The moral filter of patriotic prejudice: How Americans view Chinese in the COVID-19 era

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About one in six Asian Americans have fallen victim to anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic [J. Lee, K. Ramakrishnan, aapidata.com/blog/discrimination-survey-2022/]. By examining anti-Asian racism in the United States primarily as a domestic issue, most prior studies have overlooked the connections between shifting US-China relations and Americans' prejudices against the Chinese in China and, by extension, East Asian Americans. This study investigates the patterns and perceptual bases of nationality-based prejudices against Chinese amid the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. Our nationally representative online survey experiment reveals that Americans assess a hypothetical Chinese person in China as inferior in multiple social and psychological characteristics to an otherwise identical Japanese person in Japan or East Asian American. Furthermore, subjects who perceive China as more threatening to America's national interests assess Chinese more negatively, especially in terms of trustworthiness and morality, suggesting that perceived China threats propel Americans' negative stereotypes about Chinese. A contextual analysis further indicates that counties with a higher share of Trump voters in 2016 tend to perceive all East Asian–origin groups similarly as a racial outgroup. By contrast, residents in predominantly Democrat-voting counties tend to perceive Chinese in China more negatively relative to Asian Americans, despite broadly viewing East Asians more favorably. Overall, this study underscores the often-overlooked relationships between the prevailing anti-Asian sentiments in the United States and the US-China geopolitical tensions and America's domestic political polarization.

stereotypes | Asians and Asian Americans | US–China relations | China threats | trust and morality

In March 2021, Maria Ha took a walk in her neighborhood in Manhattan, New York City. When she felt as if someone was approaching her from behind, she looked back to find a middle-aged White woman coming closer and closer, staring at her with animosity. The White woman then came face to face with her and yelled, "You're not from here. You're from China, aren't you? Go back to China" (2). Maria was born and raised in the United States by immigrant parents from Korea. The woman misidentified Maria as foreign-born Chinese based on her appearance and made Maria the target of her animosity toward Chinese. This incident, while strictly anecdotal, not only encapsulates the countless verbal and physical attacks targeting Asians during the COVID-19 pandemic (3) but also manifests Americans' mental association between the Chinese and East Asians more generally.

As this case suggests, hostility toward Chinese in China potentially drives many hate incidents targeting East Asians in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic, partly due to the pandemic's infamous Chinese origin. The phenotypic resemblance among East Asians potentially presents a visual cue evoking the anti-Chinese attitudes of some Americans and triggering attacks. In light of frequent media coverage of such hate attacks in the United States targeting East Asians during the pandemic (4), we ask whether Americans hold stronger nationality-based prejudices against Chinese in China compared to other East Asians, and if yes, why. To address these questions, we conducted a randomized online survey experiment with a nationally representative adult sample in the United States. We aim to disentangle nationality-based prejudices against Chinese in China from potential prejudices against East Asians in general and to examine connections between nationality-based prejudices against Chinese in China and strained US–China relations during the pandemic.

Recent research has examined widespread anti-Asian (5–8) and xenophobic (5, 9, 10) attitudes as COVID-19 outbreaks swept over the United States, with findings on spillover prejudices toward other domestic racial-ethnic minorities (11). Another strand of research has documented the link between COVID-19 and Americans' attitudes toward China, as China failed to curb initial domestic COVID-19 outbreaks from spreading abroad (12, 13). There remains a crucial missing link between these two strands of literature, however. Considering the close connections between COVID-19's Chinese origin and the

Significance

Existing studies of anti-Asian racism in the COVID-19 era have left open the question of how strained international relations may foment nationality-based stereotypes of Asians. We designed a survey experiment to examine Americans' perceptions of Chinese in the context of shifting US-China relations during COVID-19. Our experiment shows that Americans rate Chinese in China lower in multiple characteristics than otherwise identical Japanese or East Asian Americans. Furthermore, Americans perceiving China as more threatening consistently viewed Chinese as less trustworthy and less moral, and residents of Republican counties generally homogenize East Asians as one outgroup. These findings pinpoint the variable causal linkages between perceived national-interest threats and nationality-based prejudices, substantiating the connections between US-China relations, domestic polarization, and anti-Asian sentiments.

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widely witnessed antagonism toward Asians, it is essential to incorporate US–China relations into examining US domestic attitudes toward East Asians (14). A study that bridges the interwoven domestic anti-Asian racism and its international underpinnings could help further our understanding of racial-ethnic tensions in the globalized world.

Perceived national threats arising from international conflicts often foment sentiments of outgroup derogation toward minority groups associated with specific national origins. US history presents numerous examples of this. Notably, when Japan became a national enemy of the United States following its Pearl Harbor attack in 1941, Americans frequently called Japanese "rats" and "monkeys" and widely viewed them as deceitful, treacherous, and cruel (15, 16). Amid public suspicion over Japanese Americans' loyalty to the United States and fear of retaliation, under Executive Order 9066, around 120,000 Japanese descendants in the United States were forced into internment camps in 1942. Similarly, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks by foreign Islamic extremists, stereotypes of Muslims as violent and untrustworthy gained popularity among Americans (17). Meanwhile, the United States saw a dramatic increase in hate crimes targeting domestic Arab and Muslim groups (18). These historical instances confirm findings from the intergroup relations literature that perceptions of inferior trustworthiness and morality are integral facets of outgroup prejudices that categorically separate "us" from "them," "right" from "wrong," and "light" from "darkness" (19–22). Indeed, major international conflicts often activate a "moral filter" that unifies derogative perceptions of citizens in a hostile foreign nation and domestic minorities from that nation to safeguard the homeland's collective interests.

Leveraging the links between US–China relations and East Asian stereotypes, this study examines the patterns and perceptual bases of Americans' varying prejudices against East Asian subgroups. Empirical tests of intergroup threat theory have indicated that threat perceptions propel negative stereotypes against outgroups (23–27), so that individuals with stronger threat perceptions hold stronger prejudices. In light of the deterioration of US–China relations, which started before COVID-19 and was greatly exacerbated by the pandemic (28), we expect that Americans who perceive China as more threatening will exhibit stronger prejudices against Chinese in China. While most previous studies have studied Asians as a racial category (29), we disaggregate East Asians by nationality groups to derive insights into how and why Americans might view East Asian subgroups differently. Our analysis focuses on nationality-based prejudices against Chinese, the largest Asian-origin group in the United States today (30) and also the most frequent victims in hate-incident reports during the pandemic (31). Our findings have significant bearing on recent experiences of social marginalization faced by Chinese Americans and other East Asians in US society.

Materials and Methods

Experiment Design. We conducted a randomized experiment as part of an online survey on the social consequences of COVID-19, with the full study protocol approved by Princeton University's Institutional Review Board. In May 2021, we fielded the Internet-based survey to about 4,000 participants who were representative of the US adult population via Ipsos's KnowledgePanel (*SI Appendix,* section 1 provides a detailed survey methodology and sample descriptions). At the beginning of the survey, we informed prospective participants of the main research objectives and our organizational affiliation to obtain their consent to participate. The experimental treatments involved displaying a randomly generated fictitious profile, which consisted of an East Asian male headshot with a text description, followed by questions prompting respondents to evaluate this person. Specifically, our three-dimensional experimental design generated a male profile by randomly manipulating information stimuli regarding 1) nationality (Chinese, Japanese, or Asian American), 2) facial expression (happy, neutral, or angry), and 3) occupation (low status, medium status, or high status), yielding 27 unique combinations with equal assignment probability. We used photos of the same man to avoid confounding effects of facial features (32).

For the experiment's core manipulation dimension of nationality, we randomly displayed one of the three locations for the fictitious profile: Beijing, China; Tokyo, Japan; or New York City, the United States. We designated the locations as nationality cues for a Chinese in China, a Japanese in Japan, and an Asian American in the United States. This dimension is intended to reveal potential variations in Americans' attitudes toward the three East Asian nationality groups.

According to the stereotype content model (SCM) literature, perceived warmth and competence are two key dimensions that reliably predict individuals' social judgments of unfamiliar persons (33–35). We accordingly took three different photos of our model for the fictitious person as he altered his facial expressions among being happy, neutral, or angry (shown in *SI Appendix,* section 8). We randomly displayed one of the three photos in the experiment. We proxied the man's competence level with one out of three randomly displayed occupations of different socioeconomic status (SES): "janitor" for low SES, "computer programmer" for medium SES, and "medical doctor" for high SES.

After priming our survey subjects with information regarding the portrayed man's nationality, warmth, and competence, we asked the participants to rate him across four perception outcomes. We asked the following four questions: "How trustworthy/moral/competent/warm do you think he is?" While the questions on trustworthiness and morality aimed to capture varying degrees of outgroup prejudice, the questions on competence and warmth helped perform SCM-motivated manipulation checks for our experimental conditions. We adopted a numerical scale ranging from "1 = Not at all" to "7 = Very much" for all questions.

Survey Design. Toward the end of the 25-min survey, we included six survey items to gauge participants' multidimensional perceptions of China's threats to the United States. The battery of questions about China threats included the following: 1) "How much is China a threat to the US economy?" 2) "How much is China a threat to Americans' intellectual property rights?" 3) "How much is China a threat to Americans' privacy?" 4) "How much is China a threat to the American way of life?" 5) "How much is China a threat to American democracy?" 6) "How much is China a threat to the security of the US?" We adopted these questions to capture threat perceptions in the six substantive domains where research and media reports suggest that Americans may perceive national-interest conflicts with China (36, 37). We used an 11-point scale ranging from "0 = No threat at all" to "10 = Very serious threat" for all threat-related questions.

Results

Main Experiment. The results from the experiment indicate that average ratings across all four perception outcomes were consistently the lowest for Chinese in China compared to Japanese in Japan and East Asian Americans (*SI Appendix,* Fig. S1). While displaying similar patterns, the nationality gradients in trustworthiness and morality were larger in magnitude than those in warmth and competence. In Table 1, we present pairwise comparisons of mean ratings differences by nationality groups. The t tests contrast the three pairwise comparisons: Asian Americans versus Chinese, Asian Americans versus Japanese, and Chinese versus Japanese. These pairwise comparisons confirm the persistently lower ratings of Chinese relative to Asian Americans or Japanese, whereas differences between the ratings of Asian Americans and Japanese were negligible. Thus, on average, Americans do not see equal "otherness" or "foreignness" in all East Asians. Rather, they view Chinese in China more negatively than Japanese in Japan and Asian Americans, especially in terms of perceived trustworthiness and morality.

The experiment additionally yielded differential ratings by occupation and facial expression. The observed patterns by occupation

Table 1. *t* tests for differences in perception ratings by displayed countries: Country-specific means and pairwise comparisons

	Country-specific mean ratings			Pairwise comparisons of mean differences					
	United States	China	Japan	United States–China	*t* statistic	United States–Japan	*t* statistic	China–Japan	*t* statistic
Trustworthiness	5.12	4.79	5.10	0.33	6.24***	0.01	0.26	−0.32	−6.12***
	(1.36)	(1.35)	(1.30)	(0.05)		(0.05)		(0.05)	
Morality	5.14	4.83	5.06	0.32	6.20***	0.09	1.74	−0.23	−4.52***
	(1.30)	(1.31)	(1.29)	(0.05)		(0.05)		(0.05)	
Competence	5.43	5.26	5.40	0.16	3.14***	0.03	0.53	−0.13	−2.64***
	(1.31)	(1.30)	(1.30)	(0.05)		(0.05)		(0.05)	
Warmth	4.52	4.28	4.43	0.24	4.20***	0.09	1.52	−0.15	−2.69***
	(1.45)	(1.45)	(1.45)	(0.06)		(0.06)		(0.06)	

SEs are in parentheses. *P < 0.05; **P < 0.01; ***P < 0.001 (two-tailed tests).

were inconsistent across the four perception outcomes. The participants saw the janitor (the lowest-SES occupation) as more trustworthy/moral and warmer than the two higher-SES occupations (*SI Appendix,* Fig. S2). A different pattern emerged in perceived competence, where the computer programmer was the most highly regarded by a small margin. The surprising result that the computer programmer is perceived as most competent may partly reflect Americans' perception of Asians' high proficiency with computer programming. Greater warmth of facial expression was

consistently associated with more favorable ratings across the four perception outcomes (*SI Appendix,* Fig. S3). In line with the existing SCM literature, friendliness helps win hearts and minds, but socioeconomic achievement does not (33–35).

To further assess the relative importance of nationality, occupation, and facial expression in determining ratings, we ran separate regression models predicting the four perception outcomes along those three dimensions. As Fig. 1 shows, whereas there were no coherent relationships between occupation and ratings, warmth of
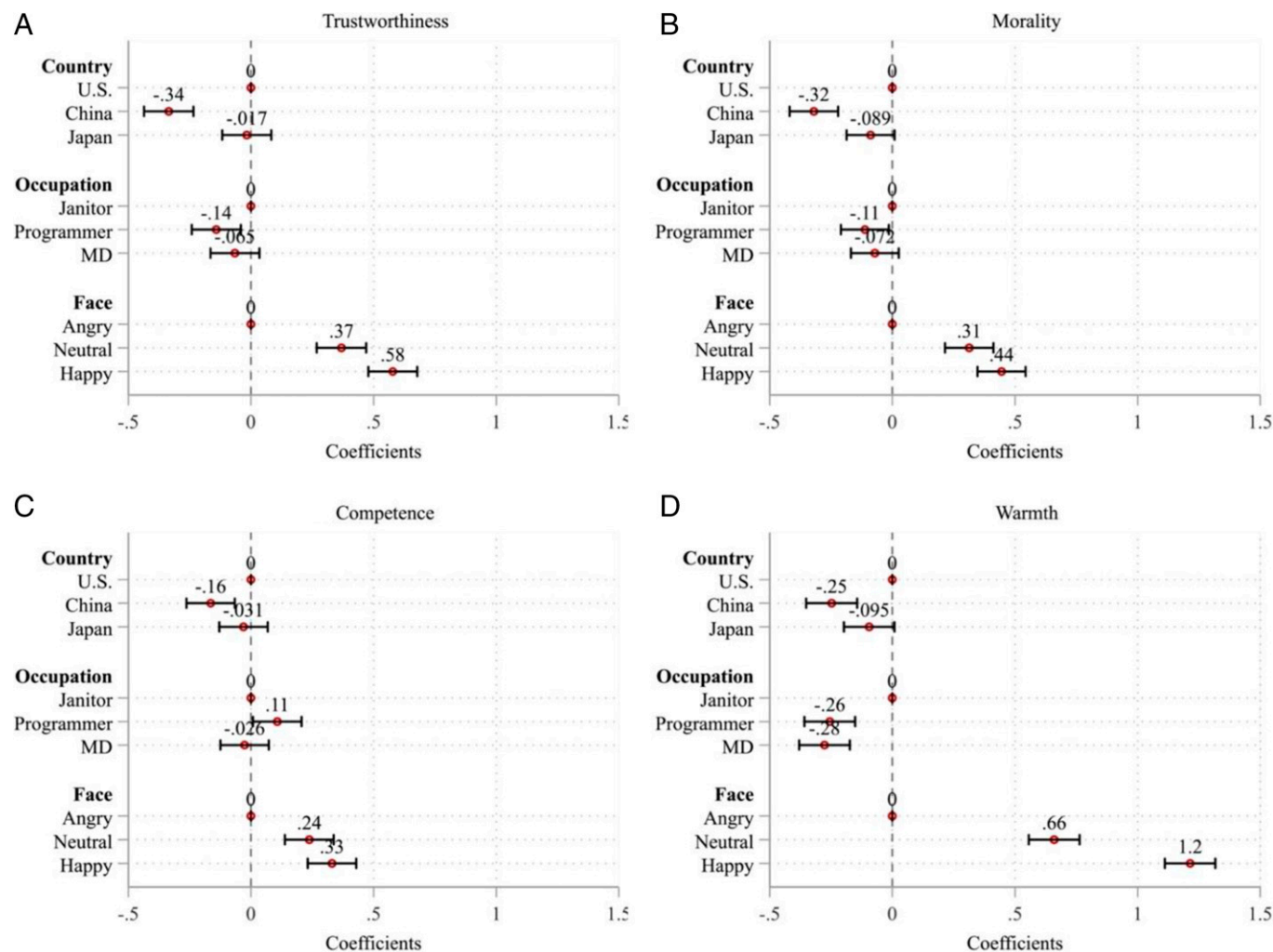

Fig. 1. Key coefficients by perception outcomes: by country, occupation, and facial expression. Point estimates with 95% CIs (reference groups marked as "0").

facial expression was the most predictive across the four perception outcomes. Despite being smaller in magnitude, the adverse treatment effects of Chinese nationality on ratings were consistent and robust.

Heterogeneous Treatment Effects by China-Threat Perceptions. To evaluate the relationship between Americans' perceptions of Chinese in China and their perceptions of China threats, we classified respondents into three terciles by summing their China-threat scores from the six survey items (*SI Appendix*, Fig. S4). We then performed subgroup analyses to assess the "Chinese" and "Japanese" treatment effects across the low-threat, medium-threat, and high-threat subgroups, with "Asian American" as the reference group. Fig. 2 visualizes those heterogeneous nationality treatment effects separately for the four perception outcomes.

Shown in Fig. 1, the average treatment effect of the individual's nationality as "Chinese in China" on his perceived trustworthiness was −0.34. As Fig. 2 shows, the effect broken down by perceived China-threat levels was −0.19 for the low-threat subgroup, −0.34 for the medium-threat subgroup, and −0.54 for the high-threat subgroup. Perceived morality exhibited similar patterns. While the average treatment effect of "Chinese in China" on perceived morality was −0.32, the group-specific effects were −0.25 for the low-threat subgroup, −0.27 for the medium-threat subgroup, and −0.49 for the high-threat subgroup (all substantively and statistically significant). We identified qualitatively similar yet markedly flatter gradients across the three China-threat subgroups in ratings of perceived competence of Chinese in China but inconsistent patterns for perceived warmth. These results validate our initial hypothesis regarding the effect of China threats on perceptions of Chinese in China (*SI Appendix*, Tables S1–S4 report the sample descriptive summaries followed by full results).

Variations across Local Political Contexts. We further investigated whether the experimental results varied by local political environment. Local political environment was proxied by county-level Republican vote shares in the 2016 presidential election (that is, votes share for Donald Trump). The results, presented in Fig. 3, suggest that local political environment predicts perceptions

of East Asians, especially in terms of trustworthiness and morality. As the proportion of Republican voters in a country increases, trustworthiness and morality perceptions decline for all three East Asian subgroups, implying a growing tendency to view them as outgroups. However, the corresponding declines in ratings differed across our three nationality groups, being most pronounced for Asian Americans and least pronounced (almost flat) for Chinese in China.

Because the rating declines were steepest for Asian Americans and flattest for Chinese, the overall negative perceptual gap attributed to Chinese in China diminished as the proportion of Republican voters in a given county increased. In predominantly Republican-voting counties, residents on average perceived the three East Asian groups unvaryingly as one outgroup. By contrast, residents in predominantly Democrat-voting counties on average exhibited more negative perceptions of Chinese in China relative to Asian Americans, despite broadly viewing East Asians more favorably as a whole (*SI Appendix*, Tables S5 and S6 report the full results). Beyond confirming prior findings on Republicans' generally more conservative attitudes toward foreigners (38), this analysis reveals more subtle differences in prejudices against East Asians based on national origins across county-level political partisanship divides.

Conclusions and Discussion

The sharp rise in the public's hostility toward Asians in the United States during COVID-19 has been well documented in the existing literature. Yet, most prior studies have overlooked the essential link between anti-Asian hate and the evolving US–China relationship, a dynamic bilateral tie vital to both countries and the world at large. Instead of broadly treating Asians as a race, we highlight Americans' distinct prejudices against Chinese in China relative to Japanese in Japan and Asian Americans. Our experimental design leveraged randomly manipulated visual and text-based stimuli to assess the effect of nationality treatment on participants' perceptions. The experiment uncovered consistent nationality-based prejudices toward Chinese among the three East Asian nationality groups, especially regarding perceived trustworthiness and morality. These findings provide broader implications for understanding the
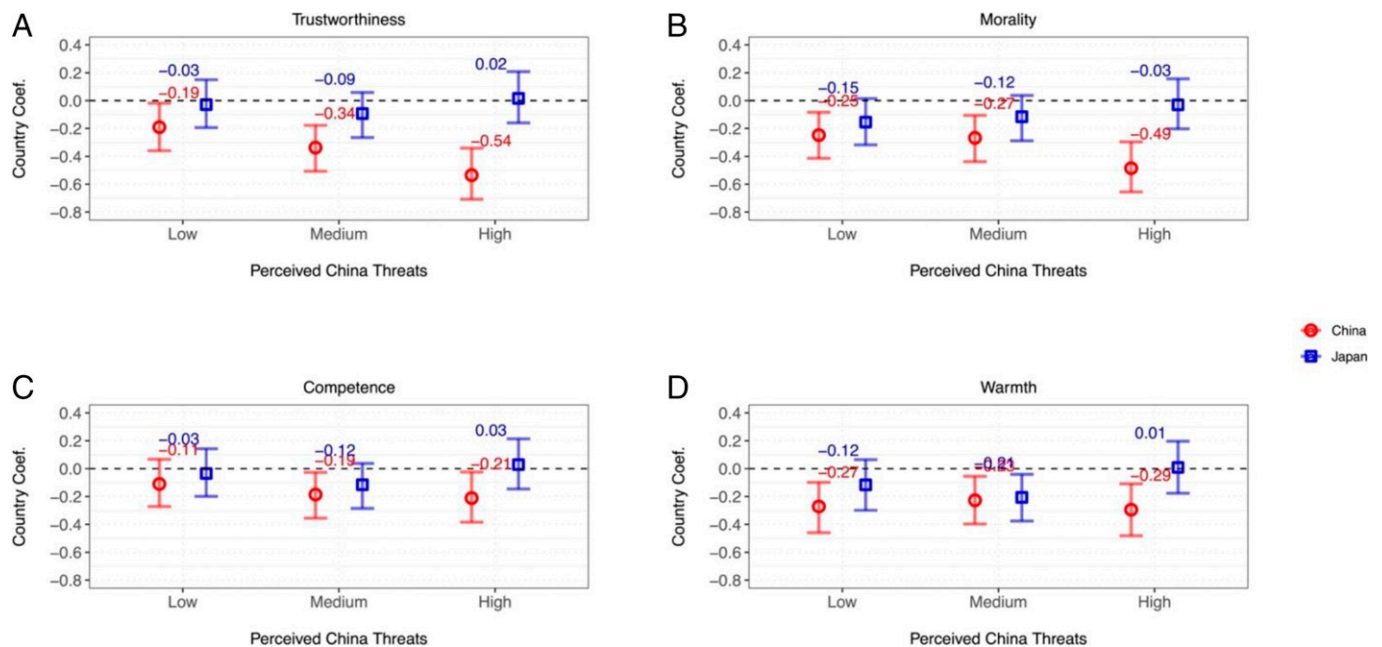

Fig. 2. Estimated "nationality" treatment effects by low-, medium-, and high-threat subgroups. The United States (omitted) is the reference group for both China and Japan; the error bars indicate 95% CIs.
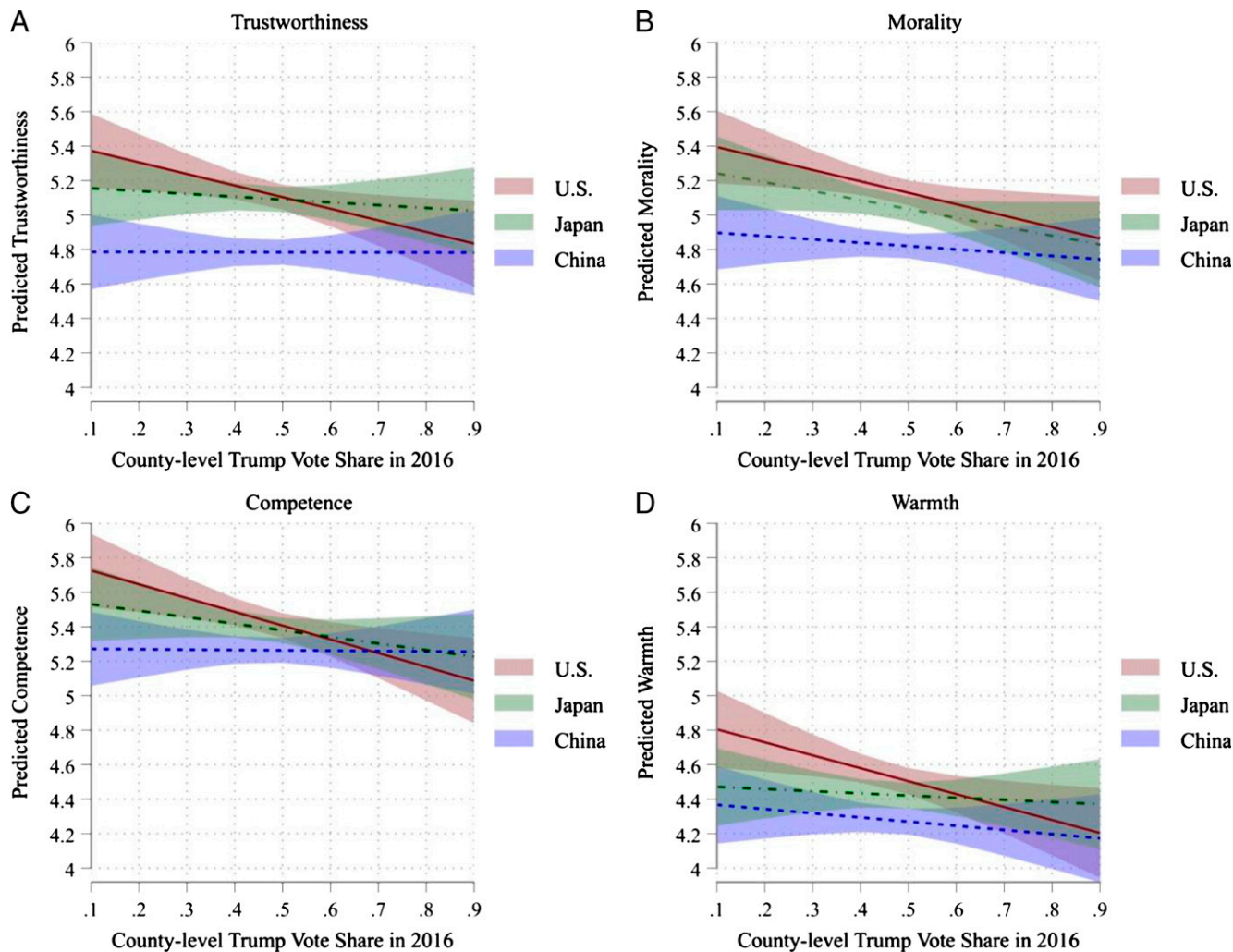
Fig. 3. Predicted perception ratings by county-level Trump vote share in the 2016 presidential election. The shaded bands indicate the 95% CIs.

frequent verbal and physical attacks on East Asians during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. To illustrate, in manipulated experimental environments we revealed much stronger prejudices toward Chinese relative to other East Asians by priming the fictitious person's nationality as Chinese. In real life, however, most Americans possess little personal knowledge of Asians they meet for the first time. Thus, physical appearance often serves as a vital visual cue to infer otherwise unknown national origin, as in Maria Ha's experience. Following this logic, considering Americans' blaming emotions toward the Chinese earlier in the pandemic, many hate incidents victimizing other East Asians may be partly driven by misdirected hostility toward Chinese.

Integrating the experiment results with survey questions gauging multidimensional China-threat perceptions, we demonstrate that prejudices toward Chinese are more pronounced among Americans perceiving greater national-interest threats from China. Prior historical studies have provided qualitative evidence that minority groups from particular national origins often become subjects of prejudice during international conflicts. Our survey experiment demonstrates that Americans' differential threat perceptions of China, America's strongest global competitor today, condition their perceptions of Chinese as a less-moral outgroup. To some extent, nationality-based prejudices against Chinese today are reminiscent of Americans' low trust of and antagonistic attitudes toward prospering Japan in the 1980s (39). This revival of East Asian stereotypes suggests

that the American public's widely shared view of China as a national adversary might linger on beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study provides quantitative causal evidence substantiating relationships between US–China bilateral ties and stereotypes about Chinese nationals.

Our contextual analysis provides nuanced insights into the relationships between political polarization and anti-Asian attitudes in the domestic context. We find that residents in predominantly Republican-voting counties generally homogenize all East Asians as one racial outgroup, regardless of foreign-born East Asians or Asian Americans. By contrast, residents in predominantly Democrat-voting counties tend to perceive Chinese in China more negatively relative to Asian Americans, despite broadly viewing East Asians more favorably. These findings thus extend the existing literature on racial attitudes by identifying the persistent linkages to county-level political polarization. Auxiliary subgroup analysis by respondents' race/ethnicity revealed that the core findings are robust for all major racial/ethnic groups in the United States except Blacks (*SI Appendix*, Fig. S5).

We acknowledge that this study has several notable limitations. Our experimental design of employing headshots of the same man as a visual cue to evoke stereotypes of East Asians constitutes both a strength and a weakness of this study. While the visual cue effectively triggered latent biases, this design prevented us from exploring ethnic or gender variations in stereotypes against East Asians. Also, we only examined individuals'

perceptions without observing their actual behaviors, as what people say is often more subject to social desirability biases than what they do (40). That is, the observed patriotic prejudices against the Chinese may understate East Asians' day-to-day encounters with discrimination in contemporary America. Despite these limitations, we hope our approach of incorporating diverse modes of information stimuli will inspire future studies to examine attitudes and behaviors toward different groups. As China increasingly challenges the world order in the foreseeable future, insights from this study will remain informative for understanding the reverberating mental repercussions of rising China in the rest of the world.

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