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# **The Overlooked Tragedy of the Pandemic: How Media Coverage of the COVID-19 Pandemic has Led to an Increase in Anti-Asian Bias and Xenophobia**

*Justin J. Hill*

## **ABSTRACT**

The media is a vital source of information, especially in times of crisis. Since the 2019 novel coronavirus became a worldwide pandemic, it has become a frequent topic of discussion in the media, and its mysterious origin has caused lots of speculation regarding its roots. Historically, scientists have named novel diseases based on the country or region in which it was thought to have originated; however, in 2015, the World Health Organization (WHO) publicly discouraged this practice because of the stigma it tended to attach to people and places. Despite this warning and the WHO's deliberate name selection for the 2019 novel coronavirus — “COVID-19” — the media and many public figures, including former United States President Donald Trump, have consistently used stigmatizing language, such as “China virus,” associating the virus with China because the first confirmed cases of the virus were discovered in Wuhan, China. Just as the WHO warned, this stigmatizing language has created a wave of violence and discrimination towards Asian Americans and caused considerable damage to U.S.-China relations. This Article explores the correlation between the presence of such stigmatizing rhetoric in the media and the increase in anti-Asian bias as well as the connection between such rhetoric and the damage to U.S.-China relations. It concludes by providing suggestions to combat the crisis of anti-Asian bias and xenophobia and encourages the U.S. and China to set aside their differences and work together to alleviate tensions and end the pandemic.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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## INTRODUCTION

On December 31, 2019, people around the world were preparing for their New Year's celebrations and writing down their goals for the new year. Unbeknownst to many, the new year would begin in an unprecedented manner. In early 2020, a novel coronavirus, or COVID-19, erupted into a global pandemic. The new virus had a variety of symptoms — ranging from mild to severe — including fever, cough, shortness of breath, difficulty breathing, fatigue, loss of taste or smell, and more.<sup>1</sup> The new virus also had an extremely high transmission rate, and it proved to be much more contagious than the seasonal flu.<sup>2</sup>

By the end of 2020 (just one year after the virus emerged), about 84 million people had been infected globally, and about 1.8 million people had passed away due to complications from the virus.<sup>3</sup> In the United States, around 20 million people had been infected, and about 362,000 people had passed away due to complications from the virus.<sup>4</sup> These ominous numbers

1. *Symptoms*, CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/symptoms-testing/symptoms.html> (last updated Feb. 22, 2021).

2. *Frequently Asked Questions*, CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL & PREVENTION, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html> (last updated May 7, 2021).

3. *Total Cases (worldwide)*, WORLDOMETER, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/worldwide-graphs/#total-cases> (last visited May 24, 2021); *Total Deaths*, WORLDOMETER, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/worldwide-graphs/#total-deaths> (last visited May 24, 2021).

4. *See Total Coronavirus Cases in the United States*, WORLDOMETER, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/us/#graph-cases-daily> (last visited May 24, 2021); *See Total Coronavirus Deaths in the United States*, WORLDOMETER, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/us/#graph-deaths-daily> (last visited May 24, 2021).

continued to increase exponentially, and just a few months later, in late May 2021, worldwide infections had doubled to about 168 million, and COVID-related deaths had increased to about 3.5 million.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, total infections in the U.S. had reached about 34 million and COVID-related deaths in the U.S. had reached about 604,000.<sup>6</sup>

The pandemic changed daily life in many ways, including the implementation of public social distancing measures of at least six feet, the requirement that people work and attend classes remotely and virtually, the closure of restaurants and unessential businesses, the restrictions on travel within the United States and abroad, and the mandating of masks in public facilities.<sup>7</sup> There remains uncertainty as to when or if everyday life will ever return to normal. The severity of the COVID-19 outbreak caused the pandemic to gain global media attention and, as a result, become a topic of public discourse around the world.<sup>8</sup> Even though the exact origin of the virus is unknown, the fact that many of its initial cases were found in stall owners, market employees, and regular visitors of a wholesale seafood market in Wuhan, China, prompted many news outlets and public figures to associate the virus with Wuhan and people of Chinese descent.<sup>9</sup>

In early media reports on COVID-19, popular news outlets such as Fox News and CNN commonly used terms such as “Wuhan virus” and “Chinese coronavirus” to refer to the virus.<sup>10</sup> The use of such language skyrocketed in early March 2020 when U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo used the term

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5. *COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic*, WORLDOMETER, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus> (last visited May 24, 2021).

6. *United States*, WORLDOMETER, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/us> (last visited May 24, 2021). The U.S. is the global leader in COVID-19 infections and COVID-related deaths. *See Reported Cases and Deaths by Country or Territory*, WORLDOMETER, <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries> (last visited May 24, 2021). India is the second global leader in infections and third global leader in deaths with about 27 million and 307,000 respectively, and Brazil is the third global leader in infections and second global leader in deaths with about 16 million and 450,000, respectively. *Id.*

7. *Social Distancing*, CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION (Nov. 17, 2020), <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/social-distancing.html>; *Coronavirus and Learning: What's Happening in Each State*, EDUC. WK., <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/coronavirus-and-learning-whats-happening-in-each-state/2020/04> (last updated Jul. 24, 2020); Exec. Order No. 13998, 86 Fed. Reg. 7205 (2021); Eric J. Holcomb, Executive Order No. 20-50, State of Indiana Executive Department (Dec. 10, 2020), <https://www.in.gov/gov/files/Executive-Order-20-50-Continuation-of-Color-Coded-County-Assessments.pdf>.

8. Yi Zheng, Edmund Goh & Jun Wen, *The Effects of Misleading Media Reports About COVID-19 on Chinese Tourists' Mental Health: A Perspective Article*, 31 ANATOLIA 338 (2020).

9. *Id.*, Lauren M. Sauer, *What Is Coronavirus?*, JOHNS HOPKINS MED., <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus> (last updated May 7, 2021).

10. Joseph Wulfsohn, *CNN Blasted for Now Declaring 'Wuhan Virus' as 'Racist' After Weeks of Network's 'China's Coronavirus' Coverage*, FOX NEWS (Mar. 12, 2020), <https://www.foxnews.com/media/cnn-china-wuhan-coronavirus>.

“Wuhan virus” on national television.<sup>11</sup> Since then, former U.S. President Donald Trump has become infamous for using similar language associating the virus with China and blaming China for allowing the virus to spread. He repeatedly used the term “Chinese virus” despite receiving criticism that the term is racist and xenophobic, and he attempted to justify his remarks by shifting blame for the spread of COVID-19 in the U.S. to China and reinforcing the idea of the virus’ alleged origins in China.<sup>12</sup>

When asked about the COVID-19 pandemic during the 2020 Presidential Debate, Trump responded, “it’s China’s fault, it should never have happened,” and even referred to the pandemic as the “China plague.”<sup>13</sup> Trump’s persistent use of similar terms to deflect from his poor regulation and oversight on COVID-19’s spread in the U.S. influenced other Republican officials to use similar language and eventually influenced many Republicans’ perceptions of China. One study found that 83 percent of Republicans expressed unfavorable views of China and over half of Republicans expressed *very* unfavorable views of China.<sup>14</sup>

Because the media plays a central role in daily life, especially in times of crisis, all the rhetoric in the media blaming China for a global pandemic resulting in the deaths of millions has had a drastic impact on China and people of Asian descent.<sup>15</sup> Since the pandemic began, the relationship between the U.S. and China has reached its lowest point in 30 years.<sup>16</sup> The last time tensions were this high between the U.S. and China was in 1989 when the U.S. froze all relations with China following the Tiananmen Square Massacre.<sup>17</sup> This deplorable rhetoric has also resulted in a wave of racism and xenophobia towards Chinese and other people of Asian descent, including a rise in hate crimes.<sup>18</sup> This Article will take a deeper look into the role the media has

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11. Bhavan Jaipragas, *Coronavirus: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo Switches Disease Name to ‘Wuhan virus’ as It Spreads in the US*, S. CHINA MORNING POST (Mar. 7, 2020), <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3074050/coronavirus-us-secretary-state-mike-pompeos-wuhan-virus>.

12. Katie Rogers, Lara Jakes & Ana Swanson, *Trump Defends Using ‘Chinese Virus’ Label, Ignoring Global Criticism*, N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 18, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/us/politics/china-virus.html>.

13. James Griffiths, *Trump has Repeatedly Blamed China for a Virus that Now Threatens His Health. This Will Make Beijing Nervous*, CNN (Oct. 2, 2020), <https://www.cnn.com/2020/10/02/asia/trump-china-coronavirus-intl-hnk/index.html>.

14. Laura Silver, Kat Devlin & Christine Huang, *Americans Fault China for Its Role in the Spread of COVID-19*, PEW RES. CTR. (July 20, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/07/30/americans-fault-china-for-its-role-in-the-spread-of-covid-19>.

15. Zheng, Goh & Wen, *supra* note 8, at 337.

16. Yanzhong Huang, *How Coronavirus Is Poisoning US-China Relations, One Accusation at a Time*, S. CHINA MORNING POST (June 17, 2020), <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3089131/how-coronavirus-poisoning-us-china-relations-one-accusation-time>.

17. *U.S. Relations with China 1949–2021*, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN REL., <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-relations-china> (last visited May 29, 2021).

18. *Covid-19 Fueling Anti-Asian Racism and Xenophobia Worldwide*, HUM. RTS. WATCH (May 12, 2020), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/12/>

played in endorsing information that has led to increases in anti-Chinese bias, racism, and xenophobia since the beginning of the pandemic.

Part I of this Article will discuss the origins of COVID-19 and many of the false narratives and conspiracy theories that have been circulated regarding the virus's origin. It will also explain where its official name, "COVID-19," came from. Part II will provide a content analysis of the various media outlets that have published stigmatizing language when referring to COVID-19 and the frequency of its use. It will also show how the use of stigmatizing language has increased substantially among media consumers after its initial appearance in the media. Part III will explain how the use of such language has resulted in an increase in bias and discrimination towards Asian Americans and how it has damaged the relationship between the U.S. and China.

## I. HISTORY OF THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF NOVEL DISEASES

Generally, the category of pathogens known as coronaviruses are not new to the human population. Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that are common in humans as well as different species of animals.<sup>19</sup> There are many different types of coronaviruses, including some that cause mild upper-respiratory illnesses such as the common cold.<sup>20</sup>

There have been two other outbreaks caused by novel coronaviruses in the past two decades. The first, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), emerged in 2003 in Asia and spread to over two dozen countries within a few months.<sup>21</sup> This respiratory illness was caused by a coronavirus called SARS-associated coronavirus, or SARS-CoV, and its symptoms included headache, discomfort, body aches, diarrhea, and dry cough.<sup>22</sup> Fewer people contracted SARS than COVID-19, but SARS had a higher fatality rate. Of the 8,098 individuals that contracted SARS, 774 people died from the virus, resulting in a fatality rate of almost 10 percent.<sup>23</sup>

Roughly ten years later, a second coronavirus outbreak occurred. In 2012, Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) emerged in Saudi Arabia.<sup>24</sup> MERS was a respiratory illness caused by the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus, or MERS-CoV, with symptoms including

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covid-19-fueling-anti-asian-racism-and-xenophobia-worldwide.

19. *About COVID-19*, CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/cdcresponse/about-COVID-19.html> (last updated Sept. 1, 2020).

20. *Id.*; see also Sauer, *supra* note 9.

21. *SARS Basics Fact Sheet*, CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, <https://www.cdc.gov/sars/about/fs-sars.html> (last updated Dec. 6, 2017).

22. *Id.*

23. *Coronaviruses Have Been Around For Centuries: What Differentiates COVID-19?*, CLEVELAND CLINIC (Mar 4, 2020), <https://consultqd.clevelandclinic.org/coronaviruses-have-been-around-for-centuries-what-differentiates-2019-ncov>.

24. *About MERS*, CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/mers/about/index.html> (last updated Aug. 2, 2019).

fever, cough, and shortness of breath.<sup>25</sup> MERS did not develop into a world-wide pandemic, and all cases of MERS were linked to the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>26</sup> In 2015, however, there was a mild MERS outbreak in South Korea, but this outbreak was linked to an infected traveler from the Middle East.<sup>27</sup> The total number of people who contracted MERS was much fewer than SARS and COVID-19, but the fatality rate was significantly higher than both. Of the 2,494 confirmed cases of MERS, 858 people died from the virus, resulting in a fatality rate of about 34 percent.<sup>28</sup>

Similar to MERS, new viruses have historically been named after the geographic location or animal from which it was thought to have originated.<sup>29</sup> For example, the Spanish Flu of 1918 was given its name because, although incorrect, it was believed to have originated in Spain.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the Swine Flu of 2009 was given its name because lab testing showed that the virus's gene segments were similar to that of viruses commonly found in pigs.<sup>31</sup>

Although this naming practice seemed convenient for identification purposes, it proved to be insensitive and harmful, particularly, when viruses were named after geographic locations. In countries with MERS outbreaks, medical staff and individuals who recovered from the virus suffered from stigmatization, including social rejection and neglect, by their colleagues and neighbors.<sup>32</sup> SARS was not explicitly named after a location; however, some of the first cases of the virus were discovered in Hong Kong. Many Hong Kong citizens found the name offensive because SARS closely resembled Hong Kong's official name, Hong Kong SAR, which is short for Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China.<sup>33</sup> Nonetheless,

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25. *Id.*

26. *Id.*

27. Yeon Jung Yu, Young Su Park, Alison Keller, Jin-Won Noh & Jiho Cha, *A Mixed-Methods Systematic Review of the Impacts of Coronavirus on Society and Culture*, 18 INT'L J. OF ENVTL. RES. AND PUB. HEALTH 491 (2021).

28. CLEVELAND CLINIC, *supra* note 23.

29. *How Do Viruses Get Their Names? From Spanish Flu to COVID-19*, ABC, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-20/fact-check-covid-19-virus-names-sars-mers-ebola-hendra-zika/12262472?nw=0> (last updated May 19, 2020, 6:07 PM).

30. *Id.* The Spanish Flu emerged during World War I, and most countries involved in the war censored its press and media. See *Spanish Flu*, HISTORY, [https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/1918-flu-pandemic#section\\_4](https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/1918-flu-pandemic#section_4) (last updated May 19, 2020). Spain was one of the few countries that remained neutral during the war and, in turn, its media was not censored. *Id.* As a result, Spain was the first country to publish media reports about the virus, and many nations only read about the virus from Spanish sources. *Id.* Thus, everyone believed that the virus originated in Spain, and, for this reason, it eventually became known as the "Spanish Flu." *Id.* However, the virus' actual origin remains unknown, and many scientists believe the virus originated in France, China, Britain, or the U.S.

31. ABC, *supra* note 29.

32. Adel F. Amnutairi, Abdallah A. Adlan, Hanan H. Balkhy, Oraynab A. Abbas, & Alexander M. Clark., "It Feels Like I'm the Dirtiest Person in the World." Exploring the Experiences of Healthcare Providers Who Survived MERS-CoV in Saudi Arabia, 11 J. OF INFECTION AND PUB. HEALTH 187, 190 (2018).

33. *CDC SARS Response Timeline*, CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION (Apr. 26, 2013), <https://www.cdc.gov/about/history/sars/timeline.htm>; Martin Enserink,

SARS had a substantial impact on Asia and people of Asian descent across the globe. Asia suffered from substantial constraints on travel and business throughout the continent, and world-wide fear and anxiety grew toward all people who appeared to be of Asian descent, regardless of their nationality or risk-factors for SARS.<sup>34</sup> For example, the Center for Disease Control's (CDC) Public Response Service received numerous phone calls from people expressing concern about living near Asians, going to school with Asians, and working with Asians.<sup>35</sup>

Based on the history of stigma resulting from the traditional naming system, in 2015, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued a public statement discouraging scientists, national authorities, and media outlets from naming new diseases based on geographic locations in an effort to minimize the negative effect of stigmatization on nations, economies, and people.<sup>36</sup> Thus, when the 2019 novel coronavirus emerged, the WHO deliberately chose the innocuous name "COVID-19" as an abbreviation for the full name it assigned the virus, coronavirus disease 2019.<sup>37</sup> However, despite the WHO's warning and deliberate name selection, many people still associate the virus with China because the first confirmed cases of the virus were in China.<sup>38</sup> Trump and other Republican officials' blatant use of terms such as "China virus" despite the WHO's public warning against such language and prudent name selection suggests that their actions are more likely a direct insult at China rather than customary naming practices for diseases as he claims. Trump alleges that his language is harmless rhetoric, but, in reality, it insinuates that the virus somehow "belongs to" China.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, this linkage is inaccurate because the exact source of the virus is unknown.<sup>40</sup>

In the midst of the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19's origin, a number of conspiracy theories have emerged. In the early days of the pandemic, a video went viral portraying a Chinese woman eating a cooked bat,

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*International Group Settles on Name for New Coronavirus*, AM. ASS'N FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF SCI. (May 6, 2013), <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2013/05/international-group-settles-name-new-coronavirus>.

34. WK Lam, NS Zhong, & WC Tan, *Overview on SARS in Asia and the World*, 8 RESPIROLOGY, at S2, (Supp. 1 2003); Bobbie Person et al., *Fear and Stigma: The Epidemic within the SARS Outbreak*, 10 EMERGING INFECTIOUS DISEASES 358, 358-59 (2004).

35. Person et al., *supra* note 34, at 360.

36. *WHO Issues Best Practices for Naming New Human Infectious Diseases*, WORLD HEALTH ORG. (May 8, 2015), <https://www.who.int/news/item/08-05-2015-who-issues-best-practices-for-naming-new-human-infectious-diseases>.

37. CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, *supra* note 19.

38. Sean Darling-Hammond et al., *After "The China Virus" Went Viral: Racially Charged Coronavirus Coverage and Trends in Bias Against Asian Americans*, 47 HEALTH EDUC. & BEHAV. 870, 870-879 1 (2020).

39. Dan Mangan, *Trump Defends Calling Coronavirus 'Chinese Virus' — 'It's Not Racist at All'*, CNBC (Mar. 18, 2020), <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/18/coronavirus-criticism-trump-defends-saying-chinese-virus.html>.

40. CTR. FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION, *supra* note 19.

and, despite bats being far from common in Chinese cuisine, many people started blaming the pandemic on Chinese eating habits.<sup>41</sup>

Information has also spread alleging that COVID-19 was created by scientists in a lab in China.<sup>42</sup> Supporters of this theory rely on the fact that Wuhan contains the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), which experiments with live bat coronaviruses and is located eight miles away from the animal market where the first case was confirmed.<sup>43</sup> Theorists have asserted that the virus was part of a biological weapons program run by China and that COVID-19 was intentionally created by Chinese scientists as a biowarfare weapon.<sup>44</sup> An article by the Washington Times suggests that the WIV contains labs with biological warfare-related connections to the Chinese defense establishment.<sup>45</sup> According to the article, WIV is one of four Chinese laboratories engaged in the development of biological weapons.<sup>46</sup> Wuhan also has another facility, called the Wuhan Institute of Biological Products, that allegedly has connections to the Chinese defense establishment.<sup>47</sup> Supposedly, according to these dubious sources, China has developed biological materials with potential applications to be used in defense or warfare.<sup>48</sup>

Theorists in the U.S. have also blamed the outbreak on the Chinese Communist Party. There have been allegations that COVID-19's growth into a pandemic is the result of Beijing downplaying the seriousness of the virus and preventing individuals from speaking out on its severity.<sup>49</sup> For example, many theorists point to the situation of Dr. Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist in Wuhan, who made public statements in December 2019 alerting doctors of the emerging disease.<sup>50</sup> He was subsequently arrested and forced to sign a document renouncing his statements and agreeing to stop speaking out

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41. *China Coronavirus: Misinformation Spreads Online About Origin and Scale*, BBC (Jan. 30, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-51271037>.

42. See Jonathan Latham & Allison Wilson, *The Case Is Building that COVID-19 Had a Lab Origin*, INDEP. SCI. NEWS (June 2, 2020), <https://www.independentsciencenews.org/health/the-case-is-building-that-covid-19-had-a-lab-origin>.

43. *Id.*

44. BBC, *supra* note 41; See also Mark Lynas, *COVID: Top 10 Current Conspiracy Theories*, CORNELL ALLIANCE FOR SCI. (Apr. 20, 2020), <https://allianceforscience.cornell.edu/blog/2020/04/covid-top-10-current-conspiracy-theories>.

45. Bill Gertz, *Coronavirus May Have Originated in a Lab Linked to China's Biowarfare Program*, WASH. TIMES (Jan. 26, 2020), <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/jan/26/coronavirus-link-to-china-biowarfare-program-poss>.

46. *Id.*

47. *Id.*

48. *Id.*

49. Marion Smith, *Blame the Chinese Communist Party for the Coronavirus Crisis*, USA TODAY, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/04/05/blame-chinese-communist-party-coronavirus-crisis-column/2940486001> (last updated Apr. 6, 2020, 12:17 PM).

50. Doug Stanglin, *Death of Doctor Who Warned About Coronavirus Triggers National Backlash over China's Censorship*, USA TODAY, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2020/02/07/coronavirus-doctor-li-wenliang-death-china-censors-anger-speech/4688827002> (last updated Feb. 10, 2020, 1:47 PM).

about the disease.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, Wuhan-based author, Fang Fang, was vilified in China after she published her diary, which describes daily life in the early days of isolation in Wuhan and criticizes China's response to the virus.<sup>52</sup> A common theme among these conspiracy theories circulated in the U.S., rather than expressing sympathy for Chinese victims of COVID-19 and Chinese Communist Party repression, is the victimization of Americans and suggestion that Americans are the targets of Chinese malfeasance. These theories may provide some sort of solace for some, but they have largely reinforced a feeling of enmity against those of Asian descent and contributed to their otherization.

According to one study, about half of American adults have encountered news and information about COVID-19 that seemed completely false.<sup>53</sup> In fact, many of these theories have actually been proven false. For example, the U.S. Intelligence Community issued a press release in which they agreed with the wider scientific community that COVID-19 was not manmade or genetically modified as a bioweapon.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, the theory that the virus originated from Chinese eating habits is also false. Although the video portraying a woman eating a cooked bat went viral in the midst of the pandemic, in reality, the video was originally filmed in 2016 and was not even filmed in China.<sup>55</sup> Rather, it was filmed in Palau, a group of islands in the western Pacific Ocean.<sup>56</sup>

Despite being false, many of these theories have consistently been circulated throughout social media and the Internet. Even though people turn to the media as a prime source of information in times of crisis, it can be harmful if the wrong information is being circulated.<sup>57</sup> As the WHO explained in their 2015 statement on naming new infectious diseases, once disease names and theories are established throughout the Internet and social media, they are difficult to change and can have serious consequences on people in the communities who are directly affected by the disease.<sup>58</sup>

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51. *Id.*

52. *Fang Fang: The Wuhan Writer Whose Virus Diary Angered China*, BBC (May 18, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-52712358>; Fan Wang & Grace Tsoi, *Fang Fang: Author Vilified for Wuhan Diary Speaks out a Year on*, BBC (Jan. 19, 2021), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54987675>.

53. Katherine Schaeffer, *Nearly Three-in-Ten Americans Believe COVID-19 Was Made in a Lab*, PEW RES. CTR (Apr. 8, 2020), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/08/nearly-three-in-ten-americans-believe-covid-19-was-made-in-a-lab>.

54. Press Release, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Intelligence Community Statement on Origins of COVID-19 (Apr. 30, 2020), <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/press-releases/item/2112-intelligence-community-statement-on-origins-of-covid-19>.

55. BBC, *supra* note 41.

56. *Id.*

57. See Zheng, Goh & Wen, *supra* note 8.

58. WORLD HEALTH ORG., *supra* note 36.

## II. CONTENT ANALYSIS: THE FREQUENCY OF STIGMATIZING LANGUAGE USED BY THE MEDIA TO REFER TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.

On February 11, 2020, the WHO published a guide to prevent and address social stigma resulting from COVID-19.<sup>59</sup> It was specifically targeted to government, media, and local organizations working on the coronavirus disease.<sup>60</sup> The WHO warned that using certain words to describe COVID-19 can fuel harmful stereotypes, fear, and stigma.<sup>61</sup> The WHO further explained that the use of non-inclusive language in the media could be detrimental to the public perception and treatment of people of Asian descent or individuals affected by COVID-19.<sup>62</sup>

The guide encourages the use of less stigmatizing language to refer to the virus, such as “the new coronavirus disease” or simply “COVID-19,” and specifically requests government, media, and local organizations working on the disease to refrain from attaching locations or ethnicity to the virus, stating that “this is not a ‘Wuhan Virus,’ ‘Chinese Virus’ or ‘Asian Virus.’”<sup>63</sup> It also encourages people to speak accurately about the risks of COVID-19 based on scientific data and official advice rather than repeating or sharing unconfirmed rumors and using language such as “plague” to refer to the virus.<sup>64</sup> In addition to the WHO guidelines, the United Nations (UN) has encouraged governments to adopt National Action Plans Against Racial Discrimination (NAPARD) and grants nations broad authority to adopt specific approaches, such as enhanced policing of hate crimes and programming encouraging tolerance, to combat racism and discrimination.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the WHO’s guidelines and the UN’s recommendations, U.S. governmental officials and conservative social and news media outlets have continued to use stigmatizing language when referring to or discussing COVID-19.<sup>66</sup> On March 5, 2020, then U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo used the term “Wuhan virus” when speaking to reporters about the aid the U.S. committed to providing countries affected by COVID-19.<sup>67</sup> A day later, Pompeo appeared on Fox & Friends and CNBC and publicly used the term “Wuhan virus” when asked about the success of Beijing’s response to the

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59. See *Social Stigma Associated with COVID-19: A Guide to Preventing and Addressing Social Stigma*, WORLD HEALTH ORG., <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronavirus/covid19-stigma-guide.pdf> (last updated Feb. 24, 2020).

60. *Id.*

61. *Id.*

62. *Id.*

63. *Id.*

64. *Id.*

65. HUM. RTS. WATCH, *supra* note 18.

66. Max Rizzuto, *U.S. Politicians Exploit Coronavirus Fears with Anti-Chinese Dog Whistles*, MEDIUM (Mar. 17, 2020), <https://medium.com/dfrlab/u-s-politicians-exploit-coronavirus-fears-with-anti-chinese-dog-whistles-ff61c9d7e458>.

67. SECRETARY POMPEO’S REMARKS TO THE PRESS, March 5, 2020, U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Italy, <https://it.usembassy.gov/secretary-pompeos-remarks-to-the-press> (last visited May 3, 2021).

outbreak.<sup>68</sup> In response to Pompeo's use of the term, spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Information Department, Zhao Lijian, chastised U.S. media outlets, stating that they were "highly irresponsible" for referring to COVID-19 as the "China coronavirus" or the "Wuhan coronavirus."<sup>69</sup> However, Lijian's admonition seemed to have gone unheard, drowned out by the U.S. media's stigmatizing rhetoric.

On March 8, 2020, a Republican Congressman from Arizona, Paul Gosar, used the term "Wuhan virus" while tweeting about coming into contact with a person who was hospitalized after contracting COVID-19.<sup>70</sup> Within an hour of Representative Gosar's tweet, the phrases "Chinese Virus," "Wuhan virus," "Chinese coronavirus," and "Wuhan coronavirus" were retweeted 24,049 times, resulting in a 650 percent increase in Twitter retweets using such terms.<sup>71</sup> According to Brandwatch, a social media analytic tool, the use of such phrases on social media were almost non-existent prior to Representative Gosar's tweet.<sup>72</sup> Another social media monitoring tool, BuzzSumo, conducted a similar study analyzing the use of stigmatizing terms and phrases when referring to or discussing COVID-19.<sup>73</sup> The study found that Pompeo's use of the term "Wuhan virus" resulted in an 800 percent increase in the use of stigmatizing language in online news articles.<sup>74</sup>

On March 10, 2020, then President Trump added fuel to the fire when he retweeted a tweet made by one of his supporters which referred to COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus."<sup>75</sup> Days later, Trump used the term "Chinese virus" in a tweet criticizing New York Governor Andrew Cuomo.<sup>76</sup> Trump's tweet angered Beijing, and Deputy Director of the Foreign Ministry Information Department of China, Geng Shuang, urged the U.S. to "correct its mistake and stop its groundless accusations against China" of starting the pandemic and putting the world at risk.<sup>77</sup> Xinhua News Agency, the official state-run

68. Jaipragas, *supra* note 11.

69. *Id.*

70. Paul Gosar (@DrPaulGosar), TWITTER (Mar. 8, 2020, 9:08 PM), <https://twitter.com/DrPaulGosar/status/1236821135964004352>.

71. Rizzuto, *supra* note 66, Darling-Hammond et al., *supra* note 38, at 870.

72. *Id.*

73. *Id.*

74. Darling-Hammond et al., *supra* note 38, at 870.

75. Iain Marlow, *Trump's Racially-Charged Retweet of 'China Virus' Message Fuels Tensions With Beijing*, TIME (Mar. 11, 2020), <https://time.com/5800917/trump-china-virus-tweet>.

76. Kevin Breuninger, *Trump Attacks Cuomo Again on Coronavirus Response: 'Andrew, Keep Politics out of it'*, CNBC (Mar. 16, 2020), <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/16/trump-and-cuomo-fight-over-coronavirus-response.html>. (in a series of tweets in which both President Trump and Governor Cuomo took turns criticizing each other over their response to COVID-19, President Trump said in one tweet "Some [states] are being hit hard by the Chinese Virus, some are being hit practically not at all. New York is a very big 'hotspot', West Virginia has, thus far, zero cases.").

77. *Trump Angers Beijing with 'Chinese Virus' Tweet*, BBC (Mar. 17, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-51928011>.

press agency of China, also responded to President Trump's tweet, calling his language "racist and xenophobic."<sup>78</sup>

Despite Beijing's complaints, public outrage, and guidelines from the WHO, Trump, his administration officials, and his supporters continued to associate the COVID-19 pandemic with China.<sup>79</sup> Trump even outwardly blamed the Chinese government for allowing the disease to spread.<sup>80</sup> According to Factbase, which hosts a searchable database containing every communication that comes from the President, Trump used stigmatizing terms and phrases over 500 times throughout the last year of his presidency when referring to or discussing COVID-19 in various tweets, speeches, political rallies, and while addressing the media or public.<sup>81</sup>

A Factbase search after Trump left office, and after he was permanently banned from Twitter, revealed that he used the phrase "China virus" 365 times, "Wuhan virus" five times, "Chinese virus" twenty-seven times, "Chinese plague" nine times, "China plague" ninety-seven times, and the racist pun "Kung flu" five times.<sup>82</sup> When asked by the media why he continues to use such language despite its racist nature, Trump responded, "Because it comes from China. It's not racist at all, no. Not at all. It comes from China, that's why. I want to be accurate."<sup>83</sup> President Trump's deliberate use of stigmatizing language was further revealed when a photographer from The Washington Post captured an image of a script of one of his speeches in which he deliberately crossed out a reference to "Corona virus" and replaced it with "Chinese virus" as he addressed the coronavirus task force at the White House.<sup>84</sup>

Trump's blatant disregard for the racist and discriminatory effects that the use of such stigmatizing language can have on Asian Americans has fueled bigotry and influenced others to follow his lead. Mississippi Governor, Tate Reeves, defended his use of the phrase "Chinese virus" in a news conference by saying "the Chinese Communist Party needs to own the fact they unleashed the virus and lied about it. I'll never be sorry for assuming the worst

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78. *Id.*

79. Mangan, *supra* note 39.

80. See Scott Neuman, *In U.N. Speech, Trump Blasts China And WHO, Blaming Them For Spread Of COVID-19*, NPR (Sep. 22, 2020), <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/09/22/915630892/in-u-n-speech-trump-blasts-china-and-who-blaming-them-for-spread-of-covid-19>.

81. See FACTBASE, "china virus" (last visited May 19, 2021), <https://factba.se/trump/search#%22china%2Bvirus%22>; FACTBASE, "wuhan virus" (last visited May 19, 2021), <https://factba.se/trump/search#%22wuhan%2Bvirus%22>; FACTBASE, "chinese virus" (last visited May 19, 2021), <https://factba.se/trump/search#%22chinese%2Bvirus%22>; FACTBASE, "chinese plague" (last visited May 19, 2021), <https://factba.se/trump/search#%22chinese%2Bplague%22>; FACTBASE, "china plague" (last visited May 19, 2021), <https://factba.se/trump/search#%22china%2Bplague%22>; FACTBASE, "kung flu" (last visited May 19, 2021), <https://factba.se/trump/search#%22kung%2Bflu%22>.

82. *Id.*

83. Mangan, *supra* note 39.

84. Chris Cillizza, *Yes, Of Course Donald Trump Is Calling Coronavirus the 'China Virus' for Political Reasons*, CNN (Mar. 20, 2020), <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/20/politics/donald-trump-china-virus-coronavirus/index.html>.

about a government that works against the USA and commits ethnic cleansing.”<sup>85</sup> In March 2020, a White House official referred to COVID-19 as the “Kung flu” in front of Chinese-American CBS reporter, Weijia Jiang, which made her wonder what White House officials were saying behind her back.<sup>86</sup>

Unfortunately, Jiang is not alone in experiencing prejudice against those of Asian descent. As the WHO warned, the use of stigmatizing language in the media has proven to have profound impacts. Since COVID-19 arrived in the United States, Asian Americans have faced racism, harassment, discrimination, and even physical attacks from individuals blaming Asian Americans for the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>87</sup>

### III. THE IMPACT OF STIGMATIZING LANGUAGE IN THE MEDIA

#### A. *Racism and Xenophobia Directed Towards Asians in the United States*

Rhetoric is not harmless, and it can have a profound impact on the people it is directed towards. Racism and xenophobia directed at people of Asian descent in the U.S. dates back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>88</sup> In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, Asian Americans were stereotyped as savages who “contaminated” the country by bringing disease and violence, a concept eventually called “Yellow Peril.”<sup>89</sup> As a result, businesses created advertisements and photographs portraying Chinese people as violent or dirty.<sup>90</sup> Out of fear that Chinese immigrants were stealing their jobs, the White Workingman’s Party coined the slogan “The Chinese Must Go!” which ultimately resulted in Congress passing the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 prohibiting Chinese citizens from immigrating into the United States.<sup>91</sup> When the bubonic plague spread in the early 1900s, another surge of hatred and fear towards Asians emerged in the United States, and yet another wave of anti-Asian sentiment swelled in 2003 during the SARS outbreak.<sup>92</sup>

On a more positive note, perceptions towards Asians began to improve shortly after the SARS outbreak subsided. Between January 2007 and

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85. Emily Wagster Pettus, *Mississippi Governor Defends His Use of Phrase ‘China Virus’*, ASSOCIATED PRESS (Sept. 2, 2020), <https://apnews.com/article/f2c77a5fa9c9def7c8331114f1b9e79d>.

86. Weijia Jiang (@weijia), TWITTER (Mar. 17, 2020, 10:35 AM), <https://twitter.com/weijia/status/1239923246801334283?lang=en>.

87. Deb Riechmann & Terry Tang, *Trump Dubs COVID-19 ‘Chinese Virus’ Despite Hate Crime Risks* U.S. NEWS, (Mar. 18, 2020), <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2020-03-18/trump-dubs-covid-19-chinese-virus-despite-hate-crime-risks>.

88. MEGAN CRUZ ET AL., *THEY BLAMED ME BECAUSE I AM ASIAN: FINDINGS FROM YOUTH-REPORTED INCIDENTS OF ANTI-AAPI HATE* (2020), <https://secureservercdn.net/104.238.69.231/a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Stop-AAPI-Hate-Youth-Campaign-Report-9-17.pdf>.

89. *Id.* at 6.

90. *Id.*

91. *Id.* at 7.

92. *Id.*

February 2020, the U.S. saw a steady decline in anti-Asian bias.<sup>93</sup> One study shows that, during this period, non-Asian Americans were less likely to view Asian Americans as foreign or “less American.”<sup>94</sup> However, the COVID-19 pandemic reversed this trend. Negative views and the otherization of Asian Americans skyrocketed in March 2020 as conservative media outlets began using stigmatizing language in reference to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>95</sup>

The increase in racist rhetoric in the media has resulted in discrimination against Asian Americans and has even led to racist attacks against Asian Americans, including beatings, violent bullying, threats, and racist abuse.<sup>96</sup> Such incidents have been reported in nearly every U.S. state.<sup>97</sup> In March 2020, as a result of the increase in discrimination and xenophobia due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a coalition of Asian American groups created a reporting center called Stop AAPI Hate.<sup>98</sup> Since its establishment, Stop AAPI Hate has received thousands of reports of racism, discrimination, and physical attacks against Asian Americans.<sup>99</sup> In its first week, Stop AAPI Hate received almost 100 reports of harassment or discrimination from across the nation every day.<sup>100</sup> In only its second week, Stop AAPI Hate received a total of 1,135 reports.<sup>101</sup> Almost a year later, at the end of February 2021,

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93. Darling-Hammond et al., *supra* note 38, at 876.

94. *Id.*

95. *Id.*

96. HUM. RTS. WATCH *supra* note 18, See Andrew Taeho Kim, Chang Hwan Kim, Scott E. Tuttle, & Yurong Zhang, *Covid-19 and the Decline in Asian American Employment*, 71 RES. IN SOC. STRATIFICATION AND MOBILITY (2021) (explaining that Asian Americans, as a group, suffered from higher unemployment rates during the pandemic than any other racial group). Generally, unemployment rates increased among all racial groups during the pandemic. *Id.* However, despite being more likely to have a bachelor's degree or higher than any other racial group, Asian Americans were affected most by unemployment during the pandemic. *Id.* This impact was most apparent in less educated Asian Americans, or those without a bachelor's degree. *Id.* Overall, people without a bachelor's degree from all racial groups suffered from higher unemployment rates than those with at least a bachelor's degree, but Asian Americans without a bachelor's degree suffered from higher unemployment rates than those without a bachelor's degree from any other racial group).

97. STOP AAPI HATE, STOP AAPI HATE NATIONAL REPORT 3.19.20 – 8.5.20 (2020), [https://secureservercdn.net/104.238.69.231/a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Stop\\_AAPI\\_Hate\\_National\\_Report\\_200805.pdf](https://secureservercdn.net/104.238.69.231/a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Stop_AAPI_Hate_National_Report_200805.pdf).

98. *About*, STOP AAPI HATE, <https://stopaapihate.org/about> (last visited Dec. 4, 2020).

99. RUSSELL JEUNG, AGGIE YELLOW HORSE, TARA POPOVIC, & RICHARD LIM, STOP AAPI HATE, STOP AAPI HATE NATIONAL REPORT (2021), <https://secureservercdn.net/104.238.69.231/a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/210312-Stop-AAPI-Hate-National-Report-.pdf>.

100. RUSSELL JEUNG, STOP AAPI HATE, INCIDENTS OF CORONAVIRUS DISCRIMINATION MARCH 19-25, 2020 (2020), [https://a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Stop\\_AAPI\\_Hate\\_Report\\_200325.pdf](https://a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Stop_AAPI_Hate_Report_200325.pdf).

101. RUSSELL JEUNG, STOP AAPI HATE, INCIDENTS OF CORONAVIRUS DISCRIMINATION MARCH 26 – APRIL 1, 2020 (2020), [https://a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Stop\\_AAPI\\_Hate\\_Report\\_200403.pdf](https://a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Stop_AAPI_Hate_Report_200403.pdf).

Stop AAPI Hate had received almost 4,000 reports of racist attacks towards Asian Americans.<sup>102</sup>

In 2020, out of America's sixteen largest cities, New York City led the nation in hate crimes reported to the police with twenty-eight recorded reports, an 833 percent increase from 2019.<sup>103</sup> One gruesome incident that occurred in February 2021 involved a sixty-one-year-old Filipino man riding on a New York City subway being slashed across the face with a box-cutter for no apparent reason but the perpetrator's racist hatred.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, from late March 2020 to late October 2020, there were 245 reported incidents in Los Angeles County alone.<sup>105</sup> Most of these incidents involved verbal harassment.<sup>106</sup> For example, a Los Angeles man reported being told "Ching-Chong Chinkie Chinaman. Take your Coronavirus and go back to China!"<sup>107</sup> Other incidents reported in California included physical assaults, workplace discrimination, refusal of service, and online harassment.<sup>108</sup> One of the more notable incidents includes a March 2021 attack where a seventy-year-old Asian woman in San Francisco was assaulted by a stranger and successfully retaliated in defending herself.<sup>109</sup> That same day, the stranger assaulted an eighty-three-year-old Asian man.<sup>110</sup> Arguably the most tragic attack on Asian Americans in the U.S. occurred in Atlanta, Georgia. In March 2021, a white man killed six Asian women in spas across the Atlanta metro area.<sup>111</sup> After the shooter was arrested, he made misogynistic comments about his motivations for targeting spa workers that correlate with racist stereotypes of Asian women.<sup>112</sup> Despite the shooter's apparent racial motivation, Cherokee

102. RUSSELL JEUNG, TARA POPOVIC, RICHARD LIM, & NELSON LIN, STOP AAPI HATE, ANTI-CHINESE RHETORIC EMPLOYED BY PERPETRATORS OF ANTI-ASIAN HATE (2020), [https://a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Stop\\_AAPI\\_Hate\\_Anti-China\\_Rhetoric\\_Report\\_201011.pdf](https://a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Stop_AAPI_Hate_Anti-China_Rhetoric_Report_201011.pdf).

103. Shane Croucher, *Liberal New York City Leads Rise in Anti-Asian Hate Crimes*, NEWSWEEK (Mar. 31, 2021), <https://www.newsweek.com/liberal-new-york-city-leads-rise-anti-asian-hate-crimes-1580147>.

104. Ritchel Mendiola, *Filipino American Man Slashed in the Face While Riding NYC Subway*, ASIAN J. (Feb. 8, 2021), <https://www.asianjournal.com/usa/newyork-newjersey/filipino-american-man-slashed-in-the-face-while-riding-nyc-subway>.

105. STOP AAPI HATE, LOS ANGELES COUNTY REPORT 3.20.20 – 10.28.20 (2020), <https://secureservercdn.net/104.238.69.231/a1w.90d.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Los-Angeles-3.20-11.30-SAH-report-FINAL.pdf>.

106. *Id.*

107. JEUNG, POPOVIC, LIM, LIN, *supra* note 102.

108. STOP AAPI HATE, *supra* note 105.

109. *Witnesses: Elderly Asian Woman Assaulted; Fights Off Attacker in San Francisco*, CBS S.F. BAYAREA (Mar. 17, 2021), <https://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2021/03/17/elderly-asian-woman-beats-up-man-attacking-her-in-san-francisco>.

110. *Id.*

111. *What We Know About the Atlanta-Area Spa Attacks*, N.Y. MAG. INTELLIGENCER, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2021/03/7-dead-after-shootings-at-multiple-spas-in-atlanta-updates.html> (last updated Mar. 21, 2021).

112. *Atlanta Shootings Live Updates: Suspect Had Visited Targeted Spas Before, Police Say*, N.Y. TIMES, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/03/18/us/atlanta-shootings-massage-spa> (last updated May 7, 2021).

County Sheriff's Captain, Jay Baker, tried to defend the shooter by alleging that he was just having "a really bad day."<sup>113</sup> Ironically, Baker had posted racist and anti-Chinese messages on Facebook prior to the incident.<sup>114</sup>

These numbers are alarming, but it is even more concerning that these statistics only represent the number of incidents that were actually reported, particularly since monolingual immigrant Asians and elders that are more vulnerable to being attacked may have difficulty reporting incidents. Considering the incidents that have likely went unreported in conjunction with those that likely took place prior to the establishment of Stop AAPI Hate, the true numbers could likely be much higher.

### B. *Damage to the Relationship Between the U.S. and China*

The impact of the media has spread beyond incidents of discrimination within the country. It has also proven detrimental to U.S.-China relations.<sup>115</sup> The growing conflict between the U.S. and China has contributed to an increasing number of Americans considering China the "greatest enemy" of the U.S.<sup>116</sup> According to Professor Russell Jeung, one of the founders of Stop AAPI Hate, when animosity grew between the U.S. and China during the Cold War, a trend of racism and hatred toward Asian Americans emerged.<sup>117</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has created a similar result. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, the relationship between the U.S. and China has reached its lowest point since 1989.<sup>118</sup>

In 1989, the U.S.'s relationship with China plummeted after the Tiananmen Square Massacre when hundreds of student protestors in China were killed by the Chinese government.<sup>119</sup> Following the massacre, the U.S. suspended military sales and froze all relations with China.<sup>120</sup> In 1992, the U.S. and China started rebuilding their relationship, and the countries returned to permanent normal trade status in 2000.<sup>121</sup> By 2006, China had become the

113. *Id.*

114. Stephanie Baer, *The Cop Who Said the Spa Shooter Had a "Bad Day" Previously Posted a Racist Shirt Blaming China for the Pandemic*, BUZZFEED NEWS (Mar. 17, 2021), <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/skbaer/spa-shooter-bad-day-racist-facebook> (showing the racist comments posted to Facebook by Cherokee County Sheriff's Captain, Jay Baker) Baker posted a photo of a custom t-shirt portraying a parody of the Corona beer label reading "Covid 19 IMPORTED FROM CHY-NA." *Id.* Along with the photo, Baker posted a caption that read "Love my shirt . . . ! Get yours while they last." *Id.*

115. Silver, Devlin, & Huang, *supra* note 14.

116. David Nakamura, *Beyond the Pandemic, Asian American Leaders Fear U.S. Conflict with China Will Fan Racist Backlash*, WASH. POST (Mar. 17, 2021), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-china-asian-american-racism/2021/03/17/69eb4bc6-873d-11eb-82bc-e58213caa38e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/biden-china-asian-american-racism/2021/03/17/69eb4bc6-873d-11eb-82bc-e58213caa38e_story.html).

117. *Id.*

118. Silver, Devlin, & Huang, *supra* note 14.

119. *Tiananmen Square Protests*, HISTORY, <https://www.history.com/topics/china/tiananmen-square> (last updated June. 9, 2020).

120. COUNCIL ON FOREIGN REL., *supra* note 17.

121. *Chronology of U.S.-China Relations, 1784-2000*, U.S. DEPT. OF STATE, OFF. OF THE HISTORIAN, <https://history.state.gov/countries/issues/china-us-relations> (last visited Dec. 5,

U.S.'s second largest trade partner.<sup>122</sup> However, tensions began to rise in 2011 when the U.S. trade deficit reached an all-time high of \$295.5 billion, and they were further aggravated in 2017 when the countries entered a trade war.<sup>123</sup>

These tensions that had been rising for over a decade erupted as the relationship between the U.S. and China plummeted during the COVID-19 pandemic. In late January 2020, President Trump issued an executive order banning all non-U.S. citizens from traveling into the U.S. from China.<sup>124</sup> Animosity between the two nations grew further when President Trump began referring to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” in response to allegations from a Chinese official that the U.S. military brought the virus to China.<sup>125</sup>

Labels such as “Chinese virus” also resulted in the spread of conspiracy theories alleging impropriety, which further damaged trust and cooperation between the two nations.<sup>126</sup> In March 2020, the U.S. limited the number of Chinese journalists from five U.S. media outlets, and China responded by expelling at least thirteen journalists from three popular U.S. newspapers — The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Post.<sup>127</sup> In July 2020, the U.S. ordered China to close its consulate in Houston, Texas, claiming that it was a center for espionage and intellectual property theft.<sup>128</sup> This merely exacerbated the steadily growing fear and animosity towards Asian Americans—upon the closing of the consulate, Mike Pompeo declared that it was a “hub of spying and intellectual property theft.”<sup>129</sup> China, in turn, closed the U.S. consulate in Chengdu, one of China’s most populous cities.<sup>130</sup> By late July 2020, Pompeo declared that all engagement with China had ceased.<sup>131</sup>

As the U.S.’s relationship with China continues to decline, anxieties about China are reaching historically high levels.<sup>132</sup> One study shows that, as of July 2020, 73 percent of U.S. adults expressed unfavorable views toward China.<sup>133</sup> This is a substantial increase from 2018, where only 47 percent expressed unfavorable views of China.<sup>134</sup> Of those who expressed

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2020).

122. COUNCIL ON FOREIGN REL., *supra* note 17.

123. *Id.*; see also Solby Lim, *Break This Down: U.S.-China Relations During COVID-19* BARNARD COLL. (May 27, 2020), <https://barnard.edu/news/break-down-us-china-relations-during-covid-19>.

124. See Proclamation No. 9984, 85 Fed. Reg. 6709 (Jan. 31, 2020).

125. COUNCIL ON FOREIGN REL., *supra* note 17.

126. Silver, Devlin, & Huang, *supra* note 14.

127. COUNCIL ON FOREIGN REL., *supra* note 17.

128. *Id.*

129. Matthew Choi, *Pompeo: U.S. engagement with China has failed*, POLITICO (Jul. 23, 2020), <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/23/pompeo-china-speech-nixon-380251>.

130. COUNCIL ON FOREIGN REL., *supra* note 17.

131. *Id.*

132. Emily Feng, *As U.S. Views of China Grow More Negative, Chinese Support for Their Government Rises*, NPR (Sept. 23, 2020, 11:14 AM), <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/23/913650298/as-u-s-views-of-china-grow-more-negative-chinese-support-for-their-government-ri>.

133. Silver, Devlin & Huang, *supra* note 14.

134. *Id.*

unfavorable views of China, 42 percent stated that they held *very* unfavorable views.<sup>135</sup> Additionally, half of U.S. citizens believe that the U.S. should hold China responsible for its role in the pandemic, even at the expense of economic relations.<sup>136</sup> These negative views toward Asian Americans and blame-shifting simply fuel the rise of bias and hate crimes directed towards Asian Americans.

Over half of U.S. adults view China as a major threat to the country's technological and innovation dominance.<sup>137</sup> In the midst of fear and conspiracy theories aimed at China, President Trump took measures against Chinese technology in the U.S., and, in August 2020, he issued an executive order banning the popular social media app, TikTok, owned by the Chinese company ByteDance Ltd.<sup>138</sup> Trump alleged that TikTok allows the Chinese Communist Party to access personal and proprietary information of U.S. citizens, potentially allowing China to conduct corporate espionage.<sup>139</sup> He went further to say that the app was used to spread pro-China conspiracy theories about COVID-19.<sup>140</sup> According to TikTok, Trump's actions "set[] a dangerous precedent for the concept of free expression and open markets."<sup>141</sup>

Ultimately, the effect that the stigmatizing language used by the media has had on Asian Americans and U.S.-China relations has been tremendous. Such deteriorating relations have increased perceptions of Asian Americans as being enemies or foreigners within the U.S. As a result, Asian Americans have suffered from substantial increases in bias and discrimination that affect their physical well-being and livelihoods. The U.S. has tainted its relationship with one of its largest trade partners, and fueled hatred, distrust, and disrespect towards members of the Asian diaspora. Although the media is not the sole culprit of these issues, it certainly amplifies racial animosity and therefore should share some responsibility for rectifying racist speech and behavior.

## CONCLUSION

Although the perpetrators of stigmatizing language in reference to the COVID-19 pandemic may think that the use of such language is harmless, it has inflicted emotional pain and instigated violence against Asian Americans. Even UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, recognized the wave of hate and xenophobia the pandemic has brought towards people of Asian descent.<sup>142</sup>

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135. *Id.*

136. *Id.*

137. Sam Sabin, *As TikTok and Huawei Restrictions Mount, Americans See China as Top Threat to Silicon Valley's Tech Dominance*, MORNING CONSULT (Aug. 25, 2020, 12:31 PM), <https://morningconsult.com/2020/08/25/china-us-technology-polling>.

138. *See* Exec. Order No. 13942, 85 Fed. Reg. 48637 (Aug. 6, 2020).

139. *Id.*

140. *Id.*

141. Bobby Allyn, *Trump Signs Executive Order That Will Effectively Ban Use of TikTok in the U.S.*, NPR (Aug. 6, 2020, 11:21 PM), <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/06/900019185/trump-signs-executive-order-that-will-effectively-ban-use-of-tiktok-in-the-u-s>.

142. HUM. RTS. WATCH, *supra* note 18.

In an effort to address social stigma, the WHO provided a list of dos and don'ts on language when talking about COVID-19, such as using inclusive language and avoiding terms like "Wuhan Virus," "China Virus," or "Asian Virus" when linking locations or ethnicity to discussions of the virus.<sup>143</sup> The United Nations has also encouraged nations to adopt action plans against racial discrimination, but these efforts must be bolstered by actions from the U.S. government and other institutions.

In order to lessen negative racial bias against Asian Americans, media outlets should screen and prohibit all stigmatizing language such as "Wuhan virus," "China virus," or "Asian virus," when referring to COVID-19. The use of such language has proven to have a strong connection to the increase in discrimination towards Asian Americans.<sup>144</sup> Second, rather than publishing information that reinforces conspiracy theories, the media should publicly discredit all conspiracy theories that accuse China of intentionally creating the virus as it relates to COVID-19. Lastly, rather than playing the "blame game" with China, the U.S. and China should cooperate in order to end the pandemic. In this time of crisis, conflict between the two superpower nations only reinforces existing tensions, biases, and conspiracy theories. As two of the world's most powerful and influential countries, international cooperation could effectively bring an end to the COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying disease of racial animosity. Racism is a disease that has burdened the U.S. since its inception. In order to end this disease, we must not see ourselves as separate or distinct; rather, we must see ourselves as one.

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143. WORLD HEALTH ORG., *supra* note 59.

144. See Darling-Hammond et al., *supra* note 38.

