

## OPINION

# Trump's 'Chinese' coronavirus taunts fuel racism



Mike Mai, 29, says he wears a face mask for his own protection. Mai was shopping with his girlfriend at San Gabriel Square, a shopping center anchored by a 99 Ranch Market and dominated by restaurants, cafes and stores that cater to San Gabriel Valley's large Chinese community. (Anna Almendrala/California Healthline)

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By **MITCHELL TSAI** |

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Last month I was deeply honored to win election by local Democrats as a member of the Los Angeles County Central Committee for the 41st Assembly District. It was the first time I have ever stepped up as a candidate to face the verdict of voters. Because of the random alphabetical order, my name was actually last on the ballot. This made victory by landing one of seven top spots from a roster of 22 candidates all the sweeter.

This happy outcome came amid a disease outbreak caused by a microbe to which the president of the United States attached an ethnic label. He repeatedly calls it “the Chinese virus.”

As a Taiwanese American, I am used to answering questions about my immigrant heritage and upbringing. What is jarring is the president's use of his bully pulpit to pin blame for a worsening pandemic on a foreign country and Asian people. His words fueled stigma against Asian Americans, including myself, when permission for division is the last thing needed in our nation.

The president was not alone. Texas Sen. John Cornyn went out of the way to defend the term “Chinese virus” by incorrectly claiming that most global pandemics originate from China. He falsely alleged, “People eat bats and snakes and dogs and things like that.”

Ignorance and finger-pointing by people in power are no way to beat a pandemic. But they do fuel racism. I was moved to see my fellow Asian Americans speak up bravely to call out this malady of bigotry. Though unaccustomed to advocacy, UCLA basketball standout Natalie Chou took to Twitter to describe suspicion and hostility she experienced while traveling in the midst of the president's diatribes. Pasadena's congresswoman, Judy Chu, also denounced his remarks, highlighting a surge of hate crimes targeting Asian Americans.

Pushback like theirs complaining of firsthand encounters with racism traceable to the president may have prompted him last week to at least sometimes change his labeling. I regret to say it's too little, too late.

I know that America is a diverse, dynamic country. Southern California is largely a progressive, inclusive bastion. But I also know, having grown up in a mostly homogenous community in Orange County, as a second-generation Taiwanese American, that diversity can be discomfiting. Not every member of our society is willing to accept those of us who are different both culturally and in appearance. We cannot ignore the fact that the president's rhetoric matters, that there are some among us who use it to legitimize abhorrent racial biases.

Trump's and Cornyn's statements brought back terrible memories of school-yard taunts, bullying and fights related in part to my cultural and racial heritage. As a teenager, I often felt alienated when I would say I grew up in Southern California, and people would ask me where I was "actually from." As an adult, I seldom have these types of experiences and am better equipped to handle them.

Chinese culture is no more to blame for COVID-19 than American culture is to blame for the emergence of swine flu, Saudi Arabian culture for the emergence of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome or Congolese culture of the emergence of Ebola.

After weeks of decrying the spreading contagion as a hoax, he reluctantly approved public-health policies aimed at stemming the disease. But hoards of people at some beaches and in the pews at several churches show that many people won't take this pandemic seriously as an American problem when the president fails to do so.

Now as an elected Democratic delegate, I take seriously my responsibility to bring people together. This virus does not discriminate, and no American should either.

*Mitchell Tsai is an environmental attorney from South Pasadena.*

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