

Confucianism and Meritocracy: Light from the East

JAMES HANKINS



Ex oriente lux. With the spring academic term finished, I am in Japan and China, ostensibly to give papers at several Japanese and Chinese universities, but really to learn more about meritocracy debates in contemporary Asia. There has been a heated debate going on there among political theorists about the forms of governance most consistent with ancient Confucian political thought. The debate tracks the theoretical shadowboxing Confucian scholars have been doing for the last two decades with the gatekeepers of official Communist Party of China (CPC) ideology. The Confucians hope to replace a moribund Marxist ideology, still taught in schools, with a political theory that is more authentically Chinese. But the politics behind the debate is so hard for a non-Chinese to read that often the only way to figure it out is to go there in person, find a quiet corner, and start asking questions.

The new politics of elites in the West also offers a pressing reason for interest in the Chinese and Japanese debates, though the typical range of American takes on the crisis of the elites is more limited. The flight to Tokyo offers an occasion to survey some recent American articles. One is a *New York Times* editorial by David Brooks, whose theme, by now a familiar one, is the moral failure of Western elites. It is the flip side of the worry among political elites about the growing power of populism. I also have with me an advance copy of a book I am supposed to review, *Tailspin*, by the crusading journalist and media entrepreneur Steven Brill, who indicts American meritocratic elites for their catastrophic failures of governance over the last half century. In addition, I have the latest *Atlantic* with Matthew Stewart's cover article, "The Birth of a New American Aristocracy" (June 2018), decrying our closed elite and the end of social mobility in America. (More social science lite for English majors, an *Atlantic* specialty.) In spite of all this elite self-criticism in America, no one has a solution to the crisis. Brooks thinks the American elite needs a new ethos. Fine, but how is that going to happen? No answer. Brill hopes for a series of infrastructure disasters, with attendant social chaos, that might awaken American elites to their neglected responsibilities. Stewart recommends vague "action from the federal government" to enforce economic equality.

So it's a relief to come to Asia, where no one has any doubt that meritocracy is a good thing. The only question is how to get more of it: whether it should become the leading principle of the whole political system (as in the "political meritocracy" theorized by Daniel A. Bell, the most well known of the "political Confucians"), a preferred method of selection for office, or simply an ethos spread by culture and education. I'm hoping to learn more about how modern Confucians justify meritocratic governance, and

especially how they think China's ancient literary and philosophical tradition can help reform modern elites and modern government. I have an idea that the same approach might be fruitful in West. Nevertheless, I'm uneasily aware that, like some sort of academic salmon, I'm swimming upstream, against the established current of scholars in search of political wisdom. For more than a century, Chinese scholars have been coming to the West to learn about liberal democracy, believing that China's future could be found in the contemporary West. Is Western interest in Chinese political wisdom a sign that China is establishing some kind of soft-power advantage in political philosophy?

Tokyo: Premodern Meritocracy?

My misgivings are soothed by the first stop on my itinerary, Waseda University in Tokyo, one of Japan's best private universities, where Western political values are still firmly in place. I am lecturing at Waseda's new Global Asia Research Center, at the invitation of the political scientist Keiichiro Atsumi, a former student of mine and one of Waseda's principals. The subject of my lecture is the theory of meritocratic governance (or "virtue politics") in the premodern West and its striking structural resemblances to *dezhi*, or virtue government, in early Confucianism. My aim is to highlight the similarities between Western and Eastern ideals of government before the triumph of contractarian and rights-based political thought in Europe in the seventeenth century. (I have tried to swot up ahead of time the literature on Japanese Confucianism, but have not found much grist for my mill.)

In premodern times, Japanese Confucianism was often sponsored by Zen Buddhist monks as an instrument of moral reform among the

daimyo/samurai class—hereditary lords, noblemen, and warriors. There was no examination system, no “elevating the worthy,” no attempt to link meritorious rule with political legitimacy—all key elements in Chinese *dezhi*. My Japanese interlocutors are kind and quite interested in the Chinese-Western parallels, but pour cold water on my hope to find something resembling Chinese Confucian or Western virtue politics in premodern Japan. As far as Japanese political theorists are concerned, meritocracy is modern, Western, and a perfectly legitimate, indeed obvious, way of staffing public institutions. It’s completely different, they say, from the patrimonial forms of power characteristic of the pre-Meiji era.

Historical research, however, isn’t always conducted in the groves of academe, and while visiting a tourist park I stumble serendipitously upon a remarkable early document of Japanese virtue politics. A young Japanese scholar of Buddhist philosophy takes me on a tour of Nara, the ancient capital of Japan. It happens to be the season for school trips and the city is packed with thousands of identically dressed Japanese schoolchildren, all eager to feed the sacred deer (shouts of *kawaii!* cute!) and see the Daibutsu, a 157-foot-tall bronze statue of the Buddha from the eighth century. To escape the mobs we slope off to the nearby village of Horyuji to visit the shrine in honor of Prince Shotoko Taishi. The prince was a key figure in establishing Buddhism in Japan and introduced Confucian influences as well through what is known as the “Seventeen-Article Constitution” (AD 605). This foundational document is well known to Japanese historians and legal scholars, but it is an exciting new discovery for me, since in effect it presents Confucian meritocracy in constitutional form. (Confucianism with Buddhist characteristics, as the Chinese might say.) It’s not a constitution in the Western sense, to be sure: it doesn’t establish institutions to order and

constrain sovereign power, but rather lays down standards of behavior expected of imperial ministers: justice, virtue, and devotion to the welfare of the people. Modern political Confucians debate fiercely whether the Confucian tradition is compatible with constitutionalism or whether its texts and theoretical assumptions commit it to absolute monarchy. The Vietnamese scholar Bui Ngoc Son, a senior research fellow at the Centre for Asian Legal Studies at the National University of Singapore, has argued recently for the controversial thesis that Confucian emperors were in effect constitutional rulers with real constraints on their power, citing the example of Imperial Vietnam. Now, here in Japan, I have come across an ancient document that actually tried to reduce the principles of virtue politics to constitutional form. As far as I know, it is a unique document in the history of premodern meritocracy.

Shanghai: The Party and Confucius

My next stop is Shanghai, where I've planned to meet the Chinese collaborator with whom I'm writing an article mischievously entitled "The Dao of Petrarch," comparing the "virtue politics" of the Italian Renaissance with the *dezhi* of ancient Confucian writers. I need the help of someone with expertise in ancient Chinese texts, especially Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi, the philosophers most frequently cited in modern reconstructions of political Confucianism. For reasons that will become clear I'm not able to give his real name or institution, so let us call him Dr. Feng. Dr. Feng, in addition to being an expert on early Confucian texts, also studied the history of Western political theory at a leading American university some years ago before returning to China. Eventually he found employment as a political scientist in a department of Marxism. He confesses to me with

some embarrassment (in America he had been a keen supporter of the Chinese democracy movement) that in order to hold this position he has had to join the Communist Party. It's not surprising—after all, 7 percent of the population of China belongs to the Party, many for similar careerist reasons—but Dr. Feng assures me, laughing, that he has not become a Marxist, nor for that matter have most of his colleagues, who are nevertheless all Party members.

In China Marxism is the only political theory that may ordinarily be taught in schools and colleges, and only specialized graduate students, under increasingly tight supervision, can make any serious study of Western political theory. This means that most undergraduate courses on politics consist of memorization and commentary on approved Party slogans. There's no room for open-ended argument, and Dr. Feng, trained in the analytical approach of Western theorists, is bored and frustrated. So are his students. As the youngest faculty member it falls to him to teach the most unpopular course in the department, the required course in Marxism (9:15 a.m., immediately after group calisthenics). This is not what Dr. Feng hoped university teaching would be like. His students, mostly business majors, sit fiddling with their cell phones while he lectures and comments on the textbook. He longs for the department to make a new hire so that he can move up and teach something more interesting.

The curriculum has been revised this year to include “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” fourteen bullet points meant to set a new direction for the country. These articulate not so much an ideology as a vision for what China is or aspires to be. Since October 2017, Xi Jinping Thought has been incorporated into the

Constitution of the Communist Party of China, and it is now being promulgated not only in schools and universities but through posters, street banners, electronic display boards, films, and even popular music. More than twenty universities have established research institutes to design ways to blend Xi Jinping Thought into daily life. At Dr. Feng's university, students are taught the three stages of China's modern history, i.e., since 1949, when the Communist Party began to sponge away the shame of colonialism—the “one hundred years of humiliation.” These are *zhan qi lai*, stand up, *fu qi lai*, get rich, and *qiang qi lai*, get strong, referring respectively to the eras of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping, and Xi Jinping. The stages are a bit like the fundamentalist Pro-testant approach to biblical theology known as dispensationalism. This approach removes contradictions between biblical teachings by positing that God deals with mankind in different ways at different times. What was right in the time of man's innocency becomes wrong under the patriarchs; what was allowed under the patriarchs is no longer permitted by the law of Moses; what was demanded under law is set aside under grace. Just so, what was right under Mao became wrong under Deng (prohibition of free markets and persecution of intellectuals, for example), and Deng's famous declaration that “to get rich is glorious” is now being tempered by Xi's revised version of socialism, oriented toward moral reform, service to the people, environmentalism, and national greatness. The dealings of the dialectic with the Chinese nation require different solutions at different times, but the Communist Party, like God, remains in its heaven.

Then there are the slogans. Dr. Feng is also responsible for teaching the China Dream (like the American Dream, but sustainable), the “Four Comprehensives” (Xi's political goals for China), and the Twelve Values of

Contemporary China. The latter include four “value targets” (prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony), four “principles to follow” (freedom, equality, justice, rule of law), and four “principles of social ethics” (patriotism, dedication, integrity, friendship). To me it sounds more like the Boy Scouts than a college curriculum. But Dr. Feng (whose mother practices Buddhism) suggests that the CPC’s addiction to making lists of doctrines reflects the residue of Buddhism in Chinese thought, which is similarly obsessed with list-making. The contrast with old-fashioned Marxism, with its impenetrable jargon and endless scholastic quibbling over obscure points of doctrine, could not be more stark.

From my Western perspective it seems that the Party’s ambition to control political thought shows its increasing power and reach. Dr. Feng, however, has a different interpretation. He sees great dangers ahead for the Party, and thinks it is pumping up patriotism and ideological education in order to bolster commitment to a regime that is threatened by huge levels of debt, an aging population, economic slowdown, high taxes, and imperial overstretch. The strategy of the Party for the last quarter century has been to endow itself with what Confucians call “performance legitimacy,” keeping the loyalty of the people through stability, peace, and making lives better in a material way. If the economy slows, if there is a debt crisis, or if there is a foreign policy failure too big to hide, there will have to be other ways to keep the loyalty of citizens. Commitment to admirable common goals through education (or indoctrination, if you prefer) is one of them.

Yet just because undergraduate ideological training is being reduced to slogans and access to non-Party versions of reality is being shut down does not mean that the thinking of the Party’s own intellectuals is vacuous or ill-

informed. Quite the opposite. Party intellectuals, especially those at the Central Party School outside Beijing, the CPC's main think tank, are rigorously trained. Favored above all is the study of the social sciences, particularly economics, sociology, and political theory, and many leading Party intellectuals have degrees from Harvard, MIT, and Oxford. Quantitative approaches (as at most elite Western universities these days) have the most prestige. The revival of social science in China, and its application to the task of preserving CPC authority, is one of the great untold stories of the last three decades. It constitutes at least part of the explanation of how the CPC has been able to keep control of the political and economic life of the country while other former Communist regimes have collapsed.

For keen observers of the Party's internal politics like Dr. Feng, the thinker who gets the most credit (although not in public) for reshaping Party ideology is Wang Huning (b. 1955). By any measure he is the most influential intellectual in the world. Formerly a professor of political thought at Fudan University in Shanghai, Wang was recruited into the service of the Party in the uncertain years after the Tiananmen Square uprising of 1989. At that time, the Party faced what became known as the "three belief crises" (三信危機): a crisis of faith in socialism, a crisis of belief in Marxism, and a crisis of trust in the Party. In those years there was a widespread belief outside China, shared by many Chinese, that liberal democracy had won the ideological battle of the twentieth century and Communism was a failed system on the way out. There were also new economic, political, and diplomatic challenges to which Marxism-Leninism-Maoism did not seem to offer any good answers. The Party began to seek out trained social scientists

and to build up think tanks to address its ideological weaknesses, as well as to formulate policy in a more scientific spirit.

Wang, a brilliant man by all accounts, was among the first scholars to benefit from the revival of China's university system after the disaster of the Cultural Revolution, in which his family suffered persecution. He came to intellectual maturity in the early Deng period, and along with many others quietly joined the search for a way forward out of Maoism. His early study of French and his Fudan master's thesis, entitled "From Bodin to Maritain: On Sovereignty Theories Developed by the Western Bourgeoisie," perhaps show an initial orientation to Western ideas. In 1985 he became the youngest person ever to hold a professorship at Fudan University. In 1988 he was a visiting scholar in the United States, at the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Iowa. By the late 1980s Wang's career began to take off, especially after he won national fame leading the Chinese team to victory in the televised Intercollegiate Debating Championship of 1993. In 1995 President Jiang Zemin personally recruited him as head of the politics group in the Central Policy Research Office in Beijing. This was and is the key body of the CPC charged with recommending policies, elaborating Party ideology, and drafting documents and speeches for Party leaders. Wang quickly made himself indispensable to the Party's leadership, and by the presidency of Hu Jintao he had become the most influential voice whispering in the ears of its leaders.

Under Xi his portfolio has expanded to include foreign policy and legal reform as well as ideology. A South Korean newspaper has described him as "China's Kissinger," but he is much more than that. He is said to be the theorist behind most of the major ideological formulations of the last two

decades, including Jiang Zemin's Three Represents, Xi's China Dream, the Four Comprehensives, and the Twelve Values mentioned above. His particular concern has been elaborating a new theoretical basis for the legitimacy of the Party's rule. He is also now a political figure in his own right since being coopted into the Politburo, the CPC's top leadership body, in 2017. And he is Xi Jinping's right-hand man, frequently photographed with him, enjoying the kind of access to power that Machiavelli could only dream of.

A matter of speculation among Party-watchers is the degree to which Wang has lent his support to the rehabilitation and appropriation of Confucianism that has taken place in China over the last two decades. Certainly, there has been concern for a long time among the Party leadership that the spectacular growth of the Chinese economy and the materialism it has bred is corrupting moral values and commitment to socialism. This concern dovetails with the need for China to present to the world a more human face than that of Mao, whose iconic portrait is still ubiquitous within China and on every Chinese banknote. The perception of Mao's life and thought is carefully managed within China, but Party leaders are well aware that, outside China, Mao is widely regarded (and with good reason) as one of the worst monsters of the twentieth century.

Confucius is the far more acceptable face of modern China. The Party's embrace of Confucius began in earnest under Hu Jintao, when the teaching of Confucianism in schools was made mandatory and the Confucius Institutes were founded (2004). They now number more than a thousand in over 120 countries. But Xi has ratcheted up the identification of Chinese culture with Confucianism and promoted the elaboration of Confucian

political philosophy in universities. Massive government funding has poured into the Confucius Research Institute (founded 1996) in Master Kong's hometown of Qufu in Shandong Province, which sponsors a regular World Confucius Conference, various prizes, grants, and awards, and in general seeks to coordinate global research on Confucius. In schools Xi has promoted the inclusion of "boxes" in textbooks on all subjects containing Confucian poems and maxims, stating that Confucianism should be ingrained in students' minds and become part of the DNA of Chinese civilization. The government's guide to university entrance exams notably increased in 2017 the amount of preparation expected in "traditional Chinese culture," above all, Confucianism.

In recent years the Party has even allowed some students and parents to opt out of the compulsory nine years of state education and to take part in what is called "Sinology education." This is a kind of Chinese equivalent to "character education" or "values education" in America, but based on the teachings of Confucius. Sinology education is conducted mostly in private schools where students wear traditional Chinese garb, learn Confucian texts, visit Confucian shrines, and order their behavior in accordance with Confucian rites. They even learn traditional Confucian musical instruments such as zithers and flutes and practice archery, one of the Noble Arts praised by Master Kong. They sing hymns suffused with Confucian teachings, such as practicing the virtues, benevolence, promoting the country's welfare, and preserving rituals. (Readers can get a sense of the atmosphere by watching the YouTube video of the Si Hai Confucius Academy in Beijing.) The hymns consist of eight phrases with four characters per phrase, and it strikes me that this way of teaching is not really so far from that used in Dr. Feng's classes on the Twelve Values of Modern China, which is expressed in

twenty-four Chinese characters, two for each “value.” Parents report that the students find the Confucian academies less stressful and results-driven than public schools, and approve the emphasis on becoming a moral person, not just a successful performer on examinations.

Government support for and promotion of Confucianism, however, is not welcomed by all political Confucians. In fact, as I am reminded on my next two stops in China, the correct application of Confucian thought to politics is among the most contentious issues in Chinese political philosophy today. Some Confucians are happy to see the Master’s wisdom reenter the bloodstream of Chinese civilization, even under Party sponsorship, while others fear Party Confucianism is a just a form of what Herbert Marcuse used to call “repressive tolerance,” a type of tolerance that serves the purposes of political domination. They fear, in other words, that the Party’s embrace of Confucianism is merely instrumental and not a matter of deep conviction, and that the lack of sincerity will taint genuine Confucians. Traditionalists feel that Confucian teachings should be learned in the traditional way, by sitting at the feet of a master. Among political Confucians, the main fault line appears to be between those who are willing to use Confucian political meritocracy to justify Party rule and those who want to use Confucianism to reform or replace it. The chief issues that separate the two families of political Confucianism, as one might expect, are democracy and freedom.

Prospects for Political Meritocracy

My first, brief stop in southern China is at Sun Yat-sen University, founded in 1924 by the first president of the Republic of China. Today it is a massive

university system enrolling over seventy thousand students in five campuses divided among three cities, Guangzhou, Zhuhai, and Shenzhen. These are three of the nine enormous mainland cities in the emerging megacity of the Pearl (or Zhujiang) River Estuary, all of them booming commercial rivals of Hong Kong. It is the region of China that has for centuries been most open to Western influences, commercial, religious, and political. It is also a region with still-thriving traditions of popular Confucianism, whose rites, shrines, and moral teachings are interwoven with local folk religions.

At SYSU, as it is known, I'm met by my host Kwak Jun-Hyeok, a Korean political theorist I first encountered in 2013 at a conference on Machiavelli in Tianjin. Kwak took his PhD in 2002 from Chicago with a dissertation on Machiavelli, completed under the Straussian theorist Nathan Tarcov. This work oriented his interests towards the classics of Western political theory. Kwak then returned to Korea where he enjoyed a brilliant career, writing about republicanism and constitutionalism, and also serving as the head of the Center for Political Theory, Peace and Democracy at Korea University. He was recruited into the philosophy department at SYSU in Zhuhai as part of its "Hundred Talents" program, funded by the Chinese government, designed to bring international talent to China. He is something of a mover and shaker, and his role now is to make SYSU a presence internationally in the world of political theory. A likable networker who is good at opening the spigots of funding, he has had remarkable success. He's organized numerous workshops with distinguished foreign scholars and a series of edited volumes about various political issues "in Asian context." Since coming to SYSU in 2016, he admits to me, the new funding environment has altered the focus of his studies: there is plenty of government funding for research on political

meritocracy, but very little for constitutionalism, republicanism, and democracy.

During the presentation and discussion of my paper, however—again a comparative one on Western virtue politics and Confucianism—I don't sense too many constraints on freedom of speech or thought. This is in part because the audience for my talk is international and because I'm speaking in English—English teaching is emphasized at the graduate level at SYSU Zhuhai. The discussion is in fact pretty free-wheeling, even more so at the *baijiu*-fueled dinner following the seminar. Some interlocutors try to sniff out my politics, but once I say some positive things about democracy, people loosen up and start to position themselves more frankly on the issue of political meritocracy. Most in fact resist the use of Confucian political theory to prop up Marxist ideology. One interlocutor sees this as the infection of genuine political Confucianism with a Western bacillus—Marxism—though he is equally opposed to Western individualism and materialism. Another raises scholarly objections to the interpretation of early Confucian texts made by Daniel A. Bell, who is represented (unfairly, I think) as the chief academic promoter of CPC-friendly Confucianism. Another makes the argument that early Confucian texts can be reconciled with democratic forms of selection, understood as one source (but not the only one) of political legitimacy, and can also be interpreted in ways compatible with political freedom in the sense of value pluralism.

The most important theorist arguing for a high degree of harmony between political Confucianism and Western liberal values is Joseph Chan, a professor in the Department of Politics and Public Administration at Hong Kong University. HKU is the last stop on my itinerary this year. Chan is in

fact the main reason for my visit to Hong Kong. I am an admirer of his major work, *Confucian Perfectionism: A Political Philosophy for Modern Times* (Princeton University Press, 2013), which presents a “critical reconstruction” of ancient Chinese political theory in the language of academic theory familiar to us in the West. His analytical framework, along with those offered in the writings of Daniel A. Bell and Tongdong Bai, has helped me make sense of the informal texts I deal with in my historical work. Teasing out the theoretical implications of undertheorized literary texts produced in premodern societies is something political Confucians are good at. It is not a widely practiced skill among historians of Western political thought, who are mostly content to analyze formal texts such as those produced by Aristotle, Hobbes, and Locke.

In any case Chan is obviously a well-liked and respected intellectual leader at HKU. A native of Hong Kong, educated at the London School of Economics and Oxford (where he wrote a thesis on Aristotle’s political thought), he has described his own curiously amphibious formation between Chinese and British culture as follows: Because British policy in Hong Kong was to leave classical Confucian culture untouched, “Many Hong Kong people’s experience of Chinese Confucian culture was positive, and that of British culture not negative, despite its domination through colonial rule. What they experienced was not so much a clash of cultures as their mutuality. Through persistence, creativity, and pragmatism, the men and women of Hong Kong—both Chinese and British—turned what otherwise would be dogmatic antagonism into productive integration.” This doesn’t mean that Chan’s goal is to harmonize Confucianism indiscriminately with any and all values of modern liberal democracy. In *Confucian Perfectionism* he shows himself sympathetic to many Western values (which he usually

prefers to characterize as “modern” rather than Western) but critical of the theoretical arguments on which they are based. At the same time, he understands the Confucian tradition as a living thing which must adapt its moral vision to modern conditions in a spirit of creative fidelity.

As an example of the first disposition, he accepts, on Confucian grounds, that some notion of human rights may be necessary in normally corrupt or non-ideal societies as a “fallback apparatus.” Such an apparatus can protect individual interests when habits of virtue and duty have decayed. But he deplores the kind of “rights talk” that seeks to substitute itself for traditional moral vocabularies and that tries to base even the most intimate forms of mutual caring and love on the litigious language of rights.

As an example of the second disposition, Chan accepts that traditional Confucianism endorsed a “monist” political authority (we might say absolutist), an emperor who is the source of law and set above it, but he argues that the spirit of Confucian teaching, especially the concept of service to the people, is compatible with modern ideas of limited government, separation of powers, and the rule of law. In general Chan exemplifies the Confucian political ethos of “realistic idealism,” moderation, and prudence. The Confucian tradition is a tool to think with; it deserves respect for its relative successes in the past and loyalty from those who love China’s traditions. It is not a pseudoscientific system of dogmatic rules to be followed and enforced in defiance of history and existing social values, indifferent to the misery and moral damage it causes.

Joseph has organized a roundtable discussion on “The Prospect of Political Meritocracy in the Contemporary World.” This consists of short

presentations by Joseph and myself with comments from Jiwei Ci and from Sungmoon Kim. Ci is a feisty political philosopher who has been lecturing for several years on the moral preconditions for introducing democracy to China. Kim is a Korean political theorist from the City University of Hong Kong, the most impressive figure in the younger generation of theorists who defend Confucianism's compatibility with democracy. Both Joseph and I believe the prospects for meritocratic governance, East and West, are parlous. As the foreign guest, I go first, beginning with an overview of meritocratic ideas, education, and institutions in the West from the Italian Renaissance to the present, focusing on the introduction of civil service examinations in Western Europe from the 1790s forward, which were in part inspired by the Chinese examination system. I describe the controversies since the 1950s over meritocratic admissions to elite universities in the United States and argue that modern, morally impoverished notions of merit have much to do with the current crisis of elites in the West. I suggest, more on the basis of hope than experience, that the humanities might be reformed, most plausibly at the level of secondary education, and returned to their traditional purpose of inculcating virtue. Only when there is a widely shared cultural recognition of what true merit looks like can a democratic society learn to value it in its leaders.

Joseph's presentation is a much heftier piece of analysis. He agrees with one of my points, that virtue politics, Confucian or Western, is not committed to a regime type. He distinguishes between political meritocracy, which *is* a regime type, and meritorious governance, which is a kind of political excellence to which any regime may aspire. The regime of political meritocracy is defined as "the idea that a political system should aim to select and promote leaders with superior ability and virtue." It thus differs

from democracy, which chooses its leaders via popular elections, and monarchy, which ordinarily invokes the principle of heredity. Meritorious government, on the other hand, is not necessarily present in the regime of political meritocracy—its forms of selection and promotion may not work well—and not necessarily absent from democracy or monarchy. Modern Confucians value certain aspects of democracy, such as its stability and the protections it offers to citizens, but they worry about the manifest defects of democratic selection. They would try “to improve democracy’s meritorious governance by injecting meritocratic institutions into a democratic regime.”

But this will be difficult, and the main obstacle is the “dogma of the sovereignty of the people” which Chan, relying on Tocqueville, says is backed by “the passion for independence and equality.” The attitude which leads self-reliant Americans to say, “I’m as good as you,” makes them ill-disposed to embracing merit as a principle of government. Traditional meritocracy was linked with aristocracy, and virtue was reinforced by notions of class, elite education, and noblesse oblige. An aristocrat declassed himself (or “degenerated”) when he failed to live up to certain standards. In the post-aristocratic societies of today the best we can hope for is a natural aristocracy of the Jeffersonian type. This would in turn require strong civil associations such as Tocqueville described in 1840s America, but such associations in modern societies are “eroded by capitalist forces and business ideologies.” Pluralist societies need to promote not the heroic, godlike qualities celebrated by the ancient philosophers, but virtues that all human beings can share, something like the “ordinary virtues” championed by Michael Ignatieff: trust, tolerance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and resilience.

Chan ends by outlining a Confucian critique of popular sovereignty, a doctrine, he says, that is not only an obstacle to meritocratic governance, but prevents democracy from working as well as it might. The doctrine of popular sovereignty isn't necessary to license popular resistance to misrule, or to justify a government's need for popular support. It does, however, lead modern people to assume that the cure for bad democracy is more democracy, whereas the Confucian tradition (and, I might add, the Aristotelian tradition in the West) would find the cures for democratic dysfunction elsewhere. He concludes that "the prospect for political meritocracy depends on whether the dogma of popular sovereignty can be dispensed with," and whether democratic societies can be schooled to reconcile their passion for equality with recognition of and support for the right sort of human qualities in those who govern them.

I will not give an account of the discussion that followed, lively though it was. On the way back to the United States it occurs to me: although meritocracy is held in much higher regard in Asia, thanks in part to the vitality of Confucianism there, in both hemispheres it will be an equally formidable task to realize a morally rich vision of virtuous government—whether based on the theory offered in early Confucian texts or in the works of ancient Western philosophers. But in China the struggle to restore the lost virtues of the past has at least made a good beginning.

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