

Racism unmasked: How racism influenced Chinese Canadians' COVID-19 response

Before the World Health Organization settled on the name “COVID-19” on February 11, 2020 (Ghebreyesus, 2020), television sets around the world flashed the words “Wuhan virus” with every story related to this mysterious respiratory virus. Masked Chinese faces soon followed news stories about this emerging disease, setting the stage for a permissive environment of anti-Asian racism in 2021.

MEMORIES OF 2003

On the eve of the Lunar New Year in 2020, the 11 million inhabitants of Wuhan went into lockdown. Before news reached Canadian TV sets, phones across the global Chinese diaspora started buzzing with the news. The diaspora was gripped with memories of SARS in 2003. Memories of shuttered businesses and bullied children haunted the community, and together they acted quickly. The entire month of February 2020 saw many Asian faces on TV talking about discrimination, pleading for everyone to be allies in the fight against it.

While some members of the Chinese diaspora worked to cushion the impact of the inevitable racism the community would face, others focused on limiting the spread of the virus. Some were quick to call for travel restrictions and mask wearing—measures not adopted by the government until months later, partially out of fear of being charged with racism.

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors were part of a team that undertook exploratory research to understand what discrimination in the wake of COVID-19 looked like (Mamuji et al., 2020). As part of that effort, the research team interviewed 83 self-identified Chinese Canadians in semi-structured form from March to July 2020.

TO MASK OR NOT TO MASK

The Chinese diaspora were quick to adopt mask wearing. Mask wearing was

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strongest among those with closer ties to Asia. Participants reported wearing masks as early as February 2020. During this time, the official position on masks was that they were unnecessary. Canada’s chief medical officer discouraged the use of masks until April 6, 2020, when she conceded that a non-medical-grade mask could help protect others (Bronskill, 2020). Canada’s official position on mask wearing ran counter to the positions held by members of the Chinese diaspora community. At the time, Canada was facing a medical supply shortage, so Canada’s chief medical officer may have had practical considerations for her advice against wearing them. However, an unintended consequence of that practicality was that it heightened an atmosphere of fear as Asian mask wearers became targets for ridicule.

Participants reported behaviour changes such as taking off masks in white (non-Asian) spaces, when they would have preferred to keep one on, after receiving “dirty looks” or other forms of microaggression. It is important to note that a “dirty look” means different things to different people. For many minorities, dirty looks from bullies could be followed by physical aggression. As a result, many participants told us they were more comfortable in Asian spaces and that they stuck to Asian-run grocery stores, where people were more likely to wear masks.

THE “CHINA VIRUS”

After Wuhan went into lockdown, Chinese Canadians sucked in a collective breath as memories of SARS rushed back. Memories of businesses shuttering and children getting bullied spurred the community into action. Many made media appearances to speak about anti-Chinese racism and the need for allies to help fight against it. Ultimately, these efforts were not enough. The accumulation of months of racist-related COVID-19 rhetoric and microaggressions peaked in 2021, when an American mass shooting targeting Asian women served to crystallize the significant problem of anti-Asian racism in North America.

High-profile politicians, particularly the former US president, were continuing to label COVID-19 “the China virus” or, even more offensively, “kung flu” (BBC, 2020), despite the World Health Organization (WHO) officially advising against location-based naming (2015). At the same time, Canadian politicians were loudly invoking fears of “yellow peril.” Derek Sloan, a Conservative member of Parliament, tweeted on April 20, 2021, “Dr. Theresa Tam, Canada’s Chief Public Health Officer, has failed Canadians. Dr. Tam must go! Canada must remain sovereign over decisions. The UN, the WHO, and Chinese Communist propaganda must never again have a say over Canada’s public health!” (Sloan, 2021).

This overt racism created anger and fear in the Chinese-Canadian community and set the stage for more violent aggression. Several participants expressed that they were more concerned about racism than the virus. This sentiment was echoed throughout the interviews, with one participant feeling fearful enough to carry a stick that could be used in self-defence.

Thankfully, for most participants during the mid-2020 interview period, racist

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incidents were limited to microaggressions at grocery stores while Ontario was still in lockdown. Microaggressions are a sad reminder that racism has not gone away. Participants expressed the desire to see better education in schools and public education campaigns against racism.

Sadly, many of their fears have been borne out as 2021 saw an increase in anti-Asian racism (Zhang et al., 2020). As in the United States, Canada witnessed an increase in violent attacks targeting the Chinese diaspora community. Such attacks have been shown to be on the rise in Canada (Kong et al., 2021).

WORDS MATTER

While anti-Asian sentiments existed prior to the pandemic, COVID-19 exacerbated this anti-social behaviour. Research during 2020 documented perceptions of the Chinese Canadian community at a point in time when the foundational actions creating the environment for today's overt racism were being put into place. The lesson remains that people in positions of authority need to exercise care when choosing their words and sending out messages. The initial advice against wearing masks created unnecessary hardship for Chinese Canadians who decided to wear them.

It is reprehensible that some politicians continue to use racist tropes in their messaging. The anxiety they created in the early days of the pandemic was stressful during an already difficult period. There is little expectation that politicians will cease using inflammatory racialized rhetoric for personal advancement. However, in fully recognizing this sad state of affairs for what it is and in also recognizing how this permissive environment for racial animosity came into being, the Chinese-

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Canadian community is looking for allies in educators, media, and public officials to help stem the tide of racism. 🍁

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