

CYBER
THREAT
ANALYSIS

•|||• Recorded Future®

By Insikt Group®

June 2, 2021



Threats to Asian Communities in North America, Europe, and Oceania

To honor Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month, Insikt Group researched threats directed toward Asians living within North America, Europe, and Oceania, including influence operation campaigns, physical threats, and cyber threats directed toward the Asian community. This research aims to raise awareness for the Asian community and examine the increased racism Asians have faced since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Executive Summary

Asian communities in North America, Europe, and Oceania have been heavily affected by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and reports of discrimination toward and violence against Asian individuals and Asian-owned businesses have increased since January 2020. Anti-Asian narratives, racist terminology, and xenophobia have been used by public figures and mainstream media and are evidenced by the rise of anti-Asian sentiment observed since December 2019 and increasing through the first few months of 2021. These narratives have also been amplified by foreign media to exacerbate divisions between minority groups or to promote anti-Western narratives (as identified in reporting from Chinese media outlets). Scammers and other cybercriminals have also taken this opportunity to exploit public support for Asian businesses by defrauding altruistic individuals looking to support initiatives such as social fundraising campaigns.

Key Judgments

- The COVID-19 pandemic is likely the primary driver of increased violence, hate speech, and harassment against people of Asian heritage, but national security narratives are also generating suspicion, particularly towards those of Chinese heritage who are living in the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK), or Australia. Together, these factors are isolating AAPI communities within North America, Europe, and Oceania.
- Increasing coverage from 2019 through 2021 in mainstream media of PRC espionage tactics has led to overgeneralization and misunderstanding of this threat, generating suspicion.
- Russia has used state-sponsored media outlets and covert influence operations to amplify narratives in mainstream and social media that the rise in violence and hate against Asian people in Western countries was a product of systemic racism and was perpetuated by other minorities in an effort to sow division.
- China also used state-sponsored media to amplify anti-Asian attitudes, sentiment, and violence, particularly in the US, as a means to deflect criticism of the PRC's own human rights record. Asian communities faced fewer cyber-related threats than other minority groups studied by Insikt Group; however, Asian communities did see a marked increase in digital abuse and online harassment, particularly on underground forums. Digital abuse and online harassment was often associated with commentary intended to polarize marginalized communities and incite physical attacks toward those of Asian heritage.
- Scams targeting Asian communities primarily involved charitable donations intended to help individuals who needed medical care after being physically attacked in high-profile cases.

Background

Throughout 2020 and into 2021, anti-Asian sentiment has increased based on reports from people of Asian heritage residing in countries outside of Asia, such as the US, UK, and Australia. The rise in reported cases of harassment and attack has been [correlated](#) with the spread of COVID-19, which emerged in December 2019 from Wuhan, China, and spread globally due to international travel and trade. Mainstream media and public figures were found to have [influenced](#) the initial narrative and used terms that blamed all of China, including both the people and the government, for allowing the virus to spread. The use of terms such as “China Virus” or “Wuhan Virus,” and later “kung flu” and other stigmatizing verbiage, has led to anti-Asian sentiment and xenophobia. Anti-Asian sentiment and xenophobia manifests in [online abuse](#), [physical attacks](#), and the [shunning of people](#) of Asian heritage due to misconstrued notions that those of Asian descent had a higher likelihood of carrying and transmitting COVID-19 or were somehow responsible for the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to statistics [released](#) by Stop AAPI Hate, they have seen an increase in reported incidents since their creation in March 2020. The group received 6,603 incident reports from March 2020 through March 2021, with 4,193 reports in 2020. In the first 3 months of 2021 alone, the group has received 2,410 reports. Verbal harassment comprises the large majority of reported incidents in 2020 (68.1% of reports), followed by shunning — the deliberate avoidance of Asians — as the second most reported category (20.5%). Physical assaults are third and increased from 10.2% of reported incidents in 2020 to 16.7% of reported incidents in 2021. [Approximately 70%](#) of reported incidents took place in public locations, such as in businesses or on the street. Attacks against individuals between the age of 18 to 45 made up the majority of incidents, and attacks against women comprised 64.8% of physical assaults.

Historical Anti-Asian Sentiment in North America, Europe, and Oceania

In addition to the effects of COVID-19, anti-Asian sentiment occurs in the context of historical and cultural anti-Asian biases. Concerns over economic opportunity have repeatedly converged with race-based ideologies, leading to [exclusionary](#) immigration [legislation](#) aimed at [Asians](#) (particularly ethnic Chinese) throughout the mid-19th and 20th centuries. National security concerns have also historically exacerbated xenophobia and otherism. In the US, for example, while the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War is often [characterized](#) as the reaction to a threat posed by a foreign power, it was also the outcome of long-standing of [anti-Japanese sentiment](#).

Today’s national security landscape is generally not so extreme as that which followed Pearl Harbor in the US. Yet anti-Asian sentiment and suspicion are rising alongside geopolitical tensions between China and countries like the [US](#), [Australia](#), and the [UK](#). Once more taking the US as an example, hate crime statistics curated by the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) (FBI) provide an indirect barometer of anti-Chinese sentiment (see Figure 1 below). However, publicly available FBI hate crime statistics only extend back to 1996. The FBI recorded 355 attacks on AAPI individuals that year, representing an all-time high between then and 2019 (the last year for which the data is available). Between 1996 and 2016, the number of hate crimes generally decreased. But beginning in 2016, the number of incidents entered a multi-year period of increasing incidents. Notably, this correlates with an increasing focus on, and tensions with, Asia, particularly China, throughout the past half decade.

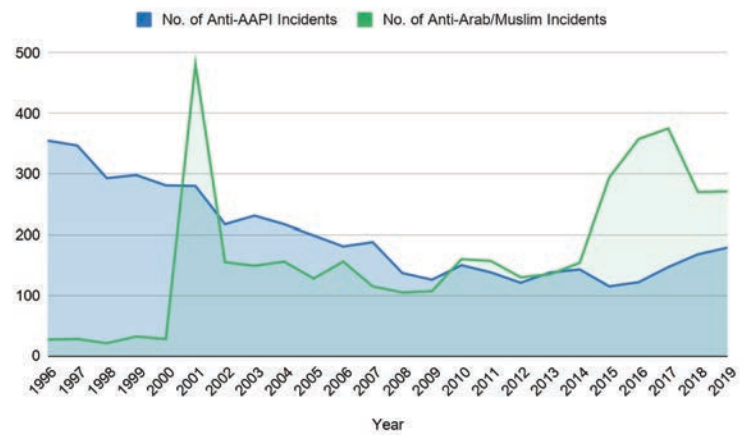


Figure 1: FBI hate crime incidents involving AAPI or Arab/Muslim victims in the United States (Source: Compiled by Recorded Future from [FBI data](#))¹

¹ Notes: Beginning in 2013, the FBI began distinguishing between anti-Asian and anti-Hawaiian or Pacific Islander incidents. We have re-combined those categories for this graph. Beginning in 2015, the FBI began identifying both anti-Arab as well as anti-Islam/Muslim incidents. We have combined those categories for this graph. Arab/Muslim victims are included as a control group. While still correlational, surges in violence against Arab/Muslim communities in 2001 (following the attacks on the World Trade Center) and 2015 (following the declaration of a caliphate by Islamic State) support our conclusion that geopolitics and national security threats influence hate and xenophobia.

Mainstream and Social Media Promotion of Anti-Asian Sentiment

The language used in popular media to describe current events related to Asia, whether regarding COVID-19 or strategic competition with China, has an effect on how audiences view and treat people of Asian heritage. Human Rights Watch [finds](#) that “Since the outbreak of the pandemic, Asians and people of Asian descent have been targets of derogatory language in media reports and statements by politicians as well as on social media platforms, where hate speech related to Covid-19 also appears to have spread extensively”. Such depictions negatively impact the health and safety of AAPI communities. The FBI [warned](#) as early as March 2020 that COVID-19 narratives would likely lead to an increase in anti-Asian hate crimes. While COVID-19 is likely the most immediate driver of rapidly increasing anti-Asian sentiment, rising geopolitical tensions between China and the US, Australia, UK, and others are also driving harassment of people of Asian heritage.

Impact of COVID-19

The widespread effects of COVID-19 are likely the most immediate catalyst of growing anti-AAPI sentiment and aggression in North America, Europe, and Oceania today. In the US, both [physical hate crimes](#) and [racist hashtags and incendiary sentiment](#) on social media against AAPI people have risen sharply during the pandemic. Studies conducted by the Human Rights Watch and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), moreover, have at least partially attributed former President Donald Trump’s use and legitimization of terms such as “China Virus” and “kung flu” as well as former Vice President Mike Pence’s use of “Wuhan Virus” to the uptick in hateful acts and speech. According to the ADL report, “About 17% of Asian Americans reported ‘severe’ online harassment, up from 11% in the same earlier period”, while in the same time period, online harassment reported by all Americans on social networks fell by about 3%. While verbal harassment made up most of the 2,800 hate incidents reported to the group [Stop AAPI Hate](#) between March and December 2020, 8.7%, or approximately 240 people, reported physical assaults. Between March 2020 and February 2021, Stop AAPI Hate reported nearly [3,800](#) hate incidents against AAPI people in the US.

The UK was also not immune to the rise of violence against AAPI people spurred on by the COVID-19 pandemic. The non-profit [End the Virus of Racism](#) tallied hate crimes against British people of Asian background during the pandemic and found that, in 2020, there were 261 hate crimes against Asians in April, 323 in May, and 395 in June. The crimes rise “each time as lockdown eased”, according to [Sarah Owen](#), a British Member of Parliament (MP). Included in a speech given before Parliament on October 13, 2020 titled “Chinese and East Asian Communities: Racism

during Covid-19”, Owen described anti-Asian racism that she encountered among fellow MPs, such as COVID-19-related jokes depicting “caricatures of a person in a Chinese pointy hat, bucked teeth and slanting eyes”. She further described one instance in which “a Tory council leader said in a meeting that this was all because someone was eating undercooked bat soup in China”. These portrayals of people with Chinese heritage have reportedly gone unaddressed.

In Australia, one survey by the Lowy Institute [found](#) that between March 2020 and March 2021, 1 in 5 Chinese Australians were threatened or attacked. This trend includes instances in which one family’s home was repeatedly [vandalized](#) with phrases like “COVID-19 China die” and “leave and die”. One study by a professor at the University of Technology Sydney found Australian news media [adopted](#) a highly biased, negative approach toward coverage of China in relation to COVID-19. However, anti-Asian, specifically anti-Chinese, sentiment in Australia is not solely the result of COVID-19. The same study details the growing prominence of “China influence” narratives that presuppose the PRC is a hostile nation and asserts that Australian media treats, without ample evidence, that Chinese heritage persons and organizations with links to China as agents of foreign influence. With the onset of COVID-19, national security concerns over China’s influence tactics in Australia converged with the pandemic as Chinese Australians and Chinese nationals who imported or exported personal protective equipment to Australia were seen as foreign agents. Such suspicions of espionage are neither confined to the media nor to Australia, as discussed below.

Suspicious of Espionage

In March 2021, a public statement signed by more than 100 AAPI heritage US national security officials was published. It [asserts](#) that “the xenophobia that is spreading as US policy concentrates on great power competition (with the PRC) has exacerbated suspicions, microaggressions, discrimination, and blatant accusations of disloyalty simply because of the way we look”. Among numerous issues in the US-China relationship that are likely driving anti-Asian prejudice is the discussion in mainstream and social media around the PRC’s espionage activities, which has re-emerged as a focus of government and public concern in recent years. Narratives regarding the alleged threat posed by students of Chinese heritage have proliferated. Academic research and news reports on the role of students, scientists, and campus organizations as a conduit for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) [influence](#), [surveillance](#), and [technology theft](#) through universities and national laboratories are being misinterpreted by many in the American, Australian, and British public institutions to mean that all or most Chinese students are a national security threat, as exemplified by figure 2 below.

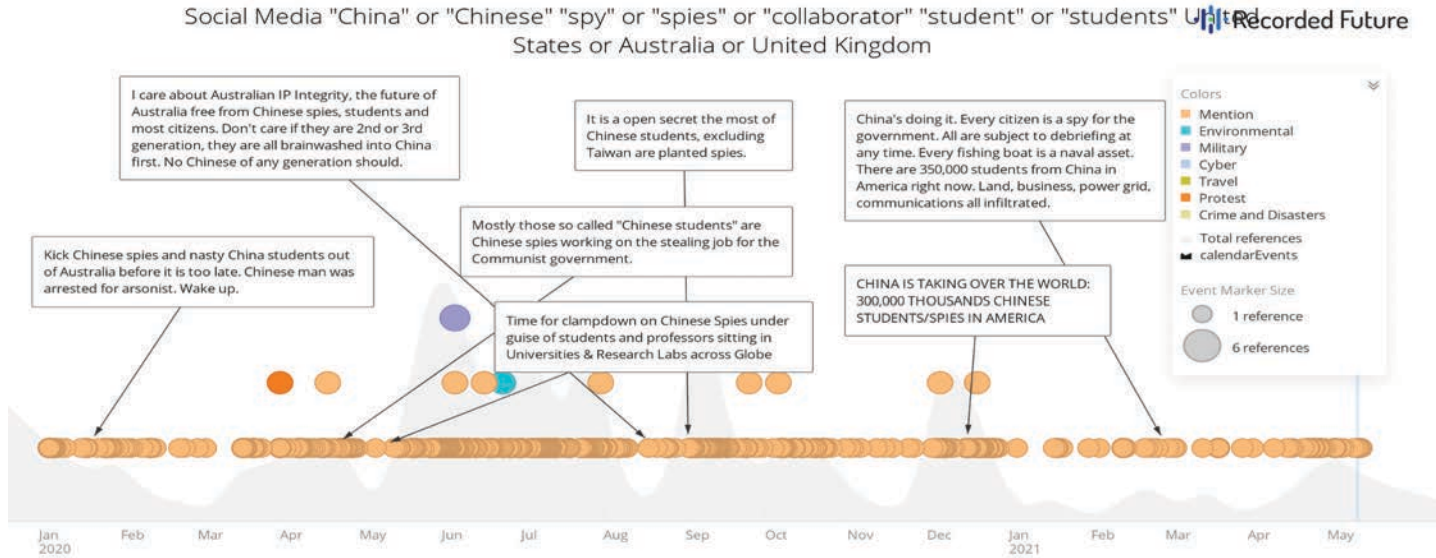


Figure 2: US, UK, and Australian social media posts broadly accusing Chinese heritage students of espionage. As an example, one social media user notes that they "Don't care if they are 2nd or 3rd generation [immigrants], they are all brainwashed into China first. No Chinese of any generation should." (Source: Recorded Future)

This exaggerated reading of legitimate security concerns is driven, reinforced, and amplified by some politicians and law enforcement efforts. For instance, in the US, former President Donald Trump reportedly [told](#) attendees to a 2018 White House dinner that "almost every student that comes over to this country (China) is a spy". A 2020 legislative proposal [suggested](#) a blanket ban on issuing visas to prospective students from mainland China seeking to study science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) topics at the graduate and postgraduate level. A February 2021 strategic report prepared by the office of a sitting US senator [asserted](#) that "it is often impossible to distinguish honest (Chinese) students from spies".

The policies implemented or seriously considered by the US and UK regarding concerns over the CCP's exploitation of academic venues for the PRC's national security goals appear to be relatively more targeted. The UK reportedly [intended](#) to add new academic subjects under its Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS) in October 2020. ATAS requires foreign students from most countries to obtain government approval before they can acquire a visa to begin studying courses related to topics of national security value (such as those related to military technology). It is unclear whether those changes were [implemented](#) based on the ATAS website. In June 2020, the US [prohibited](#) student and research visas for PRC nationals seeking to study at the graduate level if they have connections with institutions engaging in certain PRC military programs.

Despite the adoption of relatively more targeted policies, suspicions of espionage in the academic and research sectors have led to personal accusations and suffering. Under the US Department of Justice's (DOJ) China Initiative, [multiple](#) Chinese-heritage US [citizens](#) have been [accused](#) of committing crimes related to economic espionage and lost their employment only to have criminal charges dropped without explanation. Importantly, this pattern — publicly and criminally accusing Chinese heritage individuals of scientific espionage and technology theft, followed by [dismissing](#) the charges, followed by lingering, unaddressed fallout — is [not new](#). For Chinese heritage individuals and those of other Asian ancestries convicted in the US for espionage offenses, their sentences are often [longer and harsher](#) than those for non-Asian offenders convicted of similar crimes. A similar law enforcement emphasis on PRC espionage in universities is currently [underway](#) in Australia and [the UK](#), where news outlets have broadly asserted that "With 100,000 Chinese students on Britain's campuses, MI5 and the [Government Communications Headquarters] warn research and computer systems may be at risk".

Outside of academia, accusations and insinuations of loyalty to a foreign power pose a similar threat to the AAPI community. As the debate over the PRC's rise to international prominence and the CCP's particular strategies has grown more salient, members of the Asian community in various countries have faced backlash and suspicion when they attempt to highlight concerns about how national security dialogue affects members of their community. For example, [3](#) Chinese-Australians were

[asked](#) whether they were “willing to unconditionally condemn the Chinese Communist Party dictatorship” during an Australian Senate committee hearing. Their testimonies had emphasized Australia’s [lack of inclusion](#) of Asian individuals in politics and [assumptions](#) about Chinese-Australian opinions in the context of geopolitical tensions with China. In the name of investigating the PRC’s influence operations through the [United Front](#), an alliance-building concept that seeks to co-opt civil-social organizations for the benefit of the CCP, numerous civil-social organizations, public figures, and [private citizens](#) have been publicly alleged to have malicious links to the CCP in ways that sometimes involve the doxxing of Chinese-Australian individuals, including children. One American social media company that labels accounts affiliated with PRC-controlled press has been [accused](#) of labeling accounts run by ethnic Chinese journalists and not their European counterparts.

This kind of distrust extends into public service as well. In both the US and Australia, Asian Americans report that they feel [restricted](#) from serving in diplomatic posts related to countries where their language skills and cultural knowledge should be seen as an asset. One Korean American government employee at the US Department of State was [told](#) that he could not work in Korea despite never having applied for a post there. In Australia’s public service, the story is much the same: Chinese Australians are [underrepresented](#) in and prevented from obtaining jobs related to China even though the Australian government has a deficiency in Chinese language skill. In one extreme case, a Chinese-Australian local election candidate named Peter Zhuang was [labelled](#) “pro-Beijing” after a post he made on social media quoted a comedian in saying, “I urge the Chinese government to follow the law and promote the ‘strike hard’ and

‘suppression’ overseas” was taken out of context. His contact with a PRC ambassador during an event in Brisbane, Australia, was further used as evidence of wrongdoing. The Daily Mail Australia, which published some of the initial accusations against Zhuang, later recanted and issued an [apology](#) in March 2021. However, photoshopped images of Zhuang with the out-of-context statement remain on social media.

Acknowledging the existence of anti-AAPI hate and bigotry has also become intertwined with the question of loyalty and geopolitics. Social media users commenting on the US have questioned whether the movement against anti-Asian prejudice is “funded by the CCP”. One 4chan user argued in a since-removed post that in Canada, “the ccp is using their national front (ccp controlled diaspora) to play up anti asian hate crimes, so the other chinese feel scared and join the national front controlled protest group”. Scattered reports have alleged some QAnon participants believe the March 16, 2020 shootings in Atlanta were also linked to Beijing via a “[master spy](#)” who managed the businesses at which victims were employed. Additional examples of this type of rhetoric on social media that link efforts to bring awareness to and combat anti-Asian to geopolitical narratives include the following:

- “The CCP is weaponizing and orchestrating ‘Anti-Asian Hate’ campaigns in the west, using them to criticize the west for ‘racism.’ There is no major ‘anti-Asian hate,’ it is being blown up and exploited by the CCP”
- “There is not any anti-Asian movement in the US! There is an anti-Asian movement ongoing in the US led by China government! Taking down China communist Party is the right way ! Please joining Miles Guo Whistleblower movement to take down #CCP”

Discussion of China's United Front in News and Social Media

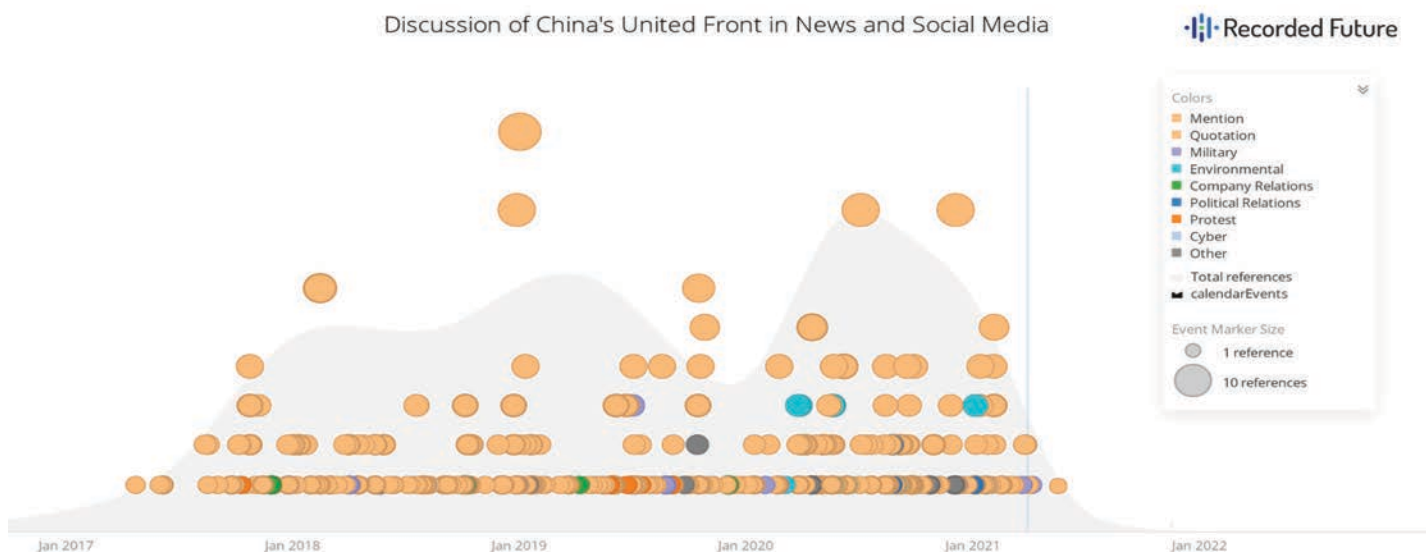


Figure 3: Increasing social media and news media mentions of China's United Front strategy (Source: Recorded Future)

- “There are several articles in recent months that indicate China as a security threat. I have this inkling feeling that the rise of Anti-Asian campaign is funded by the CCP. We had crimes against asians in the past and it’s generally called ‘hate crime’. Now, it’s a movement”

Progressive movements more broadly have even had their origins [described](#) as Maoist, with minimal evidence, by at least one prominent public figure and former US government official.

Separately, in March 2021, the [Associated Press](#) reported that the conspiracy movement QAnon has begun shifting towards anti-Chinese, as well as anti-Semitic, messaging that blends hate with national security themes. Some members of the group are now reportedly asserting that China seeks to achieve worldwide dominance through “a communist overthrow of governments backed by Jewish people who control wealth”.

Foreign Influence Operations Targeting Asian Communities

China, Russia, and Iran are amplifying the rise in anti-AAPI sentiment, with a particular focus on the US. PRC diplomats and media are using reporting on anti-Asian violence to rebuff criticism by the US as well as the UK of China’s own human rights record. Russian reporting seeks to create social divisions, while Iran’s reporting on anti-AAPI sentiment uses emotive rhetoric to undermine and discredit Western democracies and ideologies. Thus, the challenges that the US and other countries are facing with regard to racial prejudice are undermining their geostrategic interests. This becomes a threat to the AAPI community when, as discussed above in the case of US-China competition, perpetrators of hate attempt to delegitimize the movement against AAPI as a tool of foreign powers rather than a response to real concerns.

China

The Chinese government and state-sponsored media outlets are amplifying anti-Asian sentiment and racial strife in democratic countries. Rather than focusing on genuine concern, the framing of these topics is used to refute claims that China is engaged in human rights abuses as well as strengthen China’s own image. This framing is not unique to coverage of anti-AAPI and represents an [ongoing tactic](#) by the CCP to deflect criticism of its policies, as well as undermine the appeal of liberal democracy, by highlighting the shortcomings of others.

Overt Influence Activity

China’s amplification of anti-Asian sentiment in other countries begins with the central government. During a Ministry of Foreign Affairs [press conference](#) on April 6, 2021, Spokesperson Zhao Lijian asserted that “In recent years, hate crimes against Asian minorities in the United States have been on the rise.... In the United States, racism is comprehensive, systemic, and continuous..... [and] the United States should truly fulfill its commitment to protect human rights”. The following day, Zhao [elaborated](#) on America’s 5 “sins”, including ethnic cleansing and systemic racism, as he refuted the US’s recognition of China’s policies toward Xinjiang province as genocide. In late April 2021, China’s Embassy in the UK [accused](#) a British government report of “Whitewashing [UK] human rights issues while at the same time staging human rights farces” after the House of Commons passed a motion also naming China’s policies genocide.



Figure 4: Political cartoon depicting Joe Biden from Global Times article “Anti Asian-American racism stems from deep racial hatred in US ‘melting pot’” (Source: [Global Times](#))

Government statements are, in turn, frequently republished and added to broader reporting on the systemic nature of racism and anti-Asian hate in the US. These media reports are often based in truth, but present the information disingenuously and fixate on racial strife as an intractable characteristic of American society. For example, Xinhua News Agency’s March 25, 2021 [commentary](#) titled “Surging anti-Asian hate crimes and America’s inherent human rights sins” uses coverage of statistics by the organization Stop AAPI Hate to highlight a report on human rights in the US by China’s State Council, asserting that US democracy is in “disorder”. Recorded Future identified 470 references to “anti-Asian” or “anti-AAPI” in PRC state-sponsored media between January 2020 and March 18, 2021.

Amplification of "anti-Asian" or "anti-AAPI" Tensions in Chinese State-sponsored Media

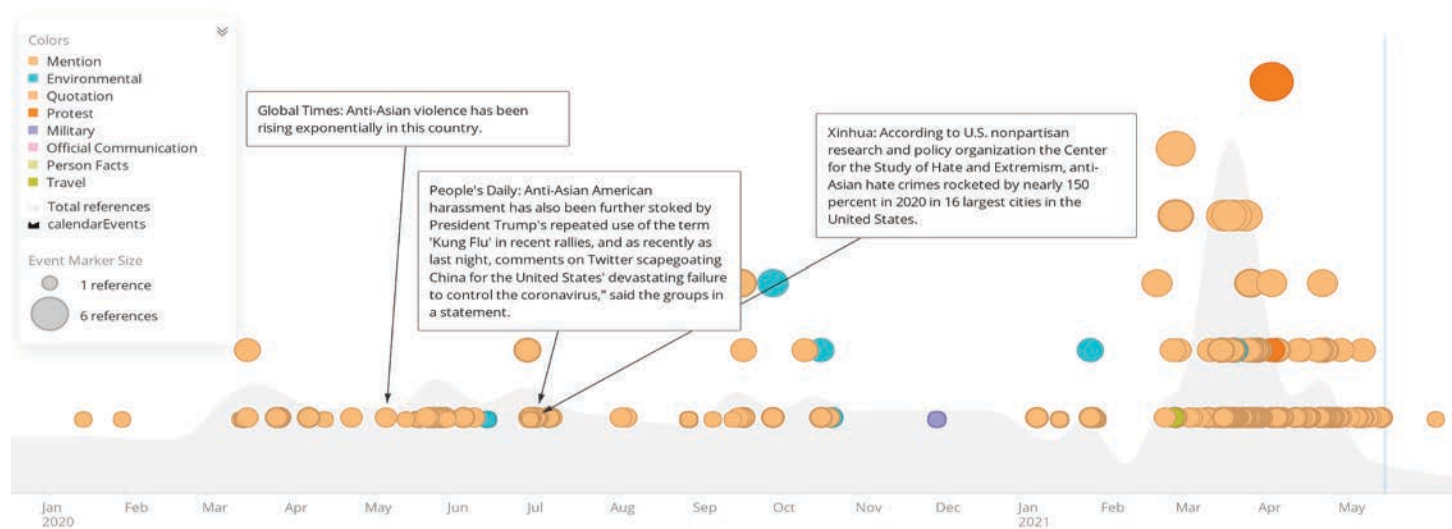


Figure 5: Amplification of "anti-Asia" and "anti-AAPI" issues in PRC state-sponsored media (Source: Recorded Future)

Specific examples include:

- Xinhua News Agency's [publication](#) titled "Facts on US breaching international rules", which asserts that the use of the terms "China Virus" and "Wuhan Virus" by US politicians as behavior that "seriously violated the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination"
- Global Times' [publication](#) titled "Deep-rooted US racism, inherited Sino-skepticism from previous admin mean no easy to 'Stop Asian Hate'", alleges that American society advocates for "Darwinism" and abides by a "survival of the fittest" doctrine
- Global Time' [article](#) titled "Is Washington Post fueling Asian fear hysteria?", which responds to a Washington Post op-ed titled "Anti-China is not anti-Asian" and attempts to refute the argument that the US can address concerns with the PRC government without fanning racism against Chinese and other Asian individuals

Russia

In addition to Chinese amplification of instances of anti-Asian violence in Western democracies, Russian state-owned media, propaganda, and disinformation sources have promoted content that highlights anti-Asian discrimination in the US.

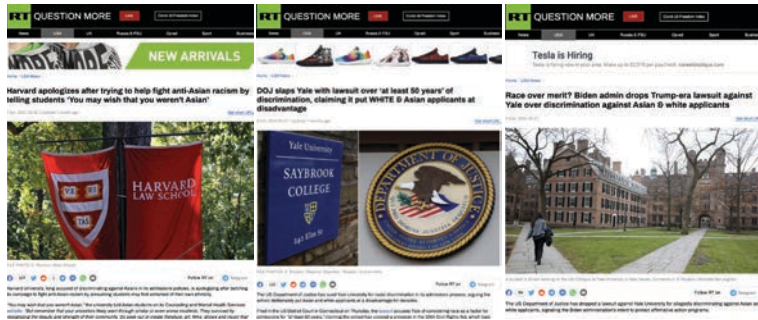
Russian state-sponsored media amplified content that focused on contentious matters within Asian American communities, like claims of anti-Asian discrimination in the [admissions process](#) at some US universities, potentially in an effort to foment polarization or otherwise highlight systemic racism against Asian populations. The use of divisive messaging focused on race has [long](#) been a cornerstone of covert Russian efforts to destabilize foreign nations. The COVID-19 pandemic has [exacerbated](#) anti-Asian harassment and violence in North America, and polarization between communities of disparate racial backgrounds perpetuates division.

At the same time, in Russia, government authorities were [engaging](#) in discriminatory behavior against people of Asian descent by conducting stops, subjecting them to questioning, and checking their identification to verify their status. Additionally, in some [cases](#), successful Asian communities within Russia become targets for harassment and abuse, resulting in an exodus from Russia.

Russian Disinformation, Propaganda, and State-Owned Media Networks

The Russian disinformation ecosystem maintains operations targeting audiences on both the right and left ends of the political spectrum, promoting narratives and commentary on either end to foment divisions within society. Such operations have largely targeted minority communities but have also been premised around polarizing issues like gun ownership, vaccination, and secession.

Historical examples of such efforts include Russian state media's ongoing coverage of an anti-discrimination lawsuit brought by the Trump administration Department of Justice against Yale claiming that Asian students were unfairly denied admissions on the basis of race or national origin.



Figures 6, 7, and 8: Stories on Russian state-owned media promoting polarizing views on race and discrimination in the Asian-American community (Sources from left to right: RT [1](#), [2](#), [3](#))

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread in Western nations, Russian disinformation also grew. A March 28 2020 New York Times [report](#) indicated that, like China, Russian information operations linked to organizations expanded false or polarizing information. The December 2020 Journal of the NPS Center for Homeland Defense and Security included a [report](#) on COVID-19 state-sponsored disinformation indicating the following:

COVID-19 anxieties have made people especially susceptible to disinformation and made the public more conspiracy-minded. Russia will certainly recognize the utility of conspiracy theories and malign information about COVID-19. Numerous detrimental outcomes include undermining medical experts, announcements of fake COVID-19 cures, stressing financial markets, and advancing racism. The Russians are using the chaos and uncertainty that the virus created to attack the distribution of accurate information and to leverage existing societal divisions.

At least 1 open-source [report](#) suggests that such divisive efforts are likely intended to weaken social unity during the pandemic. Insikt Group notes that such efforts are in line with longstanding tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) of Russian information operations that attempt to [sow division](#) between racial groups or otherwise [destabilize domestic security](#). And at least 1 Russian state-owned media outlet, RT, quoted the [discredited](#) non-profit journalism enterprise Project Veritas as suggesting that anti-Asian hate crimes were being perpetrated by individuals from the Black community, likely to foment social divisions between the two communities. [Research](#) by the Brookings Institute has found no basis for such claims and determined that the communities feel a high degree of solidarity in relation to the struggle for civil rights, representation, and equal protection under the law.



After doing some research into the apparent spike in anti-Asian hate crimes in the US, Chester said that he realized "a bunch of black men" were behind most of the attacks. Unfortunately for CNN, this perspective didn't fit in with the network's chosen narrative.

"I'm like, 'what are you doing?' We're trying to help, like, with the BLM," he vented, adding that the "optics" of black-on-Asian violence don't help the BLM cause. "Little things," like these hate crimes, "are enough to set back movements," he added.

Figure 9: Russian state-owned media outlet RT distributes false and divisive claims relating to anti-Asian violence (Source: [RT](#))

Iran

Iranian state-owned media organizations have [regularly reported on anti-Asian violence and racism](#) targeting Asian communities in Western countries, particularly the US and the UK, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Iran is likely making a deliberate and persistent effort to use loaded and emotive rhetoric to amplify anti-Asian violence and racism targeting Asian communities in Western countries in order to undermine and discredit Western democracies and ideologies. The media reporting was mostly based on true events and information, and we did not detect covert disinformation campaigns amplifying racism and crimes targeting the Asian community. However, we assess it is likely that Iran is making a deliberate and persistent effort to amplify anti-Asian violence and racism in Western countries through regular reporting and the use of loaded and emotive rhetoric in order to undermine and discredit Western democracies and ideologies.

Iranian Media Apparatus

Iran uses the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) to spread propaganda and disinformation, both internally and externally. The head of IRIB is appointed by Iran's Supreme Leader. IRIB maintains a [monopoly](#) over all types of TV and radio broadcasting in Iran and is responsible for ensuring that all broadcasting within Iran consistently promotes the doctrine of the Islamic Republic; IRIB is often the only source of information for Iranian citizens. IRIB's external media services include IRIB World Service (also known as Voice of Islamic Republic of Iran, or Pars Today), Sahar TV, Al-Kawthar TV, Qods TV, Al-Alam News Network, and Press TV. According to social media analytics firm Graphika, IRIB and its associated media services have [conducted](#)

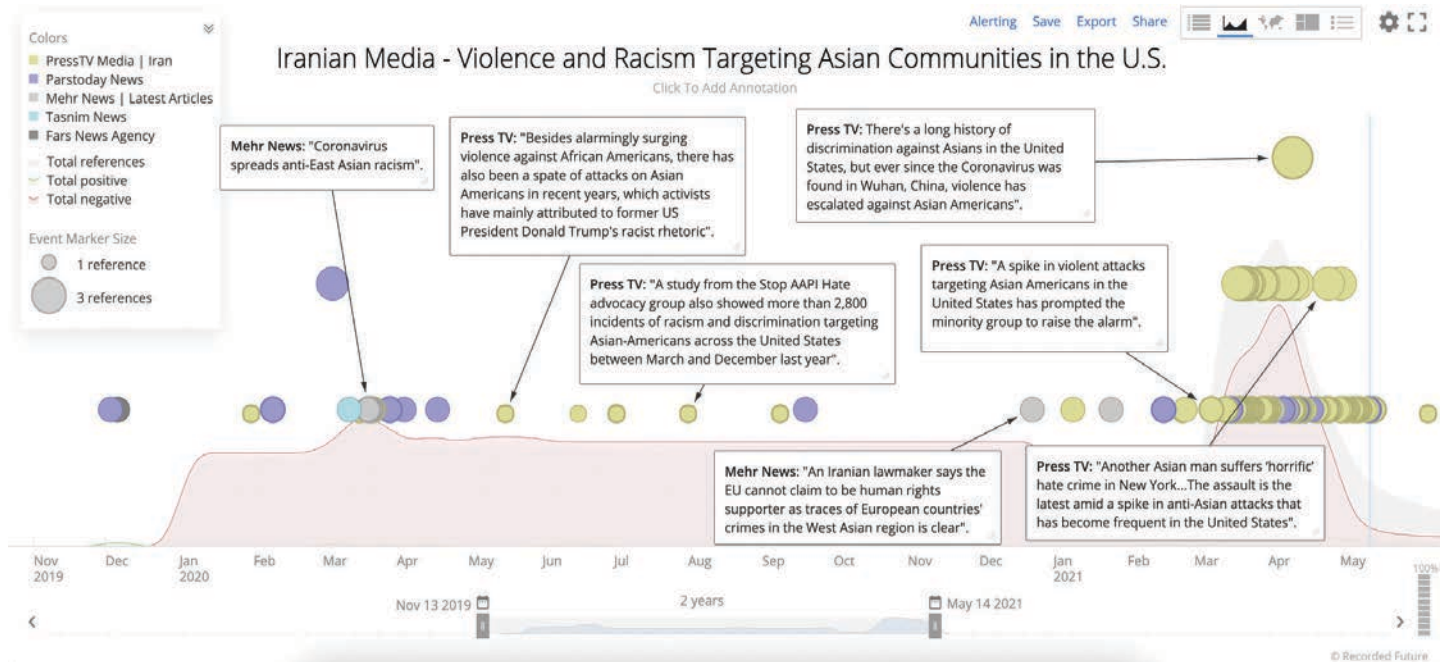


Figure 10: Iranian media reporting on violence and racism targeting Asian communities in the US (Source: Recorded Future)

covert disinformation campaigns over the past several years. However, as [reported](#) by the Atlantic Council, "Although Iran has certainly engaged in the spread of falsehood, this does not represent the majority — or even a significant portion — of its known digital influence efforts ... the actual content it disseminates is a mirror of its state propaganda: biased in Iran's favor and contrary to US interests, but seldom wholly fabricated".

Overt Influence Activity

We did not detect any covert disinformation campaigns amplifying racism and crimes targeting Asian communities, nor did we detect Iranian efforts to exacerbate divisions between minority communities; however, IRIB and its associated media services regularly reported on racism and crimes targeting Asian communities using loaded and emotive rhetoric.

On the Recorded Future Platform, there were 356 references to racism and violence targeting the Asian community on known Iranian state-owned media organizations between December 1, 2019 and May 14, 2021, with 263 of those references being published between March 14 and May 14, 2021, and 304 of the references originating from Press TV. Press TV is IRIB's primary English-language news channel, allegedly [modeled](#) after Western channels such as the BBC and CNN.

ParsToday [reported](#) on April 2, 2020, that racism against Asian communities in the "US, the UK, Australia, Canada, France and elsewhere" had increased since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and that Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke with US President Donald Trump on March 27, 2020 and emphasized that he hoped the US would "protect the health and lives of the many Chinese international students in the country". On March 14, 2021, ParsToday [reported](#) that "violence towards Asian Americans has skyrocketed and is sweeping across the United States of America with attacks becoming a weekly if not daily occurrence". The reporter went on to [say](#) that "racial violence, bigotry, and hatred has scarred [Asian American] history in the country" and that violence "erases their humanity ... nothing is more dehumanizing", and that "some of the most shameful chapters in US history involve racial prejudice against Asian-Americans". This report deliberately uses emotive and loaded rhetoric like "skyrocketed", "dehumanizing", and "erases their humanity" to amplify the issues in question and then ties recent increased violence against the Asian community to systematic racism in the US by discussing historical events since the 1800s like the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Rock Springs massacre, and more.

Press TV has regularly reported on violence towards Asian communities in the US. For example, on March 6, 2021, they [reported](#) that 3 people tried to kill a Chinatown store owner in Oakland, California, a 91-year-old Asian man was pushed to the ground in Chinatown in Oakland, California, and a 84-year-old Asian man was pushed to the ground in San Francisco and later died of his injuries. On March 17, 2021, they [reported](#) on the shootings at massage parlors in and around Atlanta, Georgia that killed 8 people, 6 of whom were women of Asian descent. And on March 30, 2021, they [reported](#) on an attack against a 65-year-old Asian woman in Manhattan, and an attack against an Asian man in a Brooklyn subway.

Furthermore, on April 29, 2021, Press TV [reported](#) that there has been an increase in racism against Asians and Asian healthcare staff in the UK as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, stating that “violence against Asians has become a bigger problem than it already was”, again suggesting that racism against the Asian community in the UK is a systemic issue. The article [states](#) that a “growing number” of Asian healthcare workers are being racially abused by patients and that they are considering moving away from the UK but cannot due to COVID-19 restrictions. However, the video in the article only [references](#) one Asian healthcare worker’s experience of receiving racist abuse from a patient that they shared on Twitter, with no evidence suggesting that it happens regularly to Asian healthcare workers or that Asian healthcare workers were looking to move away from the UK. The article ends by [stating](#) that the easing of lockdown measures in the UK will result in more potential hate crimes against the Asian community. In this example, Press TV is amplifying racism targeting Asian healthcare workers in the UK by referencing one incident, and similar to ParsToday above, attempts to link recent racist incidents with systemic racism against the Asian community in the UK.

Iranian state-owned media organizations, primarily IRIB’s Press TV, regularly reported on anti-Asian violence and racism targeting Asian communities in Western countries, particularly in the US and the UK, using loaded and emotive rhetoric to amplify the issues. The reports are mostly based on true events and information, and have quoted organizations like Stop AAPI Hate, individuals like President Biden and Asian American members of the US Congress, and AAPI members of the public. Reporting has also covered US political and public condemnation of anti-Asian violence in the US. We did not detect covert disinformation campaigns amplifying racism and crimes targeting the Asian community, nor did we detect Iranian efforts to exacerbate divisions between minority communities. Nevertheless, we assess it is likely that Iran is making a deliberate and persistent effort to amplify anti-Asian violence and racism targeting Asian communities in Western countries by regularly reporting on

those events through their external media services and using loaded and emotive rhetoric to undermine and discredit Western democracies and ideologies.

Underground Forum Commentary Seeks to Divide Communities

Similar to media and social media promotion of anti-Asian sentiment, underground forums and, to a lesser extent, cleantnet forums also promote anti-Asian sentiment. Many comments involve at least one of two themes: polarizing minority communities and promoting violence and physical attacks against Asians.

Polarizing Minority Communities

The attempt to shift the blame of these attacks to other minority communities on these forums primarily involved blaming Black communities for the increase in attacks against people of Asian heritage. Users on 4Chan shared claims that Black-on-Asian violence comprises the highest percentage of anti-Asian attacks, despite there [not being evidence](#) of Black-on-Asian violence increasing in the last year. Additionally, there were comments that members of the Jewish community were also responsible for violence against Asian individuals:



Figures 11 and 12: 4Chan posts purporting that violence against Asians is being conducted by other minority groups (Source: 4Chan, via Recorded Future)

Despite the attempts to promote disunity between minority groups, Black and Asian communities in the US have [historically](#) had solidarity when faced with adversity. Recently, the Asian American Advocacy Fund [urged](#) the Asian community to support the Black Lives Matter movement. We also identified the promotion of blame-shifting posts relating to Caucasians “saving” Asians from attacks and acting as their “protectors” — which was used to continue to evangelize the theory that minority groups were conducting anti-Asian violence.



Figure 13: 4Chan post using “savior” terminology (Source: 4Chan, via Recorded Future)

Get **#BlackonYellow** trending

Spread Awareness using memes, rants, and factually correct information to prove that white supremacy isn't the problem but rather n[REDACTED]s before the media blames white people for Asian violence.

This will be a massive redpill for many people and get people talking about the violent that blacks disproportionately cause and our c[REDACTED] campaign will make it impossible to ignore.

This will sow even more division between the blacks and Asians and will lead to some interesting things.

Feel free to post your memes, rants , information, **twitter** posts and replies here.

Let's get on it boys

#BlackonYellow

Attached File: **FE62A3BF-25C0-4763-83E7-A2DF7D58CAEB.jpg**

Post 1 of 2 by Anonymous - No Author ID on Apr 01 2021, 08:36

Figure 14: Post that calls for the promotion of sowing division between Black and Asian communities (Source: 4Chan, via Recorded Future)

Furthermore, there were attempts to get at least one racially divisive hashtag, **#BlackonYellow**, trending to amplify blame-shifting and to show that "white supremacy isn't the problem" and that anti-Asian attacks were being perpetrated by members of the Black community.

While fewer posts directly incited violence against members of the Asian community, there was evidence of individuals calling upon others to physically harm members of the Asian community. These primarily involved the idea that COVID-19 is spread by Asians.

hey b should I attack asian women with a white bag full of mortar?

Attached File: Screenshot from 2021-04-19 19-55-01.png

Post 1 of 13 by Anonymous - No Author ID on Apr 20 2021, 07:53

>>852483468

Not all Asians.

Just Chinese.

And not just women.

Men too.

I've had it with their virus.

Post 9 of 13 by Anonymous - No Author ID on Apr 20 2021, 08:11

Figure 15 and 16: Author asking whether they should attack Asian women with mortar, and responder stating that not "all Asians" should be attacked, just Chinese (Source: 4Chan, via Recorded Future)

Analysts did not identify any direct instances of these posts calling for violence against those of Asian heritage leading to the physical attacks on Asians; however, it is likely that the type of language in these posts fueled at least some of the attacks and increased anti-Asian sentiment against people in Asian communities.

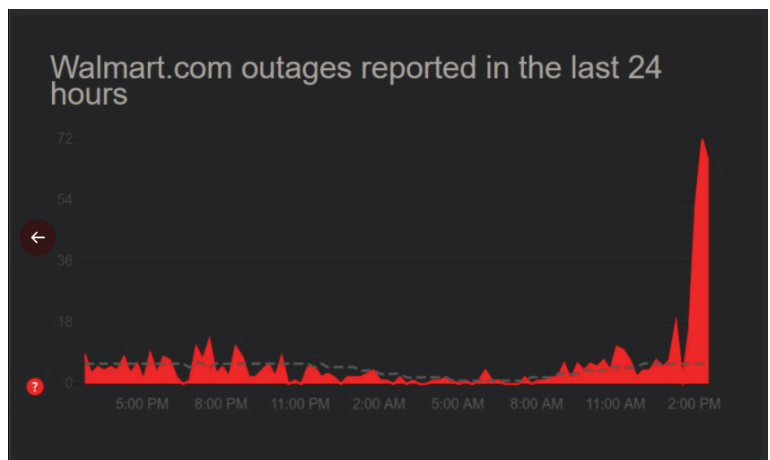
Cyber Threats to Asian Organizations, Businesses, and their Allies

Asian organizations, Asian-owned businesses, and their allies faced limited "traditional" cyber threats, such as distributed

denial of services (DDoS) attacks, defacement attacks, or phishing campaigns. The predominant forms of cyber threats to these organizations and their allies were digital abuse, online threats, and false claims as perpetrators used racial bias and anti-Asian sentiment promoted in mainstream news and social media to target those of Asian heritage.

Distributed Denial of Service Targeting Asian Organizations and their Allies

There is limited evidence to suggest that Asian-owned organizations, or their allies, have been targeted by DDoS attacks. A social media post purported that Walmart was DDoSed shortly after they released a statement denouncing the violence against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; however, we were unable to independently verify the claim.



Figures 17: Social media post purporting Walmart was DDoSed shortly after releasing a statement against AAPI violence and website outage report for walmart[.]com

Using open-source searches, we identified [US](#), Australian ([1](#), [2](#)), and [UK](#)-based institutions that provided support to Asian communities. We did not find evidence of DDoS attacks or other cyber threat events that affected these organizations since January 2020.

Rise of New Domain Registrations Featuring Anti-Asian Sentiment

Using the aforementioned list of institutions that supported Asian-American groups, we investigated typosquats of the domains used by those organizations and did not identify any references that indicated the organizations were being actively impersonated. When exploring domain registrations containing variants of “stop”, “asian”, and “hate” between January 2020 and May 2021, we identified that the large majority (approximately 98%) of these domains were registered within a short time frame — between March and April 2021, which correlated with a rise in anti-Asian sentiment in the US, Europe, and Australia. Of the 98 unique URLs identified, 41 resolved at the time of writing, while the rest were either parked domains or had a DNS Error when we attempted to visit the website.

Breakdown of Page Status

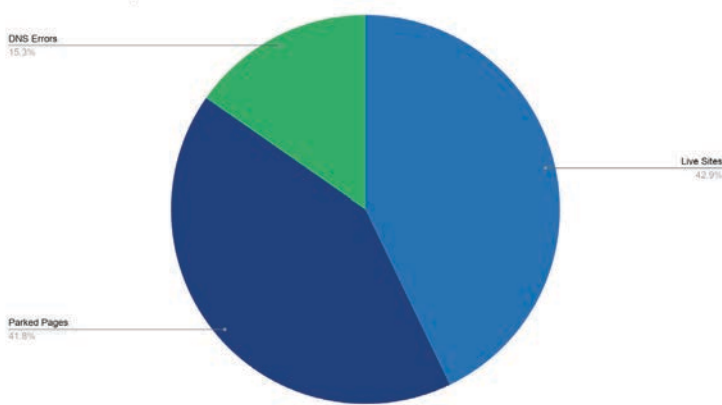


Figure 18: Breakdown of page status for domains containing “stop,” “asian,” and “hate” (Source: Recorded Future data)

Increase in Anti-Asian Domain Registrations

Between January 2020 and May 14, 2021, Insikt identified more than 500 new domain registrations that contained variants of “kung flu”, “China Virus”, or “Wuhan Virus” — all of which are derogatory terms that have been affiliated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these domains appear to have been designed to capitalize on the anti-Asian sentiment or general fear associated with these phrases to drive website traffic. We observed 2 major topic categories for these domain registrations: access to information or treatment (such as “helpline”, “facts”, “drugs”, and “treatment”), and consumer goods (such as “apparel”, “decals”, “shop”, “shirt”, “wipes”, and “dog test kit”).

Most of these domains did not resolve as of this writing. There were roughly two waves of domain registrations associated with each phrase: one wave corresponding to initial international knowledge of COVID-19 between December 2019 and January 2020, and the other corresponding to the lockdowns that were implemented in many countries between February and March 2020. The phrase “kung flu” appeared in several comparatively early registrations in January and February 2020 at around the same time that it was appearing in [parody song material](#), and some commentators were [popularizing](#) the phrase. However, most domains featuring the phrase were registered between March 17 and 30, 2020, coinciding with President Trump’s reported use of it in a [conversation](#) with an Asian-American reporter on March 17, 2020. Across all 3 phrases, the dominant majority of registered domains are currently hosted on the IP address 34.102.136[.]180, which belongs to GoDaddy.

Between March 7 and May 10, 2020, we identified a clear spike in registrations of domains with anti-Chinese phrases, based on a query for the words “fuck” and “china” or “chinese”. This did not correspond to a larger trend of domain registrations with similar phrases indicating antipathy toward other Asian countries or Asia in general. As we observed for the domain strings above, there were many anti-Chinese domains that appeared to have been set up to capitalize on sentiment for monetary gain, such as [fuckchinashirts\[.\]com](#), [fuckchinastore\[.\]com](#), and [fuckchinahat\[.\]net](#). While none of these domains resolved to pages with anti-Asian material at the time of writing, and many did not resolve at all, attributes of a few domains highlights the financial incentive associated with this trend.

- The domain [fuckuchina\[.\]us](#), which was registered on March 16, 2020, currently [redirects](#) to the domain [alpineiron\[.\]com](#), which is a construction and welding company in Nevada City, California. Both domains were registered to an entity in California.
- The domain [fuckyouchinaflu\[.\]com](#), which was registered on April 3, 2020, currently [redirects](#) to the domain [profitisnotafourletterword\[.\]com](#), which just has a picture of Scrooge McDuck sitting in money.
- The domain [fuckingchinese\[.\]com](#) was registered on April 17, 2020. On November 1, 2020, this domain [hosted a page](#) advertising a number of cryptocurrency-related domains (such as [racingcrypto\[.\]com](#)).

Phishing Campaigns Using Domains Containing Anti-Asian Sentiment

We did not identify any instances of the hashtags #StopAsianHate or #StopESEAsianHate having been used to conduct phishing activity in the last year and a half. In our data sets for references to variants of “kungflu”, “Wuhan Virus”, and “China Virus”, 3 domains were listed in an April 2020 GitHub repository titled “COVID19_phishing_domain.txt”:

- wuhanvirus[.]us
- wuhanvirus[.]cn
- stopthechinavirus[.]com

At the time of writing, each of the 3 domains had a DNS Error, which indicates that they are no longer active. We could not verify that these 3 domains were, in fact, used in phishing campaigns. A historical cache was only [available](#) for the domain wuhanvirus[.]cn. Based on a cache from March 19, 2020, the website was titled “coronavirus[.]org: things you should know, things you can do [to protect oneself from getting COVID-19]”. The page was created by an individual named “John Schultz” who claimed to know about pandemics and could help people protect themselves; however, he added the caveat that he is neither a scientist nor medical professional, and his protection techniques appear to be based on unvalidated claims and theories.

Aside from the domains above, we did not identify any evidence for phishing or malware campaigns that relied on domains incorporating the strings “kungflu”, “wuhanvirus”, or “chinavirus”.

Digital Abuse and Negative Reviews

Online platforms offer voices to marginalized groups; however, they also open them up to digital abuse from a range of individuals, including trolls and xenophobic individuals or groups. A December 2018 [study](#) by New America identified that vulnerable groups in the US have faced a disproportionately higher rate of digital abuse than Caucasian Americans. A March 2021 study by the Anti-Defamation League found that, in 2020, Asian-Americans experienced the [largest](#) single year-over-year rise in online hate and harassment. These online abuses include items such as harassment or discrimination online as a result of race or ethnicity. In 2020, there was an increase in online harassment and hate speech directed at Asians, likely compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic and the fact that more people [spent time online](#) during the pandemic. A [study](#) released by L1ght, an AI-based internet abuse detection organization, identified a 900% increase in anti-Asian language identified on Twitter compared to previous years. Furthermore, the threat of doxxing, where personally identifiable information on a target is

published publicly online, has the potential to transition online abuse to in-person [verbal abuse or physical violence](#) targeting individuals, their family and friends, or their place of employment (as seen in these examples from the [US](#), [the UK](#), [Germany](#), [Australia](#), and [France](#)).

Aside from the online harassment directed toward people of Asian descent, there has also been an increase in negative reviews for Asian-owned businesses on public review websites, such as Yelp or Google Reviews. These public reviews are detrimental to businesses that rely heavily on customers to spread the good word and have affected the restaurant industry more than other sectors. The negative reviews, compounded by [avoidance](#) of Asian businesses, has led to the shutdown of many Asian-owned organizations, particularly those found within Chinatowns across the world. According to an April 2020 [study](#), nearly half of Asian-owned restaurants in the US had closed due to consumer prejudice and misperceptions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. Restaurants and shops in US Chinatowns have [seen](#) a longer economic downturn than other businesses, and other Chinatowns in [Canada](#), [Japan](#), and [Australia](#) have been affected by [xenophobia](#) brought on by COVID-19, leading to a decline in business.

In one identified instance, a group of unnamed individuals in Colorado set up a fake Chinese restaurant that used the anti-Asian slur “Ching Chong”. The restaurant, “Ching Chong House”, included racist food menu items, such as “Crispy Burnt Pug — delicious deep-fried dog body” and “Corona — the classic quarantine chiller. Served freshly out of Wuhan.” The Instagram page for the restaurant has 1 photo of the menu, and uses a racist caricature of an Asian man as their cover photo.



Figure 19: Social media post for a fake Chinese restaurant

At the time of writing, the Yelp and Google review pages for the fake restaurant have been removed; however, writers from the Rocky Mountain Collegian newspaper had screenshots of the Google review page before its removal. Within the reviews, there were racist stereotypes of Asians, such as having live chickens in the restaurant and using dog meat in their Lo Mein.



Figure 20: Screenshot of now-deleted Anti-Asian Yelp reviews (Source [Rocky Mountain Collegian](#))

Google Reviews and Yelp have moderators who identify false claims or inappropriate content, and members of the public can also flag inappropriate comments made on the websites. To help publicly support minority-owned businesses, Yelp [offered](#) businesses the option to identify as Asian-, Black-, Latin-, and woman-owned; however, this also leaves businesses vulnerable to being targeted via these self-identifications by hateful comments or content that violates their community guidelines.

Scams or Fraud Targeting Asian Communities

As identified in the aforementioned section, physical assaults against those of Asian heritage have increased over the past year. Family members or friends of those injured in the attack have set up fundraisers to cover items such as the cost of medical bills or to help repair their businesses; however, this has also given scammers the opportunity to exploit the outpouring of public altruism to generate money for fake fundraisers. At the time of writing, there are more than 2,000 [GoFundMe](#) pages that contain variants of “Stop Asian Hate”; there is a high likelihood that some of these are fraudulent pages that are being used by scammers to pilfer money. After the March 2020 attack against [Yao Pan Ma](#), a 61-year-old Chinese man who was attacked while collecting recyclable cans on the street, left him in critical condition, his family set up a GoFundMe to help cover their medical expenses. Shortly after the GoFundMe was set up, the family [warned](#) the public of at least 4 different fake GoFundMe campaigns that purported to raise money for Yao Pan Ma.

In addition to people capitalizing on physical assaults against those of Asian descent, there have been other reports of individuals who made up events, such as the [story](#) of Brant Carnwath, a California man who purportedly required hospital care after defending an unnamed Asian woman from an attack. The GoFundMe [page](#) received more than \$100,000 USD in donations; however, [Reddit users](#) identified discrepancies within the story, such as the victim of the attack not being of Asian heritage, Carnwath’s family having a history of running scams, and the fact that no police report was made after the purported incident. The GoFundMe has since been shut down, but given the large amount of active “Stop Asian Hate” campaigns on GoFundMe, there are almost certainly still scammers creating fake pages to profit from people’s altruism.

Outlook

Asian Communities Providing Support Worldwide

The recent assembly of organizations such as Stop AAPI Hate has helped to create a safe space for those of Asian heritage to report incidents of anti-Asian discrimination, seek support, or find other community resources. A May 2021 [initiative](#) led by the US FBI has also asked for victims of hate crimes to report the incidents and the FBI has said that they will strengthen their efforts to reach out to community groups to spread awareness and build trust. Additionally, despite the increasing number of attacks targeting those of Asian heritage, there has been a call for Asian communities, Asian-owned businesses, and their allies to support each other worldwide. In May 2021, prominent Asian-American business leaders from The Asian American Foundation [launched](#) a \$250 million USD initiative to support AAPI causes in 3 areas: anti-hate programs, education, and data and research. Celebrities such as the South Korean musical group [BTS](#), NBA player [Jeremy Lin](#), and actress [Gemma Chan](#) are also bringing awareness to initiatives that help those of Asian heritage, such as a May 2021 [GoFundMe campaign](#) to support those in the East and Southeast Asian community in the UK. The April 23, 2021 [passage](#) of an anti-Asian hate crimes bill by the US Senate, and its May 13 [passage](#) by the US House of Representatives, has led to calls for other countries, such as [Australia](#), to pass similar legislation.

Foreign Media Amplification of Anti-Asian Sentiment

While it is true that Russian, Iranian, and PRC [media](#) and [diplomats](#), as well as pro-CCP groups, [co-opt](#) instances of anti-AAPI hate for their own political motives, that does not undermine the legitimacy of concerns that AAPI communities face discrimination because of national security narratives or other factors. On the contrary, the CCP's national security imperatives and propaganda narratives constitute another [threat](#) to the overseas Chinese community. Rather than being predominantly spies, Chinese students are among the groups that are [spied on](#) and [coerced](#) by individuals and organizations acting on behalf of the PRC government and CCP. Allowing or encouraging broad suspicion of AAPI communities in the US, UK, Australia, and elsewhere is also a threat to national security: it deprives countries of the skill, talent, and economic power within Asian communities, invites unrest, makes these communities more vulnerable to the very exploitation by foreign powers that the national security-minded profess to fear, and distracts from legitimate security threats.

Russian information operations targeting the Asian community are likely opportunistic in nature and seek to destabilize US domestic security and divide American communities for the benefit of the Russian government's strategic policy. Therefore, going forward, such efforts are likely to follow the trends of popular sentiment; if a community experiences increased violence or discrimination, Russian information operations are likely to focus on and amplify that activity in order to foment instability.

The COVID-19 pandemic has renewed longstanding anti-Asian prejudice; as one member of that community has [described](#) it, is "to feel defenseless against a virus as well as a virulent strain of scapegoating. It is to feel trapped in an American tragedy while being denied the legitimacy of being an American".

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