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Sections

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‘Do you have the corona?’: Asians in Chicago worry about damage done after Trump repeatedly called COVID-19 the ‘Chinese virus’

By [Alice Yin](#)

Chicago Tribune | Mar 25, 2020





Businesses along Argyle Street in the Uptown neighborhood on March 23, 2020.(E. Jason Wambsgans/Chicago Tribune)

Ro Nguyen thought it would play out differently.

The 30-year-old had just watched a movie at a Streeterville cinema with a friend on March 12 and was strolling down East Grand Avenue around 8 p.m., the two of them marveling at the deserted streets.

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As they headed toward the Red Line station, Nguyen said a man walking nearby saw them and yelled out, “F--- China!”

Then the man spat on Nguyen, he said. The saliva splattered on his jacket.

Nguyen, who is of Vietnamese and Filipino descent, had imagined this moment. Having read news stories about harassment and attacks against Asians as coronavirus cases rose, he wondered if he would be next. If he was, he thought he would take a stand on behalf of himself and other Asians.

But as he wiped the spit off with his sleeve, he and his friend — of South Asian descent — hurried away without a word to the assailant.

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"In that instance, I was just kind of shocked, or dumbfounded, of what occurred," Nguyen said.

Nguyen worries that East Asians in the United States will face even more harassment and attacks as coronavirus cases continue to rise. He said he believes President Donald Trump stoked such hate-filled reaction during a news briefing last week when he defended his use of "Chinese virus."

"It's not racist at all," Trump said. "I think they probably would agree with it 100%. It comes from China." He also said he was using the expression to fight back against Beijing officials who were blaming the U.S. military for the introduction of the disease.

The World Health Organization [has recommended](#) people use coronavirus or COVID-19, stating that other characterizations spread negative stereotypes.

On Monday, Trump appeared to walk back his earlier position, using the word "coronavirus" and stressing it was important to "totally protect our Asian American community."

"Yes, it seems that there could be a little bit of nasty language toward the Asian Americans in our country," he admitted. "I don't like that at all. These are incredible people, they love our country and I'm not going to let it happen."

But Nguyen fears it's too late. Since the president and other politicians first used the term, Nguyen and other Asians in Chicago said they have felt growing apprehension that people take the president's comments as a license for racism.

Elsewhere in the U.S., reports of hate crimes have cropped up from New York to San Francisco, some caught on video and circulated through social media. In California's San Fernando Valley, a 16-year-old was [sent to the emergency room](#) after being beat up and accused of having the coronavirus at his high school, CBS News reported.

"It's outrageous," said state Rep. Theresa Mah from the 2nd District, which includes Chicago's Chinatown. "Chinese Americans and constituents of mine understand this is a situation in which they could potentially be scapegoats for the uncertainty people feel."

'History is repeating itself'

Mabel Menard was sitting alone at her favorite neighborhood tavern in Old Town earlier this month when she noticed an unfamiliar face.

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A man, very intoxicated, made eye contact with her and said, "Do you have the corona?"

Menard, a 58-year-old Chinese American, said she didn't think twice before quipping, "I'm having a wine."

The bar's staff kicked the man out.

 Mabel Menard, an advocacy leader, encountered racism while visiting a tavern in Old Town in March 2020.

Mabel Menard, an advocacy leader, encountered racism while visiting a tavern in Old Town in March 2020. (E. Jason Wambsgans / Chicago Tribune)

"I kind of thought he was an idiot," Menard said. "That's the kind of mentality that you walk around with, thinking that you're better than anybody else, and the way to make you feel better is to be nasty to other people. I think that's pretty sad."

Tuyet Anh, 20, said she was sitting alone on a Red Line train one day late in February, headed south from Lakeview to DePaul University, where she is a junior, when she noticed two men whispering.

"Got to get our masks on," one of them said.

Tuyet Anh, who did not want her last name used, looked away. One of the men wondered aloud, "Oh, do you think she heard us?"

"I felt at first just very shocked," Tuyet Anh said. "Really? Someone would say that? But then processing it more, I just felt a little nervous and that feeling of being under surveillance, almost."

Tuyet Anh, who is of Vietnamese descent, has since been saddened to read social media comments from her fellow classmates using the terms "Chinese virus" and "Wu flu." She wasn't surprised, given that the first phrase was picked up by Trump.

"It makes me and other Asian Americans feel as if we are the virus," Tuyet Anh said. "We are labeled and demonized as this threat to white American safety."

Menard, president of Chicago's chapter of the advocacy group OCA-Asian Pacific American Advocates, said the tense environment reminds her of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act barring Chinese immigrants from entering the country, the first immigration law to exclude an ethnic group, as well as the World War II Japanese internment camps forcing Japanese Americans into incarceration.

"History is repeating itself," Menard said. "If we looked at the history of Asian Americans in the U.S., we've always been either held up as a model minority — that despite the discrimination, we're still doing well — or we're demonized because when something like this happens, it's all our fault."

Asian American organizations last week [launched the #WashTheHate campaign](#) on social media, highlighting stories of coronavirus-related racism. The Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council and Chinese for Affirmative Action groups also started [collecting reports of incidents of hostility](#) against Asians.

In less than a week, more than 400 reports surfaced, said the council's executive director, Manjusha Kulkarni.

But Chicago police say they have not seen an increase in hate crimes against people of Asian descent.

"There is absolutely no place in Chicago for hatred or bigotry of any kind," police spokesman Anthony Guglielmi said. "We strongly urge anyone who may be a victim of threatening or harassing behavior to contact Chicago police, as we will investigate and work with our partners to prosecute these acts."

Businesses hit hard

The last hour before Illinois' statewide stay-at-home order mandating the closure of nonessential stores, the Dongs were in their family-owned bonsai and restaurant supply store Q Ideas at 1134 W. Argyle St.

 Shopping along Argyle Street in the Uptown neighborhood on March 23, 2020.

Shopping along Argyle Street in the Uptown neighborhood on March 23, 2020.(E. Jason Wambsgans / Chicago Tribune)

Like many shops on the colorful street known as Little Vietnam, Q Ideas had its doors open on Saturday, ready for customers. But they did not come. "Oh, my God, it's been nothing," said Ellen Dong, 29.

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Dong, who is Chinese and Vietnamese, wonders whether the rhetoric against China has curbed business on Argyle and in Chinatown. "I'm really concerned that people are going to lose their jobs."

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Though Chicagoans led efforts to draw customers through [a restaurant crawl in Chinatown](#), business owners saw steep declines the past few months, compounded by the governor's order to close all restaurants for dining in.


For the Dongs, this year has encapsulated the long-standing paradox of being Asian American: of both being invisible, blending in the background, and still being alien in the eyes of others.

"Asian Americans are forgotten until — and I don't know why — until there's something to blame," Ellen Dong said. "Then we remember them."

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