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# Asian-Americans Are Being Attacked Over Coronavirus Fears

Phillip Lim, Prabal Gurung, and more are speaking out against the racism.

By [Kimberly Truong](#)

Feb 29, 2020 @ 7:00 am



Richard Milnes/Shutterstock

[Dr. Rosalind Chou](#), an associate professor of sociology at Georgia State University, was on a flight from Atlanta to Los Angeles this week when she witnessed a fellow passenger, a white woman in the row ahead of her, stage a selfie on her phone that also captured an Asian-American male passenger on the flight.

“Her font on her phone was very large, so I saw the reply after she sent this picture of this man without his permission,” Dr. Chou says. “The reply was, ‘Oh no! Is he Chinese?’ To which this woman replied, ‘There are a lot of them.’ This woman then added, ‘Pray for me.’”

Dr. Chou says she was the third Asian-American person in the immediate vicinity; in addition to the man, there was another woman sitting next to him.

“I assume she was speaking at least about the three of us in the aisle behind her,” she says. “I politely tapped her on the shoulder and said, ‘The font on your phone is so big, I can see what you wrote and that you sent a picture of the man behind you without his permission. It wasn’t ok what you said about us.’ She was speechless, and embarrassed. After a moment, she apologized and said she was ashamed.”

Dr. Chou says she’s seen an uptick in racist incidents against people of Asian descent since the news of the coronavirus and the imminent threat it poses began circulating in January — and she’s not alone. In the past week, designers Phillip Lim and Prabal Gurung have spoken out against the discrimination Asian people have faced after the virus spread across the globe.



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THAN THE CORONAVIRUS  
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IGNORANT ATTACKS  
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YOUR SILENCE IS DEAFENING.

Hate is an equal opportunity imposter that doesn't discriminate between race, gender, or colour. It festers in a cesspool of ignorance and apathy.

How can we fight it? We can overcome it if we open our hearts and minds, and allow empathy to guide us.

And while that is happening it's important that our diaspora, the community, comes together to galvanize against such hate. Individually we can take small steps, but collectively we can take a giant leap and show the world that we are no longer the passive minorities you assigned us to be for your comfort. Where are the celebrities, newsmakers, movers and shakers, tech billionaires? Why aren't you outraged? Why are you quiet?

The quiet won't silence us.

We are here.

We are not going anywhere.

I strongly urge all of you, each and everyone of you especially from all minority groups, allies and friends, for whom we have shown up consistently, now it's your time to show up for us.

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The coronavirus is not a foreign threat, but a human one. Racism and xenophobia targeted at Asian communities will not protect us from a virus that does not discriminate based on race, gender, or color. Now, more than ever, we must use our collective voices to celebrate the courage and resilience of those most deeply affected, our awareness to negate untruths fueled by ignorance, and our empathy to dismantle a growing hatred more detrimental than any disease.

We will not be a witness to abuse. We will continue to stay vocal and support marginalized communities and businesses, we will be an ally in the face of hostility and abhorrence, and we will be

relentless in our fight for humanity.  
Please join us to spread love, unity, and community.

[#LoveUnityCommunity](#) [#31Tribe](#)

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Though coronavirus outbreaks were [first reported](#) in the Wuhan region of China in December, little else is known about the virus's origin, and scientists have [strongly condemned](#) conspiracy theories and rumors about its genesis. Still, that hasn't stopped the proliferation of misinformation and ignorance — ignorance that has a very real impact on people's lives.

When the virus began to dominate the news, I saw the odd, occasional off-color [TikTok joke](#) or [Snapchat](#) that linked it to Asian people at large. It wasn't a surprise: there's always that one person. But soon enough, it wasn't just one person or even just a handful of people making jokes and thinly-veiled comments. An Asian woman was [physically attacked](#) in New York City for wearing a mask on the subway. A [Howard Stern staffer](#) claimed the South Korean music group BTS had the coronavirus, based on no evidence other than the fact that they are Asian. A man went on a [racist tirade](#) on the Los Angeles subway, verbally attacking an Asian woman. Chinatown businesses [in N.Y.C.](#) and [San Francisco](#) have suffered in the midst, despite the fact that there have been no confirmed cases of coronavirus in San Francisco, and just one person has [been tested](#) for it in N.Y.C. (A [total](#) of 14 cases were diagnosed in the U.S. at the time of writing, and no confirmed deaths.) [Fake flyers](#) in Los Angeles have targeted Panda Express, despite the chain restaurant being arguably one of the *least* Asian things about Los Angeles. Not to mention, doctors and nurses with an "Asian appearance" have been [abused](#) because of their race and fears about the virus. Then there was the incident at the University of California, Berkeley, when the school [sent out a statement](#) recognizing "xenophobia" and "fears about interacting with those who might be from Asia and guilt about these feelings" as "common" reactions to the virus's global spread. (The university later deleted the post and [apologized](#)).

Dr. Chou says that unfortunately, this reaction to a widespread illness is nothing new, though the speed at which we now consume media may have exacerbated this behavior in 2020.

"We have seen similar xenophobic fear with other iterations of flu in 1889 with Russians and 1918 with the Spanish," she says. "We are connected instantly now through the media and 24 hour news cycle, so we see the widespread panic and it being associated with old racist tropes of Asian, specifically Chinese, people. Misinformation can spread quickly, and the magnitude of an issue can be preemptively amplified. The anonymity of social media also allows for folks with xenophobic and racist attitudes to make their thoughts public in wide forums."

Yes, coronavirus is spreading rapidly, and with the [World Health Organization raising the threat](#) assessment to its highest level of risk, people have the right to be worried and to try to protect themselves. But spreading misinformation isn't the way to stay safe.

"I think it's hard to stop all the racist comments and attacks since we have centuries of history of racial discrimination and xenophobia," Dr. Chou notes. "What I hope is that there are enough people, of all races, willing to address these behaviors and let those making disparaging comments know that it's inappropriate. Certainly, it would depend on the circumstances as there have been some violent threats, so my hope is that there are enough decent people out there to stand up against injustice — [in] this case, xenophobia and racism."

And if you really want to protect yourself from the coronavirus, the best thing you can do is [wash your hands thoroughly](#), not project public health fears onto an entire racial group.

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