

1. From Communism to Confucianism: Changing Discourses on China's Political Future

In the United States, the political future is constrained, for better or worse, by constitutional arrangements that have been in place for more than two centuries. Barring dramatic developments that few would welcome, such as nuclear war or major terrorist attacks, it is highly unlikely that the political system will change much over the next few decades. In China, by contrast, the political future is wide open. According to the formulation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the current system is the “primary stage of socialism,” meaning that it’s a transitional phase to a higher and superior form of socialism.¹ The economic foundation, along with the legal and political superstructure, will change in the future. For independent intellectuals, the only remotely plausible justification for the current system of economic liberalization combined with tight political control is that it is a temporary necessity given the need to provide social order during the disruptive period of economic development (and many would reject this claim). Nobody argues that the current political system should remain in place once the economy is developed.

The question is, what comes after economic development? In China, the debates on this question are somewhat constrained due to political controls as well as the widely felt need to deal with China’s more immediate economic and social problems. There also seems to be an aversion to “utopian thinking,” which is an understandable reaction to Mao’s disastrous attempts to sweep away the past during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Still, few doubt that there’s a need for a different—and more inspiring—political model in the future.

In private discussions, there is room for speculation, and I will report on some possibilities.

The End of (Marxist) Ideology

Officially, the philosophy of Karl Marx underpins the legitimacy of the ruling CCP, and thus Marxism is the place to start for thinking about China's political future. It's true that the CCP no longer emphasizes class struggle, hatred of the rich, and opposition to private property. In fact, capitalists can now join the CCP, and the legal system is being reformed (slowly) so that it more closely approximates that of capitalist countries. But such developments may reflect a better understanding of Marxist theory than in Mao's day. The CCP need not abandon the commitment to communism as the long-term goal so long as it recognizes that poor countries must go through capitalism on the way.

The capitalist mode of production treats workers as mere tools in the productive process and puts technology to use for the purpose of enriching a small minority of capitalists. But it does have an important virtue: it has the consequence of developing the productive forces more than any previous economic system. The reason is that capitalists compete with each other to make a profit; hence they have an incentive to develop new, ever more efficient means to produce goods, creating a large material surplus without which socialism would not be feasible. If communism is implemented without developed productive forces (advanced technology and the knowledge to make use of it) that underpin material abundance, then it won't work for long. Without an "absolutely essential material premise," as Marx put it in *The German Ideology*, "want is merely made general, and with want the struggle for necessities would begin again, and the old filthy business would necessarily be restored." That's why Marx justified British imperialism in India: yes, it would be exploitative and miserable for Indian workers, but the foundations would be laid for socialist rule. The CCP's defense of brutal capitalism in China—as Deng Xiaoping famously put it, "To get rich is glorious"—has its roots in a similar logic.

In the Marxist framework, the moral point of the whole ugly process is to free the large mass of humankind from the need to engage in

drudge labor. Technology will be highly developed, and at a certain point—the moment of revolution—private property will be abolished, and machines made to do work for the betterment of humanity instead of the interests of one small class. Technology will do the dirty work needed to meet people’s physical needs, and people will finally be free to go fishing, read books, design and create works of beauty, and so on. Unpleasant labor will be limited to the maintenance of machinery and other tasks required to keep the system going, but this “realm of necessity” would not take up most of the working day.

But when is China supposed to implement communism? And how will the transition come about? One response is that it’s not useful to think about such questions because the transition to communism will happen anyway. Marx himself was a technological optimist (see his discussion of the Factory Acts in *Capital*, vol. 1): technological developments will lead to the communist revolution no matter what theorists say about it.² But his faith rested on now discredited economic theories such as the falling rate of profit under capitalism and the labor theory of value. And from a normative perspective, it is important to think about policies that can speed up the process and minimize the suffering of workers along the way. Perhaps that’s why Marx himself felt the need to address workers and rally them to his cause.

By invoking the rhetoric of “scientific development,” the Chinese government seems officially committed to the technologically optimistic interpretation of Marx. Yet it has recently taken on board concerns about the need to minimize the suffering of workers and farmers during the process of scientific development. In October 2006, for the first time in twenty-five years, a plenary session of the CCP’s Central Committee devoted itself specifically to the study of social issues. Chinese policymakers signaled a shift from no-holds-barred growth to a more sustainable model that would boost social and economic equality and enable low-income and underprivileged groups to have more access to employment opportunities, basic education, primary health care, and social security. And the government has been more active in promoting workers’ rights. It successfully forced Wal-Mart to accept the state-controlled union in its Chinese outlets, and it has passed a law that aims to crack down on sweatshops and gives labor unions power to negotiate worker contracts, safety protection, and

workplace ground rules for the first time since market forces were introduced in the 1980s.

Notwithstanding official rhetoric, it is unclear how much these developments stem from commitment to communism. Wu Zhongmin of the Central Party School supports the official recognition of social justice with the view that social resources should be distributed according to contribution, where members of society “are enabled to obtain according to deserts.” Chinese readers would recognize the reference to Marx’s account of “lower communism,” but in practice the government’s call for social justice seems to mean nothing more than the recognition of the need for the welfare measures that some capitalist countries have adopted to mitigate the worst excesses of capitalism (many Chinese officials of late have visited Scandinavian states to learn about their social welfare system, and such welfare states have been praised in the official media).³ And philosophically, the commitment to the disadvantaged can be grounded in social democratic theories that emphasize social and economic rights,⁴ Confucian ideas that the government should give first consideration to those deprived of resources and key social relations, or even Christian values that prioritize the needs of the poor and the humble. There is nothing distinctly Marxist about the CCP’s call for more social welfare.

Leading intellectuals of the “new left” such as Wang Hui have long been calling for social justice, meaning that China’s first priority should be to address the huge gap between rich and poor and to secure the interests of the disadvantaged. But their views, as one might expect, tend to be more critical of the status quo. They argue that social justice cannot be achieved without substantial political reforms, such as more autonomy for organizations of farmers and workers, democratic processes that allow for the articulation of interests, and a free press that would expose official corruption. Cui Zhiyuan of Tsinghua University is perhaps the most radical of the new leftists: he has argued for both economic and political democracy. In a fascinating essay titled “Liberal Socialism and the Future of China: A Petty Bourgeoisie Manifesto,” he warns that progressive forces in China should not imitate social democratic practices pursued in Western Europe. Instead, Cui argues for labor-capital partnerships and social dividends paid to all citizens according to age and family status.⁵ Only such innovations

could realize the goal of empowering the large majority of Chinese workers and farmers.

But the new leftists do not ask the question of what happens after economic development, when the large majority of Chinese no longer have to spend their days toiling in fields and factories. The discourse, both official and unofficial, seems to be confined to debates about how best to provide benefits for workers and farmers given current levels of technological development, and nobody seems to be thinking about how to move toward an abundant society that frees workers from unwanted labor and when this ideal is supposed to be realized.

So why isn't communism being discussed? For scholars, there may be political constraints. Because Marxism is supposed to provide legitimacy for the government, it is the most tightly controlled political discourse in China. At Tsinghua—the university that has trained much of China's political elite, including President Hu Jintao—my Marxist colleagues do interesting and valuable work in Marxist theory (similar to Western scholars of Marxism), but they rarely apply Marx's ideals to China's current and future political reality. I was told that it's too politically sensitive to be explicit about such matters.

The tendency to avoid utopian theorizing also helps to explain the lack of theorizing about “higher communism.” I visited the Translation Bureau of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party—the official Marxist institute with the task of translating Marx's works into Chinese—in the hope of finding out more about Marxist theorizing about communism. The institute is flush with funds from the government, and perhaps they are relatively free to think about the appropriate conditions and mechanisms for the implementation of communism in China. But I came up empty. I was handed beautifully packaged translations of the *Communist Manifesto*, and the people I met spoke about the need to deal with the problem of economic inequality in contemporary China, but they seemed puzzled by my questions about freeing workers from drudge labor in China's communist future. Let's deal with the present problems first, they said, before worrying about the long term.

There may also be the worry that talking about communism now reduces the likelihood of achieving it. An American businessman who is well connected with China's political elite told me that Marxist theorists

in the government still plan to implement higher communism in the future, but they don't want to make it explicit because communism might require expropriation of the capitalist class. If capitalists are made aware of this possibility, they might think their property rights are not stable and hence they might not be willing to invest in ways that are necessary to develop the productive forces now. The fact that foreign corporations (with some notable exceptions, like Nike) lobbied vigorously against the fairly mild Chinese proposal to upgrade workers' rights and warned that they would build fewer factories in China suggests that such fears are not entirely unfounded. Such forward-looking leaders may also worry that contemporary Chinese workers may not be willing to sacrifice in the interests of future generations. If workers are made aware of the plan to implement communism in the future, they might not be willing to undergo the sacrifices that are required to get there.

I would surmise, however, that the main reason Chinese officials and scholars do not talk about communism is that hardly anybody really believes that Marxism should provide guidelines for thinking about China's political future. The ideology has been so discredited by its misuses that it has lost almost all legitimacy in society. In reality, even the "communist" government won't be confined by Marxist theory if it conflicts with the imperative to remain in power and to provide stability and order in society. For practical purposes, it's the end of ideology in China. Not the end of all ideology, but the end of Marxist ideology.⁶ To the extent there's a need for a moral foundation for political rule in China, it almost certainly won't come from Karl Marx.

The Revival of Confucianism

In China, the moral vacuum is being filled by Christian sects, Falun Gong, and extreme forms of nationalism.⁷ But the government considers that such alternatives threaten the hard-won peace and stability that underpins the country's development, so it has encouraged the revival of China's most venerable political tradition: Confucianism. Like most ideologies, however, Confucianism can be a double-edged sword.

“Confucius said, ‘Harmony is something to be cherished,’” President Hu Jintao noted in February 2005. A few months later, he instructed China’s party cadres to build a “harmonious society.” Echoing Confucian themes, Hu said China should promote such values as honesty and unity, as well as forge a closer relationship between the people and the government. In March 2007, the prime minister, Wen Jiabao—regarded as relatively liberal—made even more explicit references to tradition: “From Confucius to Sun Yat-sen, the traditional culture of the Chinese nation has numerous precious elements, many positive aspects regarding the nature of the people and democracy. For example, it stresses love and humanity, community, harmony among different viewpoints, and sharing the world in common (*tian xia wei gong*).” Political practices also reflect such values: Communist Party officials in Henan province are assessed on the basis of Confucian values such as filial piety and family responsibility. Abroad, the government has been promoting Confucianism via branches of the Confucius Institute, a Chinese language and culture center similar to France’s Alliance Française and Germany’s Goethe Institute (so far, however, the emphasis has been on language teaching rather than the promotion of culture). The first Confucius Institute was set up in 2004, and 140 campuses have since opened in thirty-six countries (as of mid-2007).

For the government, the promotion of Confucian values has several advantages. Domestically, the affirmation of harmony is meant to reflect the ruling party’s concern for all classes. Threatened by rural discontent—according to official figures, there were 87,000 illegal disturbances in 2005, and 385,000 rural people participated in “mass incidents” from January to September 2006—the government realizes that it needs to do more for those bearing the brunt of China’s development (there is a joke in China, that development benefits everyone except farmers, workers, and women). China’s widening income gap is approaching Latin American levels and threatens to divide the country into separate classes. The call for harmony, in other words, is an implicit recognition that things are not so harmonious; but unlike Maoist days, the conflicts must be resolved peacefully, not through violent class conflict. Internationally, the call for peace and harmony is meant to disarm fears about China’s rise. The government is saying that growing economic

power won't translate into military adventurism and that peaceful resolution of conflicts is the way to go.

How does Confucianism resonate in society at large? Given that the CCP spent its first three decades in power trying to extirpate every root and branch of Confucianism that it regarded as a feudal and reactionary worldview hindering progress, it would seem to be a losing battle. It could be argued, however, that the parts of Marxism that really took hold in the population—the importance of material well-being and an aversion to otherworldly outlooks—did so because they resonated with deeper Confucian roots. And those parts of the CCP's program that failed to take hold—such as the attempt to replace family ties with ties to the state during the Cultural Revolution—did so because they conflicted with central Confucian values and habits.

The Marxist label can be misleading. Li Zehou and Jin Guantao have argued that Chinese-style Marxism was actually a continuation of traditional ways. Mao's belief that political change comes about via people's moral transformation owes more to Confucianism than to historical materialism. The Maoist practice of "self-criticism" echoes the Confucian idea that demands should be directed at oneself before being directed at others. The idea that rulers should be morally upright has Confucian roots,⁸ as does the practice of invoking model workers who are supposed to set an example for others. Even the seemingly trivial fact that senior Communist Party leaders dye their hair black can be traced to the Mencian idea that "white haired people" should be cared for rather than engaged in heavy work (IA.7): still today it might seem strange for "white haired people" to have too many responsibilities.⁹ Again, nothing in the Marxist tradition about hair color. So the break with tradition may not have been as "totalizing" as advertised.

Less controversial, perhaps, is the claim that Confucian values still inform ways of life, especially regarding family ethics. Filial piety, for example, is still widely endorsed and practiced: few object to the law that adult children have an obligation to care for their elderly parents. Filial piety is learned at a young age—my son, in primary school, was graded according to how well he showed filial piety to parents—and it appears in various social settings, such as the Chinese equivalent of soap operas, which often revolve around relationships with elderly parents. The best-selling works of the martial arts novelist Jin Yong uphold

Confucian values such as filial piety (Nicolas Zufferey, “Du Confucius au romancier Jin Yong,” in *La Pensée en Chine aujourd’hui*, ed. Anne Cheng).¹⁰ In practice, it means that adult children feel obliged to care for and spend time with their elderly parents: it is not uncommon to see extended families at restaurants.¹¹ Even criminals seem to take heed of the value of filial piety: the crime rate spikes just before the Chinese New Year, when filial sons and daughters are supposed to bring gifts to their parents.

The family-centered Confucian ethics informs the ways buildings are designed. In Beijing, the buildings occupied mainly by foreigners tend to have large lobbies, but the apartments themselves are not always so impressive. In contrast, the public spaces of buildings for Chinese of the same class are often cramped, dark, and less than welcoming, with the apartments—the centers of family life—surprisingly spacious and well decorated. Such cultural differences also affect the way people interact in social settings outside the home. In bars and clubs, for example, Westerners tend to prefer public drinking along an open bar, whereas Chinese often prefer the “family-like” atmosphere of private rooms where they can drink and talk with intimate friends.

Many intellectuals have turned to Confucianism to make sense of such social practices and to think of ways of dealing with China’s current social and political predicament. The most famous is Yu Dan, who has written a self-help book on the *Analects of Confucius* that has sold over ten million copies (including six million pirated copies). She is a national star who often appears on television to lecture about the benefits of Confucian values for everyday life. Yu Dan also visits Chinese prisons and lectures prisoners about Confucian values.¹² My graduate students and colleagues express a certain amount of skepticism regarding the academic value of Yu Dan’s work—she deliberately avoids controversial themes and resorts to ahistorical simplifications to make her points. Sociologically speaking, however, it’s interesting that so many people seem to derive comfort from Confucian values (see appendix 1).

Over the last decade or so, the teaching of the Confucian classics has moved back into the mainstream of society. Courses on Confucianism are among the most popular on university campuses (conversely, courses on Marxism struggle to get students, unless they are made compulsory; and universities have substantially cut compulsory

Marxist courses). The teaching curriculum for secondary schools now includes teaching of the classics, and thousands of experimental schools have been set up that focus largely on the classics. According to the Beijing University philosophy professor Chen Lai, more than ten million children are now studying the Confucian classics, including many ad hoc initiatives outside the formal educational system.¹³ Schools for the study of the classics have also been set up by entrepreneurs. Several high-profile companies in China instill training in “culture” that is grounded in Confucian values. China’s most widely used executive-coaching system uses a blend of Confucian values and Western corporate methods (as founder Eva Wong puts it, “Confucianism is in our blood”). Of course, such efforts are meant to increase workers’ loyalty and promote economic productivity, but these companies also emphasize corporate responsibility and philanthropy (for example, the head of China’s largest dairy company, Niu Gensheng, has pledged to donate all his shares to a charitable foundation that aims to “promote the harmonious community in China”).

On the academic front, there has been an explosion of conferences and books on Confucianism in China, to the point that even the most dedicated Confucian could not keep up.¹⁴ But unofficial interpretations of Confucianism often diverge from the governmental line. Perhaps the most influential academic work on Confucianism is Jiang Qing’s *Political Confucianism* (not yet translated into English). Jiang defends the basic values of Confucianism and argues that they are appropriate for China now and in the future. The book is an implicit challenge to the political status quo—by ignoring it, he not so subtly strips it of value—thus helping to explain why it took five years to get permission for the book to be published.

Jiang could not develop the institutional implications in that book, but the Web allows for more free speech. In an article widely distributed on the Web, he argues that the Marxist curriculum in government party schools should be replaced by Confucian material.¹⁵ Jiang and other Confucian intellectuals have been getting the attention of the government, including meetings with top government officials. It is not entirely fanciful to surmise that the Chinese Communist Party will be relabeled the Chinese Confucian Party in the next couple of decades.

But relabeling won't suffice if the government really plans to adopt Confucianism. The government also needs to change the way it does things. Perhaps the biggest challenge to the government is the Confucian emphasis on meritocracy. The Confucian view is that political leaders should be the most talented and public-spirited members of the community, and the process of choosing such leaders should be meritocratic, meaning that there should be equal opportunity for the best to rise to the top. Historically, Confucian meritocracy was implemented by means of examinations, and there have been proposals to revive and update Confucian examinations for contemporary China. There are obvious implications for political reform: Performance on an exam, rather than party loyalty, would determine who occupies what government post.¹⁶

A Challenge to Western-Style Liberal Democracy?

Does Confucianism also pose a challenge to Western-style liberal democracy? There are reasons to think that they are compatible, if not mutually reinforcing. Many theorists argue that they are compatible (see, e.g., Sor-Hoon Tan's book *Confucian Democracy*). In political practice, they have often proved to be compatible: Wang Juntao, a leading Chinese dissident who was jailed for five years over the 1989 Tiananmen prodemocracy protests, argues that many of the key figures in the various democracy movements in contemporary Chinese history drew inspiration from Confucian values (see his contribution in *Confucianism for the Modern World*, ed. Daniel A. Bell and Hahm Chaibong).¹⁷ Such influential early-twentieth-century figures as Sun Yat-sen, Kang Youwei, and Liang Qichao received a Confucian education, and they argued that democratic institutions such as parliamentary systems, elections, and equal rights are natural extensions of Confucianism. Jiang Qing, the contemporary Confucian intellectual, contrasts his Confucian theory with Western-style liberal democracy and argues that Confucianism is more appropriate for China. But his institutional proposals take on board certain liberal assumptions like the freedom of religion: he argues for the establishment of Confucianism as a state religion and compares the system to state

religions in the United Kingdom and Sweden with other religions not being prohibited.

Even official sources point to the possibility of reconciling Confucianism with liberal democracy. On October 12, 2006, the newspaper *Nanfang Zhoumou* (Southern Weekly)—perhaps the leading intellectual newspaper in China—published an editorial on the meaning of the term “harmonious society.” It invokes the quote in the *Analects of Confucius* that exemplary persons seek “harmony, not conformity.” Then it breaks down the characters in the term “harmony,” with the explanation that the first literally refers to “grain into the mouth,” meaning people and social security, and the second refers to “everything can be spoken,” meaning democracy and the freedom of speech. The editorial goes on to say that the welfare state requires democracy and the rule of law as an underlying framework.

The Confucian emphasis on meritocracy—rule by the most talented and public-spirited members of the community—might seem to conflict with democracy, but there have been institutional proposals to combine the two desiderata. In a manuscript titled *A Faith in Life and the Kingly Way of Politics* (unpublished in mainland China), Jiang Qing puts forward an interesting proposal for a tricameral legislature that includes representation for people’s representatives, Confucian elites chosen by competitive examinations that test for knowledge of the Confucian classics, and elites entrusted with the task of cultural continuity (see appendix 2). The last proposal—the elites would include descendants of Confucius’s family—stands about as much chance of being realized as proposals for reinstating more seats for hereditary aristocrats in the British House of Lords. But the possibility of a bicameral legislature, with one political institution composed of democratic leaders chosen by free and fair competitive elections, and another of meritocratic leaders chosen by free and fair competitive examinations, is more consistent with commitments to Confucian meritocracy and modern-day democracy.

But which institution should have priority? Here things become more complicated. At the local level, all sides in the debate recognize that leaders should be democratically elected. The Chinese government introduced direct village elections in 1988 to maintain social order and combat corruption of leaders, and they have since occurred in

some 700,000 villages across China, reaching 75 percent of the nation's 1.3 billion people. Of course, such elections are not free of problems. There have been worries about the quality of decision-making and the extent to which local elections really curb the power of local cadres and wealthy elites. In response, the government has backed experiments with deliberative democracy at the local level designed to address such problems (see *The Search for Deliberative Democracy in China*, ed. Ethan Leib and He Baogang). Such experiments hold the promise of aiding the democratic education process and securing more fair outcomes from that process. Once democracy becomes institutionalized at the local level, it can then be further extended to township, city, and provincial levels.

But empowering democratically elected leaders at the national level is far more controversial. It is one thing to debate and vote on the price of water and electricity and the relocation for farmers—one expects that local citizens with the detailed knowledge required for making choices that intimately affect their daily lives are best placed to make such judgments. It is another to ask voters to make informed judgments about empirically complex issues like settling interprovincial disputes or assessing the trade-off between economic growth and safeguarding the environment for future generations, the sorts of issues that may be only distantly related to their lives. And what about asking “the people” to make life-and-death decisions such as whether or not to go to war or how best to curb virulent contagious infections? With respect to decision-making at the national level, one hopes not just for fair representation and local solidarity, but also for deliberators with the ability to process large amounts of information as well as sensitivity to the interests of different kinds of people, including foreigners and future generations that are affected by national policies.

It is not just the government that balks at the prospects of turning over the levers of the Chinese state to eight hundred million rural residents with primary-school education. Few academics teaching in mainland Chinese universities—including those who call themselves “liberals”—favor countrywide democracy within the next decade or so (and discussions are completely free in the context of alcohol-fueled dinners with friends). The influential intellectual Yu Keping titled his recent book *Democracy Is a Good Thing*, but the lead essay argues that

“our construction of political democracy must be closely integrated with the history, culture, tradition and existing conditions in our nation” (5). In practice, it means that elections should be extended all the way up to the choice of representatives for the National People’s Congress, but only from candidates screened by the party. Even those critical of the lack of commitment to democracy among contemporary Chinese intellectuals may betray certain assumptions that are difficult to reconcile with rule by elected politicians. Cai Dingjian of the Chinese University of Law and Politics has written an essay (in Chinese) titled “In Defense of Democracy! A Response to Contemporary Anti-democratic Theory.” The essay is an important academic and political contribution to the debate on democratization in China. Cai argues forcefully against some of the most frequent objections to democratic rule in China—that it benefits only majorities, that it undermines stability and economic development, and that it contributes to corruption. To support the view that the “quality” of the people¹⁸ does not undermine the prospects of democracy, however, he draws on Singapore’s founding father Lee Kuan Yew’s point that Singapore’s Chinese immigrants (largely from poor and uneducated backgrounds) have succeeded in establishing a good society based on the rule of law. What Singaporean Chinese can do, mainland Chinese can do, whether it’s the rule of law or democracy. But Singapore’s “rule of law” relies on legal punishments that control detailed aspects of everyday life: as the joke goes, Singapore is a “fine” city. And Singapore wasn’t anything close to a democracy at China’s level’s of wealth and education (the same is true of Taiwan and South Korea). Today, there are elections, but Singapore-style democracy means overwhelming dominance of the ruling People’s Action Party along with harsh punishments for opposition politicians that range from public humiliation to bankruptcy and exile. Even more worrisome, Lee himself is perhaps the most notorious defender of rule by meritocratically selected political elites,¹⁹ a view he supports with dubious eugenic theories. Lee’s view is that education won’t suffice; there will always be a minority of people endowed with superior innate intelligence (such as his own son, the current prime minister of Singapore, and other family members that control key levers of the economy), and they should be society’s leaders. And the rulers themselves get to decide on who counts as

“the best and brightest.” This is not, to put it mildly, the kind of model supporters of democracy should endorse.²⁰

So for the foreseeable future, it is highly unlikely that democratic rule at the national level will emerge in China. The proposal most likely to garner support from government officials and intellectual elites who are best positioned to think about and implement political reform²¹ is for a strong, meritocratically chosen legislature that has constitutional priority over the democratically elected house. The proposal might gain additional support if it incorporates the following features:

The deputies in the meritocratic house are chosen (by examinations) for seven- or eight-year terms and there are strict penalties for corruption.

The examinations test for the Confucian classics, basic economics, world history, and a foreign language, and they are set by an independent board of academics randomly chosen from China’s universities that is sequestered from the rest of society during the examination process.²²

There is substantial deliberation before decisions are taken in the meritocratic house, and most debates are televised and transmitted to the public on the Web.

The national democratic legislature’s main function is to transmit the people’s (relatively uninformed) preferences to the meritocratic house. At the provincial, township, city, and village levels, the top decision-makers are chosen by means of competitive elections, and decisions are taken in deliberative forums.

Freedom of the press is basically secure, and there are many opportunities to raise objections and present grievances to deputies at the national level.

Farfetched? It’s no less so than scenarios that envision a transition to Western-style liberal democracy (because both scenarios assume an end to one-party rule), and it answers the main worry about the transition to democracy: that it translates into rule by uneducated people.²³ As more Chinese gain access to education, and democratic values and practices become more entrenched, the democratic legislature can be

empowered relative to the meritocratic house. Strong democrats may prefer to abolish the meritocratic house in due course—or at least reduce it to an advisory and symbolic function if it helps to strengthen the democratic system²⁴—but there may be a case for more permanent empowerment of the meritocratic house when democratic processes threaten to get out of hand. During a seminar at Tsinghua University in October 2006, the comparative political scientist Adam Przeworski noted that nonpartisan institutions play an important role in resolving conflicts when partisan politics cannot produce sufficient consensus for nonviolent decision-making, and that the meritocratic house could serve this function in the Chinese context. Like the Thai king, it would intervene only in exceptional cases.

There may be the worry that the strong meritocratic system becomes entrenched—fossilized, like the American constitutional system—and hard to change once it's in place. But what if it works well? The deputies debate at length. They favor policies that prioritize the needs of the disadvantaged. They consider the interests of all those affected by policies, including foreigners and future generations. For long-term planning, they favor technological change that frees workers from the need to engage drudge labor. They also try to limit the environmental impact of new technologies.²⁵ And what if the large majority of Chinese seem satisfied with strong meritocracy? Should we complain just because the system doesn't satisfy our ideas about democratic rule, or should we allow for the possibility that there are morally legitimate, if not superior, alternatives to Western-style liberal democracy?