

# POLICY BRIEF

## A LOOK AT THE STIGMA AGAINST ASIANS AND ITS LINK TO COVID-19 AND GLOBAL GEOPOLITICS

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### POLICY STATEMENT

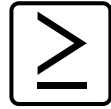
The new situation brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has reaped many lives and, above all, has caused other never-before imagined damages, such as a large increase in physical and/or verbal aggression, including various means of harassment, against Asians via the internet in several countries. According to Jianhua Xu from the Department of Sociology at the University of Macau, the stigma against Chinese-speaking people is not recent but has gained renewed force in the wake of the pandemic. Accused of being responsible for the origin of the new coronavirus and, consequently, for its spread, the residents of the city of Wuhan (the first epicenter of the pandemic), Hubei (the province in which the city of Wuhan is located), and Mainland China as well as Chinese people and those individuals whose appearance denotes Asian origin in general have been stigmatized. Based on a survey by scholars in Macau, which was published in January 2021, apart from the fear of contracting the virus, there are other factors of discrimination, such as food culture, political ideology, racism, and the custom of wearing a mask, regardless of its mandatory nature.(1)

### BACKGROUND

In the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, in a report obtained by ABC News that was released on March 27, 2020, the FBI warned about an increase in hate crimes against individuals of Asian origin in the United States (US) following the crisis caused by the growing number of people who were infected and killed by the virus. The report also warned about a possible increase in this type of occurrence, given the association that can be made by that segment of American society between COVID-19 and China. (2)

According to the American politician and academic Michael Woo, the increase of cases of aggression against Asians in the US is related to the attitudes of public figures such as Donald Trump, the former President of the US. Woo believes that by claiming that China is responsible for the pandemic, Trump and his supporters stimulated this type of violence. However, for the former Rector of the College of Environmental Design of California State Polytechnic University, “[...] the pandemic can be seen as an opportunity to bring up hatred against Asians because China, as an ascending nation, has been considered a threat to American hegemony on the geopolitical scene.”

John Faragher, a professor of history at Yale University and the author of a work describing the massacre against Asians that took place in 1871 in Los Angeles, writes the following: “The hatred of a foreign population begins with an economic threat because people assume that these outsiders accept lower wages and more precarious working conditions, thereby reducing the options of the native population.”



options of the native population.” Faragher notes that Americans are not skilled at differentiating Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or Vietnamese individuals. Hence, the typification and intentionality of aggressions become diluted in the broad conceptual universe of xenophobia and escape the debate of geopolitical bias.

(3)

## FINDINGS

Erving Goffman (1922–1982), a well-known scholar born in Canada, has authored several publications, among which I highlight, for the purpose of this research, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963). According to Goffman, the stigma rises from “a deeply depreciative attribute.” (4) An attribute might make an individual different within a group of people in which this individual could be included. This difference, whether tangible or not, within the scope of intragroup relationships, if considered incompatible with the rules that have been established by the members, could lead to the condition of an individual who is either discredited or discreditable—both of which are stigmatizing.

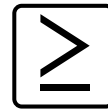
In consideration the aforementioned research of the Macau scholars, according to which stigmas against Asians are not recent, and the hypothesis raised by Michael Woo, for whom the risk of the US’s loss of international primacy could be behind the American anti-China discourse, the question that arises is as follows: what might lie behind the anti-China discourse from other countries such as Brazil? Is there an automatic and uncritical alignment to the US in Brazil? Is there any form of bandwagoning with an unclear logic? Notably, according to JP Morgan, China could become the largest economy in the world by 2027, surpassing the gross domestic product of the US. (5)

In addition, diplomatic misunderstandings, slips, and constraints may prove even more damaging to an already tumultuous world economy, aggravated by the pandemic that, as pointed out by Michael Woo and John Faragher, has even served as a smokescreen for the US to fuel its speech against China in both domestic and foreign policy. That said, yet another question arises: do geopolitical or exclusively economic disputes between States justify violence against ordinary people? As a provocation, in Joseph Nye’s words, “[w]e must recognize that we always use moral foundations to judge foreign policy, and we must learn to do it better.” (6) Given that Nye is a recognized enthusiast of US leadership in the world, this quotation gains, in the absence of a better adjective, an even more curious slant.

## CONCLUSIONS

In relation to the strength of political, economic, and geopolitical issues, the present research begins with the premise that human security goes beyond any other assumption. Nevertheless, it is important to shed light on the growing aggression against individuals of Asian origin, both in Brazil and in the US, which are increasingly fueled by defamatory and accusatory speeches given by public figures, even by presidents, such as in the cases of Brazil and the US.

One cannot overemphasize the extent to which the speech of a president can echo the nation as a whole nor how such a speech can extend beyond the nation. It is with this debate that this policy brief seeks to contribute, in the form of an alert, a meditation on the national or personal interests of prominent public figures as well as on the risk that the lack of limits in both spheres represents in the reproduction and resignification of stigmas, which puts the safety and even the lives of specific groups at risk.



## SUGGESTIONS

Faced with the challenge of moving beyond theory and, in this sense, confronting sociopolitical issues in a practical manner, we believe that it is necessary to not only summarize the great debates, such as the one initiated by Erving Goffman, but also follow their developments, such as in the publication of Bruce Link and Jo Phelan. For these sociologists, stigma arises from the co-occurrence of four processes, namely, (i) the labeling of human differences, (ii) the stereotyping of these differences, (iii) the separation of the labels from the *nodes*; and (iv) the discrimination against those so labeled based on the loss of *status*. Even considering initial steps, if agencies that are linked to the issue of stigma can organize themselves to identify and then intercept the aforementioned processes based on complaints concerning material facts, these agencies might be able to act in a network with a common methodology as well as aligned and consistent complaint mechanisms.

## REFERENCES

- 1) See Xu, Jianhua, Guyu Sun, Wei Cao, Wenyan Fan, Zhihao Pan, Zhaoyu Yao, and Han Li (2021). Stigma, discrimination, and hate crimes in Chinese-speaking world amid Covid-19 pandemic. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11417-020-09339-8>. Accessed: 05 May 2021.
- (2) See Margolin, Josh (2020). FBI warns of potential surge in hate crimes against Asian Americans amid coronavirus. Critics say rhetoric has fueled ill will. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/fbi-warns-potential-surge-hate-crimes-asian-americans/story?id=69831920>. Accessed: 05 Sep. 2021.
- (3) See Orazem, Eloá (2021). Ódio contra asiáticos não é novidade nos EUA, e cresce com pandemia. Há 150 anos, Los Angeles registrava primeiro massacre contra chineses no país. <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2021/03/25/odio-contra-asiaticos-nao-e-novidade-nos-eua-e-cresce-com-pandemia>. Accessed: 05 Sep. 2021.
- (4) See Goffman, Erving (1988). Estigma: notas sobre a manipulação da identidade deteriorada.
- (5) See Vitorio, Tamires (2021). China deve superar os EUA como maior economia do mundo em 2027, diz JP Morgan. <https://www.cnnbrasil.com.br/business/china-deve-superar-os-eua-como-maior-economia-do-mundo-em-2027-diz-jp-morgan/>. Accessed: 05 Sep. 2021.
- (6) See Nye Jr., Joseph S. (2020). Why morals matter in foreign policy. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/why-morals-matter-in-foreign-policy-by-joseph-s-nye-2020-01>. Accessed: 05 Sep. 2021.