



MAKING MERITOCRACY

*Lessons from China and India,
from Antiquity to the Present*

EDITED BY

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Political Theologies of Justice

Meritocratic Values from a Global Perspective

Michael Puett

In fourth-century BCE China, a religious revolutionary named Mozi emerged. In opposition to many of the religious practices and assumptions of the time, Mozi announced that Heaven, the highest god, was a just and noncapricious deity who had created the world for humanity. As a just deity, Heaven rewarded good humans and punished bad ones. And Heaven charged humans with creating a political order that did the same:

Moreover, there are ways that I (Mozi) know Heaven loves the people deeply. It shaped and made the sun, moon, stars, and constellations so as to illuminate and guide [the people]. It formed and made the four seasons, spring, autumn, winter, and summer, so as to weave them into order. It sent down thunder, snow, frost, rain, and dew so as to make the five grains, hemp, and silk grow and prosper, and sent the people to obtain materials and benefit from them. It arranged and made mountains, streams, gorges, and valleys, and distributed and bestowed the hundred affairs so as to oversee and supervise the goodness and badness of the people. It made kings, dukes, and lords and charged them with, first, rewarding the worthy and punishing the wicked, and, second, plundering the metals, wood, birds, and beasts and working the five grains, hemp, and silk so as to make the materials for people's clothing and food.¹

Indeed, Heaven presided over an entire hierarchy of spirits who rewarded the good and punished the bad. In antiquity, humans replicated these divine guidelines as well:

Therefore, in ancient times the sage kings made manifest and understood what Heaven and the spirits bless and avoided what Heaven and the spirits detest so as to increase the benefits of all under Heaven and eradicate the harms of all under Heaven. This is why Heaven made coldness and heat, placed the four seasons in rhythm, and modulated the yin and yang, the rain and dew. At the

proper time the five grains ripened and the six animals prospered. Diseases, disasters, sorrows, plagues, inauspiciousness, and hunger did not arrive.²

Mozi himself created a sect that followed these Heavenly guidelines as had been done in antiquity, and he called on the rulers of his day to do the same.

The ultimate vision of Mozi was one in which humans would live properly within the cosmos created by Heaven and replicate Heaven's just vision. The result would be a world of universal caring, in which everyone in the world would care for everyone else equally, regardless of whether or not they were kin. The deserving would thus always be elevated to higher ranks of power, and the undeserving moved to lower ranks. Everyone holding positions of power would do so based solely upon merit rather than birth. The political world, like the cosmos above, would be purely just.

Such a vision would be picked up repeatedly throughout the Chinese tradition. During the second century of the Common Era, when the Han imperial state was breaking down, a series of millenarian movements emerged with much the same theology. I will explore these movements in more detail in the next section. But let us pause for a moment and consider the fact that these positions in China have been consistently propounded by fairly radical, and often millenarian, movements. The point may surprise, given that China is well known for having created the longest, most extensive, and most successful institutionalized political meritocracy in world history.³ But the political theories that underlay those meritocracies were quite different from that of Mozi, or the millenarian movements that came later. A discussion of these competing political theories of meritocracy, especially when placed within a larger comparative framework, will help to ground our understandings of meritocracy within a global context.

A Just World

Discussions of meritocracy tend to get caught in one of two narratives. The first is a standard modernity narrative. In this framework, meritocracy is associated with modernity. In traditional societies, the argument goes, people's station in life was determined by birth. It was only in the modern period, according to such narratives, that true social mobility began, with humans becoming able to acquire through their own efforts social status, wealth, and power. Meritocracy is thus equated with modernity.

In another framework, these issues are placed within an East/West dichotomy. The East—and China in particular—is associated with meritocracy, here distinguished from the democracy associated with the West.

As is clear from these brief synopses, “meritocracy” is being used in very different ways and with very different connotations in these two frameworks. An association of meritocracy with modernity would entail an expansive sense of meritocracy—a world of social mobility based upon ability, broadly conceived to include financial success in the marketplace (i.e., capitalism), success in a political marketplace (i.e., democracy), and advancement in defined arenas through success in standardized tests or performance markers.⁴ In the second framework, meritocracy is being used in a far more restrictive sense to refer to only the latter of the three forms mentioned earlier (advancement through success in tests or performance markers), with a primary focus on states in which access to political power is granted through some kind of examination to measure merit.⁵ The prototypical example is the meritocratic bureaucracies of the Chinese state from the fourteenth through nineteenth centuries, in which entrance into the bureaucracy could be achieved primarily by passing a civil service examination. In this definition, meritocracy would be opposed to political forms like democracy, in which political power is achieved through combinations of popularity and access to wealth.

To allow the term to have more comparative resonance, I would suggest a two-fold approach. First, I think it will be helpful to generalize the term, using it more expansively to refer to those attempts to rework society such that opportunities are granted based upon some definition of merit as opposed to status granted by heredity. This may sound like the first framework mentioned earlier, but, as we will quickly see, there is nothing uniquely or exclusively modern about such attempts.

Once we have defined the term expansively, it will then be possible to explore the various and often contrasting ways that have been developed to so rework society based upon principles of merit. This is what Khanna and Szonyi refer to in the “Introduction” as “making meritocracy.” There has been an enormous debate throughout world history concerning ways of defining merit and ways of building meritocratic societies, and these debates have in particular had a profound effect on the history of Asia—including the present. We have already seen a hint of this in the case of China: the meritocratic visions of a Mozi and of early millenarian movements are quite different from those dominant in the late imperial system of statecraft. One of the dangers with both the frameworks just mentioned is that this debate over different definitions of merit and meritocratic institutions is lost entirely. A further danger is that by presenting the terms in simple contrastive pairs or triads (tradition/modernity, East/West), they prevent the kind of comparative work that allows us to see when and why these various conceptions of meritocracy have emerged and how they have played out historically.

To sketch an alternate approach, allow me to begin by painting, with a rather broad brush, some of the key moments when meritocratic ideas and practices arose in Eurasian history and the different conceptions of meritocracy that developed. This will allow us to define our terms both more carefully and more comparatively. It will quickly become clear that neither a tradition/modernity nor an essentialized culture framework will do justice to the debates concerning meritocracy. The interesting issues from a comparative perspective will instead be to explore how and why different visions and practices concerning meritocracy came to dominance in different parts of Eurasia, and what the historical consequences of these differences were.

Hereditary Societies

Over the course of the third and second millennia BCE, during the period now known as the Bronze Age, land and resources in agricultural areas came to be controlled by a hereditary elite, and positions of power were accordingly defined exclusively by birth. This, in fact, would become the norm throughout Eurasian history. The exceptions have occurred when powerful state institutions were brought to bear to break down these hereditary orders. These exceptions have involved things like the creation of bureaucracies with mechanisms of meritocratic selection for promotion as well as the creation of markets with mechanisms for those who accumulate wealth in the market to acquire political influence. Despite the claims of Euro-American political conservatives, it is important to note that the two are interrelated: even the latter require strong state institutions. A market economy is created by a state, which must work to break down aristocratic control over local areas by creating laws and regulations that apply across those areas (trumping local customs), building infrastructure like roads that cut across land controlled by different hereditary lineages, and so on. These attempts to break down hereditary orders have been based on sets of values related to the political order. It will be helpful to explore what these values have been, as many involve competing visions of meritocracy.

To explore these values, it is important to note that mechanisms existed in even the most stringently hereditary societies to remove or limit the power of clearly incompetent figures who had inherited significant positions of power. These mechanisms often involved limited meritocratic claims, and in many cases such mechanisms became the basis for later claims of a more generalized meritocracy.

A telling example, and certainly a key one for the types of meritocratic ideas that would develop in China, is the notion of a Mandate of Heaven. The idea first appears in our extant sources from the Bronze Age kingdom of the early

Western Zhou (ca. eleventh century BCE). According to the theory, Heaven was a moral deity that granted and withdrew the Mandate to rule based upon the moral qualities of the rulers in question. The beginning of a dynasty would occur when Heaven granted the Mandate to the most moral figure in the realm. That Mandate would then be passed down from father to son until an unvirtuous ruler appeared. At this point, Heaven would withdraw the Mandate from that lineage and again grant it to the most moral person in the realm—thus beginning a new dynasty.

Such a vision certainly assumed hereditary monarchy, and it could be enforced only by other leading lineages. But it did provide a mechanism for the possible removal of a bad ruler, and it did involve the claim that at least the founding ruler of a dynasty should be the most moral in the realm. As we will see, such a claim would become appropriated, reimagined, and dramatically generalized by groups like the aforementioned followers of Mozi, the Mohists.

Political Theologies of Meritocracy in the Mid-first Millennium BCE

The breakdown of the great Bronze Age kingdoms over the course of the first millennium BCE led to the first significant attempts to envision the hereditary societies that had dominated the agricultural areas of Eurasia for millennia. During the fifth through second centuries BCE, a series of religious movements swept Eurasia with calls to create new societies—many of which involved meritocratic claims.⁶

This is the context in which the Mohists emerged. Their vision involved taking the earlier notion of a Mandate of Heaven and both generalizing it and radicalizing it. For the Mohists, Heaven ceased to be simply a deity granting the mandate to the dynastic founder but otherwise accepting a society controlled by a hereditary elite. Heaven on the contrary was a creator deity who governed the entire realm according to purely meritocratic principles. Were humans to model their institutions on the just cosmos of Heaven, with any good action being rewarded and any bad action being punished, the result would be a world of universal caring, in which everyone would support everyone else based upon clear principles of justice instead of kinship ties and lineage position.

But this was hardly the last or even defining statement of meritocracy in Chinese history. In some ways the more influential version of meritocracy in China came from Mencius—one of the earliest and fiercest critics of Mozi.

Mencius, a teacher from the fourth century BCE, argued that all humans have a heart given by Heaven that is *in potentia* good. The highest form of humanity is a sage. And a sage is no different from other humans at birth. A sage is simply

someone who has developed these potentials to their fullest: “What is common to all hearts? Principle and propriety. The sages are simply the ones who first obtain what is common to our hearts.”⁷ Such a definition means that the sages are not necessarily going to be born into a high position. Since there is no claim here that, say, aristocrats are intellectually or morally superior to peasants, a sage is simply someone who has cultivated himself fully. This means that Mencius is committed to a form of meritocracy, as he wanted the cultivated figures to at least be moral leaders. But it is a very different form of meritocracy than that advocated by Mozi.

To begin with, it required a change in the criteria for judging ethical behavior. For Mozi, that criteria had to be as clear-cut as possible, since he wanted to limit as much as possible the danger of superiors incorrectly judging those below. Mozi accordingly chose a simple utilitarian ethic for that criterion: correct action always involved a calculus of what is most beneficial for the most people. Mozi at least claimed that such a calculus provided an objective standard. Those who met it would be promoted, thus ensuring that those on top of the hierarchy would be the best at understanding what is most beneficial for most people (i.e., getting closer to universal caring).

For Mencius, such a criterion was self-defeating. It would simply, according to Mencius, create a system in which people would strive to be promoted—the motivation, in other words, being self-interest. By making interest the criterion (the Chinese term for “benefit” and “interest” is the same: *li*), Mencius charges, Mozi creates a system not of universal caring but rather of self-interested individuals.⁸ In short, for Mencius, creating a political system where the good would always be rewarded and the bad punished would result not in a world of universal caring but rather in a world in which every individual was simply acting in order to get rewards—a world of self-interested individuals, not a world of universal justice.

The focus for Mencius was instead on self-cultivation. Goodness for Mencius involved cultivating oneself. The goal was to strive to be humane in every situation, regardless of whether it would necessarily result in rewards. No external, objective standards could measure it, and no guarantee could be given that we would be rewarded and promoted for acting humanely.

Indeed, it was crucial for Mencius that we admit that the world, at least in our experience, was fundamentally capricious, for only in this way would we strive to be good without concern for reward. Heaven was the high deity and was a good deity, but Heaven’s goodness consisted of giving each human the potential for goodness at birth. Heaven did not guarantee that the good would always be rewarded and the bad punished. In fact, Heaven would do things—for reasons that make no sense to humans—that prevent this from fully occurring.

This is clear in Mencius’s account of political history. The historical vision that Mencius followed held that the earliest rulers, Yao and Shun, ruled by virtue.

When each of them grew old, they abdicated to the most virtuous figure in the realm—a merit-based system, even if limited to only the ruler. The third of these rulers was Yu. However, when Yu grew old, he yielded not to the most virtuous person but rather to his own son. This began the practice of hereditary monarchy.

It is clear Mencius does not like hereditary monarchy. It is a system that ensures the highest power among humans would, except in the time of dynastic change, be held by someone solely because of birth not merit. Intriguingly, Mencius sees Heaven as having created hereditary monarchy. And thus he feels he has no choice but to live within it.

Wan Zhang asked: “Some people say that, when it came to the time of Yu, virtue declined. He did not give power to the worthy but instead gave it to his son. Is this correct?” Mencius said, “No. It is not so. If Heaven had given it to a worthy, then it would have been given to a worthy. Since Heaven gave it to the son, it was given to the son.”⁹

Hereditary monarchy was—inexplicably—created by Heaven:

All of this was due to Heaven. It is not something that man could have done. If no one does it, and yet it is done, then it is Heaven. If no one brings something about, and yet it is brought about, it is mandated.¹⁰

Unlike the Mohists, for Mencius Heaven does not guarantee a meritocratic world. Indeed, Heaven will at various times actively prevent such a meritocratic world—as when it created hereditary monarchy.

But then what would someone who is so cultivating themselves hope to accomplish in the world?

A telling example—and one very important for Mencius’s self-conception, was a figure named Yi Yin, who purportedly lived at the end of the Xia dynasty. Yi Yin was not of high birth, but he cultivated himself and became a sage and hoped to bring humaneness to the entire world. Mencius approvingly quotes Yi Yin:

Heaven, in engendering the people, makes the first to know awaken those who know later; makes those who awaken first awaken those who awaken later. Since I am one of the first of Heaven’s people to awaken, I shall awaken them by means of this way.¹¹

How did Yi Yin, a lowly born figure, so awaken the rest of the world? He did so by teaching a well-placed figure named Tang how to rule effectively. Tang later became the founding ruler of the Shang dynasty, with Yi Yin as his sage minister. In other words, Yi Yin does not himself become the ruler. And this is not

simply because he lived in an age of hereditary monarchy: this was at a time when the previous dynasty was falling, and a new one with a virtuous ruler needed to arise. Yet Yi Yin did not himself choose to become that founding ruler of the dynasty.

Not only is Mencius not advocating an institutionalized form of rewards and punishments, he is also arguing that even the workings of the Mandate of Heaven for the ruler do not imply that the most virtuous figure becomes the ruler. Anyone, from high or low birth, could potentially become a sage, but there is no guarantee that such a person will thereby be rewarded with the highest office.

As many have noticed, Mencius clearly saw himself as the Yi Yin of his day. Mencius thought that he was a sage, and that the time was right for the beginning of a new dynasty. But, tellingly, he did not seek to become the ruler of a new dynasty himself—he clearly understood that he was in no position to do so. Instead, he sought audiences with the rulers of the major states of the time, hoping that one of them would follow his teachings. Had this worked, the ruler would hopefully have succeeded in starting a new dynasty, and Mencius would have been his sage minister—a Yi Yin for a new dynasty.

But the plan failed. The one figure who seemed willing to listen to Mencius was the ruler of the state of Qi. But when it became clear that the ruler was simply using Mencius, Mencius left the state in disgrace. The *Mencius* includes a dialogue between Mencius and a disciple right after the debacle:

When Mencius left Qi, Chong Yu asked him on the way, “Master, you seem to look displeased. A few days ago I heard you say that ‘a gentleman does not resent Heaven nor bear a grudge against men.’” Mencius responded, “That was one time, this is another time. Every five hundred years, it must be the case that a king will arise. In the interval there must arise one from which an age takes its name. From the Zhou until now, it has been more than seven hundred years. The mark has passed, and the time, if one examines it, is proper. Yet Heaven does not yet wish to bring order to all under Heaven. If Heaven wished to bring order to all under Heaven, who in the present generation is there other than me? How could I be displeased?”¹²

Mencius clearly felt himself to be the sage of the day, and he clearly thought the time to be ripe for a new dynasty to begin. Heaven prevented it from occurring.

The remainder of the text presents Mencius as a teacher, training a new generation of students, just as the previous sage Confucius had done. Mencius, like Confucius, never achieved political power.

In short, the vision of Mencius is one in which individuals will strive to be good, and the best of them can even become sages. Those who do so cultivate themselves can in various ways affect the world for the better. But the ways in which this might occur come down to circumstance. Depending on circumstance, one may become a sage minister, or one may become, like Confucius, a teacher. Mencius himself hoped for the former but instead became the latter. Not only does Heaven not guarantee that the most worthy will succeed, Heaven will even in particular circumstances prevent this from occurring—presumably to discourage people from thinking that success necessarily awaits them if they strive to be good.

Mencius is not advocating an institutionalized form of meritocracy along the lines of a Mozi, nor does he support a political theology in which Heaven is seen as rigorously rewarding the good and punishing the bad. On the contrary, Heaven is capricious, and one's role in life will depend to a great extent on circumstance.

Indeed, a deep suspicion of institutions pervades Mencius's thinking. For Mencius, meritocracy operates through the charisma of sagely figures. Sagely figures striving to do their best in circumstances, and often doing so in conflict with Heaven itself.

Meritocratic Institutions

This early debate between Mozi and Mencius would become a defining one in Chinese political theory. Later movements would build upon one or the other, or attempt syntheses linking, for example, an institutionalized meritocracy with a general vision of Mencius-style self-cultivation.

From an institutional perspective, the most influential movement to build upon the Mohists were those figures who would later be classified as Legalists—figures like Lord Shang and Han Feizi. They would remove both Heaven and the concern for universal caring—arguably what the Mohists were most deeply committed to—and focus instead on simply the system of institutional reforms advocated by the Mohists: bureaucracies based upon rewarding proper behavior and punishing bad behavior, with rules that applied to all equally, without regard for birth or status. The result, it would be hoped, would be a purely meritocratic bureaucracy, run by an elite of the deserving, rather than an aristocratic elite. But since the religious and moral ideas of the Mohists were jettisoned, the definition of merit that would warrant promotion was simply being an effective bureaucrat, rather than being a figure striving for Heavenly justice, and the ultimate goal of the project was to create powerful, effective states, not a world of universal caring.

One of the most influential synthetic figures was Xunzi, who also saw himself as coming out of the tradition of Confucius. Like Mencius, Xunzi wanted the focus to be on self-cultivation. Unlike Mencius, however, Xunzi advocated an institutionalized form of meritocracy—a bureaucracy in which an educated, cultivated elite would be raised into positions of power.¹³

For both the Mohists and Mencius, Heaven was an actively intervening deity, albeit in different ways: for the Mohists, Heaven was a benevolent deity overseeing a moral world built for humanity, and for Mencius, Heaven was an overall benevolent but at times highly capricious deity. But for Xunzi, Heaven was largely indifferent to human concerns. Humans are the ones who must bring order and morality to the world; these are not given by Heaven. The focus for Xunzi was thus, at a personal level, on self-cultivation, and, at a societal level, on creating the conditions in which such cultivation would be encouraged. But unlike Mencius, Xunzi had a pessimistic view about the likelihood of this cultivation occurring without external pressure. He therefore fully embraced the use of strong institutions to enforce a meritocracy: laws, rules, regulations, and bureaucratic frameworks.

Xunzi was clearly also pessimistic about the likelihood of humans successfully transforming themselves into sages. Mencius's political vision required a sage to appear at least every several centuries to bring about periods of flourishing. Even this was a bit optimistic from the point of view of a Xunzi. Accordingly, the goal for Xunzi was to get as many educated figures as possible into governing positions of power. Even if no one of them was a sage, the sheer volume would make it more likely that governance would be based upon the moral values of a cultivated elite.

This same pessimism underlay Xunzi's view of hereditary monarchy. For Mencius, hereditary monarchy was an institution inexplicably instituted by Heaven, and one that humans had to learn to work with. For Xunzi, on the contrary, political institutions were human constructs, not heavenly institutions. It is therefore fascinating to note that, unlike Mencius's resignation to the existence of hereditary monarchy, Xunzi advocated hereditary monarchy as a wise institution: for Xunzi, it is ultimately the monarch who promotes the meritorious. Why? Xunzi, while strongly supporting governance by a meritocratic, educated elite, seemed to feel that hereditary elements were necessary as well to maintain stability. Given his overall pessimism, his sense was that a combination of hereditary and meritocratic institutions would lead to the best possibility for an ordered world.

Xunzi thus became the first self-proclaimed Confucian to advocate the use of institutionalized meritocratic bureaucracies. But he also still supported hereditary monarchy. Although his influence was later to wane, Xunzi's visions were to play a major role in the empires of China over the next millennium.

The Age of Empires

Over the last two centuries before the Common Era, the agricultural regions of Eurasia came under the control of increasingly large empires. To some extent, these empires began utilizing ideas and practices that had arisen from the earlier religious and political movements of the mid-first millennium BCE.

This was very much the case with the Han Empire, which dominated the eastern end of Eurasia. The Han embraced a combination of Legalist institutions of statecraft with a generally Xunzian view of meritocracy. The goal was to undercut aristocratic control of local resources and bring those resources under the control of the state. This involved meritocratic forms of selection based upon criteria of bureaucratic competence (to ensure that the candidates would be effective in their work) as well as education (to ensure some degree of socialization away from narrow aristocratic interests). The primary selection methods used for such a meritocracy were demonstrated competence or a recommendation by those already in positions of power. The latter would come from an educated elite trained in the earlier classics.

There was, however, no attempt to create the kind of universal world of meritocratic justice envisioned by the Mohists. The goal was not to create an order in which the most meritorious (as the Mohists defined it) would be raised through objective selection to positions of power. There was certainly, for example, no attempt to ensure that the children of poor farmers would be educated and tested to see if they would be more deserving of a position than a relatively high-born figure. The goal was rather to bring effective bureaucrats to power and to undercut the power of heredity. Competence was important; the claim that those in power were the most deserving in the entire realm was not.

Salvationist Religions

The spread of empires also helped to create the conditions for more radical critiques of the existing order. A series of millenarian movements began emerging across Eurasia. In the Mediterranean region, the most influential of these would be (the many varieties of) Christianity. In the eastern end of Eurasia, one sees the emergence of several millenarian movements that called for a radicalized meritocracy.

Two of the major millenarian movements that arose in the second century of the Common Era—the Celestial Masters and the Movement of Great Peace—were directly reminiscent of the earlier Mohists. In both cases, a higher, perfectly moral deity is posited as ruling over the cosmos, and in both cases the movements call for a radicalized meritocracy to be built on earth.

According to the Celestial Masters, the cosmos was overseen by a moral creator deity, in this case called the Way. Even life and death were created by the Way in order to reward good behavior and punish bad behavior: “The Way established life in order to reward the good, and established death in order to punish the bad.”¹⁴

The Celestial Masters saw the Han Empire as corrupt and failing to live up to these meritocratic principles. The Celestial Masters broke from the Han and created an autonomous community directly reminiscent of the one envisioned earlier by the Mohists.¹⁵

The relatively contemporaneous Movement of Great Peace made a similar argument. As the *Taiping Jing*, a text associated with the movement, argues, Heaven is a beneficent deity that presides over a bureaucracy of spirits. The heavenly bureaucracy is itself fully meritocratic, with the spirits who act appropriately being rewarded with promotions:

In between Heaven and Earth, all of the spirits and essences must together help Heaven generate, nourish, and grow the twelve thousand things. Thus all of the spirits and essences fully obtain ranks and sustenance. This is like the myriad ministers and worthies who all help the emperor and kings nourish the people and myriad things; they all receive ranks and sustenance. Thus they follow Heaven as their model, always with the fifteenth day of the month a small report is sent up; at the beginning of the next month a medium report is sent up; and each year a large report.¹⁶ Therefore those with great merit will receive promotion and those without merit will be sent away or punished.¹⁷

This heavenly bureaucracy oversees the human realm according to the same principles of rewarding the good and punishing the bad. The Han Empire, according to this view, was failing. It had become a corrupt state, controlled by aristocratic interests.

The Movement of Great Peace rebelled against the Han. Although the rebellion was ultimately put down, it was a key factor in the ultimate fall of the Han dynasty.

Competing Meritocracies

After the Han fell, comparable meritocratic imperial bureaucracies continued to be formed in the north China plain, and radical critiques continued to emerge. We thus see the beginnings of a dialectic that would become highly important in Chinese history: on the one hand, a recurrent attempt to build imperial institutions based upon a bureaucratic form of meritocracy. Such bureaucratic

forms of meritocracy served to break patterns of aristocratic rule, bring a talented and educated elite into the bureaucracy, and encourage the development of an administrative elite who would act on behalf of the state rather than local elites.

On the other hand, visions of a radical meritocracy, involving calls for a purely moral world in which the most deserving—regardless of their hereditary status—would always be promoted to the highest office. These visions tended to portray the bureaucracy as corrupt, dominated by an elite out of touch with the rest of society, and in need of a dramatic revision if not being overthrown. The more radical visions constantly haunted the more institutionalized forms.

The Return of Mencius

This interplay between the Legalist–Xunzian forms of elite meritocracy practiced by the empires of the north China plain and the calls for a radical meritocracy by various radical religious movements would continue for over a millennium. Beginning in the thirteenth century, however, and continuing for several centuries thereafter, attempts were made to expand dramatically the meritocratic aspects of the state.¹⁸ Whereas previous dynasties had attempted to use meritocratic principles to bring in an educated elite to limit the power of hereditary elites, during this period attempts were made to have all positions in the bureaucracy available only to those who passed a civil service exam. This would ultimately lead to one of the largest-scale experiments in examination-based meritocratic bureaucracy that the world had ever, and has ever, seen. But the revolution occurred not under a Mohist vision but rather by building upon the philosophical and religious position promulgated by—of all people—Mencius.

One of the key theorists here was the twelfth-century figure Zhu Xi, who explicitly rejected the earlier imperial systems as having been based upon the philosophy of Xunzi and as having therefore maintained an overreliance on Legalist institutions of statecraft. Zhu Xi on the contrary called for a return to Mencius. This included a suspicion of the types of centralized state institutions that had dominated the empires in the north China plain from the second century BCE onward and a stronger emphasis on the possibility of self-cultivation leading to sagehood.

Educational practice in China came to focus on a curriculum designed by Zhu Xi, with readings including the *Mencius* itself. The *Xunzi* was most certainly not on the list. Those who passed the civil service exam would of course gain office in the (relatively small) bureaucracy, but others would become teachers and local organizers, self-consciously following in the footsteps of a Confucius and a Mencius.¹⁹

This was indeed an extraordinary experiment in meritocracy, but it was a particular type of meritocracy. This was far removed from the Mohist/Great Peace utopia of universal justice. On the contrary, the great experiment in political meritocracy in China was undertaken not out of a Mohist claim of a mechanistic world of flawless rewards for the deserving but rather a Mencian focus on self-cultivation in a capricious world.

At the national level, every attempt was certainly made to keep the exams as fair as possible and to prevent children of elite families from gaining state positions simply because of their social prominence. At the same time, however, there was no attempt to ensure that, for example, farmers in the fields would have access to education and have a shot at taking the civil service exam, nor was there any support for creating the kinds of strong centralized state institutions to create such opportunities. There was certainly the hope that highly educated, cultivated figures would run the government, but—it being a capricious world—the greatest sages could just as easily end up being teachers rather than the highest-ranking ministers.

Moreover, there was active opposition to creating some kind of clear rubric for measuring ability in the exams—the sort of thing that the Mohist system, were it ever to have been put into practice, would presumably have developed. The exams were on the contrary focused on testing one's familiarity with the classical background and one's ability to use that education to think effectively. This is the sort of thing that could by definition never be developed into a clear rubric. The examination system was not, in other words, aimed at testing ability outside educational opportunity. It was only testing those who had been able to obtain an outstanding education, and the goal of the examinations was to test the degree of and commitment to self-cultivation—something that by definition could never be measured in clear, quantitative ways.²⁰

And, finally, hereditary orders were never completely divorced from the state. Most important, the emperor continued to be a hereditary monarch—one of the very things Mencius saw as exemplifying the capriciousness of Heaven. Moreover, wealthy individuals increasingly became able to buy their way into the bureaucracy.²¹ Promotions would still be dependent upon performance, but this was far from the Mohist ideal of a purely meritocratic world.

The goal then, continued to be a negative one: ensuring that the state was led as much as possible by an educated, rather than simply a hereditary, elite. It was not seeking to ensure that the wisest or most moral—regardless of birth—would mechanistically be moved to the highest levels of the bureaucracy. Indeed, the greatest sage would not necessarily be at the head of the bureaucracy at all. He might well be found outside the government altogether—for example, running a local school, as Confucius himself had done. Indeed, if the greatest sages ended

up being teachers, that was only what had been true for Confucius and Mencius. It was a capricious world.

Meritocracies in the Western End of Eurasia, or: The Reemergence of Pelagian Heresies

While China was developing its merit-based system, Europe continued to be a society defined primarily by heredity through the eighteenth century. As noted previously, such hereditary orders have tended to be the norm throughout much of Eurasian history except during those periods when strong centralized institutions are utilized to break down aristocratic control. One of the remarkable things about the western end of Eurasia is that, unlike much of the rest of Eurasia, no such strong state institutions had existed since the Roman Empire. The breakdown of these hereditary orders did not begin again until the nineteenth century—extraordinarily late by the standards of the rest of Eurasia.

But one of the key factors that led to that breakdown was directly related to the rest of Eurasia. Beginning in the thirteenth century, and particularly from the fifteenth century onward, major trade networks began developing throughout Eurasia.²² This was at least in part a by-product of the state-building work occurring across Eurasia—including China. Longer-distance trade is extremely difficult with aristocratic control over local areas, since it means trade has to occur across areas with different customs and codes, and it must do so without the kinds of infrastructure that cut across aristocratically controlled areas. Centralized states are required to provide uniform laws that apply across locales, as well as key infrastructure like roads, bridges, and so on. Such state work is not necessarily done to encourage trade (in China it usually was not), but a by-product of such state-building work is indeed the growth of trade.

The northwestern part of Europe was very different. Much of this area was still dominated to different degrees by hereditary orders, and nothing like the kinds of centralized, meritocratic bureaucracies seen in China had been developed. Moreover, the area was geographically isolated from the great trade routes. Accordingly, the area was left out of the enormous wealth being generated by the trade networks developing throughout Eurasia. The exceptions prove the rule: Venice, geographically able to connect with the trade networks coming into the Mediterranean, was able to build a fabulously wealthy empire. The kingdoms at the edge of western Eurasia—such as England, Spain, and Portugal—were not. In order to gain access to the trade networks, the rulers in these areas began funding the building of ships to reach Asia—first by sailing around Africa and then by circumnavigating the globe. The result, of course, is well known: the circumnavigation led to the discovery of the so-called New World, which was then

exploited through the slave trade into the creation of an Atlantic economy. All this required enormous military enterprises, which also required tremendous state-building. By the time one moves into the nineteenth century, the new, wealthy, highly militaristic states of Western Europe began finally moving into Asia—but now not to connect with the trade networks there but rather to take over the key nodes of the networks and make them into colonies along the lines of the Atlantic economy. A very different colonial economic system took over the world.

During this process of colonial expansion and state-building, calls for a breakdown of the hereditary orders and the creation of more meritocratic societies began developing. Such calls are evident as early as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and they became increasingly powerful in the nineteenth century. But, in part because of the context in which they came to prominence, the types of meritocratic values that came to prominence in Europe were very different from the dialectic of Mohist/Legalist/Mencian visions dominant in China.

As Eric Nelson has argued, the liberal positions articulated among British and French intellectuals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were building upon a generally Pelagian worldview.²³ Pelagianism was an early Christian heresy committed to the view that the cosmos was moral and that humans could, through their own efforts, achieve salvation. (The reason this was a heresy was that the official position of the Church held that salvation required the intervention of Jesus.) Pelagianism was, in a sense, a form of Christian Mohism. And Pelagianism haunted Christian Europe just as Mohism haunted China.

In the form of Pelagianism, which came to prominence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the focus came to rest on the sovereign individual who should be able to succeed through his own efforts. As strong pushes began to be made against the hereditary orders of Europe, such Pelagian arguments were picked up by those gaining wealth through the growing markets. Markets would provide social mobility by allowing individuals, through their work, to attain wealth. As Adam Smith argued, individuals, following their self-interest, produce a public good of the best outcome possible. It is not merely that the world is just and will reward the good; it is precisely that, by following their self-interest, the best possible outcome in the world is created: the just world guided, as Smith famously said, by the invisible hand of God.²⁴

Such a position would become increasingly important in the nineteenth century, as the market—defined as an arena where sovereign individuals, supposedly on their own merits, could attain success—came to be seen as the primary mechanism for building a meritocratic world of social mobility. This led to a push to make everything—from economics to politics—operate increasingly under market principles. The forms of parliamentary democracy that began developing over this period would then give those who obtained wealth tremendous ability

to affect the political world. The hoped-for result would be a world where the wealthy would always be the most deserving (as opposed to simply inheritors of wealth), and that wealth obtained through their own exertions would in turn give them immediate access to political power. Hereditary society, in other words, would be broken down by the market, which itself would function, according to neo-Pelagian thinking, to create a purely meritocratic world.²⁵

But, as we have seen, it takes extremely strong states to break down aristocratic control and create markets. Directly connected to the florescence of such views of the market was a development of powerful administrative states, the colonial success of which was crucial for the development of the so-called free markets.²⁶ It was precisely over this period that one sees the state-building work that had been playing out in the north China plain for centuries.²⁷ It takes a strong state to build a Pelagian market.

Competing Meritocracies in Eurasia

By the time one moves into the nineteenth century, therefore, one is seeing the emergence of similar types of administrative states at both ends of Eurasia, and both of these administrative states involve attempts to develop meritocratic elements to break down aristocratic control.

But values matter. Although in some European societies—France being an obvious example—the emerging administrative states came to be esteemed, for much of the Anglo-American world the Pelagian vision prevailed. Strong administrative states were created, but their goal was to create and maintain markets—both domestically and abroad—and markets were seen as the engines of social mobility.

In contrast, as we have seen, China, also (and much earlier) facing the emergence of powerful trade networks, had a radically different response. Unlike the western end of Eurasia, which had continued to be controlled by a hereditary elite through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, China had been developing (particular types of) meritocratic institutions for centuries. And the particular types of meritocratic institutions that had developed over these centuries in China were designed precisely to divorce state power from moneyed interests. If these bureaucratic institutions in China were initially developed in part to divorce state power from aristocratic control, then those same institutions, now greatly expanded, would also divorce state power from any moneyed interests—regardless of whether that money was obtained by birth or through mercantile activities.

Moreover, we have already seen Mencius's critique of the Mohists (the Chinese Pelagians). Mencius's reading was that, in practice, Mohism would result in a

world of self-interested individuals rather than a world of universal caring. But Adam Smith's argument was to prize self-interest as precisely the mechanism that would yield the best possible world. It is almost as if Adam Smith is the perfect working out of what—at least according to Mencius—Mohism would amount to in practice. A meritocratic position more in opposition to Mencius would be difficult to imagine.

It may require administrative states to develop meritocracies and create markets, but the types of meritocracy that are developed and the relationships that are created between the states and markets are a matter of values.

Conclusion

Let us summarize the argument thus far. An ongoing theme in the history of the past two and a half millennia in Eurasia has been an attempt to build a society in which positions of power would be defined by merit rather than birth. The values for such societies began being developed in strong forms in a series of religious movements that appeared with the breakdown of Bronze Age societies in the first millennium BCE and were then radicalized in a series of salvationist religions that started emerging in the first few centuries of the Common Era during a period of self-perceived decline in the empires. Several of these meritocratic visions were institutionalized among the empires—most fully and most enduringly in the successive empires in China.

The types of institutions developed in these empires, and the levels of their success, have had a tremendous impact on the perceived divergences at either end of Eurasia over the past several centuries. As global trade networks expanded from the thirteenth century onward, the forms of bureaucratic meritocracy developed in China emphasized a divorce between the state and moneyed interests, thus maintaining the value of education as a means of social mobility along with that of wealth acquisition. In Europe, which had largely fallen back into a world dominated by a hereditary elite, the (much later) rise of a merchant class led to a focus on wealth acquisition as the primary driver of social mobility and eventually to calls for parliamentary democracies that would grant political access and power to those achieving mobility through wealth. In both cases, strong administrative states were developed, but the type of meritocracy that was being sought and the relationship to the markets created in part through the states differed radically.

It is clear, when looking at these two modes of breaking down hereditary societies, that each could read the other in ways that yield the frameworks criticized here. From the point of view of societies valuing market liberalism, bureaucracies can easily be portrayed as states that prevent the emergence of markets—unacceptable, insofar as markets are claimed to be the engine of social mobility.

And, from the point of view of societies valuing bureaucratic meritocracy, market liberalism can easily be portrayed as recreating the unequal and unfair societies of old, in which a wealthy elite control the levers of the state.

But this is simply another way of saying that in the limited and restricted ways that the Pelagian and Mohist visions have been institutionalized, each has had a tendency to fall back to being controlled by wealthy elites. And this fact then generates further Pelagian/Mohist critiques of the existing order, which can also be turned into critiques of the lack of successful meritocratic success elsewhere.

I mentioned earlier that one way of reading the history of China in terms of the issue of meritocracy is in terms of a recurrent dialectic between an institutionalized meritocracy of educated males and a vision of a radical meritocracy in which birth would play no role. The latter often seems to haunt the former. But let me play out that metaphor more explicitly. A haunting implies an earlier presence. As we have seen, an important theme in Eurasian history over the past two thousand years has been a recurrent call—largely from religious movements—for a radical meritocracy. The institutional forms of meritocracy that emerged later built upon values from these movements but also tended to offer limited versions of these meritocratic visions—largely restricting the avenues for success to a relatively well-to-do elite with access to education. A wider elite, in other words, than simply the highest levels of hereditary aristocracy, but not with the open access called for by the radical religious visions. The haunting, in other words, is of a vision that preceded and in part helped to generate the institutionalized forms but that always tended to see the institutionalized forms as simply another type of elite domination.

But the nature of these visions has far-reaching implications. The Pelagian vision that has haunted the West has been one in which sovereign individuals can, through their own efforts, accumulate great wealth and power; the Mohist vision has been one in which a highly efficient state will establish a purely just and meritocratic society. Neither of these visions has ever been institutionalized fully. But they define the terms in which the more moderate forms of meritocracy are often criticized.

Take the more recent history of China and the United States as examples. Despite the strength and size of the administrative state in America, and despite the fact that the state operates in part according to meritocratic principles, the state is rarely spoken of in America as an engine of meritocracy. Indeed, it has often—as in recent years—been portrayed as an impediment to individual liberty and to the workings of the market—the latter, again, being seen as the mechanism of meritocracy.

In China, in contrast, the administrative state is also a frequent object of critique, but by far the most common critique is when it is perceived to be inefficient and controlled by elites—that is, as insufficiently meritocratic in terms of its

officials and not sufficiently working to create a just world among the population as a whole.

In other words, both China and America operate largely Legalist states with strong markets. But one of the key languages of critique in the Anglo-American world continues to be that of Pelagian liberalism, whereas one of the key languages of critique in the Chinese world continues to be that of Mohism. In the former case, this results in a recurrent push toward emphasizing the market, while in the latter the push is more commonly toward less corrupt, more open, and more efficient forms of statecraft.

But these need not be seen as mutually exclusive. Indeed, as we have seen, each of these radical visions, in institutionalized forms, assumes, builds upon, and to some degree necessitates the other. Markets do not exist without strong states, and strong states define themselves in part by the kinds of markets they (intentionally or not) create. Both strong states and markets create meritocratic possibilities and, at their most efficient, operate in opposition to hereditary orders.

Returning to the example of the United States and China, although education and potential government service have continued to be a strong value in China, social mobility through the acquisition of wealth has certainly been as well. In the Euro-American world, administrative states filled with educated bureaucrats are extremely strong and certainly necessary for the functioning of markets, even if a career path in such administrative bureaucracies has tended not to be valued as highly as in China.

Instead, then, of utilizing either a tradition/modernity framework or an East/West framework, it is more helpful to think in terms of a widespread debate over meritocratic values in Eurasia. These values arose in response to common problems and in comparable historical contexts. Seeing them this way allows us to explore the implications of the different values and the ways these values have (in limited and restricted ways) been institutionalized in various parts of Eurasia over the past several centuries. Given that all were trying (even if often ultimately failing) to break down hereditary orders and work with markets, is it not possible that we could learn from these various attempts across Eurasia to build meritocratic societies? If Pelagian visions have been highly productive for the creation of administrative states aimed at supporting markets, surely the visions coming out of the debates in China for creating administrative states that would be divorced from wealth (whether hereditary or generated through the market) have been highly productive as well. In particular, the debates in China involving Mohist, Mencian, Legalist, and Xunzian arguments concerning the strengths and weaknesses of different ways of building administrative states and different ways of defining the criteria for advancement are among the most powerful and useful in world history. Seeing the historical workings of these different values and practices might allow us to better understand the implications

of different ways of building meritocratic societies and to learn from the various experiments in meritocracy that have in part defined Eurasian history for the past two and a half millennia.

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Notes

1. Mozi, “Tianzhi, Zhong,” *Sibu beiyao* ed. (Shanghai: Zhonghua Shuju, 1936), 7.6b–7a.
2. *Ibid.*, 7.6a–6b.
3. See, for example, Benjamin A. Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).
4. See, for example, Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
5. See, for example, Alexander Woodside, *Lost Modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea, and the Hazards of World History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
6. This is the period that Karl Jaspers has termed the “Axial Age”—the emergence of philosophical movements at roughly the same time across Eurasia. See Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953).
7. *Mengzi*, *Sibu beiyao* ed. (Shanghai: Zhonghua Shuju, 1936), 6A/7.
8. *Ibid.*, 1A/1.
9. *Ibid.*, 5A/6.
10. *Ibid.*, 5A/6.
11. *Ibid.*, 5A/7.
12. *Ibid.*, 2B/13.
13. *Xunzi*, *Sibu beiyao* ed. (Shanghai: Zhonghua Shuju, 1936), chs. 9 and 14.
14. *Xiang'er*, ll. 299–303. My translation has been aided by the superb one given by Stephen Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 78–148. I follow Bokenkamp in referencing the line number of the commentary as given in the photographic copy of the manuscript in Ninji Ôfuchi, *Tonkô Dôkyô: Zurokuhen* [Daoist Texts from Dunhuang: Catalog], (Tokyo: Fukutake Shoten, 1979), 421–434.
15. Terry F. Kleeman, *Celestial Masters: History and Ritual in Early Daoist Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2016).
16. This refers to the reports sent up in a bureaucracy from the officials to their superiors. See the excellent discussion by Barbara Hendrischke, “Early Daoist Ideas on Political

- Practice: How to Select and Control Government Officials,” *Daoism: Religion, History and Society* vol. 2 (2010): 1–36.
17. Ming Wang, *Taiping Jing Hejiao* [Collated Edition of the Taiping Jing] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1992), 151.407–408. My translation has been greatly helped by that of Barbara Hendrischke, *The Scripture on Great Peace: The Taiping Jing and the Beginnings of Daoism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
 18. For an excellent discussion of the larger social changes behind this transformation, see Robert P. Hymes, *Statesmen and Gentlemen: The Elite of Fu-Chou, Chiang-Hsi, in Northern and Southern Sung* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). For the intellectual history of this transformation, see Peter K. Bol, “*This Culture of Ours*”: *Intellectual Transitions in T’ang and Sung China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994).
 19. *Ibid.*; Peter K. Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2010).
 20. Elman, *Civil Examinations and Meritocracy*.
 21. Lawrence Zhang, “Legacy of Success: Office Purchase and State-Elite Relations in Qing China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 73, no. 2 (December 2013): 259–297.
 22. Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System, A.D. 1250–1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); K. N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe: Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1965).
 23. Eric Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism: Political Philosophy and the Justice of God* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2019).
 24. Benjamin M. Friedman, “The Influence of Religious Thinking on the Smithian Revolution,” in *Adam Smith as Theologian*, ed. Paul Oslington (New York: Routledge, 2011); Lisa Hill, “The Hidden Theology of Adam Smith,” *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 8 (2001): 1–29.
 25. By far the most influential account of the relationship between Protestant (primarily Calvinist) values and capitalism is that of Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Allen and Unwin, 1930).
 26. North et al., *Violence and Social Orders*.
 27. R. Bin Wong, “Coping with Poverty and Famine: Material Welfare, Public Goods, and Chinese Approaches to Governance,” in *Public Goods Provision in the Early Modern Economy: Comparative Perspectives from Japan, China, and Europe*, ed. Masayuki Tanimoto and R. Bin Wong (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 130–144.