Institutionalization of Succession Norms and Autocratic Survival: Evidence from Ancient China*

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Abstract

This paper examines how informal institutions shape political stability in autocratic regimes by analyzing succession norms in ancient China. We argue that the institutionalization of vertical succession norms (VSNs)—which limit legitimate successors to the monarch's sons—narrows the candidate pool and facilitates elite coordination in selecting the successor. Using an original dataset of 358 monarchs from 17 states during the Spring-Autumn and Warring States eras (771–221 BCE), we find that VSN institutionalization reduces the likelihood of elite-led deposition. To address endogeneity, we conduct a sub-sample analysis that restricts comparisons to monarchs who inherit personal power from their predecessors and employ an instrumental variable approach based on ancestral distance to royal lineages. We also show that VSNs mitigate the destabilizing effects of elite competition. Our findings contribute to the literature on authoritarian survival and informal institutions by demonstrating that succession rules can promote political stability even before they are codified.

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Introduction

What explains the survival of autocratic leaders? A strand of literature looks at external factors such as foreign interventions (e.g., Debs & Goemans, 2010). Yet as Svolik (2009) points out, among those 303 autocrats who lost their office in a nonconstitutional way from 1946 to 2008, more than two-thirds were deposed by the domestic elite. Another strand of literature resorts to domestic institutions. They find that **formal** institutions such as parties (Brownlee, 2007; Magaloni, 2008), legislatures (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2006), elections (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009), and concrete organizational rules that government leadership succession and elite appointment (Frantz & Stein, 2017; Meng, 2020, 2021) all contribute to authoritarian continuity. Yet it remains relatively underexplored whether and how **informal** institutions shape autocratic survival.

This paper examines the impact of the institutionalization of succession norms on political stability in historical monarchies. Following Helmke and Levitsky (2004, p. 727), we define informal institutions (and norms) as "socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels."[1] We argue that the institutionalization of vertical succession norms (VSNs) narrows the candidate pool by excluding brothers and cousins from potential rightful successors, thereby facilitating coordination among elites and increasing the likelihood of agreeing on a successor. Under VSNs, sons succeed the throne, while under horizontal succession norms (HSNs), brothers and cousins do. Throughout history, states have gradually shifted from horizontal to vertical successions. Medieval and early modern European states practicing horizontal succession were either conquered by other states or transitioned to vertical succession (Kokkonen & Sundell, 2014). Likewise, brothers and cousins gradually faded away from the candidate pool of rightful successors during the Spring-Autumn and Warring States eras of ancient China (Entian Wang, 2017).

To test our hypothesis, we collect a new dataset on fates of the monarchs in ancient China during the Spring-Autumn and Warring States eras (771-221 BCE). We focus on

[1]Some scholars use "norms" and "informal institutions" interchangeably, but others do not. We follow the former as we focus on the lack of officially sanctioned channels, which is the key to both norms and informal institutions.

the case of ancient China for several reasons. First, the international system during the period of study arguably best represents anarchy (Waltz, 1986), which provides an ideal environment for the test of theories in international relations and comparative politics. History of medieval and early modern European states featured power struggles among the Church, kings, and parliaments, and this dynamic could affect both institutions and autocratic survival (Van Zanden, Buringh, & Bosker, 2012). The absence of parliaments and the Church in ancient China provides opportunities for a stronger identification.

Second, states in the Spring-Autumn and Warring States periods were all absolute monarchies, lacked codified succession rules, and originated as feudal warlords under the Western Zhou Dynasty (1045–771 BCE) before becoming de facto territorial rulers. These shared characteristics ensure a relatively homogeneous sample, which strengthens the comparability across cases. Third, there was considerable variation in the succession norms during the period of study. Last, it complements current studies which heavily relies on the experience of European states.

Measuring norms is challenging, as they are unwritten and often evolve gradually. Following best practices (Bicchieri, 2016), we use two complementary strategies. Our primary measure identifies the institutionalization of VSNs through recurrent patterns of de facto father-to-son succession.[2] As a secondary measure, we draw on historians' accounts of elite debates and normative expectations, which suggest that VSNs had become widely accepted by the end of the Spring and Autumn Period (Entian Wang, 1980, p. 79). Since this measure varies only over time and not across states, we focus on the behavioral measure in the main analysis and use the secondary measure in robustness checks.

To address endogeneity concerns, we first conduct a sub-sample analysis that restricts comparisons to monarchs who inherited personal power from their predecessors. We further employ an instrumental variable strategy based on historical ancestral ties between states and the Shang and Zhou royal families. The intuition is that states more closely related to these royal lineages were slower to adopt vertical succession norms, as they pre-

[2]We use different thresholds for robustness checks.

served older mixed succession traditions. The results from both the sub-sample analysis and the instrumental variable approach provide consistent support for the argument that VSN institutionalization reduces the risk of leader removal by domestic elites. Together, they help alleviate concerns of reverse causality—that VSN institutionalization is merely a consequence of political stability rather than a contributing factor.

We also explore a potential mechanism linking VSN institutionalization to political stability: elite competition. In ancient China, elite rivalry stemmed not only from succession disputes within royal families, but also from power struggles between royal families and influential aristocratic lineages. While data limitations prevent us from measuring intra-family dynamics, we approximate elite competition using the presence and persistence of aristocratic lineages within each state (Zhao, 2015). We find evidence that VSNs mitigate the destabilizing effects of elite competition, supporting the view that succession norms promote stability by structuring elite coordination.

We also compare monarchs in ancient China with those in medieval and early modern Europe, where primogeniture—a formal succession rule in which the eldest son inherits the throne—was widely adopted. Primogeniture can be seen as a specific form of VSNs, as it further narrows the pool of successors to the eldest son. Despite differences in institutional context, both regions faced the problem of orderly power transfer. China addressed this through norms, whereas Europe moved toward formalization. We find no evidence that informal rules in China were less effective than formal ones in Europe.[3] Future studies can explore the conditions under which succession rules become codified and the political consequences of different institutional pathways.

This paper contributes directly to the literature on succession rules and autocratic survival. First, much of the existing literature focuses on formal institutional design and appointment arrangements (Frantz & Stein, 2017; Meng, 2020, 2021). Our findings suggest that widely accepted succession norms—when institutionalized—can perform similar stabilizing functions. Second, existing studies of succession problem in historical

[3]Informal succession norms were not unique to China. Many dynasties and empires—including the Ottoman, Mughal, and Japanese—lacked codified succession rules well into the modern era. A brief overview is provided in the Appendix.

monarchies emphasize the role of primogeniture (Kurrild-Klitgaard, 2000; Kokkonen & Sundell, 2014). Our finding offers a broader interpretation: primogeniture is a specific form of VSNs, and VSNs can enhance political stability in monarchy by narrowing the pool of legitimate successors, thereby facilitating elite coordination. Third, we uncover a new mechanism linking succession norms to autocratic survival: VSN institutionalization mitigates the risks of leader removal by reducing the adverse effects of elite competition.

This paper also contributes to the literature on informal institutions in authoritarian regimes (Tsai, 2007; Hicken, 2011). Recent studies increasingly measure informal institutions through configurations of elite coalitions or cabinet appointments, emphasizing how these networks constrain executive power (Jiang, Xi, & Xie, 2024; Meng, 2020). While this work has advanced our understanding of elite dynamics and power consolidation, it remains unclear whether sanctions in these elite arrangements operate outside of officially sanctioned channels—the defining feature of informal institutions (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004, 2006). Without expectation-enforcing mechanisms, such arrangements may reflect informal practices rather than informal institutions—making it difficult to isolate whether they confer legitimacy or simply mirror underlying power distributions. This paper brings that mechanism back into focus. We show that informal succession norms can promote political stability by narrowing the scope of legitimate successors and structuring elite expectations about rightful succession.

Last, this paper enhances our understanding of a pivotal episode in Chinese history. While research on state formation in China and East Asia is growing (Haggard & Kang, 2020; Yuhua Wang, 2022; Chen, Wang, & Zhang, 2024), it often focuses on imperial China, particularly from the Northern Wei (386–534) or Tang (618–907) dynasties onward, due to greater data availability. However, a full account of China's state formation requires examining earlier periods. As Fukuyama (2011) notes, China's early state-building "set precedents in many ways for the process Europe went through nearly one thousand years later" (p. 105). Likewise, Huang (2015) argues that China's long-term trajectory was largely shaped by the Spring-Autumn and Warring States eras. Examining this earlier period not only sheds light on the origins of China's centralized

bureaucratic state but also improves our understanding of state formation as a broader political process.

The Power of Norms

Social norms are powerful in shaping behavior (Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991). Prominent examples have spoken to the power of norms: the norm of self-determination helped wiped out colonialism; the nuclear taboo helped keep the spread of nuclear weapons in check; and global human right norms helped improve domestic practice of human right in many countries (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Tannenwald, 1999; Risse-Kappen, Risse, Ropp, & Sikkink, 1999).

Scholars have different explanations for why people follow norms. The first camp emphasizes the reward and punishment system. They argue that people follow norms because of potential sanctions (Coleman, 1990). In lab studies, scholars have identified conditions under which people are more likely to sanction norms violations and which person is in a better position to take actions against violations (Rauhut & Winter, 2010). In terms of succession norms, monarchs who attempted to deviate from the norm often faced strong oppositions from the elite. A prominent example is Liu Bang, the founder of the Han Dynasty, who attempted to violate the succession norm and eventually gave in under pressure from high-ranking statesmen.

Another camp emphasizes that norms work through internalization. They argue that through repeated socialization, people gradually learn and internalize the common values embedded in the norms (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). As Fukuyama argues, "rule following for human being is not primarily a rational process but one that is grounded in emotions (Fukuyama, 2011, p. 38)." Bicchieri (2005) also conceives an individual's conform with a norm as an automatic response to cues instead of deliberation. From this perspective, people follow succession norms because they believe in the legitimacy of the norms. In summary, studies show that norms can be powerful even if there are no officially sanctioned channels.

Succession is a particularly high-stakes domain where norms can shape expectations, deter disputes, and enable elite coordination. Even in contemporary autocracies, unwritten succession rules can facilitate smooth power transitions. For instance, in China, top leaders are often promoted through a norm-bound pathway, where members of the Politburo Standing Committee are routinely drawn from within the Politburo and follow an established, though uncodified, path to promotion (Meng, 2020, Chap. 4). These patterns reflect how informal rules—though not legally binding—can structure elite expectations and reduce uncertainty during leadership transitions.

Succession Norms and Autocratic Survival

Arranging a peaceful power transition is a perennial challenge in autocratic regimes (Brownlee, 2007; Svolik, 2012; Tullock, 2012). In the Neolithic period, individuals with particular physiological or behavior trait that increases their propensity to act first in coordination games are more likely to emerge as leaders (King, Johnson, & Van Vugt, 2009). As societies evolved from small-scale communities to complex hierarchical states, the risks of contested succession grew. Early empires such as the Akkadian Empire (2334–2154 BCE) already relied on hereditary succession to manage elite competition and reduce violent transitions (Sallaberger & Schrakamp, 2015).

The shift from meritocratic or rotational leadership to hereditary succession effectively narrowed the candidate pool, making elite coordination easier. While elites may have been excluded from direct access to power, they had strong incentives to support succession norms because the danger of ending up on the losing side outweighs any substantive preferences over who prevails (Svolik, 2012). In ancient China, failed succession bids often led not only to the rebel's death but also to the execution of their extended family and political network. A prominent case is Liu An, Prince of Huainan and a paternal uncle of the reigning Emperor Wu of Han. When his plan to seize the throne was uncovered in 122 BCE, Liu An took his own life, and thousands of his relatives and political allies were executed.[4]

[4]See Sima and Watson (1993, Vol. 118).

Over time, hereditary rules became increasingly vertical. Across empires in Africa, Asia, and Europe, there was a general convergence toward VSNs, in part because they provided clearer expectations than horizontal succession norms (HSNs) (Kurrild-Klitgaard, 2000). Under HSNs, succession typically passed to the eldest brother of the previous ruler. While this rule may be straightforward in the first generation or two, it becomes increasingly ambiguous over time as multiple branches of the royal family emerge. Identifying the "eldest brother" across extended kinship networks—where different lineages may have competing claims and conflicting genealogical records—can lead to succession disputes and elite fragmentation (Vansina, 1990; Guowei Wang, 1959; Kurrild-Klitgaard, 2000).

In historical China, succession gradually shifted from a mixture of vertical and horizontal patterns to predominantly VSNs (Guowei Wang, 1959; Entian Wang, 2017). During the Shang Dynasty (1600–1045 BCE), 13 of 29 kings were succeeded by brothers and 16 by sons. In the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE), 10 of 36 kings were succeeded by brothers. By the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), brothers were effectively excluded from succession, marking the consolidation of VSNs.[5]

We argue that the institutionalization of VSNs narrows the candidate pool by excluding brothers, thereby clarifying expectations and reducing elite conflict over succession. While no succession rule can fully eliminate instability in non-democratic regimes, the institutionalization of VSNs should, on average, promote political stability by facilitating elite agreement. We further expect the stabilizing effect to be stronger in contexts with more intense elite competition.

Hypothesis 1: The institutionalization of VSNs reduces the likelihood of a monarch being removed from office by the domestic elite.

Hypothesis 2: The institutionalization of VSNs works through moderating the adverse impact of elite competition on monarchs' tenure.

[5]The historical background section provides more detail on the evolution of succession norms in China.

Historical Background

The Feudal System and its Dissolution

The Zhou Dynasty is divided into two periods: the Western Zhou Period (1046-772 BCE) and the Eastern Zhou Period (771-256 BCE). The political and economic system of the Western Zhou is similar to that of the medieval Europe's feudalism. When the Western Zhou overthrew the Shang Dynasty, its rulers were beset by the question of how to govern such a vast territory. The solution, known as "fenfeng zhi," was for the king of Zhou to keep the capital and its surrounding areas under direct control and then donated territory across the country to the relatives and statesmen who served the King as vassals (Loewe & Shaughnessy, 1999). The vassals further donated their land to their relatives. The vassals exercised hereditary succession and collected taxes within their states and built their own armies. However, they were obliged to pay regular tributes to the king of Zhou and supply manpower during military operations (Loewe & Shaughnessy, 1999).

The decentralized system began to disintegrate gradually in the late Western Zhou as the familial relationship between the king of Zhou and the vassals thinned over generations. In 771 BC, the Quanrong barbarians sacked the capital of Western Zhou and the King of Zhou moved the capital eastward. Hence started the Eastern Zhou period, which is divided into the Spring-Autumn and Warring States eras.

During the Spring and Autumn Period, feudal lords developed power and prestige on par with the king of Zhou. As the king of Zhou lost political hold on the feudal lords, the feudal system was gradually transformed into an international system (Hui, 2004). States waged war against each other, and the scale and severity of warfare increased during the Warring States Period (Zhao, 2004), which ended by Qin's unification of China in 221 BCE.

Evolution of Succession Norms in Ancient China

A key challenge in the study of institutions, particularly social norms, is explaining how they evolve over time (North, 1971; Greif & Laitin, 2004; Greif, 2006). In this

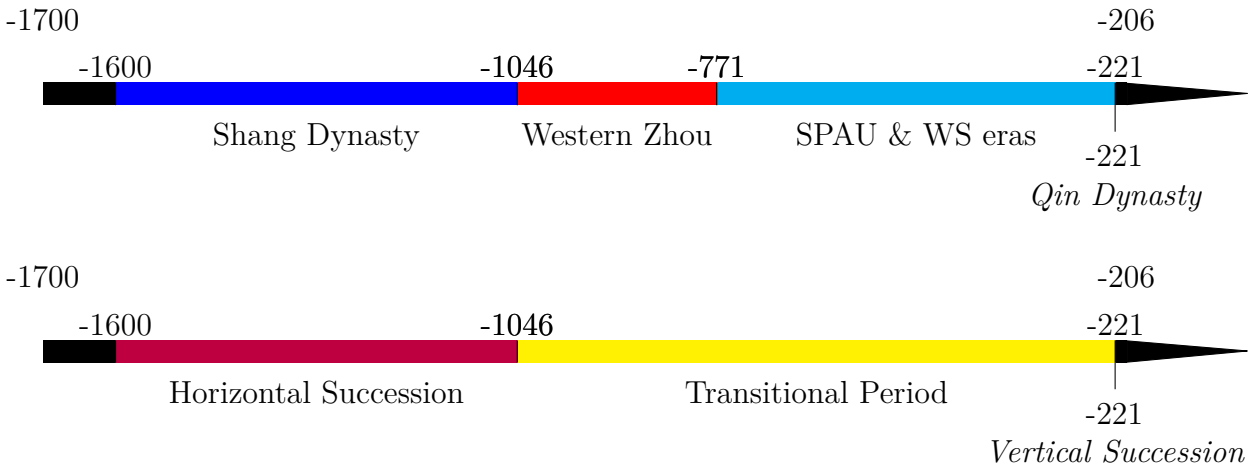

Figure 1: Evolution of Succession Norms in Ancient China

section, we provide an overview of the evolution of succession norms in ancient China during the period under study. We then explore three potential explanations for this trend and develop measures to assess the institutionalization of vertical succession norms (VSNs) in ancient China.

Unlike monarchies in medieval and early modern Europe, succession rules in ancient China were never formally codified. Figure 2 illustrates the evolution of succession norms over this period.[6] Before the Western Zhou Dynasty, agnatic seniority was the dominant succession norm (Guowei Wang, 1959). Many historians trace the origin of primogeniture to the "lineage law" (zongfa system) established by Duke Wen of Zhou as a means of controlling his vassals (Guowei Wang, 1959; Zhao, 2015). This system structured authority based on patriarchal principles (Zhao, 2015, p. 59).[7]

During the Spring and Autumn Period, states gradually shifted from agnatic seniority to vertical succession (Entian Wang, 1980). The absence of a dominant succession norm was reflected in debates among the elite on how to interpret lineage law and which succession rules to apply. For example, the Gongyang Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals stated that The heir should be chosen based on age, not merit; the heir should be chosen based on the status of his mother (legal wife versus concubine),

[6]In some cases, it is difficult to categorize the exact form of succession in certain states. For instance, there is debate over whether the state of Chu adhered to primogeniture or ultimogeniture. However, it is undisputed that Chu adopted VSNs rather than HSNs.

[7]Further details on the lineage law can be found in the Appendix.

not age."[8] According to this interpretation, the eldest son of a monarch's legal wife had the right to succeed the throne. In contrast, the Zuozhuan argued that When an heir passed away, the younger brother of the monarch should be chosen as the new heir; in the absence of a younger brother, the heir should be chosen based on age (among the monarch's sons); if two sons are the same age, the more virtuous one should be chosen; if they are equally virtuous, it should be resolved by divination (through rituals)."[9] These discussions among the elite suggest that the shift to VSNs remained incomplete during the Spring and Autumn Period.

States gradually established VSNs during the transition from the Spring and Autumn Period to the Warring States Period (Entian Wang, 1980, 2017; Li, 1987; Wei & Wang, 2010). Recent historical studies provide two key pieces of evidence for this claim. First, shortly before or after 476 BCE, a new pattern of royal succession emerged in most states. For instance, in the state of Qi, beginning with Duke Tai of Tian Qi, seven consecutive monarchs were succeeded by their sons; in the state of Han, starting with Marquess Jing of Han, ten consecutive monarchs were succeeded by their sons; and in the state of Wei, beginning with Wei Huanzi, nine consecutive monarchs were succeeded by their sons (Li, 1987, p. 68). Second, starting toward the end of the Spring and Autumn Period, several monarchs' sons inherited the throne at a very young age, a rare occurrence in earlier eras where succession rules were dominated by agnatic seniority (Entian Wang, 1980, p. 80).

Scholars have proposed three socio-economic explanations for this transition. The first focuses on marriage customs, with some historians arguing that the relative sexual freedom in ancient Chinese society led monarchs to doubt whether their sons shared their blood, thus reducing their willingness to pass the throne to them (Entian Wang, 2017, p. 56-57). This concern, they suggest, was alleviated with the rise of eunuchs, who enabled monarchs to monitor their wives and concubines (Lv, 2020). However, this explanation remains speculative. The severe punishment for infidelity, which extended to the relatives of the wives or concubines, made such doubts rare, and monarchs could simply choose another son if they had concerns. Therefore, marriage customs do not offer a systematic

[8] 《Gongyang Zhuan. First Year of Duke Yin》
[9] 《Zuozhuan. Thirty-first Year of Duke Xiang》

explanation for the evolution of succession norms.

Another explanation is economic development. Before the late Spring and Autumn Period, private property was limited (Entian Wang, 2017), but as wealth increased, competition for inheritance intensified. It is argued that the bond between fathers and sons is stronger than that among brothers, making it natural for parents to prefer passing their possessions to their children rather than siblings (Guowei Wang, 1959). However, this explanation is unsatisfactory. It fails to clarify whether the process was driven from the top-down or bottom-up. While private property may have been limited for the average household, this was not the case for royal families, where competition for the throne was always brutal—the victor took everything, while rivals, if spared, were left at the winner's mercy. As such, economic development cannot explain the transition to VSNs in the late Spring and Autumn Period.

A more convincing explanation is state capacity (Zhang, 1998). During the transition from the Spring and Autumn Period to the Warring States Period, states underwent significant bureaucratization (Zhao, 2004). As bureaucratic structures became more developed, states could tolerate less competent rulers, allowing both rulers and elites to feel more secure in narrowing the pool of succession candidates (Zhang, 1998; Qian, 1991). Additionally, if state capacity correlates with the risk of coups, omitting it from the regressions would bias the estimates. Fortunately, we control for state capacity using two novel measurements.[10]

Besides these three potential explanations from historian studies, two additional factors may also affect the institutionalization of VSNs. The first one is the level of external threats. States facing a higher level of external threats may have stronger incentives to keep a larger candidate pool in order to select a more competent ruler to increase their chance of survival in the international system, which can slow down the process of transitioning to VSNs. We address this concern by controlling the level external threats in our models. The second factor is the influence of individual rulers. Abramson and Rivera (2016) find that personal power is heritable in autocracies, and European monarchs with

[10]The data section provides more details on these measurements.

longer tenure are more likely to be succeeded by their sons. In the case of ancient China, monarchs who already had a firm grip on power may be in a better position to institutionalize VSNs. We address this concern in three dimensions: by controlling for the exit mode and tenure of the immediate predecessors, by conducting sub-sample analyses, and by using instrumental variables approaches.

Measuring norms is challenging, as they are unwritten rules understood by group members, and changes in norms tend to occur gradually. Sociologists typically measure norms using either 1) recurrent patterns of behavior or 2) normative beliefs and expectations (Bicchieri, 2016). Following best practices, we measure the institutionalization of VSNs in both ways. Our primary measure is based on recurrent patterns of de facto vertical succession, coding VSN institutionalization as 1 if five consecutive monarchs were succeeded by their sons, and 0 otherwise. And we conduct robustness checks using different thresholds. Our secondary measure is based on historians' accounts, which likely best represent normative beliefs and expectations. Although no study has pinpointed the exact timing of VSN institutionalization, historians generally agree that it occurred by the end of the Spring and Autumn Period Entian Wang (1980, p. 79), Li (1987, p. 68). Thus, our secondary measure is a dummy variable coded as 1 if the monarch took office before 476 BCE (the start of the Warring States Period), and 0 otherwise. Since the secondary measure relies entirely on time variation and lacks cross-country variation, we focus on the primary measure in the main analysis and use alternative measurements in robustness checks.

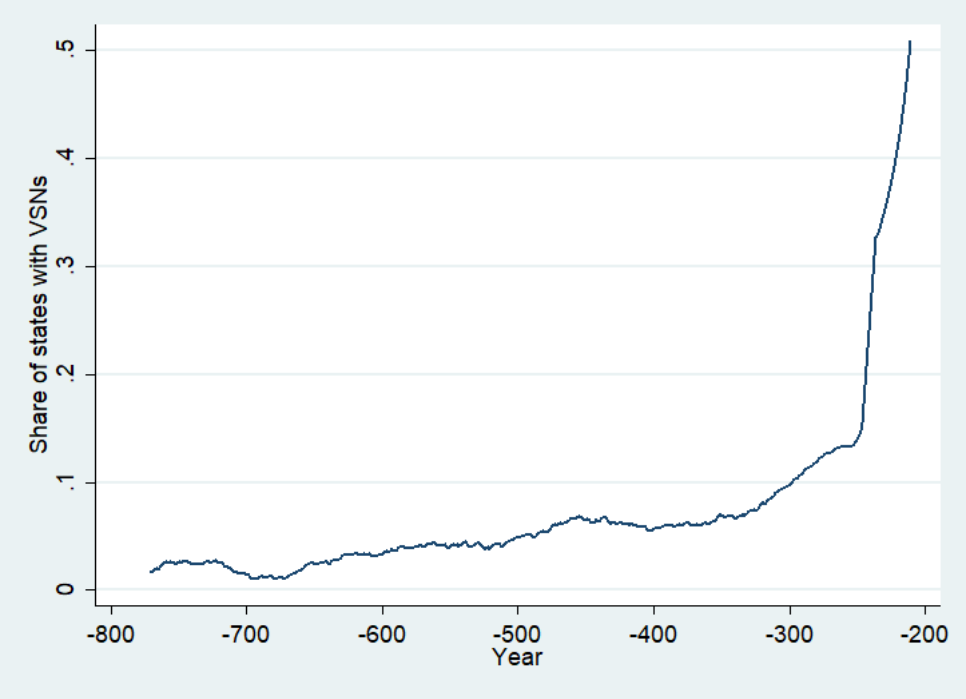

Figure 2: Share of States with Vertical Succession Norms, 50-year Moving Average

Figure 3 illustrates the trend of our key independent variable using a 50-year moving average of the share of states with institutionalized VSNs.[11] The share of states with institutionalized VSNs gradually increases over time, with a significant jump around 250 BCE, which coincides with the onset of Qin's unification War.[12] Notably, according to our primary measure, three out of seventeen states (Chen, Song, and Wey) never experienced the institutionalization of VSNs, and all were eventually conquered by states with institutionalized VSNs.[13]

Data

To test the hypotheses, we construct a dataset of monarchs in ancient China during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States eras with information about their tenure, exit modes, relationship to their predecessors, and others. We primarily rely on two sources for data collection. The first one is the Spring and Autumn Annals, as well as the Zuo

[11]The trend is not strictly monotonous due to the entry and exit of states in the international system (i.e., the birth and death of states).

[12]Results remain consistent if we exclude the period of Qin's unification war.

[13]Chen was conquered by Chu in 478 BCE, Song by Qi in 286 BCE, and Wey by Qin in 209 BCE.

Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals (aka Zuozhuan). The second one is the Records of the Grand Historian.

The Spring and Autumn Annals was likely compiled in the 5th century BC and is the earliest surviving Chinese historical text organized in annals form. It is the official chronicle of the State of Lu, covering various events during the period from 722 to 481 BC. The astronomical observations in the Spring and Autumn Annals has been confirmed as accurate (Stephenson & Yau, 1992) and archaeological evidence corroborates the reliability of its entries for many events (Von Falkenhausen, 2006).

The Records of the Grand Historian was compiled around 94 BC. It covers a wide range of periods—from the legendary Yellow Emperor to the author's own time. While it is questionable whether Sima Qian had adequate historical materials for his account of what happened before the Shang Dynasty, his records of events after the Shang Dynasty are generally considered as accurate and reliable (Lewis, 2011).

The Spring and Autumn Annals and the Records of the Grand Historian display high degree of consistency. When the two sources conflict, we follow two principals. First, we cross-reference other sources such as the Shiben. Second, when cross-reference is not available, we follow the rule of thumb in historiography and weigh the Spring and Autumn Annals over the Records of the Grand Historian because the former was written when the actual event occurred or shortly after.

Of all the 358 monarchs in the dataset, only 59 of them have reliable information on their date of birth. Thus we cannot control for the age of the monarchs. One particular concern is that those who took power at a very young age may face greater risks of being deposed. As a remedy, we control for the length of tenure of a monarch's immediate predecessor. In general, the longer a monarch's predecessor stayed in power, the older the monarch would be when he assumed power. Admittedly, this is not a perfect way to control for the effect of age, but it is the best available option. The findings that age does not have a significant effect on the likelihood of deposition in Kokkonen and Sundell (2014) also provide some assurance.

We shall clarify that the royal families of the 17 major states in our sample have

clear genealogy, and historians share consensus on whether the monarch is the son or the brother of his immediate predecessor (Lewis, 2011; Lv, 2020). However, information on whether a monarch is the first-born, the second-born, or the bastard son of the immediate predecessor is sometimes subject to debate, and we do not use this information in our analysis. Our codebook includes original texts from ancient manuscripts for each unnatural incident of leadership exit, which is available upon request.

Eventually, the data covers 358 unique monarchs in 17 states during the Spring-Autumn and Warring States eras of ancient China. Among them, 241 monarchs died naturally while in office, 71 were deposed by coups, 41 were removed from office by foreign force or died in battles, and the rest 5 either abdicated or were killed by bandits or thugs.[14] The median length of ruling is 16 years, with the maximum being 66 years. Figure 4 and 5 visualize the percent of monarchs removed by coups in each state during the Spring-Autumn and Warring States eras respectively.[15]

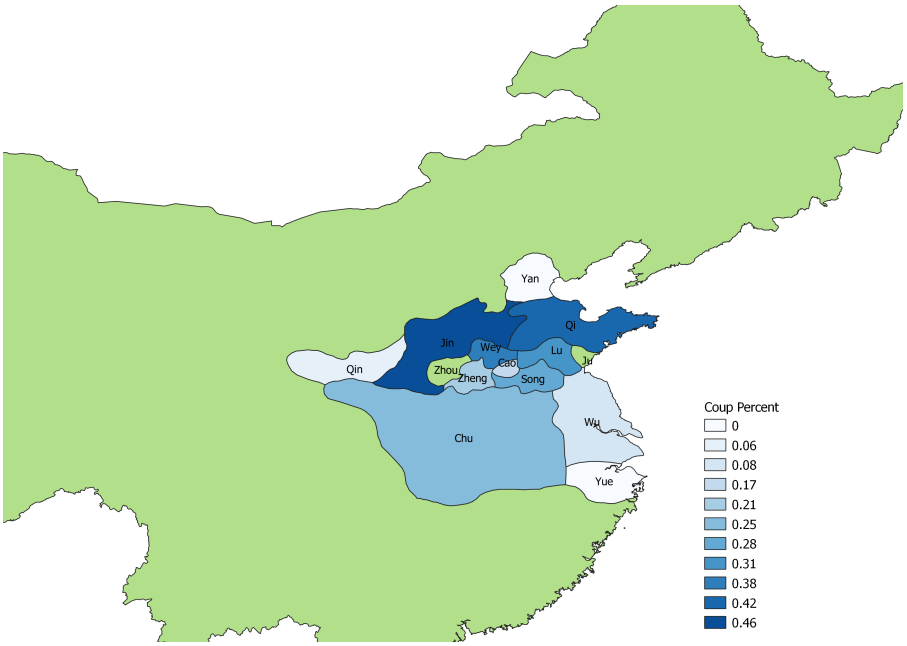

Figure 3: Spring and Autumn Period

[14] 9 monarchs have a second term because after being removed from office, they were able to reclaim their throne with the help of a foreign state. We focus on monarchs' first term where succession rules are more influential for monarchs' survival. Results remain consistent if we include those 9 cases of second terms.

[15] States' borders changed frequently during this period. The shape-files are digitized from historical maps obtained from the website http://www.txlzp.com using GIS. Zhou was the royal family and distinct from other states, and thus we do not include Zhou in the sample. Ju is left out because of limited reliable sources.

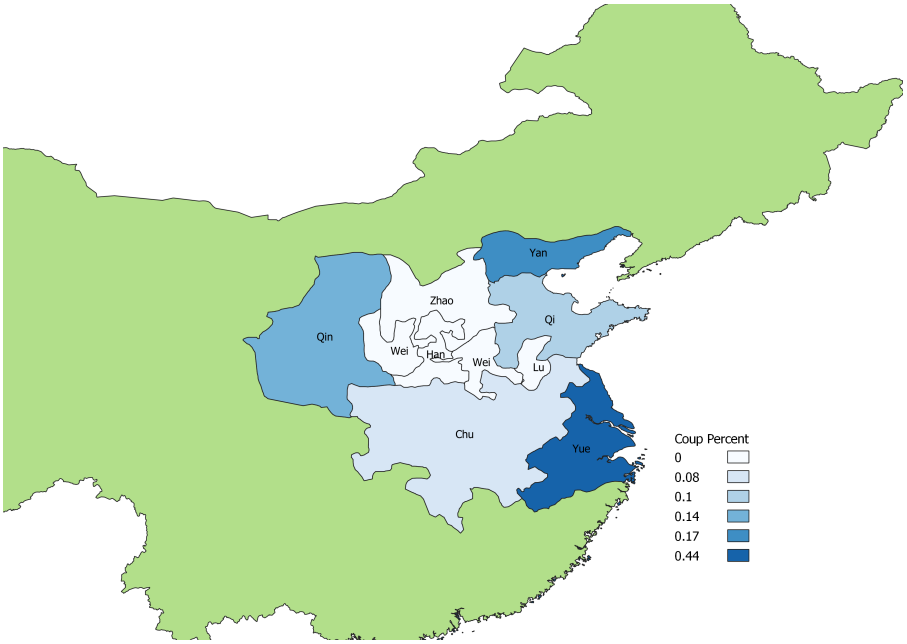

Figure 4: Waring States Period

Methodology

To test the hypotheses, we prepare the data in time-series cross-sectional format and with leader-year as the unit of analysis. The dependent variable is a binary variable which equals 1 if the leader is removed from office by coups in that year, and 0 otherwise. In our main analysis, we have opted to use conditional fixed-effects logit models as well as linear fixed effects models. Fixed effects wash away any time-invariant country-specific counfounders. The conditional logit models are appropriate for the binary nature of the dependent variable but could be biased downward due to the incidental parameters problem, whereas the linear fixed effects models provide a more intuitive interpretation but tend to underestimate the coefficients when the outcome is binary (Greene, 2004; Wooldridge, 2010). This dual approach balances the strengths of each estimator, offering a range between the downward bias in the conditional logit models and the upward bias in the linear fixed effects model, allowing us to better gauge the true effects. Results remain consistent when using rare event logit models or survival models.[16]

To account for potential within-group correlation of the error term, we cluster stan-

[16]The robustness checks section provides more details.

dard errors at the state level. To control for temporal dependence, we follow the approach suggested by Beck, Katz, and Tucker (1998) and include cubic polynomials (t, t^2, and t^3) in the regressions, where t is the number of years a monarch has been in office. Compared to cubic splines, cubic polynomial is easy to implement and does not suffer from the quasi-complete separation problem (Carter & Signorino, 2010).

We control for variables that are theoretically motivated in the historical background section. As discussed above, one potential confounder is state capacity, which we control for using two novel measures. The first measure is the total number of newly created counties. The county (xian) as a unit of administration first appeared in a few states during the Spring and Autumn Period, and was gradually adopted by all states during the Warring States Period. Counties were created in two ways. The first method is through conquest of small neighboring states, and the second way is by grouping nearby villages together (Zhou & Li, 2009). County magistrates were appointed by monarchs directly and their office was not hereditary. Also, counties' tax revenues were handed to the monarchs directly for military use (Yang, 1981). Thus, the accumulated number of newly created counties is a useful indicator for bureaucratic centralization (Chen, 2021). Zhou and Li (2009) have a thorough discussion on the names, locations, and dates of establishment for all counties during the period of study. However, some counties do not have exact dates of establishment. Therefore, we calculate the total number of newly created counties for each state during the Spring and Autumn Period and Warring States Period separately. The second measure of state capacity builds on the idea that "the number of official titles existing in a state often indicates the level of bureaucracy of that state (Zhao, 2004, p. 604)." Following Zhao (2004), we calculated the number of official titles in a state before and after its bureaucratic reforms based on the work of Dong (1998). Because both the number of newly created counties and the number of official titles have a skewed distribution, we use the log of these variables. we use on the former measure of state capacity in the main analysis because of broader coverage and more reliable sources, and results using the latter measurement are included in the

appendix.[17] The correlation between these two measures of state capacity is 0.69, which provides some assurance to the consistency of the measures.

Another potential confounder is the level of external threats. We measure it by calculating the number of times a state was attacked by other states or nomad groups in each century. The source of the data is the first volume of the *Chronology of Wars in China Through Successive Dynasties*, which is widely used by scholars who study conflict in ancient and imperial China (Kang, Shaw, & Fu, 2016). We do not count the number of times a state initiated a war because it also measures aggressiveness and state capacity. We use the log of the variable in the regression models. To account for the influence of individual rulers, we control for the exit mode and tenure length of monarchs' immediate predecessors.

Table 1 provides the summary statistics of the variables.

Table 1: Summary statistics

	mean	sd	min	max	count
Removal by coup	0.011	0.10	0	1	6744
Institutionalization of VSN	0.58	0.49	0	1	6744
Length of ruling (t-1)	19.1	13.9	1	66	6176
Exit mode (t-1)	0.17	0.38	0	1	6176
External threat	1.70	1.04	0	3.33	6744
Number of counties	1.21	1.53	0	4.33	6744
Number of titles	2.21	0.86	1.61	4.51	6744
Son of predecessor	0.74	0.44	0	1	6744

Results and Discussions

Table 2 presents the results. The coefficients of the institutionalization of VSNs are negative and statistically significant across all models, which strongly supports the hypothesis that the institutionalization of VSNs reduces the risk of monarchs being deposed by the domestic elite. The impact is also sizable. According to model 3, the institutional-

[17] Dong (1998) only discusses the number of official titles in seven major states. To extend this measurement to other states, we reference an online dictionary of ancient Chinese studies `http://www.guoxuedashi.com/.` to check if an official title is available in a specific state.

ization of VSNs decreases the odds ratio of coups by 30 percent ($e^{-1.21}$). Calculating the marginal effects, we find that the institutionalization of VSNs decreases the probability of coups by 23 percent, holding other variables at their mean values.

Table 2: Vertical Succession Norms and Autocratic Survival: Baseline Models

	(1) Conditional Logit	(2) Linear	(3) Conditional Logit	(4) Linear
VSN Institutionalization	-0.970^{*}	-0.012^{**}	-1.210^{***}	-0.015^{*}
	(0.379)	(0.004)	(0.367)	(0.006)
Length of ruling (t-1)			0.006	0.000
			(0.007)	(0.000)
Exit mode (t-1)			0.152	0.002
			(0.278)	(0.005)
External threat			0.173	0.002
			(0.191)	(0.002)
Number of counties			0.064	0.001
			(0.213)	(0.002)
t			-0.157^{*}	-0.002^{*}
			(0.062)	(0.001)
t^2			0.005^{*}	0.000^{*}
			(0.003)	(0.000)
t^3			-0.000^{+}	-0.000^{*}
			(0.000)	(0.000)
Country FE	YES	YES	YES	YES
Observations	6161	6744	5661	6176
Clusters	14	17	14	17

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by states.
$^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Surprisingly, the length of ruling and exit mode of the previous monarch do not have a significant impact on the fate of the incumbent. This may due to a special feature of the history in ancient China: states rarely experienced long-term political instability during the Spring and Autumn Period and Warring States Period. In our dataset, only 20 percent of monarchs were deposed by the domestic elite. In comparison, this number rose to 35 percent for European monarchs between 1000 to 1800 BC (Kokkonen & Sundell, 2014). Also, there is no strong evidence that fates of the monarchs are associated with the level of external threat a state faces. State capacity, measured as the number of newly created counties, appears to have no effect on monarchs' survival, which is consistent with (Kokkonen & Sundell, 2014). Our interpretation is that random measurement errors may

bias down the coefficients of state capacity toward zero.

Sensitivity Analysis

How strong an unmeasured confounder must be to fully explain away the estimated treatment effect? To answer this question, we conduct sensitivity analysis using the **evalue** package (Linden, Mathur, & VanderWeele, 2020). Figure A1 (see the Appendix) visualizes the results.[18] The results can be interpreted as the following: an unmeasured confounder that is associated with both the institutionalization of VSNs and monarchs' survival through pathways independent of the controls by an odds ratio of 2.66-fold each can explain away the treatment effect, but a weaker confounder cannot do so. It suggests that the results are fairly robust.

Addressing Endogeneity

So far, we have carefully examined the evolution of succession norms in ancient China, included theoretically motivated control variables in the regressions, and performed sensitivity analysis. However, one may still question whether the institutionalization of succession rules is a cause or a phenomenon of political stability (Pepinsky, 2014; Frantz & Stein, 2017). From this perspective, controlling for predecessors' exit mode and tenure length is not sufficient to address endogeneity if the concern is about reverse causality. To address this concern, we conduct sub-sample analysis and explore instrumental variable approaches.

Sub-sample Analysis

To control for the impact of individual leaders, we limit our sample to monarchs whose immediate predecessors had stayed in office for more than 5 or 10 years. Motivated by Abramson and Rivera (2016), we further limit our sample to monarchs whose immediate

[18] We use the estimates from model 3 in Table 1.

predecessors died naturally while in office. This strategy ensures that we only compare the risk of coups among monarchs who were well-groomed by their predecessors.

Table 3: Sub-sample Analysis of Monarchs Who Inherited Power from Their Predecessors

	Conditional Logit Tenure(t-1)>=5	Linear Tenure(t-1)>=5	Conditional Logit Tenure(t-1)>=10	Linear Tenure(t-1)>=10
VSN Institutionalization	-1.385^{**}	-0.017^{*}	-1.544^{**}	-0.019^{*}
	(0.456)	(0.007)	(0.514)	(0.008)
Length of ruling (t-1)	0.006	0.000	0.005	0.000
	(0.010)	(0.000)	(0.013)	(0.000)
External threat	0.211	0.002	0.357	0.004
	(0.275)	(0.003)	(0.283)	(0.003)
Number of counties	0.187	0.002	0.110	0.001
	(0.256)	(0.002)	(0.249)	(0.002)
t	−0.051	−0.001	−0.090	−0.001
	(0.089)	(0.001)	(0.091)	(0.001)
t^2	0.000	0.000	0.002	0.000
	(0.004)	(0.000)	(0.004)	(0.000)
t^3	0.000	0.000	−0.000	−0.000
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Observations	3689	4151	3262	3698
Clusters	14	17	14	17

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by states.
$^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3 presents the results. Although the sample size has decreased by about 40 percent compared to the baseline models in Table 2, the coefficients of the institutionalization of VSNs remain negative and statistically significant across all models. It shows that the institutionalization of VSNs reduces the risk of coups even when accounting for personal power which monarchs inherited from their strong predecessors.

Instrumental Variables Approach

To address potential reverse causality, we employ an instrumental variable (IV) approach, leveraging the diffusion pressure of vertical succession norms (VSNs) from neighboring states. Our instrument is constructed as:

$$\text{Diffusion Pressure}_{it} = \frac{\text{Neighbors with Short Ancestral Distance to Shang or Zhou}_{it}}{\text{Number of Neighbors}_{it}} \tag{1}$$

where Diffusion Pressure_{it} captures the extent to which a state is exposed to neighbors slow in adopting VSNs. We classify a state as having a short ancestral distance to Shang or Zhou if its founding fathers shared the same family name with these dynasties' royal families. Historical sources, such as the Zuo Commentary, indicate that such states shared stronger cultural ties with Shang and Zhou, which likely extended to succession norms. Since both dynasties practiced a mix of horizontal and vertical succession norms (Entian Wang, 2017), their close descendants—such as the states of Song and Lu—were slower in transitioning to exclusive VSNs (Loewe & Shaughnessy, 1999).

Empirically, ancestral distance strongly predicts VSN institutionalization. However, as it remains constant over time and the first-stage F-statistic is lower than 10, we refine the instrument following international political economy literature by incorporating diffusion pressure across two historical periods (Spring-Autumn and Warring States), which improves instrument strength (first-stage F-statistic = 22).[19]

Following the best practices of instrumental variable approaches, we use linear estimation methods even with dichotomous dependent variables (Angrist & Pischke, 2009). Specifically, we employ two-stage least squares (2SLS) estimation. Table A1 in the Appendix presents the results. As we can see, the coefficients of VSN institutionalization remain negative and statistically significant, and their sizes are almost identical to that of linear fixed effects estimators. The results provide further assurance that VSN institutionalization is a driver of political stability, not merely a reflection of it.

[19]For detailed coding, theoretical rationale, and discussions on instrument validity (relevance and exclusion restriction), please see the Appendix.

Robustness Checks

We conduct a set of robustness checks. 1) Replicate the baseline results using three alternative measures of VSN institutionalization; 2) Estimate rare event logit models to account for excessive zeros; 3) Estimate Cox survival models; 4) Use leader as the unit of analysis in the regressions; 5) Include century or decade fixed effects;[20] 6) Exclude leaders who entered and exited office in the same year; 7) Exclude leaders who entered office after 250 BCE which roughly corresponds to Qin's unification war and the jump of VSN institutionalization at the end of figure 2; and 8) Include a dummy variable for being the son of the immediate predecessor.[21] All the results remain consistent.[22]

Mechanism: How VSNs Moderate Elite Competition

The results above provide consistent evidence that the institutionalization of VSNs reduces the likelihood of a monarch being removed from office by the domestic elite. This section examines a potential mechanism: elite competition.

Elite competition is difficult to measure. We conceptualize elites as a privileged group of people who are influential in policy-making. In the context of ancient China, elite competition arises from two sources: 1) competition within the royal families, and 2) competition between the royal families and the aristocratic lineages (Da Shizu).

The first source of elite competition primarily stems from competition among potential successors, such as monarchs' sons and brothers. Unfortunately, accurate information on the number of sons and brothers is not available because only those who made a mark in history were documented. Additionally, using the number of sons to approximate elite competition raises concerns of reverse causality, as monarchs who lived longer typically had more sons. Indeed, tenure length significantly predicts the number of sons in regressions. Theoretically, the gender of the first-born may be a good instrument for

[20] We choose not to include century or decade fixed effects in the baseline models because they might overlap with time polynomials.

[21] Since this is arguably a post-treatment variable, we do not include it in the baseline model.

[22] See Tables A2–A6 in the Appendix. Due to the 15-page limit on appendices, results for robustness checks (6) through (8) are available upon request.

competition among potential successors. If a monarch's first-born child is male, the number of sons should be higher in general, thus increasing the level of competition among throne contenders. The sex of the first-born child is determined by nature and should only affect a monarch's tenure through its effects on the number of throne contenders. Unfortunately, female family members were poorly documented during the period of study, and we lack reliable information on the gender of the first-born.

We therefore focus on the second source of elite competition—rivalry between royal families and powerful aristocratic lineages—in the empirical analysis. To complement this, we draw on case studies and anecdotal evidence to illustrate how the presence or absence of institutionalized VSNs shapes elite coordination.

Quantitative Evidence from Aristocratic Lineage Data

Aristocratic lineages were powerful and influential families in ancient China that held significant political and economic sway within their respective states. Most members of these lineages occupied high-ranking positions in government or the military, playing a crucial role in determining state policies (Qian, 1991). An example of such lineages is the "Three Huan" (Jisun, Mengsun, and Shusun) in the state of Lu. These powerful families generally preferred to exert power behind the scenes. One reason is that overthrowing the monarch could potentially destabilize the state and undermine their own positions. Another explanation is that cultural and social norms at the time emphasized respect for tradition and loyalty to the ruling family, which may have discouraged them from overtly seizing power (Zhao, 2015). Disagreements among the aristocratic lineages also played a role. When Duke Zhuang of Lu was seriously ill, he wanted to pass the throne to his son. The Mengsun family conspired with the Shusun family and attempted to seize power, but the Jisun family insisted on upholding the will of the ruler. After a series of violent struggles, the Jisun family prevailed, and the succession order was restored (Entian Wang, 2017, p. 7).

Data on aristocratic lineages are drawn from He (1996, pp. 202–203).[23] Following

[23]The data cover 10 states during the Spring and Autumn period. See the Appendix for further details.

Zhao (2015), we measure elite competition as the total number of generations of aristocratic lineages in each state during the Spring and Autumn period. For example, if a state had three major lineages—one lasting nine generations and the others five each—the total would be 19. The intuition is that the more lineages a state had and the longer they endured, the more intense the elite competition. In our sample, this measure ranges from 3 to 124, with a mean of 54 and a standard deviation of 36.

To address concerns about interaction models with continuous moderators, we follow guidance from Hainmueller, Mummolo, and Xu (2019), who warn that multiplicative interaction models assume a constant marginal effect and may yield misleading results when common support is lacking. Since our key variables of interest—elite competition and VSN institutionalization—have highly unbalanced joint distributions, we recode elite competition as a binary variable equal to 1 if its value exceeds the sample mean and 0 otherwise. This approach improves interpretability and ensures sufficient overlap in the covariate space across levels of VSN institutionalization.

To examine the mechanism, we interact elite competition with VSN institutionalization and re-estimate the linear models from Table 2.[24] Since elite competition is time-invariant, we employ random effects models. Table 4 presents the results. The coefficient on elite competition is positive and statistically significant, consistent with Zhao (2015)'s claim that intra-elite rivalry undermines political stability. The interaction terms are negative across all models but only statistically significant when additional controls are included. While the evidence is not definitive, it suggests that the institutionalization of VSNs may help mitigate the destabilizing effects of elite competition.

[24]We use linear models because interaction effects in logit models are not directly interpretable from coefficients, and standard errors for interaction terms do not reflect their true statistical significance (Ai & Norton, 2003).

Table 4: Elite Competition Mechanism

	(1) Linear	(2) Linear
VSN Institutionalization	−0.001	0.001
	(0.003)	(0.004)
Elite competition	0.018***	0.016**
	(0.004)	(0.005)
VSN institutionalization*Elite competition	−0.012	−0.026**
	(0.010)	(0.010)
Length of ruling (t-1)		0.000
		(0.000)
External threat		0.002
		(0.004)
Number of counties		0.005^{+}
		(0.003)
cubic1		−0.003^{+}
		(0.002)
t^2		0.000
		(0.000)
t^3		−0.000
		(0.000)
Country RE	YES	YES
Observations	3157	2791
Clusters	10	10

Robust standard errors in parentheses, clustered by states.
$^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Two Cases from the Zuo Zhuan

While the empirical analysis reveals a pattern consistent with the theoretical mechanism—that the institutionalization of VSNs mitigates elite competition—how elites actually coordinate in the presence or absence of succession norms remains largely a black box. To provide further insight, we draw on two episodes from the Zuo Zhuan: one from the early Spring and Autumn period in the state of Lu, where succession norms still featured a mix of horizontal and vertical principles; and another from the later period in the state of Chu, where VSNs had become institutionalized (according to our

coding).

In the state of Lu during the early Spring and Autumn period, succession norms remained mixed, with both sons and brothers of the ruler considered potential successors. As Duke Zhuang of Lu (693–662 BCE) approached death, he expressed a desire to install his son Ban as his heir. He first consulted one of his brothers, who insisted that the throne should pass to the eldest surviving brother, in line with traditional custom. Fearing a challenge, Duke Zhuang then turned to another brother, who pledged to support Ban and swiftly arranged for the rival brother to be poisoned. Ban was placed on the throne following Duke Zhuang's death.

The succession, however, remained unstable. Another brother, who had previously conspired with the late Duke's consort, orchestrated Ban's assassination and installed a different son of Duke Zhuang in his place. This pattern of elite infighting and unstable successions continued for several years, with multiple contenders backed by different factions within the ruling elite.[25]

Unlike the Lu case, where the absence of clear norms led to factional violence, episodes of smooth succession under institutionalized VSNs are rarely detailed in historical records—precisely because they unfold without crisis. One notable exception comes from the state of Chu in the late Spring and Autumn period. During a military campaign, King Zhao of Chu (515–489 BCE) fell gravely ill and, believing his death was imminent, offered the throne sequentially to three of his younger brothers. All initially declined, but the third brother, Zilü, accepted after repeated requests. After King Zhao's death, Zilü publicly renounced the throne and, in consultation with senior nobles, endorsed the accession of Prince Zhang, King Zhao's son. Prince Zhang was installed as King Hui of Chu. The peaceful transition and elite consensus align with our coding of Chu as having institutionalized VSNs by this period.[26]

This case also points to a possible mechanism through which institutionalized VSNs may facilitate smoother power transitions: by shaping elite preferences and perceptions of legitimacy. When norms are well-established, elites might comply not only for strategic

[25]This case is recorded in the Zuozhuan, Years 10–13 of Duke Xi.
[26]This case is recorded in the Zuozhuan, Year 6 of Duke Ai.

reasons but also because they view adherence as appropriate or expected. Future research can further explore how succession norms influence elite preferences, including the role of non-material considerations in sustaining regime stability.

Comparison with European States

How do the findings from ancient China compare to those from historical European monarchies? A key distinction lies in institutional form: while ancient Chinese states largely relied on informal succession norms, most medieval and early modern European monarchies developed formal succession institutions, particularly primogeniture (Kokkonen & Sundell, 2014). Conventional wisdom suggests that formal institutions are more effective at regulating political behavior, due to their clarity and enforcement mechanisms (Williamson, 2009; Lauth, 2015). This comparison offers an opportunity to examine whether informal vertical succession norms (VSNs) in ancient China were equally effective in promoting political stability as formalized vertical succession institutions in Europe.

To explore this question, we merge our dataset of ancient Chinese monarchs with the replication data from Kokkonen and Sundell (2014). The merged dataset includes 193 monarchs from 14 Chinese states that had institutionalized VSNs and 451 monarchs from 31 European states that formally adopted primogeniture—a specific form of vertical succession norm (VSN) that prioritizes the eldest son as the rightful heir. As shown in Figure A2 in the Appendix, the distribution of leader tenure is strikingly similar across the two regions, though tenure in Europe exhibits a slightly heavier upper tail. The average tenure length is 19.4 years in the Chinese sample and 21.6 years in the European sample.

To more directly test for differences in political stability, we regress a binary indicator for China on leader exit outcomes, where the dependent variable equals 1 if a monarch was removed from power by domestic actors (e.g., through a coup or civil war), and 0 otherwise. As reported in Table A7 in the Appendix, the coefficients on the China

indicator are consistently negative but statistically insignificant across specifications. This suggests that monarchs in ancient China were not more likely to be deposed than their European counterparts, providing no evidence that informal succession norms were less effective in maintaining political stability than formal succession rules.

Admittedly, important differences remain between the two regions. European monarchs often ruled over multiple territories, introducing additional complexity into succession arrangements (Kokkonen, Møller, & Sundell, 2022). They also faced institutional constraints from parliaments and representative assemblies that were largely absent in ancient China (Van Zanden et al., 2012), and the Church played a significant role in legitimizing succession and mediating elite conflicts. Despite these contextual differences, both systems confronted the fundamental challenge of orderly power transfer—a problem that has long plagued autocratic regimes. This comparison offers a first step toward evaluating the relative effectiveness of formal and informal succession institutions in promoting political order. Future research may further examine the conditions under which informal succession norms emerge, persist, or evolve into formal rules, and how their effectiveness varies across institutional contexts.

Conclusions

As a pivotal episode in Chinese history, the Spring-Autumn and Warring States eras are crucial to our understandings of state formations in China and the origins of different development trajectories between Europe and Asia. By constructing a novel dataset that combines various primary and secondary sources, we shed light on the succession problems and sources of authoritarian stability in ancient China. Through rigorous empirical analysis, we show that the institutionalization of VSNs promotes political stability, and it moderates the adverse effects of elite competition on leader tenure.

Our findings contribute to the literature on authoritarian politics by demonstrating that succession rules—whether formal or informal—play a critical role in mitigating elite conflict and enabling regime continuity. In contrast to most existing studies that fo-

cus on formal institutions and appointment practices in modern autocracies, this paper highlights the stabilizing effects of succession norms that operate outside officially sanctioned channels. By showing that VSNs enhanced monarch survival even before they became codified, the study offers a broader theoretical interpretation of how succession institutions function: by narrowing the pool of legitimate contenders and shaping elite expectations. In this framework, primogeniture appears not as an isolated European development but as one manifestation of a wider logic behind successful power transfers in autocratic systems.

Finally, this study carries implications for how we understand authoritarian resilience in the contemporary world. Regimes such as North Korea and Syria may lack transparent or codified rules for leadership succession, yet elite expectations surrounding dynastic succession—within the Kim and al-Assad families—remain strong. These informal expectations reduce uncertainty, facilitate elite coordination, and enable relatively peaceful power transfers. We may underestimate the durability of some authoritarian regimes if we overlook informal succession rules.

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