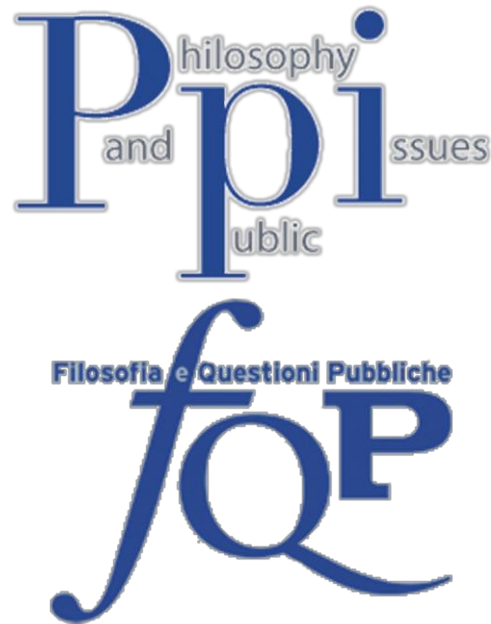


SYMPOSIUM  
THE CHINA MODEL



ASSESSING CHINA'S POLITICAL  
SYSTEM: A RESPONSE TO COMMENTS

BY  
DANIEL A. BELL

[THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK]

# Assessing China's Political System A Response to Comments

Daniel A. Bell

**T**would like to express my gratitude to the six commentators. It is a genuine honor for an author to have his words chewed over in such detail by leading minds with different perspectives. The commentators aim not just to criticize, but to move forward. Hence, my “response” is more of an account of what I’ve learned from their insightful comments that goes beyond what I’ve written in the book. Let me identify three themes that run through the comments—on method, on the need for democracy, and on the need for political meritocracy—and I will “respond” in accordance with those themes.

## I

### On Method

Why did I write this book? It comes from my experience living in Beijing since 2004 (I’ve moved to Qingdao in 2017), especially from my experience teaching at Tsinghua University, the university that trains many of China’s political leaders. In the introduction, I wrote that I realized that China’s political system has meritocratic characteristics because my own high-achieving students at Tsinghua University were being increasingly recruited in the CCP (p.12). My colleagues devoted a lot of time and energy thinking about political meritocracy, and I was motivated to systematize some of these ideas in book form. Wang Pei’s

comment asks a deeper question: why do political thinkers and actors debate about political meritocracy in particular times and places? Her response, drawing on evidence from Chinese history, is that “debates about political meritocracy tend to reappear, with new iterations and interpretations, precisely when the old political hierarchies become ossified ... *The China Model* ... appears against a similar background. Along with the anti-corruption drive in China, the debate about meritocracy became important again.” This is well put, and I should have made the point in the book. There was a lot of dissatisfaction about actually-existing political meritocracy, and my colleagues and friends agonized over such questions as how to reduce corruption in the political system. Perhaps the system did well selecting and promoting officials with ability (especially at higher levels of government), but clearly it did not do a good job of promoting officials with virtue, since a minimum condition of virtue is that officials should not misuse public resources for their private interests. Wang surveys earlier debates about political meritocracy in China, and shows that they also took place when the gap between the ideal and the reality of meritocracy became exceptionally large, with the consequence that political reformers had to think of ways of reducing the gap. And institutional innovations meant to restore meritocratic elements were devised precisely when actually-existing political meritocracy was not working well.

From my perspective, Wang’s insight is particularly valuable because it puts the critical spirit of my book front and center; had I made use of her insights in the book itself, my critics would not have mistaken my book as a defense of political status quo. My question is more historical: is it really the case that debates about political meritocracy tend to appear and reappear precisely when there is a large gap between the ideal of meritocracy and the political reality? Wang’s thesis about the history of political meritocracy is worth fleshing out and testing in a more systematic

way against the whole of Chinese political history. It's also worth asking if her thesis applies in other political contexts. Perhaps Plato defended political meritocracy precisely when it seemed furthest from the political reality in ancient Athens, American founding fathers tried to inject elements of political meritocracy in the constitutional system precisely when meritocracy came under sharpest attack, and John Stuart Mill argued that educated voters should have extra votes precisely when the value of education for political leaders was called into question? And there may be a broader point about political theorizing: perhaps political ideals are most strongly defended precisely when the gap is furthest from the social reality? In the case of China, it seems obvious the ideal of harmony was revived, both in official circles (under the Hu Jintao leadership) and by independent intellectuals, precisely when Chinese society seemed to become disharmonious, almost to a breaking point. These hypotheses are worth testing, and I thank Wang for bringing them to the table.<sup>1</sup>

Let me say more about method. As noted in my new preface, my method is contextual political theory, meaning that I try to provide a coherent and rationally defensible account of the leading political ideas of a society's public culture (p.xii). The method is applied to the case of contemporary China, and I argue that the leading political ideal in China – widely shared by government officials, reformers, intellectuals, and the people at large – is vertical democratic meritocracy, meaning democracy at lower levels of government, with the political system becoming

<sup>1</sup> I'd also like to thank Wang for pointing out that arguments about political meritocracy in Chinese history were shaped by both Confucian and Legalist insights. I did note that Confucianism is not the only way to justify political meritocracy (p.10), but I should have highlighted the (explicit and implicit) role of Legalism in shaping historical debates about how to institutionalize political meritocracy.

more meritocratic at higher levels of government (p. xiii). The book discusses the gap between the ideal and the reality and argues for ways of reducing this gap. But I do not mean to imply that the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy should be used to evaluate other political systems that may be inspired by different leading ideals. In particular, I do not think that the ideal should be used to criticize Western societies with a long history of democratic ideals still widely endorsed by the people today. Hence, Luigi Caranti's account of my view as the claim that "we should abandon the one person, one vote principle to (s)elect the central level of government" needs to be qualified. I disagree if "we" refers to societies (such as Italy or Canada) where liberal democracy seems to be deeply institutionalized and endorsed by the people. My argument is contextual, it is not meant to be, as Caranti puts it, "a work in political theory with tentatively universal validity."

But I thank Caranti for forcing me to think more about why the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy should be used to evaluate the political reality in China, but not necessarily elsewhere. There are four reasons. First, size matters: the ideal only applies in a large country. Caranti asks why I tend to compare China with the United States rather than European countries such as Sweden that more effectively realize the ideal of liberal democracy. The reason is that it is much more difficult to rule and manage huge and incredibly diverse countries such as China or the United States, and it is not helpful to compare China with small, relatively homogenous countries endowed with plentiful natural resources.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, at higher levels of

<sup>2</sup> In the same vein, Francis Fukuyama argues that Denmark is the country that comes closest to realizing the ideal of liberal democracy (see his book *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of*

government of large countries, problems are complex and often impact many sectors of society, the rest of the world, and future generations. In large countries, political success is more likely with leaders that have political experience at lower levels of government and a good record of performance. Electoral democracy may be appropriate for small countries or at lower levels of government of large countries; even if things go wrong – say, too much populism small minded navel-gazing at the cost of neglecting long-term planning and concern for future generations and the rest of the world – it's not the end of the world. But it may well be the end of the world if things go drastically wrong at the top of big and powerful countries. Nobody worries about the fact that Nicaragua hasn't signed up to the Paris accord on climate change, but President Trump disregard for the accord may well be disastrous for the world. The policies of leaders at the top of huge political communities shape the lives of hundreds of millions people, including future generations and the rest of the world. Hence, the ideal of vertical political meritocracy is more appropriate to assess the higher levels of political systems of large countries like China.

Second, the ideal of political meritocracy has a long history in China. More than 2,500 years ago Confucius defended the view that exemplary persons (*jūnzǐ*) have superior ability and virtue (as opposed to the earlier view that *jūnzǐ* have aristocratic family backgrounds), and since then Chinese intellectuals have argued over which abilities and virtues matter for government, how to

---

*Democracy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015). But it seems absurd to suggest that the political system of a relatively homogenous, well-off country of 5.7 million people surrounded by small, friendly neighbors should be used as the benchmark for assessing political success in the United States (not to mention China).

assess those abilities and virtues, and how to institutionalize a political system that aims to select and promote public officials with superior abilities and virtues. It is no exaggeration to say that ideal of political meritocracy was taken for granted in most political debates in Chinese history. And China's two thousand year history with a complex bureaucratic system can be viewed as a constant effort to institutionalize the ideal of political meritocracy. But the ideal does not necessarily apply in political contexts where the ideal of political meritocracy was not so central, and without a long history of bureaucracy inspired by meritocratic ideals. Moreover, it is extremely challenging to build up institutions inspired by the ideal of political meritocracy, and it takes decades for such efforts to show some success (in contrast, it is not so difficult to institutionalize free and fair competitive elections, even in chaotic countries such as Iraq or Afghanistan; whether those elections lead to good results for the political community is a different question).

Third, the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy has inspired political reform in China over the last three decades or so. A typical trope in the Western media is that there has been substantial economic reform in China, but no political reform. But that's because electoral democracy at the top is viewed as the only standard for what counts as political reform. If we set aside this dogma, it's obvious that the Chinese political system has undergone substantial political reform over the last few decades and the main difference is that there has been a serious effort to (re)establish political meritocracy. The country was primed for rule at the top by meritocratically selected officials following a disastrous experience with radical populism and arbitrary dictatorship in the Cultural Revolution, and China's leaders could reestablish elements of its meritocratic tradition, such as the selection of leaders based on examination and promotion based on performance evaluations at lower levels of government—



almost the same system, in form (but not content) that shaped the political system in much of Chinese imperial history—without much controversy. And since then, political meritocracy has inspired political reform at higher levels of government, with more emphasis on education, examinations, political experience at lower levels of government. There remains a large gap between the ideal and the practice, but the underlying motivation for political reform is still the ideal of vertical political meritocracy.

Fourth, survey results consistently show widespread support for the ideal of political meritocracy (aka “guardianship discourse”) in China (see p.147 of my book). The ideal is widely shared, much more so than the ideal of selecting leaders by means of elections. And the idea of political meritocracy is also widely used to evaluate the political system. Corruption became such a big issue in the popular mind at least partly because of the expectation that meritocratically selected leaders are supposed to have superior virtue. But the ideal of political meritocracy may not be an appropriate standard for evaluating political progress (and regress) in societies where the ideal is not widely shared and not typically used by the people to evaluate their political leaders.

That’s not to deny there are also more general (universal) reasons to support the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy in the modern world. For example, political meritocracy, with its emphasis on high quality leaders with wide and diverse political experience and a good track record of responding and adapting to changing circumstances, may be particularly appropriate in a time of fast technological change and unpredictable global shocks. It may have made sense for U.S. founding fathers to enshrine a rigid constitutional system that is difficult to amend in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century because they could be quite sure that society wouldn’t change much over the course of the next few decades. It was more important to fix a good political system than to allow

for an ever evolving political system that aims to select and promote different kinds of high quality leaders appropriate for different times. But today, the one thing we can be sure about is that the next few decades will bring about radical changes to our current way of life (think of the challenge of AI), and the quality of leaders will matter even more than the quality of our political institutions (more precisely, our political institutions should be designed with the aim of selecting and promoting leaders with wide and diverse political experience and a good track record of responding and adapting to changing circumstances).

In short, there is a mixture of particular and general reasons to endorse the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy as a standard for assessing the success of political reform in China. But the standard may not be appropriate in societies that lack China's particular characteristics, such as a large size, a long history of political meritocracy, a recent history of political reform inspired by the ideal, as well as widespread support for the ideal among the people.

## II

### **On the Need for Democracy**

Another more general reason to support political meritocracy at higher levels of government is that it is compatible with most democratic values and practices, unlike, say, fascism or communist totalitarianism. Elections at lower levels of government, non-electoral forms of political participation such as consultation and deliberation, and the freedom of speech are theoretically compatible with political meritocracy at the top. But political meritocracy is not compatible with competitive elections at the top because electoral democracy for top leaders would wreck the advantages of a system that aims to select and promote

leaders with experience, ability, and virtue: an elected leader without any political experience (such as Donald Trump) could rise to the top (and make many beginner's mistakes), an elected leader would have to spend valuable time raising funds and giving the same speech over and over again instead of thinking about policy, and an elected leader would be more constrained by short term electoral considerations at the cost of long term planning for the good of the political community and the rest of the world.

Still, four of the commentators remain unconvinced by my arguments against electoral democracy at the top. Jia Peitao argues that the right to vote may be an essential part of the good life for morally and politically autonomous and self-responsible human beings. I can't argue against these different starting premises other than to reiterate that most Chinese, according to survey data, do not value individual autonomy as the mother of all values: they care much more about a government that performs well and worry less about how it got there. Voting might be valued if it leads to good consequences, but not if it leads to, say, bullying by foreign powers, civil war and economic collapse. More fundamentally, perhaps, the Confucian ideal of social harmony (*he*) —meaning that social relations ought to be characterized by peaceful relations and respect for diversity—is deeply rooted in China, much more so than the ideal of individual autonomy. There is a large gap between the ideal of harmony and the reality in China, but the United States and other large countries are even less harmonious (for some empirical evidence, see appendix one of my book), and competitive elections are likely to further poison social relations in China. Jia argues that “meritocratic elitism” in China leads to a monopolization of social resources which can further polarize society, but is there any evidence that political systems with competitive elections in large countries such as the United States do better at, say, reducing the gap between rich and poor? It is abstractly

conceivable, but Jia doesn't draw on any social science or history to support his theoretical points.

Elena Ziliotti points to the example of Singapore to critique my view that electoral democracy at the top would be bad for China. Singapore has moved from a rigidly authoritarian form of meritocratic elitism to a much more open society, with more freedom of speech, fewer constraints on the freedom of association, and relatively free and fair competitive elections for political leaders, mainly in response to strong demands for a more open society by the country's citizens. I wholeheartedly agree with Ziliotti's account of Singapore's political progress. Similar demands for a more open society will only grow stronger as China modernizes, and I share Ziliotti's view that Singapore can set a good model for China's political future. But I still think China should draw the line at one person, one vote to select top leaders. Singapore, for one thing, inherited British-style electoral democracy, with its fundamental contradiction: the people can choose a leader who threatens to undermine all the achievements of political meritocracy. There is no reason for China to take such a risk. Plus, Singapore is a tiny city-state, without strong obligations to future generations and the rest of the world. China, in contrast, is a global power, with more responsibilities across time and space. It's easy to see how electoral democracy at the top in China would lead to populist pressures that favor the short term interests of voters but it's hard to see how elected politicians are more likely to promote the interests of non-voters who are affected by the policies of the government.

Jean-Marc Coicaud's comment begins with a lengthy and fair-minded reconstruction of my book's main theses. But even he is not persuaded by my arguments against electoral democracy at the top. He suggests that there is a major legitimacy crisis in China: many citizens do not trust their leaders. Corruption is one

potentially “debilitating blow.” I agree, and the fact that China does not have democratic elections as a safety valve makes corruption a deadly threat to the political system. With elections, people have the power, or more precisely, they feel like they have the power, to get rid of corrupt leaders every few years (whether they actually do so is a separate question; other large countries with electoral mechanisms such as India and Indonesia are even more corrupt than China). But political meritocracy is a source of legitimacy in China, and if leaders are viewed as corrupt, it’s a problem not just for the leaders, but for the whole political system. The good news is that there may be more pressure to deal with corruption in systems with political meritocracy as a source of legitimacy, which may help to explain why China’s leaders launched the most extensive, and arguably, the most effective anti-corruption drive in recent history. But the campaign has relied mainly on fear and harsh punishment which may be not be effective in the long term. At some point, there will be a need to rely mainly on moral education, as well as to increase the salaries of public officials and institutionalize the rule of law.<sup>3</sup>

Coicaud suggests that the authoritarian characteristics of Chinese-style political meritocracy also exacerbate the legitimacy crisis:

lack of trust is a particularly negative indicator in the context of China. Because the regime continues to some extent to be a command system, monopolizes power, tolerates little dissent, and at the same time seeks to support and endorsement of people as a major sign of legitimacy (the Chinese political system does not rule and does not want to rule mainly by force), having people not trusting it is destined to introduce doubts and

<sup>3</sup> See my article “China’s Corruption Clampdown Risks Policy Paralysis,” *Financial Times*, May 2, 2017.

questions about its legitimacy. It indicates a form of relative fragility to which pluralist democracies are less exposed.

Put differently, if the CCP is viewed as the sole source of power in society, it will be blamed when things go wrong, which can endanger CCP rule. Hence, there is a need to diffuse power, and to give more opportunities for voice and political participation, if only to diffuse responsibility when things go wrong. And what counts as successful performance is no longer straightforward. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was widespread consensus that the focus should be on poverty reduction, with economic growth as the main mechanism to reduce poverty. Good government meant the promotion of economic growth, and there wasn't a deep need to discuss other purposes of government. But now the costs of the no-holds barred approach to economic development, such as rampant pollution and huge gap between rich and poor, are sources of social discontent and the people need to be increasingly involved in helping to shape and prioritize the policies of government.<sup>4</sup> As people become more educated and urbanized, they will also have different sorts of needs. Hence, there are good reasons for China to progress to a more open and pluralistic society. But I would still draw the line at one person one vote because that would undermine what the advantages of political meritocracy, as noted above.<sup>5</sup> Coicaud

<sup>4</sup> Here I would qualify Caranti's view that politics is not just about finding the best means for certain goals, but also about setting those goals (Ziliotti makes a similar point). It depends on the political context: for example, in times of war, the emphasis will be mainly on the best way to win the war. In modern, peaceful, prosperous, and pluralistic societies, however, I fully agree with Caranti's view.

<sup>5</sup> Coicaud raises the question of whether China is in fact a political meritocracy; if there's no political meritocracy, it would render this whole issue moot. While I think there's a large gap between the ideal and the reality, I do

might reply that more openness wouldn't solve the legitimacy problem so long as people are not given the opportunity to show that they endorse the political system. Carefully controlled polls and surveys won't do the trick. Here too I agree. That's why I proposed the idea of a referendum on vertical democratic meritocracy, with, say, a 30 year mandate for rule by the CCP, along with more civil and political freedoms but short of one person, one vote for top leaders. If there is a strong yes vote, it would quell voices that question the legitimacy of the whole system. The leaders could loosen up controls on society, without worrying that the whole thing will collapse. There might still be emigration to wealthier countries for economic reasons, but such emigration would not be viewed "as a way of passing judgment on the country left behind."

Caranti, however, objects to the way I formulated the proposal for a referendum. I argued for a referendum that would ask the Chinese people to vote "yes" in favor of a more open form of political meritocracy, with more freedom of speech and more freedom to form social organizations, but without one

---

think that the political system is largely inspired and shaped by the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy. Coicaud points to a study suggesting that meritocracy is fostered at lower levels of government but that hierarchy and loyalty play a key role at higher levels. But such studies in the political science literature typically deploy a narrow definition of meritocracy as good performance in the sense of economic growth. I employ a broader definition of political meritocracy as the selection and promotion of public officials with superior intellectual ability, emotional intelligence, and virtue (chapter 2). Emotional intelligence in politics—meaning the ability to engage with and persuade different kinds of stakeholders – matters more at higher levels of the political system, and it's a good sign if public officials at higher levels have many political allies and friends because it helps them to get things done. So the fact that loyalty and patronage play a more important role at higher levels may be an indication that political meritocracy is working well.

person, one vote to choose top leaders and without the freedom to form political organizations that explicitly challenge CCP rule. I also suggested specifying a time period – say, fifty years – long enough to provide stability for the recruitment and training of meritocratically selected leaders but without binding the people to perpetual CCP-style meritocratic rule (pp. 176-77). But Caranti argues that this formulation is “grotesque” without specifying what ought to be the alternative: democracy at all levels of government. My example of the Pinochet referendum in against electoral democracy in 1988—where a “no” did mean democracy at all levels—was meant to suggest precisely the alternative of electoral democracy at the top. But perhaps the alternative would need to be made explicit in the question itself. Still, there would be two obstacles. One is noted by Caranti—the “CCP would never allow this phrasing of the referendum.” Even if the CCP does allow this phrasing, however, there’s a deeper worry. My proposal was inspired by my own personal experience living in Quebec during the two referenda on Quebec independence in 1980 and 1995. Political debates at the time were deeper and broader than the debates prior to regular provincial elections. Thus, I held the view that referenda on key constitutional changes tend to generate extensive deliberation and relatively informed debate, compared to regular elections where it’s hard to generate the same level of interest and enthusiasm on the part of the voter. I confess, however, that Brexit has changed my mind. If the voters of the world’s oldest and most mature democracy can vote recklessly on key constitutional questions without any clear roadmap for the future or deep concern for the fate of “foreigners” affected by the result (voters with less personal experience with Europeans were more likely to vote for Brexit), then it does not set an inspiring precedent for China. So perhaps a referendum on vertical political meritocracy would need some constraints on voter participation, such as a simple multiple



choice exam on the political alternatives set by independent experts. These constraints might come at the cost of some democratic legitimacy, but the task would be to design the referendum so there would be enough increased legitimacy to quell complaints about China's closed political system without recklessly endangering the whole meritocratic system.

### III

#### **On the need for political meritocracy**

Another critique comes from the opposite direction: that I underestimate the need for political meritocracy in China and elsewhere. Caranti asks the question: if political meritocracy is good at higher levels, then why not at lower levels? He recognizes two of the arguments in favor of local democracy: “a) people know pretty well virtues and vices of candidates at local elections, hence they can make responsible, informed choices; b) the issues at stake at local elections have a lesser impact than those for central government.” But he notes that the vices of electoral democracy, such as nepotism and voter buying, are most frequent at the local level.<sup>6</sup> I surmise Caranti is making a theoretical argument that he doesn't personally endorse, but in fact this argument is quite common in China. When I present my book in the West, the most typical response (or source of outrage) is that I should not argue against electoral democracy at higher levels. But in China the typical response has been that I should not argue against political meritocracy at lower levels. Village elections are notoriously corrupt, small-minded affairs, and they need to be checked by meritocratic constraints. In my book I had

<sup>6</sup> Coicaud similarly asks if the same problems of electoral democracy in the West are likely to infect local level electoral democracy in China.

reviewed social scientific literature on the topic, and came to the optimistic conclusion that the quality of village elections has generally been improving. But my experience the last couple of years—talking to academics and political reformers, as well as my own personal experience with village elections in Shandong province—has shaken my faith. The problem of vote-buying is so widespread that the anti-corruption campaign doesn't even bother to try to curtail it, unless the abuses are widely publicized. The campaign is supposed to target both “tigers and flies”, but perhaps corrupt village officials are viewed as ants, not as bothersome as flies, and the government has no need (and/or capacity) to stamp them out of existence. Instead, the CCP aims to curtail the power of elected village officials by various means, such as trying to ensure that the elected official is also the party secretary or appointing a party secretary from above to counter-balance the power of the elected village mayor. Non-governmental forces are also skeptical about the value of village elections *per se*. Independent intellectuals in Shandong province, inspired by Liang Shuming's work in the 1920s and 30s,<sup>7</sup> train Confucian moral educators to work in villages, partly in order to reduce the influence of the “petty people” (*xiao ren*) who participate in local politics. A few years ago, political actors and thinkers debated the question of whether village elections should be scaled up to higher levels of government, but now the main question is how to inject elements of political meritocracy from higher levels to the village level. That said, I'm still not prepared to give up on the principle of vertical democratic meritocracy. But it's not all or nothing, with zero meritocracy at lower levels and zero democracy at higher levels; it's a matter of tendencies,

<sup>7</sup> See Guy S. Alitto, *The Last Confucian: Liang Shu-ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

with more democracy at the bottom and more meritocracy at the top. There may be a need for some meritocracy at lower levels, and some democracy at higher levels. I didn't make this view explicit in my book, but that's my perspective now.

Let me note another change of mind, this time inspired by my experience talking to leaders in the department of organization, the powerful department that selects Chinese leaders. In my book, I described my meeting with Mr. Li Yuanchao, then Minister of the Organization Department (the following year, he was appointed vice-president of China) and I asked him which criteria they use to select and promote leaders. He replied that the criteria depend on the level of government and that intellectual ability and virtue matter most at higher levels of government. To illustrate the rigorous nature of selection at higher levels of government, Li described the procedure used to select the Secretary General of the Organization Department, who was seated nearby. They rely on a complex combination of nominations, written and oral examinations, and inspections to look into the performance and virtue of candidates, with a final decision made a committee of twelve ministers, eight of whom had to be supportive of the candidate. I replied that the organization department should do more to publicize its procedures and guidelines for selecting officials. If the department is demystified, and people understand the mechanics of Chinese-style political meritocracy, there will be more respect for China's political system.

Since then, the organization department has made some efforts to open up. Its criteria for selection and promotion (and demotion) are more transparent. And it has put on mock interviews for visiting dignitaries from abroad, showing how candidates are selected in the interview process, though without naming real people. But we still don't have any clear idea of why

some candidates get promoted, rather than others who appear to be equally well-qualified. I put this question to leaders of the organization department in Shanxi last June (2017). Shanxi was perhaps China's most corrupt province, and they invited me for a government led tour. The point of the tour, I surmise, was to show that they had successfully replaced corrupt cadres with a new group of clean and hard working leaders. I took this opportunity to ask a leader of the province's organization department why the selection process can't be more transparent. If their leaders are so great, surely it would help them make the case, both to fellow Chinese and to the outside world, to show that the leadership selection process is, in fact, rigorous and meritocratic. The organization department leader asked me how we select candidates in academia. I told him that we have a committee that aims to select the best candidates, and we deliberate among ourselves. He asked me if the deliberations are open. I replied, of course not, that would not be fair to the candidates who are not selected. He smiled and said "the same goes for us." And he told me that the organization department – one of the most selective and prestigious departments in the Chinese political system—selects candidates partly according to their ability to keep secrets.

So we should just accept that lack of transparency is an inevitable cost of any organization that aims to select the best candidates. It's true not just of the CCP and academia, but also of Goldman Sachs and the Catholic Church. That's not to say we can't hope for more transparency in the Chinese political system—the words and actions of emperors were tracked by official court historians for posterity in imperial China, and today we can imagine, say, video recordings of the deliberations of CCP leaders to be released fifty years from now. But full transparency is both

unrealistic and unfair to the “losers” in the Chinese political system.<sup>8</sup>

In short, I now think I may have been underestimating the need for political meritocracy in the Chinese political system. The problem is not just that competitive elections at the top would undermine the benefits of political meritocracy. So would a completely free and fair referendum that does not set any constraints on ignorant voters. And competitive elections at lower levels of government, including the lowest level, also need to be checked with meritocratic constraints. Nor is full transparency compatible with political meritocracy. A defender of political meritocracy might well favor a more open political system – as I do – but s/he also needs to accept that there are several trade-offs with democratic values and practices.

Cristopher-Teodor Uglea’s comment is an even stronger defense of the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy: he argues that the ideal can and should inspire political reform not just in China, but also in the European Union. Uglea notes that the “High Authority (the precursor the European Commission) was initially created as a supranational meritocratic body to exercise the leadership of the European institutions. In time, however, although the body remained supranational and, generally speaking, meritocratic, its powers were greatly decreased, while the power of the democratic institutions increased at the top levels.” The increase in democracy at the top may have been motivated a widespread desire for democratization of the EU, but it has paradoxically undermined the legitimacy of the EU because the less meritocratic institutions cannot perform as well. Uglea

<sup>8</sup> This section draws on my article “Why China guards its selection secrets so jealously,” *Financial Times*, October 30, 2017.

argues that reform of the EU inspired by the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy—more meritocracy at the top, democracy at the bottom, and experimentation in between—would improve the performance of the EU’s institutions and hence the legitimacy of the political system in the eyes of the European people. I hope he’s right, but Uglea does not discuss (or speculate about) any mechanism that can bring about the “re-meritocratization” of the EU. What are the potential obstacles? Let us return to the four factors that, together, make a strong case for the view that vertical democratic meritocratic is as an appropriate standard for assessing political reform in the Chinese context. First, China is a huge political community. This factor also applies in the case of the EU, so no problem. Second, there is a long and deeply rooted history of political meritocracy in China, an idea that motivated the development of bureaucratic institutions over 2000 years or so. The EU was initially formulated in line with the meritocracy at the top ideal but – compared to China—the ideal of democracy at all levels is far more central to European political culture, at least since the World War II era. So defenders of meritocracy in Europe may be swimming against the cultural current. Third, the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy has been continuously motivating political reform in China over the past three decades or so; in the EU, it has been the opposite tendency. Fourth—and this may well be the most serious obstacle to the (re)implementation of political meritocracy in the EU—there is strong support for political meritocracy in China. In Europe, by contrast, there is more support for populist politicians and demagogues who oppose rule by “elites” from above. Uglea writes that “a rational European citizen would probably end up accepting a Union led by meritocrats, as long as there is a trusted system of selecting them and solid democratic practices at a local and national level” but it’s hard to be optimistic.

## IV

### Conclusion

I must confess I rushed to get this book out because I worried that the whole Chinese political system would collapse and my arguments in favor of political meritocracy would soon be obsolete.<sup>9</sup> But I was too pessimistic. China's leaders have surprised almost everyone with the length and effectiveness of the anti-corruption drive, hence diluting the main existential threat to the political system. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is perhaps at its strongest point ever, and I predict (always a bad idea) that it will continue to reform on the basis of the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy over the next few decades. Even if the CCP does collapse, the ideal of political meritocracy will probably reassert itself in some form or other in the Chinese political context. The ideal is deeply rooted in Chinese political culture, and there is an even greater need for rule by talented political leaders with experience and a long term outlook to deal with such global challenges as climate change and AI. Since my book was published, I've been to workshops and events with public officials from such countries as Laos, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Nepal who are directly inspired by the Chinese political model and seek to learn from it, and I expect that more developing countries will jump on board soon. My greater worry now lies with the fate of democratic systems. In chapter one of my book, I discussed the four main flaws of electoral democracy (voter ignorance, rule by the rich, lack of concern for non-voters

<sup>9</sup> I have substantial experience with bad academic timing: I wrote a defense of communitarianism shortly before communitarian insights were absorbed by liberal thinkers, which effectively ended the whole liberal-communitarian debate in political theory, and I wrote about "Asian values" shortly before this discourse became obsolete.

affected by policies of government, and the poisoning of social relations), but since then the election of a vulgar demagogue in the United States, combined the rise of extreme right wing populists in Europe, has exacerbated these four flaws, to the point of undermining many citizens' faith in the whole democratic system.<sup>10</sup> As Nathan Gardels puts it, "unless democracies look beyond the short-term horizon of the next election cycle and find a way to reach a governing consensus, they will be left in the dust by the oncoming future. If democracy has come to mean sanctifying the splintering of society into a plethora of special interests, partisan tribes and endless acronymic identities instead of seeking common ground, there is little hope of successfully competing with a unified juggernaut like China."<sup>11</sup> I certainly hope that liberal democracies can improve based on their democratic foundations while also incorporating some meritocratic characteristics. Our world will be better off if two strong but different political systems cooperate in areas of common concern and compete to gain the hearts and minds of the rest of the world. But Chinese-style political meritocracy with democratic characteristics may well be the only one left standing several decades from now.

*Shandong University*

*& Tsinghua University*

<sup>10</sup> For some evidence from the US case, see [https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/national/democracy-poll/?utm\\_term=.2c9ffdb6dc08](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/national/democracy-poll/?utm_term=.2c9ffdb6dc08)

<sup>11</sup> Nathan Gardels, "Weekend Roundup: China's Party Congress is a wake-up call for the West," *The Worldpost*, Oct. 28, 2017.