



CORONAVIRUS IN TEXAS

As coronavirus spreads, some Asian Americans worry their leaders' language stokes a stigma

"If the virus has already been named by the [World Health Organization] as COVID-19, any renaming is highly politically charged and motivated," said one researcher.

BY **ALEX SAMUELS** MARCH 23, 2020 12 AM CENTRAL



U.S. Sens. Ted Cruz, left, and John Cornyn have both made comments linking the new coronavirus to China. Experts note that this kind of rhetoric invites the public to view what's now a global pandemic in overly simplistic geopolitical or racial terms. 📷 Erin Schaff/Pool via REUTERS

Until recently, U.S. Sen. [Ted Cruz's daily podcast](#) was most famous for one thing: daily musings about the U.S. Senate impeachment trial of President Donald Trump. But in mid-March, the state's junior senator waded into a new topic. While reflecting on his [self-imposed self-quarantine](#), he defended the president for the administration's response to the novel coronavirus.

Trump, the Texas Republican said, “wasn’t serving bat soup in the Wuhan province,” an apparent nod to a now-debunked myth that the outbreak began after a woman in China ate bat soup.

His comments are not an anomaly among GOP leaders. In a recent tweet, Trump called the novel coronavirus the “Chinese virus.” U.S. Sen. John Cornyn said he thought “China is to blame” for the illness “because [of] the culture” there. (Cornyn later said that he meant to say that the Chinese government was to blame, not Chinese people or Chinese culture.)

Texas now has more than 350 recorded infections and six dead, with a growing rate of increase — unleashing widespread fear and, in some instances, outright xenophobia and anti-Chinese sentiments among the nation’s leaders.

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While health experts are using the term COVID-19 to describe the disease caused by the coronavirus that was discovered late last year, a number of prominent conservatives have adopted different monikers: the “Chinese virus,” “Wuhan virus” and reportedly even “Kung-Flu.”

Supporters of these terms counter both that the virus first appeared in Wuhan, China, and that other famous diseases are named after the site of the best-known outbreak. But experts note that this kind of language encourages people to view what’s now a global pandemic in overly simplistic geographic or racial terms.

One Asian American studies expert called the usage of such rhetoric “textbook racist discourse.”

“The renaming will have broader meanings and implications for Asians and Asian Americans in the country and around the globe,” said Yuan Shu, the director of the Asian Studies Program at Texas Tech University. “This gesture will fuel a new wave of crimes and stigmatizes the entire racial group.

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The usage of such terms has also had a social cost for East Asians. Some said they were afraid of coughing or wearing face masks in public now, even as a simple precaution.

Eddie Pan, who volunteers at the Dallas Chinese Community Center, said the incidents he hears about reminds him of the discrimination Muslim people faced immediately after 9/11.

Using that language, Pan said, “lowers people’s perception of how widespread this could be. It helps people think, ‘If I’m not Chinese or I’m not Asian, then I can’t catch it.’”

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Pan, 39, said he hasn’t personally experienced racism or discrimination in his hometown of Plano, but he said that treating the new coronavirus as a Chinese scourge “fuels prejudice” and could lead to the denigration of certain populations.

That denigration certainly isn’t unique to this year. When the Ebola outbreak emerged in 2014, Africans were the primary [targets of stigmatization](#). During the SARS outbreak, East Asians were similarly [discriminated against](#). “Stigma, to be honest, is more dangerous than the virus itself,” Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the World Health Organization’s director-general, [said](#) recently.

Madeline Hsu, a history professor at the University of Texas at Austin, said some people have seemingly tried to avoid her since the virus began to spread. More recently, when she was at a kickboxing class in Austin, she said she felt self-conscious after another woman, who is white, began talking “extremely loud to a woman next to her about the coronavirus.”

“Elected leaders using that type of language reinforces this idea that this virus is attached to a particular country or certain persons, which undermines efforts to manage it,” Hsu said. “This virus is not going to distinguish people on the basis of race or nationality.”

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To be sure, some GOP state leaders have taken pains to warn that everyone is vulnerable to the virus. Gov. [Greg Abbott](#), who has consistently referred to it as the coronavirus or COVID-19, warned Thursday night that tens of thousands of Texans could be infected.

But even as fears over the virus have led to an uptick in reports of harassment and assault of Asian Americans and the decimation of Chinese and Asian American businesses, other leaders have continued using the terms. (In fact, [the epicenter](#) of the pandemic is now Italy, which has surpassed China as the country with the most coronavirus deaths.)

In a now-viral video posted to Twitter by [The Hill](#), Cornyn said China has been “the source of a lot of these viruses” because “people eat bats and snakes and dogs and things like that.” During a conference call with reporters last week, the state’s senior senator also said that it’s “no coincidence” that illnesses such as the novel coronavirus originate in China, putting the onus on “some of the cultural practices there.”

Cornyn and other GOP leaders who have drawn pushback appear to be taking a page from Trump’s playbook. According to [The Washington Post](#), a close-up of the president’s notes show he once crossed out the word “corona” and replaced it with “Chinese” as he spoke with his coronavirus task force. Speaking with the press, he has repeatedly defended his practice of calling the new coronavirus the “Chinese virus.”

“It’s not racist at all,” Trump told reporters last week when explaining his use of the term. “It comes from China, that’s why.”

Those protestations recall other cases in which Trump has used racist language, such as when he said four American women of color in Congress should “go back” to their countries or when he suggested a federal judge was biased against him because the judge is Mexican. (The federal judge was born in Indiana and is of Mexican American descent.)

That the coronavirus has spread beyond China’s border hasn’t diminished the spate of prejudice against the country, however. Nationally, foot traffic in Chinatowns has taken a nosedive, with some restaurants reporting losses of up to 80% of their business. To support these restaurants, some Texas officials have held public meetings and lunches at local Asian establishments to help quell public fears.

Before Abbott ordered the closure of bars and restaurants statewide, state Rep. Gene Wu, D-Houston, was encouraging his Twitter followers to visit local Asian grocers or restaurants in his or a neighboring state House district. “A lot of the Asian restaurants, not just Chinese, but Korean and Vietnamese restaurants, have been hit pretty hard,” he said. “If they go down, so will all the people who work for them.”

Wu was one of several officials who laced into Cornyn for his remarks about China, later describing the senator’s comments as “purely political.”

“There are actual real-world consequences when people use this kind of language,” Wu said, noting a recent case at a Midland Sam’s Club where a 19-year-old attacked an Asian American family.

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The response to the virus has been similar globally. According to The New York Times, at a tourist hotspot in Vietnam, owners placed a makeshift sign outside their restaurant reading, “We can’t service for Chinese, SORRY.” Other places have refused to serve Chinese guests.

Lang Nguyen, who lives in Irving, said when he tried to vote ahead of the March elections, he started coughing after choking on some water. A woman in front of him, he said, proceeded to scold him before saying, “Well, all you Asian people are spreading the coronavirus, and I don’t want to partake in that mess that y’all started.”

“It’s like they’re mad at a specific country, so they want to point the finger. But what they don’t realize is they’re pointing the finger toward Chinese Americans and Asian Americans as well,” Nguyen, 34, said of the encounter.

Nguyen, who sheepishly acknowledged that he voted for Trump in 2016, said he plans to reexamine his options ahead of this fall; experts, too, note that Trump’s rhetoric could alienate a broader coalition of Asian American Republicans.

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“Creating an anti-Asian bias is really problematic,” said Frank Fernandez, a senior research fellow with the Asian American Studies Center at the University of Houston and an assistant professor at the University of Mississippi. “Plus, the Asian American voting-age population is growing in the U.S., and people don’t forget these kinds of things.

“You’re stirring up racial bias, and this doesn’t go away,” Fernandez said.

In Plano, which has a large population of Asian Americans, Pan said he hoped government officials might be more thoughtful with their language in the near future.

“People need hope and positivity more than hatred,” Pan said. “I remember looking out the window on Sunday and just having this surreal feeling. ... It’s like zombie apocalypse.

“Makes me wonder if we’ll be like this in July, August or even later,” he added. “I’m sure I’m not the only person who feels like this, so let’s focus on the positive things. Not hatred and racism.”

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