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Chinese in UK report 'shocking' levels of racism after coronavirus outbreak

Tuesday 11 February 2020, by [CAMPBELL Lucy](#) (Date first published: 9 February 2020).

Asian community faces verbal and physical abuse in aftermath of first recorded cases of virus in Britain.

"We'll be in trouble if these guys sneeze on us," Jason Ngan overheard as he and his brother got into a lift in Manchester's Piccadilly station. Born and bred in Manchester, home to more than 7,000 Chinese people, the legal adviser said the level of anti-Asian racism the coronavirus had unearthed was "shocking".

"People seem to have put a whole race behind it and it's exposing all these underlying prejudices towards Chinese people, or at least anyone who looks Chinese. It's shocking in this day and age. It was so blatant," Ngan said.

Ngan's mother runs a Chinese restaurant in Heywood, in Rochdale, Greater Manchester. There had been "a real downturn" over the lunar new year period, particularly since cases were confirmed in York last week, he said. "It's been very noticeable, far fewer customers since all this started."

Despite only four confirmed cases of the coronavirus in the UK, Britain's 390,000-strong Chinese community have noticed a markedly racist response to the global health crisis.

In Sheffield, a postgraduate student was reportedly verbally and physically harassed in the street for wearing a face mask [1], while in Leicestershire two students - mistakenly thought to be Chinese - were pelted with eggs on the street in Market Harborough [2]. The Manchester Chinese Centre has received scores of complaints of racist incidents targeting children in schools across the region [3].

North Yorkshire police confirmed they had received two reports of verbal abuse where individuals of an "Asian appearance" had comments about coronavirus shouted at them in York, and there was a further incident where staff at an Asian tea house had been verbally abused.

Last week the University of York, home to around 2,000 Chinese students, issued a statement calling for respect and tolerance after xenophobic and racist comments were published on the anonymous confessions page Yorfess [4].

The site was shut down, but the student newspaper York Vision [5] reported that comments ranged from stating that the risk of the virus spreading was minimal because Asian students were "cliquey and unwilling to integrate", to one user not wanting to share cutlery with their international housemates.

It is relatively common in some Asian countries to wear a face mask to protect against pollution and sickness, but in the UK some Chinese immigrants say wearing a mask makes them a target for hate.

Jingyi Qian, 24, a student at the University of York, said she felt uncomfortable wearing her mask in public “because people stare at me.” Hearing about the incident in Sheffield had put her off wearing one. “I don’t want to get attacked, I just want to protect myself.”

The abuse is not confined to big cities. Waiting for a train in Edale, Derbyshire, Alice, a charity worker, overheard a woman saying she didn’t want a group who appeared to be east Asian to get on the train. She said the woman’s friend must have tried to reason with her because she then said: “I’m looking out for myself!”

The deeper prejudices exposed by the coronavirus are symptomatic of a long history of demonising Chinese people, according to Jex Wang, a Chinese-Australian DJ and writer, who was sent threatening, racist abuse after writing about the coronavirus on Instagram.

“Stereotypes of Asians as submissive and non-aggressive make them a target that people think they can make fun of and laugh at. I’ve seen posts saying Chinese people are dirty, disgusting, uneducated, we ‘deserved’ the virus because of our ‘weird’ food habits,” she said.

“I kept seeing memes and jokes being shared which really upset me. There was even a coronavirus-themed club night in Sheffield that got shut down – they were offering ‘traditional Chinese hats’ to the first 100 people. What is a traditional Chinese hat??”

After calling out the problematic behaviour and language surrounding the coronavirus on Instagram, her inbox was soon flooded with such “hateful” messages that she had to turn comments off on the post. “People accused me of eating bats, told me to go back to China, that I had betrayed the west, I was even accused of fraternising with the Chinese Communist party.” One message said: “China needs to be cancelled. Period.”

Lucy Campbell

P.S.

- The Guardian. Sun 9 Feb 2020 16.29 GMT:
<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/feb/09/chinese-in-uk-report-shocking-levels-of-racism-after-coronavirus-outbreak>

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Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.thestar.co.uk/news/crime/chinese-student-attacked-sheffield-over-coronavirus-1381837>
- [2] <https://www.leicestermercury.co.uk/news/leicester-news/two-students-international-college-chinese-3811043>
- [3] <https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/health/university-of-york-issues-statement-condemning-reports-of-racism-amidst-coronavirus-case-1-10239090>
- [4] <https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/health/university-of-york-issues-statement-condemning-reports-of-racism-amidst-coronavirus-case-1-10239090>
- [5] <https://www.yorkvision.co.uk/news/yorfess-publishes-racist-coronavirus-submissions/03/02/2020>