



“I AM NOT A VIRUS”: COVID-19, Anti-Asian Hate, and Comics as Counternarratives

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Abstract

Ever since the global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, East Asians across the globe have been ostracized, othered, pathologized, and subjected to numerous anti-Asian hate crimes. Despite contemporary China’s rapid modernization, the country is still perceived as an Oriental and primitive site. Taking these cues, the current article aims to investigate the Sinophobic attitudes in the wake of COVID-19 through a detailed analysis of sequential comics and cartoons by artists of East Asian descent, such as Laura Gao and Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom. Drawing theoretical insights from Alexandre White’s “epidemic orientalism” and Priscilla Wald’s “medicalized nativism,” this essay investigates how these chosen comics function as counternarratives through first-person storytelling. In so doing, these comics, while reinstating the dignity of East Asians, also challenge and resist the naturalized methods of seeing that justify violence and dehumanization. The article further argues that Sinophobia and anti-Asian hate crimes are motivated as much by the origins of COVID-19 in China as by the political, economic, and technological variables that have shaped modern China.

Keywords Anti-Asian hate · China, COVID-19 · Counternarratives · Epidemic orientalism · Graphic Medicine

Setting the context

When the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission (China) reported a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan on December 31, 2019, researchers identified a novel strain of coronavirus. Later, the World Health Organization (WHO), through the *Disease Outbreak News*, the official publication organ of WHO, informed the public on January 5, 2020, about the new virus. By March 18, 2020, mainland China had “13,415 confirmed cases and 120 deaths related to coronavirus disease” (Leung et al. 2020, 1). Accordingly, China enforced drastic

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measures such as lockdown, quarantine, and wearing masks, among others, to contain the spread of the virus. Consequently, Wuhan became the first city in China and the world to be shut down by the spread of the coronavirus. Since then, the Chinese community, in particular, and other East-Asian communities (such as Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese, and Mongolian) and immigrants have been targeted and victimized. This was further exacerbated by former United States President Donald Trump, who openly characterized the virus as the “Chinese virus” in a White House press meeting in March 2020 (Scott 2020). Trump’s rhetoric accentuated xenophobia and violence against people with Chinese or Asian backgrounds.¹ In fact, in some places, Southeast Asians/Asians became a proxy for the Chinese and became victims of violence and hate crimes. For instance, the #IamNotAVirus social media campaign was created by French Asians as an attempt to address the issue of xenophobic harassment faced by Asians in Western countries. In India, people from the North-Eastern states who seamlessly fit an “Indian’s imagination of a Chinese person” were targeted and were even labeled as “corona” (Singh 2021).² There were also incidents of verbal abuse in the way the virus was invoked in different parts of the world. Instead of using a scientific nomenclature (e.g., SARS-CoV-2 or the COVID-19 virus), some labeled the virus as “the Chinese virus” or “Kung-flu,” thereby contributing to the growing discrimination against the Chinese across the world (Kurilla 2021).

Concurrently, a series of efforts via public posters, Instagram posts, and comics to resist such negative and stereotypical representations of the Chinese and other East Asians have emerged. The present article examines graphic narratives created by artists of East-Asian descent, such as “The Wuhan I Know” by Laura Gao (Chinese) and two untitled Instagram cartoons³ by Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom (Korean). These texts not only map the East-Asian experience during the pandemic but also investigate how these artists use comic affordances to counteract stereotypical representations of East Asia. In so doing, these comics stage a “*refusal of stigmatized identity*, whether through first-person storytelling, narrative strategies of displacement, the aesthetics of repudiation, or visual remediation of problematic images” (Squier and Krüger-Fürhoff 2020, 4; italics in original).

Since this article deals with instances of anti-Asian hate in the Western world, it is essential to emphasize that the modern-day “West” (mainly Europe and the United States) is not a unitary category; instead, it is composed of a diverse (immigrant) population characterized by various perspectives, experiences, and identity positions. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, instances of racism and anti-Asian sentiment have been expressed by individuals and communities in the West. However, this does not reflect the sentiments of all the people in the West and applies only to those who engage in discriminatory actions towards Asian individuals and communities. Therefore, this article aims to examine and comment solely upon the behavior and actions of a select group of people in the West who engage in xenophobia, race-based rhetoric, and hate crimes.

Sinophobia: The past and the present

The Western perception of China in the nineteenth century as a land of decay, degeneration, and putrefaction gradually changed during the late twentieth century to accommodate the image of China as a land of industrialized modernization. However, the image of Chinese wet markets “as a source of disease across both the classical and contemporary periods” still exists (Zhang 2021, 64). To understand the complexities of the *white gaze*, it is imperative to trace the history of Chinese immigration to America, which formed the dominant

narratives around what Alexandre White (2023) refers to as “epidemic orientalism.” In the colonial encounter, according to White, the colonial world/the colonized is “a permanent, perpetual vector of disease,” and the colonizer and their world are “the permanently, potential victims of that threat” (White 2023, 51). Epidemic orientalism is a phenomenon premised on the colonizing worldview of white European superiority and the production of irreducible otherness. In this framework, the colonies are an ontologically distinct alter space rendered legible through a discourse of power, domination, authority, and control. Hence, epidemic orientalism takes as its root the “ontological separation between colonized and colonizer, which obliterates any subjectivity of the colonized beyond their relation to the colonizer” (White 2023, 25). Drawing on the above, it becomes apparent that the image of a colonized Oriental China influences the discourses around disease emergence and spread.

The “Yellow Peril” argument, prevalent during the nineteenth to the early twentieth century in America and repeatedly invoked during the COVID-19 pandemic, is a pertinent case of Sinophobia. Chinese immigrants were perceived as a vector of disease and a threat to America’s white national identity at the time. This not only led to “Asian exclusion in immigration policies, such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act” but also “transformed into a multi-faceted Yellow Peril argument that advanced economic, cultural, assimilationist, racial, biological, and medical claims against the Chinese” (Zhang 2021, 65). Christos Lynteris, a professor of medical anthropology, divides the classical disease-related Yellow Peril discourse into four primary imaginations: (1) “China,” (2) “Chinese urban spaces,” (3) “Chinese bodies,” and (4) “Chinese culture” (Lynteris 2018, 37). According to this theory, China was not only reviled as the origin of diseases (such as the bubonic plague during the nineteenth century) but also perceived as facilitating the spread of disease. In particular, Chinese urban spaces and, more specifically, Chinese bodies (like a “super spreader”) were perceived as a breeding ground for disease. Worse still, this imagination played into the larger narrative of “third-worldification,” which “constitutes disease outbreaks as the incarnation of a timeless and diseased ‘Third World’ leaking, through the microbes, into the metropolises of the ‘First World’” (Wald 2008, 45). Additionally, the problem of rampant poverty within Chinese immigrant groups was attributed to their “primitive practices” by the practitioners of modern medicine, which cemented “the destructive transformative power of the group” (Wald 2008, 8). To use historian Alan Kraut’s terminology, “medicalized nativism”—that is, the stigmatization of socio-cultural groups (in this case, Chinese immigrants)—is based on diseases associated with “dangerous” practices rather than the problem of emerging infections. Consequently, Chinese immigrants were blamed for the 1875–76 San Francisco smallpox epidemic and the 1900 San Francisco bubonic plague epidemic (Zhang 2021).

While Sinophobia in the past was based on China’s cultural rejection of modernity, Sinophobia in present times is premised more on the socio-scientific modernity of contemporary China. In fact, modern China’s expansionism, authoritarianism, intensification of diplomatic relations, booming economic success, and growing international rivalry since the establishment of Mao Zedong’s People’s Republic of China in 1949 have impacted how China has been viewed throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the early 1950s, China has stood against the Western superpowers, especially the US-Europe bloc, over issues such as the Korean War (1950), First Taiwan Strait Crisis (1954), Tibetan Uprising (1959), China’s First Atomic Test (1964), Tiananmen Square Massacre (1989), and US-Sino Spy Plane Standoff (2001). Since then, the US and China have engaged in stiff economic and political rivalries, culminating in rising trade tensions from 2012 to 2019. In fact, long before the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the US had branded China a currency manipulator and increased trade tariffs on Chinese goods. Additionally, China’s territorial conflicts

with countries like Taiwan, India, Vietnam, Japan, Philippines, Nepal, Myanmar, Tibet, Mongolia, Bhutan, Laos, and Singapore have tainted Western impressions of China. Therefore, when the coronavirus pandemic originated in China, which was already viewed with skepticism and antagonism, a rumor emerged that the pandemic was a Chinese weapon for biological warfare. In particular, the vilification of Wuhan solely based on wet markets animated fears concerning a China that has nurtured potentially harmful cultural practices and institutions. Thus, as Zhipeng Gao (2021, 3) argues, “politically motivated Sinophobia becomes interwoven with racial and health concerns to form a tightly knit triple conflation.” Put differently, current-day Sinophobia is a response to the conflation of three factors—race, health, and politics—that are inextricably tied in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite official investigations and studies,⁴ instances of anti-Asian hate crimes targeting “Chinese-looking” people spiked during the initial months of 2020. As a result, Korean, Japanese, Malaysian, Singaporean, Mongolian, and Taiwanese groups, among others, were homogenized and subjected to discrimination and violence. For instance, on March 14, 2020, a family from Myanmar residing in Midland, Texas, fell victim to a wave of anti-Asian hate crimes as three members of the family, including a two-year-old girl and a six-year-old boy, were stabbed by 21-year-old Jose Gomez III (Aziz 2020). In another incident on March 10, 2020, a Korean American woman in midtown Manhattan, New York, was grabbed by the hair, shoved, and punched by 42-year-old Tammel Esco, who yelled, “You’ve got coronavirus, you Asian (expletive),” and “Where’s your (expletive) mask?” (Miles 2020).

As a response to such hate crimes and verbal abuse, websites such as Stop APPI Hate, Asian Americans Advancing Justice, Anti-Defamation League’s Reports of Anti-Asian Assaults, and the National Asian Pacific Center on Aging emerged. Racialized slurs like “the Wuhan Virus” (Kurilla 2021), “Kungflu” (Kurilla 2021), “Go eat a bat, Chang!” (Tahmasbi et al. 2021), and “THIS IS BIOTERRORISM. NUKE CHINA NOW!” (Tahmasbi et al. 2021; capitals in original), among others, aggravated xenophobia, as did trending anti-Asian Twitter hashtags like #ChinaVirus, #BlameChina, and #ChinaLiedPeopleDied. The recent surge of Asian hate soon sparked a wave of backlash. Social media hashtags like #StopAsianHate, #RacismIsAVirus, and #IAmNotAVirus have emerged as symbols of support for East-Asian communities. In fact, the situation became so dire that the US Congress passed the “COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act” in 2021, which would help “conduct law enforcement activities or crime reduction programs to prevent, address, or respond to hate crimes” by “establishing online hate crime reporting processes, collecting data disaggregated by protected characteristic (e.g., race or national origin), and expanding education campaigns.”⁵

Sinophobic cartoons in the US

In addition to official records, literary texts, paintings, and pamphlets, Sinophobia is evident in historical cartoons, editorial comics, caricatures, and other visual media. Sinophobic cartoons in the US depicted the Chinese (and other East Asians) as primitive, possessed madmen, and juvenile beings. For instance, an 1899 editorial cartoon titled “The Yellow Terror in All His Glory” stereotypes the Chinese man from the Qing dynasty. The image depicts a Chinese man, identified by his long robes and traditional hairstyle known as the queue, wielding firearms and brandishing a knife while standing over a symbolic

representation of the predominantly white Western world of colonial and pre-colonial eras, portrayed as a prone white woman. This portrayal reinforces negative stereotypes of the Chinese as violent and uncivilized. Likewise, numerous posters and cartoons depict the Chinese immigrant as a significant threat to the white community in America. Such an attitude was widely supported and circulated by various American newspapers and magazines, like the weekly satirical magazine *The San Francisco Illustrated Wasp* (in short, *The Wasp*), which published a series of cartoons supporting the debate around what would later become the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882). On April 14, 1882, *The Wasp* published a cartoon titled “Burning Question,” portraying an allegorical representation of America as a distressed white woman standing atop a burning building. While a white gust of water (a metaphor for the Exclusion Act) is unleashed on the building to save the damsel, several Chinese immigrants work in tandem to cut off the water supply pipe. Interestingly, the white fireman is depicted as the savior of the damsel and, by extension, America. Such narratives not only establish the white man’s superiority but also vilify the Chinese as “dirty, impure, sick, decaying, decadent, mentally different, cunning, wily, and biologically and morally inferior” (Lee 2002). Such characterizations have emerged periodically in response to political and economic tensions and disease outbreaks.

While comics double as a cultural site where racism and xenophobia, among other social ills, thrive, they also function as counternarratives. In practice, counternarratives “counter not merely (or even necessarily) the *grand* narratives, but also (or instead) the ‘official’ and ‘hegemonic’ narratives of everyday life: those legitimating stories propagated for specific political purpose to manipulate public consciousness by heralding a national set of common cultural ideals” (Giroux et al. 2013, 2; italics in original). These narratives, which offer different perspectives and present nuanced realities, typically forward the voices of the (historically) marginalized. The comic medium, in particular, has a history of consistently supporting the marginalized, as is evident in the underground comix movement, which flourished in the United States and the United Kingdom in the latter half of the twentieth century. These underground comix examined a wide range of (taboo) topics, including illness, sexuality, addiction, violence, and trauma. In so doing, these narratives not only foregrounded the *other* but also demonstrated the subversive potential of the medium. Graphic medical narratives are yet another instance of counternarratives in that they utilize the affordances of the medium to visually enunciate the “lived realities that often tend to be stigmatized, excluded, or disavowed by societies like our own that cherish efficacy, health, and success” (Squier and Krüger-Fürhoff 2020, 3). The lived reality of stigmatization and the consequent backlash against such stereotypes constitute the corpus of East-Asian counternarratives, which are the focus of the present study.

COVID-19 and comics: Texts and contexts

The COVID-19 pandemic, though devastating, spurred various cultural, literary, and visual responses. Comics, in particular, played a several role during these challenging times: for instance, as Venkatesan and Joshi (2021, 7) argue, comics functioned “as a coping mechanism, as a therapeutic medium, as a pedagogical tool, as an impactful science communication and finally, as a medium which can affect behavioral change in individuals and communities.” Some of the principal online and print anthologies on COVID-19 are Ethan Sacks, Dalibor Talajic, and Lee Loughridge’s 2020 *COVID Chronicle: True Stories from the Front Lines of COVID-19*, Distant Connections’ 2021 *The Lockdown Lowdown*:

Graphic Narratives for Viral Times (parts 1 and 2), and more importantly, Penn State University Press's 2021 *COVID Chronicle: A Comics Anthology*. In addition to these visual narratives, the Graphic Medicine website (<https://www.graphicmedicine.org>) collected comics, editorial cartoons, autobiographical cartoons, and social media posts under the heading "COVID-19 Comics." These visual narratives reveal "the pure fear, anxiety, and grief" that will "no doubt be with us for years to come" (Boileau and Johnson 2021, ix). As such, COVID-19 comics have broadened the scope of graphic medicine (traditionally defined as the intersection of the medium of comics and healthcare) to include issues such as post-humanism, relationality, intersubjectivity, and health ethics and justice, among others. That is, graphic medicine in the post-coronavirus era focuses not only on the subjective experience of illness but also on how the environment and other contingent factors (such as isolation, structural inequalities, and racism) impact health. However, most COVID-related primary sources and scholarship are predominantly from the West (that is, US- and UK-focused), and only scant attention is paid to Asian responses to such issues.

Mired in the imagery of taintedness, East Asian communities worldwide were subjected to racism and xenophobia. Because East Asians share similar physical features as the Chinese, they were equally persecuted and discriminated against in the aftermath of COVID. Trapped in this unprecedented situation and "overwhelmed by the grave consequences, and doubtful about an unknowable future, several Chinese writers responded [to such representations] by producing 'Diaries in the Lockdown City,' which became a heated hashtag on Weibo, WeChat, and other social media platforms" (Shen 2021, 38). Major verbal narratives (in China) include Lan Xi's 2022 "Diaries in Wuhan Lockdown"; Wu Shangzhe's 2020 "Wuhan Girl Anian's Diary"; Luo Juan's 2020 "Father Had Been Dead for 25 Days; I Have Not Told Mother"; and Zha Qiongfang's 2020 *Dr. Zha's Diary of Fighting COVID-19*. Fang Fang's 2020 *Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from a Quarantined City*, a hugely popular online diary in Chinese (later translated into English by Michael Berry), documents the life of Wuhanese people during the lockdown. Similarly, in 2020, editor/translator Xinmei Liu published *First Wave: Comics from the First Months of China's Outbreak*, an anthology of comics drawn by numerous artists residing in China, which is concerned with the Chinese experience of the lockdown during the first phase of the pandemic. *First Wave* is an earnest effort to recuperate Chinese voices, experiences, and perspectives, which it does by encompassing various styles such as abstract art, naturalism, and wordless comics, amongst others.

"The Wuhan I Know": De-stigmatization

San Francisco-based Wuhanese American comic artist Laura Gao drew "The Wuhan I Know," a mini-comic that aims to displace myths and false notions about Wuhan, which was considered the epicenter of the virus. Laura, originally born as Gao Yuyang in Wuhan (China), was working as a product manager for Twitter when she became deeply disturbed by the negative portrayal of her hometown and the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes (such as the 2021 Atlanta spa shootings) in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to this prevalent Sinophobia, Gao created her first comic, titled "The Wuhan I Know," which showcased her as a skilled comic artist. In 2022, after the success of her debut comic, Gao published *Messy Roots: A Graphic Memoir of a Wuhanese American*, in which she examines her transnational (Chinese and American), immigrant, and LGBTQ identity

with candid insight. Gao's storytelling style has consistently followed a pattern of visually depicting personal experiences to address broader societal issues.

Gao's diasporic identity/transnational belonging (Chinese American) helps her authoritatively counter Sinophobia through a platform (Twitter), medium (comics), and language (English) accessible to a wider audience. Beginning with her family settling in Texas, "The Wuhan I Know" exposes American prejudices and ignorance regarding Wuhan. More importantly, the sudden increase in the mentions of Wuhan in relation to the coronavirus turned "innocent confusion" about Wuhan into feelings of "disgust and pity" (Gao 2020a). Incidentally, Gao is a victim of racialized insults because of her identity as a Chinese immigrant, which is steeped in century-old stereotypes amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, Gao uses her comic as a tool to visually remediate problematic stereotypes and presents a picture of normalcy and homeliness that characterized her childhood home in Wuhan. In an interview with *Overachiever Magazine*, Gao mentions how her comic has helped a Chinese mother explain to her "two 5–10-year-old daughters about what's going on and why they should be proud of their heritage" even though they get bullied for it (Kim 2021). Based on Gao's experience growing up as a resident of Wuhan, she takes the reader into confidence by drawing and re-telling history (e.g., Wuhan's role in the 1911 Sun Yat-sen uprising) and showcasing the food culture and cosmopolitanism of Wuhan.

At the very outset of the mini-comic, Gao explicates her narrative intention thus, "In the midst of all this panic, loss and finger-pointing, I want to steer away from politics for a bit to shine light on the beauty of my Wuhanese people and their culture and history" (2020a). In a Tweet dated March 18, 2020, introducing "The Wuhan I Know," Gao writes thus: " 'Wuhan Virus,' 'Chinese Virus,' COVID-19. Doesn't matter the name—my hometown will forever be known for that and only that. I drew this comic to shine light on what people don't know: the beautiful culture, rich history, and strong people of Wuhan" (2020b). The artist quickly lays down facts about Wuhan, followed by a hand-drawn/not-to-scale map of Wuhan. In so doing, Gao not only mainstreams Wuhan but also shows its centrality and closeness with other known cities in China, such as Beijing and Shanghai. An interesting comparison arises when she places Wuhan next to New York, London, and Tokyo. By comparing their respective populations, the artist implies that Wuhan is a modern industrialized metropolitan center on par with some of the best cities in the world. Preceding this comparison, Gao nicknames Wuhan the "Chicago of China" for "trade, transportation, steel and rail" (Gao 2020a). In so doing, Gao vindicates the title of the comic, "The Wuhan I Know," and imparts a sense of authenticity and universality to the place.

The panels here summarize Gao's emotions as the news of Wuhan being the epicenter of a new infectious disease spreads rapidly through media outlets. The first panel analyzed here (Fig. 1) highlights the dramatic shift in interest and attitude on the part of Gao's fellow Californians regarding Wuhan. Worse still, Gao shows how people who were largely uninterested in learning about her hometown and had previously dismissed her cultural roots ("Forget it, it's nowhere") were suddenly angry with her for being Wuhanese (Gao 2020a). Previously, Americans would mispronounce Wuhan as "Woo-huh?" and ask if she was from Beijing or Shanghai—cities that dominated the popular imagination of China (Gao 2020a). However, after the COVID-19 pandemic, Gao's Wuhanese identity was used to discriminate against her ("Don't bring your Wuhan germs near me!").

Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic ranged from rumor-mongering and paranoia over bio-terrorism ("Is it true the virus was created by the Chinese to take over the world?") to medicalized stigmatization of the Chinese as vectors of disease. Chinese cultural and eating habits were vilified ("Y'all deserve it for eating weird stuff") as they were perceived as the cause of the pandemic (Fig. 1). Such examples of medicalized nativism and epidemic

Fig. 1 Image of an adult Gao looking distressed by the comments thrown at her, such as “Don’t bring your Wuhan germs near me!” Reproduced by permission from Gao (2020a)



orientalism were common following the COVID-19 pandemic. Although Gao understood that questions regarding Wuhan during her childhood, to an extent, stemmed from “innocent confusion,” she conveys her disapproval and hurt in a panel through her body language: hand on the opposite arm, glum expression, red flushed cheeks, and sideways glance. Interestingly, Gao repeats the same postures and expressions (depicted in Fig. 1) when she, as an adult, is targeted by racist slurs. Though Gao’s discomfort as a child and an adult mirror each other, there is a significant change in the background, which transforms from white, implying childish ignorance, to a much darker bluish hue, signifying malice and hatred. By putting these discrete attitudes together in a quick succession of panels, Gao animates the central tension of the comic, namely the Sinophobic attitude of racially motivated groups in the West.

Wuhan, a town relatively unknown to the rest of the world before the discovery of the coronavirus, instantly became a site of multiple significations. Beyond its significance as the largest city in China’s Hubei province, Wuhan became a vortex of several meanings and metaphors and, thus, a focal point for several cultural anxieties. First, Wuhan became the world’s exotic disease-carrying *other*, where there was a wanton indulgence and intermixing of humans and animals. *Disease-based othering*, as Nossem (2020, 5) argues, refers to how a “disease is assigned to a specific location outside of one’s own borders and thus created as something foreign, which is then seen as a threat to the nation from the outside.” For instance, the 1918 Influenza epidemic was called the *Spanish Flu*, though it raged across Europe. The East tends to be perceived as a homogenous entity of anonymous

masses (based on racial considerations) and not as individuals. This rendered Wuhan invisible during Gao's childhood as it was homogenized under *China*. During the coronavirus pandemic, however, the Wuhanese were presented as a homogenous disease-carrying community (and not individuals) ready to infect and overrun the world. Put together, Wuhan was flattened and quickly became a spatial metaphor for anthropocentric and atavistic forces.

More importantly, stereotypes about Chinese food⁶—particularly the Cantonese (South China) cuisine, which includes cows, pigs, chicken, duck, pheasant, frog, camel, dog, pigeon, and all kinds of seafood—were fused with the image of an unsanitary and overcrowded wet market where humans and animals live in close proximity, thus, increasing the chance of zoonotic transmission of diseases. Here, it is important to note that the wildlife market that sells exotic animals is only a particular type of Chinese wet market. In reality, trade in wildlife and exotic animals is banned in numerous wet markets and only permitted in specific locations, such as the Hunan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan. Parallely, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), which dates back to the third century BC, uses a variety of animal organs to make Chinese medicine (Master 2019). Hence, consuming a variety of wildlife, either through Chinese medicine or Cantonese cuisine, is a fundamental aspect of Chinese culture and identity. In launching an attack on China's wet markets—whose condition can be admittedly improved and upon which stricter regulations can be imposed—the Western media (which does not reflect the viewpoint of the entire “West”) not only politicizes food but also fails to understand the nuances of a Chinese wet market.

Utilizing nostalgia, sentimentality, and the conventions of a travelogue, “The Wuhan I Know” challenges prevailing stereotypes and multiple reductive significations of Wuhan. Like a guide, the artist leads the readers on a tour of the city and introduces them to the various dishes available in Wuhan. Gao's strategy is riveting in that she presents Wuhanese food, including noodle-based, rice-based, and meat-based dishes (Fig. 2), in such a way that it dispels the notion that China is a consumer of “weird stuff” (Fig. 1). In strategically beginning her description with non-meat-based dishes, Gao complicates the faulty association of certain exotic non-vegetarian dishes with the Chinese wet markets. Gao's love for Wuhanese cuisine is also apparent in how she portrays some of her favorite dishes in the mini-comic. In an interview with *NPR*, Gao observes thus, “Whenever I go to Wuhan, my favorite part is waking up in the morning, running outside to the street where they're completely lined left and right with all these food stalls of so many different kinds of food” (Juhasz 2020). Not only does the artist visually portray China's rich culinary delicacies, but she also makes those delicacies appetizing through her clean, detailed, and colorful illustrations. Interestingly, Gao expresses a sense of pride (instead of feeling ashamed) for her Wuhanese origin and cultural heritage by introducing several dishes in the Chinese script (Han characters) and language (Mandarin). By describing the dishes in the language of a restaurant menu—where the main ingredients and cooking processes are summarized (for instance, “Hot and dry noodles coated in sesame paste”)—Gao introduces Wuhan food/Chinese cuisine in a positive light to the readers (Fig. 2).

Further, by investing in the language of belonging, Gao proceeds to highlight the important sections of Wuhan and its historical landmarks. She invokes the shimmering Yellow Crane Tower, built in 220 AD by Emperor Sun Quan, the former French Consulate building, and the former French Customs House. In so doing, Gao shifts the focus away from the Hunan wet market and towards other significant sites. Further, Gao counters the popular image of Oriental China to convey how modern China is not exotic, barbaric, or dangerous; instead, she posits an ordinary world where children play in parks and vendors serve street food. “The Wuhan I Know” also challenges various stereotypes of racially biased groups

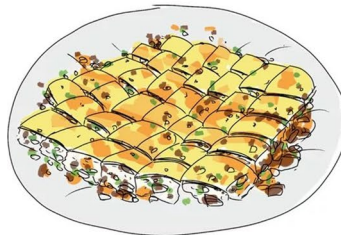
Fig. 2 Image of some of Gao's favorite Wuhanese street food (such as spicy duck neck) and their short descriptions. Reproduced by permission from Gao (2020a)

3. FOOD

WUHAN STREET FOOD IS UNRIVALED. ON ANY MORNING, ONE CAN WAKE UP TO COUNTLESS STALLS LINING THE STREETS WITH GIANT WOKS, SOYMILK TUBS, AND PROPANE TANKS. HERE'S SOME OF MY PERSONAL FAVS:

热干面
rè gān miàn

Hot and dry noodles coated in sesame paste often served for breakfast.



豆皮
dòu pí

Sticky rice with bits of meat and veggies wrapped in bean skin and fried on a giant wok.

鸭脖子
yā bó zi

Duck neck usually made insanely spicy. It's so popular as a snack that it's main chain "Zhou Hei Ya" is as ubiquitous as McDonald's is in the U.S.



in the West by emphasizing that the SARS-CoV-2 virus did not originate in Wuhan due to genetic or behavioral flaws of the Wuhanese people. Moreover, the mini-comic humanizes the *other* so that a racially biased individual is at once made uncomfortable and confronted with their own prejudice. In conclusion, Gao makes an effort to de-stigmatize Wuhan by portraying it as yet another town—like any other in the world—with a long history and a rich cultural heritage.

“Get off this tram”: Discrimination

Auckland-based transracial South Korean adoptee in Sweden, Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom, visually enunciates anti-Asian racism in her Instagram post (Fig. 3). Sjöblom, a comic book artist and adoptee rights activist, was adopted into a Swedish family as a child and struggled to fit into a predominantly white Scandinavian society. Sjöblom’s graphic memoir *Palimpsest: Documents from a Korean Adoption* (2019), originally published in Swedish in 2016 and translated into English in 2019, documents her experiences as an adoptee and her journey to search for her birth parents in South Korea. *Palimpsest* frequently mentions the experience of racism, casual prejudice, and microaggressions that the comic artist encountered as a Korean adoptee. She recounts thus, “It was tough to keep liking my Asian face, when there weren’t any role models, only caricatures” (Sjöblom 2019). Put together, *Palimpsest* turns personal lived experiences into passionate advocacy for adoptee rights and anti-racism, themes that are echoed in her single-paneled cartoons following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Published on March 4, 2020, the single-paneled image depicted in Fig. 3 is part of a series of cartoons titled after the popular hashtag #IAMNotAVirus. It recounts an incident of racism in Gothenburg, Sweden, where a 15-year-old girl of Singaporean descent was

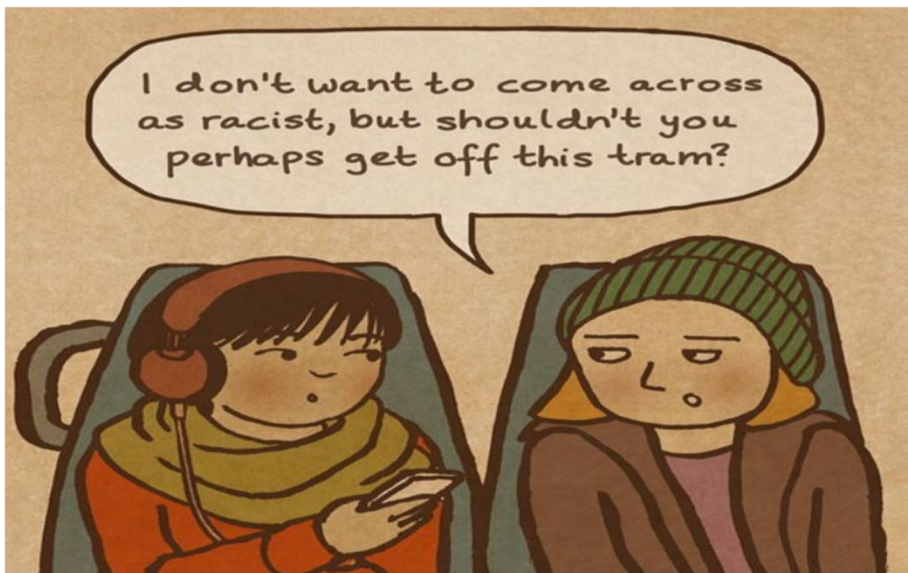


Fig. 3 Image of a white woman asking an East-Asian girl to get off a means of public transport. Reproduced by permission from Sjöblom (2020b)

asked to disembark from a tram (“I don’t want to come across as racist, but shouldn’t you perhaps get off this tram?”) by a young white woman in Sweden. In the caption accompanying the post, Sjöblom relates this incident to several others in which people of Asian origin were forced to leave hair salons and denied access to restaurants. While the white woman in the cartoon does not assault the girl, her demand that the Asian girl vacate the public transport is steeped in epistemic violence, racism, and xenophobia.

Sjöblom’s simple yet strong strokes not only encapsulate this instance of xenophobia in an impactful manner but also highlights the implicit aggression, paranoia, anxiety, and fear underlying the image. Unlike Gao’s comic, Sjöblom’s overall dull and muted color scheme, especially the yellow background (indicative of East-Asian heritage), is impactful in that it reminds the reader of the decades of ridicule faced by the East-Asian community because of their skin color. Hence, the minute differences in facial features (eyes and noses) and hair color of the two women are significant as they not only provide clues to their race but also connect to an overall history of racism and xenophobia. Hence, these women are at once individuals and embodiments of their respective races. The white woman’s slightly turned body posture indicates her aversion towards the Asian girl, whom she perceives as a carrier of a disease. The Asian girl, wearing headphones and minding her own business, is interrupted by the white woman who tries to mask her bigotry with the disclaimer, “I don’t want to come across as racist” (Fig. 3). The startling hyper-visibility of East Asians following the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in public places, gave way to marginalization and stigmatization, as is apparent in the incident Sjöblom describes. Since COVID, most East Asians grappled with the “terror of unwanted scrutiny and attention and competing demands” for safety (Cooper, Dolezal, and Rose 2023). In such a context, the anxiety of the Asian woman (symbolic of Asian immigrants) in Sjöblom’s cartoon is intensified by the very real threat of physical, mental, and epistemic violence.

From the lens of medicalized nativism, the COVID-19 pandemic is used to justify the white woman’s racism. Throughout history, especially in the US, nativists often played on the fear of disease and thus stereotyped foreigners as unclean, vulnerable, unhealthy, and a risk to the American population (Nelkin 2022, 316). Some immigrant groups were even considered a threat to the health and genetic vitality of the American population (Nelkin 2022, 316). Thus, when the 15-year-old girl was asked to disembark from a means of public transport by a white woman, it was under the pretext of protecting the other passengers from the disease-ridden Asian. Despite its overt racism and xenophobia, medicalized nativism can often be difficult to separate from sensible public health procedures like quarantine and social distancing, which are also premised on isolation (DeGooyer and Murthy 2020). However, the key factor here is that these policies—all vital components for containing the spread of COVID-19—are oriented toward individuals who have been, or may have been, exposed to the virus (DeGooyer and Murthy 2020). However, the Asian girl in the comic is mistreated not because of her status as an infected individual but due to her ethnicity. It is in this context that the white woman’s actions become deplorable.

The colonial encounter is characterized by an unbridgeable chasm that separates the (predominantly Asian and African) colonized subject and the (European) colonizer. While colonial spaces were often read as impenetrable, “overspread with misery,” and dangerous to European conquerors, diseases came to represent an unwanted piece of the colony that could ultimately travel back to Europe (White 2023, 51). So, it is inevitable that vestiges of such a stereotypical conceptualization of the colonized Orient still exist and undergird the present incident. Historically, the arrival of early European settlers in North and South America led to the spread of diseases like influenza and smallpox, which had a profound impact on the native populations, including a significant decline in their numbers and a

corresponding increase in the settlers' ability to assert control over the territories they colonized. It is important to note that, in some instances, the white settlers themselves were carriers of disease, a fact that is often overlooked. However, the stigmatization of immigrant communities has contributed to the prevalence of biased and discriminatory perceptions in certain groups of people in Europe and America. These perceptions wrongly hold immigrant populations solely responsible for disease outbreaks, often treating them as the *other*. Several recent racist incidents that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic highlight this issue. Put together, the incident portrayed by Sjöblom is not an isolated incident but a part of a larger nexus of anti-Asian hate crimes prevalent since the COVID-19 pandemic and carries with it a history of racism, xenophobia, and othering.

“My ethnicity is not a virus”: East-Asian solidarity

In yet another single-paneled Instagram cartoon posted on January 31, 2020, Sjöblom explicitly reclaims her (and, by extension, the whole Asian community's) identity as an individual, not a faceless homogenized Asian *virus*. The post has been included under the series #IAmNotAVirus, which responds to several incidents of aggression and violence against East-Asian communities, symptomatic of rising anti-Asian sentiments worldwide. The hashtag #JeNeSuisPasUnVirus (translating to #IAmNotAVirus) first gained currency when the French newspaper *Le Courier Picard* “used the inflammatory headlines ‘Alerte jaune’ (Yellow alert) and ‘Le péril jaune?’ (Yellow peril?), complete with an image of a Chinese woman wearing a protective mask” (Fouché 2020). Later, the Connecticut-based photographer Mike Keo started an online campaign wherein East-Asian individuals share their #IAM statements regarding themselves, accompanied by their photographs. The cartoon shown in Fig. 4 seems to be modeled on this trend as a sign of solidarity. In the caption accompanying the Instagram comic, Sjöblom entreats our humanity and warns us not to fall prey to hatred and half-truths. She persuades the reader not to spread comics and other media depicting Asians as unclean and unhygienic, which justifies such paranoia-induced racism.

Vis-à-vis bold lines, simple imagery, and dull coloring, the comic depicts an Asian American protagonist facing the viewer/reader with a strong message featuring above her: “I am not a virus.” The character fills up almost the entire panel, and the earthly muted background ensures the reader's attention is entirely on the woman. A mask, which now has come to symbolize the pandemic, covers her face. Scholar Dennis Zhang contends that the masked Chinese symbolizes the “intimidating, newly emergent Chinese cultural embrace of modernity” (Zhang 2021, 76). Hence, the use of masks by Chinese officials has been interpreted by some as a sign of China's technological advancement and potential capability to develop bioweapons for large-scale destruction, highlighting concerns about the country's authoritarianism and modernization. On the other hand, according to Susan Sontag's “consciousness of risk,” Zhang argues that the “repeated visualizations of a particular group in disease coverage can create perceptions of those groups as possessing *increased* risk and potential for infection” (Zhang 2021, 74–75; italics in original). Further, the masked Chinese is a constant reminder that the COVID-19 pandemic originated in China and that the Chinese were first infected by the disease.

Sjöblom's masked protagonist is symbolic of a complex dynamic where she is at once the pathologized Asian body and, simultaneously, a member of a distinct modern society. The cartoon is simultaneously a self-portrait of the artist taking a stand



Fig. 4 The image of a masked East-Asian woman looking at the reader/viewer with the words “I am not a virus” featured above her. Reproduced by permission from Sjöblom (2020a)

against xenophobia and a symbol of other East Asians worldwide. Though the protagonist seems passive and motionless—and her clothes are indicative of the cold climate that Sjöblom was used to as a Korean adoptee in Sweden—it is her eyes (representative of her Asian identity) that capture the attention of the readers/viewer. Her penetrative gaze goes beyond the boundaries of the comic and seemingly sears into the conscience of all those who view her. The gaze directly addresses the embodied reader and calls for action and active participation in the movement against Sinophobia. Through a visually economic single-paneled image, Sjöblom challenges the collective dehumanization of East Asians as mere carriers of disease. In so doing, she exposes the disease-mongering and identity politics that the Western media (which does not reflect the opinion of the entire “West”) indulges. The image animates the underlying associations related to the Chinese identity, especially in the US, where medicalized nativism and epidemic orientalism ensured that Chinese immigrants were blamed for the bubonic plague and small-pox epidemics. In the COVID era, such a structural inequality has been reinforced by the exclusion of Chinese Americans and other Asian minority communities from everyday life, thereby transferring the problem of emerging infections onto the immigrant/Asian population. It is this targeted exclusion that Sjöblom counters with her statement, “I am not a virus” (Fig. 4).

That said, the hatred does not merely stem from the fact that the virus’s origin was traced to Wuhan; it stems from an inherent colonial prejudice against the East/Orient. In her caption to the Instagram post, Sjöblom reiterates, “Don’t use the fear of the virus as an excuse to blurt out racist remarks about the ‘yellow peril.’” Here, the use of “yellow” in the caption text refers to the racist imagining of the Asian skin as yellow, which is also suggestive of being sickly. In conclusion, the panel demonstrates that theories like *othering* and,

by extension, *epidemic orientalism* are not doomed to obscurity in the pages of old books but are very much alive in the current age of COVID.

Conclusion

Sinophobia in the context of COVID is a complex phenomenon that emerges from the intersection of xenophobia, racism, medicalized nativism, and epidemic orientalism. The classical imagination of China as the origin of various diseases seems to strengthen the current stereotypical attitude of racially motivated groups in the West towards the Chinese and all other East-Asian communities who share physical similarities with the Chinese. In particular, China has been criticized for its “weird” food habits and wet markets. Additionally, China’s rapid industrialization and economic progress and its constant economic rivalry with Western countries (especially the US) have fostered anti-Asian sentiments. In such a context, East-Asian responses function as an important counternarrative to racist and xenophobic stereotypes. Here, the medium of comics is also a site of resistance and thus is consistent with its tradition of shielding the *other* through exposing issues such as racism, discrimination, and xenophobia, among others. Gao’s “The Wuhan I Know” is a strident attempt to displace the extant myths and false notions about Wuhan, the Chinese city at the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic. Taking the reader/viewer into confidence, Gao foregrounds her personal experience of enduring Sinophobia through carefully thought-out, neat, and colorful images. Given such an artistic intent, it is natural that Gao uses neutral and non-confrontational language throughout the mini-comic. Through first-person storytelling, Gao walks us through Wuhan’s various attractions and landmarks to convey the city’s positive aspects. The artist also attempts to overwrite the dominant stereotypical image of the Wuhanese wet market by highlighting the various non-meat-based Wuhanese delicacies. Gao not only invokes the 1911 Chinese revolution to detail the importance of Wuhan in the making of modern-day China but also its centrality as an important economic hub. In such ways, Gao attempts to educate and address the stigma around Wuhan. In another instance, Sjöblom underscores, in her two Instagram cartoons, the problematic attitudes of racially biased groups in the Western world towards East Asians. She achieves this by highlighting an instance of racist behavior, which is indicative of the deeper malaise of xenophobia and othering. Not only do her cartoons abridge anti-Asian attitudes, but they also bring to light the dominant elements behind anti-Asian hate crimes. Sjöblom takes a strong stance against racism and xenophobia by expressing her solidarity with the #IAmNotAVirus movement. In fact, the visual economy and dull color scheme of the images contribute to the overall narrative force of her panels. Both these counternarratives are potent in that they narratively and aesthetically dispel established biases and quell institutionalized racism.

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Author Contribution Both authors have contributed equally to the article.

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Declarations

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Ethical Approval No human or animal subjects were used. We adhere to all required ethics.

Informed Consent We have requested copyright permission from both comic artists.

Conflict of Interest No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Endnotes

¹ There were several such attacks against East Asians (see, e.g., Sakkal 2020).

² This is further vindicated by a study commissioned by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) on racial discrimination and hate crimes.

³ Cartoons are traditionally single-paneled images that rely on extra-textual information to evoke a story. Comics, conversely, consist of a sequence of panels that convey/tell a story.

⁴ In 2021, an international team of scientists led by the World Health Organization (WHO) dismissed the theory that the Coronavirus disease escaped from a laboratory in the Chinese city of Wuhan and concluded that the coronavirus most likely originated in animals before spreading to humans. After spending four weeks visiting hospitals, laboratories, and markets, the Huanan Seafood Market, the Wuhan Institute of Virology, and the Wuhan Center for Disease Control laboratory, the team reached their conclusion (see Meredith 2021).

⁵ COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act of 2021, S. 937, 117th Cong. (2021).

⁶ There are several food jokes about Chinese cuisine: “They eat anything with legs except a table and anything with wings except an airplane”; “How do we know that Adam and Eve were not Chinese? Because they would have thrown away the apple and eaten the snake” (see Popik 2022).

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