

Navigating Information and Race in the Era of COVID 19 Symposium

May 3-4, York University (virtual)

Good morning scholars and friends:

First of all, I would like to thank Dr. Jack Leong and York University for organizing this very pertinent symposium. The concept of race has been brought to the forefront during this COVID pandemic. Information and disinformation play key roles in how communities respond to this human crisis.

When the COVID virus was first discovered in Wuhan in 2019, we saw a rise of racist attacks on everything and everyone Asian. Instead of the world uniting to fight COVID, as it should have been, we ended up with an additional enemy: racism.

Despite its racist past, Canada has become a welcoming country to immigrants from different parts of the world, which means that the population of Canadians of Asian origin has increased dramatically. Unfortunately, systemic racism remains in Canada, and all it takes is an excuse to raise its ugly head again.

As long as there are humans, there'll be racism, simply because people are more comfortable with those who look like them. Genetically, there are minute differences between the diverse branches of the human race. Due to our ancestors' migration and adaptation over hundreds of millions of years, we ended up looking different depending on where we live over millennia.

When our lockdown began in March 2020, I tried to understand what the world was going through by learning about past pestilences and pandemics, of which the world had suffered numerous examples.

As long as there were few interactions between regions, epidemics were more localized. In the Middle Ages in Europe, people wore masks, and those who were able stayed away during times of health crisis. When the plague infested HK early in the nineteenth century, my grandfather moved his family to Macao. It seemed so simple then.

At that time, as today, those who were in lower-income groups suffered the most because they didn't have a choice about where they lived, and they had to continue working in crowded conditions. The matter was class then, and now, we have the added problem of race.

The pandemic of 1918 originated in the Midwest, USA, and spread to a large part of the world during WW1, mainly via the soldiers who went abroad to fight. The news about it was severely suppressed by the US

government, and the pandemic only earned the name “Spanish Flu” because of press freedom in Spain.

Where there is trade, ideas flourish, but diseases also get a free ride to spread infections. This time around, globalization and the internet enable both viruses and news of infections to spread in split seconds. Social media, with correct information or misinformation, are unstoppable. Unlike the pandemic of 100 years ago, no government can manage to control activities over social media.

Since viruses don't care about political borders, nor the colour of our skins, racism is born out of ignorance in linking certain viruses to a particular race. Disinformation is the scourge of society today.

Pandemics like this one will happen again and again in the future. I would like to think that we will get smarter

the next time around and be able to mitigate the worst health and mental crises. Racism can be unlearned through education, and that is why we have a 2-day symposium to discuss issues that concern us.

Now, we look forward to hearing the views of our scholars and learned guest speakers.