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COVID-19, Perceived Foreign Interference, and Anti-Chinese Sentiment: Evidence from Concurrent Survey Experiments in Australia and the United States

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ABSTRACT

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, a surge in anti-Chinese sentiment emerged as a pressing issue, with debates on how the pandemic exacerbated such sentiments. To explore this intricate relationship, we conducted two survey experiments, incorporating COVID-specific contextual inquiries in Australia and the United States during two phases (8–21 June 2021 and 28 July–12 August 2022). Our findings reveal that individuals' perceptions of the Chinese diaspora remained unaltered when presented with information regarding the Chinese government's initial management of COVID-19. However, when exposed to a message suggesting the Chinese government's influence over overseas Chinese communities, people's attitudes towards the Chinese diaspora significantly deteriorated. In addition, Australian respondents demonstrated heightened sensitivity to perceived foreign interference from China compared to their American counterparts. Our study underscores the role of suspicions and apprehensions surrounding China-related foreign interference in shaping anti-Chinese sentiment in the Western context.

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Anti-Chinese sentiment; anti-Asian sentiment; racism; perceived foreign interference; COVID-19; survey experiment

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a surge in anti-Chinese sentiment in the West, prompting extensive research into its underlying causes. Some attribute the phenomenon to pandemic-induced fear, framing it as a maladaptive coping mechanism (Cho et al. 2021; Reny and Barreto 2022). In contrast, the 'othering' perspective emphasises racial prejudice rooted in pre-existing stereotypes about Asians, reactivating historical tropes such as the 'Yellow Peril' and perpetual foreigner narratives (Tessler et al. 2020; Li and Nicholson 2021). The intricacies of these dynamics extend to various forms of scapegoating, implicating Chinese communities in disease transmission during the pandemic (Stop AAPI Hate 2022). Moreover, scholarship underscores the pivotal roles of political narratives and media framing in perpetuating heightened levels of stigmatisation (Jia and Lu

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2021; Sun 2021). Collectively, the intricate interplay of pandemic-related fear, political attitudes, stereotypical narratives, and media influence presents a complex tableau that defines the nature of anti-Chinese sentiment during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the expanding literature acknowledging the complex nature of anti-Chinese sentiment, existing research tends to rely on qualitative approaches and observational studies, posing challenges in drawing definitive causal conclusions. Additionally, as the pandemic narrative has evolved, initial criticisms of the Chinese government's pandemic management have broadened to encompass broader concerns about China, notably its economic and political influence (Stop AAPI Hate 2022). While both narratives have been associated with Chinese communities, carrying negative implications, there remains a limited understanding of how distinct forms of scapegoating contribute to public perceptions of the Chinese populace. This paper aims to address this gap through a nuanced exploration using background questions and survey experiments. The latter, known for enhancing control over unobserved confounders, promises greater clarity and causal explanations (Gerber and Green 2013). By employing this rigorous methodology, we seek to provide fresh empirical evidence for a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying rationale behind anti-Chinese sentiment.

This study is grounded in empirical research conducted in Australia and the United States, offering compelling case studies for several reasons. Firstly, both countries emerged as vocal critics of Beijing's handling of the pandemic (Pan and Korolev 2021). The onset of COVID-19 in early 2020 witnessed the Trump Administration engaging in a contentious blame game with China, while concurrently, the Morrison Government in Australia also took a proactive stance against China, notably initiating an international inquiry that triggered ongoing trade retaliations and unprecedented diplomatic tensions (Pan and Korolev 2021). A substantial downward shift in public perceptions toward China aligned with these geopolitical dynamics. The Pew Research Centre's 2020 global survey underscored a surge in negative opinions of China in Australia and the United States, reaching their highest points since the Centre began polling on the topic over a decade ago. Among the 14 countries examined in 2020, Australia witnessed the most substantial increase, with 81 per cent viewing China unfavourably – a 24-percentage point surge since 2019. In the United States, 73 per cent held negative views, marking a 13-percentage point increase since 2019 or a 20-percentage point rise since Trump assumed office (Silver et al. 2020). In light of these consequential changes, it is imperative to explore whether these political developments and attitudes towards China have translated into public perceptions towards individuals with Chinese heritage and impacted their daily encounters (Tan et al. 2022), a linkage that warrants further investigation.

Secondly, during the pandemic, both countries experienced a notable surge in direct assaults and violence against the Chinese diaspora and other members of the broader Asian population (Stop AAPI Hate 2022). Social surveys monitoring the experiences of the Asian diaspora unveil substantial proportions of this community facing threats or attacks during the pandemic, transpiring both offline and online (He et al. 2021; Tan et al. 2021). The Atlanta shooting in March 2021 signalled a peak in the severity of anti-Asian sentiment, attracting significant media coverage and public discussions. The prevalence and severity of anti-Chinese sentiment in both societies underscore their practical relevance and necessitate dedicated research efforts.

Furthermore, in both countries, the surge in anti-Asian sentiment has been vehemently resisted, evolving into social movements advocating an end to conflating China and people with Chinese heritage and, more broadly, an end to racism. Particularly noteworthy is the establishment of the Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center in the United States in March 2020 to systematically record and publish reports on hate incidents and crimes targeting Asians and Pacific Islanders. This initiative aimed to document the escalating attacks (Takasaki 2020). Utilising this data, the Center actively advocates for policy responses to combat anti-Asian racism and xenophobia. Inspired by the Stop AAPI Hate campaign, a similar initiative was launched in Australia in April 2020, compiling the COVID-19 Racism Incident Report Survey to collect and document instances of COVID-19-related racism (Asian Australian Alliance 2020). In addition to these initiatives, anti-Asian racism sparked numerous online discussions. It fuelled the creation of various online platforms and movements dedicated to raising awareness, promoting solidarity, and combating discrimination (He et al. 2021). Hash-tags such as #StopAsianHate gained momentum, encouraging users to amplify their voices and contribute to the broader dialogue on racism. Collectively, these social movements illuminate the pervasive issue of anti-Asian sentiment and underscore the societal forces challenging stereotypes and fostering inclusivity in Australia and the United States.

In the remainder of this paper, we begin by further contextualising the anti-Chinese sentiments within Australia's and the United States' historical and contemporary socio-cultural landscapes, followed by examining contesting arguments surrounding the rising anti-Chinese sentiment during COVID-19. Then, we delineate the methods and data utilised in our study and report the empirical findings. Drawing from these results, we further discuss two essential aspects of recent anti-Chinese sentiments in the West: their triggers and variations between countries. Finally, our concluding remarks summarise the primary findings and propose potential directions for further empirical investigations.

Literature Review

The Historical and Sociocultural Foundations of Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Australia and the United States

Australia and the United States share a complex history of Chinese immigration, marked by discriminatory practices and societal perceptions (Chang 2004; Tao and Stapleton 2018; Tao et al. 2023). Chinese labourers arrived in significant numbers in both countries during the nineteenth century, facing widespread racial discrimination (Gao 2022). Alongside immigrants from other Asian nations, these early Chinese arrivals were frequently labelled the 'Yellow Peril' and depicted as unassimilable outsiders, believed to bring economic competition, diseases, and moral degradation. Racial discrimination, especially during public health crises, led to unjust scapegoating and race-driven quarantines (Tessler et al. 2020; Stop AAPI Hate 2022). This anti-Chinese sentiment culminated in outright bans on Chinese immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with Australia's 'White Australia policy' lasting until 1973 and the U.S. Chinese Exclusion Act persisting until significant changes in 1965 (Lee 2007; Zhou 2009; Gao 2020). The world wars and China's closed-door policy posed further barriers hindering the growth of

diasporic Chinese communities in the West (Zhou 2009; Gao 2022). Not until the late twentieth century, with the adoption of multicultural ideology, changes in migration policies, and China's opening up, did a new wave of Chinese immigration emerge.

Despite historical exclusion, Australia and the United States have become major global destinations for Chinese immigrants since the late twentieth century (Goodkind 2019). Over the last four decades, Chinese communities in both countries have grown substantially, constituting 5.5 per cent and 1.6 per cent of the Australian and U.S. populations, respectively (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021; Budiman 2021). The prevalence of first-generation Chinese immigrants suggests potential vulnerability to country-based discrimination due to their recent ties to their home country. Importantly, this surge aligns with China's global rise and the simultaneous growth of the 'China threat' discourse, affecting contemporary Chinese communities in the West (Tao and Loo 2022).

Culturally, Australia and the United States share a history of Western colonialism and grapple with forming distinctive national identities without pre-existing common cultures (Stratton and Ang 1994). Successive waves of immigration have brought diverse origins, raising integration and multiculturalism issues (Tran et al. 2020). Both nations face institutional and cultural barriers for Asian immigrants, often encountering penalties related to foreign credentials, English proficiency, and acculturation levels, limiting their socioeconomic outcomes (Tran et al. 2020). Shared realms of popular culture, media, and educational curricula are pivotal in reinforcing cultural norms and expectations, significantly influencing how Chinese communities are perceived, particularly during public health emergencies.

While the Asian population is diverse, it is essential to acknowledge shared experiences of discrimination within Asian communities (Stop AAPI Hate 2022). Notably, Chinese individuals constitute the largest subgroup, leading to the interchangeability of Chinese and Asian populations in public perception (Budiman 2021; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). Consequently, anti-Chinese sentiment often manifests as a broader anti-Asian sentiment within the public's perception.

COVID-19 and Anti-Chinese Sentiment: Contesting Arguments

Various competing arguments have surfaced to explain the anti-Chinese and broader anti-Asian sentiment observed during the pandemic. One line of research has delved into the connection between this racism and fear associated with the pandemic, adopting a relatively neutral perspective that assumes the presence of a coping mechanism driven by fear of contagion rather than specific group prejudice (Reny and Barreto 2022). Blaming Asians is viewed as a maladaptive strategy used to manage the stress triggered by the pandemic (Cho et al. 2021). Empirical investigations within this line of inquiry have primarily centred on the relationship between anti-Asian attitudes and pandemic-related fear. For example, He et al. (2022) associate local COVID-19 incidence rates with Americans' attitudes towards the Chinese and China, discovering that increased local exposure to COVID-19 correlates with reduced trust in the Chinese and less favourable attitudes towards China. In another US-based empirical investigation, Lantz et al. (2023) demonstrate that, at the individual level, fear of contracting COVID-19 is linked with heightened anti-Asian prejudice. However, research also

indicates that this connection is not straightforward, as other factors mediate it. Most notably, political attitudes play a critical role. For example, in the United States, support for Trump or affiliation with the Republican party corresponds with more substantial race-based prejudice during the pandemic (Tan et al. 2021; Lantz et al. 2023).

In contrast to the coping mechanism approach, scholars following the ‘othering’ perspective place a stronger emphasis on racial prejudice and contend that the understanding of the disease is, at least in part, rooted in group-based prejudice (Tessler et al. 2020; Li and Nicholson 2021). This prejudice is underpinned by two pre-existing stereotypes about Asians, which render them vulnerable during crises (Stop AAPI Hate 2022). The first stereotype, known as the ‘Yellow Peril’, portrays Asia and Asians as a threat to Western values, civilisation, and supremacy. The second, the ‘perpetual foreigner’ trope, perpetuates the idea that Asians are forever outsiders who do not belong in their host countries. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these stereotypes have been reactivated to scapegoat Asians.

The scapegoating takes two distinct forms. First, *public health scapegoating* underscores the extensive association of the disease with China. Early in the pandemic, certain political elites, including prominent figures like Donald Trump, vigorously attributed the disease to China and the Chinese (Stop AAPI Hate 2022). This inflammatory rhetoric led to the widespread use of derogatory terms such as ‘Chinese Virus’, ‘Chinese Flu’, and ‘Kung Flu’ in media coverage and online spaces (Reny and Barreto 2022). Chinese communities, and Asian communities more broadly, were blamed for bringing and transmitting the disease, forming the most prevalent form of anti-Asian incidents documented by the Stop AAPI Hate dataset (Stop AAPI Hate 2022).

Second, the *national security scapegoating* transcends the public health dimension and aligns more closely with the broader discourse of the ‘China threat’, a narrative that has been prevalent for years. In the case of Australia, for example, the ‘securitisation’ of ‘Chinese Influence’ emerged in mid-2017, with various China-related non-state actors being perceived as potential threats to national security (Chubb 2023). Empirical analysis has demonstrated that the subsequent significant shift in Australia’s public opinion towards China between 2018 and 2020 was primarily driven by concerns over foreign interference (Chubb and McAllister 2021). Most notably, in recent years, several politicians have engaged in rhetoric naming the Chinese Communist Party as a national security threat for espionage. The Stop AAPI Hate dataset has noted the emergence of anti-Asian incidents of associating Asian Americans with spying for the Chinese Communist Party. Furthermore, the anti-Chinese sentiment might be connected to the deteriorating image of China and Chinese government policies, as indicated by global sentiment surveys (Silver et al. 2020). Some empirical evidence suggests a potential ‘spillover’ effect whereby negative attitudes toward Chinese government policies extend to individuals with Chinese heritage (Gries and Turcsanyi 2021). If this is the case, the continuous decline in the global view of China may have well spilt over to people with Chinese heritage.

Extensive research has highlighted the role of media and framing in shaping anti-Asian sentiment. Since the onset of the pandemic, Western media have primarily portrayed China’s pandemic response in political and ideological terms, perpetuating the ‘China threat/influence’ narrative (Jia and Lu 2021; Sun 2021). This persistent framing has far-reaching consequences. In the United States, for example, a study revealed that

individuals who consumed pandemic-related news from sources like Fox News and social media exhibited higher levels of anti-Asian stigmatisation (Willnat et al. 2023). Analysing Twitter platform discourse over 14 months (from January 2020 to March 2021), He et al. (2021) discovered that nodes within the network were significantly more likely to adopt hateful rhetoric after exposure to similar content, underscoring the detrimental effects of exposure to anti-Asian hate messaging. Employing a more robust experimental design, Dhanani and Franz (2021) found that emphasising the connection between China and COVID-19 and highlighting the severity of the virus's economic impact heightened negative attitudes toward Asian Americans. In contrast, messages emphasising the severe health risks associated with COVID-19 did not contribute to increased bias.

Considering the literature above, we propose the following hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 (public health scapegoating): A negative perception of the Chinese government's initial management of the COVID-19 crisis is associated with anti-Chinese sentiment in host countries.

Hypothesis 2 (national security scapegoating): A perception of connections between the Chinese government and the diasporic Chinese communities is associated with anti-Chinese sentiment in host countries.

Materials and Methods

Data

We conducted surveys utilising YouGov online panels in Australia and the United States at two strategically chosen time points (see Figure 1). The first survey was conducted

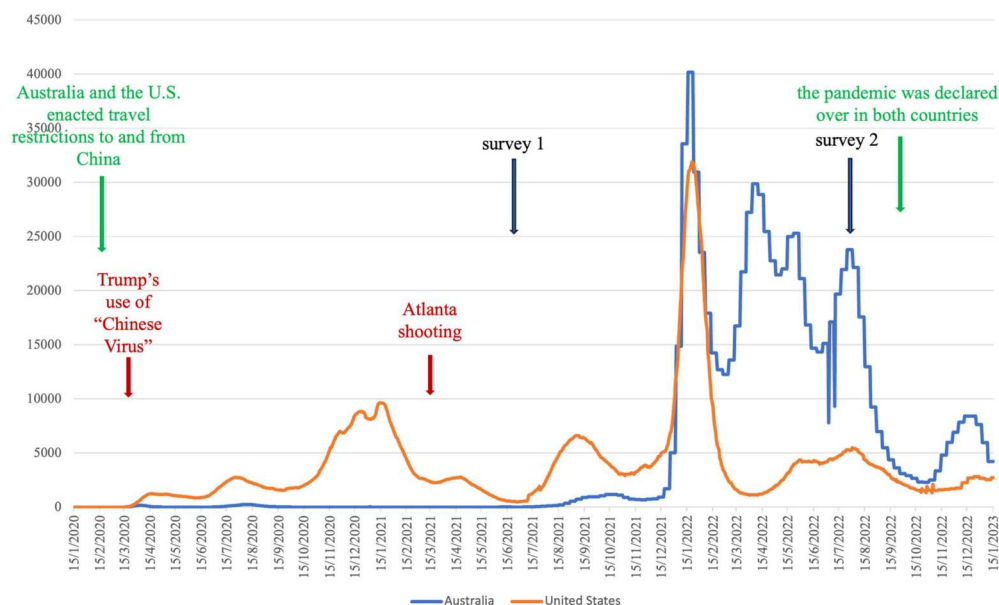


Figure 1. Biweekly confirmed COVID-19 cases per million people in Australia and the United States, January 2020-January 2023.

from 8 to 21 June 2021, during which Australia implemented a zero-COVID approach with minimal cases, while the United States was experiencing more widespread transmission. The second survey took place from 28 July to 12 August 2022, during which the situation had evolved, with the peak of the pandemic having passed in the U.S. and cases peaking in Australia.¹ By conducting surveys at these different pandemic stages, we aimed to collect information across various phases, providing a more comprehensive understanding of anti-Chinese sentiment. As noted in the literature review, anti-Chinese scapegoating has taken various forms, with public health scapegoating being more prevalent, particularly during the earlier stages of the pandemic. However, this has been accompanied by other forms of scapegoating, including national security scapegoating. Through the second survey round, we intended to capture the evolving forms of anti-Chinese sentiment and ask more appropriate questions that reflect the changing dynamics.

The authors specifically commissioned and curated both survey rounds to obtain samples representative of the adult populations in Australia and the United States. The surveys were pre-stratified to align with the national demographics in both countries, and each round involved approximately 1,000 adult respondents from each nation. We aimed to survey the same respondents over time and successfully engaged many re-contacts, in line with online sampling methodologies (Hillygus and Snell 2015). In total, 544 respondents participated in both waves in Australia and 597 in the United States. As illustrated in Table 1, except for age, the sample broadly represented the population across critical variables. The sample exhibited a slight over-representation of individuals aged 65 and above, possibly attributed to their heightened propensity for re-participation.

Background Questions

To unravel respondents' perspectives on individuals of Chinese heritage, we devised three COVID-related background questions within our survey.

One of these questions was incorporated into both survey rounds, aiming to evaluate respondents' perceptions of the changes in anti-Asian discrimination since the onset of COVID in Australia and the United States. Participants were prompted with, 'Do you think Asian Australians (Americans) experience more discrimination, less discrimination, or the same amount of discrimination than they did before the COVID-19 pandemic began?' Respondents were asked to answer using an ordinal scale from 1 (much less discrimination) to 5 (much more discrimination), with an alternative option of '6. There's no discrimination against Asian Australians (Americans)' also provided.

Furthermore, the second survey round in mid-2022 incorporated two additional background questions. The first question reads, 'How responsible do you think the Chinese government is for COVID?'. It seeks to ascertain participants' opinions on the Chinese government's role in the pandemic. Responses were captured on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all responsible) to 4 (completely responsible). Subsequently, the second supplementary question inquired, 'Do you support or oppose Chinese people being allowed to study, work, and live in Australia (the U.S.)?' Responses for this question were coded on a scale from 1 (strongly oppose) to 5 (strongly favour).

Table 1. Sample Demographics.

	Australia (N = 544)					United States (N = 597)		
	Min	Max	Proportion	Standard Deviation	2021 Census	Proportion	Standard Deviation	2019 Estimates
Political affiliation: Labor (A.U.)/Democrat (US)	0	1	30%	0.46	–	39%	0.49	–
Political affiliation: Coalition (A.U.)/Republican (US)	0	1	35%	0.48	–	25%	0.43	–
Political affiliation: Greens (A.U.)/Independent (US)	0	1	11%	0.31	–	28%	0.45	–
Political affiliation: Voted other/did not vote	0	1	24%	0.42	–	8%	0.27	–
Age: between 18 and 39	0	1	26%	0.44	36%†	21%	0.40	37%†
Age: between 40 and 64	0	1	43%	0.50	41%†	46%	0.50	45%†
Age: 65 or above	0	1	31%	0.46	23%†	34%	0.47	18%†
Gender (1 = woman)	0	1	52%	0.50	51%	54%	0.50	51%
Education (1 = bachelor's degree or above)	0	1	39%	0.49	26%‡	30%	0.46	32%¶
Employment (1 = employed)	0	1	53%	0.50	58%‡	40%	0.49	52%
Low income: less than AU \$50,000/US\$40,000	0	1	40%	0.49	–§	33%	0.47	–§
Middle income: between AU\$50,000/US\$40,000 and AU\$99,999/US\$79,999	0	1	26%	0.44	–§	26%	0.44	–§
High income: AU \$100,000/US\$80,000 or above	0	1	24%	0.43	–§	26%	0.44	–§
Missing income	0	1	10%	0.30	–§	15%	0.35	–§
Race: White	0	1	–	–	–	65%	0.48	60%††
Race: Black	0	1	–	–	–	14%	0.35	13%††
Race: Hispanic	0	1	–	–	–	14%	0.35	19%‡‡
Race: Asian	0	1	–	–	–	3%	0.16	6%††
Race: Others	0	1	–	–	–	4%	0.20	–††
Race (regrouped): White§§	0	1	84%	0.37	–	–	–	–
Race (regrouped): Asian§§	0	1	14%	0.35	–	–	–	–
Race (regrouped): Others§§	0	1	2%	0.14	–	–	–	–

Note. † Our survey covered those people aged 18 or above. To facilitate comparison, we converted census data by dividing the number of people within our categories by the number of people aged 20 or above. ‡ Of people aged 15 or above. An additional 8% did not state their educational status in the Census. An additional 6% did not state whether they participated in the labour force. § The median household income in Australia was AU\$1,746 a week in 2021 (equivalent to AU\$90,792 a year). The median household income in the U.S. was US\$62,843 a year in 2015–2019 (in 2019 dollars). ¶ Of people aged 25 or above. †† Includes people reporting only one race. ‡‡ Hispanics may be of any race. §§ In Australia, following the Census practice, we included the question ‘Which of the following best describes your racial or ethnic background?’ and provided the respondents with the 13 options with the highest populations, the 14th option, ‘Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander’, and the 15th option, ‘Other, please specify’. We regrouped Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Vietnamese, Korean, Indonesian, and Japanese as the Asian group, English, Australian, Irish, Scottish, Italian, and German as the White group, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander as the other race group, and went through open responses individually to re-classify them as appropriate.

Data source: Australia Census 2021 (<https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/AUS>); U.S. Census 2019 Estimates (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219>).

Together, these background questions allowed us to contextualise the respondents’ views, shedding light on their perspectives towards the Chinese diaspora and enhancing our understanding of the factors shaping anti-Chinese sentiment in Australia and the United States. Moreover, by providing valuable information regarding the respondents’

general perceptions of the circumstances of Asian Australians or Americans amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese government's handling of COVID-19, and immigrants from China, these background questions can facilitate the explanation and interpretation of the survey experiment outcomes.

Survey Experiments

Survey experiments have become an indispensable methodological tool in social sciences research, particularly for detecting latent unconscious biases. By randomly assigning respondents to treatment and control groups, survey experiments offer improved control over unobserved confounders, thus enabling the identification of causal explanations, a feat often challenging in observational studies (Gerber and Green 2013). Our research incorporated two survey experiments. The first was conducted during the initial survey round in mid-2021 and the second in the subsequent round in mid-2022.

In the first experiment, all respondents were presented with the following question:

Below is a list of groups. We would like you to rate each group using something we call the feeling thermometer. Ratings between 50 and 100 degrees mean that you feel favourable and warm towards the group. Ratings between 0 and 50 degrees mean that you don't feel favourable towards the group and that you don't care too much for them. You would rate the group at 50 degrees if you don't feel particularly warm or cold towards them.

To clarify their feelings of warmth or coldness towards each group, we provided the respondents with an illustration of an actual thermometer. Participants were asked to assign thermometer ratings to both (a) temporary residents/visitors from China (e.g. international students and individuals on temporary work visas) and (b) Australian/American permanent residents or citizens with Chinese heritage. The treatment group received the following statement at the beginning of their question: 'Some people say the COVID-19 pandemic started in the Chinese city of Wuhan, and was made worse because the Chinese Government covered up the virus for several months.' By introducing this supplementary context, we aim to reveal whether priming respondents with a statement frequently found in news outlets about the Chinese government's initial handling of COVID-19 affected their perceptions of the Chinese diaspora.

In our second experiment, all respondents were asked, 'How trustworthy would you rate Chinese Australians (Americans)?' Participants were invited to answer this question on an ordinal scale, with 1 representing 'very untrustworthy' and 5 representing 'very trustworthy'. For this experiment, the treatment group was presented with an additional statement at the beginning of their question: 'Some people say the Chinese government has attempted to extend its influence in Australia (or the United States) through its ties to the Chinese community.' The supplementary context sought to examine whether priming respondents with a statement directly linking the Chinese Government and the Chinese community influenced their perceptions of the Chinese diaspora.

By employing these two survey experiments, we intend to reveal whether and to what extent information regarding the Chinese government's handling of COVID-19 and its alleged foreign interference operations may impact anti-Chinese sentiments in Australia and the United States.

Results

Background Questions

Table 2 presents the statistical analysis results for the responses to the three background questions. Most of these results are aggregated nationally to reveal similarities and differences in China-related perceptions between Australia and the United States, except those comparing changes between the two survey rounds.

Broadly speaking, in mid-2022, respondents in both Australia and the United States expressed comparable levels of concern regarding the Chinese government's responsibility for the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. In both countries, the mean value of answers to the pertinent background question is 2.58, which falls between the categories of 'partly responsible' (2) and 'mostly responsible' (3). Moreover, the Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney test results indicate no statistically significant difference between respondents from the two countries, suggesting that Australians and Americans share similar views on the Chinese government's responsibility for COVID-19.

Concerning attitudes towards allowing Chinese people to study, work, and live in their respective countries in mid-2022, the mean value is 3.45 in Australia – situated between 'neutral' (3) and 'somewhat favour' (4) – and 3.32 in the United States. These results indicate that, in both countries, the average public opinion remains receptive to accepting Chinese immigrants, albeit with a moderate degree of enthusiasm. Furthermore, additional Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney test results indicate that the difference is marginally statistically significant ($p = 0.05$), implying that Australians are slightly more inclined to welcome Chinese people compared to their American counterparts. This difference may be attributed to China's greater trade importance to Australia than the United States.

Regarding the perceived impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on people of Asian heritage, in both Australia and the United States, significantly fewer respondents believed there was no discrimination against Asian Australians and Asian Americans during the pandemic. However, in both countries, the average perceived extent of the pandemic's exacerbating effect on anti-Asian discrimination declined between mid-2021 and mid-2022. Furthermore, Wilcoxon signed-rank tests comparing the two survey rounds confirm these observations, underscoring the complex dynamics of public perceptions of the pandemic's effect on anti-Asian discrimination in the West.

Nevertheless, despite similar patterns in longitudinal comparisons, the Australian and American subsamples exhibit notable cross-sectional variations in their average perceptions of the pandemic's impact on discrimination against people of Asian heritage. In the first survey round, conducted in mid-2021, around one year after COVID-19's global outbreak, approximately 15 per cent of Australian respondents claimed no discrimination against people of Asian heritage in their country. Among the remaining Australian participants, the mean value was 3.68, indicating a perceived slight increase in discrimination compared to before the pandemic. In contrast, U.S. respondents expressed significantly more concern about this issue, with a smaller percentage (10 per cent) perceiving no discrimination in the United States. Among the remaining U.S. respondents, the mean value was 4.17.

Likewise, in the second survey round conducted in mid-2022, approximately eight months after Australia and the United States reopened their international borders, 9

Table 2. Background Questions

	Australia				United States			
	Min	Max	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Chinese government responsible for COVID	1 (not at all responsible)	4 (completely responsible)	544	2.58	1.06	597	2.58	1.03
Allowing Chinese people to study, work, and live	1 (strongly oppose)	5 (strongly favour)	544	3.45	1.25	597	3.32	1.25
There's no discrimination (2021)	0 (no)	1 (yes)	544	0.15	0.35	597	0.10	0.31
Change in discrimination since COVID (2021)	1 (much less discrimination)	5 (much more discrimination)	465	3.68	0.84	535	4.17	0.97
There's no discrimination (2022)	0 (no)	1 (yes)	544	0.09	0.29	597	0.07	0.26
Change in discrimination since COVID (2022)	1 (much less discrimination)	5 (much more discrimination)	495	3.56	0.87	495	3.84	0.98
2021 vs 2022#								
There's no discrimination					χ^2 -value = 57.79, p = 0.00		χ^2 -value = 102.75, p = 0.00	
Change in discrimination since COVID					z -value = 3.40, p = 0.00		z -value = 2.52, p = 0.02	

Note. † Two-sample Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney tests were used for ordinal data, producing z -values, while Chi-square tests were employed for nominal data, yielding χ^2 -values. # Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used for ordinal data, producing z -values, while Chi-square tests were employed for nominal, yielding χ^2 -values.

Australia vs United States†

z -value = 0.05, p = 0.96

z -value = 1.97, p = 0.05

χ^2 -value = 2.12, p = 0.03

z -value = 4.50, p = 0.03

χ^2 -value = 1.12, p = 0.26

z -value = 3.78, p = 0.05

per cent of Australian respondents claimed that no discrimination against people of Asian heritage existed in their country, whereas 7 per cent of U.S. respondents claimed the same. Among those who believe that anti-Asian discrimination has worsened in their countries since the COVID-19 pandemic's onset, the mean is 3.56 for the Australian sample and 3.84 for the U.S. sample. Both means fall between 'the same amount of discrimination' (3) and 'a little more discrimination' (4). Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney test results reveal that the differences between the Australian and U.S. samples are marginally significant ($p = 0.05$). These findings suggest that U.S. respondents are still more likely to acknowledge increased discrimination against people of Asian heritage, but the gap has narrowed over time.

Survey Experiments

The results gleaned from the survey experiment questions provide two distinct insights. Firstly, they offer direct indications of Australian and U.S. respondents' general sentiment towards temporary immigrants from China and citizens or permanent residents with Chinese heritage. Secondly, by comparing the treatment and control groups, we can discern whether and to what extent information regarding the Chinese government's handling of the COVID-19 outbreak and its alleged influence over overseas Chinese communities may affect anti-Chinese sentiments. Table 3 presents both sets of information.

As displayed in Table 3, in mid-2021, feelings towards Chinese temporary residents in both Australia and the United States hovered near the neutral midpoint of 50 degrees, with the Australian average at 52.45 degrees and the U.S. average at 55.33 degrees. However, respondents in both countries expressed significantly warmer sentiments towards permanent residents or citizens with Chinese heritage, with the Australian average at 64.33 degrees and the U.S. average at 71.16 degrees. A notable divergence between Australia and the United States is the much warmer attitudes exhibited by U.S. respondents towards Chinese individuals who have acquired permanent residency or citizenship. Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney test results confirm the statistical significance of these cross-country disparities. In terms of the perceived trustworthiness of Chinese Australians and Chinese Americans, the national average for both countries lies between 'neutral' (3) and 'trustworthy' (4). More specifically, the average score for Australian respondents is 3.25, while that of U.S. respondents is 3.45. Again, Wilcoxon–Mann–Whitney test results reveal that the differences in this indicator between Australia and the United States are statistically significant, further emphasising that U.S. respondents hold a more positive sentiment towards their fellow citizens and permanent residents than their Australian counterparts.

Interestingly, neither the Australian nor the U.S. samples exhibit statistically significant variations between the control and treatment groups for the results of our first survey experiment. In other words, immediate and direct exposure to messages criticising the Chinese government's handling of the initial COVID-19 outbreak in Wuhan seems to have little impact on people's feelings towards individuals of Chinese heritage in Australia and the United States. This pattern is consistent regarding respondents' feelings towards both Chinese temporary immigrants and fellow citizens or permanent residents of Chinese heritage. These findings are against Hypothesis 1, suggesting that anti-Chinese sentiments in Australia and the United States do not appear to directly stem

Table 3. Survey Experiments.

	Min	Max	Australia			United States			Australia vs. United States†
			N	Mean	Standard Deviation	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	
Survey experiment #1, thermometer ratings to Chinese temporary residents									
pooled	0	100	544	52.45	25.45	597	55.33	28.60	z-value = -1.67, $p = 0.10$
control	0	100	270	52.79	25.79	291	55.53	27.31	z-value = -1.50, $p = 0.13$
treatment	0	100	274	52.20	25.16	306	55.13	29.81	z-value = -0.89, $p = 0.38$
control = treatment†			z-value = -0.31, $p = 0.76$			z-value = 0.27, $p = 0.78$			
Survey experiment #1, thermometer ratings to permanent residents/citizens with Chinese heritage									
pooled	0	100	544	64.33	26.32	597	71.16	27.28	z-value = -4.85, $p = 0.00$
control	0	100	270	64.31	27.13	291	70.26	26.71	z-value = -2.83, $p = 0.00$
treatment	0	100	274	64.35	25.55	306	72.01	27.83	z-value = -3.99, $p = 0.00$
control = treatment†			z-value = 0.09, $p = 0.93$			z-value = -1.00, $p = 0.32$			
Survey experiment #2									
pooled	1 (very untrustworthy)	5 (very trustworthy)	544	3.25	0.96	597	3.45	0.91	z-value = -3.05, $p = 0.00$
control	1 (very untrustworthy)	5 (very trustworthy)	274	3.37	0.89	301	3.52	0.90	z-value = -1.67, $p = 0.10$
treatment	1 (very untrustworthy)	5 (very trustworthy)	270	3.13	1.01	296	3.38	0.91	z-value = -2.69, $p = 0.00$
control vs. treatment†			z-value = 2.72, $p = 0.00$			z-value = 1.75, $p = 0.08$			

Note. † Two-sample Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney tests were employed to calculate z-values.

from a negative perception of the Chinese government's initial handling of the COVID-19 crisis.

In contrast, the second survey experiment uncovers substantial treatment effects in both countries. In Australia, respondents exposed to the extra prompt (concerning the Chinese government's efforts to strengthen its control through connections with the Chinese diaspora) reported significantly lower trust in individuals with Chinese heritage. The trust score for the treatment group was 3.13, compared to 3.37 for the control group. Although both scores lie between 'neutral' (3) and 'trustworthy' (4), their difference is statistically significant, with a z -value of 2.72 and a p -value of 0.00. Similarly, in the United States, the treatment group reported a lower trust level than the control group, albeit with a slightly less pronounced impact. The trust score for the treatment group was 3.38, and for the control group, it was 3.52. Regarding statistical significance, the z -value was 1.75, and the p -value was 0.08. That is to say, in Australia and the United States, exposure to messages alleging the Chinese government's attempts to extend its influence through ties with the Chinese diaspora in the host country can result in a significant decrease in the perceived trustworthiness of people of Chinese heritage. Moreover, the Australian population exhibited heightened sensitivity to the potential influence or threat associated with the Chinese government's ties to the Chinese diaspora compared to their counterparts in the United States. In other words, Australians appear more susceptible to concerns regarding the Chinese government's alleged influence over the Chinese community in their country than Americans. These results support Hypothesis 2.

Discussions

The Triggers of Anti-Chinese Sentiments

Our two survey experiments reveal intriguing insights into the triggers of anti-Chinese sentiments in Australia and the United States. Surprisingly, even in mid-2021, when the COVID-19 pandemic remained fresh in most people's memory, the Chinese government's management of the COVID-19 crisis did not appear to directly impact people's feelings towards individuals of Chinese heritage in Australia or the United States. This pattern holds for respondents' feelings towards both Chinese temporary immigrants and fellow citizens or permanent residents of Chinese heritage. In contrast, perceived foreign interference from the Chinese government has a more substantial adverse effect on respondents' views of people of Chinese heritage. In Australia and the United States, exposure to messages alleging the Chinese government's attempts to extend its influence through ties with the Chinese diaspora results in a significant decrease in the perceived trustworthiness of people of Chinese heritage. In other words, our study aligns more closely with the national security scapegoating hypothesis (i.e. Hypothesis 2) (Chubb and McAllister 2021) rather than the public health scapegoating hypothesis (i.e. Hypothesis 1).

There are several possible explanations for why perceived foreign interference has a more pronounced impact on anti-Chinese sentiments than the Chinese government's handling of COVID-19. One reason could be that it may be relatively easy to separate a government's one specific action/policy and the cultural or ethnic groups within the country (Tan et al. 2022). In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, respondents may recognise that the Chinese government's handling of the pandemic does not necessarily

reflect the values or beliefs of people of Chinese heritage. On the other hand, concerns about foreign interference are more general. They may evoke vulnerability, fear, or suspicion, as these concerns imply a more direct and tangible threat to the host country's sovereignty, security, and democratic processes (Irwin and van Holsteyn 2021). Consequently, these emotions may foster negative perceptions of people of Chinese heritage, seen as potential agents of the Chinese government, whether voluntarily or unintentionally.

Additionally, social movements may have played a role in mitigating public health scapegoating. Since the onset of the pandemic, considerable debate has centred around stopping the scapegoating of the Chinese people for perceived wrongdoing by the Chinese government (He et al. 2021; Stop AAPI Hate 2022). By the time of our first survey (mid-2021), approximately one year into the pandemic, increased societal awareness of the challenges faced by people of Asian heritage and a greater understanding of the injustices they encountered may have saturated the debate, reducing the perceived link between the two.

Another influential factor is the role of media coverage and public discourse in shaping opinions. In Australia and the United States, the media significantly influences how Chinese diasporas are perceived (Jia and Lu 2021; Sun 2021). As pandemic-related restrictions eased, reports on the Chinese government's handling of COVID-19 lost newsworthiness, while issues of foreign interference sustained prolonged, sensationalised, or alarmist coverage, intensifying existing fears and biases. For instance, media reports on perceived foreign interference from China, like The Sydney Morning Herald's controversial Red Alert series, can be provocative, reinforcing stereotypes and fostering suspicion around people of Chinese heritage. This shift in media focus may have heightened national security concerns as a basis for scapegoating people of Chinese heritage.

The Variations of Anti-Chinese Sentiments

Our empirical findings unveil notable cross-national disparities between Australia and the United States concerning perceptions of Chinese individuals and discrimination against people of Asian heritage. While Australians display a slightly higher inclination to welcome Chinese people, potentially due to China's greater trade importance to Australia (Brophy 2021), U.S. respondents are more likely to recognise increased discrimination against people of Asian heritage since the pandemic's outbreak. Furthermore, a significant divergence is evident in the warmer attitudes demonstrated by U.S. respondents towards Chinese individuals who have obtained permanent residency or citizenship. Intriguingly, Australians seem more susceptible to concerns regarding the Chinese government's alleged influence over the Chinese community in their country than their American counterparts.

These differences may be attributed to variations in multiculturalism and integration practices in the two countries. Multiculturalism, embraced in both nations, holds a more central role in Australia, functioning as an official government policy. In contrast, in the U.S., multiculturalism has primarily been politicised at the grassroots level, championed by minority groups, including Asian Americans (Stratton and Ang 1994). Correspondingly, the United States has a longer and stronger history of social movements surrounding anti-Asian racism. Such historical backgrounds may suggest that racism is more likely to be explicitly recognised as a social issue in the United States. Additionally, despite the

much more substantial proportion of populations being Asian immigrants in Australia, recent research illustrates that integration outcomes are better in the U.S. than in Australia (Tran et al. 2020). This variation explains why the U.S. public tends to hold warmer attitudes towards the Asian population who have already become permanent residents or citizens.

The heightened sensitivity among Australians to the perceived foreign influence exerted by the Chinese government may stem from various factors. One plausible explanation involves Australia's accelerated quest for 'ontological security' following the outbreak of COVID-19 (Pan and Korolev 2021). As a middle power dependent on a rules-based order, U.S.-led regional security, and adherence to specific values, Australia's familiar environment has been disrupted by the uncertainty and perceived threat emanating from China. Consequently, anti-Chinese sentiment has emerged as a pillar of Australia's self-identity to cope with the perceived dangers of China's influence. Additionally, the media's role in shaping Australians' perceptions of Chinese influence is highly significant. Chubb (2023) points out that despite the U.S. having a considerably larger media market, media mentions of 'Chinese influence' in the U.S. trail behind those in Australia. This more comprehensive coverage and frequent use of the term in Australian media might have contributed to heightened anxiety surrounding the issue.

Another factor potentially contributing to Australia's more profound anxiety is its significant economic entanglement with China. China is Australia's most important trading partner and second-largest source of immigrants. Nevertheless, Australia's historical alliances rooted in the Anglosphere align poorly with its contemporary economic reliance on China. This misalignment often manifests as Australia's uneasy choice between the U.S. and China, accompanied by suspicion over the loyalty of Chinese immigrants (Ang and Colic-Peisker 2022).

Additional factors contributing to the cross-national differences between Australia and the United States could encompass variations in population size. For instance, the more populous United States might influence how Americans perceive and react to foreign influence over ethnic communities within their country. In contrast, Australia's smaller population and a much higher representation of Chinese diasporas may cause its citizens to perceive the Chinese government's actions as a more immediate and tangible threat. Furthermore, Australia's closer proximity to China may contribute to heightened awareness of China's regional influence. Meanwhile, Australia's moderate military capacity, compared to the United States, could amplify concerns about China's potential impact on the nation's sovereignty and security.

Concluding Remarks

This paper examines anti-Chinese sentiment in the West during the pandemic, specifically focusing on Australia and the United States. Utilising two survey experiments embedded in two rounds of representative surveys conducted simultaneously in both countries in mid-2021 and mid-2022, we explore the implications of two distinct forms of scapegoating for public perceptions of people of Chinese heritage. Our findings indicate that, while the COVID-19 pandemic has played a role, anti-Chinese

sentiments in both nations are more closely linked to concerns about China-related foreign interference. In this way, our study contributes to the ongoing discussion of anti-Asian racism during the pandemic by providing new evidence to a relatively under-explored dimension of this complex issue.

Despite these contributions, we recognise the need for further research to advance understanding. Firstly, although our research underscores the implications of the foreign interference discourse and provides plausible explanations, the underlying mechanisms need further substantiation. Secondly, it is crucial to examine the gradual decline of the pandemic as a dominant public issue and its subsequent influence on the perceived association between anti-Chinese sentiments and the pandemic. We posit that the shifting focus of media and public discourse, along with the implications of social movements and advocacy efforts, has played a role. Still, these hypotheses require further substantiation through research.

Furthermore, our study highlights cross-national differences in the intensity and patterns of anti-Chinese sentiments. Future research may conduct more systematic comparisons to understand how differences in anti-Chinese sentiments and their underlying causes are tied to variations in population size, geographical proximity, military capacity, culture, and the governing political party. We believe these efforts will foster a better understanding of the conditions for meaningful inclusivity in multicultural societies.

Note

1. The ethics for both surveys were approved by the University of Sydney Human Ethics Committee.

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