

## Meritocracy Is a Good Thing

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BEIJING—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. Political meritocracy has been largely eclipsed from political theorizing in the modern world, but there are three important reasons for reviving and reinterpreting this political ideal, particularly in a Chinese context. First, political meritocracy has been, and continues to be, central to Chinese political culture. Second, democracy is a flawed political system and meritocracy can help to remedy some of its flaws. Third, the Chinese Communist Party itself has become a more meritocratic organization over the last three decades or so. I will discuss each of these factors and conclude with some suggestions for reducing the gap between the reality and the meritocratic ideal.

**Political Meritocracy and Chinese Political Culture** | Political meritocracy is a key theme in the history of Chinese political culture. The idea of “elevating the worthy” emerged in the wake of the disintegration of the pedigree-based aristocratic order of the Spring and Autumn period (Yuri Pines, *The Everlasting Empire*, Princeton University Press, 2012, ch. 3). This idea was shared by the vast majority of known thinkers in the Warring States period, and political thinkers debated about how to define merit and how to develop political practices and institutions based on merit. For Confucius, political meritocracy starts from the assumption that everybody should be educated. However, not everybody will emerge from this process with an equal ability to make morally informed political judgments. Hence, an important task of the political system is to select leaders with an above average ability to make morally informed political judgments, as well as to encourage as many people of talent as possible to participate in politics. Such rulers, in Confucius’s view, would gain the trust of the people.

In Imperial China, political meritocracy was institutionalized by means of the imperial examination system that put successful candidates on the road to fame and power. Whatever the flaws of the system, it did provide a minimal standard of talent selection and allowed for a modest level of social circulation. The examination system spread to Korea and Vietnam and also influenced the development of civil service examinations in Western countries. In the post World War II era, East Asian societies developed rapidly at least partly due to the sound decision-making of meritocratically-selected political rulers. Today, political surveys show that there is widespread support for the ideal of political meritocracy in East Asian societies with a Confucian heritage. In China, Shi Tianjian and Lu Jie show that the majority of people endorse “guardianship discourse,” defined as the need to identify “high quality politicians who care about the people’s demands, take people’s interests into consideration when making decisions, and choose good policies on behalf of their people and society” over liberal democratic discourse that privileges procedural arrangements ensuring people’s rights to participate in politics and choose their leaders (“Cultural Impacts on People’s Understanding of Democracy,” 2010 APSA Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C.).

The idea of political meritocracy is also central to Western political theory and practice. Plato famously defended a meritocratic political ideal in *The Republic*: the best political regime is composed of political leaders selected on the basis of their superior ability to make morally informed political judgments and granted power to rule over the community. Meritocracy was influential throughout subsequent history, though subsequent thinkers rarely defended a pure form of political meritocracy. US founding fathers

and nineteenth century “liberal elitists” such as John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville put forward political ideas that tried to combine meritocracy and democracy. Yet theorizing about meritocracy has all but faded from modern Western political discourse. There are hundreds if not thousands of books on the theory and practice of democracy, but it is hard to think of a single recent (and decent) English-language book on the idea of political meritocracy.

**Democracy and Meritocracy** | The dearth of debates about political meritocracy would not be problematic if it were widely agreed that liberal democracy is the best political system (or the least bad political system, as Winston Churchill famously put it). But there are growing doubts. The “crisis of governability” in Western democracies caused by the unprecedented globalized flow of goods, services, and capital has been well documented by political scientists (see, e.g., Charles Kupchan, “The Democratic Malaise,” *Foreign Affairs*, Jan./Feb. 2012). Capitalist interests have disproportionate power in the political process, especially in the American political system which has been described, perhaps not unfairly, as one-dollar one-vote rather than one-person one-vote. Political theorists have raised questions about the voting system itself. Part of the problem is that voters are often selfishly concerned with their narrow material interest, and ignore the interests of future generations and people living outside national boundaries who are affected by the policies of the government. Jason Brennan has argued that voters should stay away from the voting booth if they cannot make morally informed political judgments (*The Ethics of Voting*, Princeton University Press, 2011). Certainly there are some issues where the pursuit of narrow economic self-interest at the voting booth could lead to disastrous consequences for non-voters who lack representation (consider global warming). Just as worrisome, perhaps, voters often misunderstand their own interests. Drawing on extensive empirical research, Bryan Caplan shows that voters are often irrational and he suggests tests of voter competence as a remedy (*The Myth of the Rational Voter*, Princeton University Press, 2007). Of course, such proposals are non-starters in liberal democracies. The principle of political equality expressed in the form of one person, one vote has assumed quasi-sacred status today. In the nineteenth-century, John Stuart Mill could propose extra-votes for educated people, but today proponents of such proposals are considered (in Western countries) to have lost their moral compass.

Fortunately, political theorists are not so dogmatic in the Chinese context. Jiang Qing has argued that democratic forms of legitimacy—which in the West is grounded in notions of popular sovereignty—should be balanced by two other sources of legitimacy that come from Heaven and Earth. In a modern context, he argues that this political ideal should be institutionalized by means of a tri-cameral legislature, with authority divided between a House of the People, a House of Confucian Scholars, and a House of Cultural Continuity that correspond to the three forms of legitimacy (*A Confucian Constitutional Order*, Princeton University Press, 2012). Similarly, Bai Tongdong and Joseph Chan have argued for models 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]. These models may be utopian, but they provide us with a new, and, arguably, better standard for evaluating political progress in China and elsewhere. Instead of judging political progress simply by asking whether China is becoming more democratic, the new standard provides a more comprehensive way of judging political progress (and regress). The question is also whether the Chinese political system is becoming more meritocratic. And here there may be grounds for optimism.

**Meritocracy and the Chinese Communist Party** | In its early days, Communist China under Mao explicitly rejected Confucian-inspired ideas of political meritocracy. Understandably, perhaps, the main task was rewarding revolutionary energy and securing military strength for the state to put an end to abuse and bullying by foreign powers. But now, the establishment of a relatively secure and strong Chinese state under the leadership of the CCP means that China has less to worry about survival qua political community. Hence, the emphasis has shifted to the task of good governance led by able and

virtuous political leaders, and the selection and promotion mechanisms of the CCP have become more meritocratic.

In the 1980s, talented students at leading Chinese universities often did not seek to join the CCP. Today, it's a different story. College campuses have become the main location for recruitment efforts (Gang Guo, "Party Recruitment of College Students in China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, v. 14(43), May 2005). At elite schools like Tsinghua University, 28 percent of all undergrads, 43 percent of graduating seniors and up to 55 percent of grad students were CCP members in 2010 ([www.china.org.cn/china/2011-05/31/content\\_22678122.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/2011-05/31/content_22678122.htm)) (I've been teaching at Tsinghua for nearly eight years, and many of my high-performing students are party members). The CCP is also targeting the "new social stratum" of young professionals in urban areas, including business people and managers in private firms, lawyers, and accountants.

The promotion system for cadres is even more explicitly meritocratic. At a recent dialogue session with several foreign and Chinese academics, Mr. Li Yuanchao, Minister of the Organization Department of the CPC Central Committee, provided some fascinating and illuminating details. Minister Li noted that different criteria are used to judge abilities and virtues at different levels of government. At lower levels, close connection with the people is particularly important (put differently, perhaps, democracy is more important at the lower levels). At the higher levels, more emphasis is placed on rationality since cadres need to take into account of multiple factors and decision-making involves a much broader area of governance, but virtues such as concern for the people and a practical attitude also matter. Cadres are also expected to set a model of corruption-free rule. To illustrate the rigorous (meritocratic) nature of selection at higher levels of government, Minister Li described the procedure used to select the Secretary General of the Organization Department of the CPC Central Committee. First, there was a nomination process, including retired cadres. Those who received many nominations could move to the next stage. Next, there was an examination, including such questions as how to be a good Secretary General. Over ten people took the exam, and the list was narrowed to five people. To ensure that the process was fair, the examination papers were put in the corridor for all to judge the results. Then, there was an oral examination with an interview panel composed of ministers, vice-ministers, and university professors. To ensure transparency and fairness, ordinary cadres who work for the General Secretary were in the room, which allowed them to supervise the whole process. Three candidates with the highest score were selected for the next stage. Then, the department of personnel led an inspection team to look into the performance and virtue of the candidates, with more emphasis placed on virtue. Two people were recommended for the next stage. The final decision was made by a committee of twelve ministers who each had a vote, and the candidate had to have at least eight votes to succeed. If the required number of votes was not secured the first time, the ministers discussed further until two-thirds could agree on a candidate.

It is hard not to be impressed by the rigorous selection process for the Secretary General of the Organization Department of the CPC Central Committee (and it is even harder not to be impressed by the successful candidate). Such transparency in the talent selection process is likely to contribute to the government's legitimacy. If people are not aware of the selection process, they may suspect that promotion is based primarily on loyalty, connections (*guanxi*), or corruption. Hence, shedding light on the actual mechanisms is likely to dispel such suspicions. There is still a long way to go—for example, it would be useful to have more information about the criteria that influence selection of members on the Central Committee and the Politburo—but the fact that Minister Li told us about the process in his organization is a good sign of a high-level decision to increase transparency.

**Improving Meritocracy** | The advantages of "actually-existing" meritocracy in the CCP are clear. Cadres are put through a grueling process of talent selection, and only those with an excellent record of past performance are likely to make it to the highest levels of government. The training process includes the cultivation of virtues such as compassion for the disadvantaged by such means as limited

periods of work in poor rural areas. Moreover, this kind of meritocratic selection process is only likely to work in the context of a one-party state. In a multi-party state, there is no assurance that performance at lower levels of government will be rewarded at higher levels, and there is no strong incentive to train cadres so that they have experience at higher levels, because the key personnel can change with a government led by different party. So even talented leaders, like US President Obama, can make many “beginner’s mistakes” once they assume rule because they haven’t been properly trained to assume command at the highest levels of government (see, e.g., <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/print/2012/03/obama-explained/8874/>). Leaders in China are not likely to make such mistakes because of their experience and training. The fact that decision-making at the highest-levels is by committee—the nine-member Standing Committee of the Politburo—also ensures that no one person with outlandish and uninformed views can decide upon wrong-headed policies (such as Lee Kuan Yew’s policies in Singapore favoring births by educated women that were based on eugenics theories rejected by most scientists).

Once Chinese leaders reach positions of political power, they can make decisions that consider the interests of all relevant stakeholders, including future generations and people living outside the state. In multi-party democracies with leaders chosen on the basis of competitive elections, by contrast, leaders need to worry about the next election and they are more likely to make decisions influenced by short-term political considerations that bear on their chances of getting reelected. The interests of non-voters affected by policies, such as future generations, are not likely to be taken seriously if they conflict with the interests of voters.

Moreover, the fact that the real power holders in Western-style democracies are supposed to be those chosen by the people in elections often means that “bureaucrats” are not considered to be as important; hence, less talent goes to the bureaucracy. This flaw may be particularly clear in the American political system. A recent conversation with a young recipient of a Rhodes scholarship (perhaps the most prestigious scholarship in the American educational system, designed to choose future leaders) is revealing. She is interested in international affairs, and I suggested that perhaps she can join the US State Department, but she said that she had been warned that it’s hard for people of ambition and talent to succeed in that setting. In contrast, the Chinese political system does not clearly distinguish between “bureaucrats” and “power-holders” and thus ambitious people of talent are not discouraged from joining the political system at the lower levels, with the hope of moving upwards.

This is not to imply that the US and other countries should strive to emulate Chinese-style meritocracy. For one thing, political meritocracy is more likely to be workable and stable in a certain type of political culture: as noted above, political surveys show that people in East Asian countries with a Confucian heritage tend to value political meritocracy, but the same may not be true in other cultures. For example, the American political culture has developed a strong “anti-elitist” ethos, so it is hard to imagine support for meritocratic one party rule. This is not to deny that there are elitist elements in the American political system (for example, recent US presidents are graduates of Harvard and Yale), but political leaders tend not to be too open about such elitist characteristics. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine major constitutional reform of the US political system that would encourage more meritocracy (it is possible to foresee constitutional change for the worse—e.g., in the event of another major terrorist attack on American soil—but not change for better). In contrast, the Chinese constitutional system seems more amenable to substantial political change if circumstances require.

Nor do I mean to imply that “actually-existing meritocracy” in China cannot be improved. 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, harsh measures for dealing with political dissent, repression of religious expression in Tibet and Xinjiang—seem to have worsened during the same period the political system has become meritocratic. 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.

**Room for Improvement** | Political meritocracy involves the selection and promotion of political officials with both ability and virtue, and let me discuss each in turn. Perhaps the most significant improvement within the Chinese Communist Party over the last three of decades has been more emphasis on the selection and promotion of officials with above average intellectual ability, especially at the higher levels of government. However, the system is not as meritocratic as it could be, even in this respect. Consider the “anti-meritocratic” effects of constraints on freedom of political speech. The best political decisions, of course, need to be based on complete information, but fear of negative consequences may inhibit stakeholders from expressing their viewpoints. I realize that the CCP carries out internal polling to get as much information as possible, and that cadres are encouraged to constantly learn and improve, but fewer barriers to the freedom of speech may improve the quality of decision-making.

Another area of concern is that the rigorous, multi-year talent selection process may discourage risk-taking. In other words, relatively creative and original minds may be weeded out early because they have offended people or challenged the “normal way of doing things.” In times of crisis, perhaps the Chinese political system allows for substantial change, but in ordinary times, there may be unnecessary attachment to the status quo long after it has extended its practical utility. Perhaps this problem can be remedied by allowing for some positions in important government posts (including the Politburo) to be reserved for talented people from other walks of life, such as business or academia.

There may also be a need for more international exposure in the selection process. The main task of the Chinese Communist Party is of course to serve the Chinese people. But China is now a great global power, and what it does also affects the interests of people living outside of China, and it needs to be as humane as possible in its dealings with other countries. It is a good sign that the children of government leaders are often educated abroad because they can serve as informal advisors, but nothing takes the place of personal exposure to foreign ways of doing things. Perhaps the selection process of high-level government leaders can also value experience abroad and even foreign language skills. Yan Xuetong argues that the Chinese government should employ more talented foreigners as officials, similar to the Tang dynasty (*Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, Princeton University Press, 2011).

Equally important, there may be a need for more representation by members of minority groups at the highest levels of government, even if they didn’t rise through the political system. Only sincere adherents of a religion can really know what’s best for their religion and meritocratic decision-making would involve more representation by members of religious communities. One possibility is to reserve spots for members of minority groups on the Politburo. Jiang Qing proposes a House of Cultural Continuity composed of leaders of diverse religions with a long historical presence in China, including Confucianism, Tibetan Buddhism, Daoism, and Christianity.

Of course, meritocratic-decision making is not just a matter of having the ability and knowledge to make political decisions. Immoral decision-makers with high-level analytical skills and local knowledge can do more damage than not-so-competent political leaders who may not be able to figure out the best means to realize immoral ends. I do not mean to imply that Chinese political leaders lack virtue.

I've met many admirable political officials who are public-spirited and committed to the common good, even at substantial cost to their own interests. But virtuous leaders should not be corrupt, and just about everybody in China recognizes that political corruption is a serious problem. Term and age limits for Chinese leaders are helpful. But there is a need for other mechanisms to reduce corruption—a relatively independent anti-corruption agency (similar to Hong Kong and Singapore), more transparency, more freedom for media to report on cases of corruption, financial audits for leaders and their family members, higher salaries for leaders, and harsh punishments for corruption. More rigorous emphasis on ethical education for political leaders is also necessary. The current leadership selection process does not allow for enough time for systematic reflection on ethical and political matters. A few weeks at the Party School is not sufficient for leaders to read the great works in politics, history, and philosophy that deepen one's knowledge as to possibilities of morally-informed political judgments. If political leaders were encouraged, say, to take a six-month leave period with few obligations other than reading great works (especially the Confucian classics that focus more directly on political morality), the long-term effect on the ability to make morally-informed political judgments is likely to be positive. Equally if not more important, more emphasis on the Confucian classics in primary and secondary schools is likely to improve the moral education of future Chinese leaders.

Of course, a political decision maker should do more than refrain from corruption. He or she much also be motivated by humanity and compassion for people, animals, and the natural world. But is it difficult to reconcile this desideratum with the extreme under-representation of females in the political decision-making bodies, especially at the highest levels. The current leadership selection process is biased against females: the process is so time-consuming that it seems hard to reconcile with ordinary family life. Since females are often the main care-takers of family members, they may not have sufficient time to compete fairly with males for top government posts (even if females are not the main care-takers, such expectations influence the selection process: I'm told that it is more difficult for females to be hired by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs because of the expectation that such posts are difficult to reconcile with ordinary family life). If we agree that compassion is mainly a female trait, then we should encourage more females in government. Perhaps half of the government positions at the highest levels of government should be reserved for females. I have no doubt that a government composed of more female leaders is more likely to rule in a compassionate and humane way.

Obviously, the process of "meritocratization" is a long term transformation for which there is no clear end-point (unlike, say, "democratization," which usually means free and fair competitive elections for a country's top political leaders). But one clear way forward would be for the Chinese Communist Party to change its name so that it better corresponds to the institutional reality of the organization, as well as to what it aspires to be. Most obviously, the organization is no longer Communist and few Chinese, including members of the CCP, believe that the party is leading the march to higher communism. Political meritocracy was valued neither by Marx nor by Mao. Lenin's idea of the vanguard party was also different. Moreover, the party is not a political party among others. It is a pluralistic organization composed of different groups and classes that represents the whole country, and to a lesser extent, the world. A more accurate name might be the Chinese Meritocratic Union.

Let me end with one point that will be intensely controversial in countries with a democratic heritage. China can learn much from the political virtues typically associated with democratic regimes: political participation, freedom, transparency, and toleration. But the country can and should build upon the actual and potential advantages of political meritocracy: the decades long training of political officials entrusted with the top political decision making powers, the ability to make decisions that take account of the interests of future generations, the rest of the world, and the natural world, even when they conflict with the interests of the majority of citizens, and decision-making by committee rather than vesting ultimate decision-making powers in one individual (such as the US President). These advantages of meritocracy are compatible with more freedom, transparency, toleration, political participation at sub-national levels of government, and a certain degree of political competition at the

top. But meritocracy is incompatible with multi-party competition at the top and one-person one vote for the selection of top decision makers. Hence, the task in China is to improve meritocracy and learn from parts of democracy, but not from what many democrats today would consider to be its core element.