

## **Choosing Confucianism**

### Departing from the Liberal Framework

An Interview with Daniel A. Bell

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**Recounting his itinerary from research on Communitarianism to the adoption of Confucian values, political philosopher Daniel A. Bell advocates thinking of cities as representing different social values in the modern world. He also sees meritocracy, which is valued in China nowadays as a potential remedy to the flaws of democratic systems.**

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**Books & Ideas:** One of the first books you published was *Communitarianism and its Critics* (Oxford, 1993), which drew on the works of Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, Alasdair MacIntyre and so on. Do you describe yourself as a communitarian? Can your current stance in favour of political Confucianism be described as communitarian?

**Daniel A. Bell:** It's true that my first book – a development of my PhD thesis – was a defense of contemporary anglophone communitarianism. Communitarians criticize liberal individualism on the grounds that it does not take community seriously. The good life, for communitarians, lies in rich social ties, and the purpose of government is, at least partly, to provide the conditions for that sort of life. Freedom is important, but more as a means to the good life, including a means to a rich social life. Societies that deny freedom tend to deny the opportunity for rich and diverse kinds of social lives: think of the Cultural Revolution, when people were supposed to betray family members to show their commitment to the state (or at least, to Mao as a symbolic representation of the state). But anglophone communitarianism, at the end of the day, is a “branch” of liberalism, it's still meant to operate on the basis of a liberal democratic political framework.

### **Discovering Confucianism**

When I began to study Confucianism, I realized that there is rich and diverse ethical tradition that also values social life, but without “subordinating” that tradition on the basis of another framework. And the more I studied, the more I realized it's an ethical philosophy that makes sense of most of my preexisting ethical commitments: that the good life involves rich family ties and affective relations between friends, that morality develops from intimate ties and spreads to strangers, and that we should be committed to the well-being of our communities and the world at large. I like the idea that early Confucianism has vague metaphysical commitments and may be compatible with diverse religious beliefs. Confucius's idea that educators and legislators should rely on moral power before legal punishment seems attractive, as does his idea that the first task of government is to provide for the well-being of the poor. I also like Mencius's idea that humanitarian intervention abroad should be justified with reference to alleviating the material suffering of the people, not the promotion of democracy. And I'm consoled that some feminist scholars have reinterpreted Confucianism to show it's compatible with gender equality.

But my engagement with Confucianism also challenged some of my preexisting moral commitments. It's not just a matter of seeking more ammunition for my communitarian outlook, I've learned new and better ideas. By reading Xunzi, I've learned to appreciate the moral value of hierarchical rituals – they can actually

contribute to material equality – and I no longer raise my eyebrows when subordinates bow to social superiors. I’ve learned that singing can contribute to social harmony, and I’m more sympathetic to karaoke than I used to be. I’ve learned that there should be limits to critical thinking, and I won’t blindly encourage my students to criticize texts they have yet to understand. And I’ve learned to question two “sacred” Western values. First, I no longer view monogamy as the only desirable way of organizing sexual relations; the chapter on sex and karaoke in my book *China’s New Confucianism* has generated intense controversy. Confucians are much more open in that respect. Second, I’m no longer of the view that democracy in the form of one person, one vote is the best way of organizing political relations. I now think that other ways of choosing rulers, such as a combination of examinations and recommendations, are more likely to secure quality rule. I freely confess it’s the sort of argument I would have found deeply disturbing prior to my engagement with Confucianism. So I guess now I’d describe myself more as a Confucian than as a communitarian.

### **How to Define Identities**

**Books & Ideas:** How do you articulate your shift from your original (Canadian?) community to your adopted (Chinese, Confucian?) community? Do you view it as a personal illustration of the potential for Confucian values to play a role beyond East Asian countries?

**Daniel A. Bell:** My own identity has been shaped more by cities than by countries. The fact that I was born and bred in the bilingual atmosphere of Montreal has shaped my identity in pretty clear ways, but I find it much harder to explain what it means to be “Canadian” and what it means in terms of my identity. The same goes for cities such as Beijing, Hong Kong, and Singapore: I spent several years in each city and my identity has been further (re)shaped by those cities. Such claims are developed in my book *Spirit of Cities* (coauthored with Avner de-Shalit), and the point is not to be self-indulgent, but to show how cities shape our identities.

From an ethical point of view, I do think we owe more to “city-zens” than to fellow nationals, precisely because we share more of a common life with them. The Confucian idea of graded love can be helpful here: we owe our greatest obligations to

our closest relations – family members and friends – because they are the main sources of our happiness and because of what they do for us. We should extend that love and sense of responsibility. But the further we extend, the fewer the obligations. Hence, we owe more to “city-zens” than to “citizens” because cities are more intimate (or at least, less far removed) sites of social relations than countries.

Having said that, I’m not sure if Confucianism can be very helpful for understanding social contexts without a Confucian heritage. In my cities book,<sup>1</sup> I found that Confucianism was very helpful for explaining the ethoses of Beijing, Hong Kong, and Singapore – all cities with a Confucian heritage – but not helpful for explaining the ethoses of Montreal, Paris, and New York. My coauthor did not draw on any Confucianism for explaining the ethoses of Jerusalem, Berlin and Oxford, and I don’t think Confucianism would have been helpful there either.

In history, of course, Confucianism spread beyond China, and eventually it became the dominant social and political ethos of Korea and Vietnam. It is theoretically possible that Western societies will be “Confucianized” in the future. But it will take a prolonged social, economic, and political crisis in Western societies for that to happen, just as it took a century of “humiliation” for China to really open itself up to Western ideas and values. As much as I like Confucianism, I do not wish that kind of crisis upon Western societies.

**Books & Ideas:** In *The Spirit of the Cities* you emphasize qualitative methods of research (in your answer to A. Tzonis’ review you recalled that “personal experience matters”), is this consistent with the methodology you use for your other research?

**Daniel A. Bell:** Like most writing projects, this book began with a simple intuition. In early September 1991, I was taking a walk in San Francisco with my close friend Avner de-Shalit, and we marvelled how distinctive the city is compared to other American cities. Then we started talking about other cities we know well, and we thought they are also distinctive, in different and interesting ways, and that affirming

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel A. Bell and Avner de-Shalit, *The Spirit of Cities, Why Identity Matters in a Global Age*, Princeton: New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2011. A [review](#) and a [response](#) by Daniel A. Bell were published in *Books&Ideas*.

the particularity of cities is a good thing. So we thought, hey, let's write a book about that. So many of the debates in political theory deal with nations and the world, but surely cities also have ethical and political significance. We recalled Walter Benjamin's approach, and we thought we could also stroll in various cities, drawing various social and political implications based on what we experience. A few days later, however, terrorists struck in New York and the thought of leisurely strolling in cities seemed to be a luxury of the past. Fortunately, we were too pessimistic, and the project was revived a couple of years later.

In terms of methodology, we are very open: we use whatever method best helps to explain and evaluate the ethos of a city. For cities that we know well from personal experience, it makes sense to draw on that experience. For other cities, we employ a "strolling methodology": that is, we do lots of reading about the city and its history beforehand, formulate certain hypotheses, then stroll in the city, testing, refining, and sometimes rejecting those hypotheses. We schedule interviews with people of different classes, genders, ethnic and religious groups in each city, to see if they have anything in common, at least in terms of what they argue about. And we try to draw on more quantitative social scientific research where appropriate, such as values surveys of cities. Unfortunately, we found little relevant quantitative research, since most surveys measure values in countries rather than cities. Hence, we had more data about Singapore, precisely because it's a city-state. To our pleasant surprise, however, there has been a spurt in city-based research the past couple of years, especially in China where many cities are trying to identify what makes them unique. We held a conference on "Rethinking Cities and Identity" in Shanghai last May, and we had excellent papers on the "spirit" of cities such as Nanjing that were supported by survey data.

You ask if my qualitative methods of research are consistent with the methodology employed in my other books. The truth is that I've never given much thought to methodology, and I think many political theorists are similar. We try to think about interesting and important questions of social and political significance, and then we draw on whatever methods (or information) that help us to answer those questions. Often, the real thinking about methods comes after the bulk of the book is already done. I confess that's what happened with *Spirit of Cities*. We wrote most of

the chapters before we wrote the long introduction that discusses our methodology. It's true that we then drew on that methodology to revise the chapters, but they weren't revised too, too, much in response to explicit thinking about methodology. Perhaps the reader will be struck by the amount of (auto)biographical material in this book, and in that sense the book is different from my other works. But Avner and I do think such material is helpful for shedding light on our main arguments.

### **The City v. the Nation**

Consider the book's ending. I mention that my sister and I spread our father's ashes on the Canadian-American border. My father had made that request because he was born in the US and spent much of his life in Canada. Upon reflection – and I only started thinking about this when I was writing this book – it seems like a strange request. My father disliked nationalists of all stripes, yet he was still thinking in nation-based categories, *malgré lui*. This story shows the power and irrationality of nationalist thinking. In actual fact, my father loved New York, Montreal, and Paris, and he spent a few years in each city. If he was truly in touch with his strongest and most rationally defensible desires, he would have asked that his ashes be spread in those cities rather than in two countries. Probably he never even thought of that possibility. I hope you'll agree it's a good story to support our argument about the need to make more explicit the significance of city-based identities. And by the way, I hope that my loved ones will spread my ashes in the cities discussed in this book.

***Books and Ideas:*** What was your political agenda for that book?

***Daniel Bell:*** We begin with the assumption that many people love their cities. “I love New York” is perhaps the most successful slogan in modern history. Cities around the world are copying this slogan. “I love Beijing” – in English – is commonly seen on T-shirts in the Chinese capital. It's easy to be cynical, to say that the whole thing is driven by money. The “I love Toronto” website is advertised as a “guide to living well in Toronto,” which turns out to mean buying and selling real estate. But it's not just a slogan: many people really do love their cities. Countries, on the other hand, do not use such slogans. You don't often see people walking around with “I love Canada” T-shirts. And, if history is any guide, one can have good reason to worry about governments that expect their citizens to express such naked, unqualified

patriotism in public. Countries are too big, complex, and diverse – and potentially dangerous – to merit unqualified love. Yet there is no single word to express the sentiment of loving a city. Patriotism applies to countries or states, not cities. Hence, we coined a new word – “civicism” – to express this sentiment. As the world urbanizes, civicism is spreading to distant corners of the world where people were once attached to villages or towns and a new class of global cities is emerging and competing for the affection of their residents as well as for new migrants and tourists.

### **Cities Have Ethoses**

Today, more than half the world’s population lives in cities, compared to less than three percent in 1800. By 2025, China alone is expected to have fifteen supercities with a population of twenty five million each. There are reasons to welcome such developments. Globalized cities that allow for free movement of capital, humans, and goods tend to have a more open-minded attitude to foreigners and historically marginalized peoples. True, cities cannot provide the rich sense of community life characteristic of villages and small towns. But residents of cities often take pride in and struggle to nourish the particular ways of life of their own cities. Montrealers struggle to promote the French character of their city, Jerusalemites struggle to promote its religious identity, and so on. In fact, cities that seem to express a particular identity, or ethos, typically generate the most intense forms of urban pride.

Cities that combine the openness of the global with an emphasis on local particularity also tend to have an international reputation that attracts visitors. People go to Oxford to experience its ethos of learning, and they visit Paris to partake of its romantic spirit. Of course, locals may disparage the stereotypes that attract tourists and visitors. But few reject the ethos itself. People in the “marginalized” neighborhoods of Oxford criticize the elitist approach to education, forcing social actors to rethink issues of fair access to education. The Hollywood idea of love is rejected by Parisians themselves: their own idea of romance is meant to contrast with bourgeois life. Social critics in Jerusalem argue for an interpretation of religion that holds people, rather than things and rocks, sacred. And Beijing attracts the nation’s leading political critics; for example, artist with a political agenda usually prefer to

work in Beijing rather than Shanghai. In short, an ethos also provides the main source of political argument for residents of a city.

The idea that cities have a distinctive ethos – a shared way of life that informs the thinking and judgments of its inhabitants – has a long history. In the ancient world, Athens was synonymous with democracy and Sparta represented military discipline. Jerusalem expressed religious values, and the twin cities that made up the Zhou dynasty’s capital at Louyang flourished as a commercial metropolis. Does it make sense to think of cities as representing different social values in the modern world? Today’s urban areas are huge, diverse, and pluralistic, and it may seem peculiar to say that one city represents this or that. But just think of Beijing and Jerusalem: can cities get any more different? Both cities are designed with core concentric circles, but one core expresses spiritual, religious values and the other represents political power. Clearly, some cities do express and prioritize different social and political values. Even cities within countries – say, Montreal and Toronto, Beijing and Shanghai, or Jerusalem and Tel Aviv – seem to express strikingly different values. Chicago’s official website explicitly distinguishes the city’s character from that of New York. Cities, as much as countries, are often sites of collective self-determination.

But is that a good thing? If people fight too hard to affirm the uniqueness of their nation, it can easily spill into hatred or warfare. But cities are different. In fact, civicism can curb the excesses of nationalism. Except for city-states like Singapore, cities do not have armies so civic pride is less likely to take dangerous forms. Most people do have a need to affirm social particularity and it is usually better for that need to be attached to cities. People with a strong sense of civicism do not need a strong sense of nationalism to feel good about themselves. It’s true that the residents of capital cities are often quite nationalistic. It’s also true that people tend to rally around the flag in times of crisis, such as a major foreign-sponsored terrorist attack. But interviews we conducted in nine cities around the world show that most “city-zens” have their own sense of identity that need not stretch in full form to the nation.

There are other reasons to affirm the ethos of one’s city. Globalization has a dark side and nowhere is this more true than in China, where thirty years of market

reform has destroyed many traditional neighborhoods and ways of life. Hence, cities in China and elsewhere are investing thought, time, and money in protecting their unique ethos which helps them to resist the homogenizing tendencies of globalization. In Changsha, city-zens are consulted to determine what makes the “spirit” of their city unique, and such findings influence urban planning and protection of cultural heritage. Such efforts at city-branding are common elsewhere. Tel Aviv’s official website mentions the city’s aim to be the gay capital of Israel and one of the world centers of the gay community. Cities with an ethos can also accomplish desirable political goals that are harder to achieve at the level of the state. We will wait a long time for politicians in the United States or China to implement serious plans to deal with climate change. But cities like Portland and Hangzhou take pride in their environmental ethos and go far beyond what the state can do in terms of environmental protection. New York City, the self-styled “capital of the world,” can draw on its ethos of ambition to effectively carry out its own foreign policy. Mayor Bloomberg has undertaken his own climate diplomacy, circumventing state-based summitry by directly inviting hundreds of mayors from around the world to focus on how urban leaders can share policy initiatives and technologies to reduce emissions.

There are good economic reasons to promote the ethos of a city. Cities that develop a clear identity can help to revive moribund economies. One beautiful museum transformed Bilbao from a declining industrial city into a mecca of the art world. In China, cultural tourists are attracted to Qufu because they want to learn about the home base of Confucianism, and in turn help to develop the local economy. Most people tend not to worry about a city that promotes Confucianism, but such policies are much more controversial at the level of the state, which is expected to be more even-handed. Last, a city’s particular ethos can also inspire social and political theorizing of global importance. The competing models of Athens and Sparta provided the intellectual fodder for both Plato and Aristotle’s political theories, and the most creative period in Chinese social and political thinking emerged out of the ferment of ideas in different Warring States cities. John Locke’s *Letter on Toleration* was directly inspired by his stay in Amsterdam, the most open minded and tolerant city of seventeenth-century Europe. And surely it is no coincidence that Charles Taylor’s theories of multiculturalism and language rights emerged from Montreal, where residents inevitably must navigate the tricky linguistic politics of the city.

**Books and Ideas:** You are now working on meritocracy. Do you see it as the best alternative to the liberal democracy (*Beyond liberal democracy*, Princeton, 2006)? Would you describe the current Chinese system as a meritocracy?

**Daniel Bell:** Political meritocracy (贤能政治) 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.

### **Why the Chinese Value Political Meritocracy**

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.<sup>2</sup> 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 (有教无类). 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.

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<sup>2</sup> Yuri Pines, *The Everlasting Empire*, Princeton University Press, 2012, ch. 3

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.<sup>3</sup>

### **Political Meritocracy in Western Political Thought**

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. U.S. 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.

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<sup>3</sup> Shi Tianjian and Lu Jie, “Cultural Impacts on People’s Understanding of Democracy,” 2010 APSA Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C.

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 (天) and Earth (地). 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 (庶民院), a House

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<sup>4</sup> See, Charles Kupchan, “The Democratic Malaise,” *Foreign Affairs*, Jan./Feb. 2012

<sup>5</sup> *The Ethics of Voting*, Princeton University Press, 2011

<sup>6</sup> *The Myth of the Rational Voter*, Princeton University Press, 2007

of Confucian Scholars (通儒院), and a House of Cultural Continuity (国体院) that correspond to the three forms of legitimacy<sup>7</sup>. 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 (贤士院)). 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.

### **Is the Chinese Regime Meritocratic?**

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.<sup>8</sup> 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<sup>9</sup> (I've been teaching at Tsinghua for nearly

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<sup>7</sup> Jiang Qing, *A Confucian Constitutional Order*, Princeton University Press, 2012

<sup>8</sup> Gang Guo, "Party Recruitment of College Students in China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, v.14 (43), May 2005

<sup>9</sup> See the following article: [www.china.org.cn/china/2011-05/31/content\\_22678122.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/2011-05/31/content_22678122.htm)

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.

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.<sup>10</sup> 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).

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<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/print/2012/03/obama-explained/8874/>

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.

### **Limits and Prospects**

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.

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 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 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.<sup>11</sup>

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

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<sup>11</sup> Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*, Princeton University Press, 2011

Continuity (国体院) 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 (党校) 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 must also be motivated by humanity and compassion (仁) 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 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 (中国贤能联盟).

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.

My thoughts are still preliminary. My current five-year plan is to write a book on political meritocracy, China-focused but with a comparative angle. I'm half way through my five year plan and I hope I won't need an extension.

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