu novels by Sax Rohmer.

In these examples and others throughout history, when one Asian community is targeted, the effects are felt by other Asian Americans, regardless of ethnicity. During internment for example, while Japanese Americans were targeted as a threat to national security, other Asian Americans faced harassment and racism, in part due to the homogenized Western view of Asia and its people. As the authors write, "Yellow peril creates enemies of entire racialized-national populations; it does not care to differentiate variations within this 'enemy' population."<sup>6</sup>

In the case of COVID, Chinese Americans were first targeted due to the virus' connection to, and association with, China. Soon, however, other Asian Americans were subject to harassment. While some may have been mistaken for Chinese Americans, in many cases, the targeting and fear of Chinese people in relation to COVID began to spill over into anyone

<sup>6</sup> Siu and Chun (2020): 432.

## Yellow Peril thus frames Chinese Americans not as individuals, but as agents of the state, casting suspicion on anyone associated with China

of perceived Asian descent. As the authors write, “Filtered through the U.S. racial lens, East Asian phenotype—no matter one’s ethnic background—is sufficient enough to provoke hate, anger, and violence.”<sup>7</sup>

Yellow Peril thus frames Chinese Americans not as individuals, but as agents of the state, casting suspicion on anyone associated with China. This manifestation of Yellow Peril has had real material consequences for the many Chinese immigrants in the U.S., even before the pandemic. In 2019, for example, a number of Chinese American scientists were removed from positions in government and universities. While numerous academics including the MIT President L. Rafael Reif denounced this discriminatory targeting, the FBI continued to perpetuate the theory that Chinese American scientists were part of a national scheme to gain access to and steal scientific innovations. In 2020, FBI Director Christopher Wray claimed, “China has pioneered a societal approach to stealing innovation any way it can, from a wide array of businesses, universities, and organizations. They’re doing this through Chinese intelligence services, through state-owned enterprises, through ostensibly private companies, through graduate students and researchers, and through a variety of actors working on behalf of China... Put plainly, China seems determined to steal its way up the economic ladder, at our expense.”<sup>8</sup>

Given this existing narrative, it is not surprising that COVID was framed as another example of Chinese aggression. From the beginning of the pandemic, Government officials played on Yellow Peril tropes, framing COVID as a manufactured attack and further proof of China’s growing power. Trump called the virus “the worst attack we’ve ever had on our country,” and explicitly blamed China, using the expression “China virus” over 20 times in the

two week period following March 16, 2020, often replacing the word Corona in scripted speeches.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the political and economic tensions between the U.S. and China, the authors discuss the history of racializing diseases in the U.S., and how this pattern is visible yet again.

### Racializing Diseases

While the pandemic has presented extraordinary, unprecedented realities, COVID is far from the first disease to be racialized. There are many other instances throughout U.S. and world history where a disease’s perceived relation to an ethnic or racial group leads to discrimination against said group, often compounded by existing racial prejudices.



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### Common Reactions

Please recognize that experiencing any of these can be normal reactions and that over the next few days or weeks you may experience periods of:

- Anxiety, worry, panic
- Feeling helplessness
- Social withdrawal
- Difficulty concentrating and sleeping
- Hyper-vigilance to your health and body
- Anger
- Xenophobia: fears about interacting with those who might be from Asia and guilt about these feelings



A January 2020 UC Berkeley Health Center instagram post describes xenophobia as a normal reaction to news of COVID.

The SARS outbreak of the early 2000s, which reportedly infected only 8 people in the United States and caused no deaths, was met with similarly anti-Asian rhetoric and discrimination.<sup>10</sup>

Another glaring example was the reaction to the Ebola outbreak. News coverage and public hysteria over the virus, first identified in Southeastern Guinea in 2014, targeted African migrants throughout the entire continent. In the cases of SARS and Ebola, the Western homogenizing and otherising of the Asian

7 Siu and Chun (2020): 433.

8 Federal Bureau of Investigation. 2019. “Director Addresses Council on Foreign Relations.” April 26.

9 Viala-Gaudefroy, Jérôme and Dana Lindaman. 2020. “Donald Trump’s ‘Chinese virus’: the politics of naming.” *The Conversation*, April 13.

10 Fang, Jenn. 2020. “The 2003 SARS outbreak fueled anti-Asian racism. Coronavirus doesn’t have to” *The Washington Post*, February 4.



and African continents rendered vast portions of the population vulnerable to harassment. Schools in the United States, for example, sent students back home to Rwanda, and denied school applications from students in Nigeria – two countries which were thousands of miles from the outbreak. In “Ebola as African: American Media Discourses of Panic and Otherization,” Sarah Monson writes, “The US news media tapped into Americans’ fear and conceptualization of Ebola as ‘other,’ ‘scary,’ and ‘African,’ which led to the othering of Africa, Africans, and those returning from Africa. Such otherization had real-life, and in some cases, traumatizing consequences.”<sup>11</sup>

However, when viruses originate in Western, “developed” countries, white people do not find themselves subject to the same type of harassment and automatic connection to the virus. This is evident even within the current COVID-19 pandemic. The first variant, identified in the UK, in September 2020 has widely been referred to as the Alpha variant. The omicron variant, however, which is believed to have been present in Europe far before its identification, was first discovered in South Africa, and quickly became known as the “South African variant.” In addition to the name being misleading, the association between South Africa and the highly transmissible variant led to numerous consequences, such as the closing of travel borders only to South Africans.<sup>12</sup>

**Today, the homogenized view of Asian people in Western eyes renders millions vulnerable to harassment, and Yellow Peril based tropes frame COVID as a biological weapon of the growing Chinese superpower.**

The racialization of disease is both fueled by, and a contributor to, existing racial prejudices. In the case of Ebola, existing prejudices led to the targeting of all Africans and African descended people regardless of the geographic reality of the virus, and racist tropes regarding the danger of the African continent

fueled media hysteria. Today, the homogenized view of Asian people in Western eyes renders millions vulnerable to harassment, and Yellow Peril based tropes frame COVID as a biological weapon of the growing Chinese superpower.

### Key Takeaways

- Historical context should be taken into account when analyzing the current moment.**

As the authors note, “it is crucial that we situate the current unfolding within the long history of Asian racialization, one that indexes the abiding tension between the political impetus to define national belonging and the shifting economic imperatives of the nation-state.”
- We must reject Yellow Peril ideology and its influence on rhetoric in the US.**

Recognizing and denouncing arguments and propaganda that rests upon or furthers Yellow Peril ideology is crucial to combatting anti-Asian racism and xenophobia.
- Resist racist immigration policy.**

Regardless of who occupies the White House, we must continue to organize against exclusionary, inhumane, and racist immigration policies. The recent attempts to restrict entry of international graduate students show both the impact of anti-Chinese rhetoric on immigration policy, and the power of organizing to pressure the government to reverse unjust decisions. In moments of crises especially, the government has the opportunity and often consent to enact discriminatory, fear-based legislation, which we must continue to monitor and combat.

<sup>11</sup> Monson, Sarah. 2017. “Ebola as African: American Media Discourses of Panic and Otherization.” *Africa Today*, 63(3): 2-27.

<sup>12</sup> BBC News. 2021. “Covid: South Africa ‘punished’ for detecting new Omicron variant.” November 28.



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## Design & Layout

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Dewi Zarni is a BIMI Undergraduate Research Fellow and an American Studies major at UC Berkeley, concentrating in the intersection of immigration and criminal justice. She has previously interned with East Bay Sanctuary Covenant's Refugee Rights program and a local immigration attorney. Her current research work for BIMI includes the Mapping Spatial Inequality project and Amplifying Sanctuary Voices Oral History project on climate migration.