

We Belong™

A Glossary of Anti-Asian Terms and Tropes



COMMITTEE OF 100

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Introduction

Racism toward people of Asian heritage in the United States manifests itself in a wide range of words, actions, and tropes. The rhetoric surrounding the origins of the COVID-19 virus fueled a surge of discrimination and hate targeting individuals of Asian descent, but these attitudes are not new. Racism is not unique to the U.S. or Asian Americans, but it is a real problem affecting the entire country that everyone can help change.

This document focuses on the experiences and treatment of individuals of Asian descent living, working, and travelling in the U.S. For brevity, it will use the term “Asian American” to refer to individuals of Asian descent in the U.S. regardless of citizenship.

This timeline of anti-Asian racism follows the evolution of yellow peril, the idea that individuals of Chinese or broader Asian descent are inherently threatening. The concept originated with the 19th century Chinese laborers whom white Americans feared would lower wages and take jobs. These fears morphed into the perception of Chinese immigrants as dangerous, manipulative, and violent, dehumanizing them to a level that permitted the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Officially repealed in 1943, this law banned Chinese individuals from entering the U.S.

Since these early demonstrations of anti-Asian racism, stereotypes have continued to subordinate Asian Americans to white Americans by manufacturing fear-based tropes or alienating cultural practices. While the 20th century saw the formation and exploitation of softer tropes like the model minority, recent surges in racist language surrounding the U.S.-China relationship and COVID-19 and increased violence against Asian Americans reveal a return to fear-based, anti-Asian hate.

Versions of yellow peril have shifted with political, economic, and societal changes, characterizing Asian Americans as immoral and dangerous in one instance and meek and robotic in another. To reflect these variations, this glossary divides terms into three major subcategories: perpetual foreigner, deviant, and model minority. Each term is tagged with one or more of these subcategories or with “other.” Because the terms and tropes all grow out of the yellow peril concept, it is not a tag.

Tags also include “microaggressions” and “explicit aggressions.” Microaggressions are everyday statements and actions rooted in implicit biases that subtly and often unintentionally otherize. Explicit aggressions, on the other hand, are overtly and deliberately racist. Because microaggressions often appear innocent, they leave many Asian Americans unsure how to react. It is particularly important to recognize these microaggressions to ultimately deconstruct Asian stereotypes.

This glossary is intended to serve as a guide to help conscientious communicators spot and eliminate racist language and imagery. It is not exhaustive. It provides examples that demonstrate where and how problematic terms and tropes originated so users can apply the same criteria to the language they encounter every day. This document focuses specifically on racist terms that have grown out of U.S.-China policy and history, but many of the stereotypes affect most Asian Americans.

Category Descriptions

Perpetual Foreigner

The perpetual foreigner is one of the most pervasive anti-Asian stereotypes in the United States today. This trope treats Asian Americans as unwelcome foreigners and excludes them from the American identity. By painting Asians as inherently un-American, this stereotype creates a homogeneous – and potentially dangerous – image of who belongs in the U.S. Over the years, events such as World War II, the rise of the Japanese auto industry, the 9/11 attacks, and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic renewed the perceived threat of Asian Americans.

The perpetual foreigner trope appears in many forms. It instills feelings of alienation and manufactures divisions between Asian Americans and their fellow nationals. This type of discrimination causes mental and physical anguish and normalizes racist divisions and stereotypes. Some Asian Americans internalize this racial hierarchy and alter their self-perception to conform with the perpetual foreigner trope. Young Asian Americans, in particular, may feel pressure to either embrace their cultural background or reject it and assimilate into white American society.

Deviant

Gendered stereotypes present people of Asian descent as an aberrant threat. Harmful tropes objectify Asian women as submissive yet overly sexual. These images and ideas lead directly to racially motivated sexual violence against Asian women.

Even before the Chinese Exclusion Act, the U.S. enacted the Page Act of 1875, which institutionalized racism by outlawing immigration by individuals from “any Oriental country” contracted for “labor” or “lewd and immoral purposes.” The law cloaked an otherwise unlawful immigration prohibition on workers in a baseless moral argument. Its enforcement considered almost all Chinese women prostitutes, and the rhetoric

that supported the law painted Chinese women as disease-carrying homewreckers who threatened white marriage and lineage.

The intersection of racism and misogyny present in stereotypes of Asian American women make them particularly dangerous. Women and girls of Asian descent report more than twice as many hate incidents as their male counterparts.

Nevertheless, Asian men are not immune to gendered racism. Historically, film and television depicted Asian men as villains or desexualized and effeminate secondary characters. While more contemporary pop culture has made an effort to consider Asian men as desirable leading characters, the stereotype of the meek and unattractive nerd persists.

Model Minority

The model minority myth characterizes Asian Americans as a polite, law-abiding group who have achieved a higher level of success than other racial minority groups because of their “pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps” immigrant mentality. These stereotypes developed in the period following World War II and into the 1960s to push back against the Civil Rights Movement. African Americans were organizing and protesting the widespread structural racism in the U.S., and opponents of the Civil Rights Movement portrayed Asian Americans as a model of achievement who succeeded because they worked harder. Rather than try to change the existing system, Asian Americans worked within it. Their logic followed that Black Americans struggled because of their own culture, rather than policies that specifically hurt minorities. This framework aims to preserve the status quo by drawing attention away from the institutional racism.

In contemporary context, these stereotypes discount the income inequality of Asian Americans, which is the greatest of any racial group in the U.S., and contributes to the myth that Asian Americans are capable technocrats but not leaders. Further, it promotes the idea that anti-Asian racism is no longer present in America.



Terms & Tropes

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-
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A

ASIAN/CHINESE DRIVER:

A term used to describe someone who is bad at driving.

Why it's racist: This furthers the perpetual foreigner stereotype in reference to an activity often considered very American since individual use of automobiles first took hold in the U.S. Additionally, around the time of the Chinese Exclusion Act, the word "Chinese" entered the general lexicon as a pejorative descriptor of anything of poor quality.

This stereotype is statistically inaccurate. Multiple studies by insurance companies and car safety organizations have found that Asian drivers experience fewer accidents on average than the general population.

Perpetual Foreigner



ASIAN WOMEN IN THE SERVICE INDUSTRY:

Despite their representation in a wide range of professional occupations, media and entertainment often portray women of Asian descent in service worker jobs, often in nail or massage salons.

When and why it can be problematic: The Asian American community makes up 10 percent of U.S. workers in personal care services and 70 percent of people who provide nail services, but media portrayals often hypersexualize these women or insinuate that they are providing sexual services in secret. These images further the type of discrimination against Asian women perpetrated by the Page Act. They present the idea of Asian women serving as prostitutes as commonplace and foment the type of violence that took place in the March 2021 shooting in Atlanta.

Deviant

B

BANANA / TWINKIE:

A term used to describe an Asian American who is perceived as culturally American.

Why it's racist: It implies that an individual's outward appearance or perceived ethnic heritage should define their beliefs or culture. It is also used to describe Asian Americans as "practically white," meaning "'yellow' (Asian) on the outside, white on the inside" and can further the idea that the goal for immigrants is to abandon their culture and become as white as possible.

Perpetual Foreigner

Microaggression

C

CHINA VIRUS/CHINA FLU/KUNG FLU:

Derogatory terms used to describe COVID-19 that assign blame for the virus to China and ethnic Chinese individuals.

Why it's racist: These terms sanction place- and person-based language to describe a disease. It harkens back to the early anti-Asian sentiment that characterized people from China as diseased.

See also '[Disease](#)', '[Sick Man of Asia](#)'

Perpetual Foreigner

Explicit Aggression

CHINAMAN:

A derogatory term used to describe a Chinese American.

Why it's racist: This term was used during the Gold Rush and railway- construction eras in western North America, when discrimination against individuals of Chinese descent was rampant.

Perpetual Foreigner

Explicit Aggression

CHINESE FIRE DRILL:

A situation that is chaotic or confusing, possibly due to poor or misunderstood instructions or incompetence; often refers to a specific car prank where passengers and the driver switch positions at a stoplight.

Why it's racist: Around the time of the Chinese Exclusion Act, the word “Chinese” entered the general lexicon as a pejorative descriptor of anything confusing or of poor quality. It regained strength during the Vietnam and Korean Wars. “Chinese Fire Drill” itself is thought to have evolved from a specific technique used on British ships with Chinese soldiers.

Other



CHINESE RESTAURANT SYNDROME:

A mythical illness attributed to eating Chinese food that contains monosodium glutamate (MSG).

Why it's racist: U.S. Food and Drug Administration experiments have found no causal effect between MSG and reported potential symptoms. A wide range of foods contain MSG. It occurs naturally in tomatoes, mushrooms, and parmesan cheese, and it is added to a wide range of processed foods, including ranch dressing and flavored snack foods like chips and pretzels. The idea that Chinese food makes people ill is an extension of the stereotypes that portray people of Chinese descent as dangerous.

Perpetual Foreigner



CHING CHONG/CHINK:

A derogatory term to describe someone of Chinese or Asian descent.

Why it's racist: The term uses Western phonetic perceptions of the Chinese language to onomatopoeically mock individuals of Chinese descent.

Other

Explicit Aggression

D

DISCIPLINE:

As part of the model minority trope, people of Asian heritage are often portrayed as having a strong work ethic.

Why it's problematic: This trait and the model minority myth it supports erase individuality, obscure racism, and dehumanize Asians. They treat Asian Americans as a monolith whose perceived success in the U.S. disproves the existence of anti-Asian racism. These stereotypes overlook the wide range of Asian experiences in the U.S. On a practical level, the model minority myth can prevent Asian children from receiving necessary help and individual attention from teachers and others who, due to implicit bias, expect these students to excel independently and more easily than their peers. In the workplace, this stereotype contributes to the “bamboo ceiling,” which maintains Asian employees are hardworking but ultimately lack the leadership skills to reach executive positions.

See also '[Robotic](#)'

Model Minority

Microaggression

DISEASE:

Examples: “You brought coronavirus here.” “All diseases come from China.”

Why these examples are racist: Asian Americans have long been scapegoats for the spread of disease. Often based on fear and misdirected anger, these explicit aggressions intentionally attack and dehumanize Asian Americans. They reinforce the “perpetual foreigner” stereotype and encourage violent discrimination.

See also [‘China Virus’](#), [‘Sick Man of Asia’](#)

Perpetual Foreigner

Explicit Aggression

DRAGON LADY:

A domineering, deceitful, hypersexual, manipulative woman of Asian descent.

Why it’s racist: This term elicits images of a dangerous woman who breathes fire. It dehumanizes women as fire-breathing animals who can use magical powers to control people, especially men who might appear physically stronger. The term grew out of a character in a comic strip in the 1930s. The stereotype that preceded and inspired this term was often used to justify anti-Asian laws like the Page Act.

Deviant

DUAL LOYALTY:

An assumption that Americans with ancestry in certain countries, especially those who are foreign-born, hold compromising, patriotic allegiance to a country other than the United States.

When it's problematic: Asian Americans experience far more scrutiny than individuals of other backgrounds regarding their loyalty to the United States. This bias has led to false espionage charges and civil rights violations, the most egregious being the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

See also '[Spies](#)'

Perpetual Foreigner

E

EATING DIRTY ANIMALS OR HOUSEHOLD PETS:

A stereotype that Chinese people eat diseased and dirty animals or household pets. Rooted in late 19th-century media representations of Chinese eating rats, more recent versions of this stereotype surround allegations that COVID-19 originated in bats eaten by Chinese people.

Why it's racist: This stereotype generalizes people of Chinese descent, often mistakenly, and promotes otherizing. It disparages Chinese culture through an ethnocentric lens. Linking this stereotype to disease also scapegoats Chinese Americans and encourages people to treat them with derision or even violence.

Perpetual Foreigner

EXOTIC:

Not white, mysterious.

Why it's racist: When used to describe a person, food, or culture, it otherizes and fetishizes them and continues the stereotype of the perpetual foreigner.

Perpetual Foreigner

F

FLOOD:

An overpowering overabundance; often used to derogatorily describe immigrants.

Why and when it's problematic: Water-focused metaphors such as a “flood of Chinese people” or a “torrent of mud,” in reference to immigrants, have often been used in yellow peril rhetoric.

Perpetual Foreigner

Explicit Aggression

FOREIGN BORN:

Examples: “Where are you really from?” “Where is your family from?” “How long have you been in the U.S.?”

Why these examples are problematic: These microaggressions usually emerge from genuine curiosity about a person’s background. However, by questioning a person’s origin or searching for a specific answer, these seemingly innocent questions imply that Asian Americans are inherently foreign, and they perpetuate race-based ideas about American identity. The accumulation of these and other microaggressions instills feelings of alienation while promoting the “perpetual foreigner” trope that bars Asian people from full participation in U.S. society. They can lead to more explicit or even violent acts of racism.

See also ‘Dual Loyalty’, “Go back to where you came from.”, ‘Language Ability’

Perpetual Foreigner

Microaggression



FU MANCHU:

A villain of Chinese ethnicity, specifically a character representing the devil; the personification of yellow peril.

When and why it's problematic: The character himself is built on the concept that Chinese men have secret or illicit powers that allow them to overpower or trick victims. Watch for altered or shortened versions, such as “Flu Manchu,” which is a form of blaming COVID on individuals of Chinese descent.

Perpetual Foreigner



G

“GO BACK TO WHERE YOU CAME FROM”:

Related: “You don’t belong here.”

Why these examples are racist: These explicit aggressions aim to attack and alienate people of color and immigrants. Usually stemming from fear of a perceived threat and subsequent, misplaced blame on a marginalized group, this xenophobia often targets people who call America home and may have generations of family history in the U.S. These examples reinforce the “perpetual foreigner” stereotype and encourage violent discrimination.

See also [‘Dual Loyalty’](#), [‘Foreign Born’](#)

Perpetual Foreigner

Explicit Aggression

L

LANGUAGE ABILITY:

Examples: “You speak English so well.” “Say something in Chinese.”

Why these examples are problematic: While often intended as praise or derived from genuine curiosity, these microaggressions imply that Asian Americans are inherently foreign. They condescend to and marginalize people who may be native English speakers or who have no background in the Chinese language. This alienation reinforces the

“perpetual foreigner” trope, normalizes prejudice, and may even lead to more explicit and violent demonstrations of racism.

See also [‘Dual Loyalty’](#), [‘Foreign Born’](#)

Perpetual Foreigner

Microaggression

LOTUS BLOSSOM/CHINA DOLL:

A meek, submissive, hyperfeminine, alluring woman of Asian descent, usually appearing physically young; opposite of “dragon lady” yet still hypersexual.

Why it’s racist: It fetishizes women of Asian descent and treats them like objects or children. The stereotypes that preceded and inspired this term were often used to justify anti-Asian laws like the Page Act.

Deviant

N

NATURAL ABILITY IN STEM FIELDS AND MUSIC:

Asians are naturally better at math, music, computer science, and other STEM fields.

Why it's problematic: This trait is part of the model minority myth, which dehumanizes people of Asian descent by treating them as a monolith stripped of individuality.

On a practical level, the model minority myth can prevent Asian children from experiencing the same learning opportunities as other children. This implicit bias can lead educators to overlook these students' other interests or ignore their individual needs.

Model Minority

Microaggression



O

ORIENTAL:

A condescending overgeneralization of people from the East. It is often considered a slur, similar to words like “colored” or “Negro.”

When and why it’s racist: As the academic opposite of occidental, the term is vague but not problematic; etymologically, it refers to everything east of Rome or Europe. However, in its history as the colonial opposite of occidental, the term otherizes people of Asian descent as non-European or non-white and lumps together a wide range of cultures, each with their own traditions, histories, and beliefs. The term is generally more appropriate as a descriptor of objects (e.g., an oriental rug) than of people.

Perpetual Foreigner

R

RICE BURNER/RICER/RICE MACHINE:

A derogatory term used to describe motor vehicles made in East Asian countries.

Why it’s racist: The term originated to describe automobiles made in Japan and expanded to include any motor vehicle made in Asia as a comparison to those made by the “Big Three” American car makers. It harkens back to the idea that items made in Asia or China are inferior by nature.

Perpetual Foreigner

Explicit Aggression

ROBOTIC:

Asian musicians, athletes, writers, doctors, and other professionals of Asian descent perform with robotic perfection and efficiency.

Why it's problematic: This trait and the model minority myth it supports treat people of Asian descent as a monolith, portraying them as cold and uncreative. This association with robots also links to tropes where the "future" is represented as Asian. These ideas originate in American fears of loss of power, particularly when it came to technological development in the late 20th century.

On a practical level, the model minority myth drives implicit biases that prevent Asian children from getting necessary help and exclude Asian professionals from managerial and executive roles due to their perceived lack of creativity and leadership skills, as part of the "bamboo ceiling."

See also '[Discipline](#)'

Model Minority

Microaggression



S

SICK MAN OF ASIA:

A reference to a country experiencing poor governance or economic turmoil, usually related to corruption or incompetence.

Why it's racist: It describes a country in conflict and in need of assistance as a global threat rather than as human beings in need of aid. The term lacks empathy. Its use is particularly problematic in the wake of COVID-19-related discrimination. While the term is adopted from “sick man of Europe,” used to describe the fall of the Ottoman Empire, “sick man of Asia” can be particularly offensive in reference to China. It’s earliest use toward China tied the meaning to poor physical health and strength, a departure from its use to describe other countries. The term tied the nation’s loss in the Sino-Japanese War to military weakness resulting from widespread opioid addiction among its ranks, even though the prevalence of opioids were a result of colonialist policies that facilitated import of British opioids to China.

See also [‘China Virus’](#), [‘Disease’](#)

Other

SLANT/SLANT-EYE/SLOPE:

Term used to describe a person of Asian descent; derived from the physical appearance of eyes with epicanthic folds.

Why it's racist: First used in the 1860s, just prior to the Chinese Exclusion Act, this is a manifestation of the “perpetual foreigner” stereotype and otherizes individuals based on physical appearance.

Perpetual Foreigner

Explicit Aggression



SPIES:

Individuals who work for a foreign government or other organization by secretly collecting information about enemies or competitors.

When it's problematic: Many countries, including the U.S., spy on other nations. It is important for every country to protect against foreign threats and hold individuals who steal secret information for foreign government accountable. It becomes problematic when people use this term to evoke fear of a particular racial or ethnic group and perceive them as not loyal to the U.S., untrustworthy and dangerous.

See also '[Dual Loyalty](#)', '[Foreign Born](#)'

Perpetual Foreigner

Explicit Aggression

T

THREAT TO WORKFORCE:

Example: "Your people stole our jobs."

Why it's racist: Fear and anger based on the perceived threat of Asian workers to American jobs and wages has a long history in the U.S. Dating back to the first wave of Chinese immigrants in the 19th century and resurging in the 1980s auto industry, this xenophobia otherizes Asian Americans, promotes the "perpetual foreigner" trope, and may even promote violent discrimination. The murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese

American killed because he was perceived to have “stolen” a white worker’s job, represents the worst consequences of “perpetual foreigner” racism.

See also ‘[Discipline](#)’

Perpetual Foreigner

Model Minority

Explicit Aggression

TIGER MOM:

A mother who parents very closely and uses strict discipline or extremely high expectations to push her child(ren) toward success.

When it’s problematic: While sometimes used affectionately by parents of many cultures, when offered in a derogatory context, it perpetuates the yellow peril concept that Chinese Americans are a threat trying to “take over” America.

See also ‘[Discipline](#)’

Deviant

Model Minority



W

WHITENESS:

Examples: “You don’t really seem Asian.” “You’re basically white.” “Are you adopted?”

Why these examples are problematic: These examples perpetuate stereotypes about Asian and American identities, separating the two as incompatible. When delivered as compliments, these microaggressions subordinate Asian culture to white culture. The application of “whiteness” to Asians also furthers the model minority myth.

While these phrases may seem harmless, their frequency have serious consequences. They alienate AAPI individuals, reinforce harmful tropes, and normalize prejudice, perhaps even encouraging more violent acts of hate.

See also [‘Banana’](#)

Model Minority

Perpetual Foreigner

Microaggression

Z

ZIPPERHEAD:

Condescending term used to describe individuals of Asian descent.

Why it’s racist: The term originated during the Korean and Vietnam Wars when American troops referred to injured or killed enemy soldiers with this description of the skid pattern military vehicles left on individuals they ran over. This groups all people of Asian descent into one group and portrays them as both weak and dangerous at the same time.

Other

Explicit Aggression



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