British Journal of Chinese Studies, Vol. 12.1, January 2022
ISSN 2048-0601

Chinese Identity and Intersectionality in an Age of Anti-Asian Racism

Astrid Nordin, King's College London
Kerry Brown, King's College London

Abstract

'Intersectionality' is central to understanding Chinese identity in an age of anti-Asian Racism and #StopAsianHate. Using and explaining the term in a way that guards against 'Oppression Olympics' and that resonates with some Chinese traditions of thought, can help scholars and students understand and challenge anti-Asian hate in its manifold manifestations. It can help us in our efforts to adopt a critical approach to the term 'Chinese' in this context, and to other identity-markers too.

Keywords: Chinese identity, intersectionality, anti-Asian hate

The wave of anti-Asian hate that has swept much of the world together with the Covid-19 pandemic has been shocking. Abuse and violence against people who are racialised as Chinese has dramatically increased during Covid-19. This has been partly due to the antagonism and division that the pandemic has caused, fuelled by a minority of politicians and hate-groups scapegoating communities for the spread of the disease (Chan et al., 2021; Levin, 2021). Accounts of victimisation of people racialised as Chinese have been lamentably common in the press and on social media. As we write this essay in the UK in particular, many reported instances of violence against people of Chinese descent have targeted lecturers or university students. This hatred is close to home. All of this takes place in the context of a growing and increasingly polarised debate around identity politics, decolonisation, and populism.

A key term in these debates, which we believe to be crucial to thinking sensibly about Chinese identity in the age of anti-Asian racism and #StopAsianHate, is 'intersectionality'. Many academics will have come across the term in the classroom as well as in mandatory diversity training. They may know that the term was most famously articulated by lawyer and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in a 1989 article. Crenshaw argued that the experience of being a black woman cannot be understood, and legally accounted for, by simply considering being black or being a woman in isolation. What we must do, she argued, is recognise how these identities intersect (Crenshaw, 1989). Despite, or perhaps because of, widespread familiarity with the term, we believe that 'intersectionality' is commonly misunderstood, and thought to indicate oppressions 'stacking up', rather than merging into distinct forms of oppression. We suggest here that such widespread misunderstanding hampers our ability to understand, challenge, and teach issues relating to Chinese identity in an age of anti-Asian Racism and #StopAsianHate. We also outline what we think is a more productive understanding of the term, and how it may help us respond to this hate in our research and in the classroom.

In a 2021 Facebook post that went viral, PhD candidate Mary Maxfield thoughtfully argues that an appropriate understanding of intersectionality is crucial for conceptualising and articulating events like the racist, misogynistic murders of six women of Asian descent in Atlanta earlier in the year (Maxfield, 2021). She does so by setting out the misconception she previously held about intersectionality, and which many academics may recognise in themselves, in students, and in public debate. On what Maxfield calls the 'additive' model, each of us is positioned at a particular standpoint, where our various identities - like race, gender, and dis/ability - intersect. Oppressions like racism, sexism, and ableism then play out across these identities. Each new '-ism' by which an individual is victimised rather than privileged is understood to compound their experience of oppression. As Maxfield points out, this additive model may be useful for remembering that we all have different experiences of both oppression and privilege, and that social justice can never be single-issue struggles. At the same time, and more perilously, it sets us up for what others have called the 'Oppression Olympics' in a competition to win 'Most Oppressed' at the expense of empathy, coalition, and solidarity (Yuval-Davis, 2012; Hancock, A.-M., 2011). Who is more oppressed? A gay Han-Chinese farmer or a disabled Uyghur woman? What if one of them is rich and the other poor? What added identity label would tip the scales in 'favour' of one or the other? There is no way to 'calculate' answers to such questions, and it is not very useful to ask them.

Moreover, Maxfield points out, it is not intersectionality. The important point about intersectionality is not that oppressions add on top of other oppressions, so that it's harder to be identified by devalued identity (A) if we're also identified by devalued identity (B). The important concern of intersectionality is what it's like to struggle at the standpoint where (A) and (B) are interwoven so that you cannot tell them apart. In other words, it's about how numerous forms of oppression are experienced in ways that make them inextricable from one another. If you're in the middle of the Wudaokou 五道口 intersection in Beijing, you can't say whether you're on the intersecting Chengfu Road 成府路 or Zhongguancun East Road 中关村东路 – it's made up of both roads, it is more than both, it is mixed. Through this intersectional view, Chinese women, for example, experience racism and sexism in a form where you cannot tell where one stops and the other starts. They are targeted by a racialised misogyny and a misogynistic racism directed specifically at people who are identified as Chinese women – and who may or may not identify themselves as such.

Let's consider an example from the representational side of intersectional analysis, as it may crop up in our own classrooms. If we're teaching about anti-Asian hate in Chinese studies through white supremacist projections such as the fictional Fu Manchu character and the idea of the Sick Man of Asia, the racialised stereotypes of Chinese people that we teach our students to recognise and resist are really the racialised stereotypes of Chinese men (many of these are analysed for example in Frayling, 2014). If we think about anti-Asian hate through centring women, we encounter completely different stereotypes, including the sexualised stereotypes that were used on social and other media to rationalise and dismiss the murder of women of Asian descent in massage parlours and spas in Atlanta, which in turn prompted Maxfield's reflections. Anti-Asian hate looks different for people who are racialised at different points on the spectra between disabled and enabled Chinese, straight and queer Chinese, urban and rural Chinese, rich and poor Chinese, Han and 'minority ethnic' Chinese, cis- and transgendered Chinese, and so on. They may all experience racism, but those racisms may target them in a wide range of different ways.

Racialisation of Chinese men is, of course, also gendered. However, it is gendered in ways that get generalised as representative of racialisation of Chinese people as such, when in

fact it is not. It is how Chinese men are racialised. The point is not to rank the racism encountered by different groups and individuals from awful, through more awful, to most awful. The point is certainly not to suggest that some forms of anti-Asian hate are more acceptable – they are not. The take-home point is rather that if we pretend that oppressive forces like 'anti-Asian hate', 'sexism', and 'ableism' are separate, we can become blinded to the manner in which people are targeted in particular ways where these forces intersect. A consequence of such blindness is that we fail to recognise and resist the numerous permutations of Asian hate that exist. We struggle to build alliances between its wide range of victims. In order to effectively understand, unpack, and undo racism, sexism, ableism - and all the other forms of identity-based oppression – we need to recognise the ways in which they merge in specific ways in specific contexts.

In Chinese studies, we may underline the appropriateness of reading intersectionality in this way by pointing out to ourselves and others its resonance with some traditional Chinese understandings of the non-essentialised self (Nordin, 2020: 103). For example, we can illustrate it through the Daoist *yin-yang* diagram, where a dark and a light half together form a circle, with a dark dot in the light, and a light dot in the dark.

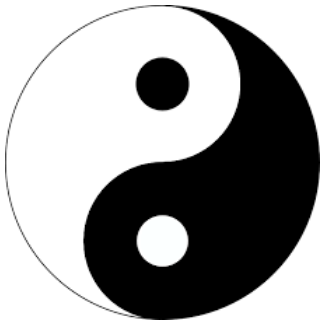

Figure 1: Yin-yang *(Wikimedia Commons, 2012)*

Many will recognise its thinking from concrete everyday practices such as cooking and traditional Chinese medicine, others from exciting new academic debates that it has inspired in the last decade or so (see Ling L.H.M, 2014; Qin Yaqing, 2018 for examples from the discipline of International Relations). It illustrates a form of thinking through which we can read intersectionality to underline its potential for broader decolonial alliances, in and beyond Chinese studies. Not only does *yin-yang* thinking offer a vocabulary of qualitative contrasts which are applicable to specific situations, and which enable us to make specific distinctions without excessive generalisation (Hall and Ames, 1995: 261). Notably, it underlines a view of the Self as an always incomplete process of becoming, where neither the Self, nor any understanding of it, can ever be one, whole, or finally inclusive (Hall, 1994: 230). No identity, Chinese or otherwise, can be taken as essential, pure, or true. All identities must instead be understood as dynamic manifestations of changing relationships, dependent on their articulation in relation to other identities. No identities are complete or self-same, isolated from others. There is always some darkness in the light. There is always some light in the dark. Just as in our simile of intersecting roads, the circle is made up of both, it is more than both, it is mixed. As such, its vocabulary points towards one entry point to "finding varieties of 'self' in the 'other'" as a hopeful path ahead (Tan Shzr Ee, 2021).

The vocabulary of *yin-yang* thinking of course does not guarantee an anti-racist politics – like any other terminology, it can be mobilised for different political purposes, including thinking in binary terms. Nonetheless, it arguably offers an entry-point for developing

conversations about intersectionality that is specific to Chinese studies, and which can allow us to unpack these different politicisations inside and outside the classroom.

The take-home point that we want to underscore is that 'intersectionality' has become a common term in parts of public debate, classroom discussion, and academic research around identity politics, decolonisation, and populism. It is central to understanding Chinese identity in an age of anti-Asian Racism and #StopAsianHate. Using and explaining the term in a way that guards against 'Oppression Olympics', and that resonates with some Chinese traditions of thought, can help scholars and students understand and challenge anti-Asian hate in its manyfold manifestations. It can help us in our efforts to adopt a critical approach to the term 'Chinese' in this context, and to other identity-markers too. It helps us do so without losing the ability to call anti-Asian hate by its name in order to resist it and, one day, stop it.

References

Chan, Anna, Susan Cueva, Daniel Fujiwara, Lu Gram, Caleb Hia, Vivienne Lo, Miles Ng, Sarah Owen, Mai-anh Peterson, Hau-Yu Tam, Jacqueline Wallace, Diana Yeh & Daniel York Loh (2021), "Response to the Call for Evidence on Ethnic Disparities and Inequality in the UK", available at: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f369d95ba72601ce27f00bf/t/600a9f5a61523742064e243a/1611308902466/Response+to+the+Call+for+Evidence+on+Ethnic+Disparities+and+Inequality+in+the+UK-21Jan2021.pdf (accessed 02.08.2021).

Crenshaw, Kimberlé (1989), "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics", *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989(1)**:** 139-167.

Frayling, Christopher (2014), *The Yellow Peril: Dr. Fu Manchu and the Rise of Chinaphobia*, New York, NY: Thames & Hudson.

Hall, David L. (1994), "To Be or Not to Be: The Postmodern Self and the *Wu*-Forms of Taoism", 213-234, in Roger T. Ames, Wimal Dissanayake and Thomas P. Kasulis (eds.), *Self as Person in Asian Theory and Practice*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

Hall, David L. & Roger T. Ames (1995), *Anticipating China : Thinking through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

Hancock, Ange-Marie (2011), *Solidarity politics for millennials: A guide to ending the oppression Olympics*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Levin, Brian (2021), "Report to the Nation: Anti-Asian Prejudice & Hate Crime", Center for the Study of Extremism and Hate, available at: https://www.csusb.edu/sites/default/files/Report%20to%20the%20Nation%20-%20Anti-Asian%20Hate%202020%20Final%20Draft%20-%20As%20of%20Apr%2030%202021%206%20PM%20corrected.pdf (accessed 02.08.2021).

Ling, L. H. M. (2014), *The Dao of World Politics: Towards a Post-Westphalian, Worldist International Relations*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Maxfield, Mary (2021), *On Intersectionality*, available at: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f5fc42975217a7b7a1a1fcc/t/610818ca7be7e81df0e0d567/1627920586282/On+Intersectionality.pdf, first posted on Facebook 17.03.2021 (accessed 11.08.2021).

Nordin, Astrid H. M. (2020), "Decolonising Friendship", *AMITY: The journal of friendship studies* 6(1): 88-114.

Qin Yaqing (2018), *A Relational Theory of World Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tan, Shzr Ee (2021), "Racisms as Plural: It's Not a Competition", Contemporary China Centre Blog, University of Westminster, available at: https://blog.westminster.ac.uk/contemporarychina/racisms-as-plural-its-not-a-competition/, first published 28.05.2021 (accessed 12.10.2021).

Wikimedia Commons (2012), "Yin Yang", available at: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yin_yang.svg (accessed 12.02.2015).

Yuval-Davis, Nira (2012), "Dialogical epistemology—an intersectional resistance to the 'oppression Olympics'", *Gender & Society* 26(1): 46-54.