

The Long Shadow of Forced Clearance: State Violence, Kinship, and Persistent Underdevelopment

Yiming Cao*

University of Hong Kong

Kun Ma[†]

Renmin University of China

Kewei Zhang[‡]

Renmin University of China

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Extended Abstract

War can have profound consequences for economic and social development. A large literature studies its material costs, including the destruction of physical capital, the loss of labor, and the diversion of resources away from production, both directly and indirectly through trade disruption and geographic spillovers (see [Federle et al., 2026](#), for a recent example). Consistent with the Solow model, these material losses dissipate quickly, and economies often recover within decades ([Davis and Weinstein, 2002](#); [Miguel and Roland, 2011](#); [Takeda and Yamagishi, 2026](#)). But war can also involve coercive interventions such as forced displacement, population clearance, and coerced resettlement that reshape the social infrastructure of affected communities, including trust, social organization, and cultural norms. The resulting institutional and cultural changes may persist long after material reconstruction is complete and shape long-run trajectories of economic development. Yet the longer-run consequences of such war-related interventions remain much less studied.

We study the long-run consequences of the Great Clearance of 1661–1683 in Fujian Province, China, one of the most dramatic episodes of state-forced population clearance in history. The edict, issued by the early Qing dynasty during its civil war with

*Faculty of Business and Economics. Email: ymcao@hku.hk.

[†]School of Economics. Email: makun2001@ruc.edu.cn.

[‡]School of Economics. Email: kwzhang@ruc.edu.cn.

Ming loyalist forces based in Taiwan, required all residents within approximately 30 li (approximately 18 kilometers now) of the coast to relocate inland, with the goal of severing contact between coastal populations and Ming loyalists. Enforcement was swift and brutal: families were given only days to leave, homes and villages were razed, the boundary was physically marked and guarded by troops, and anyone found crossing it faced execution. The policy remained in effect for over two decades before being fully lifted in 1683, after the Qing defeated the last Ming loyalist regime and took control of Taiwan. The clearance boundary then lost all administrative or legal significance, and the depopulated coastal area was reopened for resettlement.

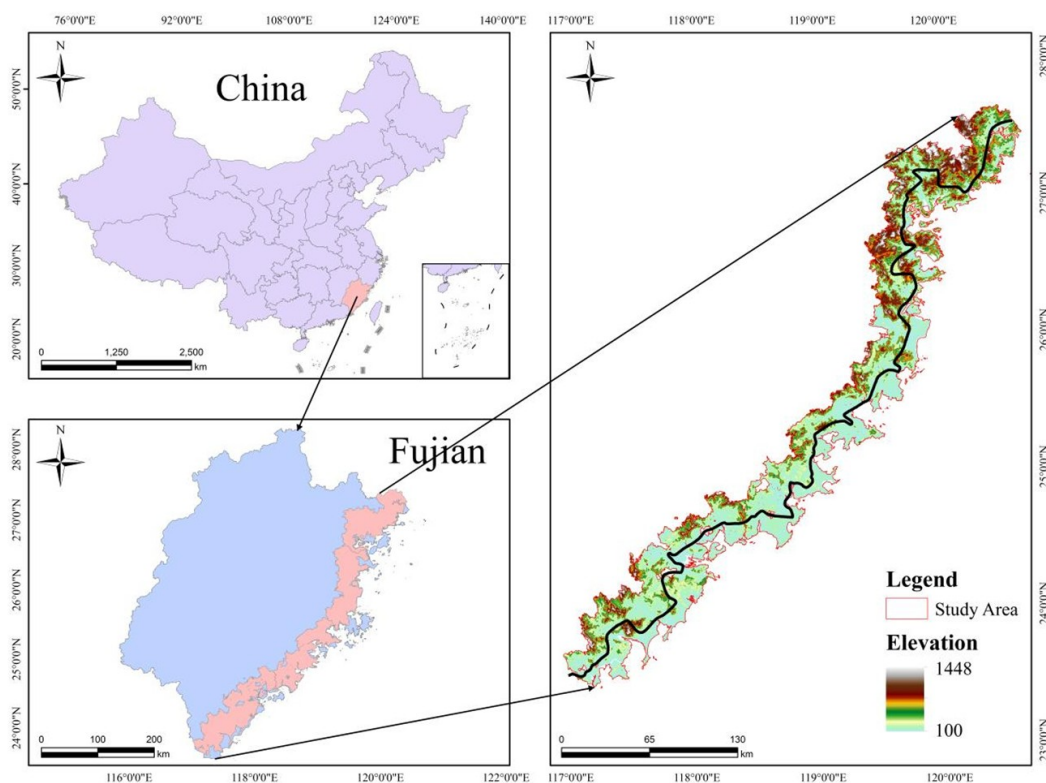


Figure 1: Map of the sample region.

Notes: The right panel shows the study area. The solid line marks the historical clearance boundary. Regions to the right of the boundary were subject to forced clearance, whereas those to the left were not. The left panel locates the sample region within China.

We use a spatial regression discontinuity design to compare areas just inside and just outside the historical clearance boundary and estimate its long-run effects on economic development (Figure 1). Despite favorable geography and proximity to maritime trade routes, the formerly cleared areas remain significantly less developed today, more than 350 years after the clearance was lifted (Figure 2). We document a sharp

and persistent discontinuity in nighttime light intensity, population density, household income, and urbanization. Areas inside the former clearance zone also exhibit greater reliance on agriculture. These results are robust to a wide range of specifications, including instrumental variable estimation using the official 18-kilometer threshold, and are not explained by differences in geography, climate, infrastructure, or public goods provision.

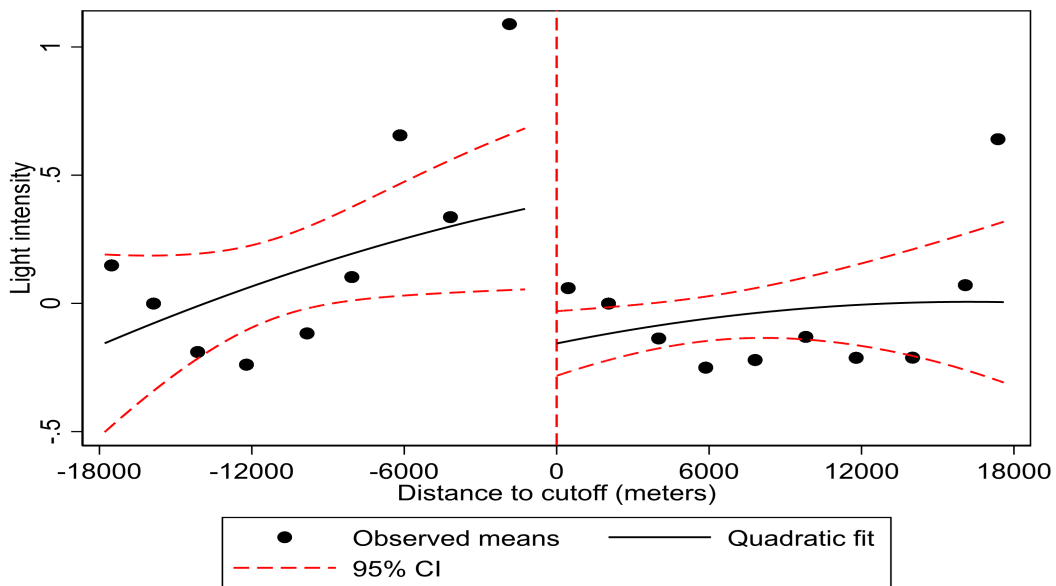


Figure 2: Regression discontinuity plot for nighttime light intensity.

Notes: A unit of observation is the town, $N = 399$. The dots represent conditional means of light intensity across binned intervals of relative distance to the clearance boundary on each side of the RD threshold. Regions with positive relative distance are those subjected to forced clearance. The solid line is a local linear regression fit on either side of the clearance boundary, controlling for boundary segment fixed effects. The dashed lines represent the 95% confidence interval. Robust standard errors are clustered at the town level.

We trace this persistent underdevelopment to a fundamental shift in social organization set in motion by the process of post-clearance resettlement. When coastal areas were reopened in 1683, returnees and new settlers encountered a landscape in which property boundaries had been erased, homes destroyed, and prior community structures dissolved. In the absence of functioning formal institutions to allocate land or adjudicate disputes, resettlement depended on the capacity of kinship groups to assert land claims, coordinate reconstruction, and enforce property rights. This process both strengthened lineage-based organization and gave an advantage to groups better able to mobilize kin-based claims and cooperation. Stronger clans consolidated control over resettled areas, while weaker groups were pushed aside or displaced en-

tirely. The result was an inward-looking, clan-centered social order that reduced coordination costs locally but limited dealings beyond kinship networks and inhibited the development of impersonal exchange.

Consistent with this interpretation, we show that formerly cleared areas exhibit stronger kinship ties, as measured by the density of ancestral halls and the concentration of surnames within localities (Figure 3). At the individual level, residents in the clearance zone report higher trust in family members but markedly lower trust in neighbors, government officials, and business associates. They also rely more heavily on kinship relations and bear a heavier burden of gift exchange within kin networks. These areas further display lower levels of education and mobility, higher fertility and son preference, larger family sizes, greater residential stability, and more reliance on precautionary savings. Together, these patterns point not to persistent resource constraints but to a social order organized around localized kin-based networks that limit participation in broader economic life.

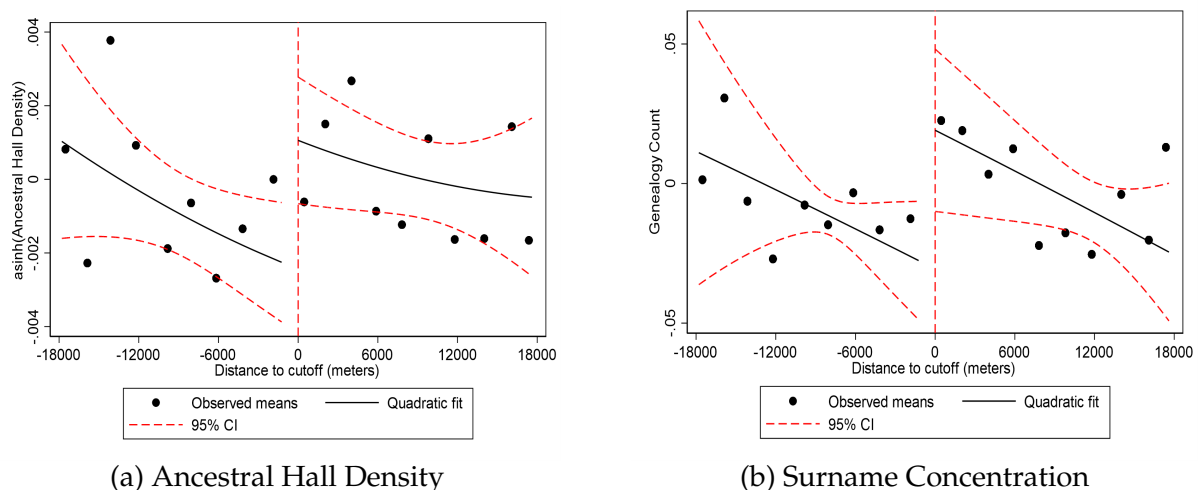


Figure 3: Regression discontinuity plot for kinship strength.

Notes: Panel (a) shows the density of ancestral halls per square kilometer. Panel (b) shows the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index of surname concentration. In each plot, a unit of observation is the town, $N = 399$. The dots represent conditional means of each outcome across binned intervals of relative distance to the clearance boundary on each side of the RD threshold. Regions with positive relative distance are those subjected to forced clearance. The solid line is a local linear regression fit on either side of the clearance boundary, controlling for boundary segment fixed effects. The dashed lines represent the 95% confidence interval. Robust standard errors are clustered at the town level.

Our findings contribute to several strands of literature. First, we provide a new perspective on the long-run consequences of conflict and state coercion. Most studied episodes involve violence that permanently alters either institutions or underlying

economic conditions, making it difficult to tell whether persistence is driven by material disadvantages or by shifts in social organization (Blattman, 2009; Dell, 2010; Acemoglu, Hassan and Robinson, 2011; Nunn and Wantchekon, 2011; Callen et al., 2014; Chaney and Hornbeck, 2016; Heldring, 2021; Lowes and Montero, 2021). We take advantage of the Great Clearance, which offers a setting in which the coercion was brief, fully reversed, and left no lasting administrative, legal, or environmental trace, yet its effects endure, to examine the cultural consequences of conflict and state coercion that may generate persistent economic effects. By showing that the formerly cleared areas differ from neighboring regions not in resources or infrastructure but in kinship organization and trust, we provide direct evidence that state violence can reshape culture itself, and that this cultural transformation, rather than persistent material deprivation, can sustain long-run underdevelopment. More broadly, our results suggest that even temporary state coercion can set in motion patterns of social organization that prove remarkably durable.

Second, we contribute to literature on forced and coercive migration. Existing research has examined how displacement affects the populations who move, tracing consequences through skill composition, network disruption, or selection (Redding and Sturm, 2008; Bazzi et al., 2016; Becker et al., 2020). Our paper shifts attention to what happens to the places that are evacuated and then resettled. We show that forced clearance can reshape the relative importance of existing institutions in the resettled region, elevating informal institutions that were peripheral before the shock into the dominant basis of social and economic life.

Third, we speak to the growing literature on kinship, culture, and economic development. Much of this work treats kinship structures as slow-moving cultural traits shaped over long historical horizons (Enke, 2019; Schulz et al., 2019; Alesina, Giuliano and Nunn, 2013; Kung and Wu, 2025). Our findings suggest that these structures can also emerge rapidly in response to discrete political shocks. When communities are forced to rebuild from scratch, dense kin-based networks can quickly become the primary organizing principle. While existing work often emphasizes the benefits of strong kinship ties, we highlight a potential downside: although reliance on kinship may ease coordination in the short run, it can also foster insularity, limit dealings with outsiders, and ultimately constrain broader economic development.

More broadly, our findings speak to how the absence of state authority shapes lasting social order. [Bazzi, Fiszbein and Gebresilasse \(2020, 2021\)](#) show that frontier environments, characterized by weak state presence and high mobility, foster individualism with persistent effects on collective action. Our setting presents a different form of state absence: not an open frontier inviting expansion, but a depopulated region requiring reconstruction from the ground up. In this context, the same vacuum of formal institutions led not to individualism but to the entrenchment of kinship-based organization, characterized by localized trust and limited openness to outsiders. This contrast underscores that the social consequences of state absence depend critically on the conditions under which communities must organize and the arrangements communities adopt. Once established, it can shape economic trajectories long after the original shock has passed.

Keywords: State Violence, Social Reorganization, Kinship, Cultural Persistence, Forced Migration

JEL Codes: D02, D74, N45, O15, Z13

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