

High School Lesson
Civil Rights and Asian Americans During Epidemics
By Sohyun An

SSUSH11: d. Describe Ellis and Angel Islands, the change in immigrants’ origins and their influence on the economy, politics, and culture of the United States.

SSCG7: a. Define civil liberties as protections against government actions.

SSCG7: b. Define civil rights as equal protections for all people.

SSCG15: e. Analyze the influence of media coverage, campaign advertising, and public opinion polls.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in January 2020, there were case after another where people of Asian descent were baselessly accused to be the cause of pandemic and were yelled at, spat on, attacked, or bodily harmed across the country.

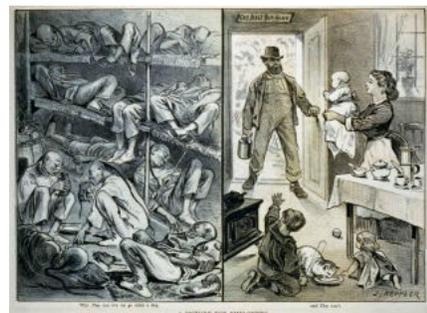
Disturbingly, this is not the first time Asian Americans have been blamed for a public health crisis. Racialized as a dirty, diseased race by the dominant society, early Chinese immigrants were scapegoated for epidemics in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Also racialized as dangerous foreigners, Asian Americans have been an easy target of hate crimes and discrimination during military or economic crises, such as the massacres and lynching of Chinese immigrants in the 1800s, incarceration of Japanese Americans during WWII, the murder of Vincent Chin in the 1980s, and a sharp rise in hate crimes and discrimination against South Asian, Muslim, Sikh, and Hindu communities along with Middle Eastern and Arab communities aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

This essay provides a brief history of civil rights violations against Asian Americans during epidemics and suggests an inquiry lesson to guide students to examine the past and contemporary cases of scapegoating Asian Americans for public health crises.

Background Information

Since their earliest arrivals in the United States, Asian immigrants have been racialized as “perpetual foreigners” who are unassimilable to dominant society and a “yellow peril” whose presence is a threat to American culture, economics, politics, and health.

In its 1876-1877 Municipal Reports, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors described Chinese immigrants as “a social, moral, political curse to the community” (as cited in Trauner, 1978)



The 1879 California State Constitution defined Chinese immigrants as “aliens who are or may become vagrants, paupers, mendicants, criminals, or invalids afflicted with contagious or infectious diseases” and as “aliens otherwise dangerous or detrimental to the well-being or peace of the State” (Hittell, 1880)

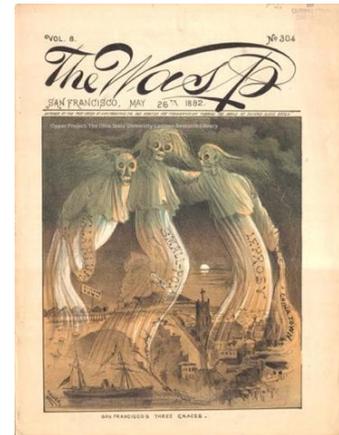
Similarly, in 1867, *The New York Times* described Chinese immigrants as a “population of befouled with all the social vices, with no knowledge or appreciation of free institutions or constitutional liberty, with heathenish souls and heathenish propensities, whose character, and habits, and modes of thought are firmly fixed by the consolidating influence of ages upon ages” (as cited in Molina, 2006, p. 17).

Such racialization of Chinese/Asian immigrants as dangerous foreigners has been at the core of countless examples of discrimination against Asian Americans, many of which turned into acts of outright violence during public health crises as well as economic and military crises. Here are a few examples of anti-Asian violence during epidemics:

1876 Smallpox Epidemic

During the 1876 smallpox outbreak, health officials in San Francisco, California were quick to condemn Chinatown as a laboratory of infection. Agreeing with the prevalent view of Chinese immigrants as a filthy, diseased race who threatened the public health, the health officials quarantined 30,000 Chinese residents in the city and fumigated their homes.

When the government measure did little to stop the spread of smallpox, the city health officer John Meares accused Chinese residents: “I unhesitatingly declare my belief that the cause is the presence in our midst of 30,000 of unscrupulous, lying and treacherous Chinamen, who have disregarded our sanitary laws, concealed and are concealing their cases of smallpox” (San Francisco Board of Supervisors, 1877, p.397).



The public panic over the epidemic along with a strong anti-Chinese racism increased calls to bar all Chinese immigrants from entering the United States, culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

1899 Bubonic Plague in Hawaii

Similar scapegoating occurred during the bubonic plague outbreaks. In 1899, a shopkeeper in the Chinatown of Honolulu, Hawaii, was diagnosed with the bubonic plague. Hawaii’s Board of Health soon declared the state of emergency and announced that the “plague lives and breeds in filth and . . . when it got to Chinatown, it found its natural habitat” (cited in US National Library of Medicine, n.d.).



Based on this belief, the government quarantined Chinatown and ordered Chinese and other Asian residents to strip naked and take a fumigation shower in plain sight. City officials also decreed that any building where someone had contracted the plague be burned down. Officials identified 41 buildings and began to set fires. Tragically, winds fanned the flames, and the fires burned for 17 days, destroying almost all of Chinatown. Over 4,000 people—mostly Chinese residents—were left homeless.



A fumigation shower in Honolulu, c.1900, Hawaii State Archives.

1900 Bubonic Plague Outbreaks in California

By 1900, the bubonic plague reached San Francisco. The city authorities were quick to define Chinese as the health threat, placing a rope cordon around Chinatown to prevent 14,000 Chinese residents from encountering white residents. Sewers and dwellings were disinfected with sulfur dioxide and bichloride of mercury.

Board of Health further forced Chinese residents to receive a vaccination with an experimental serum that was still in the testing stage. Chinese Americans resisted these unjust government actions.

In the 1900 Wong Wai vs. Williamson case, Wong Wai argued that the compulsory inoculation with an experimental drug constituted “a



purely arbitrary, unreasonable, unwarranted, wrongful, and oppressive interference” with citizen’s personal liberty (Kraut, 1994, p. 91).

In 1900 *Jew Ho vs. Williamson* case, Jew Ho argued that placing Chinese residents under house arrest while white San Franciscans were allowed to enter and leave Chinatown as they pleased was discriminatory. In both cases, the judges ruled that the government action was unconstitutional.

2003 SARS

The condemnation of Chinese/Asian Americans for disease outbreaks has continued in the 21st century. The surge of anti-Asian racism in the wake of the 2003 SARS epidemic is one example. Believed to have originated in China in 2002, SARS did not spread widely in the United States.

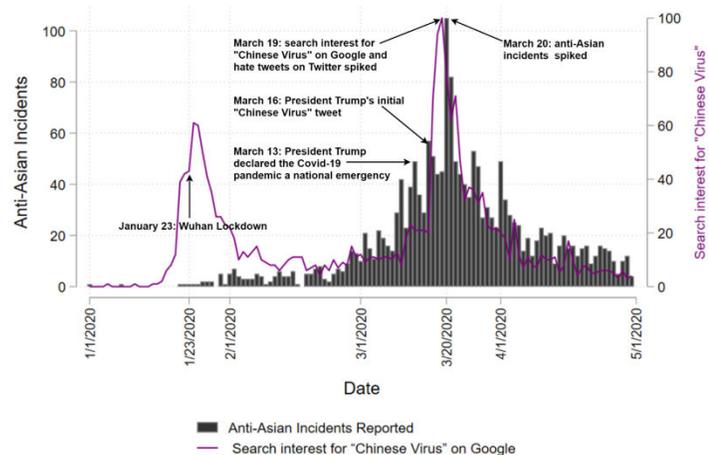


Yet anti-Asian rhetoric and racism ensued. For example, the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* published an editorial cartoon featuring a Chinese food takeout container with “SARS” written on it and a caption that read “Bad Chinese Take-Out.” This Anti-Asian rhetoric was accompanied by the avoidance of Chinese restaurants and verbal and physical attacks against Asian Americans.

2020 COVID-19 Pandemic

The upsurge of anti-Asian violence in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic is the newest example of scapegoating Asian Americans for a public health crisis. Noting that the first case of the pandemic was reported in China, then-President Trump and his political allies insisted on calling COVID-19 a “Chinese virus,” “foreign virus,” “Wuhan virus,” and the “Kung flu.” [This framing exacerbated deep-seated hate against Asian Americans](#) as dangerous foreigners, bolstering violence against Chinese/Asian Americans.

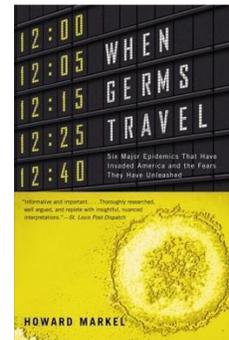
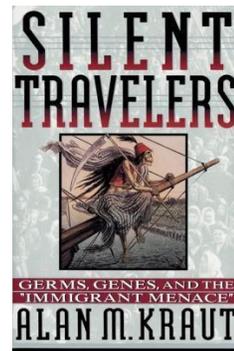
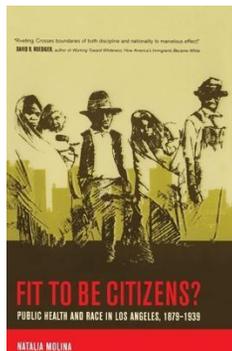
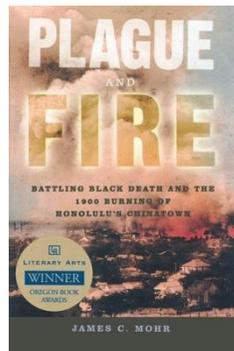
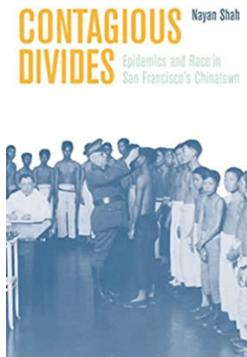
Anti-Asian Incidents and Google Search Interest in “Chinese Virus” Over Time



Stop AAPI Hate, a self-reporting center of anti-Asian hate crimes, began to document cases of anti-Asian harassment in mid-March 2020. Within a month, nearly 1,500 incidents were documented. The total number of reported anti-Asian violence from mid-March 2020 to 2022 is about 11,000 (Stop AAPI Hate, 2022). The Atlanta mass shooting on March 16, 2021, is one of the high-profile cases of anti-Asian violence occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.

An Inquiry Lesson on Anti-Asian Discrimination during Epidemics

As history shows, racialization of Asian Americans as dangerous foreigners is long held and still alive today. This nativist racism tends to manifest into physical violence and hate crimes amid public health crisis and public panic. To note, Asian Americans are not alone in this troubling history. Examples abound, which include scapegoating of Irish immigrants for the 1832 cholera epidemic, Jewish immigrants for tuberculosis in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Italian immigrants for the 1926 polio epidemic, Haitian immigrants along with gay men for the 1980s AIDS epidemic, Mexican immigrants for the 2009 H1N1 infection, and West Africans for the 2014 Ebola outbreak, to name a few. To stop the repeating history, we need to support students to interrogate the troubling history. In the following pages, a suggested inquiry lesson for high school students to explore and challenge this repeating history. The lesson is adapted from Dr. Sohyun An’s lesson published at *Social Education*, a journal of the National Council for the Social Studies.



High School Inquiry Lesson

Why have Asian-Americans been blamed for pandemics?			
C3 Framework Indicator	D2. His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts. D2. His.2.9-12. Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.		
GA Standards	SSUSH11: d. Describe Ellis and Angel Islands, the change in immigrants' origins and their influence on the economy, politics, and culture of the United States. SSCG7: a. Define civil liberties as protections against government actions. SSCG7: b. Define civil rights as equal protections for all people. SSCG15: e. Analyze the influence of media coverage, campaign advertising, and public opinion polls.		
Staging the Question	Watch a video clip on Atlanta mass shooting and anti-Asian violence in the US and engage in a whole-class conversation about what happened to Asian Americans during epidemics in US history.		
Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3	Supporting Question 4
What happened to Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic and why?	What happened to Asian Americans during 1876 smallpox outbreak and why?	What happened to Asian Americans during 1899/1900 bubonic plague outbreaks and why?	What happened to Asian Americans during 2004 SARS epidemic and why?
Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
Write one to two paragraphs that answer supporting question 1 using evidence from the sources.	Write one to two paragraphs that answer supporting question 2 using evidence from the sources.	Write one to two paragraphs that answer supporting question 3 using evidence from the sources.	Write one to two paragraphs that answer supporting question 4 using evidence from the sources.
Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources	Featured Sources
Source A: Stop AAPI Hate's National Report Source B: PBS News Hour's report on Atlanta mass shooting Source C: <i>Washington Post's</i> report on Trump tweeter message Source D: <i>Conversation</i> report on politics of naming Source E: WHO guideline for naming infectious disease	Source A: San Francisco's Three Graces from <i>The WASP</i> Source B: San Francisco Municipal Report 1876-1877 Source C: A call to employer by <i>Puck</i>	Source A: Photo collection from National Library of Medicine Source B: Photo collection from Hawaii State Archives Digital Collections Source C: <i>Hawaiian Star</i> report Source D: <i>San Francisco Call</i> report Source E: Article on Wong Wai v. Williamson and Jew Ho v. Williamson	Source A: CDC report Source B: Cartoon from <i>Tribune Review</i> Source C: <i>New York Times</i> article
Summative Performance Task	Argument Construct an argument that discusses the compelling question using specific claims and relevant evidence from historical and contemporary sources while acknowledging competing views. Extension Develop a diagram or other visualization of the repeating pattern and/or the intersect of racism, disease, media, and/or politics.		

Featured Sources	
Compelling Question	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Democracy Now (2021, March 22). Viet Thanh Nguyen on Roots of Anti-Asian Hate from U.S. Colonialism to Anti-China Political Rhetoric. https://www.democracynow.org/2021/3/22/anti_asian_hate_atlanta_killings
Supporting Question 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stop AAPI Hate (2021). STOP AAPI Hate National Report. https://stopaapihate.org/national-report-through-march-2021/ Vinopal, Courtney. What we know about the Atlanta spa shootings that killed 8, including 6 Asian women. PBS News Hour. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/what-we-know-about-the-atlanta-spa-shootings-that-killed-8-including-6-asian-women Salcedo, Andrea (2021, March 19). Racist anti-Asian hashtags spiked after Trump first tweeted ‘Chinese virus,’ study finds. The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/03/19/trump-tweets-chinese-virus-racist/ Viala-Gaudefroy, Jérôme & Lindaman, Dana. Donald Trump’s ‘Chinese virus’: the politics of naming. The Conversation. https://theconversation.com/donald-trumps-chinese-virus-the-politics-of-naming-136796 World Health Organization (2015, May 8). WHO issues best practices for naming new human infectious diseases. https://www.who.int/news/item/08-05-2015-who-issues-best-practices-for-naming-new-human-infectious-diseases
Supporting Question 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The WASP (1882, May 26). San Francisco’s Three Graces. https://hti.osu.edu/opper/lesson-plans/immigration/images/san-franciscos-three-graces San Francisco Board of Supervisors (1877). San Francisco Municipal Reports Fiscal Year 1876-1877. https://archive.org/details/sanfranciscocomuni76sanfrich/page/396/mode/2up Puck (1878, August 21, p. 16). A picture for employer: Why they can live on 40 cents a day, and they can't. https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002720432/
Supporting Question 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S. National Library of Medicine (n.d.). 1899: Bubonic plague diagnosed in Honolulu’s Chinatown.” https://www.nlm.nih.gov/nativevoices/timeline/708.html Hawaii State Archives Digital Collections. Bubonic Plague: 1900. https://digitalarchives.hawaii.gov/searchResults?query=plague&page=3 The Hawaiian Star (1899, December 12). Bubonic Plague Breed off Filth, Here. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn82015415/1899-12-12/ed-1/seq-1/#words=Bubonic+Plague+Sick The San Francisco Call’s (1900, June 1). Danger of plague has passed and vigilance will insure complete safety to the city. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85066387/1900-06-01/ed-1/seq-2/#words=Plague+Bubonic+Chinatown Wang, Xiao-Wei (2007). Plague in San Francisco and the Chinese Legal Response. https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/11418553/tangents-07-tangents-07-master-of-liberal-arts-stanford-university
Supporting Question 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Centers for Disease Control (2003). SARS: US 2003. https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5216a1.htm Tribune Review (2003, April 26). SARS: Bad Chinese Take-Out. https://www.jstor.org/stable/42704442?seq=10#metadata_info_tab_contents New York Times’ (2003, April 17). The SARS Epidemic: In the US, fear is spreading faster than SARS. https://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/17/world/the-sars-epidemic-asian-americans-in-us-fear-is-spreading-faster-than-sars.html