

Dissertation Abstract

Peiyuan Li

University of Colorado Boulder

Collective action can foment revolutions and precipitate institutional change and new state formations. My dissertation "Collective Action in State and Society: 19th and 20th century China" investigates three types of collective actions, revolution, war, and labor strikes, that took place in China and shaped the creation of modern China over a century, from the mid-19th to the mid-20th centuries. The projects consider the origins of group mobilization in specific contexts of historical development, and the lessons may be useful in understanding how collective action and collective organizations emerge and gain cohesion in other times and places as well. The dissertation project has gained support from the NSF Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grants (Award Number: 2214884).

“POLITICAL REPRESSION, MEDIA PROPAGANDA, AND NATION-BUILDING” (JOB MARKET PAPER)

In the first chapter, I examine the political persuasion effect of newspapers in mobilizing the 1911 Chinese Revolution. Nations and nation-states are products of modernity, but they also have historical roots. In the conquest of China in the mid-17th century, the Manchur-led Qing government oppressed the Han Chinese, the native population of China. Two centuries later, when modern newspaper technology became available, revolutionary propagandists seized the opportunity to reframe the political repression as an ethnic conflict to fan the flames of discontent. Applying machine learning to analyze 0.3 million newspaper article titles, I find that prefectures characterized by repression and resistance responded to the anti-Manchu propaganda by producing more nationalist revolutionaries. Using the historical political cycle as the instrumental variable, I confirm the causal link. The proposed mechanism is the preservation of historical memories by deep cultural traits created by repression and resistance. After the 1911 Revolution, revolutionaries strove to establish a modern nation-state by organizing the Kuomintang (Nationalist) party, army, and government. The results indicate that propaganda utilizing historical repression and resistance shaped the political identity and played a pivotal role in the nation-building of modern China.

“WHO LOST (OR WON) CHINA? LAND REFORM AND WAR MOBILIZATION”

In the second chapter, I investigate the role of land reform in the evolution of support for communism, assessing the hypothesis that land reform was a strategy that ultimately helped the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) defeat the Kuomintang (KMT) in the Chinese Civil War of 1945-1949. How did the Chinese Communist Party rally millions of farmers to win in 1949? The critical stage was to initiate a land reform via class struggle, empowering farmers to violently grab land from landlords, but whether the ownership permanently went to farmers depended on the war outcome. Farmers desired land ownership but feared reprisal from landlords, who were backed by the official Kuomintang government. Based on these two considerations, I model farmers' decisions. Using death records of 5,661,662

communist soldiers, I find that for counties within 82 kilometers of KMT forces, land redistribution to farmers accounted for the CCP's soldier casualties following the land reform. This is because farmers in these areas faced an immediate reprisal from the homecoming legions organized by landlords and the KMT, and it was a dominant strategy to fight. However, in counties that are farther than 82 kilometers from KMT forces, land transfer to farmers discouraged farmers from fighting, resulting in fewer soldier deaths. This resulted from the rise of the free-rider problem. This paper develops a novel theory of war mobilization and partially explains the emergence of Communism in the twentieth century.

“LABOR STRIKES AND LABOR MANAGEMENT IN URBAN CHINA 1862-1949”

In the third chapter, I examine the role of labor management and labor strikes as the instigation of a different kind of collective action. From roughly 1860 to 1920, certain urban areas of China along the coast as well as along river tributaries were impacted by the new technologies and capital of foreign trade and investment. As modern industry began to develop, workers started to organize collectively to negotiate for better wages and working standards. This project examines the development of labor strikes during this period when it is possible to observe a mix of western firms, Chinese firms, and the startup of non-communist and communist unions after 1921. Motivating questions concern the role of foreign management and the role of capital adoption in organized labor strikes in China, the roles of industrialization, globalization, and their interaction for organized labor. The project focuses on how China's early experience with labor management fits in with the global history that has so far tended to focus almost exclusively on Europe and the United States.