

Emerging Pan-Asian Identities in Chile in #StopAsianHate

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Abstract

This position paper highlights the emergence of "Asian Chilean" identities and "anti-Asian racism" discourses during #StopAsianHate social media campaigns in Chile. We argue that while panethnicity can critically respond to and visibilise the shared racialisation of ethnic Chinese and Asian persons in South American contexts, public discussions must also distinguish between ethnic Chinese persons, Chinese-owned private and state enterprises, and the PRC government, as well as highlighting the diversity within these groups and others often considered as "Chinese" in Latin America. Both approaches are necessary to apprehend the multifaceted implications of geopolitical shifts in the region without promoting biased anti- or pro-China attitudes.

Keywords: panethnicity, pan-Asian, anti-Asian racism, Chile, Latin America

In Chile, the term "*chino*" does not only refer to a person of ethnic Chinese ancestry, but has also been historically used as a colloquial term to refer to anyone of East or Southeast Asian appearance. Thus, at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in Chile, when problematic discourses of the "Chinese virus" dominated in the United States, the term "oriental virus" was used in Chilean mainstream and social media. The term "oriental," which has connotations in Chile of everything that is located outside of the "West" (Chile included), reinforced associations between the virus and not only the ethnic Chinese but also the Asian population in general. During this time, ethnic Chinese and Asian persons in Chile were verbally and physically attacked (Velásquez & Radovic, 2020); flyers calling for "*chinos*" to "go back" to "their country" were distributed in the town of Villa Alemana; racist and xenophobic memes were circulated on social media; a doctor said on public television that all that came from "China" (using air quotes) was "dangerous" (Chan & Montt Strabucchi, 2021: 382). In such a context where the lines between the categories of "Chinese" and "Asian" are blurred, anti-Chinese racism is also anti-Asian racism. Unfortunately, but not unsurprisingly, such expressions of anti-Chinese and anti-Asian racism largely were not explicitly condemned by politicians or public intellectuals.

A year later, however, an unprecedented discourse of "Asian Chilean" identity and "anti-Asian racism" emerged on social media. In the wake of the Atlanta spa shootings in March 2021 that killed eight people, six of whom were of Asian descent, several young women who identified as Asian and Chilean spoke up on social media about their experiences with racism in the country (Astaburuaga Coddou, 2021). Clearly inspired by #StopAsianHate and #NoSoyUnVirus movements, these women framed their experiences in terms of "Asian" persons and spoke of "anti-Asian" racism and xenophobia, while simultaneously referring to

their own ethnic origins and ties to Chinese or Korean languages and culture. Their emphasis on using the term “Asians” (*personas asiáticas*) can be read as a form of resistance to the derogatory, essentialist, and predominant use of the terms “chino” and “oriental” to refer to Asian persons. They eloquently and movingly spoke about how anti-Chinese racism affects all people of Asian appearance because they do not “look Chilean.” In contrast to the historical silence in Chile on anti-Asian racism, these personal narratives are exceptional. Furthermore, they explicitly claim to “visibilize the racism that Asian people suffer, how cruel it is, and how little it is discussed” (Sua, 2021).

This organic emergence of a pan-ethnic Asian identity in Chile recalls Teresa Ko’s provocative suggestion in 2016 that “panethnicity can be a way to contest a historical lack of recognition” in Argentina for Asian-Argentines (Ko, 2016: 273). In her essay, Ko draws on how, in the United States, panethnic organising and panethnicity emerged as a “political and scholarly strategy” to “confront shared processes of racialisation rather than as a cultural bond” (282). Thus, she proposes that an “Asian-Argentina does not imply an exclusive and essential Asian Argentine culture, but it can shed light on how orientalist ideologies have historically blurred heterogeneities” and shared experiences of racism by Asian persons (282). However, Ko’s proposal was troubled by the lack of “self-recognition of Asians in Argentina” at the time (284). Asian people did not self-identify in pan-ethnic terms; co-ethnic “*colectividades*” were instead the norm, or identification with Chinese, Korean, or Japanese ancestries, cultures, and languages. Nevertheless, she argued that an “Asian Argentine” approach can reveal what the dominant national discourse conceals: that their national identity is organised around a racial hierarchy based on the exclusion and “presumed absence” of Asian people (284).

The emergence of a pan-Asian discourse in Chile - at least in this initial stage - appears to fulfil the critical potential that Ko had hoped for in a South American context. In speaking about how the Covid-19 pandemic has increased racism and xenophobic attacks against Asians in Chile, rather than exclusively referring only to “Chinese” or “anti-Chinese” experiences, the young Asian Chilean women are also critically problematising essentialisms associated with the category “Asian.” Instead, they use panethnicity to raise awareness about an issue that is rarely spoken of in Chile, in contrast to the hypervisibility of anti-black racism and xenophobia faced by Afrodescendant migrant populations in the country. Their self-identification as “Asian persons” calling out anti-Asian racism evidences Diana Yeh’s (2020) declaration that “Chinese studies” must recognise how the “Chinese” are not only an ethnic but also a racialised other “the way in which the racial violence – its impact and the resistance towards it – cannot be contained within the borders of Chineseness.”

In light of Yeh’s incisive critique and such panethnic identifications and incipient movements, we ask: is the category “Chinese” still socially, politically, and analytically relevant in Chile? Precisely due to the racialised and Orientalist imaginaries, ideas, and affects that the terms “China” and “Chinese” evoke, we believe that analysis of the shifting ideas about, attachments to, and distances from these categories remains important. These terms provoke and materialise—through racist or Orientalist memes, Sinophobic discourses, yellowface performances, and homogenising stereotypes—effects in the lives of diverse Asian people in Chile.

Furthermore, the identity categories of “Chinese,” “ethnic Chinese,” or “Chinese diaspora” (*zhongguoren* 中国人, *huaren* 华人, *huaqiao* 华侨) may be strategically mobilised

in order to organise for a common cause. Following Rogers Brubaker, ethnicity as a “category” can be performative, and is “designed to stir, summon, justify, mobilise, kindle and energise” a collective or public (2002: 166). In their research on how ethnic Chinese in the capital of Chile organised a protest and other activities to confront public insecurity, particularly concerning assault and theft on the streets and in their shops, Carolina Ramirez and Carol Chan found that individuals and groups may strategically and temporarily downplay internal (linguistic and regional identity) differences to affirm a common identity as Chinese (*zhongguoren*). Informal and formal leaders on online social media groups and offline organisations evoked affective loyalty to a “Chinese community” to mobilise volunteers and participants in activities that were deemed beneficial to members of the perceived co-ethnic group, such as night patrol or protests (Ramirez & Chan, 2020).

In other words, although “Chinese” (*zhongguoren*) or “Asian” may not be a salient identity category in the everyday lives of ethnic Chinese people in Santiago, during times of crisis, identifying as “Chinese” or “Asian” cannot be seen as merely a self-essentialising and problematic category, but also as a strategic and political act. This is particularly true in contexts such as Chile where Asian persons are rendered irrelevant to the national imaginary and identity, or relevant only in terms of their foreignness and rejection. However, such strategies such as panethnicity must go hand in hand with greater clarification of what we refer to when talking about “China,” “the Chinese,” and “Chinese companies,” to name a few terms. In this historical moment where the trope of “the rise of China” is more salient than ever, the foreignness and racialisation of Asian persons is undoubtedly linked to perceptions of “China’s” absolute cultural and political difference to Chile, where the latter often self-identifies as an “Western” or “Occidental” country.

For example, heated public debates took place in Chile in 2020 when a PRC state-owned company, the State Grid Corporation of China (国家电网公司), bought over 96% of the shares of one of the biggest electrical companies in the country, Compañía General de Electricidad (CGE). CGE owns approximately 40% of energy distribution in Chile (Comisión Nacional de Energía, 2021). The strong symbolic and political significance of “China” and “Chineseness” was clear in these discussions, where economists, lawyers, and politicians disagreed on whether such a purchase was legal, whether the purchase posed a risk to free market competition, or if the presence of Chinese state-owned companies in Chilean strategic sectors posed a national security threat. In these discussions, issues of “Chinese culture” were often implicitly assumed, evoked, and conflated with the “Chinese companies,” which were also conflated with “the PRC government.” This example highlights the relevance of Chinese studies in addressing the complex challenges that Chinese state-owned companies present and face in national economies such as Chile. Due to the highly charged and historical symbolic imagery that “China” and “the Chinese” evoke, matters that should be analysed in terms of legal and institutional frameworks and processes may instead take on “culturalist” and thus prejudiced turns.

Precisely because of the frequent erroneous conflation of ideas, imagery, and values associated with “China,” “the PRC government” and “Chinese people,” it has become increasingly challenging to call out unfair anti-China bias and anti-Chinese racism without appearing - as scholars and/or public intellectuals - to defend the PRC government. As scholars based in Chile, we face an additional challenge in the fact that contemporary racialisation is intimately linked to methodological nationalism where Peruvians, Colombians, Haitians, and

Argentiniens, for example, are stereotyped and racialised according to a national category. In this scenario, the “Chinese” (and by default most East or Southeast Asian appearing persons) are strongly linked to the PRC.

In this context, we find it encouraging that local protests against Chinese infrastructure projects in southern Chile have not resorted to xenophobic or racist discourses and slogans. Instead, young activists have framed their concerns about the environmental impact of a dam construction in terms of the need for dialogue with executives of the China International Water & Electric Corporation (CWE; 中国水利电力对外公司), and called out the indifference and complicity of Chilean local state representatives. Alongside supporting and uplifting Asian Chilean identities and voices, we call for scholars in Latin America in particular to carefully distinguish between ethnic Chinese persons, Chinese-owned private and state enterprises, and the PRC government, as well as appreciate and highlight the diversity within these groups: the diversity of Chinese persons, Chinese businesses, and even state actors and specific state institutions within the PRC government (see Lee, 2017). Careful distinction between and attention to the diverse non-Chinese actors and institutions that are also involved in social, economic, and political phenomena in the region that are often attributed to “Chinese” agents and the PRC government, is the first step towards promoting and participating in critical discussions about racialisation of ethnic Chinese and Asian persons, anti-Asian racism, and China’s presence in the region.

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