Patronizing Monasteries for Political Survival

Usurpers and the Rise of Buddhism in Mid-Imperial China

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Abstract

We study the rise of Buddhism in China, which took place during the first millennium AD. We argue that illegitimate emperors could co-opt this spiritually influential but politically weak religion to strengthen their legitimacy and to counterbalance entrenched elites. We test this argument using a newly built a new dataset on Buddhist monasteries, famous monks, and secular rulers. Consistent with our predictions, we find that usurpers allowed for the construction of 2.1 times more Buddhist monasteries than legitimate emperors, *only* when they were self-entrenched. Using a staggered difference-in-difference design, we show that these constructions were more likely to take place in areas controlled by threatening local powerful elites. Areas were monasteries were built display increased likelihood of producing influential monks for decades after.

1 INTRODUCTION

Buddhism was first introduced to China in the first century BC (Poceski, 2014). Today, 365 million people practice Buddhist rituals in China (Nadeem, 2023). Depending on the survey source, the country has the largest or second-largest self-declared Buddhist population (Hackett et al., 2025). Yet, throughout its growth during the first millennium AD, Buddhism had to compete with pre-existing Confucianism and local folklore. Buddhist monasteries, requiring tax-exempt status, were often seen as harmful to state capacity and as dangerous loci of sedition (Gernet, 1995). Why and how did Buddhism rise to become one of China's main religions?

In this paper, we provide a supply-side answer to this question by introducing a theory of monastery patronage for political survival. We argue that autocrats facing legitimacy and power challenges have strategically co-opted this spiritually influential yet politically weak non-indigenous religion, which eventually contributed to the durable establishment of Buddhism in Chinese society. This argument is supported by anecdotal evidence (Palumbo, 2012; Rothschild, 2015; Rauw, 2008). We demonstrate it using newly collected data on Buddhist monasteries, famous monks, emperors and local political elites in China over the first millennium.

Ruling in mid-imperial China (318–960) was dangerous. Among the 235 emperors who ruled in that period, 100 were deposed by a coup—which often resulted in their death. For the rulers who arose from these coups, the *usurpers*, the risk of being themselves deposed, or killed, was even higher (Wang, 2024b). Upon accession, usurpers thus had to build legitimacy in a context of Confucian-led male primogeniture, and tame the power of local elites who had stayed loyal to their predecessor.

Buddhist monasteries had the ability to help them in this endeavor. Their many feasts, funeral rituals and ordination ceremonies, with their large attendance and sophisticated narration, were powerful tools of propaganda (Benn, 2024). Buddhist lay societies and large monasteries coordinated large-scale voluntary public works involving community members over years. In other words, they had both the ideological and the institutional capacity to shape the common knowledge necessary for building legitimacy (Rubin, 2025). Moreover, their capture of state capacity undermined local governments.

At the same time, Buddhist leaders had an incentive to accept the co-optation of usurpers. While they were growing in spiritual influence among both elites and the masses, their monasteries and monks never gained formal political authority, and needed the rulers' approval for their establishment (Storch, 2000). The religion's submissive doctrine implied compliance with imperial

authority (Smith, 1993), while the religion faced strong cultural resistance from orthodox Confucianism for violating traditional values such as filial piety (Guang, 2022). Consequently, Buddhist monasteries were heavily dependent on imperial support.

To measure Buddhist investment in mid-imperial China, we built an original dataset documenting the dates of construction and geographic locations of 11,502 temples, 3,907 of which date back to mid-imperial China. The data come from the combination of a contemporary list of recorded monasteries (from China's National Religious Affairs Administration) and a scholarly compilation of historically recorded ones (the Catalog of Buddhist Monasteries in Tang and Five Dynasties—*Tang wudai fosi jikao*). We employ several strategies to collect the founding date of these monasteries, and geo-locate them into 50×50 km grid cells and modern prefectures. The resulting data show the striking rise and spread of Buddhism over the first millennium.

Our empirical strategy studies how the rates of temple construction vary with the status of the emperor governing the area. We rely on two main status distinctions. First, we distinguish between legitimate rulers and usurpers. To identify usurpers among the 382 emperors in Chinese history, we extract data from *Changing the Sky: A Panorama of Palace Coups in Chinese History* (Zhang, 2011), which documents all coups mentioned in official historical texts. Second, we distinguish between the 46 usurpers who initiated the succession coup themselves and likely possessed substantial *de facto* power—"self-entrenched" usurpers—and the 52 usurpers who were entrenched by powerful elites, often serving as puppets with limited authority—"other-entrenched" usurpers. Our theory predicts that the former would have higher incentives and ability to invest in Buddhist monasteries, in particular their elite-weakening aspect.

We start by showing that self-entrenched usurpers see 2.1 times more Buddhist monasteries built during their reigns than legitimate emperors do. Other-entrenched usurpers, on the other hand, build 50% fewer temples than legitimate rulers. These results hold when instrumenting for usurper status with being the non-first-born son of an emperor, as in Chen and Fan (2021).

We then show that these monasteries are more likely to be built in areas under the control of local powerful elites. We collected data on Early Tang elite power bases using geographic information on Tang senior officials' hometowns from historical biographical data (Wang, 2021). Most of these officials belonged to aristocratic families that wielded significant local influence and were capable of resisting state penetration (Wang, 2022; Ebrey, 1978; Chen et al., 2022). As an alternative definition of elite power bases, we used the Clan Records (*Shizu zhi*), compiled during Emperor Taizong of Tang's reign, which documented the officially recognized aristocratic families and their

home bases. Taizong's documenting effort was explicitly made with the aim of identifying the families most dangerous to his reign. Using a staggered difference-in-differences design around the accession of self-entrenched usurpers, we show . Again, these results are not visible for other-entrenched usurpers.

Finally, we provide suggestive evidence that the building of Buddhist monasteries under usurpers was consequential for the persistence of Buddhism in China. We collect data on 7,682 famous Buddhist monks from the DILA AuthorityTime database over the 0–2000 period and extract their birth and ordination locations. We show that monasteries built under usurpers are correlated with the presence of famous monks for at least 100 years after their foundation.

This paper speaks to three literatures. First, it contributes to the study of the rise and decline of religious groups (see, e.g., Inglehart, 2021; Lowes et al., 2025; Barro et al., 2026). This literature has documented with increasing precision when and where religious adherence expands or contracts, but it is overwhelmingly built on the modern era and on the Abrahamic traditions. What is known about Buddhism expansion comes from a rich sinological tradition that reconstructs it from monastic gazetteers, dynastic histories and temple inscriptions (Zürcher, 2007; Ch'en, 1964; Gernet, 1995). Our contribution is to bring this case into the quantitative literature. In this respect, the paper echoes the work of Bai and Kung (2015) who religious infrastructure to trace the diffusion of Protestantism in late-imperial China.

Second, the paper contributes to the political economy of religion, and specifically to the literature on religion as a source of political legitimacy (Rubin, 2025). Since Weber (1922), the organizing idea is that rulers whose title is contested buy legitimacy from religious authorities and pay for it in resources and policy, a bargain whose terms depend on the ruler's outside options and on the concentration of the religious market (Gill, 1998; Coşgel and Miceli, 2009; Coşgel et al., 2012; Coşgel et al., 2018; Rubin, 2017; Greif and Rubin, 2022; Bentzen and Gokmen, 2023).A parallel literature treats the medieval Church not as a supplier of legitimacy but as a political rival in its own right, one that fragmented secular authority and supplied the institutional templates on which European states were later built (Grzymala-Busse, 2020, 2023a,b; Herman, 1990). We contribute to this literature in two ways. First, we test its central prediction in a setting were the religion—unlike the Church of Rome—never held independent political authority, using variation in the ruler's *need* for legitimacy that is plausibly exogenous. Second, we identify a mechanism that legitimation alone does not deliver: what usurpers bought was not only an ideological narrative but *rival-undermining religious infrastructure.* Tax-exempt monasteries competed with the landed aristocracy for the same

land and the same cultivators, and we show that usurpers built them disproportionately in the home bases of the aristocratic families that constrained them.

Third, the paper contributes to the study of Chinese political development and, through it, to the Great Divergence debate. Wang (2022) argues that the trade-off between state building and personal survival in imperial China is governed by the social terrain of the elite, which rulers take as given absent an external shock; related work stresses the informational and agency limits of absolutist rule (Ma and Rubin, 2019) and the state's progressive institutionalization of control over religion (Shi, 2016; Shih, 2022). We show that rulers were not merely constrained by elite structure but acted on it, importing an outside social force to erode it—at a measurable cost to fiscal capacity. This has a direct bearing on the divergence literature, which traces constrained government in Europe to the presence of organizations with autonomous power bases, above all the aristocracy and the Church (North and Weingast, 1989; Dincecco, 2009; Stasavage, 2020; Grzymala-Busse, 2023b; Koyama and Rubin, 2022).

2 Historical and Conceptual Background

2.1 The Rise of Buddhism in Mid-Imperial China

The introduction of Buddhism to China was a gradual process that began around the first half of the first century BCE (Poceski, 2014). It primarily arrived via the Silk Road, entering Chinese territory at Dunhuang and then spreading through Gansu towards the "region within the Passes" and the North China plain (Zürcher, 1990, 1999). By the middle of the first century CE, Buddhism was already being referenced in historical Chinese records (Zürcher, 2007). Initially, Buddhism was predominantly practiced within foreign merchant communities in larger cities. Starting in the fourth century CE, the religion began to permeate all levels of Chinese society, including the imperial court, aristocratic families, the peasantry, and urban residents. The spread of Buddhism was further accelerated by the establishment of monasteries throughout China. These institutions were often funded by affluent patrons, which significantly contributed to the religion's diffusion and its integration into the social fabric of China (Weinstein, 2008).

Among the patrons of Buddhism, emperors were particularly influential and important (Zürcher, 2013; Weinstein, 2018). By converting to Buddhism and acting as protectors of its doctrine, emperors provided great symbolic value in terms of status and influence: their endorsement made Buddhism "respectable" and promoted its position relative to competing religions. Royal support

also facilitated the penetration and development of Buddhism by initiating large-scale patronage, including the allocation of corporate landed property and the construction and maintenance of temples and monasteries. More importantly, by leveraging their privileges as rulers, some emperors introduced and implemented preferential policies that granted tax-exempt status to monasteries, thereby significantly contributing to the expansion of the temple economy (He, 2011). Specifically, usurpers are more likely to actively support Buddhism. Among the six mid-imperial Chinese emperors historically recognized as prominent patrons of Buddhism, five were usurpers.[2]

However, materially patronizing Buddhist monasteries, particularly by granting them tax-exempt status, has been criticized for undermining state capacity. The patronage diminishes state control over land and population, posing significant challenges to the administrative and fiscal authority of the state (Gernet, 1995; Benn, 2024). This scenario thus presents an intriguing puzzle: why did many Chinese emperors actively endorse the development of Buddhism through preferential policies at the expense of state strength?

Existing explanations generally followed the literature on the political roles of religion, focusing primarily on the ideological perspective. Beyond attributing Buddhist patronage by emperors to rulers' personal beliefs, conventional wisdom has suggested that Buddhism functioned as an "opium of the people," serving as a tool for rulers to exert mind control over the population (Benn, 2024). Some fundamental and widely accepted Buddhist ideas, such as karma and rebirth, aligned with the interests of the ruling classes–if peasants had been born poor that was certainly not anyone's fault but their own. Previous literature also suggested that Buddhist theories of kingship, particularly the concept of the universal monarch known as a "wheel-turning king (*cakravartin*)," conferred legitimacy on Chinese emperors (Palumbo, 2012; Forte, 2005; McNair, 2013). Moreover, Buddhism has been argued to be especially crucial in legitimizing rulers who might be deemed illegitimate by Confucian standards, such as usurpers or empresses. In these scenarios, Buddhism acted as a counterbalancing ideology to the traditional source of legitimacy (Rothschild, 2015; Guisso, 1978; Chen, 2002; Eisenberg, 2012). Recent scholarship emphasized the role of Buddhism in centralizing power away from political elites. Rauw (2008) argued that Emperor Wu of Liang had employed Buddhism to establish direct contact with his subjects, thereby reducing his reliance on the Confucianism tradition, which was dominated by the literati aristocrats.

[2]The emperors who famously patronized Buddhism were Emperor Wu of Liang, Emperor Wen of Sui, Emperor Yang of Sui, Emperor Taizong of Tang, Empress Zetian of Zhou, and Emperor Xuanzong of Tang (Li Zhong). Notably, all except Emperor Yang of Sui are well-documented as usurpers. Although Emperor Yang of Sui was not explicitly recorded as a usurper, there remains a suspicion that he ascended to the throne through a coup.

Nevertheless, these accounts, derived from historical research focusing on individual emperors or a select few, have not been empirically tested across the entire period. While providing essential insights, the ideological explanations do not fully address the puzzle as well. Employing Buddhism as an ideological tool does not necessitate supporting it through preferential policies that allocate critical resources to the religion at the expense of state capacity. This issue becomes even more perplexing when considering that emperors facing significant external military threats, such as during times of partition or nomadic invasions, would choose to actively patronize Buddhism. The current research proposes a *patronizing monasteries for political survival* theory in the next section to address the problems of existing accounts.

2.2 PATRONIZING MONASTERIES FOR POLITICAL SURVIVAL

In this section, we first outline the dilemma mid-imperial Chinese emperors faced. Based on this dilemma, we propose the *patronizing monasteries for political survival* theory, which seeks to explain why autocrats facing legitimacy and power challenges—such as usurpers in mid-imperial China—actively patronized Buddhism, a non-indigenous religion, with a focus on their strategies that granted temples control over land and population.

2.2.1 Emperor's Dilemma in Mid-Imperial China

In mid-imperial China, emperors were frequently faced with a challenging dilemma due to the presence of a strong and cohesive group of political elites, typically aristocrats or warlords, who posed significant threats to rulers' authority and survival. Wang (2022) argued that before the Late Tang Dynasty, mid-imperial China's elite social terrain mirrored a star network, which represents a centralized and coherent elite that can constrain emperors in two ways. First, the elites were embedded within a centralized social structure, enabling them to utilize their cross-cutting ties to mobilize a broad range of social forces across different regions. Second, the cooperative ties among the central elites rendered them a cohesive group, which helped them overcome collective action and coordination challenges should they decide to rebel against the ruler. In other words, emperors' power was significantly constrained by elites.

Moreover, mid-imperial Chinese aristocrats maintained their power by controlling land and population within their families' sphere of influence, transforming these regions into elite power bases that continuously supported their challenges to the rulers (Ebrey, 1978; Lewis, 2011; Dien and Knapp, 2020; Graff, 2001). Even after the decline of aristocratic families in the Late Tang period

(Wang, 2022), another group of powerful elites, the warlords, emerged (Lorge, 2005, 2018; Mote, 2003). The warlords had maintained control over subnational financial, administrative, and military power until the Northern Song Dynasty, thus performing a similar role to their aristocratic predecessors. In summary, mid-imperial Chinese emperors continuously faced challenges from political elites with strong power bases, which constrained imperial power and threatened their personal survival.

The dilemma was especially serious for usurpers who, according to Confucian ideology that valued hereditary succession and moral governance, were often considered illegitimate (Guisso, 1978; Chen, 2002). This lack of legitimacy made it difficult for them to secure widespread acceptance. Moreover, ascending to power through coups typically required usurpers to form political coalitions with other elites by making concessions or granting them more power. These elites could later use their enhanced power to challenge the usurper's rule. By successfully usurping the throne, these rulers also set a precedent that power could be seized and provided a model that could be emulated by their peers within the elite class, thereby increasing the likelihood of further challenges. Table 3.1 illustrates the likelihood of mid-imperial Chinese emperors being deposed by a coup, indicating a 34.4% increase in the risk of usurpers being deposed compared to normal successors. Usurpers were also 13.1% more likely to be murdered than normal successors (Table A1).

Table 3.1: Possibility of Mid-Imperial Chinese Emperors Deposed by a Coup

	Normal Successors	Usurpers
Normal Abdication	86 (62.8%)	49 (50%)
Abdication by a Coup	51 (37.2%)	49 (50%)
Total	137 (100%)	98 (100%)

Note: Data from Wang (2024a; 2024c). The statistics are calculated by the author.

How can mid-imperial Chinese emperors, particularly usurpers, address the dilemma posed by powerful elites? Wang's (2022) theory suggested they had few options. Wang argued that exogenous shocks, such as climate change, could disrupt the stable equilibrium created by the elite social terrain, thus offering opportunities for the state to reshape society. In such scenarios, rulers could exploit the "first-mover advantage" to restructure the elite social terrain in their favor, thereby securing their own survival. There are also studies outlining a more positive view from the emperor's standpoint. It has long been argued that the adoption of the imperial examination system (*Keju*) was aimed at breaking the aristocratic monopoly on elite reproduction and recruiting bureaucrats from among the commoners, thus weakening the threats from established elites (Bol, 1992; Wu,

1992; Chen, 1956; Wen et al., 2024). Further research has suggested that rulers could employ a strategy of compensation, offering elites government offices in exchange for relinquishing their vested interests. Chen et al. (2022) suggested that the Northern Wei aristocrats from previously autonomous localities were disproportionately recruited into the bureaucracy as compensation for accepting a stronger state presence.

In addition to reshuffling state elites and providing compensation, rulers might also pit different elite or social groups against each other to secure their own power (Barkey, 1996; Acemoglu et al., 2004). By viewing Buddhist monasteries as actors participating in social competition for essential resources, our *patronizing monasteries for political survival* theory outlines how usurpers could strategically co-opt the temples to weaken elite power bases, thereby contributing to their survival.

2.2.2 Patronizing Monasteries for Political Survival

Focusing on elite politics in one-party autocracies, Shih (2022) proposed the *coalitions of the weak* theory, arguing that dictators can strategically replace seasoned, densely networked senior bureaucrats with either politically tainted or inexperienced ones who depend on their patronage and are unable to challenge their rule. By employing such a strategy, the autocratic ruler can successfully dominate the elite and achieve true dictatorship, governing without fear of internal challenge or resistance to major policy changes. We generalize Shih's theory to a broader context of social and political competition that encompasses interactions between an authoritarian ruler facing power threats, the challenging forces, and other social actors. However, unlike the dictator in Shih's framework, our ruler cannot simply remove and replace these threatening forces, as each has its own social foundation.

As previously analyzed, mid-imperial Chinese usurpers are typically weaker autocrats confronting both ideological challenges from Confucian tradition and political challenges from powerful elites. However, it is difficult for usurpers to remove either the Confucian ideology that deemed them illegitimate or the elites that threatened their rule. Confucianism had been China's official ideology since the Western Han period, and it was deeply embedded in the political system, serving essential functions such as legitimizing the state, recruiting officials, and guiding governing practices. Meanwhile, the elites had built their power on solid control over land and population in their strongholds.

Buddhism, a non-indigenous religion that was spiritually influential but politically weak, emerged as both an ideological and a social force that could contribute to the survival of usurpers in mid-

imperial China. Ideologically, usurpers could leverage Buddhism to provide alternative divine legitimacy, counterbalancing the dominant Confucianism doctrine that questioned their rule. Politically, by granting temples tax-exempt status and providing material support, usurpers could co-opt Buddhist monasteries and monks to make them compete with elites for control over land and population, thereby weakening elite power bases with little risk of backfire.

Unlike their counterparts in some other regions, Buddhists in Chinese history did not enjoy the same political authority, such as becoming official members of the government, participating in political decisions, or autonomously selecting the head of their community (Storch, 2000). Compared to the more rebellious indigenous Daoism, Buddhism doctrine was notably compliant with imperial authority (Smith, 1993). Additionally, despite gaining spiritual influence and more believers, the Buddhist clergy relied heavily on imperial support due to substantial challenges and criticism from orthodox Confucianists for violating traditional Chinese values, such as filial piety (Guang, 2022). In summary, given their lack of political authority, submissive doctrine, and dependence on imperial favor, Buddhist monasteries were unlikely to pose a threat to their imperial patrons. Historical evidence also suggests that when the monastery economy posed a severe threat to state capacity, emperors found it relatively easy to exploit monastic properties, compel monks to resume secular life, and dissolve temple tenant peasants (Smith, 1993; Shi, 2016). Therefore, we argue that usurpers are more likely to patronize Buddhism to counterbalance the ideological challenge posed by Confucianism and the political challenge from elites, especially in regions that served as elite power bases. We formulate the argument into the following hypotheses:

> *Hypothesis 1: Usurpers tended to support Buddhism more actively than hereditary rulers.*
> *Hypothesis 2: Under a usurper's rule, investment in Buddhism tended to be greater within elite power bases than in other regions.*

However, implementing the preferred religious policy requires substantial *de facto* power. Self-entrenched usurpers, who initiated the succession coup themselves, were likely to enjoy enough *de facto* power to implement their Buddhism policies. But usurpers who were entrenched by others often became puppets, thus lacking the authority to influence Buddhism policies–a scenario that is quite common in mid-imperial China (Chittick, 2018; Graff and Higham, 2012; Lewis, 2011). Thus, we modify our hypotheses to a weak version:

> *Hypothesis 1a: Compared to hereditary rulers, self-entrenched usurpers tended to support Buddhism more actively.*

Hypothesis 2a: Under a self-entrenched usurper's rule, investment in Buddhism was disproportionately greater within elite power bases than in other regions.

It is worth emphasizing that while both ideological and political logics imply increased religious investment under Buddhist co-optation policies, they represent independent strategic considerations. The objective of legitimacy provision was more broadly applicable to mid-imperial Chinese usurpers, given the violent and extralegal way by which they seized the throne. By contrast, the goal of weakening elite power was more context-dependent, shaped by the relative strength of imperial authority vis-à-vis established elites–becoming more salient in times of intense ruler-elite competition, and less so when the emperor's power dominated that of elites. The qualitative historical cases of Emperor Wu of Liang and Empress Zetian of Zhou in the following section lend support to this distinction. The two usurpers placed differing emphasis on symbolic versus physical Buddhist investment in accordance with the specific political challenges they faced.

3 USURPERS AND BUDDHIST INVESTMENT IN MID-IMPERIAL CHINA

3.1 Data

Temple Construction. We hand-coded an original dataset using data from the temple catalogue published by China's National Religious Affairs Administration (NRAA).[9] The catalogue documents 33,804 Buddhist temples across China, providing geographic details for each location. From this extensive list, we manually collected the initial construction years for the temples, which yielded time data for 10,658 monasteries. we incorporated temple data from the Buddhist Geographical Information System (BGIS), which is based on the Catalog of Buddhist Monasteries in Tang and Five Dynasties (*Tang wudai fosi jikao*) and the 2010 List of Buddhist Temples in China (*2010 Zhongguo fojiao siyuan minglu*).[10] The BGIS data lists 844 additional temples with time information. Notably, 10,802 of all 11,502 temples were established during the imperial period (before 1912). Moreover, 3,907 temples date back to the specific focus period of the current study–mid-imperial China (ca 317-960 CE).

[9]The temple catalogue is available at: https://www.sara.gov.cn/resource/common/zjjcxxcxxt/index.html.

[10]Li (2006); Wu (2022); Gui (2010).

However, the temple data faces a survival bias problem, as the temples listed in the NRAA's catalog are those that have survived to the present day. Several historical persecutions throughout Chinese history have resulted in the disappearance of many temples that once existed (Shi, 2016; Wang and Zhang, 2023; Tsai, 2007). Additionally, non-random factors such as wars and natural disasters could influence the likelihood of a temple's survival. To address the issue, we employed model specification strategies, such as controlling for regime fixed effects, to account for potential biases in the data. Additionally, we conducted a series of sensitivity analyses to test the robustness of our baseline findings and mitigate concerns about survival bias.

Emperors. We utilized the Chinese emperor data and the Chinese historical coup data compiled by Yuhua Wang (Wang, 2024a,c). The former includes detailed information on all 382 emperors in Chinese history, such as their times of ascension and abdication, the latter includes all coups mentioned in the official historical texts that are recorded in *Changing the Sky: A Panorama of Palace Coups in Chinese History* (Zhang, 2011). Utilizing the coup data, we added several novel attributes to each emperor, including whether they were usurpers, whether they were self-entrenched usurpers, and whether they were usurpers entrenched by others. A usurper is defined as an emperor who ascended to the throne through a coup. Self-entrenched usurpers are those who initiated the succession coup themselves, while other-entrenched usurpers are those supported and installed by powerful elites or coalitions.

Elite Power Bases. We collected data on Early Tang elite power bases using geographic information of Tang senior officials' hometowns from the historical biographical data compiled by Yuhua Wang (Wang, 2021). Most of these officials were from aristocratic families that held significant local influence, capable of resisting state penetration (Wang, 2022; Ebrey, 1978; Chen et al., 2022). The elites' hometowns are mapped to 42 prefectures, accounting for 16.87% of all prefectures in our dataset. This method is advantageous for identifying the home bases of elite families that were powerful at the time, as their occupancy of senior positions in the imperial court reflects.

However, this approach might overlook the power bases of elite families that were locally strong but did not seek active participation in state affairs or whose members were not holding senior offices at a given time. According to Wang (2022), the former scenario should be rare. To further address this potential limitation, we utilize the Clan Records (*Shizu zhi*) compiled during Emperor Taizong of Tang's reign. The text documented the officially recognized aristocratic families and their home bases at the time, providing an alternative method to identify elite power bases. This alternative definition identified 80 prefectures that were elite power bases, making up 32.13% of all

prefectures.

Other Data. We utilized the Chinese historical conflict data coded by Yuhua Wang (Wang, 2024b), which include various types of conflicts such as wars between regimes, external wars, peasant uprisings led by civilians, and rebellions led by political elites. We collected a range of geographical characteristics for each prefecture as our baseline controls in the DiD estimates. These characteristics include terrain ruggedness, river density, and the suitability indexes for two staple foods in China–rice and wheat.[11]

Table 5.1 presents the summary statistics for the main variables. Panel (a) shows the descriptive statistics for FE and IV models, while Panel (b) displays those for DiD models. Table A12 reports correlations between prefectures' characteristics and their elite power base status for DiD analysis. Wheat suitability is significantly associated with elite power bases, which is important for supporting population in self-sufficient manors. These factors are accounted as in our baseline controls.

Table 5.1: Summary Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Median	Max
Panel (a): Usurper and Temple Construction						
Number of Temple Est.	173,366	0.02	0.19	0	0.00	13
Usurper (dummy)	171,125	0.46	0.50	0	0.00	1
Usurper (category)	171,125	0.73	0.85	0	0.00	2
Number of Battles	173,366	0.01	0.12	0	0.00	7
Emperor Age	169,439	38.32	15.94	2	38.00	85
Chronological Reign Year	171,125	10.64	9.28	1	8.00	47
Founding Emperor	171,125	0.18	0.38	0	0.00	1
Panel (b):Temple Est. in Elite Power Bases during Li Shimin's Reign						
Yearly Avg N of Temple Est.	2,988	0.067	0.220	0	0	4
ElitePowerBase	2,988	0.173	0.378	0	0	1
ElitePowerBase (*Shizu Zhi*)	2,988	0.321	0.467	0	0	1
Terrain Ruggedness Index	2,988	0.199	0.165	0.005	0.154	0.821
River Dist.	2,988	2.780	2.370	0.042	2.260	12.026
Rice Suitability Index	2,988	11.400	10.600	0	8.740	45.211
Wheat Suitability Index	2,988	24.600	10.400	0.842	23.500	54.639

[11] Source: Chen et al. (2020).

3.2 Identification Strategies

3.2.1 FE and IV: Usurpers and Temple Construction

To test Hypothesis 1 (1a), we begin with a baseline prefecture fixed effects model of the following specification:

$$Y_{pt} = \beta_1 \text{Usurper}_{pt} + \beta_2 X'_{pt} + \phi_p + \text{D}_{pt} + \epsilon_{pt} \tag{1}$$

where, Y_{pt} indexes the number of temples constructed in prefecture p at time t. $Usurper_{pt}$ is a dummy variable that equals 1 if prefecture p is under a usurper's rule at time t, and 0 otherwise. X'_{pt} includes a set of control variables such as the occurrence of wars, the emperor's age, the chronological year of the emperor's reign, and whether the emperor is a founding ruler. Prefecture fixed effects ϕ_p controls for time-invariant prefecture characteristics. It is acknowledged that different dynasties might hold varied general views towards Buddhism, potentially affecting the incentivization for imperial support. Furthermore, alternations of dynasties, which were periods often characterized by chaos and wars, could lead to systematic destruction of temples. This suggests a potentially higher survival rate of temples constructed in later dynasties due to fewer historical disruptions (as illustrated in Figure A1). Therefore, we controlled dynasty fixed effects D_{pt} in all models, which could partially alleviate the survival bias concern. Since all prefectures within a dynasty are uniformly under the rule of the same emperor at any given time after controlling for dynasty fixed effects, our model specification chooses not to include time fixed effects. To allow for serial correlation of the error terms, we cluster standard errors at the prefecture level. β_1 is the coefficient of interest.

Usurpation is undoubtedly a high-risk strategy for power-seekers. Various factors can influence the success of a usurpation, which, in turn, impacts the decisions of usurpers once they ascend to the throne. Furthermore, previous rulers' policies toward Buddhism may influence current religious policy choices, as well as domestic power dynamics, leading to potential endogeneity concerns that could threaten the consistency of the main results. To address this issue, we employ an instrumental variable approach, following the method outlined by Chen and Fan (2021). The chosen instrument is *Non-1st Son*, a dummy variable indicating whether the emperor is not the eldest son of his predecessor. The instrument takes a value of 1 if this is the case, and 0 otherwise.

The logic behind using this variable as an instrument is rooted in the historical practices of power succession in most agrarian or sinicized-nomadic regimes in China, which traditionally

adopted primogeniture to ensure a smooth transition of power (Bai and Chen, 1997). Under such a system, a prince who was not the first-born son had a slim chance of being selected as the heir. Therefore, the instrument satisfies the relevance restriction because an emperor who was not the first son of his predecessor was more likely to ascend to the throne through a coup, thus being a usurper.

To satisfy the exclusion restriction criteria, the *Non-1st Son* variable must influence temple construction solely through its impact on whether an emperor is a usurper. A potential concern might be that non-firstborn princes, due to the Confucian doctrines not supporting their ambitions for accession, might naturally tend to favor and support Buddhism. However, this concern is unlikely to compromise the instrument in the current study. To effectively patronize Buddhism on a national scale, a prince needs to be an emperor at least. Historical evidence shows that while several non-firstborn princes in imperial China were known as personal patrons and scholars of Buddhism, none were identified as policy makers who preferentially favored Buddhism (Wright, 1957; Martin, 2009). In contrast, it is typically emperors, and particularly usurpers among them, who were known to had actively supported preferential religious policies (Rothschild, 2015; Weinstein, 2018; McNair, 2013; Rauw, 2008). Therefore, while non-firstborn princes may have personal inclinations toward Buddhism, their capacity to influence broader religious policy and drive nationwide investment in temple construction is limited unless they ascend to the throne, which is more likely achieved through usurpation. In summary, the instrument should satisfy the exclusion restriction.

To be precise, the IV equation takes the form of the prefecture fixed-effects equation as represented in Equation (5.1) above, except *Non-1st Son* replaces the explanatory variable, as shown in the following specification:

$$Y_{pt} = \beta_1 \widehat{\text{Usurper}}_{pt} + \beta_2 X'_{pt} + \phi_p + \text{D}_{pt} + \epsilon_{pt} \tag{2}$$

where $\widehat{\text{Usurper}}$ is generated by the first-stage regression in the IV framework:

$$\text{Usurper}_{pt} = \alpha_1 \text{Non-1stSon}_{pt} + \alpha_2 X'_{pt} + \phi_p + \text{D}_{pt} + \epsilon_{pt} \tag{3}$$

3.2.2 DiD: Temple Construction in Elite Power Bases

Utilizing the reign of Li Shimin, who was both a highly capable emperor and a well-known usurper, as an empirical case, we employ a canonical difference-in-differences (DiD) strategy to

test Hypothesis 2a. This approach assesses the effect of Li Shimin's ascension, which followed his famous Xuanwu Gate Coup, by estimating Equation (5.4) below at the level of prefecture-time. The treatment group includes prefectures identified as elite power bases–specifically, those that were the hometowns of aristocratic senior officials. The control group comprises prefectures that were not the hometowns of these officials. The timing for the intervention is marked by Li Shimin's ascension in 626 CE (t_0).

$$Y_{pt} = \beta \text{ElitePowerBases}_p \times \text{Ascension}_t + \phi_p + \gamma_t + \epsilon_{pt} \tag{4}$$

Here, Y_{pt} represents the average number of temple construction in prefecture p during period t. $ElitePowerBases_p$ is a variable that equals 1 if prefecture p is identified as an elite power base, and 0 otherwise. $Ascension_t$ is a dummy variable that equals 1 for the periods following the ascension of Li Shimin, and 0 for earlier periods. Prefecture fixed effects ϕ_p controls for time-invariant prefecture characteristics, and period fixed effects γ_t controls for time shocks that are common to all prefectures. To allow for serial correlation of the error terms, we cluster standard errors at the prefecture level.

The identifying assumption for the DiD strategy is that prefectures not classified as elite power bases serve as an appropriate counterfactual for what would have occurred in elite power base prefectures in the absence of the famous usurper's reign. Thus, the coefficient β captures the causal effect of the usurper's reign on the outcome variable of interest.

4 Results

In this section, we present the main results from the FE, IV and DiD models. Consistent with Hypothesis 1 (1a), the prefecture FE and IV estimates indicate that the reigns of usurpers, particularly self-entrenched usurpers, are associated with higher levels of investment in Buddhism. In contrast, the reigns of other-entrenched usurpers show a moderate negative effect, supporting the assumption that these usurpers likely possess even weaker power in policy making and implementation than their counterparts who ascend through normal succession.

The DiD results lend support to Hypothesis 2a, suggesting that during the reign of the highly competent self-entrenched usurper, Li Shimin, Buddhism investment was significantly higher in elite power bases than in other regions. This finding remains robust after controlling for a series of

geographical traits. Moreover, the dynamic estimates show that the trend in Buddhism investment generally followed the emperor's path of legitimacy and power consolidation, providing further evidence for the paper's arguments for legitimacy compensation and political competition.

4.1 Usurpers and Temple Construction in Mid-Imperial China

The main findings from the prefecture FE and IV models are detailed in Tables 5.2 and 5.3. Table 5.1 illustrates the effects of usurper's rule on temple construction, lending support to Hypothesis 1 (1a). Column (1) shows that, on average, 0.006 additional temples were constructed per year under a usurper's reign compared to that of their normal counterparts, representing a 27.3% increase relative to the baseline mean of 0.022 temples per year. This estimate is statistically significant at the 1% level. Column (2) introduces control variables such as the number of battles occurred, the emperor's age, the chronological year of the emperor's reign, and whether an emperor is the founding ruler of a dynasty, which might influence an emperor's religious policy or investment decisions. Column (3) further incorporates lagged controls, including the number of temples constructed and the number of battles occurred in the previous year. After adjusting for these factors, the positive effect of usurpers on Buddhist investment remains robust.

Columns (4) to (6) further differentiate usurpers as either self-entrenched or other-entrenched. The results show that self-entrenched usurpers are associated with strikingly higher levels of annual temple construction compared to hereditary emperors, while the coefficients for other-entrenched usurpers are negative. Column (4) indicates that self-entrenched usurpers' rule is associated with 0.018 additional annual temple constructions compared to that of normal successors, representing a 81.8% increase relative to the baseline mean of 0.022 temples per year. Conversely, other-entrenched usurpers' rule correlates with 0.003 fewer temple constructions per year compared to their hereditary counterparts, representing a 13.6% decrease relative to the baseline mean. These coefficients are statistically significant at the 1% and 10% levels, respectively. Adding covariates only strengthens these estimates. The results indicate that the positive association between usurpers' rule and Buddhist investment was primarily driven by self-entrenched usurpers, supporting Hypothesis 1a.

Table 5.3 presents the IV results for self-entrenched usurpers, which align closely with the baseline findings. Column (1) shows a strong positive first-stage correlation between the instrument and the explanatory variable. The coefficient of interest in Column (2) is 0.023, which is similar to that in the FE model. Adding covariates does not significantly alter these estimates. In fact, the Wu-

Hausman test fails to reject the null hypothesis of the consistency of the FE estimates at the 10% level in any specification, suggesting that reverse causality and selection on unobservables do not significantly bias the FE estimates. The IV results for usurpers in general and for other-entrenched usurpers are displayed in Tables A2 and A3, respectively.

Table 5.2: FE Results: Usurpers and Temple Est.

	Usurpers (Dummy)			Usurpers (Category)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
DV	N Temple Est.					
Usurper	0.006***	0.005***	0.004***			
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)			
Usurper (self)				0.018***	0.019***	0.016***
				(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Usurper (other)				-0.003*	-0.005***	-0.004***
				(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.001)
N of Battles		-0.002			-0.002	
		(0.007)			(0.007)	
Emperor Age		-0.000**	-0.000***		-0.000***	-0.000***
		(0.000)	(0.000)		(0.000)	(0.000)
Reign Year		-0.000**	-0.000**		-0.000**	-0.000*
		(0.000)	(0.000)		(0.000)	(0.000)
Founding Emperor		0.004	0.003		0.000	-0.000
		(0.003)	(0.002)		(0.003)	(0.002)
N Temple Est. (lagged)			0.118**			0.117**
			(0.051)			(0.051)
N of Battles (lagged)			0.015			0.015
			(0.011)			(0.011)
Mean of D.V.	0.022	0.021	0.020	0.022	0.021	0.020
Prefecture FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Dynasty FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Clusters	323	323	323	323	323	323
Adj. R^2	0.037	0.037	0.051	0.038	0.038	0.051
Obs.	171,125	169,439	169,153	171,125	169,439	169,153

Note: The unit of observation is prefecture-time. Standard errors clustered at the prefecture level are in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, and $^{*}p < 0.10$.

The FE and IV results are robust to a series of checks, including using only temple data from the NRAA's Catalogue (Tables A4-A7), Monte Carlo simulation that randomly assign treatment status to regime-year-prefectures (Figure A4), as well as two sensitivity analyses that drop one prefecture at a time (Figure A5) and randomly adding temples to the control group (Figure A6). Notably, the outcome variable (Number of Temple Est.) likely contains excessive zero values due to the large panel size compared to the relatively small total number of temples constructed during the period of interest in our dataset. This could lead to biased estimates in the ordinary least squares

based fixed-effects model. To address this concern, we employed a zero-inflated negative binomial regression to fit our prefecture FE specifications (Tables A8-A11). The results remained robust under this alternative model.

Table 5.3: IV Results: Self-Entrenched Usurpers and Temple Est.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
DV	Usurper (self)	N Temple	Usurper (self)	N Temple	Usurper (self)	N Temple
Usurper (self)		0.023***		0.025***		0.021***
		(0.006)		(0.006)		(0.005)
Non-1st Son	0.252***		0.264***		0.262***	
	(0.005)		(0.004)		(0.004)	
N of Battles			0.028***	-0.000		
			(0.007)	(0.008)		
Emperor Age			0.006***	-0.000***	0.006***	-0.000***
			(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Reign Year			-0.008***	-0.000***	-0.008***	-0.000***
			(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Founding Emperor			0.118***	-0.001	0.120***	-0.001
			(0.011)	(0.003)	(0.011)	(0.002)
N Temple (lagged)					0.052***	0.124**
					(0.009)	(0.054)
N Battles (lagged)					0.037***	0.016
					(0.008)	(0.013)
Mean of D.V.	0.330	0.021	0.359	0.019	0.318	0.016
Prefecture FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Dynasty FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Clusters	323	323	323	323	323	323
Adj. R^2	0.578	0.041	0.605	0.042	0.606	0.057
Obs.	137,490	137,490	136,358	136,358	136,072	136,072
F-test (1st stage)	13,501.2***		15,473.6***		15,270.3***	
Wu-Hausman	0.194		0.445		0.240	

Note: The unit of observation is prefecture-time. Standard errors clustered at the prefecture level are in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, and $^{*}p < 0.10$.

4.2 Temple Construction in Elite Power Bases during Li Shimin's Reign

Li Shimin, also known as Emperor Taizong of Tang, is celebrated as one of the greatest emperors in both Chinese and world history, whose political, economic, and cultural achievements have been widely recognized and documented (Tang, 2017). Despite his numerous accomplishments, Li Shimin is also infamously known as a usurper who ascended to the throne through the well-known Xuanwu Gate Coup, during which he killed two of his brothers and compelled his father to abdicate (Bai and Chen, 1997).

Like other mid-imperial Chinese emperors, especially usurpers, Li Shimin's reign faced con-

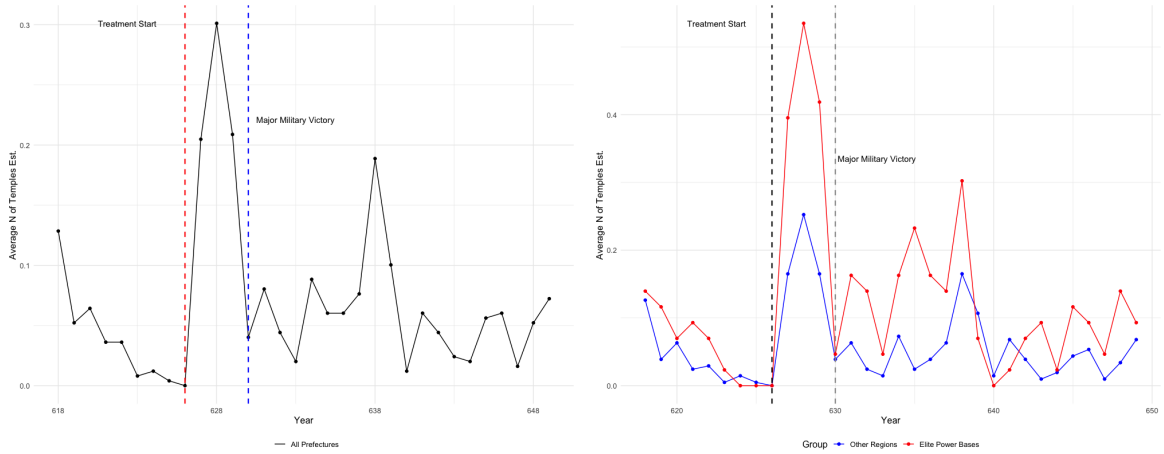
siderable challenges. He had to share power with a group of aristocratic families, especially the Guanlong Group, from which the imperial house itself originated (Wang, 2022). In 632 CE, Li Shimin ordered a survey of the genealogies of the empire's most prominent clans. He was infuriated to discover that the Cui clan of Boling had been ranked first in the first tier, whereas the imperial house was placed only in the third tier (Wechsler, 1979). Li Shimin is remembered as an open-minded ruler who often heeded the advice of his advisors, which could be regarded as a virtue–or a signal that he served the interests of the powerful aristocratic group, who constrained his policies (Twitchett, 1979a). It was not until the reign of Taizong's son, Gaozong (649–683), that the imperial power achieved a partial victory against the aristocratic power of the Guanlong Group, led by Zhangsun Wuji, Li Shimin's brother-in-law, during which Buddhism was noted to had made some contributions to these shifts in power dynamics (Eisenberg, 2012).

The initial three years following his ascension might be the most challenging period for Li Shimin as an emperor. As previously outlined, as a usurper, his rule lacked the traditional legitimacy conferred by Confucian doctrines. Compounding his difficulties, the Eastern Turks exploited Tang's power transition to invade, eventually reaching Chang'an, the capital city. The Eastern Turks withdrew only after Taizong personally made tribute–with promises of further tribute–outside the city at the Wei River Bridge (Sima, 2019). The military defeat posed a further threat to his legitimacy and power. Several elite rebellions against his reign emerged in 627 CE (Twitchett, 1979b). While they were quickly suppressed, their existence likely reflected his difficulties as a ruler without traditional legitimacy.

However, Li Shimin quickly demonstrated his competence as a great emperor. In 629 CE, he dispatched his generals and troops to launch an assault against the Eastern Turks, achieving a decisive victory the following year and subjugating the nomadic regime. Furthermore, Li Shimin himself was granted the title of Khan of Heaven by various Turkic nomadic groups (Liu, 1997). The military victory and international recognition likely played significant roles in Li Shimin's legitimacy building and power consolidation (Chen and Fan, 2021), setting stage for the *Prosperity of Zhen'guan*. Therefore, Li Shimin's reign provides valuable within-sample variances of a usurper's legitimacy and power dynamics that is instrumental for testing the hypotheses of this study.

Figure 1 displays the yearly average of temple construction before and during Li Shimin's reign. Panel (a) illustrates a sharp increase in temple construction immediately following his ascension, peaking in 628 CE. Following this peak, temple construction declined to levels moderately higher than the pre-Li Shimin period after 630 CE, a turning point for the emperor's legitimacy and power.

This pattern supports Hypothesis 1a, suggesting a correlation between Li Shimin's ascendancy, his legitimacy and power dynamics, and Buddhist investment.



(a) Yearly Average Temple Est.

(b) Yearly Average Temple Est. by Group

Figure 1: Yearly Average Temple Est. Pre- and Post-Li Shimin's Ascension

Panel (b) shows the dynamics of temple construction between elite power bases and other regions, lending support to Hypothesis 2a. It reveals that although elite power bases experienced similar temple constructions before Li Shimin's ascension compared to other regions, the number of temples constructed in these areas significantly excessed that in their counterparts during the first three years following the emperor's ascension. Notably, elite power bases continued to exhibit moderately higher levels of temple construction than other regions even after Li Shimin consolidated his legitimacy and power in 630. In summary, Figure 1 descriptively substantiates the arguments presented, illustrating the significant impact of Li Shimin's reign on Buddhist investment, particularly in regions identified as elite power bases.

Table 5.4 presents the DiD results. Column (1) shows that there were, on average, 0.063 additional temples constructed per year in elite power base prefectures compared to other prefectures. This increase is substantial, representing a 95.5% rise relative to the baseline mean of 0.066 temples per year, and is statistically significant at the 1% level. This estimate remains robust with the inclusion of prefecture-level geographical characteristics (interacted with the post-ascension period) and lagged controls in the model, as shown in Columns (2) and (3), respectively.[12] Considering the potential "capital" effect that might simultaneously influence Buddhist investment and elite aggregation, Columns (4) to (6) present models based on a subsample that excludes Chang'an and Luoyang, the two capitals of the Tang Dynasty. Excluding the capitals does not affect the robust-

ness of the results. These findings indicate that Li Shimin's reign led to a significantly higher level of Buddhist investment in elite power bases than in other regions, thus supporting Hypothesis 2a.

Parallel Pre-trends. The DiD design relies on the parallel-trend assumption. This assumption states that, in the absence of the intervention (in this case, Li Shimin's ascension), the outcome trends for the treatment and control groups would have followed a similar pattern. To assess whether the parallel-trend assumption hold, we conduct a lags-and-leads analysis by estimating a dynamic version of Equation (5.4):

$$Y_{pt} = \sum_{j=1}^{N} \beta_j \text{ElitePowerBases}_p \times \text{Period}_j + \phi_p + \gamma_t + \epsilon_{pt} \tag{5}$$

where $Period_j$ are dummy variables for each time period j.[13]

Figure 2 presents the coefficient plots for each period. Panel (a) indicates that the coefficients for the pre-ascension periods are statistically indifferent from zero, and most estimates for post-ascension periods are positive. Moreover, the coefficients for periods 1-4 are statistically significant at the 5% level. This suggests that there were no significant pre-existing differences in trends of Buddhist temple investment between elite power bases and other prefectures prior to Li Shimin's ascension. This finding supports the validity of the parallel-trend assumption required for the DiD analysis. Furthermore, the treatment effect is numerically most significant in the first period following Li Shimin's ascension (627–630 CE), which aligns with the patterns outlined by Figure 5.1. Excluding the two capital cities, Chang'an and Luoyang, from the model does not alter the results.

[12] Geographical controls include the terrain ruggedness index, river density, and suitability indexes for rice and wheat cultivation. Lagged controls are the average number of temples constructed and the average number of battles occurred in the previous period.

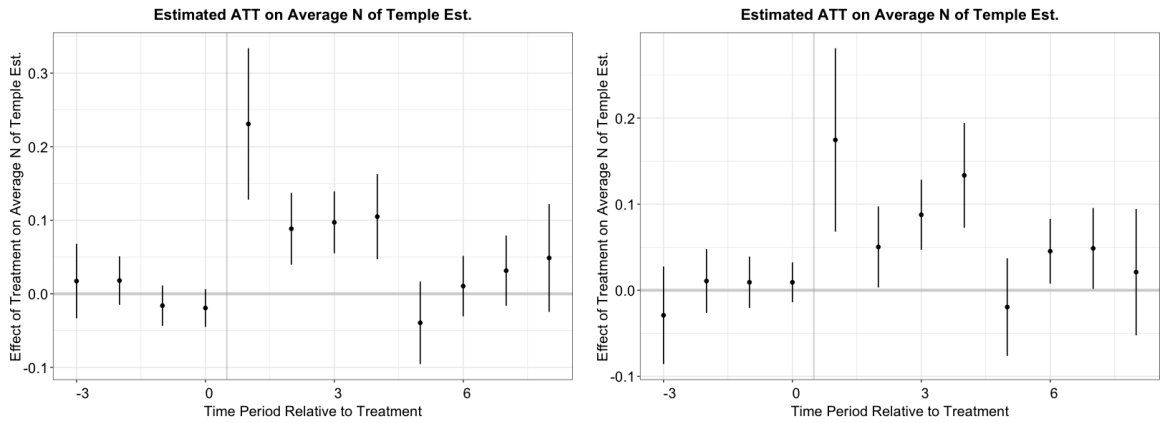
[13] Definition of time period: we choose 626 CE as period 0 because this is the year in which Li Shimin ascended to the throne through the Xuanwu Gate Coup. Each pre- and post-treatment period sequentially represents three-year intervals from 618 to 649 CE, except for period -3 (618-619 CE) and period 8 (648-649 CE).

Table 5.4: DiD Results: Elite Power Bases and Temple Est.

DV	Average N of Temple Est.					
	Full Sample			Excluding Capitals		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
ElitePowerBaseXPost	0.063***	0.063***	0.072***	0.068***	0.067***	0.075***
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.016)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.016)
Terrain RuggednessXPost		0.037	0.043		0.038	0.041
		(0.052)	(0.059)		(0.050)	(0.057)
River Dist.XPost		-0.002	-0.003		-0.002	-0.003
		(0.003)	(0.003)		(0.003)	(0.003)
Rice SuitabilityXPost		0.0014*	0.0016*		0.0015*	0.0017*
		(0.0007)	(0.0008)		(0.0008)	(0.0009)
Wheat SuitabilityXPost		0.001	0.001		0.001	0.001
		(0.001)	(0.001)		(0.001)	(0.001)
Average N of Temple Est. (lagged)			-0.150***			-0.153***
			(0.017)			(0.018)
Average N of Battles (lagged)			0.009			-0.028
			(0.028)			(0.029)
Mean of D.V.	0.066	0.066	0.066	0.061	0.061	0.061
Time FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Prefecture FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Obs.	2,988	2,988	2,988	2,964	2,964	2,964

Note: The unit of observation is prefecture-time. Standard errors clustered at the prefecture level are in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, and $^{*}p < 0.10$.

In summary, the findings provide empirical support for both Hypothesis 1a and Hypothesis 2a. The reign of Li Shimin, a self-entrenched usurper, was associated with a marked increase in Buddhist investment, particularly during time when he faced challenges to his legitimacy and power. The results further indicate that during Li Shimin's reign, Buddhist investment was generally higher in elite power bases compared to other regions, and this effect was particularly pronounced during the more difficult periods of his rule. These findings also suggest that the religious policies of a usurper may fluctuate in response to the dynamics of legitimacy and power. This variability could potentially explain the historical debate regarding Li Shimin's stance towards Buddhism, with some sources depicting him as pro-Buddhism and others as neutral or anti-Buddhism (Tang, 1983; Ho, 2017). Such recorded differences may reflect the complex and pragmatic approaches that Li Shimin adopted towards religious institutions as he navigated the political landscape of his time.



(a) Full Sample (b) Excluding Capitals

Figure 2: Dynamic Treatment Effect of Li Shimin's Ascension on Temple Est.
Note: The figures plot lags-and-leads estimates for Equation 5.4. Vertical lines represent 95% Confidence Interval.

The DiD result is robust to a series of checks as well, including using only temple data from the NRAA's Catalogue (Table A13 and Figure A9), employing an alternative definition of time periods (Table A14 and Figure A10), utilizing an alternative definition of elite power bases (Table A11), employing alternative DiD estimators (Figure A12) and randomly assigning treatment status to prefectures (Figure A13). To address the inferential challenge that might arise from potential survival bias in the data sources, we conducted two sensitivity analyses: randomly adding temples to the post-ascension control group (Figure A14) and randomly moving control group prefectures to the treatment group (Figure A15). The baseline findings remain robust even when accounting for a considerable degree of survival bias.

Another major threat to our DiD findings is the possibility that the effect of self-entrenched usurpers' reign on Buddhist investment in elite power bases is unique to Li Shimin's reign, rather than a general pattern. To address this concern, we conduct a set of DiD analysis utilizing the full panel of mid-imperial Chinese emperors and temple construction data in Section 5.1, incorporating elite power bases identified from the Clan Records (Shizu zhi). Given that the aristocratic families listed in the Clan Records are those whose rise spanned from the Late Eastern Han Dynasty to the establishment of the Tang Dynasty, it provides a fuzzy measure of elite power bases in mid-imperial China. The treatment is thus the interaction term of the usurper dummy and the (alternative) elite power base dummy.

However, several concerns arise with this approach as well. First, the rise and decline of aristocratic families varied temporally in mid-imperial China due to political struggles, interstate wars,

and dynastic transitions. It is also likely that some aristocratic families once existed but had declined before the Tang Dynasty were thus not documented in the Clan Records. This could lead to potential false positive and false negative errors in the elite power base variable. Second, because usurpers and normal successors alternate in power, the treatment switches on and off across different reigns (as shown in Figure A16). This creates a post-treatment problem, particularly for aristocratic clans that rose or declined after the first treatment period, as their influence might have changed over time. Therefore, while the results of this robustness check provide valuable supplementary evidence, they should be interpreted with caution and viewed as suggestive.

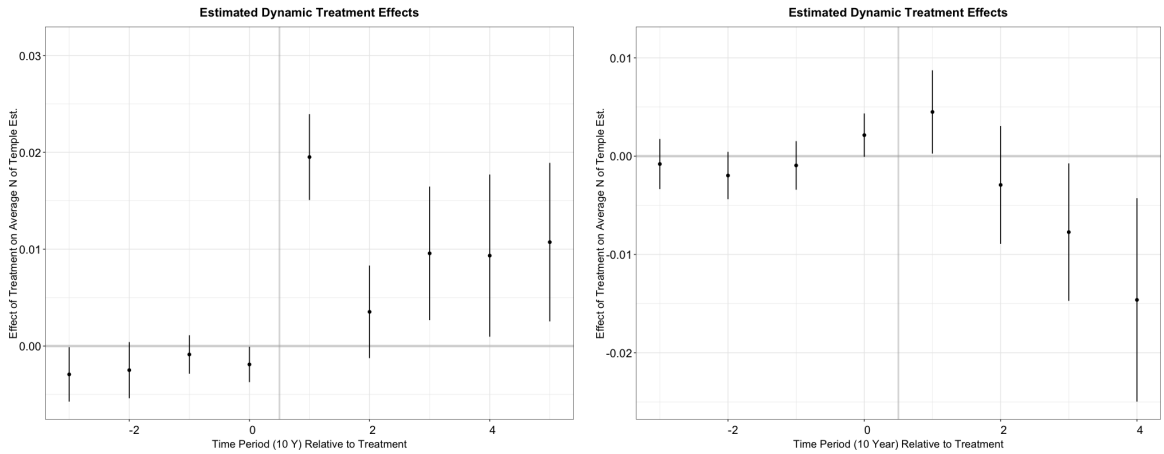
Table 5.5 presents the results of the (expanded) DiD analysis, where each time period is defined as a 10-year interval. Columns (1) to (3) show a significant and positive effect of self-entrenched usurpers' reign on temple construction in elite power bases. Specifically, Column (1) suggests that, on average, 0.013 additional temples were constructed per year in elite power base regions compared to other areas, representing a 61.9% increase relative to the baseline mean of 0.021 temples per year. Adding controls in Columns (2) and (3) does not substantially alter the results, although the coefficients are smaller. In contrast, the coefficients of interest in Columns (4) to (6) are negative and, in general, statistically insignificant. This indicates that other-entrenched usurpers' reign does not have a significant impact on temple construction in elite strongholds, and if any influence exists, it would likely be a reducing effect. In summary, these results provide further empirical support for Hypothesis 2a, suggesting that self-entrenched usurpers' reign is associated with increased Buddhist investment in elite power bases in mid-imperial China, while that of other-entrenched usurpers does not exhibit a similar pattern.

Table 5.5: DiD Results: Usurpers' Role, Elite Power Bases (*Shizu Zhi*), and Temple Est. in Mid-Imperial China

DV	Average N of Temple Est.					
	Self-Entrenched Usurpers			Other-Entrenched Usurpers		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
ElitePowerBaseXUsurper	0.013***	0.008***	0.007***	-0.002	-0.0029*	-0.003
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.0017)	(0.002)
Terrain RuggednessXUsurper		-0.007	-0.004		0.000	0.002
		(0.005)	(0.005)		(0.007)	(0.006)
River Dist.XUsurper		-0.0006	-0.0006		-0.0002	-0.0001
		(0.0004)	(0.0004)		(0.0005)	(0.0004)
Rice SuitabilityXUsurper		0.000	0.000		0.000	0.000
		(0.000)	(0.000)		(0.000)	(0.000)
Wheat SuitabilityXUsurper		0.0003***	0.0002***		0.0001	0.0001
		(0.0001)	(0.0001)		(0.0001)	(0.0001)
Average N of Temple Est. (lagged)			0.138***			0.125***
			(0.005)			(0.006)
Average N of Battles (lagged)			0.028***			0.015***
			(0.006)			(0.005)
Mean of D.V.	0.021	0.021	0.021	0.017	0.017	0.017
Time FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Prefecture FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Obs.	15,677	15,677	15,356	15,372	15,372	15,051

Note: The unit of observation is prefecture-time. Standard errors clustered at the prefecture level are in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, and $^{*}p < 0.10$.

To test the parallel-trend assumption, we further conducted a lags-and-leads analysis. Figure 3 presents the coefficient plots for each period, indicating that both self-entrenched usurpers' reign and other-entrenched usurpers' reign generally satisfy the assumption. Most of the pre-usurper period coefficients are statistically insignificant and numerically small, suggesting no significant pre-existing differences in temple construction trends between elite power bases and their counterparts before a usurper's reign. Using one year as an alternative time-period definition, the results remain largely consistent (Table A16 and Figure A17).



(a) Self-Entrenched Usurpers (b) Other-Entrenched Usurpers

Figure 3: Dynamic Treatment Effect of Usurpers' Role on Temple Est. in Elite Power Bases (*Shizu Zhi*)

Note: The figures plot lags-and-leads estimates. Vertical lines represent 95% Confidence Interval.

5 CONCLUSION

The paper investigates the puzzle of why many Chinese emperors actively patronized the development of Buddhism through preferential policies and material benefits at the expense of state capacity. We introduce the *patronizing monasteries for political survival* theory, which argues that usurpers, often facing legitimacy and power challenges, tend to support Buddhism as a strategy to counterbalance the ideological challenges posed by Confucianism and the political challenges from powerful elites. Ideologically, the co-optation of Buddhism serves to undermine the dominance of Confucianism, which traditionally views usurpers as illegitimate, thereby providing an alternative source of divine legitimacy. Politically, it positions Buddhist temples to compete with the entrenched elites for control over land and population, thus weakening elite power bases.

Utilizing original temple data from mid-imperial China, FE and IV analyses suggest that usurpers are associated with higher levels of annual temple construction during their reigns. Specifically, strikingly more temple constructions occurred during the rule of self-entrenched usurpers, who faced significant legitimacy and power challenges but were strong enough to initiate and implement pro-Buddhist policies. In contrast, the rule of other-entrenched usurpers, who were often puppets lacking substantial influence over these policies, correlated with fewer temple constructions than that of normal successors. Furthermore, a focused DiD analysis of Li Shimin's reign

reveals that regions identified as elite power bases experienced significantly higher levels of temple construction compared to other areas. These findings highlight the strategic interactions between usurpers, religious institutions, and political elites.

Elites, Religious Institutions, and the Great Divergence: China versus Europe

Canonical scholarship has attributed the political-institutional roots of the Great Divergence to the emergence of constrained government in early modern Europe, emphasizing its role in securing property rights (North and Weingast, 1989) and enhancing state capacity (Bates and Donald Lien, 1985; Dincecco, 2009). Recent studies have further traced the origins of constrained government to the impacts of elites (Stasavage, 2020) and the medieval Catholic Church (Grzymala-Busse, 2023b), both of which possessed autonomous power bases capable of checking monarchical authority.

By contrast, this dynamic did not hold in China from the tenth century onward. It is widely accepted that since the Northern Song Dynasty, there was no aristocracy or warlords with independent power bases capable of constraining the emperor (Johnson, 1970; Mao, 1988; Wang, 2022). The rise of a meritocratic bureaucracy enabled emperors to exercise divide-and-rule strategies over political elites while maintaining control of the military apparatus. In other words, Chinese monarchs had successfully consolidated absolute authority by this period.

Meanwhile, religious institutions such as Buddhist and Taoist monasteries had never constituted independent political forces in Chinese history (Storch, 2000), with Confucianism closely integrated itself into the state. Both Buddhism and Taoism were sometimes co-opted by rulers to serve their political objectives, and their development depended, to varying degrees, on imperial support (Weinstein, 2018; Kohn and Kirkland, 2000). Notably, the consolidation of state control over religion during the Northern Song Dynasty coincided with the disappearance of independent political actors—namely, aristocrats and warlords—from imperial China's political stage (Shi, 2016). This convergence may be interpreted as a form of preemptive containment aimed at forestalling the emergence of alternative social forces that could evolve into independent political power and challenge imperial rule.

Therefore, the divergent trajectories of political, social, and economic development between Europe and China may, at least in part, be attributed to the presence or absence of independent political and social actors. In the European context, actors such as the aristocracy, warlords, and the Catholic Church served as counterweights to royal authority and contributed to the eventual

creation of constrained government. In contrast, the absence of such actors in imperial China since the tenth century had allowed emperors to consolidate unchecked power, leading to a different path of institutional evolvement.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this paper has presented both qualitative and quantitative evidence in support of the *patronizing monasteries for political survival* theory, several questions remain open for future exploration. First, the current study does not fully explore the mechanisms through which usurpers implemented their preferred religious policies and mobilized Buddhist investment. Several important questions remain unanswered. For instance, how did usurpers actively promote Buddhist faith and cultivate their image as divinely sanctioned rulers to extend their influence across society? In what ways did they influence local Buddhist investment, particularly in elite strongholds, to enable Buddhist actors to compete with entrenched aristocratic elites?

Second, while two of the emperors (empresses) in the qualitative cases were self-entrenched usurpers who supported Buddhism in different ways and maintained relatively secure, long-lived reigns, the paper does not adequately assess the extent to which Buddhism contributed to their political survival. Both rulers were highly capable and implemented a broad set of ruling strategies, making it difficult to isolate the specific impact of their Buddhist patronage. More broadly, the actual effects of usurpers' Buddhist policies require systematic testing across the entire period of mid-imperial China. To what extent did Buddhist patronage enhance political stability, and under what conditions was it most effective?

Third, did imperial support for Buddhism generate spillover or unintended effects, both in the short and long term? While historical records have criticized Buddhist patronage for weakening state capacity (Gernet, 1995; Benn, 2024), this narrative–though supported by qualitative evidence–requires quantitative testing to assess its actual scale and impact. Moreover, Cheng et al. (2023) argued that the concentration of Buddhist institutions during the Tang Dynasty contributed to the development of the local press industry, which in turn facilitated the rise of exam-recruited local elites in the Song Dynasty by lowering the cost of education. This raises broader questions about the long-term, unintended consequences of imperial investment in Buddhism at the local level. The questions summarized above offer promising avenues for future research.

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ADDITIONAL TABLES

Table A1: Possibility of Emperors' Natural Death

	Normal Successors	Usurpers
Natural Death	90 (65.7%)	60 (61.2%)
Unnatural Death	47 (34.3%)	38 (38.8%)
Total	137 (100%)	98 (100%)

Note: Data from Wang (2024a; 2024c). The statistics are calculated by the author.

Table A2: IV Results: Usurpers (Dummy) and Temple Est.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
DV	Usurper	N Temple	Usurper	N Temple	Usurper	N Temple
Usurper		0.051***		0.045***		0.039***
		(0.012)		(0.010)		(0.008)
Non-1st Son	0.100***		0.121***		0.120***	
	(0.005)		(0.005)		(0.005)	
N of Battles			0.013*	-0.002		
			(0.008)	(0.007)		
Emperor Age			0.004***	-0.0003***	0.004***	-0.0003***
			(0.0002)	(0.0001)	(0.0002)	(0.0001)
Reign Year			-0.013***	0.0003**	-0.013***	0.0003**
			(0.0002)	(0.0001)	(0.0002)	(0.0001)
Founding Emperor			0.062***	0.001	0.065***	0.0002
			(0.010)	(0.003)	(0.010)	(0.002)
N Temple (lagged)					0.020***	0.118**
					(0.008)	(0.051)
N Battles (lagged)					0.022***	0.015
					(0.008)	(0.011)
Mean of D.V.	0.461	0.020	0.460	0.020	0.461	0.020
Prefecture FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Dynasty FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Clusters	323	323	323	323	323	323
Adj. R^2	0.352	0.028	0.381	0.030	0.381	0.045
Obs.	171,125	171,125	169,439	169,439	169,153	169,153
F-test (1st stage)		1,729.6***		2,586.2***		2,530.1***
Wu-Hausman		16.9***		19.8***		14.4***

Note: The unit of observation is prefecture-time. Standard errors clustered at the prefecture level are in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, and $^{*}p < 0.10$.

Table A3: IV Results: Usurpers (Other) and Temple Est.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
DV	Usurper (Other)	N Temple	Usurper (Other)	N Temple	Usurper (Other)	N Temple
Usurper (Other)		-0.056**		-0.095**		-0.088**
		(0.022)		(0.039)		(0.037)
Non-1st Son	-0.047***		-0.028***		-0.028***	
	(0.004)		(0.004)		(0.004)	
N of Battles			-0.002	-0.005		
			(0.010)	(0.005)		
Emperor Age			0.001***	0.000	0.001***	0.000
			(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.0001)
Reign Year			-0.012***	-0.001***	-0.012***	-0.001***
			(0.0001)	(0.0005)	(0.0001)	(0.0005)
Founding Emperor			-0.091***	-0.021***	-0.090***	-0.020***
			(0.009)	(0.008)	(0.009)	(0.008)
N Temple (lagged)					-0.033***	0.069**
					(0.007)	(0.015)
N Battles (lagged)					0.007	0.003
					(0.010)	(0.005)
Mean of D.V.	0.267	0.017	0.266	0.017	0.266	0.017
Prefecture FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Dynasty FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Clusters	321	321	321	321	321	321
Adj. R^2	0.241	0.024	0.277	-0.003	0.277	0.008
Obs.	125,805	125,805	124,525	124,525	124,284	124,284
F-test (1st stage)		362.2***		128.7***		127.7***
Wu-Hausman		6.264**		5.931**		5.045**

Note: The unit of observation is prefecture-time. Standard errors clustered at the prefecture level are in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, and $^{*}p < 0.10$.

Table A4: FE Results: Usurpers and Temple Est. (NRAA's Catalogue Only)

	Usurpers (Dummy)			Usurpers (Category)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
DV	N Temple Est.					
Usurper	0.005***	0.004***	0.004***			
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)			
Usurper (self)				0.015***	0.016***	0.015***
				(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Usurper (other)				-0.002	-0.004***	-0.003***
				(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
N of Battles		0.004			0.004	
		(0.006)			(0.007)	
Emperor Age		-0.0002***	-0.0002***		-0.0002***	-0.0002***
		(0.000)	(0.000)		(0.000)	(0.000)
Reign Year		-0.0001*	-0.0001*		-0.000	-0.000
		(0.00007)	(0.00006)		(0.000)	(0.000)
Founding Emperor		0.002	0.002		-0.001	-0.001
		(0.002)	(0.002)		(0.002)	(0.002)
N Temple Est. (lagged)			0.056***			0.055***
			(0.011)			(0.011)
N of Battles (lagged)			0.003			0.003
			(0.004)			(0.004)
Mean of D.V.	0.015	0.015	0.015	0.015	0.015	0.015
Prefecture FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Dynasty FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Clusters	323	323	323	323	323	323
Adj. R^2	0.032	0.032	0.035	0.033	0.033	0.036
Obs.	171,125	169,439	169,153	171,125	169,439	169,153

Note: The unit of observation is prefecture-time. Standard errors clustered at the prefecture level are in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, and $^{*}p < 0.10$.

Table A5: IV Results: Usurpers (Dummy) and Temple Est. (NRAA's Catalogue Only)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
DV	Usurper	N Temple	Usurper	N Temple	Usurper	N Temple
Usurper		0.037***		0.033***		0.031***
		(0.009)		(0.008)		(0.007)
Non-1st Son	0.100***		0.121***		0.120***	
	(0.005)		(0.005)		(0.005)	
N of Battles			0.013*	0.004		
			(0.008)	(0.006)		
Emperor Age			0.004***	-0.0003***	0.004***	-0.0003***
			(0.0002)	(0.0001)	(0.0002)	(0.0001)
Reign Year			-0.013***	0.0002**	-0.013***	0.0002**
			(0.0002)	(0.0001)	(0.0002)	(0.0001)
Founding Emperor			0.062***	0.0004	0.065***	0.0001
			(0.010)	(0.002)	(0.010)	(0.002)
N Temple (lagged)					0.029***	0.055***
					(0.009)	(0.011)
N Battles (lagged)					0.022***	0.003
					(0.008)	(0.004)
Mean of D.V.	0.461	0.015	0.460	0.015	0.461	0.015
Prefecture FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Dynasty FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Clusters	323	323	323	323	323	323
Adj. R^2	0.352	0.025	0.381	0.030	0.381	0.030
Obs.	171,125	171,125	169,439	169,439	169,153	169,153
F-test (1st stage)		1,729.6***		2,586.2***		2,530.2***
Wu-Hausman		13.0***		15.0***		13.1***

Note: The unit of observation is prefecture-time. Standard errors clustered at the prefecture level are in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, and $^{*}p < 0.10$.

Table A6: IV Results: Usurpers (Self) and Temple Est. (NRAA's Catalogue Only)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
DV	Usurper (self)	N Temple	Usurper (self)	N Temple	Usurper (self)	N Temple
Usurper (self)		0.016***		0.018***		0.016***
		(0.005)		(0.005)		(0.005)
Non-1st Son	0.252***		0.264***		0.262***	
	(0.005)		(0.004)		(0.004)	
N of Battles			0.028***	0.006		
			(0.007)	(0.007)		
Emperor Age			0.006***	-0.000***	0.006***	-0.0002***
			(0.0002)	(0.000)	(0.0002)	(0.000)
Reign Year			-0.008***	-0.000**	-0.008***	-0.0002**
			(0.0002)	(0.000)	(0.0002)	(0.0001)
Founding Emperor			0.118***	-0.001	0.120***	-0.001
			(0.011)	(0.002)	(0.011)	(0.002)
N Temple (lagged)					0.066***	0.059***
					(0.009)	(0.011)
N Battles (lagged)					0.037***	0.003
					(0.008)	(0.004)
Mean of D.V.	0.330	0.016	0.329	0.016	0.330	0.016
Prefecture FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Dynasty FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Clusters	323	323	323	323	323	323
Adj. R^2	0.578	0.034	0.605	0.035	0.606	0.057
Obs.	137,490	137,490	136,358	136,358	136,072	136,072
F-test (1st stage)	13,501.2***		15,473.6***		15,276.4***	
Wu-Hausman	0.047		0.005		0.012	

Note: The unit of observation is prefecture-time. Standard errors clustered at the prefecture level are in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, and $^{*}p < 0.10$.

Table A7: IV Results: Usurpers (Other) and Temple Est. (NRAA's Catalogue Only)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
DV	Usurper (Other)	N Temple	Usurper (Other)	N Temple	Usurper (Other)	N Temple
Usurper (Other)		-0.029*		-0.047		-0.044
		(0.017)		(0.029)		(0.028)
Non-1st Son	-0.047***		-0.028***		-0.028***	
	(0.004)		(0.004)		(0.004)	
N of Battles			0.013*	0.000		
			(0.008)	(0.004)		
Emperor Age			0.001***	-0.000	0.001***	-0.0001
			(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.0001)
Reign Year			-0.012***	-0.001**	-0.012***	-0.0007*
			(0.0001)	(0.0004)	(0.0001)	(0.0003)
Founding Emperor			-0.091***	-0.014**	-0.089***	-0.013**
			(0.009)	(0.006)	(0.009)	(0.006)
N Temple (lagged)					-0.033***	0.059**
					(0.008)	(0.018)
N Battles (lagged)					0.007	0.002
					(0.010)	(0.004)
Mean of D.V.	0.267	0.013	0.266	0.013	0.266	0.013
Prefecture FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Dynasty FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Clusters	321	321	321	321	321	321
Adj. R^2	0.241	0.034	0.277	0.027	0.277	0.008
Obs.	125,805	125,805	124,525	124,525	124,284	124,284
F-test (1st stage)		362.2***		128.7***		128.1***
Wu-Hausman		2.281		1.899		1.637

Note: The unit of observation is prefecture-time. Standard errors clustered at the prefecture level are in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, and $^{*}p < 0.10$.

Table A8: FE Results: Usurpers and Temple Est. (Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial Model)

	Usurpers (Dummy)			Usurpers (Category)		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
DV	N Temple Est.					
Usurper	0.280***	0.208***	0.202***			
	(0.047)	(0.050)	(0.049)			
Usurper (self)				0.664***	0.743***	0.694***
				(0.057)	(0.063)	(0.063)
Usurper (other)				-0.158**	-0.291***	-0.251***
				(0.062)	(0.063)	(0.063)
N of Battles		-0.052			-0.086	
		(0.148)			(0.148)	
Emperor Age		-0.002	-0.001		-0.006***	-0.006**
		(0.002)	(0.002)		(0.002)	(0.002)
Reign Year		-0.015***	-0.012***		-0.014**	-0.011***
		(0.003)	(0.003)		(0.003)	(0.003)
Founding Emperor		0.183**	0.076		-0.081	-0.166**
		(0.078)	(0.078)		(0.081)	(0.080)
N Temple Est. (lagged)			0.474***			0.428***
			(0.043)			(0.041)
N of Battles (lagged)			0.493***			0.419***
			(0.140)			(0.138)
Log(theta)	-0.330**	-0.343**	-0.423***	-0.207	-0.159	-0.241*
	(0.135)	(0.001)	(0.130)	(0.137)	(0.138)	(0.135)
Mean of D.V.	0.022	0.021	0.020	0.022	0.021	0.020
Prefecture FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Dynasty FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Clusters	323	323	323	323	323	323
Theta	0.719	0.710	0.655	0.813	0.853	0.786
Obs.	171,125	169,439	169,153	171,125	169,439	169,153

Note: The unit of observation is prefecture-time. Standard errors clustered at the prefecture level are in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, and $^{*}p < 0.10$.

Table A9: IV Results: Usurpers (Dummy) and Temple Est. (Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial Model)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
DV	Usurper	N Temple	Usurper	N Temple	Usurper	N Temple
Usurper		0.339***		0.275***		0.165***
		(0.052)		(0.055)		(0.052)
Non-1st Son	0.539***		0.702***		0.695***	
	(0.029)		(0.032)		(0.032)	
N of Battles			0.065	0.037		
			(0.057)	(0.149)		
Emperor Age			0.026***	-0.002	0.026***	-0.003
			(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.001)	(0.003)
Reign Year			-0.081***	-0.011***	-0.082***	-0.012***
			(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.001)	(0.003)
Founding Emperor			0.313***	0.320***	0.330***	0.060
			(0.069)	(0.084)	(0.069)	(0.082)
N Temple (lagged)					0.133***	0.419***
					(0.046)	(0.049)
N Battles (lagged)					0.116**	0.184
					(0.057)	(0.169)
Log(theta)		-0.701***		-1.343***		-0.301*
		(0.151)		(0.077)		(0.156)
Residuals		0.072		0.372***		0.074
		(0.053)		(0.055)		(0.054)
Mean of D.V.	0.499	0.019	0.507	0.019	0.418	0.020
Prefecture FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Dynasty FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Clusters	320	320	320	320	320	320
Theta		0.496		0.261		0.740
BIC	165,140.9		155,727.6		155,493.5	
Obs.	151,580	151,580	149,190	149,190	148,910	145,653

Note: The unit of observation is prefecture-time. Standard errors clustered at the prefecture level are in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, and $^{*}p < 0.10$.

Table A10: IV Results: Usurpers (Self) and Temple Est. (Zero-Inflated Negative Binomial Model)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
DV	Usurper (self)	N Temple	Usurper (self)	N Temple	Usurper (self)	N Temple
Usurper (self)		0.860***		0.809***		0.655***
		(0.064)		(0.073)		(0.069)
Non-1st Son	3.508***		3.874***		3.861***	
	(0.152)		(0.164)		(0.164)	
N of Battles			0.228***	0.061		
			(0.081)	(0.151)		
Emperor Age			0.046***	-0.002	0.046***	-0.005
			(0.001)	(0.004)	(0.001)	(0.003)
Reign Year			-0.052***	-0.016***	-0.052***	-0.016***
			(0.002)	(0.004)	(0.002)	(0.004)
Founding Emperor			1.338***	-0.029	1.344***	-0.213**
			(0.096)	(0.099)	(0.096)	(0.092)
N Temple (lagged)					0.596***	0.393***
					(0.058)	(0.051)
N Battles (lagged)					0.289***	0.111
					(0.084)	(0.186)
Log(theta)		-0.672***		-0.568***		-0.271*
		(0.172)		(0.172)		(0.152)
Residuals		-0.138		-0.233**		0.280***
		(0.097)		(0.104)		(0.077)
Mean of D.V.	0.292	0.020	0.295	0.021	0.295	0.021
Prefecture FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Dynasty FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Clusters	319	319	317	317	317	317
Theta		0.511		0.567		0.762
BIC	79,806.5		72,053.4		71,761.8	
Obs.	104,136	104,136	102,217	102,217	102,069	101,350

Note: The unit of observation is prefecture-time. Standard errors clustered at the prefecture level are in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, and $^{*}p < 0.10$.

Table A11: IV Results: Usurpers (Other) and Temple Est. (Zero-Inflated Poisson Model)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
DV	Usurper (Other)	N Temple	Usurper (Other)	N Temple	Usurper (Other)	N Temple
Usurper (Other)		-0.165**		-0.372**		-0.315***
		(0.072)		(0.069)		(0.065)
Non-1st Son	-0.202***		-0.028***		-0.202***	
	(0.028)		(0.004)		(0.028)	
N of Battles			-0.041	-0.247		
			(0.090)	(0.266)		
Emperor Age			0.007***	-0.001	0.007***	0.000
			(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.001)	(0.003)
Reign Year			-0.086***	-0.020***	-0.086***	-0.021***
			(0.001)	(0.004)	(0.001)	(0.004)
Founding Emperor			-1.526***	-0.504*	-1.505***	-0.500***
			(0.239)	(0.268)	(0.240)	(0.156)
N Temple (lagged)					-0.236***	0.262***
					(0.050)	(0.029)
N Battles (lagged)					0.047	0.059
					(0.085)	(0.223)
Residuals		-0.128*		0.158**		0.033
		(0.077)		(0.072)		(0.065)
Mean of D.V.	0.281	0.016	0.286	0.016	0.284	0.017
Prefecture FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Dynasty FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Clusters	319	319	319	319	319	319
BIC	117,428.5		109,395.7		109,363.7	
Obs.	114,519	114,519	112,822	112,822	112,658	111,429

Note: The unit of observation is prefecture-time. Standard errors clustered at the prefecture level are in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, and $^{*}p < 0.10$.

Table A12: Correlations between Prefectures' Pre-Treatment Characteristics and Elite Power Base

DV	ElitePowerBase
	(1)
Terrain Ruggedness Index	1.104
	(1.539)
River Dist.	-0.165
	(0.111)
Rice Suitability Index	-0.014
	(0.024)
Wheat Suitability Index	0.055**
	(0.023)
Obs.	249
AIC	226.290

Note: This table reports correlations between prefectures' pre-treatment characteristics and their elite power base status. Standard errors are in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, and $^{*}p < 0.10$.

Table A13: Using Temples from NRAA's Catalogue Only

DV	Number of Temple Est.					
	Full Sample			Excluding Capitals		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
ElitePowerBaseXPost	0.061***	0.060***	0.067***	0.048***	0.048**	0.052***
	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.013)	(0.013)	(0.015)
Terrain RuggednessXPost		0.016	0.018		0.016	0.018
		(0.045)	(0.052)		(0.044)	(0.050)
River Dist.XPost		-0.002	-0.003		-0.002	-0.003
		(0.003)	(0.003)		(0.003)	(0.003)
Rice SuitabilityXPost		0.001	0.001		0.001	0.001
		(0.001)	(0.001)		(0.001)	(0.001)
Wheat SuitabilityXPost		0.000	0.000		0.000	0.000
		(0.001)	(0.001)		(0.001)	(0.001)
Average N of Temple Est. (lagged)			-0.150***			-0.150***
			(0.018)			(0.018)
Average N of Battles (lagged)			-0.028			-0.028
			(0.025)			(0.025)
Mean of D.V.	0.052	0.052	0.052	0.050	0.050	0.050
Time FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Prefecture FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Obs.	2,988	2,988	2,988	2,964	2,964	2,964

Note: The unit of observation is prefecture-time. Standard errors clustered at the prefecture level are in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, and $^{*}p < 0.10$.

Table A14: Alternative Definition of Time Period (1 Year / Period)

DV	Number of Temple Est.					
	Full Sample			Excluding Capitals		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
ElitePowerBaseXPost	0.062***	0.062***	0.064***	0.068***	0.068**	0.070***
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Terrain RuggednessXPost		0.034	0.036		0.034	0.035
		(0.051)	(0.051)		(0.050)	(0.050)
River Dist.XPost		-0.002	-0.002		-0.002	-0.002
		(0.003)	(0.003)		(0.003)	(0.003)
Rice SuitabilityXPost		0.0014*	0.0014*		0.0014*	0.0015*
		(0.0007)	(0.0008)		(0.0007)	(0.0008)
Wheat SuitabilityXPost		0.001	0.001		0.001	0.001
		(0.001)	(0.001)		(0.001)	(0.001)
Average N of Temple Est. (lagged)			0.007			-0.016
			(0.014)			(0.015)
Average N of Battles (lagged)			0.027			0.010
			(0.018)			(0.019)
Mean of D.V.	0.070	0.070	0.070	0.065	0.065	0.065
Time FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Prefecture FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Obs.	7,968	7,968	7,968	7,904	7,904	7,904

Note: The unit of observation is prefecture-time. Standard errors clustered at the prefecture level are in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, and $^{*}p < 0.10$.

Table A15: Alternative Definition of Elite Power Bases (*Shizu Zhi*)

DV	Number of Temple Est.					
	Full Sample			Excluding Capitals		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
ElitePowerBaseXPost	0.027**	0.026*	0.032**	0.029***	0.027**	0.033**
	(0.011)	(0.013)	(0.015)	(0.011)	(0.014)	(0.015)
Terrain RuggednessXPost		0.104*	0.119*		0.104*	0.115*
		(0.055)	(0.062)		(0.056)	(0.063)
River Dist.XPost		-0.001	-0.001		-0.001	-0.001
		(0.003)	(0.003)		(0.003)	(0.003)
Rice SuitabilityXPost		0.002**	0.0028**		0.002**	0.0028**
		(0.001)	(0.0011)		(0.001)	(0.0011)
Wheat SuitabilityXPost		0.002***	0.0025***		0.002***	0.0023***
		(0.001)	(0.0009)		(0.001)	(0.0009)
Average N of Temple Est. (lagged)			-0.146***			-0.150***
			(0.017)			(0.020)
Average N of Battles (lagged)			0.024			-0.019
			(0.028)			(0.028)
Mean of D.V.	0.066	0.066	0.066	0.061	0.061	0.061
Time FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Prefecture FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Obs.	2,988	2,988	2,988	2,964	2,964	2,964

Note: The unit of observation is prefecture-time. Standard errors clustered at the prefecture level are in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, and $^{*}p < 0.10$.

Table A16: Usurpers' Role, Elite Power Bases (*Shizu Zhi*), and Temple Est. in Mid-Imperial China (1 Year / Period)

DV	Average N of Temple Est.					
	Self-Entrenched Usurpers			Other-Entrenched Usurpers		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
ElitePowerBaseXUsurper	0.012***	0.007***	0.007***	-0.004**	-0.0031**	-0.0031*
	(0.001)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.0015)	(0.0016)
Terrain RuggednessXUsurper		-0.006	-0.006		0.003	0.003
		(0.005)	(0.004)		(0.005)	(0.005)
River Dist.XUsurper		-0.0004	-0.0004		-0.0002	-0.0002
		(0.0003)	(0.0003)		(0.0004)	(0.0003)
Rice SuitabilityXUsurper		-0.000	-0.000		0.000	0.000
		(0.000)	(0.000)		(0.000)	(0.000)
Wheat SuitabilityXUsurper		0.0003***	0.0003***		-0.000	-0.000
		(0.0001)	(0.0001)		(0.000)	(0.000)
Average N of Temple Est. (lagged)			0.044***			0.046***
			(0.002)			(0.002)
Average N of Battles (lagged)			-0.004			0.000
			(0.003)			(0.003)
Mean of D.V.	0.019	0.019	0.019	0.014	0.014	0.014
Time FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Prefecture FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Obs.	137,490	137,490	137,189	125,805	125,805	125,504

Note: The unit of observation is prefecture-time. Standard errors clustered at the prefecture level are in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, and $^{*}p < 0.10$.

ADDITIONAL FIGURES

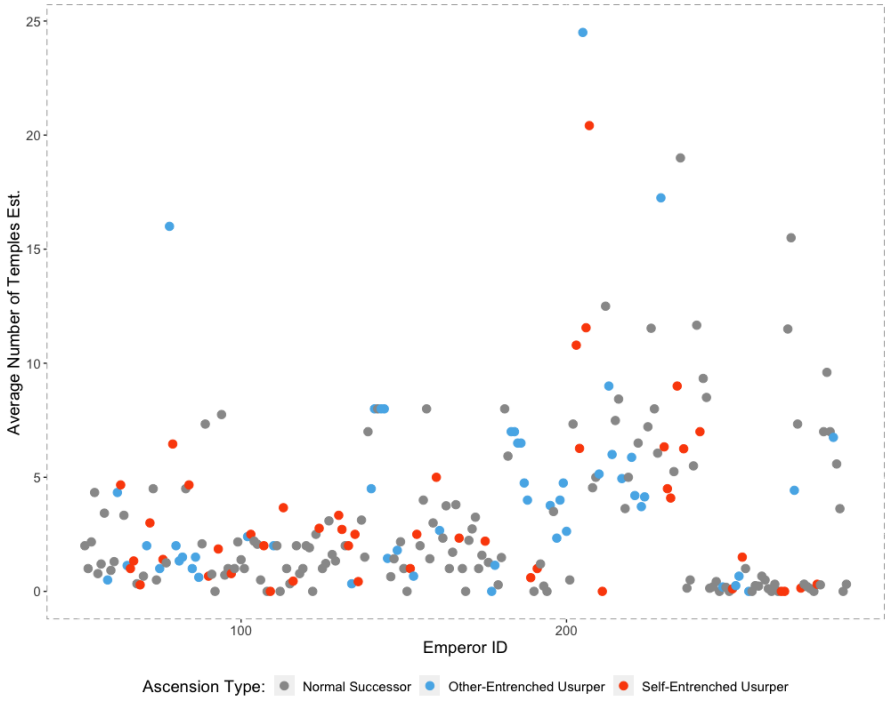
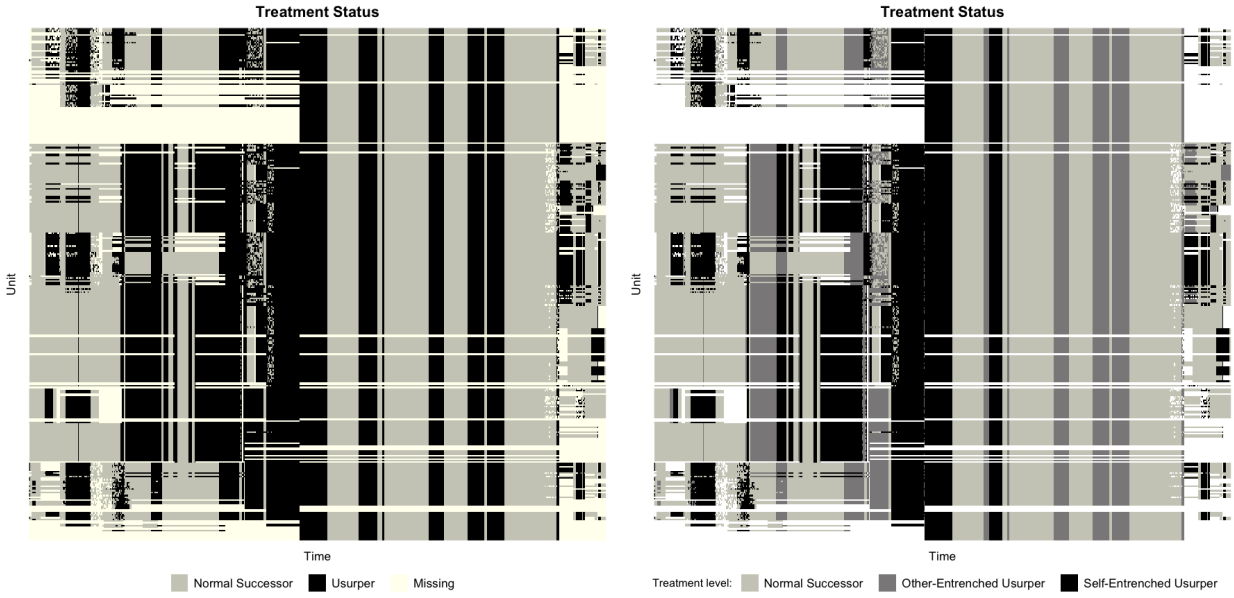


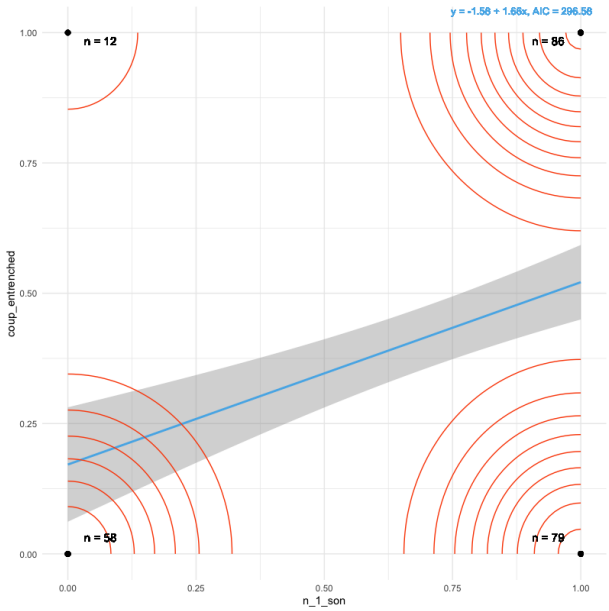
Figure A1: Average Number of Temples Est. During Each Emperor's Reign in Mid-Imperial China



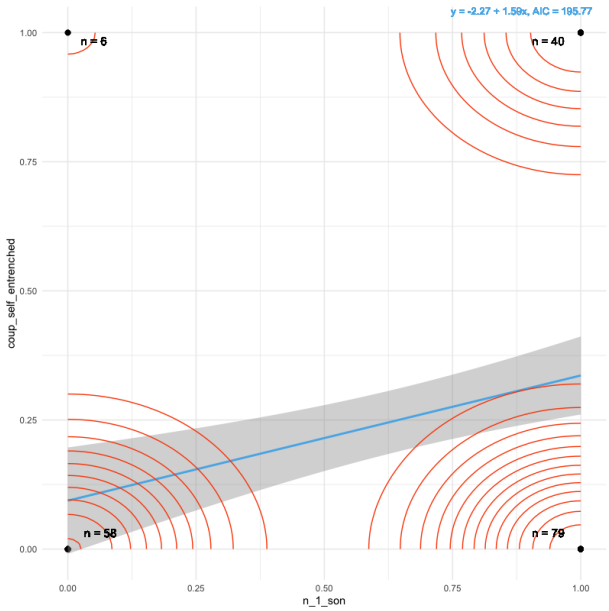
(a) Usurper (dummy)

(b) Usurper (category)

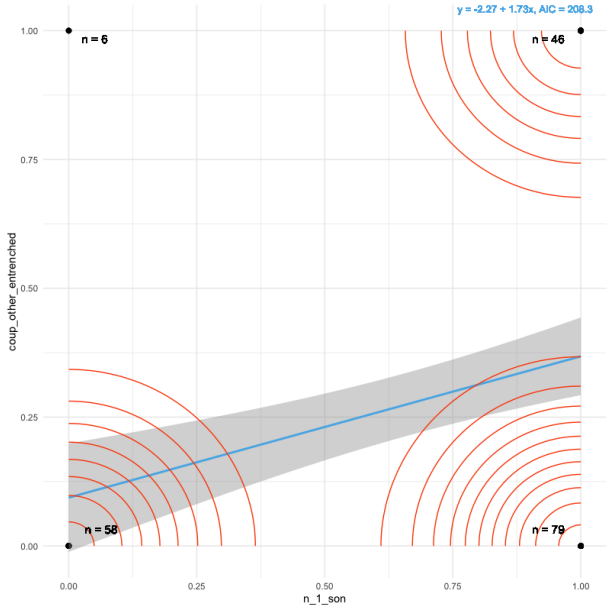
Figure A2: Prefecture FE Analysis: Visualization of Treatment Status



(a) Usurper (dummy)

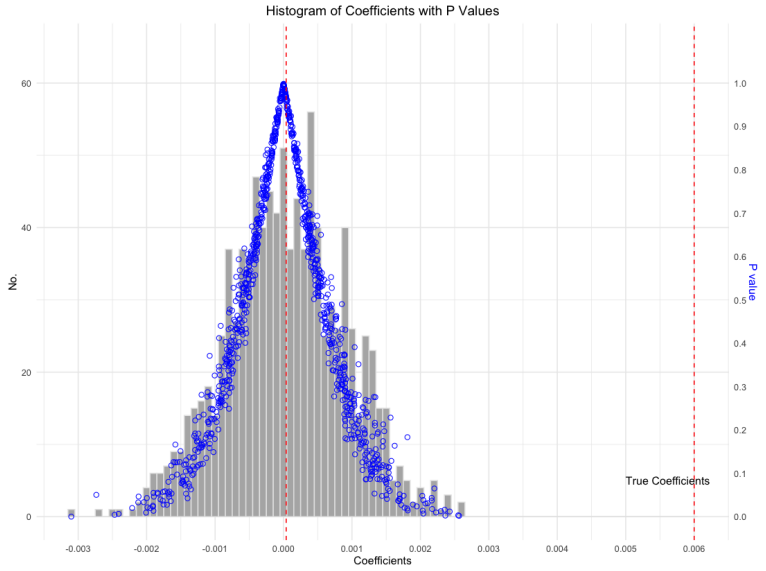


(b) Self-Entrenched Usurper versus Normal Successor

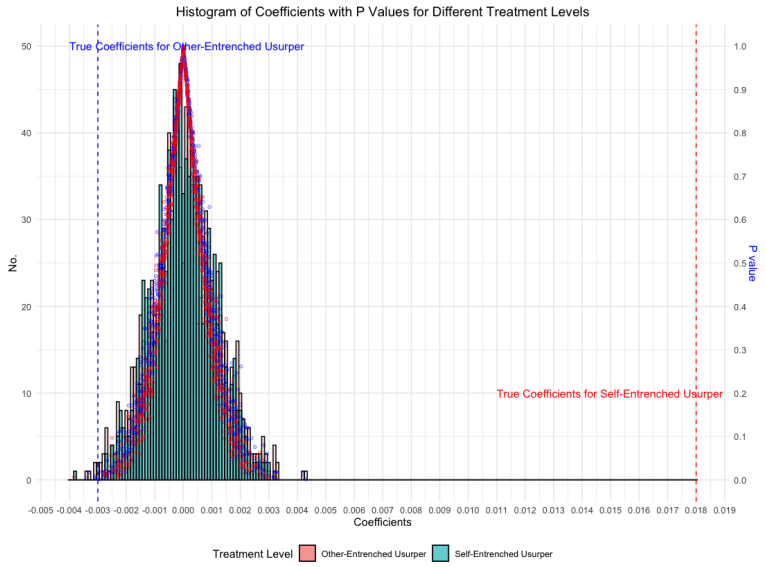


(c) Other-Entrenched Usurper versus Normal Successor

Figure A3: IV Analysis: Scatter Plot of Usurper Status and Non-1st Son



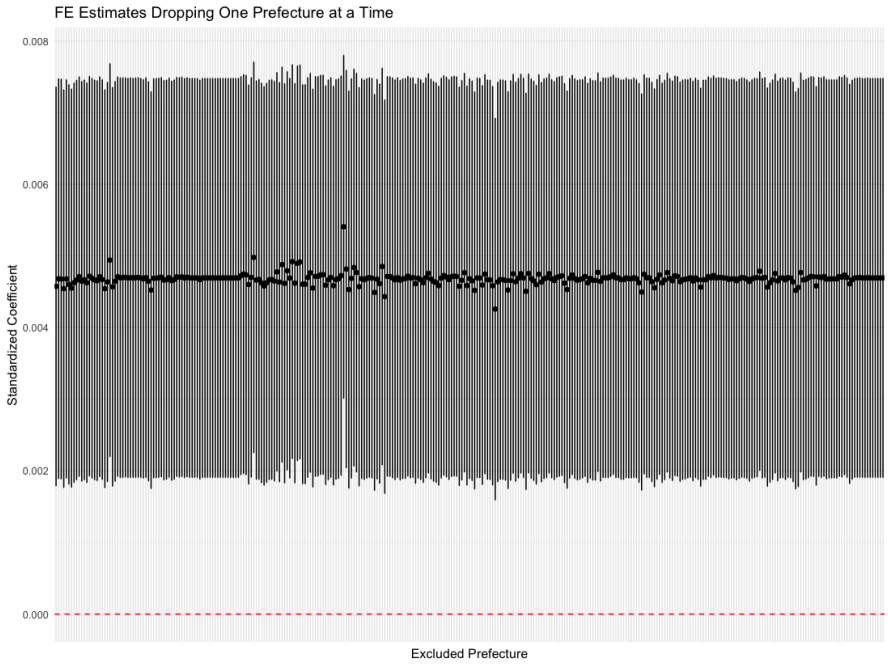
(a) Usurper



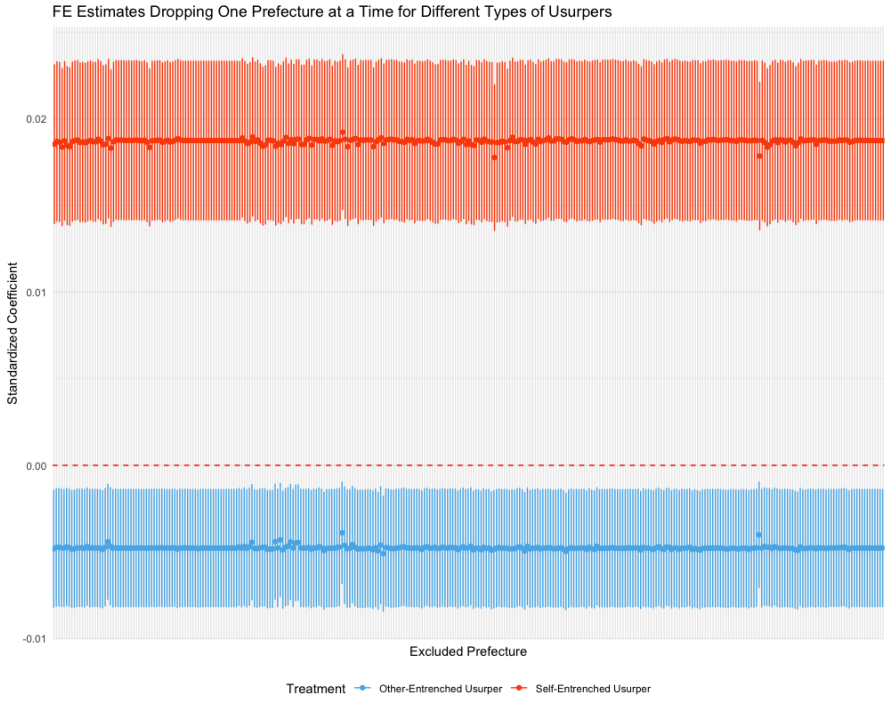
(b) Usurper (Category)

Figure A4: Randomly Assigning Treatment Status to Regime-Year-Prefectures

The figures display the distribution of coefficients and their associated p-values from randomly assigning treatment status to 78,955 regime-year-prefectures, with simulations repeated 1,000 times. All regressions control for prefecture and dynasty fixed effects. Panel (a) shows the simulation results for the dummy usurper treatment, where only 3% of the simulated regressions have a positive coefficient with statistical significance at the 5% level. The dotted red line represents the baseline coefficient of 0.006. Panel (b) displays the simulation results for the categorical usurper treatment, randomly assigning self-entrenched usurper treatment to 45,320 regime-year-prefectures and other-entrenched usurper treatment to another 33,635 regime-year-prefectures. Only 2.7% (3.3%) of the simulated regressions have a positive (negative) coefficient for the self-entrenched (other-entrenched) usurper treatment with statistical significance at the 5% level. The dotted red (blue) line represents the baseline coefficient of 0.018 (-0.003).



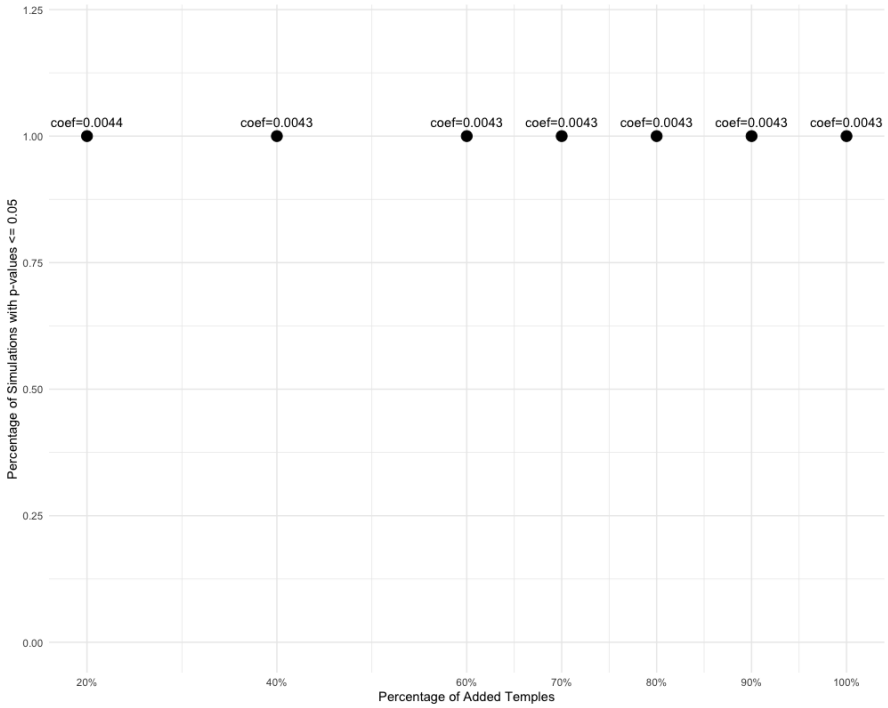
(a) Usurper



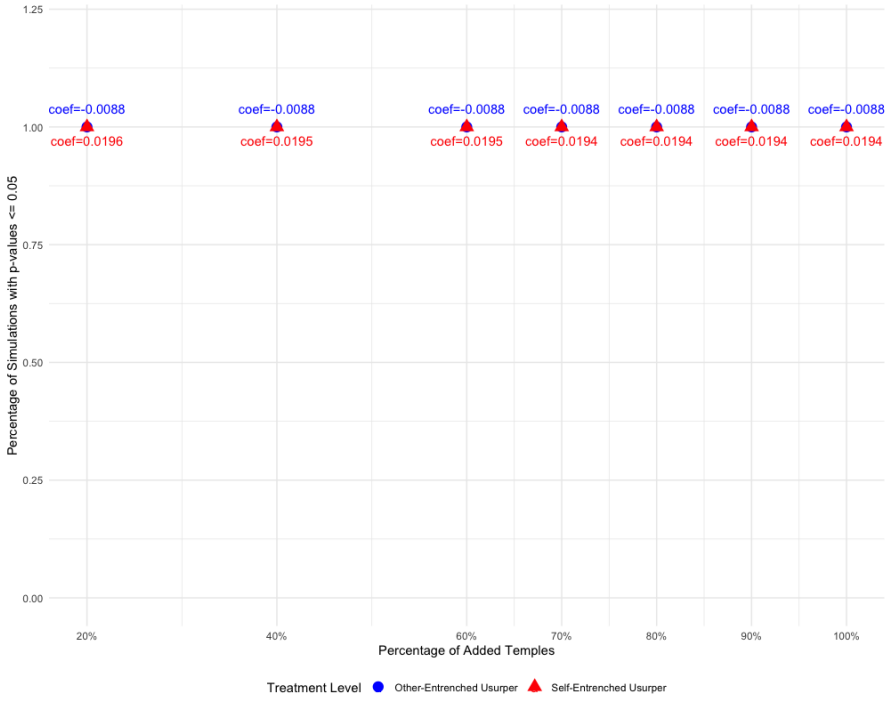
(b) Usurper (Category)

Figure A5: Sensitivity Analysis: FE Estimates Dropping One Prefecture at a Time

Note: The figures show the prefecture fixed-effects estimates of usurpers on Number of Temple Est., dropping one prefecture at a time. All regressions control for N of Battles, Emperor Age, Reign Year, Founding Emperor, as well as prefecture and dynasty fixed effects (same with column (2) of Table 5.1 and 5.2). Lines show 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the dynasty level.



(a) Usurper



(b) Usurper (Category)

Figure A6: Sensitivity Analysis: Randomly Adding Temples to the Control Group (FE Estimates)

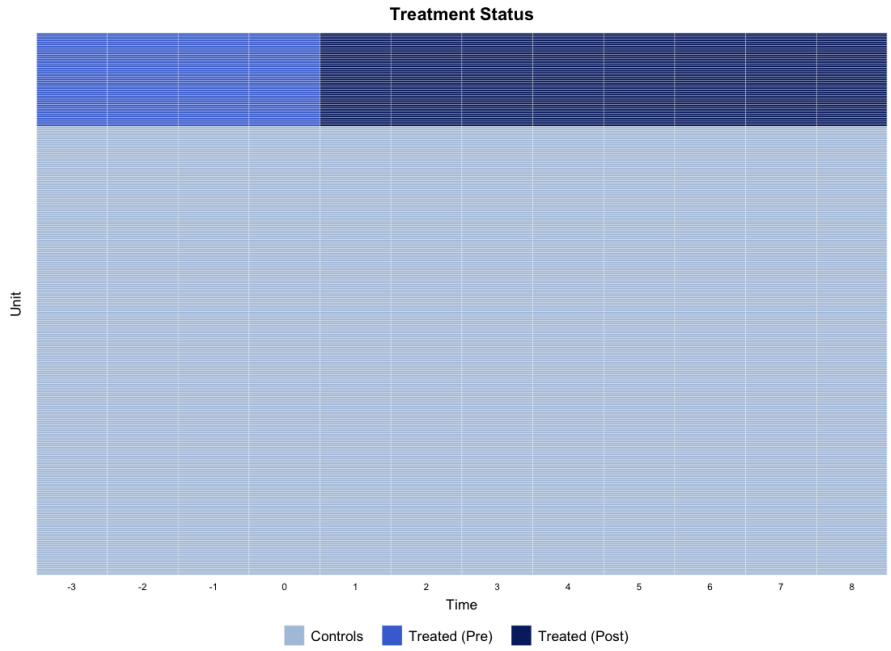


Figure A7: DiD Analysis: Visualization of Treatment Status

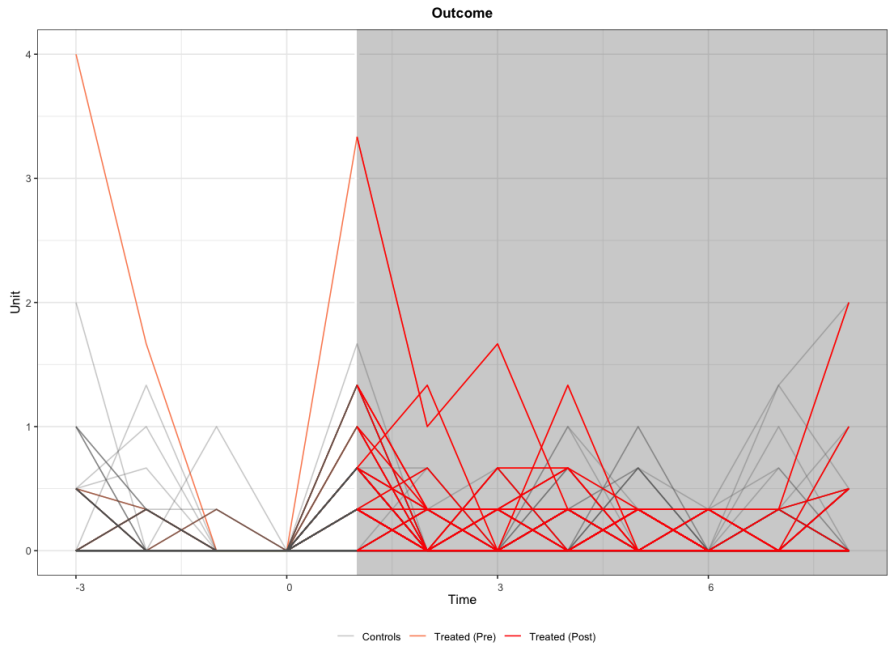
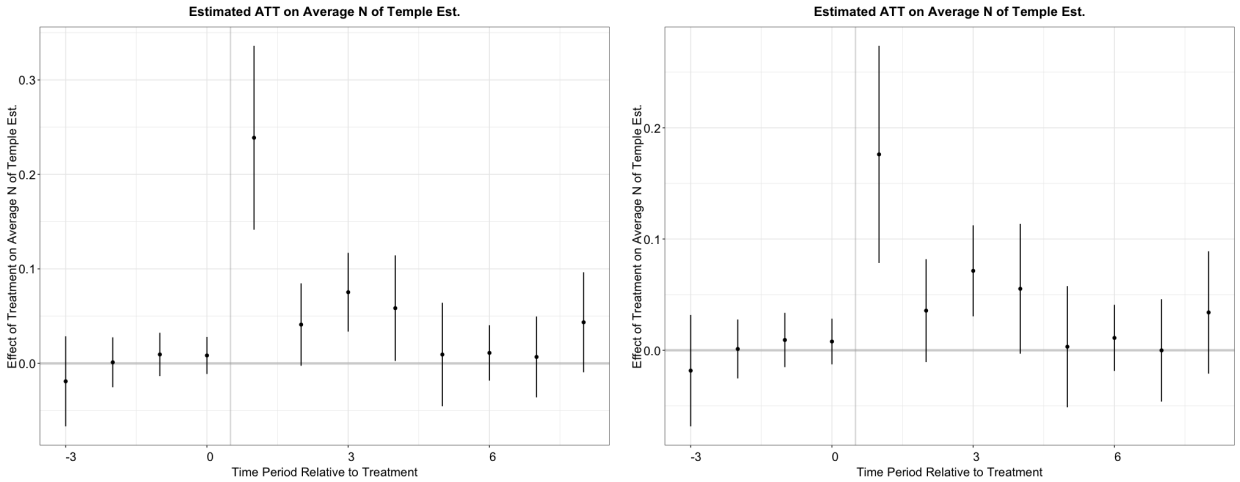


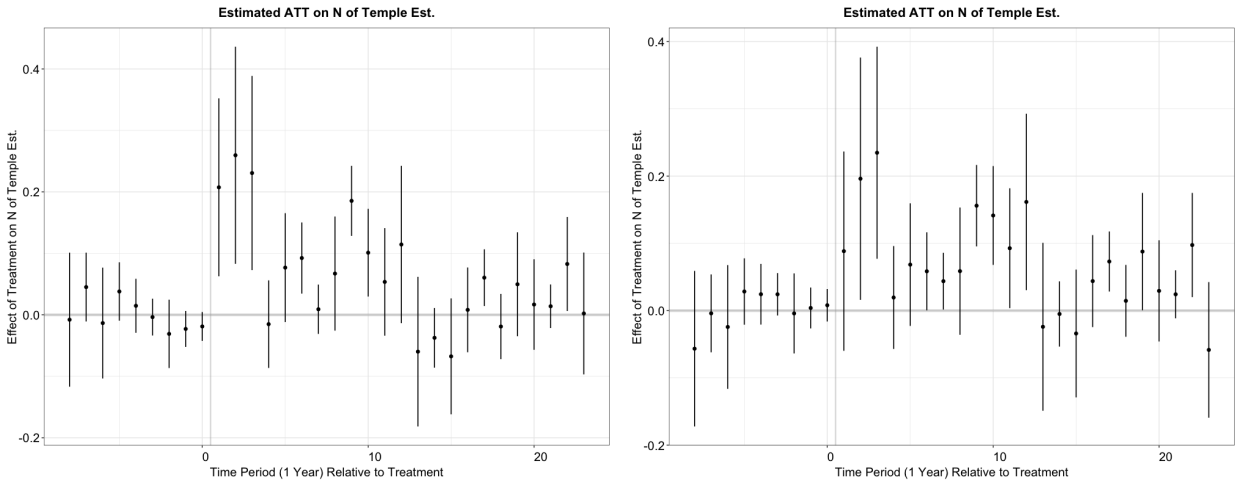
Figure A8: DiD Analysis: Visualization of Raw Outcome



(a) Full Sample (b) Excluding Capitals

Figure A9: Dynamic Treatment Effect of Li Shimin's Ascension on Temple Est. (Using Temples from NRAA's Catalogue Only)

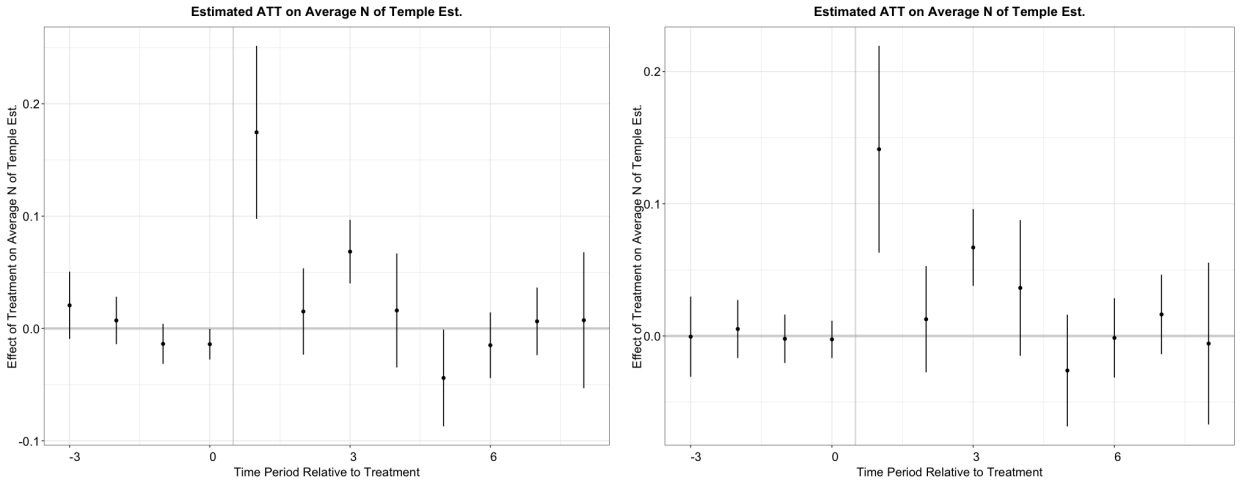
Note: The figures plot lags-and-leads estimates for Equation 5. Vertical lines represent 95% Confidence Interval.



(a) Full Sample (b) Excluding Capitals

Figure A10: Dynamic Treatment Effect of Li Shimin's Ascension on Temple Est. (1 Year / Period)

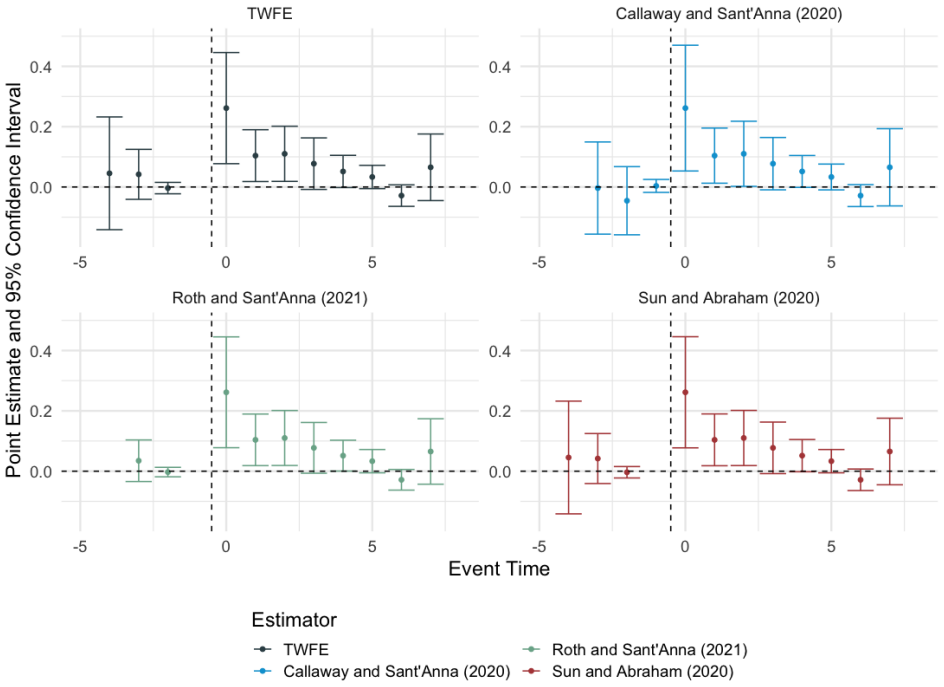
Note: The figures plot lags-and-leads estimates for Equation 5. Vertical lines represent 95% Confidence Interval.



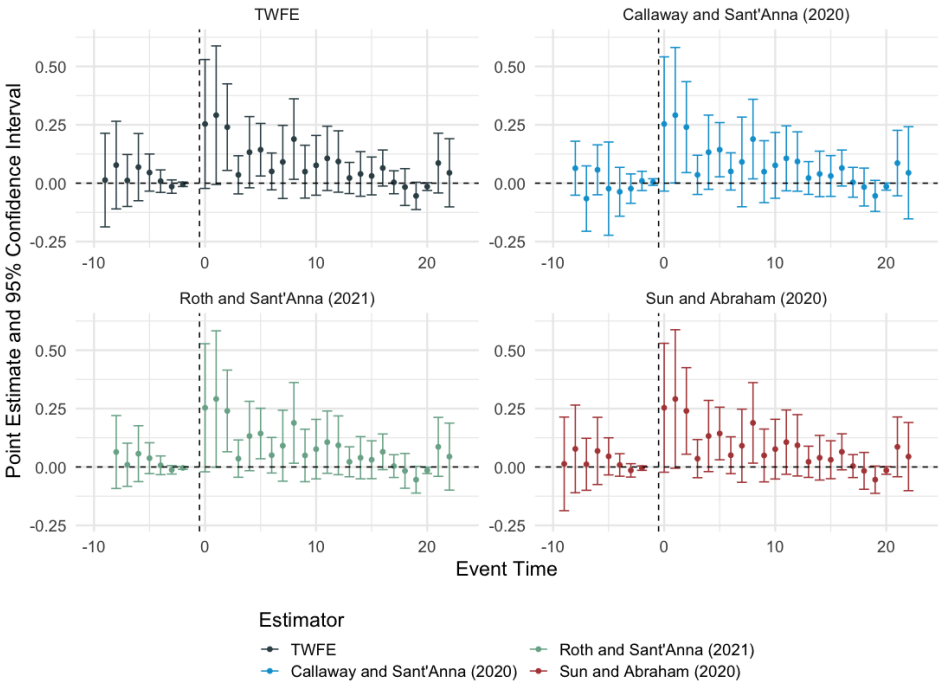
(a) Full Sample (b) Excluding Capitals

Figure A11: Dynamic Treatment Effect of Li Shimin's Ascension on Temple Est. (Alternative Definition of Elite Power Bases)

Note: The figures plot lags-and-leads estimates for Equation 5. Vertical lines represent 95% Confidence Interval.



(a) 3 year / Period



(b) 1 year / Period

Figure A12: Dynamic Treatment Effect of Li Shimin's Ascension on Temple Est. (Alternative Estimators)

Note: The figures plot lags-and-leads estimates for Equation 5. Vertical lines represent 95% Confidence Interval.

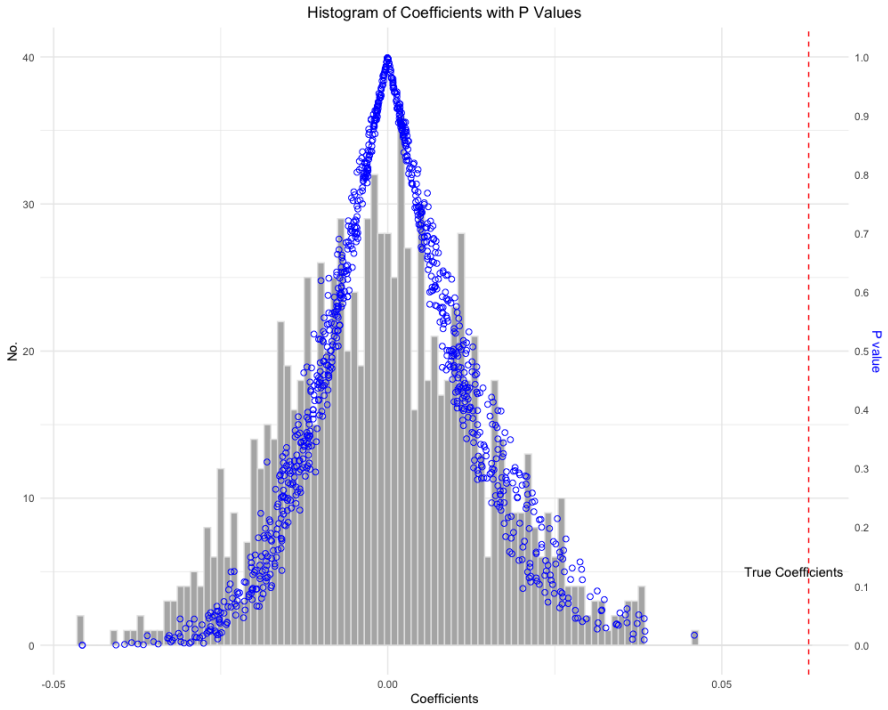


Figure A13: Randomly Assigning Treatment Status to Prefectures

Note: This figure displays the distribution of coefficients and their associated p-values from randomly assigning treatment status to 43 prefectures. This simulation is then repeated 1,000 times. Only 1.8% percent of the simulated regressions have a positive coefficient with statistical significance at the 5% level. Dotted red line depicts the baseline coefficient of 0.063.

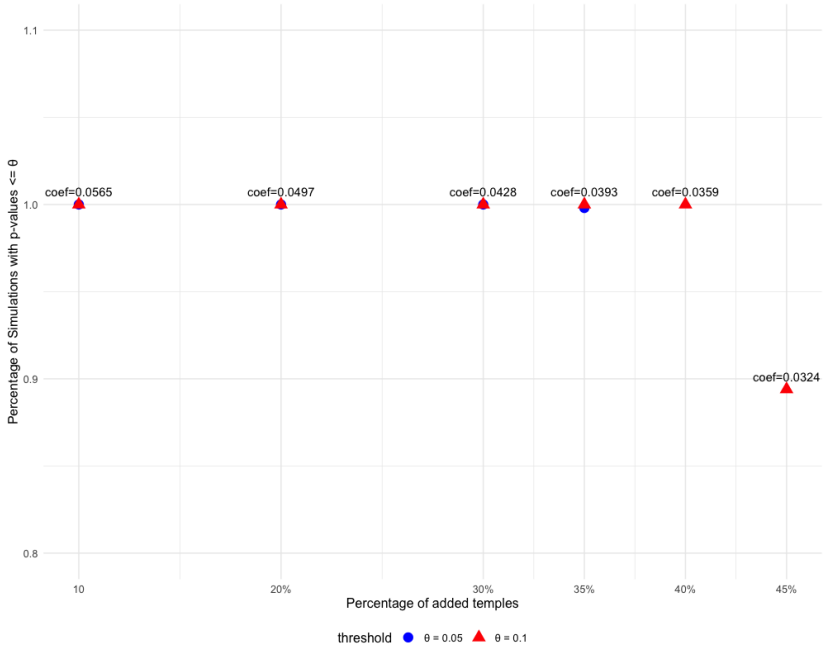


Figure A14: Sensitivity Analysis: Randomly Adding Temples to the Post-Ascension Control Group (DiD Estimates)

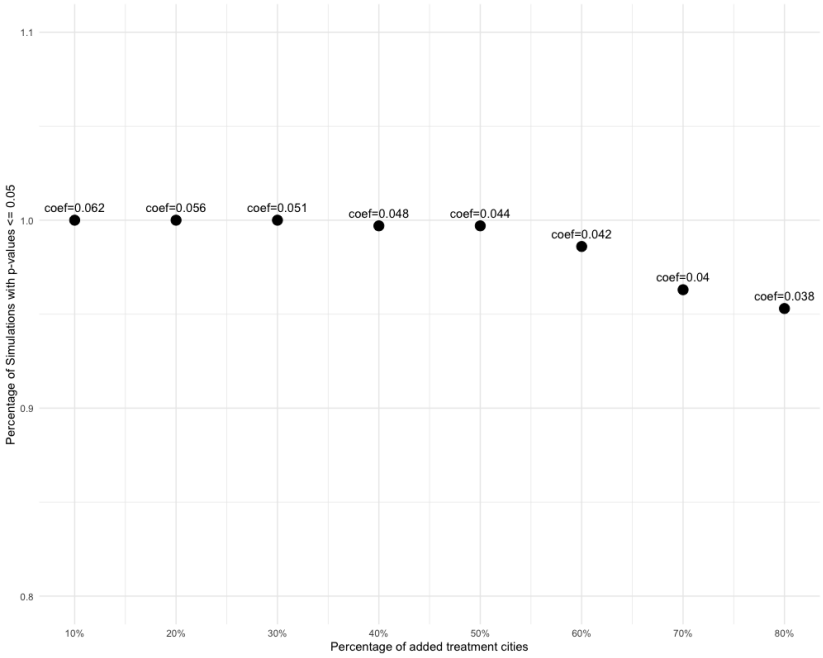
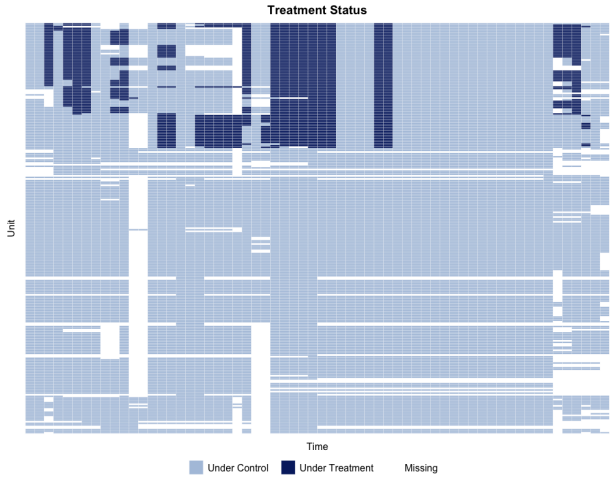
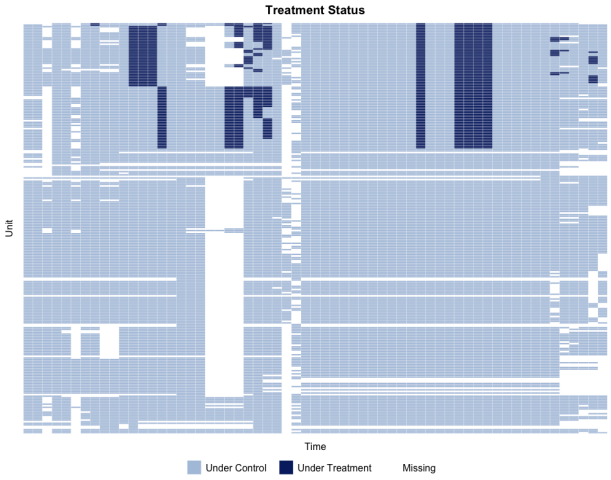


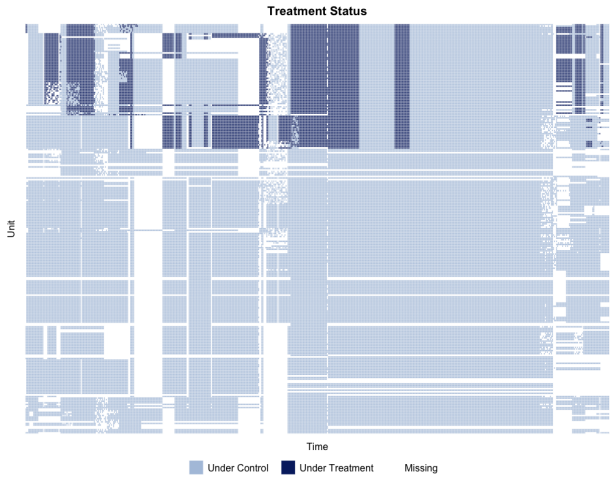
Figure A15: Sensitivity Analysis: Randomly Moving Control Group Prefectures to Treatment Group (DiD Estimates)



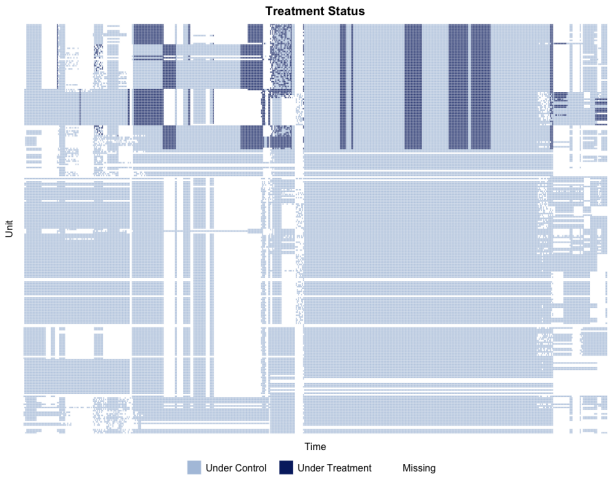
(a) Self-Entrenched Usurpers (10 Y / Period)



(b) Other-Entrenched Usurpers (10 Y / Period)

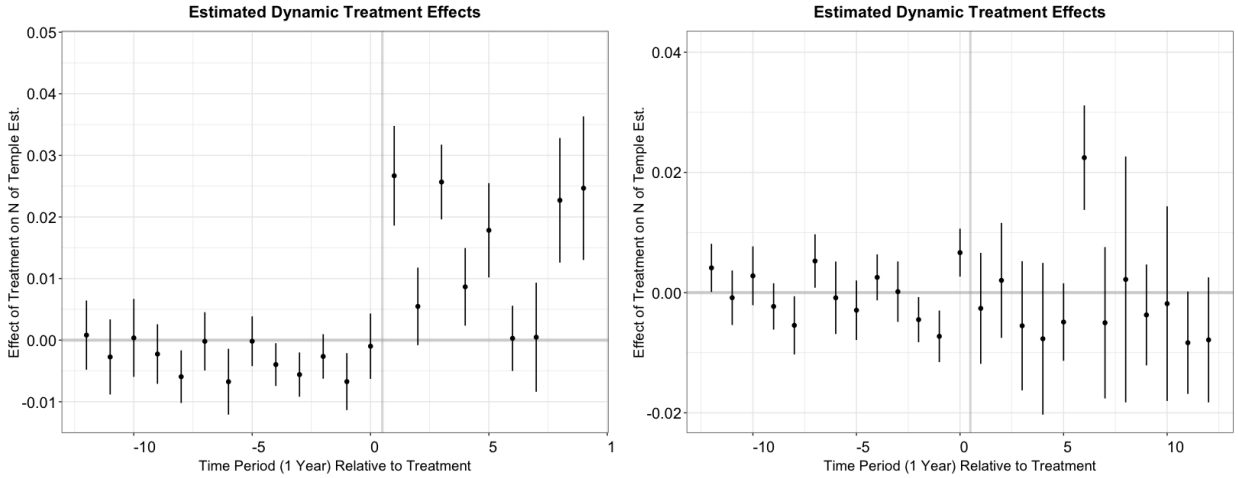


(c) Self-Entrenched Usurpers (1 Y / Period)



(d) Other-Entrenched Usurpers (1 Y / Period)

Figure A16: DiD Analysis: Visualization of Treatment Status (Usurpers' Role and Temple Est. in Elite Power Bases)



(a) Self-Entrenched Usurpers (b) Other-Entrenched Usurpers

Figure A17: Dynamic Treatment Effect of Usurpers' Role on Temple Est. in Elite Power Bases (1 Year / Period)

Note: The figures plot lags-and-leads estimates. Vertical lines represent 95% Confidence Interval.