

THE VOICE OF ASIAN AMERICAN YOUTH: WHAT GOES UNTOLD

Owen Setiawan, Class of 2023, Central High School

Abstract:

This piece follows the recent and prolonged struggles of Asian American youth in the United States highlighting key points surrounding recent events in 2020. The purpose of this piece is to highlight the voices, experiences, and opinions of Asian American youth during this time. This piece is based on Asian American youth primarily in the Philadelphia and surrounding areas. It serves as a reflection of the discontent and fear that many Asian Americans are feeling right now. The piece is based upon the COVID-19 pandemic as well as fighting discrimination on a unified front. At a time where many people are speaking out against the discrimination that they have faced, it is important to unite and share our voices. This piece is meant to be a collection of the many voices yet to be heard.

Keywords: Voices, Asian American, COVID-19, Allies, Youth, and Education

INTRODUCTION

On January 20th, 2020, the first reported COVID-19 case appeared in the United States. In mid-March, President Donald Trump began the use of the terms “Chinese Virus” and “Kung Flu” indicating that it was not racist. On May 25th, 2020 George Floyd was murdered by police officers. Each 3 of these dates were days in which life in the United States for everyone would change. After January 20th, 2020, COVID-19 sightings in the U.S. had begun to appear, sparking a future nationwide shutdown and quarantine. After COVID-19 began to appear in the United States, Asian Americans began to be called “Chinese Virus” and “Bat Eaters.” After May 25th, 2020, hundreds of thousands of people across the United States and the world began to protest the death of George Floyd and protest for police reform. After months of civil unrest and fear spreading in the United States, many people are still discontent.

Out of the many communities that are discontent with the current condition of the United States, the one community that I have the greatest ability to speak on is the Asian American community. As the son of Indonesian immigrants and a member of the younger generation, I provide a different perspective into the fold. Unfortunately, in many circumstances, the voices of Asian American youth and Asian Americans in general are forgotten. Feeling this hole in the representation of Asian Americans, I felt the need to take on this piece. Growing up as an Asian American, I have always found it difficult to identify as an Asian American due to the lack of representation of the Asian American community in the media and in general. Even now, this issue continues to be present. With the rise of more Asian American representation in the media, it shows how long it has been for Asian Americans to gain a voice. This lack of a voice goes to say for many other communities of color as well.

This piece was centered around the Philadelphia area as that is where I am from, and most of the data collected was gathered through a google forms survey that was sent out to Asian American high schoolers. Many of these high schoolers passed along this survey as well to their friends. Due to the written method of data collection, many of the responses include symbols that are normally typed, but are not normally said such as slashes and abbreviations for words. This survey however does not represent the entirety of the Asian American community in the U.S. nor can it even represent the voice of the Asian American community in the Philadelphia area. This piece carries just the voices of a couple students. However, in a greater hope, this piece will allow for more representation of the Asian American community.

This piece is split into three separate parts. The first part, “Asian Americans in 2020” will be a broader and general section. This section will highlight some of the emotions, hopes, and issues that Asian Americans are feeling that don’t fit into the more specific sections of this piece. However, this section highlights other important parts of what living as an Asian American in 2020 is like. The second part, “Asian Americans and COVID-19” will be a more specific section on the experiences and feelings that Asian American youth have regarding COVID-19. As a big topic right now and a topic that is affecting the Asian community, I felt it was only necessary to have this section be one of the highlights of the piece. The third part, “Asian Americans and Allyship” will revolve more around fighting discrimination as a whole and the feeling of allyship when facing discrimination. Each of these sections will include certain survey questions that were asked of respondents as well as their responses.

ASIAN AMERICANS IN 2020

“The way that people are racist/prejudiced toward Asians after Covid-19 happened is sad to me but not shocking,” an anonymous respondent who is a rising junior at Julia R. Masterman High School says about what many other Asian Americans are feeling right now. In agreement, Angelica, a rising senior at Washington Township High School states, “Was it surprising to see many people bash Asian Americans for the spread of COVID-19? No, frankly I would have been more surprised if people hadn’t.” In many ways these two Asian Americans share similar concerns about the responses that people had to COVID-19. Both shared the concern that the response that people had was expected. When you are a person of color living in America, the unfortunate reality is that it will be more of a surprise that you are not experiencing discrimination than it would be from when you are. As frightening as it sounds, discrimination has become a part of almost every person of color’s schedule.

As Asian Americans living in 2020, many Asians are feeling unsafe, scared, uncertain, furious, afraid, paranoid, and alienated. This list could go on for many paragraphs if you had asked any Asian American how they were feeling right now. These words are just samples of some of the words from some respondents. Asian Americans have always felt alienated and left out from many parts of society. Most importantly right now: the media.

Asian Americans have had an infamous history of being left out from the media by both news organizations as well as social media. The same anonymous respondent from Masterman High School shared, “I also feel, and have always felt, excluded on a certain level. I feel underrepresented at times.” Asian Americans are not given the recognition and representation they deserve in many aspects of modern society. However, due to COVID-19, Asian Americans have been gaining more of a voice in the media. The same student, however, highlighted how, “A pandemic had to happen for Asians to be seen and represented for a little while in the media.” The strenuous requirements to get Asian Americans a voice in modern media seems to be absolutely absurd. The student highlights the words, “little while.” It’s important to note this phrasing in how after a small period of a couple months Asian Americans and their representation in the media appeared to disappear. Most of the representation of Asian Americans in the media occurred mostly during late March and early April. However, to any person who has been on social media, the trend of rise and decline of this issue shows that the representation of Asian Americans was just seen as a social media trend rather than an actual issue. The reason why: “because of the model minority myth that is put on many Asian American students.”

As explained by Mei, a rising senior at the Academy at Palumbo, Asian American racism is many times normalized and forgotten due to a “Model Minority” myth that many people have. She further states that due to this myth, “people often discredit any struggles we face as a minority race.” Although there are many other possible factors, this myth still plays a role in this issue. Many people have a fixed mindset on Asian Americans: since Asian Americans are this “Model Minority,” they don’t have to face issues with their race. I have also noticed how the “Model Minority” myth has come into play on social media platforms. In many social media posts where Asian Americans would talk about the acts of discrimination against them, many of the responses would include comments such as “Asians are successful” or “Asians make the most money.” These two statements are ways in which the myth has come into play when disregarding Asian American discrimination and racism. The myth becomes one of the ways in which Asian American racism and discrimination becomes normalized in social media and in American society. With social media as one of the main forms of communication in the 21st century, it has become a dangerous and easy way for people to spread these myths. This allows the myth to influence people across the country furthering its harmful effect on Asian Americans. Kelly Wei, a rising senior at Washington Township High School, goes more into depth about various examples of the normalization of Asian American racism. She talks about hashtags such as “#culturenotcostume” which counters the use of traditional clothing in certain cultures as costumes. She talks about the Chinese qipao and the Vietnamese áo dài which are traditional dresses and how they are used as costumes and are disrespected. Kintan Silvano, a Southeast Asian American rising senior at John W. Hallahan Catholic Girls’ High School as well shares some of the normalized racism that Asian Americans experience today. She talks about a trend called the “fox-eye” trend. This trend shows non asian people pulling their eyes back in a way that represents the eye shape of Asians. This trend in which people are imitating Asian eyes was not meant to have that effect at first. However, this further goes into play about how sensitive parts of Asian American life are glossed over by American society. Asian Americans have been judged about the way that their eyes are shaped for many years. This issue goes back into the childhood of many Asian Americans where the quote, “Chinese, Japanese, what did they do to me” was frequently used by many people to make fun of the shape of the eyes of Asian Americans. For an Asian American to see that something they’ve been made fun of for their entire life has somehow become a beauty trend shows a lot about how oblivious people are about Asian American racism.

Asian American youth experienced many of these issues in their own daily lives. However, the survey also touches on topics that affect Asian American youth in their educational environments. Many of the respondents had similar answers when asked the question, “What do you feel like as an Asian American that your teachers could better understand about current events or generally?” One of the biggest similarities in the responses to this question was how many of the respondents wanted content in their schools that was representative of Asian Americans, Asian American culture, and Asian American history. Cherilynn Chow, a rising junior at Julia R. Masterman High School stated, “Asian American studies should also be taught because there is a large amount of Asian students in the Philadelphia School District[,] and I think it would be nice to learn at least one Asian American event that has happened in history (or something else). Maybe if people learned about Asian Americans, they would be able to appreciate Asian American culture and history more and there would be less racism.” Cherilynn proposes having Asian American studies as a way to both help people learn more about the history of Asian Americans as well as a way to help combat

the racism and prejudice that many people may have against Asian Americans. The College Board has an Advanced Placement course on European history. Many schools in Philadelphia offer and require United States history as a course. Some schools in Philadelphia offer and require African American history. Few, if not any schools in Philadelphia provide Asian American history. Chloe To, a rising sophomore at Central High School highlighted, "Because Asian-American history is left from the school's curriculum, it isn't required for us to learn about the past. It's almost like it's an attempt to erase our history. Teachers could try to introduce Asian-American history into the school system." Chloe goes more in depth about what it's like to not have your own history taught in schools. She exemplifies how it is like a historical cleansing. When Asian American students are attending schools where their own history isn't taught and represented, they feel unimportant. Sarah Joni, as well a rising sophomore at Central High School speaks more on her hopes for schools and teachers. She says that she hopes teachers can better understand, "that we exist. In the history books, in the economy, in society. The white-washed education system here in America needs to shine the light on other races." Sarah mentions a white-washed education system. In many ways this is true. America has adapted a Eurocentric learning model where much of European history is taught while the history of people of color is either left out from this retelling of history or is mentioned a few times. Many other students have responded to this question with problems that they personally have experienced in their own schools. Kintan Silvano as previously mentioned shares how none of her teachers are people of color. Kelly, who was previously mentioned, and Faiz, a rising sophomore at Central High School, both mention the importance of teachers in condoning racism and teaching younger students how to be mindful and aware of the culture of other people.

"People say 'I hope life returns to normal,' or 'life was better before COVID,' but that's impossible. 'Normal,' in regards to the health of Americans maybe, but 'normal' as in when police weren't being called out on their actions as aggressively? 'Normal,' where some people were to[o] scared to share their stories? 'Normal' where kids are kept in cages and are separated from their families for so long they can't recognize their mothers? That should have never been America's 'normal.'" To close this section, I wanted to highlight these words written by Chloe To. Chloe has grasped many aspects of America's supposed "normal" and has shown how this shouldn't be the normal of America. America can't return to normal when it's normal was only helpful and normal to a certain group of people. America needs to improve from it's supposed "normal" and become better for everyone.

ASIAN AMERICANS AND COVID-19

Asian Americans have faced a big barrier in the past couple of months. That barrier is no other than COVID-19. Other than the detrimental health effects, COVID-19 posed a unique threat to Asian Americans. Asian Americans had a lack of tools and resources to combat this barrier. They were underrepresented and silenced. This allowed for violence, racism, and prejudice against Asian Americans to continue. COVID-19 has revealed much about the current condition of the United States on Asian Americans. Unfortunately, the pandemic was given many other names such as "Chinese Virus" and "Kung Flu." Many of the respondents shared their own thoughts regarding these terms. Jessica Wei, a rising sophomore at Washington Township High School shares, "Regarding Asian Americans, we have faced discrimination and there is no doubt about it. After hearing it from political leaders calling it the "Chinese Virus" or "Kung-flu" racism just continued to spread. Asians were getting the blame for this huge pandemic especially in the US." Jessica shares her own experience of hearing these words come out from the mouths of political leaders such as the President of the United States. Kelly Wei adds on to Jessica's statement stating that, "The response from the US in regards to Asian Americans is awful. There's not much to say when the leader of the US has made racist comments about the pandemic by calling it 'the kung flu.' That in itself sets a message to the rest of the world on how the US is perceiving its Asian community." The President sends a message when he uses terms such as "Chinese Virus" and "Kung Flu" to refer to COVID-19. He shows that America is okay with these words. The President is supposed to be a representative of America. Unfortunately, he appears to have little regard to the effect that these terms have on Asian Americans. This effect comes in the form of racism. This section is here to give light and voice to the many experiences and feelings that Asian Americans have had in the past couple of months.

"I feel like other people, when they see me, may be thinking in their heads 'Stay farther away from her, she's Asian and is probably associated with other Asians that do disgusting things like eating bats.'" An anonymous respondent shared this feeling that they have on the inside when going outside. This sense that people are scared of Asian Americans is not limited to this respondent's experience. Jovialy Tanjaya, a rising sophomore at Central High School shared, "At most times I feel normal going outside but sometimes I wonder if me being an Asian American and showing physical qualities of an Asian change[s] other people's perspective on me just because of where this virus originated." Jovialy furthers this concern of what other people thought of Asian Americans due to COVID-19. Many other respondents shared this same concern including an anonymous Asian American identifying respondent. They shared their feelings saying, "I already fear for my safety as a female but there was another thing about myself that I couldn't change and that was my race. Going out to the grocery store was even weird I'd get side eyes despite being a darker complexion bc I am Filipino." Marcela, a rising Junior at Central High School shared, "not much has happened to me personally besides people looking at me when I go to a supermarket." Jessica Wei shared that, "Something as little as clearing my throat in public can drive away anyone near me. This may be because of people who are cautious, but I know my race played a factor into their opinion about their actions." Alfonsus, a senior at Upper Darby High School shared, "there's this slight feeling of being "watched", like I'm a suspect of a crime or something like that." Many people have been blaming on Asian Americans for something that they have nothing to do with. Alfonsus highlights this conflict in his statement saying how he feels like a "suspect." It wouldn't just be Alfonsus who feels like a suspect especially when many people are blaming Asians for the outbreak of COVID-19. Timothy, a rising junior at Upper Darby High School shared, "I wonder everyday if

I would be attacked by anyone.” The fear that many people have for Asian Americans can become so powerful that that fear becomes violent. Unfortunately this is a reality for many Asian Americans.

Unlike the previous paragraph where feelings and fears were shared, this next section will highlight the verbal experiences that many of the respondents have had. Although feeling something and actually experiencing it is different, a continuous trend of how other people make Asian Americans feel remains constant. Many people are driven by fear and disregard for Asian American racism. One respondent, Cherilynn Chow, shared, “When I was walking home with my sister after having to pick something up, a group of guys (who were also POC) rode by in their bicycles and called out derogatory names to my sister and I for being Chinese” ... “This happened after all of the protests against racism.” In Philadelphia where many protests occurred for the support of the Black Lives Matter movement, it felt as though there was a change occurring for Asian Americans and all people of color. Unfortunately, Cherilynn and her story shows that the fight is not yet over. Many people disregard that Asian Americans experience racism as well, and Cherilynn’s story is a perfect representation of this. When many people in Philadelphia were in support for the promotion of the treatment of African Americans in the United States, it’s unfortunate to say that this may not be true when in regards to Asian Americans. This may be because Asian Americans are many times forgotten when it comes to race. Sarah Joni shared, “I’ve only experienced racist verbal remarks.” It’s important to note that Sarah uses the word “only.” This is so because it has become aware to many people that many things worse than verbal remarks were being done to Asian Americans. Many came in the form of physical violence. One of the biggest attacks that went all over social media was when a man in Brooklyn had poured acid on the head of an Asian woman. Kintan Silvano shared one of her stories stating, “My mother and I were walking on the sidewalk, this was probably when Covid just started becoming a worry in America. A man called us “coronavirus” but we didn’t see him. I could’ve cared less about myself, I was worried about how my mom felt.” Kintan expresses her concerns about how her mother had felt as a reaction to this. Many Asian Americans who came from different countries to America, came searching for better lives for their family. They didn’t come to be berated by people just for being Asian. Sabrina Ta, a rising junior at Upper Darby Senior High School shared, “I’ve gotten a couple remarks about my Asian identity. As in people would say that it was “my people” that created the virus.” Sabrina’s experience is just one of many in which many Asian Americans are being used as scapegoats for the outbreak and start of COVID-19.

Some Asian Americans have even taken precautionary measures in order to avoid the possibility of getting verbally berated or physically attacked. Mei, who was previously mentioned, said, “I fortunately did not come across any incidents except taking different routes to avoid crowds when going home from school because I was scared that I would be targeted for being Asian.” Mei made herself put new barriers in her schedule in order to avoid violence just because she was Asian. When a student has to change how they get to and from school because of racism and prejudice from other people, it is a necessary calling to search for change. Kelly Wei shared, “I frequently warned my father that he is not allowed to cough in public, even to clear his throat, he could not do it because I was afraid. I was afraid someone would hurt my family or myself because we were Asians.” Kelly had to help her own parents adjust to new ways of living just to avoid violence. This threat and fear of violence didn’t come from thin air. It came from the incidents that people were actually seeing and experiencing. The fear and violence that people had towards Asian Americans didn’t come from thin air either. It came from constant use of words such as “Chinese Virus” that marked Asian Americans as suspects and targets. The fear and violence towards Asians as well was allowed to continue because of the normalization of Asian American racism. Many people didn’t see a problem that was occurring because of the under representation of Asian American voices and experiences. Asian Americans weren’t given an outlet to try and stop the racism occurring against them.

ASIAN AMERICANS AND ALLYSHIP

After the recent tragedies of the unjust murders of many African American people in the United States and the many other murders that occurred prior to those in 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement has emerged to fight and protest for the equal treatment of African Americans in the United States. From this movement came the idea of allyship. Although allyship was always around, it has become a larger topic that is talked about by many people. In regards to allyship and the Black Lives Matter movement, I included into the survey the question, “What do you think about being an ally and having peers as allies when it comes to events such as discrimination? How does it make you feel?” This question was inputted in order to learn more about Asian American youth and how they feel they connect to other people of color and how they create support nets. From this question, a general consensus was made. Although all the respondents completed the survey independently, many of them shared that having allies when fighting discrimination is comforting and brings a good feeling. An anonymous respondent who is a rising sophomore at Central High School shared that, “As minorities, we have all gone through some form of discrimination. It fills me with warmth knowing that minorities are uniting together.” This respondent emphasized the fact that all minorities and people of color have faced some form of discrimination. Rather than being separated, having a unified front would be a much stronger and impactful movement for all people of color. In support, Jovialy Tanjaya wrote, “I feel like all races should stand by each other and support each other when one group needs help. We should help lift their voices and listen to what they have to say.” In agreement, Sabrina Ta shares, “It brings the community together thankfully, I feel really glad knowing that there are allies in times like these and I know that there are people I’m able to talk to about these matters, not to just get it off my chest but also to maybe learn some things too.” Sarah Joni states, “It makes me feel acknowledged and safe, knowing that I’m not alone, and I hope I can make my allies feel the same way.” In a more general approach, Cherilynn Chow states, “I think that allies are very important because as a people, we should band together and work together to be stronger. It is always better and helpful when you have someone with you in fighting for what you believe in.” Cherilynn highlights having anyone as an ally. Having people of

color as allies is very important. However, also important is having white peers as allies who can exercise their white privilege to help the fight towards equality is a big way to support people. White people in America have a special white privilege that people of color don't have. This allows them to have access to many more opportunities, allows them to not be impacted by racism, gives them the ability to live without the fear of being white, and gives them a system in America that was set up to benefit people of European descent. Something as well that is important to note is that "Asian-Americans experience some privilege that African-Americans do not." Chloe To had written this sentence in her response highlighting the privilege that Asian Americans have. Unfortunately, African Americans are still much more disadvantaged when compared to Asian Americans. Asian Americans don't have to worry about the threat of being killed for their skin color. However, with the new rise of COVID-19, Asian Americans as well have new prejudices that they have to face.

In addition to the many positive factors of having allies, the respondents as well shared some concerns and negative factors that they have noticed when it comes to supporting equality. The issue that was shared is an issue that has recently been called out. This issue is performative activism and cherry picking. Many Asian Americans have felt that when they were being scrutinized and attacked for COVID-19 back in March and April, many people remained bystanders, allowed it to happen, and even participated. However, when many people began to speak about the Black Lives Matter movement, these same people who remained silent at Asian American racism were very participatory in talking about the Black Lives Matter movement. This goes into the topic of how many of these people were just participating in the Black Lives Matter movement in order to appear as though they care about the cause to their peers. Many of these people however genuinely cared about the cause, which goes into the topic of cherry picking. Asian Americans have felt that many people thought racism against African Americans was wrong, but racism against Asians was somehow okay or was ignored. It felt as though people were picking on which discrimination to fight. This is in no one way a discrediting of the Black Lives Matter movement, and instead this section is to talk about how Asian Americans have felt as a result of both performative activism and cherry picking.

Many respondents have written and shared their own thoughts and opinions on this issue. Marcela shared how this issue is confusing her, saying, "There are people who used to make fun of Asians who are now saying BLM, which make[s] me confused." In agreement, Sabrina Ta states, "It just doesn't really make sense to me that a lot of people are protesting to end racism but were just being racist to Asian[s] [Americans] accusing us of eating bats and calling the virus the Kung Flu etc." An anonymous respondent had shared a very important part of this issue stating, "The same people who preach "BLM and equality for all" turn around and become racist to other POC" ... "I know not ALL people are like that but I have seen a good amount. It makes me feel like racism against Asian Americans are being a bit disregarded. Every time I voice my opinion about this I always get put down and say that 'being black is worse'. Yes I know that and I could not imagine, but what I say gets disregarded completely." This respondent highlights one of the biggest issues that faces allyship. This issue is how in some instances, some people turn racism into a contest. For when an Asian American attempts to speak out against racism in these instances, their concerns are disregarded, often with statements such as "Being Black is worse" as illustrated by this respondent. Given the structural effects of racism, being an African American in America is unfortunately much more difficult than it is to be an Asian American. However, when an Asian American attempts to speak out against the racist acts being committed against themselves, they are not trying to state that being Asian is worse. They are only trying to identify other problems that people of color face. It's important to recognize that discrimination and the scale of it is not a contest. It is not about who is discriminated against the most. Fighting discrimination and being an ally is about being there for those who are facing discrimination and uniting together. "It makes me feel 'strong' in a sense," states Alfonsus when asked about allyship. He mentions that strength that being unified gives him. Support and allies in no doubt make a person feel strong. It makes people feel as though they matter.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

For too long, the voice and representation of the Asian American community has been silenced. Asian American youth and I say "No more" to this. We will fight for stronger representation of Asian Americans in the media and in the United States more broadly in order to make a better future for Asian Americans and people of color. Change is happening, and we will no longer go unspoken. "I'm extremely proud to be a part of a generation that is not taking the matter lying down," states Kelly Wei. The current young generation has a powerful front. They are unified and they will not back down when it comes to inequality and injustice. As a member of this generation, I will no longer allow for inequality and injustice to walk free. Just like almost every other member of this generation, I will fight for equality.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to send thank you remarks to two people who allowed for this piece to be created. First, Chloe Kannan, who brought this topic to me and who recruited me to speak on this topic. Second, Dr. Sharon Ravitch, who has given me an outlet to speak on this issue. Together these two people have allowed me to give voice to the Asian American community and am thankful for that. Additionally, I would like to thank all the contributors to the survey who voiced their thoughts and their opinions.

Owen Setiawan is an Asian American sophomore at Central High School in Philadelphia and a community-based researcher for the University of Pennsylvania-St. Thomas Aquinas Community Research Partnership.

[Report accessibility issues and request help](#)

Copyright 2021 The University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education's Online Urban Education Journal

Source URL: <https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/archive/volume-18-issue-1-fall-2020/voice-asian-american-youth-what-goes-untold>