

## CHAPTER 7

# Calls to Action

### 7.1 Racisms as Plural: It's Not a Competition

*Shzr Ee Tan*

During the early days of Covid-19 in February 2020, I watched latent Sino-phobia unleash itself upon the veneer of genteel British society. At a railway station in the Southeast, one of my Hong Kong students was followed, spat at, called names, and threatened with 'I'll report you as a perv' the minute he began recording the incident on camera. In the North of England, a colleague from China was shouted at to 'go home to your virus'.

Ha! I thought – I knew it: buoyed by nationwide xenophobia sanctioned by Brexit, (some) people in the UK were finally displaying their true colours, telling (and violently showing) Yellow persons open and blatant prejudice. News articles were written about 'incidents' (BBC 2021). Marches and performance interventions were held (Choi 2020). Academic and activist panel discussions – at which I spoke alongside thinkers on the British Chinese diaspora and on China studies – were convened (University of Westminster News 2020). Awareness of long-standing wrongs was raised overnight, even as many East Asians and Southeast Asians in the UK found the (anger-fuelled? anxiety-hastened?) courage to speak out, publicly. *Finally*, I sighed with frustrated relief – we were being heard.

And then, in June, #BlackLivesMatter happened. The fact that the latest tragic killing of a person in the US this time around (and one killing in

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a history of many) had ignited so much response within and beyond Black communities around the world was no coincidence in terms of timing. Far from a 'society-levelling' mechanism, the pandemic had clearly exacerbated longstanding inequalities and oppressions. People were angry; and why shouldn't they be? Those who were already poor, unemployed or marginalised suffered the unfolding health-turned-economic and political crises around the world much harder and more unjustly ... which also meant that for many East Asians like myself with at least some kind of economic privilege, it was far more important to hide our pain for now. It was crucial that we took a back seat for the moment and allowed the voices of our Black friends and colleagues to be fully and loudly heard. Even more important was that East Asians take responsibility in acknowledging that not a few in their community were themselves guilty of racisms against Black people(s) (daikon 2018).

On 16 March, however, the shooting of six East Asian women in Atlanta, US, triggered fresh waves of responses around Sinophobia. Indeed, even the concept of Sinophobia was being contested as a valid form of racism itself. Observing a Chinese diasporic friend's Facebook timeline detailing her own experience of hate crime against East Asians, I watched a (white) woman post a string of tone-deaf interrogations in the aftermath of the shootings: 'Have u been pulled over? Jailed? Denied a job? Denied housing? Denied loans? Denied access to education?'

To be sure, as the unsympathetic commentator infers, there are different kinds of racisms – all decidedly existing in the plural. Undoubtedly, it is important to acknowledge the differentiated natures of such (often, systemic) oppressions across timelines, geographies and generational divides. In white dominant societies, where those with bias may cross over to the other side of a road upon seeing a Black man approach, not too long ago the interaction was frequently the reverse when involving East Asians. Relegated to the ignored and invisible in their model minority 'doormat' status, Asians were, instead, expected to get out of the way. I speak from personal experience, pre-Covid: in dyeing my otherwise black and classically straight 'Asian' hair purple three years ago, I inadvertently bought myself an extra 50cms of proxemic bubble on British public transport. Now, paradoxically, in the height of a lockdown on London's streets, I enjoy as much radial space as I want, even as stereotypes of East Asians have moved on from the nerdy and emotionally embarrassed swot to that of a different, 'new Yellow Peril' (Royal Holloway University of London 2019). Today, as global power shifts place a technologically burgeoning China in a prime position with envious economic clout, new racist stereotypes of the Chinese as entitled offspring of rich single-child families have emerged.

How does one take apart these unhelpful caricatures, or even begin to understand them within different spectra of racist acts committed against other Japanese, Korean and Southeast Asians/Pacific Islanders lumped together in xenophobic conflation? And what of the many East Asians who themselves struggle with the anxiety of 'model minority' impositions, and refrain from

reporting incidents of racial abuse to the police because they ‘don’t want to cause trouble’? Plus – there’s Chinese, and there’s *Chinese*. At the height of Covid-19, one or two conversations within Asian communities themselves teetered into dangerous divide-and-conquer territory while political tensions around Covid-19 blame arose between different people from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the PRC, amidst swept-aside concerns about racisms (particularly, Islamophobia) *within* China itself. Watching from the sidelines as the holder of a Singapore passport, I experienced soul-searching aches over how I may or may not have treated Malay and Tamil friends in Chinese-hegemonic Singapore (Zainal and Jumblatt Abdullah 2021). And ... what about my Black friends in the UK itself, whose journeys of trauma and pain have long pre-existed and continue to exist alongside the pains of South/East/Southeast Asian/Indigenous/Latinx communities?

There is a danger, however, of whataboutisms. And this is where they are frequently deployed as strategies for undermining and denying pain, hurt and larger structural oppressions. Often, these equivalents of *ad hominens* function as a strategic distraction from the larger problem of white supremacy – for it is so much easier to put minorities against each other, no? To quote one of the bad-ass Black women who countered the white inquisitor of my above-mentioned East Asian friend on social media: ‘We aren’t your bargaining chips.’ Too often, white people are entirely comfortable interrogating Black, indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) about their experiences, forcing unfair identity politics into play while not considering their own privilege and power.

The same argument goes for those in the UK who claim that the race- and gender-fetishised Atlanta killings were ‘purely US-centric’ affairs spinning off Trump’s ‘Chinese virus’, bearing no relation to race relations with East Asians/Pacific Islanders in the UK. But I can tell you from at least two decades of personal experience, long predating Covid-19, that racism against East Asians in the UK is out here and very much alive, if different in varieties from racisms against Black peoples. Over the past 20 years of my UK life, I have been told again and again that ‘my English is very good’ by colleagues and students at professional events. I have been accused of plagiarism by people who did not believe I could write. My women friends and I have been asked for free massage, cleaning and ‘homecooked meals’ alongside sex on Tinder UK. Eighteen months ago, a white man at my local spa tried to tip me, thinking I was his masseuse. (She had spent an hour oiling his body, and he had not bothered looking at her face – or perhaps ... we just all looked alike, eh, never mind that I was not wearing a uniform.)

Is all this ‘Asian hurt’ less than Black peoples’ ‘hurt’? Yes – of course. But only Black and South/East Asian communities have the right to ask for such comparisons. And believe me – some of us have been doing just that. In the unfolding of this damned pandemic, one of the many lessons I have learned is that inter-ethnic solidarity has never been stronger in pockets across the UK. At the height of open anti-Asian racisms in early 2020, many East Asians reached out

to Black friends/colleagues to express how they finally had a glimpse of what life had been like for their counterparts of colour. Following the news of the Atlanta shootings, some of the first people to check in on me following news of the Atlanta shootings were my Black, Brown, Latinx, LGBTQ+ and EU friends – every one of them a member of a minority community.

And maybe – the notion of care and finding varieties of ‘self’ in the ‘other’ is where a hopeful path ahead lies. As recovery from the pandemic kicks into place slowly across the UK, I am watching people who have been hurt in one way or another on account of structural issues in society pick themselves up again, and in doing so learning how to pick others around themselves up too.

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## 7.2 The Heavy Burden on London Chinatown’s Streets

*Freya Aitken-Turff*

London’s Chinatown is preparing for the change in public restrictions on 12 April 2021. Across England, we will be able to eat outside. This holds the potential to breathe some life into the area after over a year of devastating uncertainty and commercial pressure. The possible return of visitors also comes with concerns of increasing racism and violence towards people and businesses of East and South East Asian (ESEA) heritage. Questions of safety do not simply focus

on the face masks and hand sanitisers of Covid-19 but on the physical safety of visitors, suppliers and employees. Last week I handed out personal security alarms to China Exchange volunteers carrying out street-side research in our neighbourhood. I asked them to walk in pairs. I do not want to add to their existing fears, but I also do not want to jeopardise their public safety. This is the 'new normal' in our daily Chinatown lives.

Our neighbourhood was used as the backdrop for early reports on a viral outbreak in Wuhan. Unable to travel to China, national media outlets descended for outdoor broadcasts shot with a backdrop in this distinctly 'Chinese' setting some 7,000 miles away from the emerging pandemic. Footfall fell dramatically for two months before the official start of UK lockdown in late March 2020, while no discernible difference was felt in the neighbouring areas of Covent Garden, Leicester Square or wider Soho. And then the first lockdown began (Barrie 2020). The barrage of anti-Chinese sentiment whipped up through the incendiary and insensitive comments of political leaders did nothing to improve the situation.

The Chinatown area – around a dozen streets of London's West End marked out with bilingual street signs, red lampposts, gates of welcome and stone lions – shapes and is shaped by the UK's East and Southeast Asian communities. Like many Chinatowns around the world, its origins lie in Chinese entrepreneurs who wished to create a feeling of safety by working together in an otherwise hostile environment. Its evolution to a formal branded urban space connects the influences of national and local ideas on multiculturalism, the businesses, their investors and owners, the local authority, the prospect of a larger tourist industry and the area's landlords. This does not mean that the identity and meaning created within Chinatown is uniform or uniformly positive – for many, it evokes complicated feelings about otherness and exotification (either by ESEA people themselves or by non-ESEA led organisations that profit from the area). For others, it is a place of belonging or contested belonging – somewhere to feel comfortable, at home and included. Many assume the area has a large residential population. It does not – not only due to the eye-watering costs of living in London's Zone 1 but also because the Georgian buildings were not all designed as places for people to live. The area is often used as shorthand for UK–China relations – just this week I saw an event about UK–China property investment advertised with an image of the imposing and majestic gate of welcome on Wardour Street. It is used to reflect all layers of Chineseness, all generations of ESEA diaspora experience reflected through the catch-all term 'The Chinese Community'. And it is a marketers dream for all things 'authentic'. It is also a place for food. And a 'must see' tourist destination. We expect a lot from these dozen streets, don't you think?

Pre-pandemic, Chinatown was already undergoing rapid change. This inspired my 2017 Winston Churchill Memorial Trust Fellowship research into global Chinatowns. An area that previously had been the way station for



**Figure 7.2:** China Exchange volunteer leading a tour on Gerrard Street. Photograph taken by China Exchange.

working-class immigrants and immigrant entrepreneurs now has different economic priorities. Chain restaurants and fast-food outlets have now moved into the area; long-running family businesses have closed as the children of those families have trained in other professions and no longer choose to run restaurants or small shops. The area is known for buffet-style Chinese restaurants and specialist supermarkets. Beneath this exterior lies an entrepreneurial community, grassroots advisory services and a community centre. The area's retail mix is now firmly anchored in food businesses, and fast food represents a substantial proportion of what is available. There remain bastions of the area's former identity as a focal point for other elements of culture rather than only food culture – notably Guanhwa Bookshop offering Chinese literature and cultural products since 1971 and Pang's Printing Company, the UK's first Chinese printing shop – but without someone highlighting these elements, they are not easy to find by oneself.

Community services, largely hidden from the image of the area created by its marketing account (funded and operated by the majority landlord in the neighbourhood), are under pressure. Demand for services has increased, anti-Asian hate incidents, crimes and racism have created more urgent need that the sector has met with admirable creativity and speed, but adds practical and financial pressures to already under-resourced services. There remain people who need these services for simple day-to-day activities (e.g. paying bills, translating a letter from a GP, understanding vaccine information) and that is before we talk about any of the other roles that community organisations serve.

The area's history is poorly documented and poorly understood. While developing the area's community-led walking tours, China Exchange gathered hundreds of pages of evidence of the people, businesses and social context of

this part of London from the 1500s to around 1960. If you walk through Chinatown, you will notice more than 11 heritage plaques in the area (a dozen streets, remember). These show some of the fascinating stories and people who shaped this urban space. You will also perhaps notice that not one of these plaques mentions ESEA history or a Chinese person's name. This inspired the work of China Exchange to document how Chinatown became Chinatown. Our Making of Chinatown oral history project and exhibition made a tiny but significant contribution in building understanding. The homogenised Chineseness of Chinatown is capitalised in every way. The ever-changing Chineseness associated with the people who work in or use the area is harder to derive economic value from but largely because it is difficult to pinpoint something fluid. The area's ESEA history is not yet visible enough to be acknowledged, celebrated or appreciated by the area's vast number of tourists and visitors. Standard visitor data is not available to our small charity at a rate that we can afford; however, our own experiment (counting people passing our doorway at 15-minute intervals between 11am and 8pm for six weeks) showed that an average of 450 people pass by every 15 minutes between these times. That is a lot of visitors! We want those people to have the opportunity to recognise the history of the area. We are crowdfunding to secure the first permanent public display of ESEA heritage in London's Chinatown. Why? Because we expect more from these London streets.

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### 7.3 My Own Sentimentality: Notes on Female Individualisation from Contemporary Urban China

*Jing Y.*

Recently I was invited to offer an online writing class to volunteers from an NGO, which dedicates the majority of its resources to bringing educational opportunities to migrant workers' children living in the Guangzhou metropolitan area. Out of the 37 who registered, there was only one man, and except for three young social workers, most of the women in the class were full-time mothers. After a couple of classes, a small group of women emerged showing a similar mindset. Well-intended and polite, they emphasised qualities such as listening, empathy, and solidarity. After a few private video calls and even

some personal dinners, I found they shared a certain social background: all were well-educated and enjoy a certain degree of material wellbeing in Guangzhou – the ideal candidates, according to the NGO.

But some of their other shared qualities puzzled me: they had very little interest in everyday news, whether inside or outside of China. They also had very little awareness of how the massive social and political changes that have taken place across China over the past several decades have impacted different social groups unevenly. Seeing this, I decided to bring news stories and case studies into the discussion. The result was always the same: a gracious reminder that ‘one should not judge other people’ and ‘there is no wrong or right’. Little did I know at the time that these unified tones were the outcome of various ‘emotion management’ and ‘female wisdom’ training they had taken elsewhere prior to my class.

Fine, if they insisted on taking a ‘no judgement’ approach to others and the world around them, then let us talk about the inner self. As it turns out, the inner self is a world that is not only full of judgement but also of prejudice, and sometimes discrimination. And why? This is a question that had taken me some time and effort to understand. The first factor, the most direct and obvious one, lies in the kind of knowledge they turn to for the inner self, and that is pseudo-psychology. It is type of teaching has little to do with psychology as a discipline. What they promote is a very simple motto: hold tightly to your own sentimentality, value it and accept it, as a symbol of self. So they do, using it as the source of mental strength for their ‘conclusions’ about the world.

What kind of dish might we expect from the people who follow the recipe of ‘no judgement for the outside’ and ‘be yourself for the inside’? Something harmless, I suppose. After all, as something of a typical middle-class preoccupation, millions of users all over the world have trusted their well-being in self-improvement manuals of this kind. But this characterisation does not look quite so ‘neutral’ when we consider context. Let me bring in two conversations I had to make my point. The first one was in 2017 with Mandy, a potential candidate for my ‘Writing • Mothers’ (WM) project, on the subject of motherhood.

Mandy: I am talking about our motherland: the place where someone is born. More than anything, I think one needs to love your motherland firstly, and unconditionally.

Me: I have no objection to people who choose to love their hometowns, or their birthplace. But what do you mean by ‘one needs to love your motherland firstly, and unconditionally’? What kind of logic is that?

Mandy: I don’t need logic (to prove it). The Buddha once said every life is here for a reason ... when you are born into a place, for sure you have to love it.

Then she continued to summarise my reasons for inviting people to write about their mothers, saying: ‘Your motivation for doing that is to understand

mothers better, getting closer to them, and that is no doubt an act out of love, also unconditional.

The second conversation was between me and Ma, an English school teacher from a small city. She posted on her WeChat Moments a government-made vlog which focuses on how selflessly a dispatched medical team had worked doing Covid-19 tests after a small breakout in her area, and added the following comment:

Ah, I'm old, I can't watch this, it is too heartfelt. My eyes are wet and the only thing I can say is, thank you for your sacrifice to guard the safety of many families in town, do take care of yourself.

In the comment section I wrote to her: Shouldn't it be the government's basic responsibility to make sure medical employees are fairly treated (instead of sacrificing themselves)?

Ma: If we look at the world in terms of 'should', we human beings will become cold and emotionless machines.

Me: Are there further questions to ask besides 'being moved'? Why do you think they had to work in this manner?

Ma: They must work like this because of the pandemic.

Me: So, you are suggesting wherever there is a pandemic, there will be a medical team obliged to work like this?

Ma: Why so serious, that's just talk. Can the problem be solved, even if I ask? I am just a very tiny and ordinary speck of dust. Don't accuse me, if you think you're so great, then why don't you go talk to the health department about all this. A village teacher like me could not bother less.

From self-improvement, to psychology, to Buddhism, to 'we human beings', the tools these three women used to rationalise the world may be different, but the function of the tools is the same: to own one's sentiment. Then, because they gave up their ability in reasoning, observing, and verifying in dealing with the outside world (the no-judgement attitude), the result is mistaking propaganda content as their own sentiment, their own personal life choice. Here, Mandy and Ma are respectively the worse and the worst outcome, according to levels of nationalism: one submits her own mother to the motherland with the help of Buddhism, the other has become a devoted actor in the party's 'gratitude culture' in the guise of humanitarian love. This is the context within which I situate the women from my class.

How representative are my three samples? Scholar Yan Yunxiang (2003) has used the term 'uncivil individual' to capture a similar phenomenon in a less gender-specific way. Today, what I can see in my surroundings is that Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* has joined the list, becoming new reading material for urban women. This list will probably go on growing, but little

will change until women that believe in this type of individualisation come to realise that there is not a pure, private and natural sentiment to start with or to return to, just like there is no stable, healthy material prosperity without an active civil society. If you do not act critically against this doubly bound reality, a state-dominated emotion management programme based on Social Darwinist principles, you basically remain running in one place, a no-place you mistakenly call ‘my own sentimentality’.

## The Gendering of Volunteering

### *A response to Jing Y's article by Derek Hird*

What does it mean when individuals express their concern for the sacrifices of others, offer care and feel empowered through volunteering, yet don't reflect on the sociopolitical factors that contribute to suffering and marginalisation? To understand this phenomenon in China is to recognise that the Chinese state utilises volunteering as ‘a ‘technology of power’, a means to nurture self-reliant and socially responsible individuals’ (Fleischer 2011: 300). Selfless devotion for the good of society in China is often associated with the soldier Lei Feng, the subject of a 1963 Mao-era campaign. In recent years, the Chinese government has encouraged, rather than coerced, more measured participation in mass voluntary activities such as the 2008 Olympic Games.

The Chinese state deploys volunteering discourses and practices to further ideological control, social stability, Party building and Party legitimacy, while suppressing civil society (Hu 2020). The registration of voluntary organisations is encouraged but channelled towards government initiatives – including poverty alleviation, community and environmental programmes, large-scale public events, social control, and ‘development’ of the Western regions – rather than advocacy for the marginalised and oppressed. As Jing Y. indicates, volunteers often subscribe to values that include unconditional love for the Chinese motherland and belief in the moral superiority of their activities and goals. The 21st-century Chinese state has ‘succeeded in arranging things in such ways that moulded, guided, and directed its citizens/volunteers to internalize the values and act towards its objectives’ (Chong 2011: 34–5).

We cannot ignore the gendering of volunteering, as Jing Y.'s encounters in Guangzhou and on WeChat demonstrate. Training in ‘emotion management’ and ‘female wisdom’ occurs in political and commercial contexts where women as wives, mothers and sisters have long been associated with emotional labour such as care-giving, nurturing, and child-raising (Evans 2008). A feminine ethics of care in the service of state objectives, legitimised as self-improvement and psychological self-care, enacts the ‘positive energy’ (*zheng nengliang* 正能量) beloved of government policy. Yet it also reinforces entrenched gendered divisions of labour and complicates attempts to expose state patriarchy. As Jing Y.

shows, state and market discursive practices atomise and feminise women volunteers, who remain believers in their own autonomy, yet are fashioned to provide uncritical sentiment and care.

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