

S1E3 Transcript

Why have Asian Americans often been the target of xenophobic and racist attacks during disease outbreaks?



Cindy I-Fen Cheng I, sadly, just recently entered the phenomenal world of podcasts and I'm obsessed. Like, it's my favorite, you know, when I'm doing chores, it's like, get on a series. It's so amazing!

Emily Tran Yeah, podcasts are my companion when cooking and cleaning.

Cindy I-Fen Cheng Right?

April Haynes They're good for knitting also.

Emily Tran Yes.

Cindy I-Fen Cheng Right?

[LAUGHTER and MUSIC]

Emily Tran Hello! From the University of Wisconsin—Madison, I'm Emily Tran. Welcome to *Ask a Historian*. Every episode, we bring a question submitted by our audience members to a UW-Madison historian, and we ask them to share their response.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by a spike in anti-Asian, especially anti-Chinese racism. In Vietnam, for instance, some restaurants posted signs on their doors turning away Chinese customers. In France, a newspaper used inflammatory headlines like “Yellow Peril” and “Yellow Alert” on their frontpage.

This has been the case in the United States as well. In late March, someone scrawled anti-Chinese messages at the foot of Bascom Hill and on State Street in Madison. One of those messages read, “It's from China, #ChineseVirus.” This echoed the rhetoric of President Trump who, in his daily press briefings, called COVID-19 the “Wuhan virus” or the “Chinese virus.” Asian Americans have also reported numerous incidents of harassment and violence: being spit on, told to ‘go back to China,’ blamed for the spread of COVID-19, being physically assaulted.

Today, we're answering a question from our listener Nicole, who wonders about the history behind anti-Asian xenophobia and racism during disease outbreaks.

Nicole Hi, my name is Nicole and I'm from Madison, Wisconsin. I'm currently a graduate student at the La Follette School of Public Affairs and I graduated from UW-Madison with an undergraduate degree in history and biology.

So, my question is: Currently in the United States, fear of the COVID-19 virus has led to growing anti-Asian racism. I've heard of this happening before, that white Americans have often responded to public health crises with xenophobia and racism against Asian Americans. Why have Asian Americans often been the target of this hate?

Emily Tran To answer Nicole's question, my co-host Professor April Haynes and I spoke with Professor Cindy I-Fen Cheng.

Cindy I-Fen Cheng My name is Cindy I-Fen Cheng. I am the current Director of the Asian American Studies Program and I'm a professor in the history department.

Emily Tran Cindy teaches courses that examine Asian American history and culture, Cold War culture, and identity, migration, and citizenship. Her book is *Citizens of Asian America: Democracy and Race During the Cold War*. Cindy also edited *The Routledge Handbook of Asian American Studies*.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

Emily Tran Thanks for joining us today Cindy.

As the COVID-19 virus spread across the globe, fear of contagion has been accompanied by growing anti-Asian and especially anti-Chinese racism. Has this happened before, this linking of a racial or ethnic minority group with disease and contagion in the midst of a public health crisis?

Cindy I-Fen Cheng Yes. Thank you for that very important question. Absolutely. And here, I think it's very important to also note that a really noted scholar named Nyan Shah, he wrote this wonderful book that everybody has been drawing on to understand this better and the historical linkages. The title would be *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown*.

What he looks at is the late 19th and the turn of the 20th century. He looks at a series of epidemics that broke out both nation-wide and within the city of San Francisco, from the smallpox to bubonic plague, syphilis, these type of epidemics. And what's really interesting is that you started to see the same level of xenophobic discourses charged against the Chinese immigrants in San Francisco. And they were very, very extreme in terms of the kinds of assaults that were happening on the Chinese during that time.

But just like what's happening right now, the most important part that these kinds of assaults show us isn't just that, oh, okay, there are these anti-Asian, anti-Asian American, anti-Chinese kinds of xenophobic racist acts. What it shows was that, in times of these uncertainties, the public in San Francisco, they looked to what they had marked as something foreign, as something other, to place a lot of blame.

And what this blame does is it mis-directs and hides our attention from larger structural issues. And here, the racism that's really happening is the unequal access to municipal social services, horrible housing for the poor, lack of sanitation and trash pickups, not having vaccination drives in the Chinatown area because that area is marked as foreign, as Other, as ghetto. And so, all these larger structural issues that's going on is what's causing the spread.

However, instead of turning into and looking at policies of public health and how we can improve that, what people use is different kinds of emotions and say, “These groups of people or something that's foreign, something that's Other. We're not really sure if they're part of the United States, who are, are they really citizens?” And those kinds of feelings get attributed to them.

In the same vein, I would like to point out that with the COVID-19, this obsession, like “Oh, it's from this country, where's the origin?” Those are important questions to ask. And a lot of it, many scientists are saying that it has to do with our treatment of wildlife, of animal husbandry. But when we really look at the uncertainties that's been created, there's another layer that we have to look at. What are our national policies in terms of social distancing? How respectful are they? Do we have an effective national response, federal response, not just state and local response? And when we talk about relief, are these relief going to the people who need it the most?

And what's one of the most interesting lessons that we can gain from the epidemic crisis in the late 19th, early 20th, is that public health officials over time shifted away from quarantine, to screening, testing. And so, you can see, even right now we're having a debate in terms of how do we contain it, right? Social distancing, doing more tests.

These racist assaults are important, but how is it mis-directing our attention in terms of who to hold accountable for these things? And it always reveals larger structural national policies as opposed to just a group of people.

Emily Tran So, in these health crises when white Americans have turned against an ethnic or racial group with the effect of misdirecting attention from deeper structural problems, why target Asian Americans? As our listener Nicole asks, why have Asian Americans often been the target of this hate?

Cindy I-Fen Cheng Well, I think we could say Asian Americans. But I would like to say we can use this as a stand in to talk about racial scapegoating. How do we single out a group of people for unmerited blame? And what we start to see in this situation is that, when the nation goes through either a moral crisis, a health crisis, or an economic crisis once again, how do we want to address this?

And a very easy way to address this, again, is to single out a group of people for unmerited blame and say that every single possible thing that could go wrong is attributed to this. It doesn't matter what the numbers show, what reports show what academics show. It becomes, “These are the group of people that I see that I'm not sure I know, I understand. And let's target them.”

I want you to think about parallels from history to current. When there are a deep economic crisis, we understand— at current times, we talk about words like “hedge funds” and “the financial markets” and all these things. But when there is a presidential campaign and we need to rally the masses, we don't want to talk about these larger issues. So, what do we say? We say, “It's the immigrants.”

And why is that effective? Why was it effective in 19th century to look at Chinese immigrants or Asian Americans? Why is it effective currently, in the 21st century? Well, first of all, immigrants can't vote. They don't have a voice in the political party, so you could blame them for everything. Their

larger public voice is not going to make that big of a difference in terms of voting because they're disenfranchised and they're also people who people with suspicions.

But if you look at the statistics, if we look back and I think one of this historic incidents is the move to restrict immigration of Chinese to the United States. This is a nationwide, first federally enforced policy in 1882. People may not realize that the Chinese only constituted 0.2% of the total population. They made up somewhere along the lines of—and this is an estimate—about 105,000 all across the nation. I mean, 0.2%. But every possible social ill was attributed to them. And that's quite a large thing.

And the belief is, “If we get rid of this group, everything of the nation will restore to health.” And I think when we have the benefit of time, we can look and we can sit back and we're like, “I don't think it's that easy. And I don't think they activities of 105,000 people can, in fact, totally take down a nation.”

And so, I think what we start to see when we see this historic tendency to want to attribute blame to immigrants, we need to make and understand these linkages of how once again, we use the blame against immigrants as a way to look at other things that might be more important, that might actually do more to improve our economy, that might actually do more to improve our public health.

So, I think that's something to think through, on how we can learn from this kind of what we call “immigrant scapegoating” as a very historically, process that we have used to avoid talking about harder issues and ask harder questions.

April Haynes Cindy, on this issue of scapegoating immigrants generally, I'm noticing in the U.S. media right now, a lot of language like “the invisible enemy” to describe the virus itself. And I wonder if you can reflect on that kind of rhetoric and how it has applied to immigration history.

Cindy I-Fen Cheng There are these terms, right, that we have used earlier— you guys have mentioned things like the “yellow peril.” For Asian Americans, one of the ways that, again, related to the fact that they're more foreign than European immigrants— as people have said, they're “from a different shore. And they're not from the European end, right? This is the first critical mass of non-European immigrants to come to the United States.

They were attributed to this notion of inscrutability. Like, “you cannot know the minds,” right? They're so inscrutable. And so, if you see the language, it's all, again, this nervousness around not knowing who these people are, not being familiar.

So then, you have words like “inscrutable,” “invisible,” this “silent peril,” the “yellow peril” that's going to come and overtake us. That's why xenophobia is a very powerful word to use for what's happening, is that it's the fear of the foreign.

Instead of focusing on how us as a nation could do better in terms of our containment, in terms of our approach to addressing this, we start looking and say, “It's the fault of something else, something foreign, and that we're just victims of something.” But here, we're starting to see we're not victims of anything. We could, as a nation, come together and figure out how to contain it and move forward.

Emily Tran So, I want to think about causation. You talked about, in the late 19th century, early 20th century, all of these immigration restrictions against Asian immigrants entering the United States. So, how should we think about causation? Did these exclusionary laws foment xenophobia during disease outbreaks? Or did popular racist ideas and stigma that emerged during the outbreaks lead to further exclusionary policies?

Cindy I-Fen Cheng Yeah, I think that what we see is that in major historic moments, we see these as continuations of things that's been going on, something that helps enhance it and justify it. I'll use the current situation and then I will link us back to the historic things that happened in the 19th century.

There's two things if you look at popular news today that's happening that I find very interesting because they're contradictory. And they, they're very revelatory, they're very insightful. On the one hand, when we're talking about the need to reopen the economy, the COVID-19 doesn't seem to be *that* dangerous. The COVID-19 doesn't seem to kill that much. Correct? Now, when we talk about immigration policies, not suspending the process of granting permanent residency, green cards, to those in the United States, all of a sudden, the COVID-19 is an invisible killer. All of a sudden, it is this horrifying, uncontrollable thing.

What's interesting about this period is that they're said in the same breath. "Open the economy, 'cause the virus is not that dangerous. Oh my God, we got to suspend all green card applications, close every single border an inordinate amount of time, because it's so dangerous. We've got to protect ourselves."

Now, when we see contradictions in history, we start to understand that these are products of agendas, not just neutral value-free descriptions of situations. And so, what this points to is that, perhaps, a crisis could be used to further certain agendas that has been already ongoing. And it is not a surprise that we have drummed up anti-immigrant sentiment as the way to fix our nation's every single economic woe. And so, we go backwards, we wrap around once again, to think historically, that marks a continuity.

One of the most important things I try to cover is that the actual first federal policy that was enforced against Chinese exclusion was actually in 1875. It was called the Page Act, against women. A lot of times, what we think about the problem of immigration, the popular story is, "Oh, they are taking our jobs away. The economic reasons— we got to get rid of them." At this time, if I could put it in context, there were only about at most about 7,000 Chinese women in all the United States.

The question about wanting to restrict it had nothing to do with job scarcity. It was about the belief that Chinese women were ruining the moral health of the nation because they came— most of them came as sex workers. Well, there are sex workers of all nationality. But what made Chinese women sex workers more dangerous is that they would pollute the blood of the white race. They also suggested that sex was taking place outside of marriage. And they were also believed to be carriers of syphilis. Who carries the disease? Who is ruining—? It's always, it's the foreign Other that is responsible for that. But it's never the other partners. It's never the men who are the carriers. It's always going to be the women. And here it's always going to be the immigrant women, the Chinese, the non-white immigrant women.

And so, they became such—this, this group of 7,000 in all the nation—became such a threat that we passed a federal law. And, and let me tell you, there were senators in certain parts of our states that have never met a Chinese, never met a Chinese woman, never. But this looming belief that there's something foreign, something we can't see is to be blamed, right? We passed the first one.

It also tried to exclude Chinese workers. Now that didn't work very well. It wasn't enforced. But the stipulation against Chinese women was enforced in 1875. We had earlier federal laws of immigration like the Alien Sedition Acts, but we know that those weren't federally enforced. So, they were symbolic for other reasons. The next major federal law was in 1875, and that was partially forced.

But the reason why the Chinese Exclusion Act gets so elevated is this: this is when we went all out. We started a whole Bureau of Immigration. Our whole entire immigration regime began during this time to enforce this.

And so, I think this is where ideas and how we think, they have material consequences. And so, I think this is something I want us to think about. But also, to link through what we wanted to talk about once again, is that it's not so much as if an economic crisis, a public health crisis is what gives rise to xenophobic racism. These were present. They enhance it and allows people to chase different kinds of political agendas.

Emily Tran So, I want to talk more about the material manifestation of structural racism in a historic sense by looking at urban space. We see now that many American cities with a history of Chinese immigration and settlement have really vibrant Chinatowns that serve as cultural and business hubs. Is the origin of Chinatown rooted in this history of blame for disease?

Cindy I-Fen Cheng I think what we need to see is Chinatown is— and it kind of embeds the most interesting part of spatial formation. Remember, the reason for Chinatown, the actual history it's, it's rooted in segregation, pure and simple.

Many of them emerged pre-Civil War and extended post-Civil War. And on the one hand, it was like a no-win situation. As different Asian immigrants were trying to rent out places to live, there were whites-only stipulations. There were residential segregation. There were restrictive covenants in these areas that limited certain areas to whites only.

So, they had to find very rundown spaces that policymakers didn't want to develop. And they can only rent in these places, and if they're lucky, purchase some of these properties, but most of them were renters. And so, when we talk about Chinatown disappearing, it's because a developer decided, hey, it'd be great to build a freeway here. And they lost it because they were not, they were not able to own. So, it was rooted in this history.

But what keeps it contained post-Civil War, post the fact that segregation is unconstitutional, will be these larger discourses of disease and contagion, of scary things that happen and crime that takes place in these areas, all sorts of stuff that gets attributed to this area.

And when Asian immigrants do live in Chinatown, they get blamed for what? Just wanting to live amongst their own. They don't want to integrate, right? They get blamed for lumping.

I do want to say the generative aspects, though, of places like Chinatown because no matter what, it was a space of community building. Although it was segregated, they were able to form their own supermarkets, their own mutual health associations.

If we go back to the period of the epidemics in San Francisco in the late 19th and 20th century, many of these Chinese residents, after being stigmatized, they organized and they turned all the horrible discourses over Chinese hygiene and everything, they turned those stigmas to advocate for greater sanitation, for vaccination. They advocated for more municipal services. They advocated for trash to get picked up in the area. They advocated for better housing in their neighborhoods. Because they knew that those were the real issues to help the spread, those structural things, to help limit the spread of diseases.

Emily Tran So, these spaces really became centers of community organizing and community strength, and I think that continues very much to the present. And earlier this year, when we were just beginning to be aware of COVID-19, there was a lot of concern that explicit and implicit boycotts of Chinatown would bankrupt businesses there. What were the economic consequences of anti-Asian racism during previous disease outbreaks for Chinese shopowners?

Cindy I-Fen Cheng In this question, I think it's very much along the national trend. One of the ways of containing epidemic solely through quarantine over testing, meant that businesses collapsed. And here, what we start to see is that if we shift only towards that, it hurts the people who cannot—and the stigma. People don't want to eat at a Chinese restaurant because they think the contagion is higher.

And I think this is a stigma that will have material consequences because—outside of just the fact that many of your Asian, Latinx workers, and your African American peoples, they tend to be the essential workers still in the frontlines working—their businesses tend to be stigmatized. So, even if the economy's re-opening, perhaps people in these areas will be still lower. I think that the economic devastation is huge.

But also, I think the larger issue is that even if they apply for loans, right, what we're starting to see is the small businesses are not getting them. Relief is not going to small businesses, no matter who you are, across the nation. So, once again, when we talk about these issues, what we have to then look at is the underlying fixes. How do we have a stimulus package that actually reaches down to our, everybody's, all small businesses? I think that becomes really important.

And the stigma that will continue on after this is something else to think about when we keep saying that, often we look at certain people and think that they're the foreign other, right? Because Asian Americans, they're both foreigners and non-white—so, they got two of these things going on—they often are often attributed to people, like, no matter how long you lived in the United States, how many generations you're born here, you are, what we call— they become perpetual foreigners.

The question that's posed to an Asian American is not like, “Oh, are you born in the United States or somewhere else?” The question is always, “Where are you from?” Because the assumption is you can never be from the United States. It's totally okay to ask these questions. But the question is not like, “Hey, are you from here?” It's always just like, “Oh, where are you from?” Because it can't be here.

The assumption is they're not from here. So, this type of foreign otherness, it has major consequences during this time, because what you start to see is if a situation that people attribute blame to in China, despite the fact that people of Asian descent may have lived here, are not in China, have nothing to do with this. They become socially impacted due to these political and social relations with another country.

Emily Tran What immediately comes to mind as an example of this perpetual foreignness is Japanese internment during World War Two. Can you tell us about that history?

Cindy I-Fen Cheng During this time, you know, even though you're fighting a war with Germany and Italy, it's not as if every single Italian American, every single German American were attributed to blame for disloyalty.

However, the belief in the foreignness of Japanese Americans, that because they are non-white, they could possibly never really be part of the U.S. A political situation, something that happened completely distant from them in Japan had grave social implications for their lives in the United States.

These types of connections for us to attribute to non-white immigrants as perpetual foreigners no matter how long you've lived here, how many generations, becomes again, this continuation, right, of attributing blame. And I think when you say that Asian businesses will take a greater hit, they already have, and it's likely to continue.

April Haynes I just was really interested in the linkage you were drawing earlier in response to Emily's question about the history of the economic consequences between the racial composition of so-called essential or frontline workers today. And I just wonder how the workforce got segmented by race in that way in the first place.

Cindy I-Fen Cheng There's two trends that I can point to.

The first is what happened in the 19th century, and how it got exacerbated in the post-war period, which leads us to the current situation. The history of how Asian Americans and in particular Chinese Americans first got into the service sector is—we have to remember that the first major critical mass of Chinese immigrants settled in California, in the San Francisco and Central Valley areas. And many of these were mining towns because the one of the biggest draw for immigrants of all countries became the discovery of gold, where we send fliers and petitions out. And the reason China became in contact was because China had recently lost the Opium War, their ports were opened. And so, for the first time Western nations like Britain and the United States had access. And they recruited people to come and work in the mines.

Now, when you work in the mines, the discovery gold has a limit, meaning gold will get discovered and competition gets, gets fierce. And so, what ended up happening was they started to segregate mines, where they started to say Chinese immigrants cannot mine in these areas. Well, they're here in the United States, they can't mine. They have to figure out a way to earn a living. We know that mining towns were disproportionately male in composition, right? People from all over—either you're European immigrants thinking you were going to just come work for a while, go back home, or you were from other places, come, earn—but mostly, it was men who traveled in these areas. And the women who traveled cater to these needs, and they often were sex workers.

So, when all these mining towns started to close, you have this need, because you got a lot of guys working in a mining town. They need someone to do their laundry. They weren't the best at cooking. They needed somebody to cook the foods. So, when competition got fierce, the mines started to close, Chinese immigrants had to figure out how else to earn living. And hence they went into service sector.

So, there is a history of Chinese launderers and Chinese restaurants, so much so that if you talk to any American of any nationality, getting Chinese takeout and getting pizza and getting a burger, this is just American things to do. It's so entrenched. It's because it came from this 19th-century thing where they were driven out. So that's how Asian Americans started to go into the service sector.

It also benefited, later on, other immigrant groups because, when you are in a restaurant business or laundry business, you're not beholden to somebody to employ you. You pool money together with your family members, and you can open a small shop and you use your family members as unpaid workers. However, if you were an immigrant coming here as a non-white, it would be hard to find employment because of systematic racism in employment.

So, many non-white minorities started to go into the service sector because this is something they can control. Even though banks don't loan the money, family members will pool resources together and open shop. And you see this currently from doughnuts, nail salons. They pool together and go into these service sector.

But the other larger systematic thing in the post-war period is that our nation as a whole has moved away from manufacturing—that is outsourced now—into service sector. And what we're starting to see now is the devastating consequences of a service sector-driven economy. As COVID-19 has shown, the sheer amount of people unemployed, on furlough, is because of our mass systematic shift away from manufacturing into service sector. These are our most vulnerable groups right now.

Emily Tran So, these Chinese businesses then, these laundromats and restaurants, they provided a measure of independence from exclusion, a way to navigate anti-Asian discrimination. How did exclusion by law, immigration exclusion come to an end?

Cindy I-Fen Cheng So, it ends in the most, in the most interesting way.

So, when the nation, when we pass the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and we enforce it, people don't realize that the Act was passed to say it was to take an effect for 10 years. So, every 10 years, the Congress would gather, and they would revote on the Chinese exclusion, and sometimes in between that because they wanted revisions. Tighter restrictions, lighter restrictions. And so, in total, I think there are 16 Chinese Exclusion Acts from 1882 until 1943, when the Act was repealed.

It was repealed by a simple executive order because during this time, what we knew in World War II is that the United States joined the war effort as an Allied power, we know that amongst the Allied powers, China was heavily recruited because to win the war in the Pacific, the United States needed China.

Now, Japan has been trying to get China as its colony forever, because the Japanese Empire was expanding. And they took over Indochina. They took over Philippines. They were going to all these

previous colonial outposts and they wanted China. They had Manchuria, they were going in. They waged this huge campaign, “Asians for Asia.” “Come and join us. Don't join the United States.”

And what the Japanese propaganda was doing— they were blaring it through the tanks as they were driving through parts of China, leaflets say, “Why would you join the United States and the Allied powers? Their exclusion law names us unfit for citizenship. Their exclusion law treats us secondary citizens. Can a Chinese person immigrate to the United States? No. Can they become a naturalized citizen? No. Their law names you as unfit.” So, they're blaring this.

What this has shown us is racism in the United States is really bad diplomacy. You want to be the global power of the world and shows the triumph and credibility of U.S. democracy. What is going to undercut this every single time is racism. You want to show that the United States has a better way of doing things? What's going to undermine the credibility is racism. So, during this time when the United States was trying to build diplomatic relations with other countries as the Allied power, what undercut these efforts? It's exclusionary Chinese Exclusion laws.

So, in a special meeting of Congress, the President announced and said, “We've got to mend this historic mistake.” But it still needed to appease people who thought that having more Chinese immigrants was going to undercut the economy. So, it's called the 1943 Magnuson Act which repealed it. It had three parts. It repealed Chinese exclusion. Revolutionary. The second was that it granted for the first time in U.S. history, the ability of a non-white immigrant to become a naturalized citizen. That was huge. Chinese immigrants were not allowed to become naturalized citizens until 1943. If you were born the United States, birthright citizenship was protected. But if you immigrated, even if you lived for 40 years, can't ever naturalize.

But the third was we created a racial quota. We allowed 105 Chinese into the United States annually. So, 105. People say it's a token measure, which it was. But if anything, it was the shift towards using immigration policy as diplomacy. And the reason we call this a racial quota is that it wasn't a national quota or national origin quota. It wasn't 105 people from *China*. It's 105 people of Chinese descent no matter where you're from. So, in that 105 quota, if you are a Chinese living in Mexico, you would petition in through that 105 quota. You could be a Chinese living in the U.K. You petition to the 105. It's not 105 for the country of China, it's 105 racial quota for anybody of Chinese descent living anywhere.

This is how we started to repeal, is we started to learn that racism in the United States was really bad for diplomacy.

Emily Tran How have racist ideas about Asian Americans continued to change over the course of the 20th century? I'm thinking in particular about the emergence of the myth of the model minority. Can you tell us about how this stereotype emerged and how it relates to our current moment?

Cindy I-Fen Cheng So, there's two ways of talking about model minority. One is to kind of showcase the credibility of U.S. democracy abroad. Following World War II, the United States immediately launched into the era of the Cold War, and this is when the United States, interestingly, every single repeal of exclusion laws happened in this period. The 1965 Immigration Act that—that got repealed every single kind of quota and made every country on par with each other in terms of immigration—was one of the three civil rights measures in 1965, in addition to the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act, you have the Immigration Act of 1965.

So, during this time when the United States was doing this, it needed to send its model minorities abroad to showcase before the world that the United States' democracy was in fact credible. Because the Soviet Union, like the Japanese before them, ran a huge campaign. They said, "Why would you subscribe to capitalism because look at the lynching. They don't guarantee freedom. They don't guarantee greater democracy. If you go into a communist regime, we get rid of class differences. We get rid of colonialism. We are the true bearers of democratic values of equity across race, across class, across everything."

So, the United States to counter this would send Chinese Americans, Korean Americans abroad to show that, "Hey, look. We're doing great. And democracy works because yes, there's racism, but it's getting better. And I'm going to be a living testament for this in terms of U.S. diplomatic relations." The U.S. sent a bunch of awesome jazz singers, African Americans to show that, yes, there's lynching, but it's getting better. And look at this, we're great. So that's one strand of the history of using Asians as minorities to kind of showcase the credibility of democracy.

But the more pernicious thing happened in the mid-1960s. And this is when we first see the word "model minority" in print. It was through *Newsweek*, where they started to talk about race rebellions and civil unrest in the United States. In Los Angeles we had what we call the Watts Rebellion. And it always begins with a spark, like unfair treatment of African Americans in Watts by police officers, and it starts a civil unrest.

And as a way to rectify this—the way that they wanted, again, to mis-direct our attention away from structural issues of inequality, structural racism, police brutality, unfair housing, lack of health care, all these issues—they started to say, "You know, at a time where African Americans are complaining about all their racism, it's time for us to look a little bit closer at Chinese and Japanese Americans, the United States. They experience—maybe it's not slavery—but they experience their share of racism. They were interned, they were targets of the only immigration act to name a group of people and a race for purposes of exclusion. They've endured their share of racism. But did that set them back? How did they get through this?"

And they said that these were our model minorities. And this success of Asian Americans, the uneven success of some Asian Americans, was there to undercut the claims of African Americans against structural inequality. Because this is when we started to blame African Americans, as if it's their culture, their own lifestyle that is contributing to their own fate, instead of structural racism. Because if Asians if they could rise above, why can't African Americans?

And so, that myth, the model minority is very problematic and the reason why we study it not as model minority, we only call it the *myth* of model minority is because if you look at the numbers and the reports, the numbers for Asian Americans aren't that high. There's a group of very educated and that's usually recent immigrants. But most people come as farmworkers, as garment workers, as low wage workers. And if you look at the broader Asian American community, if you look at the broader Asian community in the state of Wisconsin, the largest are Hmong refugees who came from the Secret War in Laos. And there is no way their percentages are in the level where they just come and somehow they're all educated and they all drive great cars and their income is wonderful.

So, I think it's a very, very tricky stereotype to uphold.

Emily Tran Right. It really both elides the actual lived experience of so many Asian Americans, and it's harmful to the struggle against white supremacy and racism while purporting to be, like, sort of positive designation, to be something that you should be flattered to be called.

I want to shift now to Americans' consciousness of this history of racism. Why is it that the history of racism against Asian Americans remains for many people kind of obscure and hidden?

Cindy I-Fen Cheng I think often in the United States, when we talk about race, we still see it as Black and white. We're living in a moment where scholars who've been writing about other groups is starting to get more attention because, like the last presidential election and the unmitigated attacks against undocumented immigrants, which is racialized as Latinx immigrants, is that all of a sudden, we're realizing that race relations United States may not just be white and Black, maybe there's brown.

In this COVID-19 pandemic, we're like, "Okay, wait a second. I get it. Race is not just white and Black. It may be brown and Asian as well." And during the post-9/11 world with Islamophobia, we're like, "Oh, okay, okay. It includes religious differences, and that Arab Americans and people of different faiths gets targeted as well."

So, I think that we're starting to see in a much more complex way. And I think this is what makes people having more difficulty in terms of talking about what's happening, in terms of structural racism during this COVID-19— is that people don't know how to talk about anti-Asian racism, right, outside of some key historical events, because it is not something that has emerged as a fixture in mainstream discussions of race.

But, which makes this time and these conversations incredibly productive to kind of think about our race relations in the United States as, as quite broad and deep and interesting and involves multiple groups. It crosses and works together with people's class differences, gender identities, national belongings and stuff so that if anything, it gives us a much more nuanced and complex look at race relations in the United States. So that's the number one thing.

And I think if you grew up in the United States, there's a great oral history about a writer who grew up in New York talking about her personal experiences coming to the United States. Because you study, as a Chinese American, she studied race only as Black and white, she was like, "Wait, I can experience racism too?" Or you, you always are supposed to think that what you experience is just marginal.

But I think that what we're starting to see is that these kinds of things are much, much more complex. And here I want to make sure it's racism, but also anti-immigrant. It's xenophobia and racism. When you study Latinx history and Asian American history, the dual things of xenophobia and racism goes hand in hand. The fear the foreign, and the disdain of non-white. It goes hand in hand. And so, I think this is something for us to think about: xenophobic racism.

April Haynes One thing that has happened is that in a lot of prior pandemics, say Ebola, for example, there are these kinds of stories, origin stories about cultural practices, like hunting bushmeat in the case of Ebola. And in this case, it's trading certain animals in a wet market. And that's supposed to be the origin of this scary virus that then enters the human population.

But we're also seeing a recent shift to a different origin story, which has a tone of conspiracy theory to it, which is that it's actually about this mismanagement at a Wuhan virology lab. What's at stake and shifting the focus or the blame?

Cindy I-Fen Cheng The first thing to say, that there's no question that the Chinese government has a lot of reckoning to do. I think we are intelligent and people to know the fine line to be able to say that every government and every nation has much better practices that they can do, and that some of the critiques waged against the Chinese government is more than valid, and especially their colonial ventures into Tibet, into Africa, I mean, on and on, and their human rights record. Very legit.

But we are smart enough to separate our critiques from racism against Asians in the United States. They're not, they're not supposed to be related, right? I want to definitely affirm that. And I think the practice on the wet market, it could be attributed to a much more global practice in terms of our treatment towards wildlife and animal husbandry. But it definitely has to be a critique against certain practices of attributing special healing powers to bats and other things that is contributing to extinction of animals and poaching and all sorts of things that we— every country has to do a much better job protecting its environment that that needs to be inclusive of China. Unquestioned.

The second thing about the lab is something that I am deeply interested in because I'm a Cold War historian, is that no matter what people keep saying as they reify a European-centered understanding of the Cold War—such that the Cold War ended with the fall of Berlin Wall, whereas for us who are Asian Americans, we wonder how much the Cold War has ended when there's still Cuba, there's still North Korea, and when there are refugee camps still open for Southeast Asian refugees. How do you mark the end of the Cold War?

And now when you're looking at the competition between China and the United States in global supremacy, they're starting to reinvent this thing of— these kinds of fear, right, that there is a secret weapon, right? And I want you to relate it to, like, the arms race of the Cold War. The secret weapon that someone's developing in some lab. Oops. It slipped. It's no longer nuclear arms but biochemical warfare. So, we've seen enough sci-fi and movies about this, and I think the Cold War culture permeates into our consciousness still today, that China, the communist regime is our absolute, unquestioned enemy and everything they do is evil. And that they are doing some secretive things in their lab, and they're developing a new germ warfare that's gonna wipe us out just like a nuclear war.

So, I think part of this is very rooted in Cold War history. As we're looking at these new things we really have to question: is the Cold War over? And how do we mark its end? And how do we understand its continuities?

Emily Tran So, in our current moment it's certainly, I think, more difficult to be ignorant of racism against Asian Americans. However, I've seen some commentators suggest that focusing on the President's racist dog whistling—on his attempts and those of right-wing media organizations to characterize COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus,”—they say that that is a distraction from the more enraging issue of federal mismanagement during this crisis. Is this refrain something that we've heard before? How do you respond to this contention that talking about racism, racist violence, is a distraction from the real issue?

Cindy I-Fen Cheng Well, my answer is a yes or no. It's both a distraction, but it means that we have to focus on racism differently. Not a distraction, in and of itself, away from talking about racism.

So, the first thing to note is that what is very powerful about some of the right-wing discourses around calling this the Wuhan virus—there's more derogatory names—or the Chinese virus, is the assumption or the assertion that these are value-free neutral terminologies. There's no social meanings behind it. We're just saying this is where it come from, this is the wet markets.

And I would like to adhere to that. I would like to be able to exist in that reality. But the truth is, that's not what we're seeing on the ground-level. Two groups called the Chinese for Affirmative Action and the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council, they started this national campaign to document anti-Asian assaults. They started March 19th and I think just in a few weeks they documented over 1,100 cases nationwide. So, we're starting to see that names, these calling, has social consequences, that these are not value-free neutral terminologies. They have social consequences in inciting, enhancing xenophobic racist attacks against the Asian population.

And that *is* distracting from looking at national policies. Absolutely. But it's distracting from looking at national policies because what we *should* look at is what is causing racial disparities in the deaths. It should make us re-look at health care policies. Re-look at how we redistribute wealth in the stimulus package because, is it really redistributing wealth? It needs to make us look at who has access to testing. It needs to make us look at what happens to vulnerable populations who are homeless. It makes us need to look at how we need to have better housing opportunities for everybody.

Because what this makes us have to look more attention to is these policies that have created structural racism. So, I think that's the thing that people do not want to look at, because that is part of federal policy and that's the kind of federal policy that's harder to talk about.

But as we re-emerge in this world, I do hope our attention turns to greater discussions of policies that will ensure the greater equity of our population, such as better health care services. And when we redistribute wealth, how do we redistribute wealth so that it reaches the small businesses, it reaches the poorest of our populations? And how do we have better housing policies?

[MUSIC INTERLUDE]

Emily Tran Alright, I just have one final question. We always under episode this way: why do you love history?

Cindy I-Fen Cheng I was somebody who was a science major in my undergraduate education. I was going to med school. I was a hardcore science major and I took certain Asian American classes. My parents didn't know about it, it was like my little secret.

And I loved it. Because sometimes, changing the characters of the story, who are the major players, it helps change the perspective. For me, I was that student who— it was powerful to read about American history with different kinds of characters, and they were the lead characters. Where the immigrants like myself and my parents were the ones that were shaping history. And that change was very powerful for me such that, well, here I am.

I am somebody who loves history because I think it's part of what makes education so transformative: 'cause we are storytellers of the world. In our classrooms and our lectures, in our books, we get to tell different kinds of stories, different kinds of perspectives and we have the privileged position to dedicate our lives to telling different stories. And so, in my class on immigration, it's like, what does it mean to tell that history when we have a different set of people as our main characters? How does this change our way of understanding our broader national history and our broader global history? I love that.

And I think history, maybe it's— everybody has different values, but I do think history and our ways of interpreting it, it is what we look to for certain kinds of ways of healing. And what I mean is that the alienation we may feel— sometimes, telling the story a different way can shift that. It has the power. I think people who feel under-represented— history has the power to say, “Let me retell it.” And that might have social meaning for that.

And it also makes us remember things that we forget, like how change is possible, how we actually work together for a better place. If we keep teaching and not letting each other forget all the positive things that people have done to make this world a better place, it also changes the questions we ask today.

[MUSIC]

Emily Tran Listeners, we want to hear from you. What questions do you have for a historian? And why do you love history? Write us or record yourself on your phone and send us the clip. Our email address is outreach@history.wisc.edu.

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Thanks for listening, and be well.