

## Some area Chinese Americans report increasing incidents of harassment, discrimination amid coronavirus

Catonsville Times, Ellicott City, Md

May 12, 2020 Tuesday

Copyright 2020 Catonsville Times, Ellicott City, Md

Distributed by Tribune Content Agency

**Section:** STATE AND REGIONAL NEWS

**Length:** 1299 words

**Byline:** Taylor Deville, Catonsville Times, Ellicott City, Md.

### Body

---

May 12-- May 12--Zhi Wang has lived with his wife and their two children in Columbia for the past eight years, and they've never felt unwelcome.

Their community is family-oriented, the neighbors friendly. Now, Wang and his wife feel they can no longer enjoy a walking trail they once frequented behind the neighborhood.

"Somebody was shouting from their house, maybe from their deck," Wang said, recalling the last time he and his wife were on the trail late in the afternoon of March 24.

"They were shouting, 'Coronavirus, coronavirus! Asian pig!' " Wang said.

Across the country, Asian American advocacy groups have seen a surge in xenophobic incidents, ranging from targeted harassment, as in the Wangs' case, to vandalism of Asian American-owned businesses. In March, three members of an Asian American family, including two children, were stabbed in a Texas Sam's Club.

Media outlets reported the attacker said he thought the family was "Chinese and infecting people with the coronavirus."

Organizations affiliated with the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans once saw only "a handful" of bias-related incidents reported through online channels, said NCAPA president Gregg Orton.

From mid-March to mid-April, around the time President Donald Trump began referring to the coronavirus as "the Chinese virus," NCAPA received 1,500 reports of discriminatory incidents; but those numbers had already begun climbing in late February, Orton said.

"Anger, frustration and fear" are understandable responses during crises, Orton said, but "I think in many ways, some have decided to redirect that anger or fear at Asian Americans."

While NCAPA reports an uptick in bias-based discrimination, police in Baltimore city and Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Carroll, Harford and Howard counties said they haven't received recent reports of incidents targeting Asian Americans.

Some area Chinese Americans report increasing incidents of harassment, discrimination amid coronavirus

Clarksville resident Sunny Zhang had commuted by train to her Washington, D.C., office for the past six years without incident.

She doesn't mind the 20-minute walk from Union Station to the office where she works as a computer engineer. On one of her last commutes before she began working from home, she realized she was being watched by a bulky man who towered over her in stature and who she felt was looking at her menacingly.

He followed her for about four blocks, silently at first, before he started shouting, mixing in some expletives.

"There's some [expletive] going on in your country, do you know that?" he said. "Go back to your own [expletive] country."

Zhang walked faster and tried to ignore him. As the insults continued, she turned and yelled at him.

"But inside my heart, I'm scared, you know?" she said. "While I'm fighting with him, I was kind of almost running towards my office.

"I just prayed in my heart: Please, please, please, don't let him do anything to me," she said.

Charissa Cheah, a researcher and psychology professor at University of Maryland, Baltimore County, who in March received funding from the National Science Foundation to study Chinese American discrimination in the pandemic, said, "We expect that what we're seeing now is not going to just disappear even as the [rate of new cases] declines."

Cheah is gathering data from Chinese American families across the U.S., and analyzing social media and public opinion to determine the effects on Chinese American families, including on their self-perception, child development, and mental and physical health.

"We know discrimination is associated with a slew of negative outcomes, both mental and physical -- heart disease, substance abuse, depression," Cheah said.

Data is already showing increased concern over personal safety among Chinese Americans and a large percentage of children who have experienced or witnessed discrimination in person or online, she said.

Preliminary analysis of Twitter also showed a spike in xenophobic rhetoric and the blaming of Chinese Americans around the time Trump and other political leaders began using terms like "the China virus and Wuhan virus," Cheah said.

Her team is assessing multiple forms of discrimination, from direct acts to micro-aggressions, indirect, subtle or unintentional discrimination against minority groups often veiled under the guise of humor that "some people might see as less direct, but it's not any less damaging," Cheah said.

In Catonsville, the family-owned restaurant Duesenberg's drew backlash from residents after a picture of a sign hung on the door to the restaurant circulated on social media. Underneath the barcode on the sign read, "COVID-19: Made in China."

The sign implies "that this virus was something that was [intentionally] manufactured and essentially dumped on American society," Cheah said.

COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus, first emerged in the Chinese city Wuhan in December. Even as the World Health Organization maintains the virus is of natural origin, Trump has fueled theories that the virus was created in a Chinese lab by having U.S. agencies investigate the unsubstantiated claim.

Cheah said "there's a misperception" that Asian American organizations that are standing against making the virus racial are "somehow defending the Chinese government," which Trump and others are accusing of failing to alert international health officials about the severity of the virus when it first arose.

Some area Chinese Americans report increasing incidents of harassment, discrimination amid coronavirus

That is "a legitimate policy debate about sharing information," Cheah said. But "we've clearly seen the affects of what happens when we use that kind of language, and that it puts Americans at risk."

Erica Pan Mah, a Catonsville resident of 20 years and Chinese American, penned an open letter to Duesenberg's on Facebook after seeing the outcry from residents.

"While your joke has made me feel unwelcome in your restaurant, it has not made me feel unwelcome in this town," Mah wrote.

But "the problem with things like this is it can escalate," Mah said.

A Facebook user not associated with the restaurant subsequently posted Mah's photo, and a second photo of her and her children, to Duesenberg's Facebook page.

"If you want to try to publicly destroy a business you should be brave enough to show your face as well," the user wrote.

Even though there was "nothing overtly harassing ... the fact that a person put a picture of my children [online] just brings it to a new level," Mah said.

Mah said she still feels grateful to her community for their support, but now the thought of letting her 14- and 15-year-old kids walk down Frederick Road unaccompanied "just makes me feel uncomfortable."

The sign at Duesenberg's has since been removed. In a letter, restaurant owner Gary Teegardin apologized for the "poor attempt at humor," and wrote the sign was "insensitive" to the "increased attacks against our Asian American friends" during the pandemic.

Teegardin declined to comment further.

You are now following this newsletter. See all newsletters.

Neither Wang, Zhang nor Mah has reported the incidents to authorities.

"People don't tend to report because they feel that no one will care," Cheah said.

"When we can document it, that's when we can have more active attempts to put resources into" addressing the issue, Cheah said.

Cheah also stressed the importance of bystanders speaking out when they witness forms of discrimination and blame.

"It lets the victims know that you see them and that they are not alone," Cheah wrote in an email.

"You are making a statement out loud that in this space that this is not normal and this is not appropriate," she said. "It's important for you to say it out loud ... that this is not right."

\_\_\_\_ (c)2020 the Catonsville Times (Ellicott City, Md.) Visit the Catonsville Times (Ellicott City, Md.) at [www.baltimoresun.com/explore/baltimorecounty/publications/catonsville-times/](http://www.baltimoresun.com/explore/baltimorecounty/publications/catonsville-times/) Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

**Load-Date:** May 12, 2020