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## Return of the Yellow Peril? Racism, Xenophobia and Bigotry Against Asian Americans

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# Return of the Yellow Peril? Racism, Xenophobia and Bigotry Against Asian Americans

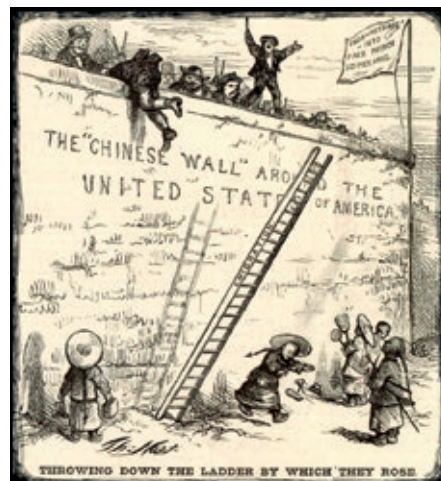
Jonghyun Lee

The recent surge of anti-Asian American violence is disconcerting. Data released by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino revealed that anti-Asian American hate crimes spiked by 339 percent in 2021 (K. Yam 2022). Massachusetts is no exception. The data presented by the Massachusetts Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (2021) show a 47 percent increase in anti-Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) hate crimes in Massachusetts between 2015 and 2020, while total hate crimes against other groups increased only 2 percent over the same period. However, only a handful of those offenders of hate crimes were held accountable for their violence. For instance, of 233 reported attacks against Asian Americans in the New York metropolitan area during the first three quarters of 2021, merely seven cases resulted in a hate crime conviction (the Asian American Bar Association of New York 2022).

The U.S. Census Bureau (2002) defines people of Asian descent as those having origins in one of more than twenty countries in Far East Asia, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent, each with its own unique histories, cultures, traditions, languages, and other distinctive characteristics (J. S. Barnes & C. E. Bennett 2002). As of 2020, there were 24 million people in the United States who identified their race as Asian alone or as part of a multiracial background, regardless of Hispanic origin. Asians make up about 7.2 percent of the total population of the United States. The Chinese population (5.1 million) was



*Invisibility of the Asian American Communities*  
from *The Asian American Foundation*  
[@LAAUNCH & @TAAFORG]  
(May 11, 2022), [twitter.com](#).



Thomas Nast's cartoon from 23 July, 1870 portrayed immigrants from Europe pulling up the ladder to stop Chinese immigration to the United States (M. Fiore, 2017). Image: Wallach Division Picture Collection, The New York Public Library.

the largest Asian ethnic group in 2020 followed by Asian Indian (4.5 million), Filipino (4.1 million), Vietnamese (2.2 million), Korean (1.9 million), and Japanese (1.6 million) (U.S. Census Bureau 2022). As the largest ethnic groups, the members of these communities shape the demographic characteristics of Asian Americans in the United States. It is projected that the numbers of Asian Americans will surpass 46 million by 2060, about a 52 percent increase from the current total (A. Budiman & N. G. Ruiz 2021).

## Violence Against Asian Americans

In the most recent national report prepared by the Stop AAPI Hate Coalition (2022), approximately 11,467 Asian American individuals across the country experienced hate incidents between March 19, 2020, and March 31, 2022. However, this report does not represent actual incidents since AAPIs are said to be the least likely to report such incidents. It is estimated that over two million Asian American individuals have experienced hate incidents since the Covid-19 pandemic started (J. Lee & K. Ramakrishnan 2021). In addition, the Stop AAPI Hate Coalition

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found that 25 percent, or one in five individual Asian Americans, experienced a hate incident.

About 67 percent, or two in three hate incidents involved a written or verbal threat in addition to derogatory gestures that featured racist stereotypes towards Asian Americans. While 17% of 11,467 Asian Americans experienced hate incidents in a form of physical violence, about an equal amount of people reported experiencing avoidance or shunning (Stop AAPI Hate Coalition). It is startling to learn that the hate incidents against Asian Americans frequently take place in public spaces. Approximately 40 percent of hate incidents took place either on public streets or sidewalks, roads, parks, parking lots, beaches, and hiking trails. While more than 27 percent of the total hate incidents took place in grocery stores, pharmacies, or retail shops, many Asian Americans also deal with vitriol online

and actions based on racial and ethnic differences, while the term xenophobia refers to fear, intolerance, or hatred of immigrants and other individuals who are perceived as foreign, unfamiliar, or different (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2020). As obstinate, unreasonable, and prejudiced beliefs against a particular group of people, bigotry comes out in the form of xenophobia, racism, or both (A. S. Lauwers 2019). Throughout the history of the United States, members of Asian American communities have battled against a long legacy of racism, xenophobia, and bigotry.

It is important to be aware that each Asian American community has its own distinctive history of migration to the United States and settlement experiences. Chinese migration to the United States started with the California Gold Rush. Following James Marshall's discovery of gold near

The arrival of the ship, *Scioto*, on June 19, 1868, signaled the first organized group of Japanese migrants to the United States, which consisted of 150 individuals headed for employment on the sugar plantations in Hawaii (R. M. Shinsato 1965). From 1886 to 1911, 400,000 additional Japanese people left their homeland for the United States to search for opportunities for a better life, peace, and prosperity (L. Ichise 2005). In addition to Hawaii, most of these earlier Japanese migrants settled along the Pacific coast including California, Washington and Oregon (Walz 2000).

Similar to the Japanese, the first significant wave of Korean migration to the United States started in Hawaii. On January 13, 1903, a steamer named the *S.S. Gaelic* from Korea arrived in Hawaii and landed 102 people (M. Noland 2003). By 1905, over 7,000 Koreans had come to Hawaii to work as indentured laborers on pineapple and sugar plantations. From 1905 to 1924, approximately 2,000 additional Korean immigrants moved to Hawaii and California (Z. Choi 2002).

While serving as miners, strikebreakers, railroad builders, and agricultural workers, Chinese and other Asian communities faced racism, xenophobia, and bigotry in the United States. The term Yellow Peril refers to a general fear, mistrust, and hatred of Chinese and other Asians in the United States (J. Ho 2020). For instance, in the nineteenth century, the Chinese were demonized as the Yellow Peril by being accused of eating vermin and engaging in pagan religious practices, while stealing jobs from white working men. Such sentiments provoked a series of massacres and riots targeting Chinese and other Asian ethnic groups in the United States.

In 1859, a Chinese School was set up to segregate the children of Chinese descent in San Francisco. On October 11, 1906, the San Francisco Board of Education changed the Chinese

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(10%), at their private residence (10%), on public transit (9%), and in school settings (9%). Reaching out for help may not be practical. Bystanders often turn their heads, pretending they do not see or hear anything.

### A Long Legacy of Racism, Xenophobia, and Bigotry Against Asian Americans

In fact, racism, xenophobia, and bigotry against Asians in the United States are not new. Racism manifests through prejudiced and discriminatory thoughts

Coloma in 1848, California attracted many of those who hoped to strike it rich from all over the world (Ngai 2015). Among the early sojourners were about 60 contracted young Chinese male laborers who arrived in Tuolumne County, California in the summer of 1849. The numbers of the Chinese miners grew quickly. By the end of 1852, there were twenty thousand Chinese miners in California. This means that they accounted for 10 percent of the total population in California and 20 percent of the mining population then residing in the state.



Laundry detergent the Magic Washer advertisement. Uncle Sam, with the proclamation and a can of Magic Washer manufactured by Geo. Dee, Dixon, Illinois, kicking a group of Chinese out of the United States. Shoher & Carqueville (c. 1886). Image: Library of Congress, [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov).

School to the Oriental Public School and ordered Japanese and Korean children to also attend (J. Kuo 1998). Starting with the Page Act of 1875, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Gentleman's Agreement of 1907, the Cable Act of 1922, and the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924 were implemented to ban immigration from all Asian countries and to prohibit their ability to acquire citizenship. These institutionalized discriminatory policies reduced Asian Americans to the status of "perpetual foreigners."

Institutional racism against Asian Americans surfaced during hard times in the United States such as the Great Depression. The Social Security Act of 1935, the first federal policy created for the poor, systemically denied coverage to Asian Americans along with other people of color (L. DeWitt 2010).

Although many Japanese were successful in farming, they could not own land until 1952 when the Alien Land Laws were ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court (C. M. Lyon 2020). Moreover, through the Executive Order 9066 signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt on February 19, 1942, about 120,000 Japanese Americans were sent to internment camps built in varying locations until World War II ended in 1945. When coming back home after the war, many Japanese Americans found their properties had been either stolen or vandalized (D. T. Nakanishi 2009).

Indeed, the members of Asian communities had to wait until 1952 when federal policy through the McCarran-Walter Act finally granted them the right to become naturalized citizens of the United States and to vote. Although this Act changed some racist provisions against Asians, it still retained the national origin quotas. It allowed only a minimal number of immigrants from Asia, while allocating over 85 percent of immigration quotas to those immigrating from European countries (M. Marinari 2012). This discriminatory immigration policy was abolished in 1965 through the Immigration and Naturalization Act, which replaced the previous quota system with new criteria of family preference, occupation, and skills. Moreover, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was signed into law to prevent

the persistent discriminatory schemes in voting, especially against Asian Americans through literacy tests and other measures designed to impede and exclude them (M. Jones-Correa 2005).

## Model Minority Myth

The model minority is another racial wedge that lumps the diverse experiences of Asian Americans into a singular narrative (K. Eckart & M. S. Rule 2021). First coined by sociologist William Petersen in 1966, the term model minority has been used most often to describe the educational and financial success among Asian Americans. However, it is a dangerous stereotype that puts minority groups in competition with one another by creating a racial hierarchy. The model minority myth resulted in the immigration reforms of 1965 that gave preference to doctors, scientists, engineers, and other skilled professionals in addition to family preference. This stereotype disregards the economic and generational heterogeneity among different Asian American communities and ignores the poverty and other forms of adversities that they experience. For instance, according to the Center for Migration Studies (2019), there were more than 1.6 million undocumented Asian Americans as of 2019. This means that they account for nearly 16 percent of all undocumented immigrants in the United States although they account for only 7.2 percent of the nation's population. However, undocumented Asian Americans are mostly invisible and bear a stigma because they do not fit into the model minority myth.

## Resilience of Asian Americans and Their Contributions

Despite the endless tides of discrimination, bigotry, and hatred, Asian Americans served the U.S. Army during the two World Wars (K. S. Wong 2005). In the 1960s and 70s, together with African Americans and other





*This photograph depicts a rally to stop Asian Hate in McPherson Square, D.C. in March 2021. Yu, E. (2021, September 7) "Social Justice is Leaving Asian Americans Behind," Columbia Political Review. Photo: Victoria Pickering, flickr.com. Retrieved from [www.cpreview.org](http://www.cpreview.org).*

people of color, members of the Asian American communities participated in the Civil Rights Movements to eliminate racial discrimination and segregation (S. Hinnershitz 2020). More

found that Asian American and Pacific Islander households paid more than \$240.4 billion in federal, state, and local taxes. This amount is much larger than the total federal government spending on some of the major social welfare programs such as housing assistance (\$51 billion), community regional development (\$27 billion), the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (\$92.4 billion), and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (\$30.9 billion) spent in 2019 (L. Tiehen 2020; U.S. Office of Family Assistance 2020; Urban Institute, 2022).

### Stand Up Against Hate

On March 16, 2021, a shooting spree targeting Asian women occurred in the metropolitan area of Atlanta, Georgia. This inhumane crime represents the resurrection of racism, xenophobia and bigotry against the Asian American

experienced blatant racism, being considered perpetual foreigners. Such acts only promote aggression, fear, or hatred among different racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Moreover, negative impacts on the mental health of Asian Americans are well documented by numerous empirical findings (Armenta et al. 2013; Misra et al. 2020).

In addition to a robust public policy that strengthens accountability for those who violate civil rights, we must stand together against various forms of racial injustice including hate incidents at school settings, workplaces, businesses, and other public spaces. Also critical is to educate the American public about Asian communities and their experience of racism, xenophobia, and bigotry. According to the Asian American Foundation (2022), 42% of adults in the United States could not identify any single historical event involving Asian Americans. Education about Asian American communities not only advances our knowledge about the history of the United States but can also enhance empathy across racial and ethnic lines. This is why the racial justice work we do at Bridgewater State University is so vital to the Asian Americans in our campus community. Such efforts can strengthen a sense of solidarity among us as the United States of America pledged to pursue LIBERTY and JUSTICE for all!



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recently, Asian American communities have made significant contributions to the United States economy. While analyzing the American Community Survey, the New American Economy (2021), a bipartisan think tank group,

communities that had been disguised under the model minority myth. While being maliciously marked as unworthy of the same rights and treatment that others enjoy in the United States, Asian Americans