Introduction

The Theory, History, and Practice of Political Meritocracy

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In 1992, Francis Fukuyama famously proclaimed that liberal democracy's triumph over its rivals signifies the end of history.[1] Needless to say, the brief moment of liberal euphoria that followed the collapse of communism in the Soviet bloc soon gave way to a sober assessment of the difficulties of implementing liberal practices outside the Western world. Brutal ethnic warfare, crippling poverty, environmental degradation, and pervasive corruption, to name some of the more obvious troubles afflicting the developing world, pose serious obstacles to the successful establishment and consolidation of liberal democratic political arrangements. But these were seen as unfortunate (hopefully temporary) afflictions that might delay the end of history when liberal democracy has finally triumphed over its rivals. They were not meant to pose a challenge to the *ideal* of liberal democracy. It was widely assumed that liberal democracy is something that all rational individuals would want if they could get it.

The deeper challenge to liberal democracy has emerged from the East Asian region. In the 1990s, the debate revolved around the notion of "Asian values," a term devised by several Asian officials and their supporters for the purpose of challenging Western-style civil and political freedoms. Asians, they claim, place special emphasis on family and social harmony, with the implication that those in the chaotic and crumbling societies of the West should think twice about intervening in Asia for the sake of promoting human rights and democracy. As Singapore's former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew put it, Asians have "little doubt that a society where the interests of society take precedence over that of the individual suits them better than the individualism of America."[2] Such claims attracted international attention primarily

because East Asian leaders seemed to be presiding over what a United Nations human development report called "the most sustained and widespread development miracle of the twentieth century, perhaps all history."[3]

The debate over "Asian values" was led by political leaders with questionable motives, but the views of Lee and his colleagues did have some traction in Asian societies: it prompted critical intellectuals in the East Asian region to reflect on how they can locate themselves in a debate on human rights in which they had not previously played a substantial part. In the 1990s, the debate focused mainly on human rights.[4] How "universal" is a human rights regime that draws only (or mainly) on the moral aspirations and political practices found in Western liberal democratic societies? If Asian cultures are less individualist than Western ones, then perhaps certain forms of governance and policies are more suitable to Asian societies that are different from the human rights standards typically endorsed by liberal theorists, Western governments, and international human rights documents formulated without substantial input from East Asia? How can "Asian values" and cultural traditions enrich the "international" human rights regime so that it truly becomes an international order based on universally accepted human rights? Asian critics of "Western-style" human rights criticized liberals both for not respecting nonliberal moralities in Asia that might justify deviations from a "Western" human rights regime and for failing to do what must be done to make human rights a truly universal ideal.

In 1997–8, however, the East Asian miracle seemed to have collapsed, and the debate over "Asian values" was one casualty of the crisis. For many, the end came not a minute too soon because the whole debate seemed to rest on faulty theoretical premises. Most obviously, Asia is a huge and exceptionally diverse landmass, encompassing much of the world's population. It hosts a number of religions, such as Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, Christianity, and Buddhism, as well as myriad races, ethnicities, customs, and languages. The assumption that Asia has its own cultural essence fundamentally different from that of the West is, to say the least, dubious. And Asian politicians such as South Korea's former President Kim Dae Jung openly questioned the idea of "Asian values" defended by Lee Kuan Yew, arguing that liberal democratic political values and practices are both universal and appropriate for his country.[5] It would only be a slight exaggeration to say that

"Asian values" were really "Singaporean values" as interpreted by that country's political leaders!

Ironically, few paid attention to the really innovative Singaporean contribution to the debate on political values: the official discourse from Singapore has theoretical and practical interest not so much because it challenges the universality of human rights but more because it challenges the universality of democracy. Singapore's leaders reject the dichotomy between "good" democratic and "bad" authoritarian regimes. Rather, they argue that the concept of meritocracy best describes Singapore's political system: given Singapore's small population and limited resource base, the country should be led by people with the greatest talent and best characters, chosen according to merit. Let us borrow Lee Kuan Yew's own words once again:

> Singapore is a society based on effort and merit, not wealth or privilege depending on birth. [The elite provides] the direction, planning, and control of [state] power in the people's interest. . . . It is on this group that we expend our limited and slender resources in order that they will provide the yeast, that ferment, that catalyst in our society which alone will ensure that Singapore shall maintain . . . the social organization which enables us, with almost no natural resources, to provide the second highest standard of living in Asia. . . . The main burden of present planning and implementation rests on the shoulders of 300 key persons. . . . The people come from poor and middle class homes. They come from different language schools. Singapore is a meritocracy. And these men have risen through their own merit, hard work, and high performance.[6]

The basic idea of political meritocracy is that everybody should have an equal opportunity to be educated and to contribute to politics, but not everybody will emerge from this process with an equal capacity to make morally informed political judgments. Hence, the task of politics is to identify those with above average ability and to make them serve the political community. If the leaders perform well, the people will basically go along.

Such an approach resonates strongly with the Confucian ideals of Singapore's Chinese community. As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (also Lee Kuan Yew's son) explains, "many Confucian ideals are still relevant to us. An example is the concept of government by honorable men (*junzi*), who have a duty to do right for the people, and who have the trust and respect of the population. This fits us better than

the Western concept that a government should be given as limited powers as possible, and always be treated with suspicion, unless proven otherwise."[7]

Why did Singapore's discourse on political meritocracy fail to gain much traction abroad? For one thing, Singapore's political system does not seem designed only to select able and humane Confucian-style leaders; it also relies on highly controversial measures such as a tightly controlled media, strict limits on the freedom of association, and harsh retaliation against members of the political opposition. Hence, in the eyes of many outsiders (especially in the Western world), the political system should still be described as (bad) authoritarianism, even if it's a "softer" form of authoritarianism compared with regimes such as North Korea. Moreover, the government's own political discourse suggests that political meritocracy should not be a universal political ideal: the need to select and promote political talent is most pressing in a tiny city-state without natural resources, and, most important, a tiny talent pool. Hence, why debate the universality of an ideal that is meant to fit only a highly unique city-state?

Judging by what they do, however, Singapore's political leaders seem to believe that political meritocracy can and should influence political reforms in other countries, especially those with a Confucian heritage. Singapore and China in particular seem to have a strong relationship. Since the early 1990s, Chinese officials have gone to Singapore for training and to learn from the Singapore experience.[8] Of course, Singapore's political values and institutions cannot readily be transferred to a huge country such as China, but aspects of the Singaporean political system may be transferable.[9] From Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping, China's leaders have repeatedly stressed the need to study (aspects of) the Singapore model of governance.

Partly inspired by the "Singapore model," China's political system has become more meritocratic since the early 1990s. Without denying the authoritarian characteristics of the Chinese political system, Hong Xiao and Chenyang Li argue that China has evolved a sophisticated and comprehensive system of selecting and promoting political talent (see Chapter 12). The success of meritocracy in China is obvious: China's rulers have presided over the single most impressive poverty alleviation achievement in history, with several hundred million people being lifted out of poverty. Equally obvious, however, some problems in China – corruption, the gap between rich and poor, environmental degradation, abuses of power by political officials, harsh measures for

dealing with political dissent, overly powerful state-run enterprises that skew the economic system in their favor, repression of religious expression in Tibet and Xinjiang, discrimination against women – seem to have worsened during the same period the political system has become more meritocratic. Part of the problem is that China lacks democracy at various levels of government that could help check abuses of power and provide more opportunities for political expression by marginalized groups: "democratic" reform has all but stalled beyond village-level elections. But part of the problem is also that political meritocracy has been insufficiently developed in China. The political system needs to be further "meritocratized" so that government officials are selected and promoted on the basis of ability and morality rather than political connections, wealth, and family background. 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 how Chinese-style political meritocracy set an alternative model – and perhaps a challenge – to Western-style democracy.

Of course, the ideal of political meritocracy is not foreign to Western political theory and practice. Plato famously defended a meritocratic political ideal in *The Republic*: the best political regime is composed of political leaders selected on the basis of their superior ability to make morally informed political judgments and granted the power to rule over the community. Meritocracy was influential throughout subsequent history, although subsequent thinkers rarely defended a pure form of political meritocracy. U.S. founding fathers and nineteenth-century "liberal elitists" such as John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville put forward political ideas that tried to combine meritocracy and democracy. Yet theorizing about meritocracy has all but faded from modern Western political discourse. There are hundreds if not thousands of books on the theory and practice of democracy, but it is hard to think of a single recent (and decent) English-language book on the idea of political meritocracy.

The dearth of debates about political meritocracy would not be problematic if it were widely agreed that liberal democracy is the best political system (or the least bad political system, as Winston Churchill famously put it). But there are growing doubts. The "crisis of governability" in Western democracies caused by the unprecedented globalized flow of goods, services, and capital has been well documented by

political scientists.[10] Capitalist interests have disproportionate influence in the political process, especially in the American political system, which has been described, perhaps not unfairly, as one dollar, one vote rather than one person, one vote. Political theorists have raised questions about the voting system itself. Part of the problem is that voters are often selfishly concerned with their narrow material interest and ignore the interests of future generations who are affected by the policies of government. Jason Brennan has argued that voters should stay away from the voting booth if they cannot make morally informed political judgments.[11] Certainly there are some issues where the pursuit of narrow economic self-interest at the voting booth could lead to disastrous consequences for voters who lack representation (consider global warming). Just as worrisome, perhaps, voters often misunderstand their own interests. Drawing on extensive empirical research, Bryan Caplan shows that voters are often irrational, and he suggests tests of voter competence as a remedy.[12] Of course, such proposals are nonstarters in liberal democracies because nobody wants to give up (or limit) the vote once they have it. Hence, it really is the end of history, but in the bad sense that no improvements are possible once the system of one person, one vote is in place. This is not to say that there is no room for meritocratic reforms in liberal democracies. But they must take place on a foundation of the principle of political equality expressed in the form of one person, one vote.

In short, the rise of China, along with problems of governance in democratic countries, has reinvigorated the theory of meritocracy. But what is the theory of political meritocracy, and how can it set standards for evaluating political progress (and regress)? Is it possible to incorporate the best of meritocratic practices within an overall democratic framework, and if so, how? In a nondemocratic context, how can political meritocracy be structured so that it is seen as legitimate in the eyes of the people and avoids the abuses of authoritarian rule? What is the history of political meritocracy in a particular time and place, and how can the lessons from the past help us to improve political meritocracy today? How did earlier thinkers conceive of political merit – which abilities and which virtues were valued in which contexts – and what is the relevance of earlier conceptions of political merit for leadership selection today? What is the practice of political meritocracy today – in China, Singapore, and elsewhere – and what are its advantages and disadvantages in terms of producing just outcomes and contributing to good governance?

To help answer these questions, the two editors commissioned research papers from an interdisciplinary group of leading philosophers, historians, and social scientists. The contributors were asked to work with a loose definition of political meritocracy as the idea that a political system should aim to select and promote leaders with superior ability and virtue. Because the contributors are also committed to some form of democracy, we asked them to think about how meritocracy can and should be reconciled with democracy – hence, the title of our book, *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy*. The East Asian challenge is thus not a challenge *to* democracy in the sense that it is trying to displace democracy entirely in favor of political meritocracy. We met in Singapore – the only country that openly calls itself a political meritocracy without rejecting democracy – for a free and open exchange of ideas. Drafts of the papers were presented, and we asked two scholars from different disciplines and orientations to comment on each paper. The papers were then revised into chapters for publication in this book.

The book is divided in three sections: the theory of political meritocracy, the history of meritocracy, and the practice of political meritocracy today. Given that the ideal of political meritocracy is, arguably, more central to East Asian societies with a Confucian heritage, we lead off each section with "East Asian" chapters that focus primarily on the philosophy, history, and/or practice of political meritocracy in China and Singapore. Each section follows with "Western" chapters that discuss the philosophy, history, or practice of political meritocracy in the United States and the United Kingdom. We are fully aware that our book can be further enriched by comparative study of the philosophy, history, and practice of political meritocracy in other regions (e.g., India, France, the Middle East), but this work aims to fill a glaring gap in the literature and to inspire further research on political meritocracy.

THE THEORY OF POLITICAL MERITOCRACY

If the process of "meritocratization" in China is an ongoing and unfinished process, how can we evaluate political progress (and regress)? We need a normatively appealing and politically feasible theory of political meritocracy, just as we need a theory of democracy to evaluate the process of "democratization." The first three essays in this section – by Joseph Chan, Bai Tongdong, and Fan Ruiping – theorize about political meritocracy, inspired mainly by Confucian political theory,

and draw some institutional implications. Roughly speaking, the chapters are organized in increasing order of commitment to meritocracy.

Joseph Chan, professor and head of the Department of Politics and Public Administration at the University of Hong Kong, distinguishes between political meritocracy as a political system that selects rulers according to their superior merit and "meritorious rule" in the sense that rulers are able and virtuous and govern effectively. Although political systems such as monarchy and democracy are not explicitly designed to select rulers of superior merit, Chan argues that they can achieve meritorious governance to a considerable degree. In Imperial China, emperors were normally chosen according to the nonmeritocratic principle of hereditary succession, but they could be trained at an early age in the art of effective and humane governance. In practice, however, Chan argues that the system was deeply flawed, with even talented rulers such as Emperor Wanli becoming disenchanted and ineffective.

But modern-day elections are more likely to achieve a considerable degree of meritorious rule. If elections are viewed as a mechanism for selecting people who have commitment to public service and who cultivate trust and harmony with the people, Chan argues that they can attain a reasonable degree of meritorious rule as well as ensure regime stability. But the practice often deviates from the democratic ideal, in which case the democratic legislature should be complemented by a meritocratic institution that explicitly selects rulers according to their virtue and ability. Hence, Chan proposes a second chamber composed of senior public servants chosen on the basis of their virtue and competence by their colleagues and "experienced journalists." Chan recognizes that his proposal best fits a small community such as Hong Kong where public servants and journalists have personal experience with each other. And he also suggests that the relative powers of the two chambers should vary in accordance with the virtue of the citizens: the more virtuous the citizens, the stronger the role of the democratic legislature. The meritocratic chamber, by means of its civil and substantive debates, could serve as a role model and improve the moral education of citizens. So the better it works, the more superfluous it would become.

Bai Tongdong, Dongfang Chair Professor at the School of Philosophy at Fudan University in Shanghai, is more pessimistic about democracy. He begins his essay by discussing four major problems with democracy, especially the institution of one person, one vote: it often degenerates into a radical form of individualism that celebrates

the pursuit of narrowly defined self interest; it lacks effective mechanisms to take into account the interests of nonvoters who are affected by the policies of government, including past and future generations and foreigners; the interests of the vocal and powerful tends to trump the interests of minorities, the silent, and the powerless; and voters often misunderstand their own interests. Bai reviews nonmeritocratic solutions to these problems and argues that they are fundamentally inadequate. Unlike Chan, Bai concludes that the problems of democracy are likely to be permanent, and he casts doubt on the likelihood of success of democratic education especially in large and complex countries, where few have the time and motive to understand and act on behalf of the common good.

Instead, Bai proposes a Confucian form of government that is not subject to the problems of a democratic selection process. This ideal form of government – Bai calls it "Confu-China" – would protect the rule of law and human rights, be responsible for the moral and material well-being of the people, and include a democratic house of the people that allows for people's voices to be heard and provides citizens with the psychological benefits of voting. The meritocratic aspect is a powerful legislature consisting of people selected on the basis of superior ability and virtue. The members would be chosen by a mixture of exams, votes by members of lower-level legislators, and a quota system to represent diverse sectors of society. The meritocratic house would have power to legislate on issues concerned with voters and long-term considerations, although their decisions could be vetoed by a supermajority vote from the popularly elected house. Bai puts forward the ideal of "Confu-China" as a universal ideal that does not presuppose the social dominance of a Confucian culture; in fact, one of the tasks of the meritocratic house would be to promote a form of moral education that makes common people respect political leaders who are morally and intellectually superior. The problem, of course, is that it is difficult to imagine people from anti-elitist cultures such as the United States ever agreeing to political institutions that promote such a form of moral education. And it is even less likely that common people will agree to proposals that limit their power to choose the country's top leaders once they have the equal right to vote. So perhaps "Confu-China" is really only applicable in a nondemocratic country such as China. And Bai might need to modify his ideal so that the "house of the people" does not select deputies by means of one person, one vote; otherwise, it would be difficult to persuade common people that

their leaders are not the only (or main) legitimate representatives of the people, even if the people vote in an incompetent and immoral way. The slippery slope to full electoral democracy may be impossible to stop once some central government leaders are chosen by means of one person, one vote.

Fan Ruiping, professor of philosophy at the City University of Hong Kong, argues not just for strongly meritocratic political institutions but also for a constitutional system that would actively promote a religious form of Confucianism. Fan argues that Confucian theorists should ask not just what kind of people should lead society and what kind of mechanisms should be used to select such persons; even more fundamental, the question is what those leaders should do. Fan argues that Confucian views about family-based ways of life should be written in the constitution and actively promoted by political leaders. Although Fan appeals to metaphysical ideas as justification for a Confucian-based family ethics, he argues that such views can be made appealing to non-Confucians (and nonreligious Confucians) because other ways of life would be tolerated and Confucian values would not be promoted in a strong-armed way.

Once we are clear about what the government should do, then we can discuss who the leaders should be and how they should be chosen. Fan argues against liberal democracy on the grounds that it encourages (or does not discourage) a highly individualistic and shortsighted form of life; even sophisticated liberal theorists such as John Rawls defend a principle of equal opportunity that conflicts with the good of family life (because Confucians allow for intergenerational savings that benefit their own children). Instead, Fan defends Jiang Qing's proposal of a tricameral legislature, with a democratic house, a meritocratic house, and a house of government that expresses a country's history and culture, with each house expressing a different form of political legitimacy. The meritocratic house would have the most power, and it would be composed largely of Confucian trained scholar-officials who aim to promote a Confucian conception of human well-being. Fan is explicit that Confucian meritocracy may only apply in the Chinese context where meritocratic political values are widely shared and ways of life already express Confucian family values. Still, it is worth noting that Jiang Qing's proposal has been intensely controversial even in China. And the proposal would face the same problem as Bai's meritocratic chamber: if a democratic house of government is established in China, it is likely to gain more legitimacy in the eyes of the people (even if