



Artist confronts anti-Asian racism with cartoons designed to help targets and bystanders

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June Chua (</category/bios/columnist/june-chua>)

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The woman jogger was coming towards her, and Canadian artist **Christine Cheung** (<http://www.christinecheung.ca/>) wasn't quite sure why.

"I was walking in the middle of the road and there was plenty of room around me. She yelled at me," Cheung recalled in a video call from the small German town where she's currently sheltering in place. "I don't know why. Maybe she was just an aggressive person. I don't know if she was being racist."

These are especially difficult times for anyone who has an Asian background. The advent of COVID-19 has corresponded with a marked rise in anti-Asian racism and violence all over the world, whether in Europe, the U.S. or Canada. Asian-looking people have borne the brunt of **cruel slurs and physical attacks** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/us/chinese-coronavirus-racist-attacks.html>).

On May 8, UN Secretary-General António Guterres **warned** (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide>) of COVID-related racism, as it "continues to unleash a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering," and urged governments to "act now to strengthen the immunity of our societies against the virus of hate."

Only now are campaigns springing up, and **calls** (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/8-tips-for-dealing-with-racist-incidents-1.5567244>) for more action against the rise of racist attacks are in the forefront.



"I believe the current situation is worse than SARS with the social and political climate of the U.S. emboldening those with racist attitudes coupled with the rising Sinophobia," Woo-Paw, a former Alberta MLA, wrote in an email. ACT2endracism has teamed up with other organizations across Canada to create ACT2endracism. The network has launched a website for reporting acts of racism, and set up a text-response line for reporting an attack: (587-507-3838).

While overall statistics on COVID-related hate crimes against people of Asian descent in Canada is still in the data-gathering stage, Vancouver police **reported** (<https://www.straight.com/news/covid-19-series-of-anti-asian-assaults-and-vandalism-continue-in-vancouver>) on May 1 a surge in hate crimes against East Asians. Eleven of the 15 hate crimes reported to police in April involved anti-Asian actions. In all of 2019, there were only 12 anti-Asian hate crimes recorded.

The ACT2endracism website has a **racist report** (<https://act2endracism.ca/racism-form/>) section utilizing an online virtual helper, "Mei," who walks the person through documenting an attack.

"It's widely known that this type of reporting is hugely under-reported due to institutional barriers," wrote Woo-Paw. "In Canada, incidents have become more noticeable and more frequent ... there's been a noticeable increase in online hate comments."

In Germany, Cheung reveals she's become hyper aware of her Asian background ever since COVID-19 became mainstream news. She says she deliberately avoids confrontation by staying her distance: "I feel lucky that I haven't been attacked."

A **visual artist** (<http://www.christinecheung.ca/category/25/p/647>), with a BFA from the University of Calgary and an MFA from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Cheung is more accustomed to creating paintings, drawings, collages, watercolours and installations that deal with physical experiences, memory and concepts of the ephemeral. This time, she's returning to her Alberta roots to help out. Cheung used to work in the mid-2000s with Woo-Paw on various Chinese-Canadian events and campaigns, including issues such as the head tax and mounting exhibits about Chinese history in Canada during Asian History Month (May).

"It's empowering to be doing this," said Cheung. "Whenever it happens [something racist is said] I'm usually shocked and unable to react. Now, it's good to know there's a number, a national registry where you can report it. It's good to name it, describe it, because a lot of people are afraid."



Three cartoons will be available on the ACT2endracism website by the end of the month. Each one has a slightly different scenario (target, bystander, youth), with a message and methodology that is based on research and recommendations done through the University of British Columbia. For instance, the bystander cartoon -- which concerns an Asian woman pushed to the ground by a man while at a bus stop -- indicates ways witnesses can help, and contains five decisive actions a bystander can take: delay, document, direct approach, delegate or distract (in addition to reporting it to the ACT2endracism portal or text method). The youth cartoon (with a teenager calling another one "Chinese virus") has a description of what microaggression is -- i.e. slights, put-downs, insults and backhanded "jokes," and states that "research has shown that microaggressions can also create negative mental health outcomes."

"I worked with Rosalind Kang, a social worker, and discussed the approach and script based on her experiences of racism and diversity," explained Cheung. "We also had to figure out whether we bring in racial slurs or not. Is it helpful to reproduce an epithet?"

It took a bit of back-and-forth to sort out the messaging and look, but she's satisfied with the outcome: "The cartoons show emotion and within a possible social situation so its direct and understandable."

Indeed, there is a foundation for the cartoons, according to Woo-Paw. The situations illustrated are developed based on Ishu Ishiyama's **Anti-discrimination Response Training** (<http://really.ubc.ca/files/2010/08/Anti-Discrimination-Responses.pdf?fbclid=IwARoCCEMAGGI-dygegZa-zrzDZd7ifSwDamwoyc-7ceAhZlc3jKjmoY7K4so>). program which addresses a person's need for appropriate responses when targeted by racist attacks or when witnessing one. Ishiyama is an associate professor of education and counselling psychology at UBC.

"The training program is partly based on the belief that people would be able to respond more effectively with awareness and practice," Woo-Paw outlined in her email. "The vignette cartoon is a visual tool that enables people to quickly grasp the basic ideas of the tool with the hope that they would learn more about the strategies."

The racist incident reporting tool and the text message tools are being made available in English, French, traditional and simplified Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, Tagalog and Korean. Moo-Paw says the collected data will be presented to organizations and academics as well as public entities so they can influence future policy, programs and decisions.

Cheung says some of her friends in Calgary have told her of the rise of racism they are experiencing, and this worries her.

"This affects your sense of belonging. When I was doing work about the history of Chinatown in Calgary, I discovered archive photos of cowboys who were Chinese-Canadian. We have been in Canada for a long time but there's an idea in Canada that Asians are 'new,' but we aren't!"

She brings up a residency she did in 2008 in a village near Beijing where locals had jobs taking apart electronics. This made her think of Western consumption and how that ends up in other places and affects the environment.

"I am interested in how we are connected, of how one small virus can affect us," she said. "Now that I'm in the countryside, I'm thinking about the metaphor of dandelions and about how we as humans travel around. People are like these flowers, seeds that disperse. That's the meaning of diaspora."

In a painting she created while in China, called **Elsewhere** (<http://www.christinecheung.ca/category/25/p/647>), Cheung investigated "the idea of how a small part can affect the whole."

More than a decade later, these issues are still relevant in her work.

"This project brings together so many of my interests," she said. "We need to speak the truth as artists. No one has the right to trespass your boundaries and belittle you. This is an expression of the right to be who you are."

June Chua is a Berlin-based journalist who regularly writes about the arts for rabble.ca.

Image: **Christine Cheung/Video Screenshot from ACT2endracism/Facebook** (<https://www.facebook.com/AsianCanadiansTogether/videos/1500542560107931/?v=1500542560107931>).



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(<https://rabble.ca/news/2020/05/risks-opening-economies-are-greatest-poor-and-vulnerable>)

At this precarious and uncertain stage in the pandemic, it is blue-collar and service sector workers in often insecure and low-paid jobs whom employers and governments want back on the job.

[COVID-19 \(/COVID-19\)](#)

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