

Epidemics, Civil Societies, and Conflicts in Imperial China

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Abstract: Epidemics have detrimental effects on human societies. While scholars have extensively studied how epidemics threaten health and economy, we know relatively little about its effect on peace and security. This paper investigates how epidemics affected civil conflicts, using a unique prefecture-level panel data from Ming and Qing dynasties of China (AD 1368-1911). The empirical findings show that epidemics increased the chances of conflicts; this main result holds in numerous robustness checks and an instrumental variable analysis. Additional tests show that resource scarcity and weakened government legitimacy (i.e., the heavenly mandate in historical China) caused by epidemics are two causal mechanisms linking epidemics to conflicts. Finally, we find that secret society organizations strengthened the effect of epidemics on conflicts while clan organizations and state capacity to collect local information do not have a mediating effect.

Keywords: epidemics; secret society; clan organizations; conflicts; imperial China.