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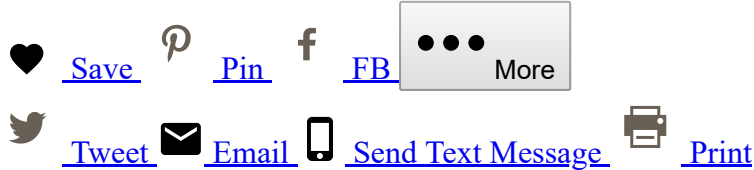
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Anti-Asian Racism Is Growing—Here's What It's Like to Be the Target of Xenophobia Because of the Coronavirus

Katie Zhao, 24, shares how the fear and anxiety of rising bigotry is influencing her own mental health and that of her family and friends.

By Katie Zhao

April 27, 2020



I was born in a snowstorm to immigrant parents who weathered every storm for the American dream. Though I was named Shujia at birth, Katherine is the name on my birth certificate. (At 15, I did not respond at first when a relative called me Shujia; I had almost forgotten that name belongs to me.) I spent two summers in China, and 20-plus years in the States. (At 21, like a drowning sailor to a lifeboat, I clung to fast-slipping memories of my Chinese roots—a *spoonful of congee on a humid Beijing morning, a jade necklace from an aunt I have not seen in 16 years.*)

I am American, but read the fine print: *until*. I am American...*until* a disease named COVID-19, called the “Chinese virus” by people intent on inciting hate and anger toward Asians, ravaged the city of Wuhan and spread to the entire world. Until “yellow peril,” a vile 19th century term painting East Asian influence as a danger to Western civilization, slithered out of history books and into real life. Now “yellow peril” means me and my loved ones, and it does not matter that we have never harmed a soul. Now we are blamed for the coronavirus pandemic. Now we are the peril.

They say “Chinese virus,” and Asian businesses [began losing customers](#)—even before the institution of state-mandated takeout-only orders. One by one, they closed their doors: among them were Jin Fong, a beloved dim sum restaurant in Manhattan’s Chinatown, and Boba Guys, which gave me many refreshing bubble tea-filled afternoons. They say “yellow peril,” and businesses that represent my culture, that brought familiarity and comfort, emptied and then vanished.

RELATED: [Protests Against Lockdown Reveal That Staying Home Is Often a Racial Privilege](#)

Bankrupt Asian-owned businesses were just the beginning. On April 5 in Brooklyn—the place I call home—a man [dumped acid on an Asian woman](#) outside her home as she took out the trash, causing her to suffer second-degree burns. On their way to and from hospitals, Asian health care workers risking their lives to save others are [facing racially charged attacks](#).

My emotions cycle through rage, fear, helplessness. Harmless activities, like grocery shopping and walking outside, are now sources of anxiety and fear. At the laundromat, a woman tapped me insistently on the shoulder. My first thought was: *Is she going to attack me?* Turned out she wanted to tell me I’d dropped my sock. This interaction haunted me long after. Even after the coronavirus has passed, I will always be looking over my shoulder, fearful of being a victim of a hate crime.

3 a.m. on April 18—the day I was supposed to attend a wedding—I'm in bed instead, with only anxiety and fear to keep me company. My stinging eyes beg for rest, but I will not close them. I have closed them for too long, and closing them again will not make the virus or death go away. Over WeChat, my mother prescribes hot water and onions to get rid of COVID-19, but even Mama and the WeChat aunties do not have a cure for racism. Once when I was 5, I held my breath underwater for so long the pressure nearly stole the life out of my lungs, and this is what being Asian American feels like: COVID-19 and "Chinese virus" squeezing and crushing and killing.

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7 a.m. a week ago, I was a morning person. Now another morning only means more hate crimes and death. An [Asian man was spat on](#) while riding the train. A Korean restaurant was [defaced with racist graffiti](#). The [Stop AAPI Hate](#) website reported 673 hate crimes from March 19 to March 25. By the next week, that number had risen to over 1,100. I check on family: they are terrified, sharing news articles. *Did you see the death toll? Did you hear about the acid attack?* Check on Asian friends: they are preparing for both the virus and racism. *Did you get masks? What about pepper spray?*

They say the virus travels fast, but fear travels faster. One hate crime leads to two, leads to 10, leads to 50, leads to a whole community paralyzed with terror like never before. This is being Asian American now: I feel a target on my back everywhere I go, and only time will tell if the virus or racism ends me first. This is being Asian American now: the rest of the world fears the invisible enemy of coronavirus, but I must contend with the invisible and visible, even though those visible enemies were neighbors just weeks ago.

My mental health plummets. Growing up, I learned English and Mandarin and Spanish, but none of those languages gave me the vocabulary to talk about mental health. I was never taught to seek treatment for anxiety or depression. I was only taught to hide it to save my family *miàn zi*, or save face.

I am 14 again, crying from pushing myself to a mental breaking point to live up to the model minority stereotype; my parents say, *zhēn méi chū xi*, *suck it up*. It isn't until college that I finally learned that the model minority stereotype is nothing but a dangerous myth. My sister is 12 again, unable to sit still or focus in class; my parents chalk it up to unwillingness to study. It wasn't until my sister is in college when she was finally treated for ADHD.

RELATED: [Did You Already Have Coronavirus Without Knowing It? Experts Explain Why That's Possible](#)

As bigotry against Asians increases, so does our fear. Unfortunately, Asian Americans are three times less likely to [seek mental health treatment](#) than their white counterparts. Asian cultures put a taboo on the discussion of mental health, shaming Asians into silently neglecting their symptoms.

Depression has no place in the model minority stereotype. Yet in light of COVID-19, the need to discuss Asian American mental health issues is greater than ever. Hate crime victims are [more likely to suffer psychological distress](#) than victims of other violent crimes. Long after the pandemic is over, Asians will feel the trauma of these hate crimes—constantly looking over our shoulders, wondering if an interaction in a laundromat is harmless or will lead to an attack.

Asians make up a [huge portion of the poorest communities](#) in densely populated urban areas like New York City. Many, especially non-US citizens and the elderly, lack a voice or access to proper medical treatment. COVID-19 threatens their livelihood the most. The model minority stereotype ignores the enormous socioeconomic disparity that characterizes the many Asian subgroups, which is especially dangerous in the face of a virus, where the underprivileged suffer more. This jeopardizes access to medical and mental health treatment of less privileged Asians in the face of COVID-19.

RELATED: [What It's Like to Get Breast Cancer Treatment During the Pandemic](#)

This is being Asian American: knowing I have a duty to report hate crimes and stand up for the invisible Asian diaspora. But my parents beg, *do not make waves or draw attention. Shǎo shuō yǐ diǎn. Say less. Stay safe.* My heart shatters when I gaze into the frightened eyes of Baba and Mama, who are normally as unyielding as the Yellow Mountain and as fierce as the northern wind. I am 19 again on vacation in Florida, and a woman tells my family, *go back to your country*; Baba and Mama brush off the racist remark; I am horrified by this woman's casual hate, saddened that my parents did not declare, *this is our country*.

This country is my home—if it is not home, then I do not know who I am. Remember: my parents sacrificed everything, weathered every storm, to chase this American dream. Never forget: we belong. This is being Asian American: straddling two cultures, fiercely claiming our rights, fighting an eternal battle against hate.

I am 15 and 18 and 21 and Asian Americans are always, always trapped in a cycle of saving face and minimizing racism and dismissing mental illness. I am 24 now, and I raise my voice and raise hell to smash that cycle. I'm 24, and I fashion my Asian American identity with pride: jade necklaces paired with Converse. They say "Chinese virus," I say Asian diaspora is not the enemy. COVID-19 is. Hatred is.

I am American, because like my parents did before me, I weather every storm—to protect my fellow human beings in the face of COVID-19, to speak out against racism and bigotry. American, without the fine print. I am American, and I will not be silenced, and I am American.

Resources for Asian American mental health treatment: Koreatown Youth+ Community Center provides bilingual mental health services for lower-income families (<https://www.kyccla.org/>). The New York Coalition for Asian American Mental Health has opened virtual resources and events (<http://www.asianmentalhealth.org/>). The Cosmos, an Asian American women wellness organization, is running a series related to COVID-19 mental health (<https://www.jointhecosmos.com/>). Hate crimes against Asians can be reported at <http://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/stop-aapi-hate/>

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- By Katie Zhao

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