

Introduction

Teaching Asia during a Resurgence of Anti-Asian Racism

Kin Cheung

The terms “twin pandemic,” “double pandemic,” and “dual pandemic” have been used to refer to the birth of a different type of global outbreak concurrent with COVID-19: a resurgence in anti-Asian racism.¹ How can educators highlight content on Asia and Asians in a way that responds to the “[m]ore than 11,000 acts of hate against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders [that] have been reported” since early 2020?² This volume examines classroom experiences teaching about: (1) wartime sexual violence against the backdrop of hyper-sexualized Asian women; (2) Asian religions to resist Orientalist romanticization; (3) critical literacy theory and culturally sustaining pedagogy; (4) an Asian American Civil Rights activist; (5) Buddhism, gender, and sexuality as localized categories; and (6) “foreign,” “bizarre,” “quirky,” or “weird” practices found in Asian contexts, in order to address unreflective xenophobic otherizing of Asians and Asian Americans. Contributors draw upon the fields of history, religious studies, education, and sociology to move beyond naïvely reifying human difference through an artificial hierarchy of race, or conversely, constructing some universal human experience that erases difference. Considering the colonialist legacy of area studies and academic disciplines, the authors write on how education on Asia and its multiple diasporas—especially Asian Americans, could contribute to anti-racism and solidarity among BIPOC and allies.

According to a Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism report, “anti-Asian hate crimes surge 149%, while overall hate crime drops 7% in 2020.”³ Yet, large

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percentages of Americans are unaware of the increased attacks against Asian Americans. Significantly, in 2022, 58% of Americans are unable to name *any* Asian American, despite prominent figures such as Kamala Harris. Behind the number one most common answer of “don’t know” or leaving the prompt blank when asked to name an Asian American, the second most common answer is Jackie Chan—who is not even Asian American. The third is Bruce Lee. This is a clear indication of the stereotypes Americans have towards Asian Americans.

More than four years since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, systemic racism in general remains endemic. Specifically, anti-Asian racism continues to impact Asian Americans. The majority of Asian Americans feel unsafe in public spaces, with young Asian American women being the least likely to feel they belong and are accepted in the US.⁴ Political rhetoric is a key cause of this problem. American politicians continue to scapegoat China in a way that directly hurts Asian American communities. Researchers of anti-Asian sentiment report that:

At present, there is an emphasis on anti-Chinese rhetoric, which results in the targeting of Asian Americans, including those who are not of Chinese descent.

Our research has found that perpetrators of hate incidents toward Asians and Asian Americans repeat rhetoric they hear from candidates and elected officials blaming China for public health crises, for economic downturns and for national security concerns.⁵

Education on China and on Asia can alter nebulous ideas of “China” as a monolithic entity by showing that even the policies passed by the Chinese Communist Party are complex, nuanced, and often enacted in locally variegated ways. The implicit biases of associating Chinese and Chinese Americans with the rhetorically constructed enemy that is “China,” employed by many politicians, impacts Asian Americans who are generally lumped together as “Chinese.” Reminiscent of how Vincent Chin was murdered because he looked Japanese, anyone who looks Chinese is thus guilty by association with a constructed enemy of “China.” The epithet “Go back to China!” is hurled at Asian Americans who have no connection to China. “Compared to 2021, Americans in 2022 are more likely to question the loyalty of Asian Americans and blame Asian Americans for COVID-19.”⁶ US history has countless examples of Asian Americans being perceived as perpetual foreigners and depicted as vermin that transmit vector-borne disease.⁷

A 2022 survey of Americans regarding anti-Asian sentiment finds that “Education is the most recommended solution overall to combat anti-Asian racism.”⁸ Survey respondents have in mind the teaching of systemic racism and

Asian American history, not teaching Asia *per se*. Nevertheless, courses on Asia can make a difference. Educators can highlight how Asia is constructed, and by extension, the categories Asian and Asian American can be interrogated, with questions of who benefits or is harmed in the deployment of these categories. Tina Chen argues for the use of “Global Asias” to, among other applications, study Asia and its multiple diasporas through the concept of “imaginable ageography,” i.e., that the asymmetry of power between “Asia” and “the West” informs how these terms are used in a way that stems from, but is not exactly the same as their respective physical geographies.⁹ Contributors to this volume provide case studies of classroom experiences in such attempts. Essay themes include: (1) deconstructing “Asian,” “World Religions,” and “tolerance”; (2) scrutinizing stereotypes of gender and (hyper)sexuality, and (3) analyzing the intersectionality of antiracism, feminism, and civil rights activism.

The initial seed for this collection of essays came from a summer 2021 conversation by members of ASIANetwork, a consortium of colleges and universities that promotes education about Asia within the liberal arts. Karen Kingsbury invited several scholars to propose panels engaging Asian Studies with Asian American Studies in response to a watershed moment in anti-Asian violence—the March 16, 2021, killing of six Asian women. Huijing Wen and I developed the title of our conference panel proposal—now the title of this collection—based on a recent volume that Minjung Noh and I contributed chapters towards (*Teaching About Asia in a Time of Pandemic*: Columbia University Press 2020). From there, Dr. Kingsbury connected us with Elizabeth Lawrence and I also invited Rachel Pang and Jue Liang to round out the collection. Besides Dr. Lawrence, whom I met through the formation of this panel, I already knew the other lead authors and we have had conversations on how anti-Asian racism has impacted us personally during the pandemic. We hope the panel and resulting essays are only the beginning of this conversation on how educators can respond. Earlier versions of four of these essays were presented at the 2022 ASIANetwork Annual Conference in Geneva, NY. On behalf of the authors, I thank the audience members there for their feedback. I am also grateful to David Kenley and Jon Wilson for their efforts in producing this online volume.

This collection will be of interest to educators in Asian Studies and Asian American Studies, and those in disciplines that cover content on Asia and Asians, including history, religious studies, comparative literature, anthropology, sociology, education, women’s gender and sexuality studies, and other humanistic disciplines or fields of study. Similar to the creators of the #AtlantaSyllabus who have generously provided an educational response to anti-Asian violence, the contributors here anticipate these essays will “spark a more informed and sustained conversation” regarding this twin pandemic.¹⁰ I hope these examples

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inspire consideration of what it means to teach Asia during a resurgence in anti-Asian racism.

Notes

¹ More generally, COVID-19 has highlighted the global endemic of racial injustices. See Bailey et al. 2022 for how this affects the classroom. Alison L. Bailey et al., “Introduction to Twin Pandemics: How a Global Health Crisis and Persistent Racial Injustices Are Impacting Educational Assessment,” *Educational Assessment* 27, no. 2 (April 3, 2022): 93–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10627197.2022.2097782>.

² Stop AAPI HATE, “Righting Wrongs,” May 2023, <https://stopaapihate.org/2023/05/03/righting-wrongs-how-civil-rights-can-protect-asian-americans-pacific-islanders-against-racism/>.

³ Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism, “Fact Sheet: Anti-Asian prejudice March 2020,” February 2021, <https://www.csusb.edu/sites/default/files/FACT%20SHEET-%20Anti-Asian%20Hate%202020%203.2.21.pdf>.

⁴ The Asian American Foundation, “STAATUS Index 2023: Attitudes towards Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders,” 2023, <https://www.staatus-index.org/>.

⁵ Stop AAPI HATE, “The Blame Game,” October 2022, <https://stopaapihate.org/2022/10/12/anti-asian-scapegoating/>.

⁶ The Asian American Foundation, “STAATUS Index 2023: Attitudes towards Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders,” 2023, 6, <https://staatus-index.s3.amazonaws.com/STAATUS%20Index%202022%20Report.pdf>.

⁷ Claire Jean Kim, *Dangerous Crossings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁸ The Asian American Foundation, “STAATUS Index 2023: Attitudes towards Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders,” 2023, 5, <https://staatus-index.s3.amazonaws.com/STAATUS%20Index%202022%20Report.pdf>.

⁹ Tina Chen, “Global Asias: Method, Architecture, Praxis,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 80, no. 4 (November 2021): 997–1009, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911821001595>.

¹⁰ Lori Lopez, Lisa Ho, and Erica Kanesaka Kalnay, “#AtlantaSyllabus,” accessed December 2023, <https://asianamerican.wisc.edu/student-resources-2/atlantasyllabus/>.