



Hyper-Sexualization of Asian American Women

History and Future Development

Guanhua Wen^(✉)

Sage Hill High School, Orange County, Newport Beach 92657, USA
24weng@sagehillschool.org

Abstract. Previous research tends to investigate discrimination against Asian-Americans, however, little research analyzes the discrimination of Asian American Women. This paper starts with Asian immigration and the establishment of the Page Act. Then, this paper argues that the Page Act is heavily reliant on the U.S. society's stereotypes of Asian American women and the association of Asian American women with prostitution. These stereotypes and associations led to the current-day hyper-sexualization of Asian American women, including verbal and physical violence. A cause of the mistreatment of Asian American women lies in hemispherical racism and western military dominance during the post-war era. Lastly, the paper highlights the need to break through western misconceptions of Asian American women through solidarity with transnational feminism organizations and a more diverse media representation of Asian American women. Overall, the paper shows the continuity of discrimination against Asian American women throughout history and concludes its damaging effects on the identity development of Asian American females in the country.

Keywords: hyper sexualization · Asian American Women · Asian discrimination · Asian American identity

1 Introduction

IN the United States, the status of current Asian American Women is closely associated with the history of Asian immigration. The first wave of Asian immigration started around the early 1800s, and the Asian immigrants were mostly men. There were two major motives for this first wave of immigration: (1) to escape and the economic and the political instability of the home country; (2) the California Gold Rush.

According to the Library of Congress, a total of 25,000 Chinese male workers arrived at California by 1849 [1]. These Chinese workers took on the role of miners, railroad builders, or other labor-intensive jobs while asking for little pay [1]. This directly led to competition in many labor fields as new Chinese immigrants seek lower wages and led to the initial wave of Chinese antagonism from the American workers. This marked the start of the yellow peril, a time period when Asians were described as aliens who brought economic competition and immorality to America [2].

2 Historical Cause of Asian American Women's Social Status in the U.S.

2.1 Page Act

Following the anti-Asian sentiment, the establishment of the Page Act in 1875 specifically targeted Asian American Women (AAW) immigrants, and explicitly stated banning “the importation of women for the purpose of prostitution” [3]. Between the 1870 and the 1880 censuses, the female population in the Chinese American community had declined from 6.4% to 4.6% [4]. Therefore, this can demonstrate the efficiency of the the Page Act's efficiency in regulating Asian American female immigrants and limiting the formation of Asian families in the United States.

The reason behind the establishment of the Page Act was not only to control the immigrating population, but also due to fearing the spread of the “eastern prostitution culture” into American societies. The hostility toward Asians that were expressed in sexualized terms existed even before the first wave of Asian immigration in the 1820s. These anti-Asian sentiments emphasized Asian prostitution and polygamy culture [5]. The correlation that Americans drawn between Chinese women and the sex industry prompted the federalization of the Page Act, and it was one of the first federal policies that is completely reliant on the stereotyping of a marginalized group in that time period. After the passing of the Page Act, the assumption that the majority of the Americans made was that the Chinese treated all women, despite in a Polygamy relationship or not, as prostitutes [5]. Even though prostitution did exist in Asian American society, but research has also shown that Chinese women made up a rather small percentage of the whole prostitute population in the West [6].

Additionally, the way of interrogation to identify Chinese prostitutes was subjective to the immigration offer's own opinion. The interrogation included questions such as “Have you lived in a house of prostitution in Hong Kong, Macao, or China? Have you engaged in prostitution in either of the above places? Are you a virtuous woman?” [5]. All Asian women that entered Angel's island were being interrogated by these gender-based and race-based questions. Additionally, even answering “no” to all these questions still led to rejecting entrance. As argued by the examination consul Bailey, the Chinese were “exceedingly deceptive” [7]. Through these interrogation methods, the Page Act transformed from an act that was supposed to regulate prostitution to an act that was specifically regulating the general immigration of Asian American Women. Furthermore, John Mosby, a U.S. immigration consul to Hong Kong, described that “It is a useless task...for me to undertake to investigate the character of [Chinese] female emigrants and to grant them passports which are treated as nullities in San Francisco on the mere presumption that every Chinese women is a prostitute” [8]. This record by Mosby revealed the real situation behind the Page Act and the American attitude toward Asian American Women. In this case, the Page Act worsened the stereotyping against Asian women. Without looking at actual data or evidence, many Americans feared that these “Asian prostitution” will destroy American traditional marriage ideals, and they firmly believed in their western stereotypes which later led to many current discrimination against Asian American Women including hyper-sexualization.

Throughout the U.S. immigration history, Asians were not the only group that massively immigrated to the U.S.. However, they were the first group being targeted by national policies and laws like the Exclusion Act, an U.S. immigration policy that banned the immigration of Chinese laborers in 1882. The outcome is not coincidental, instead, it is a result of hemispherical racism. This hemispherical racism is the main cause of the mistreatment of Asians and it led to Asians being viewed as aliens or outsiders in the social ladder of U.S. society from the 19th century till now.

3 Hyper-Sexualization of Asian American Women

In the long history of American immigration, Asian American women were targeted for their association with prostitution. However, this association did not disappear in current day society, but rather, it developed into micro-aggression, hyper-sexualization, and physical violence against Asian American women. Furthermore, applying the concept of intersectionality, Asian American women were often subject to both racial and gender oppression, causing an overlap of racialized gender discrimination [9]. The below section will introduce three case studies about the hyper-sexualization of Asian American Women.

3.1 ThisIs2016

In a case study published in 2021, a group of researcher led by Sameena Azhar collected data under the tweet #ThisIs2016, in which Asian American and Pacific Islander women shared their experiences of racialized and gendered discriminations. Two major conclusions were drawn from this collection of data: (1)Asian American and Pacific Islander women are perceived to be exotic and are overly sexualized (2)Asian American and Pacific Islander women are expected to be passive. From this research, many Asian American women shared their experience of being called “exotic,” and these conversation sometimes continued with the usage of phrases that overly fetishized Asians, for example “china doll”, “oriental girl,” and etc. [10].

This showed a continuation of the stereotypes that were present during the period of the Page Act, and it highlighted the verbal violence and microaggressions that Asian American women are facing currently. Although this may not apply to all women in the Asian American community, the significant amount of tweet proved it to be a common violence that women in this group face.

3.2 Atlanta Massacre

On March 16, 2021, eight people were shot to death in the metropolitan area of Atlanta, Georgia. Six of the victims were Asian American women. The 21-year-old perpetrator claimed to have a “sex addiction” and saw these Asian American women as a source of sexual temptation [11]. During 2021, before the Atlanta massacre, Asians were already being accused for the spread of COVID-19, leading to another wave of anti-Asian sentiments. A part of the population accuse Asians by calling COVID-19 the “Chinese Virus.” The Atlanta Massacre was a turning point that shed light to Asian hate, and

highlighted the extent that anti-Asian extremists are willing to go. Moreover, the shooting took place in a spa with the victims being Asian American women again showed the connection that certain population drew between Asian American women and the sex industry. These kinds of connection makes Asian American women more vulnerable to physical violence especially under the current global pandemic.

3.3 Case Study #3: Pornhub Top Search Result

In “the Pornhub Year in Review 2019” report, the top searched sexual clips shows the fetishization of Asian women with “Japanese” being the most searched, “Korean” being the fifth, and “Asian” being the sixth [12]. Asian American women are being overly exoticized and are being linked with sexual temptations. In many cases, this hyper-sexualization develops into depersonalization and objectification. The objectification of Asian American women was built on the 19th century stereotypes. Through painting the “Feminine East,” Asian American women are depicted as obedient and passive. From Geishas to exotic dolls, the racialized sexualization of Asian American women expose them to violence as certain groups of people view them as an instrument for sexual desires with submissive qualities [10].

3.4 Why Asian American Women?

After reviewing the above three case studies, this section will discuss what made Asian American women the target of hyper-sexualization. From the Page Act and hemispherical racism to the depersonalization and the hyper-sexualization of Asian American women, where did it all begin? The origin of discrimination can be traced all the way back to western imperialism during the World War II Era and the Proxy Wars. The U.S. military presence in Asia during the World War II, the Vietnam War, and the Korea War led to the perception of the “Feminine East” surrendering to the dominant white soldiers [13]. After World War 2, the U.S. worked with South Korean government to set up camps for soldier entertainments. In 1965, 85% of U.S. soldiers surveyed, who had been in an Asian country, reported having been out with an Asian prostitute [14]. In that time period, it was common for soldiers to have affairs with Asian females, which caused the generalization of females in Asian countries. Lastly, the contradiction of this post-war prostitution system is that the system was planned specifically for the U.S. military to satisfy their needs, nevertheless, in the end, this system used to target the females in these Asian countries.

4 Reimagining the Future of Asian American Women

Asian American women face stereotypes and mistreatments that result from both racial and sexual prejudices, therefore, ways of deconstructing these prejudices and stereotypes are necessary. In recent research, a website named *Big Bad Chinese Mama* (BBCM) emerged on the internet with the goal of subverting generalized assumptions of Asian American women with humor [15]. As a paradigmatic example of cyber-feminism, the BBCM website used humor and satire to deconstruct the assumptions that were set up

by the imperialists and the patriarchists. Furthermore, the website creator also tagged the website with similar tags of Asian pornographic website, so people searching for these websites could be taken directly to BBCM [15]. Creative methods similar this does not only help Asian American to overcome hyper-sexualization; but at the time, it also empowers other Asian American women to stand up against any kinds of discrimination and constructs a new unique identity for Asian American women [15].

In recent years, researchers start to suggest the idea of transnational feminism in the postmodern period. However, inconveniences exist between Asian American women and many global feminist groups. Some Asian American female activists believe that Asian American women could be subject to gender violence just like all other women, however, their experiences of discrimination is also very racialized. Therefore, it is challenging for them to move together with the general feminism activists due to the difference in the nature of discrimination. However, despite these challenges, finding solidarity with the transnational feminism group will only be beneficial for Asian women's rights activists. Despite the cultural divide, the end goal is to reconstruct the colonial hierarchy left by the western imperialists. Therefore, rather than focusing on differences within gender, Asian American women should see gender as a container of all differences [16].

Moreover, another emerging issue in the future of Asian American women is the lack of female representation to break through the rigid stereotypes. Media portrayal is an important factor that influence people's perception of a group. Furthermore, Asian American women in media fit the western stereotype of being passive and sexualized. The underrepresentation of Asian Americans in Hollywood is limiting the ability to break through these prejudices and assumptions. In order to increase Asian American female presence, the establishment of strong role models that pierce through western imperialists' portrayal of Asian women is the key to establishing a new identity.

5 Conclusion

To sum up, the discrimination against Asian American females started with the Anti-Asian immigration sentiments. Then, the historic association of Asian American females with prostitution and the sex industry led to the legalization of the Page Act, which federalized a social prejudice and caused more widespread misconceptions about Asian American women. Continuing in the current society, the hyper-sexualization of Asian American women is demonstrated in multiple case studies. First, under the tweet #ThisIs2016, the experiences of a considerable number of Asian American individuals share their experience of being verbally sexualized due to their race. Secondly, in the recent Atlanta massacre, physical violence against Asian American women revealed that increasing racial tension makes Asian American women subject to aggressive mistreatment. Lastly, the most searched results on Pornhub being "Japanese" and "Asian" suggest the over-fetishization of Asian females, and many stereotypes against Asian females are a combination of both gender and racial prejudices.

This paper identifies the major factors leading up to the current racialized gender discrimination that Asian American women face today. Future research may benefit from studying specific laws or policies that target hate crimes. Furthermore, researchers should emphasize the ways that these laws and policies affect the mistreatments, especially

physical violence, against Asian American women. Additionally, future research may compare and contrast the social attitude of the Asian American community after the Atlanta shooting in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic and the ways that the community progress and respond to the continuous mistreatment of Asian American women. Also, in the time of increasing usage of social media, studying Asian American women's stereotypes on media gave insight into ways to break down tags. With the significant number of teenagers on social media, positive and diverse portrayal of Asian American women is crucial to mitigating the discrimination against them.

References

1. Kanazawa, M. (2005). Immigration, exclusion and taxation: Anti-Chinese legislation in gold rush California. *Journal of Economic History* 65(3): 779–805. Accessed via Faculty Work. Economics. Carleton Digital Commons.
2. Heale, M. J. (2009). Anatomy of a scare: Yellow peril politics in America, 1980–1993. *Journal of American Studies*, 43(1), 19–47.
3. United States Congress. (2022). “1875 Page Act,” Asian American Digital History Archive. Retrieved May 11, 2022.
4. Coolidge, M.R. (1909). Chinese Immigration, New York (p. 498).
5. Abrams, K. (2005). Polygamy, prostitution, and the federalization of immigration law. *Columbia Law Review*, 105(3), 641–716.
6. Butler, A. “Daughters of Joy, Sisters of Misery”: Prostitutes in the American West, 1865–1990, at 4–7.
7. United States Department of State. (1876). Dispatches and miscellaneous letters from the Hong Kong Consulate. 1873–1886 (National Archives), vol. 1, dispatch 463, 1 September 1876.
8. United States Department of State. (1882). Dispatches and Miscellaneous Letters from the Hong Kong Consulate. 1873–1886 (National Archives), vol. 1, dispatch 210, 20 June 1882.
9. Lewis, J. A., Mendenhall, R., Harwood, S. A., & Browne Huntt, M. (2016). “Ain’t I a woman?” Perceived gendered racial microaggressions experienced by black women. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 44(5), 758–780.
10. Azhar, S., Alvarez, A. R. G., Farina, A. S. J., & Klumpner, S. (2021). “You’re so exotic looking”: An intersectional analysis of Asian American and pacific islander stereotypes. *Affilia*, 36(3), 282–301. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08861099211001460>
11. Endo, R. (2021). Asian/American Women Scholars, gendered orientalism, and racialized violence: Before, during, and after the 2021 Atlanta Massacre. *Cultural Studies Critical Methodologies*, 21(4), 344–350. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15327086211014632>
12. Pornhub Insights, (December 11, 2019). The 2019 Year in Review.
13. Woon, S. (2008). White sexual imperialism: A theory of Asian feminist jurisprudence. *Washington and Lee Journal of Civil Rights and Social Justice Law*, 14, 275–301.
14. Hoots, A. (2019). Severing the connection between sex trafficking and U.S. Military Bases Overseas. *Fordham Law Review*, 88(2).
15. Seethaler, I. (2013). “Big bad Chinese mama”: How internet humor subverts stereotypes about Asian American Women. *Studies in American Humor*, 27, 117–138.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

