



HOW CHINA  
THREAT  
NARRATIVES  
FEED ANTI-  
ASIAN RACISM  
AND HOW TO  
FIGHT BACK

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# ANTI-ASIAN RACISM IS ON THE RISE.

A major turning point came with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in the US. Stop AAPI Hate, a project that tracks reports of anti-Asian racism, recorded **6,603 incidents between March 2020 and March 2021**, with almost 40% of those reports occurring just between February and March of 2021.<sup>1</sup>

Russell Jeung, a professor of Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University and a co-founder of Stop AAPI Hate, connects this to rising US-China tensions. “When America China-bashes, then Chinese get bashed, and so do those who ‘look Chinese.’ American foreign policy in Asia is American domestic policy for Asians.”<sup>2</sup>

We can see this pattern recurring in US history, including in World War 2, the Korean War, the Vietnamese War, and the War On Terror. Because the majority of Americans are poor at distinguishing between Asian ethnicities, animosity that is drummed up against one Asian country can generate racism against people descended from dozens of other countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Today, as Professor Jeung notes, it is a rise in China-bashing, in particular from US political leaders, that is contributing to a rise in anti-Asian racism.

This document summarizes our analysis of some of the key reasons why this is happening, and makes some initial suggestions of what a counternarrative strategy to overcome these troubling trends could look like. There is of course much to criticize in the behavior of the Chinese government and Chinese businesses, but we must distinguish between legitimate criticism and threat inflation, and create alternatives to the narratives that are most likely to feed racism.

# “CHINA THREAT” NARRATIVES FEED ANTI-ASIAN RACISM

There are a number of narratives about China that feed anti-Asian racism. Attracting the greatest amount of attention is former President Trump’s use of phrases such as “Chinese virus” or “Kung flu.” This was part of a broader narrative strategy to scapegoat China for the pandemic and to displace blame for Trump’s catastrophic mishandling of this public health crisis. The point was not only to claim that COVID-19 came from China, but also that China should take all the blame for its impacts on the US. This contributed to many people in the US blaming anyone in the US who is of Chinese descent, or who “looks Chinese.” A significant proportion of incidents of anti-Asian racism have included language from the perpetrators that assign blame for the pandemic on the victims, or otherwise identify the victims as sources of disease.<sup>3</sup>

There are also a number of other narratives that, in different ways, identify China as a threat to the US and to ordinary Americans, and thereby feed racism. In addition to blaming China for the pandemic, leaders in US politics and media speak about China as an economic threat and/or a national security threat (through military power, espionage, or so-called “influence” campaigns), and accuse China of “cheating” the US. These narratives are not limited to Republicans or figures on the right like Trump, but are also popular among many Democratic and liberal figures.

When these “China threat” narratives are repeated by leaders here in the US, it creates an environment in which many Americans feel encouraged to imagine that these threats are emanating not only from China (as in the country or the government) but also from individual people who are of Chinese descent, or who are perceived to be so. And it creates a sense of license for people to express these racist sentiments in both words and actions.

**The following table shows examples of “China threat” narratives and corresponding sentiments that have been expressed in reports of incidents of anti-Asian racism.**

“CHINA THREAT” NARRATIVES	ANTI-ASIAN EXPRESSIONS
China is to blame for the pandemic	You are diseased, you are killing us
China is an espionage or influence threat	You are a spy, you are CCP
China is an economic threat	You are the reason why I lost my job
China is cheating the US	You are a liar, a cheater

## “CHINA THREAT” NARRATIVES FEED ANTI-ASIAN RACISM (CONTINUED)

Why is it so easy for people to hear these narratives about the country or the government of China and translate them into racist sentiments against individuals?

First, it is a long standing feature of racism against people of Chinese descent (as well as people of many other Asian ethnicities) that they are imagined as being part of a single homogeneous collective, lacking in individuality. This implies that if the collective (“China”) is a threat, then any individual member of that collective is also a threat.

In addition, connecting individuals of Asian descent in the US to a threat posed by China is sometimes an explicit feature of these narratives. For example, narratives about the supposed threat of espionage or “influence” from the Chinese government consistently portray individuals of Chinese descent in the US as part of the threat. For example, FBI Director Christopher Wray testified in a 2018 Senate hearing that the espionage threat from China is “not just a whole-of-government threat, but a whole-of-society threat.” He named students and academics from China as part of this “whole-of-society threat,” language that casts anyone of Chinese descent as a potential national security threat. Wray was severely criticized by Asian American civil rights organizations but has continued to make similar sweeping claims.<sup>4</sup> Originally appointed by President Trump, Wray was kept in place by President Biden.

Not just language but also actions communicate “China threat” narratives that can translate into racism. It is useful to compare this to the dynamics of Islamophobia in the War On Terror. Soon after the September 11, 2001, attacks, leaders of both parties, including President George W Bush, avoided speaking in ways that portrayed Islam or all Muslims as a threat to the US, saying things such as, “Islam is a religion of peace.” But these careful words were not enough to prevent widespread Islamophobic harassment and violence. Despite the rhetoric, US government policies treated both majority Muslim countries and Muslims in the US as threats, and those government actions spoke louder than words. Similarly, today we see a growth in anti-China policies that risk teaching Americans to accept “China threat” narratives with consequences for anti-Asian racism, even if political leaders are careful to use anti-racist language.

# TRENDS THAT LEAD TO EXAGGERATED “CHINA THREAT” NARRATIVES

There are legitimate reasons why many in the US have become increasingly critical of the Chinese government, including escalating human rights abuses. But it has also become regular practice for figures across the political spectrum to exaggerate and inflate the threat that China poses to the US and to the vast majority of Americans. For example, in a speech on June 23, 2020, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo portrayed the threat of China in almost apocalyptic terms, warning that “If we bend the knee now, our children’s children may be at the mercy of the Chinese Communist Party,” and claiming that the Chinese Communist Party aims to destroy freedom worldwide. These ideas are echoed in the Strategic Competition Act, led by Senator Bob Menendez (D-NJ), a bill that currently has broad bipartisan support in the Senate: “The [People’s Republic of China] is promoting its governance model [worldwide] and attempting to weaken other models of governance by undermining democratic institutions.” It’s now common to hear US politicians and other leading figures say that China is “an existential threat” to the US, or “a threat to the American way of life.” These are all great exaggerations and distortions of both the power and the intentions of the Chinese government, and they serve to feed anti-Asian racism.

Why is it so common to exaggerate the “China threat” in these ways? Here are some contributing factors.

## > AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

For decades, American exceptionalism has played a dominant role in American identity and the popular sense of the place of the US in the world. This is the idea that the US is essentially different from and superior to all other countries, and implies a commitment to US economic and military domination over the rest of the world. But now the US is felt to be a declining world power while China is rising and is breaking out of its previous position as a subordinate country in the US-led global system. This is experienced by many, including most political leaders, as a crisis in American exceptionalism, and a threat to American identity.

In many discussions about China we see an easy slide from the plausible claim that China is a threat to US global domination to the implausible claim that China is an existential threat to the US or a threat to every American. An unquestioned commitment to American exceptionalism can make these two claims seem equivalent. In the minds of those who have a deep investment in American exceptionalism, the sense that US global domination may be at risk can be experienced

## TRENDS THAT LEAD TO EXAGGERATED “CHINA THREAT” NARRATIVES (CONTINUED)

as an attack, in a way similar to how some white people experience threats to white privilege as an attack, or how some men experience threats to masculine privilege as an attack.<sup>5</sup> These anxieties are exacerbated by the dysfunctions of the global economy and weak overall economic growth, which fosters a sense of zero-sum competition between countries.<sup>6</sup>

### > **SCAPEGOATING CHINA AS A POLITICAL STRATEGY**

Many political leaders seek to displace blame for problems in US society onto China, hoping to channel popular anger away from them and towards a foreign threat. This has become an especially important strategy for politicians who oppose measures that would improve living conditions or address injustices within the US. President Trump failed to address the public health crisis of COVID-19 and attempted to turn China into a scapegoat for his failings. Many Republicans portray authoritarianism in China as the greatest threat to the American way of life, even as they lay the groundwork for authoritarianism in the US by spreading conspiracy theories accusing Biden of stealing the election and passing laws that disenfranchise American voters. Republican strategists aim to rebrand the Republican Party as the party of the working class by equating “anti-China” with “pro-worker,” even as the party opposes reforms such as a \$15 minimum wage, the Protecting the Right to Organize Act, or Biden’s American Jobs Plan. And so on.

### > **THE QUEST FOR ANTI-CHINA BIPARTISANSHIP**

Leading Democrats hope to use anti-China rhetoric and policy to win support for legislation from Republicans and rebuild bipartisanship on an anti-China basis. This anti-China strategy has been used in particular to support a number of economic packages that promote investment in infrastructure, research and technology, and job creation. This messaging strategy justifies public investment as necessary to confront the economic threat that China supposedly poses to the US. This is despite the fact that a number of polls show that anti-China messaging is unnecessary for winning popular, even bipartisan support for such measures.<sup>7</sup>

### > **SPECIAL INTERESTS**

Some corporate and other interest groups in US society stand to materially benefit from “China threat” narratives and promote them for that reason. For example, military leaders and the military industrial complex now turn to these narratives as their primary argument for demanding increased government spending on the military.

# UNDERLYING NARRATIVE STRUCTURES

These trends toward escalating “China threat” narratives and anti-Asian racism build upon underlying narrative structures that run deep in US society and US politics.

## THE US-CHINA BINARY

At different points in US history, dominant narratives about the US have been constructed in contrast to narratives of a foreign other. In the Cold War, the most important foreign other was the Soviet Union, or more broadly the Communist world. During the heights of the War on Terror, this role was filled by Islamic terrorism. Today, it is the People’s Republic of China.

Dominant narratives about the US and China construct a stark nationalistic binary, and portray the two countries as diametrically opposed in every way, as if they represent two fundamentally incompatible principles. (See table below.) This binary tends to take on a “good vs evil” character, and makes it seem as if conflict is inevitable. In this way it encourages the perception that China cannot help but pose a threat to the US.

US	CHINA
Superior	Inferior
Individual	Collective
Democracy, human rights, freedom	Authoritarianism, autocracy, oppression
Plays by the rules, honest and open competitor	Cheats, steals
Innovative	Derivative, copycat
Modern, progressive	Backwards, dirty, diseased

This binary selectively draws on real features of the two societies, which is part of what makes it seem so plausible. For example, it is true that the US is a democracy and generally provides greater freedom to its citizens, and that the Chinese government engages in widespread human rights abuses. But things

## UNDERLYING NARRATIVE STRUCTURES / THE US-CHINA BINARY (CONTINUED)

are not as “black and white” as the binary assumes. The US also struggles with growing authoritarianism, multiple forms of oppression, and violations of human rights; the US also breaks global rules and abuses its power on the global stage.

One function of this binary is to reshape and in effect purify America’s image of itself. By embracing this binary, Americans can avoid engaging in critical self-reflection about their own country and imagine that problems like authoritarianism are fundamentally foreign to the US. This helps to maintain a sense of American exceptionalism and justifies aggressive and nationalistic foreign policy, in particular against China.

### **RACIST NARRATIVES ABOUT PEOPLE OF CHINESE DESCENT**

Current trends also build upon long-standing narratives about people of Chinese descent in the US, which also extend to others who are perceived to be Chinese. These narratives are racist and dehumanizing, and have been around since the origins of anti-Asian politics in the US in the 19th century. They include:

- Chinese people are all alike and form a homogeneous collective; what is true of one Chinese person is true of all
- Chinese people lack any sense of individual will; they are submissive, docile, and obedient
- Chinese people are robotic and hyper-efficient workers
- Chinese people have backwards and dirty lifestyles
- Chinese people are perpetual foreigners

There is a two-way relationship between narratives about China and narratives about people of Chinese descent. We saw above how narratives about China can shape popular perceptions of Chinese people. But it is also true that narratives about Chinese people influence narratives about China, often making it easier for antagonistic narratives about China to propagate. For example, the narrative that Chinese people are hyper-efficient workers supports the narrative of China as a dire economic threat to the US and to American workers. The narrative that Chinese people form a homogeneous collective and lack individuality makes it easier to portray all Chinese people as potential agents of the Chinese government, which also makes it easier to portray the Chinese government as a sinister espionage threat to the US.



# TOWARDS A COUNTERNARRATIVE STRATEGY

In order to resist this combination of escalating “China threat” narratives and anti-Asian racism, we need a counternarrative strategy. Although it is important to critique problematic claims, a counternarrative must do more than simply negate our opponent’s narratives. We do not respond to “Chinese people are a threat” by saying “Chinese people are not a threat” because that response can actually just repeat the association between “Chinese people” and “threat” that we want to disrupt. Instead a counternarrative provides a positive alternative framework for how to understand actors and issues.

Such an alternative must confront the underlying narrative structures: the dehumanizing and de-individualizing narratives about people of Chinese descent and others who are perceived to be Chinese, and the US–China binary that portrays the US and China as the embodiment of incompatible principles that are doomed to conflict. Here are some key elements.

## > INDIVIDUALIZE AND HUMANIZE

Counter the notion that all Chinese people form a homogeneous collective by portraying a diversity of identity, opinions, etc. Promote narratives of solidarity showing that people in China and people in the US of Chinese descent experience similar problems to the majority of Americans, and that we can solve our shared problems through shared struggle. There is a need for improved education about the diversity of people of Chinese descent in the US and the overall AAPI community as well as improved education about AAPI history.

## > INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Counter “China threat” narratives and break down the US–China binary with narratives that show the biggest threats to most people in the US to be those shared across borders, which require international cooperation to create shared solutions. This includes the climate crisis, the pandemic, global poverty and inequality, and a global economy based on the oppression and exploitation of working people everywhere.

## > ALTERNATIVES TO AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

We need an alternative narrative about the place of the US in the world. So long as American exceptionalism remains the dominant form of American identity, the growing power of China will continue to feed narratives that China is a threat to the US and to American people. Recent polls show that increasing numbers of Americans are rejecting American exceptionalism, but in the absence of a compelling, progressive alternative, it will remain dominant.

## TOWARDS A COUNTERNARRATIVE STRATEGY (CONTINUED)

### > BOTH WORDS AND POLICY

Because problematic narratives are propagated by policy as well as through words, it will help to oppose and create alternatives to policies that are unnecessarily confrontational against China, and to oppose policies that target or profile people of Chinese or other Asian descent (such as restrictive immigration policies or racial profiling policies that target international students and researchers from China).

### HOW TO CRITICIZE

There are many valid criticisms of the Chinese government and Chinese businesses that should not be suppressed. These include the repression of labor and feminist activists across China, human rights abuses in Xinjiang and elsewhere in China, the crackdown on pro-democracy protesters in Hong Kong, military threats against Taiwan and military expansion in the South China Sea.

These criticisms may be less likely to exacerbate anti-Asian racism because they do not portray China (and by extension Chinese people and others perceived to be Chinese) as immediate threats to ordinary Americans, and because those who are most inclined to engage in acts of anti-Asian racism are unlikely to be deeply motivated by concerns for Uyghurs or Hong Kong protesters.

However, even valid criticisms sometimes unnecessarily feed into the US–China binary. That can be avoided in the following ways:

### > BE PRECISE ABOUT THE TARGET

Identify the “Chinese government” or specific Chinese businesses or individuals as the target of criticism, rather than “China” or “the Chinese.” This is to avoid feeding into the narrative that all Chinese people are assimilated into the Chinese government as a homogeneous collective. As discussed above, some criticisms, such as those regarding espionage or “influence,” can actively reinforce the narrative of the homogeneous collective and so it is especially important not to inflate these threats.

### > APPLY CRITICISMS UNIVERSALLY AND CONSISTENTLY

Most valid criticisms of the Chinese government or Chinese businesses could also be extended to other bad actors in other countries. For example, the crackdown on Uyghurs and other Turkic groups in Xinjiang is justified as a way to fight Islamic terrorism, and draws on Islamophobic

## TOWARD A COUNTERNARRATIVE STRATEGY / HOW TO CRITICIZE (CONTINUED)

principles established by the US government in its War on Terror and used in repressive policies in many other countries. Rising authoritarianism is a feature not just of Chinese politics, but of the politics of countries around the world, including in the US. Abuses of labor rights are systemic in the neoliberal global economy, and have long been embedded in the business model of multinational corporations. A progressive narrative will oppose such practices because they violate human rights and human dignity, not because they are perpetrated by a particular government.

### > **SEPARATE VALID CRITICISM OF HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES FROM CLAIMS THAT CHINA THREATENS THE AMERICAN PEOPLE ECONOMICALLY AND MILITARILY**

There is no logical connection between the project of protecting human rights in China and the project of maintaining US global supremacy. When US lawmakers connect their criticism of human rights abuses in China with the idea that Americans will suffer unless the US maintains global domination, it feeds the idea of China as uniquely villainous. It also feeds nationalism in China and makes it easy for the Chinese government to argue that “human rights” is a cynical US ploy. This isolates progressives in China, making them vulnerable to repression.

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For more on our research on narrative strategy visit [www.justiceisglobal.org/us-china-narrative](http://www.justiceisglobal.org/us-china-narrative)

## ENDNOTES

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