



The Great Wall We Cannot See

On breaking down the rise of anti-Asian sentiment in America

By Sarah Gutierrez

In the land of opportunity, where the American dream is said to know no boundaries, there exists an insidious undercurrent that has plagued the nation for generations - xenophobia against people of Asian descent. As the sun sets on yet another day in the free world, a shadow is cast over this story of unprecedented prejudice and violence. It's a narrative that has not only gained significant relevance in recent years but has also been reignited with a cruel fervor. As an Asian American woman, I continue to feel the weight of this resurgence very deeply.

I don't usually watch the news, but it was playing on TV that Spring morning. March 27, 2021. CBS News was airing a story of an elderly Chinese woman who was attacked in San Francisco by an unprovoked male assailant in broad day-

light. I watched helplessly as the camera panned to the 70-year-old victim, tears streaming down her face as she held an ice pack to her bloodied eye and swollen cheek. She had looked so much like my own grandmother. I turned the TV off immediately.

Just 11 days prior, in Atlanta, a white man opened fire on two Asian owned spas and massage parlor, leaving eight innocent people dead. Six of the victims were Asian women.

This wave of anti-Asian sentiment, as with many forms of discrimination, cannot be fully understood without an examination of the historical context in which it arose. It dates back to the 19th century, with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the first U.S. law to restrict immigration based on nationality. During World War II, in the wake of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor,

the internment of Japanese Americans - 62% of which were U.S. citizens - furthered the ostracism of Asian communities. These historical events, among others, laid the foundation for the xenophobia that persists today. Between the years 2020 and 2021, the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism revealed that the amount of Anti-Asian hate crimes had risen by

339%. This alarming surge in hate crimes has drawn much needed attention to the deeply ingrained stereotypes and biases that exist far within American society.

The COVID-19 pandemic has played a serious role in fanning the flames of anti-Asian hate. The virus's initial identification in Wuhan, China led to a rise in xenophobic rhetoric that saw Asians as a convenient target for misplaced blame. Minorities often bear the brunt of scapegoating during times of crisis - the pandemic was no exception. Notably, political leaders, including then U.S. President Donald Trump, exacerbated the situation by referring to COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus" on social media. Such inflammatory language only intensified the atmosphere of hostility and fear. The media has a responsibility to shape a narrative that fosters understanding. The stories we consume shape our perceptions, and it is imperative that the media contributes to dismantling, rather than reinforcing, harmful notions of Asian identity. Now, not only were Asian Americans grappling with the health challenges posed by COVID-19 itself, but they were also contending with the racially charged rhetoric that emerged alongside it.



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Many Asian citizens like myself have endured the trouble of being treated as perpetual foreigners, despite our families' extensive history in this country. The "model minority" myth, which characterizes Asian Americans as docile overachievers, is a double-edged sword that simultaneously masks and perpetuates harmful standards that veil the struggles faced by many Asian American communities. Unlike what the label suggests, Asian Americans constantly struggle with significant inequality - particularly with income - in the workforce. This paradox becomes stark

when considering the racial ac-costing of Asian health-care workers who have been attacked by their own patients amid the pandemic. The contrast is almost absurd - Asian Americans are initially held up as model citizens, but at the snap of a finger, vilified, threatening contagion on the sole basis that the virus was discovered in China. After a survey conducted by the Asian American foundation during the height of the pandemic, CEO Norman Chen stated that "Over half of Asian Americans felt unsafe, they felt unsafe in public transportation, on subways, they felt unsafe in their own neighborhoods, in their own schools,



and their own workplaces.” In the face of this prejudice, however, the Asian American community has not remained silent. From grassroots movements to social media campaigns, there is a growing chorus of voices determined to break down the walls of this phenomenon of hate. It is a collective effort that is necessary to dismantle the stereotypes and bigotry that have long shrouded the Asian American experience.

The power of social media emerged as a potent tool in this fight for justice. Personal narratives like the many heart-wrenching stories of those directly affected by hate crimes, have flooded social media platforms. Society cannot be allowed to turn a blind eye.

The Stop Asian Hate movement took the internet by storm, the use of hashtags such as #StopAAPIHate and #StopAsianHate took off on Instagram, Twitter, and many other platforms. Originating as a social media hashtag, it has since grown into a nationwide movement, encouraging a widespread reassessment across various industries. This has prompted the implementation of new policies at the federal and state levels, reshaping the broader awareness of anti-Asian racism.

For the first time since the pandemic, anti-Asian hate has dropped, according to data released by the FBI, late October of this year. In the wake of this decline in anti-Asian hate, it becomes imperative that we delve into the strategies employed by the Asian American community and its allies to combat prejudice effectively. Beyond hashtags and social media campaigns, the heart of the movement lies in the diverse stories that are now being shared, humanizing the statistics. Organizations such as Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAJC) and Stop AAPI Hate have actively collected and shared these stories, providing a platform for victims to voice their experiences and for others to better understand the depth of the situation.

One of the pivotal aspects of the Stop Asian Hate movement’s success lay in its ability to bridge cultural gaps and unite diverse Asian ethnicities and peoples under a common cause. The fight against xenophobia against Asians

has become a shared narrative, weaving together the stories of Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, and countless other Asian communities. This unity has strengthened the movement’s efforts and challenged the perpetuation of divisive stereotypes.

The impact of these collective efforts extends beyond social activism. The federal and state-level policies implemented in response to the movements signal a systemic shift in addressing hate crimes. From enhanced reporting mechanisms to increased penalties for offenders, these measures aim to create a safer environment for the Asian American community.

However, the fight is far from over. While the recent FBI data indicates a drop in anti-Asian hate, it is crucial to remain vigilant. The underlying prejudices that fueled these crimes persist, necessitating a sustained effort to continue educating and raising awareness. The power of providing victims with a platform to voice their experiences must continue to be harnessed, not only as a reaction to incidents but as a proactive force for change.

In confronting the resurgence of xenophobia and anti-Asian hate, it becomes more important than ever for us to recognize the interconnectedness of our shared humanity. The shadows of prejudice may cast darkness over specific communities today, but their presence threatens the fabric of our nation’s society as a collective. We stand at a crossroads where empathy, education, and unity can either illuminate our path forward or leave us stumbling in the darkness of ignorance. The choice is ours alone to make.

