

To Dismantle Anti-Asian Racism, We Must Understand Its Roots

In the wake of the Atlanta shootings, corporate America struggled to meet the moment.

by

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Illustration by Oliv Barros

Summary. Individuals, leaders, and organizations are struggling to know how to navigate this dark chapter of anti-Asian racism and violence in the U.S. This piece argues that, in order to move toward a safer, more equitable future for Asian Americans, we need to learn from... [more](#)

In the days that followed the mass shootings in Atlanta, Georgia, that killed eight people, six of them Asian women, an outpouring of pain from Asian and Asian American communities in the United States

flooded social media. As mainstream media outlets fumbled their initial reporting on the events, the corporate world responded with a smattering of supportive statements on social media to denounce the violence that occurred.

But then, an uneasy silence. No crescendo of charitable donations to Asian organizations occurred. No spike in community partnerships, new diversity and inclusion initiatives, or renewed commitments to corporate social responsibility emerged from corporate America. Nowhere was this more apparent than within my own community of diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioners, individuals whose careers were made offering actionable advice in times like these.

Many of us were at a loss. I was at a loss. We knew that a tragedy of racist violence had taken place, and yet the language to describe the “why” behind that racism felt far out of reach. The actions to dismantle it felt harder to find, still. Months later, amid Asian Heritage Month, we’re still struggling to move beyond saying #StopAsianHate toward actionable change.

“There’s just too much we don’t understand,” one executive confided to me, a few days after the Atlanta shooting. The previous day, they had been pointedly told by a junior employee, who is Asian, to self-educate on anti-Asian racism.

This executive is not alone. In my work over the past few months, it’s become clear to me that many of my colleagues in corporate America lack the knowledge to contextualize this recent wave of anti-Asian racism and violence in the U.S.

We all need to self-educate on anti-Asian racism. In order to meet this moment and make good on the promise of [corporate social justice](#), we need to fully understand the under-written histories of anti-Asian racism and the Asian American identity — and how today’s

#StopAsianHate movement fits into those histories. I'm sharing this overview in the hopes that it starts or supplements you or your organization's learning journey. Recognize that while there is always more to learn, understanding at least some of the complexity behind this issue will help you meaningfully take action.

About the Research

As a diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioner I find that teaching the historical context behind identity and ...

[1]

The Roots of Anti-Asian Racism in the U.S.

Discrimination against Asian immigrants began almost as soon as they entered the U.S. in the middle of the 19th century.

The first immigrants were Chinese laborers looking for new work opportunities abroad in the aftermath of the Opium Wars. By the early 1850s, the 25,000 Chinese migrants attracted by the California Gold Rush constituted roughly [10%](#) of California's [total population](#).

Despite the integral role of these laborers in American mining, agriculture, textiles, and perhaps most prominently, the Transcontinental Railroad, Chinese immigrants faced mounting hostility from white settlers who saw them as an economic, health, and moral threat. Exclusionary immigration policies followed, and within 35 years, the [Page Act of 1875](#) and the [Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882](#) made legal Chinese immigration all but impossible.

Chinese immigrants already in the U.S., who faced [mass lynching](#), urban displacement, and violent attacks in their communities, had their options for recourse severely limited by [People v. Hall](#) in 1853, in

which the California Supreme Court ruled that Chinese witnesses could not testify against white witnesses.

Subsequent waves of Asian immigrants arrived in the U.S. seeking opportunities like Chinese immigrants before them — and they were met with similarly oppressive policies. Immigration from Japan rose in the late 1880s and was curtailed by [The Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907](#). South Asian immigration rose and fell with the [1917 Immigration Act](#), an expansion of the Chinese Exclusion Act that had created an “Asiatic Barred Zone” from which all immigration was completely banned. And when Filipino immigrants — the only immigrants not targeted by the Exclusion Act due to the annexation of the Philippines by the U.S. after the Spanish-American War — began immigrating to the U.S., their immigration was swiftly curtailed by the [Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934](#). Crowning these many policies and their impacts was the quota system established by the [Immigration Act of 1924](#), which sought to ensure that the population of immigrants in the U.S. would always stay proportional relative to the white population.

Anti-Asian racism took aim at one specific nationality during World War II. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Japanese Americans fell under intense social and political suspicion. This racial hysteria became the basis for [Executive Order 9066](#), passed on February 19, 1942, and the establishment of Japanese internment camps. [One hundred and twenty thousand Japanese Americans](#), two-thirds of them citizens, were forcibly relocated.

[2]

The Model Minority Myth and the Pan-Asian Movement

During World War II, Chinese Americans took great pains to distance themselves from Japanese Americans — Chinese American

organizations distributed pins [only to those who could speak a Chinese dialect](#) proclaiming, “I’m Chinese,” or even [buttons](#) reading, “I Hate [the Japanese] Worse Than You Do.” At the time, the Roosevelt administration was interested in ensuring the good treatment of Chinese Americans for [other reasons](#); they worried that the Chinese Exclusion Act was hampering relations with China, an ally against Japan in the war. Efforts began to build public and political support for reducing anti-Chinese sentiment and repealing the Chinese Exclusion Act. One private organization, the Citizen’s Committee to Repeal Chinese Exclusion, deployed a strategy that would stick: [recasting Chinese Americans as unassuming, nonviolent, and law-abiding citizens](#). These efforts succeeded. In 1943, one year after Japanese internment, [Congress repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act](#).

In the 1950s, the Cold War and the association of “Asia” with communism further complicated the experience of Asian immigrants in the U.S. One of the largest events of this period, the Korean War, resulted in an [influx](#) of Korean refugees — “war brides,” “war orphans,” and intellectuals — into the U.S. Many of these refugees [feared speaking out](#) about their experiences, lest nuance be lost to Cold War Manichaeism. While this was occurring, Chinese Americans similarly faced increased [persecution](#), especially from government agencies like [the FBI and the Immigration and Naturalization Service](#). Yet the strategic [rebranding](#) of Chinese Americans that began during World War II continued. Chinese American communities and “cultural values” were lauded as solutions to social ills, prime examples of “melting pot” assimilationism, and positioned opposite Black urban ghettos.

When the Vietnam War began in 1955, the decades-long conflict would only further [enflame hostilities against Asians in the U.S.](#) To the average, unaware American, and even to soldiers on the front lines in Vietnam, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans — even fellow

American soldiers from these ethnicities — looked no different from “the enemy.”

At the same time, the stereotyping and valorization of Asian ethnicities in the U.S. gained a formal name: the “model minority.” [In a New York Times article published in the 1960s](#), the model minority stereotype was formalized using the experience of [Japanese Americans](#) as a focal point. This budding stereotype was further leveraged to challenge and delegitimize the social and political disruption caused by Black civil rights activists, exemplified well in [a 1966 issue of the U.S. News & World Report](#), which argued that “at a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities...one such minority, the nation’s 300,000 Chinese-Americans, is winning wealth and respect by dint of its own hard work...not a welfare check.”

Many Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and other Asian immigrants and their descendants [resented this narrative](#). Critics of the myth [noted](#) how the reductive narrative glossed over challenges Asian communities faced, many of them created or exacerbated by government-instigated or government-supported discrimination and violence, and opposed these ideas being used to [delegitimize](#) the struggles of Black Americans.

The burgeoning resistance to the model minority myth coalesced around the term “Asian American,” [coined by then-students Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka in 1968](#), who were looking for a way to unify the many Asian immigrants in the U.S. around a shared identity. Catalyzed by their opposition to the Vietnam War and inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, Asian Americans united around similar experiences of marginalization: Japanese internment, harassment and deportation driven by McCarthyism, colonization, and the daily harassment and discrimination that came from being seen as “not American.” The

student-led movement worked to protect affordable housing in low-income Asian neighborhoods and support exploited workers. It also organized alongside the Black Student Union and other student groups for the creation of the first ethnic studies programs in the U.S. And it would go on to evolve into a Pan-Asian civil rights movement that rallied communities across the country to organize against discrimination, community underinvestment, unequal working conditions, and [police brutality](#).

But the collective Asian American identity was far from static. As more groups entered under the Asian American umbrella, and as the divisions sowed by the model minority myth widened, the Pan-Asian movement struggled to maintain the solidarity that had defined it.

The Supreme Court's 1967 *Loving v. Virginia* ruling legalizing interracial marriage paved the way for new generations of multiracial and mixed-race Asian Americans. [In the 1970s](#), the U.S. saw an influx of Cambodian, Laotian, Vietnamese, and Hmong refugees emigrating from Southeast Asian countries directly impacted by colonization, war, and imperialism. These immigrants found themselves targeted by the same racist discrimination and violence that oppressed the Asian immigrants who came before them — as well as additional challenges related to the settling of these communities within and around historically Black neighborhoods. Low-income Southeast Asian Americans faced [a paradox](#): if they strove for success and achieved it, they were seen as an undifferentiated “model minority”; if they engaged in activism and advocacy, they were racialized similarly to Black Americans and faced comparable rates of policing, disciplinary action, and systemic oppression.

During the same decade, South Asian Americans [fought to be recognized as a distinct minority](#) protected under civil rights legislation and affirmative action programs. While recognizing the

limitations of the developing Asian American identity, namely that it equated the experiences of East Asian Americans for those of all Asian Americans, South Asian Americans hesitantly allied with other Asian Americans under the umbrella.

The murder of Vincent Chin in 1982 would catalyze the next chapter of the Asian American movement. Vincent Chin, a Chinese American man, was murdered in Detroit by white autoworkers who believed he was Japanese and blamed Japan for the current recession. At the time, Asian Americans were not recognized as a legal class with protections under civil rights law: even in the police report, the only options [for listing Vincent Chin's race](#) were “white” or “Black.” Community organizing efforts led by activist Helen Zia set off [a wave of Asian American student organizing](#), [galvanized Asian American communities](#), and resulted in the expansion of civil rights protections to include Asian Americans and Latinxs, broadening the legal conceptualization of race in America.

[3]

The Movement Splinters

Yet tensions between Asian American communities persisted, exemplified during the battles over affirmative action that started in the late 1980s and continue to the present day. Stories proliferated in the news media about Chinese, Japanese, and Korean American students with perfect test scores, grade point averages, honors, and awards who were denied admission to prestigious universities. Asian Americans rallied to accuse Brown, Stanford, the California UC system, and other prestigious colleges and universities, of implementing “Asian quotas,” and pressured them to change their admissions policies and practices.

The affirmative action debate [drove a wedge into the Pan-Asian movement](#). On one side were some East and South Asian Americans, many of them wealthy newer immigrants, who bought into the model minority myth and saw representation for Asian students admitted to universities “based on merit” directly opposed to Black and Latinx representation “based on affirmative action.” This side was backed [by conservative intellectuals and lawmakers](#) looking to attack the concept of affirmative action at large. On the other side were activists fighting for greater access to higher education, including [Asian American organizations](#) who had played a historical role in the Pan-Asian movement, as well as Southeast Asians and other lower-income Asian communities that had historically benefited from affirmative action programs.

While Asian American activism would continue into the 1990s, the schisms driven by the model minority myth would increasingly define a small subset of “Asian American issues” that were granted the most visibility and resources to combat. These issues included hate crime legislation, increased political participation, and workplace discrimination. And, despite the pushback of many Asian American organizations, the term “Asian American” became commonly understood as representing only East Asians.

As the foreign policy of the U.S. shifted, so too did anti-Asian sentiment. After the September 11 attacks, a new wave of [violence](#) and [discrimination](#) crashed upon Sikhs and Muslims (regardless of their ethnicities), Arab and Persian Americans (regardless of their religions), and South and West Asians. Despite the diversity within and between these communities, they were [uniformly profiled](#) as the enemy in the U.S.’s War on Terror. The conflation and targeting of these disparate identities echoed the conflation and targeting of all Asian Americans throughout U.S. history. And just as a collective Asian American identity and Pan-Asian movement formed in

response to racism and violence then, coalitions formed between [West and South Asian Americans](#), as well as [Sikh](#) and [Muslim](#) Americans, to denounce the racism and violence against their communities in the post-9/11 era. These coalitions, however, did not receive the broad buy-in and solidarity to form a new Pan-Asian movement.

In the most recent decade, we have seen increasing anti-Chinese rhetoric from U.S. politicians on both sides of the aisle, echoed by media outlets, corresponding to China's rise as a global superpower. This undercurrent of Sinophobia and racism accompanies the [ongoing persecution](#) of Chinese academics, scientists, and businesspeople, often on unfounded charges of [spying](#), or solely due to [their association with the Chinese Communist Party](#). And it undergirded the Trump administration's racist descriptions of Covid-19 as the "[China virus](#)" or the "[kung flu](#)," which has further fueled the anti-Asian racism, discrimination, and violence we're witnessing in the U.S. today. As the complex racial politics of Asian Americans enter back into mainstream conversation, Asian Americans find themselves at a familiar crossroads.

History repeats itself — but we have the agency to choose how. We all must rally around the Chinese American and East Asian communities being targeted today and support communities under direct attack from racist violence. But there's even more we can do. Violence in the U.S. during the Covid-19 pandemic, while directed nominally at Chinese people, has impacted Korean Americans, South Asians, Thai Americans, Filipino Americans, and [even Latinx Americans](#). Building on the momentum, politicization, and racial awareness catalyzed by the ongoing Black Lives Matter movement, Asian Americans and their non-Asian allies can reject the model minority myth and recognize how anti-Asian racism connects every group under the Asian American umbrella. The original Pan-Asian movement rose through

unity and fell at the hands of the model minority myth. Now, to revive it, Asian Americans and their allies must first challenge the one-dimensional Myth and remember the shared experiences that connect the diverse groups under the vast umbrella of “Asian American.”

5 Key Takeaways

This brief review of Asian American history is not simply a series of important events to remember or useful set of facts to consider. Embedded this history is a recurring cycle of racism, discrimination, violence, and sociopolitical reckonings. Understanding that cycle is key to engaging with modern Asian and Asian American issues. So, what can we make of this complex history? Here are five takeaways.

1. Anti-Asian racism and discrimination in the U.S. has always been directed at a moving target.
2. Throughout its long history, anti-Asian racism has been inflicted indiscriminately upon disparate ethnic and religious groups.
3. The term “Asian American” encompasses an enormous diversity of more than 20 ethnic groups and nationalities.
4. The Asian American identity was conceived as an active political identity of solidarity across these different ethnicities — not solely as an umbrella term.
5. The “model minority” myth erases not only the inherent diversity of Asian American communities, but also the activist history behind the identity and movement.

[4]

The Responsibility of Leaders and Organizations Today

With these histories and takeaways top of mind, the complex dynamics of the present day become a little clearer. As present-day challenges become more definable, so too do avenues for solidarity, aid, and assistance from leaders, and organizations. And thanks to the recent precedent of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and rising racial consciousness, Asian American communities are developing new language to advocate for uniquely Asian and Asian American issues. These issues include:

- **Workplace discrimination**, which includes interpersonal microaggressions, harassment, and on-the-job treatment to discrimination in hiring, firing, and promotion affected by stereotypes, prejudice, and the model minority myth.
- **Increasing unemployment and economic damage** for East Asian communities in the wake of Covid-19 fearmongering, in addition to ongoing damage to West Asian, South Asian, Sikh, and Muslim communities in the wake of 9/11.
- **Displacement from in ethnic enclaves** like Chinatowns in the face of gentrification and housing discrimination.
- **High poverty rates and high school drop-out rates** in Southeast Asian American communities.
- **Poor access to health care** due to communication barriers, residency requirements, and overrepresentation in jobs without private insurance.
- **Low usage of mental health services** due to the model minority myth's erasure of mental health issues in Asian American communities.
- **Spiking hate crimes and street violence** against Asians and Asian Americans, as well as exacerbation of all of the above issues due to xenophobic and racist rhetoric in U.S. culture following the Covid-19 pandemic.

What can organizational leaders do to address these issues? Here are some places to start:

Disaggregate data on Asians and Asian Americans, to the extent possible. Avoid the fallacy of the average — especially with groups that have such enormous within-group variation like Asians and Asian Americans. Doing so allows you to observe more complex trends while challenging the reductive model minority myth. For example, avoid statements like, “Asians are overrepresented in our workplace,” when a more specific statement could be, “Highly educated East Asian immigrants are overrepresented in our IT department.”

Eliminate anti-Asian discrimination in the workplace. In addition to nondiscrimination policies, ensure that there are clear shared expectations and norms that discourage harassment, and provide accountability for victims when it occurs. Work to eliminate systemic bias in hiring, firing, and promotions by auditing personnel data, creating standardized guidelines and processes for decision-making (e.g. structured interviews and hiring panels), and training decision-makers to act intentionally to avoid biased behavior.

Equip Asian and Asian American workplace communities to provide mutual support, organizing, and inter-group education and advocacy. Increase budgets for all employee resource groups to not only support their own Asian and Asian American members, but organize cross-group events for mutual learning, solidarity, and advocacy work.

Create working environments that are integrated into larger cultural shifts around social issues. Offer greater flexibility for all employees to take time off as needed and access learning and development opportunities around issues of race, gender, class, ability, religion, and other identity factors. Train managers to be able to create psychologically safe environments that can hold space for difficult

conversations and dedicate time for every manager to ensure that their daily work is done in a way that reflects the company's stance on social issues.

Ensure that your organization is doing no harm outside of the workplace. Closely examine your impact on Asian communities (as well as communities of other stakeholders). For example, is your workplace contributing to local gentrification, disproportionately impacting people of color? Is your company putting out news headlines or products that bad actors are using to harass Asians and Asian Americans? If this harm is occurring, take immediate steps to eliminate it.

Engage meaningfully with external communities around issues related to your organization. Rather than a one-time donation to a national Asian nonprofit, consider closer, more meaningful partnerships with Asian professional organizations in your industry, local Asian communities around your offices or stores, and Asian advocacy groups working for the wellbeing of your Asian employees and customers.

Ensure that all of your efforts take an intersectional lens. Address the diversity of nationalities and ethnicities within the Asian American community, and understand how gender, class, sexuality, and religion add further complexity to these experiences. Draw connections between Asian American issues and the issues of other marginalized groups, and invest resources into building genuine racial solidarity — [not single-issue struggles](#).

As your workplace commits to these efforts, I'll make one final observation: This moment-turned-movement, rising on the heels of #BlackLivesMatter and a larger social reckoning around race, is unlikely to be the last one. The expectation that employers will engage

critically with social issues and social movements will continue to grow. We are moving toward a corporate America where workplaces will be increasingly judged on their ability to remain relevant and timely amid cultural shifts toward equity and justice. The workplaces that recognize this fact, educate themselves on the issues at hand, and act, will be the workplaces of tomorrow.