

From 'yellow peril' to COVID-19: New book takes unflinching look at anti-Asian racism

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More than 150 years ago, some 15,000 Chinese workers arrived in the U.S. to help construct the country's first transcontinental railroad, which connected the West Coast with the East Coast's rail network.

These Chinese laborers received lower wages than their white counterparts for the same job and endured worse living conditions.

Over the past century and a half, discrimination against Asians has persisted.

During World War II, the U.S. incarcerated hundreds of thousands of Japanese Americans; after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, hate incidents against Middle Eastern and South Asian communities soared; following the coronavirus outbreak, hatred directed at people of Asian heritage spread across the globe.

After witnessing a surge in anti-Asian hate incidents during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, University of Colorado at Boulder Ethnic Studies Professor Jennifer Ho collected a diverse range of stories from authors of Asian heritage worldwide and released the edited volume "Global Anti-Asian Racism" in February.

"If you know someone who's Asian, living anywhere in this world, they have been subjected to and have thought about being the target of violence and racism," says Ho, a Chinese American woman who was herself subject to anti-Asian harassment at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

May marks the 155th anniversary of the railroad's completion and the annual celebration of Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month. CU Boulder Today spoke with Ho, director of the Center for Humanities & the Arts, about her new book and the importance of supporting AAPI communities year-round.

What ignited the recent wave of anti-Asian racism?

The COVID-19 virus originated out of China. That's really all it took,

given the centuries-long circulation of "yellow peril" rhetoric, which describes the Western fears that East Asians would take over the West and disrupt Western values.

The peak of the recent wave of anti-Asian racism was in March of 2021 when a gunman in Atlanta, Georgia, killed eight people, six of whom were Asian women. Around the same time, we saw multiple videos of Asian elders being punched in the face in various Chinatowns across the U.S.

Racism against Asian Americans is not new. How are the recent events different?

The recent events are specifically targeting Chinese or people who have East Asian features and are misidentified as Chinese. But this violence is rooted in a longstanding history of targeting Asians in the U.S. simply because they look different.

In the U.S. context, [white supremacy](#) is the main driving force of anti-Asian racism. White supremacy perpetuates the belief that Asians never inherently belong in U.S. spaces and that Asians are always hyphenated Americans. For example, I'm never going to be treated or seen as someone who is just plain American, because in the minds of most people in the U.S., an American is someone with a white face.

Has the spike in anti-Asian hate incidents simmered down?

Thankfully, we have not had another kind of mass fatality after Atlanta and Indianapolis. But that's not to say that anti-Asian racism isn't happening. For example, Florida recently passed a law banning Chinese nationals from purchasing real estate. The kind of anti-Chinese rhetoric

that is constantly in the news means that if there's ever some kind of security threat, whether through a virus or an Asian entity, we will likely see another uptick in anti-Asian racism.

How are Asian American communities responding?

Over the years, there has been a growing collective sense of what it means to be Asian American. About 15 years ago, a survey revealed only 20% of Asian Americans identified themselves as Asian American. Instead, the vast majority of people of Asian heritage in the U.S. identified first and foremost with their ethnic background, like Chinese, Chinese American, Indian, Indian American, South Asian and so on.

In response to the recent waves of anti-Asian racism, more people realized if you have East Asian features, you can be misidentified as Chinese and become the target of hate incidents. As a result, the attacks that happened against one Asian ethnic group become attacks against all Asian ethnic groups. This led to a greater understanding and awareness that Asian Americans, as a racial collective body, need to come together in solidarity to protect one another.

What inspired you to create this book?

I had done a few public-facing pieces during COVID-19 on anti-Asian racism. After one of them was published, I was contacted by people from around the world asking me if there were resources that I knew of in their countries similar to the Stop AAPI Hate coalition in the U.S.

My expertise is very limited to a U.S. context, and I didn't have other resources to share. So when I was contacted to develop a volume on global anti-Asian racism, I was grateful to curate a collection of essays from a diverse array of scholars from around the world.

What do you hope the readers will take away from this book?

I do hope the book can reach out to a more general readership, outside of a classroom space, outside of the ivory tower of academia. I hope that people who have a curiosity about anti-Asian racism, whether they're Asian-identified or not, will read about various forms of anti-Asian racism that have happened around the globe.

During COVID-19, I saw colleagues step up and be interviewed by a number of news outlets, write opinion pieces and share their expertise on what they knew about anti-Asian [racism](#) with the world. I hope, very humbly, that this book can be my contribution.

Can society break the stereotypes around Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders?

Breaking stereotypes is always just hard. In the U.S., we really like binary systems, like our political parties. We prefer things to be categorized as either good or bad. But the reality is always more complicated than that.

But I do have hope. The way we are now starting to understand that gender is not binary but on a spectrum and fluid makes me hopeful that one day we can do that with race.

What kind of stories would you like to see told?

The stories of Asians in America is yet to be told publicly, broadly and widely. I wish more people would do stories about the communities, not just when there's something bad happening to Asian Americans in America, but out of genuine curiosity about who Asian Americans are.

We are this really wonderful, complex group. It's not like we're all good, or we're all bad. It's not like we all excel in school. But we have really interesting stories to tell. I wish more people wanted to tell the stories, and more of the public would be curious about these stories outside of AAPI month.

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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