

Meritocracy and Compromises

The abstract concept of meritocracy necessarily needs two wings to come to life: basis of meritocratic differentiation, and differential reward. Both are prone to political manipulation and inevitably unfair to at least some of the people involved.

Meritocracy practices in China are not immune to these challenges. However, Chinese culture is simultaneously less rigid in class role setting and more tolerant of inequality, and therefore a friendlier environment for implementing meritocracy policies.

Uninterrupted, institutional aristocracy has not been part of the Chinese history since at least the Tang dynasty. A bureaucratic meritocracy with the imperial test as the entry threshold encourages social mobility. Senior positions, the rich and influences these positions bring, are all open to every male constituent of the Chinese empire, as long as he could prove his academic merit. It is a massive social conveying belt that carries a large mass of the population almost purely based on merit, and shapes a meritocracy culture in China which is almost democratic in spirit. Because the basis of differentiation in this case is relatively transparent, and the “churn” annual, the imperial test had been a fairly effective meritocracy instrument.

But effective as it was, not all parties benefited equally. The regional quota system that was introduced into the imperial test system is an interesting case study of “Affirmative Action” implemented over hundreds of years.

The context of the debate was the growing North and South disparity in Song Dynasty. The North traditionally ruled in terms of intellectual superiority. However, successive waves of nomadic invasion and civil war had driven large part of the population south, bringing them also scholastic tradition. By the early Song Dynasty in 11th century, the reverse in North – South intellectual power was taking shape.

Sima Guang, as leader of the Northern political block, was sufficiently alarmed to send a special missive to Emperor RenZong in 1064. Sima Guang’s argument was that the design of imperial examination system was fundamentally unfair to the Northern intellectuals, because it focused on literary talents as the most important selection criteria. The Northerners, straight shooters as they were, tended to do less well in these tests. They were however less disadvantaged when put to the classics test, which were more of rote memory test. To Sima Guang, there is a compelling government interest to get more Northerners into the bureaucracy, lest the government becomes a Southerner’s government, and unity of the country would be under threat.

His first proposed remedy was to do away with the poetry related tests. After this failed (writing skills and literary creativity were very much valued in classical China), he proposed an outright quota system by administrative area (逐路取士), by which Northerners would be guaranteed a certain share of the final pool.

Sima Guang had a formidable opponent. Representing the Southerners was Ouyang Xiu, an even more renowned scholar giant in China’s history. One of the Eight Masters of Tang and Song dynasty (唐宋八大家), he was from the Jiangxi province in the South. Ouyang Xiu argued that “customs vary, and people

are born different in their intellect” (四方风俗异宜，而人性各有利钝). This was a bold and provocative statement even when political correctness was not paramount to political discourse. Ouyang Xiu believed that a pure meritocracy system was fundamental to fairness, and one should not violate this fundamental principle in trying to bridge a disparity which to him was part of nature. In today's language, he argued that such a remedy (the quota system) would not pass the strict scrutiny test, necessary for even temporary alterations to fundamental principles.

The debate between pure meritocracy and managed meritocracy continued through Song and the subsequent dynasties, until the end of the imperial period. Politics eventually prevailed, despite several brief interruptions, regional preference quota had been systematically applied since the 15th century.

Results of this interesting social experiment over several hundred years had been mixed. Some research suggests over 70% of chief ministers since Ming dynasty had come from the South. The 1st place honor of imperial examinations, which had not been quota controlled, were overwhelmingly from the South. A more complex meritocracy system also created room for fraud. Because it was easier to make it in the North, many candidates from the South forged their residency papers to register in Northern Exam Districts. Beijing (then Fengtian Fu) was a favorite district for such special “migrants”. In the 16th year of Kangxi, one investigation revealed that three quarters of the candidates from Fengtian Fu were not genuine locals. Later emperors had to introduce specific definitions of a “local resident”, including the 20-year waiting period before migrations became officially recognized.

But these challenges were managed within the imperial system, and with the people's understanding that some type of inequality is expected part of life. The lack of a democratic platform for every party to seek arbitrations for their injuries, limited the impact from politicizing the issue and allowed the system to operate with imperfections. The fundamental thrust of a meritocracy-based competition, and the self-motivation to get ahead, remained with the Chinese culture.

Politicizing a meritocracy system is a natural instinct of any political group. There is no perfect meritocracy system that pleases everyone. Setting boundaries and reaching compromises are key to promoting meritocracies that benefits that largest common denominator. The Chinese emperors were able to navigate this as the final and sole arbiter. It is much more challenging to achieve this in a different political environment, with a more aggressive constituent base.