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The Perpetual Foreigner: Modeling Cycles of Asian American Discrimination

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The Perpetual Foreigner: Modeling Cycles of Asian American Discrimination

by

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A project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Bachelor of Arts degree in Honors Liberal Arts

Seattle Pacific University

2024

Presented at the SPU Honors Research Symposium

May 18, 2024

Abstract:

Through an Asian American perspective catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic, this research investigates the concept of the state of the perpetual foreigner for Asian Americans and the subsequent cycling of race-related tensions. To define the state of foreignness for Asian Americans, this is understood first through Kim's model of Racial Triangulation, which intends to model the relationships of racial groups in the United States – namely between Black, White, and Asians – through concepts of civic ostracization and relative valorization that relate directly to foreignness and hierarchy. This is then further expanded upon through the creation of a separate model, dubbed the "Sphere of Influence" model which describes the relative foreignness of "American groups" in relation to dominant sociocultural systems – especially that of the American system –and historical context. With this established, in addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, two historical addition periods of Anti-Asian aggression are investigated, being the Chinese Exclusion Act and Japanese internment. From this, a pattern of cycling is observed, being integration, agitation, escalation & separation, and resolution, which ultimately demonstrates how Anti-Asian American aggression continues to persist throughout history despite social developments.

Introduction:

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, there has been a resurgence of anti-Asian prejudice throughout the United States over the past few years, with the public narrative quickly shifting the pandemic from a global phenomenon to a distinctly Asian American one. By "Asian American", I am referring specifically to those of East Asian descent. As a person of Korean American descent, I have personally witnessed these changes in various facets of my life. These started out small, where at the beginning of the pandemic, I started noticing that people around us would often – consciously or not – position themselves farther away from me in public or turn their heads away. This type of reaction would only become more explicit as the pandemic progressed, where in a particular case, my family found themselves being gawked at in an airport, with a child pointing at us – fearfully asking his parents if they were going to catch Covid. While I was familiar with these smaller acts of aggression, other Asian Americans at this time were not quite so fortunate. According to statistics provided by the California Department of Justice, there was a 107% increase in hate crimes committed against Asian Americans in 2020 within California, compared to the previous year.[1] A separate study conducted by the SAH advocacy group in 2021 noted that 21.2% of Asian Americans have experienced an "act of hate" in the past year.[2] Paradoxically however, despite this association of Covid with Asian Americans, the Covid cases tell otherwise. s

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[1] California Justice Information Services Division, "Anti-Asian Hate Crime Events during the Covid-19 Pandemic," California Department of Justice, 2020. https://oag.ca.gov/system/files/media/anti-asian-hc-report.pdf.
[2] Stop AAPI Hate, "National Report (through September 2021)," Stop AAPI Hate, January 25, 2024. https://stopaapihate.org/2021/11/18/national-report-through-september-2021/.

UNITED STATES COVID CASES BY RACE (2020)

TOTAL POPULATION (APRIL 1, 2020)		%	Group Population (Estimate)	Covid Cases (Total)	Covid Cases per Capita
331,449,281	White	58.90%	195223627	36,270,259	0.185788
	Black	13.60%	45077102	8,470,947	0.187921
	Native	1.30%	4308841	706,867	0.16405
	Asian	6.30%	20881305	2,961,043	0.141804
	Pacific Islander	0.30%	994348	188,245	0.189315
	Latin Americans	19.10%	63306813	16,264,932	0.256922

Figure 1. United States Covid-19 cases by race in 2020, including cases per capita.[345]

According to an analysis of Covid cases within the United States by race in 2020, through numbers provided by the CDC and US census, Asian Americans for that year overall had the lowest Covid infection rates, numbering approximately 0.142 cases per capita – a number notably lower than any other racial group at this time. As such, it may be concluded that Asian Americans were statistically just as, or even lower of an infection risk compared to other racial groups in the United States, yet somehow, the association between Covid and Asian Americans continued to explode into the mainstream.

Prior to the pandemic, I thought little of my racial background, where I assumed my status as an "Asian American" was inconsequential to my placement in American society. After all, it seemed like my identity did little to impede my relationships with my peers in how they treated or perceived me. In retrospect, I saw myself as "Whiter", like the rest of the peers around me than anything distinctly Asian. However, the developments under Covid proved otherwise, forcing me to witness a paradigm shift that made me question how I perceived my own identity and its relation to what is deemed the "American identity". After all, if Asian Americans were integrated so well within American society, even deemed as successful "model minorities", then how could a crisis like Covid reduce them to the state of "foreigners"?

As I conducted more research on the matter, I determined that these social shifts throughout the events of the Pandemic were not a unique phenomenon in the overall context of American history in its entirety. In fact, this has happened consistently ever since Asians started immigrating into the United States, from the Chinese Exclusion Act to Japanese Internment, and now the Pandemic. This phenomenon is often known as the "Yellow Peril" and by its namesake, explains how crisis within the American system leads to the scapegoating and separation of

[3] CDC, "CDC Covid Data Tracker," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023, https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#demographics.
[4] US Census Bureau, "U.S. Census Bureau Quickfacts: United States," The United States Census Bureau, 2020, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/POP010220.
[5] Benedict Truman, Man-Huei Chang, and Ramal Moonesinghe, "Provisional Covid-19 Age-Adjusted Death Rates, by Race and Ethnicity - United States, 2020–2021," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 28, 2022, https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/wr/mm7117e2.htm.

Asian Americans in attempt to alleviate these fears. However, as this "Yellow Peril" has manifested consistently throughout American history, I believe that the Yellow Peril is not a result of circumstance but is indictive of the persistent underlying assumption of "the other" that continues to define Asian Americans to this day, as determined by institutions that control social discourse. As such, Asian Americans have always remained in the forefront of American society as a perpetual foreigner, regardless of current social standing, and thus through times of social crisis, the periodic rise of Anti-Asian hate is exposed.

Section 1: Modeling Foreignness

The existence of the "other" is an inevitability in societies throughout history, where in juxtaposition to the normal and known, lies the foreign and unknown – or the "other". This sense of the othering is not simply a fact of acknowledging the differences between different coexisting groups, but rather a component of social hierarchies that marks "us" versus "them", where the "other" is often perceived and treated differently – an act of "othering" – as a second-class outsider of what is considered "normal". Being said, the concept of the "other" is typically understood through the framework of race and ethnicity, where disparities are derived from a multitude of physical and cultural characteristics such as appearance, language, lifestyle, and religion. This understanding of the "other" continues to become apparent as the world grows more interconnected, where ideologies and cultures once foreign to one another are driven into the public forefront. For the sake of the argument, this major point of convergence would be within the United States of America.

The United States even to this day, is often characterized as the "melting pot" of the world, where proponents of this model say that the United States' strength lies within the homogeneous integration of diverse foreign cultures and ideas. In the context of Asian American influence, advocates would point to the existence of cultural centers like Chinatown, the popularization of Asian media, or even various examples of cultural blending – for many "Korean Tacos" or "California Rolls" would come to mind. While this diversity may point to the cultural richness of the United States, it says little about the relationship between Asian Americans and their American identity. In fact, I believe that this framing of Asian American culture in this way gives credence to the separation of the "Asian" identity from a truly "American" one. In other words, the representation of Asian cultural elements within the United States represents more of a "complementation" of the dominant culture, rather than a full integration of such, where Asian American culture is still deemed as foreign. After all, going back to the context of food for example, why do we still deem "Chinese food" as distinctly "Chinese", despite its ubiquitousness, rather than "American", while at the same time deem something like Pizza – an Italian invention – as the latter? This relationship is further accentuated during times of crisis like Covid-19, where sites of Asian American cultural convergence such as Seattle's own Chinatown became a ghost of its former self, and Asian restaurants nationally were avoided. Overall, this demonstrates that even at a surface level, Asian American culture is defined by its foreignness relative to the prevailing "dominant" culture.

Paradoxically however, Asian Americans relative to other groups in the United States have been documented to be highly successful, even more-so than most other ethnic groups. In a 2021

census for instance, Asian Americans overall had a median income of $100,573, an amount even higher than the White American median income of $74,932.[6] Likewise, unemployment rates for Asian Americans, as of 2019 prior to the Pandemic, was lower than that of White Americans, with 2.7% and 3.3% respectively.[7] For a group that is considered a minority, and "othered" as a foreigner separate to "American culture" how could such disparities in success exist? As such, many attribute this to the concept of a "model minority", where "…cultural values of diligence, family solidarity, respect for education, and self-sufficiency have propelled [Asian Americans] to notable success" and the failures of other minority groups, such as African Americans are "…due to their own deficiencies."[8] In other words, the model minority model places Asian Americans on a pedestal because of their "otherness" in American society – essentially a justification for the "perpetual foreigner" – to impose the same expectations on other minority groups who are faring worse. As such, this also demonstrates that a significant portion of this "othering" is imposed upon Asian Americans likewise, where Asian Americans are expected to conform to this standard.

As an aside, it would be interesting to note the presence of self-imposition of "otherness" by Asian Americans among other minority groups, and how "foreignness" overall may provide the means to break away from conventional conformative standards set by the United States, towards success. For instance, the far less rigid cultural structures of Asian societies, such as within the likes of synchronist religious practices, may likewise demonstrate a compartmentalization of American culture that balances a fine line between conformity and separation, which is often erroneously perceived as simple "family solidarity" and "respect of education" – characteristics not uncommon among other ethnic groups. Perhaps in another study, this may be understood through the analysis of the differing views on the "American Dream" and opportunities between different immigratory ethnic groups, but I digress, that's a topic for another time.

[6] US Census Bureau, "United States Census Bureau Datatable," United States Census Bureau, 2024, https://data.census.gov/table/.
[7] US Labor Statistics Bureau, "Labor Force Characteristics by Race and Ethnicity, 2019," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, December 1, 2020, https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/race-and-ethnicity/2019/home.htm.
[8] Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," Politics & Society 27, no. 1 (March 1999): 118, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503619166-007.

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SUPERIOR ↑                                      ● Whites

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                             ╱╱
                           ╱╱
            ●╲Asian Americans
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                     ╲
                       ╲
                         ╲
                           ╲
INFERIOR                     ╲→● Blacks
         FOREIGNER              INSIDER

              FIELD OF RACIAL POSITIONS


         ───────────→   = Civic Ostracism
         – – – – – →     = Relative Valorization
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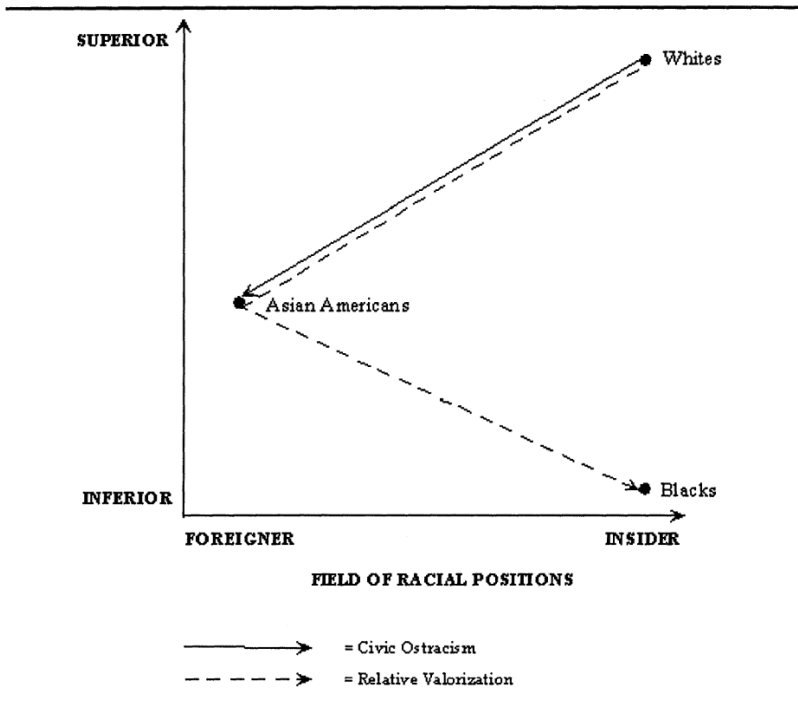
Figure 2. Kim's Model of Racial Triangulation.[9]

With all of this in mind, I believe that the persistence of the "otherness" that continues to define Asian Americans is best illustrated through Claire Jean Kim's model of "Racial Triangulation". Unlike other models that attempt to define the structure of race in the United States as strictly independent of one another or ordered relative between "black" or "white", such as the "different trajectories" or "racial hierarchy" approaches respectively. Kim's model builds upon these, addressing their respective limitations, with the addition of the dimension of "foreignness" as well as providing further depth to the formation of racial hierarchy through interracial interactions, outside of the typical "black and white" dichotomies. With this, the model first simplifies the American hierarchy through the relative situation of Asian Americans between that of "Black" and "White". Of course, as the United States has historically maintained an encompassing social standard that incorporates typically Western ideals, highly reflective of its majority ethnic "European White" population, the "Whites" are deemed as both the insider and the superior, given their dominance within the American system. As such, Kim claims that much of this discourse surrounding this racial hierarchy is primarily constructed by "major opinionmakers" composed of "…white elected officials, journalists, scholars, community leaders, business elites, and so on."[10] From this, all other groups within the United States are defined relative to this dominant group. The "Blacks" on the other hand, are deemed as "inferior insiders", where through historical and systemic racism, African Americans have been discriminated against consistently throughout the American system. Despite this, they are also deemed as the "insider" within the hierarchy, where despite their "inferior" position relative to

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[9] Kim, "Racial Triangulation," 108.
[10] Kim, "Racial Triangulation," 107.

White Americans, they are still deemed as core components to the American identity. Of course, this identification traces its way back to the institution of slavery, where the cultural separation and breakdown of the African identity throughout, led to the assimilation into a system defined by White Americans. As such, it is often observed that there is a cultural disconnect between mainland African culture and African American identity.[11]

However, the positioning of Asian Americans on the other hand, is quite peculiar as they are deemed inferior to Whites, and superior to Blacks, yet are deemed "foreign". According to Kim, this relationship modeled through the graph demonstrates that Asian Americans have been "triangulated" in American society, primarily defined through "White American" standards. Asian Americans are first ostracized relative to White Americans, where this dominant group "…constructs [Asian Americans] as immutably foreign and unassimilable with Whites on cultural and/or racial grounds in order to ostracize them from the body politic and civic membership."[12] Hence, why even though Asian Americans are economically successful relative to White Americans, their relatively lower populations as well as a lack of political prevalence – a sentiment that mirrors prior troupes of submissive apolitical "coolies" – they remain as less influential overall. In addition to this, this civic ostracization paints a particular image of Asian American foreignness, not only in their separation from the core American identity, but also a sense of loyalty, where it is believed that Asian Americans "…have more ties and loyalties to their ancestral homelands than to the United States."[13] This sentiment would particularly become visible during times of conflict throughout American history. At the same time, this racial triangulation model also claims that Asian Americans are also valorized, where through justifications such as the "model minority" – painting othering as a cultural benefit – Asian Americans are seen as relatively "superior" to any other racial group, especially that of African Americans. As stated, this is used to emphasize the lack of success within these groups, not based on systemic factors, but on a lack of personal accountability for cultural traits. As noted by Kim, "The model minority myth's suggestion that Asian Americans prosper despite (and in some cases due to their apoliticalness not only disparages politically active Blacks but also cautions Asian Americans from seeking greater political involvement."[14] With both the civic ostracization and relative valorization of Asian Americans, it draws the discourse surrounding hierarchy away from the White American elites, and towards every other minority group. According to Kim, this then results in the domination of both groups by said elites.[15]

While this model provides an explanation for the placement of Asian Americans within the American hierarchy, relative to other racial groups, it has several limitations. For one, it is limited in how it defines the level of foreignness. Asians are deemed as simply "foreign" relative to "Blacks" and "Whites" without any scale of how foreign they are within American society.

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[11] Tunde Adeleke, "Black Americans and Africa: A Critique of the Pan-African and Identity Paradigms," The International Journal of African Historical Studies 31, no. 3 (1998): 505–36, https://doi.org/10.2307/221474.

[12] Kim, "Racial Triangulation," 107.

[13] Vinay Harpalani, "Racial Triangulation, Interest-Convergence, and the Double-Consciousness of Asian Americans," Georgia State University Law Review 37, no. 4 (September 6, 2021): 9, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3806339.

[14] Kim, "Racial Triangulation," 119.

[15] Kim, "Racial Triangulation," 107.

For Asian Americans to participate within American society and succeed, I believe there needs a certain level of integration to begin with. Historically, while this may not have occurred immediately, as we see with the first waves of Asian immigrants in contrast to the established "American" population, the perception of "foreignness" may shift and settle over time, often accommodated through the "Americanization" of the next generation alongside shifting public opinion. Likewise, this model is also limited as it does not explain the dynamic shifting of "otherness" over time, as well as the lack of consistency for a level of "otherness" among different groups. For example, Irish Americans, who were once defined as the "other" due to a swathe of cultural and religious differences that clashed with the traditional "American identity" at that time – often putting Irish Americans on a comparable social level to that of African Americans – have assimilated into a greater "White" identity in the late 19th century onwards. According to Ignatiev, this was namely due to the shift of the American concept of race to emphasize physiological rather than cultural characteristics, especially regarding the developing "black versus white" dichotomy at that time.[16] On the other hand, African Americans, while assimilated more-so into the American identity, are understood as "lower" in relative status through the persistence of systemic problems.
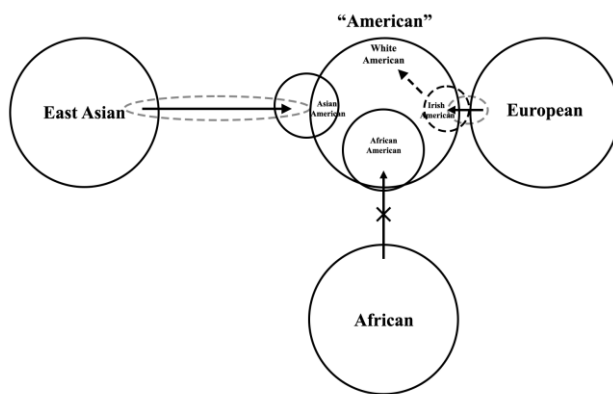

Figure 3. Proposed Sphere of Influence Model.

Knowing this, I have created a supplementary model to help visualize these variances among different groups in the contemporary – which I call the "spheres of influence" model. Within this model, it places emphasis on a central sphere of "American identity", which inherently overlaps with the dominant "White American" group. At the same time, other spheres come to intersect with this central identity, being the "Asian American", "African American", and "Irish/European American" spheres, which vary in the amount of space intersected. This space of intersection represents the area of "conformity" or "assimilation" into the main "American Identity", where certain aspects of that group, such as culture or likewise, are seen as "definitive" or "acceptable" to the central identity, facilitating integration into the mainstream public conscious. This of course creates a separation between what is and is not foreign, allowing for many to draw the line between "Asian Americans" and "Asians". Of course, however, the rest of the sphere

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[16] Noel Ignatiev, "How the Irish Became White". London, England: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, (2015), 190.

hanging outside of the dominant identity represents a seemingly immutable sense of foreignness that continues to distinguish Asian Americans from White Americans, and likewise, the prevailing American identity. Like stated prior, in addition to the categorization that separates "Asian Americans" from "Americans", why is it that the presence of Asian culture within the dominant space, whether it be food or social practices, seen as detached? Of course, this sharply contrasts with the "African American" and "Irish American" spheres of influence, where foreignness is either relatively non-existent or eliminated through total integration respectively. In describing why these differences occur between these Americanized spheres, the model contains separate points of origin for each respective Americanized sphere, being "East Asian", "African", and "European" spheres respectively, seen as separate to the "American identity." However, what is crucial about these points of origin are the distances between them and the "American identity", represented by arrows of various lengths. The distance between each point of origin and the "American identity" represents an inherent difference of foreignness, where a longer distance represents much larger differences between each culture, and a smaller distance represents a smaller difference. With immigration, this sphere stretches out to meet that of the sphere of "American identity", and eventually breaks off to form an independent group that while leaning towards the point of origin, is maintained solely within the "American identity".

This makes sense, given each of the three examples shown in the model. For Irish Americans, alongside other non-Protestant European "Whites", they were initially deemed as foreign due to several inherent cultural and social differences. However, as stated by Ignatiev, the shifting discourse that emphasized physiological characteristics, namely a "White European" background, over cultural differences, facilitated seamless integration into the overall "White American" identity, no longer belonging to the "other".[17] After all, they were "physically indistinguishable from old-stock whites" and could simply "…shed their past, their ethnicity – the language, customs, dress and culture of the old country."[18] For African Americans on the other hand, the observed difference in foreignness is significantly larger, with a culture and physical appearance completely different from the core "American identity" inherently. As such, in one would expect that African Americans would be seen as significantly foreign. However, the reality shows otherwise, where despite discrimination based on certain physiological and sociocultural factors, there is a closer association within the ingroup of the "American identity" – African Americans to are not seen as perpetual foreigners. As indicated by the cross on the diagram, this indicates the unnatural breakage of foreignness for many African Americans, through enslavement's reconstruction of identity, once again mirroring Kim's ideas presented in her model where the identity of African Americans was defined relationally by the dominant "White American" group. For Asian Americans, in contrast to the other groups portrayed in this model, it is apparent that despite some degree of interaction with the dominant culture, there continuously exists an immutable perception of unassimilable "foreignness" that extends outside of the dominant sphere. This coincides with the significant difference in inherent foreignness that separates the distinctly "East Asian" point of origin and the "American identity", which is

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[17] Ignatiev, "Irish," 190.
[18] Ronald Takaki, "Strangers from a different shore," Boston, Massachusetts: Little, Brown, (1989), 12.

attributed to differences in both physical appearance as well as sociocultural aspects – such as collectivism for the latter – both of which deemed "incompatible" with the dominant culture.

As an aside, it is important to note that this diagram is not comprehensive of every racial group or identity in the United States and only seeks to expand upon the concepts provided by Kim under the most recognizable cases. With some of my preliminary understanding, the model used to define Asians as the foreigner is similarly applicable to many other groups deemed "foreign" in the United States. For instance, with Muslim Americans in the United States post 9/11, or Hispanic Americans in the discourse surrounding immigration.

Section 2: Historical Prevalence and Cycling

With Asian Americans set as the perpetual foreigner, as established through characteristics of top-down civic ostracization and inherent relative foreignness, this plays directly into the repeated cycles of fear and violence against Asian Americans throughout history – otherwise known as "Yellow Peril". These cycles I believe may be universally understood through several distinct stages. The first is social stability, where despite Asian Americans defined as the perpetual foreigner, they are treated within the acceptable bounds of American identity – that is, they were seen as simple participants within the system, economic, social, or otherwise. This falls in accordance with the spheres of influence diagram, where the overlap between the "Asian American" identity and that of the mainstream "American" identity is emphasized. In other words, this segment of the cycle marks the so-called "peaceful" period preceding any social instability, a time where arguably the Asian presence in the United States was valorized in accordance with Kim's model. In recent memory, we saw this prominently within the years prior to Covid-19, where Asian Americans continued to participate and thrive within American society, as mentioned prior. Nationwide discrimination and fear against Asian Americans and the discourse surrounding such, relative to the years proceeding this, was at an all-time low and deemed socially unacceptable. Of course, this period of social stability, before the rise of Yellow Peril, has occurred multiple other times throughout American history. Take for instance, the first waves of Asians coming into the United States in the mid to late 19th century, especially after the Californian gold rush, where the incoming Chinese were recognized to play a crucial role as "…developing the state's economy'" with roles including "…ploughmen, laundrymen, placer miners, woolen spinners and weavers, domestic servants… [etc.]" Later, Chinese immigrants were able to work alongside White workers – albeit at lower wages – and contribute through their own small businesses.[19] Of course, alongside relative valorization to African Americans – given the characterization of Asian workers as "quiet, peaceable, industrious, [and] economical" – Asian Americans quickly became accustomed to involvement within the American system.[20] Of course, by no means am I implying that the state of Asian Americans from nearly two centuries ago had the same rights, opportunities, or treatment compared to today. After all, mistreatment of Asian workers, strict immigration policies, and discrimination continued to persist throughout this period. However, at this point, few questioned the presence of Asians in

[19] Erika Lee, "The making of Asian America: A history," New York City, New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, (2021), 71.
[20] Lee, "Making," 71.

American society, as in addition to continuing to reinforce the gap between Whites and Blacks, as seen in Kim's model, they were integral to contributing to the system economically and were not seen as a hindrance socially. In other words, there was no need to call into question their foreignness when their integration proved far more beneficial. This similar sentiment, bolstered through perpetual foreignness, would continue to be prevalent among other Asian American groups several decades later – notably that of the Japanese – where the persistence of inequality and discrimination was met with whatever was deemed acceptable societal involvement.

However, the next part of this cycle demonstrates the fragility of this social stability, where the awakening of unforeseen agitation tips the scales away from a perception of stable integration, and towards foreignness. Of course, this particularly hinges upon the idealized state of society, set by the societal elites – namely American Whites – where social harmony was primarily dictated on how well everyone else complied with the social order. As stated, this may be seen in the early economic integration of Asian Americans, through their compliance within the system controlled by a single identity. However, the stability of an idealized society is entropic, and it is inevitable that shortcomings will inevitably arise, whether it be economic, social, cultural, or likewise. As a result of this, with the incentive to shift blame away from those who control the system, the failings of such inevitably lead to the scapegoating of someone else. Naturally, this shift of blame is often directed towards those who are deemed outside of society, the "others" that do not fit the conventions of the idealized American identity. As such "...Oriental enemies, not U.S. government actions nor corporate practices, are always to blame."[21] Hence, the historical rise of racial tension against Asian Americans was historically perpetrated by the inner failings and subsequent fears and insecurities of the dominant group, coupled along a questioned sense of social identity and integration. This led to the scapegoating of Asian Americans as a threat to the system instead of an asset, which may be justified through a variety of different ways.

One set of prominent justifications included fears surrounding competition and loyalty, where Asian Americans as the other were eventually seen as "competitors" to the innermost circles of accepted American culture – namely White American circles – had little responsibility or obligation to the wellbeing of the systems in power. In many cases, this is framed through a purely economic standpoint, where in contrast to sentiments expressed prior that valorized Asian Americans as diligent contributors to the system, they eventually became blamed as the root cause of these failures. One notable example of this may be seen in the sentiments surrounding the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, where there were fears that the masses of Chinese immigrants were overtaking the job market, competing with the mainstream sphere of Americans for labor opportunities. According to Senator John F. Miller at this time, who was in favor of Chinese exclusion, Asian Americans were an "…economic danger [as] they competed with white workers with their 'machine-like' ways and their 'muscles of iron.'"[22] In other words, people at this time were worried that the dominance of Asian Americans in the job market, especially that

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[21] Tchen, John Kuo Wei, and Dylan Yeats, "Yellow peril!: An archive of anti-Asian fear," London, England: Verso, (2014), 228.
[22] Lee, "Making," 89.

of cheap labor, would demean the value of American economic development and the standing of White workers.

However, building upon these economic values of competition, there also was the aspect of loyalty. With the discourse surrounding the Chinese Exclusion act, there was a sense that due to the foreign nature of these Chinese immigrants, they simply were not loyal, and therefore felt no sense of obligation for the needs of the dominant system in place, and rather to themselves or to their country of origin. As such, Asian Americans were seen as "taking away" opportunities for those defined under a more mainstream "American identity" – those that "belonged". However, this aspect of questioned loyalty also extended past that of internal economic pressures, and onto a more social and cultural one where instead, the main concern was based on the determination of the "American identity" and how "othered" groups played a detriment to that. This may be seen in the discourse, again, before the Chinese Exclusion Act, where Asian Americans were deemed "inferior" and "incompatible", where civic ostracization based on orientalist sentiments led to the belief that Asian Americans were simply too far removed from "civilized" society for integration.[23] Such sentiments were reflected in ideas that the presence of Asian Americans within the United States was a "corruptive" force, where alongside their different social roles, especially pertaining to gender, Asians were also defined as oriental "sexual deviants" that preyed upon "innocent white women into their dens of vice and depravity" whilst also spreading various forms of "moral and racial pollution.".[24] In other words, it was apparent through the discourse at this time that the dominant American identity was fearful of intrusion by foreign influence, where the perceived "incompatible nature" of Asian Americans was deemed "…incompatible with the United States and threatened to corrupt the nation."[25]

This aspect of loyalty, however, was taken a step further with the beginning of the United States' involvement in World War 2. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, public attention quickly shifted towards the aggressors of the conflict – the Germans, Italians, and Japanese – and fear quickly disseminated throughout, calling into question whether these groups were loyal to the United States, lest they be a threat. However, despite similar circumstances, it was apparent that the perceptions of and subsequent reactions to each group were different from one another. While it was true that German and Italians were arrested and imprisoned at internment camps, namely consisting of foreign nationals, a disproportionate number of Japanese American citizens and nationals numbering approximately 110,000 – over 90% of the total population – were arrested and interned. [26] In comparison, a similar number of native-born Germans were also interned, out of a total population of around 6 million nationals and American born Germans.[27] These discrepancies show that the United States maintained an inherent prejudice against the Japanese, where again, despite similar circumstances between both Japanese and German Americans, the reaction to either group vary significantly. As an aside, it is interesting to note that these

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[23] Lee, "Making," 90.
[24] Lee, "Making," 91.
[25] Lee, "Making," 89.
[26] Tchen et al., "Yellow Peril," 223.
[27] Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, "Personal Justice Denied," Washington, D.C: The Commission: For sale by the Supt. of Docs. U.S. G.P.O, (1982), 289.

discrepancies also played into political voting power, where the large relative population of German Americans in the United States had a great prevalence within "…the industrial northeast, the Midwest and the northern plains… voting blocs," where "radical measures such as exclusion or detention would have carried a very heavy political cost."[28] This seems to echo many of the sentiments established before, including the usefulness of a group to the status of the current system in place, as well as prior stereotyping – as stated by Harpalani – that attributed Asian Americans as relatively "apolitical".[29]

Overall, the situation in the United States proceeding Pearl Harbor is reminiscent of what is seen in the proposed spheres of influence model, where those that were inherently closer to the idealized American identity – being the Germans – through appearance and similar, were identified as belonging to this group. Very much like the Irish, the Germans became nearly indistinguishable from the average "White American". The Japanese Americans on the other hand, remained as the perpetual foreigners outside of the system. When fears spiked due to the United States' involvement in the war, this perception of foreignness was heightened, and the spotlight was put onto Japanese Americans regarding their loyalty to the system – the enemy within. To many, this resulted in nativist discourse that painted Japanese Americans as inherently foreign and disloyal to the American system, in favor of their foreign identity, and thus a threat to the security of the state. They were "…by their ancestry a faceless mass loyal only to their emperor and therefore unassimilable to American society" where "…their immutable racial allegiance was stronger than their loyalty to their adopted home."[30][31] Overall, the Japanese Americans, through their identity as the Asian perpetual foreigner, fueled the fearful discourse that led to the system turning against them.

The situation with Covid-19 back in 2020 was no exception to these patterns established before. However, instead of the threat of economic competition or the threat of an internal wartime aggressor, this was based upon an internal fear of health. Asian Americans – regardless of whether they were Chinese or not – were feared as harbingers of disease. Despite this, as stated prior, the statistics paradoxically show that the rates of infection per capita for Asian Americans were low, if not the lowest of any other group in the United States. As such, the attribution of Asian Americans to Covid-19 was based on underlying sociological factors that determined Asians overall as separate from the rest of the population. This may be reflected in some of the earlier examples of discourse reflected early in the pandemic, such as the association of Covid-19 with "bat soup" – accentuating Asian sensibilities as stereotypically foreign – as well as the Wuhan Lab leak theory – which sparked discussion on whether the virus was an intentional bioweapon against the West or a matter of Eastern incompetency.[32] It is worthy to note that this attribution of Asians to disease, is In other words, it was clear then that fear arose from established perceptions of immutable foreignness attributed to Asian Americans. Akin to the

[28] Commission, "Justice Denied," 289.
[29] Harpalani, "Double Consciousness," 9.
[30] Tchen et al., "Yellow Peril," 255.
[31] Tchen et al., "Yellow Peril," 223
[32] BBC, "Covid Origin: Why the Wuhan Lab-Leak Theory Is So Disputed," BBC News, March 1, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-57268111.

discourse surrounding Japanese internment especially, it did not matter then whether an Asian in the United States was native born or nationals from overseas, they were still a risk regardless.

This overall reflects a trend throughout much of American history, where in times of crisis within the dominant social system "…biological and cultural deficiencies… are to blame for the violence and despair accompanying social inequality…" not "…U.S. government actions nor corporate practices."[33] [34] With this instability of the social order and the accompanying fear that follows, this results in the appearance of another part of this cycle, being the outbreak of mass hysteria and resultant atrocities against Asian Americans. With the discourse surrounding the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, this not only resulted in the enforcement of discriminatory Chinese immigration laws, but also fostered an environment of violence against the Chinese. For instance, in 1871, 17 Chinese victims were forced out of their homes and lynched by a mob of 500 people.[35] Likewise, in 1885, a violent mob forced approximately 900 Chinese victims from their homes out of Tacoma, Washington, which was then accompanied with similar treatment within Seattle, Washington.[36] With the discourse surrounding Japanese internment, as stated, this was primarily accompanied by the imprisoning of approximately 110,000 Japanese Americans under squalor conditions.[37] However, the process of internment further resulted in the displacement of Japanese American livelihoods and culture, where business owners were forced to sell their properties at a loss, and violent schisms arose within these enclosed communities.[38] For Covid-19, as established, this resulted in increased social ostracization against Asian Americans and rapid increase of hate crimes – violent or otherwise – committed against Asian Americans in 2020.[39]

Naturally however, these periods of hysteria would eventually fade, often aligning with the interests of the dominant culture. With the US involvement in World War 2, sentiments surrounding Chinese exclusion changed dramatically, where the non-Japanese Asians – allies to the United States at the time – were then seen as "good Asians", leading to the repealing of the Chinese exclusion act in 1943. Though, what this essentially did was redefine who was truly the "foreigner" and created a new scapegoat that was still based on a fundamental identity as "Asian". Note, that the non-Japanese were considered exceptions, rather than the established norm. However, Japanese internment too passed with time, with the surrender of Japan at the end of World War 2, and the reconstructive westernization that linked together the United States and the former as allies. This was further bolstered through the Cold War, where special interest in Asia – to stifle the spread of Communism – invigorated the prevalence of Asian Americans withing American society, facilitating strides in international anti-discriminatory practices and ideologies, social justice, and humanitarianism. By this point leading into the contemporary, it seemed as if Asian Americans truly integrated into popular American society, not as foreigners, but as true Americans. After all, this marked the point where the success of Asian Americans

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[33] Tchen et al., "Yellow Peril," 224.
[34] Tchen et al., "Yellow Peril," 228.
[35] Lee, "Making," 93.
[36] Lee, "Making," 94.
[37] Tchen et al., "Yellow Peril," 223.
[38] Tchen et al., "Yellow Peril," 238.
[39] California, "Anti-Asian Hate", 10.

"despite it all" transformed into our modern-day perception of the "model minority" – the embodiment of the American Dream.[40]

Section 3: Closing Thoughts

Likewise, with fears surrounding the Covid-19 Pandemic diminishing as of late, with the number of Anti-Asian American hate crimes likewise decreasing since 2021, it would seem like this would mark another minor footnote in the "othering" of Asian Americans in contemporary history, something forgotten.[41] However, with what I have discussed here with the establishment of Asian Americans as the "perpetual foreigner" and the cycles of othering and escalation that have continued to arise throughout history, I believe that that these same trends would continue to persist in the future under similar circumstances, despite any sort of advancements we have seemed to make in social justice. After all, what the American System defines as the "other" has constantly shifted throughout history, to accommodate its needs. If not Asians who else, and what is stopping these cycles from occurring again against Asian Americans? In short, the "… 'they' is always changing. In the 1960's, it was the Russian communists. In the 1980's, it was the Japanese capitalists. At each moment the 'they' makes sense, for each moment produces its own they. These 'they' help justify why the American Dream hasn't delivered on its promises…"[42]

In summary, Anti-Asian discrimination throughout American history has always, and continues to persist in the public consciousness. This is driven forward by the interests of institutions that have a hegemonic strangle over social discourse, who deem it necessary for Asian Americans to remain as perpetual foreigners to ensure continued stability of the system. As a result, as we have seen throughout the historical periods examined, Asian Americans are often scapegoated as a "foreigner" in opposition to the system in times of social turmoil, to direct blame away from the failures within the system itself. The Chinese Exclusion Act, Japanese Internment, and the violence associated with the Covid-19 Pandemic, were all consequences of this discourse, and despite everything, this catalytic identification with the foreign continues to persist today.

With this fundamental concept in mind, I believe that the discourse surrounding Covid-19 and Asian Americans were only a symptom of a much larger concern on a global scale. Everything from "bat soup" to "biological weapons" – all points that sought to further separate Asian Americans – seem to point to the rising tensions between the West and the East. We may have remembered that early in 2024, there was a stir all over the media about a supposed "Chinese spy balloon" that flew over US airspace.[43] We may also remember how concerned many were about the involvement of mainland Chinese institutions within social media – such as TikTok – harvesting the data of end users. Likewise, there are also ongoing concerns in our academic and technological circles that attribute mainland Chinese students and workers to espionage, only

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[40] Lee, "Making," 253.
[41] FBI, "Federal Bureau of Investigation Crime Data Explorer," cde.ucr.cjis.gov, (2024), https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/.
[42] Tchen et al., "Yellow Peril," 222.
[43] BBC, "Chinese Spy Balloon over Us Is Weather Device Says Beijing," BBC News, February 3, 2023. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-64515033.

participating in American society to harvest assets or perform acts of sabotage.[44] In other words, the social perception of the Chinese in the modern era is increasingly shifting to readily define the foreigner – a threat that seeks to undermine the wellbeing of the United States and its institutions as the enemy within. Akin to what I have discussed throughout my findings, this discourse echoes many of the justifications preceding the escalation of Anti-Asian discrimination. If adversity is attributed to the foreigner, when what is stopping social discourse from challenging the loyalty of Asian Americans to the system they reside in? If escalation continues to progress between the West and the East, with sentiments among the American public growing uneasy at the prospect of global conflict, will these same cycles, just like we saw with Covid-19 only recently, appear again?

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[44] CSIS, "Survey of Chinese Espionage in the United States since 2000: Strategic Technologies Program," Center for Strategic and International Studies, (2000), https://www.csis.org/programs/strategic-technologies-program/survey-chinese-espionage-united-states-2000.

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Appendix: Honors Symposium Presentation

Title: "Challenging Hegemonic Discourse – Reframing How We View Our Worlds"

Time: May 18, 2024, 10:30 AM

Description:

"Facets of our society are built on structures of social power where discourse is produced and reinforced by institutions. However, this paints a narrow view of reality that often dehumanizes others. Across various disciplines, our panelists explore the innerworkings of our society and the ways humans interact with the self, the Other, and their environments. Through exploring the "foreigner," constructed views, morality, and the "(r)evolutionary," they consider how narrow perceptions of reality limit our understanding of the holistic human experience."

Presentation Transcript:

Presentation Title: "The Perpetual Foreigner: Modeling Cycles of Asian American Discrimination"

Presenter: Philip Min (2024)

Hello everyone, thank you for joining us today at this year's Honors Symposium. Our panel today will be discussing the topic of "Challenging Hegemonic Discourse – Reframing How We View Our Worlds". My name is Philip Min and today I will be starting off this panel session with the findings of my research:

"The Perpetual Foreigner: Modeling Cycles of Asian American Discrimination."

Before I begin my presentation, I would like to briefly thank several people who have helped me in my endeavors.

I would first like to acknowledge Dr. Christine Chaney, and Dr. Joshua Tom for providing guidance in my Honors education and project from the very beginning, as well as providing the means for me to become a more academically well-rounded individual. Secondly, I would also like to acknowledge my history professors Doctor Zhiguo Ye and Doctor Alissa Walter for playing a substantial role in re-contextualizing my view of the world, especially from a non-Western perspective, and provide the means to challenge my own beliefs.

Finally, I would also acknowledge my mom, dad, and sister. They were always there for me, instilling my faith and values as well as providing encouragement to pursue and achieve my goals. Without them, I would have never developed an interest in my Asian American heritage and culture, nor my identity as an individual.

[Start]

Now to begin…

The Covid-19 Pandemic was one of the most impactful events in recent history, inspiring a period of fear and uncertainty that radically reshaped, and continues to reshape many of our lives even 4 years later. For my life, one of the more impactful things the Pandemic did was force me to re-think my own identity as an Asian American and my placement within the greater American system – what is an "American" precisely?

The reasonings behind this were far more personal. Prior, I believed myself to be as "American" as everyone else, and thus took my identity and heritage as a Korean American for granted. However, I the greater societal changes that happened before my eyes changed this. The sideways glance and the errant uncomfortable shifting of bodies away from me. The gawking of children at my family, fearfully asking their parents whether they were going to get sick. I later found out that hate crimes against Asian Americans on a national level exploded, with noticeable upticks in incidents, violent or otherwise, occurring in several states, coupled alongside a report by the AAPI stating that approximately 21% of Asian Americans, overall, experienced acts of hate the following year. However, certain aspects of these developments throughout the Pandemic were puzzling to me. For one, despite the shift of focus onto Asian Americans during the Pandemic, they had the lowest reported Covid-19 infection rates per capita, out of any other group in the United States, as of 2020. Similarly, it also appeared that the social standing of Asian Americans in American society – such as reflected within median incomes – was also deeply contradictory to the disproportionate reaction during the Pandemic.

This showed to me that these targeted sentiments of fear were founded on something more fundamental. Likewise, the way how discourse changed after the Pandemic was also concerning, where initial sentiments of fears and later acknowledgement of the social effects of the Pandemic on Asian Americans seemed to have disappeared from public consciousness. Asian Americans once again, became as "American" as they once were. However, as I continued to do more research into the matter, I realized that these incidents during the Pandemic seemed to parallel several others throughout American history, namely the Chinese Exclusion Act and Japanese internment. From this, I then realized that the reappearance of Asian American discrimination was first rooted within an underlying assumption of the "other", where Asian Americans were inherently defined by a state of perpetual foreignness that puts them outside of American society, even to this day.

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As an addendum, with recent events that have transpired as of writing this presentation, this initial claim of foreignness alongside my identity was further cemented with a startling first-hand encounter on the matter. Just this Monday, right outside this very building, a White man unaffiliated with SPU walked past me and unprompted, derogatorily referred to me as a profanity laced slur, one that explicitly degraded Korean Americans like myself, as a foreigner – an adulteration of the word representing the Korean People.

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With all this being said, I first investigated how this idea of the "perpetual foreigner" was constructed in American Society, in light of my uncertainty on the matter. This was primarily done through my analysis of Kim's Model of Racial Triangulation, as shown here:
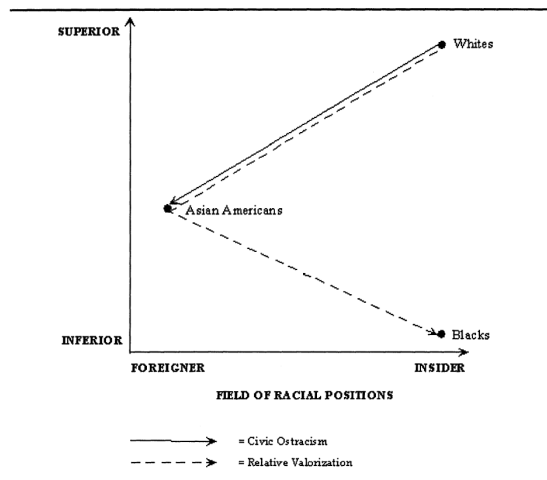
Unlike other models that attempt to define the structure of race in the United States as strictly independent of one another or ordered relative between "black" or "white", this model added the dimension of "foreignness" in context of interracial interactions outside of the "black and white" dichotomies.

As we see here, the model defines Asian Americans through civic ostracism and relative valorization. Asians are civically ostracized, where a perceived "inassimilable" nature of Asian Americans, due to foreignness, thus led to the perception as removed from the core of American society. This is seen through the designation of Asian Americans as being "inferior" to White Americans, whilst also being separated through inherent foreignness.

However, with relative valorization, Asian Americans are brought up above other groups of people, such as African Americans, where their foreignness is paradoxically utilized as a "benefit". This may prominently be seen in the myth of the model minority, where Asian Americans, through foreignness, are perceived as containing inherent qualities that make them superior to any racial group. For instance, we are often familiar with attributes such as familial structures, collectivism, and work ethic. However, all this does is continue to alienate Asian Americans as foreigners in American society, whilst also putting down other racial groups. After all, "if the Asians can do it, why can't you?" Together with this, it facilitates the domination of both groups – Asians and African Americans – by those who control the social discourse.

Overall, this system proposed by Kim enforces the state of Asian Americans as the foreigner, for the sake of greater "American society". This will be important to note later when acknowledging hegemonic discourse and the institutions that control it.

However, there are several limitations to this model, as it is limited in how it defines the level of foreignness and how such develops over time compared to other groups, and second in how

foreignness relates to external influence. After all, it is not like Asian Americans are completely separated from American society in modern times, given the vast improvements in social standing relative to two centuries ago. As such, I have created a model myself to visualize these variances, building off the princeps established by Kim.
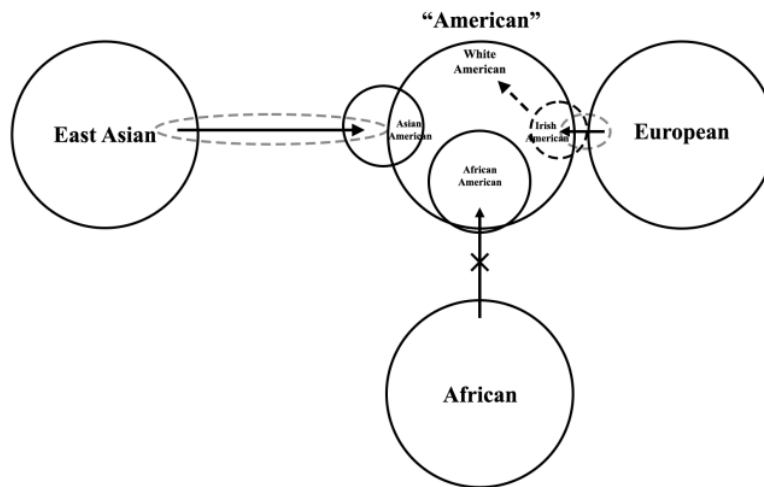
I could spend another hour explaining this model, but to put it briefly, this model is what I call the "Spheres of Influence" model, where various groups are understood to have different "presences" within the core American identity. Each group inherently resides from various levels of "foreignness" derived from different historical backgrounds. The Irish, for instance, while discriminated as a non-white before, have integrated into the greater "White American" identity, due to intrinsic similarities in physiological and social qualities and recent developments in the redefining of American identity. African Americans, on the other hand, due to factors that encouraged forceful assimilation and the destruction of culture, reside within as an "ingroup" yet are still defined as separate – not seen as intrinsically African, but more-so defined within the bounds of American identity. Asian Americans on the other hand, are intrinsically more separated – as seen with this large gap here – and thus do not fully integrate within the core American identity, with the overlap showing a degree of participation.

What is truly important here is the overlap in this model, and how this plays a role in the cycling of discrimination, where public discourse is shaped on how identity is framed. Are they inside or outside of the main circle?

This model here shows a pattern of these developments:
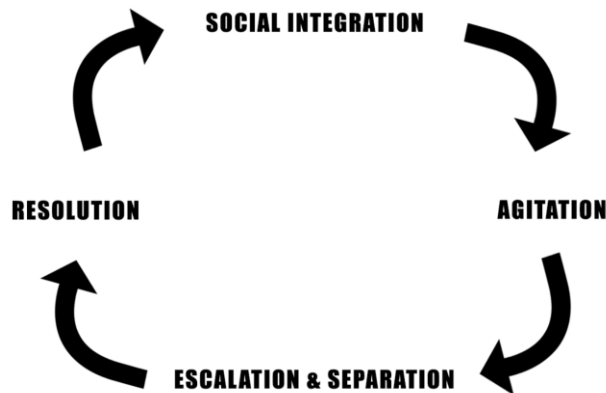
Which is defined by Social Integration, then Agitation, then Escalation/Separation, and then Resolution. These same patterns have been seen throughout both the Chinese Exclusion Act and Japanese internment, as well as the Pandemic.

Social integration refers to the period where the greater society – as established by institutions – sees Asians as an asset, where Asians were useful to the current system through labor, work, and otherwise. Before the Chinese Exclusion act, for instance, Chinese Americans were seen as a great benefit to the American economy, with the discourse surrounding it characterizing them as "industrious" and a good source of cheap labor.

During agitation, however, a failure in the system occurs, economic or otherwise. The section of "foreignness" is focused on and taken advantage of as a scapegoat to the problems that have occurred. It is not the system's fault nor the institutions, therefore it must be the foreigner! Before the Chinese exclusion act, for instance, this resulted in sentiments that regarded the Chinese as economic detriments – through stealing American jobs and spreading immoral vices. For the Japanese, they're seen in a similar way economically, but this was accentuated through the Japanese Imperial movements that led to the questioning of Japanese American loyalty to the United States – the latter catalyzed by Pearl Harbor. In other words, the fear of the "enemy within". Likewise Asian Americans, especially Chinese Americans, during Covid-19, were perceived as health risks to everyone around them, which was heightened by the uncertainty over Covid-19. After all, I'm sure you are aware of the discourse surrounding "bat soup" and "biological warfare".

The subsequent Escalation and Separation are mostly self-explanatory. It's when we see the complete degradation and subsequent discrimination against Asian Americans on a national level. For the Chinese Exclusion Act, thousands of Chinese Americans, even here in Washington State were chased out of cities with a sizable number lynched in other places such as Los Angeles in 1871. With Japanese internment, over 90% of Japanese Americans were sent to internment camps, resulting in the degradation of culture, family, and identity, alongside livelihoods. For Covid, we similarly saw an uptick in race related crimes – violent or otherwise – alongside social stigmatization against Asian Americans.

However, this often does not last, as Resolution demonstrates that Asian Americans gradually re-integrate into the American identity and system. However, this does not mean that Asian Americans have suddenly become less of an outsider than before, rather it shows that priorities have shifted for the sake of those that control the system, as we saw with Kim's model. Chinese Exclusion ended in World War 2, when it was beneficial for the Chinese to be allies against the Japanese. General acceptance of Asian Americans spiked during the Cold War, where it was in the best interest of the United States to watch over Asian allies to stop the spread of and prove the moral superiority over Communism. With the end of the Pandemic and lockdowns, crimes against Asian Americans have likewise decreased. There was no more need for a scapegoat, so these concerns quietly "disappeared"! In other words, the return to social integration and hence normalcy, was a result of the whims of the systems and institutions that controlled the flow of discourse.

It is apparent through my research that these cycles exist, and as Asian Americans remain as perpetual foreigners – as enforced by the needs of the system – this will continue to happen. With tensions rising between the West and the East in the realms of geopolitics, with talks of "Chinese spies" infiltrating our fields of study and social media or setting up "spy balloons" it calls into question the type of discourse that is currently circulating as we speak. Where have we seen this before – where the discourse decrees that the enemy is within and actively seeking our destruction, whilst loyal only to their foreign roots? Are we already going through another period of cycling where the sudden failure of the system will result in a spiraling of scapegoating and discrimination? If so, what does this mean for Asian Americans in the near future?

[Closing]

In summary, all of this demonstrates that the social values of the United States are built upon an established hierarchy – one carefully managed through the needs of the institutions in power. With this, they alone drive the popular discourse into the mainstream, allowing them to enforce their truth:

Who is to blame, who is the enemy, and who is the "other"?

In a quote by Tchen and Yeats, the "… 'they' is always changing. In the 1960's, it was the Russian communists. In the 1980's, it was the Japanese capitalists. At each moment the 'they' makes sense, for each moment produces its own they. These 'they' help justify why the American Dream hasn't delivered on its promises…" (Yellow Peril, 222)

As such, the purpose of this presentation in the context of this panel, is to show that discourse does not have to exist alone through the prevalence of a single hegemonic force, which otherwise results in the repeated cycling of atrocities throughout – Chinese exclusion, Japanese Internment, Covid-19 – that sought to only preserve the status quo of those in charge at the expense of human dignity.

Rather, discourse should be acknowledged as something that encompasses the totality of human experience – including the unheard voices outside the realms of mainstream society. Analyzing

history and the patterns within, as I have done myself, challenges these preconceived notions of truth, and lays down the foundations of which we may understand what truly makes us human.

Thank you for listening.

[End]