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Violent Conflict and Political Development Over the Long Run: China Versus Europe

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political geography, representative government, autocracy, state formation, historical analysis, exit-voice-loyalty model

Abstract

Is the traditional logic by which violent conflict fosters long-run political development universal? To help address this question, this article compares Europe with China. While historical warfare was very common across both units, representative government flourished only in Europe. We suggest that the relationship between violent conflict and political development depends on the underlying political geography context. In Europe, political fragmentation was rampant. Thus, conflict tended to be external (i.e., interstate), and attack threats were multidirectional. Furthermore, exit ability was high in this context. Elites were therefore in a strong bargaining position to demand political representation in return for new tax revenue. China, by contrast, was politically centralized. Here, conflict tended to be internal, attack threats were unidirectional, and exit ability was low. The emperor was thus powerful enough to extract tax funds without surrendering political control. In this context, violent conflict promoted autocratic re-entrenchment. We conclude by briefly analyzing the relationships between political geography, historical conflict, and political development in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America.

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INTRODUCTION

Violent conflict is a prominent explanation for long-run political development in Europe (e.g., Bates & Lien 1985, pp. 54–57; Mann 1986, pp. 125–32; Downing 1992, pp. 18–55; Tilly 1992, pp. 67–95; Ertman 1997, pp. 74–87; Stasavage 2016, pp. 154–56). The basic logic of this argument is as follows. Historical warfare was very costly (Hoffman 2015, pp. 19, 21–22). To obtain new funds, sovereign rulers were willing to exchange political freedoms (e.g., political representation) which gave elite taxpayers formal roles in public policy matters. By partially surrendering political control, rulers could secure new revenue and thereby increase military strength.¹

Is this logic universal? Given the literature's traditional focus on the European experience, the answer remains unclear. To help address this question, this article compares historical patterns of violent conflict and long-run political development in Europe versus China. This comparison makes sense for several reasons. First, both units are major players on today's world stage. Second, they are relatively similar in physical size, making for geographical comparability. Third, as we show here, violent conflict was a main historical feature in both Europe and China. While Europe has a long tradition of political representation, however, China remains autocratic.

We argue that historical differences in political geography helped influence the relationship between violent conflict and long-run political development in Europe versus China. Historically, Europe was highly politically fragmented, while China was politically centralized. Circa 1500, for example, there were more than 200 independent states in Europe (Tilly 1992, pp. 45) but only a single polity in China (Rosenthal & Wong 2011, pp. 12–13). We argue that such differences in political geography help explain variations in the nature of historical conflict between the two units. While warfare was very common across Europe and China alike, there were at least two basic differences in its contours. The vast majority of major violent conflicts in fragmented Europe were fought between rival states. In centralized China, however, most major conflicts took the form of rebellions and civil wars. High political fragmentation, moreover, meant that foreign attack threats in Europe could emanate from multiple directions, whereas in China the most significant recurrent foreign attack threat came from Steppe nomads. Elites in Europe were thus in a relatively strong bargaining position to demand political freedoms (e.g., political representation) from their rulers in return for new revenue to put toward military defense. Given high political fragmentation, European elites could credibly threaten to move abroad to a nearby sovereign polity if the ruler did not meet their demands, and could exploit the fact that the ruler was vulnerable to external attack threats by military rivals from several directions. In China, by contrast, political centralization meant that the emperor's bargaining position relative to elites was stronger. Due to the difficulty of moving abroad, the threat of exit by Chinese elites was less credible. Furthermore, external attack threats were unidirectional, reducing the emperor's vulnerability. In this historical context, the ruler may have been powerful enough to extract tax revenue to fund military efforts without surrendering any political control through representative government. Over time, this dynamic may have promoted autocratic re-entrenchment, as the Chinese state exploited threats of internal rebellion to strengthen its coercive power.

To return to the motivating question from above, then, our analysis suggests that violent conflict need not foster long-run political development. Depending on the underlying political

¹Besley & Persson (2009; 2011, pp. 45–63) link warfare with state development in formal models. Their core model portrays military defense as a common-interest public good that promotes investments in the state's extractive capacity. Gennaioli & Voth (2015), by contrast, argue that warfare promotes state development (including representative government) only if military victory is dependent on high revenue. In their view, this change did not take place in Europe until after the sixteenth-century military revolution (Parker 1996, pp. 1–2). Møller (2016) and Boucoyannis (2015) analyze the role of warfare in political development in two first-mover states, Aragon and England, respectively.

geography context, historical warfare may promote representative government (as in Europe), or it may induce the ruler to double down on autocracy (as in China).

We structure this article as follows. The next two sections contrast historical conflict patterns between Europe and China, and relate differences in the basic contours of conflict to political geography. We then develop a simple exit-voice-loyalty model that links political geography and violent conflict with political development. As part of this approach, we briefly evaluate an alternative argument that portrays representative government as the result of economic growth. The subsequent three sections show evidence that helps corroborate several implications that flow from our model, including exit ability, extractive capacity, and the political legacy of historical conflict in China. We conclude with a brief analysis of the relationships between political geography, historical conflict, and political development in two world regions beyond Eurasia: sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America.

HISTORICAL CONFLICT PATTERNS

Violent conflict was a central feature of Europe's historical landscape (Tilly 1992, pp. 72, 74; Parker 1996, p. 1; Hoffman 2015, pp. 21–22). Describing Renaissance Europe, for example, Hale (1985, p. 21) states: "There was probably no single year throughout the period in which there was neither a war nor occurrences that looked and felt remarkably like it."

Yet historical warfare in itself does not appear to differentiate Europe from China. According to Hoffman (2015, p. 70), for example, early modern China fought interstate wars in 56% of all years, while England fought 53% of the time and France 52%.

To improve our understanding of historical conflict patterns in China versus Europe, we bring together two new databases, each of which attempts to geocode all major historical military conflicts within its region. We take the European data from Dincecco & Onorato (2017, pp. 19–30), who in turn rely on comprehensive works by two military historians, Clodfelter (2002) and Bradbury (2004). The Chinese data are from Wang (2016), who collects exhaustive conflict information from *The Catalog of Historical Wars*, produced by the Nanjing Military Academy (2002). These databases, which are broadly comparable in terms of conflict coverage, support the view that violent conflict was a main feature of both European and Chinese history. We estimate that there were more than 850 major recorded land conflicts in Europe and about 1,470 land-based conflicts in China between the years 1000 and 1799 (see **Figures 1** and **2**).

While the frequency of historical conflict does not seem to distinguish China from Europe, the nature of warfare appears to have differed in at least two basic ways. The first difference concerns external (interstate) versus internal (intrastate) conflicts (Gupta et al. 2016, p. 66). The vast majority of sample conflicts in Europe were battles or sieges fought between rival states (e.g., England versus France). In China, by contrast, more than 65% of sample conflicts were rebellions and civil wars.

The second difference concerns multidirectional versus unidirectional foreign attack threats. In Europe, historical attack threats could emanate from several directions (Ko et al. 2014, table 7). In China, however, the most important recurrent foreign attack threat came from Steppe nomads (Hoffman 2015, pp. 70–71). According to our data, more than 80% of external conflicts in China between 1000 and 1799 were fought against the nomads. By contrast, there were no nomadic invasions of Western Europe over a similar period (Ko et al. 2014, table 6).

This brief overview suggests that, though historical conflict was very common across Europe and China alike, there were important differences in its basic contours. We now analyze what may help account for such differences.

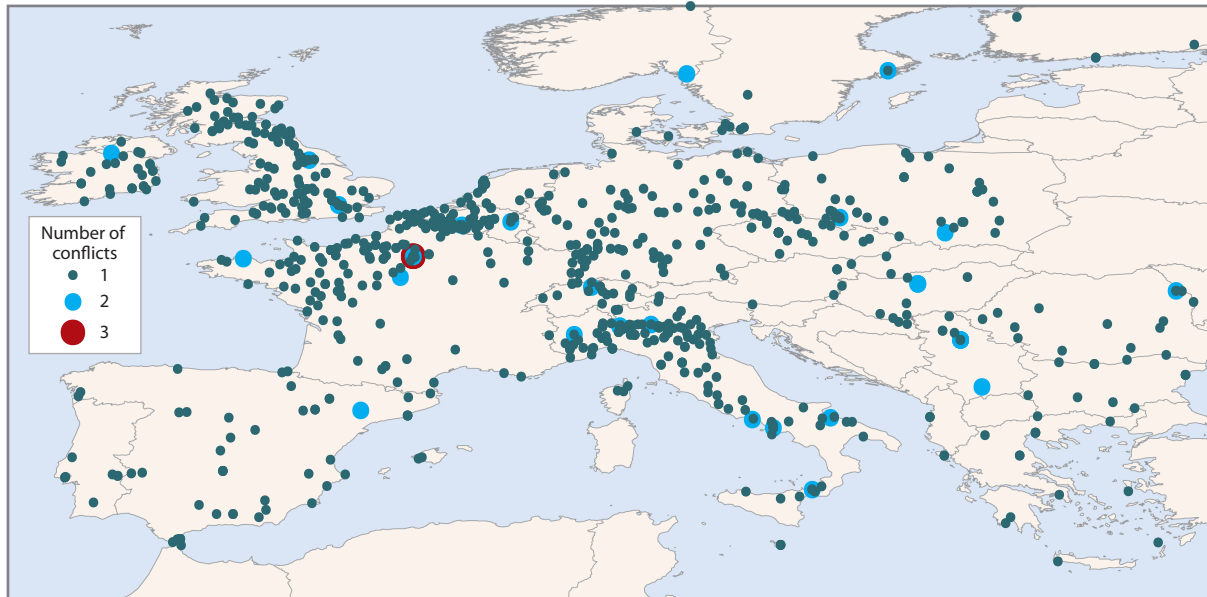


Figure 1

Major military conflict locations in Europe, 1000–1799. There were 856 land-based conflicts. Dot sizes indicate the number of conflicts geocoded to each specific location. Source: Dincecco & Onorato (2017).

THE IMPORTANCE OF POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

To help explain historical differences in the nature of warfare between Europe and China, we focus on the role of political geography. We argue that, historically, political fragmentation best represents Europe, while political centralization best represents China.

The ninth-century fall of the Carolingian Empire resulted in a high level of political fragmentation in Europe (Strayer 1970, pp. 15),² and this fragmentation was enduring.³ In 1500, for example, it is likely that there were at least 200 independent states in Europe (Tilly 1992, p. 45). Average state size was relatively small: roughly 25,000 square kilometers and just over 300,000 inhabitants (Tilly 1992, p. 45).⁴ In this historical context, it makes sense that (a) external conflicts between the small rival states were common and (b) foreign attack threats could emanate from several directions.

China, by contrast, was enormous (Rosenthal & Wong 2011, pp. 12–14). The Qin (221–206 BCE) established the first unitary state in China (Rosenthal & Wong 2011, p. 17),⁵ after

²Stasavage (2011, pp. 95–100) describes the “accidental” way in which the Carolingian Empire was partitioned. Before Charlemagne, Western Europe was politically fragmented from the demise of the Roman Empire onward (Hoffman 2015, p. 107).

³The international relations literature (e.g., Spruyt 1994, Fearon 1997, Hui 2004, Schweller 2004, Levy & Thompson 2005, Wohlforth et al. 2007, Møller 2014) analyzes why the competitive “states system” in Europe never gave way to control by a single power.

⁴Hoffman (2015, pp. 108–16) explains why physical geography alone (e.g., mountainous terrain, irregular coastlines) cannot account for historical differences in political fragmentation and state size between Europe and China.

⁵Scholars including Kiser & Cai (2003), Hui (2005), and Zhao (2015) relate early political centralization in China to violent conflict during the Warring States era (475–221 BCE). Between the years 1 and 1800, a single political authority ruled China for more than 1,000 years (Ko & Sng 2013, p. 480). Historical periods of political fragmentation (e.g., Northern and Southern



Figure 2

Major military conflict locations in China, 1000–1799. There were 1,468 land-based conflicts. Borders are for territory under the Qing Dynasty. Source: Wang (2016).

which the central government abolished feudal titles and appointed national officials to govern local jurisdictions (Hui 2005, pp. 97–99; Fukuyama 2011, p. 118). Furthermore, the Qin established a uniform written language, standardized the currency, measures, weights, and axle lengths for carts, and laid the groundwork for a centralized tax system (Fukuyama 2011, p. 130; von Glahn 2016, pp. 99–108). In Europe, however, comparable centralization efforts (e.g., the standardization of measures and weights) did not typically take place even within individual nation-states until after the French Revolution of 1789 (Dincecco 2010, p. 308). Indeed, the European Union was unable to establish a common currency across (much of) Europe until the early 2000s—a feat that China accomplished roughly two millennia before.

The available quantitative evidence further supports the view that political fragmentation was most descriptive of Europe’s historical political geography, while political centralization was most descriptive of that of China. Taking data from Nussli (2011), Wei (2011), and Ko et al. (2014,

Dynasties, 420–589; Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, 907–60) were relatively brief and may be thought of as exceptions to the rule.

figure 1), we calculate that the average number of sovereign states between 1000 and 1799 was nearly 85 in Europe, but only 1.5 in China.

As described above, it is likely that historical political fragmentation in Europe was related to the nature of warfare (external conflicts and multidirectional foreign attack threats). Similarly, it makes sense that historical political centralization in China had implications for the basic contours of violent conflict found there. First, unlike in Europe, China's huge size and long border with the Eurasian Steppe may have made it more likely that external threats would be unidirectional. Second, political centralization meant that, in contrast to Europe, internal conflicts were more common in China. The central government found it challenging to monitor officials in far-flung jurisdictions of the vast territory (Sng & Moriguchi 2014, Ma & Rubin 2016). Our data suggest that more than 20% of historical sample conflicts in China were rebellions led by regional elites against the emperor, while another 30% were mass revolts.⁶ Political centralization itself could make domestic politics more contentious by increasing the potential scale (and therefore the threat) of collective action efforts (Tilly 1995, pp. 5–14), a process which Acemoglu et al. (2016) label the “political agenda effect” of state centralization.

ECONOMIC GROWTH?

In the previous two sections, we have highlighted differences in the basic contours of historical conflict between Europe and China, and we have argued that political geography may help explain such differences. In the next section, we will develop a conceptual framework that links political geography and violent conflict with political development. Before proceeding, however, we briefly evaluate a classic argument that views representative government as the result of economic growth.⁷

One historical variant of this argument is as follows. Europe's central corridor runs from the Low Countries to Northern Italy through parts of France and Germany. Historically, rich soil and easy river access made this corridor advantageous. Rich soil enabled local populations to generate food surpluses that made urban agglomerations possible. Aided by river trade routes, urban agglomerations helped foster commerce. In time, the effects of economic agglomeration allowed the most prosperous urban centers to build upon their previous success. According to this view, representative government in medieval Europe was an outcome of urban-led economic growth, as wealthy city dwellers eventually overcame traditional agricultural interests and established pluralistic institutions.

This classic argument may help partially explain historical variation in political institutions within Europe (Stasavage 2016, pp. 152–54). The available evidence, however, suggests that economic growth alone cannot fully account for the development of representative government in Europe versus other world regions. Economic development in Western Europe in 1000—the start year for our analysis—was far lower than in China and slightly lower than in the Middle East (Stasavage 2016, pp. 153–54). If economic development drove political representation, then China should have historically been a parliamentary leader. Representative government, however,

⁶Moore (1966, pp. 201–27) claims that China was historically prone to mass rebellions because peasants did not believe that the central government played any meaningful economic role in their lives. Endemic mass violence thus became part of a survival strategy by the peasantry (Perry 1980, p. 11).

⁷This type of argument has a long pedigree, including Lipset (1959), Rokkan (1975, pp. 575–91), Przeworski et al. (2000, pp. 78–141), Glaeser et al. (2004), Haber (2012), and Boix (2015, pp. 209–15), among others. Abramson & Boix (2015) provide systematic historical evidence for Europe in favor of it. Others argue that the causation actually runs the other way, from political reforms to economic growth (Acemoglu et al. 2008, Papaioannou & Siourounis 2008, Acemoglu et al. 2015, Cox 2017).

flourished in Western Europe alone. According to Pomeranz (2000, p. 8), moreover, economic development levels across parts of China and Europe were relatively similar through the mid-1700s. Yet political divergence between the two regions still took place.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Our conceptual framework helps explain how political geography may influence the relationship between violent conflict and long-run political development. Several historical arguments about interstate competition (Landes 1998, pp. 29–44; Jones 2003, pp. 104–26; Rosenthal & Wong 2011, pp. 167–207; Gelderblom 2013, pp. 1–18; Cox 2017) influence this framework. To anchor it, we now develop a simple game theory model (we leave the technical details to the section titled Model Appendix). Our model draws on Clark et al. (2017), who formalize Hirschman’s (1970) well-known “exit, voice, and loyalty” argument.

Our simple model analyzes the optimal political decisions of a ruler who must defend her polity against external threats of military attack by rival states. Such threats may be predominantly unidirectional or multidirectional in nature. To fund military defense, the ruler must gather tax revenue from domestic elites. The ruler must decide whether to use coercion or bargaining to gather this revenue. Coercion involves the outright expropriation of the elites via the threat or actual use of physical force. Bargaining, by contrast, involves the provision of a political freedom such as political representation in exchange for tax revenue.

Elites have three possible responses to the ruler’s demand: moving, contesting, or staying. Moving refers to the elites’ decision to relocate to another polity where they can escape future taxation by the ruler. Contestation means negotiating over the exchange of a political freedom (e.g., political representation) in response to the ruler’s tax demand. Such contestation is costly in terms of time and effort to both the ruler and elites. The ruler may deny or grant the demand of the contesting elites. If their demand is granted, then the elites receive a positive benefit associated with political freedom, while the ruler incurs a cost due to the surrender of partial political control. If the demand is denied, however, then the elites must decide whether to move abroad or stay. Staying refers to their decision to accept the ruler’s action—whichever it may be—as it stands. Whenever the elites stay rather than move, the ruler receives a positive benefit associated with their loyalty. This payoff captures the extent to which the ruler depends on the elites for the survival of her polity as a sovereign (i.e., independent) entity.

Our simple model suggests that warfare may have diverse implications for political development depending on the underlying political geography context. Namely, the model predicts that political representation is more likely to emerge in the context of political fragmentation. Here, the elites may credibly threaten to move abroad if the ruler does not meet their demand for a political freedom. Furthermore, the ruler may be more vulnerable to external attack by military rivals emanating from multiple directions, enhancing the value that she places on elite loyalty. For both reasons, the elites may be in a strong enough bargaining position vis-à-vis the ruler to demand political representation. In the context of political centralization, by contrast, the elites’ threat to exit is less credible, due to the difficulty of moving abroad. The ruler, moreover, may place less value on elite loyalty, both because of the smaller chance that elites will move abroad and because of the greater probability that foreign attack threats will be unidirectional in nature, thereby reducing her vulnerability. The ruler’s bargaining position versus elites should thus be stronger, making the emergence of political representation less probable. We argue that this model helps explain why political representation was less likely to develop in China than in Europe. **Table 1** summarizes the main components of our conceptual framework.

Table 1 Exit, voice, loyalty: Europe versus China

Attribute	Europe	China
Political geography	Fragmentation	Centralization
State size	Small	Large
Exit ability ^a	High	Low
Warfare	Common	Common
Conflict type	External	Internal
Threat direction ^b	Multidirectional	Unidirectional
Power balance	Favors elite	Favors ruler
Political representation	More likely	Less likely

^a“Exit ability” refers to the elite’s ability to move abroad to another polity.

^b“Threat direction” refers to the directionality of external (i.e., interstate) attack threats by military rivals.

EXIT ABILITY

To motivate our model, we have highlighted basic differences in the underlying political geography context and the nature of historical conflict between Europe and China. We now corroborate three key implications that flow from this model: exit ability, extractive capacity, and the political legacy of conflict in China.

We start with historical differences in the ability of elites to exit in Europe versus China. According to the model, European elites could credibly threaten to move to another polity and escape coercive taxation, because political fragmentation was high and average state size was small. The historical evidence supports this implication. Individual freedom of movement was the norm in Western Europe (Winter 2013, pp. 406–7, 412);⁸ de Vries (1984, p. 213) states: “One of modern historical demography’s key findings is that the preindustrial European population was highly mobile.” In this context, urban elites could play sovereign rulers against each other by threatening to change allegiances if their demands for local political freedoms (e.g., political representation) were not granted (Gelderblom 2013, pp. 1–18; Cox 2017). During the Investiture Controversy, for example, urban elites in eleventh-century Italy were able to play the Holy Roman Emperor against the Pope and seize local political power from traditional church and state officials (Hohenberg & Lees 1995, p. 41).

In politically centralized China, by contrast, the emperor’s territory stretched from the Mongol Steppe to the South China Sea. The ability of elites to credibly threaten to move to a foreign polity was thus low. In this context, immobile capital—namely, land—played an important role (along with education) as part of a long-term strategy by elites to maintain their social standing (Beattie 1979, pp. 1–21). This emphasis on land-holding made it difficult for elites in China to credibly bluff exit, further weakening their bargaining position vis-à-vis the emperor.⁹

Urbanization rates are a tractable, albeit rough, proxy for cross-regional mobility levels in history. While Europe and China appear to have had relatively similar urbanization levels through the 1200s, the urbanization rate in Europe was more than double that of China (i.e., 13% versus

⁸In Eastern Europe, by contrast, feudal lords placed new limits on individual mobility after the fourteenth-century Black Death (Winter 2013, pp. 406–7, 412). Consistent with our argument, representative government was less likely to flourish there (van Zanden et al. 2012, pp. 842–43).

⁹This observation corresponds with observations by other scholars that owners of mobile capital such as machinery have greater voice in public policy matters than owners of immobile capital such as land (Bates & Lien 1985, pp. 59, 61; Boix 2003, pp. 12–13; Acemoglu & Robinson 2006, pp. 32–33).

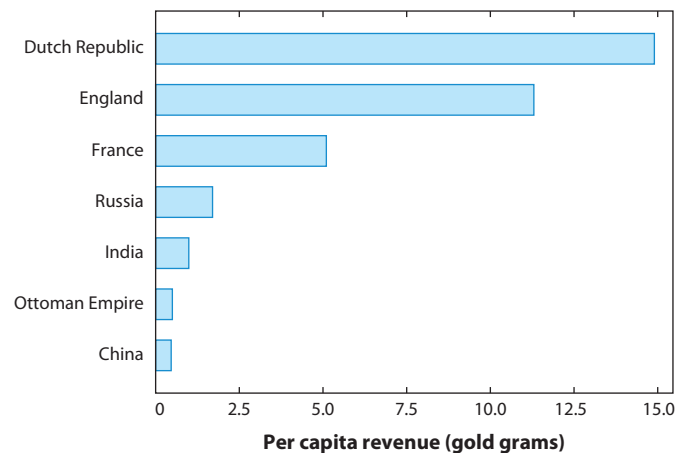


Figure 3

Per capita revenue across Eurasia in the 1780s. See Dincecco (2017) for construction methods. Sources: Karaman & Pamuk (2010) for the Dutch Republic, England, France, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia; Hoffman (2015, p. 51) for China; Gupta et al. (2016, p. 57) for India.

5%) by the start of the 1800s (Winter 2013, p. 405; von Glahn 2016, p. 372). This evidence is consistent with our argument that historical mobility (and exit) was higher in Europe than in China.

EXTRACTIVE CAPACITY

Another implication of our argument, though not explicitly a part of our model, is that political representation should facilitate greater revenue collection. The logic here is simple. As more political control accrues to elites, it becomes more likely that new tax funds will be spent on items that will benefit them (versus the ruler only). Thus, parliamentary elites may be more willing to agree to new tax requests, thereby increasing the state's extractive capacity.¹⁰ The expression “no taxation without representation” conveys this logic, hinting that fiscal strength is in part a function of representation and transparency (Besley & Persson 2013, p. 56).

Consistent with this argument, state revenue in the late eighteenth century was significantly higher in Western Europe than in China (see **Figure 3**). Per capita revenue was roughly 15 gold grams in the Dutch Republic and 11 gold grams in England (both of which we may think of as parliamentary regimes; see Stasavage 2010, p. 631) but was less than 0.50 gold grams in imperial China. Similarly, **Figure 3** suggests that revenue per capita was very low in other imperial Eurasian states.

Beyond the rationale of our argument, which highlights the relatively weak bargaining position of the elites vis-à-vis the emperor, China's vast geographical scale itself—a by-product of political centralization—may have made it difficult to establish representative government and increase extractive capacity. First, geographical scale would have raised communication and travel costs (Stasavage 2011, pp. 14–16), thereby reducing the ability of hypothetical representatives to attend parliamentary events and the ability of constituents to monitor their performance. Similarly, geographical scale meant that the emperor could not effectively supervise local tax agents, whose predatory behavior could lead to rebellions and threaten regime stability. In an attempt to avoid violent revolts, the emperor may have kept taxation low (Sng & Moriguchi 2014). Tax levels and

¹⁰This argument is called the fiscal contract view of state building (e.g., Bates & Lien 1985; Levi 1988, pp. 52–67; North & Weingast 1989; Hoffman & Rosenthal 1997; Cheibub 1998; Timmons 2005).

public good provision, for example, were significantly lower in Qing China than in Tokugawa Japan (Sng & Moriguchi 2014), which was also centralized but much smaller. Ma & Rubin (2016) argue that the Chinese emperor intentionally restricted the government's ability to oversee tax agents. This commitment to weak fiscal institutions enabled tax agents to hide bribes. Their ability to enrich themselves increased their loyalty to the regime and thereby enhanced its stability.

THE POLITICAL LEGACY OF HISTORICAL CONFLICT IN CHINA

A final implication of our model concerns the political legacy of historical conflict in China, which our argument suggests may look rather different from the European benchmark. Namely, violent conflict in China may have promoted autocratic re-entrenchment rather than political representation.

As described in our conceptual framework, the relatively high level of political centralization in China may have made representative government less likely to ever develop. First, political centralization meant that elites could not play sovereign rulers against each other by threatening to switch allegiances if their demands for local political authority were not met. Second, vast geographical scale (a result of political centralization) meant that external threats were more likely to be unidirectional, reducing the emperor's vulnerability and making elite loyalty less important at the margin. For both reasons, the ruler's bargaining position vis-à-vis elites was stronger in China than in Europe, enabling the emperor to rely on coercive resource extraction rather than the surrender of any political control to gather tax revenue (Stasavage 2016, pp. 155, 159).

It may be that, over time, the strong coercive power of the state, combined with the low bargaining power of the mostly landed elites and the high frequency of rebellion, came to form a political equilibrium in China that was self-reinforcing (Greif & Laitin 2004). The Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864)—among the largest mass rebellions in Chinese history—provides an illustrative example (Wang 2017). During this event, the Qing government ran out of funds for its antirebel efforts. To defeat the rebels, the emperor asked local gentry for financial help. In exchange, public school quotas were adjusted in the gentry's favor, increasing the odds that their sons would later be admitted to the imperial civil service. Wang (2017) finds that gentry located in zones nearer to the so-called Taiping Heavenly Kingdom—the revolutionary regime established by the Taiping—contributed significantly more to the emperor's military efforts. This evidence suggests that, rather than exploit the ruler's need for quick funds to bargain over local political freedoms, as was common in Europe, the gentry agreed to remain loyal in exchange for a greater chance for their offspring to gain entrance to the imperial civil service.¹¹ The gentry's donations not only helped the incumbent regime put down the rebels but also strengthened the government's coercive power.¹²

The political dynamics evident in the Taiping Rebellion may reflect more fundamental historical trends in China. Wang (2016) shows evidence that the state repeatedly used rebellion threats as an opportunity to double down on its coercive power. To proxy for state strength, he analyzes the locations of military garrisons during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). The Ming regime established more than 500 garrisons across its territory. Taking the form of a military-agricultural colony, each garrison was settled by rank-and-file soldiers under the command of

¹¹We may think of the competitive civil service exam system as a relatively cost-effective way for the politically centralized regime in China to maintain elite support, without having to strike a parliamentary bargain and formally surrender political control as in politically fragmented Europe. Indeed, the abolition of the civil service exam at the start of the twentieth century reduced political stability in China (Bai & Jia 2016).

¹²In modern-day Southeast Asia, Slater (2010, pp. 3–52) highlights a similar dynamic, whereby regional rebellions induced ruling elites to make new state capacity investments in order to retain power.

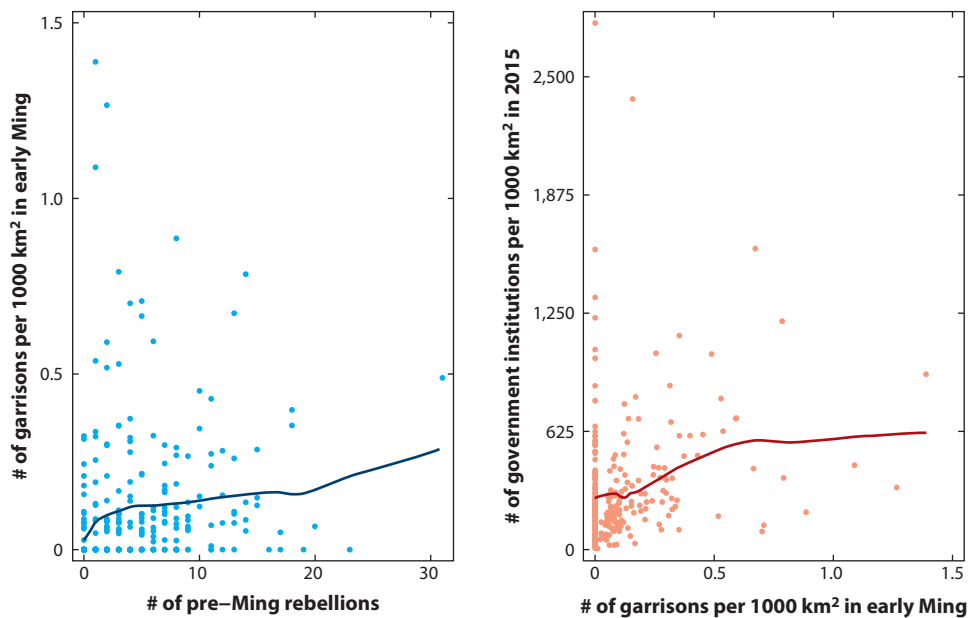


Figure 4

Pre-Ming rebellions, Ming-era garrisons, and contemporary government presence in China. The left panel plots the number of garrisons per 1,000 km² during the early Ming era against the number of rebellions prior to the Ming era. The right panel plots the number of government institutions per 1,000 km² in 2015 against the number of garrisons per 1,000 km² during the early Ming era. Solid lines represent locally weighted scatter plot smoothing (LOWESS). Source: Wang (2016).

military officers, with soldiers assigned a fixed acreage to cultivate (Kuhn 1970, pp. 21). The garrisons were both self-defending and self-supporting. When conflict took place, soldiers would be mobilized to fight; otherwise, they were demobilized to farm. Although the garrisons were originally used to defend border regions, they were eventually established throughout the state's interior territory for domestic repression. To populate the garrisons, the Ming recruited both ordinary subjects and criminals. Later, the government made garrisons hereditary, and soldier communities remained there for several generations (Kuhn 1970, p. 21; Dreyer 1982, pp. 76–83). Both the large-scale migration and the self-supporting nature of the garrisons appear to have had a persistent influence on local governance even after the Ming Dynasty fell. To connect the capital, Beijing, to the garrisons (and to connect the garrisons themselves), the Ming built a network of courier routes. This road network helped the central government broadcast power over what were previously peripheral zones (He & Wu 2015, p. 80).¹³ Wang (2016) finds that the Ming systematically located garrisons in zones that were prone to rebellion.¹⁴ He also shows evidence for persistence: Prefectures that had a higher density of Ming-era garrisons have a significantly greater government presence today. **Figure 4** displays the positive correlations between pre-Ming rebellions, Ming-era garrisons, and contemporary government institutions.

¹³ Herbst (2000, pp. 84–87, 159–70) evaluates the long-run relationships between road networks and state power in sub-Saharan Africa.

¹⁴ Downing (1992, p. 50) argues that the Ming-era garrisons were detrimental to political development in China. Not only were they administered by (and thus loyal to) the state, but also their main function was to suppress peasant unrest and not to defend against external attack.

The rebellion–coercion dynamic in China did not end with the fall of the imperial regime at the start of the twentieth century. Between the 1990s and the present, for example, China’s domestic security apparatus has dramatically expanded, and “stability maintenance” operations have become a top priority for local government officials (Wang & Minzner 2015, p. 339). Wang & Minzner (2015) find that policy changes in response to the Tiananmen democracy movement in the late 1980s help explain this expansion. Over the past 20 years, these changes have evolved into an elaborate scheme, whereby local governance appears increasingly organized around the need to prevent social unrest.

BEYOND EUROPE AND CHINA

We argue in this article that the relationship between violent conflict and long-run political development depends—at least in part—on the underlying political geography context. In Europe, the historical interaction between high political fragmentation and conflict (in this case, largely external and multidirectional) appears to have promoted representative government. In China, by contrast, the interaction between political centralization and conflict (here, largely internal and unidirectional) appears to have instead induced autocratic re-entrenchment. Our analysis thus suggests that the traditional logic which links violent conflict with political representation does not extend outside of the European context.

The historical evidence for sub-Saharan Africa appears to provide further support for this claim. Dincecco & Onorato (2017, pp. 102–6) focus on a feature of political geography specific to sub-Saharan Africa: the high land–labor ratio. In 1500, there were far fewer individuals per square kilometer in sub-Saharan Africa than in China or Europe (Herbst 2000, p. 16). Bates (1983, pp. 41–42) recognizes one political benefit of historical land abundance. In this context, the exit ability of elites was particularly high. Thus, they were in a relatively strong bargaining position vis-à-vis the ruler, a position they could exploit to gain some control over public policy matters.¹⁵ However, the high historical land–labor ratio in sub-Saharan Africa may have promoted enduring warfare (Dincecco & Onorato 2017, pp. 102–6). Given labor scarcity (versus land scarcity, as in Europe), a main goal of historical conflict was to capture slaves (Herbst 2000, pp. 42–43; Reid 2012, p. 5). The nature of warfare in sub-Saharan Africa thus appears to have differed from that in Europe or China. The most common type of African warfare—the raiding war—was characterized by recurrent small attacks on the rival’s resources, human and otherwise (Reid 2012, pp. 4–5). Over time, this type of warfare may have engendered open-ended conflict, particularly in combination with historical events such as the transatlantic slave trade (e.g., Whatley & Gillezeau 2011). Bates (2008, p. 85) states that “past conquests by monarchs and warriors created territorial disputes that reverberate to this day.” Similarly, Besley & Reynal-Querol (2014) show evidence for a significant statistical correlation between precolonial conflict and modern-day conflict in Africa.¹⁶

It is not at all obvious whether warfare promoted long-run political development in Latin America. Centeno (1997, 2002, pp. 101–66) argues that elites in post-independence Latin American states were too politically divided among themselves to take advantage of the opportunity for institutional reform afforded by foreign military threats. In this context (as in sub-Saharan

¹⁵Fenske (2013) evaluates the relationship between Africa’s high historical land–labor ratio and long-run political and economic development.

¹⁶Bates (2014) and Reid (2014) both argue that late-nineteenth-century efforts by European colonialists to implement the “imperial peace” blocked the process of war-driven political development in Africa. Osafo-Kwaako & Robinson (2013) analyze the relationship between warfare and political development in precolonial Africa. Thies (2007) analyzes it over the period 1975–2000.

Africa), the high historical land–labor ratio (Herbst 2000, p. 16) may have made it more difficult for national governments to consolidate political authority and broadcast power. By contrast, Thies (2005) finds that interstate military rivalry (though not external warfare in itself) did in fact foster state development in twentieth-century Latin America. Similarly, Arias (2013) shows evidence that fiscal capacity grew significantly in militarily vulnerable regions in Mexico in the aftermath of Spain’s defeat in the Seven Years’ War. Soifer (2015, pp. 1–23) argues that the specific nature of political interactions between national and regional elites explains differences in long-run state development across Latin America.

We do not, of course, think of the analysis in this article as the last word on this important topic. Future research should continue to examine the political legacy of historical conflict across a wide variety of world regions. This will further improve our understanding of the underlying contextual factors that influence the relationship between violent conflict and long-run political development.

MODEL APPENDIX

Setup

To fund military defense and fend off external attack threats by rivals, a ruler must gather tax amount $t > 0$ from domestic elites. The ruler must decide whether to use coercion or bargaining to gather this tax revenue. The elites may respond to the ruler’s tax demand in three ways: move, contest, or stay. Let m be the elites’ payoff for moving. As we describe below, m can be positive or negative depending on political geography. Let $c_R, c_E > 0$ be the ruler’s and elites’ costs, respectively, of contestation (e.g., time and effort). The ruler may deny or grant the elites’ demands. If the elites’ demands are granted, they receive payoff $p > 0$, while the ruler receives payoff $-p$. If denied, then the elites must decide whether to move abroad or stay. Whenever the elites stay, the ruler receives payoff $l > 0$ associated with their loyalty. We describe below how l can vary depending on political geography. **Figure 5** illustrates the model’s timing and payoffs.

Optimal Decisions

We analyze the optimal decisions by the ruler and the elites for two historical contexts. First, we analyze such decisions under political fragmentation. Second, we analyze them under political centralization.

Context 1: Political fragmentation. Political fragmentation may manifest itself as a plethora of small sovereign states. Thus, it may be relatively painless (e.g., in terms of travel costs) for elites to escape the ruler’s taxation by moving abroad to another polity. To reflect the high potential for exit in this context, we designate the elites’ payoff associated with moving $m > 0$. Furthermore, given political fragmentation and small average state size, the ruler may feel extra vulnerable, because external attack threats may emanate from multiple directions. In this context, therefore, the ruler will likely place a particularly high value on elite loyalty: $l \gg 0$.

We solve for optimal decisions in this historical context by backward induction. Given $m > 0$, the elites prefer to move abroad rather than stay at the final stage. At the preceding stage, the ruler prefers to grant rather than deny the elites’ demand for a political freedom (e.g., political representation) so long as the ruler’s payoff to elite loyalty l exceeds her cost for the surrender of partial political control p . As described above, $l \gg 0$ under political fragmentation because of the ruler’s relatively high vulnerability to external attacks. Thus, it is likely that this inequality

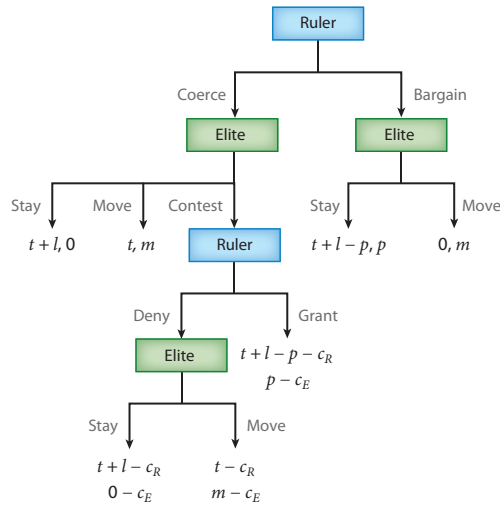


Figure 5

Model and payoffs. Payoffs are ordered (Ruler, Elite). We always assume $t, p, c_R, c_E > 0$ while we assume $m > 0$ and $l \gg 0$ under political fragmentation and $m < 0$ and $l > 0$ under political centralization. Definitions: t , tax amount that ruler must gather from elite to fend off external threats; m , elite's payoff from moving abroad to another polity; p , elite's payoff from receiving a political freedom; c_E , elite's cost of contesting coercive action by the ruler; c_R , ruler's cost of surrendering (partial) political control; l , elite's value as a taxpayer to ruler.

(i.e., $l > p$) will hold in this context. Going backward another step, the elites prefer contestation to moving abroad in response to initial coercive action by the ruler so long as the payoff m to moving is not too attractive. Similarly, they prefer to stay and accept initial bargaining by the ruler rather than move abroad so long as the value of a political freedom is high enough (i.e., $p > m$). Finally, at the first stage, the ruler prefers to bargain and grant the elites a political freedom rather than attempt coercive action that will be costly to ultimately retract in order to gather tax revenue; $t + l - p > t + l - p - c_R$. Formally, the subgame perfect equilibrium under political fragmentation is (*Bargain, Grant; Contest, Stay, Move*).

Context 2: Political centralization. Political centralization may manifest itself as a single large sovereign polity instead of a plethora of small states. It may therefore be relatively difficult (e.g., in terms of travel costs) for the elite to escape the ruler's taxation by moving abroad. Given the low potential for exit in this context, the elites' payoff associated with moving is $m < 0$. Similarly, given the difficulty of moving abroad, the ruler may downgrade the importance of elite loyalty. Large state size may exacerbate this tendency by making it more likely that external threats will be unidirectional, reducing the ruler's anxiety about attack. For these reasons, we now have $l > 0$ (versus $l \gg 0$ under political fragmentation).

To solve for optimal decisions, we again proceed by backward induction. At the last stage, the elites prefer to stay rather than move abroad because $m < 0$. Thus, the ruler prefers to deny rather than grant the elite's demand for political freedom at the preceding stage in order to forego the cost of the surrender of any political control (i.e., $t + l - c_R > t + l - p - c_R$). Moving backward another step, the elites prefer to stay and accept initial coercive action by the ruler rather than move abroad or contest it, as $0 > m$ and $0 > c_E$. Similarly, they prefer to stay and accept the initial bargaining by the ruler rather than move abroad, because $p > 0$ and $m < 0$. Finally, the ruler

prefers to take coercive action at the first stage in order to gather tax revenue rather than bargain and grant the elites a costly political freedom, as $t + l > t + l - p$. Formally, the subgame perfect equilibrium under political centralization is (*Coerce, Deny, Always Stay*).

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