

The Failure of the Suppression Strategy: Examining Zuo Xiong's Reform of the Recommendation System from the Perspective of Reformative Institutional Change

Tao Jia^{1, a}

¹School of Communication, Liaoning Communication University, Shenyang, 110136, China

^ahenry_1974@icloud.com

Abstract

Existing research summarizes the failure mechanism of reformative institutional change as a three-stage model of "design compromise–path dependence–institutional lock-in" which is suitable for explaining the failure of compromise-based institutional reforms. This article takes the reform of the recommendation system by Zuo Xiong in the Eastern Han Dynasty as an example to propose a second path to the failure of institutional reform—suppression-based failure. Zuo Xiong's reform directly suppressed the core interests of vested interest groups through measures such as age restrictions, introduction of examinations, and retroactive accountability. The reform was effective initially due to strong support from imperial power. However, with the interruption of authority following the death of Emperor Shun, vested interest groups quickly counterattacked, and the reform measures were abolished. This article constructs a three-stage model of "political suppression–authority interruption–old guard counterattack" to reveal the failure mechanism of the suppression strategy and further proposes that its success requires two conditions: stable and sustained political authority and the successful transformation of path dependence. This research enhances the study on the logic of failure in reformative institutional change, providing theoretical reference and historical lessons for the practice of institutional reform.

Keywords

Institutional Reform, Path Dependence, Political Authority, Recommendation System, Suppression Strategy.

1. Introduction

The study of failure mechanisms in institutional reform is an important topic in institutional change theory. The author and Zhang Yan, through analyzing the alienation of the Cao Wei Nine-Rank System, proposed a three-stage model of "design compromise–path dependence–institutional lock-in" revealing how reforms avoiding the restructuring of core interests are co-opted by the old system and become ineffective[1]. However, this model struggles to explain another type of reform failure in history—those reform attempts that directly challenged vested interest groups and ultimately failed.

The Yangjia New System promoted by Shangshu Ling (Director of the Secretariat) Zuo Xiong during the reign of Emperor Shun of the Eastern Han Dynasty is a typical example of such reform. Unlike the compromise strategy of the Nine-Rank System, Zuo Xiong's reform directly suppressed the aristocratic families controlling the recommendation system through measures like age restrictions, introduction of examinations, and retroactive accountability. The reform achieved significant results during Emperor Shun's reign but failed rapidly after his death. This case forces us to consider: when reformers choose suppression rather than compromise, is the failure mechanism of reformative institutional change different?

2. Theoretical Framework: Two Failure Paths of Reformative Institutional Change

2.1. Core Mechanisms

Institutional change theory holds that institutional change exhibits characteristics of path dependence [2]. The initial institutional choice forms a lock-in effect through self-reinforcing mechanisms. Vested interest groups will strive to steer institutional change in a direction favorable to themselves, even at the cost of maintaining inefficient institutions[3]. The compromise-based failure model reveals the mechanism through which avoiding core contradictions via design compromise ultimately leads to institutional alienation—avoiding core contradictions in design compromise leads to the self-reinforcement of the old system's path dependence, eventually rationalizing and locking in this path dependence. This model implies a premise: the reformers choose to cooperate with vested interest groups.

But historical reforms were not always gentle compromises. When reformers possess sufficient authority, they may choose another strategy—the suppression strategy. This involves using coercive means to directly deprive or restrict the core interests of vested interest groups, aiming to reshape the power structure. By forcefully prohibiting vested interest groups from interfering with new rules through political means, the suppression strategy, while potentially avoiding the trap of reformative institutional change inherent in the compromise strategy, is highly dependent on the continuity and strength of political authority. Once the support of political authority weakens, the reform will face a counterattack.

2.2. Core Concepts

Reformative Institutional Change: Unlike revolutionary change, reformative institutional change aims to retain the core framework of the old system while only adjusting its non-core aspects. For example: Zuo Xiong's reform did not abolish the core mechanism of the recommendation system (i.e., evaluating talent based on reputation) but established new rules to restrict and control talent selection, attempting to break the aristocratic families' monopoly on talent selection, improve the fairness and transparency of selection, and eliminate corruption.

Path Dependence: The current institutional arrangements of an organization are deeply influenced by its historical development path, and institutional change exhibits a high degree of dependence on and inertia from the historical path. Path dependence is explicit in compromise-based reform and implicit in suppression-based reform. In suppression-based reform, path dependence of the new system can only replace that of the old system after the new system has operated for a sufficiently long time.

Suppression Strategy: Reformers use political authority to forcibly restrict the core interests of vested interest groups, preventing them from interfering with the implementation of new rules. Its characteristics include: (1) coercive institutional change; (2) direct exclusion of vested interest groups; (3) reliance on political authority for implementation.

Authority Interruption: The phenomenon where the political authority supporting the reform cannot be sustained due to leadership change, shifts in power structure, or weakened legitimacy. In suppression-based reform, authority interruption often leads to the disappearance of reform momentum.

2.3. Model Construction

There are at least two paths to failure for reformative institutional change:

Type I: Compromise-based failure (represented by the Nine-Rank System). Failure path: Design Compromise → Path Dependence → Institutional Lock-in. (Jia Tao and Zhang Yan, 2025)

Type II: Suppression-based failure (represented by Zuo Xiong's reform of the recommendation system). Failure path: Political Suppression → Authority Interruption → Old Guard Counterattack.

This study focuses on Type II (suppression-based failure), with the following mechanism:

Political Suppression: Although institutional reform cannot achieve forced change by overthrowing the old system, political means can be used to forcefully prohibit vested interest groups from interfering with new rules, directly restrict or deprive their core interests, and thereby break the path dependence of the old system.

Authority Interruption: The suppression strategy is highly dependent on the continuity and strength of political authority. Before the path dependence of the new system is established, reformers can only rely on political authority to suppress vested interest groups. If authority is interrupted due to leadership change, power structure shifts, or weakened legitimacy, the effectiveness of suppression will rapidly decay, losing its constraint on vested interest groups.

Old Guard Counterattack: Vested interest groups, freed from strong political suppression, will quickly push for the dissolution of the institutional reform measures, restoring the old interest structure and leading to the failure of the institutional reform.

3. The Suppression Strategy of Zuo Xiong's Recommendation System Reform and Its Failure Logic

3.1. Reform Background

By the time Emperor Shun of the Han Dynasty was in power, the recommendation system had been implemented for over two hundred years, and the power to recommend Filial and Incorrupt (Xiaolian) candidates had been controlled by aristocratic families[6]. *Book of the Later Han: Biographies of Zuo, Zhou, and Huang* records: "The Filial and Incorrupt from commanderies and states mostly selected the young who could repay favors, while elderly and great worthies were often abandoned." [4] A contemporary saying went: "Recommended as Cultivated Talent (Xiucan), yet ignorant of books; selected as Filial and Incorrupt, yet his father lives apart" [5] vividly reflecting the corruption of the recommendation system. Aristocratic families formed closed interest cycles through networks of disciples and former subordinates. During the reign of Emperor Shun of the Eastern Han, Zuo Xiong led the implementation of the Yangjia New System, attempting to regulate the system of recommending Filial and Incorrupt candidates.

3.2. Reform Content

In the first year of the Yangjia era (AD 132), Zuo Xiong, who was the Shangshu Ling at that time, advised Emperor Shun: "The Filial and Incorrupt from commanderies and states are tributes of scholars from ancient times; when they go out, they govern the people and should promote harmony and education. If they are ignorant, they are of no use. Confucius said: 'At forty, I had no doubts.' *The Rites* says 'strong for service.' I request that from now on, those under forty years old may not be recommended as Filial and Incorrupt. All must first go to the Sangong Offices. Students should be examined on classical traditions and clerks should be tested on drafting memorials. Copies of results should be sent to the Duan Gate to verify their truthfulness, to observe exceptional abilities, and to improve customs. Those who do not comply with the regulations should be punished according to the law. Exceptional talent and outstanding conduct should not be limited by age." [4] Emperor Shun accepted his advice, and the Yangjia New System began implementation.

Zuo Xiong's reform of the recommendation system mainly included three measures:

Age Restriction: Those under forty could not be recommended (relaxable for special talents), ensuring candidates' experience and maturity and preventing aristocratic families from promoting young scions to monopolize official positions.

Introduction of Examinations: Students were examined on their family teachings (classical traditions) and clerks were tested on drafting memorials. The Sangong Offices conducted assessments of Filial and Incorrupt candidates on Confucian learning or document drafting ability, preventing emphasis on lineage over talent and eliminating the unlearned and incompetent.

Retroactive accountability: Recommending the wrong person meant the recommender was also punished (joint liability). This held those who made inaccurate recommendations accountable, significantly increasing the risk cost and potential price for recommenders, making aristocratic families dare not act recklessly when recommending.

These measures directly targeted three advantages of the aristocratic families—advantage of youth, priority of lineage, and freedom of recommendation—demonstrating clear characteristics of suppression.

3.3. Reform Effects

With Emperor Shun's support, the reform was initially highly effective. *Book of the Later Han: Biographies of Zuo, Zhou, and Huang* records: "Xu Shu, a Filial and Incorrupt from Guangling, had not reached the recommended age. A court lang official doubted and questioned him. He replied: 'The decree says: like Yan Hui or Zi Qi, age is not restricted. Therefore, my commandery selected me.' The lang official could not refute him. Zuo Xiong questioned him: 'Yan Hui heard one point and knew ten; how many does the Filial and Incorrupt know upon hearing one?' Xu Shu had no answer and was thus sent back to his commandery. Thereupon, more than ten persons, including the Governor of Jiyin, Hu Guang, were dismissed from their posts for erroneous recommendations. Only over thirty people, including Chen Fan from Runan, Li Ying from Yingchuan, and Chen Qiu from Xiapi, were appointed as Langzhong (Court Gentlemen). From then on, regional governors and administrators were fearful and dared not recommend lightly. Until the Yongxi era (AD 145), selection was clear and fair, often getting the right people." [4]

Chen Fan, Li Ying, and Chen Qiu, who were recommended as Filial and Incorrupt in the second year of Yangjia, all became famous ministers of their generation. Among them, Chen Fan and Li Ying were upright, achieved outstanding administrative results, and were highly respected by later generations. Supported by the absolute authority of Emperor Shun, Zuo Xiong's policies were unimpeded, and the suppression strategy achieved phased success. The old interest conveyance path was forcibly interrupted.

However, the biggest risk of the suppression strategy lies in its sustainability. In the first year of Jiankang (AD 144), Emperor Shun died, a young emperor succeeded, and power fell to maternal relatives. The central authority structure changed dramatically. Losing the suppression from the highest power, the long-dormant vested interest groups quickly counterattacked. Although the Yangjia New System was not explicitly abolished, it was shelved and not used. The recommendation system returned to the old track, fully controlled by aristocratic families as before the reform. The old system was restored.

3.4. Failure Logic

The effectiveness of Zuo Xiong's recommendation system reform did not stem from the self-reinforcement of institutional design but relied entirely on Zuo Xiong's personal political status and the strong support of the imperial power (Emperor Shun). Behind the success of the Yangjia New System was an extremely high dependence on political authority. This was a fragile and uninstitutionalized power.

The Yangjia New System faced opposition from aristocratic families from the very beginning[7]. Hu Guang, Shangshu Puye (Vice Director of the Secretariat), criticized Zuo Xiong using ancestral institutions as a reason: "Based on the words of one minister, he cuts against old statutes. The benefits are unclear, and people's hearts are dissatisfied. Correcting excesses and changing constants is important in governance, yet he did not consult the Secretariat officials, nor did he seek advice from the ministers." [4] Zhang Heng, Taishiling (Grand Historian), said: "Since the initial recommendation of Filial and Incorrupt, it has been two hundred years until now. All prioritized filial conduct. If conduct was sufficient, then they began to learn legal statutes. The Xinmao Decree (part of the reform) limits selection to the ability to comment on classics and draft memorials. Even if one has utmost filial piety, one still cannot meet the criteria. This is abandoning the root for the branches." [4] When Emperor Shun passed away and maternal relatives held great power, the Yangjia New System was shelved [8].

Institutions are human-devised constraints. The premise for these constraints to be stable and effective is that path dependence has already formed. When reformers choose to restrict the core interests of vested interest groups, they will inevitably encounter resistance. At this time, the path dependence of the new system has not yet formed, so implementing the new system can only rely on political suppression. This suppression must be backed by sustained and powerful political authority—powerful enough that vested interest groups dare not openly resist, and sustained enough for the path dependence of the new system to form. Once the path dependence of the new system forms, the reformative institutional change succeeds.

Reform using the suppression strategy begins with political suppression and succeeds upon the formation of new path dependence. During this period, the strength and continuity of political authority cannot be interrupted. Once authority is interrupted, based on the path dependence of the old system, vested interest groups will inevitably counterattack and restore the old system. The failure of Zuo Xiong's recommendation system reform illustrates the three-stage model of "political suppression–authority interruption–old guard counterattack." This failure did not stem from design compromise but from unsustainable political suppression.

4. Conditions for the Success of the Suppression Strategy

The success of the suppression strategy requires two basic conditions: (1) sustained and powerful support from political authority; and (2) the completion of the transformation from the old system's path dependence to the new system's path dependence within the lifespan of that authority. The failure of Zuo Xiong's recommendation system reform lies in meeting only the first condition without achieving the second.

Reforms overly reliant on individual authority or a single power center are inherently fragile. Successful reforms need to rapidly promote and strictly supervise new rules to quickly form the new system's path dependence. The suppression strategy needs to complete the transition from authority support to the new system's path dependence within the authority's lifespan.

5. Conclusion

Through the case study of Zuo Xiong's recommendation system reform, this article reveals a second failure path of reformative institutional change—suppression-based failure—enhancing existing theory. Research shows that the failure of institutional reform can result not only from the gradual alienation of "design compromise–path dependence–institutional lock-in" but also from the rapid termination of "political suppression–authority interruption–old guard counterattack." The success of the suppression strategy is highly dependent on the sustained support of political authority and the smooth transition to the new system's path dependence.

This research has implications for contemporary reforms: reformative institutional change relying on political suppression struggles to resist the risks of authority changes. Successful institutional reform needs to rapidly complete the transformation from the old system's path dependence to the new system's path dependence on the basis of political suppression.

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