



Letter to the Editor

Sinophobia as the disease and palaeopathology as the cure: response to Adja et al.



We have very much enjoyed the correspondence by Adja et al.¹ on the social and xenophobic stigma suffered by the Italian Chinese community after the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic, which later became a pandemic. Building on their correct assessment of the case, we would like to endeavour to offer some explanations for the xenophobic reaction described by the authors and propose a potential educational solution to it.

Xenophobia as an aetiological-vectorial explanation

The authors write that ‘the human nature propelled xenophobic actions while preparedness efforts culpably lagged behind, favouring the spread of the virus’. The nature vs nurture debate on the origin of human racism is still ongoing, as shown by a recent study suggesting that the latter has a more prominent role in the absence of evidence of racial sensitivity of the amygdala until around 14 years of age.² However, concur with the authors and additionally stress that an in-depth scrutiny of the past of diseases and their historical interaction with human populations can help people understand that such a xenophobic response is not something new. The Thucydidean episode clearly indicates an ancient mix of war-related conspiracy theories and ethnic blame. In our opinion, the most evident and best instance of the phenomenon discussed here, that is, the act of blaming foreigners for the origin or spread of an infectious disease, is offered by venereal syphilis, a disease that devastatingly occurred in Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries. The Italians, Germans and English blamed it on the French, calling it *morbus Gallicus* (the ‘French disease’), while the French in turn accused the Neapolitans, the Poles the Germans, the Russians the Poles and so forth.³

Sinophobia

The described anti-Chinese sentiment, or Sinophobia, is based on a set of thoughts, prejudices and feelings against China, its people and culture. However, it is far from being a novel manifestation. Sinophilia prevailed in European culture from about the 16th to the mid-18th century – as testified by the work *Novissima Sinica* (1697) by the German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) in which he asserted the peaks of human cultivation lie in the two extremes of the common Eurasian continent «[...] *maximus generis humani cultus ornatusque; hodie velut collectus sit in duobus extremis nostris continentis, Europa et Tschina* [...]»^{4,a}. The general attitude towards China started to change as the result of Johann Gottfried

Herder's (1744–1803) 1791 *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (‘Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind’), a work from which the idea that China's history was stagnating powerfully emerged and was epitomised by the pejorative definition of that country as ‘an embalmed mummy’ (*eine balsamierte Mumie*). This change in attitude would be later exacerbated by European imperial adventures in Asia, the Opium Wars (1839–1842 between China and the British Empire, 1856–1860 also involving France), the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), World War 2 (with an intra-Asian anti-Chinese sentiment fuelled by the invading Japanese empire), and the current economic and political tensions between China and its opposing superpower, the United States of America. Hence, the current episodes of Sinophobia should be interpreted as the latest manifestations of a phenomenon which is over two centuries old.

Palaeopathology as a potential cure for disease-related xenophobia

In light of the presented facts and wishing to corroborate the authors' stance, we strongly believe that a comprehensive study of the history of medicine and palaeopathology, the science that examines diseases in past populations providing information on both chronic and infectious conditions,^{5,6} can help biomedical scientists and the general public understand that such disease-related xenophobic events are nothing new and can be effectively tackled in their early stages. This is in the interest of public health and the preservation of the integrity of the very fabric of our own nations and communities.⁷

Availability of data and material

Data are publicly available.

Author statements*Ethical approval*

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^a The Latin quotation is from the second edition of Leibniz's work (Hannover: Förster, 1699).

Competing interests

None declared.

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