

## Opinion | Asian-Americans are proud to be Yellow

John Liu, Frank H. Wu :: 5/3/2024



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May marks Asian-American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. (Shutterstock)



By [John Liu](#) and [Frank H. Wu](#)

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May marks [Asian-American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month](#) and Asian-Americans should reclaim the word “Yellow.” After all, we are a people of color who belong as members of this nation. We stand alongside the Black and Brown — not as the so-called “model minority,” but as a community facing discrimination and deserving of equality. Indeed, we have been so marginalized, we are not even considered “marginalized.”

Asian-Americans are the fastest growing racial community in New York and much of America, and unsurprisingly, we share a myriad of struggles with other racial minorities. For some time it appeared that we were gaining recognition, such as inclusion in the reconstituted and renamed [New York City Council’s Black Latino and Asian Caucus](#) and the New York State [Black, Hispanic, Puerto Rican, and Asian Legislative Caucus](#).

Lately however, we seem more and more left out of the equation. Discussions of social equity in recent years make much reference to the concerns of Black and Brown people, to the apparent exclusion of Asian-Americans.

The facts should not be ignored. Asian-Americans are more than 10% of New York State residents, and at a population of 1.5 million, represent more than one out of six New Yorkers. In the borough of Queens alone, there are more than 700,000 inhabitants of Asian ancestry.

Asian-Americans have the greatest “income stratification” of any racial category, according to the [Pew Research Center](#), a leading think tank on demographics. Alongside some who are well-to-do, there are countless others who are anything but. Observers all too often confuse the new transnational elite with the vast majority of families who struggle no differently than their neighbors in what once were tenement projects.

Social equity issues, ranging from access to quality education to public safety, can be understood only if racial diversity is fully accounted for and not limited to Black and Brown communities. Otherwise, the picture of people who are affected, or who could be part of the remedy to the problems, is at best incomplete and at worst inaccurate.

The attacks on Asian-Americans during the pandemic brought awareness about a population that had been largely invisible. Violence against Asian-Americans, often just walking down the street, starting with taunts and escalating without provocation, nearly became a fact of daily life.

The addition of “immigrants” on lists of those who face bias is much needed. But the assumption that all Asians are “fresh off the boat” is itself a form of prejudice. Asian-Americans have been here since before the Civil War and New York’s Chinatown dates back a century and a half. Despite striving to assimilate, Asian-Americans often are treated as “perpetual foreigners,” whose allegiances belong elsewhere.

To include Asian-Americans ought not threaten anyone else. To the contrary, Asian-Americans embrace allyship. In fact, the term brings together those whose ancestors fought bitterly against one another overseas, but who realize they share common cause in the new world.

Reclaiming the term “Yellow” is an important step to addressing the marginalization of not just Asian-Americans, but Black and Brown communities as well. Asian immigration was made possible by the struggle for Black equality. The [1965 Immigration and Nationality Act](#) removed long standing racial barriers to entry. That policy passed because of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Both policies had the same idealistic spirit.

When young Asian-Americans, primarily of Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino background, second and third generation, formed a “Yellow Power” movement during the “Summer of Love” of 1967, they emulated and drew inspiration from the Black Power leaders.

Those coalitions, and the work of activists such as [Yuri Kochiyama](#), who accompanied Malcolm X; and [Grace Lee Boggs](#), a labor organizer with her husband, an African-American son of sharecroppers, have been neglected but ought to be revived, and indeed, taught in schools as an integral part of American history.

Asian-Americans are a community of color, in the same fight for equal opportunity and treatment. We want to be side-by-side with our Black and Brown sisters and brothers. Although many South Asians accept the Brown descriptor, a large swath of Asian-Americans are ostensibly excluded from “Black and Brown.”

The danger is real when semantic omission projects social paradigm. “Black, Brown and Asian” would be inclusive though the hint of differentness erodes the unity and harmony that’s intended.

The 19th century “Yellow Peril” slur had already been co-opted by the 20th century “Yellow Power” movement. Let’s reclaim Yellow, much the same way African-Americans reclaimed Black. And let’s keep building upon the decades-old

coalition that is people of color. How beautiful it sounds: Black, Brown and Yellow!

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