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# Reflections on Organizing Ottawa's Vigil for Atlanta Shooting Victims in 2021

**Ines Huang, Xiaobei Chen, and Jiyoung Lee-An**

**Ines Huang** is a trilingual professional with a Master's degree in Communication, Politics and Society, and a dual bachelor degree in History and Political Science. She is an avid practitioner of non violent communication and an active community volunteer supporting various causes. A former public servant, Ines currently dedicates her time as a gift planner to serve individuals, families and business owners navigate the Canadian philanthropic landscape and help bridge charities and nonprofits across divides to work collaboratively to create lasting impact.

**Xiaobei Chen** is Professor of Sociology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Carleton University. She served as President of the Canadian Sociological Association (2020-2021). Her research and teaching interests include: sociology of childhood and youth, governance and power, citizenship, racism, colonialism, citizenship, Asian diasporas especially the Chinese diaspora, and Buddhist social thought. Her latest book is a co-edited volume *The Sociology of Childhood and Youth in Canada*. Her current research and community engagement are focused on anti-Asian racism and Sinophobia.

**Jiyoung Lee-An** is an Assistant Teaching Professor in Sociology in the Department of Environment, Culture & Society at Thompson Rivers University. Her teaching and research interests include Critical Race Theory, Marriage Migration, Transnational Feminism, Social Justice, etc. Dr. Lee-An is a co-founder of the Student-Faculty Support Group for Anti-racism at TRU and a co-chair of the TRUFA Equity Committee. She is committed to creating an inclusive and anti-oppressive learning environment for everyone.

In this article, we share our experiences involved in organizing a vigil for the Atlanta shooting victims in March 2021. We were part of a small voluntary community group that came together and took the name of Asian Canadian Community Group based on our shared desire to take actions against anti-Asian racism and misogyny, especially after learning about the targeted tragic death of Asian women in Atlanta, the United States, in 2021. The Asian Canadian Community Group is a mix of people, mostly women, who are first- or second-generation Asian immigrants and Canadians. While all members have had extensive engagement with diverse community demographic groups, we have very uneven experiences with grassroots organizing against racism and misogyny, with some being totally new to such grassroots activism and others being veterans bringing to the group rich experiences and deep understanding. Together, we shared a goal to have a collective voice heard and to increase understanding among members from diverse backgrounds on the issue of anti-Asian racism and misogyny.

Ines is a first-generation Chinese Canadian woman who settled with her husband in Ottawa in early 2010. She worked in the public sector at the time and had been involved in various volunteering roles, with a focus on work supporting victims of

violence, promoting crime prevention, and bridging services for newcomer seniors and parents of school-aged kids. She received training in nonviolent communication. Xiaobei is also a first-generation Chinese woman. She came to Canada in the 1990s as an international student and is a professor of sociology and actively participated in many community initiatives against anti-Asian racism in response to the spiralling anti-Chinese, anti-Asian hostility. Jiyoung is a Korean immigrant who came to Canada as an international student and now teaches sociology at the university. Both in South Korea and Canada, she has been involved in grassroots migrant justice activism.

The murders of eight people, six of them Asian immigrant women, in Atlanta spas in March 2021 sent the whole world into shock. For Asian Canadians, these killings are widely seen as the culmination of growing hate and hostility against them. However, over most of the day, the media was repeating over and over again explanations that mainly focused on the murderer Robert Aaron Long's "sexual addiction" and his inability to cope with "temptations". Xiaobei forwarded the news report about the Atlanta shootings to a WeChat discussion group of Ottawa-based Chinese Canadians with a focus on anti-racist discrimination, and she initiated discussions about what should be key points to convey in interviews with the media. One point that became clear very quickly was that "[w]e feel the fear among Asian Americans" as well as a sense of helplessness. Ines recalled that we asked ourselves: Is there anything we can do here to help? Another point that emerged from the discussion was that Chinese Canadians need to break free from the pattern of inaction and do something about anti-Asian racism, through concrete actions to empower ourselves and restore hope.

After that, Xiaobei was interviewed on CBC Alan Neal's All in a Day, in which she criticized the incredulous situation of the police and the media repeating the murderer's narrative, causing further harm to the murdered victims, their families, and Asian communities. The authorities' inability to see the tragedy from the perspective of the victims and their communities reinforced the deep-rooted and normalized prejudices against Asian women. Treating the tragedy as the individual male offender's problem effectively denied that the incident was hate motivated. To engage in public discussion about this issue further, Jiyoung and Xiaobei (2021) published an article in [The Conversation](#), which brings attention to the intersection of gender, race and social class in anti-Asian racism, which "is intertwined with the sexualization of Asian women, a fetishization of Asian women's bodies and the stigmatization of sex work." While the concept of intersectionality has transformed a great deal of scholarship on critical studies of social injustice, Xiaobei recalled taking on intense and oddly bifurcated work in the days following the murders: on the one hand, explaining to Chinese Canadians that this tragedy was not just about anti-Asian racism and that these Asian women were stigmatized and targeted as Asian "women"; on the other hand, explaining to some feminist scholars studying gender based violence that it is very important to speak about the anti-Asian racism that produced this tragedy. Like many Asian scholars (Kang 2023), Jiyoung and Xiaobei found themselves having to explain to different audiences the historical and social factors that make Asian immigrant women, especially those in massage work and those in sex work, vulnerable targets of violence. They pointed out that the

sexualization of Asian women stems from a history of white imperial domination of the Asia Pacific as well as colonial ideas of Orientalism that constructed Asian women as “exotic” sexual objects. In North America, settler colonialism constructed Asian women as diseased bodies threatening the biological reproduction of the white nation.

In the Asian Canadian Community Group, we felt a strong interest to step up to connect with broader community members and to join the nation-wide momentum for collective voicing-out by taking swift and concrete actions. After hours of discussion, the format of vigil was chosen over others, in the hope to provide a safe and timely space for concerned community members to see, hear each other going through collective grief and healing. Within 72 hours, we had an open letter drafted, finalized, translated and disseminated in three languages inviting other Asian groups in Ottawa to join us and had many email discussions and online meetings to organize the vigil. On March 28, 2021, we held the vigil to commemorate the victims at the Ottawa Women’s Monument near Elgin Street, with the central message identified as “to stop anti-Asian racism and misogyny”. Despite the rainy weather, about 150 to 200 people from diverse backgrounds gathered to mourn the victims, expressing solidarity in fighting racism and misogyny. While this vigil itself was successful, given the short time of organizing the vigil with different groups, at many points we wondered whether we could really succeed in organizing. It was clear at the outset that we (different organizers) had very different, sometimes contradictory, views on a number of key issues, for example, the presence of the police. Organizing the vigil not only taught us much about the practice of anti-racism and feminist action, but it also raised questions for reflection about how we with different backgrounds and views can work together towards building solidarity. In this paper, we share some of these: practicing intersectional analysis, focusing on systemic racism rather than individualized hate, and dialoguing about a critical perspective on policing in solidarity with Black, Indigenous, and other racialized communities.

### **Practising intersectional analysis of race, gender, and class**

The Atlanta spa shootings prompted widespread protests by Asian American and Asian Canadian communities under the slogan of #StopAsianHate. While we support these protests, we observed that many of the #StopAsianHate protests focused on anti-Asian racism as a whole, and failed in highlighting violence against women, especially working-class Asian women in the spa and sex work industry. This failure must be understood as a product of class-based prejudices and misogyny against these groups of women within Asian communities. Grounded in an intersectionality analysis of this tragedy and in response to the majority of protests around us, we felt that it was critical that our vigil send the message that the horrific murderous acts in Atlanta were a result of misogynistic violence and anti-Asian racist violence. We highlighted this in our event poster (see Image 1). In our speeches at the event, organizers also emphasized the discrimination against working class Asians, spa workers and sex workers.



Image 1. Poster for the Ottawa Vigil for Atlanta Shooting Victims, March 28, 2021. credit - Ansari

### **Focusing on systemic racism rather than individualized hate**

The Atlanta spa murders are widely seen as the culmination of growing hate and hostility against the Chinese and Asians since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. This tragedy led to many protests across North America, united by the hashtag slogan #StopAsianHate. Hate and how the government should respond to it emerged as central concerns to many individuals and advocacy groups. However, some organizers questioned the narrow focus on hate crime alone and pointed out a number of other problems. First, organizers expressed the concern that the legal tools against hate are extremely limited. Second, the preoccupation with anti-Asian hate crimes follows a long-standing pattern of only noticing individual racism, where overt and dramatic racist acts are blamed on the pathology of a few individuals. This misses the structural and systemic nature of racism. The 2020 protests against anti-Black racism in the wake of George Floyd's killing by police have made mainstream the concept of systemic racism (James 2022). Ironically, little media coverage about anti-Asian racism has included the mention of this important concept, which understands racism as a systemic condition that is pervasive, deeply rooted in the culture of a society, and imbricated with the system of power and privilege (Chen 2021). Systemic racism has multiple layers of meanings. In the context of anti-Asian racism, this concept directs our attention beyond the exclusive preoccupation with policing anti-Asian hate attacks by individuals against individuals. Simply calling for hate crime laws and more policing are

not effective solutions, and moreover it may damage solidarity and a collective struggle against racism (Talusán 2021; 18millionrising.org). Social and political institutions including the media, popular culture, schools, and government policies, interact to (re) produce anti-Asian racism. To address anti-Asian racism, we must understand the roots of anti-Asian racism in North America as well as colonial and imperialist aggressions in Asia. On the ground, the structural analysis of systemic racism raised questions and led to debates about what messages we wanted to communicate through the vigil, specifically, whether we centre the prevailing slogan #StopAsianHate. Relatedly, some community groups in British Columbia contacted us because they would like to promote all the Canadian protests on that weekend as a nationally coordinated action of #StopAsianHate. Some vigil organizers were in favour of banding the actions together to show strength under the slogan of #StopAsianHate. However, some others were hesitant due to their reservations about these BC protests' focus on hate and a lack of attention to misogyny. Furthermore, we did not know the BC groups well enough to allow dialogue and potential coordination in a short time. After a long debate, we decided to decline the invitation to be publicized together as a coordinated national action.

### **Negotiating with divergent stances regarding the police**

One issue that has caused major disagreements among organizers was whether to contact the Ottawa Police about the vigil for safety concerns. Given the murderous violence targeting Asian spa workers and the overall skyrocketing violence against Asians, we had some concerns about the safety of people coming to the vigil. Some organizers proposed that we contact the police to request police presence to keep order and prevent potential attacks on vigil participants. This was strongly opposed by others who saw the police as a source of violence against Asian spa workers and sex workers (see Lam 2025 in this issue). These colleagues felt strongly about committing to an anti-carceral and anti-policing stance in solidarity with Black, Indigenous, and other racialized communities (see Park 2025 in this issue) and believed it is important to speak about the problems of policing against racialized communities at the event. Some others, while supporting a critical stance regarding policing because of the police's role in the colonial and racist state formation and its record of discrimination and brutality against Black, Indigenous and other racialized peoples, they nevertheless felt that this vigil should not centralize an "anti-policing" position categorically, recognizing that Asian seniors and older immigrants have different views about the police, especially in the context of a viral increase of hate crimes against Asians, often seniors and women. Frustrated by these disagreements, some on both sides of the debate decided not to participate in organizing further. Amidst these challenges, those who stayed to continue with organizing made two decisions: one, we definitely would not contact the police "for protection", instead we would develop community protection protocols; two, the vigil would not focus on an anti-policing position itself, rather it would be centred on honouring the victims and calling on actions against misogyny and anti-Asian racism.



In conclusion, despite the challenges and unresolved differences we face, our collective action under the umbrella of the Asian Canadian Community Group was a meaningful initiative to envision and practice a broader Asian solidarity beyond the boundaries of ethnicities, cultures, and diasporic cohorts. It was also an important reminder to recognize not only similarities as Asians but also complex differences between us who embody different migration histories and multiple social locations originating from colonial history and individual life paths. This action provided an opportunity for us to situate our fight against anti-Asian racism within a broader context of systemic racism against all racialized groups and to envision nuanced solidarity with other oppressed groups in order to move forward to achieve racial justice.

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Image 2: Ottawa's Vigil for Atlanta Shooting Victims, March 28, 2021. Photo credit: Susan



Image 3. Organizers for Ottawa's Vigil for Atlanta Shooting Victims, March 28, 2021. Photo credit - Jiyoung Lee-An





Image 4. An organizer making a speech in front of the Ottawa Women's Monument, March 28, 2021.  
Photo credit - Jiyoung Lee-An

