

**Annual International Conference on Islamic Education and Multiculturalism
(AICIEM) Fakultas Tarbiyah dan Ilmu Keguruan [FTIK] IAIN Manado 2024**

Discrimination and Racism Against the Asian-American Community

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Abstract

This research discusses the discrimination and racism experienced by the Asian-American community. Through Wright & Rogers (2011) and Romero (2014) race and ethnicity studies, this research highlights discriminatory issues that occurred during the migration of Asians to America until the Covid-19 pandemic which further exacerbated stereotypes and prejudices against the Asian-American community. This study presents data on incidents of violence, discrimination, and racism affecting the Asian-American community. The Stop Asian Hate movement, which represents public protests and government actions in addressing this racial issue, serves as a follow-up effort to combat racism occurring in America.

Keywords: Asian-American; Racism; Stop Asian Hate; Covid-19

Abstrak

Penelitian ini membahas diskriminasi dan rasisme yang dialami komunitas Asia-Amerika. Melalui kajian ras dan etnisitas Wright & Rogers (2011) serta Romero (2014) penelitian ini menyoroti isu-isu diskriminatif yang terjadi pada masa migrasi orang Asia ke Amerika sampai dengan pandemi Covid-19 yang semakin memperburuk stereotip dan prasangka terhadap komunitas Asia-Amerika. Penelitian ini menunjukkan data dari insiden kekerasan, diskriminasi dan rasisme yang menimpa komunitas Asia-Amerika. Gerakan Stop Asian Hate yang menjadi wujud protes masyarakat dan aksi pemerintah dalam menangani isu rasial ini menjadi tindak lanjut untuk melawan rasisme yang terjadi di Amerika.

Kata kunci: Asia-Amerika; Rasisme; Stop Asian Hate; Covid-19

Introduction

Race is commonly understood as a natural category that reflects biological differences between groups whose ancestors came from different parts of the world. This perception arises because of obvious physical differences, such as skin color and facial shape. However, this view is a misconception. Race is a social category, not a biological one. Throughout its long history, race has not been defined as an inherited biological trait, but rather it has been determined by the social and political dynamics of the past. This means that people in society are built by social constructions related to their history and cultural context. In the United States, the classification of “black” and “white” is very racially charged. A person is considered “black” if they have any African heritage. On the

other hand, anyone with European ancestry would be considered “white”. In addition, people of East Asian origin are considered to be in the same racial category (Wright & Rogers, 2011).

This racial classification eventually leads to oppression or injustice to certain groups. This paper focuses on the discrimination experienced by Asians, especially Chinese, in America. Since the outbreak of the coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) in early 2020 or Covid-19 (the name of the disease) was discovered in Wuhan, China, it has triggered various reactions including in the form of racism. In America, there has been a spike in incidents of racism and violence targeting Asian Americans. Based on a report by the Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center, a reporting center established by a coalition of Asian-American groups, about 1,500 cases of incidents of racism, hate speech, discrimination and even physical attacks against Asian immigrants and Asian-Americans (Wijayanti & Sudarman, 2023). BBC Indonesia wrote on March 4, 2021 a case of violence occurred in San Francisco, California where an 84-year-old Thai immigrant died after being pushed to the ground. In Brooklyn, New York an 89-year-old Chinese woman was slapped and burned. Then, a Filipino-American passenger had his face slashed on the subway and there were still several other dangerous incidents (Cabral, 2021). This is supported by a report from Human Rights Watch (2020) which shows that there has been violence in several US states such as California, Minnesota, New York and Texas which shows an increase in racism against Asians (Watch, 2020).

These forms of hate crimes are increasingly having a negative impact on Asian-Americans because they were triggered by the words of former president Donald Trump who tweeted on his personal social media (twitter) with the keywords Chinese Virus, Wuhan Virus and Kung Flu. Based on data from thetrumparchive.com, Trump has written tweets containing Anti-China sentiments from March 16, 2020 to January 3, 2021. This is not the first time that Chinese immigrants and Asian Americans have experienced discrimination and racism. In the mid-19th century, many Chinese workers were brought to the United States to work on large projects such as railroad construction. However, their presence raised tensions from white American-born workers as they were perceived as a threat to depress wages and displace striking local workers. This implied that white American workers would lose their bargaining power. Eventually, these anti-Chinese pressures resulted in a law known as the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 that stopped almost all immigration from China and stipulated that Chinese immigrants in America were barred from obtaining US citizenship (Wright & Rogers, 2011).

Another legal system that supported racism against Chinese immigrants was the case known as *People v. Hall*. In 1854, the California Supreme Court decided to overturn the murder conviction of George W. Hall because three of the prosecution witnesses were Chinese. The court stated that their testimony was inadmissible under an 1850 law that

prohibited blacks or Mulattoes and Indians from testifying for or against whites. Professor Charles McClain viewed this case as the most offensive racial rhetoric in the history of appellate jurisprudence in California (Traynor, 2017). As such, this paper aims to expose issues of injustice, discrimination, racism and even hate crimes experienced by Asian Americans in the United States.

Theoretical Studies

Based on Wright and Rogers' analysis in *Racial Inequality* (2011), race is a social construct rather than a biological certainty. This understanding is critical to analyzing racism against Asian-Americans, as it highlights the historical and cultural processes that define racial categories and their implications. For instance, racial classifications have varied across contexts, with groups like Asian-Americans often homogenized into a single "race," erasing distinctions such as nationality or ethnicity. The fluidity of racial constructs enables the perpetuation of stereotypes, such as the "model minority" myth, which paradoxically marginalizes Asian-Americans by setting unrealistic standards and dismissing systemic inequalities.

Wright and Rogers discuss distinct forms of racial oppression, including second-class citizenship and diffuse discrimination, which resonate with the experiences of Asian-Americans. Historically, policies like the Chinese Exclusion Act and the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II exemplify institutionalized racism. These events not only stripped Asian-Americans of rights but also entrenched stereotypes of foreignness and distrust, which persist today. Contemporary manifestations include hate crimes and xenophobia exacerbated by crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting deep-seated biases rooted in historical oppression.

The socioeconomic marginalization of Asian-Americans also illustrates how racism intersects with economic structures. Wright and Rogers point to employment discrimination and differential access to resources as critical areas of inequality. For Asian-Americans, this includes underrepresentation in leadership roles despite high educational attainment and racialized wage disparities within industries. Furthermore, Wright and Rogers' discussion on the divisive effects of racism within labor movements highlights the structural obstacles Asian-Americans face in achieving economic and social equity. These barriers underscore the pervasive and systemic nature of racial discrimination against this community.

Race is framed not as a natural or biological given but as a category shaped by historical, cultural, and institutional forces. This perspective parallels Wright and Rogers' insights on racial classifications, highlighting how they serve to maintain systems of domination and privilege. For example, the historical creation of the "one-drop rule" in the U.S. demonstrates how racial boundaries are manipulated to perpetuate inequality. Similarly, Collins' observation that oppressive ideologies are embedded in individuals and

institutions encourages a critical analysis of how racial categorizations operate within broader power structures. Both perspectives suggest that challenging racial inequality requires recognizing the malleable nature of race and actively working to dismantle the systems it supports.

According to Romero (2014) race intersects with other social structures like class, gender, and technology, influencing how discrimination and privilege manifest. Wright and Rogers highlight how systemic racism marginalizes racial minorities economically and socially, often exacerbated by intersections with poverty or immigration status. Technology, while a tool for social justice movements, can also reinforce existing biases through algorithms or echo chambers, as it transmits and amplifies societal prejudices. The tension between racial progress and persistent racism reflects the contradictions inherent in societal efforts for justice. The chapter underscores the role of sociological imagination in addressing these challenges, advocating for a deliberate rethinking of ideologies and institutions to create a more equitable society. As Tim Wise and Frederick Douglass emphasize, the pursuit of racial justice depends on active resistance and the courage to demand transformative change.

Method

The method used in this research is qualitative research method. Qualitative research aims to describe an object or social phenomenon that is poured in narrative writing (Anggito & Setiawan, 2018). This research uses data collection techniques sourced from books, scientific articles, internet sites and so on. The theories used in this research are the theories documented by Wright & Rogers (2011) on Racial Inequality and Romero (2014) on Racial Discrimination.

Results

1. History of Asian Immigrants to America

After proclaiming its independence on July 4, 1776, the founding fathers of America thought that they needed a lot of people to build a strong and large country. Therefore, the country began to open up to migrants from various countries. The first president, George Washington, declared that they were ready to welcome not only honored guests but also those from the oppressed and persecuted from different nations and religions. Since the 18th century, migrants have been arriving in increasing numbers. According to Bruce Oatman (1986) the arrival of migrants to America was triggered by the great migration wave that occurred after 1820. McLemore (1983) states that American historians agree that the first migrants came from Ireland, Scandinavia and Germany. However, the

flow of migration in the 1880s changed dramatically due to the presence of a number of migrants from eastern Europe to the west, China and Japan to the east, Canada to the south and Mexico to the north of America. (Jamiludin, 2017). More than a million Asians migrated to America, most of them from China with 409,439 people (Hraba, 1979).

Immigrants from China are one of the largest immigrant groups in America. Chinese migration to America is divided into two periods. The first period took place in the mid-19th century, from the 1850s to the 1880s. At that time, their goal was to find job opportunities, one of which was the construction of railroads. Unfortunately, since the government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, Chinese immigration was halted. Then, the second period began to experience changes from the previous period which began in the 1970s until today. Diplomatic relations between the United States and China in 1979 began a new period for Chinese immigrants (Hooper & Batalova, 2015).

In his book entitled Chinese Americans, Jamiludin (2017) outlines two main factors driving Chinese migration to America. First, political factors. This assumption is based on unstable political conditions that are responded to by the community as citizens for dissatisfaction with the performance of the government that manages the country. In the case of China, political dynamics over the past few hundred years have caused some people to feel unsafe and threatened in China. Eventually, they saved themselves by leaving the country. They then settled in European and American countries. An incident of political oppression like this occurred in 1989, known as the Tiananmen tragedy. The protesters' actions in Tiananmen Square were the culmination of long-standing dissatisfaction with corruption, social injustice and political restrictions under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party. Another event was the collapse of the Ming dynasty in 1644 and its replacement by the Manchu dynasty. The Manchu dynasty purged the remnants of the Ming dynasty's power which resulted in resistance from the Ming dynasty's followers by fleeing to southern China and establishing military bases in 1683. The conflict lasted for a long time until the Manchu dynasty finally won its victory by suppressing the Tai Ping rebellion. Since the defeat, many members of the army and their families migrated out of China.

The second factor was economic. The impact of the uncontrolled political conditions at the time, resulted in the economic conditions of the Chinese people deteriorating. Eventually, the urge to migrate to other countries became stronger as the natural resources could no longer be utilized due to the barren lands. They left and left their families behind in the hope of improving their economic conditions and living a decent life. In addition to domestic pressures, the worsening economic conditions in the country were also dominated by western nations in their economic affairs.

The early arrival of Chinese immigrants was well received. They were seen as hardworking and productive. Their persistence and earnestness at work were a plus and admired by Americans. They formed a group that filled a certain area of the city, just like other immigrant groups. The area was originally known as "Little China" or "Little Canton"

but is now known as Chinatown (Wijayanti & Sudarman, 2023). By the end of the 19th century, the expansion of Chinese immigrant communities spread to almost all parts of America

Table.1
Chinese Immigrants in America
1870-1930

Year	United States	California	%	Other Western States *	%	Other in US	%
1870	63.199	49.277	78	13.554	21,4	368	0,6
1880	105.465	75.132	71,2	26.970	25,6	3.363	3,2
1890	107.488	75.472	67,4	24.372	22,7	10.644	9,9
1900	89.863	45.753	51,5	21.976	24,4	22.134	24,6
1910	71.531	36.248	50,7	15.686	21,9	19.597	27,4
1920	61.639	28.812	46,7	9.792	15,9	23.035	37,4
1930	74.954	37.361	50,1	7.522	10	30.071	40,1

* Other western states are the regions of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Colorado, Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico.

Source: Daniels (1990) in (Jamiludin, 2017).

2. Racial Discrimination against the Asian-American Community

The concept of race that society maintains is a social construct. Race shapes our attitudes and beliefs about others, how we see ourselves, how we behave and who we interact with. Since childhood we are taught to value people based on their skin color characteristics, eye features and even the size and shape of their nose (Kang & Inzlicht, 2012). This prejudice will lead to an adverse stereotype of a person or group. Prejudice can be positive or negative, but it is not always based on social reality. If it is based on social reality, prejudice will lead to unfair treatment and discrimination. Prejudice and discriminatory attitudes that come together become racism, a belief system that treats a certain group unfairly (Romero, 2014).

Racial oppression has long been recorded in American history. The five forms of racial oppression in America are genocide and geographical displacement; slavery; second-class citizenship; non-citizen labor; diffuse racial discrimination (Wright & Rogers, 2011).

a. Chinese Exclusion Act 1882

The American economy was in decline in the 1870s. During this time, Chinese immigrants were present as a labor force willing to work longer hours for lower wages. This made them easy to blame as newcomers and people of a different race. White Americans accused Chinese immigrants of taking their jobs. Anti-Chinese sentiment and other laws made it difficult for Chinese immigrants to find work. The Chinese Exclusion Act

passed by President Chester Arthur in 1882 banned Chinese immigrants for 10 years. The Scott Act of 1888 also addressed the issue of preventing immigration from China to America (Wijayanti & Sudarman, 2023). In 1924, stricter restrictions were imposed on immigrants, especially banning legal immigration from Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Wright & Rogers, 2011). A decade later, in 1934, the Chinese Exclusion Act was officially repealed. Factors for this were political considerations related to the bilateral relationship between America and China during World War II and the decline of anti-Asian sentiment in America (Rizki et al., 2022).

b. Racial Crime Incidents

The incidents of hate crimes experienced by Asian Americans are not only post-Covid-19. However, since the beginning of their migration to America, they have been considered unable to adjust or adapt because they come from different backgrounds and cultures. Discrimination and hate crimes must also be endured because they look biologically different and there is competition in the field of work. In 1869, in Gold Hill, Nevada, about 350 members of the Miners Union destroyed the homes of Chinese workers who worked for the railroad company. Unfortunately, the incident did not cause any response from the local community. Fuchs (1994) wrote in Jamiludin (2017) A Local Security Chief actually told them that they were allowed to act alone if they suspected a Chinese man of committing a crime. As a result, two Chinese men were brutally hanged to near death for not recognizing their actions, and eventually they were expelled from the area (Jamiludin, 2017). Institutional discrimination refers to practices that are considered acceptable and create opportunities and privileges for some, while others experience disadvantages and inequalities (Romero, 2014).

The National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium's annual audit of anti-Asian violence shows a significant increase in hate crimes against Asian Americans between 1995 and 1996. Threats and intimidation more than doubled, while harassment increased by 161 percent. Vandalism and vandalism increased by 177 percent, racially motivated hate crimes occurred in homes, workplaces and schools and colleges. UC Berkeley is one of the colleges with the largest Asian population. A survey of 260 Berkeley students revealed that 25% of those who experienced anti-Asian discrimination chose not to report the incident. The reason was that they thought the incident was not that important, reporting it would not change anything. In addition, an online survey conducted by a Magazine in 2000 showed that 33% of 559 respondents had been called ethnic epithets or been the target of racially motivated verbal attacks on campus (Kia, 2007). Another instance of discrimination also happened to Japanese immigrants, when they were offered jobs by white people. They paid them only about \$2 a week for their work with sleeping accommodations in a horse stable (Campney, 2019).

Other hate crimes have been summarized by Jamiludin (2017), such as the custom of making fun of Chinese men by white Americans. They mocked Chinese migrants who arrived in San Francisco were herded into Chinatown then beaten, stoned, and rotten fruit. Not only that in 1871, in Los Angeles, 21 Chinese were shot and hanged. A total of 28 people

were killed in 1886 by 150 armed men and they robbed and burned the homes of Chinese workers. In 1887, 31 Chinese miners were robbed, killed, and molested, all by a group of white Americans (Jamiludin, 2017).

After subsiding somewhat, the racial discrimination occurred again in the 21st century. The emergence of Covid-19, which originated from Wuhan, resulted in the name China being highlighted by many parties. Anti-Asian sentiment peaked when former president Donald Trump posted on his personal Twitter account. As reported on National Geographic's official website, in the early days of the pandemic, thousands of Asian Americans were targeted for harassment and assault. President Trump repeatedly referred to Covid-19 as the “Chinese virus” and “Chinese flu”, and blamed China for the spread of the outbreak. In April, an IPSOS survey showed that three in ten Americans blamed China or Chinese people for the virus (Wijayanti & Sudarman, 2023). Research published in the journal *Health Education & Behavior* states that while anti-Asian bias has been on a consistent decline for more than ten years, it changed dramatically in just a few days following the use of discriminatory language related to the coronavirus. The language increased the subconscious belief that Asian Americans are “eternal strangers,” according to the researchers (Yam, 2020).

Pew Research Center reports on its latest survey for 2022 to 2023. About 4 in 10 adults of Chinese descent (39%) say they personally know another Asian person in the United States who has experienced a threat or attack since Covid-19. This was followed by Korean adults (35%), Vietnamese adults (31%), Japanese adults (28%) and Filipino adults (28%). (Ruiz et al., 2023). They also wrote down racialized experiences of Asian Americans during covid-19. A Korean immigrant woman recounted when a white woman attacked her by saying “you are so disgusting” in public. The Korean woman felt humiliated and was afraid to fight back because of potential deportation. Another story came from a 30-year-old Chinese immigrant when the pandemic started, her room was sealed with adhesive tape that read “Chinese virus quarantine”.

Referring to a report from Stop AAPI Hate (2020) out of 1,843 incidents 502 reports or approximately (27.2%) stated being specifically attacked with taunts mentioning the term “China” or “Chinese” during the Covid-19 pandemic. Other racist or xenophobic incidents reported were physical assaults due to ethnicity when Chinese immigrants were thrown with soda drinks from moving vehicles and shouted “Chinese, go back to your country!”. A Chinese person was also personally assaulted when a white man walked past him and said “You f**cking Chinese are spreading the Coronavirus to this country, you should all leave this country!”. This assault also took place in a public space, with a white woman blatantly yelling at a Chinese person “dirty Chinese”. A group of men from a car driving around Chicago shouted “Chinese Virus” and told Chinese people to get out of America (Borja et al., 2020). The attacks have gotten worse as several Asian immigrants have been killed. For example, as described in the BBC Indonesia news, a Thai immigrant

died, a Chinese woman was slapped and set on fire, a Filipino-American passenger had his face slashed and several Asian-American homes were stoned (Cabral, 2021). These negative stereotypes experienced by Chinese people constitute hate crimes as well as unfounded accusations.

Community and Government Responses

a. Community Responses: Stop Asian Hate

After the discrimination of verbal abuse and murder of Asian-Americans (especially Chinese), public awareness began to rise as the number of racial violence cases soared. They organized the Stop Asian Hate movement to protest against violence, discrimination and racism against Asian-American and Pacific Islander communities triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic. The movement aims to uphold justice, equality and eradicate structural racism and end xenophobia against racial minorities in America, especially anti-Asian sentiments (Rizki et al., 2022).

The Stop Asian Hate movement was carried out as a form of struggle to uphold humanitarian issues. Not only Asians, the international community also attended the rally to protest racial discrimination in America. During the rally, they carried banners that read “We are Not Virus” and “Stop Asian Hate”. Apart from the street protests, they did it in several ways such as marches, convoys and running a 5km marathon in Miami. Digitally, they used the hashtag #StopAsianHate and became a trending topic on twitter. The social media campaign also received support from a number of well-known public figures and personalities, including the famous South Korean boy band BTS. This support has had a far-reaching and influential impact globally. BTS' post on their official account has been retweeted by more than 1 million users and has received 2.5 million likes on twitter (Rizki et al., 2022)

b. Government Responses

There are three main points that Joe Biden conveyed when presenting the American presidential campaign in 2020: racial justice, respect for workers, and national unity. These important issues emphasized the injustices faced by minority groups. Biden stated that he would try to unite a country divided by racism caused by Donald Trump. In the future as president, Biden will also strive to show courtesy and empathy to everyone, including those who did not vote for him (Kahlenberg, 2021). After his election, Biden signed an executive order banning the use of sentimental language against Asian Americans by the previous President, Donald Trump (Cabral, 2021).

Discussion

The experiences of Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic are part of a broader historical pattern of discrimination and violence against the Asian community in the United States. This discussion explores the systemic roots of these injustices, situating recent events within the historical trajectory of racism against Asian immigrants. From the

anti-Chinese sentiment of the 19th century to the enactment of exclusionary laws, Asian migrants have long been framed as "perpetual foreigners," a stereotype that persists today. This perception not only marginalizes Asian Americans socially and economically but also makes them vulnerable to targeted violence during moments of national crisis, such as the pandemic.

The roots of this discrimination lie in economic and political insecurities that have historically driven exclusionary attitudes. During the mid-19th century, Asian migrants were perceived as threats to white laborers, a sentiment that culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act. This legislation institutionalized racial bias and laid the groundwork for systemic inequality. Today, similar fears of economic displacement, coupled with misinformation about COVID-19, have reignited these prejudices. Hate crimes during the pandemic underscore the enduring link between economic anxieties and racial scapegoating.

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified existing stereotypes, associating Asian Americans with the virus due to its origins in China. This conflation of ethnicity with disease fueled xenophobia, resulting in verbal abuse, physical violence, and even fatalities. These acts reflect not only personal prejudices but also the failure of societal structures to counteract misinformation and stereotypes. Despite progress in racial equality, these events highlight the fragility of social cohesion when misinformation spreads unchecked.

Efforts to combat this injustice have been multifaceted, ranging from grassroots advocacy to government intervention. The *Stop Asian Hate* movement mobilized both Asian and non-Asian communities, creating visibility for the issue and calling for systemic change. Demonstrations, both online and offline, challenged stereotypes and demanded accountability for hate crimes. These movements demonstrate the power of collective action in reshaping public narratives and advocating for marginalized communities.

The U.S. government has also taken steps to address racial discrimination, signaling a commitment to equality under President Joe Biden's administration. Policies aimed at reducing hate crimes and promoting diversity underscore a shift towards inclusivity. However, these efforts must be sustained and supported by education reform, anti-discrimination laws, and media representation to dismantle deep-seated biases effectively. Combating racism requires a collective societal effort to ensure that moments of crisis no longer serve as catalysts for prejudice and violence.

Conclusion

This research shows that the hate crimes experienced by Asian Americans during the Covid-19 pandemic were not the first time. Through a long history, Asian migrants arrived in the mid-19th century. There are two factors that make them migrate, namely:

political and economic factors. The strong intention and determination to get a job turned out to be a threat to white Americans. Asian migrants were seen as taking away their opportunity to work. Eventually, there was anti-Chinese sentiment and the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act made it even more difficult for migrants. It got worse with hate crimes ranging from verbal to physical involving intentional killing. All of this is due to stereotypes and prejudices against the Asian community. This sentiment was further heightened by the Covid-19 pandemic. To address these injustices, the Asian community and the rest of the international community showed support with Stop Asian Hate demonstrations in person and on digital media. In addition, with the inauguration of Joe Biden as President, the government made policies to avoid discrimination in America as an effort for the welfare of its people.

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