

How Asian-American Leaders Are Grappling With Xenophobia Amid Coronavirus

As Asian-Americans face racist attacks and President Trump has tied the virus to China, community and political leaders have tried to comfort constituents. But even they admit to feeling unnerved.



By **Matt Stevens**

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Soon after President Trump first uttered the phrase [“Chinese virus,”](#) Representative Grace Meng got a call from her parents, who had read about it in the newspaper. Had Mr. Trump, they wondered, really given the coronavirus that corrosive moniker?

Yes, she told them, indeed he had. And no, despite being a member of Congress and her parents’ continued pleas, there was nothing she could do to make him stop.

“I have, at times, felt helpless,” said Ms. Meng, a Democrat from New York whose large and multicultural district encompasses many neighborhoods in Queens, including Flushing. “Hearing stories consistently from around the world where people are being harassed and assaulted really reminds me that often times we are, as a community, still viewed as outsiders.”

After enduring decades of exclusion, racism and discrimination that include some of the darkest chapters of American history, Asian-Americans entered 2020 with reason for optimism on the political front. A wave of second-generation Asian-Americans had come of age, sparking hope that they could [help break voter turnout records in the fall](#). And three people with roots in the diaspora [had run for the country’s highest office](#) during the same cycle, with one of them, Andrew Yang, [energizing Asian-American voters](#) in a fashion seldom seen before.

And then along came the coronavirus — a pandemic that unleashed [a torrent of hate and violence](#) as bigots blamed Asian-Americans for the outbreak. In recent weeks, they have been yelled at, spit on, physically attacked and more, leading at least [three](#) organizations [to begin](#) tracking [the episodes](#). Hundreds of people have filed reports, the groups say,

though an untold number of incidents have most likely gone uncounted as victims have chosen to keep quiet.

In interviews, a dozen Asian-American politicians, academics and leaders of nonprofit groups denounced the racial animus that has shown itself during the crisis, vowing to speak out against it and to protect their community even as they personally acknowledged feeling angry, fearful and unsettled.

“They are doing this because they have certain political motives and they are not taking into account the effect of their actions on other huge groups of people, including Asian-Americans,” Representative Judy Chu, Democrat of California, said of her Republican counterparts in Congress and the White House. “I hope this wakes people up.”

Some of those interviewed expressed cautious hope that the events of the past several weeks might unite the sprawling and diverse Asian-American community in a productive way that could build on the political momentum that has been bubbling in recent years.

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But they also spoke of a profound sadness; despite a long struggle for hard-won educational, economic and political gains, the xenophobic attacks and political rhetoric of the last month have served as a reminder that, especially under Mr. Trump, Asian-Americans may never fully be able to shake the feeling that they are [perpetual foreigners](#).

“These stereotypes have been here for decades,” Ms. Chu said. “They’re always kind of underneath the surface. But if there’s some precipitating event, then it can bring it all back out.”

Mr. Yang put it bluntly: “People around the country all of a sudden are being targeted in ways they’ve never experienced before. It’s very depressing.”

The racist abuse on display has evoked painful memories. Asian-American leaders were quick to recall the government-sponsored discrimination baked into the [Chinese Exclusion Act](#) of 1882 and [Japanese internment](#) in the 1940s. Experts say those events and others contributed to the perpetual foreigner and “[Yellow Peril](#)” myths that promoted the false ideas that people with Asian features were disease carriers, a threat to the nation and could never truly become American.

In other words, said Janelle Wong, a professor of American studies at the University of Maryland, College Park, “You still are assumed to eat bat soup.”

For other leaders, it was the 1982 slaying of [Vincent Chin](#) — who was beaten to death in Detroit by two autoworkers in the midst of a recession — that came to mind.

And still others said the current situation contained strong echoes of the period after Sept. 11, 2001, when “anyone who was brown was equated with being a terrorist,” said Karthick Ramakrishnan, a professor of political science at the University of California, Riverside.

“I was really fearful back in those days that they were going start rounding up Muslims the way they did with my grandparents and my parents,” said Mark Takano, a Japanese-American congressman from Riverside, Calif., whose father still has scars on his legs from internment. “We as Asian-Americans know that in times like these, mass blame and mass guilt gets assigned to a group of people.”

That the situation hits so close to home has made the messaging coming from Mr. Trump and some Republicans all the more frustrating to Democratic lawmakers like Mr. Takano, Ms. Chu and Ms. Meng, whose complaints have [been backed by Speaker Nancy Pelosi](#).

For days, Mr. Trump insisted on calling the virus that causes Covid-19 the “Chinese virus” — [a term he initially defended](#) as “not racist at all” because, he said, the virus “comes from China.”

Some of Mr. Trump’s advisers and allies, like Kellyanne Conway, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Senator [Lindsey Graham of South Carolina](#), have similarly argued for the use of the phrase, citing both the virus’s origin and a desire to hold the Chinese government accountable for its slow public acknowledgment of the extent of the crisis.

Those talking points were subsequently picked up by some corners of conservative media and by Republican lawmakers like Representative Kevin McCarthy of California, the House minority leader, and [Senator Charles E. Grassley](#) of Iowa, who repeated the “Chinese virus” language publicly.

Historians, public health experts and groups including the World Health Organization have recommended against assigning names to infectious diseases that include a

geographic location and have emphasized that associating them with an ethnic group can lead to discrimination and xenophobia.

Asian-American leaders in particular have sounded the alarm about Republican messaging that they say stigmatizes their community and fans racism. Ms. Chu, who is chairwoman of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, [sent a letter](#) to her colleagues last month urging them not to spread misconceptions. Mr. Takano said he personally spoke to Mr. McCarthy and asked him to stop using the term “Chinese coronavirus.” And Ms. Meng recently introduced [a resolution](#) condemning anti-Asian sentiment connected to the virus.

Amid the outcry, Mr. Trump [eventually stopped using the phrase](#) and [said publicly](#) that it was “very important that we totally protect our Asian-American community in the United States” adding that the virus was “NOT their fault in any way.”

Democratic lawmakers said his statements came too late, and experts noted that even in walking back his use of the phrase, Mr. Trump had referred to Asian-Americans using language that reinforced the idea that they are an “other.” “They are working closely with us to get rid of it,” [Mr. Trump tweeted](#).

The criticism from Asian-American lawmakers in Congress has fallen along party lines in part because there are no Republican Asian-American or Pacific-Islander members of Congress aside from Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagen, the nonvoting delegate who represents American Samoa.

[Young Kim](#), a former state assemblywoman who is one of several Asian-American Republicans currently running for Congress, [appeared to distance herself](#) from Mr. Trump’s “Chinese virus” rhetoric.

“This virus is not spread by any one group and does not discriminate based on gender, ethnicity, race, or social class. It affects everyone,” she said in a statement. “Now is not the time for division, labeling, or name calling.”

Dan Hom, who chairs the advisory board of the Asian Business Association of San Diego, said he found the racist acts targeting Asian-Americans “inexcusable,” but added that he supported Mr. Trump’s handling of the crisis.

“I believe the president is holding China accountable,” Mr. Hom, a Republican, said. “If you start with the premise that the president’s a racist, then anything he says or he does, you’re going to say he’s a racist.”

Mr. Yang, the former presidential candidate who largely [sought to avoid attacking Mr. Trump during his campaign](#), said he saw the president’s language as an attempt “to

distract from his administration's slow response to the coronavirus" and was disheartened by his decision to inflame hostilities.

Mr. Yang said that over the past several weeks, he, too, had experienced sudden moments of self-consciousness while in public. And he had been acutely reminded of the sadness and anger he felt as a child when he was one of only a few Asian-Americans at his school.

"It's been a real uphill battle over my lifetime and it feels like we've made really dramatic progress," he said. "And then it feels like we're being sent backward in various ways — and that's painful."

Ms. Meng expressed similar sentiments, saying that for perhaps the first extended period in her life, she could not be sure "how someone will react to me at any given time."

"You finally have that feeling like, 'Oh, we've made it.' My parents' generation — that first generation of immigrants — their sacrifices were worth it. We are now accepted," she said. "For this to happen brings up these feelings that I always assumed were part of people's history. They are now something we have to deal with."

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The C.D.C. has [recommended](#) that all Americans wear cloth masks if they go out in public. This is a shift in federal guidance reflecting [new concerns that the coronavirus is being spread by infected people who have no symptoms](#). Until now, the C.D.C., like the W.H.O., has advised that ordinary people don't need to wear masks unless they are sick and coughing. Part of the reason was to preserve medical-grade masks for health care workers who

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