Meritocracy as an alternative to democracy?
An analysis of political Confucianism

Xu Tian- Department of Political Science

Abstract

Democracy is widely regarded as the best way to build a responsible government that promotes the material and mental welfare of the people. However, this claim is questioned by the underperformance of newly democratized polities and the recent rise of authoritarian China. Therefore, whether China can find its particular way towards good governance, instead of relying on the one-person-one-vote rule, remains problematic. Among the various approaches, Confucian heritage has the potential to provide its own inspirations. As a perennial rival to democracy, the meritocratic idea of selecting the most competent and virtuous to rule has deep root in Confucianism. To evaluate Confucian meritocracy, this dissertation decouples representation and accountability, two concepts that are almost universally recognized as the most important political goods, from liberal democracy, and use them to compare Confucian meritocracy with liberal democracy.

The comparisons vindicate the possibilities of political representation and accountability in a political meritocracy without electoral democracy. Confucian meritocracy not only offers an alternative to the democratic model of representation, but also provides a different approach to achieve political accountability. The virtue-based Confucian alternatives challenge the democratic monopoly of these two concepts and partly explain the longevity of the imperial dynasties in Confucian East Asia. Moreover, this dissertation pushes forward the debate between meritocracy and democracy by placing emphasis on the fundamental roles of democratic institutions and of an active citizenry in the creative transformation of Confucian meritocracy. Meanwhile, it also stresses the importance of virtues in developing a selection model of representation and a trust-based theory of accountability for democratic societies.

The findings of this dissertation further validate that meritocracy and democracy are complementary approaches toward good government, rather than being contradictory. The combination of these two might create a hybrid regime that is based on democratic institutions and features meritocratic characteristics.