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'Eclipses and the memory of revolutions: Evidence from China'

We study the historical roots of social unrest in China. In particular, we investigate whether the incidence of social unrest against local government officials under the Qing dynasty (1644-1912) has a persistent impact on the incidence of anti-government protests in present-day China. To generate plausibly exogenous variation in the incidence of past protests we exploit differences in the visibility and magnitude of solar eclipses across Chinese counties during the Qing dynasty period. In the Confucianism tradition, solar eclipses are considered a negative divine signal on the legitimacy of the ruler, and can thus facilitate the coordination of protest actions. We test this hypothesis using detailed data on the timing and location of anti-government rebellions extracted from local chronicles. We show that counties within the totality zone of an eclipse were significantly more likely to experience a rebellion in the eclipse year. We find that plausibly exogenous variation in past rebellions generated by the incidence of solar eclipses has a positive effect on the incidence of social protests in present-day China. Why should the incidence of past protests have long run effects on the inclination of a certain community to protest? We argue that a potential explanation is the inter-generational transmission of the memory of past protest experiences. A tangible sign of this transmission is the construction of temples and memorials celebrating the leaders of anti-Qing rebellions that occurred during the early years of the Qing dynasty period. To test this argument, we collect data on the date of construction and the geographical location of physical structures -- such as temples or memorials -- celebrating a leader of anti-Qing protests as well as the diffusion of legends regarding officials who died in the war against the Qing invasion. We find that the long-run effect of past rebellions is concentrated in areas that celebrated these past rebellions via temples dedicated to the early rebel leaders, thus preserving their memory for future generations.