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## Introduction to *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*

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The idea that political leaders should be chosen according to one person, one vote is taken for granted in so many societies that any attempt to defend political meritocracy should begin with a critique of electoral democracy: most readers in Western societies won't even be willing to contemplate the possibility of morally justifiable alternatives to one person, one vote as a means of selecting political leaders, so a book arguing in favor of an alternative must at least raise some questions about democratic elections.<sup>1</sup> Some philosophers have defended the rights to vote and run for office on the grounds that political liberties are intrinsically valuable for individuals whether or not they lead to collectively desirable consequences. These arguments, however, have been vigorously contested. And if the aim is to promote electoral democracy in China, arguments for democracy appealing to the intrinsic value of voting will not be very effective because political surveys consistently show that citizens in East Asian societies understand democracy in substantive rather than procedural terms: that is, they tend to value democracy because of its positive consequences rather than valuing democratic procedures per se. So the politically relevant question is whether democratic elections lead to good consequences. Democracy has had a good track record over the past few decades: rich, stable, and free countries are all democratic. But democracies also have key flaws that may spell political trouble in the future, and it is at least arguable that political meritocracies can minimize such problems.

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1 Reprinted from *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* by Daniel A. Bell (Princeton University Press, 2015), with permission. Daniel A. Bell has published several books on East Asian politics and philosophy and he is the founding editor of the Princeton-China series. His works have been translated into 23 languages.

Chapter 1<sup>2</sup> of the book *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*<sup>3</sup> discusses four key flaws of democracy understood in the minimal sense of free and fair elections for the country's top rulers, and each flaw is followed by a discussion of theoretical and real meritocratic alternatives. The first flaw is "the tyranny of the majority": irrational and self-interested majorities acting through the democratic process can use their power to oppress minorities and enact bad policies. Examinations that test for voter competence can help to remedy this flaw in theory, and Singapore's political meritocracy is a practicable alternative. The second flaw is "the tyranny of the minority": small groups with economic power exert disproportionate influence on the political process, either blocking change that's in the common interest or lobbying for policies that benefit only their own interest. In theory, this flaw can be remedied by means of a citizen body that excludes wealthy elites, and China's political system is a practicable alternative. The third flaw is "the tyranny of the voting community": if there is a serious conflict of interest between the needs of voters and the needs of nonvoters affected by the policies of government such as future generations and foreigners, the former will almost always have priority. One theoretical remedy is a government office charged with the task of representing the interests of future generations, and Singapore's institution of a president with the power to veto attempts by politicians to enact policies that harm the interests of future generations is a practicable alternative. The fourth flaw is "the tyranny of competitive individualists": electoral democracy can exacerbate rather than alleviate social conflict and disadvantage those who prefer harmonious ways of resolving social conflict. A system based on consensus as a decision-making procedure can help to remedy this flaw, and China's political model has some practical advantages in terms of reducing social conflict.

In short, there may be morally desirable and political feasible alternatives to electoral democracy that help to remedy the major disadvantages of electoral democracy. If the aim is to argue for political meritocracy in a Chinese context, however, we do not need to defend the strong claim that political meritocracy consistently leads to better consequences than electoral democracy. We can simply assume that China's one-party political system is not about to collapse and argue for improvements on that basis. Chapter 2 proceeds on the following assumptions: (1) it is good for a political community to be governed

2 This and all subsequent references are to chapters in *The China Model*, not to specific content in this issue of *Journal of Chinese Humanities*.

3 Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

by high-quality rulers; (2) China's one (ruling) party political system is not about to collapse; (3) the meritocratic aspect of the system is partly good; and (4) it can be improved. On the basis of these assumptions, I draw on social science, history, and philosophy to put forward suggestions about which qualities matter most for political leaders in the context of large, peaceful, and modernizing (nondemocratic) meritocratic states, followed by suggestions about mechanisms that increase the likelihood of selecting leaders with such qualities. My findings about which abilities, social skills, and virtues matter most for political leaders in the context of a large, peaceful, and modernizing political meritocracy are then used as a standard for evaluating China's actually existing meritocratic system. My conclusion is that China can and should improve its meritocratic system: it needs exams that more effectively test for politically relevant intellectual abilities, more women in leadership positions to increase the likelihood that leaders have the social skills required for effective policy making, and more systematic use of a peer-review system to promote political officials motivated by the desire to serve the public.

Any defense of political meritocracy needs to address not only the question of how to maximize the advantages of the system but also how to minimize its disadvantages. Chapter 3 discusses three key problems associated with any attempt to implement political meritocracy: (1) rulers chosen on the basis of their superior ability are likely to abuse their power; (2) political hierarchies may become frozen and undermine social mobility; and (3) it is difficult to legitimize the system to those outside the power structure. Given that electoral democracy at the top is not politically realistic in China, I ask if it is possible to address these problems without democratic elections. The problem of corruption can be addressed by mechanisms such as independent supervisory institutions, higher salaries, and improved moral education. The problem of ossification of hierarchies can be addressed by means of a humble political discourse, opening the ruling party to diverse social groups, and allowing for the possibility of different kinds of political leaders selected according to new ideas of political merit. The problem of legitimacy, however, can be addressed only by means of more opportunities for political participation, including some form of explicit consent by the people. The question, therefore, is how to reconcile political meritocracy and democracy. Can it be done in morally desirable ways without multiparty competition and free and fair elections for top leaders?

Chapter 4 discusses the pros and cons of different models of "democratic meritocracy": more specifically, models that aim to reconcile a meritocratic mechanism designed to select superior political leaders with a democratic mechanism designed to let the people choose their leaders.

The first model combines democracy and meritocracy at the level of the voter (e.g., allocating extra votes to educated voters), but such proposals, whatever their philosophical merit, are not politically realistic. The second (horizontal) model aims to reconcile democracy and meritocracy at the level of central political institutions, but such a model will be almost impossible to implement and sustain even in a political culture (such as China's) that strongly values political meritocracy. The third (vertical) model aims to combine political meritocracy at the level of the central government and democracy at the local level. This model is not a radical departure from the political reality in China and it can also be defended on philosophical grounds.

The political model in China, however, is not simply democracy at the bottom and meritocracy at the top: it is also based on extensive and systematic experimentation in between the lowest and highest levels of government. The concluding chapter sketches out three basic planks of the China model and shows how political reform in the post-Mao era has been guided by the principles of "democracy at the bottom, experimentation in the middle, and meritocracy at the top." There remains a large gap between the ideal and the reality, however, and I suggest ways of closing that gap. The legitimacy problem is perhaps the most serious threat to the meritocratic system. At some point, the Chinese government may need to secure the people's consent to the Chinese adaptation of vertical democratic meritocracy by means such as a referendum. The chapter ends with remarks about the exportability of the China model: while the model as a whole cannot readily be adopted by countries with a different history and culture, different planks of the model can be selectively adopted and the Chinese government can play a more active role promoting its model abroad.

This book's central area of concern is the question of how to maximize the advantages and minimize the disadvantages of a political system that aims to select and promote political leaders of superior virtue and ability, particularly in the contemporary Chinese context. Other than arguing for the need to enact policies that benefit the people, I have been deliberately vague about what those leaders should do: China is a large, complex country with different needs and priorities in different times and places, and any informed answer needs to be partly based on what the Chinese people actually want. That said, some general guidance may be helpful and the book includes two appendixes published online at <http://press.princeton.edu/titles/10418.html>. The first appendix is a Harmony Index that ranks countries according to how well they do at promoting four different types of social relations characterized by peaceful order and respect for diversity. This kind of index, either in part or in whole, can be used to judge social progress (and regress) in China and elsewhere. Another possible

use of the Harmony Index more specific to the Chinese context is that it can be considered as a standard to judge the performance of political officials for purposes of promotion (or demotion), especially given the widespread consensus that economic growth can no longer be used as the sole indicator of good performance.

The second appendix is a real political dialogue (carried out in person and via email) with a political official in the [Chinese Communist Party]. My own ethical commitments are largely inspired by Confucian values, but I do not think that Confucianism is the only way to justify political meritocracy, so I have not been too explicit about the empirical and normative relevance of Confucianism in this book. Still, Confucianism can influence how one thinks about political meritocracy, and the second appendix focuses more directly on the role of Confucianism in shaping China's political meritocracy. The dialogue is a rare window into the views of an erudite CCP official who is speaking in a private capacity. The appendix is titled "A Conversation between a Confucian and a Communist," but by the end of the dialogue it will not be clear who's who.

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# A Critical Discussion of Daniel A. Bell's *Political Meritocracy*

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## Abstract

“Meritocracy” is among the political phenomena and political orientations found in modern Western democratic systems. Daniel A. Bell, however, imposes it on ancient Confucianism and contemporary China and refers to it in Chinese using loaded terms such as *xianneng zhengzhi* 賢能政治 and *shangxian zhi* 尚賢制. Bell’s “political meritocracy” not only consists of an anti-democratic political program but also is full of logical contradictions: at times, it is the antithesis of democracy, and, at other times, it is a supplement to democracy; sometimes it resolutely rejects democracy, and sometimes it desperately needs democratic mechanisms as the ultimate guarantee of its legitimacy. Bell’s criticism of democracy consists of untenable platitudes, and his defense of “political meritocracy” comprises a series of specious arguments. Ultimately, the main issue with “political meritocracy” is its blatant negation of popular sovereignty as well as the fact that it inherently represents a road leading directly to totalitarianism.

## Keywords

Democracy – meritocracy – political meritocracy – totalitarianism

It is rather surprising that, in recent years, Daniel A. Bell’s views on “political meritocracy” have been selling well in China. In addition, the Chinese edition of his most recent and representative work, *The China Model: Political*

*Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*,<sup>1</sup> was translated not long ago using the Chinese title *Political Meritocracy: Why Meritocracy Is More Appropriate for the Chinese Context Than Electoral Democracy*,<sup>2</sup> and a large number of readers have been receptive to Bell's ideas. Nonetheless, we find it necessary to offer a critique of the views advanced by Bell, because this "political meritocracy" (also translated as *shangxian zhi* 尚賢制)<sup>3</sup> inherently represents a slippery slope that could lead to totalitarianism, which would severely and damagingly affect not only contemporary Confucianism and China in general but also the world's other political civilizations.

## 1 The Convoluted Logic of "Political Meritocracy"

### 1.1 *The Confusion Surrounding the Concept of "Political Meritocracy"*

It cannot be said for sure whether the conceptual murkiness surrounding Bell's use of the terms "meritocracy" and "political meritocracy," as well as their Chinese translations—namely, *xianneng zhengzhi* 賢能政治 and *shangxian zhi*<sup>4</sup>—is intentional, but it does, ultimately, mislead the reader.

#### 1.1.1 The Original Meaning of Meritocracy as "Elitism"

As is well known, the term "meritocracy" first appeared in the dystopian and satirical novel *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, written by the British sociologist Michael Young and published in 1958.<sup>5</sup> As has already been pointed out,

1 Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

2 Daniel Bell [Bei Danning 貝淡寧], *Xianneng zhengzhi: weishenme shangxianzhi bi xuanju minzhuzhi geng shi he zhongguo* 賢能政治: 為什麼尚賢制比選舉民主制更適合中國 [*The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*], trans. Wu Wanwei (Beijing: CITIC Publishing Group, 2016).

3 Translator's note: Literally, a system in which people of high merit or virtue are held in high regard.

4 Translator's note: The literal meaning of *xianneng zhengzhi* 賢能政治 could be "politics in which the virtuous and talented assume a leading role."

5 Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, 2d rev. ed. (London: Transaction Books, 2004). In fact, before that, Alan Fox had already published an article titled "Class and Equality," in *Socialist Commentary*, May (1956), in which he discussed the term "meritocracy." However, the *Oxford English Dictionary* records the first appearance of the term as being in Michael Young's novel. See Jo Littler, "Meritocracy as Plutocracy: The Marketising of 'Equality' under Neoliberalism," *New Formations*, nos. 80-81 (2013).

Actually, the translation into Chinese of the term “meritocracy” by the expression *renren weixian* 任人唯賢<sup>6</sup> definitely remains a subject of dispute. After all, “merit” refers, originally, to things that are more of an instrumental nature, such as personal strengths, worth, and achievements, and it doesn’t possess at all the moral significance carried by the word *xian* 賢.<sup>7</sup> Although the principles behind “meritocracy” as a political philosophy emerged from the rationalism of the seventeenth-century Enlightenment movement, the word itself was coined by the British sociologist and Labour Party politician Michael Young. In his allegorical and satirical novel *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, the author imagines a world where the hereditary system that currently largely defines the accession to power in England has collapsed and has been replaced by a governing elite that is selected based on its members’ intelligence quotient. Members of the working class with excellent educational backgrounds have, as a result, joined the elite, but eventually, the enmity felt by the lower strata toward them exceeds even the dissatisfaction they used to feel toward the aristocrats who dominated politics in the past. This hatred culminates in 2034, when a violent revolt breaks out and ends up overthrowing the ruling elite.

In 2001, Young wrote an article for *The Guardian* in which he criticizes Tony Blair, who was then serving as prime minister of the United Kingdom and leader of the Labour Party and who promoted, quite unknowingly, the political principle of “meritocracy” as a new catchword. As Young puts it, members of the aristocratic elite that have traditionally governed in Britain are fully aware that they owe their leading position to their bloodline, and they also understand very well the necessity of demonstrating a certain degree of moderation. In contrast, members of the new elite—who have risen to their position by means of their excellent educational achievements—are being self-righteous and blindly believe in the moral legitimacy of their own political position (because they believe they have been relying entirely on their own efforts and achievements). For this reason, they will seek advantages even more unscrupulously, forgetting and betraying the class to which they used to belong. The lower strata are hence left with no one to represent the popular will, and in the

6 Translator’s note: The expression translates as “to appoint people merely according to their merit and virtue.”

7 Translator’s note: The word *xian* 賢 could be translated as “virtuous.”



course of democratic progress, their voice is gradually less and less heard, a situation that ultimately instills a feeling of alienation in the masses.<sup>8</sup>

For a relatively thorough analysis of “elitism,” we strongly recommend reading Jo Littler’s article, “Meritocracy as Plutocracy: The Marketising of ‘Equality’ Under Neoliberalism.”<sup>9</sup> A few points are made clear here: what we call “meritocracy” should translate into Chinese as “elitism” [*jingying zhuyi* 精英主義] or as a “system of elitism” [*jingying tizhi* 精英體制] and remains purely a Western discourse. Far from being the antithesis of democracy, it is, on the contrary, a political phenomenon that occurs *within* democracies. Moreover, it is not a universal and intrinsic quality of democratic systems but, rather, a political phenomenon that is currently being seen in some democratic states.

To use the term “meritocracy” to refer to the political reality of “elitism” that has prevailed in democratic societies conveys the same satirical allusion that is present in Michael Young’s novel. Wealth and power might not appear to be distributed according to the lineage of one’s family background but, instead, according to what we deem to be “merit” (or achievements) (and that must be understood as “IQ + Effort = Merit” [I + E = M]). People may seem to have access to equal opportunities; yet, in reality, the family into which one is born and the environment in which one grows up differ from one person to another and have an impact on the conditions and opportunities that allow one to become part of the “elite”—or not. This system thus becomes just another kind of unfair hereditary system. A good example of this is the United States, a democratic country “that prides itself on being a meritocracy.”<sup>10</sup> This is why the title of Michael Young’s article is “Down with Meritocracy.”<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, “meritocracy” remains a concept that pertains to Western modernity. Far from opposing democracy, it is a reassessment of the current state to which democratic systems have evolved, in the hope of redressing the situation.<sup>12</sup> In fact, we could go so far as to characterize “meritocracy” as nothing more than a contentious arena in which competing political parties in a democratic system debate. The term “meritocratic system” ends up being pejorative

8 Ye Pengfei 葉鵬飛, “Sui you su er bu de shi 雖有粟而不得食 [Although Revenues Are Being Made, People Can’t Enjoy Them],” *Lianhe zaobao*, August 4, 2013, <http://www.zaobao.com/forum/views/opinion/story20130804-236753/>.

9 Littler, “Meritocracy as Plutocracy.”

10 Edward Luce, “The End of American Meritocracy,” *Financial Times*, May 8, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/c17d402a-12cf-11e6-839f-2922947098fo/>.

11 Michael Young, “Down with Meritocracy,” *The Guardian*, June 29, 2001, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2001/jun/29/comment/>.

12 Littler, “Meritocracy as Plutocracy.”

because the system itself leads to the emergence of new ideologies or organizational principles that reinforce both power inequalities and the idea of social hierarchy based on class.<sup>13</sup> It also perfectly encapsulates the corruption that, at the current stage of Western democratic politics, is becoming more apparent. This malpractice is accentuating the decline in social mobility and hardening of class barriers as well as widening the gap between rich and poor, creating a situation that led to the populism now trending in the United States and other parts of the Western world and that is challenging the powers in place. In sum, according to the original meaning of the term, “meritocracy” is neither something from the past nor something that stands in opposition to contemporary democratic systems; on the contrary, it reflects the current stage and conditions to which democratic systems have evolved—conditions that are still waiting to be improved.

Keeping in mind the considerations above, the present article aims to discuss not so much Young’s concept of “meritocracy” but, rather, the concept of “political meritocracy” that Bell himself “crafted,” as well as its Chinese translations, *xianneng zhengzhi* and *shangxianzhi*.<sup>14</sup>

#### 1.1.2 Daniel A. Bell’s Concept of “Political Meritocracy”

Daniel A. Bell tries to attach the label of “political meritocracy” to China’s current anti-democratic system, by presenting it as a system where power is handed to people of high merit and virtue, accordingly with the direction already set by ancient China’s Confucian system. Bell actually succeeds in creating a lot of confusion regarding the concept of “meritocracy” itself, and in order to accomplish this, he first has to “purge” the word “meritocracy” from its pejorative meaning.<sup>15</sup> He hence declares: “In English, the word ‘meritocracy’ still carries quite a lot of negative connotations. This is why I am talking about

13 Ibid.

14 Translator’s note: In opposition to the traditional translation of the term as *jingying zhengzhi* 精英政治 in which *jingying* 精英 refers to the elite.

15 The reader may refer to Marco Del Corona’s interview with Daniel Bell, originally in Italian: Marco Del Corona, “Facciamo l’essame a chi comanda: Daniel Bell e la meritocrazia politica,” *Corriere della sera*, May 17, 2015, <http://leviedellasia.corriere.it/?r=4&s=daniel+a.+bell/>; translated into Chinese as: Marco Del Corona, “Zai yi ge xifang xuezheng yanzhong, zhongguo moshi meili hezai 在一個西方學者眼中，中國模式魅力何在 [According to a Western Scholar, the China Model Is Full of Promises],” trans. Liu Xushuang 劉旭爽, *Guanchazhe*, July 21, 2015, [http://www.guancha.cn/BeiDanNing/2015\\_07\\_21\\_327510.shtml](http://www.guancha.cn/BeiDanNing/2015_07_21_327510.shtml).

'political meritocracy' in order to stress the particular ways in which I make use of the term."<sup>16</sup>

For this reason as well, Bell purposely distinguishes between "political meritocracy" and "economic meritocracy," asserting his intention to limit his discussion to the former. As for "economic meritocracy," it "can refer to a principle governing the distribution of economic resources: [it] is a system that distributes wealth according to ability and effort rather than class or family background."<sup>17</sup> It seems to be quite evident that this would serve as an indicator of social progress; however, Bell opposes the idea and cites as evidence to support his point both Karl Marx's criticism of capitalism and John Rawls's condemnation of this system as leading to the emergence of "a callous meritocratic society."<sup>18</sup> What Bell advocates, therefore, is not "distribut[ing] wealth according to ability and effort" but, rather, distributing *power* according to ability and effort. This, precisely, is what Bell means when he uses the term "political meritocracy."

We cannot refrain from asking, however: why should we consider these two types of meritocracy differently? On what grounds is it justified to apply double standards? Moreover, the crux of the matter is this: if we stand by Bell's position regarding political meritocracy—namely, that political power should be distributed according to ability and effort—then, the inevitable outcome of this is that people with abilities that are considered lesser will ultimately find themselves occupying a lower status and will not be considered worthy of enjoying political power. Clearly, this position consists in an anti-democratic and extreme form of elitism, as it divests people of their political power.

### 1.1.3 The Chinese Rendering of the Term "Political Meritocracy" by *Xianneng Zhengzhi* or *Shangxian Zhi*

As indicated above, what Bell calls "meritocracy" has nothing to do with China or with Confucianism but is, in fact, a contemporary political phenomenon that is entirely Western. Yet Bell declares: "Since my book mainly deals with China, it is worth mentioning that in Chinese, we used the word *xianneng zhengzhi* to talk about what usually translates as *jingying zhengzhi* (political meritocracy)."<sup>19</sup> Regardless of whether he does so intentionally, Bell clearly misleads his readers, and, by forcing a Western invention on China, he

16 Translator's note: This citation appears only in the Chinese translation of Del Corona's interview with Bell, "Zai yi ge xifang xuezhe yanzhong."

17 Bell, *The China Model*, 4-5.

18 Ibid.

19 Translator's note: This citation appears only in the Chinese translation of the interview by Del Corona, "Zai yi ge xifang xuezhe yanzhong."

“assaults” China’s traditional political culture and, even more so, the Confucian tradition of political philosophy.<sup>20</sup>

### 1.2 *The Inherent Contradiction between “Political Meritocracy” and Political Democracy*

One thing needs to be made clear from the beginning: Bell’s “political meritocracy” does not at all involve the sort of meritocratic system that is prevalent in democratic regimes. It actually has nothing to do with the original meaning of the word “meritocracy,” since in his view, “meritocratic institutions within an overall democratic context ... can exercise power only in a restricted domain and are ultimately accountable and subordinate to democratically elected politicians; they are meant to supplement, rather than pose alternatives to, electoral democracy.”<sup>21</sup> Yet what Bell seeks is for these meritocratic institutions to “pose alternatives”—in other words, for this “meritocratic system” to take precedence over the democratic system. For instance, Bell cites the case of the United States as evidence: “in one of the grand ironies of American public opinion, the United States is still the place where the meritocratic faith burns brightest,”<sup>22</sup> something that he qualifies, however, as nothing more than “(false) beliefs.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, when it comes to the model provided by Singapore, he goes on saying that “[p]erhaps it was a mistake to try to build single-party meritocracy on the foundation (or form) of a democratic electoral system.”<sup>24</sup> In sum, Bell’s “political meritocracy” serves as an “alternative to electoral

20 We draw here a strict distinction between what we call the “Confucian tradition” and “traditional Confucianisms.” Traditional Confucianisms refer to the various premodern forms of Confucianism, such as Confucianism at its earlier stage, Confucianism during the Han and Tang dynasties or the neo-Confucianism of the Song and Ming dynasties. The period to which each of these belongs, as well as their characteristics, remain entirely different. By contrast, the Confucian tradition refers to the Confucian principles that persist throughout all of these movements. As for the modern interpretation made out of this particular set of principles, it does not, actually, correspond to anything like Bell’s political meritocracy [*xianneng zhengzhi*], but, rather, corresponds to what we term “civic politics” [*guomin zhengzhi*]. See Huang Yushun 黃玉順, “Lun ruxue de xiandai xing 論儒學的現代性 [A Discussion of Confucianism’s Modernity],” *Shehui kexue yanjiu*, no. 6 (2016); idem, “Guomin zhengzhi ruxue-rujia zhengzhi zhaxue de xiandai zhuanxing 國民政治儒學——儒家政治哲學的現代轉型 [Confucianism’s Civic Politics: The Modern Transformation of Confucian Political Philosophy],” *Dongyue luncong*, no. 11 (2015).

21 Bell, *The China Model*, 20.

22 Translator’s note: Here, Bell is actually quoting from Christopher Hayes, *Twilight of the Elites: America after Meritocracy* (New York: Crown, 2012), 62–63. See Bell, *The China Model*, 39–40.

23 Bell, *The China Model*, 39–40.

24 *Ibid.*, 35.

democracy"<sup>25</sup>—in other words, it is not only democracy's antithesis but also the system that should replace it.

However, there is something quite paradoxical here: Bell contradicts himself by asserting very clearly that he endorses democratic politics. In response to people who point out that his book "consists in an attack against democracy," he attempts to defend himself: "It is not at all my intention to undermine democracy, quite the contrary, I strongly support the idea that countries which have implemented systems of electoral democracy proceed with these.... The alternatives to democracy appear, with no exception whatsoever, to be even more disastrous than the electoral system has been."<sup>26</sup> He later declares:

I argued that sustainable political meritocracy requires features typical of democratic societies: the rule of law to check corruption and abuses of power, and freedom of speech and political experimentation to prevent the ossification of political hierarchies.... political meritocracies will find it difficult if not impossible to solve the legitimacy problem without giving the people the right to political participation.<sup>27</sup>

He also admits that "it is hard to imagine a modern government today that can be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the people without any form of democracy."<sup>28</sup>

Hence, Bell is caught in a series of contradictions: on the one hand, he advocates "meritocracy" and opposes democracy; on the other hand, he also sums up the problem as one of "reconcil[ing] political meritocracy and democracy."<sup>29</sup> That is how much confusion reigns in Bell's work.

### 1.3 *The Absurdity of Bell's Logic*

The logic hiding in Bell's views is as follows: that is how Chinese society has traditionally been, and therefore that is how it should remain for the time being and for the future to come. He writes: "In the past, political meritocracy has always been at the core of Chinese political culture, and it will likely remain

25 Ibid., 58; Bell, "Foreword to the Chinese Edition," in *Xianneng zhengzhi*, xii.

26 Bell, "Foreword to the Chinese Edition," xii. Translator's note: This is a translation of a passage that is found only in the Chinese translation of the book. The reader might also refer to chapter 1, n16 (p. 201), in which Bell writes: "My aim is *not* to undermine faith in electoral democracy in countries that have implemented such systems, if only because the practical alternatives tend to be military dictatorship or authoritarian populism."

27 Bell, *The China Model*, 152.

28 Ibid., 151.

29 Ibid., 150.

as such in the future.”<sup>30</sup> Later, he affirms: “Now that China has progressively been creating and implementing a meritocratic system in order to select and appoint political leaders with outstanding intellectual abilities, social skills and moral character, should we not expect that any sort of improvement ought to rest on these foundations that have already been laid out?”<sup>31</sup> If we are to follow this kind of logic, it would also be possible for us to ask: since ancient China progressively saw the formation and implementation of absolute monarchy, should it not mean that any following development ought to rest on these foundations? Because humanity has engaged in slavery, should it not mean that any following development should have rested on such foundations? And if we are to keep on going like this: just because all humans were once primates similar to apes and monkeys, should it not mean that any development ought to proceed from this idea? This kind of logic truly is absurd!

## 2 The Main Fallacies at Work in Bell's *Political Meritocracy*

### 2.1 *The Supposed “Four Key Flaws” of Democratic Regimes*

In his book, Bell discusses four main flaws of electoral democracy, which he also describes as four different sorts of “tyrannies.”

#### 2.1.1 “The Tyranny of the Majority”

The thing is, Bell himself admits that democratic regimes have already been addressing this problem: “In the twentieth century, however, liberal democracies consolidated constitutional restraints on majority rule, and liberal democracies typically protect minority groups and unpopular individuals from gross abuses of human rights”;<sup>32</sup> “most democracies have protections for minority groups and individuals. The *liberal* part of democracy is meant to protect the interests of minorities by means of various constitutional mechanisms that restrain majorities from violating the basic rights of people.”<sup>33</sup>

30 Bell, “Cong ‘yazhou jiazhi guan’ dao ‘xianneng zhengzhi’ 從‘亞洲價值觀’到‘賢能政治’ [From ‘Asian Values’ to ‘Political Meritocracy’],” *Wen shi zhe* 文史哲 [Journal of Literature, History and Philosophy], no. 3 (2013).

31 Bell, “Foreword to the Chinese Edition,” xiii-xiv.

32 Bell, *The China Model*, 21.

33 Bell, “Appendix 2: A Conversation between a Communist and a Confucian,” in *The China Model*, 4, available at <http://assets.press.princeton.edu/releases/m10418-2.pdf>.

### 2.1.2 “The Tyranny of the Minority”

Here, Bell is actually referring to the “tyranny of the wealthy minority,”<sup>34</sup> that is, to the capitalists who control politics. Bell believes that the fundamental reason such a “tyranny” has emerged is the wide gap that still exists between rich and poor, as well as income inequality in general. He recognizes, nonetheless, that the situation is far from better in “meritocratic systems” such as the ones he praises: “China and Singapore are not doing much better than the United States in terms of income inequality, which has worsened over the past two decades”; “the ‘tyranny of the minority’ may be similarly problematic in China and the United States.”<sup>35</sup> At the same time, Bell concurs that “many electoral democracies—such as [his] home country, Canada—do a much better job of limiting the influence of money in politics.”<sup>36</sup>

### 2.1.3 “The Tyranny of the Voting Community”

By this, Bell means that a nation-state’s government’s policies apply differently to citizens and noncitizens: “Political equality ends at the boundaries of the political community: those outside are neglected.”<sup>37</sup> He goes on to say: “democratization tends to strengthen the political salience of national identity.”<sup>38</sup> Nonetheless, common sense tells us that democratization and attempts “to strengthen the political salience of national identity” are not necessarily connected: undemocratic states have similarly aimed at strengthening national identity, and examples of ultranationalist movements brandishing the banner of “patriotism” are ubiquitous. Actually, Bell fails to identify the real heart of the matter: namely, that in this era of nation-states, this is a common problem and will remain so as long as human societies do not find their way out of this era.<sup>39</sup>

### 2.1.4 “The Tyranny of Competitive Individualists”

Everybody who only cares about his own interests and in the vicious competition that reigns in electoral democracies is an individualist, and this results

34 Bell, *The China Model*, 42.

35 *Ibid.*, 43, 46.

36 *Ibid.*, Appendix 2, 9.

37 *Ibid.*, 46.

38 *Ibid.*

39 See Huang Yushun 黃玉順, “Yishen weiben’yu ‘datong zhuyi’- ‘jiaguo tianxia’ huayu fansi yu ‘tianxia zhuyi’ guannian pipan ‘以身為本’與‘大同主義’——‘家國天下’話語反思與‘天下主義’觀念批判 [A Rethinking of the Discourse of the Nation under Heaven and a Critique of the Notion of the Heavenly Doctrine],” *Tansuo yu zhengming*, no. 1 (2016).

in the destruction of social harmony.<sup>40</sup> However, this sort of thinking, which draws an opposition between “competition” and “harmony,” is not tenable. Bell discerns two levels of social harmony: (1) “Harmony, at a minimum, means peaceful order (or the absence of violence). Conflict is unavoidable, but it should be dealt with in a nonviolent way to establish a peaceful order.”<sup>41</sup> Can we not, precisely, affirm that electoral democracy consists in a nonviolent way to govern, or that it helps us achieve a peaceful order? Conversely, when societies that are governed by undemocratic regimes attempt to “establish a peaceful order,” do they not generally do so by means of violent revolts? (2) The highest level of harmony is one that admits “diversity” and opposes competition. Bell considers this “the Confucian idea of harmony,”<sup>42</sup> but this way of looking at things is indeed biased. Confucianism never rejected competition; it has, however, advocated competition that, at the same time, shows respect for both rites and order. As Confucius is known to have said: “The student of virtue has no contentions. If it be said he cannot avoid them, shall this be in archery? But he bows complaisantly to his competitors; thus he ascends the hall, descends, and exacts the forfeit of drinking. In his contention, he is still the *junzi* 君子.”<sup>43</sup> In competition, the *junzi* must act exactly as he would do in the context of the contest taking place during the archery ceremony, which means in a competition that follows a peaceful procedure. Can we not qualify electoral democracy as a peaceful procedure, or should it be described as a violent struggle between parties?

## 2.2 *The Four Main Premises of Bell’s Political Meritocracy*

According to Bell, the establishment of a “political meritocracy” is based on four “assumptions”: “(1) it is good for a political community to be governed by high-quality rulers; (2) China’s one (ruling) party political system is not about to collapse; (3) the meritocratic aspect of the system is partly good; and (4) it can be improved.”<sup>44</sup> Let’s limit ourselves here to Bell’s first assumption. When Bell talks about “high-quality rulers,” he is referring to people with both high morals and abilities. Yet both history and the current reality serve as warnings in this regard. We cannot rely on rulers’ morals: a good system might have rulers act in the right manner, but a bad system will allow them to be corrupted.

40 Bell, *The China Model*, 55.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., 43.

43 *Analects*—Ba yi. 論語•八佾. Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Lunyu yizhu* 論語譯注 [Translation and Commentary on the Analects] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2002), 25.

44 Bell, *The China Model*, 8.



Neither can we rely on rulers' abilities; in a bad system, the stronger the rulers' abilities are, the more harm they are likely to cause.

### 2.3 *Bell's Counterarguments to the Three Main Problems in Political Meritocracy*

Bell concedes that what he calls "political meritocracy" still has "three key problems."<sup>45</sup>

2.3.1. The first problem is corruption, in other words, "rulers ... are likely to abuse their power."<sup>46</sup> Bell's basic point of view in this regard is that "electoral democracy is not always ... a strong bulwark against corruption," that "[w]hat does seem to help combat corruption is the level of economic development," and finally, that "high [gross domestic product] per capita is still the best bulwark against corruption."<sup>47</sup> He does not check whether these arguments are in keeping with facts but, rather, examines what causes corruption, the first of which he identifies as the lack of a democratic system: "The most obvious cause of corruption is the absence of independent checks on the power of the government." Despite the fact that present "meritocracies" have adopted all kinds of measures in this regard, he concedes that "[s]till, the basic problem has not changed: there are no independent legal or political institutions with the formal power to investigate or check the power of the collective leadership.... The problem of one bad emperor may have been solved, but not the problem of how to avoid several bad leaders at the top of a rotten system."<sup>48</sup>

2.3.2. "Political hierarchies may become frozen and undermine social mobility."<sup>49</sup> The examples of ossification that have occurred in democratic countries and that Bell identifies, in addition to examples taken from ancient Chinese history, simply do not pertain to the same categories of problems and have an entirely different nature. Moreover, the ossification problems emerging in democratic regimes are not nearly as severe as what happens in the "meritocratic" regimes that Bell admires. For instance, in China, the "second-generation" phenomenon, in which the offspring of powerful people inherit their parents' status (as do the children of entrepreneurs [*fu erdai* 富二代] or officials [*guan erdai* 官二代]), is getting worse by the day.

45 Ibid., 111.

46 Ibid., 8.

47 Ibid., 112-13.

48 Ibid., 116.

49 Ibid., 8.

2.3.3. The problem of legitimacy. Bell admits that “[t]he legitimacy problem is perhaps the most serious threat to the meritocratic system”<sup>50</sup> and that “it is difficult to legitimize the system to those outside the power structure.”<sup>51</sup> He identifies three things that may give the Chinese regime legitimacy, namely “nationalism, performance legitimacy, and political meritocracy.”<sup>52</sup> First, let us rule out the third source of legitimacy mentioned by Bell; otherwise, we might have to surrender to the sort of absurd logic that would have us declare that “meritocracy’s legitimacy comes from meritocracy.” To regard “performance” as a source of political legitimacy does not hold water either: the performance of tyrants in the ancient past as well as of contemporary authoritarian or totalitarian regimes could qualify as equally fine or, in some cases, could even be considered excellent. Bell admits that “no ruler is so great that he or she should rule depoliticized masses without accountability. It is hard to imagine a modern government today that can be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the people without any form of democracy.”<sup>53</sup> As for regarding “nationalism” as a source of legitimacy, this could prove even more harmful. We might as well reflect some more on the relationship between nationalism and what happened during World War II, particularly, on the totalitarian form of nationalism advocated by the Nazis.

#### 2.4 *“Political Meritocracy” Represented by the China Model*

Bell’s monograph discusses “three models of democratic meritocracy” and advocates the establishment of the third one: a model with a democratic structure at the lower levels and a meritocratic structure at the highest levels.<sup>54</sup> (1) When it comes to the lower levels of governance, Bell highly praises the democratic elections that China has been attempting to put in place in recent years. Yet, while he admits that some problems remain in local-level democracy, he barely elaborates on them.<sup>55</sup> (2) As for adopting meritocracy at the highest level of government, Bell declares that “[t]he advantages of ‘actually existing’ meritocracy in the CCP are clear,” but he concedes that “‘actually existing meritocracy’ is flawed.”<sup>56</sup> According to him, when it comes to China’s meritocracy’s flaws, two aspects should be considered: “Part of the problem is that China lacks democracy at various levels of government that could help check abuses

50 Ibid., 9.

51 Ibid., 8.

52 Ibid., 139.

53 Ibid., 151.

54 Ibid., 152.

55 Ibid., 169.

56 Ibid., 172-73.

of power and provide more opportunities for political expression by marginalized groups. But part of the problem is also that political meritocracy has been insufficiently developed in China.<sup>57</sup> What the first reason outlined here reveals is that there is actually a demand for more democracy, something that contradicts Bell's main objective, which is to make a case for "meritocracy." However, the second reason laid out by Bell indicates the most vital issue affecting the meritocratic system. This system has no way to truly make it "so that government officials are selected and promoted on the basis of ability and morality rather than political connections, wealth, and family background," especially that "[s]till, defenders of political meritocracy at the top must confront the problem of legitimacy," and this may well make meritocracy "increasingly difficult to sustain" in the future.<sup>58</sup>

Bell's conclusion in this book is the "China model," which he attempts one more time to define: "Since the model—democracy at the bottom, experimentation in the middle, and meritocracy at the top—is unique to China, we can call it the 'China model.'"<sup>59</sup> This corresponds, in fact, to the model that Bell has already dismissed because of how poorly it performs in practice. Yet Bell considers that this model "is both a reality and an ideal. It is a reality that has characterized China's approach to political reform over the past three decades or so. It is also an ideal that can be used as a standard to evaluate political reform and to suggest areas of possible improvement."<sup>60</sup> But when it comes to "the reality of political reform,"<sup>61</sup> this "China expert" has no clue whatsoever about the relationship between "rules" and "unwritten rules" that define Chinese politics. As for his discussion of the "ideal of political reform,"<sup>62</sup> Bell ends up negating to a certain extent some of the things he touched upon when presenting the "real" aspects of the China model. Interestingly, with regard to the aspects of "meritocracy" that have not yet been perfected and still need some improvement, Bell constantly returns to introducing democratic elements and goes so far as to suggest that democratic mechanisms are fundamentally needed, if only to serve as safeguards.

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57 Ibid., 173-74.

58 Ibid., 174.

59 Ibid., 180.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., 180-88.

62 Ibid., 188-95.

### 3 The Key Issue in *Political Meritocracy*

#### 3.1 *An Undisguised Negation of Popular Sovereignty*

Bell's definition of what he calls "political meritocracy" goes as follows: "everybody should have an equal opportunity to be educated and to contribute to politics, but not everybody will emerge from this process with an equal capacity to make morally informed political judgments. Hence, the task of politics is to identify those with above-average ability and to make them serve the political community."<sup>63</sup> To put it simply, the fundamental principle of "political meritocracy" is that political power should stem from political ability. Here, the people's "equal opportunity ... to contribute to politics" is in fact cancelled out by a very small and "above-average" minority's "capacity to make morally informed political judgments." This constitutes a flagrant negation of people's political rights. The key issue here is that "meritocracy" goes against citizens' equal access to political participation. Bell declares in his introduction: "My concern, to repeat, is to defend *political* meritocracy—the idea that political power should be distributed in accordance with ability and virtue."<sup>64</sup> This means that political power should not actually originate with the people or the entire body of citizens but, rather, with the political elite, who are supposedly more competent and moral. To put it another way, the degree of legitimacy conferred to those who hold political power does not reside with the people but lies in the hands of the political elite. This clearly demonstrates an outright contempt for popular sovereignty as well as an undisguised negation of the principle.

#### 3.2 *The Instrumental Rationality at Work in Bell's Thinking*

According to Bell, "The idea that a political system should aim to select and promote leaders with superior ability and virtue is central to both Chinese and Western political theory and practice."<sup>65</sup> In other words, regardless of whether we are talking about a democratic system or a "meritocratic" one, the aim should always be to select leaders who would be considered "meritorious." Therefore, political systems are merely tools for us to achieve this goal and are not there to protect certain values. As he puts it, although

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63 Ibid., 32.

64 Ibid., 6.

65 Ibid., 2.

some philosophers argue that the rights to vote and run for political office are intrinsically valuable for individuals ... such arguments have been vigorously contested and the leading Anglo-American philosophers from J.S. Mill to John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin tend to defend political equality in the form of one person, one vote on instrumental grounds.<sup>66</sup>

This is a deliberate misinterpretation of the thinking of these philosophers, because contemporary Anglo-American philosophy's mainstream has never based its theories on the sort of instrumental grounds invoked by Bell. Rather, it has done so on the grounds of the values encompassed by what we call "natural rights." In fact, the aim served by a certain political system is not to select those to lead the country. Rather, political systems are there to answer the question of who will constitute the *bodies* that hold power and preside over the rights of citizens. Therefore, in absolutely no way is democracy merely an instrument; on the contrary, it stands for one value in particular: it guarantees popular sovereignty.

### 3.3 *Totalitarianism's Dangerous Prospects*

Bell's inclination toward totalitarianism is revealed by his discussion of the sources of political legitimacy. It is Bell's opinion that "meritorious" political leaders must possess three key qualities: intellectual abilities, social skills, and virtue.<sup>67</sup> Of first importance are intellectual abilities, since they are the most crucial element when it comes to legitimacy. For this reason, Bell cites Max Weber's classification of the kinds of political legitimacy conferred on political leaders, that is, traditional authority (in which people approve of a ruler's authority based on tradition or conventions), charismatic authority (when people endorse a leader because of his or her personal charisma), and rational-legal authority (when rulers are endowed with power following a rational and legal procedure).<sup>68</sup>

Bell's portrayal of charismatic political leaders stands out among the three types for his praise-filled tone. Bell mentions "the qualities of leaders that dominate by charisma, that is, domination by virtue of the devotion of those who obey the purely personal charisma of the leader."<sup>69</sup> The "meritorious" leaders

66 Ibid., 17-18.

67 Ibid., 68.

68 See *ibid.*, 75-77. See also Max Weber's 1919 lecture, "Politics as Vocation," <http://www.doc88.com/p-9923360009177.html>.

69 Bell, *The China Model*, 75.

he describes are none other than the fearful figures to whom he alludes after having declared that “[p]olitical leaders have power over us.”<sup>70</sup> Moreover, Bell adheres to Weber’s definition of “the state as a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory,”<sup>71</sup> and he goes on to affirm that “[t]he political leader must be prepared to use morally dubious means for good results” and that they will have the determination needed to “make use of the instruments of violence for the sake of less-than-perfect political decisions.”<sup>72</sup>

Before the portrait sketched by Bell of this sort of leading figure, one cannot help but think of Hitler. This leads Bell to rapidly attempt to differentiate between the “meritorious” leaders he has been promoting and the charismatic type. He writes: “Weber’s account of the charismatic political leader seems more applicable in times of warfare or violent civil strife,” and he also adds that “[i]n the context of a modernizing, largely peaceful society characterized by collective leadership such as China, the desired traits of a leader are likely to be different, perhaps closer to the characteristics of what Weber calls the ‘civil servant.’”<sup>73</sup> However, in the following sentences, Bell refutes the distinction he has just made:

In imperial China ..., there was no distinction between civil servants and political leaders: the successful examination candidates were put on the road to be political leaders with the power to decide on matters affecting the lives of millions of people (although they were still supposed to serve, in an ultimate sense, at the behest of the emperor). In contemporary China, the public service examinations ... are also stepping-stones to political power; there are not separate tracks for political officials and civil servants.<sup>74</sup>

It is truly hard to discern, in Bell’s writing, whether, in the end, an actual difference, in essence, in the charismatic type of authority he depicts exists between the absolutism of China’s ancient past and contemporary totalitarianism.

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70 Ibid., 151.

71 Ibid., 75.

72 Ibid., 76-77.

73 Ibid., 77.

74 Ibid., 77-78.

#### 4 The Misrepresentation of the Confucian Tradition in Bell's Work

At the beginning of this article, we made reference to the fact that meritocracy, which is usually translated into Chinese as *jingying zhuyi* and not *xianneng zhengzhi* or *shangxian zhi*, is a concept that pertains entirely to contemporary Western democratic systems in place. Yet Bell claims that "China has a long tradition of political meritocracy."<sup>75</sup> In order to obscure the facts, Bell has us completely "lost in translation." He may think that "meritocracy" or *xianneng zhengzhi* is part of the Confucian tradition, but this is actually a misrepresentation of Confucian political philosophy.

##### 4.1 *The Original Meaning Behind the Book of Rites' Mention of "Choosing Men of Talents, Virtue, and Ability"*

When they speak about "virtuous and talented people," the meaning of which is behind the word *xianneng*, people quite naturally think about *The Conveyance of Rites* [*Liyun* 禮運], which is chapter 7 in the Confucian classic the *Book of Rites* [*Liji* 禮記], and which mentions people in the distant past "choosing men of talents, virtue, and ability":<sup>76</sup>

I never saw the practice of the Grand course, and the eminent men of the three dynasties; but I have my object (in harmony with theirs). When the Grand course was pursued, a public and common spirit ruled all under the sky; they chose men of talents, virtue, and ability; their words were sincere, and what they cultivated was harmony. Thus men did not love their parents only, nor treat as children only their own sons. A competent provision was secured for the aged till their death, employment for the able-bodied, and the means of growing up to the young. They showed kindness and compassion to widows, orphans, childless men, and those who were disabled by disease, so that they were all sufficiently maintained. Males had their proper work, and females had their homes. (They accumulated) articles (of value), disliking that they should be thrown away upon the ground, but not wishing to keep them for their own gratification. (They labored) with their strength, disliking that it should not be exerted, but not exerting it (only) with a view to their own

75 Del Corona, "Facciamo l'essame a chi comanda."

76 Bell also discusses, at some point, "the ideal of the 'Great Unity' (*datong*) described in the *Book of Rites*. See Bell, *The China Model*, Appendix 2, 32. Translator's note: James Legge's version of the *Book of Rites*, which is used here, translates the term *datong* 大同 as "Grand Union." See James Legge, "The Li Ki," in *The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 28 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885).

advantage. In this way (selfish) schemings were repressed and found no development. Robbers, filchers, and rebellious traitors did not show themselves, and hence the outer doors remained open, and were not shut. This was (the period of) what we call the Grand Union.

Now that the Grand course has fallen into disuse and obscurity, the kingdom is a family inheritance. Everyone loves (above all others) his own parents and cherishes (as) children (only) his own sons. People accumulate articles and exert their strength for their own advantage. Great men imagine it is the rule that their states should descend in their own families. Their object is to make the walls of their cities and suburbs strong and their ditches and moats secure. The rules of propriety and of what is right are regarded as the threads by which they seek to maintain in its correctness the relation between ruler and minister; in its generous regard that between father and son; in its harmony that between elder brother and younger; and in a community of sentiment that between husband and wife; and in accordance with them they frame buildings and measures; lay out the fields and hamlets (for the dwellings of the husbandmen); adjudge the superiority to men of valour and knowledge; and regulate their achievements with a view to their own advantage. Thus it is that (selfish) schemes and enterprises are constantly taking their rise, and recourse is had to arms; and thus it was (also) that Yu, Tang, Wen and Wu, king Cheng, and the duke of Zhou obtained their distinction. Of these six great men everyone was very attentive to the rules of propriety, thus to secure the display of righteousness, the realisation of sincerity, the exhibition of errors, the exemplification of benevolence, and the discussion of courtesy, showing the people all the normal virtues. Any rulers who did not follow this course were driven away by those who possessed power and position, and all regarded them as pests. This is the period of what we call Small Tranquillity.<sup>77</sup>

Three periods are brought up in this excerpt: at the very beginning, there is the period of the “Grand Union,” in which the “grand course” [*dadao* 大道] is being practiced; later, there is the period of “Small Tranquillity” in which lived “the eminent men of the three dynasties”; and finally, there is the period in which Confucius finds himself, that is, a period in which rites and music are no longer rightfully honored and in which the moral standards on which society rested are slowly falling apart. This is a description of things going from bad

77 *Liji—Liyun* 禮記•禮運. Wang Wenjin 王文錦, *Liji yijie* 禮記譯解 [Translation and Commentary on the Book of Rites] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2001), 287.



to worse. The period of the “Grand Union” refers in fact to the primitive state of society, and Bell indeed also goes on to say that this “ideal ... sounds more like what Marx would call ‘primitive communism.’”<sup>78</sup> However, this is not at all what Confucius intended to say when he sought to sketch what this “Grand Union” would be like. If he says that he himself has never witnessed “the practice of the Grand course, and the eminent men of the three dynasties,” he also declares, “but I have my object (in harmony with theirs).” By saying this, Confucius is asserting an ideal that should serve as a direction for the future. There is a desire to re-establish or, to put it more accurately, to go on building a society that resembles that of the “Small Tranquility” or even of the “Grand Union.” However, when it comes to clanship and imperial societies as well as the periods of empire that prevailed from the Qin and Han dynasties onward and that were met by later Confucians, they were absolutely not the political ideal that Confucius had envisioned.

Interestingly, the mention by Confucius, in the *Book of Rites*, of people “choosing men of talents, virtue, and ability” is not part of the period he described as the “Small Tranquility,” during which Yu, Tang, Wen, Wu, king Cheng, and the duke of Zhou lived. Rather, it is part of the period of the “Grand Union” that is yet to come. Clearly, this does not correspond in any way to the supposedly ancient “political meritocracy” to which Bell keeps referring. In the end, when it comes to traditional society in ancient China, whether it is the elitist meritocracy described by Michael Young or the equally elitist political meritocracy discussed by Bell, both basically qualify as sheer fiction.

#### 4.2 *Bell's Outright Distortion of Confucian Thought*

Bell goes so far as to claim that “both Plato and Confucius argued for a form of political meritocracy that effectively excludes the majority from political power.”<sup>79</sup> To profess that Confucius would advocate the exclusion of the majority from political power is truly a calumny against Confucius. It probably comes from Bell's misreading of the following statement by Confucius: “When right principles prevail in the kingdom, there will be no discussions among the common people.”<sup>80</sup> Some elements here should be taken into consideration that seem to have eluded Bell: first, the “discussions” brought up by Confucius [*Yi* 議 in the original] refer to “public censure” [*feiyi* 非議] and not to the right to “discuss political matters” [*yizheng* 議政]. Hence, the philosopher He Yan 何晏 (190-249) interprets the passage as follows: “The master said: Nowhere

78 Bell, *The China Model*, Appendix 2, 32.

79 *Ibid.*, 151.

80 *Analects*—Jishi. 論語•季氏. Yang Bojun, *Lunyu yizhu*, 174.

would there be censure.” Xing Bing 邢昺 (932-1010), for his part, comments: “*Yi* signifies ‘vilification’ or ‘derision.’ The master said that when right principles prevail in the kingdom, the upper levels of government grant consideration to the voice of the people when making political proclamations and that since such conduct prevails among those in power, the common people have no cause neither for censure nor for calumny.”<sup>81</sup> Second, it is assumed in this passage that the absence of censure derives from the ruling class’s abiding by the right principles; conversely, if rulers lack principles, the common people are obviously more likely to resort to censure. Third, Xing Bing’s comment that “the upper levels of government grant consideration to the voice of the people when making political proclamations” indicates that even when the “right principles prevail,” “the voice of the people” is still allowed to be heard and people are still allowed to “discuss political matters.” Fourth, what Confucius is saying here is aimed precisely at the political powers in place at that period in time, and it should not be taken as the formulation of a principle of political philosophy for which one would claim universality.

Bell simply does not comprehend the political philosophy inherent in Confucianism, and therefore he is not in a measure to differentiate between the political propositions advocated by Confucianism, which are specifically addressed to conditions during a particular period in history, and the universal and basic tenets of Confucian political philosophy. These tenets pertain, furthermore, to the ethics of the classical Chinese system, that is, to the “the Chinese theory of justice,”<sup>82</sup> which holds, from its core theoretical structure, that from benevolence [*ren* 仁] emerges justice [*yi* 義] and that from justice emerges rites [*li* 禮]. In other words, the spirit of universal love brings about principles of justice, which in turn brings about institutions and norms. According to the basic tenets of Confucian political philosophy, what today’s modern way of living requires is precisely the establishment of a democratic system, and not the “meritocratic system” that ends up challenging it.

81 *Shisanjing zhushu*—Jishi. 十三經注疏·季氏. Xing Bing 邢昺, annot., *Lunyu zhushu* 論語注疏 [Commentary on the Analects], in *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經注疏 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), 2522.

82 See Huang Yushun 黃玉順, *Zhongguo zhengyilun de chongjian-rujia zhidu lunlixue de dangdai chanshi* 中國正義論的重建——儒家制度倫理學的當代闡釋 [The Re-Establishment of the Chinese Theory of Justice: A Contemporary Interpretation of Confucian Ethics] (Hefei: Anhui People’s Publishing House, 2013); published in English as: *Voice from the East: The Chinese Theory of Justice*, trans. Hou Pingping and Wang Keyou (Reading, UK: Paths International, 2016); Huang Yushun 黃玉順, *Zhongguo zhengyilun de xingcheng-Zhou Kong Meng Xun de zhidu lunlixue chuantong* 中國正義論的形成——周孔孟荀的制度倫理學傳統 [The Formation of a Chinese Theory of Justice: The Ethical Tradition from the Duke of Zhou to Confucius, Mencius and Xun Zi] (Taipei: Eastern Publishing, 2015).

Therefore, the contemporary version of New Confucianism has nothing other than a demand for political democracy. In short, the “political meritocracy” that Bell forces upon Chinese Confucianism is inherently an antidemocratic political program and a road that leads directly to totalitarianism.

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# Building a Modern Political Ecology and the Need to Demystify Political Meritocracy

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## Abstract

To construct socialism with Chinese characteristics, advance socialist democracy, and establish a political ecology for socialism with Chinese characteristics, we should devote our efforts toward building a stronger political system and strengthening the rule of law and democracy. Important projects, such as the anti-corruption campaign, mass-line education, or team building for government officials should be guided by the spirit of democracy and the rule of law and proceed in an orderly and regulated manner. Still, voices in support of political meritocracy have become increasingly audible in Chinese political and academic circles, supporting a political phenomenon completely incompatible with the goal of building a socialist democracy. Meritocracy as a political system entails a high degree of uncertainty, unsustainability, and risk and is essentially just a modified version of the rule of man or, to put it differently, the rule of man “2.0.” Its fatal weakness is its inability to resolve two fundamental problems related to the legitimacy of political power: Where does power originate, and how can we control it? An important theoretical prerequisite for building a clean political ecology is thus to demystify meritocracy and dispel any popular myths surrounding it.

## Keywords

Democracy – political ecology – political legitimacy – political meritocracy – rule of law – rule of man

A new trend in Chinese politics and academia has emerged that advocates political meritocracy and new authoritarianism. The timing of this political phenomenon is related to the current low ebb in the global wave of democratization and follows the pervasive theme in current Chinese thought and public opinion that promotes traditional culture centered on Confucian theories.

This trend and the voices supporting political meritocracy run counter to the big trends in the development of human society—democracy and the rule of law—and fail to conform to the demands of the socialist democracy that China strives to realize. Moreover, it is harmful for building a clean modern political ecology. The reasons are obvious: the system design of political meritocracy entails a high degree of uncertainty, unsustainability, and risk. Are the anti-rightist campaign, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution [1966-1976] not all logical results of political meritocracy? Our recent history is filled with prominent examples, so we should heed the warning and avoid making similar mistakes.

After rejecting totalitarianism and only thirty-some years of the Reform and Opening-up Policy, voices advocating political meritocracy have emerged because we have not yet fully reflected on the serious flaws of political meritocracy as a system of governance: it perpetuates the rule of man, opposes democracy, and hampers the education of the people. To construct socialism with Chinese characteristics, advance socialist democracy, and establish a political ecology for socialism with Chinese characteristics, we should devote our efforts toward building a stronger political system and strengthening the rule of law and democracy. Important projects, such as the anti-corruption campaign, mass-line education, or team building among government officials, should be guided by the spirit of democracy and the rule of law and proceed in an orderly and regulated manner. Against the backdrop of an era that seeks to advance traditional culture, political meritocracy—as an important part of traditional political culture—is set to make a comeback in both theory and practice. This is a political phenomenon entirely incompatible with the goal of building a socialist democracy. An important theoretical prerequisite for building a clean political ecology is thus to demystify meritocracy and dispel any popular myths surrounding it.

1

Unsurprisingly, current Chinese efforts at building a political culture draw heavily on traditional Chinese thought. The progress and development of any country and its people, especially in the course of modernization, are

influenced by traditional factors, and its inherent connection with traditional culture is not easily broken. The question of how traditional culture should be preserved and passed on needs to be addressed with a scientific and objective attitude; we cannot completely negate traditional culture one moment and completely embrace it the next. Academic research on political meritocracy should equally maintain such an attitude, which is, however, not the case at present.

The fervor of research on political meritocracy is a typical manifestation of the renaissance of traditional culture, exemplified by Confucian thought, in the political sphere. Because the selection and promotion of men of virtue and talent form the essence of political meritocracy, they offer vigorous public support for Confucian doctrines based on the teachings of Confucius 孔子 [551-479 BCE] and Mencius 孟子 [372-289 BCE].

Scholars such as Daniel A. Bell, Bai Tongdong 白彤東, and Wang Guoliang 王國良 are representative of current academic research on political meritocracy. Among them, Daniel A. Bell is a pioneer in theoretical research on modern political meritocracy.

But what is political meritocracy? According to Bell's understanding, the basic idea of meritocracy is that although everyone should be granted equal access to education and the opportunity for political participation, not everyone is endowed with the same aptitude for moral and political decision making. Identifying men of outstanding ability and persuading them to serve in politics is therefore an important task.<sup>1</sup> It follows that political meritocracy is the idea that a political system is designed with the aim of selecting political leaders with above average ability to make morally informed political judgments. That is, political meritocracy has two key components: (1) the political leaders have above average ability and virtue and (2) the selection mechanism is designed to choose such leaders.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, meritocracy has always existed and advocates for political meritocracy acknowledge that "political meritocracy has been, and continues to be, central to Chinese political culture."<sup>3</sup>

In China, political meritocracy can be traced back to the times of the Three Sage Kings [mystical age] and the idea of "abdication in favor of someone worthy" [*shanrang zhi* 禪讓制] or even further to primitive versions of democracy

1 Daniel Bell [Bei Danning 貝淡寧], "Cong 'Yazhou jiazhi guan' dao 'xianneng zhengzhi' 從'亞洲價值觀'到'賢能政治' [From 'Asian Values' to 'Political Meritocracy]," *Wen shi zhe* 文史哲 [*Journal of Literature, History, and Philosophy*], no. 3 (2013).

2 Bell, "Xianneng zhengzhi shi ge hao dongxi 賢能政治是個好東西 [Political Meritocracy Is a Good Thing]," *Dangdai shijie* 當代世界 [*Contemporary world*], no. 8 (2012).

3 Bell, "Cong Yazhou jiazhi guan dao xianneng zhengzhi," 7.

in ancient times that championed the ideal that “all under heaven belongs to the people” [*tianxia wei gong* 天下為公]. At the very least, we can trace the idea to the Western Zhou dynasty 西周 [1046-771 BCE], when we find evidence in the Book of Documents [*Shangshu* 尚書].<sup>4</sup> The Duke of Zhou said: “King Wen was able to make the minds of those in the [three high] positions his own, and so it was that he established those regular officers and superintending pastors, so that they were men of ability and virtue.”<sup>5</sup> Supposing that political support already existed for the idea of “exalting the virtuous” [*shangxian* 尚賢] during the Western Zhou and considering that Confucius was known to “follow [the practice] of the Zhou” [*congzhou* 從周], it is obvious why he also adopted their ideas on meritocracy. As a result, “exalting the virtuous” became an important political proposition in Confucianism that Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi 荀子 [316-237 BCE] all spoke about at length, in an effort to publicize the idea.<sup>6</sup> “Zhonggong 仲弓, who was serving as a steward for the Ji family, asked the Master about governing. The Master said, first appoint your supervising officials, then overlook their petty faults and promote those who are worthy and talented.”<sup>7</sup> After the fall of the Qin [221-207 BCE] and Han dynasties [206 BCE–220], political meritocracy manifested itself in various selection mechanisms for political and administrative talent: worthy men could be selected for office directly by the sovereign [*zhengpi zhi* 征辟制], recommended to the central administration by officials at the local level [*chaju zhi* 察舉制], ranked and designated for office by impartial judges [*jiupin zhongzheng zhi* 九品中正制 system of nine ranks and impartial judges], or rise through the imperial examination system [*keju zhi* 科舉制].

This shows that the special character and essence of political meritocracy are that political leaders and officials at all levels are selected through a set of mechanisms based on their level of education, moral virtue, and ability.

As those advocating political meritocracy have proposed, attempts are currently being made to combine certain aspects of democracy with the basic model of traditional political meritocracy to create a meritocratic system with

4 Ge Quan 葛荃, *Quanli zaizhi lixing-shiren chuantong zhengzhi wenhua yu zhongguo shehui* 權力宰製理性——士人傳統政治文化與中國社會 [*Power Dominating Rationality: Literati, Traditional Political Culture and Chinese Society*] (Tianjin: Nankai University Press, 2003), 44.

5 Shangshu—Zhoushu—Lizheng. 尚書·周書·立政. Translation based on James Legge, trans., *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Confucianism*, Part 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), 223.

6 Ge, *Quanli zaizhi lixing*, 44.

7 *Analects—Zilu*. 論語·子路. Translation based on Edward Slingerland, *Confucius Analects: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 138.



modern characteristics suited to the conditions of our time. Scholars such as Professor Bai Tongdong at Fudan University and Professor Chen Zuwei 陳祖為 [Joseph C. W. Chan] at Hong Kong University have “argued for a hybrid political regime that combines elements of democracy and meritocracy, with meritocratic houses of government composed of political leaders chosen by such means as examination and performance at lower levels of government (I have also argued for a hybrid regime, with a meritocratic house of government termed the House of Exemplary Persons [*xianshi yuan* 賢士院]).”<sup>8</sup>

But the very idea of a selection mechanism for talent already reveals that political meritocracy is, at its core, a form of the rule of man. To put it bluntly, those who propagate political meritocracy are doing no more than cloaking political meritocracy in a layer of democracy to make it seem more appealing and modern.

A theoretical proposition inherent to political meritocracy is the assumption that only a talented political elite has the necessary ability, moral foundation, and public-mindedness to manage and govern a country and society. Ordinary people are limited by their education and upbringing and lack the ability and the necessary public spirit to participate in politics. “The basic idea of political meritocracy is that everyone should have an equal opportunity to be educated and to contribute to society and politics, but not everyone will emerge from this process with an equal capacity to make morally informed political judgments and become an outstanding talent.”<sup>9</sup> Frankly speaking, the essence of political meritocracy is nothing but political elitism. This makes political meritocracy as such entirely incompatible with democracy. Even if those in support of political meritocracy attempt to introduce democratic elements into the meritocratic system, this does not suffice to fundamentally reverse the system’s rule-of-man character expressed by merit-based selection and governing elites.

We should also bear in mind that human society continuously advances. Humanity has already advanced from a feudal society of “subjects” to a modern society of “citizens.” Unlike in the age of feudalism, it is no longer a small social elite that sustains modern societies but “right holders” universally acknowledged by society. This is to say the present era considers the individual the basic unit of society. Individuals are individuals not only in the moral sense but

8 Bell, “Xianneng zhengzhi shi ge hao dongxi.”

9 Bell, *Xianneng zhengzhi: weishenme shangxian zhi bi xuanju minzhu zhi geng shi the Zhongguo* 賢能政治：為什麼尚賢制比選舉民主制更適合中國 [The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy], trans. Wu Wanwei (Beijing: CITIC Publishing Group, 2016), 21.

also in the sense of the rights that they possess. This idea of the individual as the basic unit is significant because it respects the freedom, rights, and dignity of each person, not just the freedom, rights, and dignity of the political elites as advocated by political meritocracy.

Despite diverging opinions and controversies surrounding political meritocracy, the issue is not primarily one for academic discussion but, rather, concerns the realities of a political model both influenced and reflected by historic traditions. It essentially raises questions about the type of political system China eventually desires and the general direction of China's future development. After a hundred years of ongoing discussion, all issues surrounding political meritocracy have been sufficiently debated at a purely academic level.

During the age of regional governance, before the birth of the international system, democratic ideas and practices were implemented within regional and national borders and had not yet converged into a global democratic trend. The people lacked a clear sense of their own autonomy or rights and their democratic consciousness was not yet fully developed. If we assume that these factors were conducive to meritocratic practices, it seems oddly out of place to argue for so-called political meritocracy in an era of globalization with the free circulation of information and a surging democratic tide.

## 2

It is puzzling that political meritocracy has once again entered the political arena in an age of globalization marked by fully developed consciousness of citizenship and a global civil society. Let us list the many queries and request that those in support of political meritocracy provide a convincing and earnest response that can dispel any lingering doubts and suspicions.

First, how do you guarantee that a meritocratic selection process is open and transparent? How do you guarantee that positions are truly open to the public? And how do you guarantee that the power of those appointed to office is properly controlled? These are important standards for evaluating the sustainability of a system's political ecology and issues greatly valued in modern political ecology.

The main reason for raising these matters is the serious malpractice that has occurred during the implementation of political meritocracy in the past. In political meritocracy, the mechanisms for talent selection are neither open nor transparent. Seemingly operating as a black box, the system lacks social persuasiveness and public credibility and produces officials of questionable

legitimacy. Even though the talent selection process is regulated, the rules and principles are often ignored by powerful institutions or high-ranking individuals because of the rule-of-man qualities inherent in political meritocracy. During the selection and appointment process, personal willpower often transgresses the rules of the system, rendering them powerless to supervise and control the process. This makes it difficult to guarantee that vacant positions are equally open to all. What is more, after taking up their posts, the “worthy and able” will overstep the limits of their power, as is customary in political meritocracy. After the founding of the New China [1949], we continued to practice a modified version of political meritocracy for a long period, because the democratic system had not yet been fully established. The serious problems of the “discretion” and excessive use of political power remained unresolved, and the highest political leader “acted more and more arbitrarily and subjectively, and increasingly put himself above the Central Committee of the [Chinese Communist] Party. The result was a steady weakening and even undermining of the principle of collective leadership and democratic centralism in the political life of the Party and the country.”<sup>10</sup> Honestly speaking, to attack a political leader personally for acting “arbitrarily and subjectively” seems inappropriate. The attack should, instead, target the meritocratic system whose unscientific design is responsible for such unwanted results.

The second question is related to what we have just discussed: How do you “measure” political meritocracy? If political meritocracy, unlike democratic election processes, cannot be “measured,” then how do you guarantee the

10 “Zhongguo gongchandang zhongyang weiyuanhui guanyu jianguo yilai dang de ruogan lishi wenti de jueyi 中國共產黨中央委員會關於建國以來黨的若干歷史問題的決議 [Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party since the Founding of the People’s Republic of China],” *Peking Review*, no. 27 (1981): 25. The resolution was adopted by the sixth plenary session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on June 27, 1981. The quotation is part of an evaluation of the Cultural Revolution and specifically discusses the role of Mao Zedong 毛澤東 [1893-1976]. The full passage reads: “Comrade Mao Zedong’s prestige reached a peak and he became arrogant at the very time when the Party was confronted with the new task of shifting the focus of its work to socialist construction, a task for which the utmost caution was required. He gradually divorced himself from practice and from the masses, acted more and more arbitrarily and subjectively, and increasingly put himself above the Central Committee of the Party. The result was a steady weakening and even undermining of the principle of collective leadership and democratic centralism in the political life of the Party and the country. This state of affairs took shape only gradually, and the Central Committee of the Party should be held partly responsible. From the Marxist viewpoint, this complex phenomenon was the product of given historical conditions. Blaming this on only one person or on only a handful of people will not provide a deep lesson for the entire Party or enable it to find practical ways to change the situation.”

fairness of the meritocratic selection mechanisms? Also, how do you guarantee that those selected are indeed “men of virtue and talent”? Political meritocracy attempts to divorce itself from real society and any human considerations and claims that talent selection and promotion are impartial processes based entirely on ability. The system places blind trust in the moral character of those selected and attaches little importance to constructing mechanisms to restrain their power. The criteria and decision-making processes used for selecting and employing talent are highly arbitrary and not quantifiable. What is being created, I am afraid, can only be described as a utopian political meritocracy that does not exist in real politics. Even advocates of political meritocracy must admit this much: During China’s feudal age, senior local officials exercised great power over the promotion and recommendation of talent for office, “but the influence of local wealthy families also had a strong effect on the process. Virtuous and talented candidates with a humble family background were not necessarily chosen for recommendation, while those from wealthy families were often appointed despite lack of morals or talent.”<sup>11</sup> In addition to the appointment of ordinary officials, “candidates for the more important positions were recommended by senior officials at the imperial court and finally decided on by the emperor.... Great Confucian scholars of successive dynasties, such as Zhu Xi 朱熹 [1130-1200], were strongly opposed to the practice of the emperor directly appointing officials according to his own liking. They demanded that the selection of officials strictly follow set procedures. The combined efforts of successive generations of Confucian scholars, however, were not sufficient to effectively prevent the autocratic will of the sovereign from taking precedence. This became the biggest shortcoming of the talent selection process in ancient China.”<sup>12</sup> If we do not fundamentally modify the basic framework of traditional political meritocracy but, instead, continue to modify and amend the system, how will this new political meritocracy solve the existing problems?

The third question is: How do you guarantee that the selection process draws on a sufficiently large pool of talent? In political meritocracy, only the exam system for lower-level public servants draws on a sufficiently broad range of possible candidates from society at large. The various steps involved in the selection and promotion of high-level talent, however, are carried out

11 Wang Guoliang 王國良, “Rujia xianneng zhengzhi sixiang yu zhongguo xianneng tuiju zhidu de fazhan 儒家賢能政治思想與中國賢能推舉制度的發展 [Confucian Thought on Political Meritocracy and the Development of a Meritocratic Selection System for Office],” *Wen shi zhe*, no. 3 (2013): 31.

12 Ibid.

over successive hierarchical levels from the top down. Here, the number of possible candidates is limited, and the steps and mechanisms involved in the selection process are rarely known to the public. This type of system design inevitably leads to a narrowly defined talent pool. Talent can be drawn only from the bureaucratic and administrative system or affiliated institutions. It is hard to extend the scope to a broader field outside the system, let alone search for candidates from among ordinary people. In the “political meritocracy” of the feudal age, candidates for key positions were normally recommended by important officials at the imperial court. Eventually, the emperor decided whether to appoint a candidate. With only few individuals involved in the selection process and a narrow pool of eligible talent, it was difficult to realize the self-professed goals of political meritocracy, namely, for all people to fulfill their potential and only men of talent and virtue to be appointed for office. Given political meritocracy’s top-down system of talent selection that, compared to democracy, lacks the power to mobilize all parts of society and inspire political participation, we might ask: How do you guarantee that the system does not “bury” men of real talent?

The fourth question is, how do you guarantee that those selected by political meritocracy for “being able and virtuous” actually maintain these qualities over time? How do you ensure they use their abilities for the benefit of the people without being carried away by selfish desires, thereby turning corruption into an even more serious problem? How do you ensure that they use their power for the people’s advantage, not to advance their subjective goals, or rely on their power to push for major economic, political, and social policies that are divorced from reality, and sacrifice the basic interests of society and the country? In the past, these were the biggest shortcomings of political meritocracy to be castigated by the people. Numerous examples prove time and again that if the “able and virtuous” lack systematic and rigid limitations on their power, the initial impetus to “use the power for the benefit of the people” gradually begins to weaken and eventually turns into a desire “to use the power for their own benefit,” to use public office for private gain, and to give in to corruption. There are simply too many painful examples showing that policies based on subjective and surreal ideals of political leaders can sacrifice the collective benefit of a country and the future of a country and its people.

Political meritocracy makes extremely strict demands on the virtue and character of civil servants, sometimes even bordering on the inhumane. Meritocracy seems to have an unhealthy obsession with “moral cleanliness” and demands that politicians strive for moral perfection and continually uphold their best self. But to insist on such stringent standards when searching for political talent can only be described as looking for a needle in a

haystack. Moreover, the current society no longer resembles that of old but has become far more complex and diverse. Politicians must face a world full of temptations, which, without doubt, further increases the demands on personal cultivation. Because the transmission process of traditional culture represented by Confucian thought was ruptured in China, today's moral cultivation and accomplishment no longer lives up to the standards of antiquity. At this point, without a doubt we have an urgent need for systematic limits on power. Given the present circumstances, where is the moral basis and scientific rationality for advocating political meritocracy that is based merely on moral self-cultivation?

Currently, most people believe that the environment in society is “unclean and improper” and that moral standards have been severely lowered, to the point that they can no longer compare to the standards before China's economic reform period. On the surface, this is, as many have pointed out before, the necessary result of a market economy not yet fully developed and perfected, in which the limits on power are unclear, in which collusion between public officials and businessmen is rampant, and pay-to-play deals are ubiquitous. The most important cause, however, is modern-day political meritocracy and its top-down system for selecting talent that sows the seeds for corruption. If an official sees the opportunity to change the trajectory of his career, he only needs to spend relatively little energy and money to “make a deal” with his superiors and be transferred or promoted accordingly. What limited costs are incurred in the process can easily be passed on to subsidiary departments or companies under his control to pick up the check.

Compared to democracy, on which adequate mechanisms does political meritocracy rely to ensure that “power is placed in a cage of regulations”?<sup>13</sup> Experience shows that we cannot blindly place our hopes in the system to “select and promote political leaders with superior intelligence, social skills, and virtue.”<sup>14</sup> The risk that political leaders selected in this fashion will make erroneous policy decisions or commit serious mistakes is at least 50 percent. The question we should ask is: through which permanent and reliable method can we prevent this 50 percent risk from materializing? Meritocratic practices have failed to provide a satisfying answer in the past. Political leaders periodically abuse the power with which they were entrusted by society and blindly

13 “Ba quanli guanjin zhidu de longzi li 把權力關進制度的籠子裡 [Placing Power in a Cage of Regulations]” is an idea put forward by the Chinese president Xi Jinping during the second plenary session of the 18th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party in early 2013.

14 Bell, *Xianneng zhengzhi*, preface.

pursue political and social policies that are fundamentally flawed, thus seriously delaying social progress. At this point in time, no trace remains of the idea of “virtue.” If we insist that virtue continue to play a role, it mostly has the negative effect of confusing people and concealing the reality of those with “ability” manipulating power. Maybe this political system also attempts to “place power in a cage of regulations,” but in political meritocracy, power has a persona that is much more powerful and beyond the reach of all regulations. In real politics, the “cage” is eventually nothing more than a tiny “birdcage” and a plaything in the hands of the powerful. Moreover, where political power and authority are highly concentrated in the hands of a select few, those individuals have no intrinsic motivation to establish mechanisms that will restrict their own power, such as constitutional courts or independent systems of judicial review. On the contrary, any type of institution or person holding power has a natural tendency to further consolidate that power; this is a rule virtually set in stone. In political meritocracy, with its high esteem for people of virtue and merit, virtue is considered the only proper way of controlling power, rendering any institutional mechanism to restrain and control power superfluous. Given these facts, it seems nonsensical to expect a highly concentrated, meritocratic-style power system with a strong rule-of-man character to limit its own right to exercise power. Who would be willing to restrict his own power? As Jo Littler writes in her work, “meritocracy is a description that is both inaccurate and harmful, and that its use legitimizes inequalities of power and privilege through ‘claims that are demonstrably false.’”<sup>15</sup> We need to slowly break down political authority and work toward a separation of powers, slowly progressing toward democratization. This is the only way to create a suitable political environment for building a legal system and procedures that can limit the highest power and authority.<sup>16</sup>

The fifth question is closely connected to these issues. Political meritocracy as a political system and any type of meritocratic practices have always been closely connected to the idea of privilege. On the one hand, political meritocracy defies rationality and holds politicians to an unrealistic “sage”-like moral standard, as if they were saints or paragons of virtue. On the other hand, political meritocracy also grants politicians a multitude of material

15 Jo Littler, “Meritocracy as Plutocracy: The Marketising of ‘Equality’ under Neoliberalism,” *New Formations*, nos. 80–81 (2013): 55.

16 Jiang Feng 姜峰, “Sifa shencha de zhengzhi baoxian lun 司法審查的政治保險論 [‘Political Insurance’ Theory of Judicial Review],” *Renda falü pinglun 人大法律評論* [*Renmin University Law Review*], no. 2 (2016).

benefits, even operating a “special supplies” system.<sup>17</sup> With detailed regulations deemed unsuitable to be made public, the system grants politicians a range of privileges that far exceed the treatment accorded to ordinary citizens. Is this not what makes political meritocracy so self-contradictory and leaves observers bewildered? Until now, the supporters of political meritocracy have failed to resolve the question of privileges of “public servants” that necessarily result from the lack of oversight in political meritocracy. In this regard, democratic and meritocratic systems are hugely different. Some have argued the more modest the lifestyle of national leaders after leaving office, the lower a country’s level of corruption and vice versa. After his retirement, the former Japanese prime minister Tomiichi Murayama 村山富市 was given no guards, secretary, or servants and lived on a pension of several hundred thousand yen as a former member of the Japanese Diet. He did not receive any family allowance or money for books or transportation. In case of illness, he was covered by an ordinary health insurance policy for Japanese citizens and had to pay one-third of the expenses himself.<sup>18</sup> His example should suffice to make the point.

The sixth and final question is: How do you realize the integration of political meritocracy and democracy? Following the reasoning of those who design its style of governance, we should add democratic features to the basic framework of political meritocracy. Given political meritocracy’s Confucian tradition and the continuous improvement and refinement of its talent selection process in contemporary China, “it can be developed into a superior democratic system with Chinese characteristics.”<sup>19</sup> But one question remains: the main characteristics of Confucian political meritocracy are talent selection and examination systems, based on a top-down selection process. How do you reconcile this with the defining features of socialist democracy: a bottom-up election system and the people as masters of their own affairs? Even if you forcibly combine the two, how can you guarantee that the systems are sufficiently compatible?

In clear contrast to political meritocracy, the way in which democratic systems are designed guarantees a broad selection of talent without “burying” men of real talent and virtue. Through the separation of politics and law, and the corresponding mechanisms of checks and balances, democracies clarify, to the maximum degree possible, the limits to the exercise of power. This

17 In the Chinese context, *tegong* 特供 [special supplies] refers to a long-existing supply system of organic and safe foodstuffs for the political elite.

18 Xu Jingbo 徐静波, *Riben ren de huofa* 日本人的活法 [*The Japanese Way of Life*] (Beijing: Huawen chubanshe, 2017), 5.

19 Wang, “Rujia xianneng zhengzhi sixiang.”



prevents policy makers from ignoring the basic interests of the majority, willfully deciding on policy matters according to their own desires.

As can be seen, political meritocracy, is essentially nothing but a modified version of the rule of man or, to put it differently, the rule of man “2.0”—a far cry from modern democracy.

### 3

General Secretary Xi Jinping 習近平 first mentioned the idea of “political ecology” [*zhengzhi shengtai* 政治生態] at the sixteenth collective study session of the Politburo on June 30, 2014.<sup>20</sup> He spoke about strengthening party building and the need to create a positive political environment, that is, a clean political ecology. He continued to stress the importance of purifying the political environment on several different occasions, hoping to create “ranks of efficient and moral party members and public officials, convenient and effective control mechanisms, and a clean and nurturing political ecology that gives no room for unhealthy trends and evil practices.”<sup>21</sup> From this, we can infer the epochal significance of a clean political ecology for political system building. In times that value and promote traditional culture, the voices in support of political meritocracy contradict the express goal of establishing a clean political ecology. An important prerequisite for building a clean political ecology is therefore to demystify the idea of political meritocracy.

From the perspective of the study of political ecology, a modern political system with a clean political ecology means a political system that can protect the freedom and legitimate rights of its citizens, safeguard public interests, curb abuse of power, and, at the same time, provide public efficiency. To successfully cultivate this type of modern political system, we must ensure the necessary limits on political power and contain it within the boundaries set by social justice and citizens’ rights. If we use these expectations to think about political meritocracy, it becomes obvious that political meritocracy touches

20 “Guanyu ‘zhengzhi shengtai’ Xi Jinping dou shuole shenme 關於‘政治生態’習近平都說了什麼 [What Did Xi Jinping Say about ‘Political Ecology’],” Xinhua Wang 新華網 [Xinhua Net], November 3, 2015, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-03/11/c\\_1114601310.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-03/11/c_1114601310.htm).

21 “Xi Jinping zhuchi zhaokai shan’ganning geming laoqu tuopin zhifu zuotanhui ceji 習近平主持召開陝甘寧革命老區脫貧致富座談會側記 [Sidelights on Xi Jinping Moderating the Opening of the Symposium on Poverty Alleviation for the Shaan-Ganning Old Revolutionary Region],” Xinhua Wang, February 16, 2015, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-02/16/c\\_1114394435.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-02/16/c_1114394435.htm).

upon a range of issues, such as protecting the freedom and legitimate rights of citizens, preserving public interests, preventing any form of abuse of power or infringements of the basic interests of society. Overall, the record of meritocratic practices in the past has not been ideal.

Irrespective of whether we look at the functionality of the system design or historical examples of meritocratic practices, the natural evolution of society and humanity will eventually result in democracy. Democracy clearly satisfies the requirements of a clean political ecology and conforms more fully to the history and future trends of human development. Democracy, without a doubt, represents the future development of human political culture.

Traditional political meritocracy is based on the rationality of the individual, which is naturally limited. Based on personal preferences and drawing on their positions of authority, political decision makers manage the affairs of the people in a top-down manner. Modern democracy, by contrast, aggregates the rationality of all individuals in society. In a democratic system, the common people draft the “rules of the game” and entrust representatives to handle the affairs of the community in adherence with all relevant laws and regulations. In political meritocracy, power is granted by the highest leaders, while democratic power comes from the people. With political meritocracy, power operates in only one direction from the top down, whereas democratic systems allow for vertical interaction of power in both directions. Democracy is thus more scientific and humane and provides a more sustainable political ecology because of various corrective mechanisms built into the system. This is why modern societies worship, trust, and pursue democracy.

From a metaphysical perspective, people ordinarily think of democracy as a form of political system with elections as the defining feature. Without elections, there is no democracy. Democracy, however, is also based on a number of additional factors. Democracy also means freedom, justice, a system of accountability, checks and balances, a state of equilibrium, and all processes and procedures necessary to ensure these values. Political meritocracy, however, lacks all of these. From the perspective of political ecology, democracy remains the political form best suited to the demands of social ecology.

This rings true because a political system founded on democratic ideas and regulations is an open system. Its openness is displayed in two ways: the system is open to both the outside and the inside. Open to the outside means that the emergence and behavior of political leaders are the result of interaction between the political system and the society in which it operates. The system provides for certain modes of interaction, such as voting, hearings, responses to inquiries, supervision, and other democratic features, all of which are dependent on the political system’s openness to society. At the same time,

and through a continuous process of opening up, the political system accepts supervision and control by society and manages to control and balance the flow of goods, power, and information between the system and the environment. Being open to the inside means that a democratic system encourages mutual supervision and control between all its subsystems and important institutions. Democratic systems are built for and defined by internal conflict, debate, and compromise. Its inefficient, controversial, and tedious policy-making process seems completely incompatible with the rapid rhythm of modern life. However, only such a prudent policy-making process, marked by a multitude of choices and intense debate, can prevent seriously flawed policy decisions and make a society develop more efficiently. In comparison, a system of centralized state power, symbolized by political meritocracy, appears to be highly efficient at first sight. The policy-making process, however, entails the risk of major policy errors that have the potential to delay the development of society. Democratic systems that are based on the principle of openness to the inside fare immeasurably better in this regard.

Looking back on China's long history of political development, what we lack least is political meritocracy. In essence, political meritocracy is a form of the rule of man that takes individual members of the elite as its political leitmotif. A notable characteristic of political meritocracy is the leading figures' extreme veneration for individual willpower and agency and for individual power divorced from actual conditions and any type of restrictions. This implies that political meritocracy opposes any form of supervision or limitation, the separation of powers, and eventually also democracy and the right of citizens to equal political participation. Some of the advocates for political meritocracy have proposed merging meritocratic and democratic practices and "continuously improving and perfecting the meritocratic selection process, by employing effective measures to avoid any drawbacks or pernicious habits of China's traditional talent selection mechanisms. If we learn from the strong points of the talent selection and promotion systems in today's world and gain concrete experience through actual practice, we can gradually create a superior democratic system with Chinese characteristics."<sup>22</sup> Eventually, however, this must remain wishful thinking.

Political meritocracy relies on the personal ability and moral integrity of its "righteous rulers and virtuous ministers," while lacking an effective system to control their power. History has repeatedly shown that no matter how the concrete shape varies, political meritocracy will eventually develop into a form of the rule of man, centralized state power, erroneous policy making,

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<sup>22</sup> Wang, "Rujia xianneng zhengzhi sixiang," 31.

and an unenlightened population. In times when people were still “subjects” of feudal rulers and lacked a clear awareness of their own rights, political meritocracy’s absolute rule persisted. In our modern age, however, people perceive themselves as individuals, and their democratic consciousness has mostly been awakened. Because political meritocracy has no power to balance or resolve the inherent conflicts that necessarily exist between those in power, on the one hand, and the citizens and their institutions, on the other hand, the actual probability that political meritocracy will be implemented has greatly declined. Even supporters of political meritocracy admit to this point:

The success of meritocracy in China is obvious: China’s rulers have presided over the single most impressive poverty alleviation achievement in history, with several hundred million people being lifted out of poverty. Equally obvious, however, some problems in China—corruption, gap between rich and poor, environmental degradation, abuses of power by political officials, overly powerful state-run enterprises that skew the economic system in their favor—seem to have worsened during the same period the political system has become meritocratic.<sup>23</sup>

But even if some advocates of political meritocracy have recognized the power of democracy in solving these problems, they stubbornly continue to express their support:

Part of the problem is that China lacks democracy at various levels of government that could help to check abuses of power and provide more opportunities for political expression by marginalized groups. But part of the problem is also that political meritocracy has been insufficiently developed in China. The system has become meritocratic over the last three decades or so, but it can and should become more meritocratic in the future.<sup>24</sup>

The most fatal weakness of political meritocracy is that it fails to resolve two fundamental problems related to the legitimacy of political power: the source and limitation of power. Objectively speaking, implementing political meritocracy will not yield satisfactory results. Modern political theory and practice have always paid close attention to issues such as the source and limitation of power, proof of legitimacy of a political system, and its degree of ecologization.

23 Bell, “Cong yazhou jiazhi guan dao xianneng zhengzhi,” 10.

24 Ibid.

Modern political theory and practice have repeatedly shown that only democracy, and political and legal systems based on democratic ideals, can provide a wholesale and systematic solution to the two fundamental problems directly related to the issue of legitimacy: where does power originate, and how do we control it? Only democracy can be an inexhaustible source of trust in a political system. "Power needs legitimacy. Only power that has won approval is truly sustainable and effective. This type of legitimacy can only derive from democracy."<sup>25</sup>

Nothing can be truly perfect, and any differences in quality must be relative; this also applies to political systems. Democratic systems equally have flaws, such as the tyranny of the majority, which democracy needs to control. From antiquity until today, the question of the most suitable political system has frequently been posed in the political life of various societies. Why do most societies eventually move toward a democratic system of government? One important reason is that political life in any society is filled with differences, conflict, and contradictions, compelling people to search for a more systematic way to resolve them. Several thousand years of political practice have shown, time and again, that democracy offers the best mechanisms for resolving discrepancies, conflicts, and problems of any kind. Only a democratic system can successfully maximize the common interests of all citizens and turn the protection of the majority's interests from an empty promise into a reliable political principle. To go one step further, the essential meaning of democracy is that it creates a win-win situation for both the majority and the minority in society. Democracy will not sacrifice the legitimate interests of the minority in defiance to the will of the majority. Otherwise, democracy would, without a doubt, be nothing but an autocracy of the majority.

The crux of the matter is, how do we guarantee that democracy does not move in an unwanted direction? Democracy is a political system that has been shaped under strenuous efforts and through countless practice. This is especially true for modern democracies, which represents an even greater achievement. When democratic systems were designed, those responsible for drafting its rules already thought about mechanisms to prevent corruption. That is to say, democratic systems already contain elements of self-restriction and self-supervision. In this sense, the rules restricting a democratic system

25 Zhang Moning 張墨寧, "Yi dangnei minzhu gaibian zhengzhi shengtai-zhuanfang zhongyang dangxiao dangjian jiaoyanbu zhuren Wang Changjiang jiaoshou 以黨內民主改變政治生態——專訪中央黨校黨建教研部主任王長江教授 [Using Inner-Party Democracy to Change Political Ecology: An Interview with Professor Wang Changjiang, Director of the Party Building Teaching and Research Department at the Central Party School]," *Nanfeng chuang* 南風窗 [South Reviews], no. 21 (2014).

are inherent. This is the essence of democracy. But a good democratic system does not automatically produce good democratic results. A democratic system may operate effortlessly in one country and with one people but produce catastrophic results in another. Not every system works the same way in all environments. For a democratic system to produce satisfactory results, it is important to lay a solid foundation. In addition, the results also hinge on the degree to which the people actually make use of the control mechanisms available to them. To turn democracy's inherent control mechanisms into a requirement for political ecology fully accords with the political values expressed by the theory of political ecology. At present, a democratic system has two options for realizing supervision and control: first, through the separation of powers within the system, realizing mutual control between the numerous systems and key elements within it; second, through opening up and broad political participation that establishes communication channels and feedback mechanisms between the political system and society, thereby realizing a form of outside control. We need to establish an ecological relation between the numerous systems and key elements within a political system, while, at the same time, building communication channels and control mechanisms connecting the political system to its environment. In this way, we can successfully contain any democratic tendencies to overstep the limits of power and turn democracy into an "ecologized" political mechanism. We can now conclude that any democratic system that conforms to the demands of ecology is a democratic system with restrictions and limitations.<sup>26</sup>

In short, political meritocracy has a vertical responsibility system that operates upward one level of hierarchy at a time, while democracy has a vertical responsibility system that operates downward in the same manner. China's current and future use of political meritocracy will rely more on democratic ideas than on political meritocracy. Compared to political meritocracy, the current trends of democracy and socialization of power develop in roughly the same direction. In the words of Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, entrusting the people with the highest power in society is the safest option. Assuming that the people lack sufficient knowledge to control this power prudently, we should give them the necessary knowledge, instead of wresting power from their hands.<sup>27</sup> We should bear in mind that

26 Liu Jingxi 劉京希, *Zhengzhi shengtai lun: zhengzhi fazhan de shengtaixue kaocha* 政治生態論: 政治發展的生態學考察 [*Political Ecology Theory: Observations on the Ecology of Political Development*] (Jinan: Shandong daxue chubanshe, 2007).

27 Thomas Jefferson, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (Washington, DC: Lipscomb and Bergh, 1903-1904), 15: 278.

the basic political development goal of socialism is socialist democracy and not political meritocracy. China is currently attempting to build a socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics, which constitutes one of the most important core values of socialism. Only if socialist democracy is further developed and perfected will we be able to broaden our talent selection process and to systematically limit political power, thereby preventing corruption and safeguarding civil rights. Only a developed socialist democracy will allow us to build and maintain a clean political ecology and environment. Political meritocracy, however, is clearly at odds with these goals and requirements.

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# The Future of Meritocracy: A Discussion of Daniel Bell's *The China Model*

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## Abstract

Compared to Wang Shaoguang's approach to re-interpret the old concept "democracy" to overcome the Schumpeterian model of political legitimation, Daniel Bell's *Political Meritocracy* takes a more challenging path, attempting to build a new discourse of legitimacy centering on the concept "meritocracy" and incorporating elements of ancient China's traditions, the socialist revolutions in the twentieth century, and the system of competitive elections common in the Western world today. This inspiring work is full of incisive arguments, but could be improved by further considering the tension between the Confucian tradition and the revolutionary tradition in the twentieth century.

## Keywords

Meritocracy – democracy – *The China Model* – Daniel Bell

The end of the cold war was followed by a failure of political imagination. In 1989, Francis Fukuyama's famous essay "The End of History?" although criticized by many, presented a belief (or at least a wish) commonly held in the West: the idea that any political system other than Western liberal democracy is doomed to failure.

This belief is seriously short of historical sense. In the 1950s and 1960s, just as socialism was becoming increasingly influential, the United States—in the midst of the quagmire of the Vietnam War and domestic racial conflict—was

hardly qualified to speak in defense of electoral democracy. A generation of American intellectuals sought to understand what had gone wrong. But in the wake of the cold war and the resulting unipolar world, the West, and the US in particular, came to monopolize the definition of democracy. Western political scientists deemphasized the principle of economic and social equality, which had been a priority of socialist countries. In its place, they emphasized elections and competition between elite interest groups seeking to influence the selection of political representatives as the primary features of democracy. This is usually called the Schumpeterian definition of democracy. It followed that even a society with a rigid caste system could claim to be a democracy as long as it met these criteria. Societies that did not were seen as authoritarian even if their political systems were effective and responsive to the needs of the people—perhaps as well-ordered authoritarian countries, at best.

In the post-Cold war unipolar international system, the Schumpeterian definition of democracy seems to have become a handy conceptual weapon to negate the legitimacy of China's political system and practices. No matter how much consensus building and consultation are involved in China's political system, and no matter how many people have been pulled out of poverty or how far its economy has advanced, it will always be viewed poorly on the basis of this standard. In China, many suggestions have been made on how to remedy the poverty of discourse in political legitimation. Among them is Wang Shaoguang's attempt to place the concept of democracy in a historical context, arguing that Schumpeterian democracy by no means represents the essence of democracy. True democracy, he contends, must emphasize political output and responsiveness to popular demands.<sup>1</sup> If more emphasis were placed on substance, rather than procedure, many aspects of China's system would be viewed in a much more positive light, such as the practice of reaching political consensus through consultation.<sup>2</sup> Wang's method draws on concepts and vocabulary popular in Western and US academia, but he strives to use them in a more nuanced and complicated way.

Daniel Bell's *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (originally published in English by Princeton University Press and later translated into Chinese)<sup>3</sup> represents a second approach to remedy the poverty of discourse in political legitimation. Instead of offering a different

1 Wang Shaoguang 王紹光, *Minzhu si jiang* 民主四講 [Four Works on Democracy] (Beijing: Joint, 2008).

2 Wang Shaoguang and Fan Peng 樊鵬, *Zhongguoshi gongshixing juece* 中國式共識型決策 [Chinese-style Consensus Model Policies] (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2013).

3 Daniel Bell [Bei Danning 貝淡寧], *Xianneng zhengzhi: Weishenme shangxianzhi bi xuanju minzhuzhi geng shihe Zhongguo* 賢能政治: 為什麼尚賢制比選舉民主制更適合中國

interpretation of the existing vocabulary, he proposes a new vocabulary, drawing on the discourse surrounding the concept of legitimacy, to use as a standard for evaluating political systems and their governance. In the Western context, this second method is more challenging than the first. It is not difficult for Wang Shaoguang to draw upon a wealth of native resources in Western discourse, including the discourse of socialist experiments beginning in the nineteenth century. Bell's method, by contrast, has fewer native Western discursive resources available to draw upon. For example, the word "meritocracy" is rarely used in English to describe an overall political system, except perhaps in an ironic sense. Because of this, Bell is forced to rely more on a combination of Chinese historical discursive traditions and contemporary China's political practices, which has led his work to be accepted more widely in the Chinese context. With a far longer history of meritocracy in China, the Chinese word for "meritocracy" [*shangxian zhi* 尚賢制, or *Xianneng zhi*, 賢能制] has richer connotations than the English word. According to Confucian thought, even in the world of "great harmony" [*datong* 大同], political power would still be exercised by sages. In addition, China has over one thousand years of experience with the imperial examination system, so the idea that society should select those who are both virtuous and capable for public service has embedded itself in the cultural consciousness and even set the stage for modern China's various examination systems. For the Chinese public influenced by the Confucian legacy, the selection of the virtuous and capable could undoubtedly play the role of "higher law" to assess the legitimacy of the Chinese political system.

However, the political ethos of contemporary China is the product of multiple historical influences. Besides the Confucian meritocratic legacy, the political standards established after the revolutions of the twentieth century, as well as the now-popular concept of Schumpeterian democracy, all made their mark on the public consciousness. Bell recognizes these historical complexities. As a Canadian scholar who has put down roots in China, he values promoting dialogue between Chinese and Western theories, as well as reconciling China's historical tradition with modern-day practice. He also borrows and synthesizes theories of "the China model" or "the China path" from modern-day Chinese scholars, forming a rich theoretical system with a broad vision and ultimately attracting a broad readership from both East and West.

In *Political Meritocracy*, Bell attempts to combine these three different heritages, advancing multifaceted criteria for evaluating political systems: he calls

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[*The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*], trans. Wu Wanwei (Beijing: CITIC Publishing Group, 2016).

for the top level of political leadership to be formed through a meritocratic process but believes that lower-level bureaucrats can be selected through a more democratic process. He argues that a country should curb the power of private capital, reduce economic inequality, build a broad pool of talent across all strata of society, and even enact minority quotas in politics and education. Many of these suggestions embody his recognition of the revolutionary legacy of the twentieth century. But, in light of China's experience in the twentieth century, it is also worth asking what other potential policies and practices have been excluded from his political package. Although the legacy of Confucian meritocracy and twentieth-century China's socialist revolution seem to have similar ways of choosing political leaders, the two systems differ sharply in ethos. In this article, I will first review the central arguments in *Political Meritocracy*. Then, I will proceed to reveal similarities and tensions between the two legacies and offer a historical perspective through which to consider *Political Meritocracy*.

## 1 Norms and Standards of Political Meritocracy

In practice, the Chinese word for “meritocracy” has much richer connotations than its English counterpart. Although the word “merit” in English has the broad connotation of “a praiseworthy quality”,<sup>4</sup> “meritocracy” in everyday context is oriented toward achievement with a functional understanding of talent or ability. The English word emphasizes promoting individuals based on their talents and abilities, rather than means or family origin. Therefore upon scrutiny, the commonly understood English meaning of “meritocracy” centers on achievements and talents. In comparison, the Chinese word consists of the characters for “ability” [*neng* 能] and “virtue” [*xian* 賢]. Ability is usually defined in terms of a functional relationship, but virtue can transcend practicality and efficiency, even coming to represent a political community or a civilization's idealization of the model human.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps due to the meager connotations of the English word for “meritocracy”, although scholars often use it in the context of business or public management, the word is rarely used as a key term to refer to an overall political system. The limited usage is often expressed in a satirical sense. In 1957

4 *Webster's Dictionary*, 9th ed. (Beijing: World Books, 1988), 743.

5 Of course, the virtuous person is not the highest ideal of Confucianism. The sage supersedes the virtuous person, but, for most people, becoming a virtuous person is a more attainable goal.

the English sociologist and socialist activist Michael Young published his novel *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, which offered a biting parody of the idea of meritocracy.<sup>6</sup> In Bell's opinion, the book identifies three problems with meritocracy. The first is the potential for leaders chosen through a meritocratic system to be corrupt or misuse their power. The second is the possibility that a meritocratic system will lead to an ossification of the political system and decrease social mobility. The third is the problem of legitimacy. Because Young's book was so influential, the idea of meritocracy took on a negative connotation for several generations of Western political scientists.<sup>7</sup> In order to defend meritocracy, Bell has to respond to Young's theories.

First, Bell sets out to define his vision of meritocracy:

The basic idea of political meritocracy is that everybody should have an equal opportunity to be educated and to contribute to politics, but not everybody will emerge from this process with an equal capacity to make morally informed political judgments. Hence, the task of politics is to identify those with above-average ability and to make them serve the political community. If the leaders perform well, the people will basically go along.<sup>8</sup>

This definition appears to be a watered-down version of the idea that "politics is education," which holds that politics is not only about securing the private interests of the people but also about increasing the quality of participants in the system through education. But Bell clearly knows that the classical belief in "the great chain of being" has been very thin in the contemporary world. In a society where multiple comprehensive doctrines compete with each other, groups with different belief systems may have diverse understandings of virtue and the model human. Consensus is more obtainable on the functional need in governance.

To further the goal of establishing meritocracy as a legitimate political system, Bell has no choice but to challenge the doctrine that electoral democracy is the only legitimate model. He acknowledges that the ability to vote can be satisfying, to the extent that, once obtained, it is difficult to get people

6 Michael Dunlop Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction, 1958).

7 What were political scientists concerned about at the time? Bell writes: "Starting from the 1960s, the key issue for theorists became the question of how to promote a society of equals." Bell, *Xianneng zhengzhi*, 96. To connect this with the historical context, around this time the victory of the socialist movement over capitalism led to tensions in the academic world. This also coincided with the rise of the civil rights movement in the US.

8 Bell, *Xianneng zhengzhi*, 21.

to relinquish it. But does electoral democracy result in good governance? To answer this question, Bell has to respond to Winston Churchill's maxim "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others." In Bell's opinion, electoral democracy can easily have a number of negative results: the tyranny of the majority, the influence of money on elections, so-called negative voting, conflicting identity politics, and the divisive social effects caused by all these phenomena. In these respects, China's and Singapore's governance can offer some counterexamples. Of course, these counterexamples cannot definitively prove that meritocracy is superior to democracy, but Bell's goals are more modest than that. He only seeks to persuade readers of the many problems associated with electoral democracy—problems that, in an ethnically and religiously diverse large country such as China, could well prove fatal. As long as reader could accept this premise, he could move on to delving into the standards by which political leaders are evaluated.

Chapter 2 of *Political Meritocracy* is dedicated to a discussion of how to select good leaders in a political meritocracy. In this chapter, Bell cites a number of studies of leadership and emphasizes that leadership takes place under different social and political circumstances. He considers Max Weber's discussion of charismatic statesmen in *Politics as a Vocation*, in which Weber writes that statesmen must have "passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion."<sup>9</sup> But Bell emphasizes the importance of considering context when evaluating the standards of a meritocratic system. In a modern and peaceful society under collective leadership such as China, the qualities of a good leader are perhaps closer to the qualities of a civil servant. Bell proposes three requirements for a good leader: intellectual ability, social skills, and virtue. He then outlines a system to select for these qualities.

Perhaps because the book primarily aimed at Western readers who are unfamiliar with China's history and political system, Bell's discussion of China is limited to which system could well serve the selection of a particular quality. But, in practice, how does China's political system select for these qualities? It is a very broad question, but I believe several convenient starting points exist for answering this question. China has a more complicated method of evaluation than the three basic qualities mentioned above, particularly in terms of the posthumous titles of political leaders. The ancient text "Table of Posthumous Titles" [*Shi fa biao* 諡法表] mentions a series of positive and negative qualities of emperors and political elites. There is a similar, albeit less complete, system

9 Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 115.

of posthumous titles in contemporary China for political leaders. An important function of China's official dynastic histories, often presented in a series of biographies, was establishing standards of virtue for officials and scholars seeking political careers. In light of these resources, intellectual ability, social skills, and virtue can be used as starting points for introducing the reader to the study of the character of politicians, but after this line of inquiry has begun, these qualities are unable to move the study along, and we have to enter the more detailed and complicated "politics of exemplar."

On a theoretical level, I have reservations on Bell's response to Weber's theory of the qualities of good political leaders. Bell believes that Weber's so-called charismatic statesmen are well suited to times of war or domestic instability but are not necessarily suited to a modern nation-state in times of peace, which would likely do better with a bureaucratic politician. In making this argument, Bell draws a distinction between the requirements of times of war and times of peace. But this dichotomy may be vulnerable. We live in a world where the boundary between war and peace has been blurred. Wars are often invisible, and peace is rife with tensions and states of emergencies. A statesman/stateswoman unable to deal with a state of exception or emergencies cannot maintain peace and order effectively. Moreover, whether in peacetime or in wartime, governing cannot be viewed as a purely administrative job. Economic and social change are constantly breaking the balance of power among various social groups, leading to a variety of competing perspectives on the social order and social identity. Even though the mission of statesmen/stateswomen is to maintain the existing social order, they must closely monitor these changes. In addition, statesmen/stateswomen need to have political qualities (a word commonly used by the Chinese Communist Party) that are different from those of bureaucrats. Although those qualities do not necessarily result in charisma, they are indispensable in the making of a "real statesmen/stateswomen". This is why it is necessary to draw a distinction between meritocratic politics and meritocratic administration.

After addressing the standards for virtue, Bell responds to Young's three criticisms of meritocracy. On the charge that meritocracy leads to corruption, Bell contends that even elections are ineffective in stamping out corruption and that, in a meritocratic system corruption will eventually present a challenge to the legitimacy of the regime, motivating it to fight corruption to ensure its survival. On the charge that a meritocratic system will eventually lead to ossification of the political system, Bell argues that the proper meritocratic ideal is that political leaders be chosen from a wide-ranging pool of talent. He proposes a quota system for social vulnerable groups, but also believes that the

permanent cure lies in the equalization of social wealth. Meanwhile, the criteria to assess talents should maintain a certain level of plurality and flexibility. This may make it necessary to draw talents from various social groups.

On the question of legitimacy raised by Young, Bell synthesizes several examples from China to respond to the criticism. He notes that “the degree of legitimacy of the Chinese political system is very high”<sup>10</sup> and argues that this legitimacy comes from three sources: nationalism, political performance, and meritocracy. Of course, Bell’s theory emphasizes the limitations of the first two sources of legitimacy: civil society groups can put forward their own understandings of the national interest and can call for increasingly higher standards in areas such as poverty reduction, economic development, and responses to crisis. Because of this, Bell emphasizes the importance of the third source of legitimacy. He mentions the findings of a study by Shi Tianjian et al.<sup>11</sup> on political culture, concluding that the Chinese people approve of the leadership of high-level politicians.

In chapter 4, Bell discusses three different models of democratic meritocracy: the electoral model, the horizontal model, and the vertical model. John Stuart Mill’s plural voting scheme is representative of the electoral model. The defining characteristic of this model is that voting rights are allocated on the basis of so-called political ability. Bell points out that this model is impracticable at the moment, because attempting to select “rational voters” from the general populace would be “rough and unreliable.”<sup>12</sup>

The second model is the horizontal model, which would have elected bodies at the central government level in parallel with a meritocratic system vested with more power. Bell also discusses Sun Yat-sen’s proposed examination branch, Friedrich Hayek’s second chamber system, and Jiang Qing’s tricameral legislature. However, Bell believes that because nondemocratic meritocratic institutions have more power than democratically elected institutions, the legitimacy of these institutions would be continually questioned.

After dismissing the first two models, only the vertical model remains, of which China is presented as an example. Bell describes the Chinese model as “democracy on the bottom and meritocracy at the top,” with room for experimentation in the middle. He believes that the lower levels of Chinese government contain comparatively more democratic elements. Of course,

10 Bell, *Xianneng zhengzhi*, 121.

11 Tianjian Shi, “Democratic Values Supporting an Authoritarian Regime,” in *How East Asians View Democracy*, eds. Yun-han Chu et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 229–231. See also Tianjian Shi and Jie Lu, “The Shadow of Confucianism,” *Journal of Democracy* 21, no.4 (2010).

12 Bell, *Xianneng zhengzhi*, 140.



here Bell's democracy does not refer strictly to a system of competitive elections. He also views public consultation as a form of democracy, for example. The room for experimentation in the middle of the system is necessary for governing a large country, but it has other functions as well. For example, it can be used to experiment with different standards for meritocratic selection. A meritocratic government by definition cannot have democratically selected leaders at the highest level, but it can be compatible with democracy at the lower levels, non-electoral political consultation and deliberation, transparency, citizen referendums, and other political practices often associated with democracy.

Bell's discussion of China's vertical model emphasizes the question of how to recruit individuals to fill different roles in the government. *Political Meritocracy* spends relatively little time on institutions related to the further cultivation, training, and testing of civil servants and statesmen. In the Chinese system, a graduate of a top university who enters the state bureaucracy has a long process ahead of him or her to reach the top levels of government leadership. He or she should work hard to enter the visual field of organizational department of the party to be listed as a candidate for further cultivation; he or she would be put on different type of posts in order to gain comprehensive political experience and ability; once he reaches the provincial level, he may be lifted from one province to another, from an agricultural province to an industrial province, from hinterland to coastal area, from Han area to ethnic minority area, so as to gain a comprehensive curriculum vitae record and rich experience of leadership; sometimes he or she would be appointed to high risky areas or posts to receive severe test; their performance in the face of major political incidents is also the concern of the organizational department of the party. If they could not pass the test, their political career could be impeded, or even terminated. It is not easy to define these mechanisms, but examining the employment history of various senior cadres could be a good starting point. We hope future revisions of *Political Meritocracy* could add this aspect in order to provide a more complete picture of the vertical system.

Could the vertical system spread to other countries? Bell's view is quite clear: the system only suits larger states, because in smaller ones it is more difficult to promote experimentation at lower levels of the government; it is not suited to electoral democracies and governments with frequent political changes either, because people are often reluctant to give up their existing voting rights, and because it is difficult to sustain a political experiment over the long term in an unstable system. Finally, it would also be problematic to implement such a system in a country without an existing tradition of meritocracy.

At this point, we have established a basic understanding of Bell's evaluation of electoral democracy: a democratic electoral system could be easily

established and remain self-sustaining even in the absence of good governance outcomes, because even if the people are dissatisfied with the current system, they find it difficult to think of other possibilities. In contrast, a meritocratic system must result in good governance, because the basis of its legitimacy rests on the superior quality of the incumbent politicians, and only the outcome of good governance can prove the superior quality of the leaders. It could be further inferred that as long as good governance is indispensable for the legitimation of meritocracy, theorists of meritocracy must pay close attention to various infrastructural capacities and institutions of the state, because good governance not only needs good leaders, but also requires the existence of a series of institutional infrastructures as its safeguard. Here Bell's work intersects with that of Wang Shaoguang, whose research focuses on the infrastructural power of the state.

Another aspect of Bell's book that is worth mentioning is his evaluation of the relationship between meritocracy and democracy, as he points out: "Ultimately, the only way is to show without a shadow of a doubt that the people support political meritocracy. In other words, democracy may be necessary to legitimize meritocracy."<sup>13</sup> Bell's concept of "democracy" here is not necessarily referring to electoral democracy but to a system in which consent comes from the bottom up in general. From Bell's point of view, it may be hard for a meritocratic system, in establishing its legitimacy, to hold up virtuous statesmen/stateswomen as models because it may not sit well with those who are shut out of the system. Here, again, meritocracy appears to depend on the discourse of democracy. This is where Bell and Wang again cross paths. However, on this issue, do they agree on everything?

## 2 How a Meritocratic System Obtains the Consent of the People

How does a meritocratic system go about obtaining the consent of the governed? Logically, there should be two steps. The first is agreeing on a set of standards for the system, and the second is ensuring that politicians are motivated to effect good governance in line with the standards they have set out. Public education needs to emphasize virtue and ability, in order to maintain a sense among the people that the career of a statesman/stateswoman requires special talents and training, and perhaps suits only a minority of the people. However, the average person can still participate in public affairs at the grassroots level and even have outstanding achievements recognized by the public

<sup>13</sup> Bell, *Xianneng zhengzhi*, 131.

and the state. Historically, Confucian education was able to achieve the former but fell short of the latter because of its insistence on ordering society in terms of traditional distinctions among scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants. Only with the changes brought by China's revolution in the twentieth century were average people fully integrated into the political life of the state. But do the new traditions brought about in the twentieth century constitute meritocratic traditions?

If we consider the 1950s and 1960s, the mainstream political discourse in China paints the following picture. On the one hand, the discourse emphasized that cadres should act as vanguards, taking on more responsibility in society and serving as models for ordinary people. Such "advanced elements" were to be identified and funneled into higher positions. But the selection process was not based upon competitive election. The honor was awarded most often to so-called frontline workers; nearly all well-known model workers came from this population. Shi Chuanxiang, a manure digger in Beijing, was lauded as a national model worker and was recognized by Chairman Liu Shaoqi, who shook his hand and said: "As a manure digger you are a servant of the people, and as chairman of the state I also am a servant of the people, the difference is only in the revolutionary division of labor." In analyzing the legitimacy of meritocracy, Bell notes that discrepancies in political power often go hand in hand with efforts to promote a sense of political equality, perhaps in order to encourage the common people to aspire to types of work other than politics. There are perhaps no better models of this than the interaction between Liu and Shi.

The difference between that era and modern China is that the earlier period had no distinction between insiders and outsiders. Those who were selected as model workers often were able to use the opportunity to enter the political arena, which helped to forge the common belief that ordinary jobs can offer valuable contributions to society and even the possibility of being conferred with a leadership position. This was exemplified by the adage *you hong you zhuan* 又紅又專, literally, "both red and specialized," used to refer to talents who were politically conscious as well as professionally competent.

But does this constitute meritocracy from Bell's perspective? The answer is perhaps negative. When Bell discusses meritocracy, it is in connection with the period after the reform and opening up, and he focuses mainly on graduates of top universities competing for leadership positions. From this, we can draw a conclusion as to his thoughts on historical events up to that point. He does not associate *you hong you zhuan* with virtue. In order to understand his position, it may be necessary to return to the connotations of the English word for meritocracy. Even though "merit" can be understood in a quite broad sense,

“meritocracy” demands performance requirements. An engineer who develops a more advanced machine for digging manure would be considered to have contributed more than Shi Chuanxiang, so he or she would fulfill the selection requirements of a meritocracy. As for Shi, he was politically conscious along the lines of the revolutionary ideals of the time, which means he was considered virtuous. However, his contributions were limited in scope. From the Party’s point of view, he represented the spirit of “working hard and diligently,” so by definition he was virtuous. Therefore, to borrow a concept of Susan Shirk’s,<sup>14</sup> honoring Shi Chuanxiang was representative of the spirit of “virtuocracy”—that is, rewarding and promoting the virtuous, but not of meritocracy in the Western sense.

Thus it makes sense here to acknowledge the tension between the Chinese words for “virtue” and “ability”, which are combined with the characters representing politics to make up the word for “merit.” Contemporary China’s political thought has been influenced by two major traditions, the native Confucian traditions and the newer traditions that arose out of twentieth-century socialism. Both emphasize *xianneng* 賢能—which can be translated as either “sage” or “talent,” and neither accepted competitive elections as the major means of selecting a country’s top leadership. Twentieth-century socialism brought with it a great promise of social equality, meanwhile China had to industrialize as soon as possible so as to survive in a dangerous international environment. This led to tensions between the two goals as economic growth resulted in greater income inequality. *Youhong youzhuan* emerged in response to these tensions, calling for a semblance of balance between the two competing forces. But from the point of view of traditional Confucianism, such a balance has already ignored the importance of professional output and the role of educated intellectuals.

After China shifted to a policy of prioritizing economic development, the focus on performance increased and model workers were increasingly selected from among management and professional and technical personnel rather than frontline workers. This tendency has been so excessive that it finally incurs doubts whether it has deviated from the original intention of the institution. In response, in recent years there was an emphasis on selecting more model workers from among frontline workers. But after all, Chinese society is increasingly educated and literate and more in line with Western meritocratic standards. Among party and government officials, we can find the largest group of doctorates in China.

14 James L. Watson, eds., *Class and Social Stratification in Post-Revolution China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 56-83.

Of course, this does not mean that the traditions of the twentieth century have already become obsolete. The basic framework of China's political system has been stable since 1949. What is open to consideration—returning to Bell's assertion that “democracy may be necessary to legitimize meritocracy”—is whether the new tradition of the twentieth century can enhance the legitimacy of the existing meritocratic system.

The greatest resource for maintaining legitimacy perhaps is still the “mass line,” which stems from the revolutionary era. The mass line, the Party term for a policy aimed at cultivating contacts with the common people, emphasized the idea of coming from the masses and going among the masses. It represents opposition to the idea that a minority of elites should be able to pursue top-down policies. Instead, it argues that the discovery and understanding of truth is a process that is constantly being revised through collective practice and that close contact with the masses is necessary for reaching a more realistic understanding of the country's situation, which in turn is critical for formulating the correct Party line and policies. Therefore, the mass line can be viewed not only as a political belief but also as a system of organization. It calls on the Party to emphasize cadres' rapport with the masses when making employment decisions, as well as mass-line work and research in the training process.

To put the concept of the mass line into practice, the primary step is to “find the masses.” This not only requires the cadres to go out into the masses but also necessitates a certain level of organization of a grassroots society, in order to create stable connections between the grassroots, policymakers, and the executive branch of government. With these connections, policymakers can hear the voice of ordinary people and improve the responsiveness of their policies. Although the mass line does not conform to the definition of democracy in the Schumpeterian sense, it fits Wang Shaoguang's substantial definition of democracy. When cadres go out into the masses, in Wang's view, this is one type of “adverse participation” in democracy.<sup>15</sup>

In *Political Meritocracy*, Bell uses China and Singapore as examples of meritocracies. However, the book does not discuss the similarity in the practice of the mass lines of the two countries. Singapore's People's Action Party (PAP) drew on the Chinese Communist Party's experience with the mass line, which allowed it to explain government policies from the top down, provided an avenue for citizens' concerns to be transmitted from the bottom up, and facilitated grassroots organization and mobilization. The PAP established networks at the ground level in order to connect the ruling party with the government

15 Wang Shaoguang, *Zhongguo zhengdao* 中國•政道 [*China and the Way of Governance*] (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2014), 10-14.

and the masses, forming countless connections that allowed for a large percentage of society's elite to be absorbed into this system and to take on some of its public functions. This allowed Singapore's policies to be relatively responsive to the needs of the people while also reducing the pressure to introduce a system of competitive elections. Wang Shaoguang and Ou Shujun describe this history in their most recent book, *Small City-State, Good Governance: State-building in Singapore*.<sup>16</sup>

The idea of the mass line originated in China, but it flourished in Singapore, where its development in turn could have an important influence on China. What does this mean for the narrative of meritocracy? In my opinion, it shows that the Confucian tradition is not sufficient to explain contemporary China's meritocracy. It is also necessary to understand the history of the Leninist party model and the ways in which it was adapted to China. Compared to the Russian Revolution, the Chinese revolution lasted much longer and encountered more difficulties, which forced revolutionaries to rely upon the grassroots people in order to survive. Ultimately, the mass line played a more central role in the political system that revolutionaries created. The highly elitist Soviet Union ultimately was unable to remain a cohesive state, while China and Singapore with their closer connections to the people were able to remain stable. If meritocracy ultimately depends on the consent of the people, then it cannot live without the discourse of democracy in a substantial sense. Although the egalitarian spirit may have tension with the hierarchical assumption in the meritocratic discourse, there could be productive intersection. In the twentieth century, the "adverse participation" conducted by the vanguard party through mass line secured popular support for its political leadership, and constitute an alternative to competitive election. The experience merits continued study and may provide a valuable intellectual resource for further inquiries into democracy and meritocracy.

### 3 Conclusion

Although the unipolar system after the Cold war greatly limited our political imagination, all signs indicate that we are now entering a period of global change. As the global economic landscape shifts, Fukuyama, who declared

16 Ou Shujun 歐樹軍 and Wang Shaoguang, *Xiao bang da zhi: xinjiapo de guojia jiben zhidu jianshe* 小邦大治:新加坡的國家基本制度建設 [*Small City-State, Good Governance: State-building in Singapore*] (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2017).

that 1989 was “the end of history,” has recently returned to the topic of political decay, in particular the growing concern about the decline of the US as a world power.<sup>17</sup> President Donald Trump, who tries to preserve the hard power of the U.S., is much more reluctant to invest on regime change in other countries in the world. China’s rise also encourages many developing countries to consider alternatives to the western models. The space of institutional imagination has been enlarged through the years.

Daniel Bell’s *Political Meritocracy* is the result of this historical moment. It argues boldly to a Western audience that electoral democracy is not the only possible endpoint of political development and puts forward meritocracy as a potential alternative. It lays out the criteria for selecting political leaders in a meritocracy, discusses the challenges inherent in the system, and further refines the various models of meritocratic government. It offers proposals that incorporate elements of ancient China’s traditions, the socialist revolutions in the twentieth century, and the system of competitive elections common in the Western world today.

Bell also recognizes that the legitimacy of a meritocratic system in contemporary society ultimately depends on the support of the people and cannot rely on more traditional belief in a universe of hierarchical order. It is on this point that his approach to raise a new political concept could be echoed and supplemented by the aforementioned approach to reinterpret an existing concept—democracy. The latter approach expands our understanding of democracy beyond the narrow definition of a system with competitive elections, and explores different paths to expand political participation and the responsiveness of public policies. The communist revolutions in the twentieth century led to the creation of China’s mass line, which in turn influenced the governing style of Singapore’s PAP. Perhaps future studies of China’s and Singapore’s meritocracies can reconsider the twentieth-century revolutionary legacy that connects the two countries. This legacy and the differing degrees to which it affected the two countries gave rise to differing possibilities for meritocracy and for democracy. History has not yet run its course, and the future remains uncertain; therefore it is crucial to remain open-minded as we move into a new historical era.

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17 Francis Fukuyama, “America in Decay: The Sources of Political Dysfunction,” *Foreign Affairs* 93 (September/October 2014).

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# Pre-Qin Daoist Reflections on the *Xianneng*

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## Abstract

In the pre-Qin era, the *xianneng* 賢能 [those of virtue and talent] were a commonly discussed topic, on which every school of thought had its own views. Daoist discussions on the *xianneng* sometimes reflected strong aversion and rejection, yet at other times gave them abundant praise and approval. Because of uncertainty on the universality of moral principles, on the limitations of one's individual ability, and on the effectiveness of political actions, views in the *Laozi* 老子 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 on the *xianneng* saving society were skeptical in nature, sometimes even taking a mocking tone. Scholars of the Huang-Lao tradition had realized the limitations of individual ability and hoped that the greatest level of political benefit could be attained. Consequently, under the premise of safeguarding monarchical authority, fully displaying the skills and talents of all kinds of sages (imperial teachers and virtuous officials) through the practice of *wuwei* 無為 [inaction], and the highest leaders' respect for virtue became the main direction in the Huang-Lao understanding of the *xianneng*. This tendency has much in common with the Legalist school of thought.

## Keywords

Daoism – Huang-Lao – *Laozi* – *xianneng* – *Zhuangzi*

## 1 Introduction

The term “those of virtue and talent” [*xianneng* 賢能] generally refers to leaders who are both morally strong and highly talented. Without a doubt, following the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period

[770-221 BCE], political meritocracy [*xianneng zhengzhi* 賢能政治]<sup>1</sup> became an important part of China's political culture. As to its substance, political meritocracy was seen as a political concept that could be applied to a monarch just as well as a minister. If applied to a monarch, it often was characterized by striving for the ideal, calling for those who possessed both skills and integrity to occupy the highest political positions. In earlier times, teachings on the abdication of a once-popular monarch referred to this kind of situation and were mostly popular with Confucians and Mohists. However, after the abdication of King Kuai of Yan in 316 BCE these ideals came under real and ruthless attack and were no longer widely popular.

The concept of *xianneng* was used by the monarchy to set requirements for moral character and ministerial competence, prerequisites extremely common and, at the same time, easily carried out. During the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States periods, the social structure underwent major transformations, intense changes occurred in the political system, and competition among states was fierce. Under the principle of not challenging any authority higher than the monarch, the inspection, discovery, promotion, and use of various talented people became a matter of the utmost importance. No household could avoid this, and the schools of thought had some differences over how they interpreted "virtue" and "talent." Relatively speaking, Confucians valued virtue most. The emphasis of early Confucian thought on virtue was often due to the fear that someone from a humble social background might break into aristocratic circles and gain recognition, regardless of whether he had virtue, so even true talent still needed to be "packaged" in virtue.<sup>2</sup> Along with their emphasis on virtue, Confucians also often took painstaking care to emphasize

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- 1 In recent years, because of the widespread popularization of this idea by the Canadian political scientist Daniel Bell, "political meritocracy" is seen as a distinguishing characteristic of the politics of ancient China. Bell's main point is that the key characteristics of the politics of ancient China were "having superior ability and virtue" and "having ability and integrity." Today, political meritocracy suits China better than a democratic electoral system. Wu Wanwei has translated Bell's work *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* 賢能政治：為什麼尚賢制比選舉民主制更適合中國 (Beijing: CITIC Publishing Group, 2016). Although this article also uses the concept of "political meritocracy," it does not discuss its influence on, or its function in, the present-day political system. I also believe that political meritocracy is not an independent political pattern: any political system can end up practicing "political meritocracy." In the pre-Qin era, most political doctrines except for some Daoist thought highlighted the necessity of promoting and assigning high-ranking positions to the "talented and virtuous," in order to promote and put their respective political views into practice.
  - 2 There are many accounts of this in the *Zuo Commentary* [*Zuo zhuan* 左傳] and the *Discourses of the States* [*Guoyu* 國語]. For a discussion of this, see Wang Guoliang 王國良, "Rujia xian-neng zhengzhi sixiang yu zhongguo xianneng tuiju zhidu de fazhan 儒家賢能政治思

the importance of selfless commitment to the public interest without seeking reward. For example, the chapter “Conduct of the Scholar” [*Ru xing* 儒行] in the *Book of Rites* [*Liji* 禮記] says:

The scholar recommends members of his own family [for public service], without shrinking from doing so because of their kinship, and proposes others beyond it without regard to their being at enmity with him; he estimates men’s merits, and takes into consideration all their services, selecting those of virtue and ability, and putting them forward, without expecting any recompense from them; the ruler thus obtains what he wishes, and if benefit results to the state, the scholar does not seek riches or honours for himself—such is he in promoting the employment of the worthy and bringing forward the able.<sup>3</sup>

Even though the idea of “elevating the worthy” [*shang xian* 尚賢] in Mohist thought also attaches importance to “virtue,” the main emphasis was on using true talent to break through limitations imposed by order of succession and appointment by favoritism, so as to allow low-ranking talented and virtuous people to reach important positions, without, however, avoiding the seeking of benefits, and emphasized the importance of corresponding esteem and remuneration. “Elevating the Worthy I” [*Shangxian shang* 尚賢上] says:

The sage kings of ancient times, in the conduct of government, gave precedence to virtue and exalted worthiness so, although someone might be a farmer, or a craftsman, or a merchant, if he had ability then they promoted him, conferring on him high rank, giving him a generous salary, entrusting him with important matters, and providing him with executive power.... Thus, officials were not necessarily assured of permanent nobility, and ordinary people were not necessarily lowly for their whole lives. Those with ability were advanced. Those without ability were demoted.<sup>4</sup>

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想與中國賢能推舉制度的發展 [Confucian Thought on Political Meritocracy and the Development of a Meritocratic Selection System for Office], *Wen shi zhe* 文史哲 [*Journal of Literature, History and Philosophy*], no. 3 (2013).

3 *Liji*—Ruxing. 禮記•儒行. Translation from the Chinese by James Legge, *The Book of Rites (Li Ji): English-Chinese Version* (Washington [DC]: Intercultural Press, 2013), 297.

4 *Mozi*—Shangxian shang. 墨子•尚賢上. Translation from the Chinese by Ian Johnston, “Exalting Worthiness I,” in *The Mozi: A Complete Translation* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2010), 59.

The Legalists main point was that the virtuous should not challenge the centralization of monarchic power. Therefore, Shen Dao wrote: “Establishing a lord and yet still revering the worthies leads to conflict between worthies and lords, and the chaos of this is greater than if there were no lord at all.”<sup>5</sup> If the talented and virtuous fuel dissension and discord, they must be firmly repressed. As the *Han Feizi* 韓非子 says: “He who manages to get clothing and food without working for [magistrates] is called an able man, and he who wins esteem without having achieved any merit in battle is called a worthy man. But the deeds of such able and worthy men actually weaken the army and bring waste to the land.”<sup>6</sup> At the same time, Legalists believed that virtue was neither trustworthy nor reliable, and that a monarch should only make use of people’s tendency to follow profit while avoiding harm, use the method of reward and punishment to make the most of things, and allow the talents of all kinds of sages to fully develop. As the *Han Feizi* says: “Ministers exert their utmost strength to comply with the ruler’s need; the ruler confers ranks and emoluments to comply with the minister’s desires. Therefore, the relationship of ruler and minister is not as intimate as the bond of father and son; rather, it is an outcome of mutual calculations.”<sup>7</sup> This quotation points out that the relationship between a ruler and a minister is, in fact, based on business, trade, and reciprocal scheming. Therefore, in Legalist thought “virtue” and “ability” often both stand for ability, without necessarily being connected to virtue.

How about Daoists, then, who faced the same social reality and were just as keen to come up with a sound strategy to keep the country safe; surely, they could not avoid the topic of the *xianneng*—so how did they approach it? We found out that, with regard to *xianneng*, Daoist thought sometimes expressed strong aversion and denial and yet at other times showed abundant praise and approval. How could this kind of contrast take root in the logic of Daoist ideology? Few scholars have paid attention to this, and it is therefore an issue worth discussing in more depth.

5 Shenzi—Yiwen. 慎子·逸文. This and all translations from the Chinese of quotations from the *Shenzi* are by Eirik Lang Harris, *The Shenzi Fragments: A Philosophical Analysis and Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 124.

6 *Hanfeizi*—Wudu. 韓非子·五蠹. Translation from the Chinese by Burton Watson, *Han Feizi: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 105.

7 *Hanfeizi*—Nanyi. 韓非子·難一. W.K. Liao, *The Complete Works of Han Fei Tzu: A Classic of Chinese Legalism* (London: Probsthain, 1959), 146.

## 2 Distrust in, and Refusal of, *Xianneng* in the Lao-Zhuang Tradition

Considering Laozi the originator of Daoist thought, we note that the *Daodejing* 道德經 does not make direct use of the word *xianneng* and does not juxtapose *xian* and *neng*, and yet the book evidently does pay attention to this issue and contains discussions about it. In chapter 3, for example, it bluntly puts forward the idea of not valuing or employing the virtuous [*bushangxian* 不尚賢]:

Not to value and employ men of superior ability is the way to keep the people from rivalry among themselves; not to prize articles which are difficult to procure is the way to keep them from becoming thieves; not to show them what is likely to excite their desires is the way to keep their minds from disorder.<sup>8</sup>

Here the concept of *bushangxian* is not necessarily aimed directly in opposition to the Mohist idea of *shangxian* 尚賢, because the latter is likely to have been a popular topic earlier or at that time, only the Mohists had made it one of their key views. Looking at what follows, “not to prize articles which are difficult to procure is the way to keep people from becoming thieves; not to show them what is likely to excite their desires is the way to keep their minds from disorder” and “the sage, in the exercise of his government ... constantly tries to keep people without knowledge and without desire, and where there are those who have knowledge, to keep them from presuming to act on it,”<sup>9</sup> we note that these men who “have knowledge” and are therefore able to stir people’s feelings and desires and cause rivalry are in fact what *xian* stands for.

According to Laozi, social unrest stems mainly from a troubled relationship between the ruler and the people, the main cause of disorder being the ruler’s excessive avarice and overabundant “agency” [*youwei* 有為]. Laozi therefore suggests that the ruler yield and reach out to people—that is, turn his control into a fresh dose of vitality and energy among the people. Therefore, in his reflections on the correct way to address social unrest, Laozi does not rely on the “virtuous” and on the intelligence of the “wise” in seeking a good strategy to save society; in his view, this would have been a desperate choice of action, treating the symptoms rather than the disease; particularly after these world-saving remedies no longer had any effect, it was better to give them up and not use them. In resolving or mitigating a contradiction, the agency of the wise

<sup>8</sup> Translations from the Chinese of this and all quotes from the *Daodejing* by James Legge, *Tao Te Ching: The Way and Its Virtue* (Miami, FL: Bailey Street Press, 2017), 15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

and the virtuous was only likely to exacerbate the problem: better to subtract it than to add it. Inaction [*wuwei* 無為] and anti-intellectualism [*fanzhi* 反智] are this kind of subtraction: they cause people to be fully ignorant and free of desire, and they eliminate the core of all disputes. Only these ideas pave the way to an ultimate solution.

Following this train of thought, the *Daodejing* contains a considerable amount of discussion that opposes the employment of the *xianneng*. For example, Laozi describes the entire evolution of human civilization as a history of moral degeneration. We therefore find statements such as:

When the Great Dao [Way or Method] ceased to be observed, benevolence and righteousness came into vogue. Then appeared wisdom and shrewdness, and there ensued great hypocrisy. When harmony no longer prevailed throughout the six kinships, filial sons found their manifestation; when the states and clans fell into disorder, loyal ministers appeared.<sup>10</sup>

To Laozi, the concepts of benevolence and righteousness [*renyi* 仁義], knowledge and skill [*huizhi* 慧智], filial piety and parental affection [*xiaoci* 孝慈], and loyal ministers [*zhongchen* 忠臣] advocated by the virtuous are clearly not a sign of civilization making progress but, rather, the result of cultural backwardness. Not only would the use of these ideas to save humanity not return humankind to a true and good society, but it would only cause more chaos. “Then appeared wisdom and shrewdness, and there ensued great hypocrisy”<sup>11</sup> means that widespread hypocrisy and falseness are, in fact, an inevitable consequence of human intelligence.

Laozi was not necessarily unaware of the fact that wisdom could bring convenience and benefits; his use of extreme language here is meant to emphasize that wisdom brings people many more afflictions than advantages. At the same time, he states that “simple views, and courses plain and true, would selfishness end and many lusts eschew.”<sup>12</sup> The ultimate solution lies in remaining simple, with few desires. Of course, Laozi does not actually mean to cut off people’s desires and instincts; he only wants people to restrain their desires to

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>11</sup> This phrase, however, does not appear in the *Guodian Daodejing*, a version reproduced in the mid-Warring States period [475–221 BCE]. Only in the early Han Mawangdui version does the statement appear: “Then appeared wisdom and shrewdness, and there ensued great hypocrisy.”

<sup>12</sup> James Legge, *The Sacred Books of China: The Texts of Taoism* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1891), 62.

a reasonable level, to “fill their bellies, ... and strengthen their bones,”<sup>13</sup> “think their [coarse] food sweet; their [plain] clothes beautiful; their [poor] dwellings places of rest; and their common [simple] ways sources of enjoyment.”<sup>14</sup> For Laozi, this is not unachievable, as indicated by the following:

the sage, in the exercise of his government, empties their minds, fills their bellies, weakens their wills, and strengthens their bones. He constantly [tries to] keep them without knowledge and without desire, and where there are those who have knowledge, to keep them from presuming to act on it.<sup>15</sup>

The most outstanding politics involves weakening and limiting politics driven by feelings and ambition, keeping those who have knowledge from acting on it, and not allowing the virtuous with strong willpower to find use for their skills. Chapter 65 says that “governing the state by wisdom” is a calamity; rather, “he who does not try to do so” is a blessing for the state. The ancient rulers at the time were strong; not only did they not encourage people to become virtuous and talented, but they even preferred stupidity. Because Laozi says “[there is] no calamity greater than to be discontented with one’s lot; no fault greater than the wish to acquire,”<sup>16</sup> any wondrous thing that encourages indulgence in material desire and weaken natural instincts, any opinionated moral sermon, and any resourceful skill that fuels discontent are all misfortunes that intensify contradictions in society. Only by abandoning ideas such as benevolence and righteousness and other such so-called moral standards and eliminating any tendency toward profiteering and argument can humanity achieve a truly meaningful rescue. In other words, returning to the perfect Great Way is the only way out for humanity.

In short, judging from Laozi’s logic, knowledge, skills, moral standards, fame, and status are the true cause of misfortune, the actual source of evil. Therefore, if no cause of misfortune and no source of evil exist, then there is no reason for the praise or even the existence of the virtuous, who are carriers of knowledge, skills, moral standards, fame, and status. That is why Laozi says, “the ruling sage acts without claiming the results as his; he achieves his merit and does not rest arrogantly in it: he does not wish to display his superiority.”<sup>17</sup> Before the people,

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13 Ibid., 49.

14 Ibid., 122.

15 James Legge, *Tao Te Ching*, 15.

16 James Legge, *The Sacred Books of China*, 89.

17 Ibid., 119.

he does not pose as a ruler but in all respects focuses on rulers who exercise restraint and are ready to compromise; even though he may have real wisdom and talent, he intentionally does not reveal them to avoid causing unnecessary unrest: this is what is called “not displaying his virtue.”

Later Daoist scholars such as Zhuangzi adopted Laozi’s painstaking stance against wisdom and virtue. Like Laozi, Zhuangzi believed that after the entire perfect Great Way was destroyed and disappeared, all sorts of doctrines and methods appeared to address all kinds of problems and controversies, along with the wise and virtuous who advocated them. However, the farther they were from the Great Way, the weaker the function and effectiveness of such teachings and methods were. As recounted in the chapter “The World” [*Tianxia* 天下] in the *Zhuangzi* on the circumstances of the destruction of the Way:

There ensued great disorder in the world, and sages and worthies no longer shed their light on it. The Dao and its characteristics ceased to be regarded as uniform. Many in different places got one glimpse of it, and plumed themselves on possessing it as a whole. They might be compared to the ear, the eye, the nose, or the mouth. Each sense has its own faculty, but their different faculties cannot be interchanged. So it was with the many branches of the various schools. Each had its peculiar excellence, and there was the time for its use; nevertheless, no one covered or extended over the whole range of truth. The case was that of the scholar of a corner who passes his judgment on all the beauty in heaven and earth, discerns the principles that underlie all things, and attempts to estimate the success achieved by the ancients. Seldom can one embrace all the beauty in heaven and earth or rightly estimate the ways of the spiritual and intelligent; and thus it was that the Dao, which inwardly forms the sage and externally the king, became obscured and lost its clarity, became repressed and failed to develop. Everyone in the world did whatever he wished and was a rule unto himself. Alas! The various schools held on their several ways and could not come back to the same point or agree. The students of that later age unfortunately did not see the undivided purity of heaven and earth and the great scheme of truth held by the ancients. The system of the Dao was about to be torn into fragments all under the sky.<sup>18</sup>

18 *Zhuangzi*—*Tianxia*. 莊子•天下. Translation from the Chinese of this and all quotes from James Legge, trans. *Zhuangzi* (USA: Create Space Independent Publishing, 2015), 309.



This is to say that people in the world are all opinionated, insistent on their views, and yet “no one covered or extended over the whole range of truth” and mastered the thought and vision of the overall situation, therefore no one is able to evaluate the situation as a whole and “pass his judgment on all the beauty in heaven and earth, discriminate the principles that underlie all things, and attempt to estimate the success arrived at by the ancients.” He is nothing more than a person of limited talent. This inevitably leads to everyone doing “whatever they wish and be a rule unto themselves” with their theories resembling the ear, the eye, the nose, or the mouth or “many branches of various schools.” Although they have some brightness, some growth, and some use, they still cannot see “the undivided purity of heaven and earth, and the great scheme of truth held by the ancients.” Therefore they cannot be called “those not separate from the primal source,” “those not separate from the essential nature,” and those “not separated from the real truth”: heavenly men, spirit-like men, and perfect men. I need to point out that the “sages and worthies” [*xiansheng* 賢聖] that we encounter here are people who, in Zhuangzi’s view, could master “the Dao, which inwardly forms the sage and externally the king,” and clearly not those with limited talent.

Only after discussing the decline of the Way in the chapter “The Way of Heaven” [*Tiandao* 天道],<sup>19</sup> do we come across “benevolence and righteousness,” “objects and their names,” and the “five variations” and “nine variations” of “rewards and penalties.” Because in the eyes of common people, the virtuous who could master these concepts are all “speakers who know the instruments of government, but do not know the method of it, are fit to be used as an instrument in the world, but not fit to use others as their instruments”: they are sophists, men of small ideas, whose theories can merely “serve their superiors,” yet “it is not by them that those superiors nourish the world.”

The chapter “Letting [It] Be, and Exercising Forbearance” [*Zaiyou* 在宥] discusses the reasons that “abolishing sageness and casting away knowledge will bring the world to a state of great order.”<sup>20</sup> The most talented and virtuous among rulers—the Yellow Emperor, Emperor Yao, and Emperor Shun, known as the Three Sovereigns and seen by everyone as exemplary sages who created benevolence and righteousness and formulated laws—were ruthlessly mocked by Confucian and Mohist thinkers. Zhuangzi points out that if the world is in turmoil and increasingly chaotic, it is because Confucian and Mohist scholars committed a crime against the Three Sovereigns, “meddling

19 *Zhuangzi*—*Tiandao*. 莊子•天道. James Legge, *The Sacred Books of China*, 330.

20 *Zhuangzi*—*Zaiyou*. 莊子•在宥. *Ibid.*, 297.

with and disturbing [their] minds,”<sup>21</sup> disturbing and harassing initially peaceful and calm minds, so the stronger their competence, the more brilliant their methods, and the more chaotic society becomes.

In the present age those who have been put to death in various ways lie thick as if pillowed on each other; those who are wearing the cangue press on each other on the roads; those who are suffering the bastinado can see each other all over the land. And now the Confucians and the Mohists begin to stand, on tiptoe and with bare arms, among the fettered and manacled crowd! Ah! Extreme is their shamelessness, and their failure to see the disgrace!<sup>22</sup>

This intense chapter accuses Confucians and Mohists of being extremely shameless people who are only calculating the degree of seriousness of every type of punishment in tragic times without providing any way to ease people's woes. Therefore, sageness and wisdom and benevolence and righteousness are just the same as instruments of torture, but in people's eyes the greatly able and virtuous Zeng and Shi are no more than the first signs of characters such as Tyrant Jie and Robber Zhi. The chapter “Geng-sang chu 庚桑楚” even goes so far as to say: “if you raise the men of talent to office, you will create disorder; making the people strive with one another for promotion; if you employ men for their wisdom, the people will rob one another.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, only “abolishing sageness and casting away knowledge” can “bring the world to a state of great order.”

At the same time, Zhuangzi proves from another point of view why talent and virtue should not be trusted or relied on. Laozi's thought places stronger emphasis on the importance of the Way in observing the world and reflecting on problems and on the decisive role and guiding function of the “Way” and the “universe” in the relationship between the Way and living beings and that between the universe and humankind. But Zhuangzi highlights the need to observe the world and reflect on problems from the point of view of living beings and humankind. He explores how mankind can continue to exist appropriately, with dignity and perhaps even poetry. Zhuangzi realized that, if people want to secure such an existence, they first have to clarify one crucial prerequisite, namely, that compared to the Great Way and the universe, they

21 *Zhuangzi*—Zaiyou. James Legge, *Zhuangzi*, 91.

22 *Ibid.*, 91-92.

23 *Zhuangzi*—Gengsangchu. 莊子•庚桑楚. *Ibid.*, 210.

were extremely negligible in size, their function was extremely limited, their wisdom was not boundless, and their political actions were not omnipotent.

The reasons why society moves closer and closer to chaos and cannot be saved are decided by the nature of all living things. Compared to the perfection, continuity, infinity, and completeness of the Great Way, living things can only be relative, temporary, limited, and divided, and humans, which are among those living things, are just as negligible and pitiable. As the chapter “Cultivating a Healthy Life” [*Yang sheng zhu* 養生主] states, “there is a limit to our life, but to knowledge there is no limit. With what is limited to pursue after what is unlimited is a perilous thing; and when, knowing this, we still seek the increase of our knowledge, the peril cannot be averted.”<sup>24</sup>

First, it is ridiculous to arrogantly and conceitedly believe that it is possible to save the world by means of one’s own strength without being aware of one’s physical irrelevance and the limitations of intelligence and talent. Second, precisely because all living things, including humans, have some limitations and unfinished deeds—if not *yin* then *yang*, if not male then female, if not large then small, if not valuable then worthless—and are unable to reach farther than the two poles, humans can only dwell in specific places, occupy certain positions, obtain limited knowledge, and have a limited function. Even so, people still easily believe their own wisdom to be absolute and their talent to be inexhaustible. In “The Adjustment of Controversies” [*Qiwu lun* 齊物論], Zhuangzi offered a vivid discussion and critique of people’s unhealthy tendency to become self-important. People always believe that if this is right, then that is wrong—in other words, “that view involves both a right and a wrong; and this view involves also a right and a wrong,”<sup>25</sup> which causes everyone to rely on his own opinion and maintain his own views, never yielding and endlessly arguing. “So it is that we have the contention between the Confucians and the Mohists, with one side affirming what the other denies, and vice versa.”<sup>26</sup> According to Zhuangzi, these seemingly blind assumptions merely cover a certain aspect of the Great Way, but if a concept or value is defended tenaciously or promoted stubbornly, they will hide from reality or even cause greater chaos. Therefore, those sages, distinguished men, and capable ministers pleased with themselves are endlessly bragging about wisdom, talent, method, and values that are not in any way universally applicable. As per “The Floods of Autumn” [*Qishui* 秋水], “when we look at them in the light of the Way, they are neither noble nor mean. Looking at them in themselves, each thinks itself noble and despises

24 *Zhuangzi*—Yangshengzhu. 莊子•養生主. Ibid., 27.

25 *Zhuangzi*—Qiwulun. 莊子•齊物論. James Legge, *The Sacred Books of China*, 183.

26 Ibid., 182.

others. Looking at them in the light of common opinion, their being noble or mean does not depend on themselves.”<sup>27</sup> From the standpoint of the Way, right and wrong, expensive and cheap, superior and inferior, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, possibility and correctness are all opposites, and no one’s opinion can become the perfect truth.

Furthermore, Zhuangzi tells people that any kind of theory or method has both strong and weak points, to the point that its weaknesses might even be determined by its strengths. In the words of *Lie Yukou* 列禦寇, “knowledge seeking to reach to all that is external; bold movement producing many resentments; benevolence and righteousness leading to many requisitions”;<sup>28</sup> people who have technical skills, intelligence, and talent will come to harm because of excessive harassment from living beings. Heroic and active people will suffer from hatred because of this; those who are excessively benevolent and righteous, just as some people will obtain happiness, will have to bear the blame of those who have not. This is why Zhuangzi says: “understanding all knowledge so as to possess an approach to it.”<sup>29</sup> Those only able to master a certain kind of knowledge and talent and yet unable to grasp the overall situation and truly understand the Great Way may well be those skilled and respected sages, and yet they are not worth a mention.

Finally, Zhuangzi soberly realizes that, as brilliant as a sage may be, it is still very difficult for him to fully retreat from the entanglement of social connections and the plots of political rights. “Formerly, Lung-feng was beheaded; Pi-kan had his heart torn out; Chang Hong was ripped open; and Zi-xu was reduced to pulp. Worthy as those four men were, they did not escape such dreadful deaths.”<sup>30</sup> As excellent as a sage may be, it is very difficult for him to preserve his strength forever without being buffeted by destiny.

Consequently, Zhuangzi mercilessly bursts the beautiful bubble of the *xian-neng*, the “talented and virtuous,” to the point of taking a stance completely opposed to that of Mohists and Confucians: “in the age of perfect virtue they attached no value to wisdom, nor employed men of ability.”<sup>31</sup> If the wise were valued, there would be seeking of profits, and influence by values, and it would become impossible to shake off the control of destiny and enter the endless spiritual realm.

27 *Zhuangzi*—Qiu shui. 莊子·秋水. Ibid., 379.

28 *Zhuangzi*—Lie Yukou. 莊子·列禦寇. Ibid., 211.

29 Ibid.

30 *Zhuangzi*—Qujie. 莊子·胠篋. Ibid., 283.

31 *Zhuangzi*—Tiandi. 莊子·天地. James Legge, *Zhuangzi*, 111.

In short, according to the Lao-Zhuang tradition, the moral principles set down by the talented and virtuous are by no means universal, the individual talents they embody are by no means unlimited, and the political conduct they encourage is certainly not always effective. Therefore, those with talent and virtue are not almighty; in fact, one must distrust them and be on guard against their wisdom and ability, and should even turn away from it and criticize it.

### 3 Praise for, and Approval of, *Xianneng* in the Huang-Lao Tradition

Huang-Lao Daoism prospered during the Warring States, Qin, and Han eras. It focused on merging Laozi's and the Yellow Emperor's ideology on the Way, on supplying practical politics with concrete, realistic guidance, and on striving to promote political views that are applicable anywhere at any time and transcend the relationship between mankind and heaven.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, even though it likewise held the Way in great esteem, the Huang-Lao tradition clearly had major differences with the Lao-Zhuang tradition. One was detached from the world, and the other was rooted in it; one dissected, the other constructed; one criticized, the other built; one opposed wisdom, the other used wisdom; one kept away from politics, and the other engaged in politics. Since it was a political ideology, Huang-Lao thought had to rely on people of talent and virtue to be carried out, and therefore could not reject the talented and virtuous as the Lao-Zhuang tradition did, let alone consider them initiators of turmoil. On the contrary, why sages were needed, what kind of sages were needed, and how to make use of them were important elements of Huang-Lao political thought.

First, why are the talented and virtuous needed, and what were the necessity and the logic of their existence? Huang-Lao thinkers had a specific explanation of that. As indicated by statements such as “since the ruler’s wisdom and talents are not sufficient to spread his splendour across lands and seas, he is surrounded by high ministers who assist him”<sup>33</sup> and “the virtue of Heaven and Earth, the powers of the Sage, and the uses of the myriad things in Creation,

32 For a basic definition of Huang-Lao Daoism, its function, and its significance, see the introductory remarks in Cao Feng 曹峰, *Jinnian chutu huanglao sixiang wenxian yanjiu* 近年出土黄老思想文献研究 [Studies on Recently Discovered Huang-Lao Literatures] (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2015).

33 *Huainanzi—Xiuwu*. 淮南子·修務. Wang Liqi 王利器, *Wenzi shuyi* 文子疏義 [Commentary on *Wenzi*] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2000), 372.

are not perfect in every direction,”<sup>34</sup> Huang-Lao scholars realized that, other than the universal and complete Great Way, even if the universe and the sages were not perfect in every way, if the competence of sages had its strong and weak points and their wisdom had its limits, it was necessary to provide them with supplementary assistance, and the best rulers would inevitably be good at using the wisdom of others. This, of course, implies an important prerequisite, namely, that Huang-Lao scholars would respect and protect the highest ruler, but he also had to be a wise man who experiences the Way and adheres to it.

Second, unlike Zhuangzi, Huang-Lao thought did not merely focus on individual freedom; there had to be arrangements and a role for the talented and virtuous. Huang-Lao scholars thought that all political affairs in the world had to follow and adhere to the example of the Way: not only did politics have to adjust to the pace of the Way, but political systems and patterns also had to follow the tempo of natural events. The first section of the chapter “Sixteen Classics” [*Shiliu jing* 十六經] in “Establishing the Mandate” [*Liming* 立命], in *Huangdi sijing* 黃帝四經, describes how when the Yellow Emperor became a forefather with “a mandate from Heaven, a position on earth, and fame as a person,”<sup>35</sup> he first emphasized the three highest ranks for officials, that is, the importance of setting up a political system and making plans for the talented and virtuous. Then, he stressed the importance of “counting days, of the calendar month, of calculating age, so as to move along with the pace of the sun and moon,”<sup>36</sup> that is, imitating and following the motion, pace, and order of the universe. Consequently, as the system of heaven is centered on the polar star and surrounded by countless stars, the politics of people inevitably revolve around the monarch, with the talented and virtuous surrounding him as a support mechanism. The chapter “The Way’s Governance” [*Daoduan* 道端] in the *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子 says: “Heaven is how the myriad beings got established; Earth is how the myriad beings got security. Thus, heaven settles them; earth places them; time develops them; things receive them. the sage models them.”<sup>37</sup>

However, in the eyes of Huang-Lao scholars, this shaping, and following of, the Way is multilayered. A sentence in the “Nine Rulers” [*Jiuzhu* 九主] of

34 *Liezi*—Tianrui. 列子•天瑞. Yan Beiming 嚴北溟 and Yan Jie 嚴捷, *Liezi yizhu* 列子譯注 [*Translation and Commentary on the Liezi*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2016), 6-7.

35 Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *Huangdi sijing jinzhu jinyi* 皇帝四經今注今譯 [*Modern Commentary and Translation on Huangdi Sijing*] (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2016), 196.

36 *Ibid.*, 199.

37 *Heguanzi*—Daoduan. 鶡冠子•道端. Translations from the Chinese of the *Heguanzi* are by Marnix Wells, *The Pheasant Cap Master and the End of History: Linking Religion to Philosophy in Early China* (St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2013), 113.

the Mawangdui Silk Texts [*Mawangdui boshu* 馬王堆帛書] says: “the ruler governs heaven, his aides govern the earth, his ministers govern the four seasons, his people govern all living things,”<sup>38</sup> where clearly the progression “people—ministers—aides—ruler” is well matched with that of “all living things—the four seasons—the earth—heaven.” The chapter “The Circularity of the Way” [*Huandao* 圜道] in the *Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lü* [*Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋] says: “the Way of Heaven is circular and the Way of earth is square. The sage-king models himself after them to establish the high and the low.... The ruler holds to the circular; the ministers take their places in the square. When the square and the circular are not interchanged, the state flourishes.”<sup>39</sup> Further, the chapter “Proper Conduct and Assessing the Situation” [*Xing lun* 行論] says, “he who follows the Way of heaven will become monarch, and he who follows the Way of earth will simply become an official.”<sup>40</sup> This indicates that all kinds of political concerns among people reflect all kinds of concerns in the world. Like all kinds of concerns in the world, political concerns among people must present themselves as complementary and synchronized. Along with such views, Huang-Lao Daoists had quite a number of special strategies when it came to talent and virtue in politics, as if the appearance of all these sages was not meant to settle existing political problems and conflicts but, rather, to harmonize with the order of the universe. As chapter “Daoduan” in the *Heguanzi* tells us,

consequently, the first kings in appointing knights promoted the worthy and employed the able. They did not pander to their generation. Humane men sit on the left and east, loyal ministers sit in front and south, righteous ministers sit on the right and west, the sage sits in the rear and north. The left makes a law of humane benevolence, so spring generates and reproduces. The front makes a law of loyalty, so summer’s achievements stand. The right makes a law of righteousness, then autumn completes

38 Wei Qipeng 魏啟鵬, *Mawangdui hanmu boshu huangdishu jianzheng* 馬王堆漢墓帛書<黃帝書>箋證 [Commentary on the Mawangdui Han Dynasty Silk Manuscripts of Huangdishu] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2004), 253.

39 *Lüshichunqiu—Huandao*. 呂氏春秋•圜道. Translation from the Chinese by John Knoblock and Jeffrey Riegel, *The Annals of Lü Buwei: Lüshi Chunqiu* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 109-110.

40 *Lüshichunqiu—Xinglun*. 呂氏春秋•行論. Zhang Shuangli 張雙棣 et al., *Lüshi Chunqiu yizhu* 呂氏春秋譯注 [Translation and Commentary on Master Lü’s Spring and Autumn Annals] (Changchun: Jilin wenshi chubanshe, 1986), 735.

the harvest. The rear makes a law of sagacity, then winter shuts down and stores.... these four are what the ruler takes from outside.<sup>41</sup>

Here, the Four Great Officers [Sidafu 四大夫] are a rank entirely made up; however, to Huang-Lao scholars, scrupulously abiding by the principle of “from the Way to the affairs of this world,” creating it was a necessary measure. Just as the chapter *Weiming* 微明 in the *Wenzi* 文子 divides humanity into twenty-five types of people according to the regular patterns of the five elements, it covers not only all kinds of ranks but, at the same time, all kinds of needs.

In the past, Master Zhonghuang said: “Heaven has five directions, Earth has five phases, music has five notes, food has five flavors, color has five primary hues and man has five dispositions. Between heaven and earth there are twenty-five types of people. The highest five are the numinous man, the true man, the man of the Way, the accomplished man and the sagely man. The next five are the virtuous man, the worthy man, the wise man, the capable man, and the eloquent man. The intermediate five are the impartial man, the loyal man, the trustworthy man, the righteous man, and the ritual man. The next five are the knight, the artisan, the hunter, the farmer, and the merchant. The lowest five are the layman, the servant, the fool, the boor, and the petty man. The top five compare to the bottom five as human beings to cows and horses. The sagely man looks with his eyes, listens with his ears, speaks with his mouth, and walks with his feet. The true man sees clearly without looking, hears clearly without listening, he moves without walking, and is impartial without talking. Therefore, the true man has never made a mistake in the means by which the sagely man moves all under heaven, whereas the sagely man has never observed the means by which the wise man straightens those who follow worldly customs.<sup>42</sup>

Even though the chapter “Weiming” attaches great importance to the “true ones” who, moving along with the Way, “see clearly without looking, hear clearly without listening, move without walking, and are impartial without talking,” the difference from the Lao-Zhuang school is that the “wise ones” who

41 *Heguanzi*—Daoduan. Marnix Wells, *The Pheasant Cap Master and the End of History*, 115.

42 *Wenzi*—Weiming. 文子•微明. Translation from the Chinese by Paul van Els, “The *Wenzi*: Creation and Manipulation of a Chinese Philosophical Text,” PhD diss., Leiden University, 2006, 181.



“straighten those who follow worldly customs,” even though in position they are inferior to “the true ones” [*zhenren* 真人] and “worthies” [*shengren* 聖人], here they are not targets of aversion but, rather, are considered to be those whom one should take seriously and rely on. They are seen as sages who “look with their eyes, listen with their ears, speak with their mouth, and walk with their feet”; on the one hand, they must rely on “true ones” and, on the other, they must also rely on “worthies.” The “true ones” do not interfere with the actions of the sage, and the sage does not interfere with the actions of the “worthies.” The world can be made up of these twenty-five kinds of people whose position in society and tasks have been clearly assigned and form a harmonious, rational structure.

Third, the existence of sages is, in fact, a sign of “inaction” or an outcome of “inaction.” Just as the chapter “Daoduan” says:

cold and warmth’s changes are not what one essence transforms. The Under-Heaven’s tasks are not what one man can alone know. The sea waters’ breadth and greatness do not look to one stream’s flow. Consequently, the illumined ruler, to rule his generation, urgently seeks men. He does not alone attempt it. Together with heaven and earth, he firmly establishes the four wefts to sustain the nation’s governance. Hooks and strings mutually extend, bits and halters mutually control. When divisions into threes and fives are both prepared, established positions will then be firm.<sup>43</sup>

If an outstanding ruler wants to achieve great things, not only is it impossible for him to rely solely on a monarch’s own ability or that of a number of talented ministers but he must use all kinds of talented people and thereby obtain a political structure that is open to mutual cooperation, harmonious and restrained, and let all sages be exclusively at his service. To this aim, the monarch must practice inaction, or else inaction must become the certain outcome of the action of those who are talented. The chapter “Distinguishing Proper Functions” [*Fen zhi* 分職], in the *Lüshi chunqiu* discusses this in detail: “if the ruler is able to renounce his own wisdom, talent, and accomplishments, he will be able to bring fully into play his people’s wisdom, talent and accomplishments.”<sup>44</sup> Sima Tan’s discussion in “On the Fundamentals of the Six Schools” [*Lun liujia yaozhi* 論六家要旨] can be considered the manifesto of the

43 *Heguanzi*—Daoduan. Marnix Wells, *The Pheasant Cap Master and the End of History*, 114.

44 *Lüshi Chunqiu*—Fenzhi. 呂氏春秋·分職. Zhang Shuangli, *Lüshi Chunqiu yizhu*, 888.

Huang-Lao School; in it, his criticism of Confucians is that “the ruler will make strenuous efforts, and the ministers will be at leisure,”<sup>45</sup> the Confucians prefer to have the ruler be an example to everyone, and they therefore advocate the idea of “the ruler being the proper model of all in the world,”<sup>46</sup> the ruler has to do everything well, he has to strive for perfection, and also has to “lead, while the ministers adapt; be first, while the ministers follow.”<sup>47</sup> The outcome of this is “knowledgeable, yet incompetent; hard-working, yet unproductive,”<sup>48</sup> in fact, this is a statement mocking the Confucian ruler who is unable to effectively control and use the talented and virtuous, wearing himself out doing a thankless job.

What kind of *xianneng* should be seen as important and useful, then? The quotation above from the chapter “Weiming” in the *Wenzi* shows that the two kinds considered most important by the Huang-Lao school were, on the one hand, “the true ones” and, on the other, the “worthies.” “The true ones” could guide the monarch to experience spiritual enlightenment and thereby allow him to be a man who can see the overall situation and master natural laws. Characters of this kind are visibly rare in other schools of thought. I have noticed that writings of the Huang-Lao genre include a batch of special texts that can be called a “ruler’s teacher literature.” These texts usually take the form of a dialogue, many of which are between an ancient emperor or monarch, such as the Yellow Emperor 黃帝, or Emperors Yao 堯, Shun 舜, Yu 禹, and Yin 殷, King Wen of Zhou 周文王, King Wu of Zhou 周武王, and others and a character who has a deep understanding of the Way and of the affairs of the world, with a wide vision and an open mind, such as Qibo 岐伯, Peng Zu 彭祖, Yi Yin 伊尹, and Jiang Taigong 姜太公. The topics the ruler asks about are often the most significant and vital issues, for example, how to obtain sovereignty, and, once one gains military success, how to obtain a long period of peace and political stability, and how to remain in good health and live a long life. Teachers are often messengers for the Way: what they say appears to be veiled in mystery and yet definitely has a practical significance. Scriptures that were handed down, such as the *Huangdi neijing* 黃帝內經, the *Liu tao* 六韜, and *Da dai liji: Wuwang jianzuo* 大戴禮記·武王踐阼, and excavated texts such as Jiuzhu 九主 in the Mawangdui Silk Manuscripts, the bamboo slip

45 Yao Nai 姚鼐, *Guwenzi leizuan* 古文辭類纂, annot. Hu Shiming 胡士明 and Li Zuotang 李祚唐 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2016), 5.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

manual *Shiwen* 十問 of the materials on medicine and nurturing life found at Mawangdui, as well as *Yin gaozong wen yu san shou* 殷高宗問于三壽 and *Tang zai chi men* 湯在啻門 from the Qinghua bamboo slips are all typical examples of “ruler’s teacher literature.” The existence of a large quantity of such documents shows that the sages so respected in Huang-Lao thought were none other than these “teacher” characters. Therefore, Huang-Lao thought divided people of virtue and talent according to whether they were more virtuous than the sovereign and treated them correspondingly.

For example, the chapter “Broad Selection” [*Boxuan* 博選] in the *Heguanzi* says: “Men have five types of arrivers: one is 100 times yourself, two is 10 times yourself, three is equal to yourself, four is servant, five is slaves.”<sup>49</sup> Lin Dongzi says that “the five types of arrivers” [*wuzhi* 五至] have broadened the scope for selecting worthies to include everyone in the country, no matter who they may be: as long as they have talent, they may serve the ruler without any exceptions.<sup>50</sup> Bearing in mind the aforementioned pattern of twenty-five kinds of people outlined in the chapter “Weiming” in the *Wenzi*, one certainly has such a feeling. However, Huang-Lao scholars still attach most importance to the ability to be one hundred or ten times more, and these sages, who are wiser than the ruler, they treat with extremely high esteem and ceremony. As the chapter “Boxuan” says:

Hence, if facing north, you serve them, then those hundred times yourself will arrive. If first to hasten and last to rest, first to ask and last to remain silent, then those ten times yourself will arrive. If you hasten when they do, then those equal to yourself will arrive. If you sit against a table or lean on your cane, and give orders by pointing and signaling, then servants will arrive. If you shout and scold, then slaves will arrive. Hence, an emperor dwells with teachers; a king dwells with friends; a perishing ruler dwells with servants.<sup>51</sup>

On “kings dwelling with friends,” the chapter “Aphorisms” [*Cheng* 稱] in the *Huangdi sijing* adopts similar rhetoric:

49 *Heguanzi*—Boxuan. 鶡冠子·博選. Translation from the Chinese by Carine Defoort, *The Pheasant Cap Master (He Guan Zi): A Rhetorical Reading* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 74.

50 Lin Dongzi 林冬子, *Heguanzi yanjiu <鶡冠子>研究 [Research on Heguanzi]* (Yinchuan: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 2016), 175.

51 *Heguanzi*—Boxuan. Carine Defoort, *The Pheasant Cap Master*, 115.

A minister of an emperor is, in fact, a teacher of the emperor although he is a minister in name. A minister of a king is, in fact, a friend of the king although he is a minister in name. A minister of a powerful lord is, in fact, a guest of the lord although he is a minister in name. A minister of an imperiled ruler is, in fact, a hired laborer of the ruler although he is a minister in name. A minister of a ruler whose state is going to disintegrate is, in fact, a slave of the ruler although he is a minister in name.<sup>52</sup>

It seems plausible that it was precisely such messengers of the Way who were able to become the emperor's teacher or the king's friend. "Five Phases" [*Wu xing* 五行] in the *Guanzi* 管子 says:

In ancient times, Huangdi obtained Chiyou and illuminated the way of Heaven; obtained Da Chang and arranged the resources of the earth; obtained She Long and arranged the eastern regions; obtained Zhu Rong and arranged the southern regions; obtained Da Feng and arranged the western regions; obtained Hou Tu and arranged the northern regions.<sup>53</sup>

As to the second type of "worthies," in Huang-Lao thought they would have been bureaucrats by profession, familiar with political affairs and masters of some technical skill. These people were also an absolutely indispensable part of the national management apparatus. This touches upon the third issue in Huang-Lao politics of the virtuous: how to make use of, and have firm control of, the *xianneng*. The essentials of that are abiding by the natural world of all living creatures, making full use of their pluralism and complementary nature, controlling and selecting to promote all kinds of professionals as much as possible, and ensuring that you encourage their initiative, their enthusiasm, and their creativity, at the same time using advantages and ignoring disadvantages, mutually cooperating, and thereby "using all talents simultaneously," allowing complete freedom for these people's roles. The following quotation from the chapter "Nature" [*Ziran* 自然] in the *Wenzi* provides an excellent illustration of this:

52 Translation by Leo Chang and Yu Feng, *The Four Political Treatises of the Yellow Emperor: Original Mawangdui Texts with Complete English Translations* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 47.

53 *Guanzi*—Wu xing. 管子•五行. This follows a translation found in a discussion of the "Wu Xing" in Michael Puett, *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 131.

Among soldiers, there will be agile ones, heavy and slow ones, greedy ones, and honest ones; the characteristics of these four types of soldiers are all different, however on the battlefield none of them is indispensable. The agile ones are active, the heavy ones calm, the greedy ones eager to gain, and the honest ones not profit-thirsty. Therefore, the agile can be asked to charge and strike, but not defend; the heavy and slow are suited for defense, but not for assault; the greedy can be asked to storm and capture, but not to keep watch; the honest can keep watch, but are unsuitable for storming and capturing. Ones who keep their promises can maintain agreements and alliances; they cannot be asked to act spontaneously. These five types of men have opposite characters, however sages can still use them in a tolerant way.... If guarding just one corner means leaving out the rest of the world, and selecting one species means giving up all other beings, one is sure to achieve very little: the reach of one's administration will also certainly be very narrow.<sup>54</sup>

This corresponds in meaning to the chapter “Integrating Customs” [*Qisu* 齊俗] in the *Huainanzi*: one needs to make the most of things, as well as use advantages and ignore disadvantages. In this way, he will no longer merely “guard just one corner, leaving out the rest of the world, and select one species, giving up all other beings.” The chapter “Ziran” in the *Wenzi* also says:

The sage handles matters strictly according to people's talents and their strong points. Those with a certain kind of merit will assume a corresponding level of official position, and those with a specific talent will be engaged in corresponding tasks. People whose energy surpasses that needed for their responsibilities will be capable of lifting the feeble, and those whose ability surpasses that needed to carry out their responsibilities will not feel in any difficulty carrying these out. The sage is good at using people's strong points, so that there are no redundant people, and no being's ability is discarded.<sup>55</sup>

Here the emphasis is put on knowing to which posts people should be appointed so as to make full use of their ability. However, the phrase “those with a certain kind of merit will assume a corresponding level of official position, and those with a specific talent will be engaged in corresponding tasks” is identical in meaning to “the usual way of appointing a minister is that his

54 *Wenzi*—Ziran. 文子•自然. Wang Liqi, *Wenzi shuyi*, 349-350.

55 *Ibid.*, 367.

position shall not surpass his ability”<sup>56</sup> in the chapters *Jingfa* 經法 and *Daofa* 道法 in the *Huangdi sijing*. These ideas are not unlike the concepts of “the shape and the law being consistent” [*xing ming can tong* 形名參同] and “to be worthy of one’s name” [*ming shi xiang fu* 名實相副] advocated by the Legalists.

As to employing the *xianneng*, Huang-Lao thought also particularly emphasizes “acting for the other” [*zi wei* 自為] as opposed to “acting for oneself” [*wei wo* 為我]. “Acting for the other” uses the selfish, mercenary, and yet defensive mentality of the common people to bring fully into play their initiative and enthusiasm in striving for themselves. On the contrary, “acting for oneself,” whether for the monarch or for the benefit of the people, according to Huang-Lao thought is likely to descend to thirst for fame, compliments, and indulgence in exaggeration, and there is no way of truly mastering and using it. The *Shenzi*, for example, explores this in depth:

The Way of heaven is such that if you follow then you will be great, while if you alter then you will be insignificant. To follow means following the dispositions of people. Among people, no one fails to act for himself; if you [try to] alter that and cause them to act for you, then there will be none whom you can secure and employ. Therefore, the former kings did not use as ministers those who would not accept a salary, and they did not take as partners in difficult endeavors those whose salary was not large. In circumstances where people are not able to act for themselves, those above will not get any use out of them. Therefore, if you make use of people who act for their own benefit rather than those who act for your benefit, then there are none whom you cannot secure and employ. This is what is called following [their dispositions].<sup>57</sup>

Therefore, those not “acting for others” and not accepting a salary were not appointed, and only those truly acting for themselves were allowed to commit their wisdom and talent. The psychology of these seemingly unfeeling but actually keen people of talent attracted all the more interest among the various views on the *xianneng* in the pre-Qin era.

The four chapters in the *Han Feizi* that are Huang-Lao oriented advocate that “the ruler is not side by side with his subjects,”<sup>58</sup> the ruler guides, his peo-

56 Chen Guying, *Huangdi sijing jinzhū jìnyì*, 25.

57 *Shenzi*—Yinxun. 慎子•因循. Xu Fuhong 許富宏, *Shenzi jijiao jizhu* 慎子集校集注 [*Collected Annotation and Commentary on Shenzi*] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2013), 24-25.

58 Zhang Jue 張覺, *Hanfeizi yizhu* 韓非子譯注 [*Translation and Commentary on Hanfeizi*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubans, 2016), 67.

ple have skills, and “the ruler uses the way of forms and names to handle his ministers.” One of the prerequisites for the “way of forms and names” is the unity and coordination of the scope of one’s devotion and dedication, and the salary grade, along the same train of thought as the theory of “autonomy.”

So do Huang-Lao views on the *xianneng* attach any importance to some aspect of “virtue” [*de* 德], or do they not? The aforementioned chapter “Daoduan” (in the *Heguanzi*) demonstrates that the Four Great Officers each possess a moral quality, for example, benevolence, honesty, justice, and wisdom. These moral qualities are matched with the four seasons: spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Therefore, the “virtue” here is not one built on human affection; in fact, Huang-Lao thought believes that creating virtue on the basis of human affection is detrimental to the implementation of *xianneng* politics. As the chapter “Qi su” in the *Huainanzi* says:

In ancient times, Grand Duke Wang and Duke Dan of Zhou met with each other after receiving fiefs.

Grand Duke Wang asked the Duke of Zhou, “How will you govern Lu?”

The Duke of Zhou said, “I will exalt the noble and draw close to my kindred.”

The Grand Duke said, “Henceforward Lu will grow weaker!”

The Duke of Zhou asked the Grand Duke, “How will you govern Qi?”

The Grand Duke said, “I will raise up the worthy and promote those of merit.”

The Duke of Zhou said, “In later generations, there will certainly be a ruler who rises through assassination.”

Afterwards, Qi grew daily larger, to the point of becoming hegemon.

After twenty-four generations, the ducal house was replaced by the Tian clan.<sup>59</sup>

Clearly, according to the *Huainanzi*, the strength of the state of Qi resulted from respecting the worthy, and the weakening of the state of Lu was the consequence of excessive attention to the etiquette and moral values of drawing close to one’s kindred. Therefore, considering that Huang-Lao views on the *xianneng* sometimes also emphasize virtue, it is mainly virtue matching all the living things in nature; more often, in fact, there is no connotation of virtue among the *xianneng*, and “virtue” and “talent” stand mainly for knowledge,

59 *Huainanzi*—Qi su. 淮南子·齊俗. John S. Major et al., *The Huainanzi: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Government in Early Han China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 399.

skills, and competence and do not acclaim superficial moral character and moral integrity.

In conclusion, the Huang-Lao school greatly values the *xianneng*. The *Huangdi sijing*, for example, repeatedly highlights the issue of “the virtuous unworthy” [*xian buxiao* 賢不肖]; what is being stressed sometimes is that the virtuous cannot be seen as unworthy and, at other times, that virtue and unworthiness should each fulfill its function. The majority of chapters in the *Heguanzi* discuss how the *xianneng* should be selected and used: chapter 1 is called “Boxuan”, which goes to show how much the *xianneng* are esteemed in the *Heguanzi*. On a number of points, the views of the Huang-Lao school resemble those of the Legalists, for example, in that of painstakingly protecting monarchical authority, in that of emphasizing the use of natural people and human feeling, and in that of using reward and punishment as a way of having everyone respond to their role; also, in that of emphasizing that the monarch must draw support from the wisdom of the talented and must find comprehensive use for the talents of various kinds of people; and finally in that of not highlighting virtue, even rejecting it. It may be that the Huang-Lao school influenced the Legalists; it is also possible that the similarities in these two schools of thought caused them to develop comparable views on the *xianneng*.

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# Virtuous Governance and the Chinese Way

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## Abstract

Lucian W. Pye, the renowned American Sinologist, argues that power/authority in Chinese culture follows a paternalistic structure, that the distinction in Chinese society between public and private has historically been in a state of tension, and therefore that Chinese governance has always emphasized central power over local self-governance, suppressed cultural pluralism, and rebuffed multipolar structures of power. Even though the inherent tension identified by Pye certainly exists, the thesis that Chinese culture has a deeply ingrained authoritarian orientation is simply incorrect. In order to resolve the tension between the public and private realms, Chinese thinkers—from the various strands of legalist thought to the Confucian notion of “kingly governance”—have premised the division of power on the priority of preserving centralized power. In other words, diffusion of power has been premised on the idea of an already collectivized authority. Therefore, the power structure that defines Chinese culture has certainly not been the polycentric one that Pye implicitly values, but neither has it been the centralist, authoritarian structure that he abhors. Rather, it has been the Confucian model premised on the values of governance through ritual and moral virtue. Insights from cultural psychology help explain ethical governance—that is, rule by an ethical meritocracy—in Chinese society and culture.

## Keywords

Lucian W. Pye – public-private divide – power structures

This paper takes a culturalist approach to the understanding of ideas about power structures in Chinese culture and history. This way of thinking is tied

to my long-held belief that we need to recognize the existence of multiple modernities and a multicultural world. Furthermore, I also believe that it is impossible to understand a country's system of governance, in particular its power structures, without taking into consideration its cultural and historical background. Based on these assumptions, we can analyze the power structures inherent in Chinese culture and understand the possible future orientations of the Chinese sociopolitical system.

## 1 Lucian Pye and Chinese Governance

Lucian W. Pye [1921-2008], was one of the most authoritative American scholars on Chinese culture. In his book *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority*, he posited that the Chinese political structure is fundamentally paternalistic.<sup>1</sup> In his model, the Chinese structure of authority is associated with the following:

1. Omnipotence—In the eyes of the Chinese people, the thesis goes, the ideal is that there is nothing the ultimate political authority cannot accomplish and that the ultimate goal of the sovereign power is the resolution of all social issues. In this model, the central authority orders not only society but also the entire universe. It is profoundly different from the division of power in the modern West, where each locus of authority is responsible for the resolution of issues within its domain: political issues should be resolved within politics, religious matters within the Church, and legal disputes within an independent judiciary. According to Pye, in the Chinese model, in contrast, all these different aspects of power coalesce into the same authority.<sup>2</sup>
2. Centralization—The Chinese, Pye argues, accept from a young age a centralized power structure and therefore cannot tolerate the contemporaneous existence of multiple centers of power because multiplicity breeds factionalism. Indeed, this kind of reasoning has been combined with nationalism to strengthen its manifestation and render power ever more centralized. Japan's long-standing feudal system and its family-based social structure made the Japanese more tolerant of the idea of multiple centers of power. Therefore, centralization is a distinctive

1 Lucian W. Pye and Mary W. Pye, *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985), 186, 198-200.

2 *Ibid.*, 43-45, 49, 183-84.

- feature of Chinese politics and one of the primary reasons that democratic principles have not been able to develop in China.<sup>3</sup>
3. Ideology—The Chinese traditionally put an excessive amount of effort into proving certain ideological and moralistic tenets. The lack of emphasis on the concrete and particular dimensions of the political process lead to the nonpractical nature of Chinese politics. Although in the West, Pye argues, utility, benefit, and the expression of the individual became the principal goals of the political process, Chinese politics retained a deep disjunction between theory and practice.<sup>4</sup>
  4. Rule by Moral Example—Contrary to Western conceptions of power based on the utilitarian pursuit of benefit, traditional notions of power in China promoted the idea that authority was derived from the inherent ethical capabilities of individuals.<sup>5</sup> In Western culture, the ideal leader combines strength, resolve in making decisions, and an openness to criticism. In Asia, however, the ideal ruler is benevolent, understanding, and morally superior, as defined by a spirit of self-sacrifice.<sup>6</sup> Pye further argues that the Chinese model of politics constitutes a “virtuocracy,” in which rule by moral example is fundamentally opposed to the political process because decision-making is not premised on the principle of the election of leaders or selection policies.<sup>7</sup> Instead, the Chinese political model is defined by personalization, thus weakening institutionalized governance. Pye concludes that this element of personalized politics defines almost all contemporary Asian political systems—Japan being the notable exception—which explains the weak and unstable electoral processes in Asian democracies.<sup>8</sup>
  5. *Guanxi* (i.e., personal connections)—Pye’s identification of the significance of personal relationships rests on the claim that the Chinese have historically had little faith in—and, indeed, experience with—power as exercised in the public domain. Chinese history has always overly emphasized the power of personal ties in the sociopolitical realm and this accounts for the ebb and flow of national and factional interests over time.<sup>9</sup> However, the most significant difference between China and Japan is that the Japanese not only valued and relied on personal ties in the

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3 Ibid., 183-91.

4 Ibid., 186-87, 204-9.

5 Ibid., 49-50.

6 Ibid., 28.

7 Ibid., 42.

8 Ibid., 23.

9 Ibid., 190.

public sphere but also openly acknowledged their significance [*on-giri*], publicly promulgating personal relationships as the foundation of political action. In China, however, informal modes of the operations of power were at play, in the absence of a principled structure. Of course, this does not mean that personal relationships were not used in the advancement of personal interests in China.<sup>10</sup>

6. The anti-political nature of Chinese politics—The claim here is that Chinese politics regards ideological issues as more significant than the political process of deliberation. Thus, politics in premodern China: (1) did not emphasize the rationalization of the political process but, rather, its moralization; (2) did not doubt the significance of personal sacrifice as a fundamental political value; (3) valued centralized authority and viewed with apprehension the division of power, stifling political pluralism and creativity; and (4) in the absence of political competition, succeeded in cultivating a sense of fear about the expression of criticism. Pye further points out that, generally speaking, Western thinkers understand power as participation in the decision-making process, whereas political consciousness in Asia equated power with being spared the burden of making decisions. Westerners see political participation as a prerequisite to human fulfillment, whereas Asians regard decision-making as an inherently risky enterprise. The essence of power and of being in power is not to decide but, rather, to attain a feeling of safety. This was the reason that Chinese emperors were so rigidly tied to a strict schedule of ritual obligations.<sup>11</sup>

## 2 The China Model Revisited

Ultimately, Pye falls back on cultural relativism and opposes any meaningful critique of the Asian model of power as inferior or less advanced—a point that he makes abundantly clear. In discussing the Chinese government's efforts to push ahead with new modernization policies, he points out: "The reason why the results of these reforms have not been impressive is that they have not touched the key hierarchical relationships or the cultural attitudes about power and action."<sup>12</sup> Such reforms made people feel less safe and spurred them to seek further protection in personal relationships. Pye criticizes the

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 190-91, 291-99.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 210.

ideological cornerstone of Zhao Ziyang's reforms because, according to him, it is simply inconceivable for Chinese leaders to believe that diversity and a pluralistic power structure can accelerate modernization.<sup>13</sup> His criticism includes figures such as Sun Yat-sen, Chang Kai-shek, and Mao Zedong and their internal "revolutions," which only sought to strengthen personalized power but not institutional authority.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, Pye argues that if Deng Xiaoping's reforms exhibited a principle of multiplicity—that is, a recognition that different localities have different interests and priorities—this would constitute a true revolution because it would challenge the hierarchical power structure that has dictated Chinese politics. If Deng's reforms are successful, Pye concludes, they would have an impact far greater than any of Mao's revolutionary actions.<sup>15</sup>

Following Pye's line of reasoning, the question boils down to whether the Chinese conception of power/authority has to be abandoned in order to achieve true modernization. My answer to this question is that it does not.

Pye's description of the Chinese power structure as "paternalistic" is indeed correct. However, Pye is mistaken in claiming that the Chinese are inculcated from a young age—whether in the family or the classroom—with fear of challenging authority. This is simply not the case. I have repeatedly stressed in previous writings that traditional Chinese values do not posit an absolute hierarchical division and do not call for unconditional support of sons toward fathers, wives toward husbands, and the population toward its rulers. Quite the opposite: from Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi, and other pre-Qin Confucian thinkers to Han dynasty [202 BCE–220] scholars such as Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒, Ban Gu 班固, and Liu Xiang 劉向, all the way down to the Cheng brothers 二程, Zhu Xi 朱熹 and the great Confucians of the Ming [1368–1644] and Qing [1644–1912] dynasties—they all placed great value on criticizing and admonishing the political elite, elevating such action to the level of a moral imperative.<sup>16</sup> This attitude can be further attested by the historical account of the *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露, which shows the extent to which the ancient Chinese were unafraid of criticizing political authority. Indeed, precisely because authority was never made absolute in Chinese history, it has been easy for the Chinese to

13 Ibid., 189.

14 Ibid., 189–90.

15 Ibid., 191.

16 Fang Zhaohui 方朝暉, "'Sangang' zhende shi zaopo ma? Chongxin shenshi 'sangang' de lishi yu xianshi yiyi '三綱'真的是糟粕嗎? 重新審視'三綱'的歷史與現實意義 [Are 'Sangang' Really Feudal Leftovers?]," *Tianjin shehui kexue* 天津社會科學, 2 (2011); idem, "Shi shui wujie le sangang-dafu Li Cunshan jiaoshou 是誰誤解了三綱—答覆李存山教授 [Who Misunderstood the 'Sangang']," *Zhanlue yu guanli* 戰略與管理 5/6 (2012).

overthrow or bring down existing political structures. If my position is indeed correct, then it would disprove Pye's main argument.

Thus, we come to the question of whether the Chinese political equation has division of power.<sup>17</sup> Pye stresses many times over that the key problem in Chinese politics is that it never valued the multiplicity of power, and therefore competition, rationalization, and, ultimately, modernization could never really take hold. Perhaps, this view comes from an incomplete, or even misguided, understanding of Chinese history. Over the millennia of Chinese history, politics has always been dominated by the issue of the division and consolidation of power, the interplay between the central authority and peripheral centers of power. From the feudal system of the Western Zhou [1046-771 BCE] to the Warring States period [475-221 BCE], this has repeatedly manifested itself in violent ways, as the division of power brought about war. Similar periods of disunity, disruption, and war recurred time and again in Chinese history, strengthening the quest for peace and stability. For this reason, the idea of a unified political ruler in China coheres with the patterns of change in Chinese history. Also for this reason, division of power as a means of attaining multiplicity and multiculturalism never came to be primary political objectives.

Thus, how does unified political rule affect the diffusion of power? Pye's outlook on diffused power is primarily concerned with local autonomy and cultural pluralism. Using local records from townships and county-level schools, scholars such as de Bary and Bol have shown the extent to which local societies in premodern China exhibited a high degree of self-determination. Similarly, Rankin, Rowe, Wakeman, Shils, and Xu Yinshi, among many others, have shown in great detail the existence and extent of a private economy in premodern China. Indeed, from the Song dynasty [960-1279] onward, the development of regional cultures in China is almost an obvious fact—something repeatedly stressed in Japanese scholarship. The biggest issue I take with Pye's analysis is that it lacks a robust understanding of Chinese history. Instead, his presentation of China is anachronistic, because he tries to explain China's current political situation by referring to Chinese culture overtime. But even if one accepts that Chinese culture has an inherent trajectory—as I do—Pye fails to take into consideration the fact that modern China is the product of thousands of years of culture in a violent clash with the modern West: the modern Chinese political predicament is an unresolved clash of values. What the current political reality shows is the effect of China's having been pushed off its traditional cultural trajectory.

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<sup>17</sup> Pye, *Asian Power and Politics*, 189.



We have to realize that if China were a federalist state like the US—that is, if it had a strong sense of division of power—then it is indeed quite likely that separatist forces, local warlords, and disunity would arise—as they have repeatedly done throughout Chinese history. One of the main ideas in political Confucian texts is that a completely independent and self-governing province simply does not work. The reason traditional Chinese thinkers were highly suspicious of the effects of dividing power is that, following the patterns of change in Chinese history, disunity has always brought war. In this light, then, Taiwan's model of democratic governance, which has overwhelmingly modeled itself after the American system, constitutes a strong departure from the Confucian ethos and marks a strong historical break. Of course, these points are all perfectly consistent with the cultural relativist stance that Pye himself adopts.<sup>18</sup>

If Pye's paternalistic model of authority is, indeed, an accurate description of Chinese politics, then it is definitely more complex than he is willing to recognize. This can be attributed to the fact that Pye—like all scholars—brings his own value system and implicit biases into his research, which leads him to commit two major errors. First, he has not acknowledged all the evidence that points to the fact that the premodern Chinese political system is not as centralized, authoritarian, and devoid of rationality as he has made it out to be. Second, he has not acknowledged that the Chinese conception of the centralization and division of power—including the relationship between the center and peripheries, state and society, the central government and local rule—has been formed through historical experience, defined by its own model of rationalization, and that this historical experience is simply distinct from Euro-American history. In the next section, we explore Pye's claims about Chinese power further from a culturalist perspective.

### 3 Centralized Power Revisited

Pye holds that the reason centralized power has been emphasized in Chinese politics is that China has historically been faced with a paradox owing to opposition between the private and public realms. The most classic manifestation of this is the clash between the center and the peripheries, the state and different groups of individuals (including families, religious groups, associations). Devolution of power to the peripheries leads to regionalism, and diffusion of power to organizations leads to factionalism. I follow Fei Xiaotong 費孝通, Liang Shuming 梁漱溟, Xu Langguang [徐琅光 Francis L.K. Hsu], He

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 28.

Youhui [何友暉 David Y.F. Ho], Huang Guangguo [黃光國 Hwang Kwang-kuo], 濱口惠俊 [Hamaguchi Eshun], Huang Meihui [黃美惠 Mayfair Mei-hui Yang], Andrew Kipnis, and Richard Nisbett among others and take Chinese culture as profoundly “relational”:

The Chinese cultural model can be summed up as a way of thinking and a mode of living that is defined by mutual dependency, assistance, and imitation premised on intrapersonal affection and understanding. And it is on the basis of mutual dependence on one another as well as on the environment that a feeling of personal security is sought after. I call this feature the “relations standard” of Chinese culture and it is an aspect of the psychological structure of Chinese culture.<sup>19</sup>

Beginning in the 1970s, scholars such as Hofstede<sup>20</sup> and Triandis<sup>21</sup> have researched from various perspectives the polarity between the individual and the collective and have identified that the distinction between the “self” and the “other” is a defining trait of all collectivist cultures—that is, a clear distinction between the in-group and the out-group. Brewer and Chen have conducted a robust overview on the scholarship on collectivism,<sup>22</sup> which I have used to craft this simple chart:

TABLE 1 Three types of cultures

Individual	Relationship	Collective
Independent self	Relational self	Collectivist self
Individualism	Relationship-based collectivism	Communitarian collectivism

19 Fang Zhaohui, *Wenming de huimie yu xinsheng: ruxue yu zhongguoxiandaixing yanjiu* 文明的毀滅與新生: 儒學與中國現代性研究 [*The death and Rebirth of Civilization*] (Beijing: Zhongguo renmin daxue chubanshe, 2011), 86.

20 Geert H. Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-related Values*, abr. ed. (Newbury Park: Sage, 1980/1984).

21 Harry C. Triandis, *Individualism & Collectivism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

22 Marilynn B. Brewer and Ya-Ru Chen, “Where (Who) Are Collectivism? Toward Conceptual Clarification of Individualism and Collectivism,” *Psychological Review*, 114, no. 1(2007): 133-151.

In this spectrum ranging from individual to collective, East Asian cultures fall on the collectivist end because they are ultimately based on a web of intra-personal relations. Societies that are primarily individualistic, no doubt, also exhibit aspects of collectivist cultures and, in some cases, to the point that some elements of collectivism are stronger in such societies than in East Asian ones. From my own research, I regard Chinese culture as “relationship-based collectivist” society.

Now we can analyze, from the standpoint of social psychology, why Chinese culture requires unified central power. The most important reason is that in Chinese history regionalism and factionalism—periods when division and separation of power prevailed—have never been able to preserve security and social order. Instead, such periods have been marked by conflict and violence. The quest for political unity in China has generally been defined by the fact that the majority of the Chinese belong to the same ethnic group, bound by a common writing system, way of living, and set of beliefs, without exerting strong pressure on minorities to assimilate. To understand this point, we need to review Pye’s distinction between the Chinese and Japanese conceptions of relationships (*guanxi* versus *on-giri*). According to Pye, interpersonal hierarchical relations in Japan are premised on the feelings of guilt and shame. The externalization and formalization of these emotional states gives private relations public recognition, and the political process in Japan is premised on such public affirmation of interpersonal relations. In China, however, private relations beyond the family are relatively weak, circumstantial, and malleable. Relations in China have been and still are fundamentally private and personal affairs that lack the potential for formalized public expression and recognition. As such, personal relations historically have not acted—and, in principle, cannot act—as the foundation of political behavior and action, as they have in Japan.

The question, of course, persists: Is there not a better alternative to the preservation of centralized power? Part of the answer lies in recognizing that some form of centralized authority will always be necessary because a factionalist or regionalist conflict by definition requires a higher power (either one of the factions or an external power) to act as the final arbitrator. This historical precedent has impelled Chinese political thinkers to walk from disunity to unity.

Pye’s criticism of *guanxi* and centralized authority suffers from one major misconception. According to Pye, a centralized authority can only be the product of the suppression of local governance and civil society, as well as opposition to multiculturalism. However, this merely represents the model of accumulating power proposed by the traditional Legalist school in antiquity and does not correspond to the predominant historical reality in China. As

the main sociopolitical ideology, Confucianism has always advocated a different model in which the public domain does not dominate the private domain. Rather, Confucianism's internal logic consists in the recognition that the fierce struggle between the public and the private realms is the result of a failure to uphold social justice and value local priorities. If a sense of justice prevails in society and local voices are heard, then the clash between the public and the private is significantly mitigated, to the point that it ceases to be the fundamental polarity in society and politics. Indeed, if such conditions are met, not only will centralized authority not be harmed but it will gain legitimacy and strength. This is why Confucius says: "If the people of distant regions are not obedient, then civility and virtue are to be cultivated to attract them to be so";<sup>23</sup> similarly, Mencius states: "a government based on benevolence will make the officers of the world aspire to serve in your [Majesty's] court, the farmers wish to plough your fields, the merchants desire to store their goods in your markets, travellers wish to use your roads, and all throughout the world who feel aggrieved by their rulers wish to come and complain to you."<sup>24</sup> Therefore, "using virtue to rule over people," "using goodness to cultivate people," and the idea that "the benevolent does not have enemies"<sup>25</sup> point to the political ideal of kingly rule. These sayings help us understand how—based on the theoretical precondition of justified centralized authority—the resolution between the public and the private can be achieved. This is the main reason Confucius compiled the *Spring and Autumn Annals* and all subsequent Confucian scholars in Chinese history have stressed the significance of ethical governance as a fundamental political ideal. And even if it has not always been achieved, Chinese political history has been invariably affected by this ideal.

Thus, why is it that in such a society—as Chinese society has historically been—wealth is distributed equitably, privileges are restrained, the people's needs are met, local self-governance is strong, and public-private tensions can be resolved?

The reason people form groups is that they seek a sense of security. If the political structure in force is unjust, people will feel the need to protect themselves against threats the central governing body is failing to address or to protect themselves against the political structure itself. When public authority is fair, however, the feeling of security it can afford to the population is far

23 *Analects*—Jishi. 論語·季氏. Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *Lunyu yizhu 論語譯注* [Translation and Commentary on Analects] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2002), 172.

24 *Mencius*—Lianghuiwang shang. 孟子·梁惠王上. Yang Bojun, *Mengzi yizhu 孟子譯注* [Translation and Commentary on Mencius] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2003), 17.

25 *Mencius*—Gongsun chou. 孟子·公孫丑下. Ibid., 86.

greater than the feeling of security afforded by any small individual group, simply because the power of the state is far greater than that of any particular group. Finally, individual organizations are defined by relations that are ultimately at odds with the general public interest because they prioritize the interests of the particular group over the interests of the general public. Thus even if particular groups can provide a sense of security, their inherent opposition to the public interest makes its members feel insecure. This is the outcome of factionalism because it lacks a great ethical or, indeed, psychological foundation.

If my theory stands up to scrutiny, it shows not only that Pye's thesis is misguided but also that it is possible for China to create a model of political authority based on mutual reliance between the public and the private—a model that is profoundly different from the Western one.

#### 4 Omnipotent Political Rule

Let us revisit Pye's theory of the Asian "omnipotent political authority." In Western culture, the division between politics and education is one of the cornerstones of modernity, on which the separation of state and society, politics and administration, ethics and law, are established. The Asian model of an omnipotent ruler is indeed profoundly different from the Western model. However, it makes sense that such an ideal was sought.

Judging from social psychology, the thesis of "omnipotent political authority" coheres rather well with Chinese psychosocial mechanisms. The Chinese way of thinking is defined by a strong sense of holism and collectivism as well as an orientation for affairs of "this world" and not a metaphysical or spiritual "otherworld." This way of thinking is manifested in the Chinese tendency to rely on and seek safety from the collective that exists in the present world and not in any another world (e.g., a Christian afterlife). Therefore, Chinese politics has predominantly stressed the significance of ideology to define the self based on the whole and to implement specific policies only after the successful establishment of ideology. Finally the dominant tendency in Chinese politics is to view the political process as a mechanism for solving the problems of the whole and not merely those of one of its parts.

The reason holism emerged in China is related to the this-worldly orientation of the Chinese—unlike the Christian orientation toward an afterlife. The traditional conception of life after death was that people existed as ghosts and spirits, not in a different world or plane of existence but, rather, in the same world as the living. Indeed, the this-worldly orientation in Chinese thinking is

so strong that belief in immortality in the form of a celestial being who lived within the bounds of this world was at times incredibly strong. If we compare these beliefs with the Christian or Hindu belief systems, then we can see that the Chinese orientation has an incredibly strong focus on the present world and not an afterlife. Using the rubric of modern Western philosophy, these beliefs exist within the bounds of the “visible world.” Of course, Chinese thought also had its own “metaphysics” that was rather similar to the Platonic idea of an “intelligible world”; however Chinese metaphysics is significantly different because it does not espouse a transcendental idealism or the possibility of pure existence of the soul or of any other kind of metaphysical object.

The focus on the present world has been the guiding force behind some key concepts in Chinese thought: the unity and harmony of nature and man and the holistic reasoning in Chinese philosophy. Because it lacked a belief that life after death was on a different existential plane, it has always emphasized making the present world safe and secure for all. Thus, it should not be a big surprise that an almost mystical quality was attributed to the collective because, as we have seen, the collective is the most successful medium for attaining security and order.

But what is the effect of a this-worldly orientation? People do not aim to transcend or reject the present world, so they are urged to become part of one body because it is in unity with all others that security can be attained. A this-worldly orientation, coupled with holistic thinking, helps explain why the highest authority has to be singular, indivisible, and, of course, omnipotent. Centralization of power, then, is motivated by a quest to avoid disruption and fragmentation and to provide a sense of security.

In *Geography of Thought*, Richard Nisbett, a cultural psychologist, conducts several experiments to demonstrate that East Asians have a holistic way of thinking.<sup>26</sup> Xu Langguang's *The Americans and the Chinese* analyzes the Chinese situational way of thinking: a relational way of thinking in which the individual seeks to understand and acquire a sense of safety through his/her relationship to the context.<sup>27</sup> In this lies the holistic way of thinking. Sun Longji's analysis of the underlying structure of Chinese culture shows that its conception of man is radically different from the Western one.<sup>28</sup> In China,

26 Richard Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently ... and Why* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 89-90, 99, 142-43.

27 Francis L.K. Hsu, *The Americans and the Chinese: Reflections on Two Cultures and Their People* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Natural History Press, 1970).

28 Sun Longji 孫隆基, *Zhongguo wenhua de shenceng jiegou* 中國文化的深層結構 [*The Deeper Structure of Chinese Culture*] (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe, 2004).

humanity has traditionally been understood as the unity of the body and the “heart-mind” whereas, in the West, human beings are regarded as the unity of body and soul. In the Western conception, the individual is in a framework of values that prioritizes independence, freedom, human rights, and the rule of law—only in this broader framework of values can the Western notion of the individual be established. But the Chinese conception of human life, which prioritizes a feeling of security, is premised not on the idea of independence but, rather, on participation in social relations. This participation in the world gives rise to the impetus that the unity between the body and “heart-mind,” the self and the other, humanity and nature is essential in the quest for security.

These psychological studies help us understand why the ideal political structure in China is omnipotent: its purpose is to satisfy the inherent need to feel safe, and to do so it needs maximal power. Is it possible to have a world where power is diffused to different authorities as relegated by the different loci of the present world? Of course, it is possible, but doing so in the Chinese context would require starting from the assumption of trying to preserve “a great unity” of power. In other words, only through an omnipotent authority can the Chinese derive a sense of security, and only an omnipotent authority can successfully cohere with this fundamental need in Chinese psychology.

## 5 Becoming Ideological

Pye stresses repeatedly that political speeches by several Asian leaders are not intimately tied to policy formation but, rather, have a strong symbolic function. This kind of political behavior often entails an element of deception because the purpose of the speech is to augment the leader’s power and is devoid of any specific political meaning. Pye seemingly argues that the ideological transformation of Asian politics is the embodiment of the nonpolitical nature of politics. That is because the main focus is not the most important realms of the political process—policy formation, decision-making, effectiveness, and feedback mechanisms—but, rather, nonconcrete actions and behaviors. Pye holds an implicitly negative outlook on this issue. However, if we acknowledge as sheer fact the reality that some cultures, such as the Chinese, regard relationships as their fundamental building block and the feeling of security as the utmost political priority, then we might not take such a negative stance. That is because the role of relationships in Chinese culture leads to another major trait: its affective response.

In their experiments, Nisbett and Taka Masuda discovered that Asians have a more heightened sense of other people's emotional states than Americans.<sup>29</sup> Leung and Bond have further shown that, Chinese are more influenced than Americans by personal relations in the distribution of resources.<sup>30</sup> In a culture with a heightened sense of interpersonal sensitivity, harmony and solidarity receive more attention, and an equal distribution of resources is more important than a fair distribution (i.e., one in which each gets as much as they produce). At the same time, the principle of fairness is favored in cultures that focus on productivity, competition, and personal achievement.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, interpersonal sensitivity is particularly high in Chinese culture, and this, in turn, makes people want to imitate one another, giving rise to the affective "response" of Chinese culture. This is expressed in the *Analects*: "The relation between the morally superior and petty people is like that between wind and grass. The grass must bend, when the wind blows across it." Confucius' point here is typical of a broad feature of Chinese politics. Confucius identifies social change with a change in norms and argues that norms can be changed most effectively by changing the ethos of the highest political authority. This is indeed an archetypal mode of governance in Chinese politics, in which the ideal political structure takes full note of this sociopolitical imperative and employs all the means at its disposal to enact it.

In previous scholarship, I examined the crisis of the model of Chinese academia through the significance of social norms in Chinese governance as expressed in the *Classic of Poetry*.<sup>32</sup> From a political science perspective, norms are effectively related to the orientation of the human mind: when the mind is focused on the same unified purpose, it can form unified strength, resulting in great political effectiveness. This kind of unity of mind across people is often expressed in the adaptation of norms. If people's minds are not unified, not only will there not be a strong motivation to action but, more crucially, the possibility that part of the population will act as a hindrance is high. This is the reason that, throughout Chinese history, the completion of many major political projects was premised on public sentiment—a feature, of course,

29 Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought*, 60.

30 Kwok Leung and Michael H. Bond, "The Impact of Cultural Collectivism on Reward Allocation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 47, no. 4 (1984): 793.

31 Michael H. Bond, Kwok Leung, and Kwok Choi Wan, "How Does Cultural Collectivism Operate? The Impact of Task and Maintenance Contributions on Reward Distribution," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 13, no. 2 (1982).

32 Fang Zhaohui, "Cong 'Maoshi' fengjiao kan zhongguo yanjiu de fanshi weiji 從〈毛詩〉風教看中國研究的範式危機 [Recognizing a Paradigm Crisis by Analyzing Research on the Feng Poems of the Book of Odes]," *Guoxue xinshiyue* 國學新視野 3 (2012): 55-70.



not unique to Chinese history. Returning to Pye's position on Asian leaders' speeches, it could be that Asian politicians wish to test the public's response to their speeches and gauge popular sentiment on key political issues. Therefore, even if such speeches may not appear to be political, it is mistaken to label them as "lacking a political nature," for they are inherently interested in consolidating specific sociopolitical norms. Moreover, the primary role of ideology in Chinese culture is the unification and stimulation of the human "heart-mind" as a catalytic agent of political will.

If the moralizing ideological turn in Chinese and Asian politics is not a manifestation of the non- or anti-political nature of politics, as Pye argues, then the question becomes: how do these societies find an ideological orientation? Actually, this is not a hard question to answer, for, in ancient China, Confucianism provided an answer to the ideological issue that cohered with Chinese norms and customs. Of course, during different periods premodern China had different ideological orientations: in the Warring States period, the "hundred schools" were in contention, in the Wei-Jin era [220-420] religious Daoism emerged, in the Tang [618-907] and Yuan [1271-1368] dynasties Buddhism flourished, and in the Han, Song, Ming, and Qing dynasties Confucianism was held in high regard. This very cursory overview of Chinese intellectual history simply shows that the dominant ideological orientation in Chinese history has not been unequivocal over time. However, from a more macroscopic perspective, Chinese culture beginning in the Western Zhou has regarded Confucianism as its dominant ideology, regardless of the fact that other intellectual trends have taken hold. In the modern era, Chinese culture has been faced with profound challenges, and the faith of intellectuals and the people in Confucianism and Chinese culture has been unprecedentedly shaken. Thus modern China is faced not with the issue as identified by Pye—how Chinese politics can move away from a moralizing ideology—but, rather, with which ideological orientation best fits China. The multiplicity of answers to this question in the past century is the real crux of the matter, and Pye's concerns with the separation of power and pluralism are wholly external to the Chinese discourse and historical development.

## 6 Is Ethical Governance the Way to Rule?

Western theorists are particularly fixated on the question of how the central authority can be checked to ensure that it is on the right path of governance. If the central authority is unjust, corrupt, and self-interested, what mechanism is

there to correct it? In short, what is the corrective mechanism in the Chinese political domain?

First, we have to recognize that this question is often posed based on the assumption that the Western political system—with its emphasis on constitutionalism, rule of law, and democracy—is indeed the best system for controlling the ultimate authority. However, scholars such as Pye have long ignored this fact: in a culture defined by relationships, the ultimate political authority is also bounded by a specific controlling mechanism. It is just radically different from the one found in the West and therefore hard to recognize as such. Over China's thousand-year history, the highest political authority has been checked by the imperative to rule with ritual and virtue.

Pye's analysis of governance through ethical virtue—what he calls a “virtuocracy”—is rule by virtuous men and rule by moral example.<sup>33</sup> He takes this to embody a unique feature of the Asian conception of power/authority. Only through recognition of moral talents that the people obey can the central authority attain legitimate power.<sup>34</sup> Pye presents ethical rule as a conceptualization of power that is inherently antithetical to politics, because it does not see utility and efficacy as the key political targets. Thus, reconsidering the aforementioned tension between the private and the public domains, we can appreciate how governance based on ethical virtue is one of the primary mechanisms for resolving this tension.

In his book, Pye analyzes Pakistan, Indonesia, and other Asian countries that, since their independence, have fervently tried to incorporate systems of political authority from the modern West in their effort to establish their own modern states. The experiences in these countries included chaos, military juntas, separatist movements, and many other negative outcomes. The ultimate reason for the impossibility of applying Western paradigms of power in Asia is, according to Pye, Asians' conception of political authority, which is fundamentally paternalistic.

However, the paternalistic model has at least two variations in Chinese history: the Legalist model and the Confucian model. The ideal of authority for Legalists is “charismatic leadership” (i.e., granted as a gift—*charisma*—from a supernatural power), whereas the Confucian ideal is a virtuous authority, that is, governance based on ethical rule. We know that Confucianism places particular emphasis on “ruling by virtue”<sup>35</sup> and that “leading/instructing with

33 Pye, *Asian Power and Politics*, 42, 200.

34 *Ibid.*, 42, 48–50.

35 *Analects*—Wei zheng. 論語•為政. Yang Bojun, *Lunyu yizhu*, 11.

virtue brings peace.”<sup>36</sup> Beginning with the *Book of Documents* [*Shangshu* 尚書], Chinese culture has had a very clear orientation toward ethical governance, because one of the results of the “relationship standard” is that people occupying high positions of authority set an example for others to follow. In the words of Confucius, only through virtue can one rectify oneself, and after having rectified oneself will the people follow “like they follow the northern star.”<sup>37</sup> This can also be seen in the *Mencius*: “With a just ruler, the state is stable”;<sup>38</sup> and the “Great Learning [*Daxue* 大學] chapter in the *Book of Rites* [*Liji* 禮記]: “When the sovereign treats the old as the old ought to be treated, the people become filial; when the sovereign treats his elders as the elders ought to be treated, the people develop brotherly submission; when the sovereign treats compassionately the destitute, the people do the same.” The Confucian canon is filled with similar sayings. But why is ethical governance necessary? One could say that the “relationship standard” in Chinese culture has brought about this effective conception of authority and has defined the necessity for ethical governance.

Therefore, in a society that places great value on interpersonal bonds, the key political issue is how to ensure that individuals of the highest talent—and not institutions—retain the highest decision-making power. That is why the phrase that a ruler ought to “use people in ruling people” from the Golden Mean [*Zhongyong* 中庸] chapter in the *Book of Rites* became the paramount political model in Chinese history. This model is ubiquitous in Confucian thought.

Can “using people to rule people” limit a violent and mercurial autocrat? Looking at Chinese history, we can see that Chinese social structure has been premised on some rationalizing assumptions. The ancient dynasties in China were subject to the limitations of any monarchical system, but after years of exploration, the system of selecting and appointing officials based on examinations was developed, which meant that it could not be manipulated by the will of a few. From the Han dynasty selection process, to the Tang and Song formal examination system onward, this model of governance represents the political practice and structure in premodern China.

If we follow Pye’s agreement with Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict in taking a cultural relativist turn,<sup>39</sup> and if we agree with the idea that “different

36 *Guanzi*—Mu min. 管子•牧民. Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, *Ershier zi* 二十二子 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1992), 92.

37 *Analects*—Wei zheng. Yang Bojun, *Lunyu yizhu*, 11.

38 *Mencius*—Lilou shang. 孟子•離婁上. Yang Bojun, *Mengzi yizhu*, 180.

39 Pye, *Asian Power and Politics*, 28.

cultures produce different norms and customs and therefore different modernizations,<sup>40</sup> then we cannot maintain an ultimately positive or negative attitude toward the Chinese model of authority. We have to realize that the inherent cultural patterns of a given group determine its internal tensions and contradictions as well as the models and mechanisms through which these tensions are resolved. Based on this point, then, the statement that Chinese politics is inherently “anti-political” cannot be established—rather, the ethical dimension of Chinese politics represents the model of political governance in China.

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40 Ibid., 13.

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# Vertical Democratic Meritocracy in China: Response to Comments

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Let me first thank editor Benjamin Hammer for organizing this series of exchanges. My book *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*<sup>1</sup> has generated much heat and light. The first two comments—by Huang Yushun and Liu Jingxi—generate heat and the second two comments—by Zhang Yongle and Cao Feng—generate light. I take special pleasure in the comments that generate light because I can learn from them. But I also need to respond to comments that generate heat because it is important to clarify misunderstandings and to spell out areas of irreconcilable differences. Let me begin by discussing the first two comments, and then I will say what I have learned from the last two comments.<sup>2</sup> For reasons of space, I cannot respond to all the detailed argumentation, nor will I engage with the polemics.

## 1 What's Wrong with Endorsing Both Political Democracy and Political Meritocracy?

It is important to clarify the relationship between political meritocracy and democracy. Both Huang Yushun and Liu Jingxi argue that democracy should serve as the standard for selecting and promoting leaders, regardless of the level of government and the history and culture of a country. They oppose any form of political meritocracy and propose a one-size-fits-all solution to

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1 Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

2 The fifth comment—by Fang Zhaohui—is interesting, but I will not respond because it does not involve the topic of political meritocracy or my book on the topic. Let me just say that I agree with Fang's critique of Lucian Pye's work.

the problem of political rule that has been the subject of intense debate by political theorists since the age of Confucius and Plato. My view is sensitive to context. The ideal that I defend is “vertical democratic meritocracy”: democracy at the lower levels of government and political meritocracy at higher levels of government, with political experimentation in between. Democracy refers to the idea of politics by the people, and political meritocracy refers to the idea that the political system should aim to select and promote public officials with above-average ability and virtue. In my view, both democracy and political meritocracy are important, and we need to think about how they can best fit together in particular contexts.

My argument is that the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy should be used to evaluate the political reality in China, but not necessarily elsewhere. I then apply this principle to the contemporary Chinese context and show that a large gap exists between the ideal and the reality, and propose measures for reducing this gap. But why should “vertical democratic meritocracy” be employed as the standard for evaluating the political system in China? There are four reasons. First, size matters: the ideal applies only in a large country. It is much more difficult to rule and manage huge and incredibly diverse countries such as China, and it is not helpful to compare China to small, relatively homogeneous countries endowed with plentiful natural resources.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, at higher levels of government of large countries, problems are complex and often affect many sectors of society, the rest of the world, and future generations. In large countries, political success is more likely with leaders who have political experience at lower levels of government and a good performance record. Electoral democracy may be appropriate for small countries or at lower levels of government of large countries; even if things go wrong—say, too much populism or small-minded navel-gazing at the cost of neglecting long-term planning and concern for future generations and the rest of the world—it is not the end of the world. But it may well be the end of the world if things go severely wrong at the top of big and powerful countries. Nobody worries about the fact that Nicaragua has not signed the Paris accord on dealing with climate change, but President Donald Trump’s disregard for the accord may well be disastrous for the world. The policies of leaders at the top of huge political

3 Francis Fukuyama argues that Denmark is the country that comes closest to realizing the ideal of liberal democracy (see his book *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015]). But it seems absurd to suggest that the political system of a relatively homogeneous, well-off country of 5.7 million people surrounded by small, friendly neighbors be used as the benchmark for assessing political success in large countries, such as the United States, India, or China.



communities shape the lives of hundreds of millions of people, including future generations and the rest of the world. Hence, the ideal of political meritocracy is more appropriate to assess the higher levels of political systems of large countries, such as China.

Second, the ideal of political meritocracy has a long history in China. More than 2,500 years ago, Confucius defended the view that exemplary people [*junzi* 君子] have superior ability and virtue (as opposed to the earlier view that *junzi* have aristocratic family backgrounds), and since then Chinese intellectuals have argued over which abilities and virtues matter for government, how to assess those abilities and virtues, and how to institutionalize a political system that aims to select and promote public officials with superior abilities and virtues. It is no exaggeration to say that the ideal of political meritocracy was taken for granted in most political debates in Chinese history.<sup>4</sup> And China's two-thousand-year experience with a complex bureaucratic system can be viewed as a constant effort to institutionalize the ideal of political meritocracy. But the ideal does not necessarily apply in political contexts where the ideal of political meritocracy was not so central and that lacked a long history of bureaucracy inspired by meritocratic ideals. Moreover, it is extremely challenging to build up institutions inspired by the ideal of political meritocracy, and it takes decades for such efforts to yield some success (in contrast, it is not so difficult to institutionalize free and fair competitive elections, even in chaotic countries such as Iraq or Afghanistan; whether those elections lead to good results for the political community is a different question).

Third, the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy has inspired political reform in China over the past four decades or so. A typical trope in the Western media is that substantial economic reform has taken place in China, but no political reform. However, that is because electoral democracy at the top is viewed as the only standard for what counts as political reform. If we set aside this dogma, it becomes obvious that the Chinese political system has undergone substantial political reform over the past few decades, and the main difference is that a serious effort has been made to (re)establish political meritocracy at higher levels of government. The country was primed for rule at the top by meritocratically selected officials following a disastrous experience with radical populism and arbitrary dictatorship during the Cultural Revolution,

4 Huang claims that I distort Confucian thought, but he does not provide any evidence that Confucians supported the idea that people should have equal rights to participate in politics before the encounter with Western political thought in the mid-to late nineteenth century. It is certainly true that Confucians often advocated criticisms of mistaken policies and open discussion of political matters, but that does not translate into a defense of equal rights to political participation or elections as a way of selecting rulers.

and China's leaders could reestablish elements of its meritocratic tradition, such as the selection of leaders based on examination and promotion based on performance evaluations at lower levels of government—almost the same system, in form (but not content) that shaped the political system for much of Chinese imperial history—without much controversy. Since then, political meritocracy has inspired political reform at higher levels of government, with more emphasis on education, examinations, and political experience at lower levels of government. A large gap remains between the ideal and the practice, but the underlying motivation for political reform is still the ideal of vertical political meritocracy.

Fourth, survey results consistently show widespread support for the ideal of political meritocracy (aka guardianship discourse) in China, especially at higher levels of government. The ideal is widely shared, much more so than the ideal of selecting leaders through elections. And the ideal of political meritocracy is also widely used to evaluate the political system. Corruption became such a big issue in the popular mind at least partly because of the expectation that meritocratically selected leaders should possess superior virtue. But the ideal of political meritocracy may not be an appropriate standard for evaluating political progress (and regress) in societies where the ideal is not widely shared and is not typically used by the people to evaluate their political leaders.

That said, the way in which I framed this issue in my book may have led to misunderstanding. “Vertical democratic meritocracy” is a matter of tendencies, not a matter of absolutes. I may have given the impression that I object to any form of political meritocracy at lower levels of government and to any form of democracy at higher levels of government. But I do not mean to deny the need for some form of political meritocracy at lower levels of government and the need for some form of democracy at higher levels of government, even if the principle should still be “the higher the level of government, the greater the need for meritocratic mechanisms for the selection and promotion of leaders.” When I present my book in mainland China, a typical reaction is that more political meritocracy is needed at lower levels of government, not just at higher levels, because local elections are often corrupt. I agree. Here in Shandong Province, for example, Confucian-trained intellectuals inspired by Liang Shuming's example from the pre-revolutionary era provide moral education for farmers in the countryside. Such meritocratic mechanisms that aim to improve the quality of decision-making in villages can and should be welcomed. But they should not replace democratic foundations, and the ultimate aim should be to promote more democracy at the local level, where the people are best placed to understand local needs and to assess the quality of their leaders.

Along with Huang and Liu, I also agree that more democratic mechanisms are needed at higher levels of government. Unlike, say, fascism or totalitarianism, political meritocracy is compatible with most democratic values and practices. Non-electoral forms of political participation, such as consultation and deliberative polling, as well as freedom of speech, are theoretically compatible with political meritocracy at the top. But political meritocracy is not compatible with competitive elections at the highest level of government because electoral democracy for top leaders would wreck the advantages of a system that aims to select and promote leaders with experience, ability, and virtue: an elected leader without any political experience (e.g., Donald Trump) could rise to the top (and make many beginner's mistakes), an elected leader would have to spend valuable time raising funds and giving the same speech over and over again, instead of thinking about policy, and an elected leader would be more constrained by short-term electoral considerations at the expense of long-term planning for the good of the political community and the rest of the world.

So what are the differences between my views and those of Huang and Liu? The differences are political, not philosophical. They oppose any form of political meritocracy and favor democracy at all levels of government, including electoral democracy at higher levels of government. And they defend this principle as a universal value that should serve as the standard for evaluating political progress and regress, regardless of a country's historical context, national characteristics, or size. My view is different. I wholeheartedly endorse some universal values: as noted in my book, widespread agreement exists on the value of basic human rights and prohibitions against slavery, genocide, murder, torture, prolonged arbitrary detention, and systemic racial discrimination, as well as the idea that all citizens should be equal before the law in criminal cases. I also think that, as societies modernize, their need for more democratic mechanisms increases. More freedom of speech and association (short of the right to form political parties that compete for power at higher levels of government) is necessary as societies become more complex and citizens become more educated and demanding. Non-electoral forms of political participation, such as the right to exercise oversight of the government and the right to provide advice, can help to satisfy the desires of the ambitious and public-spirited people outside the political system. Such tendencies characterize other modernizing East Asian societies, including Singapore, which explicitly appeals to meritocracy as a source of legitimacy, and there is no reason to think that China will be an exception. But electoral democracy at the top will eliminate the advantages of "vertical democratic meritocracy," and that is where we need to draw the line. Huang and Liu would probably disagree with

this caveat, but at a minimum we need to be clear about where we disagree. I am prepared to change my mind, but Huang and Liu would need to explain why they think electoral democracy would be beneficial at the top in a large country with a tradition of political meritocracy that still enjoys wide support among the people. Rather than simply asserting their political preferences, they would need to support their claims with evidence from contemporary social science and history, as well as explain why leaders elected by the people are more likely to deal with global challenges, such as climate change and regulating dangerous forms of artificial intelligence. I look forward to such debates, and I hope that they can be carried out in a civil and respectful manner so that we can learn and improve from our exchanges: both Confucius and John Stuart Mill would surely agree that we should strive to learn from alternative views! I hope to learn from my critics, so let me turn to two comments that provided learning opportunities.

## 2 Maoism and Daoism: Remediating the Drawbacks of Political Meritocracy

In chapter 3 in my book, I discuss the drawbacks of political meritocracy and propose ways of remediating those drawbacks short of electoral democracy at the top. The first drawback is that rulers selected on the basis of their superior ability may abuse their power. I argue that China has developed mechanisms to deal with this problem, such as collective leadership and term and age limits.<sup>5</sup> But these safeguards are not sufficient. To deal with corruption, I argue that Confucian moral education and institutional safeguards are needed. What I did not expect is that the anti-corruption drive could achieve relatively rapid success in the couple of years since my book was published. The main reason for success is that the anti-corruption drive has relied on the Legalist tradition, that is, the use of fear and harsh punishments as a means to maintain social order. But Legalism can only be effective in the short term. For long-term success to be achieved, the public must internalize the notion that corruption is a moral evil, and public officials should abstain from engaging in corruption even when they do not worry about being caught. So I still think Confucian

5 Recent developments in China are not encouraging, but it is worth noting that electoral democracies are also vulnerable to abuses of power: elected politicians in Russia, Turkey, Poland, Hungary, and even the United States scapegoat minorities and violate basic rights. There is no single institutional safeguard that can rein in politicians hungry for power, especially if they enjoy widespread support in society at large.

moral education, with its emphasis on moral transformation, has an important role. It is encouraging that Confucian moral education has been revised in the formal education system and in schools for training public officials. But success in transforming attitudes will take years, and such measures must also be accompanied by measures that reduce the incentives for engaging in corruption, including higher salaries for public officials and clearer separation of economic and political power.

The second drawback to political meritocracy is that it can lead to the ossification of political hierarchies. This has been a recurring problem throughout Chinese history, with a constant need for new thinking about meritocratic ideas and institutions designed to break down ossified hierarchies and to ensure equality of opportunity among members of the political community.<sup>6</sup> In contemporary China, perhaps the biggest problem is the large gap between rich and poor, which means that those born to wealthier families have a greater likelihood of eventually attaining political power. Hence, it is imperative to reduce the gap between rich and poor, but this, too, will take years to achieve.

The third drawback is the problem of legitimacy: in a political meritocracy without competitive elections at the top that give all citizens the hope (or illusion) that they can participate in the political system, it is difficult to legitimize that system to those outside it. In my book, I argue that the current sources of legitimacy—nationalism, performance, and meritocracy—will not be sufficient in the future and that the problem of legitimacy can be addressed only through democratic reforms. I propose the idea of a referendum on “vertical democratic meritocracy” that would be an explicit form of popular consent. I defend the idea of a referendum on the grounds that the electorate tends to be unusually well-informed when they vote in referenda on major constitutional issues compared to regular democratic elections. My views were influenced by my own experience with two referenda on the question of Quebec’s independence. Since I wrote the book, however, Brexit has shaken my faith in referenda. If the electorate in the world’s most mature democracy can vote in a less-than-rational ways—the levels of education and actual interaction with European migrants in the UK inversely correlated with votes in favor of Brexit—why should we expect more sensible voters in a relatively poor country without a long history of democracy? So if a referendum on vertical democratic meritocracy is held in China, perhaps it should be accompanied by meritocratic checks, such as a simple multiple-choice test on political options designed by independent experts.

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6 See Wang Pei, “Debates on Political Meritocracy in China: A Historical Perspective,” *Philosophy and Public Issues* 7, no. 1 (2017).

But this proposal for a referendum may seem far-fetched in the Chinese context. Meanwhile other mechanisms are needed to secure more democratic legitimacy for the political system, especially to secure the endorsement of those outside it. And here the comments by Zhang and Cao are particularly helpful. Zhang argues that Confucian education emphasized virtue “in order to maintain a sense among the people that the career of a political requires special talents and training, and perhaps only suits a minority of people.” However, it is also necessary to affirm the idea that “the average person can also participate in public affairs at the grassroots level, and even realize outstanding achievements and achieve recognition by the state.” China’s revolution, inspired by Mao’s thought, allowed for the possibility that average people could achieve recognition by the state. For one thing, a less intellectual view of what constitutes political merit prevailed at the time, as Zhang writes: “those who were selected as model workers often were able to use the opportunity to enter the political stage, which helped to forge the common belief that ordinary jobs can offer valuable contributions to society and even the possibility of being transferred to a leadership position.” In Mao’s time, however, valuing workers was accompanied by a radical form of anti-intellectualism. Today, the challenge is one of valuing different forms of political merit without radical critiques of forms that fall outside those valued by the state (and without violence directed at people from “bad” class backgrounds).

The greatest resource for maintaining legitimacy, Zhang argues, is the “mass line,” which stems from the revolutionary era:

The mass line, the Party term for a policy aimed at cultivating contacts with the common people, emphasized the idea of coming from the masses and going among the masses. It represents opposition to the idea that a minority or elites should be able to pursue top-down policies. Instead it argues that the understanding of truth is a process that is constantly being revised by collective practice and that close contact with the masses is necessary to reach a more realistic situation of the country’s situation, which in turn is critical for formulating the correct party line and policies.... To put the concept of mass line into practice, it’s necessary to “find the masses.” This not only requires the cadres to go out into the masses, but also necessitates a certain level of organization on the part of grassroots society, in order to create connections between the grassroots, policymakers, and the executive branch, which helps policymakers become more responsive to grassroots society. A system of government that is highly responsive to the people is very likely to earn their support.

Zhang's argument is thought provoking. The mass line put into practice is a way of securing widespread legitimacy for the political system without a system of competitive elections. Today, it is encouraging that up-and-coming public officials in China typically need to spend extended periods in impoverished rural regions to help to make the cadres more sensitive to the needs of the worst-off members of the community.<sup>7</sup> But opportunities for self-organization at the grass-roots level are insufficient at the moment.

Cao's article discusses Daoist critiques of meritocracy. Confucians and Mohists defended different conceptions of political meritocracy in the pre-Qin period, but the Daoists argued against the entire system. Laozi, the originator of Daoist thought, bluntly put forward the idea of not valuing or employing the virtuous:

Not to value and employ men of superior ability is the way to keep the people from rivalry among themselves; not to prize articles which are difficult to procure is the way to keep them from becoming thieves; not to show them what is likely to excite their desires is the way to keep their minds from disorder.

The basic idea is that any sort of competitive society—including a society that encourages competition according to a conception of political merit—will make people, especially the “losers,” envious and miserable, so it is best to discourage any form of competition and desire for a better life. Hence, “the sage, in the exercise of government ... constantly tries to keep people without knowledge and without desire, and where there are those who have knowledge, to keep them from presuming to act on it.” The ruler should limit politics driven by competitive feelings and ambition, which means not employing the wise and the virtuous.

In the same vein, Zhuangzi discouraged the use of the wise and virtuous. He shares Laozi's view that “elevating the worthy” will lead to a competitive and chaotic society: “if you raise the men of talent to office, you will create disorder; making the people strive with one another for promotion; if you employ

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7 During the Cultural Revolution, millions of educated urbanites had to spend extended periods in the countryside to be “educated” by farmers. It was a miserable experience for many intellectuals (especially because they had no indication of when they could return to the cities), but it did have the positive consequence that public officials in charge of the initial period of economic reform had experience in the countryside and a good feeling for the needs of the farmers (I thank Wang Hui for this insight). In more recent years, the cadres lost touch with the “masses” and were more likely to implement policies insensitive to their needs.

men for their wisdom, the people will rob each other.” Zhuangzi goes further by casting doubt on the whole idea of distinguishing between those with more and less worth. Everyone has limited talent and a biased perspective:

No one has covered or extended the whole range of truth ... there is a limit to our life, but to knowledge there is no limit. With what is limited to pursue after what is unlimited is a perilous thing; and when, knowing this, we still seek the increase of our knowledge, the peril cannot be averted.

Humans can only dwell in specific places, be present in a specific situation, and obtain limited knowledge, yet they often regard their own view as the whole truth and argue endlessly from and for their limited perspective: “So it is that we have the contentions between the Confucians and the Mohists, the one side affirming what the other denies and vice versa.” And however brilliant a sage may be, he cannot avoid becoming entangled in social connections and political plots that lead to disaster: “Longfeng was beheaded; Bigan has his heart torn out; Chang Hong was ripped open; and Zixu was reduced to pulp. Worthy as these four men were, they did not escape dreadful deaths.” So the solution is to abandon the whole idea of pursuing wisdom: “in the age of perfect virtue, they attached no value to wisdom, nor employed men of ability.”

The Lao-Zhuang tradition may seem extreme in its anti-intellectualism. But it reminds us of our necessarily limited perspectives and of the need to distrust those who arrogantly claim to know the whole truth and confidently assert their political effectiveness. The solution is not to abandon the idea that some perspectives are better than others—at the very least, even Zhuangzi would agree that those who are aware of their limitations are better than those who are not. Nor is the solution to abandon the political aim of selecting and promoting those with above-average talent and virtue. What must be done is to employ officials with diverse talents and different perspectives to help compensate for the necessary limitations of any one person. Cao shows that the Huang-Lao tradition drew on Daoist insights for political purposes:

Being a political ideology, Huang-Lao thought had to use the talented and the virtuous to implement and carry out, and therefore could not possibly unconditionally suspect and reject the talented and virtuous like the Lao-Zhuang tradition did, let alone consider them to be initiators of turmoil. On the contrary, why sages were needed, what kind of sages were needed, and how to make use of them were important elements of Huang-Lao political thought.



In political practice, the monarch needs to recognize that he cannot do everything on his own and he needs to employ public officials with superior talents. Even the wisest sages have limited knowledge and perspectives and need assistance (and criticism): “since the ruler’s wisdom and talents are not sufficient to spread his splendor across lands and seas, he is surrounded by high ministers who assist him.” To allow public officials to flourish and make contributions, the monarch must practice inaction: “if the ruler is able to renounce his own wisdom, talent, and accomplishments, he will be able to bring fully into play his people’s wisdom, talent, and accomplishments.” Given necessarily limited knowledge and perspectives, the monarch should strive to employ different kinds of public officials with different backgrounds and different skills: diverse “types of men have opposite characters, however sages can still use them in a tolerant way.... If guarding just one corner means leaving out the rest of the world, and selecting one species means giving up all other beings, one is sure to achieve very little: the reach of one’s administration will certainly be very narrow.” In short, the monarch should be aware of his limitations and make comprehensive use of public officials with diverse backgrounds and talents.

In a political system without a monarch, the Huang-Lao school of thought might counsel against one-person rule, especially if the ruler is buttressed by a cult of personality that portrays him as all-wise and benevolent. In a system of collective leadership, diverse perspectives can inform the policy-making process at the very top. In a large country such as China, collective leadership at the top also needs to be supported by an extensive bureaucracy at different levels of government staffed with a wide range of public officials from diverse backgrounds with diverse talents. But even this kind of system would not fully assuage Daoist worries about the downside of political meritocracy: in the modern world, even a well-functioning political meritocracy that selects and promotes public officials with diverse talents and backgrounds needs to be supported by an ultracompetitive education system that aims to identify and educate those with above-average ability and talent, and the dominant competitive ethos of that society will lead to endless striving for success that causes misery for the “losers” and hence sows the seeds of social disorder. And these Daoist worries would be further exacerbated in a capitalist economic system that rewards companies that successfully invent new needs and desires for consumers who are never supposed to be satisfied with the status quo.

So what can be done to soften the deleterious societal effects of political meritocracy in the modern age? Perhaps the best way is to emphasize that being a professional public official is not the only way to lead a meaningful life.

This means assigning more social (and material) value to “nonpolitical” ways of life that contribute to the social good, such as the lives of farmers, family caregivers, and manual laborers. It also means allowing for mechanisms that cast doubt on the meritocratic system, but without really threatening the entire system. Perhaps the most fascinating social development in contemporary China has been the rapid spread of a “culture of cuteness”: a public affirmation of cute animals, robots, and emojis that inform everyday social interaction. The trend started in Japan in the 1970s,<sup>8</sup> when Japan was largely ruled by meritocratically selected leaders selected in an ultracompetitive education system. It was led by teenage girls and eventually spread to other sectors of society. Over the past decade or so, the culture of cuteness has spread to China almost like wildfire. The streets of Chinese cities are crowded with ridiculously cute dogs and cats, and the use of cute emojis is almost mandatory for communication on social media, even in official settings, such as exchanges between university administrators.<sup>9</sup> It is worth asking why the culture of cuteness has planted social roots so quickly and so deeply in China. One explanation is that it is helpful for meritocratic competition: according to one recent study, viewing cute images promotes careful behavior and narrows attentional focus, with potential benefits for learning and office work.<sup>10</sup> But the deeper reason may be both disturbing and encouraging for defenders of political meritocracy. On the one hand, the culture of cuteness represents a kind of rebellion against the entire system: instead of affirming the value of boring and hard-working (largely male) bureaucrats who serve the public good, it affirms the value of playful and somewhat self-indulgent ways of life. On the other hand, the culture of cuteness reduces the desire to join the “race to the top,” which helps to

8 Paul Ratner, “Why Do Japanese People Love Cuteness? Learn the Science of ‘Kawaii,’” *Big Think*. <http://bigthink.com/paul-ratner/why-do-the-japanese-love-cute-things/>.

9 This is not meant to be a criticism. One of the problems with traditional email is that messages that rely on text often have difficulty in conveying emotions and hence could be easily misunderstood. But now we can add a smiley face or other such symbols of emotions to convey the feelings meant to accompany our messages, which reduces the risk of misunderstanding. On the other hand, the use of cuteness and emojis could also dampen critical thinking, feeding materialist urges and distracting the public from taking or expressing critical views of officials and the political system. The effect of emoji use and cuteness is yet to be fully explored.

10 Hiroshi Nittono et al., “The Power of Kawaii: Viewing Cute Images Promotes a Careful Behavior and Narrows Attentional Focus,” *Plos One*, September 26, 2012. <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0046362>. I thank Julien Bell for sending this study.

placate the “losers” in the political meritocracy and hence stabilizes the meritocratic system.<sup>11</sup>

To summarize: if the task is to improve and consolidate vertical democratic meritocracy, we can learn much not just from Confucians and liberal democrats but also from Maoists and Daoists. More specifically, both Maoist and Daoist ideas can help to promote the legitimacy of the system among those left out of official power hierarchies in political meritocracies that lack the safety valve of electoral competition for higher-level political posts. The Maoist mass line can help to provide avenues for grass-roots participation in politics and make elites more responsive to the needs of the masses. And Daoist-style skepticism about the desirability of the meritocratic system can help to legitimize alternative avenues for socially valued ways of life, such as the “culture of cuteness,” which give meaning to the lives of those shutout of the political hierarchies.

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11 If the culture of cuteness is (at least partly) a reaction to an ultracompetitive meritocratic political system underpinned by an ultrameritocratic education system, one might expect the culture of cuteness not to have a substantial social impact in societies that are more easygoing and less competitive. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the culture of cuteness has had little social impact in the world’s happiest countries, such as Norway and Denmark. Though it does seem to be taking hold in the US via increasing development of emojis, which may speak less about a reaction to competition and more about a feeling of alienation, political helplessness or economic anomie.