

COVID-19 Related Discrimination Aimed at Asian Americans: Medical Scapegoating in a Historical Perspective

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Asian Americans as Medical Scapegoats in 19th C. California The 1957 “Asian Flu” and the 1968 “Hong Kong Flu”



A virulent smallpox epidemic in the mid 1870's claimed the lives of 1000 Chinese, making street funerals a commonplace sight



Present Day with COVID-19

“One day in March 2020, I mustered up the courage to go to the supermarket to buy some disinfection supplies. When I was walking on the street wearing a mask, suddenly a black car passed by me, and the woman in the black car shouted at me. I read: **“F****ing covid Virus! Go back to your country!”** At that moment I felt helpless and panicked, and I was even afraid that he would stop the car and hurt me. . . . **I became afraid of going out and all social activities. I locked myself in a small dormitory every day.**” ~ Xiaoting, SBU undergraduate student.

- ❖ The “seeds of medical scapegoatism” appeared in the 1860’s when Californians first began considering the Chinese to be both an “inferior race” and a “degraded people.” (Trauner 1978)
- ❖ Beginning in 1870, the San Francisco Board of Health targeted Chinatown as the source of every epidemic that hit the city, a politically and socially expedient option.
 - Chinatown residents were blamed for just about every public health crisis from cholera to smallpox to the bubonic plague
- ❖ Health officers veiled their attacks against the Chinese community in the common medical theories of the period first through miasma theory and then germ theory.
- ❖ Chinatown residents were subject to piecemeal quarantine measures whenever it benefited the San Francisco Board of Health, leaving the people of Chinatown to treat themselves.
- ❖ In 1894, the bubonic plague resurfaced in China and blame was quickly fixed upon the Chinese community in San Francisco as the city became increasingly interconnected with the rest of the world. (Barde 2003)
 - Many non-Asians assumed that the plague was strictly a Chinese affliction developed in the “long-accumulated filth” of the densely populated Chinese community.
 - This fear would come to life when the *Nippon Maru* arrived in 1899, two weeks after its intended arrival
 - There had never been any confirmed cases of plague in the U.S. up to this point
- ❖ In 1900, the Chinese Six Companies opened the Tung Wah Dispensary to provide care that residents in the Chinese community would not have otherwise received.

- ❖ Early reporting of the 1957 influenza pandemic in *The New York Times* was quick to name the disease as a threat from a foreign country.
 - In this case, the target was China. American fears of China and the Far East reflected the Cold War political climate.
 - That label implied that Red China was not only a threat to democracy but public health as well.
- ❖ This framing of fear and war can be demonstrated in several *New York Times* headlines
 - “U.S. Acts to Bar Asian Influenza.” June 8th 1957.
 - “Asian Flu **Strikes** East Coast Base.” June 22nd 1957 (Emphasis added)
 - “U.S. Acts to **Combat** Far East Influenza..” June 26th 1957 (emphasis added).
 - During the 1968 outbreak, it was even referred to as the “Mao flu” (Stanley 2020)
- ❖ There was one voice that attempted to reframe the name given to the 1957 flu pandemic in a June 1957 editorial: “It isn’t just ‘Asian Influenza,’ although that name has already been pinned on it. It is a broadly human ailment that must be met wherever it appears.”
- ❖ These framings resurfaced during the 1997 “Hong Kong Flu” and the 2003 SARs outbreak.

- ❖ On March 16th, 2020 former president Trump first utilized the term the “Chinese Virus” to refer to COVID-19.
- ❖ Other Republican officials were quick to follow suit, invoking terms such as “Kung Flu,” and the “Wuhan Virus,” while advancing harmful and demonizing racial tropes about Chinese individuals.
 - Senator John Cornyn (R-TX) openly justified blaming the Chinese by using racist tropes about their diet. He stated that the Chinese ate bats, snakes, and dogs.
- ❖ As a result of such framing, there was a significant increase in hate crimes toward the Asian-American community.
- ❖ According to the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University San Bernardino, Asian-American hate crimes increased 149% in 2020 in 16 major cities across the United States including San Francisco, San Diego, Philadelphia, Boston, and New York City. NYC, in particular, saw the most drastic increase, from only 3 anti-Asian hate crimes reported in 2019 to 28 reported in 2020, an increase of 833%. San Francisco, on the other hand, showed a much smaller increase (50%), but an increase nonetheless.
 - Between March 19th-December 31st 2020, the following proportions of hate crimes/assaults were reported across the United States:
 - Shunning/Avoidance: 20%
 - Physical Assault: 8%
 - Coughing/Spitting: 6%
 - Verbal Harassment: 66%
- ❖ For additional information and student testimony, please refer to the supplemental packet included with this presentation.