

**What Is in a Name:
The Covid-19 Virus Naming Variants and Their Impact on Chinese Canadian Community**

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Introduction

Chinese Canadians have settled in Canada since as early as 1788 (Lai & Leong, 2012). The first large scale of Chinese immigrants came to Canada during the Fraser River Gold Rush in the 1850s, followed by waves of Chinese railroad workers at the end of the nineteenth century. Most Chinese Canadians since the 1960s have moved from a sojourner mentality to calling Canada home (Leong, 2019; Poy, 2003). Many Chinese Canadians see themselves as Canadians, but do others see them as Canadians too? The COVID-19 Pandemic has once again brought this notion into the spotlight. From anti-Asian racism, to the naming of the virus, to contesting Chinese Canadians as simply Chinese, the pandemic highlights subtle, unconscious, and systemic discrimination against Chinese Canadians. In this presentation, I'll discuss various names used to refer to the COVID-19 virus, specifically those related to ethnicity and origins, and reveal the anti-Chinese racism associated with these terms. I argue that this terminology, most often claimed to have derived from convenience or common sense, denotes deep-rooted racist classification and what Michel Foucault calls "dividing practices" arising from the binary system. In naming the virus as the "other", the dominant subjects/mainstream media/society divide themselves inside - in this case, the Chinese Canadians from other Canadians - or divide themselves from others, the Chinese. The process reinforces and re-legitimizes the dominant group as subjects and as in power (Foucault, 1982). This presentation provides insights on advancing Foucault's analysis of power, knowledge, and the other and proposes a more fluid, diverse, and multicultural approach to understanding and resisting racism and systemic bias in the context of the pandemic.

Having experienced SARS back in 2003 in Toronto and Hong Kong, I was immediately interested in the report of a new virus similar to SARS emerging at the end of 2019. Since then, I have been following its reporting and development into a pandemic in the news, in social media, and in my community, in addition to paying attention to discussions of the origin and evolution of the virus, the effectiveness of wearing masks, empty shelves in grocery stores, lockdowns, remote school and work, vaccination, social distancing, the Freedom Convoy, and so on. The discussions of naming the virus and its variants, and its impact on people based on ethnicity, deserve further analysis. In my research and this presentation, I will focus on the naming of the virus in Chinese and English, and examine the implications, underlining racist and xenophobic discourses of contagion, of various names used by the news media, politicians, and social media in Chinese and Chinese Canadian communities.

My sources mainly consist of news reports, social media discussions, scholarly papers available on the Internet, and the comprehensive electronic resources accessed through York University Libraries. I survey articles in Chinese and English using keyword searches for "COVID", "Racism,"

and combinations of various common names that have been adopted to refer to the coronavirus, before the World Health Organization recommended the use of the term “COVID-19,” in news and social media, such as “Wuhan pneumonia,” “Wuhan Virus,” “Virus from Wuhan,” “Chinese Virus,” or “Virus from China.” For comparison, I include articles that shed light on the naming practices of the COVID-19 variants before the wide adoption of Greek letters, such as the UK or British variant, the Indian Variant, and the South African Variant.

To understand the systemic and pre-pandemic anti-Chinese racism in Canada, we need to trace the racist treatment early Chinese settlers and Chinese immigrants received across generations.

Historical Context of Chinese in Canada

For Chinese Canadians, the period before the 1960s was predominantly one of discrimination and exclusion, with their voting rights denied by British Columbia in 1872 and their entry into Canada hindered by the introduction of a head tax for Chinese immigrants in 1885. If the head tax measure did not prohibit Chinese from entering Canada for decades, the Chinese Immigration Act, also known as the Exclusion Act, in force from 1923 to 1947, completed the mission, at least legally. The tide started to turn in 1947 when the Chinese Immigration Act was repealed and the federal government granted Chinese people the right to vote. Subsequently, in the 1950s and 1960s, Canada witnessed a new wave of Chinese immigration, primarily through family reunions, as the Chinese Canadian community consisted mainly of men whose wives and children were living in China at the time (Li, 1998). During this period, the Chinese in Canada, facing discrimination and racism, formed a segregated community, usually centred on Chinatowns in major cities, including Toronto (Lai & Leong, 2012). They were perceived by Canadian society as Chinese, or foreigners, living in Canada, even though many of them had settled and lived in Canada for decades or were born and grew up in this country.

Since the 1960s, Chinese Canadians have gradually emerged from being invisible – for example, missing from the last Canadian Pacific Railway spike – and being classified as “visible minority” or even “model minority,” to challenging the controversial labelling of “visible minority”, particularly in Metropolitan areas, such as Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, and Calgary (Li, 2019). In 1967, Canada started to adopt a universal point system to select immigrants according to their educational backgrounds, occupational skills, and other criteria linked to economic and labour requirements. Many Chinese immigrants selected by this new policy were professionals such as engineers, teachers, executives, doctors, entrepreneurs, and technicians. With the new immigration and multicultural policy, the Trudeau government invited more Chinese to immigrate to Canada, particularly from Hong Kong. According to the 1996 census, there were 921,585 people of Chinese origin living in Canada. The Chinese population in Canada just surpassed 1 million in the 2001 census, reached 1.35 million according to the 2011 census, and hovered around 1.77 million in 2016 (Statistics Canada, 2001 & 2016). On June 22, 2006, the Government of Canada issued a formal apology to Chinese Canadians for the discriminatory head tax and Exclusion Act. As a whole, Chinese Canadians have gained prominence in businesses, community organizations, and many professional occupations. Individually, numerous Chinese Canadians, such as Vivienne Poy, Adrienne Clarkson, Olivia Chow, Yuen-pao

Woo, Lillian Dyck, G. Raymond Chang, and Patrick Chan, have been recognized widely for their outstanding achievements (Li, 2019).

Anti-Asian Racism in the Era of the Pandemic

It is within this context of anti-Chinese racism, its reckoning and reconciliation, that the controversial naming of the COVID-19 virus and the anti-Asian racism that surrounds it must be considered. In the following section, I will provide a chronological outline of the various names that have been used to refer to this new virus.

On December 31, 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) first officially registered the cases of “viral pneumonia” in Wuhan, People’s Republic of China, also referred to as “pneumonia of unknown cause” in Wuhan or “atypical pneumonia cases” in Wuhan, through media statements by the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission and on ProMED, a programme of the International Society for Infectious Diseases (WHO, 2020).

Although since 2015, the WHO has advocated the best practice for the generic descriptive naming of newly discovered human diseases to avoid geographic locations, people’s names, or references to culture, population, industry, or occupations (WHO, 2015), in early 2020 media reports primarily used the terms “Wuhan pneumonia,” “Wuhan coronavirus,” or “Wuhan virus” (Cao & Zhou, 2020; Wong, 2020; National Post, 2020; Jiji, 2020). This common practice of using geographic origins, adopted even among the mainstream media in Mainland China in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, stigmatized Chinese and Asian people, and led to anti-Chinese and anti-Asian racism globally, especially in countries with significant Chinese and Asian populations, such as Canada. A survey of the headlines in the Toronto Star and the New York Times in January 2020, for example, shows frequent use of the terms “Chinese coronavirus,” “Wuhan virus,” “China virus,” and “Wuhan coronavirus” before WHO provided the tentative name of “novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV)” on January 21, 2020 (WHO, 2020). On February 11, 2020, WHO officially named the 2019 novel coronavirus “severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2”, or SARS-CoV-2 for short. The disease it causes was called “coronavirus disease” or COVID-19. After that, the majority of headlines referring to this virus used the terms “coronavirus” or “COVID-19” and references to China, Chinese, or Wuhan were provided in the secondary text with more context.

However, the wide use of “Chinese virus” or “Wuhan virus” has created the perception that the pandemic is coming from China and from Wuhan in particular (Catungal & Tungohan, 2021). This public narrative has led to a resurgence of anti-Chinese and Anti-Asian racism. At the end of January 2020, an online petition signed by 9,000 parents in York Region, north of Toronto, which has a large Chinese population, requested the school board to impose a 17-day stay-at-home quarantine on students whose families had recently returned from China. This petition raised concerns of racial profiling and discrimination against Chinese Canadians, and it was not accepted by the school board, a decision commended by groups representing marginalized communities (Bresge, 2020).

The York District School Board's decision to refuse racial profiling, and the subsequent statements by various community organizations, did not stop the widespread association of the virus with the Asian, particularly Chinese, communities in Canada, leading to a series of anti-Chinese and anti-Asian incidents. The following months and years saw rising numbers of verbal and physical assaults on Asians for wearing masks (Lafontaine, 2020) or simply for being Chinese (Paradkar, 2020). In April 2020, Dr. Teresa Tam, Chief Public Health Officer of Canada, was attacked during the Conservative Party of Canada's leadership competition simply because of her Chinese heritage. One of the candidates in the race tweeted a statement calling for Dr. Tam's removal and questioning whether she worked for Canada or China (Gooch, 2020). In the same month, Corbett Communications conducted a poll, commissioned by the Chinese Canadian National Council for Social Justice, that surveyed 1,130 adults living in Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal. 44 percent of the respondents thought it was unsafe or uncertain to sit next to an unmasked Chinese or Asian person on a bus (Li, 2020). In June 2020, the Angus Reid Institute conducted a poll online reporting that half of the 516 Chinese Canadians surveyed had been called names or insulted because of the pandemic (Angus Reid Institute, 2020). In July 2020, a white customer at a major supermarket arguing with a Chinese Canadian staff member over the requirement of wearing masks was caught on a video recording shouting racist phrases like "go back to China" and "Where did we get our Wuhan communist virus? From China. From you guys" (Yuen, 2020). These incidents demonstrate the deep-rooted bias against Chinese Canadians based on their ethnicity, regardless of their profession, social status, gender, or education level.

Amid the rise of discrimination against Chinese and Asian communities, fueled by the spread of COVID-19, several campaigns have been organized to mitigate the coronavirus-related racism and misinformation that has led to xenophobia, including the Chinese Canadian National Council's "#stopthespread" and police forces closely monitoring hate-motivated incidents against Asian Canadians (Patton, 2020; Gillis, 2021). In Toronto, police registered a jump in hate-crime cases from 17 in 2019 to 57 in 2021; 41 of those were anti-Asian (Gillis, 2022). Incidents of anti-Chinese and anti-Asian racism have continued throughout the pandemic. The double jeopardy of dealing with both a pandemic and discrimination creates disproportionate stress and mental health issues among Asian Canadians (Keung, 2020).

As shown by the incidents and surveys discussed here, calling a virus by names relating to geographic locations or people has led to a significant increase in verbal and physical violence against Asian Canadians. Similar concerns have been raised with regard to naming variants after where they were first found, especially when the locations include a large proportion of people of colour, such as what is now called the Delta variant being referred to as the "Indian variant." Interestingly, when the Alpha variant first appeared in Kent, England, over 90% of whose residents are white-British, race was not blamed (Chamary, 2021). The naming stigmatization and racism become more acute when the virus is associated with people of colour, which reinforces my argument that the pre-existing and unconscious bias against people of colour, such as Chinese, Indians, and Asians in general, has been fuelled during the initial stage of associating the virus with Wuhan, China and other places with vulnerable populations.

After the official announcement of the scientific terminology of the novel coronavirus and the disease that it causes, most mainstream media has gradually adopted these official terms. Names matter, and it helps to remind people to avoid discriminating, stigmatizing, or profiling any people based on their ethnicity or other innate characteristics. Nevertheless, media reports, political debates, and community and social activities continue to be haunted by the practice of naming the virus in derogatory terms that lead to blaming and stigmatizing vulnerable communities. Even though, since early 2020, the WHO and most governments in the world have advocated for the use of COVID-19 or Coronavirus to avoid racism caused by associating it with geographic names, references to Chinese, Wuhan, Indian, and the concepts of “a raced elsewhere,” “the other,” or “foreign” still appear from time to time with political intentions beyond the discussion of the virus. The most notorious examples are the appalling racist terms used by then-US president Donald Trump, who referred to the virus as the “Chinese virus” or “Kung Flu,” prompting a rapid rise in the number of assaults and hate crimes against Asian Americans (Viala-Gaudefroy & Lindaman, 2020; BBC News, 2020; Reja, 2021). Trump’s allies, such as then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, insisted on using the term “Wuhan virus” in a joint G7 statement, which was rejected by other members (Simpson & Panetta, 2020). Facing acute criticism both locally and globally, Trump and his followers argued that these terms were not racist and that it was common and innocuous to use geographic names for diseases, such as Spanish Flu, West Nile virus, German measles, and Ebola (Mastio, 2020). Trump and his associates failed to realize the systemic and unconscious racial prejudice embedded and perpetuated by this line of argument, and ignored the damage such racist terminology has done to vulnerable communities in the US and the world.

In Canada, the use of “Wuhan” or “Chinese virus” continues among politicians and community members with political agendas, creating and fuelling racial conflicts. For example, a pro-democracy Hong Kong-style restaurant owner in Ontario posted a notice on the front door asking customers to wear a mask to “prevent an unidentified virus pneumonia in Wuhan” (Xu, 2020). After that, the restaurant received numerous negative reviews, the store was vandalized, and the owner received online death threats. Among the complaints against the use of the term “Wuhan pneumonia” came accusations that the restaurant was supporting Hong Kong independence. Inside the restaurant were cards and stickers demonstrating support for the Hong Kong pro-democracy protests, and the restaurant received support from the Hong Kong Canadian community. The tension between pro-Beijing Chinese Canadians and pro-democracy Hong Kong Canadians was highlighted by this incident and the debates that followed in the community, demonstrating the divisive consequences when a name associated with a country or people is used.

More than one year after the general adoption of COVID-19, the debate over various names goes on and the use of “Chinese flu” continues among some public figures. For example, in April 2021, a councillor from Essex, Ontario, tweeted that “COVID stands for ‘Chinese Origin Virus’” (Jarvis, 2021). In the same month, a Chinese Canadian doctor posted a sign in Chinese referring to COVID-19 as “Wuhan pneumonia,” which again sparked debate over anti-Asian racism and conflict among the Chinese community in Canada, with various political viewpoints that could perhaps have been shaped by their affiliations with Mainland China, Taiwan, or Hong Kong

(Blackwell, 2021). The use of “Wuhan virus” or “Wuhan pneumonia” continues in Taiwan in order to demonstrate their dissent with Mainland China. For example, the Taiwanese premier still uses and defends “Wuhan pneumonia,” using the out-of-date argument of geographic origin, as recently as in February 2022 (Chen, 2021; Zhang, 2022).

These recurring references to the new virus with names such as “Asian disease,” associated with anti-Asian racism, remind us that the prejudice of what Edward Said refers to as “orientalism” is alive and continues to influence the public view of Asians as the other, even if they are Canadians (1978; Zhang & Xu, 2020). Such prejudice differentiates the “other” group from mainstream society, legitimizes discrimination against the “other” group, preserves status and privilege for the so-called “majority,” and permits appropriation of linguistics or cultural differences (Foucault, 1982, p. 792).

Conclusion

The naming and its racist effects uncover and intensify the bitter reality of the discursive and ethnical struggles aided by both the notions of ignorance and the political production of knowledge (Foucault 1982 & 2003). In his essay “The Subject and Power,” Michel Foucault points out that linguistics and semiotics, in this case, the naming of the virus, “offered instruments for studying relations of signification” (1982, 778). The naming process, through signs, communication, reciprocity, and production of meaning, preserve power and “domination of the means of constraint, of inequality, and the action of men upon other men” (Foucault, 1982, p. 786-787). My survey of news reports and scholarly articles on racism and COVID-19, illustrates how the widespread but non-official naming of COVID-19 in racially-associated terms produces a divisive, alienating, and racist discourse of treating Asians, immigrants, and other vulnerable community members as “the other,” on whom discrimination is exercised. Chinese Canadian history as a whole further demonstrates how the anti-Asian racism fuelled by associating the pandemic with Asia and Asians is .

With over 80% of the population fully vaccinated, Canada has started to lift restrictions and transition to sustained management of COVID-19. In Ontario, the provincial government has dropped its vaccination mandate and mask requirement on March 21, 2022. As of March 15, COVID-19 has infected over 3.3 million Canadians and caused close to 37,000 deaths (Government of Canada, 2022). We do not have official figures to illustrate the damage to Asian and other vulnerable communities affected by racism and prejudice. Nevertheless, analysis of news reports and literature reviews of articles on anti-Asian racism present an ominous picture. When life began to move beyond the pandemic, have we learned our lessons about racism? Will we resume a new normal of anti-racism to embrace equity, diversity, and inclusion? Can we shatter the circularity and oscillation, to borrow Mannheim and Ricoeur’s words in their discussion of ideology and utopia, of racism and anti-racism and make it a spiral (Mannheim, 1935; Ricoeur, 1986)? How do we achieve the possible world, an alternate form of the *status quo*, where equity, diversity, and inclusion are integrated in every aspect of our society? For the Asian community, and the Chinese in particular, discrimination has been heightened to remind them of the bitter reality of public perceptions of the “Yellow Peril” and the long history of anti-Chinese and anti-Asian racism. Studies during the pandemic show that Chinese Canadians who

embrace their Canadian identity are greatly impacted by personal discrimination, and those who maintain close ties with their Chinese identity experience less adverse effects from group discrimination (Lou et al, 2022). For the long-term well-being and social functioning of Chinese and other vulnerable communities, perhaps maintaining their heritage identity can help to cure the “disease” of racism and achieve a strong and positive multicultural self-identity.

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