

# ANTI-ASIAN RACISM

## EXPERIENCED BY EAST ASIANS IN A CANADIAN CONTEXT

Last updated:

### What is in this resource?

In Canada, anti-Asian racism is prevalent today and is rooted in the historical discrimination that actively impacts Asian communities. It is their “social, economic, political and cultural marginalization, disadvantage and unequal treatment” (National Defence, Anti-Racism Implementation group, n.d.). We hope this guide is a starting point in your engagement and learning journey. To encourage learning and comprehensively present information, this primer is part of a series, each one focusing on Asian regions and their communities. This resource discusses significant experiences faced by East Asian communities in Canada. It is not an attempt to reduce the experiences of South Asian and Southeast Asian communities or to exclude them from the overall Asian discourse. Please explore other parts of this series to learn about anti-Asian racism...

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### What is anti-Asian racism?

Anti-Asian racism refers to the specific discrimination, stereotyping, and oppression faced by Asian peoples. Asian identities include several ethnic groups and populations that often have roots in East Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia. This definition is adopted from University of Waterloo’s **Equity Survey**. Diasporic Asian communities are continuously subjected to overt and subtle racist stereotypes that contribute to social, economic, political and cultural



marginalization. It is important to note that, as with all racism, anti-Asian racism is not monolithic and is felt in varying ways by different Asian communities because of their unique lived experiences.

## History of anti-Asian racism

In Canada, anti-Asian racism is present through historical and ongoing discriminatory governmental policies and practices that date back to the 18th century (Yao, 2021). Historical facts below focus on East Asian communities. However, multiple historically underrepresented communities were targeted with these practices, some of which will be noted below.

### Voting Rights

- In 1872, British Columbia amended the Qualification and Registration of Voters Act, to bar Chinese Canadians from voting in provincial elections. In 1895, the province passed the Provincial Voters' Act Amendment Act which stripped Japanese Canadians of the right to vote. Finally, South Asians were barred from voting in provincial elections following the 1907 amendment.
- This voting exclusion became federal under the Dominion Elections Act of 1920, which stated that racial groups excluded from provincial franchise would also be excluded from federal franchise.
- It wasn't until 1949 that these Acts were revoked, and Asian Canadians were given their right to vote.

### Immigration Policies

- During the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), more than 15,000 Chinese workers were employed to build the railway. They worked under dangerous conditions with unfair pay while crucially contributing to the CPR. Their presence, however, caused a lot of controversy. Backed by sustained anti-Chinese racism, the government decided the workers were no longer needed and they imposed a Chinese Head Tax to restrict Chinese immigration. From 1885 to 1923, under the Chinese Immigration Act (1885), Chinese migrants entering Canada had to pay \$50 per person which was later raised to a \$100 and then \$500 by 1903. According to historical resources on government of British Columbia's website, \$500 equalled to two years wages of a labourer and for the total of 38 years this anti-Asian immigration policy was in place, Chinese immigrants paid nearly \$23 million in tax. The head tax was also individually applied in Newfoundland in 1906-a British colony at that time. They passed the Newfoundland Chinese Immigration Act under which Chinese residents paid \$300 per person. Their Act remained in effect till 1949.
- In 1907, anti-Asian beliefs caused a rally in Vancouver to turn into a violent race riot that destroyed Chinese and Japanese residents' properties. Consequently, the federal government of Canada entered an agreement with the Japanese Foreign Minister to limit Japanese immigrants coming to Canada. Hayashi-Lemieux "Gentleman's Agreement" was a way of Canada controlling Asian, in this context specifically Japanese, communities from growing.
- Another product of the 1907 race riots in Vancouver was Canada's first drug law. In 1908, the federal government passed the Opium Act (Carstairs, 1999). The foundations of this Act were grounded in anti-Chinese racism and specifically targeted Chinese men. "White victims and Chinese villains" (Carstairs, 1999)

was the rhetoric used by newspapers and police were granted more power to deport and control Chinese migration altogether.

- Sikhs from Punjab had arrived and settled in British Columbia in 1906 and a prevailing sentiment that continues to impact racialized communities is the narrative around Canada being “a white man’s country.” Lobbies against Japanese and Chinese immigration bled into measures against Punjabis, particularly Sikhs, and other South Asians. 1908’s “continuous journey” law was an overtly discriminatory policy to restrict immigrants arriving from Japan and the Indian Subcontinent. Non-stop travel from Japan and India was not existent at that time and Canada’s law prohibited newcomers to enter if they had a stop in their journey. Exceptions to this law were if newcomers had over \$200, or their country had a special agreement with Canada. This law remained in effect till 1947.
- Chinese Immigration Act 1923, known also as the Chinese Exclusion Act was introduced to stop Chinese immigration for 24 years. It was passed to replace the 1885 Chinese Immigration Act with more restrictions. It prohibited entry of Chinese immigrants, increased government oversight of the ones residing within the country and intensified social and economic barriers.

### **Japanese Internment Camps**

Asian segregation and anti-Japanese sentiments have been an ongoing struggle for many Japanese Canadians throughout history. In 1942, the federal government, under the War Measures Act, exiled more than 20,000 Japanese Canadians to isolated areas of BC and other provinces. This action was a direct result of Japan’s Pearl Harbour bombing during the Second World War. Japanese Canadians, without any basis, were detained in overcrowded internment camps while others were forced to work on farms in Alberta and Manitoba. The government confiscated and sold homes and businesses of these citizens and held proceeds from the sales. As camps began to close after the Second World War, Mackenzie King provided the detainees with two cruel options; resettle east of Rocky Mountains or deportation to Japan. Approximately 4000 captives left Canada, only some moved back to BC and others relocated elsewhere in Canada with no connection to their communities, history and language.

### **Present-day Immigration Programs**

The foundations of current immigration programs evolve from historical discrimination and racism that Asian migrants continue to face. “Once more, Canada is bringing in workers to labour, harvest, pack, and process food for poor pay and extensive hours, only to deny access to permanent residency or citizenship.” (Chinese Canadian National Council for Social Justice, 2022). Both agricultural and domestic care workers, under the Temporary Foreign Workers programs mostly Filipina and South Asians, work in precarious conditions. Workers face abuse and if they file a complaint they are often fired or deported. Although Canadians depend heavily on temporary foreign workers, the workers are seen as quickly disposable labour. Workers visas are tied to one employer limiting their freedom to secure better opportunities elsewhere and their rights are constrained because they do not have a pathway to permanent residency in Canada.

### **SARS and COVID-19**

The SARS outbreak of 2003 fed historical anti-Asian sentiments which became talks of the mainstream media, politics and society. Chinese and Southeast Asian communities were victimized, and past misconceptions resurfaced for example thinking Chinese people as “diseased” and “dirty” while public discourse blamed SARS as an Asian problem (Leung, 2008). This same rhetoric, marginalization and shunning of Asian communities in Canada spiked again due to COVID-19 and social media amplified it. Asian businesses took a hit and Kwong (2020) mentions Asian communities were questioned “...if we eat dogs and bats”. The concept of hygiene was used to justify social exclusion of anyone who were Asian presenting and hate incidents exacerbated.

### **National Security and Discrimination**

The government of Canada is currently working on consolidating a “list of entities that pose a risk to national security” (Chiu, 2023). The list will contain names of foreign partner universities and research institutes that have connections to their state and pose a “threat” to Canada. While universities across Canada are preparing to manage relationships with those partners, researchers at Canadian universities are caught up amid these political tensions. Chinese academics come under high scrutiny as views that “Chinese collaborators are stealing Canadian university-generated IP (Intellectual Property)” (Özsu, 2023). M. Tamer Özsu (2023) clarifies, this kind of mindset curtails the attitude that “knowledge is exchanged” and Canada will lose valuable knowledge from these collaborations. The developing narrative increases discrimination for Chinese “high-tech researchers” (Chiu, 2023) and creates surveillance and fear within academic peers.

## **Examples of Anti-Asian R**

Stereotypes and narratives around Asian communities contribute to anti-Asian racism that we see today. Given Canada’s long history of exclusionary politics and pervasive stereotypes, heightened violence and racism against Asian communities, specifically during COVID-19. Furthermore, throughout 2021, East Asian communities continued to report the majority of incidents and attacks, making up 51% of all reports. (Chinese Canadian National Council for Social Justice, 2022).

### **Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype**

One of the most pervasive stereotypes in anti-Asian racism — witnessed by many during COVID-19— is the “perpetual foreigner stereotype”. It is a racist and xenophobic narrative that paints naturalized and native-born citizens of western countries as foreign because of their heritage. While this stereotype impacts all races, there is a prevalence of the “go back to where you came from” attitude towards people of Asian descent. A 2021 analysis of police-reported hate crimes found that when compared to statistics from 2019, hate crimes against East Asian and Southeast Asian populations increased by 301% in 2020— the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (Moreau & Wang, 2022).

A subset of the “perpetual foreigner” stereotype that particularly effects East and Southeast Asian communities is the “Yellow Peril” phenomenon. This racist rhetoric paints East and Southeast Asian individuals as a “danger” to the western world. This form of racism ties individual bodies to ideas of a geopolitical threat or abstract danger, regularly targeting Asian communities.

## **Model Minority Myth**

Another stereotype that negatively impacts Asian diaspora is the model minority myth. It portrays Asian individuals as hard-working, independent, and prodigal geniuses. It refuses the diversity and diaspora within Asian communities and instead collectively clusters all Asians under one umbrella. It pressurizes Asian communities to live up to toxic successful standards and makes way for thoughts that working hard erases racism and injustice. Many Canadians, primarily white, believe that systemic racism against Asians does not exist because they have “succeeded” in Canada, refuting the socio-economic, political and educational challenges faced by many working-class Asian Canadians. The model minority myth dismisses anti-Black, anti-Indigenous and racism against other people of colour by implying that racism does not exist because model Asians have been successful.

The model minority myth may also impact the ways in which Asian community members interpret and understand their self-concept. Canada’s point-based immigration system focuses on bringing highly qualified immigrants (Dirks, 2020). Those who score higher points because of their education and experiences are invited to come to Canada overemphasizing this model pool. The new immigrants are forced to uphold the work harder cycle and only successful stories are highly celebrated. Wei et al. (2020) recognizes “... not every Asian American fits the model minority stereotype. Asian Americans who do not fit the stereotype might fear that others will discover how much knowledge or ability they really lack. Thus, they might believe that their success in life or in their profession has been the result of “some kind of luck” (i.e., impostor feelings) (p. 435)”. Another belief the model minority myth perpetuates internally is depicting Asian women as “quiet” and “submissive” (Mukkamala & Suyemoto, 2018), ignoring the racist and sexist challenges experienced by “working-class Asian women” (Tabibi, 2021).

Model minority myth intensifies inequity and rift between and/or within Asian communities and other historically underrepresented groups by re-emphasizing the views on who deserves a voice and recognition in Canada.

## **Tangible actions to combat anti-Asian Racism**

### **1. Examining biases**

Due to the pervasive nature of racism, it is incredibly important for everyone, especially educators, employers and service providers, to reflect on their informed beliefs. Viewing students and employees as holistic individuals rather than monolithic groups helps unlearn problematic associations. With all anti-oppressive work, there is usually a level of discomfort in examining our own behaviour; this discomfort is a good sign that you are truly engaging in anti-racist work.

### **2. Empower and value resources**

Asian communities are organizing movements, consolidating resources and recommending actions. As allies it is important to listen, learn, support and value their energy and knowledge. Support may also look like connecting and building trust with community groups and promoting civic engagement in classrooms and workplaces.

### **3. Challenging power and privilege**

Examining one's own power and privilege is crucial to anti-oppressive education. Educators should work with their students to define anti-oppressive terms and embed reflective questioning throughout all areas of learning. It is also important for educators to understand that they are also humans that are learning and be willing to model accountability, which empowers students to engage in difficult conversations and question power systems.

### **4. Recognize intersectionalities**

Anti-Asian racism— like other forms of bigotry— are built on monolithic stereotypes. Asian identities include a vast range of cultural, ethnic, gender, sexuality, ability, and class experiences. Teaching students about different systems of oppression and imbuing curriculum with intersectional teaching material helps individuals understand just how complex and fluid Asian diasporas are. For service providers and rest of the campus community, an intersectional lens helps recognize gaps and advocate for inclusive services.

### **5. Holding high expectations**

Educators must hold high expectations for all their students in all areas of growth, not just STEM academic achievement. Do not confuse perfectionism with high expectations; this is how educators can perpetuate the model minority myth and reinforce the cycle of harm perpetuated by it. It is important to combat that myth and teach Asian students that embracing mistakes is a necessary part of the learning process, helping them unlearn their own internalized insecurities.

### **6. Participating in ongoing EDI-R training**

Bystander intervention and educational trainings can prepare us in learning, identifying and de-escalating anti-Asian harassment. There are many social justice organizations that offer such trainings. The University of Waterloo's Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Anti-Racism (EDI-R) office also offers some **workshops**.

### **7. Check in with your Asian peers**

Non-Asian allies can show their support by checking in with their Asian peers, offering support in any way they need. In companies and organizations, the simplest thing managers and organizational leaders can do for their Asian employees is to use their privilege to acknowledge the news of anti-Asian violence, and give space for impacted individuals to process, grieve and heal.

### **8. Coalition building**

Coalition building is defined as the "primary mechanism through which disempowered parties can develop their power base and thereby better defend their interests" (OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2018). Building partnerships within the Asian, Black and Indigenous communities establishes inter-racial solidarity and helps disrupt anti-oppressive systems that continue to dismiss and pit groups against each other. Project 1907 has put together some **resources** for Asian allies and community members.

## Further Learning

Here are some resources to learn more about anti-Asian racism, what you can do to combat it, and for Asian individuals who need mental health or legal supports:

- **Addressing Anti-Asian Racism: A Resource for Educators**  
A guide to combatting Anti-Asian racism within schools and classrooms.
- **Immigration Waterloo Region Resources**  
A guide to learn about racism and access resources, tools and information to assist in taking action to end racism in Waterloo Region.

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