

China

## Yellow whistles serve as symbol and signal to call out violence against Asian-Americans

Three friends in New York, disturbed by recent verbal and physical attacks, create a whistle distribution programme to thwart race-based assaults

'A whistle is loud, we are staking our ground and are loud on racists, in a legal, safe, responsible way'



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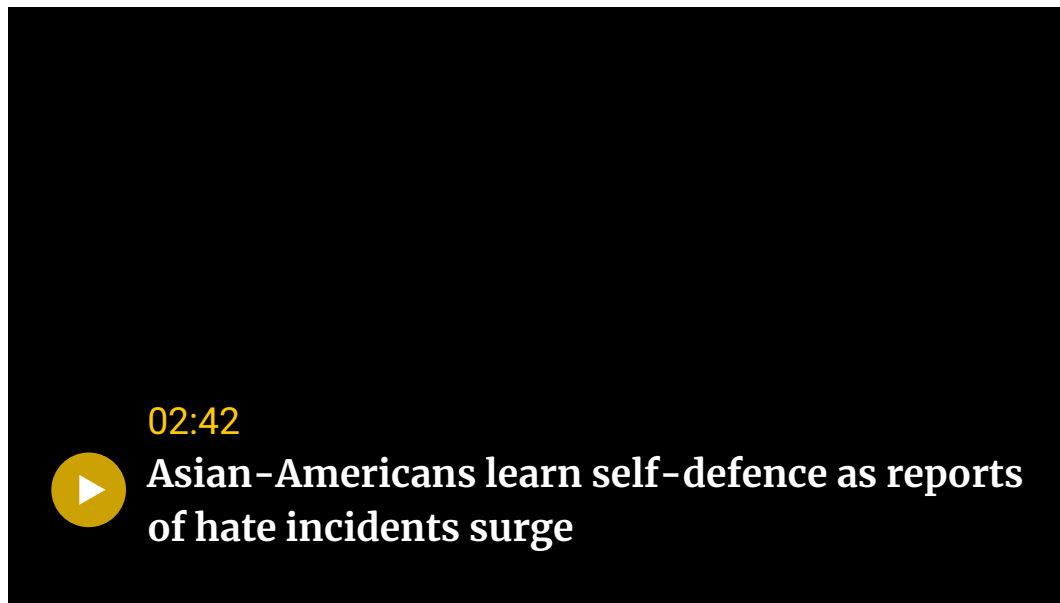
Demonstrators rally against Asian-American violence and discrimination in Los Angeles. Photo: Getty Images/TNS)

Hsiu-Lan Chang and several friends in the Boston area have become increasingly fearful as hate incidents proliferated amid the pandemic and comments by former president Donald Trump fuelled prejudice and stereotypes.

After Chang, 70, had a man aggressively bump into her repeatedly in a supermarket and others shun her after loudly exclaiming she probably carried the virus, the former financial industry executive and her Asian-American friends welcomed a gift of yellow whistles to alert others if they are attacked.

“It’s a great idea. It’s like a cry for help, a symbol,” she said. “And the colour yellow, while it’s identified with the negative connotations of yellow people, it’s also the colour of danger, being careful, a warning light. So the simplicity of it struck me.”

The yellow whistle campaign – officially launched on Monday, which was the Patriots’ Day holiday in Massachusetts – is the brainchild of three Asian-American friends who were disturbed by recent verbal and physical attacks and decided last month that they wanted to help.



Asian-Americans learn self-defence as reports of hate incidents surge

Li-En Chong, an art administrator and recent naturalised US citizen, suggested they donate pepper spray. Agnes Hsu-Tang, an archeologist, said that could create legal problems and that older people might struggle to use it with shaking hands.

They considered a personal alarm, but rejected that given the need for batteries.

Then Hsu-Tang thought about a whistle, which she carries on archaeological digs in the desert, something that can warn, help raise awareness, presents no language barriers and might even become a symbol of the struggle, in the same way a ribbon image did among Aids activists.

Brainstorming further, they decided on a wrist cord rather than a lanyard, which an attacker could use to strangle its wearer.

“It’s really spontaneous. All of us were reading newspapers and frustrated at not being able to do anything,” said Hsu-Tang. “A whistle is loud, we are staking our ground and are loud on racists, in a legal, safe, responsible way.”

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Growing number of African-American China experts work to gain recognition, puncture stereotypes

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Oscar Tang, Hsu-Tang’s husband, then weighed in, suggesting the colour yellow – evoking the long-standing “yellow peril” xenophobic trope as well as the colour’s association with spring and rebirth – and adding the slogan “we belong”.

“This has always been an issue for Asian-Americans, always looked upon as perpetual foreigners. And I don’t feel like a foreigner, I feel very American,” said Tang, a philanthropist. “The idea of belonging is something that most of us have earned. And the point is that we all belong. None of us came from here except Native Americans. One way or another, we all assimilated in this country.”

So far, the campaign has distributed 10,000 of the yellow whistles free of charge through dozens of activist groups tied to the Asian-American community, as well as elderly food pantries, health care, religious, historical and LGBT organizations and rallies, with another 25,000 on order.

US Representative Grace Meng, Democrat of New York, speaks as Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer stands next to her at a news conference to discuss an Asian-American hate crime bill on Monday in New York. Photo: AP

The three organisers, all over 40, have jokingly dubbed themselves “senior bleeding heart activists”. They won’t say how much the China-made whistles cost, but say they are a bargain if they help reduce violence; they plan on distributing them at a rally on Sunday in the New York City neighbourhood of Flushing, which is expected to include politicians, activists and academics, including US Representative Grace Meng, a Democrat from New York.

Chong said that she always held a very high view of the United States from afar, but that living in the US during the past five years of divisiveness, name calling and anti-Asian hatred has been an eye-opener. But unlike her native Malaysia, or Hong Kong, where she lived for a decade and holds permanent residence status, there’s room for political activism in the US, she added.

“If you care about something, this is the country that will give you an opportunity to do something about it,” she said.

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Joe Biden seeks racial equity for Asian-Americans in wake of Donald Trump’s anti-China talk

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President [Joe Biden](#)’s administration has made anti-Asian violence a priority, including the signing of an executive order in January against xenophobia and bias, even as Stop AAPI Hate, a civic group, reports nearly 3,800 anti-Asian hate incidents reported over the past year. The US Senate is expected to vote Wednesday on a bill sponsored by Meng and Senator Mazie Hirono, Democrat of Hawaii, to curb the rise in hate crimes against Asian-Americans.

This follows years of references by Trump and members of his administration to the “China flu” and “kung flu” that, many say, contributed to an atmosphere of prejudice and racism.

“These evil tendencies exist in all of us, myself included,” said Tang. “Our leadership under the demagoguery of Trump, who used that for their own purposes, brought it to the fore.”

“There’s been a lot of frustration, factoring in the fact that China is viewed as a threat and poor Asian-Americans become the target,” he added.

Activists help publicise and distribute yellow whistles for safety. Photo: Handout

Hsu-Tang said she never used her archaeological whistle on a dig, but did use it once in Providence, Rhode Island, when some men followed her in a car yelling sexist and racist comments, threatening to kill her and chop up her body. Fearing they were going to pull a gun, she ran in a zigzag pattern, and reported the incident to the police.

They turned out to be from a notorious local gang, she said. “I have worked in dangerous places in the Third World, including rural Central Asia, but America can be more dangerous,” she said. “Whistles work! And you know what, I am going to keep whistle-blowing!”

Asian Pacific Islander American Public Affairs is among the groups distributing the whistles through its 30 chapters around the US.

“This project is an excellent idea,” said Vincent Wang, the group’s national president. “We can use it as one of the major messages, we belong here, we’re as American as anyone else, we have a voice, a face and visibility.”

Hsiu-Lan Chang (right), who helped start an activist group, takes part in a recent anti-hate rally. Photo: Handout

Whistle users Chang and her friend Stephanie Fan, 75, felt their own need to become more politically active after the murders of six women of Asian descent last month in Atlanta. As they watched younger members of the Asian-American community demonstrate, the two – protesters against the Vietnam war and other causes during the 1960s and 1970s – decided to take action.

They created a group called Greater Boston Asian American Seniors for Peace and Justice – now numbering more than 20, all in their 70s and 80s – that has demonstrated, boned up on self-defence tactics and showed their support for the cause. After considering various unwieldy acronyms for the organisation, they settled on “Gasp.”

“This is our last gasp, no one can shut us up” said Chang. “We love our acronym as we find it so fitting for a group of seniors like us – it means that we will ‘make good trouble’, as the late congressman John Lewis said, till our last gasp!”