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“I’M NOT A VIRUS”: ASIAN HATE IN  
DONALD TRUMP’S RHETORIC

JENNIFER ZHENG

98 Pages

Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, expressions of anti-Asian sentiments have been on the rise. From March 2020 to June 2021, there were a total of 9,081 self-reported incidents of hate across the United States (Stop AAPI Hate, 2021). As the coronavirus spread into the United States, President Donald Trump immediately blamed China. He did so by referring to the virus as the “Chinese Virus” and used the hashtag #chinesevirus on Twitter (Weise, 2021). Anti-Asian sentiments expressed on Twitter grew after Trump’s tweet about the “Chinese virus” and the number of Chinese and other Asian hate crimes grew exponentially. The purpose of this study is to explore the rhetorical strategies that Trump utilized to create a sense of fear against the dangerous “Other.” I used a rhetorical thematic analysis to analyze a series of Trump’s tweets and speeches that contains language such as “Chinese virus” or “Kung Flu.” In his tweets, themes such as scapegoating, fear of the other, China bashing, and populist appeals were prevalent. In his speeches, the themes were China bashing, scapegoating, and populist appeals. Describing Chinese and other Asian bodies as “spreaders” of diseases, reinforces the Yellow Peril and perpetual foreigner stereotypes. The study showed the importance of presidential rhetoric in influencing public opinion in the context of COVID-19 and Asian hate.

**KEYWORDS:** Presidential rhetoric, Yellow Peril, coronavirus, China, Asian hate, model minority, perpetual foreigner, Twitter, speech

“I’M NOT A VIRUS”: ASIAN HATE IN  
DONALD TRUMP’S RHETORIC

JENNIFER ZHENG

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

School of Communication

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2022

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“I’M NOT A VIRUS”: ASIAN HATE IN  
DONALD TRUMP’S RHETORIC

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

On March 16, 2021, Robert Aaron Long, a white American, went on a shooting spree in the Atlanta, Georgia, region (Arnold, 2021). During his shooting spree, he killed eight civilians, six of whom were Asian women. When he was later confronted about the murders, he mentioned that he has a “sex addiction” and was aiming to go to locations where he had “temptations for him that he wanted to eliminate” (Atlanta Police Press Conference, 2021). In general, and as this alarming example demonstrates, there is a possibility that Asian women have been negatively stereotyped and fetishized in media. As a result, the negative stereotypes of Asian women may lead to violence as a result of their fetishization and exoticization in media. When there is violence toward Asian women, there is usually little to no repercussions for the perpetrator. With the example of the Atlanta shooting, Cherokee County Sheriff’s Captain Jay Baker argued that Long “had a really bad day,” which prompted him to kill eight civilians (Arnold, 2021). This incident is one of many hate crimes that came out of the pandemic since many associate the coronavirus (COVID-19) with Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans.

Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, expressions of anti-Asian sentiments have been on the rise. From March 2020 to June 2021, there were a total of 9,081 self-reported incidents of hate across the United States (Stop AAPI Hate, 2021). Specifically, Dr. Russell Jeung finds, “of 9,081 hate incident reports included in this report, 48.1% included at least one hateful statement regarding anti-China and/or anti-immigrant rhetoric” (Stop AAPI Hate, 2021, para. 16). Hate crimes are defined as “crimes in which the perpetrators acted based on a bias against the victim’s race, color, religion, or national origin” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d., para. 2). However, many victims of hate crimes do not report their hate crimes which makes these figures higher than projected (Pezzella et al., 2019). Asian Americans live in fear due to the

unpredictability of when these crimes might occur. According to the Pew Research Center, “32% of Asian adults say they have feared someone might threaten or physically attack them – a greater share than other racial or ethnic groups” (Ruiz et al., 2021, para. 1). These attitudes are the result of the violence and harassment toward people of Asian descent, more specifically Asian seniors.

In this thesis, I will be addressing the Chinese American community and the larger Asian American community as well. Even though Donald Trump used anti-Chinese and anti-China rhetoric, many may associate that with other Asian American individuals as well. Most of Trump’s rhetoric directly targets China and Chinese people but also has implications for Chinese-descendant individuals and other Asian communities. Yang (2022) explained, “when all members of a diverse race of people are viewed as one, one ethnic group’s being targeted can mean any ethnic group’s being targeted” (para. 28). The inability to differentiate between the Asian cultures is one explanation for the hate crimes against other Asian American victims who are not Chinese.

The pandemic provided justification for many to use the virus to blame Chinese and other Asian communities. People have expressed their blame in several ways, including but not limited to racial slurs, physical assaults, and even killings. On February 13, 2022, Christina Yuna Lee, a Korean American, after walking home, was brutally stabbed in her Chinatown apartment (Brown, 2022). A witness, Eunhae Son, saw the man yelling “You Asian [expletive]” and other racial slurs to Lee when following her to her apartment (Chao, 2022). She was later stabbed 40 times. A month before Lee’s unfortunate death, Michelle Alyssa Go was pushed to her death in front of an oncoming subway train (Chavez, 2022). Although Go’s death has not been ruled a hate crime, many Asian Americans across the nation were still affected by the violent crimes

because they were reminded of the violence that could be inflicted on them simply for their identity. These two examples with Lee and Go are just two of many examples of victims who were targeted since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. One of the reasons that motivated people to lash out toward Chinese and other Asian communities is because their president legitimized it. Since President Trump had a platform and a large following, he led by example.

Furthermore, the rise in xenophobia resulted in an increase in “anxiety, depressive symptoms, and sleep problems among those who are targeted” (Abrams, 2021, para. 4). To add onto the problem, Sue et al. (2012) state Asian Americans are one of the fewest groups to seek mental health resources compared to other minority groups and whites. Some of the reasons for the lack of utilization for these services is because of “stigma, shame, and a lack of service providers who speak Asian languages” (Sue et al., 2012, p. 539). These barriers make it difficult for many Asian Americans to receive counseling and help during a time of distress.

The assaults occurred because of the belief that Chinese people are responsible for the spread of the coronavirus (James & Hason, 2021). This is problematic because Chinese and other Asian Americans are still used as scapegoats for the coronavirus pandemic. As a result, many Americans voiced their frustration of COVID-19 by blaming and harassing Chinese and other Asian Americans. For example, in the United States, nearly one in four people, including nearly half of Asian Americans, have heard or witnessed others blaming Asians for COVID-19 (Page & Elbeshbishi, 2021). This is perhaps not too surprising, although it is definitely alarming, since Holt, Kjaervik and Bushman (2022) report how media framing of the virus as originating from China and associated with Asians in general, has created common blame attribution to Asians. Holt et al. (2022) also argue that such media framing is probably, at least in part, the reason why the advocacy organization Stop AAPI received more than 2,800 hate incidents directed at Asians

in the United States in the single of year of 2020, including a nine-fold increase in New York City alone (Cabral, 2021).

Asians are often associated with viruses; immigrants have often been associated with disease and germs (Markel & Stern, 2002). In the 1900s, Asian immigrants were scapegoats when trachoma was spreading across the United States (Ji-Hye, 2014). Ji-Hye (2014) mentioned that even though trachoma was spread in unsanitary schools in New York, many individuals used the infection as a tool to discriminate against Asian immigrants. The same can be observed with the coronavirus. The virus is used as a justification to discriminate against Chinese and other Asian Americans. Mallapragada (2021) said, “Asian Americans are being invested with the epidemiological properties associated with COVID-19 – infectious, contaminating the air around them, and contagious” (p. 283). Since Asian Americans’ bodies are associated with the virus, they remain a threat to the rest of the American population.

As the coronavirus spread into the United States, President Donald Trump immediately blamed China. He did so by referring to the virus as the “Chinese Virus” and used the hashtag #chinesevirus on Twitter (Weise, 2021). Trump’s use of the hashtag prompted his followers to use the anti-Asian hashtag as well, and the number of Twitter users who used #chinesevirus grew by 8,351%. Users that used #chinesevirus instead of #covid19 were using the hashtag to advocate for “killing Chinese people, bombing Chinese cities as well as racist attacks on all things Asian” (Weise, 2021, para. 9). Anti-Asian sentiments expressed on Twitter grew after Trump’s tweet about the “Chinese virus” and the number of Chinese and other Asian hate crimes grew exponentially.

COVID-19 impacted many lives, and many individuals have had to adjust their way of living to adapt to the recent anti-virus policies, such as vaccine requirements and mask wearing.

As of October 29, 2021, there have been about 46.7 million COVID-19 cases in the United States (Elflein, 2021). To further highlight the significance of the pandemic, the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (2021) found that there were a total of 5,068,704 worldwide deaths due to COVID-19. As a result, the nation set new social distancing procedures as well as invoking stay-at-home orders. Furthermore, individuals had to abide by mask mandates to suppress the spread of the coronavirus (CDC, 2021). The everyday way of life changed because of COVID-19, and these changes ranged from how individuals went to the grocery store, gym, or even to see their family and friends. Most Republicans were more comfortable than Democrats to carry on with their everyday activities despite the raging pandemic (Deane, Parker, & Gramlich, 2021). This is because many did not sense the risk and dangers associated with the coronavirus. Many Republicans were and are strongly opposed to the mask and vaccine mandate because they feel that it strips them away from their independence (Graham, 2021). Consequently, many Americans were outraged when social distancing policies were set in place as well as the COVID-19 lockdowns that occurred. Many Americans felt frustrated during this time. Undoubtedly, Trump's remark about the "Chinese virus" and "Kung Flu" prompted many Americans to blame the Chinese and other Asian Americans for the spread of COVID-19.

Personally, I felt the impact and tension that Trump's anti-Asian rhetoric had on the Asian American community. During the height of anti-Asian sentiments, I was attending graduate school. One night over fall break, I was having a conversation with a couple of friends. I have a vivid memory of one of my peers referring to me as a "dog eater" to her mother and proceeded to laugh about her comment. She was introducing me to her mom and said, "this is Jenn, and she eats dogs." I was shocked and disgusted. A couple of my friends who were a part of the conversation asked me how I felt afterwards because they could sense the discomfort

through my facial expressions. While this incident does not pertain to the coronavirus, it demonstrates how seemingly intelligent people utter racist and insensitive comments. Asian American harassment is a significant issue and harms many.

I am passionate about this topic, and I am writing a thesis to further the literature centering Asian American identity. Asian American issues should be discussed to a greater degree. In fact, a 2021 survey indicated that “nearly 80% of Asian Americans say they do not feel respected and are discriminated against in the U.S.” (LAAUNCH, 2021, p. 3). Many Americans do not believe that Asians are discriminated against because of stereotypes. One prominent stereotype that could help shed some light on the misperceptions of Asian violence would be the model minority myth. The model minority myth discusses that all Asian Americans are successful when they immigrated to the United States because of their hard work and determination (McGowan & Lindgren, 2006). Since many perceive Asian Americans as a “model minority,” then, as the thinking goes, they obviously do not face any discrimination or harassment.

According to LAAUNCH (2021), “37% of white Americans say they are not aware of an increase in hate crimes and racism against Asian Americans over the past year, with 24% saying anti-Asian American racism isn’t a problem that should be addressed” (p. 3). One reason that many Americans are unaware is due to the silencing of Asian voices and perspectives in media. For example, in their study, Holt, Kjaervik and Bushman (2022) found that media overwhelmingly frame the coronavirus as associated with China. In another recent study, researchers found that 42% of Americans were unable to name a famous Asian American celebrity (Wang, 2021). One of the reasons is because some individuals have less interactions and experiences with foreigners, which makes it difficult for them to differentiate between the

cultures (Guo, 2016). As a result, Asian issues and perspectives should be discussed more frequently so that discussions of Asian hate can be analyzed. Additionally, raising awareness of these issues will show the rest of the Americans that many Asians face racism daily.

Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, there has been an increase in anti-Asian hate crimes. This comes from people blaming Asian Americans, specifically Chinese Americans. The scapegoating of Chinese individuals is not a new concept since the Chinese body is commonly associated as a spreader of viruses that must be contained. However, this topic receives special impetus today because of the rhetoric of a President who has capitalized on an existing surge of anti-foreigner sentiments. Since there is a lack of research discussing the intersection between Trump's rhetoric and anti-Asian sentiments, I am compelled to write this thesis. In this thesis, I will be exploring Trump's anti-Asian rhetoric and how that has amplified the climate of hate that was already occurring. This thesis is not intended to explore the causal link between Donald Trump's rhetoric and how that attributed to the increase in hate crimes. Instead, the premise of the thesis investigates how Trump emboldened these expressions of anti-Chinese sentiments. Anti-Chinese sentiments already existed. However, Trump's presidency added to and exacerbated the atmosphere of hatred and fear toward Chinese and other Asian American communities. Trump fostered a more intense climate of hostility toward these groups. To explore this topic, I will first explore important and relevant scholarly literature on this subject. Afterward, I will explain my method of investigating Trump's speeches and tweets. Subsequently, I will use the method to analyze the text and present my analysis. Finally, I will end with my conclusion that will explain the significance of Trump's rhetoric on the Chinese and other Asian American community during a time of national uncertainty and despair.



## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Now that we know the background of the topic, we will proceed to a reporting of the current, scholarly literature relevant to this subject. This chapter will start with a review of literature in presidential rhetoric, more specifically in presidential and racial rhetoric. Then I will move to review the literature that exists regarding anti-Asian rhetoric. I will focus on various Asian stereotypes such as the so-called “Yellow Peril” and the model minority myth. Finally, I will review the current literature that exists about former president Trump’s anti-Asian rhetoric and hate rhetoric toward other marginalized populations. Therefore, I will end the chapter by discussing why the current body of literature lacks the discussion of Trump’s problematic racial rhetoric and how it amplified and justified the hate sentiments toward Chinese and other Asian American community.

### **Presidential and Racial Rhetoric**

The position of the president is one of importance, and for this reason, there has been extensive literature written about presidential rhetoric. The words that a president chooses to use are important because they shape how the public views them. Since the presidency holds an enormous amount of power and influence, a president’s rhetoric can impact his approval rating by using the method of priming (Druckman & Holmes, 2004). Priming is when “an individual changes the *criteria* on which he or she bases an overall evaluation” (Druckman & Holmes, 2004, p. 757). Consumers of media focus on a recent news story, and their judgment of the president’s actions or behaviors influences how they perceive the president’s performance (Malhotra & Krosnick, 2007). Priming can influence a president’s image to the public since presidents can focus on an issue and communicate the issue to their supporters to the point where the issue remains salient in their minds. The president can influence the amount of power and

success that they can acquire from the public's approval before reelection. The course of action that a president decides to use to solve a national problem can also influence the public's perception and confidence about the president. Malhotra and Krosnick's (2007) study highlights that a president's rhetoric influences public approval and can garner support from their voters. The news media also play a considerable role in how the public views the president by also reporting on those same issues. Much of what media present about the president pertains to what the president says – their rhetoric.

Politicians often center their rhetoric on central, polarizing issues. One of these is the notion of race. Historically, presidents have referred to race as a problem (Beasley, 2004). Their belief is that racial differences will lead to heightened tensions, with the rhetoric often blaming one side or the other for societal problems. Beasley (2004) mentions the most frequent target of this blaming rhetoric is African Americans. In other words, African Americans are usually the scapegoats for many issues that the nation is facing.

Additionally, presidents have argued that immigrants will never assimilate to be “true” Americans and understand the American culture (Beasley, 2004). Sabato, Kondik and Skelley (2017) argue, “Between the Ronald Reagan – George H. W. Bush era and the Obama era, there was a marked increase in the level of racial resentment among white voters in the United States” (p. 204). Racial resentment is “one way for whites to express prejudice without sounding racist” (Feldman & Huddy, 2005, p. 170). Republicans and Democrats generally view race differently. Typically, white Republicans have more racial resentment than white Democrats (Sabato, Kondik & Skelley, 2017). Since the 1960s, Republicans have seemingly focused on, and advocated for, issues that cater to a white male demographic (Kennedy, 2011). On the other side, Democrats strive to form a demographically diverse party. Party leaders in either party have their

own opinions about race and diversity in America. Sabato, Kondik, and Skelley (2017) argue that, due to many white Republican's unhappy sentiments during the Obama era, Trump attracted many of the white working-class voters.

Past presidents have made ample comments about race and used racial rhetoric in their public addresses. One contentious social issue is the mass incarceration rates due to the War on Drugs. The War on Drugs was originally created to decrease the distribution of drugs (Rosino & Hughey, 2018). However, there were significantly negative impacts on people of color. People of color, specifically black Americans, tended to dominate the criminal justice system (Rosino & Hughey, 2018). Norris and Billings (2017) conducted a study on past presidents' rhetoric regarding the War on Drugs in relation to race. From the study, the researchers uncovered that past president have used phrases such as "cuts across all generations," "universal problem," and "drug abuse has swept across America" (p. 90). However, the presidents used these phrases specifically in relation to black communities. The Presidents never explicitly said that specific racial groups contributed to the problem but used anecdotes instead. By relating these to specific communities, the presidents implied that minorities, predominately the black community, were the cause of this societal problem. Norris and Billings (2017) argued that criminals are viewed as the "racial other" (p. 94). With the problem of the War on Drugs, Black individuals were seen as the "Other" because they were perceived as the cause of the criminal and drug problems, especially when underscored by presidential proclamations. Hence, presidential discourse involving the War on Drugs demonstrates how rhetoric from the White House can be extremely influential in characterizing and representing certain racialized social issues.

Past presidents have also been discriminatory toward Asian Americans. One example is with Japanese Americans. Prior to the placement of Japanese Americans and foreigners in

internment camps, military officials had the idea of removing all Japanese individuals from the West Coast. The staff members of Lieutenant General John DeWitt believed that around 20,000 individuals of Japanese descent were planning a Japanese invasion in San Francisco (Muller, 2021). Their goal was to gather all people of Japanese descent regardless of their citizenship and force them to remain under the custody of the military. However, this plan failed due to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). Ultimately, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 in 1942 which forced Japanese Americans into internment camps because they were viewed as a threat to national security. The executive order was race neutral when it mentioned that they were removing “any or all persons” from those certain areas (Muller, 2021). However, the actions of the military said otherwise. Although Italians and Germans were also interned during this time in the United States (Taylor, 2017; Tremoglie, 2022), the military specifically targeted the Japanese community and displaced many from their homes. President Roosevelt had an enormous platform that he utilized to spread the idea that all Japanese people were seen as foreigners. Consequently, foreigners, but specifically Japanese Americans, were viewed as a threat to national security. The office of the presidency can influence the public about a variety of issues (Oliver, 1998). Due to this, many racist American citizens harassed Japanese Americans. Yet, all presidents should remain accountable for their behaviors and actions. Since the 2020 election, questions by “Congress, platforms, and the public rose” on how to hold the president accountable for their words (Scacco & Coe, 2021 p. 427). Since the presidency holds significant influence on the public, the accountability agents – Congress, platforms, and the public – should hold the president’s rhetoric accountable.

## **Anti-Asian Rhetoric**

The anti-Asian rhetoric displayed in stereotypes fuels the anti-Asian and anti-immigrant sentiments. Asian stereotypes began when an influx of Chinese immigrated to the United States in hopes of a better future. Chinese laborers started immigrating to the United States in 1865 to build the railroad systems (Sunseri, 2015). During this time, many Chinese individuals were hired as laborers by the management of the Central Pacific Railroad (CPRR). The management resorted to hiring overseas Chinese laborers because there was a shortage of labor in the West. However, at the time, many white laborers were under the impression that the Chinese immigrants were taking their jobs since the management could get away with paying them lower wages. This was one of the reasons that resentment increased toward the Chinese.

One of the acts that impacted Chinese history was the Chinese Exclusion Act. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prevented immigrants of Chinese descent from immigrating to the United States (Calavita, 2000). This act is significant because it is the first federal immigration law that prevented a specific nationality from entering the nation. The Chinese immigrants who were already living in the United States faced constant discrimination. To combat the ongoing discrimination, many Chinese immigrants assimilated to the norms of the western society (Chen & Xie, 2020). Chen and Xie (2020) mention that these immigrants would “invest in human capital, improve English skills, and adopt American-sounding names” (p. 29). By assimilating to and adopting these new rules, the Chinese hoped to decrease the number of racial assaults and discrimination that they encountered.

During this time, the anti-Chinese sentiments in the United States influenced how Mexican leaders and citizens viewed the influx of Chinese immigrants in Mexico as well (Lee, 2007). Many of the Chinese workers who immigrated to Mexico were called racial slurs such as

“*chinacate*,” which means “chink” or “Chinaman” (Hu-DeHart, 1980, p. 294). The harassment was partly due to the economic success that the Chinese laborers had compared to some Mexican workers. Many Mexicans felt embarrassed that the Chinese were successful in running local businesses in town. The individuals who were friendly with the Chinese immigrants also faced discrimination and were labeled “*chinero*,” which translates to “chink-lover” (p. 295).

Not only were Chinese individuals discriminated against, but there were also many anti-Japanese sentiments following World War II and during the U.S. and Japan trade wars during the 1980s. The discrimination toward Japanese Americans was also known as “Japan bashing,” in which American citizens used Japanese Americans as scapegoats when U.S. and Japan tensions were heightened (Iino, 1994). During the U.S. and Japan trade wars, many cars were imported from Japan. The foreign imports increased Detroit’s automobile unemployment rate. Consequently, the expressions of anti-Japanese and even other anti-Asian sentiments were felt by many Asians all over the country (Iino, 1994). Many Americans are ignorant of the vast diversity within the Asian American community. Since the typical American is unable to differentiate between the various Asian cultures, this led to the targeting of and discrimination toward other Asian Americans – not just Japanese – as well (Iino, 1994). In 1982, Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, was brutally beaten to the point where he died by two auto workers who were resentful of importing Japanese cars (Wu, 2010). Therefore, Chin was the scapegoat for the workers’ frustration over the trade wars. Immigrants typically bear the brunt for problems facing the United States (Kawanabe, 1996). Unfortunately, immigrants continue to be scapegoats for societal problems that occur.

The “Yellow Peril” stereotype was commonly used to “describe Asian Americans as ‘foreigner foreigners’ who divert from U.S. dominant cultural norms, are economic competitors,

and thereby undermine the white nation” (Kawai, 2005, p. 110). The stereotype highlights the Westerner’s fear of Asians. When Asians originally immigrated to the United States *en masse*, white individuals felt threatened that the Asians would instill instability in their nation. Americans were worried that the immigrants would “take away their jobs, threaten American democracy with anarchistic ideas, and endanger the nation’s health” (Ji-Hye, 2014, p. 573-574). Furthermore, Kawai (2005) mentions, “The Yellow Peril referred to cultural threat as well as economic, political, and military threats to the white race” (p. 112). Asian immigrants were considered “Orientals” because they were from the East with the inability to assimilate into the dominant white culture (Kawai, 2005).

General racial discrimination and ostracism of Asians are in line with the so-called “Yellow Peril” stereotype. The stereotype frames Asians as the “Other” since they are perceived as “uncivilized” and difficult to assimilate to the western culture due to their “unusual” food practices (Li & Nicholson Jr., 2021; Zheng, 2020). Asians were considered barbarians for eating dogs. The dog-eating stereotype remains a popular stereotype. By suggesting that Asians are dog eaters, the stereotype reduces them to one small aspect of their overall perceived culture (Wu, 2002).

Asian Americans who immigrated to the United States were often referred to as the “perpetual foreigner” (Huynh, Devos & Smalarz, 2011). The idea behind this stereotype is that Asian immigrants would never fully assimilate as “Americans” because they would always be perceived as foreigners. Even when many Asian immigrants attempt to assimilate into western culture, they are still seen as foreigners because of their unique facial features, traditions, and culture. For example: Japanese Americans were trying to assimilate to the U.S. culture, the Los

Angeles mayor Fletcher Bowron downplayed their assimilation and called it an act to try to fool white individuals (Wu, 2002). In 1942, Bowron delivered a speech and said,

The Japanese, because they are nonassimilable, because the aliens have been denied the right to own real property in California, because of the Alien Exclusion Act, because of the marked difference in appearance between Japanese and Caucasians, because of the generations of training and philosophy that make them Japanese and nothing else – all of these contributing factors set the Japanese apart as a race, regardless of how many generations may have been born in America. (Bowron, 1942, para. 40)

This plays into the idea that members of the mainstream culture believe that Asians are not able to assimilate into western culture and will continue to perceive them as foreign.

Another popular stereotype that many Asian Americans face is the model minority stereotype. The model minority stereotype depicts all Asians as hardworking, successful, and intelligent (Lee & Joo, 2005). The stereotype pressures many Asian immigrants to assimilate into the white culture by suggesting that if one works hard, then they will be prosperous. The model minority myth has been under scrutiny because it fails to account for the diversity within the Asian community. The idea that all Asians are hardworking creates pressure for Asians who do not meet those expectations, triggering deep mental anguish and even trauma (Cohut, 2020). Additionally, this stereotype creates the idea that Asians are a monolithic culture. Those that view Asians as hardworking typically perceive that there is a lack of discrimination and harassment toward Asian individuals, when, in fact, significant discrimination does exist (McGowan & Lindgren, 2006). The negative implications of the model minority stereotype make it difficult for struggling Asian families from obtaining assistance from government programs. Even though Asian students are positively viewed as hardworking and studious, they are



constantly ridiculed and stereotyped as social outcasts and “nerds” (Gee, 2009). The model minority stereotype remains a prominent stereotype placed on Asian Americans to the point where many Americans do not recognize the oppression and anti-Asian sentiments that exist.

The stereotypes of model minority and the “Yellow Peril” form the concept of racial triangulation (Kim, 1999). Racial triangulation posits that white Americans believe that Asians are superior to African Americans but Asian are still ostracized. As such, racial triangulation highlights that there are competing narratives about Asian Americans in the United States. Of course, various communities view Asian Americans differently. Some may argue that these negative and inaccurate stereotypes result in xenophobia and racism (Gover, Harper & Langton, 2020). According to Zhang et al. (2021), one reason that Asian Americans are targeted is because of

the ‘model minority’ stereotype assuming Asian Americans’ success in economics, education, and other opportunities generates potential competition or threats by members of other racial groups, which in turn may lead to resentment to be further acted upon through hate crimes. (p. 17)

The model minority stereotype is harmful and violent to Asian Americans. Asian Americans hate crimes are more likely to be committed by non-white offenders compared to hate crimes against African Americans or Hispanics (Zhang et al., 2021).

### **Trump and Hate/Anti-Asian Rhetoric**

Since Trump was both a celebrity figure and president, he amassed a large following on Twitter. Trump was known as the “Twitter president” because of his excessive use of Twitter to communicate to the public (Ingram, 2017). According to Bratslavsky et al., Twitter has been “commodified and utilized by elites to advance their own political agendas, or more cynically, to

exercise strategies to legitimate their power” (2020, p. 619). The researchers use Trump as a prime example to highlight how he used Twitter for his own needs. However, a crucial problem is that most of the content that Trump tweeted contained misinformation and information that cannot be verified (Sabato, Kondik & Skelley, 2017). An example was when Trump used Twitter to falsely claim that Blacks were the ones who killed a large portion of white homicide victims in 2015. As this example reveals, Trump was notorious in using hate rhetoric against minority groups.

Trump uses specific rhetoric to blame social problems on the “imagined other” such as women, blacks, and other minority groups (Stuedeman, 2018). Stuedeman (2018) mentions Trump’s populist rhetorical appeals “as a legitimizing and galvanizing mechanism for xenophobia, ethnocentrism, and white nationalism” (p. 24). Trump’s populist style treats his white voters as “true Americans” and others as not. Using this style most likely increased his support from his voters. Trump’s hate rhetoric targets any individual who is not male and not white. By targeting his attacks toward these specific groups, he refers to them as the problem and threats to the United States (Wingard, 2018). Trump’s “election campaign reinforced the ethnic boundaries of American identity – defining who is a member, and who is not” (Schertzer & Woods, 2020, p. 1170). When Trump capitalized upon these boundaries, he used the strategy of scapegoating to “shift the responsibility for anything negative associated with himself or his administration” (Kreis, 2017, p. 615). By reinforcing the boundaries of the American identity, Trump created a distinction between a “true” American and the dangerous “Other.”

Not only does Trump engage in racial rhetoric on Twitter, but he also used his platform to create offensive content about women. During the 2016 presidential election, Trump “repeatedly launched ad hominem attacks against his primary opponents and ‘crooked’ Hillary.

People who challenged or questioned him were labeled ‘stupid,’ ‘bad,’ ‘crazy,’ ‘horrible,’ ‘dumb,’ ‘overrated,’ and ‘worse’ (Sabato, Kondik & Skelley, 2017, p. 173). In 2005, a private *Access Hollywood* video surfaced of Trump saying, “They let you do it. You can do anything. Grab ‘em by the pussy” (Nelson, 2016, para. 2). As a result, Trump received major backlash from his use of derogatory language. Trump’s vocabulary “perpetuates a male-centric social hierarchy in which women are relegated to a submissive position, away from significant social positions” (Di Carlo, 2020, p. 62). Trump’s rhetoric in the *Access Hollywood* video contributed to the overall climate of “hate” that already existed. While he received some pushback due to the comments, many of his supporters still elected him to be the next president (Kulig & Haner, 2019). Those who viewed him favorably continue to support him. One reason that could explain his fanbase’s loyalty to Trump is because his “appeal to white racial resentment and ethnonationalism resonated with a large proportion of less-educated white voters who were uncomfortable with the increasing diversity of American society” (Abramowitz & McCoy, 2019, p. 150). On the flip side, those that viewed him unfavorably will continue to criticize his actions. This is a significant issue because his derogatory language toward females does not seem to change the perceptions of Trump in the eyes of his followers. As such, we might see a similar connection with Trump’s followers when he espouses anti-Asian rhetoric.

Every United States president after World War II believed that the Japanese American internment camps were unethical and immoral (Pistol, 2020). These presidents all agreed that the actions should never be replicated in the future. Former president Ronald Reagan publicly apologized for the mistreatment of Japanese citizens (Qureshi, 2013). Furthermore, Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act which gave reparations to the victims of the camps. However, the same could not be said about former president Trump. During an interview, Trump said he was

unsure about whether he embraced the idea of Japanese internment camps or not (Scherer, 2015). In the interview, he said, “I would have had to be there at the time to tell you, to give you a proper answer. I certainly hate the concept of it. But I would have had to be there at the time to give you a proper answer” (para. 2). Thus, Trump exhibited anti-Asian rhetoric even prior to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, Trump denies the fact that his views are racist, which endears him to the white supremacist community who follow him (Konrad, 2018). Trump’s rhetoric toward minorities is problematic because it can fuel negative stereotypes, discrimination, racism, and even violence. The type of rhetoric from Trump fuels one of the two visions that Holling and Moon (2021) mention. Holling and Moon highlight two visions which are America and Amerikkka. America embodies the potential for “rights, freedoms, and democratic participation,” whereas, Amerikkka is an “ideology of white supremacy” (Holling & Moon, 2021, p. 436). As a result, there are competing visions for the United States. One vision strives for the equity of marginalized communities, while the other vision views hate speech as appropriate due to the First Amendment rights. Trump’s racist rhetoric fuels the vision of Amerikkka. These differing visions for the United States make it difficult to address injustices since the version of Amerikkka that Trump allowed will “continue to constitutionally protect hate speech as free speech” instead of protecting the human dignity of marginalized communities (Holling & Moon, 2021). Holling and Moon (2021) mention that if we want to “advance America, we need to repair Amerikkka’s past” and some mechanisms to achieve the vision of America are through “voter registration and multiracial and youth mobilizations” (p. 439).

Trump has shown numerous instances of using racist rhetoric on Twitter. For example, one tweet argues that “81% of white homicide victims were killed by African Americans”

(Anspach, 2021, p. 2699). This tweet is just one example of the many racially motivated tweets that Trump has posted during his presidency. The tweet caused other Twitter users and voters to view black Americans with negative stereotypes such as the myth that Blacks are generally violent criminals (Anspach, 2021). Many may engage in racist actions and practices due to the misinformation that Trump's racial tweets perpetuate. Trump's followers may believe that Trump has their best interests at heart and follow his lead in using the anti-Asian rhetoric as well.

Donald Trump referred to COVID-19 as the "Chinese Virus" and "Kung Flu" on Twitter. Since Trump started referring to the coronavirus as the "Chinese virus," the "dangerous dissemination of false information and anti-Chinese racism have spiked dramatically" (Gao & Liu, 2021, 262). Trump's rhetoric on Twitter prompted many users to also use the same rhetoric when referencing the coronavirus. Trump became the catalyst for the emergence of other tweets that blamed Chinese individuals for the start and spread of the coronavirus (Nguyen et al., 2020). Nguyen et al. (2020) conducted a mixed-methods study and uncovered that there was an increase in anti-Asian sentiments when COVID-19 started spreading in the United States. A series of racist tweets targeting not just Chinese individuals, but individuals of other Asian groups, grew in popularity. These racist tweets revealed that many continue to think diseases are brought in by immigrants. Many of the racist tweets were tweeted by Republican politicians (Stop AAPI Hate, 2020b). The Stop AAPI Hate organization found that only half of the politicians' tweets were related to the coronavirus. This meant that the anti-Asian rhetoric displayed in about half of the tweets were not related to the pandemic. Through the analysis of the messages, they found that Republican tweets tended to contain anti-China sentiments. On the other hand, the Democrats used language in support of the victims of these hate crimes and discrimination. To further differentiate the types of tweets by legislators, Arora and Kim (2020) studied tweets by

politicians during the height of COVID-19 and Asian hate crimes. Arora and Kim found that Democrats and politicians of color were more likely to condemn anti-Asian hatred. On the other hand, Republicans and white politicians were less likely to do so.

Gover et al. (2020) argue in their study that the anti-Asian hate crimes contribute to the “Othering” of Asians in the United States. The researchers focus on the problematic rhetoric of referring to the coronavirus as the “Chinese virus” and discuss how it is problematic to tie a virus to an ethnicity. They argue, “Racial/ethnic inequality has been reproduced through the establishment of an ‘*us. vs. them*’ modus operandi that relegates Asian Americans to the bottom of the social hierarchy” (p. 663). The study highlights the discrimination of Asian folks. However, the study does not address presidential rhetoric and how the presidency displays influence with their constituents.

Asian Americans were rarely discussed during the 2020 presidential election. Nishime (2021) argues, “To be left out of the election’s visual vocabulary is to be neglected in the national imagination” (p. 458). Most of the Asian Americans’ narratives were absent during the 2020 election. The news about COVID-19 deaths and everyday challenges largely ignored Asian American stories and experiences (Nishime, 2021). The news media would use stories from other marginalized groups, but they would not include Asian American representation. As this demonstrates, Asian voices are constantly absent in mainstream discourse.

With the widespread adoption of Twitter as a platform to spread information and influence, Trump had the freedom to spread misinformation online without a filter. Trump amassed over 20 million Twitter followers (Stelter, 2017). Many Twitter users trust social media more than traditional news media because they can obtain their news faster on the social networking sites compared to news media (Sabato, Kondik & Skelley, 2017). Furthermore,

Twitter users believe they are receiving more accurate information on social media than through news media because they are retrieving the material directly from the source. This is concerning because “online social networks could spur social influence offline” (Jones et al., 2017, p. 2). Zompetti (2019) furthers this argument by mentioning that “Trump used Twitter to construct a voice of ‘authenticity.’ The platform inimitably allows Trump to present himself with an authentic voice while simultaneously sounding as if he is also the authentic voice of the people” (p. 32).

Although Trump was known as the “Twitter president,” we still need to recognize that he gave many speeches along with other presidential duties. In Trump’s speeches, he “offered himself as the hero who could return the nation to greatness. During his campaign, he had promised that through force of will, he would bring almost magical change immediately upon becoming president” (Rowland, 2021). Trump made statements to show that he was the “right” president for the job. His self-image was important to him, and for Trump “the presidency is more about being the president than governing the country” (Wignell et al., 2020, p. 2221). He created a sense of panic and fear in his supporters by painting a picture that the nation was in crisis, with the only solution being his leadership (Jamieson & Taussig, 2017). Trump’s rhetoric in his speeches “seemed ‘authentic,’ ‘in your face,’ and ‘anti-PC’” (Lamont et al., 2017, p. 173). Lamont et al. (2017) further note that Trump’s rhetoric influenced the white working class to support him.

A review of the current body of literature makes it evident that individuals of Asian descent face discrimination and racism. Since the 2016 election, the number of anti-Asian sentiments is on the rise. However, most research does not emphasize this. There is a lack of research focusing on Trump’s anti-Asian rhetoric. Most of the research examines Trump’s racist

rhetoric toward minorities and how he views them as a threat to American society. The use of language plays an enormous role in the creation of racism (McPhail, 1994). An analysis of the research articles that were written about Trump in relation to anti-Asian racism suggests that most of the recent research highlights the content analysis of the anti-Chinese tweets. The current body of literature does not address how Trump's COVID-19 rhetoric amplified the harm toward Chinese and other Asian American population. Trump used the Asian American community as a scapegoat to blame for the coronavirus-related problems in the United States. Presidential figures have authority and can influence a large group of people, which is why the office of the presidency is known to command the "bully pulpit," or unique persuasive power because the status and role of the presidency receives careful and frequent attention by the world's media (Miles, 2014). Therefore, the words that a president chooses to use are important and require careful investigation. Presidential rhetoric can influence others to also do the same. By focusing specifically on Trump's rhetoric, I hope to uncover how his rhetoric legitimized expressions of anti-Asian hate.

In chapter two, I reviewed the current literature that exists in presidential and racial rhetoric. Afterward, I reviewed the research that discusses anti-Asian rhetoric and the discrimination that they have faced and continue to face. Finally, I looked at Trump's anti-Asian rhetoric. This discussion is important because it reveals that little has been written about Trump's anti-Asian rhetoric and how his rhetoric toward Chinese and other Asians is problematic.

In this thesis, I hope to analyze Trump's problematic messages of Asian rhetoric through his speeches and tweets, particularly concerning his rhetoric involving the coronavirus. Additionally, I hope the thesis can reveal that Trump's rhetoric is racist toward Asians and Asian Americans. Due to the problematic nature of his rhetoric, it activated others to commit Asian



hate crimes. The astronomical increase in anti-Asian sentiments and hate crimes that were mentioned in the introduction is what drives me to write this thesis. In the next chapter, I will provide the methodological approach that I will use to carry out my analysis.

## CHAPTER III: METHODS

The main objective of Chapter three is to explain the texts that will be analyzed in the thesis as well as the methodology that will be utilized to carry out the analysis. A rhetorical analysis is integral in carrying out this project because the topic touches on Trump's problematic rhetoric in how he addressed COVID-19. As mentioned in the literature review, current research that focuses on Asian hate in relation to the pandemic uses either quantitative or qualitative methods. Although the current research gives us more knowledge about the subject area, it fails to take into consideration actual presidential rhetoric: Trump's utterances of "China virus" and "Kung Flu." By using a rhetorical analysis, we can begin to uncover how Trump's rhetoric played a significant role in the expressions of anti-Asian sentiments during COVID-19. In this section, I will discuss Gramsci's concept of hegemony as well as the method and text I will be using.

### **Antonio Gramsci Hegemony**

Since there was a history of discrimination toward Asian immigrants, many were voiceless and could not express their individuality. The overarching concept of hegemony explains the power struggle that many marginalized groups had to face. When Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony, he was referencing it in the context of class struggle. Hegemony is when "the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of 'direct domination' or command exercised through the State and 'juridical' government" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12). The dominant class has control and power over the subaltern. Subaltern groups can be defined as, a "figure of exclusion, representing the specular opposite of the citizen...the subaltern represents a lack of access to institutions of rights and obligations" (Thomas, 2018, p. 861). Subaltern groups are relatively voiceless and powerless. The dominant

group controls the narrative of the subaltern groups. As a result, ideologies are sustained using language (Althusser, 2001; Zompetti, 2012). Language can also act as a vehicle for social change because of language's influence on how we think about ideas (Del Gandio, 2008). Asian Americans, as a subaltern group, have been voiceless during the COVID-19 pandemic. As mentioned previously by Nishime (2021), Asian American identities were largely silenced during the 2020 election. Instead, they were only depicted in negative ways. This is because those in power were able to control the narrative of Asian identities. The silencing of many Asian American voices during the 2020 election and during COVID-19 highlights how Asian Americans are relegated to the subaltern terrain. The dominant group of violent, racist Americans create and sustain the ideology that Asians and Chinese Americans are "dirty" and a threat to the health and safety of the nation.

### **Rhetorical Thematic Analysis**

A rhetorical analysis helps the critic to uncover the hidden meaning of a text. There are a variety of methodologies to do so. In this thesis, I will use a thematic analysis. A thematic analysis is useful to "capture emerging themes" (Adam et al., 2005, p. 239). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a thematic analysis follows six steps. The steps require familiarity with the data, the generation of initial codes, a defining and naming of themes, a search for themes, a review of the themes, and a production of the report. A rhetorical critic can analyze a text using all six steps without labelling or demarcating each step, as the phases can overlap and reinforce each other. Additionally, the thematic analysis process is not intended to be linear; rather, the steps are more recursive, which means the critic can move from step to step as needed. Braun and Clarke (2006) also mention that the critic can uncover both semantic and latent themes. Semantic themes are explicit meanings derived from the text. On the other hand, latent themes

are underlying meaning that are less obvious to the average reader. The critic would have to “offer a deeper interpretation” of the text to uncover the latent themes, which a rhetorical analysis allows (Wigginton & Lee, 2014, p. 266). These themes are meant to “articulate or describe a particular social phenomenon” (Aguinaldo, 2012, p. 769). The categories are meant to represent the text as a whole. Furthermore, a thematic analysis is useful for this topic because “no one really approaches political Twitter use from a thematic lens” (Zompetti, 2019, p. 33). Therefore, given its appropriateness and that virtually no one has examined Trump’s tweets in this manner, the use of thematic analysis is warranted.

### **Texts for this Thesis**

The texts that I will analyze are a combination of speeches and tweets from Trump when he mentioned the coronavirus in conjunction with blaming Asians in general, and the Chinese in particular. As mentioned in the literature review, Trump was commonly referred to as the “Twitter president” due to his excessive use of Twitter to disseminate information. Trump has tweeted about COVID-19, and the rhetoric was problematic. However, Trump also gave speeches, just as past presidents have done. He has made public comments about COVID-19 and referred to the virus as the “China virus” and “Kung Flu.” Therefore, I believe it is fitting to analyze both speeches and tweets as texts to analyze.

I will first analyze a series of Trump’s tweets. Since Trump’s Twitter account is permanently banned, I used the Trump Twitter Archive which is an online database containing his old tweets. I searched for terms that contain phrases such as “China virus,” “Chinese virus,” “Wuhan virus,” “Kung flu,” and “plague from China.” These were the most common phrases he would use when referring to the coronavirus. I analyzed a range of tweets starting from March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020, to January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021.

The speeches I analyze are as follows: President Trump’s remarks in address to the nation on March 11, 2020; President Trump’s coronavirus task force briefing speech, which he delivered on March 18, 2020; Trump’s rally speech in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on June 20, 2020; Trump’s rally speech in Phoenix, Arizona, on June 23, 2020; President Trump’s speech to the 75<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly on September 22, 2020; and Trump’s speech “Save America” rally in Washington, D.C. on January 6, 2021. These speeches were important to analyze because they garnered attention across the nation. Trump discussed the issue of the coronavirus in detail in the speeches. These speeches are a combination of Trump’s rally speeches and other presidential speeches. I hope that by analyzing different types of speeches, I will uncover some differences (if any) in his rhetorical strategies when discussing the topic of COVID-19 as it relates to anti-Asian rhetoric.

## CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

Chapter three discussed the methods I will use to conduct the analysis. In this chapter, I will be exploring the themes in Trump’s tweets and speeches. Trump tweeted about the “China virus” from March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020, to January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021. Soon after, on January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021, his Twitter account was permanently suspended (Lomeli, 2021). Similar to the time range for Trump’s tweets, the speeches that I will analyze range from March 2020 to January 2021. The analysis will be in three sections. The first section will examine the themes from Trump’s tweets. The second will be themes from Trump’s speeches. Finally, I will compare the similarities and differences between the themes from both modalities. I argue that both tweets and speeches are important to analyze because tweets and speeches, as vehicles for communication, have traditionally been used distinctively. Trump used many derogatory references to China and Chinese individuals when referring to the coronavirus, which will be examined in detail in this chapter.

### **Twitter**

Trump spent a significant portion of time tweeting to his followers about the coronavirus. This section of the analysis will focus on common themes that emerged from Trump’s tweets that relate to China and the coronavirus. The themes that I will discuss are scapegoating, fear of the other, China bashing, and populist appeals.

### ***Scapegoating***

When Trump discussed the harmful effects of COVID-19, he singled out the Chinese community and anyone who disagreed with him, thereby not accepting any responsibility for some of the detrimental impacts the virus placed on the nation. According to McClymond (2019), scapegoating “requires a social system that is willing to substitute one living being on

behalf of another, to redirect condemnation” (p. 6). Trump created many narratives of the “Other” and reinforces an ideology that the “Other” is dangerous and threatening American ideals. As Rowland (2021) mentions, “Trump’s rhetoric created an us-versus-them dynamic that reinforced their sense of threatened identity” (pp. 25-26). Throughout his presidency, Trump has scapegoated many marginalized groups. In this section, I will focus on how he scapegoats the Chinese and other Asian populations.

In every instance when Donald Trump tweeted about the “Chinese virus,” he added the negative harm that COVID-19 has created for American citizens. Even with a 280-character limit on Twitter, Trump still managed to blame the Chinese community for the coronavirus. He mentioned the impact of the “Chinese virus” on the American airline industry, American lives, and businesses. On March 16, 2020, Trump discussed the impact on the airline industry by stating, “The United States will be powerfully supporting those industries, like airlines and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus. We will be stronger than ever before!” (Trump, 2020b). On March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020, he blamed the “Chinese virus” for the “shutting down of hotels, bars and restaurants” (Trump, 2020d). By doing so, he attributed the decline of businesses and industries to the virus while not taking any responsibilities as the leader of his nation. In the same tweet, he continued by saying, “the onslaught of the Chinese Virus is not your fault! Will be stronger than ever” (Trump, 2020d). By using the word “your,” he established an “us” versus “them” framework. The “us,” of course, refers to the American people, primarily his supporters, and the “them” means Chinese people. Since Chinese and other Asian Americans are blamed for the issues that COVID-19 has caused, many lives were lost or damaged due to the hate crimes. Furthermore, Asian businesses were also vandalized. The notorious example was the Atlanta-area spa shooting which killed eight civilians and six of them were Asian women

(Ramachandran, 2021). Other small businesses are also frequently harassed. An example is the Chinese American couple who owns RiceBox, a Cantonese BBQ restaurant, in downtown Los Angeles who consistently received prank calls (Fox, 2021). These prank calls would contain discriminatory messages such as “Do you serve bats? Do you serve Covid?” (Fox, 2021, para. 6). These acts of discrimination and harassment have been the new reality for many Chinese and other Asian Americans.

Not only did Trump blame the “Chinese virus” on domestic issues, but he used the harmful rhetoric to discuss the spread of the coronavirus internationally. This started on November 16, 2020, when Trump tweeted, “European Countries are sadly getting clobbered by the China Virus” (Trump, 2020y). On December 18, 2020, he said, “Europe and other parts of the World being hit hard by the China Virus – Germany, France, Spain and Italy, in particular. The vaccines are on their way!!!” (Trump, 2020z). A day later, on December 19, 2020, he said, “the entire WORLD is being badly hurt by the China Virus” (Trump, 2020ab). By using words such as “clobbered,” “hit hard,” and “badly hurt” in association with the “China virus,” Trump indirectly showed how negative the virus is. Moreover, Trump showed how China and Chinese people are to blame for the spread of the virus.

Trump and many Republicans took less precautionary measures such as “avoiding large gatherings, social distancing, and donning facial coverings,” which “appears to have impacted the trajectory of the spread of COVID-19 in places with a larger number of Republicans” (Morris, 2021, p. 2428). Instead of prioritizing the needs of his citizens by taking COVID-19 seriously, he decided to focus on the nomenclature of the word. One of the reasons for the failure of many businesses is because he did not take the pandemic seriously. In fact, Trump called COVID-19 the “Democrats’ new hoax” and downplayed the severity of the virus (Egan, 2020).



Trump has a history of not trusting science and scientists. Hetherington and Ladd (2020) note, “he has gutted scientific expertise and administrative capacity in the executive branch, most notably failing to fill hundreds of vacancies in the Centers for Disease Control itself and disbanding the National Security Council’s taskforce on pandemics” (para. 3). When the death rates kept increasing, Trump had a simple solution which was to place the blame on the Chinese and other Asian communities. In doing so, he pointed out to his followers that their interests and values were upheld and protected by his leadership.

McClymond (2019) mentions that the strategy of scapegoating must be beneficial for both the individual engaging with the act as well as for the community. When it comes to the coronavirus, Trump is protecting his own self-image as well as shifting the burden of the virus onto the Chinese community. By scapegoating, Trump is able to:

shift guilt (and the socio-political “taint” that accompanies potential criminal action) that might land on his shoulders onto others. He casts these figures as scoundrels (or even criminals) and directs public attention away from his own unethical actions to other peoples’ behavior, effectively avoiding any personal social and political cost. These scapegoats pay a public price as a result of Trump’s behavior, suffering public distancing or professional exile. When this is done effectively, the president remains legally blameless and unimpeded by social “taint”. (McClymond, 2019, p. 7)

By placing blame on one community, Trump showed his followers that he is one for “the people” and has his followers’ best interest at the forefront of his agenda.

As previously mentioned in the literature review, viewing Asians, primarily Chinese individuals, as spreaders of diseases and germs is not a new concept. In 1897, trachoma was named a vicious disease that originated from unsanitary public schools in New York (Shin,

2014). The medical professionals did not associate the disease with immigrants. However, the policymakers and immigration officials scapegoated the immigrants for the dangerous disease. Shin (2014) mentions the officials “were alarmed by the growing number of newcomers into the United States and reminded of the necessity to control and regulate the immigration flow. For them, trachoma was a convenient tool through which to exclude and deport undesirable foreigners” (p. 579). By blaming the spread of trachoma on immigrants, the American immigration authorities were able to limit “unfavorable” immigrants from entering the United States along with ignoring the unsanitary nature of schools in New York. Scapegoating immigrants is not a new strategy and has been an easy solution for politicians by shifting the blame. This rhetorical strategy helps uphold anti-immigration legislation, which is consistent with Trump’s policy agenda (Trump, 2015).

Not only was the scapegoating of Chinese individuals popular in New York, but medical scapegoating happened in San Francisco as well. During the 1870s, the sanitarians thought that “epidemic outbreaks were caused either by the state of the atmosphere or by poor sanitary conditions affecting the local atmosphere” (Trauner, 1978, p. 73). Trauner (1978) mentions that these sanitarians commonly referred to Chinatown as a “laboratory of infection” (p. 73). Chinatowns and Chinese communities were and continue to be at the forefront of these issues. Trauner (1978) notes, “whenever a major epidemic threatened San Francisco, however, health officials descended upon Chinatown with a vengeance” (p. 82). Instead of addressing the root problem from where the diseases originated, the public health officials at the time automatically pointed fingers at Chinese individuals. These examples of continuously blaming Chinese bodies and Chinatown for the epicenter of diseases and germs shows that they are “being recast as a racial contagion” (Mallapragada, 2021, p. 282). By associating Chinese bodies with the

coronavirus, expressions of anti-Asian sentiments increased, which can be seen with the increase of Asian hate crimes. These historical precedents lay the groundwork for Trump's use of scapegoating.

Not only does Trump scapegoat the Chinese population, but he also blamed and was critical of anyone who disagreed with him such as the media. Trump was popular for using the phrase "fake news." For example, Trump said, "why isn't the Fake News reporting that Deaths are way down? It is only because they are, indeed, FAKE NEWS!" (Trump, 2020k). When he is criticized by the news media, he would "turn to Twitter, venting frustrations and dismissing an increasingly wide variety of things he doesn't like as 'fake' or 'phony'" (Keith, 2018, para. 1). Trump is strategic in how he attempts to manipulate his followers by using the label "fake news". By doing so he attempted to "deter the public from trusting media reports, especially those critical of his presidency, and in turn to position himself as the only reliable source of truthful information" (Ross & Rivers, 2018, p. 2). Trump has used the term "fake news" in relation to his handling of COVID-19 numerous times. Trump said:

I always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously, and have done a very good job from the beginning, including my very early decision to close the "borders" from China – against the wishes of almost all. Many lives were saved. The Fake News narrative is disgraceful & false! (Trump, 2020e)

In this example, Trump praised himself for "saving" many lives. However, Trump did not discuss the number of lives that were lost. When he referred to himself, he only mentioned the positive impact that he has made for the nation. In another example, he did the same by saying:

Why does the Lamestream Fake News Media REFUSE to say that China Virus deaths are down 39%, and that we now have the lowest Fatality (Mortality) Rate in the

World. They just can't stand that we are doing so well for our Country! (Trump, 2020l)

In this example, Trump was adamant in exclaiming that the news media do not report on “low” mortality rates. In another example, Trump said similarly:

You will never hear this on the Fake News concerning the China Virus, but by comparison to most other countries, who are suffering greatly, we are doing very well – and we have done things that few other countries could have done! (Trump, 2020o)

In each of these examples, Trump criticized those who were critical of him and his handling of the virus. Brummette et al. (2018) argue that the term “fake news” is politicized. Those that tended to use “fake news” did so to “challenge the opposition and support beliefs and opinions that resemble their own ideologies” (Brummette et al., 2018, p. 510). By attacking the media, Trump attempted to decrease their credibility while highlighting his more “accurate” information to his followers. Trump delegitimized mainstream media because they “failed” to report favorable news that he wanted the nation to hear. Therefore, when Trump tweeted about the “fake news,” he also included the opposite narrative that favors his image. For example, in the example above, Trump called out the “fake news” and then included how the United States is doing well. In fact, according to his tweet, the United States is progressing on the right track because of his leadership. Not only did Trump use the term “fake news,” but he used the word “hoax” as well. In one example, Trump said, “I called the politicization of the China Virus by the Radical Left Democrats a Hoax, not the China Virus itself. Everybody knows this except for the Fake and very Corrupt Media!” (Trump, 2020q). Throughout his presidency, Trump has constantly used the word “hoax” to discredit those who stood in opposition to him (Egan, 2020). He was known to distrust experts and thought he was smarter than many experts.

Trump was notorious for scapegoating the Chinese community. However, he seemed to not take any of the responsibilities for the spread of COVID-19 unless it was positive news for the United States. For example, he gave himself the credit for the COVID-19 vaccine. On December 24, 2020, he tweeted, “More than one million Americans have already received the China Virus Vaccine, a record pace!” (Trump, 2020ac). Another example is on September 18, 2020, when Trump compared his handling of the virus to Biden’s handling of the swine flu by saying, “Biden FAILED BADLY with the Swine Flu. It was the Gang That Couldn’t Shoot Straight” He didn’t have a clue. We have done an incredible job with the much tougher China Virus!” (Trump, 2020w). In this example, Trump boasted his accomplishments. Meanwhile, he highlighted that Biden “failed” in his attempt of handling the Swine Flu. On March 18, 2020, he said, “I always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously, and have done a very good job from the beginning, including my very early decision to close the ‘borders’ from China – against the wishes of almost all. Many lives were saved. The Fake News new narrative is disgraceful & false!” (Trump, 2020e). On July 20, 2020, Trump noted, “We are United in our effort to defeat the Invisible China Virus, and many people say that it is Patriotic to wear a face mask when you can’t socially distance. There is nobody more Patriotic than me, your favorite President!” (Trump, 2020n). When COVID-19 was spreading at an alarming rate across the globe, Trump consistently compared the severity of the virus to that of a flu (Shabad, 2020). Despite the fact that Trump neglected the seriousness of the coronavirus, he still managed to praise himself for the work that he and his administration did against the virus. In simple terms, Trump’s demeanor online is one where he consistently praises himself. Kreis (2017) notes,

His particular communication style and his use of a participatory web platform as a major tool of communication further index how he views himself in relation to the people: the

leader who, on the one hand, returned sovereignty to the people and, on the other hand, protects the nation and homeland from the dangerous “Other.” (p. 615)

By constantly tweeting about the positive actions that he has taken as president, Trump showed that he has prioritized the interests and well-being of his followers. This is because Trump wanted to be viewed positively by his followers and used his rhetoric to do so (Ross & Rivers, 2018). Trump was strategic in showing his audience base that he is their savior and will uphold American ideals and protect America against the dangerous “Other.” By scapegoating Chinese and other Asian individuals, Trump avoided the blame for the negative effects from the coronavirus while simultaneously maintaining and reaffirming the narrative that Chinese and other Asians are “filled” with diseases.

### ***Fear of the Other***

During COVID-19, several negative stereotypes emerged against Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans. Many of these stereotypes may result in microaggressions, discrimination and hate crimes. When COVID-19 started spreading across the globe, my family and I were scared for our lives – like everyone else – because we did not want to contract COVID-19. We would always wear masks when we had to interact with others in public. When we brought groceries home, we would wash our groceries before bringing them inside the house. To say the least, we took the virus very seriously. However, during this time the President’s rhetoric made things much, much worse for us and other Asian Americans who also had to fear the backlash from bigoted Americans. As mentioned previously, many Asian businesses were targeted and vandalized (Ramachandran, 2021). My family also owns a small business, and I was fearful that my family’s business might be attacked by those who are racist toward Chinese individuals and culture. Not only have I had this fear in the back of my mind, but I have also

been called many derogatory terms. Some specific ones are “dog eater” and “ling ling” (a name that is attributed to an Asian person whose name remains unspecified). These comments have made me feel degraded. When mask mandates were lifted, I still had an urge to keep my mask on because I had a fear that others might think I am a spreader of the virus since I am Chinese. Similarly, another Asian-identifying author named Choi (2021) reflected on her own experience: “When I did take a walk with my family, I was hyper-conscious of keeping our distance, seeking to stay well over six feet away if possible, fearing that others would assume we might be infectious because we were Asian” (p. 235). These are just two experiences of many that highlight how some Asian Americans might be feeling because of the increase in expressions of anti-Asian sentiments.

Trump used fear appeals in his tweets to create a sense of panic and fear against Chinese Americans and China. Dillard et al. (1996) define fear appeals as those highlighting “the noxious consequences that will befall message recipients if they fail to adopt the recommendations of the source” (p. 44). Fear appeals are notoriously used in elections and by politicians to influence the opinions of individuals. Fear appeals worked most effectively when “the message depicted relatively high amounts of fear, included an efficacy message, and stressed susceptibility and severity related to the concerns being addressed” (Tannenbaum et al., 2015, p. 1196).

Tannenbaum et al. (2015) discuss how the recipients should perceive high amounts of fear in the message; the authors emphasize “that it reflects a property of the message’s content, rather than the subjective state of fear that message recipients experience” (p. 1180). Fear appeals should also have an efficacy message, which is defined as a “statement that assures message recipients that they are capable of performing the fear appeal’s recommended actions (self-efficacy) and/or that performing the recommended actions will result in desirable consequences (response-

efficacy)” (Tannenbaum et al., 2015, p. 1180). When the receiver of the message agrees with the recommended action by the sender and believes the action will keep them from harm, the fear appeal will be more effective. The findings suggest that efficacy statements are important and will make the fear appeals even more effective (Tannenbaum et al., 2015). However, fear appeals may still be strong without efficacy statements. Lastly, the receivers of the message should also feel susceptible to the fear. Witte et al. (1998) further this idea by saying “individuals need to feel susceptible to a severe threat before they will be motivated to act” (p. 582). When the receivers feel susceptible, they may feel the severity of the issue and will more likely to be persuaded by the fear appeal.

Tannenbaum et al. (2015) also mention that including a one-time only behavior in fear appeals as well as targeting female populations will produce higher fear in messages. However, since this portion of the thesis is only examining Trump’s message construction and how that invokes a sense of fear, I will not be examining behaviors or audiences. Furthermore, since COVID-19 is a multifaceted issue, it may be difficult for the former president to recommend one-time behaviors that his supporters should follow. Since I am examining tweets, Trump is not tweeting specifically toward women, and it would be difficult to examine if the messages had a particular effect on a primarily female population. For these reasons, it would not be applicable here, and I will only be examining his messages. When analyzing a series of Trump’s tweets, I will be using the fear appeal components as described by Tannenbaum et al. (2015) to interpret how effective I believe Trump’s fear appeals were in attempting to persuade his audience about the severity of the “China virus.” The first tweet that I examine is on March 18, 2020, when he said:



I only signed the Defense Production Act to combat the Chinese Virus should we need to invoke it in a worst case scenario in the future. Hopefully there will be no need, but we are all in this TOGETHER! (Trump, 2020f)

To provide some context, the Defense Production Act “allows federal agencies to require companies to prioritize government contracts for medical supplies to address national emergencies, like COVID-19” (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2021). When COVID-19 was initially spreading, there was a shortage in protective medical equipment and supplies to address the outbreak.

First, the message that Trump constructed contains a high amount of fear because of the phrase “worst case scenario.” These specific words show that the coronavirus could potentially be more disastrous and harmful than anticipated. It also showed his followers that Trump has already prepared for the worst. Thus, this message revealed to his audience the severity of the issue and creating a sense of fear. Secondly, the tweet contains an efficacy message. At the end, Trump tried to reassure his followers that they are not alone and will be unified during this time. It is important to note that when Trump says “we” that he is just referring to his supporters. Kimura (2021) says, “the use of *you* and *we* indicate the collective sense of people who are not Chinese (i.e., *we*) through the act of hate against Chinese/Asian people (i.e., *you*)” (p. 141). The same *you* and *we* logic can be applied in this message because when Trump refers to “we,” he is tailoring the message to his American followers and their hard battle against the Chinese/Asian. Lastly, the message stresses the susceptibility and severity of the issue because of the signing of the Defense Production Act. The signing of the act is a sign of the severity of the issue; it means that there is a shortage of medical supplies that can protect everyone. This means that the United States may not have the necessary equipments to contain the virus.

In the next tweet, Trump used the term “the plague from China” when he referred to the coronavirus. On May 13, 2020, he mentioned:

As I have said for a long time, dealing with China is a very expensive thing to do. We just made a great Trade Deal, the ink was barely dry, and the World was hit by the Plague from China. 100 Trade Deals wouldn't make up the difference – and all those innocent lives lost! (Trump, 2020g)

Trump discussed the financial strain that it will take to “deal” with China. By including the financial aspect, he hoped to instill fear in his audience since it takes a great amount of money to “deal” with China. Additionally, relating China to the enormous economic toll the coronavirus threatens the United States aligns with Trump’s anti-China trade rhetoric and economic agenda (Trump, 2015). The tweet also shows the severity of the issue because Trump mentioned the number of lives that were taken due to the coronavirus. The tweet does not contain an efficacy statement; however, the fear appeal is still effective without it. The fear appeal in this example is still effective since the appeal includes a fear as well as shows the severity of the coronavirus. One of the reasons these tweets may not have an efficacy statement is because of the character limit that a user has. Given Twitter’s character limit, a user may not be able to include all the thoughts in a single tweet. Another reason for the lack of efficacy statements is that Trump does not tweet about pragmatic solutions. Instead, Trump enjoyed tweeting about how the United States is great and will remain powerful (Rowland, 2021). In this tweet, Trump referred to the coronavirus as the “plague from China” where he makes it a point to say that the virus came from China. According to the World Health Organization (2022), a plague “is an infectious disease caused by *Yersinia pestis* bacteria, usually found in small mammals and their fleas” (para. 1). Many believed that the coronavirus originated in Wuhan, China because Chinese

people ate bat soup. However, this remains a rumor since there is no evidence that supports the bat soup claim (Nunez, 2020). This is one of the reasons for why the CDC and the WHO have used the term COVID-19, coronavirus, and pandemic to refer to the virus. Trump, however, still insisted on using “plague from China” to spread misinformation on his Twitter account.

In the next series of tweets, Trump discussed how the coronavirus has spread internationally by saying: “Big China Virus breakouts all over the World, including nations which were thought to have done a great job. The Fake News doesn’t report this. USA will be stronger than ever before, and soon!” (Trump, 2020p); “European Countries are sadly getting clobbered by the China Virus” (Trump, 2020y); “Europe and other parts of the World being hit hard by the China Virus – Germany, France, Spain and Italy, in particular” (Trump, 2020z); “The entire WORLD is being badly hurt by the China Virus...” (Trump, 2020ab). By using the word “big” when referring to the coronavirus, Trump highlighted the severity of the issue. The fear appeal here shows that the coronavirus has spread quickly, and the scope of its transmission has led to countries all over the world.

As mentioned before, Trump consistently attacked those that disagree with him, especially Democrats. Trump’s tweet blamed former Governor Cuomo for his handling of the coronavirus:

Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York has the worst record on death and China Virus. 11,000 people alone died in Nursing Homes because of his incompetence! (Trump, 2020r)

On the same day, Trump tweeted again about his sentiments against Cuomo:

@NYGovCuomo should get his puppet New York prosecutors, who have been illegally

after me and my family for years, to investigate his incompetent handling of the China Virus, and all of the deaths caused by this incompetence. It is at minimum a Nursing Home Scandal – 11,000 DEAD! (Trump, 2020s)

There are high fear appeals in these tweets because Trump quantified the number of civilians that have died. Not only did he provide the number, but he also mentioned that the deaths are coming from the elderly population in nursing homes. Although these tweets were intended to blame Cuomo, Trump still managed to invoke fear of China within the message. Rowland (2021) says, “He increasingly manifested the persona of a strongman, often making strident attacks on his opponents, labeling them un-American in an attempt to delegitimize their criticism and create hate” (p. 118). By attacking former Governor Cuomo’s handling of the coronavirus, Trump can decrease Cuomo’s competency as a leader; thereby, if Cuomo decided to attack Trump’s handling of the virus, he would have already lost his credibility. While this example is specifically attacking the competence of former Governor Cuomo, Trump was notorious for using this rhetorical strategy to make himself look better and for creating another opportunity to blame China. After all, according to Burke (1965), scapegoating is a way to purge guilt or deflect responsibility by blaming others.

In these examples, Trump appealed to the fears of his followers. One reason for why he used fear appeals was to blame China and Chinese people for the spread of the coronavirus. Trump referred to Chinese bodies as the “Other,” which reinforces the Yellow Peril and perpetual foreigner stereotype. By assigning Chinese and other Asian Americans as the “Other,” Trump portrayed Asian bodies “as not just the virus itself and/or a carrier of the virus, but also as a weapon that will kill people” (Kimura, 2021, p. 141). Doing so dehumanizes the bodies of Chinese and other Asian Americans. When certain groups are dehumanized, they are often “the

most common targets of harmful behavior” (Fincher et al., 2017, p. 290). This hate discourse, emanating from the so-called leader of the free world, perpetuates the discrimination and hate crimes that many Chinese and other Asian Americans have had and continue to face.

### ***China Bashing***

One main theme throughout Trump’s tweets is how he consistently blames China. By scapegoating China, he contributed to and helped encourage this anti-Chinese culture. Trump made it a point to make sure everyone knows the virus originated from China. For example, on May 25, 2020, Trump tweets, “Great reviews on our handling of COVID-19, sometimes referred to as the China Virus” (Trump, 2020h). Another example is on May 13, 2020, when Trump says:

As I have said for a long time, dealing with China is a very expensive thing to do. We just made a great Trade Deal, the ink was barely dry, and the World was hit by the Plague from China. 100 Trade Deals wouldn’t make up the difference – and all those innocent lives lost! (Trump, 2020g)

Similarly, on September 7, 2020, Trump said, “starting to get VERY high marks in our handling of the Coronavirus (China Virus), especially when compared to other countries and areas of the world” (Trump, 2020t). In these examples, Trump was intentional in pointing out that the coronavirus started in China. Many narratives exist about the origin of COVID-19 (Felter, 2021). However, the evidence remains inconclusive. There needs to be more investigations and studies to determine how the coronavirus outbreak happened so that we can prevent future pandemics (McKeever, 2021). Additionally, Trump connected to China the innocent lives that have been lost. He does not take any of the blame for his leadership (or lack thereof) when the coronavirus spread to the United States.

Throughout his tweets, Trump used “China virus” and “Chinese virus” the most to refer to the virus. Most of his tweets contain “China virus” when referencing the coronavirus. By having the name “China” and “Chinese” at the beginning, he wanted to remind his followers about the true “enemy,” which is China. Trump associated the coronavirus with Chinese ethnicity. However, Dr. Mike Ryan, the executive director of the World Health Organization health emergencies program, mentions that “viruses know no borders and they don’t care about your ethnicity or the color of your skin or how much money you have in the bank” (Yeung et al., 2020, para. 8). It is important to not associate the coronavirus to a specific ethnicity. There is a difference between linking a virus to a country and blaming an entire ethnicity. Trump was intentional in using “China virus” and “Chinese virus” to blame China and the entire Chinese population. Since Trump relates the coronavirus to the Chinese community, there has been an increase in expressions of anti-Asian sentiments across the United States (Stop AAPI Hate, 2021).

As mentioned previously, the President holds the most esteem position in the American government and influences others, commonly referenced as the presidential “bully pulpit” (Elving, 2017; Miles, 2014). Stuckey (2020) mentions:

Three kinds of rhetoric – educative, vituperative, and performance – work together to support the president both institutionally and personally. They combine to place presidents at the center of the political system as its representative and chief manager. They allow presidents to identify priorities for action and to define the terms of debates. They position presidents as the person most representative of the nation and its shared democratic values. (p. 374)

Undoubtedly, Trump influenced many of his supporters to also use similar rhetoric. In fact, when the new Omicron variant came to fruition, Senator Ted Cruz and Donald Trump Jr. heavily criticized the World Health Organization (WHO) for skipping the Greek letter, Xi (Roche, 2021). Xi is similar to the name of Chinese President, Xi Jinping (Roche, 2021). In a tweet, Donald Trump Jr. stated, “As far as I’m concerned the original will always be the Xi variant” (Trump Jr., 2021). Similarly, Senator Cruz retweeted a tweet about the Greek letter Xi by saying, “If the WHO is this scared of the Chinese Communist Party, how can they be trusted to call them out the next time they’re trying to cover up a catastrophic global pandemic?” (Cruz, 2021). Through these tweets, Trump Jr. and Senator Cruz are still attempting to connect COVID-19 to China through the similarity between the Greek Letter, Xi, and Chinese President’s name, Xi Jinping.

The WHO suggests that when naming a disease, it should “consist of generic descriptive terms, based on the symptoms that the disease causes... and more specific descriptive terms when robust information is available on how the disease manifests, who it affects, its severity or seasonality” (2015, para. 5). Dr. Keiji Fukuda from the WHO mentions the importance of naming diseases, since

disease names really do matter to the people who are directly affected. We’ve seen certain disease names provoke a backlash against members of particular religious or ethnic communities, create unjustified barriers to travel, commerce and trade, and trigger needless slaughtering of food animals. This can have serious consequences for peoples’ lives and livelihoods. (para. 2)

For this reason, the WHO was intentional in using COVID-19 to refer to the new virus and Omicron as the new variant. Trump’s anti-China rhetoric contributed to the racism and discrimination that many Chinese and other Asian Americans face. As a result of the hate toward

China, many Chinese and other Asian bodies are dehumanized since many view them as a spreaders of diseases and germs.

### *Populist Appeals*

Trump used populist rhetoric throughout his tweets. The positive tweets are primarily about Trump's leadership and accomplishments (Rowland, 2021). One example related to the coronavirus was on May 25, 2020, when Trump said:

Great reviews on our handling of Covid 19, sometimes referred to as the China Virus.

Ventilators, Testing, Medical Supply Distribution, we made a lot of Governors look very good – And got no credit for so doing. Most importantly, we helped a lot of great people!

(Trump, 2020h)

In this example, Trump showed that he is working for his American people. When he said that he made many governors "look very good," he delegitimized their leadership and their handling of the pandemic. They would not have progressed to where they are without him. In this example, he praised himself like a savior that the United States needs during this crisis.

A couple of months later, on July 8, 2020, Trump said:

Economy and Jobs are growing MUCH faster than anyone (except me!) expected. Job growth is biggest in history. China Virus Mortality Rate is among the LOWEST of any country. Shaping up for a good third quarter, and a great next year! NASDAQ at new record high, 401k's way up!!! (Trump, 2020m)

Trump's rhetoric depicted himself as a hero in defending his nation and the interests of his supporters. Although Trump boasted about how the mortality rate in the United States was the lowest, the CDC actually states that between June 27-July 11, deaths related to COVID-19, influenza, and pneumonia increased for the first time since mid-April (Center for Disease



Control and Prevention, 2020). Trump manipulated the American population by providing inaccurate information. Trump tried to make it seem like the mortality rates were low due to his leadership. Similarly, on September 8, 2020, he tweeted to communicate how he has positively handled the coronavirus. He said:

My Campaign spent a lot of money up front in order to compensate for the false reporting and Fake News concerning our handling of the China Virus. Now they see the GREAT job we have done, and we have 3 times more than we had 4 years ago... (Trump, 2020u)

On the same day, Trump continued to boast about his campaign:

Because of the China Virus, my Campaign, which has raised a lot of money, was forced to spend in order to counter the Fake News reporting about the way we handled it (China Ban, etc.). We did, and are doing, a GREAT job, and have a lot of money left over, much more than 2016... (Trump, 2020v)

On December 29, 2020, Trump discussed the need for American citizens to receive more in their stimulus checks. He tweeted “\$2000 for our great people, not \$600! They have suffered enough from the China Virus!!!” (Trump, 2020ad). With this, Trump uses populist rhetoric since he is tweeting against the powerful elites. By tweeting against the powerful elites such as Democrats and the mainstream media, Trump is characterizing himself as an authentic president who speaks for the average citizen. However, throughout these series of tweets, Trump did not provide any pragmatic policy solutions. Instead, Trump promised to his supporters that the United States will maintain its global hegemony and will be better than China. Populist rhetoric also “feeds on the traumas of the people, the majority” (Galito, 2018, p. 57). The people refer to Trump’s supporters who have had to endure the suffering that the “China virus” has instilled. In their

eyes, the enemies are Chinese and other Asian people who must be blamed and shunned because they are spreading the virus.

## **Speeches**

Donald Trump was known to use Twitter to communicate with his followers, which coined him the title of “Twitter President” (Ingram, 2017). However, he also gave plenty of speeches, especially during his infamous rallies. In this section, I will be analyzing Trump’s rhetoric in his speeches to uncover any common themes that may emerge. These speeches ranged from March 2020 to January 2021. The speeches I analyze are: President Trump’s remarks in address to the nation on March 11, 2020; President Trump’s coronavirus task force briefing speech, which he delivered on March 18, 2020; Trump’s rally speech in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on June 20, 2020; Trump’s rally speech in Phoenix, Arizona, on June 23, 2020; President Trump’s speech to the 75<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly on September 22, 2020; and Trump’s speech “Save America” rally in Washington, D.C. on January 6, 2021. One of the reasons why I decided to analyze a mix of Trump’s rally speeches and some of his important presidential speeches is because Trump is known to change his tone depending on the type of speech he is delivering. Rowland (2021) notes, “the tone of these speeches was much more subdued than his rally speeches or Twitter comments” (p. 85). By adding a variety of speeches, I can analyze to see if anti-Chinese rhetoric is present as well as locate the common themes that emerge. In each of these speeches, he used terms such as “China virus” and “Kung Flu” when addressing the coronavirus. It is important to examine whether there is a difference in how he uses hate rhetoric in his speeches compared to his tweets. For example, during his rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Trump said, “I can name, Kung Flu, I can name, 19 different versions of names” (Trump, 2020i). Some of the terms he uses instead of COVID-19 are Chinese virus, China virus,

kung flu, the Chinese flu, the Chinese coronavirus, the Wuhan coronavirus, Wuhan virus, foreign virus, and the plague from China. Trump uses these names for COVID-19 to blame China for the creation of the virus and pandemic. The themes apparent in his speeches that I will discuss are China bashing, scapegoating, and populist appeals.

### ***China Bashing***

One of the prominent themes that emerges from Trump's speeches is China bashing. He voiced his opinion about China and is blatant about how the coronavirus started in China. One of the reasons Trump emphasized this assertion is because China hypothesized that it was American soldiers who spread the coronavirus when they visited Wuhan in October (Myers, 2020). Zhong Nanshan, a renowned Chinese respiratory scientist, made a statement that the origin of the virus is not necessarily from China even though it was discovered there (Xinhua, 2020). Since there is no conclusive evidence that supports from where the coronavirus originated, the United States and China point fingers at one another. The mutual blaming might occur as a result of the ongoing tensions that have already existed between the two nations. Trump was notorious in viewing China as a competitor in global politics. According to Ward (2018), "Trump has preferred to treat the country as a strategic competitor that requires a more aggressive response by the United States" (para. 2). So, when China claimed that the coronavirus came from American soldiers, Trump was ready to express his disdain for China. Through his speeches, Trump made sure to show his American citizens that China was the real enemy with COVID-19 and other issues not related to the virus.

Trump made it a point to say that the coronavirus originated and spread from China. In his Presidential address to the nation on March 11, 2020, Trump remarks, "Tonight, I want to speak with you about our nation's unprecedented response to the coronavirus outbreak that

started in China” (Trump, 2020a). During his rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on June 20, 2020, Trump says, “We’re not going to be where we were, but in many ways, other than the horrible, horrible death that was so needlessly caused by a virus that should have been stopped where it originated, which was China” (Trump, 2020i). Not only does he make it a point to show the origins of the coronavirus, but he also points out the inadequacies of the Chinese government in their handling and containment of the virus from spreading. In the same speech, Trump refers to the coronavirus as a “plague,” when he claims, “China sent us the plague...” (Trump, 2020i). This reaffirmed to his supporters that the coronavirus originated from China. In another rally he gave in Phoenix, Arizona, on June 23, 2020, just three days after his Tulsa rally, he also used hateful rhetoric when referring to the coronavirus. In the Arizona rally, Trump also referred to the coronavirus as “a plague coming over from China” (Trump, 2020j). These examples shows that Trump was direct and straightforward when declaring that the coronavirus came from China. Trump is intentional in scapegoating China and does not take any responsibility for the effects that the coronavirus had on Americans. As mentioned previously in the Twitter section, by using the term “plague,” Trump spread misinformation to his audience since health officials did not call the coronavirus a “plague.” Labeling the virus a “plague” undoubtedly heightens the sense of fear that, according to Trump’s rhetoric, is associated with China (Baker et al., 2020).

Another example of when Trump pinned the coronavirus on China is during the “Save America” rally in Washington, D.C. on January 6, 2021. In this speech, Trump said, “China destroyed these people. We didn’t destroy. China destroyed them, totally destroyed them” (Trump, 2021). In this portion of the speech, Trump was strategic when he manipulated his tone and emphasized on the word “destroyed” in reference to the destruction that China made. Additionally, he repeated the same statement three times to emphasize that it is China’s fault.

There are some instances in his speeches when he was bashing China, but he does not necessarily relate it to COVID-19. During his rally in Phoenix, Arizona, Trump claims, “For decades they’ve ripped us off. They ripped us off like nobody...and I charged them a little thing called the massive tariffs” (Trump, 2020j). Additionally, when Trump presented to the 75<sup>th</sup> session of the United Nations General Assembly, he said:

Every year China dumps millions and millions of tons of plastic and trash into the ocean, overfishes other countries’ waters, destroys vast swath of coral reef, and emits more toxic mercury into the atmosphere than any country anywhere in the world. China’s carbon emissions are nearly twice what the U.S. has, and it’s rising fast. (Trump, 2020x)

These are a few of the many ways that Trump pointed out China’s poor leadership, as he delegitimized their global influence by highlighting the harmful effects they have caused such as pollution. Here Trump intentionally scapegoated China in areas unrelated to COVID-19. Trump constructed this larger context of expressions of anti-Chinese and other anti-Asian sentiment. So, when Trump does blame China for COVID-19, his audience is already primed. As mentioned in the literature review, priming is when “an individual changes the *criteria* on which he or she bases an overall evaluation” (Druckman & Holmes, 2004, p. 757). When issues are repeated and receive more attention, these issues become more salient in the listener’s mind. The theory of priming assumes that when individuals make a decision, they do not take into consideration all the information around them (Krosnick & Brannon, 1993). Instead, individuals are likely to “make satisfactory judgments without expending a great deal of effort” (Krosnick & Brannon, 1993, p. 963). Trump frequently utilized priming as a rhetorical strategy.. Additionally, the mass media play a large role in priming presidential discourse. The more frequently the media pay attention to a particular issue, the more an issue becomes primed (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990).

Krosnick and Kinder (1990) further by saying “the standards citizens use to judge a president may be substantially determined by which stories media choose to cover and, consequently, which considerations are made accessible” (p. 500). By doing so, “a president’s overall reputation, and, to a lesser extent, his apparent competence, both depend on the presentations of network news programs” (Iyengar et al., 1982, p. 853). Since Trump did not have a filter and had the freedom of voicing his opinion freely, his supporters may have thought he was more authentic since he was bashing China directly in his speeches. Additionally, many news outlets started writing stories and posting news about Trump’s use of the term “China virus.” The production of these news articles primed the issue even further since his supporters saw the anti-China rhetoric in his speeches as well as in news articles. As a result, the topic of China and Trump’s negative views of China becomes salient in his supporters’ minds. In these messages, Trump used enthymemes. Enthymemes is defined as, “principles or notions which are so obvious to the audience that the argument seems to express necessity, rather than possibility” (Breitholtz, 2020, p. 1). The impact of enthymemes is that the receiver of the message does not work as hard to understand the argument presented. Enthymemes were present when Trump was bashing China. Trump primed the audience by blaming China for the coronavirus and other issues unrelated to the virus. As a result, his followers drew conclusions that China and other Chinese individuals were the cause of the outbreak. By doing so, he was able to rally his base and amplify anti-China sentiments.

According to the survey by the Pew Research Center about U.S. citizens’ views of China, “73% of U.S. adults say they have an unfavorable view of the country, up 26 percentage points since 2018...around two-thirds of Americans (64%) say China has done a bad job dealing with the coronavirus outbreak” (Silver, Devlin & Huang, 2020, para. 1-2). These statistics show that

many Americans already have a negative view of China. More specifically, the survey demonstrated that a majority of Republicans compared to Democrats have negative views of China, especially regarding China's handling of the coronavirus (Silver, Devlin & Huang, 2020). Since many of Trump's supporters already have a negative impression of China, Trump was easily able to reaffirm their disdain for China.

### ***Scapegoating***

Similar to Trump's tweets, he also created an "us" versus "them" framework in his speeches. Trump was notorious for making claims that the United States is "threatened by undocumented immigrants, Islamic terrorists, and various other groups who were not white Americans" (Rowland, 2021). With the coronavirus, Trump dehumanized Chinese and other Asian bodies by casting them as the dangerous "Other." The fear that Trump instilled in his supporters is an:

American dystopia in which ordinary white working-class voters were losing their jobs to unfair trade deals, undocumented immigrants, and reverse discrimination, a dystopia that faced an epidemic of crime coming from inner cities and terrorism from undocumented and radicalized immigrants. (Rowland, 2021, p. 164)

By creating a sense of fear, Trump was able to dehumanize the "Other" and uphold white supremacy. Blow (2019) notes, "white supremacy isn't necessarily about rendering white people as superhuman; it is just as often about rendering nonwhite people as subhuman" (para. 4). By attacking the Chinese and other Asian community, Trump upheld the ideology that Chinese and other Asian people are less than human. This is because their ethnicity is associated with the coronavirus. When Trump spoke about woman or a nonwhite person he would often "transform

them into something less than human” (Tumulty, 2018, para. 10). Trump reaffirmed the perpetual foreigner stereotype while simultaneously maintaining white supremacy.

During Trump’s rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, he scapegoated the Chinese individuals and China when speaking to his base about the coronavirus. Trump argued, “We’re not going to be where we were, but in many ways, other than all of the horrible, horrible death that was so needlessly caused by a virus that should have been stopped where it originated, which was China” (Trump, 2020i). By scapegoating others, Trump does not have to take responsibility for the deaths that occurred within his own nation. Instead, he can easily blame China because it was supposedly due to their mishandling that the coronavirus spread outside of their borders.

Trump frequently commented about how the virus has many names. During his rally speech in Phoenix, Arizona, on June 23, 2020, he said, “There’s never been anything where they have so many names. I could give you 19 or 20 names for that, right? It’s got all different names. Wuhan. Wuhan was catching on. Coronavirus, right?” (Trump, 2020j). This shows that by joking about the nomenclature, he does not take the coronavirus seriously. Additionally, by stating “Wuhan,” he is claiming that the nickname of Wuhan was “catching on” because he is hinting at how the coronavirus originated from Wuhan. Afterwards, people in the crowd were screaming “Kung flu.” To which Trump follows with:

Kung flu, yeah. Kung Flu. COVID. COVID-19. COVID. I say, ‘What’s the 19? COVID-19?’ Some people can’t explain the 19...I said that’s an odd name. I could give you many many names. Some people call it the Chinese flu. The Chinese flu, right? They call it the China, as opposed to the China. I’ve never seen anything like it...(Trump, 2020j)

During Trump’s presidency, he was notorious for saying “China” in a way that mocks and pokes fun of the country. When Trump said, “they called it the China, as opposed to the China” he



added specific emphasis to the word “China” the first time he mentioned it. Similarly, in his Oklahoma rally speech, Trump continued to poke fun of the name “Kung Flu,” and he does not understand the importance of using the appropriate name of “COVID-19.” Trump declares:

But you don’t hear them talking about COVID, COVID, to be specific, COVID-19. That name gets further and further away from China, as opposed to calling it the Chinese virus...By the way, it’s a disease without question, has more names than any disease in history. I can name, “Kung flu.” I can name, 19 different versions of names. Many call it a virus, which it is. Many call it a flu, what difference? I think we have 19 or 20 versions of the name. (Trump, 2020i)

As such, Trump uses the power of naming to reinforce his rhetorical tactic of scapegoating.

In these examples, Trump mocked the name COVID and claimed that by using these names, the American people will forget that it actually originated from China. Mercieca (2020) notes, “for Trump’s supporters, his aggressive tone and politically incorrect rhetoric toward the establishment were exactly why they supported him for president” (p.27). By using “Kung Flu” as a play-on words to Kung-Fu, he ridicules Chinese culture. This is one example of how Trump connects with his base. Trump is notorious for creating a strong sense of group solidarity with supporters since they share in the perception that their enemies exist in the dangerous “Other” and political elites. Trump creates expressions “of negative emotions such as fear, anger, and hatred against perceived elites and ‘dangerous groups’ groups such as immigrants and refugees” (Rowland, 2021, p. 3). Additionally, “Trump’s goal at presidential rallies was to create fear and anger to energize his supporters and to distract them from policy failures, ongoing investigations, and his own outrageous conduct” (Rowland, 2021, p. 112). This relates to Gramsci’s concept of hegemony as Trump has the power to shape the narrative of marginalized groups such as those

who are Chinese and other Asian American. He reaffirms the narrative that Chinese people are “dirty” and thus must be expelled or extinguished. Identifying and understanding this narrative explains one of the reasons for the rise in hate crimes against Chinese and other Asian bodies.

### *Populist Appeals*

Trump tended to show that he is one for the people. By “people,” I mean his supporters who often typify the “average” citizen. In the previous section, I discussed how Trump consistently bashed and scapegoated China for issues related and unrelated to the coronavirus. He sets up China as the enemy while he depicts himself as the “hero” since he has solutions to help his American citizens. One way he does so is responding to China’s comment about how the coronavirus was started by American soldiers. This is one example when Trump bashed China. During Trump’s coronavirus task force briefing on March 18, 2020, a reporter asked why Trump continuously uses the term “Chinese virus.” Trump responded with, “China tried to say at one point – maybe they stopped now – that it was caused by American soldiers. This can’t happen. It’s not going to happen – not as long as I’m President. It comes from China” (Trump, 2020c). By saying “it’s not going to happen – not as long as I’m President,” Trump illustrates how he is a president for the people. Trump is showing to his followers that they will not be “bullied” and “harassed” by China. Additionally, Trump appears patriotic because he defends his American soldiers. He starts by saying how the “China virus” has “claimed countless lives in 188 countries” (Trump, 2020x). Trump’s setting up the negative effects that the coronavirus has caused worldwide shows American citizens the severity of the issue. He followed this by saying:

In the United States, we launched the most aggressive mobilization since the Second World War. We rapidly produced a record supply of ventilators, creating a surplus that

allowed us to share them with friends and partners all around the globe. We pioneered life-saving treatments, reducing our fatality rate 85 percent since April. (Trump, 2020x)

In this example, he primed his audience that China has harmed many lives and families internationally. Then he added that he will be the savior who has the solution for Americans and other countries. Adams (2021) explains:

The status of women, African Americans, Hispanics, and other minorities has been improving, and Trump adherents, especially non-college-educated White males, fear they will lose their dominance in society. White patriarchy and “white privilege” are jeopardized. Evil Others threaten to displace “real” Americans, and Trump mobilized this White anxiety, directing it into attack mode. (p. 169)

The fear from his frustrated base that they might lose their power and dominance allowed Trump to capitalize on that fear and use it to his advantage. By using his hate-filled rhetoric toward China and the Chinese community, Trump attempts to comfort his base. Rowland (2021) mentions, “Trump’s base supporters ‘love’ him not for his policies but for the performative cruelty he exhibits toward racial minorities and the way he sticks his thumb in the eyes of elites” (p. 177). One of the reasons that explains the loyalty of Trump’s supporters is that Trump’s hatred resonated with frustrated followers.

In Trump’s speech addressing the nation on March 11, 2020, he said, “I will never hesitate to take any necessary steps to protect the lives, health, and safety of the American people. I will always put the wellbeing of America first” (Trump, 2020a). He then added, “We are all in this together. We must put politics aside, stop the partisanship, and unify together as one nation and one family” (Trump, 2020a). Trump portrayed himself as a charismatic leadership who will do “whatever it takes” to make sure his followers prosper. Additionally, he

attempted to unify his base by using words such as “we” to show that “we” are all fighting the same battle, which is putting America first. He attributed some of his successes to the American people by saying, “...we’re doing it well. And I’ll tell you, the American people have been incredible. For the most part, they’ve been really incredible” (Trump, 2020c). Trump incorporated Americans into the conversation and this allowed his supporters to feel supported and included in their “successes.”

In his rally speech in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Trump discussed how the “Chinese virus” has impacted the lives of his supporters. However, he ends the fearful statement with “we were in big trouble, and we were, and I got it back together” (Trump, 2020i). Trump comforted his base by portraying himself as the hero who will save the United States from all the problems that they are facing (Rowland, 2021). In the same speech, he also used “we” and “us” to show unity between him and his American citizens. He said, “If we are vigilant – and we can reduce the chance of infection, which we will – we will significantly impede the transmission of the virus. The virus will not have a chance against us” (Trump, 2020i). Trump reassured his base that they will prevail against the coronavirus. By using populist rhetoric, Trump was able to show his base that he will be the leader that they need to fight against the dangerous virus.

In his speeches, Trump is “pro-America.” In his remarks to the nation On March 11, 2020, he claimed, “No nation is more prepared or more resilient than the United States. We have the best economy, the most advanced healthcare, and the most talented doctors, scientists, and researchers anywhere in the world” (Trump, 2020a). In this example, Trump reassured his fellow Americans that the United States is leading the world in fighting against the coronavirus. Not only does Trump use “pro-America” rhetoric to show his commitment to the nation, but he also uses the specific rhetoric to mask the drastic number of deaths in the United States. Trump

disregarded many of the statistics that showed how the United States was leading the rest of the world in numbers of cases and COVID-19 related deaths. Bendix and Gould (2020) claimed, “the U.S. has more coronavirus cases than any other country: more than 8.6 million...the U.S. also has the highest number of deaths: more than 225,000” (paras. 3-4). Cases and COVID-19 related deaths have skyrocketed; yet, Trump is known to disregard those issues and creates a false narrative that the United States is flourishing.

### **Comparing and Contrasting Trump’s Tweets and Speeches**

A comparison of Trump’s rhetoric in his tweets compared to his speeches demonstrates that there were more context and explanation in his speeches. One of the reasons that could explain this is that there is not a character or space limit that constrains Trump’s message. Since Twitter only allows 280 characters, users cannot be wasteful with their wording. In his speeches, Trump includes more context and information, as his speeches are some of the longest among recent presidents (Whiteside, 2020). According to Ott (2017), “Twitter structurally disallows the communication of detailed and sophisticated messages. To be clear, a Tweet may be clever or witty, but it cannot be complex” (p. 60). One of the reasons for this is because of the limited characters that a user is allowed to use when producing a tweet.

One implication from the analysis of the tweets and speeches is that the rhetorical strategies that he used overlap with one another. For example, when he used fear appeals, his followers may also associate that with placing blame on China and Chinese people. Regarding scapegoating and populist appeals, Trump’s messages all had common intersecting themes.

Another commonality between his tweets and speeches are the instances of incivility. Ott (2017) explains two reasons that Twitter encourages incivility which are that Twitter is informal and depersonalized. First, Twitter is informal because users tend to not use formal language such

as having proper grammar (Ott, 2017). Secondly, Twitter is depersonalized, which means that it “is much easier to say something nasty about someone when they are not physically present” (p. 62). In Trump’s tweets, he was able to invoke fear appeals in a relatively succinct and attention-grabbing manner. He discussed the racialized “Other” and how they were the problem that America was facing. One of the reasons that he was able to invoke fear about the dangerous “Other” is because Twitter is depersonalized. Within his speeches, he did not contribute to as much fear. Instead, he focused more on amplifying his leadership and how he was leading the United States on the right path.

In both tweets and speeches, Trump uses simple language that is easy to understand. In fact, some analysts find that Trump speaks at a fourth-grade level, which allows him to connect with a range of constituent citizens (Burleigh, 2018). He tailors his language and messages so that he does not have any difficulty when communicating his points. Ott (2017) mentions, “Trump’s lexicon is simple and repetitious, relying heavily on monosyllabic words such as “good,” “bad,” and “sad” (p. 64). Since his followers are “low-information voters,” he uses language that is simple to understand. By using language that is simple and accessible, Trump was able to communicate to a wider group of people and garnered more support (Kayam, 2018). The success of Trump’s simplistic language shines light on Trump’s use of colloquial language which allowed his message to be accessible by a large demographic and to the common citizen who perceived that he was speaking directly to them. Trump’s success “implies that the public today appreciates straightforwardness and the use of simple, or even colloquial, language” (Kayam, 2018, p. 86). The use of simplistic language is a factor in Trump’s overall success in gaining a loyal fanbase.

Trump used populist rhetoric in both tweets and speeches to show that he cares about his supporters and that he is “the guy” who will lead the United States to prosperity. One way that Trump does this is by using “Twitter to present the same nationalist populist message as at rallies and in more formal speeches but in more concentrated form” (Rowland, 2021, p. 119). Because there was a character limit on Twitter, he had to be concise with his populist message. By emphasizing his populist rhetoric, Trump was able to create the same rally atmosphere on an online platform for his followers (Rowland, 2021). This shows that both his tweets and speeches were influential in garnering support from his base. Rowland (2021) explains this notion: “Trump masterfully used Twitter to make himself, his campaign, and later his presidency a ubiquitous presence in the daily lives of his supporters. In so doing, he solidified his relationship with them and undercut the grounds for critique of his actions” (p. 136). As a result, Trump was strategic in how he used Twitter to spread his messages. He used Twitter to “displace blame onto dangerous Others, attack his political opponents and the media, and brag about what most experts thought was a failed response” (Rowland, 2021, p. 135). For these reasons, both his tweets and speeches were successful in promoting a fear of the dangerous “Other” while portraying him as the triumphant leader who will protect his followers.

When it comes to Trump’s followers, his base consists of primarily white, working-class men (O’Connor, 2020; Thompson, 2016). These are the types of individuals who typically listen to his speeches and read his tweets. Even though they are the audience for Trump’s hateful rhetoric, they may not be the only offenders to commit Asian hate crimes. The evidence that is circulating remains inconclusive. One article argues that a majority of anti-Asian violence was committed by people who were white (Yam, 2021b). On the other hand, Zhang et al. (2020) note, “hate crimes against Asian Americans are more likely than hate crimes against either

African Americans or Hispanics to be committed by non-White offenders” (p. 17). In another article, Borja and Gibson (2020) argue that, in terms of “the source of anti-Asian harassment, discrimination, and stigmatization, the majority of the offenders were identified as male, white, and, in the case of politicians, affiliated with the Republican party” (para. 2). These articles highlight the need for more research about Asian hate crimes since the offender’s race remains inconclusive. However, the media were notorious in circulating images of primarily black people attacking elderly Asians (Yam, 2021b). In general, the news media tend to overreport crimes committed by black people and underreport crimes committed by white people (Paybarah, 2015). Since Trump was using anti-Chinese and other anti-Asian rhetoric, he was promoting a culture that legitimized violence against Chinese and other Asian individuals.

An interesting similarity with Trump’s rhetoric in both his tweets and speeches is that Trump did not discuss any policy or policy implementations. Wignell et al. (2021) mention that to Trump, “the presidency is more about being the president than governing the country” (p. 221). Even though he did not discuss detailed policies, Trump still managed to enhance his popularity. One possible explanation for this is because his followers tended to be “low-information voters” (Rowland, 2021, p. 39). His voters did not need Trump to discuss a pragmatic solution to the problems facing the country. Instead, his voters enjoyed his hateful rhetoric against the dangerous “Other,” “fake news” media, and powerful elites. Trump used hate rhetoric toward groups that had differing ideals and values against him while using prideful and “pro-America” rhetoric with his loyal fanbase. Trump’s strategic use of his rhetoric contributed to his success in galvanizing a large loyal fanbase.



## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

In the previous chapter, I analyzed a series of Trump's tweets and speeches. I used a rhetorical thematic analysis to uncover common themes. The method is a blend of rhetoric and qualitative research. Originally, scholars would differentiate the two methodologies. Qualitative research was strictly interviews and focus groups. On the other hand, rhetorical methods interrogated a specific text to uncover latent meanings. But, the line between rhetoric and qualitative research can blur. Even though scholars argue that these methods are distinct, the two approaches can reinforce one another, as this thesis demonstrates. The common themes that were apparent in his tweets were scapegoating, fear of the other, China bashing and populist appeals. When the coronavirus was spreading in the United States and causing many deaths and hospitalizations, Trump refused to take the blame or responsibility for his mishandling of the coronavirus. Instead, he blamed it on China as well as Chinese and other Asian individuals. Trump's followers remained in support of their president and expressed their frustration with the Chinese and other Asian communities. Not only did Trump scapegoat these communities and China, but he also blamed the news media for their production of "fake news." In his speeches, the themes were China bashing, scapegoating, and populism. In his speeches, he was consistent in bashing China, and he even discussed the incompetency of China's leadership. By scapegoating China, he made himself to be the president that could "do it all." He played on his supporters' patriotic values to seem that he was the right president for the job because he was also prideful of his nation. In his speeches, Trump was able to be more thorough about the eminent danger of the coronavirus spread from China and Chinese people.

The themes of fear appeals, scapegoating, China bashing, and populist appeals overlap with one another. For this reason, Trump's rhetoric had multiple implications. By using "China

virus” and “Kung Flu,” Trump can blame and scapegoat China as well as the Chinese American population. By doing so, he relieved the burden from himself and used populist rhetoric to show that he was a leader for the American people. Trump attempted to establish himself as the “president of the people.” By doing so, it helped embolden him to his audience and heightened the connection with, and loyalty from, his followers. Therefore, when he does use populist rhetoric, the message helped enhance his persuasive appeal to his followers. This shows that Trump’s anti-Asian hate message may be more persuasive and resonated with his supporters.

Trump delivered a speech on March 2020, where he expressed support for Asian Americans and argued the need to protect the Asian American community who are not at fault for spreading the coronavirus (Samuels, 2020). Although Trump tried to say he was not inciting violence against Asian Americans, he did not condemn the violence and hate crimes that continued to increase. There was a lack of support from the government to the point where Chinese and other Asian American communities had to rely on one another for support. For example, one coalition called Stop AAPI Hate was formed in March 2020, and their purpose is to “track and respond to incidents of hate, violence, harassment, discrimination, shunning, and child bullying against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the United States” (Stop AAPI Hate, 2020, para. 1). When president Biden came into office, he signed the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act which addressed the ongoing hate crimes and violence toward Asian Americans (Sprunt, 2021). In contrast, Trump did not implement any practical solutions when he was president. After he delivered the speech on March 2020, he continued to use anti-Asian rhetoric when addressing the coronavirus.

## **So What?**

The hate crimes toward Chinese and other Asian bodies disproves the model minority myth and reaffirms the yellow peril and perpetual foreigner stereotype. Asian Americans are commonly associated as “model minorities.” The model minority myth assumes that all Asian Americans do not face racism and/or discrimination. However, as we have explored, many Asian Americans live in constant fear because of a president who has capitalized on existing expressions of anti-Asian sentiments. These stereotypes highlight the differences between Asians compared to their white counterparts. COVID-19 gave former President Trump along with his followers an excuse to attack Asian individuals. My analysis reveals how Trump used weaponized rhetoric to promote violence. As a result, it is clear that America is nowhere close to achieving equality regardless of skin color. Ethnicity and race play a very significant role in determining who is “American” and who is perceived as threats. Chinese and other Asian American continue to be despised and are not considered equal to white Americans although many have already assimilated into the dominant American culture. The model minority myth is commonly used against both Asians and other racial groups. Doing so pits the minority groups against one another. When it comes to racism, many of these identity groups focus more on our differences, rather than similarities (Nguyen, 2020). This means that we are not focusing on a common enemy, which is inciting hate and racism against minority groups to maintain hegemony. Instead, Asian, and black identities are commonly pitted against one another (Demsas & Ramirez, 2021). Kim (1998) notes, “a pair of comments that white people often made remains stubbornly in my memory: ‘At least you are not black,’ or ‘You should be grateful that you are not black’” (p. 4). These comments are not just ignorant and racist, but they also create tensions between the Asian and black community. By comparing Asian Americans to blacks, such

commentary perpetuates anti-blackness. By being a “model minority,” Asian Americans are not like those “other” minorities. DeCook and Yoon (2021) argue, “Asian/Americans are not only fighting rising hate and xenophobia, but also must recognize and fight how we are used in perpetuating anti-Blackness as proxies of white hegemony” (p. 129). From the perspectives of white males, Asians are considered superior to black Americans, yet are still considered foreigners and not on the same hierarchy as whites. The positioning of Asian people in relation to other identity groups in the United States is complex and goes back to the concept of racial triangulation (Kim, 1999). Asian Americans will still be ostracized by white people but are still seen as more superior than black Americans. The complexity with the positioning of these identity groups promotes white privilege and supremacy since white people are able to create these ideologies and narratives.

In this thesis, I mention how the media primarily focus on black hatred against Asians instead of also reporting the wrongdoings of white individuals (Yam, 2021b). However, it is important to note that many instances of anti-Asian violence are from black Americans (Fong, 2008; Ma, 2021). With the ongoing violence against Asians in the United States, it is important to not demonize those who are committing these acts of violence, but instead find a solution to prevent these crimes from happening.

As mentioned in my analysis, the violence and discrimination against Chinese and other Asian individuals was committed by both white and black people. When exploring the literature about the race of the offender in Asian hate crimes, the findings remain inconclusive. However, the mainstream media were underreporting crimes committed by white individuals. Instead, mainstream media capitalized on Asian violence committed by black people and attached pictures of the black perpetrators in their news articles (Yam, 2021b). Kim (1998) explains one

reason to explain this distinction: “The mainstream media have a stake in discouraging links among marginalized individuals and groups. Instead, they are invested in the maintenance of certain kinds of white supremacy” (p. 4). Of course, Trump was notorious for using violent rhetoric, but the mainstream media should be blamed as well. The media use the images of black perpetrators in their news articles and rarely would they discuss the hate crimes committed by white Americans. The media perpetuate the narrative that black people are violent against Asians.

It is also important to note that presidential rhetoric plays a significant role in shaping the public’s opinion. The rhetorical impact of Trump’s anti-Asian rhetoric inspired others in his fanbase to use it as well. For example, Trump’s Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, also referred to the coronavirus as the “Wuhan virus” in “vilifying the country where it originated” (Landler, 2020, para. 7). Trump’s voice was powerful and influenced many others to also use the same rhetorical strategies to blame China.

Finally, the last reason and, arguably the most important reason, for studying this material is because many do not believe “China virus” and “Kung flu” are racist terms. Instead, the justification for many Republicans is that their president is only using the terms because the virus came from China. Even Mastio (2020) from the *USA Today* claims that “Wuhan virus” and “China virus” are not racist. Mastio’s argument is that focusing on the “racism” of these terms takes away from more “serious” accusations of immigration against immigrants and blacks. However, I argue that we can advocate for multiple marginalized groups. We should focus on all violence against minority groups. These arguments delegitimize the experience of Asian Americans especially the victims of these violent hate crimes. News articles such as the one from the *USA Today* are one of the reasons that many Chinese and other Asian Americans do not

report their hate crimes. In fact, Asian Americans are the least likely to report hate crimes (Yam, 2021a). Yam (2021a) mentions that some of the reasons Asians fail to report crimes include the fear of retaliation and the fear of bringing unwanted attention to themselves and their family members. Many of the victims do not wish to cause more burdens on their family, so they choose to remain silent about their issue. I hope that by writing this thesis, we can see the rhetorical strategies that were used to show that these terms helped create a climate which amplified anti-Asian sentiments and violence.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

One of the limitations of this project is that I focused primarily on Chinese and other Asian identities. However, there were other identity groups that were also impacted because Trump is notorious for demonizing marginalized groups who are not a part of his base. Kimura (2021) notes, “the Asian body has not been the only target of the hate discourse during this pandemic. Rather, there are other racialized minority groups of people such as women, Black, indigenous, people of color, and LGBTQ who have been discriminated against inside and outside of the U.S.” (p. 142). COVID-19 helped uncover the inequities that many minority groups have had to face such as income inequality (Kantamneni, 2020). Economic and structural issues were always prevalent; however, COVID-19 shed light on the severity of the inequities that these groups had to face. Chinese and other Asian Americans have had to experience racism and discrimination due to the American president who has capitalized on his rhetoric. Language has consequences. Therefore, a president needs to be held accountable for their discourse.

Another limitation of this thesis is that I focus on expressions of anti-Asian sentiments and not on how Chinese and other Asian folks felt about the former president’s rhetoric. I personally felt attacked as a Chinese American when Trump used “China virus” and “Kung flu”

when referring to the coronavirus. However, I am just one Asian person out of many. Therefore, I think it is also important to research and analyze the sentiments of other Chinese and Asian Americans to capture their reactions and opinions regarding Trump's anti-Asian rhetoric.

This thesis is important because there is a lack of research surrounding Asian American experiences, especially since their identity is often used to justify discrimination and hatred. Asian American voices and experiences are hardly expressed in scholarly literature and research. Nishime (2021) mentions that due to the absence of Asian American experiences and narratives in the 2020 presidential election, there needs to be more done to add onto the Asian American narrative. Even though the purpose of this thesis does not provide space to discuss Asian voices and the ongoing hate incidents, future research should expand on capturing the Asian American experiences. The thesis points to the need for and importance of ongoing research to address Asian American issues. Nishime (2021) argues that we need to write about the Asian American perspective, but we also must discuss how "we [Asian Americans] are absent from U.S. history and public political culture" (p. 462). By doing so, we are one step closer to creating a world that is inclusive of all identities.

### **Final Thoughts**

The terms such as "China virus," "Chinese virus," "Wuhan virus," and "Kung flu" are racist and violent. The purpose of the thesis is to uncover that racism against Asian Americans still exists. The rhetoric of the president – the most esteemed position in America – matters and should not be used to scapegoat entire groups. I hope by studying and writing about Asian American violence there will be more literature about the Asian American experiences. We must collaborate to call out racism and to advocate for our communities. The rise in Asian hate crimes has inspired many to take action. An author from the *Washington Post*, Marian Chia-Ming Liu

(2022), discussed how she reclaimed her Chinese name by dropping her American one. When Asians immigrate to the United States, they often feel that they have to assimilate into the American culture by using western names. Additionally, Liu now uses the correct pronunciation of her last name instead of the “Americanized” version of it (Liu, 2022). The symbolic action of reclaiming an Asian name shows that she is empowered and is proud to be Asian. Liu’s example shows just one of many ways to advocate for our community and work to better the world. It is up to us to work together to dismantle white supremacy and work on creating a world that is equal and fair for all identity groups. Asian Americans and other minority groups should be able to create their own narratives and experiences. We should be the only group that explains what it means to be not just Asian, but American as well.



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