

From Yellow Peril to Model Minority and Back to Yellow Peril

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, some perceptions of Asian Americans in the United States shifted as anti-Asian hate crimes escalated. However, little is known about how these shifting views manifest in K–12 schools. This qualitative case study uses Asian critical race theory to examine how two Southeast Asian American students faced exclusion and erasure before and during the COVID-19 pandemic and how their Southeast Asian American teacher advocated for them at a public elementary school in the Pacific Northwest. Implications include how researchers can pursue inquiries about Asian American students' holistic development and how in-service and pre-service teachers can address anti-Asian xenophobia.

Keywords: *Asian American students, COVID-19, model minority, yellow peril, imperialism*

“YELLOW peril,” a derogative ideology invented by European imperialists during the 19th century, pathologizes Asian people as an existential threat to Western civilization and justifies the colonization of Asian nations (Tchen & Yeats, 2014). This idea became popular in the United States as many Chinese male laborers arrived on the West Coast in the mid-19th century. Their lifestyles and work ethics challenged working-class Whites’ financial security and the idea of “White purity” (Takaki, 1998). When the smallpox epidemic broke out in San Francisco in 1876, local health officials depicted Chinese immigrants as contagious diseases and Chinatown as the main site of urban decay (Shah, 2001). The fear-mongering led to the lynching of Chinese immigrants during the 1870s and the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, restricting the number of Chinese immigrants and denying them U.S. citizenship. When Japan’s Imperial Army bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 that authorized the incarceration of Japanese Americans and cast them as perilous to national loyalty. In the next three decades, the U.S. military bombarded Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. These imperial wars resulted in the massive death of Asian people and racialized them as “yellow perils” who needed to be contained and annihilated (Hamamoto, 1994).

“Model minority,” another prejudicial term coined by a White male American sociologist during the 1960s, exoticizes Asian Americans’ ability to transcend historical racial antagonism, overcome systemic barriers, and achieve mainstream success (Wu, 2013). During the Cold

War (1945–1991), this ideology targeted Asian Americans for civil inclusion on the premise of pledging allegiance to U.S. imperialist aggressions in Asia (E. Lee, 2015). In so doing, this insidious belief covers the yellow peril trope, essentializes Asian Americans as achievers of the American dream, renders Asian Americans politically passive, pits Asian Americans against other people of Color, and upholds White supremacy in the United States (Hartlep, 2021; Wu, 2002). However, “yellow peril” and “model minority” are two sides of the same racist coin, and Whites possess the institutional power to flip it as needed. This is evident as the Trump administration reignited the “yellow peril” pathology during the COVID-19 pandemic to diverge U.S. anxiety on the trade war and competition for technology supremacy by demonizing China as a threat to humanity and posing the U.S. empire as a savior to the world (Siu & Chun, 2020). Consequently, this rhetoric intensified anti-Asian xenophobia in the United States. Yet little is known about how this shifting social climate may manifest in U.S. K–12 schools.

Critical Race Theory in Education

Critical race theory was conceptualized to challenge how “race and racial power are constructed and represented in American legal culture and, more generally, in American society as a whole” (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xiii). Following African American legal scholars such as Derrick Bell Jr., Asian American legal scholars developed Asian critical race theory. Chang (1993) proposed an Asian American critical



race legal framework to name similar yet different encounters of racism within diverse Asian American communities and empower members to express their voices in solidarity. Matsuda (1995) argued that Japanese Americans could use reparations to address racial injustices inflicted on them during World War II. Asian American scholars from other disciplines (e.g., Asian American Studies) also bridged U.S. imperialism in Asia and anti-Asian xenophobia in the United States (Leong & Nakanishi, 2002).

Critical race educational scholars contend that racism is normalized in U.S. schools, and property rights are valued more than human rights in U.S. society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Teranishi (2002) was among the first to use critical race theory to examine Chinese and Filipino American students in four California high schools. He uncovered the “susceptibility and vulnerability of supposed resilient model minorities to inequality and oppression in school contexts” (p. 152). S. J. Lee’s (2005) ethnography of a Wisconsin high school revealed that Whiteness subjugated first- and second-generation Hmong American students as second-class beings. Within this scholarly lineage, Iftikar and Museus (2018) developed AsianCrit in education to explain how White supremacy dehumanizes Asian Americans and how they resist such dehumanization. It has seven tenets: Asianization; transnational contexts; (re)constructive history; strategic (anti)essentialism; intersectionality; story, theory, and praxis; and commitment to social justice. This study focused on three of these tenets:

1. *Asianization* interrogates how Asian Americans in the United States are racialized as “perpetual foreigners, threatening yellow perils, model and deviant minorities, and sexually deviant emasculated men and hypersexualized women” (Iftikar & Museus 2018, p. 940);
2. *Strategic (anti)essentialism* “recognizes and counters the ways that white supremacy racializes Asian Americans as a monolithic group in the U.S.,” but “emphasizes that Asian Americans can and do actively intervene in the racialization process” (Iftikar & Museus 2018, p. 940);
3. *Intersectionality* emphasizes that “white supremacy and other systems of oppression and exploitation intersect” (Iftikar & Museus 2018, p. 940) to shape Asian Americans’ lived experiences.

The Racialization and Essentialization of Asian American Students

Asian American students have been racialized and essentialized as yellow perils in U.S. schools and society across different times and geographical locations. For example, White elites in California and Mississippi exploited the labor of Chinese immigrants during the late 1800s but denied their

children access to public schools because they were seen as perilous to White norms (Kuo, 1998; Loewen, 1988). Historians such as S. S. Lee (2011) observed that Chinese and Japanese American students in Seattle public schools were positioned to exemplify U.S. cosmopolitanism on the global stage during the 1920s. However, the yellow peril trope surfaced as White students and parents antagonized Japanese American students for their top academic performance in the 1930s, followed by their incarceration from 1942 to 1945. The yellow peril ideology persisted during the Cold War as the U.S. federal government increased surveillance of Chinese American families and racialized them as communist sympathizers threatening U.S. imperial hegemony (Hsu, 2015). As many Southeast Asian refugees settled in the United States since the 1970s, the yellow peril pathology, infused with anticommunist rhetoric, instigated the mass shooting of Cambodian and Vietnamese American children in Stockton, California, in 1989 (Wong, 2001).

Asian Americans have also been racialized and essentialized as model minorities, which reduces their success to work ethics and cultural traits and fosters interracial conflicts to digress racial justice (Kim, 1999). This idea creates a dilemma for Asian American students. The holistic development of the academically oriented is ignored (Pang, 1998), while those who flounder are “doubly silenced by their simultaneous positioning as deficient *and* undeserving of special assistance” (Goodwin, 2010, p. 3119). For example, studies found that Asian American students, especially girls, are more likely than other students to encounter racial harassment in school, yet the model minority idea caused many educators to ignore their safety and well-being (Cooc & Gee, 2014; Koo et al., 2012). Other researchers, such as Ngo (2006) and Tandon (2016), suggest that many Burmese, Cambodian, and Vietnamese American students face inequitable access to education due to the intersection of race, gender, class, and refugee status. Sadly, the model minority myth silences their varying needs and blames their low performance on themselves.

“Yellow peril” and “model minority” also racialize and essentialize Asian Americans as a monolithic group to perpetuate a layered master narrative in U.S. K–12 schools. First, many state standards portray Asian Americans as transcending racial barriers despite their struggles of being treated as yellow perils and thus need no inclusion in history curricula (An, 2016). Second, Asian Americans, often males, are sporadically included in curricula to exemplify social progress. For example, Suh et al. (2015) analyzed eight secondary history textbooks in Virginia. They found that the textbooks distorted “both the actual historical and social reality that Asian Americans and others have experienced” (p. 49) by highlighting how work ethics helped Asian Americans overcome racial discrimination. Third, many children’s books uphold the model minority myth and default to East Asians’ stories as representative of all Asian

Americans (Rodríguez & Kim, 2018). In essence, “yellow peril” and “model minority” both convey that Asian Americans are desired for their hard labor and “obedient” spirit to construct the U.S. empire, and despised for their existence as seen in historical and current anti-Asian racism.

Asian Americans Responding to Racialization and Essentialization

Asian Americans respond to the “yellow peril” trope in divergent ways. During the 19th century, Chinese immigrants mobilized communal resources to challenge segregation laws in the West and Southern regions of the United States. One technique was establishing Chinese schools to affirm their children’s heritage and buffer the yellow peril idea (Kuo, 1998; Loewen, 1988). Second, as anti-Japanese attitudes intensified on the West Coast during the 1940s, some Chinese Americans distanced themselves from Japanese Americans to avoid anti-Asian hysteria (partially due to Japan’s colonization of China), while other Chinese Americans opposed the yellow peril pathology attached to Japanese Americans (S. S. Lee, 2011). Third, as the Civil Rights movement (1954–1968) grew, many Asian Americans, especially working-class women, became critical of the injustices inflicted on them and other people of Color and developed a pan-ethnic Asian American identity to resist the yellow peril pathology and U.S. imperialism (Espiritu, 1992). This pan-ethnicity was a protocol for Asian American activism in subsequent decades.

As the model minority myth infiltrated Asian American communities since the 1960s, some Asian American students subscribe to this fallacy, others leverage it to navigate schools, and many reject it. For example, some Burmese refugee students aspire to acclimate to the American dream despite being displaced by U.S. imperialism (McWilliams & Bonet, 2016), while some Cambodian American students focus on academic success to counter teachers’ deficit views (Chhuon, 2014). S. J. Lee’s (2009) ethnography of an East Coast high school revealed that Korean-identified students embraced the model minority image by disassociating themselves from Southeast Asian students, Asian-identified students used the pan-ethnic Asian identity to negotiate the model minority image yet distinguished their ethnic and socioeconomic differences, new wave Asian students rejected being cast as model minorities and remained ambivalent about academic performance, and Asian American students “reclaimed the Asian American pan-ethnic label as a source of pride, solidarity, and strength” (p. 131) to critique educational inequities.

Many Asian American teachers oppose the yellow peril and model minority pathologies through their curricula, pedagogy, and role modeling. For example, the Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese American teachers in Pang (2009) used culturally relevant curricula and fostered a collectivist

learning environment to resist deficit views of their low-performing Asian American students in a California K–8 school. Similarly, Rodríguez (2018) found that the Chinese, Indian, and Vietnamese American elementary-grade teachers in Texas evoked their racial identities to center Asian American history, counter Eurocentric ideas of U.S. citizenship, and promote inclusive cultural citizenship for Asian American students. Furthermore, Endo’s (2015) study of female Filipina, Hmong, and Vietnamese American teachers in Midwestern schools revealed that each participant encountered racist and sexist remarks. Some confronted such comments directly, while others redirected those comments by advocating for their Asian American students.

Even though existing research and scholarship illustrate the struggles and resilience of Asian American students and teachers, there are some notable gaps. First, there are very few studies on Asian American elementary students in Washington State, given the long and diverse history of Asian Americans in this region. Second, studies on Southeast Asian American students, especially Burmese, are consistently underrepresented. Third, none of the previous research used AsianCrit to analyze the racialization and (anti)essentialization of Asian American students. Last, there are no empirical studies on how the COVID-19 pandemic affects Asian Americans in U.S. K–12 schools. Hence, the current study addresses some of these gaps.

Research Methods

This is a small-scale qualitative case study. According to Yin (2017), a qualitative case study “investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context” (p. 15). This method helps researchers zoom in on a specific situation, analyze data to deepen understanding of the phenomenon, and develop multilayered insights about real-life situations. This method is fitting when researchers explore “how” questions, have little or no control over participant behaviors, and focus on a contemporary rather than an historical event (Yin, 2017). Given the nature of this study, this method is appropriate to investigate the following questions:

- How did two Southeast Asian American elementary students encounter exclusion and erasure in school before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- How did the two Southeast Asian American students and their Southeast Asian American teacher respond to their exclusion and erasure in school?

Research Site

This study took place in a Title I elementary school called Lakeview (pseudonym) in Washington State, with about 580 students and 40 teachers during the 2019–2020 academic

year. According to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (2020), the racial demographics of the students were 14.8% African American; 22.7% Asian American; 26.6% Latinx; 6% Multiracial; 0.2% Native American/Alaskan Native; 4.1% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander; and 25.6% White. The student gender ratio was 49.5% female and 50.5% male. Seventy percent of the students received free or reduced school lunch; 38% were English language learners, and 10% qualified for special education services. The racial demographics of the teachers were 2.4% African American, 7.3% Asian American, 2.4% Latinx, and 87.8% White. The teacher gender ratio was 17.1% male and 82.9% female. These data indicate a racial and cultural divide, where a largely homogenous teaching population (White females) interacts with an increasingly ethnically diverse student population (Howard, 2019).

Research Participants

Two female Southeast Asian American fourth-grade students participated in the study. Olivia is a second-generation Cambodian American whose parents immigrated to and settled near a metropolis in Washington State in the 1980s. Alexis is a second-generation Burmese American. Her parents shared a similar immigration journey and found a new home near the same metropolis in Washington State in the 1990s. Leaving their ancestral homelands after the U.S. imperial wars in Southeast Asia, the parents of Olivia and Alexis found themselves in a new racial landscape that limited them to service-sector jobs and the same segregated neighborhood. Despite their families' meager income, both Alexis and Olivia have upbeat attitudes toward school. At the time of the study, they were the only two Asian American students in their class and had their first Asian American teacher.

Ms. Emily, the teacher in the study, is a second-generation Vietnamese American. Born and raised by working-class parents displaced by the Vietnam War, Ms. Emily grew up near a metropolis in Washington State and never saw herself reflected in curricula or teachers during her K–12 schooling experience. However, her parents ensured that she maintained her heritage by enrolling her in “cultural” schools on the weekends to learn the Vietnamese language, dances, and religious practices. Ms. Emily also socialized with her friends, siblings, and grandmother, and translated paperwork for her parents. These relationships and experiences enhanced her Vietnamese fluency and ethnic identity. Ms. Emily earned a master's in teaching degree from a predominantly White institution in Washington State in June 2019 and started teaching in August 2019 in the same district where she was a former student. Despite the increasing Asian American student population, Ms. Emily was one of the only two Asian American teachers at her school.

Data Collection

Ms. Emily recruited Alexis and Olivia to participate in the study in July 2020. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, I could not meet any participants in person. Hence, I asked Ms. Emily to email both students the interview questions focusing on how the COVID-19 pandemic may have affected their sense of belonging at the school. After reading their initial responses, I probed for more information and received their subsequent answers via email in August 2020. I conducted a 1-hour open-ended interview with Ms. Emily on Zoom in January 2021. In our conversation, I mostly asked how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected her view of race in the United States and her advocacy at the school. Later, I emailed Ms. Emily her interview transcript, of which she corrected a few phrases and added more information. I also reviewed the school's website and collected information on its curricula and educational goals.

Data Analysis

During the first stage of analysis, I used open coding to make sense of the data. AsianCrit served as a guiding lens to generate codes describing the students' encounters of racialization and essentialization. This procedure produced descriptive codes, such as “insufficient cultural representation” and “addressing racist remarks.” I also wrote analytic memos to identify emerging themes (Saldaña, 2015). I then engaged in axial coding to draw connections between codes and organize coding categories, such as “invisibility in school” and “teacher advocacy” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Next, I followed Patton's (2014) suggestions for ensuring the study's trustworthiness. First, I triangulated the interviews of the students and the teacher with other data I gathered from the school (e.g., curricula). Second, I sent preliminary findings to Ms. Emily to rule out any misinterpretation of her words. Third, I asked a female mentor of Color to review earlier drafts of the paper, whose constructive feedback improved my interpretation of the data.

Researcher Positionality

As a member of the Chinese Diaspora in the United States, I possess insider knowledge that China fought and lost the Opium Wars (1839–1842; 1856–1860); the British and French empires profited off drugging Chinese people while humiliating us as the “sick men of East Asia;” and the “Chinese virus” rhetoric was rooted in Western colonial history. As a researcher of Color who does not share the same ethnic, cultural, or gender backgrounds with the participants, I filtered my analyses of their (counter)stories through an “outsider-within” lens, in which we are all subjugated similarly and differently as Asians by U.S. imperialism. As the father of a Chinese American daughter, I have agonized about how she might one day be victimized, similar to what

many Asians and Asian Americans have experienced before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. My historical knowledge and personal concerns inform my scholarly inquiry and advocacy.

Findings

Three major themes emerged after the data analysis. They are encountering exclusion and erasure in school, pan-ethnic sisterhood as a shield and target, and varied responses to exclusion and erasure in school. These findings indicated that the specific experiences of the participants were illustrative of and consistent with general patterns of Asian American students and teachers in U.S. K–12 schools. Each theme is presented with supportive data.

Encountering Exclusion and Erasure in School

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, Alexis and Olivia had been rendered insignificant and invisible by their school's academic curricula. During the 2019–2020 school year, the mandated English language arts curriculum was Expeditionary Learning (2017), of which the central units were poetry, animal defense mechanisms, the American Revolution, and ratifying the 19th Amendment. The last two units examined colonialism and women's suffrage, yet neither contained Asian American perspectives or experiences. White literary voices dominated the curriculum, with six of the required texts written by White females and two by White males. The history curriculum was similarly exclusive. Without a mandated textbook, the school adopted *An Overview of Pacific Northwest Native Indian Art* (Leung, 2006) for fourth grade. Centering the rich art history of Indigenous peoples in the Pacific Northwest helped counter the Eurocentrism in mainstream history curricula, yet the school failed to include Asian Americans despite their enduring contributions to the region. In sum, Alexis and Olivia never saw people of their ethnicities and cultures reflected in the English language arts and history curricula.

Olivia and Alexis also encountered exclusion and erasure in the school's social curricula before the COVID-19 pandemic, from insufficient support resources, to tokenized cultural events, and to assumptions of a singular story for Asian Americans. Alexis expressed concern about the lack of support by saying, "There are many Asian students at the school, yet my other teachers had a hard time finding an interpreter for my mom during conferences." Echoing this observation, Olivia said, "The school had a multicultural night with food and dances at the end of last year. It was the only time I shared my culture in public, but I know my culture is more than food and dances." Ms. Emily remembered how the school perpetuated the fallacy of a singular Asian American narrative and neglected Asian Americans in various settings:

When we discussed student assessment data at staff meetings, "Asians" were lumped into one group. The White female principal did not bother to disaggregate the data to see if different Asian students may need more support. The school library has a section on Asian cultures, but most books focus on East Asian nations. In the staff lounge, I once heard two White female colleagues talking about going to the International District to watch the Chinese New Year celebration. When our community was under attack in early 2020, the principal did not check in with our Asian American students, parents, or teachers, let alone celebrate the Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month.

The school claimed to be proud of its student ethnic diversity and professed "respect" as one of its core values. However, these observations and reflections suggest that the school does not live up to this core value for the participants since it erased the cultural heritages of Alexis and Olivia in its academic curricula and ignored their personal needs in its social curricula.

Pan-Ethnic Sisterhood as a Shield and Target

Alexis and Olivia grew up in the same neighborhood and had attended the same school since kindergarten, which deepened their connections. However, others in the school often essentialize their ethnic identities. Alexis stated, "Some people think I am Chinese because I look Asian, but I am Burmese." Olivia echoed, "Some people think I am Chinese. Maybe it's because of my hair or eyes, but I can't control that I am Cambodian. I just am." These shared life experiences helped Olivia and Alexis form a pan-ethnic sisterhood that buffered alienation in school prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Ms. Emily used a "peer-partner" system to support students' academic and socioemotional growth. Alexis and Olivia frequently teamed up, given the freedom of choosing a different partner each month. They also often ate lunch together and shared their home lunch items. During one of the morning routines, Ms. Emily asked, "What makes a good friend?" Olivia stated, "A good friend is someone loyal, listens to my secret, and gives me advice." Alexis said, "A good friend is someone who is kind to me and helps me become a better person." Both girls smiled at and nodded to each other while sharing their answers.

The pan-ethnic sisterhood between Alexis and Olivia was also apparent in other spaces as they often appeared together in the library and walked shoulder to shoulder on the playground. However, this pan-ethnic sisterhood became a target of othering during the COVID-19 pandemic. On a usual weekday in February 2020, Alexis and Olivia finished their mathematics group activity and took the morning recess. As they were walking and talking with each other on the playground, two sixth-grade White male students ran up to them, made slanted eyes, pointed their fingers, and chanted: "What do bats taste like? You've got everyone sick. It's all your fault. Go home to China!" Disturbed by their remarks, Alexis and Olivia walked away. With no adult supervisor in sight,

the two White male students followed Alexis and Olivia and repeated their chant for 2 more minutes. When the bell rang to return to class, both girls started to cry while waiting in line with their classmates.

Later, both girls reflected on why they became targets of the older White boys' negative attitudes and actions. Olivia explained, "I felt they targeted me because they thought I looked like Chinese people, but I am not Chinese, and I do not have the virus." Alexis stated, "I felt targeted because they think Olivia and I are Chinese and the virus started in China, but we had nothing to do with it." These comments suggest that the girls distinguished their ethnicities from Chinese people yet were still harassed due to their similar physical traits. This incident suggests that White male supremacy emboldened the two White boys to pathologize and threaten Alexis and Olivia, while rendering them vulnerable and unable to use their pan-ethnic sisterhood as a shield.

Varied Responses to Exclusion and Erasure in School

Ms. Emily used a layered approach to address the erasure and exclusion that Olivia and Alexis encountered in school. For example, when teaching the poetry unit, she wrote a poem on jackfruit that included Vietnamese language and cultural traditions to illustrate who she is. She then used this poem as an example to teach students how to compose a "Where I Am from?" poem through their cultural lenses. Ms. Emily also subverted mandated curricula and introduced content that Alexis and Olivia could relate to. For example, she designed a unit on the history of the Lunar New Year and highlighted the various ways different Asian communities worldwide celebrate this festival by showing *Vietnamese New Year Customs* (X-Team, 2016). Furthermore, Ms. Emily warmly demanded collective success from students. Olivia noted that "She challenged us to work hard in groups. When we did a good job, we earned points in class." Ms. Emily also modeled how students can stand up for themselves. Alexis recalled that "Whenever students called her name the wrong way, Ms. Emily would respectfully correct them."

Ms. Emily's pedagogical approaches developed trust with Alexis and Olivia as she addressed the bullying incident. When Alexis and Olivia returned to class in tears, Ms. Emily asked everyone to work on an entry task and walked both girls to the door. She asked the girls what happened, recorded their descriptions, sent them to the bathroom for a short break, and hugged them when they returned. On her way to lunch, Ms. Emily saw the teacher (a Latina) of one of the White male students and retold the incident. This teacher laughed and said, "He's just being funny." Shocked by this reaction, Ms. Emily placed a note in the principal's office and asked the secretary to ensure that the principal received her message. Later, Ms. Emily changed the last activity of the day to re-reading *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2003) and

discussing the importance of addressing people by their legal names.

Ms. Emily also used her upbringing and schooling experiences to address the bullying incident. She explained her family's influence, "I became a teacher to honor my bà ngoại (grandmother). The incident didn't feel right. If I did nothing, I would have dishonored my bà ngoại." She then elaborated on how her K-12 experiences informed her advocacy, "When will they get another teacher who looks like them? College? That's too late! That's when the problem gets too big and swallows them whole." Moreover, Ms. Emily solicited advice from the parents of Alexis and Olivia and three ethnically different Asian American mentors. In so doing, she used her pan-ethnic connections to ensure that the school took the incident seriously.

Two days later, the principal requested a meeting with Ms. Emily, who repeated what she had already recorded in her notes and explained the impact of this incident. Without talking to Alexis, Olivia, and their parents, the principal decided that both White male students needed to apologize for their behaviors and could not talk with their peers during recess. On the next day, the two White male students gave Alexis and Olivia an "I'm sorry" sticky note during recess and ran away to sit on a bench without any seeming remorse. Their superficial apology indicated that they trivialized the severity of the incident and its effects on Alexis and Olivia. Furthermore, the Latina teacher's indifference and the principal's minimal disciplinary actions evinced their tacit support of White male "innocence" and racial and gender discrimination of Asian Americans.

Having never experienced such blatant discrimination at the school, the two girls initially responded to the incident differently. Alexis clarified why she was angry, "My brother is in the same class with one of the boys, who is the class clown and gets away with everything. So, I felt mad because his teacher might think what he said was funny." Alexis also rejected being further victimized as a submissive Asian American female by drawing a fire pit (Figure 1) to express her racialized emotion. She explained, "I drew a fire pit because I was really upset with what the boys said and the consequences they got. And I've never felt this way before."

Olivia shared her dissatisfaction and bewilderment about the incident, "I felt the school favored the boys more than us. I also felt confused because other kids who are not bullies were punished by staying inside during recess if they did something wrong." Unlike Alexis who negotiated her racialization through the incident, Olivia resisted essentialism yet subscribed to the racialized discourse of the coronavirus to convey her emotion (Figure 2). She explained, "I felt sad because the boys thought I was Chinese. So, I googled China's National Flag and drew a picture of it."

As the school year progressed, Alexis remained "hopeful of seeing Olivia and meeting new friends in 5th grade, and not experiencing the incident again because the two boys



FIGURE 1. Alexis's drawing.



FIGURE 2. Olivia's drawing.

would have graduated.” Olivia found comfort in her parents’ advice to “not let this incident distract me and focus on getting into the high cap.” She was also “excited for 5th grade” because she does “not have to see those boys next year.” While Alexis considered pan-ethnic friendship a source of strength, Olivia focused on academic success. Nevertheless, neither girls hoped to be targets of dehumanization again.

Discussion

This study describes two Southeast Asian American (Burmese and Cambodian) female students’ experiences of exclusion and erasure in an ethnically diverse elementary school in Washington State during the 2019–2020 school year. Both students faced insufficient curricular representation and institutional support in various contexts, consistent with previous research on Southeast Asian American students specifically (Ngo, 2006; Tandon, 2016) and Asian American students broadly (An, 2016). Among the limited representation of Asian cultures in the school library,

neither students saw their ethnic heritage reflected as the books only contained histories and cultures of East Asian nations, a common issue among children’s books on Asian Americans (Rodríguez & Kim, 2018). These issues convey a dual message to both students: (1) they are not important enough to be included in curricula or school, and (2) they are Asian Americans and thus need no academic or social support (Goodwin, 2010; Pang, 1998). Hence, the tenets of *Asianization* and *strategic essentialism* discern how White supremacy has essentialized the two Southeast Asian American female students as model minorities before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The two Southeast Asian American students formed a pan-ethnic sisterhood to buffer alienation in school, as suggested by Espiritu (1992). However, their bond became a degrading target by two older White male students in early 2020. The bullying incident essentialized the two Southeast Asian American students as ethnically Chinese, pathologized them as a deadly virus, and reinforced the yellow peril trope. Such actions are reminiscent of how Asian American students were cast as perilous to White norms in public schools in the 19th century (Kuo, 1998; Loewen, 1988). The responses from the Latina teacher and the White female principal shared a similar pattern with White educators in Seattle in the 1930s (S. S. Lee, 2011). Namely, they trivialized antagonism directed toward Asian American students and upheld Whiteness and patriarchy. Furthermore, the model minority fallacy, intersected with gender, indicated that the Southeast Asian American girls’ encounters of bullying would not be adequately addressed, as documented by previous research (Cooc & Gee, 2014; Koo et al., 2012). In sum, the tenets of *Asianization* and *intersectionality* reveal how the yellow peril pathology was reinscribed in the incident, how the model minority myth influenced the school’s apathy toward the two Southeast Asian American girls, and how they were doubly affected by racism and sexism.

The teacher of the two Southeast Asian American female students used layered tactics to address their encounters of exclusion and erasure. Like those in Pang’s (2009) study, the Vietnamese American female teacher used culturally relevant materials to subvert Whiteness in the school’s mandated curricula. Re-reading *The Name Jar* (Choi, 2003) after the bullying incident reaffirmed the two students’ humanity, similar to the teachers’ pedagogies described by Rodríguez (2018). She also confronted disparaging remarks about the students and leveraged communal resources to advocate for them, analogous to the teachers’ practices described by Endo (2015). The two students’ responses to the bullying incident varied. Contrary to what McWilliams and Bonet (2016) found, the Burmese American student rejected being essentialized as a passive Asian female and desired to be in communion with peers. The Cambodian American student focused on academics, as seen in other Cambodian American youth (Chhuon, 2014). Yet she refuted racial essentialism

while endorsing dominant narratives about the coronavirus. In sum, the two students used different approaches to navigate the racialization and essentialization of their multiple identities, resembling those observed by S. J. Lee (2009). Thus, the tenets of *strategic (anti)essentialism* and *intersectionality* shed light on how diverse Asian American students may simultaneously embrace and resist politicizing efforts.

Limitations

This study includes some limitations that future research can address. Though embodying different ethnic, cultural, and gender identities, the researcher and the participants shared the same membership in the Asian Diasporas that could have led to “identifier syndrome.” This potential bi-directional bias was mediated by the triangulation of data, participant member checks with the teacher, and peer review feedback. However, the researcher could not obtain feedback from the student participants on interpretations of their interviews. Another limitation was the data collection method. Due to COVID-19 safety protocols, in-person observations or interviews were impossible. The email and Zoom interviews may have limited the authenticity range and depth of the data. The researcher countered this possible constraint by having follow-up email contact with the students after receiving their initial responses, sending the interview transcripts to the teacher participant, and collecting multiple data sources. Future research can use the methods described above to increase its internal validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Implications

This is one of the first empirical studies that examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted public perceptions of Asian American students in U.S. K–12 schools. The methodology and findings of the study could assist educational researchers and practitioners across the United States in analyzing the psycho-emotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Asian American students with diverse ethnic and gender identities. Given that the “Chinese virus” rhetoric may have increased harassment of Asian American students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Le et al., 2021), some timely research questions are worth exploring. For example, how can schools include diverse Asian American students authentically to prevent harassment and heal their trauma? How can policy makers create culturally responsive accountability mandates beyond reactionary solidarity statements for Asian Americans? The answers to these questions could have significant implications for Asian American students and communities across the nation.

The findings of this study also have implications for in-service and pre-service teachers. After Donald Trump reignited the yellow peril pathology by calling COVID-19 the “China virus,” conservative politicians downplay the racism

in this rhetoric, while progressive politicians rely on “Stop Asian Hate” to counter its impact. Neither approach would eradicate anti-Asian racism in the United States when the anti-China stance is a bipartisan consensus and normative reality in mainstream media. Hence, current and prospective teachers must reckon that the xenophobia directed toward the two students in this study is not exceptional or episodic. Instead, it is deeply rooted in the historical and current U.S. imperialist aggressions in Asia and widespread across the United States (Man, 2020). Scholars such as Vossoughi et al. (2020) and Chávez-Moreno (2021) proposed concrete steps that in-service and pre-service teachers could take to undo U.S. imperialism in practice and promote a just future for the Asian Diasporas in the United States.

Conclusion

According to Au and Yonamine (2021), it is time for all educators to fight for Asian Americans because the United States has largely erased their history, silenced their suffering, and ignored their comprehensive contributions. This fight entails dismantling White supremacy that renders Asian Americans subhuman and pits them against other people of Color. It also requires allocating resources to support educators who endeavor to close the gap between democratic ideals and realities. Most important, this fight will determine where the U.S. moral compass will point toward in the coming decades. After all, we can no longer remain silent on anti-Asian hate crimes because our collective silence speaks louder than the gunshots that take so many lives from Asian American communities (and other communities of Color). And the children, including Asian Americans, are always watching, listening, and learning both the desirable and undesirable!

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Open Practices

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