

Reviving the history of radical Black-Asian internationalism in the USA

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Amidst a global pandemic, Third World internationalism offers a framework to connect today's movements against antiblackness, imperialism and anti-Asian racism.

Sax Rohmer's 1913 novel, [The Mystery of Fu Manchu](#), captivated readers with its distillation of centuries of Western desire, fear and fascination of "the East" into a single antagonist: Dr. Fu Manchu, "the yellow peril incarnate." Equipped with both the "cruel cunning of an entire Eastern race" and mastery of the Western sciences, the devious Chinaman thrilled and terrified readers with his spectacular exploits.

A criminal mastermind, mad scientist and master chemist, one prick of his hypodermic needle enough to drive even the strongest-willed leading man mad. In Fu Manchu, Rohmer adeptly crystallized Western associations of Eastern disease, invasion, corruption and enslavement into a monstrous man to be feared, reviled and, ultimately, vanquished.

The racialization of COVID-19 — as the "Chinese virus" or "kung flu" — revives this deeply embedded cultural touchstone. Despite emerging evidence that [suggests](#) the virus was circulating for years prior to the first documented outbreak in Wuhan in December 2019, the scapegoat narrative that the virus derives from the Chinese city's "wet markets" or even escaped from a high-security Chinese virology lab has firmly settled in popular imagination, highlighting the lasting rhetorical uses of the yellow peril trope.

As the new Oriental invasion, COVID-19 became a convenient external enemy, necessitating national unity in a time of social upheaval, never mind the grossly disproportionate impact of COVID-19 in Black, Indigenous and Latinx communities. Like the "Chinese Must Go!" labor movements, lynchings and vigilante violence of the 1870s, recent anti-Asian violence — from a Texas grocery store [stabbing](#) to a Brooklyn [acid attack](#) — serves to preserve national, economic and bodily health by violently excising the "alien in our midst."

Yet, as the isolation of social distancing gave way to mass Black Lives Matter mobilizations in the wake of the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, another version of yellow peril has been revived. Protest signs wielding the slogan "Yellow Peril supports Black Power" allude to the oppositional politics of the Asian American movement of the "long sixties": one in which the nightmare of Oriental invasion is subverted into a call for anti-colonial revolt. Embedded in this slogan is the spirit of Black-Asian internationalist critiques of global empire and white supremacy which defined the "Third World" idea.

The overlapping social upheavals of a pandemic racialized as "Oriental" and Black uprisings against white supremacist policing require an analysis that sutures the discourses of antiblackness and Orientalism, not as equivalent but constitutive components of global racial capitalism. Amidst the contradictions between an intensifying military "pivot to Asia" and a Black abolitionist vision to

divest from carceral institutions, the revolutionary internationalist tradition of Black and Asian anti-imperialists provides a road map for envisioning and building a different world.

REVULSION OR REVOLT? YELLOW PERIL'S COMPETING DISCOURSES

Yellow peril — an imperial discourse — functions by creating an entity to fear and extinguish; an external enemy around which the idea of the West [coheres](#). In the 1932 *Mask of Fu Manchu*, one of the many film adaptations of Rohmer's novels, a yellow-faced Boris Karloff hatches a plot to uncover the lost mask of Genghis Khan. With the legendary conqueror's mask, he can pronounce himself the Khan's heir and lead the peoples of Asia and the Middle East into a war to "kill the white man and take his women!"

The yellow peril genre foregrounds the imagery of Oriental hordes and senseless violence — what John Kuo Wei Tchen and Dylan Yeats [call](#) a "transhistorical fantasized tradition of Eastern antagonism against the West." Any subtext of anti-colonial insurrection is excised in favor of a feigned Western innocence in need of manly defense from the terroristic East.

The colonial domination of Asia was itself framed as a preemptive measure against the threat of yellow peril. In 1895, as European imperialist powers carved Asia into a series of colonial administrations and concessions, the divine vision of colonial conquest was visualized by a [lithograph](#) commissioned by German Emperor Wilhelm II. A glowing Buddha floats ominously in the East, as the nations of Europe — personified as angelic Hellenistic warriors — are warned: "Peoples of Europe, Guard Your Most Sacred Possessions." In 1905, when Japan shocked the Western world by defeating a European power in the Russo-Japanese war, Wilhelm's nightmare of an anti-imperial race war seemed imminent.

Yet for some on the other side of the Atlantic, Japan's resounding victory struck a very different chord. Pan-African socialist and sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois [heralded](#) what he saw as "the awakening of the yellow race," an event which made all but inevitable the "black and brown" races to follow. "This," Du Bois wrote, "is the problem of the yellow peril and of the color line, and it is the problem of the American Negro."

Du Bois' color line thesis [identified](#) the global nature of white supremacy and clarified the power of the world's Black, brown and yellow majority to undermine imperialism and capitalism. Where the Western powers saw a threat to global white supremacy, Du Bois saw the yellow peril as a beacon of potential for peoples of color to transgress the color line once and for all

And while history would prove that Japanese military might would not challenge but in fact entrench the forces of global imperialism, Du Bois' radical interpretation of the Japanese victory demonstrates that yellow peril has had two uses: both as a tool of empire and as a call to arms against it.

YELLOW PERIL SUPPORTS BLACK POWER

In 1968, when the young members of Berkeley's [Asian American Political Alliance](#) showed up to a San Francisco protest to free imprisoned Black Panther Party leader Huey Newton, they did so carrying signs emblazoned with the now-iconic slogan: "Yellow Peril supports Black Power."

In Du Boisian fashion, their repurposing of the imperial discourse of yellow peril became shorthand for a praxis of shared rebellion against racism, imperialism and capitalism.

For Asian American radicals in the midst of the Black Power movement and an imperialist Vietnam war against an "invisible" Oriental enemy, the trope that damned Asians in the US as [perpetual foreigners](#) and ["enemy aliens"](#) became the very discourse to inhabit foreignness as a critique of US

empire. It clarified a commitment to a revolutionary internationalist order that could undermine the logics of white supremacy, imperialism and the United States itself.

In the resurgent Black Lives Matter movement, “Yellow Peril supports Black Power” has [reemerged](#) as a clarion call for Asian American solidarity. While some have [lodged](#) complaints against the “Yellow Peril” slogan on the grounds that it decenters Black struggles, we would be remiss to forget that it was the leaders of the Black liberation movement themselves who encouraged early Asian American activists to go global in their orientation.

For instance, when Black Panther Party member David Hilliard [told](#) the Red Guards, “If you can’t relate to China then you can’t relate to the Panthers,” he was insisting that Asian communist and anti-imperialist movements were crucial complements to the Panthers’ struggle against antiblackness and white supremacy. To stand with the Panthers, then, Asian Americans had to look beyond assimilationist claims to US belonging and instead towards the rising tide of Third World revolution in the East.

Calls for Black-Asian internationalist solidarity ebbed and flowed throughout radical movements of the 20th century. In 1943, poet and activist Langston Hughes [penned](#) the anti-colonial poem “Roar, China!” which called to “smash the revolving doors of the Jim Crow Y.M.C.A.” — linking Jim Crow segregation in the US South to white-only businesses in Shanghai’s imperialist concessions. In 1964, Malcolm X [declared](#) Vietnam “the struggle of the whole Third World.”

And then, in 1979, the Anti-Imperialist Delegation — headed by Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver — [led](#) a “people’s diplomacy” tour of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, North Vietnam and the People’s Republic of China. This multiracial delegation itself was a critique of the so-called West. Looking East for revolutionary tactics to adapt to the belly of the beast, Cleaver [called](#) for “the oppressed and revolutionary peoples of the world [to] follow the example of the heroic Korean people.”

Empire was at the heart of this delegation’s critiques, noting the ways that racialization was mapped onto the world. As symbols of the Third World idea, Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, and Kim Il Sung represented a different kind of leadership and political philosophy, one that could free the masses from capitalist exploitation and colonial trauma. Identifying with the project of the Third World, diasporic communities — including Black and Asian American radicals — forged solidarities based not on equivalence, but on the alliances and coalitions necessary to create a non-aligned world order in an era of decolonization.

These internationalist, anti-imperial alliances contested the global color line, which Du Bois famously argued was the defining problem of the 20th century. Our current crises demonstrate both the longevity of this global arrangement of power, as well as its flexibility.

The linear color scheme of the era of de jure segregation, partitions and colonial rule has been largely retooled into a discourse of multicultural inclusion that tolerates or even celebrates “difference” while retaining the structures that produce race-based vulnerabilities. The capacity of the color line to adapt is paradigmatic to contemporary racism, as multiculturalism and racial liberalism have emerged as the dominant narrative of US politics, obscuring the ongoing racism and imperialism in an ostensibly “post-racial” era.

In the mid-20th century, a new script emerged to incorporate Asian racial difference into the project of empire: the myth of the “model minority.” In contrast to Black Americans agitating for racial equality and Third World anti-colonial, communist national liberation movements, Asian Americans were [framed](#) as apolitical, upwardly mobile and, therefore, proof of the benevolence of US capitalist

liberal democracy.

Where the yellow peril demarcated the global color line through the imagined threat of transgression, the model minority myth upholds the post-racial fantasy of the color line's supposed irrelevance. The model minority narrative domesticates the internationalist spirit of Asian America's radical origins, foreclosing possibilities for oppositional, anti-imperialist politics so necessary in our current moment.

THE COUNTERREVOLUTIONARY FUNCTIONS OF THE MODEL MINORITY

The renewed appeal of "Yellow Peril supports Black Power" stems from its rejection of the model minority narrative, which presupposes Asian American apoliticism, antiblackness and an assimilationist embrace of American social norms. The slogan has long been a refusal of what Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan [called](#) a white "racist love" for Asian Americans in service of "racist hate" against Black Americans.

The [emergence](#) of the model minority myth as a tool to admonish Black-led demands for racial justice in the 1960s has been well-documented. William Petersen's 1966 [article](#) "Success Story: Japanese American Style," which heralded Japanese American family values, educational achievement and a culture of diligence amidst racial discrimination, is emblematic of the myth's utility in contrasting Asian American "success" with the supposed Black cultural pathology popularized by [the Moynihan Report](#).

Certainly, the touting of Asian American achievement as "proof" of US meritocracy and racial liberalism is central to the model minority discourse, often explicitly wielded to admonish Black Americans for failing to do the same. In this sense, the model minority myth functions as a counterrevolutionary discourse: defanging Black-led calls for an antiracist redistribution and reconstruction of a fundamentally racist US society by pointing to Asian American "success stories" as evidence of US equal opportunity.

What this model minority "origin story" often misses is the myth's other counterrevolutionary function: as imperial propaganda in a Cold War context in which US racism risked derailing the geopolitical project of winning "hearts and minds" across the Third World. Where yellow peril wields the specter of Oriental aggression and poses US settler colonialism and imperialism as the shining knights of Western civilization, the model minority subsumes the very existence of US imperialism under a veneer of multicultural harmony.

This is visible in the case of multiple US occupations in the Pacific. Dean Saranillio has [written](#) that the representation of Hawaiian statehood as an Asian American civil rights victory provided liberal cover for what in fact was the entrenchment of settler colonialism over Kanaka Maoli land in service of Hawai'i's strategic positioning in the US military's Pacific front. In 1952, propagandist Edward Bernays [cited](#) Hawai'i's strategic position as a "melting pot" of "Oriental assimilation" which would make the island archipelago "invaluable as a psychological rampart in the national defense of the United States" against "communist charges" of US racism and imperialism.

Likewise, the postwar US occupation of Japan and its molding into a junior partner of the US Cold War agenda in Asia necessitated the racial rehabilitation of Japanese people from their WWII image as "kamikaze" aggressors to that of, as historian Naoko Shibusawa [argues](#), a feminized, docile position as "international model minorities."

Like the model minority's evocation of a "problem" minority, the valorization of model geopolitical allies exists in productive tension with "enemy nations." Through this lens, corporate media's recent

portrayal of international pandemic responses could be productively read as a neo-Cold War geography of US agendas in Asia. Where South Korea, Taiwan and Japan were heralded as models of Asian public health done “the right way,” spurious claims about falsified numbers, mass graves, and other markers of “authoritarianism” were weaponized against the governments of China, the DPRK and Iran.

Where the yellow peril paints an isolated and sanctions-starved Democratic People’s Republic of Korea as a belligerent nuclear threat to the American people and justifies US military presence from South Korea to Okinawa, Guam, Hawai’i and the Philippines as a righteous crusade to “contain” China, the internationalization of the model minority poses Japan, South Korea and others as “success stories” of Western capitalist modernity and vindication of US hegemony in Asia in the name of anticommunist containment and capitalist integration.

Demarcating Asian “success stories” from “enemy nations,” the yellow peril and model minority narratives continue to work in tandem to legitimize US geopolitical supremacy.

AGAINST A POLITICS OF “CLAIMING AMERICA”

The complementary counterrevolutionary functions of the yellow peril and model minority tropes make it difficult to refute one without reifying the other. The pandemic-prompted rise of anti-Asian violence, for instance, has inspired some Asian Americans to attempt to evade the imperial discourse of yellow peril through claims of US imperial citizenship. Most notoriously, former presidential candidate Andrew Yang embodied this model minority impulse in his [call](#) for Asian Americans to “show without a shadow of a doubt that we are Americans who will do our part for our country.”

Despite widespread critique from the Asian American mainstream, Yang’s argument was not too different from the claims that many Asian Americans have long made about safety, inclusion and belonging. Prominent Asian American writers [wrote statements](#) and [organized](#) daylong workshops like “United Against Hate: A Day of Solidarity.” Scholars have [ignited](#) critical conversations about Asian and Asian American experiences on campus. Commentators — even celebrities like [John Cho](#) — [remarked](#) on the ease with which the comfortable, if invisibilizing, position of the model minority could give way to the racialized visibility and scrutiny of yellow peril.

Many of these responses to Orientalist rhetoric and violence called for broader civics, combatting tropes of invasion with ones about citizenship and belonging. These claims to model minority status dismissed a deeper critique of the US, instead seeking safety from the state discourse of yellow peril in the arms of the state itself. Many have turned to hate crime legislation and police enforcement, legitimizing the role of carceral violence as a salve for rising anti-Asian hate violence.

For instance, in May, New York City [launched](#) a \$100,000 effort to combat anti-Asian discrimination through public outreach, including signs that read: “Discrimination and harassment due to COVID-19 are illegal in New York City.” Similarly, the Japanese American Citizens’ League resource guide on anti-Asian violence [implores](#) witnesses and victims of hate violence to “cooperate fully with the police.” These calls for safety through an embrace of the carceral state are part of a longer history of co-opting anti-Asian violence to [bolster](#) federal hate crimes legislation — dismissing an anti-imperialist stance that identifies the US itself as the world’s “greatest purveyor of violence.”

If assimilation has historically mediated the relationship between yellow peril and model minority, then claims of Americanness inevitably swaps the imperial nightmare of anti-colonial “race war” for the legitimizing imperial fantasy of “post-racial” harmony. Instead of resisting the imperial logics of yellow peril, Asian American claims to belonging often function as a simple *redirection* of imperialist violence. T-shirts proudly [stating](#) “I’m Asian but I’m not Chinese” demonstrate this most literally.

Meanwhile, the Asian American Journalists Association [called](#) on media to avoid “generic images of Chinatown” in their COVID-19 coverage, warning that it could “reinforce stereotypes and create a sense of ‘otherness.’” While surely well-intentioned, such responses naturalize imperial violence in Asia, taking issue primarily with its misapplication to “innocent” Asian Americans. Rather than inhabiting foreignness as a critique which destabilizes the valorization of all things American, claiming the US entrenches imperial violence. Merely advocating for expanded parameters to define the American “us” implicitly reifies the dichotomy between “us” and “them.”

Interestingly, despite its ostensible invocation of the specter of Oriental anti-colonial revolt, the revival of the “Yellow Peril supports Black Power” slogan largely obscures this internationalist context in favor of a domesticated version of Asian American solidarity modeled on a template of white [allyship](#).

Counterintuitively, the meme-ification of “Yellow Peril supports Black Power” occurs alongside a brand of Asian American discourse which presumes Asianness is antithetical to the values of social justice on which Asian American support for Black lives is presumably predicated. For instance, the recent “talk to your Asian parents about antiblackness” [genre](#) poses second-generation, mostly college-educated Asian Americans as the necessary bridges to shepherd their parents into the milieu of recognizing privilege, unpacking colorism and debunking the model minority myth.

Despite their intent, this genre associates Asianness with ignorance and racism and Asian Americanness with progressivism and solidarity — an assumption which risks excising the anti-colonial, anti-imperial and communist struggles which many of our parents and grandparents lived through as somehow irrelevant to the task of engaging in struggles against antiblackness and white supremacy. Where Asian American allyship is delimited to the same terrain of liberalism and multiculturalism which construct the facade of US post-racialism, a return to internationalism enables a fundamental critique of Americanness motivated not by charity or empathy, but an analysis of the intertwined systems of antiblackness, Orientalism and global white supremacy.

In spite of the theses that claimed that COVID-19 pulled back the curtain of the model minority to reveal yellow peril, it may be more accurate to say that the pandemic has clarified how instrumental the coexistence of both discourses is to their coherence. In an attempt to reclaim “yellow peril,” these efforts unwittingly recreate a new model minority, defanging the radical internationalism at the crux of Asian American identity formation in favor of a model subject of US progressivism and racial liberalism.

THE THIRD WORLD AWAITS

As historian Vijay Prashad [urges](#), “The Third World awaits...resurrection, not as nostalgia but as a project that matches our contemporary dilemmas.” Indeed, the spirit of Third World internationalism is alive and well — if overlooked — in today’s Black Lives Matter movement.

The stunning 2016 policy platform Vision for Black Lives directly implicated US militarism in its call to divest from carceral structures and invest in Black communities. Citing the “increasing militarization of Africa” under US military programs such as AFRICOM, the document [denounced](#) US imperialism as a “direct threat to global Black liberation” and identified demilitarization as a prerequisite for investment in Black communities.

Others [have identified](#) international police exchanges and the sale of military supplies to police departments as further evidence of the conjoined carceral functions of domestic police occupation and international military hegemony which necessitates an interlinked abolitionist and anti-imperialist movement.

Black Lives Matter's critical connections to anti-imperialist struggle have been largely silenced in mainstream discussions. This speaks to a historical truth: Black liberation movements have always posed a particular problem for the maintenance of US empire. State Departments have [complained](#) that the brutal repression of protesters undermines the "moral authority" of the US to projects to advance its geopolitical agenda. Meanwhile, the US embassy of Seoul ostentatiously [displayed](#) a Black Lives Matter banner as the US military continues its 70 year occupation of the Korean peninsula.

Where Black internationalists have sought to [exploit](#) the connections of the Third World by forging strategic alliances with the colonized peoples in Africa, Asia, Latin America and beyond, US political elites have instead [co-opted](#) civil rights progress as "proof" of US democratic values on the world stage. The beneficiaries of today's global color line have a vested interest in domesticating struggles for racial justice, cordoning off domestic rebellions into the same narrative of US progressive exceptionalism that necessitates US global leadership.

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted an affective crisis for Asian Americans caught between the comfortable invisibility of the model minority and the racialized scrutiny of the yellow peril. Yet in the context of a renewed Black Lives Matter rebellion, the productive contradictions of this emotional turmoil have been largely buried under important but limiting framings of Asian American privilege, allyship and solidarity.

They provide an opportunity to understand the crude Orientalism of the "Chinese virus" and the endemic antiblackness of our carceral institutions as complementary, constitutive elements of global white supremacy.

The intertwined abolitionist and internationalist traditions offer an alternative to imperial hegemony: to center a politics of refusal and commit to dismantle, undo, unlearn, deny, defund and abolish US imperial rule through internationalist solidarities. As the foundational abolitionist organization Critical Resistance [declared](#) in their pandemic policy platform, "This pandemic is not bound by borders. As such, our solidarity and response must be international."

Amidst both a global pandemic and a global uprising, the history of Black-Asian internationalism — encapsulated in the slogan "Yellow Peril supports Black Power" — operates as a critical framework to deconstruct the systems of antiblackness and Orientalism, policing and perpetual war, necessary to transform this oppressive world order.

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