



## Sinophobia Will Never Be the Same after Covid-19

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Just hours before I started writing this article, US President Donald Trump hit the headlines again for calling Covid-19 ‘the Chinese virus’ and ‘Kung-flu’ at a campaign rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma (The Guardian 2020). He has been using such racially codified terms in public appearances and on Twitter since March, right after Covid-19 became much more than just a viral outbreak in China (Viala-Gaufrey and Lindaman 2020). Although there has been major backlash against him in Asian American communities, as well as from Asian countries and communities around the world, a major distinction between these two groups, which are often lumped together under

the racialised category of ‘Asian’ in US media and public discourses, is that while US citizens of Asian ancestry can vote, Asians without citizenship (including permanent residents) cannot. Trump’s tactic for appeasing Asian Americans inevitably capitalises on this very fact. On 12 May, he tweeted: ‘Asian Americans are VERY angry at what China has done to our Country, and the World. Chinese Americans are the most angry of all. I don’t blame them!’ (Yam 2020). What he attempts to do in this statement is drive a wedge between Asian Americans and non-American Asians, purporting to speak on behalf of the former. He wants his Asian American voters to be nationalistic according

Artwork by the illustrator  
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specially commissioned by  
the author to accompany  
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to his exclusive definition, and to distance themselves from China. In other words, Chinese Americans may strive to become the good exception within populations racialised as ‘Chinese’ by constantly emphasising their Americanness. This is the Trumpian vision of an ideal, well-behaved Asian America and some of the very few politically visible figures from that community, such as Andrew Yang, the social entrepreneur who ran as a candidate in the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries, do not seem to—or dare to—disagree (Zhou 2020).

If Chinese Americans reject this Trumpian tactic and reaffirm their commonality and solidarity with their families and friends in China, they risk confirming and perpetuating the stereotypes of the Chinese being inscrutable, unassimilable, and untrustworthy perpetual foreigners whose allegiance is fundamentally questionable (Tuan 1998). If, conversely, they adopt the Trumpian framing, they go down the unavoidable path of performative nationalism, which means being pressured to make endless assertions of American exceptionalism and superiority over other—especially non-white—nations whenever they participate in discussions about the virus. Such a loyalist dilemma is not limited to Asian Americans. Chinese diasporas living in most white-majority Western societies constantly face similar suspicions. For most of us living in a range of different diasporic conditions, including many of the international students studying in the West, the renunciation of our racialised connection to the ‘foreign’—in this case Asia or China—and the subsequent unapologetic declaration of a seemingly de-racialised form of Western nationalism are inherently reductive and self-defeating choices to make. After all, the majority of racist incidents targeting ‘Chinese’ peoples in the West have been based on superficial phenotypical distinctions rather than the victims’ nationalities, which is why we often see reports about East and Southeast Asians with no connection to China also suffering from the discrimination and violence brought

about by Sinophobic sentiments since the onset of the pandemic (Iau 2020; Boonlert 2020). If racists see no national distinctions but only a generalised and imagined ‘Chinese look’, why should anti-racist struggles against Sinophobia be confined within the boundaries of white-majority nations in such an *a priori* fashion? For this reason, I wish to put forward an internationalist proposal: the perpetual foreigner stereotype is worthy of preserving and perpetuating for diasporic groups no matter where they are, because there is nothing wrong with being foreign.

## Embracing the Foreign

The mutual harms of racism should not be overlooked just because its purported targets are foreign rather than local. The spread of Covid-19 has been accompanied by a surge of racist incidents around the world, and people who ‘look Chinese/Asian’ are among the most attacked. Wikipedia (2020) even has a whole page documenting these incidents and the list is still expanding. Considering how the physiognomic and biologic discourses of ‘Mongoloid’ and ‘Yellow Peril’ have been declared ‘mere relics of a bygone era’ in most Western societies as they take pride in their progressive and multicultural appearances, this surge of crude phenotypical racism may seem like a surprising retrogression (Lynteris 2018, 54). However, for most East and Southeast Asians living in the West, Covid-19 has merely brought to the surface beliefs that had always been lurking in the racialised social structures of their everyday experiences.

For instance, back in February, when my Chinese British friends and I were spat on for walking down the streets wearing face masks, the aggressor certainly did not care whether we had a British passport, a Chinese passport with the right to permanent residency in the United Kingdom, or a brand-new Singaporean passport without stamps. The colour ‘yellow’ may be rarely used nowadays as a racialised

designation, but its reductive racist effect is well preserved and demonstrated in such anti-Asian incidents based on an imagined ‘Chinese look’. It was this perceived foreignness that lumped us together on that occasion, and it is in these moments of heightened antagonism that the affective and political bonds of pan-Asian or even pan-people-of-colour solidarity can be formed and cultivated. This is also why I cannot help but feel a strong sense of double alienation and disappointment whenever I join academic panels or general discussions on anti-racist struggles and find that the Chinese British or Asian American commentators often begin their arguments by saying: ‘I was born in this country.’ On such occasions, I often find myself asking, rhetorically: ‘I was not born here, and I do not and probably will never have a British passport. Does this mean I should simply go back to my own country when the racists on the street tell me to?’ If the legitimacy of anti-racist struggles has always to be built from such birth qualifications and national identity confirmations, they can easily fall back into a narrow-minded nationalist framing that excludes many other groups victimised by the same Sinophobic sentiments, and thus forecloses possible solidarities across national and racial divides.

In other words, a nationalistically conditioned multiculturalism is inadequate in tackling pervasive Sinophobia that sees no national boundaries and distinctions. On the one hand, there are certainly similarities between the nineteenth-century sentiments related to the Yellow Peril and the Sinophobic assaults on Asians following the Covid-19 outbreak, as they both manifest as daily practices of physical attack and verbal abuse targeting Asians regardless of their ethnic background or country of origin. On the other hand, Sinophobia at the discursive level will never be the same in the post-pandemic era as far as the People’s Republic of China (PRC) is concerned, since the nation is no longer a semi-colonised empire in decline but a rising technological and economic superpower. The kind of multiethnic American nationalism

instigated by the Trumpian vision of a divided Asia/America means that, in practical terms, foreign countries and peoples can be blamed and attacked without worrying about accusations of racism, since a seemingly progressive American exceptionalism could always justify itself by citing support from a related hyphenated community at home in opposition to external nation-states and the populations they encompass (Andersen 2018).

Therefore, contemporary Sinophobia in the West is, in essence, a specific form of xenophobia—a tactic of fear- and hate-mongering targeting the foreign. Based on this important recognition, my advocacy is this: since nationalism does not build a genuine and effective coalition against racism, Chinese communities in different kinds of diasporic conditions, together with their local and international allies and friends, must embrace the foreign. Embracing the foreign is not in conflict with efforts at localisation. On the contrary, it is based on the recognition that the foreign *is* part of the local, and local politics do affect and are affected by the foreign living among us. Moreover, embracing the foreign does not mean becoming unconditional apologists for all the decisions made by the Chinese government, but it does require us to stop treating anti-Chinese sentiments and incidents as merely domestic issues in the West and be more sensitive and attentive to the international aspects of Sinophobia, especially those seemingly progressive discourses around China, the specifics of which I discuss in the following sections.

## Ruptures and Continuity

When I say that Sinophobia will never be the same following the Covid-19 outbreak, I do not intend to mark 2020 as presenting any kind of deterministic rupture from all the antagonistic sentiments and discourses against China and the Chinese in the West since the late Qing period. To be more precise, it is the liberal

disavowal of Sinophobia that will not be the same as the pandemic exposes liberalism's long tradition of complicity with xenophobia and modern empire-building (Lowe 2015). There is certainly a discontinuous yet interconnected genealogy of dominant Sinophobic tropes in the West—from the Yellow Peril of a decaying dynasty, to the Red Scare of a brainwashing Communist regime, to the neo-Orientalist struggle against an authoritarian superpower (Yang 2010; Gries 2014; Ooi and D'Arcangelis 2018; Visco 2019). With this genealogy in mind, I would suggest that Covid-19 has intensified a preexisting trend of Cold War ideological opposition to China to the degree that dominant—both conservative and progressive-liberal—discourses in the West have stopped expecting the country 'to be normal like us', which Daniel Vukovich (2012, 23) calls 'the becoming logic'.

This logic operated in Western-centric expectation and hope: the hope was once that market reforms would entail political reforms, leading to the eventual collapse of the authoritarian one-party state and China's transformation into a multiparty liberal democracy (Anderlini 2013). However, the fact is that, since the Opium Wars, China has never been more powerful than it is today, and there is now an increasing sense of recognition both in China and abroad that the country will not only keep exploring its own model of political and economic development but may as well surpass the West in many aspects of modern life—infrastructure, technology, e-commerce, cultural industries, etc.—regardless of or, even more scarily for Western liberals, because of its sociopolitical organisation and management. In other words, rather than becoming the silent and conformist 'model minority' in the international order dominated by Western liberal democracies, China's rise is seen through the stereotype of the Chinese as 'unassimilable' foreigners who will always cause disruptions in the West as well as to Western governance and blueprints of the world. In other words, as the becoming logic fails to realise its promises and

predictions, its reversal, the century-old idea of immutable Orientalist difference, is staging an alarming comeback.

In this sense, the Trumpian advocacy for Asian American nationalism is but a preemptive move that renders Sinophobic attacks against China politically correct for a range of his constituencies across the conservative/liberal divide in American society, or even morally justified in universalist terms when the Chinese government or specific sociopolitical events in China become the primary targets of criticism, albeit always tainted with subtle racialised undertones. Even without Trump, the conservative and liberal camps in the United States and the United Kingdom already tend to be united in their consensus that it is definitely not racist if the China blame game is played by focussing on issues of censorship, racist incidents within China, and Chinese hegemony towards other Sinophone territories (Promise Li 2020). While these are complex issues that certainly warrant grounded analyses and targeted criticism, Western critical discourses surrounding these sensitive areas should not be exempt from (self-)reflections on Orientalism and critiques against Sinophobia, especially if they manifest in totalising languages that may easily escalate into a new Cold War that demands or dismisses ideas purely based on a binary logic of incommensurable political allegiances—e.g. either 'pro-China' or 'anti-China', either the 'West' or 'China', either 'Sinophone' or 'Chinese'.

Against an already-risen powerful PRC championing globalisation coupled with a much more authoritarian mode of domestic governance, the resurgence of Sinophobia following the Covid-19 outbreak has acquired new legitimacy through its integration into sophisticated layers involving international and inter-racial politics. If diasporic communities are serious about standing together with the foreign to tackle this new wave of Sinophobia, always starting the anti-racist conversation with 'I was born here' is counterproductive. The first step towards embracing the foreign is

to become aware of the international aspects of racism involving political judgements against other countries. In the case of Sinophobia, the analyses of systemic racism should not be confined to the presentation of the sufferings of individual Chinese people living in the West but must be extended to the examination of biased Western discourses and images of the nation of China. In the rest of this essay, I describe and explain three prominent ideological slippery slopes that constitute this new post-Covid Sinophobia, which have made it increasingly difficult to separate Western anti-racist, anti-authoritarian discourses from their own Orientalist tendencies and effects.

## The Wane of Western Triumphalism

Firstly, post-Covid Sinophobia has finally exposed the unproductive and hypocritical aspects of the dominant form of anti-PRC rhetoric built on the neo-Cold-War binary of democracy versus authoritarianism. As the ‘Coming Collapse of China’ thesis keeps collapsing year after year (Chang 2001, 2011, and 2020), Western triumphalism following the end of the Cold War has inevitably started to wane, being replaced with the increasing sense of unease and fear that the Chinese Communist Party’s authoritarian control will actually prove to be a working method of modernisation and development, eventually spilling over and contaminating the democratic ‘Free World’ (Human Rights Watch 2020).

From late January to mid-March, when most cases of Covid-19 were still confined to mainland China, numerous articles appeared in mainstream Western media lambasting Chinese authoritarianism and censorship as the cause of the outbreak (The Economist 2020; Tufekci 2020). Not only did they highlight the silencing of Dr Li Wenliang, they also criticised the unprecedented method of large-scale lockdown as ‘violating human rights’, continuously

doubting its efficacy (Buckley et al. 2020; Eve 2020). The subtext was clear: Covid-19 would never have happened in the democratic West, and even if it did, it would have been handled much more effectively and humanely than it was in authoritarian China. Such positional superiority was taken for granted until the turn of events since March quickly proved the opposite. This is what Belinda Kong (2019, 380) terms ‘bio-Orientalism’, which had already manifested thoroughly during the SARS outbreak in 2003, when Western media and public discourses portrayed China as ‘the site of exotic and unhygienic culinary traditions as well as authoritarian secrecy, a lethal combination’ threatening to break ‘the boundary between first-world health and third-world contagion’. As Marius Meinhof (2020) points out in a poignant summary, such dominant bio-Orientalist discourses:

(1) perceived events through the framework of liberal/authoritarian, (2) read the outbreak as a proof of the inevitable failure of the non-liberal, (3) delegated the virus into the sphere of the authoritarian other, (4) muted Chinese voices by making all statements from within China suspicious: Official Chinese case numbers, death rates, reports on successful containment strategies—always there would be someone to suspect manipulation by the authoritarian regime, which made it difficult to act upon these information.

This bio-Orientalist Sinophobia’s unreflective totalisation of a preconceived anti-authoritarian ideology did a huge disservice to everyone living in Western societies, not just the Chinese diasporas. The blind faith in idealised versions of liberal democracy bolstered by this conjecture of the authoritarian Other has weakened Western vigilance against the virus, and in extreme cases, resulted in blatant racism that designates the virus as ‘only affecting people of the yellow race’ (Kang 2020; The Storm Media 2020). The complacency has

also hampered much-needed scientific as well as political collaboration with China, and the unwillingness to take seriously Chinese methods of containing and treating the virus backfired in cataclysmic proportions (Zhang and Xu 2020).

Rejecting the authoritarian/democratic binary embedded in post-Covid Sinophobia does not mean that we cannot criticise the Chinese government's policies and actions. On the contrary, a much more nuanced case-by-case method of critique is urgently needed in order to avoid distorting the purpose or effect of critique into self-indulgent mystification of Western superiority. In other words, to steer clear of such Sinophobic tendencies, we must constantly ask ourselves: are we critiquing China because we have the best interests of people in China at heart, or because we just want to make ourselves feel good that we are not Chinese or not living in China? Common Asian American reactions based on birthplace and political allegiance can hardly confront this sophisticated anti-authoritarian Sinophobia, and we must learn to defuse and re-appropriate the Othering nature of many of the dominant China-watching discourses in order to avoid traps of hypocrisy, which can be so enticing in their superficial tone of enlightenment and progressiveness.

## **Triangulations of Anti-racist Competitions**

Secondly, post-Covid Sinophobia is not confined to the racial binary of white versus yellow anymore, and actively incorporates anti-Blackness into a complex triangulation of (anti-) racist competitions that set the postcolonial, progressive, and multicultural West apart from racist, backward, and monolithic China. In such a racial triangulation, the Chinese are often presented as trapped in the West's own racist past without any historical contextualisation of their own history of contact with people of African descent. Put more simply, one of the

popularised Sinophobic arguments is now this: not only are the Chinese very racist against Black people, their racism also manifests in abhorrent ways that we in the white-majority societies have long overcome.

Nothing illustrates how this sophisticated anti-racist Sinophobia—how oxymoronic!—works better than many of the progressive-sounding Western media reports on the problematic treatment of African migrants in Guangzhou in April. Toward the end of March after the domestic situation was more or less brought under control, the Chinese government shifted its focus on to international border control to prevent Covid-19 from travelling back to China. This shift certainly brought much pressure on local governments in cities like Guangzhou, which hosts a significant foreign population, especially African nationals. Therefore, when news and images started circulating on social media showing Black residents being evicted from their flats by their Chinese landlords, Guangzhou McDonald's putting out notices of 'No Blacks shall enter', and anti-Black hate speeches proliferating on the Chinese Internet, the outrage was expected, understandable, and much needed (BBC 2020; Hangwei Li 2020). Make no mistake here: these incidents were motivated by xenophobia and must be condemned as such. It is well documented and researched that anti-Black sentiments in the PRC date back to the 1970s, and Africans in Guangzhou continue to face racism, while the most outrageous racist attacks have been posted online by nationalistic Chinese netizens who do not live anywhere close to the Black communities (Sautman 1994; Cheng 2011; Lan 2017; Huang 2020). What is troubling is how these issues concerning the welfare of Africans in China are often picked up by Western media to demonise the PRC as an outstandingly racist nation mired in exceptionally backward inter-racial cultural politics.

For example, a video explaining these anti-Black incidents in Guangzhou went viral on Facebook in May, in which the host puts forward the thesis that 'planet China is

racist' (Project Nightfall 2020). Instead of historicising anti-Black ideologies in China as part of the nation's race to become modern after being forcibly incorporated into a racially stratified system run by Euro-American imperialism (Dikötter 2015; Lan 2017), the video presents a bricolage of racially codified cultural phenomena in contemporary Chinese society to emphasise both the pervasiveness and the severity of Chinese anti-Black racism. They include animalising images, Blackface performances, and the literal whitewashing of Black bodies in commercial advertisements. As a result, this portrayal of a hyper-racist country is totalised into 'planet China'. The accusatory agenda of the video's anti-racist critique is achieved by instigating kneejerk reactions of shock and shame from its Anglophone audiences, which are evoked by the indelible historical memories of similar racist practices in Western societies. The effect is almost immediate: it confirms the belief that 'planet China', despite its political clout and economic development, is culturally stuck in 'our' past, and unlike 'us' in the multicultural progressive West, the Chinese offer no compassion for, or solidarity with, Black people. Rather than pointing out the obvious fact that Blackface and whitewashing in contemporary China may have a different genealogy and produce different social—still harmful and offensive—effects than in, say, the antebellum American South (Castillo 2016; Black Livity China 2018), the video foregrounds Chinese anti-Blackness as not only anachronistic but also particularly unforgivable given the progressive camp's anti-racist criticisms against anti-Asian sentiments within Western societies. Similar to the rush to condemn authoritarianism, Western media discourses tend to grab every opportunity to claim the moral high ground over the PRC around topics of race and racism.

The proliferation of such biased media discourses may affect their readers' real-life perceptions and interactions with PRC nationals as well, who are often expected to speak and explain for 'their country'. To offer a personal example, when I shared reports

on anti-Asian incidents in London or articles supporting the Black Lives Matter movement on social media, some of my British friends responded by sending me videos and reports from the *BBC* and *The Guardian* on racism against Blacks in China (Burke et al. 2020). They said, in an offended reaction of white fragility and whataboutism, that they found it funny that a Chinese person would accuse the West of being too racist against Blacks while China is 'colonising' the entire African continent with the Belt and Road Initiative—another totalising claim long challenged by scholars working on issues related to the Chinese presence in Africa (Yan and Sautman 2017; Yan 2020). Since most of the grassroots reports and organisational materials calling for Chinese support for Africans in Guangzhou can only be found in Chinese, I could not show them that many Chinese people disagree with such xenophobic practices as well and are doing all they can to offer concrete help to their African neighbours and friends on the ground (Douban 2020). There is also a host of African voices sharing their experience about living in China, including YouTubers like Wode Maya and Fyjo Molly, but they are rarely commented upon by Western scholars and critics, and are generally ignored in the major media outlets. When Sinophobia takes on anti-racist tones in the post-pandemic era, it is more important than ever that those of us seeking to build diasporic and pan-coloured solidarities equip ourselves with the knowledge and critical capability to contextualise each criticism of racism. Whataboutism does not help with addressing the multiple and intersecting systems of oppression at hand (see Franceschini and Loubere's op-ed in the present issue). anti-Black incidents in China should not be cited to excuse anti-Chinese incidents elsewhere and vice versa. As paradoxical as it may sound, the contextualisation of racism and criticism against racism is necessary to build solidarity across racial and national divides regardless of one's location and identity.

## Sinophobia in Sinophone Communities

Finally, just as anti-Blackness is not confined to white majority societies, Sinophobia can be found in abundance in Sinophone communities outside of mainland China. Despite Western media's portrayal of Sinophone regions like Hong Kong and Taiwan as perpetual victims of Chinese hegemony, the complex cultural politics manifested in these places cannot be reduced to another binary of oppressive centre versus marginalised peripheries (Shi, forthcoming 2020). Sinophone mockeries and racialised memes against China proliferated online following the outbreak in Wuhan. Anti-mainlander YouTube channels such as Hong Kong Golden Music (高登音悦台), which had been a key driving force in the 'anti-locust' campaigns in the city throughout the last decade—with 'locusts' (蝗虫) being a derogatory term for mainland Chinese in Hong Kong (Yan and Sautman 2015; Ong and Lin 2017; Carrico 2018)—enjoyed a revivalist surge of popularity after producing parodic songs like 'New Pneumonia, Countrymen Dying' (新型肺炎国人渐已死) and 'Little Nigger' (小尼哥) targeting both the PRC and the World Health Organisation (HKGolden Music 2020a and 2020b). In Taiwan, an adaptation of Jolin Tsai's hit song 'Wonder in Madrid' (马德里不思议) titled 'Mother Pneumonia Wonder' (马的肺炎你真不思议) includes the line 'China has always been sick' (中国本来就有病) and has had over 1.5 million views on YouTube (Caiyiling 2020). Not surprisingly, when Jolin Tsai released a new song, 'Fight as One', with Hong Kong singer Eason Chan, they were widely lampooned by Hong Kong and Taiwanese netizens for participating in brainwashing Chinese propaganda (Chan and Tsai 2020). Since the establishment of the Communist government on the mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwan's cultural similarity and affinity with the PRC have always been overwhelmed by the political and ideological divide between China and the liberal West, whose anti-authoritarian

assertions of progressive superiority often materialise in highly inflammatory and discriminatory terms on these Sinophone frontlines (Law 2000; Chen 2010; Li 2019). Such neo-Cold-War divides will only intensify in the post-Covid era, making Sinophobic sentiments and discourses ever more difficult to detect and challenge.

## Building New Coalitions

The anti-authoritarian, anti-racist, and Sinophone aspects of post-Covid Sinophobia demand transnational awareness and cross-cultural sensitivities that cannot be nurtured in any single nationalistic mode of thinking. The concept of ethnic/racial minority is usually defined in relation to nation and sovereignty as given concepts and lived experiences, but minority subjects also travel across national boundaries and in this process become the 'foreign'. For example, when Chinese Americans travel back to China, they cease to be ethnic minorities in that context and thus may need to reflect on their own complicities with the dominant structures and discourses around them, or they may encounter new intersectional situations that afford them unexpected means of coalition-building based on more cosmopolitan outlooks, such as solidarity with other 'foreigners' who are not born in China and do not speak Chinese well. The exploration of innovative ways of responding to the new wave of Sinophobia has just begun, and embracing the foreign, in China, the West, and anywhere else shall serve as a constant reminder against nationalism in all of its forms, conservative or liberal. ■

This text is taken from *Made in China Journal: Volume 5, Issue 2, 2020*,  
edited by Ivan Franceschinim and Nicholas Loubere, published 2020 by ANU Press,  
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/MIC.05.02.2020.22](https://doi.org/10.22459/MIC.05.02.2020.22)