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Appeal to a higher power: How indigenous–migrant conflict over property rights shapes state capacity

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Abstract
Ethnic conflicts over land often coincide with statebuilding efforts. How do such conflicts shape state capacity? When migrants face threats to their property rights from indigenous groups, they are more likely to cooperate with state enumeration in return for property rights protection, especially if such threats to migrant property rights outweigh potential threats from the state, such as expropriation and taxation. This proposition is tested with demographic data from the 1940 Manchukuo Census disaggregated across ethnic groups and an illustrative village-level comparative case study. I find evidence consistent with theory in the case of Han Chinese settlement into Mongol Lands.

Keywords
Ethnic conflict, state capacity, northeast Asia, property rights

Introduction

How do inter-ethnic conflicts over land between migrants and indigenous groups shape the state's ability to build state capacity across regions and groups? Ethnic conflict arising from migration continues to be a pressing issue, especially "Sons of the Soil" (SoS) conflicts—defined as those that involve a regionally concentrated minority ethnic group that is in conflict with relatively recent yet ethnically distinct migrants, where the minority assert the basis of their claim as indigenous and claim possession of the area as their historical homeland (Fearon and Laitin, 2011; Weiner, 2015).

The literature identifies factors linking migration to conflict. Weiner (2015) highlights how internal migrant–indigenous conflicts are heightened when indigenous people perceive demographic–economic threats, especially when the migrants belong to dominant groups. Focusing on civil wars, Fearon (2004) and Fearon and Laitin (2011) showed that a third of ethnic civil conflicts worldwide between 1945 and 2008 were of this kind, and are they are especially persistent.

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Moreover, SoS conflicts are more likely to lead to longer conflicts, simmering on without escalating to civil war. Mukherjee (2014) shows that this may be due to SoS conflicts occurring in medium-capacity states where politicians are more likely to choose to contain these conflicts rather than solve or be overwhelmed by them. Complementing this institutional focus on the relationship between the central state and local elites, Bhavnani and Lacina (2015) demonstrate how emigration can cause nativist riots using climate shocks, also finding that the relationship between migration and rioting is contingent on local alignment with the center, wherein aligned local governments can assuage potential rioters by obtaining central concessions. Other literature highlights factors such as minority language recognition (Öztürk and Öztürk, 2025) or internal referenda (Goers et al., 2025) in driving ethnic conflict and regional separatism.

Other works demonstrate the importance of land and land tenure institutions as a central nexus driving the escalation of SoS conflicts. Focusing on the role of land property rights institutions, Boone (2014, 2017) elucidates how migrant–indigenous conflicts in Africa tend to escalate into civil war when land property rights are administered directly by the state, rather than under a "neo-customary" land regime where local elites administer land rights in the name of indigenous groups.

While the literature on how migration and economic competition may escalate into conflict has developed prodigiously, how measures to enhance state capacity are conditioned by SoS conflict has been left unaddressed. Theorizing and demonstrating this relationship shows how states can utilize conflicts on the ground, and highlights how threats to property rights arising from ethnic conflict over land can affect this process.

In contrast to the literature on state-sponsored settlers who migrate as a part of an explicit strategy of control (Chakma, 2010; Eiran, 2019; Haklai et al., 2015; McNamee, 2018), where state support often drives conflict escalation (Fearon, 2004; Fearon and Laitin, 2011), this study focuses on cases where the migrants are not state-sponsored. Many states find themselves facing such conflicts between migrants and indigenous groups not of their own making. For example, Uganda faces such conflicts owing to internal migration coupled with population growth (Mwesigye and Matsumoto, 2016). In the Ivory Coast, the migrants came voluntarily and were not state-sponsored—yet conflict between "autochtones" and migrants intensified with land scarcity and elite-led ethnic politicization (Nordås, 2018). In Darfur, migration and settlement occurred owing to drought, and the government exploited horizontal inequalities between local groups to enhance regional control, exacerbating conflict (Brosché and Sundberg, 2018). As Barter and Côté (2015) shows, even in cases such as Indonesia where the state actively pursued "transmigration" to consolidate the periphery, migrant–indigenous conflicts often occur in cases where migration was voluntarily, without state backing. How, then, would these conflicts enable or constrict state capacity across the different groups?

This study examines the relationship between migrant–indigenous conflicts, ethnic diversity, and statebuilding. The conventional literature on the effect of factors such as civil wars, ethnic conflict, and ethnic diversity on state capacity returns mixed results. In contrast to Tilly's bellicist theory on the effect of interstate competition (Tilly, 1992), Besley and Persson (2008) have shown that civil conflicts tend to undermine fiscal state capacity. Similarly, the literature on the consequences of ethnic diversity tends to find negative relationships between ethnic diversity and state capacity. Further works also demonstrate how diversity undermines state capacity by increasing the costs of acquiring information (Charnysh, 2022; Johnson and Koyama, 2017; Magiya, 2020) and by decreasing incentives for providing indiscriminate public goods,[1] or that less legible minorities receive fewer public goods (Charnysh, 2022). However, there has been further push-back on this idea through works such as Singh and Vom Hau (2016) and Wimmer (2016), which argue that the relationship is spurious, or that the relationship between the presence of ethnic minorities

and lower state capacity is endogenous (Pardelli and Kustov, 2022). Alternatively, Charnysh (2019) shows how heterogeneity created demand for third-party enforcement, which enhanced state capacity in the long run. In contrast to the literature that emphasizes incentives for coordination and the provision of public goods measured in aggregate, this paper demonstrates that the variations in state capacity are often driven by the threats faced by these groups and the nature of their stakes in that conflict.

Threats to migrant property rights arising from such SoS conflicts can increase compliance by making the state a relatively attractive enforcer of property rights, even when there is a danger of expropriation. A state need not be inclusive, fair, or even fully effective, as long as it provides some property rights protections through registration. In many cases, states facing SoS conflicts can be flawed, and can even threaten property rights through extraction and expropriation. States need not be inclusive or fully effective—they need merely to provide property rights protections marginally better than no protection. When threats are sufficient, migrants turn to state registration despite risks of taxation or expropriation.

The empirical analysis suggests that areas with greater threats to migrants show higher levels of migrant compliance with state measures to enumerate the population. The case at hand is the ethnic land conflict between Han migrants and indigenous Mongols in the "Mongol Lands"[2] of Eastern Inner Mongolia located in Manchukuo (a state founded by elements of the Japanese Army during 1932–1945). Cross-sectional regressions, using newly digitized census data from 1940. show that areas where voluntary Han migration has more thoroughly displaced the indigenous Mongols and areas where the degree of segregation is low are more likely to generate lower quality census data for the Han, as measured by age heaping, following the framework proposed by Lee and Zhang (2016). A two-village comparison between counties with total and partial displacement of the indigenous Mongols also illustrates the process, showing that the presence of indigenous Mongols is associated with threats to migrants' property rights, demand for state enforcement, and subsequently higher levels of compliance with land taxes.

This case provides insight into the relationship between land conflict and state capacity over migrants, as it provides unusually detailed census data on age cohort sizes across different ethnic groups across territorial units. Furthermore, as the Han migrants neither were backed by the Manchukuo authorities nor shared an identity with the colonial power, it allows us to learn more about the relationship between migration, conflict, and state power outside of the realm of state-sponsored settlement.

The literature on transitional justice highlights property disputes as key obstacles to peace, justice, and growth (Perez, 2013). Land and housing claims are often zero-sum and emotionally charged, making substitution difficult (Psaltis et al., 2020: 9). States may legislate property rights but often lack the capacity to enforce them. This study examines how conflict influences the state's capacity to make land and people legible.

Threats to property rights and compliance with enumeration

Suppose there are migrants and indigenous groups competing over land. "Migrants" are defined as those identifying as belonging to the demographically dominant ethnicity that is migrating to a frontier area populated by the indigenous group. The "indigenous" people are defined as those who have traditionally lived in the area in question (Fearon and Laitin, 2011). The migrants in this instance are not state-sponsored and are migrating voluntarily, typically for economic reasons. The region is also overseen by a third actor, the state.

We can think of the indigenous people as being pressured to undergo forced migration by the migrants moving in. The extensive literature on forced migration has identified factors such as economic deprivation, violence, social networks, environmental degradation, ethnic conflict, and governance failures among others as drivers of forced relocation and return (Richmond, 1988; de de Haas, 2021; Neumayer, 2005; Ozaltin et al., 2020). In such circumstances, indigenous individuals in rural settings who wish to return or contest their displacement must contest with the migrants who in turn seek to possess this territory, a common theme in studies of return migration (Alrababah et al., 2023; Stefanovic et al., 2015). Such conflicts over land inherent to these processes are known to drive relationships between migrants and the state (Richmond, 1988).

In this case, migrants seek to assert and defend their individual property rights over parceled plots of land, while seeking to avoid onerous demands by the state such as taxation, expropriation, conscription, corvèe labor, and so on. In contrast, the indigenous people seek to protect or reassert their property rights, while also seeking to avoid the state demands detailed above. Such a contest over land is seen in other instances of forced migration and migrant return. These studies also illuminate the importance of the availability of the returnees' secure property rights over land as a key factor driving return migration: in many instances, such as in Burundi or Afghanistan, the availability of land drove whether particular dislocated groups chose to return to their homelands after cessation of the conflict that caused their original displacement (Huggins, 2009; Harild et al., 2015). In the Guatemalan civil war or the Israel–Palestine conflict, disputes over alienated personal land as well as access to alternative land for residence and agriculture have been central to larger territorial and ethnic disputes (Loizides, 2007; Stepputat, 2008; Yacobi and Milner, 2022). Thus, for both the migrants and the indigenous groups in our scenario, property rights over land comprise a central concern.

Simultaneously, the state seeks greater legibility over its land and its subjects in order to build capacities to mobilize resources, tax outputs, and encourage production to pursue its other goals. For example, states across the world have also expanded measures to formalize land titles in recent years, which has been linked to economic development by allowing title-holders to leverage their holdings to obtain credit and by preventing future conflicts (De Soto, 2007).

Under sufficient threat, the migrant may turn to the state for defense of property. The primary threat against the migrants' property rights comes from the indigenous groups re-asserting dominion, by repossession, re-extension of indigenous administration, taxation, or rent collection. The migrant therefore may attempt to defend a piece of individually parceled land from countervailing claims through the state's mechanism for protecting individual property, such as registration and adjudication. In theory, it is possible to protect individual property rights through informal institutions. Customary property rights are especially expedient for the claimant when land is cheap, which makes transaction costs for registration not worth the cost (Joireman, 2008: 1237). Yet, as Murtazashvili and Murtazashvili (2016) shows, the informal institution in question must provide political stability, enforcement capacity, and constraint to credibly provide property rights. However, it can be difficult for relatively newly established migrants to form such institutions, especially if they come from disparate origins. In contrast, long-established traditional institutions have the stability and constraint to be credible providers of property rights, owing to repeated interactions among their constituents, even if they sometimes lack the enforcement power.

Submission to the state, however, can be a double-edged sword. To access property right protections through registration and adjudication, the migrant must submit to various forms of state enumeration which make him known to the state. When the perception of such a threat wanes, the migrant is now subject to a relatively greater danger of demands by the state. Thus, as these indigenous threats subside, the migrant will be less willing to submit to state enumeration, and the

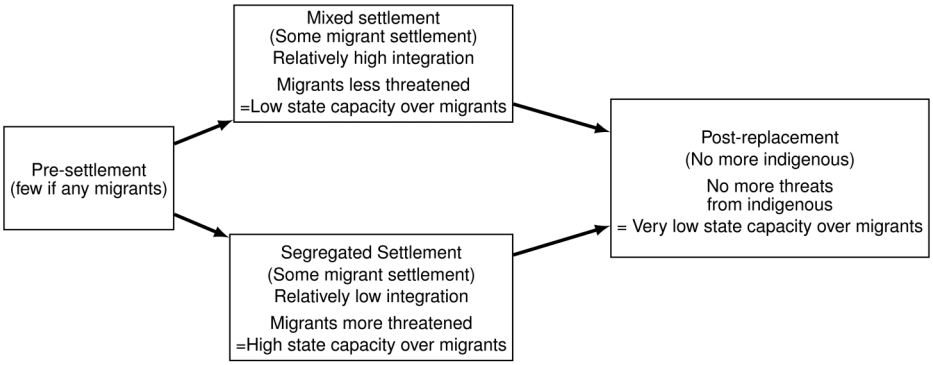

Figure 1. Divergent demographic replacement processes and implications for state capacity. If an area is almost entirely free of migrants in some prior period, the proportion of migrants in a region should indicate the degree to which displacement has proceeded.

state's legibility over the migrant suffers as a consequence. One can see a similar logic in Sánchez-Talanquer (2020), who show that while large landowners in Colombia were loathe to register their land titles for fear of taxation, increased threats of property rights disputation led to a spike in property registrations.

Two factors ought to drive such threats: the degree of demographic replacement and the integration of the migrant with the indigenous population, if it still remains. In the first instance, short of projecting power against numerically superior migrants or receiving favorable adjudication from the central state power, indigenous commoners, elites, and organizations will have a difficult time contesting property claims where migrants are in the overwhelming majority, owing simply to the lack of numbers. In contested areas, as will be discussed below, there can be instances of violence by both sides, which becomes physically difficult once the last of the indigenous residents leave for good. Thus, as demographic replacement of the indigenous groups by the migrant groups becomes more complete, the threats against the property rights of the migrants decrease.[3] Figure 1 shows the general move from lower to higher proportions of migrants and how this would lead to lower state capacity over migrants through the process.

In the second instance, the relationships on the ground between indigenous and migrant groups should matter for the security of the latter's property rights. If relations are contentious and acrimonious, the migrant ought to feel a greater danger to their property rights and be more favorably inclined to submit to state power than they would under a situation of neighborly relations and mutual respect. One driver and indicator of good relations is residential segregation. The literature on the relationship between threat perception and inter-ethnic relations, largely in contemporary urban contexts, provides mixed results for the effect of group concentration on the degree to which such groups are better integrated into the host society, and the degree to which original residents perceive the newcomers as a threat.[4]

The above theoretical discussion provides the main hypothesis of this paper:

Demographic replacement hypothesis: Areas where demographic replacement of indigenous with migrants is further along should see lower state capacity over migrants.

Segregation hypothesis: Areas with more residential segregation should see higher state capacity over migrants.

Conceptualizing state capacity as legibility

While state capacity has been conceptualized in various ways, it has often been characterized as the capacity of a state to ascertain, extract, and administer a territory. Here, we focus on control and ascertainment. This study conceptualizes state capacity as legibility (Lee and Zhang, 2016; Scott, 1998), or the ability of a state to ascertain accurate information about its subjects, using a method for analyzing the accuracy of censuses using the phenomena of age heaping, proposed in Lee and Zhang (2016), and utilized in works such as Osorio et al. (2018) and Charnysh (2022). Focusing on legibility is appropriate in a situation where state power is weak, and the state must take basic steps to enumerate its subjects as a prerequisite to exercising other aspects of power, such as taxation, conscription, and service provision. A discussion of the significance and validity of this measure for the case at hand is given in the "Data and measurement" section.

Han–Mongol Sons of the soil conflict in Manchuria

Case selection

The 1940 Manchukuo census provides an opportunity to test theories on state capacity with heterogeneous impacts across groups. Ideally, testing a theory that outlines the effects of an ongoing SoS conflict on state capacity over migrants across different stages of demographic displacement would benefit from some data that measure state capacity across the relevant groups, between regions, over time.

Manchukuo provides two features: a measure of state capacity that varies across ethnic groups, across territorial units. The report provided separate age cohort counts by ethnicity per county, allowing ethnicity-specific age heaping to be computed across regions. States rarely report these data across ethnic groups, let alone states facing migrant–indigenous conflicts across smaller territorial units. A more detailed description of the census is provided in the "Data and measurement" section.

However, we lack time series data. This census was the first modern census in this region, and subsequent censuses lack sufficient detail. As the outline below demonstrates, the foundation of Manchukuo froze in place an ongoing process of migration and displacement, resulting in administrative arrangements that, with some adjustments, froze the status quo of settlement which the Inner Mongolian elites carried over into the PRC (Christmas, 2016). Thus, cross-sectional comparisons allow us to see units at different stages of displacement, which would probably have continued apace otherwise.

The study focuses on "Mongol Lands" (meng-di) (the area highlighted in blue (or the darker tone) in the right map of Figure 2), territories assigned to semi-autonomous Mongol units by the Ch'ing Dynasty, later incorporated into Manchukuo in 1932, including those that fell out of Mongol ownership or administration. Under the banner system, Mongols collectively owned and used these lands for pasture and agriculture (Borjigin, 2017: 97). Mongols are defined as the indigenous group in the Mongol Lands and the Han are defined as the migrant group. Functionally, the Han in Eastern Inner Mongolia played a similar role to the one exercised by internal migrants today. Thus, it is possible to apply the logic presented in this study to other instances of ethnic conflicts over land that arose from internal migration.[5]

The transitions from Ch'ing to republican-warlord to Manchukuo rule, as well as Manchukuo's status as a quasi-colonial "puppet state" may undermine external validity. Yet many non-colonial governments face migrant conflicts between migrants and indigenous groups that are not of their own making. In many contemporary cases, similar transitions occur as incumbents lose power and ethnic coalitions become reshuffled. In this instance, Japanese bureaucrats under the

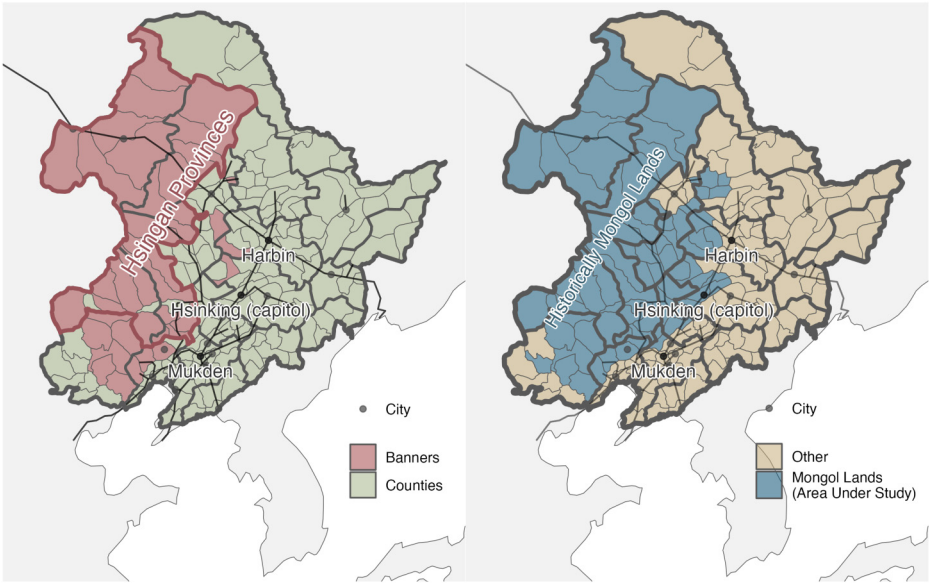

Figure 2. Administrative units of Manchukuo and extent of Mongol Lands (1940). The map on the left shows the distribution of banners and counties in Manchukuo, as of 1940. Banners are sub-provincial level administrative units for Mongols, whereas counties are sub-provincial administrative units for other races, such as Han and Koreans, and are equivalent to counties in China proper. The map on the right shows the distribution of "Mongol Lands" in blue (or the darker tone), or the entirety of the territorial extent of Mongol banners under the Ch'ing Dynasty; the analysis in the rest of this paper is restricted to this territory. As can be seen with a comparison of the left map with the right map, many counties were carved out of this territory. Manchukuo also created provincial-level administrative units for Mongols, or the Hsingan provinces. These contained both banners and counties, and some banners lay outside of Hsingan. Maps include rail lines as of 1932 and settlements designated as cities in the 1940 census. All maps in this article were created by the author.

supervision of the Japanese Kwantung Army sincerely attempted to construct a state with at least the trappings of a modern nation, with sophisticated censuses, heavy industry, high-capacity administration, economic regulation, civil policing, capable judiciary, and an effective military. Scholars can learn lessons about hindrances to deploying various technologies of state power insofar as the challenges that Manchukuo faced are challenges weaker states face today.

Han migration into Mongol Lands

Under the Ch'ing Dynasty, most of Manchuria was restricted from Han settlement as a homeland for the ruling Manchu and their Mongol allies (Edmonds, 1979: 601). The Ch'ing organized Mongol Lands into banners—quasi-tribal territorial administrations with assigned grazing lands, governed by hereditary princes called Jasag (Di Cosmo, 2012: 180).

Gradually, Mongol elites and the Ch'ing allowed some Han to cultivate Mongol Lands to address issues such as revenue decline, overpopulation, and famine. Land openings involved converting communal land into individual plots sold by provincial administrators, with profits shared between Mongol and Han officials. Han-settled land became county-administered, creating dual administration systems (Borjigin, 2004: 49, 51). These changes displaced many Mongols, forcing them into remote areas or sedentary agriculture. The Han migrants' assertion of land

rights led to conflicts such as the 1891 Chintantao Incident, where hundreds of thousands of Mongols were massacred and more displaced by Han rebels (Borjigin, 2004: 55). While limited state-sponsored settlement programs existed through the Ch'ing and Republican periods, the preponderance of the migration was voluntary and economically motivated (Gottschang and Lary, 2020: 4). Table 1 shows the course of aggregate demographic displacement in all of Inner Mongolia through the 16th century to the late 1930s.

Following the end of the Ch'ing in 1911, banners were incorporated into republican provinces. Princely rulers retained some power, but Mongol privileges eroded under the ROC (Hirokawa, 2005: 22–23). By the 1930s, many Mongols practiced sedentary agriculture (Borjigin, 2014: 364). Conflicts in Inner Mongolia at this time were often deadly, with repeated Mongol attempts for independence or autonomy.

Wholly Han settlements meant the creation of a parallel society outside of Mongol control, whereas intermixing allowed migrants to integrate into the host society (Borjigin, 2017: 210–211). Mixed residence owing to piecemeal migration may also indicate that the migrant came on the host's terms, as opposed to wholesale and large-scale land development, which was largely a Han enterprise and resulted in homogeneously Han agricultural villages. The contrast between the lower and upper routes in Figure 1 shows the contrast between these different forms of settlement and their implications for state capacity outcomes.

While this tendency was largely halted through Japanese intervention, there should be separate paths of migration and displacement, which leads to different implications for legibility outcomes over the migrants. With the creation of Manchukuo, the Mongol Lands were "frozen" at different stages of displacement, enabling cross-sectional comparisons that equate to comparisons across different stages of displacement.

Manchukuo period

The Kwantung Army seized Manchuria from the Fengtien clique and founded Manchukuo in 1931–1932. They aimed to prevent further reclamation of Mongol Lands, promoting ethnic harmony while building a strong state for economic development and resource mobilization (Duara, 2004: 64–71). Balancing Mongol and Han interests, they sought to limit Han migration to protect Mongol Lands without disrupting agriculture. Some Mongol Lands were incorporated into Hsingan Provinces, a special administrative region for Mongols (as seen in the left of Figure 2), while Japanese technocrats decided where traditional Mongol life could be preserved. Hsingan included cities and non-Mongol counties with large Han populations, and extensive Han settlements existed within these areas. Some Mongol banners lay outside Hsingan, and many Han-dominated counties were excluded owing to advanced Han migration (Hirokawa, 2005: 28–30).

Through the 1930s, the Japanese authorities attempted to "modernize" land registries across Manchukuo. In the Mongol Lands, they sought to transform land ownership from a patchwork of overlapping taxation and usufruct rights, conflicting property claims, and inconsistent land titles to clear ownership and uniform land taxation.[6] From 1938 to 39, the lands claimed by the banner princes and other feudal elites were nationalized, and the incomes from the land were turned into tax revenue, permanently alienating these lands from Mongol control (Hirokawa, 2005: 310–311).

Land claims, personal enumeration, and compliance

Land claims in Manchukuo were tied to personal identification. Before Manchukuo, officials would often issue multiple titles for one piece of land in order to pocket fees. The title receipt would be

issued, but the registries were not public (Shimizu, 1941: 193). Following Japanese reforms, the new authorities attempted to resolve conflicts, make titling consistent, and make the registry public. Under the new system, landowners were given notice to apply for a new land title. To successfully register, dispute, inherit, sell, transfer, and otherwise amend the land registry, the government required applicants to attach a document verifying the applicant's identity (Matsuda, 1946). Thus, those seeking state protection for their claims must comply with policies intended to identify, register, and tax individuals.

While these measures went to great lengths to formalize property rights, other policies directly threatened them. For example, during the Greater East Asia War (1941–1945), mobilization resulted in substantial appropriations of agricultural products. Furthermore, some land was forcibly purchased for Japanese settlement at below-market rates, which directly undermined individual property rights of the landowner (Liu, 2001: 363).

Data and measurement

The main data come from the 1940 Manchukuo census, which contains data on age distributions by nationality, race[7] and gender at the city/county/banner level. This census contains age cohort data on 210 administrative units, including counties, banners, and cities in 19 provinces and one special municipality (the capital city of Hsinking).

The diagram shows the proportion of Mongols compared with Han across counties and banners in the Mongol Lands according to the 1940 census, with 1932 rail lines and major cities indicated on top. The geographic distribution of the main ethnic groups of note, Han and Mongol, are shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4.

Age heaping as a state capacity measure: the 1940 Manchukuo census

I estimate the main outcome variables, state capacity (as legibility) at the county level for the Han and Mongols, using a measure proposed in Lee and Zhang (2016). This measure uses the Myers' Blended Index (MBI) for age heaping, which quantifies the degree to which the distribution of ages in a census reflects the "natural" distribution of ages in a population, based on the assumption that lower-quality enumeration will result in "age heaping", or the phenomenon whereby ages are rounded up or down owing to the inability of the state or the individual to accurately assess their correct ages. They are often rounded to multiples of 5 or 10, resulting in an excess of these digits— for example, a low capacity state may round a 37 year old's age to 35 or 40 owing to a lack of information (although MBI is agnostic about which digit the heaping happens on). The index is computed by taking the percentage of the subset of the population ending in each digit (i.e. the number of individuals whose age ends with 0, so those who are aged 10, 20, 30, 40, and so on in the dataset), and taking the deviation of the percentage of each terminal digit from the expected value (10% for each terminal digit), and is summarized by adding the absolute value of all of the deviations for each terminal digit and dividing by half. A perfectly even distribution would yield a score of zero, with higher MBIs indicating greater age heaping, which in this case is used as an indicator for lower quality census data. This measure should be robust to most demographic shocks, since these would probably be spread across different terminal digits even if they may be concentrated in an age range. For such events to affect MBI score, the range would have to be quite narrow. For example, in a situation with an MBI score of 0, if all 1 year olds are removed, this would increase the MBI, although not by so much, since all 11 year olds, 21 year olds, 31 year olds, etc., would balance out the number of those with a terminal digit of

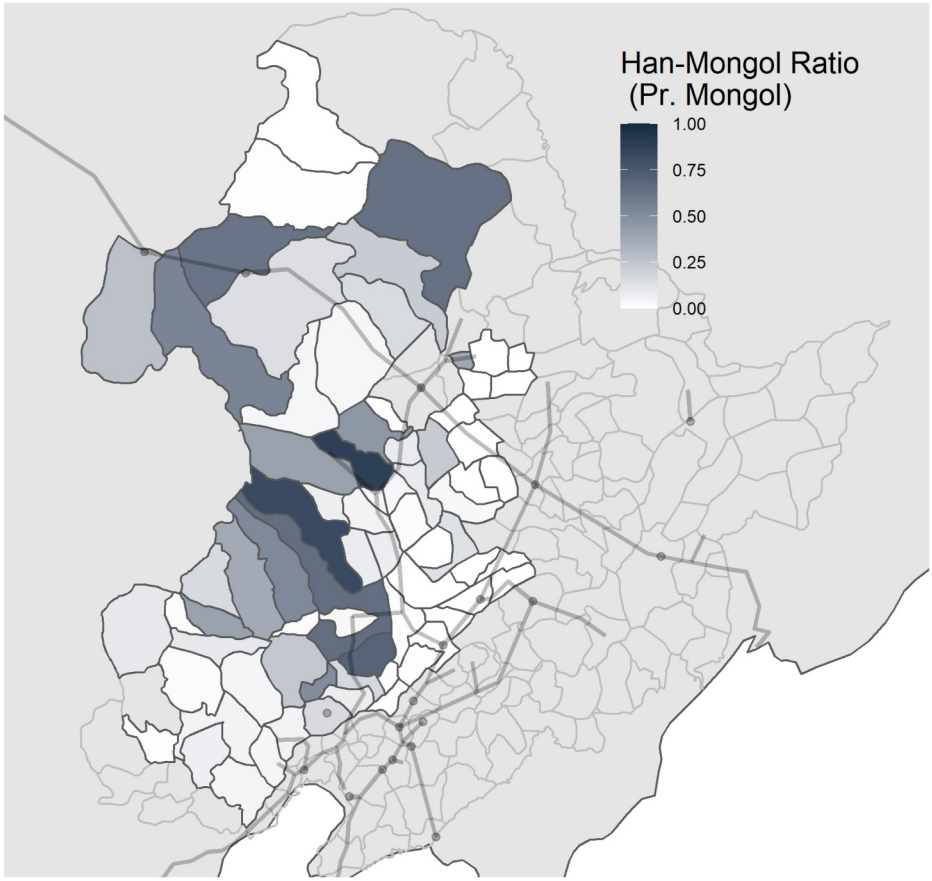

Figure 3. Han–Mongol ratio in the Mongol Lands.

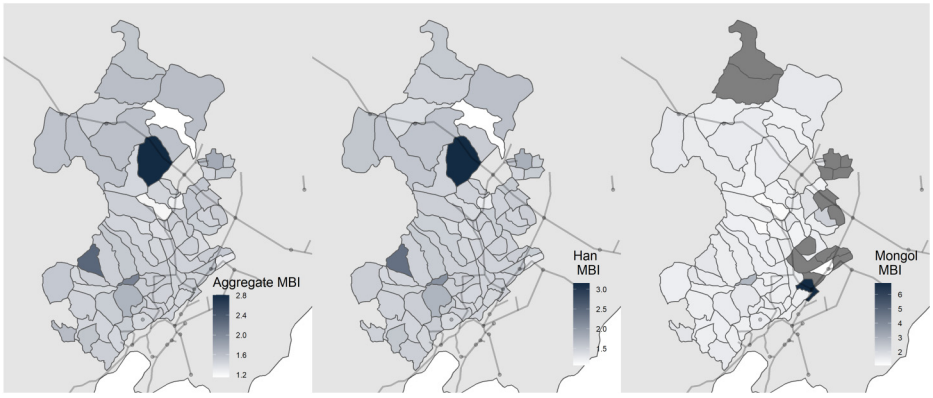

Figure 4. Distribution of aggregate Han, and Mongol state capacity as legibility (in the Myers' Blended Index, MBI) in the Mongol Lands.

1. That being said, very small populations can produce wildly high MBIs that are largely meaningless for our analysis, so observations where the population or sub-population is below 100 is excluded from analysis. This analysis focuses on the legibility of Han migrants, as the MBIs of other groups are erratic owing to the prevalence of regions with small population sizes for these groups.

The analysis for the effect of diversity as such uses the entire sample, whereas the analysis on Han–Mongol conflict focuses on lands that traditionally belonged to Mongol banners, which saw ongoing Han migration.

Determinants of age heaping

Multiple factors are known to cause age heaping, and heaping has been used as an indicator for different phenomena. In economic history, it is often used as a measure of numeracy (Baten et al., 2022), while political science has been using it as a measure of state capacity (A'Hearn et al., 2021; Byun and Kwon, 2025; Charnysh, 2022; McMurry, 2022; Suryanarayan and White, 2021). What, then, drives age heaping in our case? First, I will convey the precursors to and implementation of the census, whereupon I will discuss its significance for age heaping. Age heaping stems from three factors: (1) improper enumeration methods; (2) intentional avoidance (especially for conscription); and (3) prior registration exposure. Factor (2) primarily drives the results shown here, as alternative specifications show that prior state capacity measures are not major determinants. There were incentives to especially misrepresent ages and hide young men owing to the concurrent introduction of conscription, yet these incentives were probably constrained by prior exposure to registration owing to the threat of verification.

Age heaping serves as a viable proxy for compliance to enumeration by providing a measure that provides a combination of avoidance and exposure to prior state capacity, which determines the degree to which the state is able to ascertain accurate information about the population. In this setup, inter-ethnic conflict leads to differential incentives to divulge information to register land, affecting prior exposure. As the subsequent section will illustrate, prior exposure shapes avoidance by serving as a threat of external verification for information proffered by residents for the census. Additionally, prior state capacity also shapes prior exposure to registration, since high-capacity states are more likely to be able to obtain personal registrations from residents. Improper e numeration or errors by low-quality officials in obtaining or processing the data are also likely to be shaped by prior state capacity. Prior state capacity is a potential confounding variable that is partially addressed in analysis by controlling for units that contained concessions that were directly governed by the Japanese prior to the formation of Manchukuo. A more detailed discussion of prior registration and how they may drive later state capacity is provided in the Online Appendix.

The 1940 census

The 1940 census, unlike the previous tabulations, was to be conducted on a strict basis of confirmation through the return of census forms by heads of households. Enumerators were assigned to specific tracts and were to hand out forms and collect them by the specified deadline. The identities of the enumerators remain unclear, but they were probably local civil officials and police. Then provincial administrations were able to partially tabulate the data, and then the census administration under the Department of Civil Affairs tabulated the final figures (Beal, 1945: 246).

The census form asked for names, family compositions, ages, relationships, sex, race/nationality, place of permanent residence for travelers, and military status (Beal, 1945: 249). The extent to which

respondents could get away with lying is unclear. On the one hand, the self-reported nature of the census forms would enable misrepresentation by leaving out family members of a certain age range, misreporting ages to avoid conscription, or using approximations. On the other hand, the fact that this census was also to serve as the basis for universal household registration implied verifiability. There was also a fine for refusal to return census forms or for false information, further incentivizing truthful reporting, or at least the reporting of information that was consistent with what was previously given to the authorities.

Thus, such means of non-compliance by Manchukuo residents would probably result in age heaping. This would probably be compounded by prior avoidance of local civil registrations. In turn, a lack of prior state capacity to enforce registrations would also probably undermine the ability of the state to force residents to answer truthfully in the 1940 census.

A history of Manchukuo published after the war by Japanese administrators notes that the census was largely successful (Manshukokushi Hensankankokai, 1970: 56–58). In contrast, the official internal history of the Manchukuo Police (published in 1942) bemoaned that the pre-census registrations and the universal civil registrations based on the 1940 census both suffered from a reliance on self-reported information and lacked independent verification through an "investigation of actual conditions". The same history also partly blamed the relatively low level of education for police, which hindered their ability to complete administrative tasks (Manshukoku Chianbu Keimushi, 1942: 406).

Taken together, these facts show that the intragroup variation in MBI across localities was probably caused by a combination of avoidance, prior registrations, and local administrative competence. The following analysis focuses on the avoidance aspect as driving the variation in MBI scores across regions for a given ethnic group. While impossible to rule out entirely, some controls for prior state capacity are introduced in the analysis. A section in the Online Appendix also addresses the possibility that cultural factors may influence age heaping.

Residential segregation measures

In addition to the static population distributions, the population data at the city, town, or village level are used in order to measure county/banner-level segregation. Borjigin (2017: 210–211) notes that while Mongols were able to integrate Han who moved into Mongol villages, all-Han settlements created an entirely alien society and did not allow Han to integrate into local Mongol society, creating greater conflict.

The 1940 census provides population counts by gender and age for all cities, towns, and villages, which allows the researcher to construct segregation measures, although it is not possible to find out where exactly in the counties and banners these settlements were located, or to compute MBI at that level, since they only provide totals rather than age cohorts. For this analysis, four common measures of segregation are used: dissimilarity, exposure, entropy, and GINI. The particular derivations are elucidated in the Online Appendix section titled "Segregation Measures", but in short, dissimilarity measures the even-ness with which demographic groups are distributed, that is to say, how much the population distributions within villages in a banner or county deviates from the banner/county average. The score varies from 0 (highest integration—all villages have the same ratios of ethnic groups as the county or banner) to 1 (lowest integration—complete segregation; all groups live in ethnically homogeneous villages). Such measures have been used in works such as Alesina and Zhuravskaya (2011) to show a relationship between segregation and the quality of government at the national level or by Corvalan and Vargas (2015) to examine the impact on ethnic and religious segregation on civil conflict.

Exposure measures potential contact, and differs from dissimilarity in that it accounts for the relative sizes of each group, and can be computed differently from the perspective of these different

Table 1. Demographic displacement in Inner Mongolia.

Period	Mongols	Han	Total	Percentage Mongol
Late sixteenth Century	1,090,000	705,000	1,795,000	61%
Early nineteenth Century	1,030,000	1,000,000	2,150,000	48%
1912	877,946	1,550,948	2,403,179	37%
1937	864,429	3,719,113	4,630,576	17%

Note: Figures are from Wang (2013: 25). These figures are for all of Inner Mongolia, including the western part, which is not covered in this paper.

Table 2. Replacement and Han Myers' Blended Index (MBI).

	Dependent variable:		
	MBI (Han)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Percentage Han	0.06	0.45***	0.36*
	(0.13)	(0.17)	(0.21)
South Manchuria Railway adjacent territory		−0.01	0.0003
		(0.14)	(0.21)
Unit type (county)		−0.06	−0.08
		(0.07)	(0.10)
Population density			0.0001
			(0.001)
Ethnic province dummy		X	X
Province dummy		X	X
Observations	73	73	73

Note: *$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$

groups. The higher the score is, the more that the group in question will be exposed to members of the same group relative to other groups. The Entropy index is a weighted average of the degree to which groups are evenly represented in each area and the GINI index is a score of the deviation from an even distribution computed by deriving the weighted mean of all the differences across pairs of sub-county/banner units, as a proportion of the maximum weighted mean difference (Massey and Denton, 1988: 285). A figure in the Online Appendix illustrates the distribution of the aforementioned segregation measures.

Empirical analysis

Demographic replacement

In order to test the Demographic Replacement Hypothesis, this section shows the relationships between migration and state capacity over the Han. Ideally, there would be panel data of the demographic displacement and age heaping measures across the groups; however since this is the first and only census in the region that measures age cohorts separately across ethnic groups, the analysis is conducted on a snapshot that captures different regions at different stages of displacement. The analysis shows

that as Han displace Mongols, legibility over Han decreases. Table 2 shows the results for this analysis. Controls are added for territories adjacent to the South Manchurian Railways (SMR), which contained Japanese-administered concessions from before the creation of Manchukuo, and for type of administrative unit (county or banner) given the longer history of thorough household registrations in the former, and population density. Looking at models 1–3, we see that the effect of percentage Han on MBI is insignificant without controls, but is significant and positive at the 1% level for model 2, and at the 10% level for model 3. Taking model 2 as an example, increasing from the first quartile of proportion Han (65.5%) in the same to the third quartile (97.4%) increases the MBI by 0.17, which is a 0.62 standard deviation increase in Han MBI (which indicates a decrease in legibility/state capacity).

Residential segregation

When looking at the effects of the four different measures of segregation in Table 3, the analysis yields similar results. Most of the segregation measures show negative relationships on Han MBI, although some are not significantly different from zero (models 2 and 7 are insignificant at 10% level and models 1 and 5 are only significant at the 10% level). This largely supports the Segregation Hypothesis, as it shows that settlement patterns characterized by residential segregation (and therefore less integration, and greater potential threats to Han property rights) are associated with higher levels of state capacity for migrants.

Substantively, when looking at Table 3 Model 12, increasing the GINI from the first to the third quartile (0.28 to 0.38) results in a 0.08 decrease in Han MBI or a 0.3 standard deviation increase in state capacity.

Both analyses run the danger of endogeneity; it is entirely possible that those Han who were more inclined to cooperate with Manchukuo's efforts to bolster state capacity were more likely to move into areas with more Mongols and less residential segregation. While impossible to rule out, there is suggestive evidence that this is probably not the case. One measure of anti-Japanese sentiment is the level of police militarization in the early period of Manchukuo, as areas with strong anti-Japanese insurgencies had militarized police units to combat insurgency, and police forces transitioned to administrative police as areas were pacified. Although limited to areas under county administration and therefore a truncated sample size, the table titled "Pol. Militarization, Ethnic Composition, and Segregation" shows that there appears to be no clear relationship between prior anti-Japanese sentiment among the Han and the ethnic composition or segregation of administrative units. The section in the Online Appendix on prior state capacity also shows that other plausible proxies of pre-census state capacity are not strongly correlated with Han MBI in 1940. Another potential source of bias may arise from peculiarities of the case itself—despite the official rhetoric of ethnic harmony, historical accounts tend to describe the Mongols as a favored race relative to the Han under Manchukuo (Narangoa, 2001), reversing the prior trend of anti-Mongol discrimination under warlord rule. However, this is likely to bias against finding a result, as the relative benefits of submitting oneself to state enumeration ought to decline under these circumstances.

Village comparison case study

The following comparison draws on village surveys from the 1930s. A comparison of these two cases shows that continued Mongol presence threatened Han property rights, leading to demands for state adjudication, and higher levels of compliance.

White dots indicate the locations of the villages, with the relevant counties shaded in black. The areas shaded in red indicate Chinchow and Kirin provinces (Figure 5).

Table 3. Effect on Myers' Blended Index (MBI) (segregation, Han).

	Dependent variable:											
	MBI (Han)											
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Dissimilarity	−0.29**				−0.28**				−0.35*			
	(0.14)				(0.14)				(0.18)			
Exposure (Han)		−0.11				−0.45**				−0.37		
		(0.18)				(0.21)				(0.27)		
Entropy			−0.54**				−0.32				−0.80*	
			(0.27)				(0.32)				(0.45)	
GINI				−0.76***				−0.72**				−0.82**
				(0.28)				(0.28)				(0.35)
SMR Administered territory					0.01	−0.02	−0.01	0.01	−0.01	−0.01	−0.05	0.002
					(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.14)	(0.21)	(0.21)	(0.21)	(0.20)
Admin unit type (county)					0.03	−0.04	0.01	0.03	0.04	−0.06	0.01	0.04
					(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Population density									0.0001	0.0001	0.001	−0.0000
									(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Ethnic province Dummy					×	×	×	×	×	×	×	×
province Dummy									×	×	×	×
observations	73	73	73	73	73	73	73	73	73	73	73	73

Note: *$p < 0.1$; **$p < 0.05$; ***$p < 0.01$

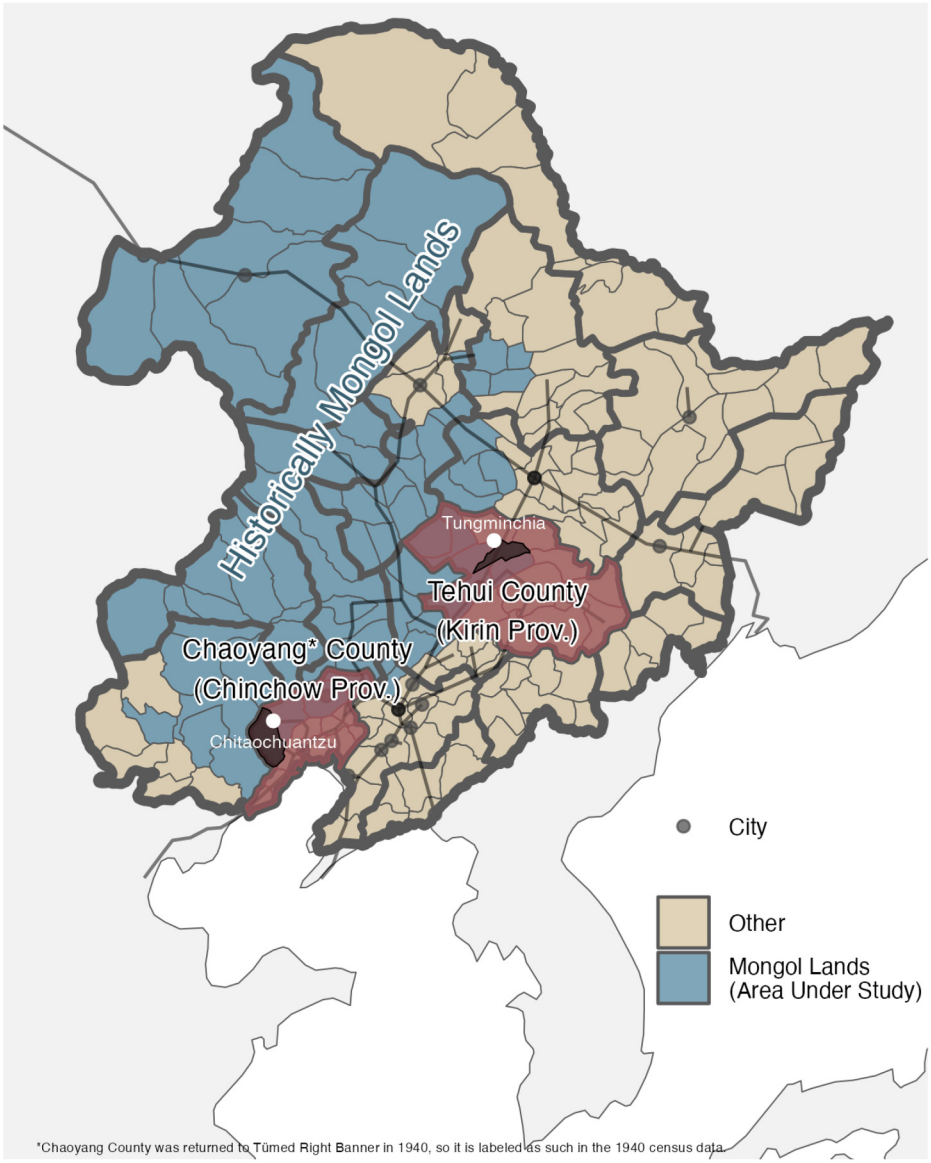

Figure 5. Tungminchia and Chitaochuantzu villages in Manchukuo.

The two villages examined here are Tungminchia village in Tehui County, Kirin Province, and Chitaochuantzu village in Chaoyang County, Chinchow Province, with their locations shown in Figure 5. Both fall within historically Mongol Lands. Tehui County was rendered from Gorlos Front Banner, and settled through 1799–1827, with a Mongol population of merely eight individuals out of a population of 284,655 in the 1940 census; no Mongols resided in Tungminchia or any adjacent villages. In contrast, many Mongols remained in Chaoyang County, created from Tumed Right Banner, with a 4% Mongol population as of 1940. Locally, Chitaochuantzu had

Table 4. Village comparison summary.

	Chitaochuantzu Village Chaoyang County Chinchow Province	Tungminchia Village Tehui County Kirin Province
Village demographics	46 Han HH, 1 Mongol HH	33 Han HH
Surrounding village demographics	18% Mongol	All Han
Han–Mongol conflicts	Tenancy conflicts throughout settlement Chintantao Incident in 1891 Conflict over conversion of Han tenancy into ownership in 1920s–1930s	Conflicts over rent between Han migrants and Mongol banner authorities in 1910s
Han–Mongol conflicts under Manchukuo	Ongoing	Non-existent
Danger to Han property rightss under Manchukuo era	Ongoing	Not mentioned
National land tax non-payment	3% non-payment (1935)	20% non-payment (1934)
Mongol fees non-payment	No non-payment (1935)	20% non-payment (1934)

one Mongol household out of 47 as of 1936, but 18% of the households in adjacent villages remained Mongol.

Case selection. These cases were chosen to illustrate the process and mechanism. County-level comparisons were impossible owing to a lack of data for the outcome (some measure of compliance). Instead, villages were chosen as the units of analysis because the surveys reported levels of tax compliance.

Cases were selected from Mongol Lands, excluding areas with major natural disasters. The reports did not indicate case choice logic at the county or village levels, although they state that their purpose was to understand the land property rights, material relations, output capacity, rural financial integration, and public service quality.

Tunminchia village, Tehui county. Tunminchia was initially settled in the eighteenth Century by Min Wan-Chang, a Shantung peasant. The land originally belonged to the Gorlos Front Banner, and the manner of land acquisition was lost to time. By 1936, the population had grown to 33 households, all Han. Indeed, no Mongols resided in adjacent villages. Village lands were assessed by the authorities under the late Ch'ing and the Republican eras and given land titles over time, although Gorlos Front Banner retained residual taxation rights (MKJRC, 1938a: 54–56).

While the village survey does not mention Han–Mongol conflicts in Tunminchia, they were not unknown in the area. In 1910, Han migrants and squatters clashed with Mongols over land taxes and cultivation rights. The Mongol banner authorities eventually deployed soldiers to evict the migrants, resulting in fatal armed combat between the two sides, with the incident eventually

mediated by the Han Tehui county magistrate (Kashiwara and Hamada, 1920: 56–57). However, I have not been able to find mentions of such occurrences under Manchukuo.

For the outcome, we measure compliance with national and Mongol land taxes in 1934. The survey was conducted in 1936 and contains data from 1934 and 35, but we will focus on 1934 as 1935 saw extensive land tax payment delays owing to natural disasters. Owing to overlapping jurisdictions that were present until reforms in the late 1930s, part of the land tax was collected by the Mongol banner. Of the national and Mongol land taxes owed, 20% were not paid on time (MKJRC, 1938a: 168–183).

Chitaochuantzu village, Chaoyang county. Chitaochuantzu began as a Mongolian settlement in Tumed Right Banner, and Han migration began in the eighteenth century. The Han began as tenants but converted tenancies into outright ownership over time. By 1936, only one Mongol household remained in this settlement out of 47 households, although 18% of the 284 households in adjacent villages remained Mongol. As the Mongols were relatively concentrated, this area is characterized by segregated settlement and incomplete displacement (MKJRC, 1938b: 119–123; 209–219; 298–313).

This area had seen past and ongoing instances of Han–Mongol conflict, as the local Mongols could actively oppose Han attempts to secure property rights. When such conflicts occurred, the parties often called upon the Manchukuo authorities to mediate and step in to resolve them.

During the 1891 Chintantao incident, local Han rebels attacked Mongol villagers and Mongol Lamaist temples. Later land surveys under warlord rule in the 1920s meant to formalize the Han property rights in Chitaochuantzu were also actively opposed by local Mongol residents and monks (MKJRC, 1938b: 119). Unlike in Tunminchia, such conflicts were still ongoing under Manchukuo — while contemporary incidents in Chitaochuantzu were not recorded, there were such conflicts in the rest of Chaoyang. For example, a 1935 meeting of land section chiefs reports an incident in Chaoyang where a Han landowner transferred land to another Han without paying the transfer fees to the Mongols, resulting in a dispute. This conflict was only resolved after an intervention of the county- and province-level Manchukuo authorities (Tochikyoku, 1935: 164).

As for state capacity outcomes, the survey reports data for 1935 and 1936 but we take 1936 as the baseline year owing to natural disasters in 1935. There is high compliance with the national and Mongol land taxes—3% of the national taxes were unpaid when due, and the Mongol land taxes were paid in full, alongside extra payment for unpaid sums from the previous year (MKJRC, 1938b: 252–265).

Discussion and comparison. Table 4 summarizes the key points from the discussion above. As Tunminchia shows, total displacement results in lower levels of conflict, as local Mongol residents no longer remain to oppose attempts to consolidate Han property rights. With property rights relatively secure from Mongol opposition, there is less demand for intervention, and consequently lower levels of compliance with land taxation. In contrast, there is a substantial number of Mongols in segregated residence in Chiaochuantzu—resulting in ongoing opposition and constraints on the ability of the Han migrants to consolidate their property rights. Consequently, these conflicts bring in the higher authorities, and the Han must appeal their case to the authorities—resulting in higher levels of compliance with state taxation. These examples, alongside the quantitative analysis, illustrate how local demographics can affect the ability of migrants to secure their property rights, which shapes their relationship with the higher authorities.

Conclusions

Using data from Manchukuo, this paper shows evidence on how threats to property arising from indigenous–migrant conflict shape migrant compliance to state capacity measures under a lack

of state sponsorship for the migrants. It demonstrates that the extent of threats to their property rights can improve the state's capacity to ascertain information about the migrants. Success and cooperation with basic tasks that enhance state capacity as legibility, such as personal registration and public land titling, are important preconditions for other capacities such as the ability to tax and mobilize subjects of the state. Migrants, in this case, the Han in historically Mongol territories (Mongol Lands), are more likely to be recorded with higher-quality census data—which is here interpreted as greater cooperation with enumeration attempts by the state—where the potential threat to their staked property rights from the indigenous Mongols ia greater. Additional case study evidence shows the same pattern for tax compliance.

This work builds upon previous research on SoS conflicts and connects it to a broader literature on state capacity by showing how such conflicts constrains a state's ability to engender compliance with its attempts to expand its ability to see what its domain entails. Such conflicts are likely to increase during the twenty-first century as both land scarcity and rural–rural migration increases, and will become especially acute with increasing pressures from climate change. The role that states play in such conflicts, as well as the manner with which states are shaped by these conflicts, will become more important in the coming years. Furthermore, given the centrality of land property rights in transitional justice for instances of inter-communal conflict, engendering compliance to state policy through the threat of expropriation by the adversary may raise difficulties in entering and maintaining post-conflict peace settlements.

This study may have some implications for the relationship between migrants and the state in current conflict environments where newcomers contest for land property rights with natives. Those contesting for land who may otherwise be weary of state interference, such as radical settlers in Israel or Turkish Cypriots who claim property in disputed areas (Haklai and Loizides, 2015; Loizides, 2007), may find it more favorable to submit to state control in return for adjudication and legal backing in that they otherwise may wish to avoid, such as enumeration or taxation. The results may also have some implications for the viability of non-state actors contesting for sovereignty—those who can administer secure property rights for incumbent residents are able to obtain tacit support. The Taliban insurgency, for example, was able to obtain support by providing swift and effective adjudications in property disputes (Grasse et al., 2024). Similarly, rebel groups such as M23 in the D.R. Congo may be seeking acquiescence by creating a parallel justice system, using its militants to enforce land claims (IPIS, 2025).

There are some limitations. The relationships explored here represent a snapshot of an ongoing process of migration and settlement that was temporarily halted owing to historical happenstance, rather than a systematic time series. Therefore, a clean causal identification is difficult. Future research would require a measure of state capacity that disaggregates across politically salient groups, across territories, and over time. Such a measure would allow researchers to build and test dynamic theories of how indigenous–migrant conflict shapes state capacity. Cases of internal migration-induced land conflict in African contexts that are concurrent with attempts to formalize land titles and state capacity as legibility may be the most fruitful for future research, if state capacity measures that can be dis-aggregated across groups can be developed.

Finally, what happened in Inner Mongolia in the following years? Han–Mongol relations in the Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region alternated between autonomy and repression. Peking promoted Mongol language rights, cultural distinctiveness, and minority representation in education and administration (Sneath, 2008: 97), while pursuing repression. During the Cultural Revolution, Mongols suffered pogroms, purges, and identity suppression (Cheng et al., 2023). Repression eased after Mao's death, but protests reemerged in the 2010s over mining-related ecological damage and in the 2020s against Chinese-language education. Despite Inner Mongolian

Autonomous Region's formal autonomy, demographic displacement continues: Mongols, about 20% of the population at the PRC's founding, had declined to roughly 12% by 2000 (Minority Rights Group, 2008).

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. For example, Alesina et al. (1999); Habyarimana et al. (2007), to cite a few representative examples out of a vast literature.
2. The scope of this analysis will be limited to the "Mongol Lands" throughout this manuscript. These are historically Mongol territories that were under the exclusive administration of Mongol banners under the Ch'ing Dynasty (Bulag, 2017: 353), some of which were alienated from the Mongols through Han migration. Their extent in the region of interest can be seen on the left-hand map of Figure 2.
3. A similar argument has been made in the racial threat literature regarding race relations in the USA, where more non-whites are perceived by whites to decrease the whites' abilities to socially control non-whites (Enos, 2016).
4. For example, Rocha and Espino (2009) shows that Anglo threat perception of Latinos in US cities is not affected by group size in segregated cities but has a negative effect in integrated ones. The posited relationship between segregation and perceived threats to migrants' property rights also parallels the racial contact hypothesis, which posits that repeated contact with outgroups decreases prejudice against them (Paluck et al., 2019). Corvalan and Vargas (2015) also shows that ethnic segregation is associated with the incidence of conflict in a cross-national analysis.
5. This process may not strictly be internal migration, as the question of Chinese dominion over Eastern Inner Mongolia remained unsettled until Communism (Bulag, 2017, 373–379).
6. The Japanese in this case were not trying to preserve Mongol common property per se, but rather wanted to prevent further encroachments by the Han to preserve the Mongols and to resolve the ethnic conflict. It

seems that Japanese officials preferred plots registered to individuals without overlapping rights but had a hard time navigating the disputes and institutions in the mixed areas.

7. "Manchurians" subdivided into Manchu Banner People, Mongols, Han, and Hui, "Japanese" are subdivided into mainland, Korean, and other Japanese. Additionally, there are foreign nationals, and stateless persons.

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