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Debunking the Myth of Confucian Meritocracy

By Jaeyoon Song

Aspecter is haunting China today, the specter of Confucianism. Since the early 1990s, the Chinese government has continuously emphasized as the national goal achieving the Society of “Lesser Peace (*xiaokang shehui*),” meaning “a relatively comfortable life.” Instead of striving toward the long-term utopian goal of “Grand Unity (*datong*),” the late 19th century slogan of reform-minded Confucian intellectuals, the Chinese government has set the moderate goal of achieving a “relatively comfortable life” in terms of income, food consumption, housing, and human resource development. Both “Grand Unity” and “Lesser Peace” are derived from the *Book of Rites*, one of the Five Confucian Classics. Whereas the former symbolizes the utopian order of high antiquity, the latter refers to ‘the governance of modest stability’ achieved by the legendary law-giver, the Duke of Zhou (ca. 11th century BC).

In the 1950s-1960s, Mao Zedong’s (1893-1976) utopian dream of building a communist state brought about the catastrophic consequences of the Great Leap Forward and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. To shuck off the ideological straitjacket of Maoism, Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997) used the term “*xiaokang*” to initiate the “Reform and Opening-up” designed to ameliorate the actual standards of living for the Chinese people. In China today, however, the *xiaokang* ideology is used by the Chinese government to suppress calls for political freedoms, human rights, and democracy. The idea is rather simple: “not now, but later.” China today has not yet reached the stage in which people can pursue those values as it still strives to achieve *xiaokang*, a relatively comfortable life. By setting the “moderate” goals of Lesser Peace, the Chinese government can require the people to lay down part of their rights. Remembering

how the dystopian dreams of the recent past resulted in collective sufferings, the Chinese people are easily persuaded not to indulge in the luxuries of modern Western liberal democratic dreams. In fact, the idea of “Lesser Peace” is a convenient ideology for the Chinese government to limit the basic human rights and political freedoms of the Chinese people.

Maybe for this reason, the Chinese government continues to promote Confucianism as justification for its gradualist and pragmatic approaches to basic human rights and political freedoms. At a forum marking 2,564 years since Confucius’ birth, China’s leader Xi Jinping declared that ancient traditions “can offer beneficial insights for governance and wise rule.” Stressing the importance of restoring Confucianism, Xi Jinping noted specifically that “Lesser Peace” is a Confucian value. Xi seems to promote Confucianism as the source of wisdom by which the Chinese people can “grope for stones while crossing the river,” the expression used by Deng Xiaoping to emphasize the experimental nature of the Reform and Opening-up. Xi calls on the Chinese people to create something new, something fundamentally “Chinese” from the Chinese tradition rather than emulate the Western style of democracy. Highlighting the subversive nature of liberalism and democracy, Xi takes a step further to cite the Legalist philosopher Han Feizi (ca. 280-233 BC) as well: “to ward off the temptations of corruption and Western ideas of democracy.” In short, the Chinese government invokes the long-standing traditions of Chinese history, mainly Confucianism, to rein in on popular calls for political liberties and democracy.

In tandem with the Chinese government’s promotion of Confucianism, a group of Chinese political thinkers and legal

theorists have actively engaged in the constitutional discourses on the Chinese political system. In their discourses, some theoreticians have argued that the political doctrine of Confucianism can be re-invented as the constitutional alternative for the future of China. Pointing to the shortcomings of “Western-style democracy,” they have spelled out their visions of Confucian “meritocracy.” By creating the dichotomy of democracy vs. meritocracy, they have stressed the strengths of the Chinese political system, and sought to envision how it can evolve into a more effective constitutional government. Unlike the representatives of Western democracies, they argue, the leaders of China are selected through the rigorous processes of merit assessment and public surveillance; only those with stellar academic records and flawless work performances could attain to leadership positions. Although the Chinese government system might conflict with the conventional wisdom of Western political thinkers, they argue, it epitomizes the long-standing ideal of Confucian meritocracy, the cumulative wisdom of the Chinese imperial state of over two millennia. By tapping into the tradition of Confucian meritocracy, they argue, the Chinese government can evolve into a constitutional meritocracy bypassing the disruptive forces of demagogic Western-style democracy.

popularly elected politicians, technocrats of liberal democracies are generally selected through merit-based examinations of various sorts and advance through the ladder of bureaucracy.

Second, in liberal democracies, such liberal rights as freedoms of expression and association secure the open criticism and surveillance of government in general; contrarily, authoritarian regimes limit such liberties. Obviously, liberal democracies tend to be more transparent whereas authoritarian regimes tend to be more corrupt. How can an authoritarian regime guard against corruption? Whatever the Confucian ideals might have been, the traditional Chinese imperial state failed to guard against bureaucratic corruption! Non-democratic meritocracies, in theory, might work well if and only if morally upright philosopher kings rule with competence for the public good; but I think we know of no such regime in history. The process of democratic elections (one person one vote) can always result in electing a Hitler; however, in reality, the people tend not to be so absent-minded. Moreover, open and fair elections come with the denuding public examination of candidates in an open form of public deliberation. Although precarious, open democratic elections can secure the most effective quality control of political leaders.



By tapping into the tradition of Confucian meritocracy, some theoreticians argue, the Chinese government can evolve into a constitutional meritocracy bypassing the disruptive forces of demagogic Western-style democracy. But given the diversity of “Confucian” pursuits, who is there to say Confucianism is essentially this or that?

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Given the size of the Chinese population, their constitutional discourses should hold far-reaching implications beyond China. As the emerging constitutional discourses in China today are still ongoing with increasing audiences, it would be hasty to make any conclusive remarks as to their arguments and suggestions. However, in order to heighten the level of their political discourses, it is necessary to debunk the myth of Confucian meritocracy. In my opinion, the idea of Confucian meritocracy is flawed for at least three reasons.

First of all, history shows many different forms of democracy, of which liberal democracy is but one. I think the idea of meritocracy is indeed reflected in the way in which political theorists married liberalism and democracy: liberal democracy is the idea that democracy ought to be prescribed, and thus constrained, by the liberal constitution. For example, even if a majority of the constituents opts for the enactment of racist, fascist, or sexist laws, such popular decisions would be declared unconstitutional in a liberal democratic society. Those who decide on the constitutionality of such decisions are typically the Supreme Court Justices who are selected through a transparent process of merit assessment and public surveillance. Moreover, apart from

Third, meritocracy is not confined to “Confucian” conceptions of good government. Even the Legalists who abrogated Confucianism conceptualized “meritocracy” as a political ideal. Which political theorist would oppose the view that qualified individuals should occupy government offices? Whatever Confucianism might be, it cannot be brought back to justify one party dictatorship of China today. Most Confucians that I know from history emphasized the importance of public deliberation (*gongyi*) and open channels of political expression (*yanlu*). They were clearly aware of the dangers of one man rule or one faction dictatorship, and tried to implement policies to guard against despotic tendencies in government. Given their acute awareness of the susceptibility of authoritarian rule to corruption, those Confucians might even think that democratic procedures and liberal values are more effective means of bringing on meritocracy in reality.

In theory, we can think of a pure democracy that is governed solely by the principle of majority rule; in reality, however, liberal democratic regimes strive to be meritorious, lest they be voted out. All liberal democracies strive to achieve meritocracy as the people tend to, though not always, vote for qualified

representatives in government. In the 1970s and '80s, South Korean and Taiwanese dictators ruled in the name of meritocracy by recruiting high-quality technocrats for economic development. Interestingly, both Park Chung-hee (1917-1979) in the Republic of Korea and Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975) in the Republic of China promoted Confucian values through government campaigns. The Korean economy as well as the Taiwanese economy grew at the annual rates of 8-10 percent during those years. However, as the needs of society diversified over time, the people of both countries chose to build liberal democracies because the authoritarian regimes had shown their obvious limitations: corruption, political suppression, the loss of popular support, tendencies toward cultural uniformity, so on and so forth.

In short, it would be erroneous to compare "democracy" with "meritocracy" as if the two are mutually exclusive. Meritocracy is a political norm upheld by political thinkers of almost all persuasions. Likewise, the idea of Lesser Peace, though shrouded in the Confucian rhetoric, is a hackneyed strategy of "gradualism," used by the authoritarian leaders of developmental dictatorships, to limit popular calls for the expansion of human rights, political liberties, rule of law, and democracy. For the Chinese government to promote Confucianism as an alternative to democracy seems no more than a rhetorical justification of its authoritarian rule. For Chinese intellectuals to invent

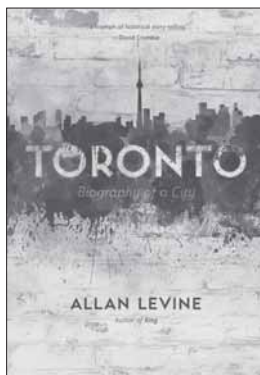
"Confucianism" as the ideological ground of a new Chinese political system seems theoretically less robust than need be.

"Confucianism" is a broad church which evolved over two millennia in East Asian civilizations. In traditional China, as in all other civilizations, political thinkers and statesmen were often at fundamental odds. Confucianism was no more than the common political language they used to make their political claims: some "Confucians" called for the *laissez faire* retreat of the state; some "Confucians" implemented vigorous state-activist reforms; some "Confucians" emphasized the importance of rules and regulations; some "Confucians" sought to promote paternalistic intervention and rule of man; some "Confucians" shut themselves off from politics in self-imposed eremitism; some "Confucians" sought to overthrow the ruling regimes.

Given the diversity of "Confucian" pursuits, who is there to say Confucianism is essentially this or that? As the young students of Hong Kong today rally in the streets of the city center with umbrellas in hands, the people in China as well as outside of it should be on alert not to buy into the dubious rhetoric of "Confucianism."

Dr. Jaeyoon Song (songjae@mcmaster.ca) specializes in 11th-14th century Chinese intellectual history and the history of political thought at McMaster University.

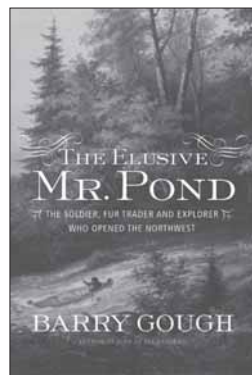
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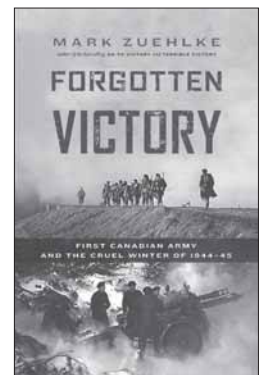
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