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Covid-19, Anti-Asian Racial Violence, and The Borders of Chineseness

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Abstract

This position paper argues that Covid-19 related anti-Asian racial violence highlights how contemporary problems facing Chinese communities worldwide – and responses to them – cannot be contained within the borders of Chineseness.

Keywords

Chineseness, race, ethnicity, racial violence, East and Southeast Asians, Covid-19

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Despite China's alert to the World Health Organization (WHO) in December 2019, and research warning of the likelihood of a global pandemic in January 2020 (Wu et al., 2020), the UK government continually downplayed the seriousness of Covid-19 as it began to devastate parts of China and spread to Thailand, Japan, South Korea, and other parts of Asia. The European failure to respond to Covid-19 in a timely manner has been attributed to a "colonial temporality" – it was "postcolonial arrogance" (Meinhof, 2020) that deemed it a crisis happening "over there" or a culturally, if not scientifically backward "Other" disconnected from the hygienic and modern so-called "West."

All the while, the crisis was in fact taking immediate toll on "the Chinese" in the UK. Not only did some have loved ones in Wuhan and, later, other parts of Asia, falling ill or dying. Months before Donald Trump's infamous "Chinese virus" tweet, stories of the origins of the virus were linked to Chinese eating bats, based on a 2016 video of Mengyun Wang, a Chinese influencer, eating a bat in Palau, Micronesia. Due to the racialisation of the virus as "Chinese," we began witnessing and experiencing an unprecedented rise in racial violence – physical, verbal, symbolic, and structural – that took place on the streets, in public transport, at workplaces, in the media and social media, and in the mouths of the political elite.

Long before it became a national crisis and a lockdown was announced, "Chinese" were already self-isolating for fear of racist attacks, and were losing businesses and livelihoods (Menendez, 2020). Yet, of course, it was not only "Chinese" but also those who work with us, or are friends with us and sought to protect us, who also lost jobs, became suspects for associating with us, and experienced forms of racial violence, as the case of Meera Solanki demonstrates.[1] Over six months later, and despite appeals by the WHO, the United Nations, and Human Rights Watch to governments worldwide to address Covid-19-related hate, the UK has still to fully acknowledge or act upon the violence wrought by the racialisation of the disease.

Chinese studies is equipped to provide valuable perspectives on Covid-19, as many of the other contributions in this volume demonstrate. Yet, in relation to this specific question of the racial violence against "Chinese" people in the UK (or globally), there are potential challenges. First, Chinese studies has been a colonial discipline. As it has been reconstructed in a variety ways across the globe, its colonial legacy is fading, as is the tradition of taking "China" as a culture to be "understood" (Chan, 2020). Despite this, with its focus on China "the place," and Chinese language and culture, it remains the case that the study of diaspora and attendant questions of race are still marginal within it.

Historically, besides a few sociological studies (e.g. Broady, 1955), much of the early research on the Chinese in Britain emerged out of a thwarted anthropological study of China. When the People's Republic was established in 1949 and closed its borders, those characterised by Eades (1995) as "frustrated researchers who could not get into the PRC" began working in Hong Kong and Taiwan and on overseas Chinese communities instead. Many works retained a China-centrism to the extent that some scholars attempted to "use the results of studying Chinese outside China to explain Chinese society" (Wang, 2000: 18).

While Chinese studies can no longer be caricatured in this way, in line with other academic disciplines, its privileging of "Chineseness" as ethnicity, opposed to, potentially, a racialised category – might blinker in view on the way in which the racial violence – its impact and the resistance towards it – cannot be contained within the borders of Chineseness.

Acts of Covid-19-sparked racial violence were perpetrated against the "Chinese," not only as an ethnic other, but as a racial other, in other words, against anyone sharing the perceived phenotype of "Chineseness" – that is, mainly, but not exclusively, light-skinned East and Southeast Asians. The first case of physical Covid-19-related racial violence reported as a "hate crime" to the police in the UK was the assault of 24-year-old Thai city-worker Pawat Silawattakun (Iqbal, 2020). Soon after, the structural nature of the racial violence was highlighted when An Nguyen, a Vietnamese curator was discharged from the Affordable Art Fair by her gallery, who feared that her presence would "create hesitation" among audiences (*The Guardian*, March 5, 2020). There have also been several reports of Filipinx – many of whom are healthcare workers and are also suffering the highest death rates among healthcare workers (Caulfield, 2020) – experiencing racial abuse (BBC, February 11, 2020; Gilroy, 2020).

Yet in much state, media, and law enforcement discourse, the focus continues to be on "the Chinese." While some agencies do report on offences against "Southeast Asians," most police forces, and many media outlets and political spokespeople, only report on "the Chinese" (Mercer, 2020). In part, this can be explained by colonial legacies. If the "Chinese" in Britain are rendered almost invisible in debates over racisms and multiculture, due to their ambivalent place in the racial hierarchy and the politics of the British Empire (Yeh, 2018), other East and Southeast Asians have been entirely erased. In current statistics, they only appear as part of the aggregated group "Other Asian" alongside a range of ethnicities. This relative privileging of the "Chinese" experience also constructs a polarity between the "deserving" and "undeserving" – those who should be afforded protection and those not. The construction of the Chinese as a "model minority" (Yeh, 2014) can extend to other East and Southeast Asian groups (the Thai city-worker, the Vietnamese curator, the Filipino NHS worker). It also coincides with its opposite – the Sinophobic tropes of bat-eaters circulating in the media. But it is also the case that other East but especially Southeast Asians – those distanced from global capital and whiteness – are also stereotyped in specific ways as undeserving – the Vietnamese cannabis grower, the Thai bride, the Filipino sex worker.

Perspectives privileging the Chinese experience of racial violence not only render those of other East and Southeast Asians invisible, but are also unable to capture anti-racist solidarities emerging on the ground that transcend "Chineseness." Some of the most powerful of such expressions are unfolding in the realm of art and culture. In March this year, I participated in a performance by the UK-based Korean artist Youngsook Choi of "Unapologetic Coughing," a response to the racialised media hysteria around Covid-19. Hosted by the collective Asia-Art-Activism, this involved attendees dressing in face-masks and surgical gowns, and undertaking a collective reading of news clips about the virus and its impact on Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipinx, Japanese, Koreans, and their diaspora communities. At points, we were invited to sing along in Mandarin to a Chinese New Year song and to recite Martin Luther King in Cantonese. Participants – who were mainly East and Southeast Asians – were also encouraged to cough when the news stories caused any emotional discomfort. Just two weeks before lockdown, at a time when our very embodied presence constituted a suspect threat, the performance provided a space not only to breathe but also to be able to cough – a "right" that was beginning to be denied to us in public space. Choi hopes the work can be part of "a healing action and to provide a platform for exchanging personal recounts and discussing the ways of changing racial narratives" (Wang, 2020). Another initiative in the pipeline is Moongate Productions' *WeRNotVirus* (Nelson, 2020), a series of plays and monologues by writers of Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese, and Korean, including mixed heritage people, about Covid-19-related racism, and also featuring the British-Nigerian playwright Oladipo Agboluaje on the racial violence experienced by Africans in China. Such creative community responses not only provide comfort, solidarity, and resistance but also testify to an interethnic and interracial anti-racist organisation that transcends the narrow politics of "Chineseness."

Covid-19 has, of course, only sharply exposed the significance of rather than sparked racial violence in the lives of "Chinese" communities worldwide. The irony is that those of us who are moved to examine some of the key challenges facing the "Chinese" – and their responses to it – must necessarily acknowledge the way in which these cannot, now, more than ever, be contained within the borders of "Chineseness."

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Notes

[1] Solanki, a South Asian woman, was reportedly punched unconscious for defending her Chinese friend against verbal Covid-19 related abuse (ITV News, February 23, 2020).

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