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Can cultural norms reduce conflicts? Confucianism and peasant rebellions in Qing China ☆

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ABSTRACT

Can culture mitigate conflicts triggered by economic shocks? In light of the extraordinary emphasis that Confucianism places on subordination and pacifism, we examine its role in possibly attenuating peasant rebellion within the historical context of China (circa 1651–1910). Our analysis finds that, while crop failure triggers peasant rebellion, its effect is significantly smaller in counties characterized by stronger Confucian norms as proxied by Confucian temples and chaste women. This result remains robust after controlling for a long list of covariates and instrumenting Confucian norms using ancient Confucian sages (500 B.C.–A.D. 550) to address concerns of measurement error and reverse causality.

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1. Introduction

There is now more or less a consensus that economic (climate) shocks tend to trigger social conflicts (Bai and Kung, 2011; Besley and Persson, 2011; Bruckner and Ciccone, 2010; Collier and Hoeffler, 1998, 2004; Miguel et al., 2004; among others). But much less is known, at least empirically, about the potential attenuating effect of cultural norms on conflicts, despite the theoretical claim that such an effect exists (Funk, 2004; Posner, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Rasmusen, 1996).[1] By employing a unique dataset, we examine whether a set of cultural (Confucian) norms that have persisted for at least several millennia have had the benign effect of reducing social conflicts triggered by economic shocks.

We predicate our analysis on a specific form of social conflict—peasant rebellions—and examine whether the cultural norms associated with Confucianism served to attenuate the effect of economic shocks in triggering peasant rebellions in the last 267 years of China's dynastic rule (the Qing dynasty, circa 1644–1911). Peasant rebellions are the principal form of social conflict in agrarian societies. In these societies, peasants live so close to subsistence that periodic food shortages caused by the vagaries of weather easily give rise to what James Scott (1976) termed "subsistence ethic"—an ideology that justifies the occasional robbing and plundering for the sake of survival. The ties with which the peasant rebels have had with their village communities render them neither full-time military nor criminals, only someone forced to switch from farm work to robbery in times of economic hardship (Hobsbawm, 1972; Scott, 1976). This "two-faced" nature of peasants renders peasant rebellion a uniquely interesting form of conflict whose occurrence may occasionally be sparked by economic shocks.

To suppress this "subsistence ethic", China's emperors had tirelessly inculcated in the populace Confucian norms throughout the country's long history (circa 206 B.C. to A.D. 1911).[2] By inducing shame and moral distress in those who fail to abide by the principles taught, Confucianism stresses the importance of "subordination"—of a subject to the

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[1] A notable example is shaming punishments, which involve deliberate public humiliation and moral distress of the offender, as an alternative to the formal criminal justice system (Posner, 2000). Recent endeavors of the United Nations and other international communities in implementing a "peace education program" in those areas of Africa rife with civil conflicts are premised on this principle (Blattman et al., 2011; UNICEF, 2009).

[2] It is easy to understand why the Chinese emperors were concerned about peasant uprisings. Throughout the country's long history, peasant rebellions had directly overthrown Qin (221–207 B.C.), Han (202 B.C.–A.D. 220), Sui (581–618), Yuan (1271–1368), and the Ming dynasties (1368–1643) (Wakeman, 1975).

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ruler, of a son to his father, and of a wife to her husband; the intended result was conflict avoidance. To foster this ethos, the Chinese emperors built temples to honor Confucius and his followers, praised the so-called chaste women (*lienv*) for the sacrifice they allegedly made by remaining as widows or even committed suicide upon their husbands' deaths,[3] developed an education and civil service examination system based almost exclusively on the memorization of Confucian classics and rote learning,[4] and so forth. While the Confucian ethos was undoubtedly undermined during the tumultuous times of the Communist rule in the twentieth century, it has been revived and persists even to this day.[5] Indeed, few civilizations have seen the persistence of cultural norms for such a long period of time, which presents an ideal situation for testing the possible effect of culture on conflict reduction.

To do this, we construct a panel dataset of 107 counties in Shandong Province that covers 260 years (1651–1910), a period that basically overlaps with the Qing dynasty. After several millennia of diffusion, Confucianism had by the Qing dynasty been firmly established as the cornerstone of morality in the Chinese society, permeating thoroughly to even the bottom rung of the social hierarchy (Ho, 1962; Yang, 1961). As for choosing Shandong Province, the reasons are two-fold. Foremost is that Qufu County of Shandong Province is the birthplace of Confucius; choosing Shandong Province thus allows us to examine the purest effect of Confucian culture in reducing social conflicts.[6] Shandong is also ideal for studying peasant rebellions because historically, certain parts of the province had been prone to both droughts and floods and had turned out to be the heartland of peasant rebellions in China.

Empirically measuring the strength or more specifically the popularity of Confucianism, however, is challenging. In light of the importance that the Chinese emperors accorded to the "religion" and the praises they showered on local Confucian exemplars, we employ the numbers of Confucian temples and chaste women to proxy for the strength of Confucianism. Given that cultural norms tend to evolve very slowly over time, our two measures of Confucianism should be fairly stable throughout the Qing dynasty.

To empirically assess if Confucian norms play any significant role in mitigating the effect of economic shocks on peasant rebellions, we rely on the results of the interaction between yearly incidence of crop failure in each county and Confucian norms within the framework of a generalized difference-in-differences approach. This allows us to use county- and year-fixed effects to control for all the county-specific factors and the common trend faced by all the counties alike that may bear upon both peasant rebellions and Confucian norms.

But the effect of culture could still be confounded by other unobserved socioeconomic characteristics correlated with both Confucian norms and peasant rebellions. A notable case in point is economic prosperity, which is likely correlated with the numbers of temples, on the one hand, and peasant rebellions on the other. We control for this possible omission by employing two proxies—the suitability of land for planting the major crops at the time and the level of urbanization.

As Confucian classics made up the core curriculum in schools, our measures of Confucianism likely also capture the effect of education on peasant rebellions. To disentangle the effect of Confucian culture from that of education, we control for the number of schools in each county to proxy for education. A related possible omission is social mobility. In late imperial China, social mobility was achieved via success in civil service examinations, whose syllabi also drew heavily on the memorization of Confucian classics. To rule out the possibility that Confucian norms may affect peasant rebellions via the channel of social mobility (i.e., those who failed the exam became a rebel), we employ the number of county/prefectural level degree holders (*shengyuan*) to proxy for social mobility, as such a degree is the ticket to the gentry class and facilitated upward mobility.

Then there is the issue of state capacity, which is likely to reduce conflicts but may also simultaneously affect the diffusion of Confucian norms. To reduce this possibility, we expand our list of control variables to include also the number of imperial soldiers stationed in a county, a county's famine relief capacity (granaries) and fiscal capacity (land tax), and a county's political status (of being a prefectural capital).

Taoism and Buddhism—two religious-cum-philosophical beliefs—similarly advocate harmony, and so we control for them by enumerating their temples. By the same token, we also control for the possible effect of Western influence in the late Qing period by employing the years of opening up to the West (using the duration of treaty ports as proxy) and the years of (Christian) missionary presence. In order to disentangle the hypothesized mitigating effect of Confucian norms from the above list of controls, we interact these controls with crop failure.

Our empirical analysis finds that, while economic shocks as measured by crop failure do have the expected positive effect on the number of peasant rebellions, the effect is significantly smaller in counties with stronger Confucian norms. While we cannot rule out every conceivable factor that might be correlated with both Confucian norms and peasant rebellions, the evidence gathered is sufficiently robust in substantiating the claim that Confucian norms or culture have had a mitigating effect on economic shocks and accordingly peasant rebellions.

Given that temples may be destroyed during civil conflicts, reverse causality cannot be ruled out. A related concern is possible measurement error arising from the crudeness of our proxies for Confucian norms. To address these issues we adopt an instrumental variable approach in which we employ the number of ancient Confucian sages that ever lived prior to the Qing dynasty (from 500 B.C. to A.D. 550) to instrument for the strength of Confucian norms during Qing times. Our choice is premised on the reasoning that the strength of Confucian norms as it had developed over the past 2000 years would likely have continued into the Qing dynasty and thus be strongly correlated with it. Consistent with the OLS findings, the instrumented results reaffirm that the effect of economic shocks on peasant rebellions is significantly reduced by strong Confucian norms.

Our study contributes to an emerging literature that examines the mediating effects of political institutions, culture, and technology on conflicts. For example, Besley and Persson (2011) find that the effect of economic shocks on political violence exists only where political institutions are non-cohesive. Similarly, Jia (2014) observes that the triggering effect of droughts on peasant revolts in historical China could be mitigated by the introduction of New World crops—specifically the sweet potatoes. Likewise, Fetzer (2013) reports that in India a social insurance scheme known as the "Indian National Rural Employment Guarantee" has had the virtuous effect of mitigating insurgency violence triggered by income shocks.

Our study also contributes to a small but growing literature that examines the direct effect of cultural norms on conflicts, violence and crime. For example, Voigtlander and Voth (2012) find that medieval anti-Semitism can explain the violence against the Jews in the 1920s. Similarly, Fisman and Miguel (2007) find that diplomats from countries with severe corruption proclivities have a tendency to commit parking violations in the United Nations. Of course, not all cultural norms have a negative impact on social behavior. We aim to demonstrate how, in the context of China's long history of civilization, the stable cultural norms of Confucianism had the effect of mitigating social conflicts triggered by economic shocks. In this respect, our work coincides with that of MacCulloch and Pezzini (2010), who find that Christian beliefs have the benign effect of reducing the taste for revolts, and is in line with

[3] These women allegedly exemplified the important virtues of Confucianism, namely subordination, loyalty and purity.

[4] Established in the tenth century, the civil service examination was designed to select qualified candidates to serve in the state's bureaucracy.

[5] After being denounced during the Communist era, Confucianism was recently embraced, albeit cautiously by the Chinese Communist Party once again as the moral cornerstone on which to "re-establish" social morality and maintain a harmonious society. *The Economist*, April 28, 2011.

[6] We would have liked to test the hypothesis on China as a whole, but the amount of time and effort required to collect the necessary data would be prohibitively arduous.

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