

SHAKING LEGITIMACY:  
THE IMPACT OF EARTHQUAKES ON CONFLICT IN HISTORICAL CHINA\*

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**Abstract**

In historical China, because rulers ascribed their legitimacy to a heavenly mandate, natural calamities like earthquakes were seen as signs that the ruler's legitimacy had been weakened. I therefore proxy legitimacy shock by quake-induced minor shaking (i.e., strong enough to be felt by the population but too weak to cause material damage to persons or objects) and show that it causes significant political instability (as measured by conflict). This effect is much larger in regions with higher levels of ethnolinguistic fragmentation, suggesting that legitimacy shock can serve as a coordination device for overcoming the problems inherent in collective action.

*Keywords:* Legitimacy shock, earthquake, minor shaking, conflict

*JEL Codes:* D74, N45, P48.

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