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CONVERSATIONS

Critical conversations: being Yellow women in the time of COVID-19

Nini Fang (she/her/hers)

School of Health in Social Science, University of Edinburgh

nfang@exseed.ed.ac.uk

Shan-Jan Sarah Liu (she/her/hers)

School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh

Shanjan.sarah.liu@gmail.com

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Abstract

Drawing on feminist and critical race theories, this conversation unfolds the experiences of two Yellow migrant women living and working in the UK in the time of COVID-19.

Opening with a brief explanation of what it means to be Yellow, we share our experiences of being seen as hysterical and our fear of being ridiculed and harassed at the beginning of the outbreak. We then discuss the racialized discourse surrounding face covering and anti-Asian racism in both the private and the public spheres. We conclude by discussing our transformation in times of crisis. We also emphasize the importance of (re)claiming our Yellowness and link such an empowering act to standing in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

Being Yellow women

Sarah: We're going to talk about our experiences as two Yellow migrant women living in the UK in times of COVID-19. Nini, could you explain why you call yourself a Yellow woman?

Nini: I call myself a Yellow woman to foreground the gendered racial category of the East Asian woman. I believe that we need to critically reclaim the term as there has been scant discussion in critical race theory of the unique struggles of the Yellow woman. "Yellow woman" evokes a particular set of racial imaginations that sexualize and objectify her (Cheng 2018, 2019). Historically, the racialized representation of Yellow womanhood is refracted through the colonial lens of "commodity aesthetics" (Kalnay 2020) that pins her down to an image of artificiality, objectivity, and play-thingness. She is deemed worthy only when she is "used" to generate good feelings for others. She is not meant to have her own subjectivity and agency – and when she does, she is deemed disruptive. We may see how this happens as our conversation unfolds!

Sarah: That makes us two Yellow women here! What were your experiences like as a Yellow woman, dating back to January or February 2020, before the UK went into a lockdown?

Being (seen as) hysterical

Nini: What struck me at the time was how much my Taiwanese identity became dominant. There was already news about the virus in Taiwan, which made me aware of the early warnings from the Taiwanese authorities last December. Meanwhile, seeing that there was no

discussion here in the UK, I felt the need to raise some concerns about this discrepancy to Will, my partner, and his family, who are white British. They seemed genuinely unconcerned and dismissed my worry about the virus being something more serious than the British media was admitting. This became a very disorientating experience for me. On the one hand, I was receiving cautions from Taiwan. On the other, I was constantly being told by British people that I needed to relax. I began doubting myself and thinking that maybe the virus was not going to get here. The more I expressed my fear, the more I felt I was being perceived as “hysterical.” I swayed between feeling hysterical and feeling ashamed when COVID-19 was treated as something to joke about in the West. On a few occasions, I had to explain that it was unusual to have bats as part of our diet! Eventually, the UK government announced the “herd immunity” approach, which would just eliminate the weak, unproductive members of the society. We, the East Asians, became simultaneously cast as the victims, as the first people to be struck by the virus, and the villains, as those who gave birth to it.

Sarah: I was in Taiwan when most of the world first heard about Wuhan. Upon my return to Scotland in January, I began to panic about the situation. Knowing that the government hadn’t implemented any restrictions was difficult for me. I began to limit my exposure to, and my interactions with, people early on. The last time I was out before the lockdown was to attend a Women’s Dinner at the Scottish Parliament in mid-March to celebrate International Women’s Day. The event took place when Justin Trudeau’s wife was just tested positive after her trip to London. I was hoping that the organizers would cancel the dinner, but they didn’t. Without a refund policy, I felt like I had to attend. Many members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) who had just traveled back from London were at the dinner. Who knows whom they saw in London – a hot spot? I remember panicking the whole night and thinking that it was the night I was going to contract the virus. Throughout the entire dinner, I wouldn’t shut up

about how terrified I was and about how serious the crisis was going to be to people at my table. As one of the few East Asian women there, if not the only one, others thought I was overreacting, especially when I refused to shake MSPs' hands. At the end of the dinner, I got up to use the loo. When I came back, a woman sitting at my table told me that this other woman was really worried now because my constant attention on the pandemic had scared her. What she said surprised me. My immediate thought was: "The pandemic has been all over the news – how could the news not have scared you already?" I felt like I was being blamed for making women at my table anxious. Going back to what you were saying about being seen as hysterical, I felt the same way. It was such a privilege to not have to worry! Many Westerners, Europeans, and North Americans think that diseases like this are an Asian thing or an African thing. They let their guard down because pandemics wouldn't happen in Western countries like the UK. It is such a white privilege to not be hysterical.

Nini: I've really identified with being made to feel like a "killjoy" (Ahmed 2014). Everyone was having a good time, but by speaking out about our concerns we were treated as "affect aliens" (Ahmed 2014, 221) – the disruptive ones who killed the vibe with bad news! It really is a lose-lose situation. First, we were dismissed as being hysterical, and then we were blamed when the situation began to get serious.

Racialized discourse surrounding face covering

Nini: I remember feeling so frustrated arguing with Will's dad. In the earlier days, he kept saying that COVID-19 was just a bad flu and that my worry was unfounded as the death rate was low. Then came the facial mask debate in which he'd say that the effectiveness of facial masks was not proven.

Sarah: We see a lot of protesters in North America and also some parts of the UK where people refuse to wear masks. I understand that face covering might not have been a norm in Western societies, but we have seen successes in Asia. So why are people still being doubtful? Having spent most of my time in the US, I had never worn a mask my entire life before the pandemic, but I normalized face covering from the very beginning because I understood that it was about protecting myself, as well as others. Yet some parts of the discourse surrounding face covering still center on the protection of individual freedom, which can be seen as more important than collective like public health.

Nini: “White ignorance” (Jungkunz and White 2013) at its best! Time and again, we see white supremacy clouding the West’s judgment of the East. Why bother getting to know more if the East is by default inferior and our cultural practices are folk rituals? Imagine if it were the other way around and everyone in the West had the cultural habit of face covering in public spaces and East Asians didn’t. The scientific and political discourse would be very different – we would be seen as unhygienic and barbarian.

Sarah: Many people have also said to me that Asia succeeds because Asians are just more collective and more obedient. The discourse is not just about how Asians are not selfish, but instead it’s about how we obey rules. “Asian governments can make Asians do anything because they are not democratic”, so to speak. This is inaccurate because many Asian regimes are democratic! However, people just assume that Asians are backwards and obedient whereas Westerners have critical thinking abilities and democratic values. As you were saying, there is this hierarchy of countries or regions. There’s also this assumption about Asians. Even when Asian countries successfully combat the virus, it’s attributed to the stereotype and not our common sense, intelligence, experience, or policymaking. Both the

discourse on how COVID-19 began in China and the discourse on how other parts of Asia have dealt with it are racialized. The mad cow diseases from Britain or swine flu from the US were never racialized!

Nini: I was made fun of all this time for following the rules when Will seemed much more relaxed about it.

Sarah: Do you think that also has something to do with the fact that you are not a British citizen, but your partner is? Law breaking would mean different things to you two.

Nini: For sure. I realized that it is not only my health but also my right to be here that I'm risking if I don't follow the rules. That's when racism allies with the anti-immigration culture in the UK to generate surveilling white eyes to make sure we, the racial others, are behaving ourselves.

Sarah: Immigrants are always outsiders. We constantly negotiate our belonging and our membership is contested and earned. Being model immigrants is crucial, as every single action of ours dictates whether we get to stay or go.

Anti-Asian racism in the public and private lives

Sarah: At the beginning of the lockdown, I didn't leave my house for 30 days straight. I rationed my food and planned every meal. I didn't want to leave the house partly because I was scared of the virus, but also because I was terrified of attracting attention. I was really worried about wearing masks when I was out because it still wasn't a norm at that time. As an East Asian, I really didn't feel safe wearing a mask when I was out because there were

already incidents where East Asians get beat up for carrying the “Chinese virus” or the “Kung flu.” When my friends found out that I didn’t go out for a week, they just couldn’t believe it. I got responses like “I don’t know how you do it. If I didn’t go for a walk every day, I would go crazy!” I understand that leaving the house is beneficial for people’s mental health, but going out as a Yellow woman living in the UK also brought me significant anxiety. I constantly had to explain to people why I chose to stay in, but only my friends of color would understand. Another Asian friend actually got me a whistle which she herself carries when going out. Going out for a walk without feeling anxious about being harassed was a white privilege I didn’t have. Eventually, I did get spat at when I could finally go into my office to collect things. The police caught him in just a few days. When I told my friends that the police had found the suspect, their responses would be “They probably acted quickly because you’re Asian. If you were white, the police wouldn’t even care.” Because the death of Belly Mujinga led to the BLM movement in Britain, white people think my race all of a sudden benefits me in this situation.

Nini: I wouldn’t go out without Will these days. I saw your tweet about what happened to you. Immediately, I thought “That could have been me!” This sense of our shared fate as Yellow women grows stronger when I see the rise of anti-Asian racism. If I have to go out with my mask on, I can’t do it without Will. I believe that being seen with him somehow neutralizes the penal tattoo of my skin color (Tyler 2020) that says, “I am a potential virus carrier!”

Sarah: White people are often represented as saviors. How do you negotiate that?

Nini: My psychological reliance on Will only developed recently. We are conscious not to conform to the stereotypical view of a romance between a white man and a Yellow woman. However, at this critical juncture, multiple forces of aggression and hostility co-exist against me, us, in the face of racism and anti-immigrant politics. The dilemma has been to avoid hostile attention while still speaking out on important political issues, such as this conversation we are having. Above all, we need to survive the pandemic *and* racism. I definitely feel pressured to keep my head down. I am careful to keep my distance not only from anyone who coughs but also from anyone who stares at me. I could recover from the pandemic, but I would be scarred for a long time if I were to be spat on.

Sarah: Tell me about your experience since we've moved online, which has blurred our public and the private.

Nini: Since everything has moved online, I have lost count of the number of microaggressions I've experienced on virtual forums. This is compounded by how people are less inhibited when they are online and things that they would not have otherwise said to my face have come out. A few weeks ago, I attended a virtual webinar. After presentations, I was the first to respond. As I started to speak, I noticed the comments posted publicly on the chatbot. Other participants said that I was "taking too long" and that I should "cut it short." They – all white people – also accentuated their comments with an excessive use of exclamation marks and question marks. I was made a target of social shaming. Social shaming works to induce powerful sense of inadequacy and remorse in the humiliated group while reassuring oneself of one's own superiority (Watkins 2018). Some of my students were present, so I felt deeply embarrassed that they saw their lecturer being shamed publicly in a professional community. Was this social shaming partly stoked by the pandemic, which has

been racialized as the disease of the East? Was I being blamed for what caused everything to be moved online on top of so many deaths? I cannot know. But one thing that was clear to me was that they were ready to devalue a Yellow woman's view. Perhaps it didn't cross their minds that she could be a university lecturer either.

Sarah: Your experiences have shown that despite the stereotypes of Asians being intellectual, we are rarely seen as public intellectuals (Wu 2002). Asian scholars have contributed to and added a nuanced dimension to critical race theory, and yet we are rarely given the platform to show our expertise. Asian scholars are expected to have a wealth of knowledge about Asia, but we're often precluded from being the authority on things related to Asia. The model minority is such a myth, too!

Feeling more empowered as we survive COVID-19

Sarah: Do you notice any changes in yourself since the outbreak? I've been more vocal. As an East Asian migrant worker in the UK, my identity and status have made me more precarious than my British colleagues and always constrained me in how openly critical I could be of the government. Since the start of the pandemic, however, my outlook on life has changed. I am now aware that it's possible that I leave this world tomorrow because of coronavirus. Therefore, I'm going to speak the truth today in case I don't get a chance to tomorrow.

Nini: Now I am much more expressive of my anger when I encounter or observe anti-Asian microaggressions in my everyday life. Previously, I'd dismiss them for fear of offending people, but now I realize that this is no time for silence. The challenge, though, has been for me to raise awareness that racism exists beyond the Black-and-white relation. It happens

when you were spat at and when I was socially shamed online. There is still a prevalent view that racism against Yellow women is only manifested in the form of positive stereotypes – for example, in the orientalist notion that we represent certain gender ideals and sensuality. Yet the impact of this colonial fetishization of Yellow women somehow gets overlooked.

Sarah: Historically, East Asians were called white. “Yellow” only began to appear towards the end of the eighteenth century when Europeans thought that Yellow represented Asians because Asia was a seductive, exotic place (Keevak 2011). Although “Yellow” was not used entirely derogatorily at first, it still indicated that Yellow was the deviant while white was the norm. East Asians were not white enough and East Asians’ levels of civilization and literacy were not on par with those of Europe. Now, however, we see more and more East Asians flipping the script and taking pride in being Yellow. Even Coldplay’s “Yellow” was played in the final scenes of *Crazy Rich Asians!*

Nini: It is down to us to critically reclaim our Yellowness!

Sarah: What we shouldn’t forget, though, is that Black people were never called white, like East Asians were; their experiences of racial inequality are different from ours. In the midst of the killings of Black people and the BLM movement, racism against Black people requires our attention as a community of racial minority. As two Yellow women, we must also understand that standing in solidarity with other people of color helps us to gain insight into how race shapes one’s experiences with and survival of COVID-19 (Bonilla-Silva).

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