

They spit, they yell at them, they attack them: the Chinese-Americans fear for their safety

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Body

Yuanyuan Zhu was walking to his gym in San Francisco on March 9 thinking that this exercise routine might be the last in a while, when he realized a man was yelling at him. I was shouting insults at him about China. Then a bus passed, as she recalls, and the man yelled at the vehicle, "Run them over."

She tried to keep her distance, but, when the traffic light changed, she had to wait next to him at the pedestrian crossing. I could see how he stared at her. And then, suddenly, he felt the man's saliva falling on his face and his favorite sweater.

Impacted, Zhu, who is 26 and moved to the United States of China five years ago, ran the rest of the way to get to the gym. He found a corner where no one could see her and cried silently.

"That person didn't look weird or angry or anything, you know?" he said of the person who tormented her. "He just looked like a normal person."

As the coronavirus turns life in America headlong, the Chinese-Americans face a double threat. Not only are they grappling like everyone else about how to avoid the virus, but they're also struggling with growing racism in the form of verbal and physical attacks. Other Asian Americans—with families from Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, Burma, and elsewhere—also face threats by being grouped with the Chinese-Americans for a bigotry that doesn't recognize the difference.

Two people visit the esplanade of the Chinese TCL theater in Los Angeles, California. REUTERS/Mario Anzuoni (MARIO ANZUONI/)

In interviews over the past week, more than 20 Asian Americans across the country said they were afraid to go to the supermarket, travel alone on the subway or by bus, let their kids play outside. Many commented that they have been shouted at them in public, as a sudden spasm of hatred has emerged reminiscent of what Muslim Americans faced after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

However, unlike in 2001, when then-President George W. Bush called for tolerance toward Muslim Americans, this time President Donald Trump uses language that Asian Americans claim to incite attacks Racist.

Trump and his Republican allies insist on calling the coronavirus the "Chinese virus," which contravenes World Health Organization guidelines for not using geographic locations to name diseases, as doing so has brought repercussions in the past.

Trump told reporters Tuesday that he called the virus "Chinese" to combat the disinformation campaign orchestrated by Beijing officials who claimed the U.S. Army was the source of the outbreak. He dismissed the concern that his language might have effects.

"If they keep using those terms, children are going to learn them," said Tony Du, an epidemiologist in Howard County, Maryland, who fears for his 8-year-old son, Larry. "They're going to call my 8-year-old son 'Chinese virus'. That's serious."

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Du said he posted on Facebook that "this is the darkest day in my more than twenty years of living in America," referring to Trump's insistence on using the term.

A delivery man rides his bike on 7th Avenue in a nearly deserted Times Square after the Coronavirus disease outbreak (COVID-19), in the Manhattan district of New York City. REUTERS/Carlo Allegri (CARLO ALLEGRI/)

Although there is no hard data yet, researchers and pro-Asian-American activist groups indicate that there has been a sudden increase in verbal and physical attacks reported to newspapers and helplines.

San Francisco State University found a 50 percent increase in the number of news articles related to coronavirus and discrimination against Asians between February 9 and March 7. Lead researcher Russell Jeung, a professor of Asian-American studies, said the figures represented only "the tip of the iceberg" because only the most outrageous cases are likely to be reported by the media.

Jeung has collaborated in the creation of a website in six Asian languages to gather first-hand experiences; about 150 cases have been reported on the site since it came online last Thursday.

No one is immune to being attacked. Edward Chew, director of the emergency department at a large hospital in Manhattan, is at the forefront of the battle against coronavirus. He said that over the past few weeks, he has noticed that people are trying to cover his nose and mouth with their T-shirts when they are close to him.

In his spare time, Chew has been buying protective equipment, such as goggles and protective visors, for his staff in case they end up in the hospital where he works. He said Wednesday night at Home Depot, with his cart full of Tyvek brand protective visors, masks and monkeys, he was harassed by three men in his twenties, who then followed him to the parking lot.

"I've heard from other Asians who have been attacked by this, but when you personally experience being ridiculed, you really feel it," he said the next day.

(REUTERS/Lindsey Wasson) (LINDSEY WASSON/)

The attacks have also become physical.

In California's San Fernando Valley, a 16-year-old Asian-American teenager was attacked at school by bullies who accused him of having coronavirus. He was sent to the emergency room to check if he had suffered a concussion.

In New York City, a woman carrying a punch cover was kicked and beaten at a subway station in Manhattan, and a man in Queens was followed to a bus stop, where he was shouted and beaten in the head in front of her 10-year-old son.

People have rushed to take steps to protect themselves. A man created a Facebook group to organize a peer system for Asians in New York who are afraid to take the subway alone. Armory owners in the Washington, D.C. area said they've seen a sudden increase in the number of Chinese-Americans who are buying guns for the first time.

At Engage Armament in Rockville, Maryland, most gun buyers in the first two weeks of March were Chinese-American or Chinese, according to owner Andy Raymond.

More than a fifth of Rockville residents are of Asian origin, and Raymond says buyers of Korean and Vietnamese ancestry were not unusual. However, Raymond notes that he is amazed by the number of Chinese customers—particularly green card holders from mainland China—who started attending a few weeks ago, a group that was rare to shop at their store.

"They came non-stop, it's something I'd never seen before," he said.

Du tries to keep hope. He spends his weekends training to become a volunteer for Maryland emergency medical workers. He is part of a group of Chinese-American scientists who organized a GoFundMe account to raise money for protective equipment for hospital workers in the area. In three days, they collected more than \$55,000, almost all through small donations.

But he said he was afraid of the chaos that might be unleashed if the death toll in the United States rises significantly.

Asians born in the United States experience a sudden sense of being observed that is as uncomfortable as it is unknown.

"It's a look of contempt," said Chil Kong, a Korean-American theater director in Maryland. "It's as if they were asking, 'How dare you exist in my world? You are a reminder of this disease and you do not belong to my world.'"

He added: "It's especially difficult when you grow up here and you expect this world to be yours too. But we don't live in that world anymore. That world no longer exists."

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