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RESPONSE

Author's Response

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Political meritocracy is the idea that the political system should aim to select and promote public officials with superior ability and virtue. The ideal was developed in pre-Qin Chinese history by Confucianism and other schools of political thought. A similar ideal is put forward in Plato's *Republic* but political meritocracy has been central the Chinese political thinking for about 2,500 years. It was institutionalized in imperial China by means of a complex bureaucratic system designed to select and promote superior public officials that lasted more than two millennia. The imperial system collapsed in 1912 but the meritocratic bureaucratic system has been reestablished in form (but not content) over the last four decades in China.

In a political meritocracy, there is no sharp distinction between political leaders who decide and civil servants who implement: all public officials are supposed to be selected by meritocratic mechanisms. Of course, there is a big gap between the ideal and the practice and my earlier book, *The China Model*, tried to systematically defend the ideal and propose ways of reducing the gap in contemporary China.[1] That book was inspired by my experience working at Tsinghua University, the university that trains many of China's future leaders. My colleagues discussed such questions as which abilities matter for political leaders, which virtues matter, what is the relation between ability and virtue, how to assess ability and virtue for public officials—but I did not have any experience "within" the system.

So I was fortunate to be offered a post as dean at Shandong University's School of Political Science and Public Administration, a large faculty with over 1,000 students at the premier university in a province of 100 million people that also trains public officials in Shandong province. It was a good opportunity to observe

[1] Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Theory and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

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political meritocracy in practice. Did my practical experience help shed light on theory of political meritocracy? It did, as I try to show in my book. For example, in my earlier work I discussed three traits that matter for public officials: IQ, EQ, and a commitment to serving the public. When I served as dean, I came to the realization that perhaps the most important trait (which I lacked) is the capacity for hard work. That's also why I admired my hard-working colleagues. I have great admiration for the work ethic of fellow leaders and came to the realization that much of China's progress is due to such public officials who work tirelessly for the common good. Yao says that one cannot be perfect but the question is whether the system, past and present, consistently selects public officials with above average ability and virtue. My own experience makes me optimistic in this respect.

At Shandong University, the main problems arose when we were asked to implement transparently mistaken policies that came from higher levels of government, such as enforcing lockdowns and quarantines to prevent the surge of Omicron. By early 2022, these policies were clearly doomed to fail, yet they had to be rigidly enforced at great cost to the academic well-being of students and teachers. So here I agree with Yao's point that for political meritocracy to work, the top leader has to promulgate informed policies that benefit the community. I also agree with Li and Yao that such policies are more likely to be successful if leaders are constrained by the rule of law and democratic practices that inform the decision-making process, especially at lower levels of government.

But, contra Li, it doesn't follow that we should overthrow the whole system in favor of an electoral democracy at the highest level of government. Electoral democracy at the top owes nothing to China's political culture and may lead to the selection of populist leaders with no political experience who appeal to people's worst instincts. Whatever China's problems, it hasn't gone to war since 1979 and 800 million people have been lifted out of poverty, at least partly due to policies devised and implemented by talented and hard-working public officials. The system does a relatively good job of selecting high-quality public officials, especially at the mid-level of government where ability and performance matters more than loyalty to official ideology. Those mid-level officials can and should be given more discretion to do as they see fit given local needs and requirements, with more room to innovate and experiment. In this sense, I've become more pessimistic because things are going in the wrong direction, with more centralization and rigid adherence to higher level dictates. But the overall system worked relatively well in the past and things will improve once a new generation of more open-minded leaders take power at higher levels of government. Almost every Chinese I've met under 50 favors a more open form of government, partly because they haven't been shaped by the cruel and paranoid times of the Cultural Revolution.

It's worth asking why the political system has become more repressive. Li was more optimistic about political meritocracy in China more than a decade ago. He wrote that "searching for virtuous talent in China today has evolved into the most comprehensive and sophisticated process of its kind in history"[2] and

[2] Xiao Hong and Chenyang Li. "China's Meritocratic Examinations and the Ideal of Virtuous Talents," in *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Daniel Bell and Chenyang Li (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 340.

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concluded that "the kind of selection process developed so far may serve as an effective way to generate good candidates for government positions."[3] But he seems to have changed his mind and now suggests the entire system should be scrapped in favor of an electoral system to select public officials. One can surmise he changed his mind because of current leadership that is pushing China in a more repressive direction. Yao adds that political meritocracy lacks any mechanism to prevent one charismatic leader from becoming a tyrant and from fostering a personality cult. But we still have some form of collective leadership in China. We are not sure how it works—is the top leader surrounded by "yes men" or is there more deliberation and critical input because the leader can trust "his" allies? But it's still collective in principle and we can't explain everything by pointing to one leader who has bent the whole system to his will. We need to consider other reasons for increased repression.

One reason is the US-led effort to demonize China and curb its economic development, especially its high-tech sector. The US government is open about its aim to curb China's rise, which only strengthens the security forces in the Chinese political system. If relations between the US and China improve, the Chinese leaders will be less paranoid and forces in the political system that favor more openness will be empowered. These forces are not so latent: perhaps the only thing that liberal, socialist, and Confucian intellectuals have in common is that they object to growing curbs on academic research and favor more freedom of speech.

Another reason for increased repression is linked to the anti-corruption campaign. The campaign was necessary precisely because the ideal of political meritocracy informs the system. The leaders are supposed to have above average ability and motivation to serve the public and if they fail by being corrupt, the whole system lacks legitimacy (as opposed to a democratic system where the system is justified because the leaders are selected by the people; if the leaders are corrupt, the people can change them every few years, and corruption doesn't undermine the legitimacy of the whole system). But the "success" of the campaign, with millions of officials purged and others seeing their prospects for promotion diminished, means that there is a huge constituency of public officials who dislike the current leaders, which makes the leadership more paranoid and security conscious. If the campaign transitions from "Legalist-style" punishment to "Confucian-style" moral education, there will be fewer enemies in the system and the leaders can relax somewhat. As Li notes, however, there are few signs (yet) of such a transition. Yao seems skeptical even of the possibility that moral education can work but he sets too high a standard for success. The point is not to make public officials "perfect," but to select and promote those with above average virtue. Even the most pessimistic of the Confucians such as Xunzi allowed for the possibility that the natural tendency to selfishness can be mitigated by such means as moral education and participation in rituals that generate a sense of social harmony.

A third reason for increased repression, as Zhang notes, is the comeback of Marxist ideology. It's true that repressive means have been used to rein in capitalists as a way of reducing the huge gap between rich and poor, with the

[3] Hong and Li. "China's Meritocratic Examinations," 359.

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consequence that the state has strengthened its role in the economy and the entrepreneurial spirit that has helped to drive China's development has been somewhat tamed. In Marxist theory, however, "Communist statism" is meant to be temporary, and the state is expected to wither away once advanced machinery can do the socially necessary work and people are free to realize their creative talents. In reality, the state is not about to wither away, if only because a strong state may be necessary to deal with challenges Marx did not anticipate such as climate change and the regulation of nuclear weapons. What we can take from Marx, however, is the idea that the point of machines is to serve humans and that states should have some sort of control over the most advanced technologies to ensure they serve human well-being, as opposed to letting corporations go full steam ahead with whatever increases profits, even if technological development may harm the great mass of humankind. The question is how the state can exercise some control over key technologies without damping down the "animal spirits" that continue to drive innovation and entrepreneurialism.

Zhang has the impression that I prefer Confucianism to Marxism. I do think Confucianism is highly relevant for the modern world. Since the state won't wither away, we need to ask how to select and promote superior public officials and the Confucian tradition has much to offer in this respect. I also endorse the Confucian idea that the good life lies partly, if not mainly, in nourishing compassionate and humane social relations, starting with the family and extending outwards. But I also endorse the Marxist ideal that the good life involves the realization of one's creative talents and we should aim for an economic system that allows for this possibility. These two ideals are in tension, but both are important for shaping China's political future.

Yao's critique of academic meritocracy suggests that high-level administrators in China have too much power that often has negative consequences for academics. I share the concern that academic censorship is a huge obstacle to academic development. But Yao's view may be influenced by his experience in Beijing where things may be worse. In Shandong, the Confucian culture of modesty and humility still informs the workings of academia and "bosses" are less willing to impose unwanted standards on academics. To the extent there are problems, it's often due to "publish or perish" incentive structures that may be similar to the pressures that non-tenured academics face in Western universities. The solution is not to abolish academic meritocracy, but to develop more refined standards of academic merit that allow for top-level academic research. There should also be concern for research that benefits the community. In this respect, the experience of Chinese universities may have something to offer to universities in the West that often seem cut off from the public. I'm saddened to report though that this sort of academic discussion could not be published in mainland China under the current political environment.

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