

# The Roots of America's Anti-Asian Violence

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On March 16, 2021, a gunman purchased a firearm and used it to target workers at three Asian-run massage parlors in the Atlanta metropolitan area. Over the course of an hour, he murdered eight people. Seven were women, six of whom were of Asian descent. The shootings prompted an immediate outpouring of grief, horror, and calls to recognize the attacks as racially motivated hate crimes.

The killer's own words complicated that narrative. He stated that his aim was to "eliminate" sexual temptation, and denied that his actions were racially motivated. For a moment, it appeared that this false binary of racism versus misogyny might obscure the fact that for Asian American women, the two have always been intertwined. The spa workers were vulnerable to economic and sexual exploitation in a business that relies on the sexualization and fetishization of Asian women.

The mass shooting happened in the midst of a yearlong rise in attacks against Asian people in the United States, a spike that many have linked to former President Donald Trump's relentlessly jingoistic response to COVID-19, which he called the "China Virus" and "Kung Flu." Such language clearly echoes the "Yellow Peril" scare, which painted East Asian immigration in the late 1800s as an overwhelming threat that would degrade American society.

In the past year, according to the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino, hate crimes against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders skyrocketed nearly 150 percent, in contrast to a dip in overall reported hate crimes. Asian women comprised more than two-thirds of those reporting verbal and physical assaults.

We cannot understand these attacks without thinking about both race and gender. As scholars

have long argued, gender and race—ideas of masculinity and femininity, of heritage and biology—co-construct each other as social structures bound up with power. The particular form that a social category takes, shaped by historical factors and given life through law and culture, creates specific vulnerabilities and inequities. Although the Atlanta murders brought some of this history to light in relation to Asian American women, very little coverage has recognized the importance of gender in the larger history of race.

## MEAT VERSUS RICE

Gender's direct relevance to the ways in which ideas of race have evolved is evident in how racism has shaped the experiences of Asian American men. Ideas of manhood were central to the first period of sustained hostility to Asians in America. The anti-Chinese furor that shaped West Coast politics in the late nineteenth century fixated on Chinese men as illegitimate work competition. "Free Labor" politics coalesced around the ideal of the self-sufficient white male breadwinner.

In the early twentieth century, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) printed a pamphlet titled *Some Reasons for Chinese Exclusion. Meat vs. Rice. American Manhood Against Asiatic Coolieism. Which Shall Survive?* The title captured the main argument offered by the AFL and others: that "American" (white) men required fundamentally higher standards of living and therefore could not fairly compete with the degraded existence supposedly acceptable to semi-enslaved Asian laborers. (Notably, the authors insisted that their obviously inflammatory and racist language was "not inspired by a scintilla of prejudice of any kind.") Ideas of masculinity undergirded every aspect of this argument, from the contrast of "meat versus rice" to the feminized domestic and laundry work that Chinese men had been pushed into.

The AFL circulated the pamphlet in the US Senate in support of calls for a second extension of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. The Asiatic Exclusion League reprinted the pamphlet in

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1908, at a time when the negative stereotypes it perpetuated were increasingly used against Korean, South Asian, and Japanese immigrants.

Policies that aimed to restrict and confine Asian immigrants were animated by the imperative to “protect the American family.” The 1875 Page Act, the first national legislation intended to discourage immigration, was enacted after the transcontinental railroad was completed with the labor of Chinese and Irish workers. The Page Act set the stage for future immigration restrictions. Although it ostensibly prohibited “undesirable” Chinese men and women—defined as unfree laborers and convicts, as well as women brought for “immoral purposes”—in practice, it was not targeted at men. The law’s framers and enforcers aimed to screen out Chinese women as potential prostitutes, concubines, or sex slaves.

Legislators focused disproportionately on Chinese sex workers as alleged vectors of disease who threatened to infect both the literal and metaphorical body politic of white men. Historians have argued that this focus had the larger purpose of protecting monogamous, heterosexual marriage and male-headed households, which were enshrined by the turn of century as a bedrock of American society. (At the same time, state laws enacted across the country prohibited white Americans from marrying partners of other racial categories.)

These policies did not seek to ameliorate the root causes of economic and housing discrimination on the basis of race and gender that resulted in poverty, overcrowding, and sexual exploitation—or the racist violence that plagued many Chinese communities. Rather, white politicians often scapegoated immigrants as a danger to society in order to advance their own political careers. Legislation that prohibited most Chinese immigration, particularly the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, sparked further violence—effectively empowering white mobs across the West to beat and kill Chinese men, and to burn down Chinese communities with impunity. The attackers portrayed themselves as defenders of a free society built on white Protestant dominance.

Politicians, advertisers, and popular media consistently portrayed Chinese people as threats to the nation in strongly gendered ways. Most initial Chinese immigrants were men who sent money

back to their families. Their status as males separate from women and children, and increasingly segregated by a labor market that forced them to take up “women’s work,” set Chinese migrants outside the bounds of prevailing gender norms and family structures. Economic competition posed by Japanese farmers and Filipino workers often resulted in similarly pernicious stereotypes and legalized disadvantages.

Meanwhile, widely held assumptions cast “the East” as passive, traditional, and despotic, in contrast to a West depicted as active, modern, and enlightened. Thus, Asian men were reduced to neutered or feminized stereotypes—a far cry from the breadwinner patriarch—or deemed a sexual threat to white women.

In the early 1920s, the Chinese parlor game mahjong became a huge national fad as marketers emphasized its “exotic” Chinese origins. Despite the game’s mostly male background—from its masculine connotations in China, to the white businessmen who introduced it to an American public, to the male game experts who helped popularize it—mahjong quickly became known in the United States as a women’s game, feminized by its cultural associations with China. The feminine stereotype of Asian people has persisted to this day, manifested in a lack of

representation of Asian men as masculine Hollywood sex symbols and fueling discriminatory patterns in online dating.

## TENUOUS GAINS

Over the course of the twentieth century, legalized race-based discrimination fractured and weakened, but gendered stereotypes changed more slowly. Hard-fought changes were shaped by decades of effort by an array of actors, including long-established Chinese American community groups, Filipino labor activists, middle-class Japanese American advocates, South Asian writers, feminists working across ethnic lines, and internationally minded radicals, among others.

Although working toward diverse and sometimes conflicting goals, these groups nonetheless built on each other’s efforts to reduce barriers against Asians in America. Their work combined with Civil Rights-era gains driven by Black activism—and shifts in global politics that made explicit racism a political liability—to change the

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United States' relations with Japanese and Chinese migrants in particular. But the gains have often felt tenuous.

Beginning in the 1930s, more threatening Asian stereotypes in films and fiction were often replaced with friendlier characters: Charlie Chan succeeded Fu Manchu and Suzy Wong replaced the Dragon Lady. However, these images were equally limited and flattened—and often rooted in the same gender stereotypes of Asian women as acquiescent and sexually accessible. This association was strengthened by US military occupations of Asian countries. In 1945, the first liberalization of Asian immigration restrictions made way for war brides.

The recent rise in violence has reinforced Asian Americans' fears that their equal citizenship is dependent on the changing winds of economics and geopolitics, and shadowed by a perception of perpetual foreignness. Japanese Americans experienced such a loss of equal protection when they were forcibly removed from their homes during World War II on suspicion of being untrustworthy Americans, perhaps sympathizers of the Japanese enemy; two-thirds of those incarcerated were US citizens by birth.

In the 1960s, immigration reform profoundly remade US demographics and shifted the politics of race as well. The 1965 Hart-Celler Act replaced the system dating from the 1920s, which was explicitly designed to preserve a nation primarily composed of descendants of Protestant Northern Europeans through country-based (and effectively race-based) exclusions and quotas. The Hart-Celler Act reopened legal Asian immigration, but it prioritized migrants who were wealthy, well-educated, or relatives of American citizens. Deep-rooted stereotypes about Asian Americans morphed in this new context.

## MINORITY MYTHS

This transformation occurred at the same moment as protests insisting on Black civil rights spread across the country. Soon, media outlets promoted an image of Japanese and Chinese Americans as what would be called “the model minority,” in direct contrast to African Americans. Portrayals of the model minority emphasized Asian Americans' supposed docility and sought to delegitimize Black protest. Stereotypes applied to Asian Americans had reversed from the early twentieth century. Now they ironically praised Asian family life, in contrast to the cries about the

threat to the American family that dogged Asian migrants less than a century earlier.

The model minority stereotype obscures widely divergent realities between, for example, Hmong refugees and Silicon Valley engineers. The murders of the Korean spa workers in Atlanta revealed once again what *New York Times* journalist Claudine Ko has called “two Asian Americas,” riven by class and status, one hailed as the “model minority,” the other struggling in the shadows.

The status markers of education and upward mobility associated with the model minority stereotype provided little protection against violence when ideas about manhood intertwined with economic fears of an Asian threat. In 1982, in the midst of the auto wars between Detroit and Japanese car makers, and layoffs in American factories, two white auto workers in Highland Park, Michigan, attacked and killed Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man whom they scapegoated for the decline of their industry.

In the ensuing trial, the killers bargained the charges down to manslaughter and ended up serving no jail time. The judge defended his lenient sentencing by explaining, “These weren't the kind of men you send to jail.” He added, “You don't make the punishment fit the crime; you make the punishment fit the criminal,” thereby making explicit the logic behind profound racial disparities in sentencing.

Chin and his assailants first encountered each other in a strip club during Chin's bachelor party. One of the murderers began by impugning the heterosexual masculinity of Chin and his friends. Their racial animus was motivated by economic resentments—one of the men who beat Chin to death had recently been laid off—but it was first expressed in a gendered taunt. Chin's death and the miscarriage of justice for his murder proved to be a turning point in Asian American activism.

Each of these historical patterns comes flaring to the surface during times of social stress, particularly when influential leaders direct popular anger and fear down well-traveled routes. The most pernicious stereotypes—of Asians as job-stealers, perpetual foreigners, or vectors of disease, and of Asian women as especially passive or vulnerable—are so widespread and enduring that they cross political, racial, and economic lines, exposing Asians to attacks from a diverse range of assailants.

## CULTURE WARS

In this moment of acute tension, two divergent approaches to topics of race and gender are both gaining momentum: one focused on newly popularized understandings of history, and the other dead-set against it. As American society was struggling through a racial reckoning fueled by Black Lives Matter protests against police killings of Black men and women, a space opened for mainstream media to more rigorously engage with the rise in anti-Asian violence and its links to the long-term experiences of Asians in America.

After the Atlanta murders, reporters quickly brought the work of historians and sociologists before the public to examine the roots of these attacks. Amid reinvigorated mass feminism organized largely around the idea of intersectionality—the idea that intersecting identities create particular forms of oppression that cannot be solved by addressing only a single issue—more coverage highlighted the racialized misogyny experienced by Asian American women.

At the same time, however, conservative politicians and right-wing media have increasingly targeted “critical race theory” in the culture wars, along with adjacent ideas like intersectionality, accusing them of undermining belief in the United States as a land of individual freedom and opportunity. Their view can include condemnation of

anti-Asian violence (often in terms of being “un-American”), but it substitutes an emphasis on individual “bad actors” for an understanding of historical patterns and embedded social structures, and it insists on viewing race as separate from gender.

Conservatives’ culture war focus on race and gender has resulted in bills proliferating in state legislatures. Measures against transgender rights, and against defining gender as a set of social norms that have changed over time, have overlapped with more recent legislation banning history education that centers the development of racial categories and racial oppression.

As a society, we cannot prevent, understand, or heal from anti-Asian violence without an intersectional approach that accurately perceives these attacks as rooted in race and gender. Ideas matter. Ideas are cognitive tools, and tools for understanding race and gender are getting into more hands (and heads) far beyond the college classroom. But these tools are under serious threat of being locked away from public education, or of being made politically untouchable. Efforts to silence critical approaches to race and ethnicity, though seemingly focused on abstract theories of American history, make real-life people more vulnerable to violence rooted in historical legacies. ■