Terminating the Intersectional Harm of Triple Pandemics for Asians: An Educational Imperative

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Abstract

The COVID-19 crisis has exposed three additional pandemics that Asians have been battling against historically: Anti-Asian racism, Sinophobia, and the model minority myth. These multiple pandemics are bringing intersectional harm to Asians in mental health, academic achievement, and alliance with other racialized groups. Being casted as the model minority, the "kung flu" and the "red scare" at the same time had prevented many educators from seeing Asian students' academic needs and strengths in non-academic areas, resulted in mental health crises and precluded Asians and other racial groups from forming interracial solidarity. It is imperative that we stop the hate and terminate the intersectional harm through addressing the knowledge gaps in Asian American/Canadian history and stereotypes in K–12 educational curriculum, supporting teacher education, and building racial alliances and solidarity among students of diverse racial backgrounds.

Three Additional Pandemics Facing Asians

Since July 2021, as the number of COVID-19 cases continues to fall in most of Canada, the fear and anxiety among Asian communities, including myself, has been intensified. Vancouver, the city which I now call home, the most Asian city outside the Asia Pacific, has recently earned the title of "anti-Asian hate crime capital of North America" due to a 717% increase in anti-Asian hate crime over a one year period from 2020 (Baylon & Cecco, 2021). There are daily news reports about physical and verbal attacks on visibly Asian people on the street, in coffee shops, in parking lots, on public transportation, and in front of private homes in the city, across Canada, and in the United States. Close to home, as I was writing this article, on July 13, three Asian students were publicly harassed on the University of British Columbia campus by a stranger who projected them to be a model minority in that they were students from the Faculty of Science probably because [they were] Asian. At work, I noted an increase in Sinophobia as Canadian and American universities reopen with international students returning to campus and cross-border academic collaborations with China began to resume. In addtion, the newly released risk assessment process of the National Security Guidelines for Research Partnerships by the National Science and Engineering Research Council of Canada Alliance (NSERC) on July 12, 2021, is causing tremendous anxiety among scientists who have collaborations with China.

Down south in the U.S., the situation has been equally if not more dire for Asian Americans: Anti-Asian hate crimes were up to 164% from May 2020 to May 2021 in 16 of the nation's largest cities and counties (Campbell, 2021). Asian Americans have been assaulted daily on the street or in public spaces and were targeted for mass killing in Atlanta in March, 2021. As of May 2021, over 6,600 reports of hate incidents including hate crimes, violence, or discrimination against Asian American and Pacific Islanders, or AAPIs, were collected between March 2020 and March 2021 by Stop AAPI Hate (Pillai, Yellow Horse, & Jeung, 2021). Meanwhile, the accusations, like

China has become the new "red scare" and "Sinophobic racialization of disease" and Chinese people are spreaders or carriers of COVID-19, have been persistent in the media and in daily life in both Canada and the U.S. (Anand & Hsu, 2020; Zhang, 2021). Similar to Canada, governments in the U.S. and other G-7 countries are taking measures to "prevent research from being stolen by other countries" with their eye on China (Miki, 2021). These accusations, in turn, fuel more intense anti-Chinese hate and anti-Asian sentiment.

It is clear that Asians in North America are battling more than the COVID-19 pandemic—they are battling against three additional pandemics that they have been suffering historically: Anti-Asian racism, Sinophobia, and the model minority myth. These three pandemics, together with the COVID-19 pandemic, are exerting increasing "intersectional harm" to Asians and non-Asians alike (Qin & Li, 2020). This intersectional harm has spread from the streets where Asians, especially elderly Asians, are being targeted and attacked daily, to schools, where abuse and bullying against Asian students are rising sharply. For example, nearly 1 in 2 Chinese American parents and 1 in 2 Chinese American youth reported being directly targeted by COVID-19 related racial discrimination in person or online in a survey conducted from March 14 to May 31, 2020, and 1 in 5 of those incidents occurred in school (Cheah et al., 2020). While many Asian parents have become fearful to go out and conduct their daily lives, Asian students increasingly do not feel safe in school and a significantly high percentage of Asian students (e.g., 78% Asian vs. 29% White and 59% Black and Latino students) were reported to choose remote learning compared to students of other racial backgrounds, citing anti-Asian racism as the factor in their decision (Marcelo, 2021). A similar phenomenon is occurring in higher education where incidents of harassment against Asian students are increasing sharply, and more researchers and scientists of Asian descent face growing scrutiny and censorship. More than ever, we need concerted efforts to end this ever-expanding harm to people of Asian descent and their next generation. In this commentary, I explicate the intersectional harm of the three pandemics and propose ways to terminate it in the educational system.

The Intersectional Harm of Multiple Pandemics

The three additional pandemics, operating together and exacerbating each other, are rubbing salt into Asian people's wounds resulting from the historical legacy of racism. No other ethnic groups have suffered from such a drastic status drop in such a short time as Asians since the beginning of the pandemic. It took Asians 60 plus years (from the 1890s to 1950s) to shake off the Yellow Peril stigma and earn another, more complimentary, title of the model minority in the 1960s. It took only a few months since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic that Asians, especially the Chinese, to be once again cast as the "Yellow Peril" or spreaders of the "kung flu" (Cho, 2021). These pendulum swings between raising Asians high up in the racial hierarchy and throwing them deep down in the ditch through arbitrary radical racialization, have brought additional harm to Asian people and their younger generation who were already facing negative impacts in mental health, academic achievement, and alliance with other racialized groups, among other damages.

One frequent question Asians are often asked is why we don't like to be called the model minority. The issue is that positive stereotypes like this represent a complex duality of favoritism and dehumanization, impose pervasive and profound negative consequences, and help perpetuate systemic inequity and uphold traditional power hierarchies in which certain groups are consistently disadvantaged (Czopp, Kay, & Cheryan, 2015). For Asians in North America, the apparently complimentary labels of the model minority stereotype (i.e., Asians are good at math; Asians are

hardworking, quiet, and non-complaining) often connotate negative perceptions that Asians are not good at other things, such as sports, or Asians are just good at calculating numbers with no creativity. For example, in an article entitled, *Too Asian? The Enrollment Controversy*, published by the Canadian magazine *MacLean's* on the concern that efforts in the U.S. to limit enrollment of Asian students in U.S. higher education may push them to migrate to Canada, a guidance counselor in a Canadian high school was quoted to say the following about Asian students:

> The [Asian] kids were getting 98% but they didn't have other skills…Their parents would come in and write in the resume letters that they were in the clubs. But the kids weren't able to do anything in those clubs because they were academically focused. (Findlay & Köhler, 2010, n.p.)

This narrow/negative stereotype in the name of the model minority has prevented many teachers and counselors, as well as fellow students, from seeing Asian students as capable individuals with different talents and consequently overlook their strengths in non-academic areas. An Asian middle schooler, Tiger, in Qin & Li's (2020) study, for example, was good at shot put, but his athletic abilities were never recognized by his teachers or peers. Because of his appearances (i.e., clothing style of wearing a red jacket and glasses) and accented English, he was ridiculed as "gay" among peers, which contributed to his lack of motivation to do well in school and interact with peers and to his low self-esteem.

The model minority stereotype also focuses the white gaze on a small group of the highest-achieving Asian students and neglects the vast diversity among Asian students, many of whom are underachieving in our schools (Gunderson & Li, 2020; Sellery, 2019). In a study based on a random sample of 5,000 Chinese students' academic achievements in key academic subjects of English, mathematics, science, and social studies from grades 8–12 in Vancouver, Gunderson and D'Silva (2016) found that many East Asian (i.e., Chinese) students were not the so-called model minority in these key subject areas including mathematics. In particular, the average Cantonese students' scores fell below a mean of 2.00 or C for Grade 12 English (1.7) and social studies (1.7) and below 3.0 or B in math (2.4) and science (2.7). Among those "Asian model minorities" who make it to university with higher GPAs than white students, many experience a reversal of the achievement gap during the college years with consistently lower GPAs than their White counterparts (Dmitrieva et al., 2008). These studies suggest that many Asian students need extra academic support during K–16 education. Still, their needs are often unnoticed due to the model minority stereotype that they are good at academics and can succeed on their own. With a high percentage of Asian students opting for remote learning during the pandemic due to the fear of racist targeting, their achievement may be at risk. Several studies on the impact of remote learning during the pandemic have documented that many minority students suffered from significant learning loss and lack of engagement, and the pre-existing achievement gaps have widened, particularly among those from disadvantaged families and school districts and with non-English first-language backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

In addition to these academic consequences, internationalizing the model minority stereotype can have severe psychological impacts leading to mental health issues. On one level, the model minority label connotes Asians as linguistically incompetent in English. As one Canadian-born Chinese student in Cui's (2016) study noted, this perception often leads teachers to have complex dual expectations of Asian students: "[the teachers] did make a distinction between the different races…kind of by expectation…Like they expect the Chinese students to do well but they also expect them to be bad in English and stuff…like in Social and Humanities…" (p. 158). This "forever foreigner" perception often causes Asian students to have a low self-concept about their capabilities and underestimate their competence in English, even among those who were born in

the country and who may have higher achievement in English than their white peers (Yeung & Han, 2018). On another level, internalizing the model minority myth has resulted in mental health crises among many high- and low-achieving students who both "choke under pressure" (Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000; Padgett et al., 2020). Aas a result, Asian students are reported to experience more anxiety, depression, and psychological stress due to the fear of not meeting the expectations of high academic achievement and living up to the "model minority" stereotype (Cho, 2021; Li & Wang, 2008). Even more concerning, having been crowned as a model minority who can succeed on their own, Asians are three times less likely than their white counterparts to seek treatment for their mental health concerns (Spencer et al., 2010).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Asians in North America have been increasingly dehumanized (Markowitz et al., 2021). Being racialized as the source of the virus has further exacerbated the mental health struggles for Asians: East Asian Canadians face a disproportionate mental health impact from the COVID-19 pandemic compared with other groups as a result of targeted racist attacks, violence, and discrimination (Wu et al., 2020). Similarly, in the U.S., the steep rise in anti-Asian discrimination and violence during COVID is causing a mental health crisis More are reported to experience anxiety, depressive symptoms, and sleep problems among Asian communities (Kumar, 2021). For Asians, battling these intersectional assaults during the pandemic is "really like being in a pressure cooker; it just gets heavier and heavier and heavier" (Yam, 2020, n.p.).

Internalizing the model minority myth and dehumanization of Asian people are not just bad for Asians. They are equally harmful to other ethnic groups who have been suffering from systemic barriers and racism. As many scholars have noted, the model minority stereotype, engineered by white supremacy as a way of maintaining the racial pecking order, has been used as a "divide and conquer" tactic to weaponize against other racial groups (i.e., the Blacks in the U.S.) (Anand & Hsu, 2020; Cho, 2021). Consequently, Asians, Blacks, Latinos, the Indigenous Peoples, and Muslims have been less able to form alliances in the fight against racism and other forms of discrimination as each group has had to fight on its own. Further, research has found that the more people internalize the model minority stereotypes, the more likely they are to have anti-Black attitudes, oppose affirmative action, and hold just world beliefs and colorblindness (Yi & Todd, 2021; Yoo et al., 2010). Consequently, there is a huge divide among Asian communities with regard to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and among Black people on anti-Asian crime. While many Asians have enthusiastically joined the fight against anti-Black racism (Chao, 2021), others opposed the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement, conforming to the model minority stereotype (Anand & Hsu, 2020). In fact, in a study on Americans' attitudes toward the BLM movement, it was found that 42.5% Asian Americans reported indifference—highest among all other racialized groups (Yellow Horse et al., 2021). Amidst the current surge of anti-Asian hate crimes, supporters of White supremacy have been directing the public's attention to the "trope of Black-Asian conflict" dismissing interracial solidarity (Lee & Huang, 2021). Many media images have perpetuated the idea that anti-Asian violence is committed mainly by people of color, despite the fact that the majority of attackers are white (Yam, 2021). At the same time, the media and those in power have been whitewashing White crimes against Asians. The most telling case was Captain Jay Baker describing the Atlanta White mass shooter who murdered six Asian women as just "having a bad day" at the press conference (Huppke, 2021).

Terminating the Harm: An Educational Imperative

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the pervasive and long-lasting damage that three mechanisms of white supremacy—anti-Asian racism, Sinophobia, and the model minority myth—have brought upon Asians and other minority groups. More than ever, it is imperative that we stop the hate and terminate the intersectional harm through educating the younger generations. While antiracism efforts have been ongoing, efforts to address anti-Asian racism, Sinophobia, and the model minority are just beginning to face a reckoning. Across Canada, school districts are coming to realize the importance of addressing anti-Asian racism in schools. In British Columbia, the B.C. Teachers' Federation (BCTF) issued a statement on COVID-19 and the rise of anti-Asian racism in June 2020, acknowledging that "beyond the history lessons [about Asians in Canada], we collectively need to unlearn racism and acknowledge that's what is holding us back from becoming the kind, equitable, democratic society we think we already are" (BCTF, 2020).

However, no explicit actions have been taken to help teachers address anti-Asian racism specifically, despite the spike in anti-Asian crimes in B.C. after the statement. The only province that is taking some action is Ontario. In May 2021, the Ontario government began to form partnerships with Asian community groups to combat anti-Asian racism and discrimination, support advocacy for educational issues and concerns related to Asian Canadians in the education system, and address pandemic-induced issues and risks for East Asian Ontario families. The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario and the Toronto District School Board have compiled a resource for teachers to address anti-Asian racism in the classroom. Similarly in the U.S., efforts to address anti-Asian racism have just begun in the educational systems. In July, 2021, Illinois became the first state to require that public schools teach their students the history of Asian Americans to help dispel the stereotype of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners or a model minority (Associated Press, 2021). Several educational media outlets (e.g., Education Week) have begun to urge schools to consider including addressing anti-Asian racism. Some teachers are also exploring ways to address anti-Asian racism in their classroom especially after the Atlanta mass killing of Asians. Many communities or non-profit organizations such as Pear Deck (https://www.peardeck.com) and Facing History and Ourselves (https://facingtoday. facinghistory.org) have compiled resources for teachers and schools.

We still have miles to go. As we forge forward, we need to break down the white supremacy firewall that excludes the experiences of Asians from the formal curriculum and divides equity and justice-seeking efforts among different minoritized groups. We must make concerted efforts to address the knowledge gaps in Asian American/Canadian history and stereotypes about Asians in K–12 educational curriculum. As noted earlier, these should not be just about the historical facts, but also about the historical injustice of Asian experiences in the context of whiteness. We also need to start such education early in the education system beginning in early childhood education. Teachers must be supported in facilitating diverse students in learning these histories, and engaging them in difficult conversations as these are new undertakings in curriculum and classroom. Finally, while engaging in history learning about Asians, efforts must also be devoted to build racial alliances and solidarity among students of diverse backgrounds. By building interracial solidarity and working together, we will be stronger and more successful in fending off the intersectional harm of the multiple pandemics facing all of us.

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