Envisioning and Enacting a Pan-Asian Political Identity The Cultural Politics of the First 'Stop Asian Hate UK' Protests

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7th September 2021

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a sharp rise in racism against Asian people across the world: the London Metropolitan Police reported a 300% increase of hate crimes against the Chinese community in London in the first quarter of 2020 (Khan, 2021). At the same time, there has been a surge in community mobilisation and antiracism activism in Asian communities around the world, and this is exemplified by the proliferation of 'Stop Asian Hate' protests in different parts of the world, including the recent rallies that took place in Birmingham, London and Newcastle on 24 July 2021 – the first 'Stop Asian Hate' protests in the UK. Transnational pandemic racism and antiracism activism have unexpectedly brought together South Asian as well as East and Southeast Asian (ESEA) communities – two distinct ethnic communities traditionally separated in the British context – and transformed what the term 'Asians' may mean in the UK. This article focuses on the opportunities and challenges of the newly emerged pan-Asian political identity following the recent transnational 'Stop Asian Hate' movement. Using the recent 'Stop Asian Hate' Birmingham rally as a case study, this article contends that the pan-Asian identity enacted in the 'Stop Asian Hate' movement has the potential to forge new forms of racial and ethnic solidarities.

> What is new in the recent wave of global 'Stop Asian Hate' movement is its use of the 'Asian' identity category as a strategy for community mobilisation and political activism.

Before we discuss the emergence of a new pan-Asian identity, it is important to understand what the designation of 'Asian' traditionally means in the British context. The UK's racial and ethnic demography and government policy have been shaped by the country's long imperial and colonial history. South Asian and Afro-Caribbean communities are among the largest racial and ethnic groups besides the 'White' population. The current official designation for racial and ethnic minorities, BAME (short for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic), is a highly contentious term because it is defined by and against the White population and risks erasing cultural differences among minority racial and ethnic groups. Whereas the Black Rights Movement in the UK has consolidated the category of 'Black' as exclusively referring to people of African and Black Caribbean heritage, the term 'Asian' is traditionally seen as primarily referring to people from the South Asian subcontinent. After years of campaigning led by the British Chinese community, the term 'Asian' started to include 'Chinese' in the 2011 UK government census. Despite this, most people of ESEA origins continue to be marginalised or rendered invisible in recent government censuses and policies. They are often statistically counted under the broad category of 'Chinese' (regardless of their diverse ethnic and cultural origins), 'other Asian' or 'other ethnic group'. Especially now, in an era marked by heightened political tension between China and the Western world, many ESEA people fall victim to Sinophobia and anti-Asian racism in a post-Brexit and pandemic-stricken Britain. Within the ESEA community, 'Chinese' is sometimes seen as a hegemonic term erasing ethnic and cultural differences amid a climate of increasing antagonism between China and the West perpetuated by pandemic racism; there is a call in the ESEA community to disassociate with 'Chineseness'. In other words, the term 'Asian' – traditionally understood as South Asian and now selectively including 'Chinese' – fails to capture the heterogeneity and diversity of ESEA experiences in the UK government policy.

It is worth mentioning that ESEA – or BESEA (British East and Southeast Asian) and somewhat controversially called CESEA (Chinese and East and Southeast Asian) – has emerged in recent years as an umbrella term for

antiracism activism among community groups (Yeh, 2021). The term ESEA seems capacious enough to encompass all ESEA communities and has therefore been frequently used in community mobilisation for antiracism activism in recent years. However, there has also been criticism of the term ESEA for potentially alienating an older generation of people of diverse ethnic origins who have lived in the UK for generations and who endorse the notion of a 'cultural China' (Tu, 1991) and a transnational, diasporic and cosmopolitan Chinese identity (Benton and Gomez, 2007). Umbrella terms such as ESEA or BESEA can often create UK-born/non-UK born and even UK-colonised/non-UK-colonised binaries; they can even reinforce hierarchies and inequalities based on people's fluency in the English language, access to Britain's colonial and imperial history, as well as their perceived cultural capital of a cosmopolitan British culture. ESEA or BESEA is not always the best identity category for people. As Dr. Yeow Poon from the Birmingham Chinese Community Centre commented in my interview:

> We should not assume, just because some people prefer ESEA, that others in the Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Filipino, Thai, Malaysia etc want to. Depending on the context, it may be relevant to use Asian, ESEA or CESEA, but for each community we should not assume how people view their ethnicity and cultural identity. Proper research is needed to identify how each community feels about this and how they identify themselves.

What is new in the recent wave of global 'Stop Asian Hate' movement is its use of the 'Asian' identity category as a strategy for community mobilisation and political activism. Admittedly, the global 'Stop Asian Hate' movement originally started in North America where the term 'Asian' has a longer history to include ESEA people. Terms such as 'Asian' or 'Asian American' or even AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander) have been mobilised as a more inclusive pan-Asian (and pan-Pacific) political identity for government policy and antiracism struggles in North America for a long time. In the UK, the 'Stop Asian Hate UK' Facebook and Instagram pages were only set up after the Atlanta shooting in March 2021, when a younger generation of British ESEAs – mostly second-generation ESEAs – realised that the UK government, media and the public fail to acknowledge the existence of anti-Asian racism in the UK, and that being a 'model minority' was not an option at such a historical moment. Within the first four months after its initial establishment, the 'Stop Asian Hate (UK)' Facebook page attracted more than 1,000 members, making 'Stop Asian Hate UK' the biggest ESEA antiracism community group in the country. Although 'Stop Asian Hate UK' uses multiple terms including ESEA, Chinese and British Chinese for its public communication, depending on the subject matter and the specific context, it has particularly embraced the 'Asian' identity category. As 'Stop Asian Hate UK' said in my interview:

> Though our organisation is called 'Stop Asian Hate UK', our focus so far has been on raising awareness of COVID-related racism, which has primarily been targeted towards people who 'look' ESEA. As our organisation and focus expands, we would like to branch out into education and providing resources and support for all kinds of hate (not just racism but sexism, homophobia, transphobia, religious bigotry, colourism, ableism, etc.) towards all Asians, not just those within the ESEA community.

'Stop Asian Hate' Birmingham rally, 24 July 2021

Photo by author.

The organisers are aware of the contested nature of the term 'Asian' in the UK context, but they also see its potential in opening up new possibilities and forging new forms of solidarity between South Asians and ESEAs. As previously mentioned, the hegemonic use of the term 'Asian' as traditionally denoting South Asian and leaving out ESEAs was shaped by Britain's colonial history and its Eurocentric government policy, and this has resulted in the artificial division between South Asian and ESEAs in the UK context. The 'Stop Asian Hate UK' movement's efforts to reclaim and redefine Asianness as a pan-Asian political identity for antiracism mobilisation is part of the decolonisation process through which racial and ethnic minority communities work together to fight against racial discrimination and cultural marginalisation in an increasingly nationalist and xenophobic post-Brexit Britain.

In the context of the 'Stop Asian Hate UK' protests, the solidarity between ethnic groups goes beyond the South Asian/ESEA binary. There are multiple forms of solidarity in action, including those based on the 'migrant' category or even on the state designated term BAME. For example, the 'Stop Asian Hate' Birmingham rally on 24 July 2021 was co-organised by different community and activist groups including Chinese Community Centre Birmingham, Birmingham Asian Resource Centre, Migrant Voice and Stand Up to Racism. Speakers who made speeches at the rally included representatives from different community groups and councillors from different political parties (Labour, Liberal Democrats and Conservatives). The 'Stop Asian Hate' Birmingham rally therefore represented new solidarities not only across different political spectrums in British politics but also among different racial and ethnic groups in the UK. At a critical historical moment, participants stood together against anti-Asian, anti-BAME, and anti-migrant racism. Liberal Democrats councillor Roger Harmer stated: 'We will work cross-party with colleagues from all different parties with those that share those views [opposing racism]' (Abdi, 2021a). Malaysia-born Chinese Dr. Yeow Poon from the Birmingham Chinese Community Centre said: 'It's important that we stand together, that we help and support one another, working with all sections of the community to fight hate crime together' (Abdi, 2021b).

Second generation Pakistani Salman Mirza from Migrant Voice expressed: 'It's really important to support the "Stop Asian Hate" movement as I have zero tolerance for all forms of racism. It's not enough to just be non-racist to others, we all have to be actively anti-racists together.' British Bangladeshi Imtious Sheikh, director of the Birmingham Asian Resource Centre, expressed similar views: 'I would like to see all communities and groups working together and stand up against racism regardless of their origins, religious beliefs and sexual orientation.'

The goal of antiracism has brought these diverse community groups together to articulate a strong stance against British nationalism, xenophobia and anti-Asian racism. The newly forged 'Asian' identity, in this context, becomes a catalyst to bridge racial, ethnic and cultural divides and to imagine new forms of identity and social solidarity. Admittedly, as one of the most cosmopolitan and multicultural cities in Birmingham is in a good place to envision and enact such a pan-Asian identity. In a post-Brexit Britai pan-Asian identity can also be observed elsewhere and is often mobilised for political purposes. For when a restaurant in London released a promotional video with orientalist and reductionist depictio people, 'Stop Asian Hate' fought back; different ethnic minorities unanimously condemn racism and inappropriate cultural appropriation by commercial companies (Abdi, 2021b).

The long-term sustainability of such a newly forged pan-Asian political identity (which brought together East, Southeast and South Asians without alienating Chinese-identified participants) is still to be seen. The pan-Asian political identity, as any other, should be seen as contingent, unstable and strategic. Nevertheless, it is the potential of such a cross-racial, cross-ethnic and cross-cultural pan-Asian identity that should draw our attention as we begin to map a historically informed conjunctural analysis, imagine the contingency and openness of the social, and envision new forms of sociality and solidarity.

Identity categories matter. We rely on categories such as Asian or ESEA to understand the complex world and to live out our everyday life; sociologists use categories to map the social world and to conduct critical analysis. It is important not to view these categories as fixed and inherent, but as dynamic processes where meanings are constantly generated and contested. Identity categories are not neutral; they can be mobilised to gain domination or to fight hegemony; they can divide communities or bring people together. The shifting meanings of 'Asian' at a time of anti-Asian racism and 'Stop Asian Hate' demonstrate the productivity of thinking about social categories in an open, flexible and dynamic way.

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Cite this work

Bao, H. (2021, September 7). Envisioning and Enacting a Pan-Asian Political Identity: The Cultural Po
the First 'Stop Asian Hate UK' Protests [Online]. The Sociological Review. https://doi.org/10.51428/ts

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