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National Identity and Anti-Immigrant Sentiment: Experimental Evidence from Mexico

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore how historical patterns of identity construction shape today's attitudes toward immigrants in Mexico. Immigrants in Mexico constitute a very small percentage of the country's population. Yet some immigrants, in particular those of Asian origin, face strong hostility as measured in terms of opinions and opposition to their social and political incorporation. We trace contemporary anti-Chinese sentiment back to historical processes of Mexican colonisation, which resulted in a particular policy of Chinese incorporation at the turn of the 19th century. This incorporation was violently contested during and after the revolution, leading to the construction of a national identity based on openly excluding the Chinese community. Using experimental evidence, we show that anti-Asian prejudice today is best explained by looking at ethnic traits and civic norms that are endorsed by natives as being constitutive of Mexican national identity.

Keywords: mestizaje, national identity, anti-immigrant sentiment, *anti-chinismo*, survey experiments, public opinion, Mexico, Global South.

1. Introduction

What factors shape anti-immigrant sentiment in the Global South? Do extant theories of anti-immigrant prejudice hold any leverage when it comes to exploring anti-immigrant sentiment outside Western democracies? Our paper contributes to this debate by examining recent experimental evidence on contemporary attitudes toward different groups of immigrants in Mexico.

We claim that the process of state building and in particular the role that different groups of migrants were granted in it is central to understanding which groups of immigrants rouse more opposition in today's Mexico. We use the concept of national identity to explore whether exclusionary views of immigrants are motivated by ethnic (ascriptive) and/or civic norms endorsed by Mexicans as constitutive of the national identity (Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990; Miller 1995; Pehrson, Vignoles, and Brown 2009; Theiss-Morse 2009; Schildkraut 2011). We describe in detail how, in Mexico, the construction of Mexican-ness or *mexicanidad* can be traced back not only to objective foreigners' features that place them as out-group (such as race or religion), but also to the role immigrants played during state-

engineered colonisation at the turn of the nineteenth century and the post-revolutionary process of nation building. Political narratives around who is a good immigrant and who qualifies as stereotypical Mexican are crucial to understanding which foreigners are to be perceived as out-groups, or marginalised in the in-group, even today.

A major limitation of the anti-immigrant research agenda is that ironically, this agenda tends to be highly Western-centric. While there is a considerable percentage of immigrants in the Global South that move to other countries in the same region (Ratha, Eigen-Zucchi, and Plaza 2016), only recently has research started to gather experimental data to investigate the correlates of anti-immigrant sentiment in countries outside the United States and Western Europe. Besides contributing to a growing literature on the determinants of attitudes toward immigrants in the Global South, ours is one of the few works that approaches this topic using experimental evidence (Adida 2011; Cogley, Doces, and Whitaker 2019; Davison and Peng 2021; Ha, Cho, and Kang 2016; Harris et al. 2018; Lee and Chou 2020).

Based on a survey experiment asking a representative sample of the Mexican population about immigrants of different national ethnic backgrounds, we find that Asians encounter systematic prejudice in a manner that does not show when questions concern White European and Central American phenotypes. We argue that prejudice against foreigners of Asian origin has deep historical roots that go back to the post-revolutionary process of identity building, which stigmatised immigrants of Asian origin, fundamentally the Chinese, as antagonistic to the racial identity crafted by the post-revolutionary state.

[1] Historical legacies appear as the most convincing explanation for persisting hostility towards a community that is otherwise marginal in Mexico, when measured in numbers.[2]

The paper proceeds as follows. In the first section, we focus on the ethnic as well as on the civic components of national identity, providing a detailed background of the historical

role that different groups of foreigners had in the political construction of what it means to be Mexican. Historiography shows that this construction was heavily based on portraying the Chinese as an adversarial ethnic group to be excluded from the construction of Mexican identity. We hypothesise and show that this nation-building process contributed to fixing the perception of the Chinese in a way that is consequential for today's appraisal of this group of immigrants (Lee and Chou 2020). In Section 3, we present the data and methods. Section 4 discusses the results. We conclude with a reflection on what our findings add to the understanding of attitudes toward migrants in the Global South, as well as the relevance of this study in a context of rising anti-Chinese sentiment associated with the recent global pandemic.

2. The Chinese in the Construction of Mexican National Identity

National identity has at its core the idea of belonging to a group or a community. As Theiss-Morse (2009, 6) puts it, "it is the shared belief that one is a member of a group of compatriots that is at the core of the idea of a nation." Who qualifies as belonging to an out-group is closely related to natives' perception of what it means to be a national of the country; in particular, whether belonging to the in-group is determined by a predominance of civic (permeable) norms or ethnocultural (strict and exclusionary) traits of national identity (Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990; Miller 1995; Sides and Citrin 2007; Schildkraut 2014; Pehrson, Vignoles, and Brown 2009; Theiss-Morse 2009; Schildkraut 2011; Wright, Citrin, and Wand 2012). The construction of national identity often implies the construction of stereotypes, which informs who is a "true" member of the group and who becomes marginalised within the in-group (Theiss-Morse 2009, 4). It is crucial for our analysis to retain that what it means to be a national of the country is highly context-specific. As Miller states, assessing national identities – and their consequences – requires understanding the historical processes by which

they arise (Miller 1995, 40). And as Theiss-Morse (2009, 11) puts it, "the general contours of the group boundaries are determined in part by constructions of the past."

2.1. An Ethnic Definition of Mexican Identity

An explanation of the anti-Asian prejudice we identify in this study requires us to go back to the role played by Chinese immigrants in historical processes of Mexican colonisation under President Porfirio Díaz (1894–1909). It also requires analysing the reactions to that role during the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period. Most fundamentally, we claim that the roots of contemporary anti-Asian sentiment are to be found in the post-Revolution process of state and nation building, with anti-Chinese racism being used as "an instrument of collective identity formation" (Chang 2019, 994). Central to the definition of Mexican-ness was identification of the Chinese as a threat to the very project of the construction of a racial state.

Under President Porfirio Díaz, Chinese immigrants were welcome in the country as so-called *motores de sangre* ("machines of flesh and blood", i.e., draft animals) to help in the country's colonisation (Chang 2019, 995). The 1899 Mexican–Chinese Treaty of Amity, Commerce and Navigation facilitated the arrival of non-settler Chinese labourers who were needed for agriculture, mining, and railroad construction.[3] Importantly, the landing of Chinese immigrants did not only have an economic motive but also a political one. Chinese communities were strategically injected to help fight unruly indigenous people, whom the Porfirian regime technocrats saw as unreasonable people *(gente sin razón*), not suitable to undertake the modernisation of the country (Chang 2017, 57–58; Treviño 2005, 420). While the regime expressed a preference for White Europeans for the mission of colonising Mexico, failure to attract this class of foreigners resulted in the arrival of the Chinese as a second-best

(Yankelevich 2012, 410). The Chinese landed in large numbers in the northern states of Mexico, especially Baja California and Sonora, as well as in areas with large indigenous populations, such as the Yucatán peninsula. These were regions where the Porfirian regime fought racial wars against the indigenous population. The Chinese community became the second-largest group of immigrants (Chang 2017, 11; Chao Romero 2011, 175) and continued to grow until the early 1930s, even amid intense social and political hostility.

Backlash against Chinese communities was caused by both racism and economic nationalism. In a first period, *anti-Chinismo* took the form of what Chang (2017, 111) describes as "grotesque assemblies", in which spontaneous grass-roots committees subjected the Chinese population to mob attack, assaults, and destruction of their business and residences. Anti-Chinese sentiment was fuelled by an active campaign that portrayed the Chinese as "an aesthetic, cultural, sexual, and religious threat to Western and Christian values. They were also considered to be of low morals, as well as natural carriers of contagious diseases" (Rénique 2015, 95; see also Treviño 2005, 421; Craib 1996, 17; Chao Romero 2011). During the Revolution, the epitome of anti-Chinese virulence was the killing of 303 members of the Chinese community in Torreón, Cohauila, in 1911.

After the Revolution, however, embracing *anti-chinismo* became equivalent to rejecting the Porfirian regime (Chang 2017, 91). *Anti-chinismo* was convenient for the post-revolutionary political project of building "a political community of culturally and racially homogeneous individuals", at the centre of which was a new *mestizo* identity (Rénique 2015, 92). The mestizaje nation-building project advocated the mixing of desirable whites and indigenous peoples with the aim of fabricating an "intermediary race" resembling the white–criollo of Northern states (Rénique 2015, 106). Inspired by the ideas of intellectuals such as José Vasconcelos and Manuel Gamio, the mixing of indigenous people with white

populations would give way to a disciplined class of mestizos in charge of the process of self-colonisation.

The identification of "Mexican" with "mestizo" met various political objectives. One of the most important was solving the secular Indian problem through "conscripting" the Indians into a state-sponsored mestizo race (Chang 2017, 180). Mestizaje was an openly xenophobic and sinophobic project, aiming at "whitening" the native population. Consequently, Chinese men mixing with native women became the main threat to the project of a racialised state based on mestizo supremacy.[4] Simply put, *anti-chinismo* "was the right kind of racism for the Mexican state to construct a mestizo hegemony" (Chang 2017, 17,25). In the process of constructing what would be the dominant mestizo group, the Chinese were systematically harassed in multiple ways, fitting well what Theiss-Morse (2009, 4) describes as marginalised groups. As the stereotypical, true Mexican became equivalent to being mestizo, all other groups that did not fit this definition came to be excluded and their group features fixed as a threat in a way that we posit continues to have an impact on anti-immigrant prejudice today (Lee and Chou 2020).

In view of this discussion, we hypothesise, first, that in comparison to other groups of foreigners, natives will hold worse opinion of immigrants when asked about foreigners after being primed with Asian phenotypes. Second, given the centrality of race to the building of national identity, we also hypothesise that natives who rate ethnic traits as very important in the definition of what means to be Mexican will hold worse opinions of immigrants, but only when primed with Asian phenotypes.

2.2. A Civic Definition of Mexican Identity

The construction of a national identity often contains a civic dimension. Unlike ethnic conceptions of national identity, civic identity emphasises behaviours; and unlike ethnicity, civic norms are "inclusive and involve a set of beliefs that anyone can possess" (Schildkraut 2014, 447). Civic conceptions of the nation put the focus on the responsibilities as member of the community. Under this conception, the search for the common good is at the centre of what it means to be national of a country (Schildkraut 2014; 2011; Theiss-Morse 2009).[5] Consequently, it places as out-groups, and marginalises in-groups, that are perceived to destabilise communal living, as well as those that do not see the community as part of their own identity. As we discuss below, historical accounts of Chinese immigrants depict this group not only as an undesirable race, but also as un-civic.

The portrayal of the Chinese as *un-Mexican* from a civic point of view and adversarial to the common good is most evident in the description and discussion of their economic presence in the country.[6] Indeed, economic fears were part and parcel of the anti-Chinese movement. The Chinese were perceived as a "regime of vile *abarroteros*" (grocers, merchants) and as an "insatiable yellow hydra" (Rénique 2015, 102; Gómez Izquierdo 2019, 208–9; Chang 2017, 87). Their rapid success in business and commerce soon raised hostility, calls for "the extinction of the Asiatic merchant" (Rénique 2015, 101, citing José Maria Arana), and pleas to "buy from the Indio" (cited in González 2013, 55). The Chinese were accused of achieving rapid economic ascendance by carrying out illicit practices, monopolising and excluding Mexicans from certain economic activities, bribing civil servants and politicians, evading taxes, and being involved in poppy cultivation, gambling, and the opium trade (Rénique 2015, 104; Craib 1996, 15; Chao Romero 2011, 157). These mafia type of activities raised widespread accusations against the Chinese for not being good citizens, being a source of crime and vice, and being reluctant to contribute to the Mexican economy (Chao Romero 2011, 146, 150–53).[7] The argument of unfair competition for local

jobs against Mexicans is well documented in many historical accounts of Mexican *anti-chinismo* (see for instance Craib 1996, 15-16).[8] Often, *anti-chinismo* was sold to the public as an attempt to "moralize commerce" and as "worker advocacy" (Chang 2017, 132, 174). In Sonora, the "avant-garde" of anti-Chinese policies, fears of unfair competition for jobs led to the passing of a Labour Law in 1919 to ensure that foreign business offered at least 80% of jobs to Mexicans, defined both in terms of ethnicity and birth (Rénique 2015, 104; González 2013, 57).

Moreover, violent fights among Chinese factions over political conflicts in the homeland (the so-called Tong Wars) gave further ammunition to anti-Chinese groups and helped to solidify the image of the Chinese as dangerous, violent, corrupted, and "pernicious individuals" (Chang 2017, 136, 137; Chao Romero 2011, 137, 144; Gómez Izquierdo 2019, 215; Rénique 2015, 110).[9] Perceived as a threat to the local economy and to social peace, their expulsion was decreed under Article 33 of the 1917 Constitution. Between 1910 and 1940, three-quarters of the Chinese population of Mexico were expelled (González 2013, 67).

A fundamental source of anti-immigrant sentiment has to do with the perception of immigrants as not identifying with the national group and as unwilling to integrate (Brader, Valentino, and Suhay 2008; Hainmueller and Hangartner 2013; Hellwig and Sinno 2017). As the narrative above shows and multiple historical accounts emphasise, the Chinese were perceived as individuals who kept "their Chinese customs, relations, and systems without trying to identify themselves with the Mexican people, which makes [Mexicans] consider them in turn as foreigners" (Luis Meixueiro, cited in González 2013, 64). Moreover, those customs, relations, and systems were regarded with contempt and often found short of morality, a threat to public health, and disrespectful of laws.[10]

We therefore hypothesise that the perception of the Chinese as unwilling to identify as Mexicans, as well as a threat to the domestic economy and political institutions, continues to resonate among natives who strongly endorse civic norms in the definition of what it means to be Mexican. When primed with an Asian phenotype, these natives will exhibit worse opinions of foreigners.

Note that while some research suggests that ethnocentrism does not distinguish among different out-groups, others show that certain nationalities and religions awake more opposition among natives (Gadarian and Albertson 2014; Hainmueller and Hangartner 2013; Konitzer et al. 2019; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014, 233). In this regard, and given the above discussion, we hypothesise that in comparison to other out-groups, the Chinese will receive worse evaluations than other groups of foreigners. True, the Mexican national identity construction process was overtly anti-foreigner in general, but we do not expect to observe the same level of animosity among natives against other foreign nationalities. For instance, during the process of state building, resentment against U.S. citizens "was grounded, for the most part, in economic, cultural and class factors, [while] anti-Chinese sentiments (…) were often overtly racial" (Rénique 2015, 94). As Chang puts it, "anti-Americanism was anti-Imperial and thus bolstered protectionism but did not constitute a racial threat" (p.123). In other words, "the Anglos" did not pose a serious threat to the racial elite project of whitening the native population, indeed ranking high in the racial hierarchy. And while the Indians were located, together with the Chinese, Jews, and Africans, in the lowest ranks of desirable races, they moved from being "objects of extermination" under the *Porfiriato* to being "subjects of improvement" in the post-revolutionary period (Chang 2017, 10). In the racial construction of *mexicanidad,* indigenous natives needed to be upgraded through a correct miscegenation, but not excluded (Chang 2017, 187). In contrast, the building of Mexican-ness did see the Chinese as a direct threat to the national *mestizaje* project. Therefore, we further hypothesise

that a strong endorsement of civic norms and racial traits among natives will negatively impact the opinion about immigrants when respondents are primed with an Asian phenotype, but less so when natives are primed with indigenous and Anglo-Saxon phenotypes.

3. Data and Method

We use the 2016 Mexico wave of *The Americas y El Mundo* public opinion survey to test what drives anti-Asian immigrant prejudice in Mexico among a representative sample of 2400 respondents. The survey was carried out by the Centre for Research and Teaching in Economics (CIDE) and asks individuals 18 years or older a wide range of questions regarding national policies on security, national identity, foreign relations, and attitudes towards immigrants and about Mexico's status as both a receiving and as a transit country for immigrants.[11]

A descriptive analysis of the raw data gives us some hints regarding public opinion toward different types of immigrants and different countries. A majority of the Mexican public has good or very good opinions of immigrants in general; the Chinese, however, are among the lowest rated foreigners. According to Pew Research Center data on global attitudes, 55% of Mexicans believe that it is bad that Chinese ideas and customs spread in the country (Armony and Velásquez 2015); U.S. citizens are valued higher than the United States; that is, there is more animosity against the country than against its citizens, and interestingly, a large battery of questions regarding attitudes toward Central Americans reveal that contemporary animosity toward this group is closely connected to their migratory status as transiting, and often illegal, immigrants (Maldonado et al. 2018, 88, 86).[12]

The unique feature of the *Mexico y el Mundo* survey is that it has a survey experiment where respondents are primed with the ethnicity (diverse phenotypes) of the hypothetical

immigrant before answering the question regarding their general opinion of foreigners. There are three treatment groups in addition to the control group. The three possible group cues vary by national origins and ethnicity: White, Asian, and indigenous Central American (as stated in the survey report, Maldonado et al. 2018, 144). For each treatment group, the enumerators show a picture of a randomly assigned phenotype and read the following script: "I will show you a photograph of a foreigner. Please respond to the following questions with the image of the foreigner in mind." Figure 1 shows the photos, which are of men with phenotypical appearances of the respective racial/ethnic group. The control group is not read the experimental script or shown a picture of a foreigner.

*** Figure 1 about here ***

The dependent variable for our analysis is the question immediately following the treatment, which is the respondent's opinion towards foreigners. The specific question asks respondents their opinion of foreigners, like those in the randomly assigned picture, who live in Mexico. Since the control group was not exposed to any picture of an immigrant, this group's responses are assumed to be reflective of foreigners in general. The responses are on a five-point scale from "very bad" (1) to "very good" (5). Around ten percent of respondents have negative views of immigrants, thirty percent have neutral opinions, and sixty percent of respondents have positive views. For the analysis, we recoded the variable from 0 to 1 to facilitate the interpretation of results.

We use an OLS regression to estimate the effects of the immigrant's phenotype on opinions towards foreigners. The main models regress the dependent variable on the experimental treatments and use robust standard errors. Additional analyses include controls

for socio-demographic variables and state fixed effects (see the supplementary Appendix). The control variables include gender, age, education, income, and urban/rural residence.[13] While the control variables do not predict the treatments, there are some minor imbalances between the treatment groups and the control group.[14] For example, women make up 49.4% of the control group whereas they make up 42.3% of the Asian treatment group. Controlling for socio-demographic variables remedies the small imbalances across the experimental groups. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the control variables used in our analysis.

*** Table 1 about here ***

The functional form of the regression to estimate the effects of race/ethnicity on Mexican opinions of foreigners is:

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 D_{1i} + \beta_2 D_{2i} + \beta_3 D_{3i} + \lambda X_i + \mu_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where *D* refers to the experimental treatment. Each treatment will be included as a dummy variable in the regression and β measures the causal effect of the racial/ethnic priming. These effects are interpreted as the difference of means between the treatment group and the control group. We include a vector of controls for socio-demographic factors in X and include fixed-effects at the state level (μ). All models include robust standard errors.

4. Results

Recalling the main expectation of this study, we proposed that given the role that different groups of foreigners played in the process of identity construction in Mexico, anti-immigrant sentiment will be stronger among those prompted with the Asian phenotype. We also

established that given the centrality of race and eugenics in the state-led process of construction of the "true" Mexican, we should not observe the same hostility towards foreigners when natives are prompted with a White phenotype. Also, the Central American phenotype (indigenous) should not raise as much hostility toward foreigners as the Asian phenotype because the former is likely to be perceived as less distant from the Mexican mestizo. Recall that the mestizo identity sought to incorporate, rather than to exclude, indigenous people in the national identity through "correct" miscegenation. Indians were to be redeemed, not excluded (Chang 2017, 127 citing Manuel Gamio).

Figure 2 presents the baseline results from the survey experiment, confirming our main expectation. Respondents primed with the Asian immigrant photo hold significantly more negative views of foreigners than the other experimental groups. Compared to the control group, which was not exposed to any specific phenotype, the average treatment effect in the Asian group decreases support for immigrants by 3.4 percent.[15] The results are robust to controlling for socio-demographic variables and state fixed effects. The average treatment effect is also negative for the White and Central American treatments, with the effect being the least negative in the case of the White treatment; nonetheless, the results for these other phenotypes are not statistically significant.[16] Thus, in contrast to other groups of foreigners, Mexican respondents show a stronger prejudice against immigrants when prompted to think of a foreigner of Asian origin.

*** Figure 2 about here ***

We hypothesised that this strong anti-Asian sentiment is rooted in the historical process of identity construction in Mexico. Therefore, our main hypothesis places national

identity at the centre of our argument. We explore whether support for different ethnic traits and civic constitutive norms of what means to be Mexican impacts the opinion toward foreigners differently depending on the phenotype respondents are presented with. We anticipate that a strong endorsement of ethnic (ascriptive) traits among respondents will strongly penalise perceptions of immigrants when respondents are primed with the Asian phenotype. Not only were the Chinese regarded an undesirable race, but they were also considered dangerous foreigners, unwilling to integrate, and involved in a range of illicit activities. Therefore, we also proposed that endorsement of civic norms as central to Mexican identity will particularly penalise perceptions of Asian foreigners. We test the effect of ethnic and civic dimensions of nationality on opinions about foreigners through interaction models between a number of ethnic traits and civic norms and the different experimental treatments.

The survey *Mexico y el Mundo* asks respondents about various items concerning what it means to be Mexican. In respect to the concept of national identity, we focus on three items frequently included under the category of ethnic conceptions of nation; namely, *being born in Mexico (nativity), being Catholic,* and *speaking Spanish* – and three items associated with civic conceptions of the nation addressing attachment to the group (*proud of being Mexican*) and responsibilities towards the community (*paying taxes* and *respect for norms and institutions*). Admittedly, some of these items are subject to discussion as to their inclusion in one or the other conception of nation (Wright, Citrin, and Wand 2012, 472). For instance, *speaking Spanish* could be treated as an ethnic, a cultural, or a civic norm; the latter if learning the local language is considered a civic obligation (Schildkraut 2011, 48; Kunovich 2009; Pehrson, Vignoles, and Brown 2009). For some authors, it is necessary to avoid conflating affective dimensions of nationality (pride and love for the country) with "normative content" (criteria that define membership in the nation). In this regard, the inclusion of the item *proud of being Mexican* in our civic dimension could raise doubts.

However, we keep it as a proxy of what Schildkraut (2011, 49) describes as a civic aspect of nationality that "represents how people think of themselves vis-à-vis the national community" in contrast to the other two civic dimensions (*paying taxes* and *respecting laws*) that refer to how people *act*. As part of commitment to the group, which is central to civic conceptions of national identity, people need to evaluate their national group positively (Theiss-Morse 2009). This is well captured by the item *proud of being Mexican*.[17]

Rather than aggregating these different items, and given that a few of them admit different interpretations, we opt for looking into these six items separately. These sets of questions were asked prior to the experimental treatment of race/ethnicity.[18] Therefore, the respondents' responses about ethnic and civic factors of national identity were not affected by whether a respondent was shown a picture of an Asian, White, or Central American phenotype. This allows us to examine the interaction effects between race and factors concerning what it means to be Mexican.

The responses to the national identity dimensions are based on a 4-degree scale rating items from "not important" to "very important". Table 2 shows the distribution of responses for each dimension of national identity used in the interaction models. Respondents place the highest importance in shaping what means to be Mexican on *nativity*: 77% of respondents said it is "very important". Nearly 64% of respondents feel that it is "very important" to *speak Spanish* in terms of what means to be Mexican. Surprisingly, *being Catholic* is not as important as language or place of birth. A little over 40% of respondents place Catholic as a very important feature of Mexican identity.

Respondents vary on how much they support certain civic behaviours as constitutive of what it means to be Mexican, but this dimension certainly appears to be important for many natives. *Pride in being Mexican* is very important for Mexican respondents with the

distribution of responses being similar to the *nativity* item. Over 60% of respondents believe that respecting laws and institutions is "somewhat" or "very important" in defining what it means to be Mexican. *Paying taxes* shows the most variation among civic traits, with fewer than half of respondents thinking that paying taxes is a "very important" aspect of Mexican identity.

*** Table 2 about here ***

We show that opinions about foreigners decline significantly as respondents place high value on ethnic and civic traits of national identity, and this negative trend is consistent when the public is primed with the picture of the Asian foreigner. Figures 3 and 4 present the results in visual form through marginal effects plots on opinions of foreigners of the Asian treatment interacted with the different dimensions of national identity.[19] The interaction coefficients do not yield significant results. This is largely due to the distribution of responses for the ethnic and civic norms of identity given that relatively few respondents found these traits "not at all important" or "a little important". This results in large confidence intervals in their marginal effects. However, as some of the results show, the interaction effects suggest important trends in how views of what constitutes being a national of Mexico shape anti-Asian sentiment.

Figure 3 presents the average marginal effects of the Asian treatment on opinions of foreigners based on how important respondents consider certain ethnic traits of Mexican identity.[20] Respondents place high importance on *nativity* and the results show that Asians are viewed negatively the more important this trait is rated. Opinions of foreigners decline 5% among respondents who believe that being born in Mexico is "very important" and who were primed with the Asian immigrant photo. This is in contrast to those who believe that *being*

born in Mexico is "not at all important" – the marginal effect increases by 9%, but it is not statistically significant. Within this treatment group, the marginal effect on opinions among those who state that being born in Mexico is "not at all important" to "very important" declines by 14%.

Surprisingly, the other two ethnic traits, religion and language, did not produce a similar pattern.[21] When these features are "somewhat" or "very" important for respondents, the marginal effects are also negative. However, these features do not show the clear negative trend for the interaction results that we found for *nativity*. For both *being Catholic* and *speaking Spanish*, the marginal effects are quite flat. Therefore, the ways that respondents value *Catholicism* and *speaking Spanish* as constitutive of Mexican-ness do not seem to explain variation in anti-Asian prejudice, while *nativity* substantially does.

*** Figure 3 about here ***

Figure 4 presents the results from the interaction results using the civic norms of nationality interacted with the Asian treatment.[22] Anti-Asian prejudice follows a clear negative trend the more important these civic norms are for respondents. This trend is strongest for the item *pride in being Mexican*, which captures attachment to the community. Note that for this item the marginal effects exhibit a declining trend, moving from positive to negative the more important this feature is rated. Similar to *nativity*, *pride in being Mexican* has a strong endorsement as a constitutive feature of *mexicanidad* – more than 70% of respondents believe it is "very important." Among those assigned to the Asian treatment, the marginal effect on support for foreigners declines by 9% between respondents who state that

attachment to the group is “not at all important” in comparison to those who state that it is “very important”.

Asian immigrants are viewed negatively the more respondents value *paying taxes* and *respecting laws and institutions*. Interestingly, with respect to *paying taxes*, while endorsement of this civic norm does not appear to be a strong component of Mexican identity among the public, opinions on Asian immigrants get worse the more important paying taxes is rated as component of Mexican identity. The difference in marginal effects between paying taxes as “not at all important” and “very important” is 5.3%, which is much larger than the differences between these responses regarding *being Catholic* (2%) and *speaking Spanish* (1.9%). This result likely reflects the historical construction of Asian exclusion in Mexican economic nationalism. The anti-Chinese rhetoric often portrayed the Chinese as engaging in dishonest economic behaviour, one of these being avoiding tax payments. Finally, recall that the official rhetoric around Chinese immigrants changed from considering them “disposable labourers” during the *Porfiriato*, to “killable subjects” during the Revolution, and eventually considering them as “pernicious defilers” during the peak of anti-Chinese campaigns (Chang 2017, 10). Consistent with this narrative, greater importance placed on *respecting laws and institutions* is also associated with negative attitudes towards foreigners, even though the trend is not as strong as for *paying taxes*. The marginal effect of the Asian treatment group declines by 1.7% across the range of importance attributed to the item *respecting laws and institutions*.

*** Figure 4 about here ***

Interestingly, unlike views on Asian immigrants, placing high values on ethnic traits and civic norms as constitutive of Mexican identity does *not* significantly shape opinions of

Whites and Central Americans. Figures 5 and 6 show that even under the "very important" responses, the White and Central American treatment groups do not have the negative and statistically significant results that we observe for the Asian treatment.

Regarding ethnic dimensions of national identity, only the *nativity* trait seems to be consequential to understanding anti-immigrant sentiment when prompted with the Central American treatment. In this case, the more respondents endorse this dimension as "very important", the more negative the marginal effects are. In turn, civic dimensions of identity have more leverage for understanding anti-immigrant sentiment when interacted with the White treatment, although the marginal effects are not statistically significant.

Overall, and in order of substantive impact on anti-immigrant prejudice, strong endorsement of the nativist ethnic trait; namely, *being born in Mexico*, and of *pride in belonging to the group* negatively shape views of foreigners among the Mexican public, but *mostly when respondents are prompted with an Asian phenotype*. Interestingly, *paying taxes* beats ethnic traits like language and religion when it comes to shaping views of foreigners, and this despite this item not being widely endorsed by the Mexican public as a very central aspect of national identity; but again, we observe this result *only when respondents are prompted with an Asian phenotype.*

*** Figure 5 about here ***

*** Figure 6 about here ***

4.1. Robustness

So far, we have focused on the long shadow of historical processes of identity building in shaping contemporary views of foreigners. We claim that certain negative traits were inextricably associated with the Chinese group through politically articulated narratives of the Mexican nation; we further claim that these perceptions endure (Manzano-Munguía and Juárez Palomino 2020). Suffice it to take a look at the contemporary media portrayal and current political narratives regarding the Chinese influence in Mexico to corroborate the idea that some traits ascribed to them appear to be "unmalleable" (Lee and Chou 2020).

In order to give more credit to our argument, we explore several competing hypotheses that might shape anti-Asian sentiment through a series of interaction models in Tables A4–A6 in the Appendix. First, some argue that prejudice against immigrants may be ameliorated, under certain conditions, through first-hand contact with immigrants (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Ceobanu and Escandell 2010; Homola and Tavits 2018; Sides and Citrin 2007; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014).[23] We test for the contact hypothesis by interacting the experimental treatment groups with a variable that asks respondents if they have a prior relationship with an immigrant or foreigner.[24] Table A4, Column 1 shows that having prior contact improves opinion of immigrants, but there is no significant interaction effect with the Asian treatment group. This result is unsurprising given that segregating the Chinese community to minimise miscegenation was a central policy in the anti-Chinese campaigns (Rénique 2015, 101; Gómez Izquierdo 2019, 214-15). The geographic concentration of the Chinese communities in specific locations continues to be a reality today, as well as the belief, well fed by the media, that the Chinese are not interested in integrating. For example, a

recent project of building a distribution centre in Cancún (Dragon Mart) and the potential arrival of one thousand Chinese families aroused misgivings on a similar basis to what one can read in the historical accounts. One digital media report claimed that the project would become a Caribbean Chinatown and describes the Chinese community as characterised by "endogamy and resistance to integration in the host culture … which might affect local traditions and beliefs" (Cornejo 2019, 888).[25] Table A4, Column 2 interacts the treatment with region as specified by the survey. Chinese populations were concentrated in the northern and southern regions; however, the results show that respondents in these regions do not respond differently to the Asian treatment.

Second, Table A5, columns 1 and 2 tests a narrow version of the labour market hypothesis with interactions on whether the respondent, or someone in their household, works in the commercial or agrarian sector. The Chinese became highly visible in both sectors, especially in commerce, often being accused of accepting slavish wage conditions that displaced low-skilled Mexicans working in these sectors (Yankelevich 2012, 424). The media, political, and business elites have stirred fears of Chinese competition in certain manufacturing (e.g., "*Chinese motorbikes invade Mexico",* cited in Cornejo, et al. 2013, 64) and agricultural sectors (e.g., false news regarding Chinese competition in the prickly pear industry). Gross distortions have been accompanied by nationalistic and identity appeals to protect certain "national" products (Lutz and Padilla 2012, 188). However, we do not find support for this indicator of labour market competition hypothesis to explain today's anti-Asian prejudice.

Finally, some claim that China's "going out" policy and its increasing economic presence in Latin America is a source of anxiety among natives over commercial "invasion". We test whether the foreign direct investment inflows from China shape anti-Asian prejudice. Chinese foreign economic policy may be a source of anti-immigrant sentiment to the extent

that immigrant communities are perceived as "foot soldiers" of an aggressive commercial and investment policy (Armony and Velásquez 2015, 11). Yet in comparison to other Latin American countries, Chinese contemporary economic incursions into Mexico have been moderate and often unsuccessful (Cornejo 2019, 889–90). Despite this reality, contemporary media continues to refer to China as an economic threat for certain sectors and even for national security, persisting in claims of Chinese illicit economic practices. A compilation of headlines by Cornejo et al., (2013, 64) ("*Common front against China, demands Derbez"*; *"China, a threat"*; "*Mexico at war against China in the WTO";* "*The dragon monopolizes"*; or "*Chinese pirates invade Chiapas",* among others) shows that the "yellow hydra" rhetoric continues to be in good health in contemporary Mexico, often being used by business interests and political actors as a scapegoat strategy. The strategy does not seem to work among ordinary Mexicans, though. Table A5, column 3 interacts the Asian treatment with percent change in Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) at the state level between 1999 and 2016 and shows that Chinese FDI does not increase anti-immigrant prejudice.[26]

Finally, Table A6 presents interaction results between the phenotype treatments and several demographic factors. There are no heterogeneous treatment effects conditional on gender, age, or education. In sum, none of these alternative hypotheses has leverage to explain current anti-Asian sentiments in Mexico, reinforcing our account that beyond material concerns, contemporary prejudice towards this group is deeply rooted in the historical process of national identity construction that marginalised and stigmatised the Chinese community.

5. Discussion

In this paper, we have shown that the concept of national identity provides a useful framework for explaining attitudes toward different groups of foreigners in Mexico. We

argue that in order to account for today's attitudes toward immigrants, we need to understand the role that different groups of foreigners were granted in the process of national identity formation. Our research makes several contributions to different debates: it explores the historical roots of contemporary anti-Asian sentiment, using Mexico as a case study; and it contributes to the literature on the consequences of national identity and ethnocentrism for contemporary immigration debates and inter-group conflicts in the Global South. Empirically, our paper explores these issues using new experimental evidence from Mexico.

Given the centrality of race to the construction of national identity, we hypothesised that in comparison to other groups of foreigners, those prompted to think about an Asian foreigner would hold worse evaluations of immigrants. Further, given strong support among natives for so-called ascriptive aspects of national identity – such as place of birth or language – we expected that these traits would carry a considerable weight in explaining anti-Asian sentiment; but we also posited that the Chinese were deemed pernicious citizens for their potential to destabilise local socio-economic structures. For this reason, we also expected that a strong endorsement of civic norms by natives should penalise Asian foreigners significantly more than other groups.

Indeed, in today's Mexico, (1) Asians arise the greatest hostility; (2) thinking that *being born in Mexico* is central to Mexican identity penalises Asians the most (ethnic trait) closely followed by rating (3) *proud to be Mexican* (national identification) as a very important group norm. Other ethnic traits that we expected to be stronger in view of previous research on national identity (such as language or religion) turned out to be less important in Mexico (Schildkraut 2014). In contrast, when respondents are primed to think of Asians, some civic norms that we did not expect to matter so much in view of the weak backing they hold among the Mexican public (such as paying taxes) turned out to have considerable leverage. In all, hostility toward Asians (in fact, *chinos*) persists. And the fact that *nativity* in

Mexico seems to matter so much in the perception of Asians suggests that naturalisation and access to Mexican citizenship probably helps little in terms of seeing foreign-born Chinese as belonging to the national group. Most likely, neither is nativity in Mexico enough to create a perception of Mexicans of Asian descent as truly belonging to the dominant group. Unfortunately, the battery of questions about what means to be Mexican did not ask about holding citizenship or include an explicit question about race; these are interesting issues to explore in future research. Finally, our next step of this research agenda will explore to what extent attachment to these ethnic traits and civic norms of Mexican identity has implications for marginalised groups' social and political incorporation.

Certainly, Mexico is not alone in its high doses of anti-Chinese sentiment. In other Latin American countries, as well as in other regions ranging from Africa to South and South-East Asia or Central-East Europe, the Chinese are the object of resentment and the target of racist rhetoric (Armony and Velásquez 2015; Sibiri 2021; Liu 2020; Sun 2021; Chan and Montt Strabucchi 2021). But while fears of economic competition, geopolitical and security concerns predominate in contemporary Africa and Asia (Sibiri 2021, 11), in Mexico and other Latin American countries with once substantial Chinese presence, state-crafted Sinophobia during nation-building processes offers a better explanation for enduring mistrust towards the Chinese community.

Violence and discrimination against the Chinese community are not relics from the past (Manzano-Munguía and Juárez Palomino 2020). The recent COVID-19 pandemic has shown that historically rooted anti-Chinese sentiment based on racial exclusion still shapes perceptions of the Chinese communities on grounds not far from those that shaped it back in the 1920s and 1930s. In Mexico, the media, songs, and even public figures have, for instance, associated the virus with Chinese eating customs. Chinese people have been ridiculed and deprecated in a way that resembles the cartoons that were popular during the anti-Chinese

campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s (Sanchez-Rivera 2020, 35–36; Lim 2020, 443). In other Latin American countries, as well as in countries around the world, anti-Chinese expressions have been on the rise (Lim 2020, 443; Chan and Montt Strabucchi 2021, 375; Sun 2021). The revival of the "yellow peril" rhetoric demonstrate how successful national identity processes can be in fixing certain negative stereotypes. In Mexico, a national identity that could only create a dominant in-group by excluding others is, in our view and according to our findings, the most convincing account of persistent anti-Asian feelings in Mexico.

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Figure Legend List

Figure Caption

1 Experimental treatment based on picture of foreigner

2 Average Marginal Effect of Race/Ethnic Treatment on Opinion of Immigrants

3 Ethnic Views of Being Mexican and Attitudes on Asian Immigrants

4 Civic Views of Being Mexican and Attitudes towards Asian Immigrants

5 White and Central American Treatment Effects Conditional on Ethnic Views of Being Mexican

6 White and Central American Treatment Effects Conditional on Civic Views of Being Mexican

Endnotes

[1] While the empirical section of this paper asks about Asian phenotypes, our theoretical discussion revolves around the historical presence of the Chinese in Mexico and their position during the process of post-revolutionary state building. Equating Asians with Chinese is deliberate. As Chang (2017, 10) puts it "[I]n Mexico, Chinese populations – in fact all Asians — are known as *los chinos*. This term, is commonly heard across Latin America in reference to all Asians as a racial category carried over from the colonial era…" See Lim (2020, 443), who discusses the portrayal of Koreans as "just a type of chinos." See also Chan and Montt Strabucchi (2021, 377).

[2] According to the most recent Mexican census, there are barely 10,547 Chinese foreigners in Mexico (about 5,500 Japanese and a similar figure of South Koreans) (Censo de Población y Vivienda, INEGI 2020). Some put the focus on the fact that Chinese presence, while low, has increased since the 1980s (Lisbona and Rodríguez 2018). Mexico hosts about 1 million foreigners, the majority of whom are US citizens.

[3] The passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) in the United States and the diversion of the coolie trade from the Caribbean were also major drivers in the arrival of Chinese immigrants to Mexican territory (Chang 2017, 36,58).

[4] As Jose María Arana, a prominent *anti-chinista* put it, the union of Chinese men with "bad Mexican women" produced "weak, feeble, sick and unpatriotic" offspring (cited in Rénique 2015, 102).

[5] In the vast literature on American identity, this is often referred to as civic republicanism, which differs from liberal views of identity in that "civic republicanism emphasizes the responsibilities, rather than the rights of citizenship" (Schildkraut 2011, 40).

[6] A narrower approach to capturing economic competition could be addressed in terms of material or economic theories of anti-immigrant sentiment. These theories anticipate that those economically affected by immigration will take a position against immigrants and liberal immigration policies (Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014; Hainmueller and Hiscox 2010; Facchini, Mayda, and Mendola 2013; Scheve and Slaughter 2001; Mayda 2006; Meseguer and Kemmerling 2018; Citrin et al. 1997).

[7] For instance, the Chinese were often accused of not investing their savings in Mexico, but rather sending them back to China as remittances (Chao Romero 2011, 150–53).

[8] Calls to extinguish diplomatic relations with China and to repeal the 1899 Mexico–China Immigration Treaty were constant demands of the *anti-chino* movement.

[9] The Tong Wars were fought in northern Mexican cities from 1922 to 1924. The wars were triggered by the overthrown of China's dynastic empire in 1911 and the subsequent fight between the Kuo Ming Tang (KMT) and the Chee Kung Tong (ChKT), which were overseas branches of mainland Chinese political parties (Chao Romero 2011, 136). The conflict had echoes among the Chinese diaspora in Mexico, resulting in bloody internal struggles.

[10] In turn, this perception prompted the passing of laws that further isolated the Chinese in special neighbourhoods and punished interracial marriage (Rénique 2015, 101; Gómez Izquierdo 2019).
[11] https://www.lasamericasyelmundo.cide.edu/
[12] Indeed, according to survey reports, Guatemalans are the worst regarded nationality, most likely related to the large inflows of Central American immigrants arriving through the southern border in transit to the United States.
[13] Education is measured as years of schooling. Income is based on a 11-point scale asking respondents about their monthly income in pesos.
[14] Balance tests are in Table A7 (Supplementary Appendix).
[15] Figure 2 is based on the results in Table A1, Column 1. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.
[16] The effect of the Central American treatment increases from −0.019 to −0.028, and it becomes statistically significant when control variables and state fixed effects are added.
[17] Thiess-Morse (2009) is careful in distinguishing national identity from patriotism (see also Schildkraut 2014, 454). While the former refers to group/community attachment, patriotism refers to love for the country. De Figueiredo and Elkins (2003, 175) make a distinction between nationalism and patriotism (see also Theiss-Morse 2009, 23; Miller 1995), by emphasising that unlike patriotism, nationalism is inherently comparative and competitive, entailing a belief in national superiority. We focus on items closely related to Thiess-Morse's approach to national identity, with the nuances specified above.
[18] The question addressing ethnic and civic factors of national identity asks: People have different ideas of what it means to be Mexican. In your opinion, how important is each of the following factors in being Mexican? Very important, somewhat important, a little important, or not important.
[19] The full results are in Tables A2 and A3. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.
[20] Full results are in Table A2.
[21] In studies on American-ness, both Christianity, but above all speaking English are very important constitutive factors of national identity (Schildkraut 2011; 2014; Theiss-Morse 2009; Kunovich 2009)
[22] Full results are in Table A3
[23] For instance, Liu's (2020) study about attitudes toward Chinese migrants in Central–Eastern Europe shows that contact with Chinese foreigners reduces hostility against them.
[24] The question on prior relationships with a foreigner was asked before the treatment and dependent variables. It asks, "Do you have a relationship with foreigners who live in Mexico?" This question does not mention any race or ethnic background of the foreigner. About one in five Mexicans report having contact with a foreigner (Maldonado et al. 2018, 85).
[25] Our translation.
[26] Chinese FDI data acquired from < https://datos.gob.mx/busca/dataset/informacion-estadistica-de-la-inversion-extranjera-directa/resource/07c9e4f3-5ae0-4bf2-8dce-56c0160743d6?inner_span=True >. Date accessed: December 8, 2021.