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Infantilization of the Asian American Elderly and the Nature of the Media

Gun Ho Moon

Abstract

As hostility towards Asian Americans has been on the rise since the start of the global pandemic, Asian American elders have been particular targets of public brutality. While Asian Americans have historically been defined and positioned with varying stereotypes depending on their context in America, including the duality of the model minority myth and the international threat, the Asian American elderly do not seem to be registered in either of these categories but continue to exist as victims to these violences. Rather, there seems to be a uniquely intersectional position the Asian American elderly occupy in consequence to them being infantilized that causes Americans to desire to inflict harm upon them. The media has been devoutly displaying the news of these assaults, rampantly spreading them as widely as they can for the nation to see, but there seems to be something cynical about their obsession with images of violence.

Introduction

The COVID-19 global pandemic has marked the beginning of a novel era of hostility against Asian Americans as Anti-Asian hate crimes in the United States against them have dramatically risen by 164% in the span of a year, from May 2020 to May 2021 (Campbell). With a culture of explicitly xenophobic rhetoric in development, especially bolstered by former President Donald Trump's usage of phrases such as the "Chinese virus" and Kung flu" in reference to COVID-19, Anti-Asian sentiment in the United States has become increasingly obvious in the public eye as numerous assailants have expressed their resentment of Asians in relation to the coronavirus (Salcedo). Since their arrival onto American soil, Asian Americans have become a homogenized melting pot of various ethnicities of domestic and international contexts, leaving no surprise that a broad range of Asian American communities—the

Vietnamese, Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos, Laotians and many more—have been immediate victims of the violences as they are endlessly misidentified as one another, and to many, all perceived as the same (Yang). The ignorant historical relationship between the United States and Asian Americans speaks for itself through innumerable instances of misjudgment, isolation, and discrimination which can be traced throughout our history across different time periods, social contexts, and ethnic communities. The signing of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barring Chinese people from entering the United States and the forced relocation of Japanese Americans to internment camps due to overwhelming wartime suspicions are two prime, well-known examples of insensible, merciless prejudice (Wu). But even after decades of reflection and adjustment, the sentiment against Asian Americans seems to persist (Yang). Regardless of it existing intentionally or not, as well as whichever forms it is materialized in such as microaggressions or physical violence, it has been real in the way it has been exacerbating Asian American life.

Discrimination against Asians in the United States may not be unfamiliar, but as Anti-Asian hate crimes have recently escalated, media sources have blatantly highlighted the Asian American elderly as the primary targets of violence. For the past two years of the pandemic, images and videos of these brutalities have been broadcasted across national news platforms. The highly-publicized stories include two elderly Chinese women who were stabbed at a bus stop in San Francisco (O'Neill), a 65-year-old Filipino woman who was punched and kicked leaving her face bruised and swelling (Suansing), and an 81-year-old Laotian, Mark Sanouvong, who was beaten in San Diego just this past December of 2021 (Nakano). The list has been lengthening every day since these attacks began, fortifying these individual crimes into a real trend of violence against the Asian American elderly. Although the assaults against these innocent beings

may seem incomprehensible and inexplicable, it is unlikely that this phenomenon has been structurally unpremeditated and simply a matter of coincidence. Rather, I argue that throughout history, a social position for Asian Americans has existed outside of the well-known labels of being a model minority or an international threat, and in tandem with being a modern day elder, a uniquely intersectional experience ridden with brutality has been produced. Furthermore, along with the rise in assaults against the Asian elderly, there has been a paralleled, fervent desire from the media to visibilize these violences across their platforms.

Racial Formation: Infantilization

Asian Americans, originally immigrants from the East, have been ontologically characterized as the Orient—the exotic and incomprehensible—and thus, not truly human (Said 48). Settling in the United States, Asian Americans have been racialized, developing social identities in opposition to those who are considered settled (Omi and Winant 11). Two primary social identities are most often described in stereotyping the nature of the incomprehensibly foreign Asian American: the model minority and the international threat. The model minority myth describes the successes of Asian Americans in opposition to disenfranchised racial minorities, highlighting “innate, inhuman” traits that allow them to progress in society, such as unmatched diligence and obedience when partaking in academic systems and the labor force (Zhou 32). However, Asian Americans do not have the luxury to fully assimilate into civil society because they are “otherized” as forever foreigners, on perpetual standby to be depicted as international threats depending on the context of international relations as well the momentary impact they as a race have on society (Zhou 36). Past historical tensions between the United States and Asia have produced an everlasting anxiety that Americans have around Asian immigrants, evincing the immediate pathologizing of Asian folk in the wake of the coronavirus.

Asians have been consistently monitored throughout all of their time present in America, leading the United States to define them as either the hardworking cogs or the foreign enemies whenever the nation calls for it. While the pandemic seems to have triggered great anxiety and fear of the entire Asian race, what explains the spike in hate crimes against the Asian American elderly? In comparison to other Asian American age groups, elders do not seem to be any more threatening considering that many are socially alienated, invisible in the social work space, and lack English proficiency (Lee 110). Nevertheless, it is a material fact that a culture of assault against Asian American elders has developed since the COVID-19 began, and like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and Japanese internment, there should be a warrant for the malicious attitudes, or at the very least, a collection of warrants that explain the context that had permitted the particular hostility to foster.

There is another social identity of Asian Americans that does not fit in nor between the “model minority” and “international threat” positions; this identity is produced from the process of *infantilization*. Collins Dictionary defines infantilization as “the act of infantilizing, the act of prolonging an infantile state in a person by treating them as an infant.” The term infantilization is often linked to individuals who seem to lack a form of social agency, including bedridden patients, those with disabilities, and literal infants. Thus, infantilization positions Asians differently, away from the model minority and international threat, as both assume the agency and uncertain capacity of the Orient. Actor John Cho, a prominent voice for Asian American representation in the media, discusses the impact of infantilization as he states:

There’s this belief that Asian babies are really cute, and it got me thinking that our whole race is infantilized to some degree, and it manifests itself in different ways. You infantilize a woman, and she becomes eroticized. You infantilize a man, and he becomes

emasculated. You infantilize a baby [laughs] — and it's possible, it appears that you can infantilize a baby even more. (Wang)

Cho's claim is very much comprehensible once one traces the different intersectional positions of infantilization across differing genders and ages throughout history. Asian men have not just been historically emasculated due to feminized representations from Chinese men who were often laundrymen and cooks in the late seventeenth century, but they have also been enfeebled with descriptions of their perceived exotic nature such as the "mixture of the child, the slave, and the sphinx" as well as the commercialization of their "childlike looks" through the diffusion of their pictures on the covers of song sheets with "submissive posture[s]" and "chubby childish face[s]" (Chen 59). These images imply their lack of socially-linked biological development to have the capacity to hold positions of adulthood. Asian women, on the other hand, have been hypersexualized through the process of infantilization (Bong 7). This eroticization is robustly evinced by the digital popularity Asian women have had in film domestically and internationally, being portrayed as Asian teens and Japanese school girls, displaying a strong correlation between "race and pedophilia" (Woan 292).

John jokes about the infantilization of Asian infants, but I argue that age is an important factor to take into consideration as the Asian elderly may currently occupy this infantilized position in their own unique, intersectional fashion as well. "Currently", because although the first Chinese immigrants had arrived in large waves to the United States several centuries ago to find work opportunities, the lack of media presence and attention to their lives outside of their labor tasks have rendered those previous generations of elders historically invisible. However, this current generation of elderly largely immigrated to the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, and today, especially in particular ethnic enclaves, they can be recognized in

abundance, normalizing and solidifying their settlement in America (Lee 106). Anyone who has stepped foot into San Francisco's Chinatown has seen elderly Chinese people roaming the stores, restaurants, and markets of the community; although they may come off as foreign and unfamiliar to those outside the Chinatown, their presence is unavoidable, meaning that the recent violence against them has been an unmistakable, targeted phenomenon. Many elders arrived to the United States as first-generation immigrants or as parents who have shadowed their children in their journey to the United States, leaving them with a multiplicity of cultural obstacles, such as language barriers, which make it much more difficult for them to engage in society (Lee 106). Additionally, a multitude of racist legislation, including the Alien Land Law of 1913, established socioeconomic impediments such as the prevention of owning land and school segregation, subjecting many to impoverished lives (Lee 105). These de facto and de jure conditions have fostered perceived infantilized attributes that Americans seem to pick at, such as quietness and helplessness. In fact, it is said that "the language barrier is just one of several reasons why Asian seniors rarely speak up and why these hate incidents are underreported in this community," meaning there are many more hindrances that have set the stage for them to be ignored and dehumanized (Choe).

The elderly as a population tend to be infantilized by society across all races. We tend to pathologize them as senile, incapable, and incompetent due to the biological inevitabilities of aging; thus, many choose to infantilize them due to their passive acceptance, especially within clinical spaces (Marson and Powell 146). Many would argue that violence has been exacerbated against the Asian American elderly simply because they are old, easy targets during a time of animosity against Asians. This may be true to some extent, but there has not seemed to be a culture of public assault against elderly populations in the United States, especially as depicted

by the media. Abuses against the elderly tend to be domestic, perpetuated by those directly acquainted to them, such as family members and caregivers (Galvin). Additionally, while harassment against Asian elders in New York increased by 11% from 2019 to 2020, harassment decreased by 3% for black folk and 1.5% for white folk, displaying the disconnect between public violence and the pathologizing of old age across all races (Chung and Li). These data show that infantilization does not operate in the same fashion for all elders; the experiences of the Asian American elderly are uniquely intersectional. Having been receiving violence from unassociated aggressors in the public sphere, it demonstrates the novelty of the phenomenon, away from simply old age. With the immensity of news and media platforms today, there has been an inevitable visibilizing of these hate crimes against the Asian American elderly, revealing the obvious nature of the infantilization.

Media Perpetuation and Circulation

Most would argue that the influx of the media has been critical in helping the nation locate and recognize violence for the public to act upon it. It is true that the media has cultivated an attitude of widespread retaliation against Asian hate along with material improvements such as the reprioritization of police hate crime task forces towards Asian elderly communities. However, my criticism is rather of the hyperfixation the media has had on Asian elderly suffering images and their rapid, unhesitant dissemination of them. Academic Saidiya Hartman theorizes this hyperfixation as a spectacularization of violence (17). This spectacularization creates an empathetic guise as the media provides a space for these narratives of abuse to be seen and made understood but then compulsively recycles and redisplay the images all throughout their platforms. This repetition causes the distress of Asian elders to become repeatedly sexualized as the audience fixates on the nature of the subjects' infantilized expressions and

movements of agony, and as empathy draws them emotionally closer to the affliction, it creates space for imagination, permitting the audience to consciously and unconsciously derive pleasure in pondering the Orient's vulnerabilities (Hartman 20). This may sound rather bizarre for just describing how we intake violences presented by the news, but the idea of attachment to violence is not a new concept at all. This idea is revealed by human infatuation and curiosities about these discomforts, illustrated by topics such as horror genres in film and the American glorification of war. It is a part of human nature to obsess over the unknown.

To bring context to Hartman's theorization of the innate, racialized obsession over images of suffering, the process of spectacularization can be perceived and analyzed in a 2021 viral video clip that displays the harassment, robbing, and assault of an elderly Asian man in San Francisco (Miller). The perpetrator is recorded taunting the elderly man to collect his recyclables, and as the elderly man gets close, he swings a metal pole several times in an attempt to injure him. A crowd surrounds the two in observation of the harassment, howling at the elderly man as he narrowly escapes the blows, running away. As the elderly man bawls in fear for his life, the cameraman closes in on his anguished expression and mimics the sounds of his wailing, mocking him in the most humiliating fashion. I argue that this spectacularization is representative of the fantasy the West has in their exploration and dissection of foreign subjects. No matter how much one may sympathize for the elder or feel in control of their moral code, there is an unconscious and perhaps conscious curiosity to observe the degradation of the docile, quiet elderly man, helplessly wailing in his broken English as infants do. This infantilization is accompanied by the adultification of the perpetrators' own selves as they ground themselves in privilege and authority in opposition to the subject (Hartman 22). After receiving their pleasures, the image is recycled and circulated by the media for the rest of the world to see and share,

bringing his pain so close to the self that the process gets normalized, and its audience is too numb to realize nothing has changed (20). Thus, there has been an epidemic of not just assault upon the Asian American elderly but also the mass hypervisibility of Asian elderly-specific violence throughout the media. A simple google search of hate crimes against the Asian elderly would lead one to an endless laundry list of pictures and videos of Asian elders being beaten, stabbed, and robbed—collected and saved since the assaults first began.

Conclusion

Elderly Asian populations are easily one of the most neglected minority groups in America, lacking in research and discussion, especially through an intersectional lens. More narratives and evidential disaggregation are necessary to potentially uncover instances of Asian elderly marginalization within America's past, locating them across differing events, locations, ethnic communities. In doing so, a linear timeline of the racialization of this population may be discovered and consolidated, including the context of origin for Asian elderly infantilization, permitting us to make comparisons with the present and to see what sustains these stereotypes. With the nation's past neglect of Asian American well-being, history most definitely holds hidden and forgotten experiences that would more clearly articulate the lives of Asian American elders throughout their time in America. Alongside engagement with the past and discovering more about these patterns of violence, it is also important to educate the communities around us about how these offenses have turned out to be historical continuities of racist attitudes the nation has held against the Asian elderly rather than presuming absolute novelty and intermittence behind the attacks. As for the present spectacularization of violence, it is increasingly critical to resist the desire to circulate images and videos of these hate crimes against the elderly because sexualized, orientalized tropes have become ingrained in the minds of

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the public, ceaselessly and mundanely perpetuated. Rather, narratives of Asian American elderly engagement with society should be introduced into the media, humanizing them and unraveling this racialized, social identity that has been plastered upon them. With that, we can gradually learn to attend to the voices of marginalized Asian seniors with genuine care and consideration.

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