THE CHINA MODEL

A PRÉCIS

BY

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In October 2013, a slick cartoon video of mysterious provenance went viral, with more than ten million viewings in two weeks. The video, released at the time of the U.S federal government shutdown, contrasts the selection of leaders in different countries. It depicts the meteoric rise of President Barack Obama, aided by hundreds of millions of dollars in campaign financing, with victory coming in the form of a countrywide national election on the basis of one person, one vote. This process is labelled "democracy." It also depicts President Xi Jinping's decades-long ascent to the pinnacle of Chinese power: his promotions from leadership in a primary-level office to the township level, the county division, department levels, the province-ministry level, the Central Committee, the Politburo, and then the leading spot in the Standing Committee of the Politburo, with rigorous and ultracompetitive evaluations at each stage meant to test his political leadership abilities. This process is labelled "meritocracy." The clear implication of the video is that Chinese-style political meritocracy is a morally legitimate way of selecting top political leaders, perhaps even better than democratic elections.

The video was likely produced and distributed by a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) organ, but if political meritocracy is so good, why can't the CCP take responsibility for the video? More generally, why can't the CCP officially embrace political meritocracy and openly take pride in its meritocratic system? The

main reason is that Chinese-style political meritocracy is imperfect in practice. But this leads to the question of what should be the moral standards for evaluating political progress (and regress) in a regime that aspires to be a political meritocracy?

More questions come to mind. The video suggests that political meritocracy and electoral democracy are fundamentally incompatible political systems. But is it possible to reconcile the best of meritocratic and democratic practices, and if so, how? The video says nothing about China's harsh treatment of political opponents. If the system is so great, why is there a need to crack down on political dissent? Is it really possible to structure political meritocracy so that it is seen as legitimate by the people and avoids the abuses of authoritarian rule? My book is an attempt to answer such questions.

Political meritocracy is perhaps the most studied and the least studied topic in political theory. 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. The reason seems obvious: we demand trained and qualified persons in leadership positions in science, law, and corporations; why not also in the most important institution of all? As the distinguished American sociologist Daniel Bell (1919–2011) put it, "one wants men in political office who can govern well. The quality of life in any society is determined, in considerable measure, by the quality of leadership. A society that does not have its best men at the head of its leading institutions is a sociological and moral absurdity." Hence, political thinkers—from Confucius, Plato, and Zhu Xi to John Stuart Mill, Sun Yat-sen, and Walter Lippmann—struggled to identify the ways of selecting the best possible leaders capable of making intelligent, morally informed political judgments on a wide range of issues.

But such debates largely stopped in the post–World War II era. In China, they stopped because Maoism valued the political contributions of warriors, workers, and farmers over those of intellectuals and educators. Whatever the top-down political reality, revolutionary leaders claimed they were building a new form of participatory socialist democracy from the ground up, and defenders of political elitism were nowhere to be seen (or publicly heard from) in mainland China. In the West, they stopped largely because of the intellectual hegemony of electoral democracy. A democracy demands only that the people select their leaders; it is up to the voters to judge the merits of the candidates.

If voters are rational and do a good job choosing leaders, there is no need to agonize too much over what ought to be the qualities of good leaders and which mechanisms can best select such leaders. Political theorists therefore shifted their interests to questions such as how to deepen democracy in politics and other spheres of social life and how to promote fair forms of wealth distribution in the nation and the world at large.

The debates over political meritocracy were revived in the tiny city-state of Singapore. Starting from the 1960s, the country's leaders advocated the institutionalization of mechanisms aimed at selecting leaders who were best qualified to lead, even if doing so meant imposing constraints on the democratic process. They argued that political leaders should take a long-term view rather than cater to electoral cycles, and the political system can and should be structured to prevent the exercise of power by short-term-minded "populist" political leaders. But Singapore's discourse on political meritocracy failed to gain much traction abroad, largely because it was not presented as a universal ideal.

Rather, Singapore's leaders emphasized that the need to select and promote the most capable and upright people is particularly

pressing in a tiny city-state with a small population, limited resource base, and potentially hostile neighbors. Hence, why debate the exportability of an ideal that is meant to fit only a highly unusual city-state?

But two recent developments put debates about political meritocracy back on the global map. For one thing, the crisis of governance in Western democracies has undermined blind faith in electoral democracy and opened the normative space for political alternatives. The problem is not just that democratic theorists came to realize the difficulties of implementing democratic practices outside the Western world; the deeper problem is that actually existing democracy in the Western world no longer sets a clear-cut positive model for other countries.

In difficult economic times, for example, voters often select populist leaders who advocate policies inimical to the long-term good of the country, not to mention the rest of the world. Hence, innovative political thinkers argue that governance in Western democracies can be improved by incorporating more meritocratic institutions and practices.

Equally important, the theory of political meritocracy has been reinvigorated by the rise of China. Since the early 1990s, China's political system has evolved a sophisticated and comprehensive system for selecting and promoting political talent that seems to have underpinned China's stunning economic success. Like earlier practices in imperial China, the political system aims to select and promote public servants by means of examinations and assessments of performance at lower levels of government. Chinese-style meritocracy is plagued with imperfections, but few would deny that the system has performed relatively well compared to democratic regimes of comparable size and level of economic development, not to mention family-run dictatorships in the Middle East and elsewhere. And the world is watching

China's experiment with meritocracy. China, unlike Singapore, can "shake the world." In the early 1990s, nobody predicted that China's economy would rise so fast to become the world's second largest economy.

In twenty years' time, perhaps we will be debating Chinese-style political meritocracy as an alternative model—and a challenge—to Western-style democracy.

Before saying more, let me clarify some terminology. My book is a defense of *political* meritocracy. Liberal democracies empower meritocratically selected experts in administrative and judicial positions, but they are accountable, if only indirectly, to democratically elected leaders.

They are meant to exercise power in a narrowly defined domain and should try to remain politically neutral to the extent possible. For example, British civil servants are meant to serve elected politicians and may need to set aside their own political views as they do so. In contrast, political leaders in meritocracies such as China are meant to exercise political judgment in a wide range of domains. They hold the ultimate power in the political community (including control over the instruments of violence), like elected leaders in democracies. And there is no clear institutional distinction between civil servants and political leaders in a political meritocracy. In short, meritocratically selected public servants in democratic countries are not meant to be political, whereas meritocratically selected public servants in political meritocracies are meant to exercise political power.

It is also important to distinguish between political and economic meritocracy. In English, the term *meritocracy* can refer to a principle governing the distribution of economic resources: meritocracy is a system that distributes wealth according to ability and effort rather than class or family background. Karl Marx

criticized capitalism because it tends to distribute resources according to class background, notwithstanding the myth that people are rewarded mainly according to ability and effort. Communism aims to abolish class differences, and the distribution of resources in the immediate postcapitalist period ("lower communism") will translate capitalist rhetoric into reality: economic resources will be distributed according to the principle "from each according to his ability, to each according to his contribution." Although this seemingly meritocratic principle recognizes no class differences, it is still flawed because "it tacitly recognizes unequal individual endowment and thus productive capacity as natural privileges." That is, people should not benefit from unearned natural talent and it is unfair to penalize those who are less productive through no fault of their own. Hence, society should move on to "higher communism" so resources can be distributed according to the principle "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

John Rawls, the most influential political philosopher in the twentieth century, similarly recognized the danger that seemingly fair opportunity could lead to "a callous meritocratic society." Being born with ability confers no moral right to wealth because what one is born with, or without, is not of one's own doing. Instead of distributing wealth on the basis of productive contribution, Rawls defends the "difference principle" that inequalities are allowed only if they benefit the least well-off.

More surprisingly, perhaps, the world's most powerful central banker, then–Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke, expressed a similar critique of meritocracy in a graduate address at Princeton University in 2013:

> A meritocracy is a system in which the people who are the luckiest in terms of their health and genetic endowment; luckiest in terms of family support, encouragement, and, probably, income; luckiest in terms of educational

and career opportunities; and luckiest in so many ways difficult to enumerate: these are the people who reap the largest rewards. The only way for even a putative meritocracy to hope to pass ethical muster, to be considered fair, is if those who are the luckiest in all of those respects also have the greatest responsibility to work hard, to contribute to the betterment of the world, and to share their luck with others.

I am sympathetic to these critiques of "meritocracy" as an economic system, but my aim here is not to defend a particular theory governing the distribution of material goods. My concern, to repeat, is to defend *political* meritocracy—the idea that political power should be distributed in accordance with ability and virtue—and I invoke arguments about the distribution of economic resources only insofar as they bear on the issue of how to establish a morally desirable and politically realistic form of political meritocracy.

Outline of the Book

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. 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.

Chapter 1 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 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.[*]

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[*] The following is a precis of the *Introduction* to Daniel A. Bell's *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2015, 1-10). *Philosophy and Public Issues* thanks Princeton University Press for permission to reprint.