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From Rhetoric to Racism

Jilleen Liao is Chinese, Taiwanese, and the fifth or sixth generation in her family to be in America. She was on a grocery run holding four grocery bags on April 19, 2020 when a man crossed the road to get in her face. He stood close enough to see the lines in his face and said, “Next time don’t bring your diseases back from your country,” (Kang and Kambhampaty). Following this incident, she makes multiple grocery trips a week in fear of being put in a position where she couldn’t defend herself; she also rides a skateboard to distance herself from other pedestrians. These are actions a fifth or sixth generation German would not have to take.

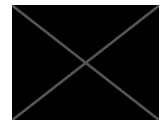
Abraham Choi is a second generation Korean-American. He was in a Penn Station bathroom on March 13, 2020 when a man stood behind him and started coughing and spitting on him, then shouted “You Chinese f-ck. All of you should die, and all of you have the Chinese Virus,” using a term he probably heard from American political officials, (Kang and Kambhampaty). He reported the situation to a police officer, but was told it wouldn’t be worth the paperwork. He later shared his story anonymously on Reddit, but said he was afraid to come forward because his family could become targets.

These stories occurred around the same time and follow a pattern of harassment, fear, and actions taken. The actions taken do not lead to any solution, forcing victims to change their behavior out of fear, something that should not have to happen in “the land of the free.” These

incidents were not isolated events, but part of a broader pattern of discrimination that intensified in the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 due to political rhetoric that labeled the virus with ethnic terms which contributed to the perception that Asian Americans were responsible for the virus.

Although harassment toward Asian Americans spiked in 2020 during the pandemic, there has been a long history of racism towards Asians in America being driven by the political climate. It seeped its way into law with the Page Act of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, two of the United States' first immigration laws which were designed to ban Chinese American laborers from entering the country due to concerns about workplace competition (Zhou). During this time, San Francisco had a smallpox outbreak and officials blamed the “presence in our midst of 30,000 of unscrupulous, lying and treacherous Chinamen, who have disregarded our sanitary laws, concealed, and are concealing their cases of smallpox,” (Zhou). The city experienced something similar with the bubonic plague in 1900, when a case appeared in Chinatown, and the city attempted to quarantine the 14,000 Chinese Americans who lived there, and at one point proposed sending them to a detention camp to be separated from the rest of the public (Zhou). The widely accepted concept of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners laid the groundwork for Japanese Internment camps during World War II, when Japanese American citizens were sent to detention camps solely based on their ethnicity. Also, Muslim Americans and South Asian Americans faced prejudice following the 9/11 terrorist attacks from assumptions that they were not loyal to the United States because of their external appearance, showing the continuation of this trend into the 21st century.

The COVID-19 pandemic was not an exception to an immediate blame put on Asian Americans by government officials and the public. After starting in Wuhan, China in December 2019, 118,000 cases of COVID-19 appeared in 114 countries and 4,291 deaths by March of



2020, when the WHO declared a pandemic ("CDC Museum"). In the United States, major politicians such as President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo used terms such as “Wuhan Flu” to refer to the virus. A rise in verbal, physically violent, and online hate towards Asian Americans was seen following these incidents. The American political climate contributed significantly to the negative narrative around Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While anti-Asian bias had been in steady decline for over a decade, the trend reversed in days after a significant uptick in discriminatory coronavirus speech which was shown in a study published in the journal Health Education & Behavior. While overall hate crimes in America in 2020 decreased by 6 percent, Asian hate crimes increased 145 percent (Jan). This could be explained by several political figures including representatives, the secretary of state Mike Pompeo, and President Donald Trump using the term “China virus” to refer to the coronavirus (Yam, “Anti-Asian Bias”). “What followed, the research shows, was a 650 percent increase in Twitter retweets using the term ‘Chinese virus’ and similar language. On March 9, there was an 800 percent increase in such rhetoric among conservative media outlets,” (Yam, “Anti-Asian Bias”). The language continued to be repeated by conservative social and news media channels throughout the month. In February, the World Health Organization had cautioned against using such language, warning that it could stigmatize groups of people. This suggests a strong relationship between political rhetoric and the rise of negative narratives surrounding Asian Americans.

Along with specific politicians, the White House press secretary Kaleigh McEnany denied the malicious intent behind President Trump’s use of racist terms to describe the coronavirus pandemic. The White House stated that the president had no "regrets putting the



onus back on China" for the virus and that it is "an indictment of China for letting this virus get here" (Wise). The White House's claim that there was no malicious intent in Donald Trump's repeated use of racist terms to describe the virus rests upon the questionable assumption that his words, even if they were not meant to spark racism, did not impact any of his supporters to do so. Along with the World Health Organization, the CDC also warned against using labels such as "Wuhan virus" which was used by Senator Tom Cotton when he announced that his Washington Office was closed due to the spread of the illness. Representative Paul Gosar used the same term, Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., referred to the "Chinese coronavirus," and President Donald Trump retweeted a comment using the term "China Virus" (Yam, "GOP Lawmakers"). Several Republicans defended this use by saying that the media had used similar terms when reporting on the outbreak, showing that it also played a role in the spread of racism.

The impact on Asian Americans was shown specifically through Asian employment and earnings. In a study done by a Northeastern University researcher, it was found that the political rhetoric against Asians impacted their employment status, leading to the unemployment rate of Asians surpassing that of Whites for the first time in modern American history (Kuzub). The study also found that, "Asians were more likely to be unemployed — by a statistically significant 7% — in jobs that required face-to-face interaction. The study also found that, if still employed, Asians saw a drop in their weekly earnings by an average of 8%" (Kuzub). These negative effects were stronger in Republican-leaning states. This aligns with the political party of the majority of the figures who were using racist terms, proving the direct causation.

The impact of the rise in Asian American hate was also seen in their mental health. The uptick in anti-Asian discrimination has been linked to increases in anxiety, depressive symptoms, and sleep problems among those targeted (Abrams). Research studies have established a



correlation between racialized victimization and poor mental health outcomes including an increase in the number of intrusive thoughts following victimization (Jan). Furthermore, Asian Americans who have experienced racism reported to be more stressed by anti-Asian hate than the pandemic itself, one in five Asian Americans who have experienced racism display psychological and emotional harm caused by racism, and experience of racism during the pandemic has been found to be more strongly associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms (Turton).

The surge in Asian American discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic was deeply rooted in a long history of racial scapegoating in the United States and amplified by the rhetoric of political leaders. Moments of national crisis have repeatedly led to Asian Americans being blamed by prominent officials, and this time it included offensive diction by the president, congressmen, and White House secretary which fueled a measurable rise in hate crimes, online hostility, economic discrimination, and mental health struggles in Asian Americans. These effects have shown that the political language used carries real-world consequences. Recognizing this pattern is essential to preventing future cycles of blame and ensuring that political discourse does not once again translate into discrimination.

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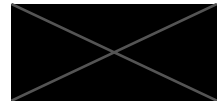
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