Rethinking Meritocracy:
Imperial Principles for Contemporary Times

by

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INTRODUCTION

When I was in Junior College\(^1\) in Singapore, one of my teachers used to parody the line of our school song “we’ll do our best whate’er the test” to “we’ll do our best to beat the rest.” In so doing, he was half-mocking the recently dubbed “Gateway to the Ivy League” by the Wall Street Journal that produced the best and the brightest in the country but that also encouraged the development of mechanical individuals more concerned about acing the exams than about learning. This was meritocracy at its finest: intelligent young minds competing for government scholarships that would give them an education at the top overseas universities before drawing them back home to serve in the civil service. While my Junior College was then a public school and admission was open to all regardless of social status or wealth, one could not help but notice that many of the students were sons and daughters of government ministers and prominent business and cultural leaders in the country. Later, serving in the navy, the social divides in this meritocratic state became more apparent, where those identified as potential scholars or children of prominent figures were given preferential treatment,

\(^{1}\) The equivalent of a pre-university institution.
where the Malay soldier lamented his inability to rise in rank due to his ethnicity and relative lack of education, and where my peers from other pre-university institutions considered a government scholarship and overseas education as too lofty a goal to even consider pursuing.

While these experiences are personal, they reflect the tension inherent in meritocracy that fosters efficient government and economic growth on one hand, and aggravates social inequality on the other. The fundamental mechanics of meritocracy lie in discriminating between the capable and the less capable and we find this reflected in the hierarchical Confucian tradition in East Asian societies. Singapore has often unofficially worn this Confucian badge in its developmental process, but traditional Chinese history and Confucian philosophy are never formally taught in schools. Tu Wei-ming argues that “the need to search for roots, despite the pervasiveness of global consciousness, is a powerful impulse.” This broadly encapsulates my motivations for this thesis: 1) to resolve my ambivalence towards meritocracy by articulating and affirming the mechanics that have allowed it to work for such a long time despite all its shortcomings; 2) to constructively critique contemporary meritocracies and revise meritocratic values so that it can continue to be a viable and sustainable organization of state and society.

Meritocracy, as a political concept, primarily represents an opposing societal organizational force to the trappings of a hereditary aristocracy and feudalism. In a meritocracy, an individual is rewarded according to his ability in a manner that is ideally highly egalitarian and politically practical. It is a system that encourages the best and the brightest in society to enter government and administer the country in an

enlightened manner, a system that gives everyone a fair chance to climb the social
ladder regardless of birth or social status, and a system that legitimizes government
while discouraging corruption and nepotism. In the case of East Asia, meritocracy
comes with the added dimension of Confucianism, which is where the concept finds
its roots. Politics and society are extensions of the organizational hierarchy of the
family where the respect shown to one’s elders is a critical societal feature in
accordance with good social conduct. Ho Ping-Ti highlights the dilemma of
traditional Chinese societies as being “necessarily hierarchical” where different
classes have unequal rights and obligations based on the historical feudal experience.
He argues that such a hierarchical society “cannot survive indefinitely unless its
inherent injustice is substantially mitigated if not entirely eliminated via a concept
which transcends feudal boundaries.”

This concept is found in meritocracy as manifested in Imperial Confucianism
that was the official ideology held by the Han Dynasty in the beginning of the third
century till the Qing Dynasty at the turn of the nineteenth century. While meritocracy
sustained the imperial Chinese dynastic system for more than two millennia, creating
and maintaining a highly complex bureaucracy and organized society, it also fostered
an anachronistic and unwieldy government that was seldom able to adapt quickly
enough to the onslaught of modernization and westernization. Despite this fact,
Confucianism and meritocracy remain very much alive in contemporary East Asia
and are fundamental features that help us to understand and explain the socio-political
characteristics of the region.

3 Ping-Ti Ho, The Ladder of Success in Imperial China: Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368 - 1911 (New
A meritocratic organization of society is still a fairly young and untested concept in this era of globalization, multiculturalism, and widening income gaps. The sustainability of a meritocratic Confucian-based society within the context of modernity is a timely one to consider as China negotiates and forges its new modern identity and as East Asian societies continue to adapt to the challenges of globalization. Even as China reaps the fruits of capitalism, Confucian thought and education are making a resurgence in Chinese society as the Chinese look to their past to recover an identity that was lost during the Cultural Revolution. In other East Asian societies, Confucianism and meritocracy have developed in their own ways with cultural variations but nevertheless remain as common identifiable features with similar roots. By looking at the common roots of the Confucian Diaspora in the imperial meritocratic model, the challenges faced in traditional China may help us to think about potential solutions to contemporary problems in these societies that call for a revised version of meritocracy.

Pure meritocracy is a highly individualistic concept that throws into question its ability to produce government officials who would genuinely work in the interest of the people, making it a form of political organization that is quite untenable on its own and therefore needing Confucian values to keep it from becoming self-serving. In this regard, the Confucian element should be seen for the political utility of its values that promote a harmonious and stable polity rather than its weighted cultural implications. The meritocratic arrangement was never perfect to begin with, as evidenced by the longstanding problems of status anxiety, elitism, corruption and poverty that were present in traditional Chinese society and that persist today in
modern Confucian societies. The level-playing field ideal of meritocratic states is often marred by income inequality that has a profound effect on the mechanics of social mobility. Nevertheless, there were certain structural elements within Confucianism and traditional Chinese society that “at once justified social inequality and upheld the principle that social status should be determined by individual merit.”

Alexander Woodside argues that it is this “symbiosis of social salvation aims with administrative calculation” that tempers the meritocratic state. Even with the influence of western notions of universal equality and individual rights that seem to contradict Confucian values, there continue to be policy elements in contemporary times that reign in its more pernicious tendencies, allowing it to be sustainable enough for a state to reap its rewards. Losing the Confucian element would lose meritocracy its viability.

This paper is broken up into four parts:

Chapter 1 gives a brief overview of the philosophical roots of meritocracy in China. This includes an analysis of the key ideas in the Confucian Analects as well as major classical texts of the time period. I argue that the Confucianism that emerges and forms the basis of meritocratic rule in imperial China from around 400 BC to 1911 represents an amalgam of ideas and traditions that originate from many thinkers. The chapter looks at the basic philosophical underpinnings of meritocracy and the

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4 Ibid., 86.
inherent philosophical tensions to set the basis for the discussion of meritocracy in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 provides a historical account of the institutionalization of Confucian meritocracy in Imperial China as a means of hiring officials through the civil examination system and as a framework for running the state. Imperial Confucianism coupled with the civil examination system as an institutionalization of the public will created a complex bureaucracy that allowed for the centralized control of China despite its size. Examining the mechanics and evolution of the examination system would thus provide us insight into the mindset of the government as well as the type of officials produced by the system. This chapter also looks at the various shortcomings and problems within the meritocracy including relevancy of the examination syllabus, corruption and the role of wealth superseding meritocratic ideals. I argue that meritocracy did not function alone and that there were numerous cultural and institutional features at work that counterbalanced the less benevolent aspects of meritocracy.

Here, we witness the manifestation of Confucian harmony, where the tension of administrative utility and benevolent virtue was deliberately put in place to create a system that approximated to a Confucian society. Looking at this period of time, I argue that while the notion of virtue politics was idealistic, there were mechanisms in place that promoted virtuous behavior. At the end of the chapter I present a framework of the Imperial Model, highlighting key features that allowed it to work successfully. This Imperial Model will be used in the subsequent chapter as a point of reference to contemporary criticisms and features of modern day meritocracies.
Chapter 3 highlights some of the major criticisms of meritocracy, grouping them into three major categories: 1) Defining merit and the social good; 2) Leveling the playing field; 3) Polarizing society. For each section, I first elaborate on the major criticisms of meritocracy, before drawing parallels from the Imperial Model, underscoring areas where similar problems were faced and emphasizing responses from the Imperial Model to the criticisms. Finally, I bring the discussion to the present bearing in mind the contemporary challenges of capitalism, multiculturalism, globalization, and the influence of western liberal ideas. In each discussion of the contemporary period, I use Singapore as a case study as I see it as a greenhouse for meritocracy due to its small size, one party rule, and dominant Chinese population in a multicultural society. Policy effects become evident quickly while societal problems also develop with the same rapidity. Due to its geography and history of racial violence in its formative years, the political balance is a finer one to tread and the Confucian harmony ever more pertinent. In addition, Singapore’s secular government and multiracial characteristic has led it to be described as a “sanitized version of Chinese society” and this is useful when we consider the wider application of Confucian political philosophy and meritocracy in non-Confucian based societies.6

The conclusion summarizes the findings in Chapter 3 and briefly looks at some of the broader challenges that not only affect meritocracies but other types of societies as well, bringing up new ideas in thinking about the way forward for meritocracy today. I also consider the universality of meritocracy and Confucian values, highlighting some of features that possess political utility regardless of cultural context.

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6 Tu, “Cultural China,” 154.
The evolution of social theory and concepts of meritocracy amongst statecraft thinkers from the Spring and Autumn Period in the second half of the eighth century BC to the Han Dynasty in the third century BC is a complex and messy affair. The schools of thought, while seemingly distinct, draw upon the same evolving zeitgeist in Chinese history, especially during the pre-dynastic turbulence of the Warring States period between 476BC to 221BC. The different schools of thought overlapped at many points and developed concomitantly with each other, sharing many common points of reference. Much of the texts were also written and collected over extended periods of time, making it difficult to clearly attribute certain concepts to certain schools of thought. Nevertheless, the early stirrings of meritocracy are evident throughout the various works.

This chapter will elucidate the philosophical fundamentals that lay the groundwork of meritocracy as embodied in Imperial Confucianism, a dynastic ideology that begins in the Han and lasts till the Qing. Pre-Han Dynasty philosophy makes no explicit mention of meritocracy and what manifests in the Han is really an
amalgam of numerous different ideas under the name of Confucianism. Nevertheless, the ideal of harmony persists throughout both eras and the opposing tensions within the resulting Imperial Confucianism worked towards this end. Efficiency must be balanced with virtue, hierarchy must be balanced with compassion for society and family, and individual self-cultivation must take place within the context of a society, and not by one’s self.

For the purpose of clarity, the texts will be dealt with thematically rather than chronologically, in order to draw emphasis to the interplay of ideas of individual morality and governance amongst the various thinkers as they developed. Confucian theory will serve as the basis of comparison and analysis. The key texts used in this chapter and their approximate dates of authorship are as follow:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Time period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Analects</td>
<td>479BC – 221BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mozi</td>
<td>470BC – 391BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Guanzi</td>
<td>450BC – 400BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mencius</td>
<td>372BC – 289BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xunzi</td>
<td>312BC – 230BC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Han Feizi (Legalist school)</td>
<td>280BC – 233BC</td>
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This chapter focuses on five major areas: 1) Personal aspirations towards righteousness; 2) Ideal governance; 3) Recruiting the meritorious; 4) Inequality; and 5) Confucian justice.
1.1 PERSONAL ASPIRATIONS TOWARDS RIGHTEOUSNESS

The key notion of Confucian philosophy that forms the basis of its view on statecraft is that everyone should aspire to be a gentleman (*jun zi* 君子). A *jun zi* is a virtuous person of moral learning who strives to be a sage (*sheng ren* 圣人). Moral merit that is embodied by good character, especially in relationship with others, supersedes practical talent and ability. Sagehood\(^7\) can best be defined as a state of moral being where one is able to act spontaneously in the right way all the time while having positive influences on others. This is perhaps best exemplified in Confucius’ spiritual autobiography where he recounts that at seventy, he could follow his heart’s desires without overstepping the bounds of propriety.\(^8\)

The role of relationships and community in a person’s moral development is a crucial element in Confucianism that focuses on practice over theory. The ideal *jun zi* is not a sage meditating alone in a cave to reach perfection but is rather one who exerts an influence in the lives of the people in his or her community. A moral person has *ren* (仁), roughly translated as ‘humaneness’ or ‘virtue’, which in early texts was the all-encompassing virtuous quality that the aspiring *jun zi* strived for. In later periods, *ren* had a more specific significance of benevolence as Mencius highlights in the four main virtues of the Way: benevolence, righteousness, propriety and wisdom; and Zhu Xi argues that the latter three qualities are really manifestations of

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\(^7\) The goal of achieving sagehood is the alignment of one’s desires with those of the ‘exemplary standards’ or what would later be known as the Way (道) such that following it becomes an organic, natural and spontaneous process without the need for external incentives. There are numerous stages of morality which one has to achieve before one can attain sagehood, but the distinctions gradually become blurred over time and are not entirely relevant to the subject matter.

For the purpose of clarity, this chapter will look at a passage from the *Analects* that form the basis of the Mencian virtues:

“A young person should be filial when at home and respectful of his elders when in public. Conscientious and trustworthy, he should display a general care for the masses but feel particular affection for those who are Good. If he has any strength left over after manifesting these virtues in practice, let him devote it to learning the cultural arts (wen 文).” *Analects* 1.6

Commentators Liu Baonan and Yin Tun argue that this passage highlights the primacy of virtuous behavior, specifically filial piety, as the “root” of personal development, with the study of arts and culture as secondary concerns. Self-cultivation necessarily stems from one’s familial relations and any acquisition of head knowledge should support the ultimate pursuit of heart or moral knowledge. From this passage, we can identify the key themes of self-cultivation, rituals, familial relationships, and circumspection (translated as conscientiousness).

Self-cultivation and learning to become a *jun zi* is a never-ending process and is open to everyone regardless of social status. Cheng Shude points out that learning, as understood by the ancients, referred to cultivating oneself. Thus even an uneducated peasant could rise above the unwashed mass (*min 民*) to become a person

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10 Ibid., 2A6.5: p47
12 ‘Conscientiousness’ refers to being meticulous and careful with performing a certain duty whereas ‘circumspection’ refers more to broader prudence.
(ren 人) or moral agent through self-cultivation. The love of learning and ritual are important to attaining the virtue of wisdom that Mencius mentions above. As Confucius recounts, he begins his path to become a jun zi by submitting to the rigors of study and ritual practice such that it becomes internalized. It is crucial to note here that while Confucius endorses rote learning (as is evident in contemporary Confucian societies), he also places emphasis on thinking about what is being learned, for “no matter how many odes (a jun zi) might have memorized, what good are they to him?” Only through reflection and constant self-evaluation can one truly benefit from study and put the lessons learned into practicable actions. The emphasis is on virtue and not on practical ability as seen in Analects 8.11 where “if a person has talents as fine as the Duke of Zhou, but is arrogant and mean-spirited, the rest of the qualities are not worth notice.” Talent, undirected by virtue, is worthless.

Ritual (li 礼) and learning discipline the moral character and are all important to attaining the virtue of wisdom that Mencius mentions. Ritual, in the Confucian sense, refer to the set of traditional and religious practices revealed to the Zhou Kings by Heaven that include sacrificial offerings to the spirits and daily behavioral conventions. It is through ritual that people acquire virtue, restraining their lesser inborn tendencies in order to find their purpose and place (li 立) in the world, for it is only when everyone is in their right place that harmony can be achieved in society. The emphasis of ritual in Confucian philosophy points to a pragmatic recognition of the lack of spontaneous virtue in human nature. It is thus something that needs to be

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13 Cited by Slingerland, Confucius Analects, 1.
14 Analects 2.4
15 Analects 13.5
16 Slingerland, Confucius Analects, 241.
cultivated through the development of good habits in one’s personal life aided via social structures that check immoral behavior and promote virtue.

Xunzi views the original nature of people as bad but argues that even a character, rigid like a piece of wood, can be made pliable enough to be reformed into a useful tool. Like a piece of clay, one’s human nature can be molded through the “cutting”, “polishing”, “carving” and “grounding” of moral character such that one can become a virtuous person. Mencius holds a more optimistic view, arguing that people are all born good with innate feelings of compassion, where “benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom are not welded to us externally,” but are instead inherent and dormant within the human heart. It is only through learning that we reawaken those virtues. Nevertheless, what unites these thinkers together is the belief that people can become masters of their own morality, shaping and molding their character to align it with the Way. This is a difficult life-long process that is achieved only through consistent observation of the appropriate rituals and rigorous learning. There is also a call for a principled and righteous life exemplified in Analects 10.12 where Confucius “would not sit unless his mat was straight (正).” The daily actions in one’s life over time ultimately contribute to one’s moral development. Therefore, through the seeming rigidity of ritual, spontaneous virtue will spring forth. The daily life of the ruler, the minister, and even the commoner should thus ideally be conducted in accordance with ritual in order to attain the state of jun zi. In the same

18 Analects 1.15
19 Mengzi 6A6.7
way, on the national level, societies can and should be shaped through the means of appropriate ritual or policy.

Familial relations are a microcosm of larger social relations. Without first engaging in self-cultivation and getting one’s relations with one’s family in order, one cannot expect to be able to be virtuous beyond the household. As Slingerland points out in *Analects* 1.2, political order derives itself from moral character that is formed within the context of family life. This is echoed in *Mencius* 4A1 where “if everyone simply loved their parents and respected their elders, the world would be at peace.” As such a leader’s political legitimacy should inextricably be linked to his personal moral life. While this view may seem simplistic from a contemporary viewpoint, filial piety was and still is an important virtue in contemporary Confucian societies.

Extending this to the political sphere, the ruler is like the father of the nation with a strong moral commitment to the well being of his people. Although the family must always come first for the jun zi, Confucius does not endorse favoritism or nepotism. The jun zi must also act in accordance with justice (义) and impartiality (公), which will be further explored later in this chapter.

Circumspection is an important feature of Confucian philosophy, especially when we consider it as a key quality of a virtuous minister. Circumspection refers to a general prudency that entails the consideration of multiple viewpoints with an element of appropriate adaptability. It can best be understood via *Analects* 4.15, which points to shu (恕) and zhong (忠) as being the “single thread” that links all of

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20 This is summarized in the saying derived from The Great Learning: “修身，齐家，治国，平天下，” that translates as the order of priorities of goals one must accomplish in order to achieve peace under Heaven. One must first cultivate one’s self, before one can care for one’s family, and after one’s household is in order, only then can one govern the state.

Confucian teaching. *Shu* is the process of empathizing with others or what Slingerland calls the “negative” version of the Golden Rule: “Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.”\(^{22}\) Zhu Xi together with Wang Bi view *zhong* as exhausting one’s energy to the task of following the Way and being ever attentive to other people and to the situation.\(^{23}\) There is thus a balance here with the element of constancy present in *zhong* and the element of social adaptability and understanding present in *shu*. This highlights two things: firstly, Confucianism is a flexible philosophy that focuses on creating harmonious human relationships; secondly, one’s duties are not be fulfilled out of obligation but because one truly wants to do so. Consequently, service to one’s country should not be done for material incentives but as a calling and the highest moral duty one can perform. Good governance can be achieved only if the *jun zi* cares not only for the people in his immediate community but for the masses as well.

### 1.2 IDEAL GOVERNANCE

An ideal Confucian ruler rules without ruling (*wu wei* 无为). This can be traced to the harmony achieved by Heaven in the natural world, which human relations should emulate.\(^{24}\) *Wu wei* translates as effortless action where upon the state machinery runs in harmony on its own accord driven mainly by the virtue of the king. Only a Sage King is able to perfectly achieve this as he has cultivated his character to such a high degree of virtue that it radiates to all his subjects, naturally changing and

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 242.
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 34.
\(^{24}\) *Analects* 2.1
shaping their moral character without any deliberate action on his part. This is best exemplified by the Sage King Shun, who only had to face south to ensure the good governance of the state.\textsuperscript{25} The emperor as a `cosmic man’ must follow the Polar Star, “which does not move and yet commands the homage of all stars around it.”\textsuperscript{26} The Sage King’s virtue perpetuates the virtue of the kingdom.

Good governance begins with a virtuous ruler who will attract virtuous men to serve under his government and morally transform the common people through the inspiration of his virtue. Xunzi in 14.4 argues that “one who uses the attraction of locusts to light need only devote his attention to the brilliance of his fire,” focusing more on self-cultivation rather than the deliberate attempts at legislating policies to influence people – a form of leadership by example. In \textit{Analects} 13.4, Confucius writes that when a ruler loves rightness and trustworthiness, none of his people will dare to disobey or be dishonest. The state, rather than basing its authority on its monopoly over violent force, gains legitimacy in the eyes of the common people by virtue of its moral authority inherent in the ruler and his ministers. Confucian society is ideally more of a moral society than a legalistic one. In the subsequent chapters we will see this theme in the anti-corruption policies present in both imperial and contemporary governments.

Crucial to good governance is the notion that the ruler must truly care for the common people and tend to their needs. The roots of this can be traced back to the \textit{Guanzi}, which states that “success of the government lies in following the hearts of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} \textit{Analects} 15.5
\item \textsuperscript{26} \textit{Analects} 2.1 cited in Julia Ching, “Son of Heaven: Sacral Kingship in Ancient China,” \textit{T'oung Pao} 83, no. 1/3, Second Series (1997): 38.
\end{itemize}
the people” and “shepherding” them.27 This is echoed later by Mencius who puts simply, “one cares for the people and becomes king,” an idea that forms the basis of the Mandate of Heaven concept, which will be discussed in the next chapter.28 Unlike a noble who has a constant heart and will not err even if without a constant livelihood, the common people need a constant livelihood in order to have a constant heart lest they engage in criminal activities as a result of deprivation.29 Therefore, rulers need to be sensitive both to the sentiments and practical needs of the people in order to ensure peace in society. Referencing Mencius’ belief that all people have hearts that “are not unfeeling towards others,” Van Norden argues that the Sage Kings possessed this quality and as a result their governments were compassionate to the people, and could therefore bring order to the state.30 Confucius’ suspicion of civil litigation corresponds with this point as he believes that rulers should not coerce their people into obedience by the threat of punishment but rather persuade them with their virtue such that they may change on their own free will.31 As Guanzi notes, “those who would shepherd the people desire them to be correct.”32 More than just maintaining the efficient running of society, the Sage King is primarily concerned about the morality of each individual under his rule, which determines the harmony in society. Laws are generally created retrospectively as a reaction to an unwanted event while virtue provides the individual with the moral disposition to avoid such events in the first place. Thus even if the litigation was fair, the fact that it is even necessary signals

28 Mengzi 1A7.3
29 Mengzi 4A7.2
30 Van Norden, Mengzi, 46.
31 Analects 12.13
32 Guanzi 10.8
a failure on the ruler’s part for not shepherding the population and allocating
resources well enough. Morality is valued over practical efficiency, but the two are
not mutually exclusive.

Han Feizi, a major proponent of the legalist school, diverges quite
significantly from this view. The Legalist school represents the most utilitarian
viewpoint in the early Confucian dialogue in affairs of governance and is often linked
to the eventual Qin dynasty. For Han Feizi, having the appropriate laws in place and
executing them is supreme in ensuring good governance and stability. Confucian
philosophy does not call for subjugating individual interest to that of the community
but rather calls for an alignment of individual interest with that of the community
focusing on self-cultivation in the context of a community. However, in the Legalist
school, individual development does not figure as prominently and instead the state
and law, rather than the people, become the ends of government. Unlike Confucian
philosophy, Han Feizi rejects the ways of the Sage Kings and tradition in general,
which he argues, has no relevance in contemporary governance.33 The Legalists
advocate a brutally efficient approach to politics that finds compassion more of an
obstacle than a necessity to effective governance. As Han Feizi puts, “benevolence,
righteousness, eloquence, and wisdom are not the means by which to maintain the
state,” since the teachings of Confucius envision a world that is overly idealistic.34
Law supersedes virtuous officials and perhaps even makes their presence unnecessary.
What matters is attracting people “who have a clear understanding of what is
beneficial to the nation and a feeling for the system of laws and regulations” in order

33 Han Feizi, Han Fei Tzu: Basic Writings, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University
Press, 2003), 98.
34 Ibid., 101; 103-104.
to effectively advise the ruler on decisions.\textsuperscript{35} Consequently, in choosing, a truly enlightened ruler would rely on the law to weigh the merits of each person rather than using his own judgment that is less reliable in comparison.\textsuperscript{36}

Reward and punishment figure prominently in Legalist philosophy as they serve as incentives to guide a human nature, which is far from virtuous and altruistic. Han Feizi argues that “the best rewards are those which are generous and predictable” and the best penalties are those that are severe and inescapable.\textsuperscript{37} In Han Feizi’s mind there are no grey areas in the law and the role of government is to ensure that legislation is made clear to the public and that society fully understands and internalizes them. Only then will society be compelled to obey them; only then will there be stability without having to deal with all the ambiguities involved in Confucian philosophy. Legalist philosophy, as we shall see, becomes very prominent in later imperial times in the civil service examination with its focus on stringent rules and an overarching goal of seeking virtue, forming a synthesis of both Legalist and Confucian values.

1.3 RECRUITING THE MERITORIOUS

Finding the right people to assist in governance equals in importance to being a virtuous ruler, and the latter should ideally entail the former. Practically speaking, the ruler cannot govern the country on his own and needs ministers who are his arms and legs in managing the affairs of the state. As Mozi rightly points out, a ruler should be engaged in important affairs and avoid petty ones, while Confucius notes

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 22.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 104.
that a *jun zi* should delegate tasks and not be caught up in the minutiae of daily affairs.\(^{38}\) There is general agreement in the texts that the chaos (*luan*) in the state is usually attributed to the failure of the ruler to pick the right persons for the numerous offices. Mozi argues that the failure of the ruler to honor the worthy leads to disorder while Xunzi finds that the calamity of the ruler of men lies in not sincerely and rigorously using the worthy.\(^{39}\)

Confucian philosophy does not advocate ‘office open to talent’ but rather ‘office open to virtue’, weakening the traditional hold of power by the aristocracy, and articulating an important meritocratic characteristic. In this respect, there is a premium placed on morality in Confucian politics. On one hand, talent refers to one’s practical capabilities like scholarship or administration. On the other hand, virtue refers to one’s moral disposition, which is associated with less tangible abovementioned qualities such as benevolence and wisdom. Virtue, according to Confucius, is more important that talent. One who possesses virtue would more often than not, through learning and self-cultivation, possess talent as well, but this does not necessarily work vice versa. Throughout the numerous texts, one recurring warning is against honoring the rich, the prominent, the handsome, or the glib of tongue. Confucius argues that “a clever tongue and fine appearance are rarely signs of Goodness.”\(^{40}\) Mozi agrees with Confucius on this point, stating that wealth, eminence and fine appearance do not equate to wisdom and vigilance in public office.\(^{41}\) People who possess these qualities are looked upon with suspicion as they tend to mask their

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\(^{39}\) Mozi, *Mozi*, 19; *Xunzi* 14.4

\(^{40}\) *Analects* 1.3

\(^{41}\) Mozi, *Mozi*, 27.
lack of virtue. While it is evident that favoritism and nepotism were common in Chinese courts, it is fair to assume that hiring morally meritorious ministers who upheld the law was the ideal that most rulers officially aspired towards but fell short of in reality. Nevertheless even the appearance of such motivations is significant since moral capital was prized publically and the bureaucracy was, to an extent, beholden to this public expectation.

Recognizing the importance of virtuous ministers is relatively simple, finding out how to identify and recruit them is more challenging. In choosing, Mencius points out that it is better to employ commoners over nobility and the distant over relatives while carefully considering public judgment of potential candidates.\(^{42}\) Xunzi argues that political office should only be given to people who are able “accumulate culture and study, rectify their character and conduct, and are capable of devotedly observing the requirements of ritual principles and justice,” regardless of their social class.\(^{43}\) Both thinkers encourage the expansion of recruitment of ministers beyond the aristocracy to the larger populace as virtue is not an aristocratic privilege but can be found in everyone. Emphasis is also placed on the people as playing an important voice in the hiring of government officials. This will later manifest itself in the civil service examination system, which one can consider an institutionalization of the public will. In order to incentivize political office, two distinct ideas are evident: 1) creating positions of stature and distinguishing between the commoner and minister; and 2) attraction by virtue. Mozi and Xunzi, deviating from the *Analects*’ ideal of altruistic servitude to the nation and the attraction of virtuous government, note the

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\(^{42}\) *Mengzi*, 1B7.3

\(^{43}\) Xunzi, *Xunzi: A translation and study of the complete works*, 94.
importance of “enriching and honoring” the virtuous while maintaining the dignity of the court by creating distinctions, gradations and hierarchical rituals.\textsuperscript{44} There is certain practicality in this, a realistic understanding of motivations and the need for material incentives in people. Guanzi also calls attention to rewarding the worthy according to their achievements in order for the ruler to retain legitimacy and fairness in the eyes of the people.\textsuperscript{45} The idea of having both material and virtuous incentives are not necessarily mutually exclusive but point to an ideal middle path that is both idealistic and grounded in reality at the same time. In Chapter 3, we will see the growing importance of material incentives in contemporary times and the absence of virtue politics that figured so prominently in imperial thought.

1.4 INEQUALITY

One of the seemingly attractive qualities of meritocracy is the egalitarianism and social mobility inherent in the system that in theory gives everybody the opportunity to enter into political office without having come from a noble lineage or possessing wealth. This is substantiated by the notion of an equality as moral agents: regardless of whether the basic nature is good, evil or neutral, no one person matters more than another in society. Nevertheless, there is still great emphasis placed on hierarchy and social distinctions, reflective of a more realistic vision of society and the tensions necessary for harmony. While there is some form of equality in terms of one’s moral core, there is a clear distinction between classes in society and between different types of personal dispositions. As Joseph Chan argues,

\textsuperscript{44} Mozi, Mozi, 18; Guanzi, 10.1
\textsuperscript{45} Guanzi 9.1
Confucian philosophy “does not see natural inequalities or social inequalities as inherently unjust.” The widespread belief in all the texts that everyone has a set purpose and position in society philosophically institutionalizes the inequality.

Xunzi argues, and most thinkers of that era would agree, that society is built upon distinctions and each individual recognizes the rightful duties and responsibilities (yi 益) of his lot (fen 分) in life, thus if a man’s emolument is the whole empire, “he will not think it too much for himself” or if he is a gate-keeper, “he will not think it too little of himself.” However, Xunzi’s philosophy has strong strains of social mobility as well, pointing out that even if a man is a descendant of a king, “if he does not observe the rites of proper conduct and justice, he must be relegated to the common ranks”; conversely, if a commoner “has acquired learning, good character, and is able to observe the rules of good conduct and justice, then elevate him to be minister.” For this reason Sage King Yao picks Shun, a peasant, to become the next ruler since virtue and talent transcend social divisions, and even a member of the lowest social group can become a jun zi. What seems at first to be a contradiction of ideas actually points to the maintenance of societal harmony and the emphasis of self-cultivation. Everyone should and can perform their station in society to their utmost and with humility regardless of function or what others think. Thus even though society is a distinctly hierarchical one, it is not a static one as the virtuous are promoted over the talented, thereby maintaining a moral society by placing a premium on morality over birth or talent.

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47 Xunzi, Xunzi: A translation and study of the complete works, 147; Ho, The Ladder of Success in Imperial China, 8.
48 Ho, The Ladder of Success in Imperial China, 7.
On the other hand, there is also the category of the *min* (民), which is often seen as a reactive mass and the thermostat of the public mood that measures the state of a ruler’s governance, but which has no popular sovereignty. Guanzi likens them to sheep that need to be shepherded by the government.\(^{49}\) While Confucius argues that “in education, there is no differences in kind,” indicating how education should be universal, he also notes at the same time that the masses can be made “to follow” the Way but they cannot be made “to understand” it.\(^{50}\) Whether this is a comment on the mass’ cognitive ability or their entitlement to such knowledge, it is clear that there is distinction between one social group and another. Mencius recognizes the fact that things are “inherently unequal” and treating everything as identical in society would necessarily lead to chaos.\(^{51}\) Thus, while everyone can aspire to positions in political office, not everyone can make the cut and not everyone should. Xunzi acknowledges that the *jun zi*, while being no different from other men by birth is better at “borrowing” the use of external things or moral lessons.\(^{52}\) This begs the question of what makes a *jun zi* better at “borrowing” external things. One answer is that if the path to virtue is through the rigorous study of the Odes and classics, the rich would have a natural advantage as they can afford the opportunity cost of studying instead of working and are able to hire tutors and be in the company of scholars. In contrast, the peasant in the field has no such opportunity. Thus on the basis of income inequality there would already be unequal potential, and this shall be discussed in the following chapters. In addition, some people just have an inborn predisposition to learning, to

\(^{49}\) Chapter title in the Guanzi: On Shepherding the People (牧民)

\(^{50}\) *Analects* 15.39; 8.9

\(^{51}\) *Mengzi* 3A 4.18; 4A 1.7

\(^{52}\) *Xunzi* 1.3
“accumulating,” and “borrowing,” while others do not. All men are not born equal socially or intellectually. In the case of a meritocratic system, opportunities may be open to all but some are better able to take advantage of them due to inherent personal inequalities. The ritual of hierarchy and social division become all the more important in this light, since treating everyone equally when they are clearly not is a very ineffectively arbitrary thing for a government to do. This shall be looked at in greater detail in Chapter 3.

A clear manifestation of inequality is also seen in the concept of differentiated love. Differentiated love arises out of different degrees of concern for different groups of people, a gradation of care with the family in the center. Confucius advocates for fathers to cover up for their sons and for sons to cover up for their fathers as an “upright” act in the face of law. Mohist and legalist thinkers alike vehemently object to this line of Confucian thought as it values familial relations over considerations of public justice. Confucius’ argument reflects his suspicion of civil litigation and also his emphasis on familial relationships as the basis of society. Nevertheless, one’s love for one’s family should ideally not compromise the harmony of society. Shun’s preferential treatment of his brother, who attempts to murder him, can be considered valid as long as it does not affect his care for the people. Shun gives his brother both wealth and rank as a sign of good faith and an expression of brotherly love, but withholds any effective political power from him. This returns to the idea of persuading and transforming someone’s moral character for the better through virtue. While there are benefits to differentiated love, it is also prone to

53 *Analects* 13.18
54 Slingerland, *Confucius Analects*, 147.
55 *Mengzi* 5A3
exploitation. There is, admittedly, seeming moral ambiguity in this area of Confucianism and perhaps may have shaped the culture of guan xi (关系) whereby relationships and social connections are leveraged to achieve certain goals rather than relying on individual merit. Nevertheless, differentiated love, rather than being incompatible with meritocracy, actually complements it by reminding us of the need for compassion amidst the fierce competition in society. Later in Chapter 3, we will also see the role of differentiated love in a decentralized welfare system.

1.5 CONFUCIAN JUSTICE

The Confucian idea of justice differs from the egalitarian one often associated with modern notions of justice as the former is an ideal of sufficiency and meritocracy while the latter emphasizes equality.\(^56\) Joseph Chan highlights two concepts of justice: 1) justice (义) refers to a person’s righteousness, which is measured by the extent they respect the ethical norms associated with their social role; 2) impartiality (公) refers to fairness that requires the government to care for the people without favoritism or discrimination.\(^57\) For a government to be just it must thus be both righteous and impartial in carrying out its duties, providing welfare for the people and displaying fairness in the distribution of offices and the formation of policies. The two features of justice are evident in the following portion of the Analects where Confucius highlights the importance of distribution and of welfare:

“If wealth is fairly distributed, there should be no poverty; if your state or house is in harmony, there should be no scarcity; and if your people are content, there should be

\(^57\) Ibid., 1.
Chan articulates the distinction between Confucian justice and egalitarian justice in the framework of meritocracy: in the former only people’s actual abilities and the fairness of distributing office is relevant, whereas in the latter, distribution is only fair if a level playing field exists in the beginning. The modern conception of social justice, like that of egalitarian justice, seeks to equalize the inherent social and natural inequalities of life to a sufficient societal standard, and is not a robust feature of traditional Confucian philosophy. We shall see later that this has affected the way modern Confucian societies have developed.

The imperial Confucian philosophy that emerged in the Han dynasty was a synthesis of numerous ideas from many schools of thought. This, mixed together with traditional cultural practices and ritual, created a philosophy that was very much a product of its times and circumstance. The emphasis was always on harmony, which meant striking a balance between seemingly contentious forces such as differentiated love and impartiality. As we shall see, as dynasties became more stabilized and established, Confucian philosophy grew to become more practicable in statecraft as a matter of policy guidelines as well as a legitimizing tool for the state. This is in line with the long Chinese historical trend of borrowing from past traditions and beliefs to solidify political power. Confucianism, with its long history and fairly humanistic concepts is a reservoir for institutional ideas and ideological justifications that both the people and government can draw upon to solve evolving societal problems.

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58 *Analects* 16.1
2. MECHANICS OF AN IMPERIAL MODEL

The Chinese civil service examination system was an institutionalization of Confucian ideas and a manifestation of meritocracy in China. Its history is a long and complex one, with the examination structure going through numerous revisions of content and process within and between each dynasty. Nevertheless, what remained constant was its rootedness in Confucian ideals and the vast undeniable influence it had on society. As Benjamin Elman asserts, “The civil examinations were an exercise in cultural and educational might unmatched in coercive magnitude by any other educational institution. Only death and taxes, and perhaps legal cases, affected more people during the late empire.” The dichotomy of the populace and the bureaucracy converged in the civil service examination system that embodied the meritocratic ideal of empowering and regulating the imperial government. Furthermore the meritocracy could only remain legitimate and efficient with other societal and institutional Confucian-based structures in place to rectify the negative externalities of the system. This chapter will highlight the mechanics of the

60 Benjamin A. Elman, A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China, 1st ed. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 194.
civil service examination system and of imperial society and politics with the goal of providing a historical context for the meritocratic tradition and constructing an Imperial Model that embodied the ideals of harmony in Confucian philosophy.

Five broad areas are analyzed in this chapter: 1) Imperial Confucianism as a dynastic ideology of control; 2) Legitimizing government through the civil service examination system; 3) Social mobility realities in the imperial meritocracy; 4) The civil service examination in practice; and 5) Dulling the sharper edges of meritocracy. Following these analyses will be a summary of the Imperial Model that will be used in the subsequent chapter.

2.1 IMPERIAL CONFUCIANISM

The amalgam of the prevailing moral value system and Confucian philosophy culminated in a universal Imperial Confucian system during the Han Dynasty in the second century BC. This marked the beginning of a consolidated and cohesive Imperial Model that was adopted by subsequent dynasties till 1912 with the fall of the Qing Dynasty. As the point of confluence for local cultural traditions, the Han court was the site of the cross-fertilization of philosophical ideas, cosmological principles, and political techniques from various traditions.\(^6\) Led by Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BC), a Confucian scholar and minister, the Han courts selectively assimilated many of the ideas of the thinkers described in Chapter 1, into a consolidated and coherent national philosophy that legitimized government in a cosmic sense while concurrently yielded political utility. Dong saw human and natural orders as being so integrated

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with each other such that action in the former had implications for the latter, and it was the role of the emperor and his ministers to be the managers of this dichotomous, rectifying any imbalances between the two.⁶² As De Bary and Bloom argue, Dong articulated “a vision of an omnipotent but disciplined sovereign, who sought to align the population with the norms of Heaven and Earth, based on the advice and counsel of scholar-officials versed in the classical traditions of antiquity.”⁶³ By using the Sage King model, Dong was able to tap into the popular Confucian tradition that romanticized the glorious bygone reigns of Yao and Shun, thereby strengthening the state’s control through the control of culture. The emperor became the linchpin in the state of the kingdom according to the mechanism of *wu wei*. This legitimized the imperial state and elevated the role of emperor to a divine level, reviving and expanding the Mandate of Heaven⁶⁴ notion that became fundamental to imperial ideology that was never publically questioned.⁶⁵

The Han was viewed as restoring the institutional legacy of antiquity that the Qin had broken away from. This was to be achieved through the textual Classics, which revealed how the Sage Kings had created civilization through ways of governance that were applicable to other periods as well.⁶⁶ Drawing particularly on the *Spring and Autumn Annals* 蘆輀 of the *Luxuriant Dew* 春秋繁露 of the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, Dong interpreted the text in line with his reformist goals by

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⁶² Ibid., 546.
⁶³ Ibid., 292.
⁶⁴ The Mandate of Heaven refers to the cosmic sovereignty the king had over *tianxia* 天下 or 'all under heaven' that was endowed upon him by *tian* 天 or heaven.
⁶⁶ Peter K. Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2008), 59; 47.
glorifying it as a crucial Confucian text that would end Qin excesses in society. This would be achieved by providing the necessary legal procedures and cosmological authority that justified the enhanced importance of the ruler and bureaucracy as performing a noble and divine duty. The text validates the king as being “Heaven’s agent,” one who “promotes those who possess merit and demotes those who lack merit,” one who accumulates worthy men in order to extend his virtue and achieve ultimate peace in the states.67 The state thus bases its power on the monopoly over morality rather than violence as illustrated in Chapter 1. Dong’s new vision of Confucianism thus appealed to the polity as it kept the cost of government down since it was a value system that everyone could relate to and that glorified public service.68 The public also found that this new philosophy resonated with their traditional belief systems where everyone has a specific responsibility (yi) and lot (fen) in life and to fulfill one’s obligation was to work towards harmony in society – the ruler and the peasant thus both contribute to society but in different ways. Finally the Confucian scholars benefited greatly with the end of state support for non-Confucian texts and the establishment of a text-based ideology based on the Spring and Autumn Annals.69 Contemporary philosophy and values were thus translated into real policy that worked to great effect.

The notion of the scholar-official, as the arms and legs of the king, vastly increased their status in the bureaucracy, linking education very closely to the civil service. In his attempts to gain further official support for Confucianism, Dong

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pushed for the establishment of a government college asserting that “a college is intimately related to the fostering of virtuous scholars and is the foundation of education.” The first imperial college was established in 124 BC near the capital where government-appointed teachers taught students who were chosen and dispatched to the capital by provincial authorities; those who were deemed capable upon graduation were offered official positions. By the later Han period there were more than thirty thousand students enrolled in the college, indicating the permeation of Confucianism in the various ranks of the bureaucracy and the setting of precedence for a civil service that was to be inextricably linked to academia.

Imperial Confucianism and the rise of the scholar-official in the Han represented the first real formalization of meritocracy and an early form of the civil service exam in China. The philosophical underpinnings of Imperial Confucianism incorporated numerous beliefs in society and were seen as something new yet familiar. It represented a shared set of values and historical references that contributed to the sociopolitical cohesion and made the rise of the civil service examination and the institutionalization of meritocracy acceptable to the populace and the bureaucracy. As Chapter 1 points out, while Confucian society is based on a hierarchically ordered society, it is one that is also based on merit and virtue that hedges the ruler’s power with moral restriction and provides a common moral standard that opens room for criticism and a restraint on the exercise of absolute power.

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70 Ibid., 312.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid., 316.
2.2 LEGITIMIZING GOVERNMENT

The civil service exam initially began as tool for political consolidation and control and evolved into one that sought to identify and recruit talented men to serve the bureaucracy. In the Han, Sui, and Tang, the civil service examination was instituted primarily to centralize power in a civilian government and unify the ethnically and culturally diverse sections of China under one system. The examination system mitigated formal feudalism and aristocracy by centralizing power in the government body, giving the Emperor greater control over state affairs.

Most scholars agree that the imperial examination system formally began in the Sui Dynasty in the early seventh century to counter the power of the aristocracy that seriously constrained the emperor's power to appoint officials. In the Tang, Empress Wu Zetian (625-705) used an examination system to break cliques and to legitimize her rise to power as a female emperor through the loyalty gained from successful candidates since she would become their official patron under a central system. By bringing in men from the Southeast to compete with those of the capital regions, she strengthened the imperial position through the balancing of potentially rival regional groups within the bureaucracy. Equitable recruitment of officials throughout China also offered the advantage of strengthening allegiances of well-represented regions, avoiding the antagonism of frustrated literati while encouraging the development of an educated local leadership to assist the centrally appointed

73 Ichisada Miyazaki, China's Examination Hell: The Civil Service Examinations of Imperial China (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 111.
regional officials.\textsuperscript{74} Evidence of the increasing faith in the examination system as the prevailing validation tool of status and credibility in the Tang can be seen where those who gained office through their parentage were not highly regarded either by the imperial government or by society at large.\textsuperscript{75}

In the Northern Song, civilian government mitigated the military threat that was prevalent in the Tang and during the five dynasties (907-960). The persistent distaste for the use of arms amongst the educated civil officials eclipsed military officials within the political circles.\textsuperscript{76} Even under foreign rulers like the Mongols and Manchus, the imperial examination system persisted to sustain the political bureaucratic machinery that made the complex rule of the country possible and to placate the disgruntled conquered elites with a value system that validated their self-worth. Elman argues that with the Juchen, Mongols, and Manchus seeking political legitimacy and the Han Chinese searching for cultural superiority and status under foreign rulers in the Yuan and Qing dynasty, common ground was found in a "classical memory" of tradition as a reservoir of values to reproduce classical ideals and political loyalty.\textsuperscript{77} The Ming and Qing were empires established on horseback, but needed a civil service to administer the country, and this was to be derived from the examination system. More importantly, it was through the examination system that the state directed, circumscribed, and channeled education to legitimize its existence and its policies.


\textsuperscript{75} Miyazaki, \textit{China's Examination Hell}, 112.

\textsuperscript{76} Elman, \textit{A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China}, 152; 70.

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 65.
2.3 SOCIAL MOBILITY

The imperial examination was fair in principle but not in reality. In late imperial Chinese society, the imperial examination system represented the preferred path to wealth and upward social mobility. Aside from individuals who were from families that were associated with “base occupations,” the law did not prohibit any male in society from participating in the civil service examination. There was also no discrimination between families with degree holders and those without. However, most analyses are unanimous in the view that the examination system was never egalitarian in nature. Ichisada Miyazaki argues that the contention that the examination system was “open to all applicants” was an exaggeration while Elman asserts that the imperial exam was not designed to increase social mobility, but served as an institutionalized system of inclusion and exclusion that publicly legitimated the impartial selection of officials.\(^78\) Nevertheless, given the “sense of agency” within the examination framework, a candidate willingly endured the hardships of the examination, and failure only demonstrated the limitation of the individual and not the state.\(^79\) While the examination system certainly worked in the favor of certain social groups, it nevertheless served as a powerful symbol of hope and of social mobility.

Gaining access to the imperial civil service was limited to those who could afford it and to those who were privileged enough to inherit an office. In this sense, social mobility was very much linked to wealth. Taking the exam depended a great

\(^{78}\) Miyazaki, China’s Examination Hell, 119; Elman, A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China, xxix.

deal on having adequate economic resources to allow for the numerous years of study, the gifts for examination officials, and living and traveling expenses for the examination itself. Having an initial base of wealth became increasingly important to get a degree from the mid fifteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. Ho points out that before 1450, money could indirectly help in the attainment of academic degrees; after 1451, money translated directly into higher status through the purchase of studentship and offices; after 1850, money overshadowed higher academic degrees as a determinant of higher status. In addition, there was also hereditary privilege, *yin* (蔭), which allowed some individuals to skip the hurdle of the civil service examination to enter office but where they still had to pass a competence exam in its stead. Nevertheless, credibility and legitimation was always found in passing the imperial exam and gaining the *jinshi* degree. As such, the number of officials of hereditary privilege remained small and they were not as highly regarded as those who had risen through the examination route.

Furthermore, the imperial exam was also only open to those who were literate in the classical mode of discourse, which by definition excluded the majority of the population, most of which could not read or write in the first place. Classical literacy required extensive academic learning and many years of study, something that most people could not afford. The strict demand for classical literacy was exemplified in the 1700s under the Kangxi regime (1662-1722) where any detection of examination papers deemed illiterate was evidence that a corrupt local official had permitted a

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80 Ho, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China*, 256.
classically illiterate commoner into the exam hall and both parties were punished.81 The imperial bureaucracy was open to talent but this opening was a very narrow one. By today’s standards, the Chinese imperial examination system clearly marginalized the majority of the poor who did not have the resources to pursue academia or to even cover the cost of participating in the examination process. With the gatekeeper function of the imperial examination system that systematically barred those without the prerequisites of cultural and linguistic resources, social mobility was limited to a small group in society.82 However, once a candidate did make it pass the gates, the system treated everyone similarly. Pan and Fei optimistically argue that the road was always open for all who possessed the appropriate ambition.83 In this sense, the beauty of the examination system lay in the fact that everyone who entered the examination compound was looked upon equally regardless of their origins. Later in office, successful candidates were also not favored based on their social background. Robert M. Marsh points out that there was no significant difference in terms of advancement in the civil service between elite families and commoner families. Seniority and norms in the Qing operated in such a way as to equalize the chances of officials from different family backgrounds.84

The imperial examination system was a clever illusion of equality that drew its strength and legitimacy from the necessarily hierarchical Confucian tradition of choosing virtuous men to administer the state. Miyazaki argues that “the faith people

81 Elman, A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China, 221.
82 Ibid., 248.
had in the examinations, and the honor they showed to those scholars who succeeded in them, attest to the general trust in the system's fairness,” despite not being entirely facilitative of social mobility. The intense egalitarianism, the open competition and the rigor of examination protocol itself seemed to outshine the effective exclusion of the lower classes of society from competing in the first place.

2.4 CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATION IN PRACTICE

The whole examination process was a grueling, rigorous affair that was transparent to all in society and contained numerous rituals and measures to prevent cheating and corruption. Examiners went to extremes to ensure that the fairness of the system never came under question, with the threat of severe punishment to deviant candidates as well as to the officials who failed to detect any discrepancies or who engaged in favoritism or accepted bribes. A system meant to identify the virtuous in society had to be itself incorruptible and held to the highest of standards. The structure of the whole system during the Ming-Qing period can be broadly broken up into the four examinations in the order: tongshi, xiangshi, huishi, and dianshi. This can be seen in Figure 1.

The numerous hurdles candidates had to cross had the purpose of not only identifying the cream of the crop for office but to also ensure the veracity of the entire process, to affirm and reaffirm that the system had found the best men for the job. In some sense, it can be likened to having various levels of security checks that extended from the macro structure of the examination stages down to the minutiae of regulations and protocol in the examination hall itself. Such a security system was

85 Miyazaki, *China’s Examination Hell*, 120.
crucial in protecting the bureaucracy from corrupt and incompetent men while
upholding the purity of the imperial examination system as a legitimate symbol of
control the people had over the government.

![Diagram of the Main Divisions of the Examination System](image)

Figure 1: Main Divisions of the Examination System

The civil service itself contained within it an anti-corruption element
embodied in the examination system. Since the bureaucracy was constantly recruiting
new talent every year and the size of said bureaucracy never fluctuated much, it
entailed a one hundred percent turnover every three or four years and the retiring of

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older civil servants. Such a system not only potentially allowed for a constant inflow of new ideas, it also prevented cliques from forming since an official did not stay long enough in one position to build up a following. As Elman asserts, “freshness and new energy (from the turnover), however ultimately routinized, kept the Ming and Qing bureaucracy from succumbing completely to corruption, absolutism, or irrelevance.” Leon Stover offers a more pessimistic take on this system, arguing that an official’s goal in office was to make monetary profit and to return home to glorify his family once he had made enough. Such homeward-looking officials were what an emperor wanted since it discouraged officials from forming political parties to rival the imperial house. However, even if officials were profit driven, rituals and norms were structured in such a manner where their energies were directed towards social goods and they were held accountable for their actions. While there were flaws in the system, what is truly remarkable was that the Chinese imperial government had the foresight to impose such rigorous anti-corruption mechanisms in the first place and in doing so, to save the meritocracy from itself.

Physically, the examination hall was an impressive and highly secured structure. It was a permanent fixture attached to a district office, or yamen, and existed as a standalone complex in the provincial capitals. Examinations were held in a spacious examination hall called a kao peng, and candidates for the juren (举人) degree took their exams in the provincial compound. The provincial compound was like a honeycomb of thousands of single cells each big enough to hold one man.

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87 Elman, A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China, 13.
89 Elman, A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China, 41.
Entry to each cell was open from top to bottom for easier surveillance from a single pavilion that was above ground level.90 This was very much in the spirit of a Benthamite panoptic tower that acted as a psychological deterrent for cheating. The scene of the candidates constantly being watched by the administration mirrored the situation outside the walls of the examination compound where the public was intently watching the government administer the examination. The whole examination compound only had one entrance, the Great Gate, used by both examination staff and candidates, which once closed could not be opened again until the scheduled time. Thus even if a candidate died within the compound, the body would be removed only through an opening in the compound wall.91 A canal divided the administrative outer section officials from the examiners – the former had access to the examination site, the latter, charged with judging the papers, were restricted to their quarters and could not leave the area until grading was complete.92 This was done to maintain the integrity of the system and to prevent cheating.

Protocol and procedure attempted to fill the security gaps in the architectural construct of the examination compound to prevent cheating and bribery. Each candidate and his luggage were physically searched twice by four guards at the main gate and again at the second gate of the compound. A guard who found anything suspicious, like any form of writing, was rewarded three ounces of silver, resulting in a very stringent search process. In addition, if any discrepancies were found in the second search, both the candidate and the guards from the first search would be

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90 Ibid., 182.  
91 Miyazaki, *China’s Examination Hell*, 42.  
92 Ibid.
punished.93 Guards were also posted in the alleys to keep candidates from passing notes to each other, and clerks conducted regular checks in the cells to mark each paper with a seal to ensure that they were not replaced while also checking that the admission slips of each candidate corresponded with their cell number.94

The grading process was an even more complex process than the actual sitting of the examination itself. Candidate papers never had their names but only their seat numbers. Their answers, written in black ink, were recopied in vermillion ink by scribes and proofread for corrections. Both scribes and proofreaders indicated their names on the papers to take responsibility for any discrepancies.95 After grading, the papers were verified by both the assistant and chief examiner and were sent to the Board of Rites in Peking to be examined again.96 Comparisons were also made with scripts from previous examinations to confirm the handwriting of the candidates in order to prevent impersonations. Furthermore, a specific statute in the Qing legal code treating corruption and bribery in civil examinations entailed punishments that ranged from severe beatings to banishment to death by strangulation.97 While these measures never quite overcame the corruptibility and creativity of the human spirit, the measures taken nevertheless were reflective of the official mind of the bureaucracy that was obsessively committed to upholding the legitimacy of the examination system, with the added public pressure of ensuring the fair execution of the process.

93 Ibid., 44.
94 Elman, A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China, 196; 197.
95 Miyazaki, China's Examination Hell, 52. Miyazaki, China's Examination Hell, 52.
96 Ibid., 55.
97 Elman, A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China, 202.
While it certainly was no democracy, *gong yi* (共议) or the public mood of the masses (*min* 民) in imperial China was regarded as a powerful thermostat that measured the performance of the bureaucracy and determined whether the Emperor possessed the Mandate of Heaven\(^98\), explaining the striking role it played in keeping the civil service examination disciplined. *Gong yi* refers to the “views widely shared concerning the common welfare,” and does not entail a participatory role for the populace but rather served as the popular mood, which ministers strived to interpret.\(^99\)

The public scrutiny surrounding the examination process was intense, one which the bureaucracy had to constantly placate with pomp and circumstance, and swiftly rectifying any discrepancies detected in the examination process. From the provincial exam to the palace exam, there was great fanfare at the beginning of the exam till when the names of successful candidates were announced. The festive market atmosphere prevailed outside the compound and was site of cultural ritual where friends and family of the candidates would reside for the duration of the exam, heightening the fair-like spirit of commerce and activity in the city.\(^100\)

One can imagine the potential explosive reaction of the crowd around the examination compound and the thousands taking the exam inside should there have been rumors of bribery in the examination. As Elman argues, “competition separated the candidates from each other, but corruption and cheating brought them together,” a notion, which when extended to the multitude waiting outside the compound, leaves

\(^{98}\) “Heaven does not speak, but simply reveals the Mandate through actions and affairs” (Mencius 5A:5.4)


\(^{100}\) Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 178; 180.
the bureaucracy with a very angry mob on its hands.\textsuperscript{101} Even with the public posting of results, which Miyazaki asserts was a way to protect the examiners by indicating that everything about the test had been open and fair, these lists were scrutinized for irregularities such as if there were too many sons of high government officials or too many friends of the examiners on the list.\textsuperscript{102} A 1699 case in Peking found evidence that an old chief examiner and associate examiner were involved in flagrant bribery resulting in the imprisonment of the former and the banishment of the latter.\textsuperscript{103} In keeping with the Confucian ideal of the populace as a political thermostat coupled with concerns of maintaining official legitimacy, it was in the personal interest of the emperor and his ministers to pacify any protests, especially in major cities like the provincial capital. For the larger populace, the imperial examination was a cultural institution that embodied the meritocracy and formed an important component of their political lives

2.4.1 TALENT AND VIRTUE DEBATES

In accordance with Confucian tradition, a virtuous ruler attracted virtuous ministers and collectively their virtue radiated throughout the country and effortlessly peace and harmony would prevail. While adopting such a view of politics in present times would seem overly idealistic, there was an earnestness with which the civil service examination sought to achieve this very end by identifying virtuous men for office. The ‘merit’ in meritocracy was ideally first and foremost one of meritorious

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 202.
\textsuperscript{102} Miyazaki, \textit{China's Examination Hell}, 22; 120.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 120.
virtue rather than talent, but even this was difficult to define and debates abounded about how it should be measured. Measuring this virtue was believed to be derived from assessing an examination candidate’s *wen* (文) that broadly referred to the writings from the past (memorization of the Classics), thought to provide models for the present and the ability to write in good style (literary composition). Whether it actually measured virtue is open to discussion and the form of the examination was a topic heavily debated in the courts. The examination often included belles lettres (雜文)\(^{105}\), the Five Classics (五經)\(^{106}\) and the Four Books (四書)\(^{107}\). In addition, there were policy questions that began in the early examination form during the Han and became the precedent for later written palace examinations in the Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties. These questions evolved during the Tang and Song dynasties as vehicles for addressing cultural, political, and institutional problems, providing a channel for dissenting opinions.\(^{108}\)

Throughout the different dynasties starting from the Song and at various levels of examination, there were many permutations and changes in the configuration of examination content, from belles lettres to policy questions to questions on the Five Classics and Four Books in various combination. The variations in the examination content reflected the prevailing notions of what manner of skills a scholar-official should possess in the effective management of the state.

\(^{104}\) Bol, *Neo-Confucianism in History*, 49.

\(^{105}\) A Tang conception of what a “cultured” person was, which included the ability to compose poetry, rhyme-prose, or eulogies.

\(^{106}\) The *Classic of Changes* or the Book of Changes (易經, Yi Jing), The *Classic of Poetry* or The Book of Odes (詩經, Shi Jing), The *Classic of Rites* (禮記, Li Ji), The *Classic of History* (書經 Shū Jing), The *Spring and Autumn Annals* (春秋 Chun Qiu)

\(^{107}\) The *Great Learning*, The *Doctrine of the Mean*, The Analects of Confucius, The *Mencius*

\(^{108}\) Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 9.
For the purpose of clarity, this section will focus on the jinshi degree or Palace Examination and the way it evolved from the Song to the Qing.

The talent versus virtue debates about what constituted effective merit in the civil service examinations came to the fore in the Song dynasty, specifically between belles lettres versus classical learning. Broadly speaking, there were three traits in contention that were desirable in a scholar-official: 1) virtue, 2) effective administrative skill, 3) music and poetry composition. The issue at hand was the priority of the characteristics that candidates were to be assessed by. Ho Ping-Ti notes that the examination system produced both men of sound common sense and conformist parrot-like scholar-officials without imagination.109 It seems that while there flourished a progressive culture of intelligent political debate in the upper echelons of government in the Song, the “parrot” officials outnumbered the competent ones. Bol notes that there was an interesting self-awareness in the court with respect to “parrots” as by 1050, a memorization degree had become to be regarded as second-rate, something requiring more effort than intelligence to pass.110

Wang Anshi (1021-86), a Song Dynasty statesman and jinshi, sought to address this issue of relevancy by prioritizing administrative efficiency and economic strength, formulating a vision of a political, social and economic program manifested in the “New Laws” in 1069 based on Confucian principles. The New Laws mostly had economic importance as Wang found that the fiscal interests of the state were contingent on the economic welfare of the people.111 De Bary and Bloom argue that while the New Laws bore strong resemblance to Legalist inspired institutions, they

109 Ho, The Ladder of Success in Imperial China, 259.
110 Bol, Neo-Confucianism in History, 48.
111 De Bary and Bloom, Sources of Chinese Tradition, 609.
could also have been promoted under the banner of Confucian benevolent paternalism that justified a “vigorous exercise of state power to promote the general welfare.” 112 Wang asserted the need to “secure capable men” who were both virtuous and effective administrators, and criticized the school and examination system for extolling skills such as music and poetry composition that have no place in government. 113 In addition, he also argued that the old political philosophies were simply untenable in his age that was “far removed from that of the ancient kings,” with stifling regulations that often tied the hands of the well intentioned scholar from making more effective dynamic reforms. 114

On the other side of the spectrum, officials like Ouyang Xiu (1007-72) and Su Shi (1036-1101) felt all of China’s problems were a result of the Buddhist dilution of Confucian philosophy. Criticizing Wang for departing too far from tradition, they pursued a more fundamentalist route of reform that aimed to make basic institutions conform to the virtue politics of the Sage Kings. 115 Ouyang Xiu called for emphasis to be placed on “rites and rightness” in the education of a scholar in order to stand up against Buddhist doctrine, harking back to the Confucian ideal of cultivating virtue via the means of wen instead of poetry composition. 116 Su Shi, in the spirit of Mencius 4A5.1, argued that a ruler only needs to rely on the human heart, which is the root of the state, and that the first concern of the ancient king was to show compassion to the people. 117 In Ouyang and many other thinkers, there was a desire to

112 Ibid., 611.
113 Ibid., 614; 615.
114 Ibid., 613; 615.
115 Ibid., 590.
116 Ibid., 595.
117 Ibid., 621; 623.
reach back in time to the *gu wen* (古文), which were the classical texts from the idealized Xia, Shang, and Zhou period of governance, in order to revitalize the values of the Sage Kings. For Ouyang, the ancient Sage King government was to be a model for the present ruler – not in its specific institutions, but in the understanding of priorities and purposes. For these thinkers, the focus of the meritocratic system should thus primarily continue to focus on cultivating virtuous scholar-officials as opposed to emphasizing practical administrative utility and material results.

Emerging victorious out of this debate, albeit much later in the Yuan Dynasty, were the ideas of Zhu Xi (1130-1200), a Confucian scholar who was an important exponent of Neo-Confucianism or *dao xue* (道学). Zhu Xi’s work would define the standard interpretation of the Confucian canon at a time when the Chinese literati felt that Chinese traditional virtue was in jeopardy under the Mongol rulers of the Yuan. They found an appealing synthesis of the disparate views of the Song in Zhu Xi’s work and were able to revive the examination system based on *dao xue* in 1315. Zhu Xi’s main philosophy was that of *ge wu* (格物) or the “investigation of things,” which is the study of principles and self-cultivation that bring one’s conduct into conformity with the principle that should govern it. The Canonization of the Four Books as the basic texts of the imperial examinations shaped the official orthodoxy from the fourteenth century to the turn of the twentieth century.

Zhu was primarily concerned with the problem of measuring virtue and for the most part, he had little faith in the examination system because it failed to turn

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119 De Bary and Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 698.
120 Ibid., 699.
students toward moral cultivation, but instead made the selfish desire to succeed the
goal of learning. He distinguishes between studying for the examination and “true
learning” that entails the strengthening of one’s moral principle. For this reason,
Zhu attacked the moral irrelevance of belles lettres as being “empty words that were
useless to educate people and insufficient to select literati (for office).” His
proposal entailed a core in humanities and included practical technical specialization.
The impact he left on the imperial court was one where his language became standard
rhetoric even if official reality paled in comparison to its ideals. During the Qing, a
system of recommendation existed in addition to the imperial examination route. This
was something Zhu would have endorsed as a response to the shortcomings of the
civil service examination system’s less than stellar ability to clearly identify virtuous
and competent men, and to also promote those who may have inadvertently fell
through the cracks of the system. To prevent abuse of the system, recommendations
were often accompanied by an explicit statement concerning whether the candidate
had influential relatives, in addition to the recommender being held accountable to the
actions of the candidate.

121 Peter K. Bol, “Government Society and State: On the Political Visions of Ssu-ma Kuang and Wang
An-shih,” in Ordering the world, Robert P. Hymes and Conrad Schirokauer, eds., (University of
122 Zhu Xi, Learning to Be A Sage: Selections from the Conversations of Master Chu, trans. Daniel K.
123 Elman, A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China, 29.
124 De Bary and Bloom, Sources of Chinese Tradition, 737.
2.4.2 EIGHT LEGGED RIGIDITY AND DYNASTIC DECLINE

The examination system would ultimately take its form in the eight-legged essay in 1487. As an examination form, it symbolized a formalism that constrained rather than enhanced the identification of talent in terms of virtue, effective administrative utility and stylistic form, while narrowing the minds of those whose lives were consumed memorizing its form and content. At the state level, the eight-legged essay represented a growing irrelevancy that negatively affected the collective mind of the bureaucracy as a whole by creating more “parrot” officials.

The origins of the eight-legged essay date back to the policy questions of the Han, the parallel prose of the Tang, and the gu wen prose of the Northern Song that was unified and structured by the scholar-official, Wang Ao’s examination answer in 1475.126 Elman characterizes the eight-legged essay as “an exaggerated structural commitment to formal parallelism and thinking by analogy,” which yielded a precise literary measure of a candidate’s linguistic talent while “cognitively locking generations of scholars into its structure.”127 In terms of identifying talent, Chen Li, a Cantonese literatus in the 19th century criticized the eight-legged essay as a formalistic exercise that imprisoned the minds and hearts of the candidates while Xue Fu Cheng, advisor to the chief ministers in the late Qing, argued that candidates “study things they will never use and later use what they have never studied.”128

The eight-legged essay persisted in the imperial examinations as it was considered a legitimate and convenient measure of knowledge of the Confucian canon. One important factor influencing the adoption of the eight-legged essay was

126 Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 381; 382.
127 Ibid., 391; 394.
128 Ibid., 582.
the increasing population in China – between 1700 and 1771, the population in China grew from 150 million to 270 million. Comparing the Qing dynasty ratio of graduates to candidates in the Metropolitan Exams in 1691 and 1850, the number of candidates jumped from 2,500 to 6,000, while the number of graduates increased only from 156 to 209 respectively. Considering that the Metropolitan Examination was preceded by the Provincial Examination and other minor exams, the total number of candidates was in reality a lot larger, overwhelming the available examination facilities and administration.

As a result, having an objective and precise structural measure in the eight-legged essay was perceived as a legitimate and convenient evaluative tool. Feng Gui Fen, a Qin Hanlin academic, criticized the eight-legged essay as becoming so much a part of literati life that it was too easy for candidates to prepare and too hard for examiners to discern superior essays. Examiners would consider the form over the content of the essays as they read and evaluated thousands of scripts, failing a candidate if there was any discrepancy in word count, misplaced characters or structural inconsistency. By the Ming-Qing period, the examination had taken center-stage over the actual learning and self-cultivation that Zhu Xi had envisioned, becoming a shell of its original Confucian purpose. Yet for everything that was wrong with it, the imperial examination system rooted society in an established and legitimate institution that had become the heart of the empire by producing its leaders.

129 William T. Rowe, Saving the World: Chen Hongmou and Elite Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century China (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 156.
130 Elman, A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China, 680.
131 Ibid., 579.
132 Ibid., 394; 395.
The decanonization and eventual demise of the imperial examination system in 1905 presents a picture of an institution so embedded in Chinese society that its disappearance contributed significantly to the collapse of the Qing dynasty. The examination system created equilibrium and a value system that catered, for the most part, to different groups in society. For the numerous young men of sufficient wealth, it was an avenue for privilege and success, for the literati, it was the manifestation of Confucian ideals, and for the imperial bureaucracy, it was both a tool of legitimation and authority. As Elman argues, the examination regime was a viable educational and cultural institution through which its continuities and changes, served the political, social and intellectual needs of those in the state and society. If we evaluate Confucian education solely in light of modern goals of academic specialization and economic productivity, then the social and political dynamics of this cultural and institutional enterprise would be misrepresented.133 Without any other institution in place to replace the imperial examination system, the Qing court lost the loyalty of tens of thousands of examination candidates and literati who suddenly found that the value system through which they derived a great deal of their self-worth was suddenly gone. In the face of the destabilizing effect of the West, which was as if the “Buddhist conquest and the Mongol invasion had been combined and compressed into one generation,” the imperial government thus had nothing concrete to fall back on.134

133 Elman, A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China, 618; Benjamin A. Elman, “Imperial Politics and Confucian Societies in Late Imperial China: The Hanlin and Donglin Academies,” Modern China 15, no. 4 (10, 1989): 381.
2.7 DULLING THE SHARPER EDGES OF MERITOCRACY

Left to its own devices, the meritocratic nature of the civil service examination would, over an extended period of time, serve as a catalyst for social instability. As an elitist tool of power retention that could be passed on to the offspring of the elite, albeit not as easily as through the aristocratic inheritance of office, polarization between rich and poor would become aggravated. The single path to success and upward mobility through the civil examination would leave many in the populace marginalized and disgruntled. Coincidentally, Hong Xiu Quan had failed the imperial examination four times before going on to become the leader of the Taiping rebellion during the last days of the Qing.135 If we were to assess the system in the light of modern liberal notions of egalitarianism, the imperial civil examination system was unfair and highly likely to lead to social instability. Nevertheless, for the populace of imperial China, this “unfairness” was simply part of the societal narrative and did not really seem to them a social injustice.

The manifestation of the complexity and balanced nature of Confucianism mitigated these problems as the civil service examination system existed in tandem with numerous cultural and institutional elements, which dulled the sharper edges of meritocracy and created a balanced harmony. Firstly, as discussed earlier, the widespread Confucian doctrine ensured that the prevailing notion of a hierarchical society was justified, both ideologically and practically, in the eyes of all. The notion of fairness took on a whole different meaning from contemporary interpretations of it, as presented at the end of the previous chapter. Secondly, scholars who did become

ministers were often genuinely concerned about the welfare of the populace and worked in the favor of society as seen in the numerous relief-type policies that were vigorously implemented to ensure social peace and stability. Thirdly, the emperor and ministers were confined by rites and regulations and could not act arbitrarily on their own without “public” consultation in the court. Fourthly, parallel value systems existed such that the main Classics-based examination system was not the sole path to success and self-affirmation in imperial society.

2.7.1 IDEOLOGY

The justified inequality in the meritocratic system hinged on the Confucian ideology of stability in hierarchy. As Xunzi asserts, society is built upon distinctions and harmony is achieved when each individual recognizes his rightful duties and responsibilities (yi 義) of his lot (fen 分) in life.136 This is reiterated by Sima Guang, a jinshi and high chancellor of the Song Dynasty, who argues that the survival of a state is a function of its success in getting men accustomed to hierarchical relations of authority. In the Comprehensive Mirror to Aid Government (資治通鉴) he asserts that a hierarchy of authority and clearly defined levels and areas of functional responsibility were basic to order and unity.137 John Rawls’ Difference Principle can helps us to understand the justification of inequality inherent in the imperial meritocracy where “unless there is a distribution that makes both persons better off (limiting ourselves to a two-person case for simplicity), an equal distribution is to be

136 Xunzi, Xunzi: A translation and study of the complete works, 147.
preferred.” For Rawls, inequality is only justified if a state of equality leaves the marginalized and society generally worse-off. The high social status of government ministers compensates them for their leadership and administration efforts, which contribute to sustaining stability and economic growth; more of this will be discussed in the subsequent chapter. From this reasoning we can understand how the Chinese meritocratic system was justified through the widespread social benefits generated by the bureaucracy.

In line with the obligations tied to the Mandate of Heaven, poverty was considered to be politically created rather than being eternal or inevitable. It was the responsibility of the emperor and bureaucracy to govern society based on the general theory of social good provided by the Classics to serve the interest of the society. Alexander Woodside points out that the close linkage of the Classics and politics stimulated in officials the desire to legislate welfare expansion within the state rather than to resort to revolution. Chen Hongmou (1696-1771), an official of the Qing, declared that state-directed provision of public welfare was for “making up the deficits of nature” and should constitute unequivocally “one of the first priorities of kingly rule.” Chen even goes as far as to articulate an early notion of private property rights (strikingly similar to those of John Locke), which he claims as Heaven’s will since those who have been deprived of private property are without a stake in the socio-moral order and are therefore self-evidently threatening, “willing to sink to any

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depravity.” It was thus the state’s responsibility to afford them property, livelihood and employment.  

The fact that China was governable at all is a testament to the effectiveness of the bureaucracy in ensuring stability in society. McKnight highlights, “there is great temptation to forget that the government was tiny—tiny, that is, when its manpower is measured against the numbers of the governed and the size of the territory controlled,” referring to the Southern Song where there were fifty to sixty million people under rule, governed by a civil service that numbered only twelve thousand. This ratio was arguably much larger in later imperial times with an expanded territory and population under a single dynasty. Despite the inevitable corruption, there was genuine concern for the masses in the courts. This can be seen in the numerous debates in court on how best to run the country together with the welfare and relief policies that were implemented.

2.7.2 WELFARE POLICIES

As discussed in Chapter 1, both the Analects and the Mencius promote the belief that the legitimacy of government is strongly tied to their ability to create wealth and provide welfare for the people. Confucius calls “one able to broadly extend his benevolence to the common people and bring succor to the multitudes” as being surely a “sage” while Mencius states that a ruler must win the hearts of the

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140 Rowe, Saving the World, 371; 190.
people to have their trust.\textsuperscript{142} Food shortage was a persistent problem in imperial 
China, and was aggravated in the Qing when population growth was unmatched by an 
increase in cultivated acreage. Unlike eighteenth century Europe where it was 
overwhelmingly the market itself that brought about the reduction in severity of 
famine, in Qing China, government regulators had a far larger role to play.\textsuperscript{143}
Provisioning was achieved via the ever-normal granary (常平倉) and the community 
granary system (社倉). The former stabilized the food market prices while the latter 
was more of a system of poor relief for the destitute that provided loans and food 
especially during times of natural catastrophe. Beginning in the Southern Song 
Dynasty, Zhu Xi looked to the community granary as a means of freeing the organic 
rural community from its dependence on a state that had proven unresponsive to the 
predicament of the poor. Looking to create localized self-sufficient systems that were 
entrusted to the management of “men of high moral character,” Zhu Xi sought to rely 
on the lineaments of social hierarchy and reciprocal responsibilities in order to 
ameliorate local tensions while creating an honest provision system based on social 
obligations.\textsuperscript{144} While overly optimistic and generally unsuccessful as an institution, 
Zhu Xi’s notion of the community granary represented a marrying of Confucian 
virtue and decentralist policy with the goal of providing relief and welfare to the 
masses. Richard von Glahn argues that Zhu Xi’s reordering of government priorities, 
narrowing the focus on political activism from the broad domain of national

\textsuperscript{142} Analects: 6.30, Mencius 4A9.1 
\textsuperscript{143} Rowe, Saving the World, 158. 
\textsuperscript{144} Richard von Glahn, “Community and Welfare: Zhu Xi's Community Granary in Theory and 
Practice,” in Ordering the World: Approaches to State and Society in Sung Dynasty China, ed. Robert 
administration to the confines of the locality, was a significant landmark in Chinese political and institutional history.\textsuperscript{145}

In the Qing, the provisioning of the population remained a crucial national goal with a great deal of administrative resources invested in the endeavor. William T. Rowe hails the Qing efforts as one of the most comprehensive provisioning programs in human history with an incredibly thorough information-gathering system that has been judged by specialists to have been as accurate and reliable as any ever previously used in the world. Beginning in the early eighteenth century, the Kangxi emperor required submission of monthly reports by local magistrates, collated and forwarded by the provincial governors, on weather, harvest conditions, and grain prices.\textsuperscript{146} Chen Hongmou personally toured the flood and drought stricken areas of his jurisdiction to gain personal assessments of the crisis. He implemented the policy of work relief\textsuperscript{147} and military rationing schemes as well as publicized examples of elite philanthropy that included the opening of gruel kitchens and organized charities.\textsuperscript{148} The latter policy of publicizing philanthropy, was based on the notion of “radiating virtue”, discussed in Chapter 1, since such practices would, as Chen envisioned, spread throughout the county and thereafter the country.

Throughout the Qing, there was great collaboration between state and local organizations in delivering welfare to the masses. Many early charitable organizations like benevolent societies, orphanages and poor houses in China arose from the

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 254.
\textsuperscript{146} Rowe, \textit{Saving the World}, 160.
\textsuperscript{147} This is a policy of turning a crisis into a positive advantage by drawing from state coffers to pay people to collect firewood during a famine. The people could then use these earnings to buy food. Once the famine was over, the firewood could then be sold back to the people.
\textsuperscript{148} Rowe, \textit{Saving the World}, 171; 181.
grassroots level first in the Wanli reign of the Ming (1573-1619) and became a common feature of the urban landscape during the early eighteenth century. Such organizations gradually became bureaucratized, signaling the growth of state interest in welfare policies. Rowe argues that no political regime in history was more expert than the Qing at co-opting local communities and leaders as well as delegating authority to non-state agents for the completion of state-assigned tasks.\textsuperscript{149} Chen’s policies and ideas strongly resonated with Confucian virtue and like Zhu Xi, he was deeply aware of the power of the village community or \textit{xiang} (乡) and the complex kinship ties within such communities. He understood it to be the locus of consensual opinion formation (offering a powerful standard of correctness not only for the actions of group members but also for government as well) and local interest identification.\textsuperscript{150} Chen experimented with the delivery of public welfare services, implementing what was gradually known as \textit{guandu minban} (官督民辦) or popular management with official oversight, an evolved practical version of Zhu Xi’s earlier decentralist vision.\textsuperscript{151} Welfare policies were a reality in late imperial China: formulated and administered by the talented men chosen via the meritocracy of the examination system, they justified inequality by making the fruits of Confucian virtue a practical reality for many.

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 363; 368.  
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 379; 381.  
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 373.
2.7.3 RITES AND RITUALS

Rituals in the imperial courts functioned to prevent the misuse of authority by both bureaucrats and the emperor and to ensure that social and political order was maintained. Custom was the safety net of the polity since it entailed a willingness to follow the established authority of Confucianism thought that embodied all that was needed to ensure social stability.\(^\text{152}\) When considering this in relation to the meritocratic system, rites legitimized inequality by keeping the bureaucracy in line with the imposition of rules that entailed a greater burden of responsibility while ensuring that policy decisions were debated in the courts and the talent of officials used to its fullest potential for the welfare of the masses. For Sima Guang, the rightful place of the emperor was to be confined in his own stratum of bureaucratic rites and ritual, subordinated to Confucian principles and bearing full responsibility for the survival of the state – not an entirely enviable position.\(^\text{153}\) Ron Guey Chu asserts that ritualization empowered the individual by serving to check imperial authority and foster a constitutional culture that limited or modified dynastic rule.\(^\text{154}\) The role of public opinion, while not formalized as political representation, was a critical forum for evaluating individual official performance, where a demonstrated insensitivity to the popular mood in deciding litigation would adversely affect an official’s career as a result of public complaint.\(^\text{155}\) Thus the retention of legitimacy for officials and rulers

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\(^{153}\) Ibid., 158.


\(^{155}\) Rowe, Saving the World, 375.
was very much dependent on whether one was doing one’s job well; this often entailed keeping within the confines of ritual.

An illustration of this idea can be seen in the political reception of Emperor Ming Taizu’s actions in two political incidences. In 1369, Taizu prohibited the sacrifice to Confucius outside the capital, arbitrarily limiting the ritual to a small group of people. This was not received well by scholars and Taizu was forced to revoke his edict and embrace the principle of universal sacrifice, signaling to the public an acknowledgement that Confucian principles claimed a higher authority than the emperor and thus regulated his actions.¹⁵⁶ In 1372, Taizu removed Mencius’ spirit tablet from the Confucian temple without consulting the court, resulting in political uproar and a hasty restoration of the status quo.¹⁵⁷ In both instances, the emperor himself was slapped on the wrist by ritual and the scholar elites for failing to abide by ritual, a testament to a respected order in place, which the emperor could not violate arbitrarily.

That Confucian ritual legitimized the emperor’s authority to rule can be traced back to the Imperial Confucianism of Dong Zhongshu in the Han dynasty. The emperor had to play by the rules that the court was committed to, in accordance to the Mandate of Heaven obligations contract he had with his officials and with the masses at large. Court officials and, by extension, the Confucian scholarly community were not silent or passive partners in the ritual process. They had a stake in maintaining Confucian ritual and virtue since this was where they derived their personal worth as

¹⁵⁶ Chu, “Rites and Rights in Ming China,” 170; 172.
¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 173.
torchbearers of Confucian tradition. The examination system itself provided the government with the institutional means to ensure that the social elite had a vested interest in the survival of the state, which recognized them as scholars; rites simply reaffirmed this bond.

Rites also necessitated emperors to seek out and measure the thermostat of “public opinion” via court officials before making political decisions, therefore not only preventing the emperor from acting tyrannically but ideally enabling the emperor to make better informed decisions. As the Analects states, “The gentleman is harmonious but not uniform, the non-gentleman is uniform but not harmonious,” the concept of ‘和而不同’ that translates to ‘harmony despite difference’ is very relevant to debate in the courts. Stephen Angle argues that Confucian harmony not only allows for creativity, differences of opinion and criticisms but actually demands such expression, such that ministers must not be “yes-men” for the rulers they serve. This is seen in the Classics Mat during the neoclassical revival of the Song: “The Learning of the Emperors” took place where rulers were educated by scholars of their responsibilities based on the examples of sage kings and worthy ministers of high antiquity. The ritual of seeking “public opinion” as well as the Classics Mat offered a channel for officials to freely express their views, debate, and criticize existing policies for the betterment of the empire.

158 Ibid., 175.
160 Analects: 13.23
2.7.4 PARALLEL SYSTEMS

Parallel value systems that were set up helped ease the societal tensions that a single value system grounded in the “standard” imperial examination would have created had it existed alone. Considering Jean Jacque Rousseau’s notion of *amour propre* in society, which “inclines every individual to set greater store by himself than by anyone else,” parallel value systems open more paths for people to achieve goals of “success” through various means, allowing different outlets to express their “vanity.”163 These systems in imperial China were not created with the intention of serving this function but did have an ameliorating effect on the “rat race” of the period by granting a sense of self-affirmation to those who could not succeed in the civil service examination system. This became even more pertinent as more and more people qualified for the imperial examination without a similar increase of official positions.

Most prominent of these parallel systems was the military route of progression. The military was kept distinctly separate from the civil service and had its own examinations. These examinations mirrored the civil service examinations in terms of different stages of progression. However, the major difference was that the military exams tested martial skills that included components such as archery, bow bending, and halberd brandishing.164 Scholarship was also tested, but this involved study of the military classics.

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164 Miyazaki, *China's Examination Hell*, 102-103.
The study of mathematical science came into prominence during the Ming and served as an alternative measure of success. While Catherine Jami argues that it never really quite served as an alternative to classical learning, she also points out that mathematical science was considered an important capability for the imperial bureaucracy for astronomical purposes and also the management of state affairs.\(^\text{165}\) As the preface to Mei Wenting’s (1633-1721) work on linear algebra tells us, “without mathematics, it is impossible to understand the measurement of Heaven and the survey of Earth; it is impossible to regulate taxes and to manage finances; it is impossible to raise armies and dispose troops; it is impossible to administer civil engineering.”\(^\text{166}\) A 1668 imperial edict emphasized the importance of celestial phenomena and called for governors in the metropolitan areas to send all who were well versed in astronomy to the capital to be examined.\(^\text{167}\) While the study of mathematical sciences never gained the same prestige as the “standard” classical education, the very fact that it was never a part of the main examination system and therefore not a skill that all *jinshi* were well-versed in gave official mathematicians a specialized and important role in the bureaucracy; such a status grew in importance during the Qing, especially with the growing influence of Western science.

Religion also functioned as a parallel value system by allowing people to find alternative paths to self-affirmation. In addition to Imperial Confucianism as the state cult with the Emperor as a ‘cosmic man,’ other religions like Buddhism and Daoism significantly shaped the way people viewed merits and demerits. Buddhism, a foreign


\(^\text{166}\) Ibid., 226.

\(^\text{167}\) Ibid., 237.
religion adapted to the Chinese context, appealed to people because it “addressed questions of suffering and death with a directness unmatched in native Chinese traditions,” offering a “fully developed vision of the afterlife and the prospect of salvation.”\textsuperscript{168} This radically changed the way people viewed life and society as it was the accumulation of karma that determined one’s next reincarnation. Daoism developed out of folk religion (worship of local gods and mediumistic techniques) and elite traditions of pursuing longevity and immortality.\textsuperscript{169} The effects of both religions can best be seen for our purposes in the \textit{Ledgers of Merit and Demerit} beginning in the twelfth century. These were texts expressing certain basic beliefs about moral action and consequences grounded in the faith of a higher justice that distributed supernatural rewards and retributions.\textsuperscript{170} These texts were a consolidation of ideas from traditional Daoist and Buddhist scriptures integrated with prevalent Confucian thinking in what must have been an early form of the self-help book that assigned ‘points’ to moral and immoral actions that could be tabulated and used to determine one’s fortune.\textsuperscript{171} More than anything, they validated a person’s moral worth outside the official meritocratic system.

\section*{2.8 SUMMARY OF THE IMPERIAL MODEL}

The task of comprehensively identifying the features that allowed the imperial system to function sustainably for as long as it did is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, this chapter has highlighted five key areas that have dulled the sharper

\textsuperscript{168} Ebrey, \textit{The Cambridge Illustrated History of China}, 97.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 4.
edges of meritocracy, allowing a good degree of stability in society despite the inefficiencies and inequalities generated by the civil service examination. A summary of each key area is given below:

2.8.1 PREVAILING CONFUCIAN IDEOLOGY

The creation of Imperial Confucianism as a dynastic system during the Han, based on the amalgam of prevailing value systems and beliefs, formed an adequate homogeneity of thought that made meritocracy a legitimate and efficient organization of society. This by no means dismisses the diversity of religion and ethnicity that existed in China but points to the influence and reach of Imperial Confucianism that permeated every aspect of society, defining the standard of what the social good meant, as well as justifying the institutionalized hierarchy. The social good entailed the prioritization of social harmony and stability over individualism with a moral obligation of the government to maintain the social welfare of the populace and lessen the material gap. In the civil service, a noble and prestigious ideal for people to strive towards was created since the highest human good in the Confucian sense was considered to lie in public service.\footnote{Daniel A. Bell, \textit{Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 153.} By structuring the study of Confucian works at the core of the civil service examination, the system facilitated the societal internalization of Confucian values as the exam itself was a cultural institution whose arms reached even into the remotest village in the country.
2.8.2 FAIRNESS IN ASSESSING AND RECRUITING

The civil service examination system and the meritocracy were seen by society, for the most part, to be fair. It is helpful here to emphasize that fairness did not mean equality and social justice was never really a societal goal in traditional China. Fairness referred to the righteousness (义) and impartiality (公) of the system in its functional aspect, where the civil service examination system was considered a publicly legitimate path to prestige and public officials deserved to be in their position with the expectation that they were to rule justly. This especially grew out of the highly transparent and rigorous processes of the examination system, as laid out above, which served both to legitimize the bureaucracy as well as to keep it in check. As Franz Michael argues, “the commoners looked to the gentry for leadership…they respected them as men of learning, as their superiors.”173 The fact that examination officials were also highly sensitive to public opinion inadvertently empowered the commoner with an accountability function as any discrepancy in the legitimacy of the examination could potentially lead to riots and public outrage, something officials would have rather avoided. Equality in the Confucian sense is linked to the notion of Confucian justice, where equal worth and dignity was accorded to every person as having an important functional role in society. Regardless of whether one was a farmer or a ruler, everyone had their place and purpose to ensure social harmony.

2.8.3 FUNCTIONAL PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

There was a genuine interest within the bureaucracy to achieve Confucian objectives in society. Despite the corruption inherent in the bureaucracy, the system produced and encouraged its fair share of effective officials such as Chen Hongmou, who were virtuous men with real concern for the populace. They implemented effective welfare policies to alleviate disaster-stricken areas including the use of community granaries that served as tools with which to tide a village through periods of drought. In addition, the development of official institutions from grassroots welfare organizations, like orphanages and poor houses, exemplified the government’s use of existing community-based familial networks to create effective systems of delivering social services. Care for the populace was something that was expected of the government and a key component for the emperor to maintain the legitimacy of his Mandate of Heaven. The bureaucracy’s ability to deliver on these obligations was sign that the meritocracy was functioning as it should. The fact that a bureaucracy of roughly twelve thousand was able to maintain control and administer a population of fifty to sixty million in the Song, a ratio that continued to grow since the number of civil servants did not fluctuate much while the population increased dramatically, is testament to the notion that the effectiveness of the bureaucracy and meritocracy seemed to outweigh its ineffectiveness.

2.8.4 RITES AND RITUALS AS CHECKS ON POWER

Rites and ritual provided accountability. Confucian rites, on an individual level, were meant to discipline one’s less-than-righteous nature and cultivate virtue. These were in turn reflected in the political arena where court ritual often prevented
the emperor from arbitrary despotism since the emperor really had little control over the Chinese ideological and social system.\textsuperscript{174} The development of an early form of constitutional culture constrained dynastic rule ensured that room was made for debate in the court, where ministers reported on the state of the “thermostat” of society, and voiced concerns of the populace to the higher state-levels. Thus on one level, these rites had a very practical function of keeping the bureaucracy within reasonable bounds. On another level, it showed the populace that even the bureaucracy was subservient to the larger ideal of Confucian tradition and ritual, affirming its supremacy and correctness in society.

\textbf{2.8.5 PARALLEL VALUE SYSTEMS}

Parallel value systems diverted some of the steam from the pressure cooker of the main imperial examination meritocracy to alternative social spheres in which people could find self-affirmation or gain social status. These included the military path as well as scientific fields of study, which allowed individuals who were less inclined towards the Classical education a chance to climb the social ladder via the bureaucracy. In addition, the role of religion and belief in supernatural justice motivated people to act morally as well to affirm their efforts in life. In all cases, these value systems served to validate peoples’ self-worth and place in society.

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid.
3. THE MERIT IN MERITOCRACY TODAY

Meritocracy is a highly individualistic and competitive organization of society, in some ways more in line with capitalism than it is with creating a society of harmonious relationships. As it was back in imperial China, the truly Confucian society remains an elusive ideal. Even Singapore’s founding father, Lee Kuan Yew, himself a staunch proponent of Confucian principles in governance, recently commented, “I always thought that humanity was animal-like and that Confucian theory was man can be improved…I’m not sure you can actually change the character of a man, but you can discipline him.”

Meritocracy and the associated Confucian elitism has been criticized as an illegitimate political system, but given that all East Asian societies developed out of some form of meritocracy and continue to thrive today should give us pause for closer

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evaluation. Tu Wei-ming argues that Confucianism is an essential component of “the lived experience of the populace of the East Asian countries,” shaping the region’s mind and affecting the development “not only of individual personalities but also socio-political organizations.” However, the Imperial Model of meritocracy faces a number of complex challenges with the advent of new liberal ideas and rapid social changes. As Lee has discovered, some of the features of modernization and development are beyond the complete control of the “Sage King.” Multiculturalism, individualism, liberal democracy, and increasing income gaps pose a challenge to modern East Asian societies whose strengths were once based on a single traditional culturally homogenous ideology.

Ironically, while “meritocracy” has been touted by members of the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) as a central tenet of Singapore’s economic and social success, the word itself was first coined by Michael Young, a British politician and sociologist, as a negative satire of British society. Young argued that meritocracy would eventually create an aristocracy of talent, a hereditary cognitive elite whose position is secured by the possession of superior mental ability that is passed on from generation to generation through both genetic and social inheritance. The dark satire encompasses a number of the key contemporary objections to meritocracy that will be individually analyzed and considered.

In this chapter, I take a closer look at the major criticisms of meritocracy, which I group into three major categories: 1) Defining merit and the social good; 2) Leveling the playing field; and 3) Polarizing society. For each category, I first articulate the fundamental concern, before drawing parallels from the Imperial Model, underscoring areas where similar problems were faced and emphasizing responses from the Imperial Model to the criticisms. Finally, I examine how the concept of meritocracy stands up to the contemporary challenges of capitalism, multiculturalism, globalization, and the influence of western liberal ideas, drawing examples mainly from Singapore where relevant. The findings and summary of this exercise are presented in the concluding chapter.

My goal is not to debate on whether liberal democracy is better than a limited one, as much of the literature has done, but to measure the viability of the meritocratic Imperial Model in contemporary times as a legitimate tool for political efficacy. In approaching this task, we have to be cautious about not idealizing the Confucian meritocracy of the Imperial Model as fully functioning and robust, when in reality historical contingencies made it exist more in name than in form. One could consider this project as “taking men as they are and laws as they might be,” to determine if there is any value to be reaped from the Imperial Model in the organization of politics and society.¹⁷⁹

3.1 DEFINING MERIT AND THE SOCIAL GOOD

Problem

Defining “merit” and the social good are important when considering meritocracy since it is via this definition that society is organized and policies are justified. At a conceptual level, a postmodern approach erodes the Confucian-based grounding of the imperial meritocracy since ideologies are no longer as easily accepted and internalized as they once were. Amartya Sen’s qualm with meritocracy stems from this idea and he argues that meritocracy’s main weakness is the lack of “clarity” in its definition since the concept of “merit” is deeply contingent on the definition of a good society, especially in terms of “(merit’s) exact force vis-à-vis other normative concerns in terms of which the success of society may be judged.”

Defining a ‘good society’ carries a lot of cultural baggage, as articulated by Michael Walzer who argues that “rights beyond life and liberty…do not follow from our common humanity” but rather from “shared conceptions of social goods (that) are local and particular.” With the ever strengthening force of globalization, resulting in the movements of peoples between societies, the adoption of new ideologies and the breakdown of old ones, the identification of the social good, and consequently merit, is not only more difficult but also one that is in a greater state of flux.

Sen highlights the fundamental tension between “the inclination to see merit in fixed and absolute terms and the ultimate instrumental character of merit.” If merit is based on the normative concerns of society, the definition of merit should...
change in tandem with societal needs and as the social good is redefined. Principles of merit in a totalitarian state are probably not the same as those in a democratic one. Nevertheless, in both cases there is the propensity of merit to be defined rigidly in the context of past priorities instead of seeing it in terms of contemporary issues—this for Sen is one of the major difficulties of meritocracy.183

Conceptually, the problem with meritocracy is that it is often backward looking, where one is rewarded for what one has done in the past, rather than for what one can and will do in the face of present day challenges. Sen highlights the tendency to similarly personify meritocracy by “giving the label of merit to people rather than actions” and consequently focusing on the “talent” rather than whether this “talent” achieves a positive outcome.184 Ideally a person is rewarded for the benefit that their actions reap in society rather than for their educational achievements, but often paper qualifications, educational background, and even ethnicity is used as a benchmark. These latter determinants at best tell an incomplete story of meritocracy, often masquerading as legitimate and rational explanations of the status quo.

Educational achievement is a good and necessary indicator as to how potentially capable one is, and it is also a convenient standard by which judging various candidates for a position in government may take place. However, it is an approximation and not always accurate. Educational achievement tells us that someone can take a test well but nothing about moral character, as Zhu Xi had pointed out earlier. What results is a distortion of values where candidates seek paper qualifications as a means to climb the social ladder rather than proving themselves

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183 Ibid.
184 Ibid., 12.
and their merit by their actions outside of academia. A society fixated with personal advancement is one that would readily sacrifice the cultivation of virtue on the altar of pragmatism since virtue would not necessarily translate into a high-paying job or a prosperous country.

**Imperial Model Response**

The conception of the social good itself is not a problem in the Imperial Model, as the chief goal of good government is to achieve a harmonious Confucian community of morally cultivated persons. This held center place in the minds and hearts of both rulers and commoners as codified in the Confucian classics and tradition.\(^{185}\) Serving one’s country was seen by the Confucian tradition as being the highest duty one could perform in the process of true learning. However, the path to achieving the “social good” always remained an issue of debate in the imperial court. The employment of virtuous and capable individuals into the civil service was the main route to achieving the social good, but even with the social good defined, merit remained a slippery concept as evidenced by the numerous permutations of the civil service examination. Virtue could never really be measured by a written test, especially with the popularization of the eight-legged-essay that further encouraged rote learning. Michael Walzer accurately describes the whole process where “what was tested was increasingly the ability to take a test,” a notion that resonates both in imperial and contemporary East Asian societies.\(^{186}\)


\(^{186}\) Walzer, *Spheres Of Justice*, 141.
The concern of irrelevancy in the meritocracy existed even before the eight-legged-essay and is best exemplified by Wang Anshi’s attempt to reform the imperial examination curriculum by testing for practical political acumen rather than a candidate’s ability to memorize the Confucian classics. Wang was against the selection of “parrot officials” who were rewarded for their performance in the imperial examination but who ended up as ineffectual civil servants unaccustomed to thinking adaptively in order to handle the actual challenges of the job that their narrow study for the examination had not prepared them for. In this sense, merit tended towards certain rigidity in the imperial model due to the nature of the selection mechanism that was designed such that a small number of examiners could assess a comparatively larger number of candidates. Nevertheless, the system still produced its fair share of virtuous officials like Chen Hongmou, Wang Anshi, and Zhu Xi, amongst others.

In addition, there was a self-awareness of the problem of relevancy, a recognition that the system was not perfect and that constant debate and changes were necessary. In response to Sen’s issue with meritocracy as being based on past priorities, the Imperial Model shows that the standard of merit was constantly shifting and that it had the corrective mechanisms of ritual. Furthermore it had a bureaucracy that was keenly concerned about the public mood, which kept officials in line and moved them towards working to the public good. Once candidates passed the exams, it could not be said that they deserved office but rather that they were entitled to be considered for a range of offices to be determined by the Board of Civil
Appointments that decided which merits were most necessary at a given time.\textsuperscript{187} Furthermore, the presence of policy questions on the examination was sign that an attempt was being made to select individuals who really had ideas that they could put into practice since these questions often dealt with present day problems. In the last permutation of the Metropolitan Civil Service Examination after the 1901 reform, we see a major change in the syllabus with the inclusion of “Policy questions on world politics” and “Discourses on the history of Chinese politics.”\textsuperscript{188} This was certainly a reflection of the times, with the recent conclusion of the Boxer Rebellion by the foreign powers, and the humiliation and weakening of the Qing dynasty. It was at best, a last ditch attempt to find individuals who could modernize the dynastic system in order to find a sustainable path through the siege of foreign powers. Unfortunately for the imperial meritocratic system, exogenous forces overwhelmed the gradual bureaucratic adaptation process.

\section*{Contemporary Application and Elaboration}

The social good is a lot more difficult to define in the contemporary context than it was in the Imperial Model. Modernization of the state poses two problems for the Imperial Model: firstly, the social institution of the state becomes differentiated from family, religion, and the economy; and secondly, the civic code is based on individualism, structural differentiation, and cultural fragmentation.\textsuperscript{189} There is thus a lack of cohesiveness in articulating a common social good especially when the

\textsuperscript{187} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{188} Elman, \textit{A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China}, 737.
strengths of traditional ideologies based on common cultural tradition or a state cult are no longer as pervasive or influential as they were in the Imperial Model. Nevertheless, there is still a need for a government to identify the collective social good that society agrees upon and desires to realize. Unlike the Imperial Model, there is a greater deal of flux in the contemporary definition of the social good is requiring a much more dynamic and constantly evolving definition. The meritocratic mechanism is really just a tool to achieve this moving objective. As Walzer puts, “once we understand what the helm is, and what it is for, we can move easily to a description of the ideal pilot” and thus define the merits we are looking for.190

Multiculturalism under a single flag is an issue that will increasingly become the norm as globalization continues to develop and the rates and ease of immigration increase. Finding a collective definition of the social good in a society of diverse cultures with the need to protect minority rights makes the process a lot more challenging. S. Gopinathan articulates Singapore’s unique case of a multicultural society in a geographically small location: “…the complexities of managing moral education in a plural context bedevil Singapore's educators. The very richness of the cultural tradition here imposes the task of selection, and subsequent justification, of the core values to be taught”191 Legislation of a common morality is inevitable in order to define the social good and to unite society via a common identity. The Imperial Model was able to contain and administer a multitude of cultures, and was adopted even by foreign rulers as it was one that could maintain both control and harmony through Imperial Confucianism. Such an accessible avenue of common

190 Walzer, Spheres Of Justice, 286.
ideology is no longer viable today. The Singapore government attempted to introduce a set of social goods through the formulation of the national Shared Values\textsuperscript{192} in 1991 that reveal a strong predilection towards Confucianism:

1. Nation before community and society above self
2. Family as the basic unit of society
3. Community support and respect for the individual
4. Consensus, not conflict
5. Racial and religious harmony

For all the merit that these values may have in promoting a harmonious society, the problem today is that Confucianism has become so much associated with the Chinese culture that it is easy to criticize such moral legislations as cultural imperialism, especially in a multicultural state. I will not argue that this is not the case, but that it has justified itself by the welfare provisions and general economic stability that it has created. However such a society should also be conscious of the danger of becoming insensitive to the needs of the minorities, whose rights should not be compromised based on their ethnicity, and whose marginalization is clearly not sustainable without affecting long-term stability. Unless a stronger national identity is forged that creates loyalties unique to the Singapore psyche, it is difficult to be culturally neutral in a multicultural state, and perhaps some form of cultural imperialism is unavoidable. This problem is aggravated with the influx of immigrants, encouraged by low birthrates and the need to maintain a certain productive population quota further muddling the melting pot.

Market-based structures have eroded moral value systems, heightening the sense of individualism and making virtue politics a misnomer in contemporary political parlance. The contemporary definition of merit emphasizes that only those of superior intelligence, rather than virtue, should be society’s leaders and it is these leaders who subsequently decide who constitutes the “best and the brightest.”

In Singapore, the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) had great influence over the civil service since the country’s independence in 1965, defining merit in Singapore politics and shaping the popular understanding of who deserves to win. While the focus on developing an educated workforce and civil service via meritocratic means has worked well towards economic growth and good governance, it has exposed society to the negative externalities of capitalism and economic pragmatism. Leaders of East Asian societies such as communist China and Singapore both initially supported strong secularism during the initial state-building stage of their societies, but now find the need to revive some form of moral system to replace the initial state-building fervor and to deal with what they perceive to be the societal effects of the lack of guiding moral principles. As Wang Gungwu queries about China, “Without revolutionary ideals which guided earlier generations of cadres, what can be done to save China from becoming an increasingly money-grubbing society?”

In the early 1980s, the Singapore government attempted to introduce religious and moral education studies into the public education system to develop the moral

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195 Crime, corruption, laziness, etc.
aspect of the social good. Students could choose one out of six subjects\textsuperscript{197} with Confucian ethics being one of them. This was the first time an attempt was made to teach Confucian ethics in English at the secondary school level and the government had envisioned that most Chinese students would opt for Confucian studies allowing for the soft indoctrination of positive and harmony-promoting Confucian values.\textsuperscript{198} The government even went as far as inviting Confucian scholars like Tu Wei-Ming to bolster the claims of legitimacy for Confucian education in Singapore. Naturally, Tu’s conclusion was that it was “not only desirable but necessary” for young people in Singapore to “be moral in a highly competitive and pluralistic society.”\textsuperscript{199} The attempt to implement a Confucian education failed primarily due to the fact that Buddhist studies appealed more to the Chinese students and parents as it was perceived as the easier subject to do well in, ironically consistent with the government’s ideology that grades earned in school determined one’s future success.\textsuperscript{200}

Unlike the imperial civil service examination that explicitly sought to test for virtue, such a moral motivation neither exists in today’s education systems nor is it necessary for one to be successful in contemporary society. Gaining a good academic degree to get a high paying job has become of greater importance than being righteous because even righteousness has become commoditized and measured in terms of moral education grades. While Civics and Moral Education continues to be taught in Singapore schools with the goal of “nurture(ing) a person of good character,

\textsuperscript{197} The other options were the five major national beliefs: Bible Knowledge, Islam, Hindu studies, Buddhism, Sikh studies.
\textsuperscript{198} Tamney and Chiang, Modernization, Globalization, and Confucianism in Chinese Societies, 65.
\textsuperscript{199} Tu, Confucian ethics today, 147.
\textsuperscript{200} Tamney and Chiang, Modernization, Globalization, and Confucianism in Chinese Societies, 79-80.
who is caring and acts responsibly towards self, family, community, nation and the
world,” it remains less of a priority than Math or English class. Additionally, there
is also a yearly obligation of every student to fulfill a certain number of mandatory
community service hours. These attempts at teaching society to be moral bring to
mind the Confucian mechanisms set up to encourage virtue, but at the end of the day
students are judged for the grades they achieve over any moral action they may
endeavor towards, and this is what matters.

In China, the traditional Confucian-based education of discipline and rote
learning is giving way to creativity and adaptability needed for the constantly
changing context of modernization. Jiang Xueqin observes that the traditional
Chinese education system of rote memorization was and still is effective at cultivating
elites to serve the Chinese bureaucracy, but economic development and globalization
have created the need for a more diverse talent pool. Jiang further argues that the
Communist Party now recognizes that it also must train knowledge workers and
creative management talent. In this sense the contemporary situation actually
departs from the rigid imperial model for good reason and in fact approximates closer
to the Confucian ideal of ‘harmony despite difference’. Angle, in his analysis of
the Zuo Commentary, elaborates that “differences in appropriate balance with one
another are essential to harmony” and that harmony is “creative” in that it leads to

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201 Ministry of Education, “Civics and Moral Education Syllabus (Secondary, 2007)” (Curriculum
Planning and Development Division, Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2006),
202 Jiang Xueqin, “Realities of Education Reform in China,” Far Eastern Economic Review,
203 Analects 13:23
productive outcomes and involves articulating novel solutions. While the Imperial Model itself adapted to the needs and intellectual developments of the times, it was not able to adapt fast enough to handle the destabilization of the West and modernization in general. Today redundancy occurs on a day-to-day basis as technology and global trends remain in a constant state of flux. Globalization has also made countries more vulnerable to external shocks than ever before, making systemic adaptation particularly pertinent and challenging.

3.2 LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD

Problem

Meritocracy does not function well alone because completely fair equality of opportunity is impossible and in some instances, undesirable. Even if one were to consider meritocracy from behind the Rawlsian veil of ignorance, that “excludes the knowledge of those contingencies which sets men at odds and allows them to be guided by their prejudices,” meritocracy would work only for the first generation before socioeconomic inequality eventually sets in and gives some of the next generation an unfair advantage over others. Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller Jr. argue for the cumulative advantage of wealth inheritance that carries with it a great deal of social perks including cultural capital, social capital, and other non-merit advantages like better health. Cultural capital refers to the knowledge of functioning within a social group one belongs to, social capital refers to the inherited “value” of network of connections to people with power and influence. Children from

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204 Angle, Sagehood, 63; 65.
privileged backgrounds also tend to have greater chances of health throughout life.206 Their ideas resonate with Malcolm Gladwell’s central thesis in *Outliers*, where success has everything to do with where and when one is born and who one knows, as much as how hardworking one is.207 As such, Young’s major concern in *The Rise of the Meritocracy* is that ranking society by intelligence would only serve to reinforce the class system in Britain, since the privileged already have the aforementioned “capitals,” while the poor would simply become more and more disenfranchised from any political or financial capital.

However, an alternative radical egalitarianism would entail children being taken away from their parents at birth and brought up by some other agency that ensures genuine equality of opportunity. Such a solution is untenable and undesirable, going against our natural sensibilities and against the Confucian emphasis on familial relations.208 McNamee and Miller do not condone such equality but rather highlight the need for humility amongst the privileged, and the maintenance of universal dignity by acknowledging that “inheritance, luck, and a variety of other circumstances beyond merit” determine a person’s social status instead of the “incomplete explanation for success and failure” that meritocracy tends towards. As they propose, “We may always have the rich and poor among us, but we need neither exalt the former nor condemn the latter.”209 The problem here is that by labeling a system a “meritocracy,” one is inadvertently affirming that the system is fair when it

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208 Conversation with Prof. Donald Moon, November 10, 2009.
is in fact not. As Jonathan Duffy of the BBC commented, “the hideous thing about meritocracy is it tells you that if you've given life your all and haven't got to the top you're thick or stupid. Previously, at least, you could always just blame the class system.”

The distinction between ‘careers open to talent’ and ‘equal opportunity’ is an important one to make when considering fairness. The former is more concerned about revealing the best person for the job for the sake of efficiency while the latter is interested in giving everyone an equal chance to earn a job and find his or her place in society. Ideally, a meritocratic system contains both elements in equilibrium. While some will ultimately do better than others in life, it is crucial that the system is as fair as possible in order to reduce discontent amongst the marginalized and prevent any destabilizing societal forces from below. A low self-esteem as a result of the meritocratic project, while being a very personal issue, can expand and be projected into a revolution, as evidenced by the role played by failed scholars during the Taiping Rebellion. Although inequalities are inevitable, any inequality has to fulfill the condition of the Rawlsian difference principle in order to be justified. As such there needs to be mechanisms external to the meritocratic system that soften its sharper edges. In general, a crucial Confucian goal of a state is to allow its citizens to live lives with dignity, even for those who do not succeed in the system.

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Imperial Model Response

The Imperial Model does not give a robust answer to the question of leveling the playing field. Nevertheless, it does present a good degree of fair competition in the examination system. It also justified inequality by the rigor and transparency of the examination itself and the various welfare policies instituted by those who made it through the meritocracy to become officials. One key philosophical aspect of the Imperial Model, which differs greatly from modern day liberal conceptions of the individual, is the explicit recognition that people are not born with the same ability. Xunzi argues that while every man has the capacity to know and the ability to put what he knows into practice, things are by Nature inherently equal, and that the junzi is simply better at “borrowing” the use of external things.\textsuperscript{213} Complete egalitarianism did not fit into the worldview or the philosophical perspective of Confucians in traditional China, much less so with the imperial bureaucracy. While Confucian philosophy did advocate for widespread education, and community schools existed, they were increasingly directed at civil service exam preparation and serving the upward mobility of the educated elite rather than serving the need of general education.\textsuperscript{214} The imperial government was more focused on acquiring rather than developing talent. However, the Imperial Model is perhaps the earliest attempt to develop human capital on a national level, albeit to the benefit of political administrative efficacy rather than for economic growth. Modern meritocratic societies have continued to place great emphasis on education for both the purposes of economic growth and political efficacy.

\textsuperscript{213} Xunzi, \textit{Xunzi: A translation and study of the complete works}, 144; 136.
While making it to the examination hall was no easy task with the prerequisite of wealth and time invested in studying, the civil service examination itself served a profound stabilizing social function. It provided a legitimate channel for people to express their *amour propre* tendencies in a constructive manner while being a symbol of fairness that was legitimate enough for society to put its faith in. Consequently, the public also vested great responsibility in the civil service to live up to the Confucian ideal of serving the people and maintaining societal harmony. In later imperial times, the number of examination candidates only grew year after year, suggesting that more and more people had access to education and the opportunity to compete in the examination system. In addition, the presence of parallel value systems also continued to enable those less inclined towards the Classics to excel in the military and scientific paths of progress.

**Contemporary Application and Elaboration**

Today, human capital has grown in prominence as traditional comparative advantage constantly changes with globalization and the diminishing reliance on natural resources as a source of sustainable economic growth. As much development theory like the Dutch Disease\(^\text{215}\) and Sen’s ideas in *Development as Freedom*\(^\text{216}\) has shown, what sustains a society and maintains economic and social welfare is not the absolute reliance on material assets but more importantly the intellectual and social

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\(^{215}\) Dutch Disease refers to the adverse effects on the manufacturing sector as a result of the increased exploitation of natural resources, discouraging technological innovation and development of human capital. As such economic growth is usually short-term in scope and unsustainable. W. M. Corden, “Booming Sector and Dutch Disease Economics: Survey and Consolidation,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 36, no. 3 (November 1984): 359-380.

\(^{216}\) Development through freedom which is seen in the form of individual capabilities to do things that a person has reason to value. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Reprint. (New York: Anchor Books, 2000).
development of the domestic human capital asset and its enlightened application.

McNamee and Miller define human capital as referring to the skills, knowledge, or experience workers possess that they can exchange for income in open markets. This acquired capacity is not the same as being inherently talented since opportunities to acquire skills and experience are independent of inherent capacity to do things.217 Focus should thus be on the conditions that allow for the universal acquisition of these skills. East Asian societies in general regard education as a high priority both at the policy level as well as at the basic cultural level. Between 1959 and 1994, education expenditure in Singapore has increased 54 times from S$63 million to S$3.4 billion.218

In the Confucian sense, education is a tool of self-cultivation to achieve virtuous behavior, something which perhaps modernity has lost sight of. Nevertheless, Mencius does point out that “It is only men of education, who, without a certain livelihood are able to maintain a fixed heart. As to the people, if they have not a certain livelihood, it follows that they will not have a fixed heart. And if they have not a fixed heart, there is nothing which they will not do, in the way of self-abandonment, of moral deflection, of depravity, and of wild license.”219 Practically, it makes sense to educate a populace, to empower people to find jobs and earn their own keep and in doing so, promote the notion of dignity and self-worth that contributes towards social stability. This is especially pressing in the modern context where cheaper immigrant labor can potentially displace the local labor force especially in low-skilled jobs.

217 McNamee and Miller Jr., The Meritocracy Myth, 39.
219 James Legge et al., The Chinese classics (Clarendon Press, 1895), 49.
The decentralization of educational incentives is a feature that persists both in the imperial model and in contemporary meritocratic societies. A common Chinese phrase used in formal personal well wishes, especially to students, is “学业进步” that translates to “May your studies improve.” One cannot easily find a parallel phrase in the West used in everyday language that conveys the same sentiment. While this comparison is a little rudimentary, it does illustrate the different perceptions of education between societies, where the acquisition of education is largely self-motivated in Confucian-based societies. In Singapore, there is a prevalent culture of seeking out-of-school tuition with private tutors to enhance a student’s academic edge or to help in deficit areas of their studies. In addition, many parents expect their children to learn a musical instrument or a skill external to the normal academic curriculum, willingly investing a lot of money towards the cultivation of their child’s talents. Martin Schoenhals’ observes that the “Chinese spend a great deal of time determining who is the best and who is not.” This kiasu (怕输) or ‘afraid to lose’ mentality partially explains the serious attitude taken towards education and status in Confucian societies. Consequently, the education process is in some sense less problematic for a meritocratic government since a competitive atmosphere is naturally fostered by the standards of the main promoted path to societal success, which the populace subscribes to.

Contemporary meritocratic societies depart from the Imperial Model in legislating mandatory universal public education, and providing aid for the acquisition of education. The goal is for widespread education, not one that is

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confined only to the elites or those who are able to afford it, and for this to happen there must be equality of opportunity. As John Roemer argues, there must be recognition that educational achievement is determined via a combination of circumstance and effort, and that equality of opportunity necessitates “compensating persons for the differences in their circumstances insofar as those differences affect educational achievement, but not compensating them for the consequences of the differential application of effort.”

Educational policies should thus allocate educational resources to ensure that how well a person does in the acquisition of an examination grade reflects only his effort, not his circumstances. Such a goal has its fair share of problems, as Roemer points out: “there is no way of determining what aspects of people’s environment are beyond their control and affect them in a way that might absolve them of personal accountability.” Modern solutions will at best be approximations to the ideal and will differ according to the societal priorities. Nonetheless, focus should be on the universal provision of education according to the principle of a level playing field and fairness with the goal of maintaining dignity and developing moral individuals.

A clear example of an explicit meritocracy can be seen in the substantial number of merit-based scholarships the Singapore government awards each year to students for the pursuit of higher education in local or overseas universities. All Singaporean students are eligible for government scholarships regardless of social class or ethnicity. In some instances, scholarships are even offered to foreign nationals who show exceptional talent. These scholarships are given to students not

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222 Ibid., 23.
223 Ibid., 21; 30.
only from Junior Colleges but also to those from technical institutes and polytechnics that are generally perceived as institutions ranking lower in the social strata. The better the grade a student attains, the higher the chances of getting a scholarship with a greater attached monetary value. At the peak of scholarship hierarchy is the President’s Scholarship that finds its imperial parallel in the Zhuangyuan (狀元) title. Scholarship holders are bonded to the Singapore government upon completion of their studies, which means that they are legally obligated to work in the public service for a certain number of years, depending on the type of scholarship awarded. This practice mirrors the Confucian goal of putting the best and the brightest at the fore of public administration, when they would otherwise move to the private sector. In addition, talented students who would otherwise be unable to afford to attend the Ivy Leagues and the Oxbridges of the world can do so by earning state sponsorship via their own academic merit. Through the scholarship system, the Singapore government has created a modern permutation of the imperial civil service examination system that achieves similar objectives while experiencing different problems.

The Singapore scholarship system, like the Imperial Model, has resulted in a highly educated and efficient civil service that is constantly bringing in a new batch of youthful leadership into government every year. However, a key difference lies in the selection process. While the Imperial Model relied solely on the examination to assess both the talent and virtue of a candidate, the scholarship model involves a more comprehensive and rigorous process. Rather than an actual civil service exam, the main standard of measure used in the scholarship model is the national Advanced

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224 However, the President’s Scholarship has only gone to graduates from Junior Colleges and not from other educational institutions.
Level General Certificate of Education (A-Levels)\textsuperscript{225} where candidates can choose to test for math, science or humanities subjects depending on their course of study. In addition to attaining near perfect scores in these examinations, candidates must show exemplary performance in co-curricular activities and are also subjected to a barrage of psychometric testing and interviews. This is evidenced by the President’s Scholarship that looks for individuals with achievements “beyond academic ability and excellence in co-curricular activities,” and who “display a strong ethos of public service” and “have shown a soundness of character and the potential to lead.”\textsuperscript{226} The scholarship model is certainly superior to the imperial system in identifying qualities “beyond academic ability.” While good academics and intelligence are a prerequisite for the civil service, good character is ascertained via interviews, recommendations, and what one has done outside of academia. The use of psychometric tests also allow the scholarship board to measure, in some approximation, a candidate’s personality traits, intellectual abilities, creativity, etc., all of which an academic examination is not really designed to test.

However, there are trade-offs in the scholarship system that loses important legitimacy elements of the imperial examination. There is a great lack of transparency in the scholarship selection process, which itself presents a complex model, where decisions are made behind closed doors out of public sight with only the final results emerging in the public press. Evaluations of candidates based on interviews are ultimately subjective, dissimilar to the clear objectivity and standardization of the

\textsuperscript{225} A remnant of the British colonial heritage, A-Levels are the equivalent of a college entrance exam. The A-Levels taken in Singapore are still graded in the UK for official reasons of legitimacy and standards.

imperial examination. Top candidates are not subjected to the same informal scrutiny of the public as in imperial times, their examination papers are not made publicly available and their family background is not public knowledge. Policy guidelines such as racial quotas mostly exist in the public as unofficial knowledge and is something not included in scholarship descriptions.

For those who do not quite fulfill the criteria to compete at the level of the potential scholarship holders, there are alternative routes they can take. In addition to sports and arts-focused educational institutions that are departures from the main educational system, educational streaming takes place in all Singaporean public secondary schools where students are grouped into classes according to their academic performance. The official rationale offered is that “by offering teaching and learning approaches based on different abilities and learning styles, it allows students to learn at an appropriate pace and progress as far as possible in their studies.” Seen from a Confucian perspective, this policy is in line with the notion of different gradations within society. Rather than ignoring these differences, a clear attempt is made to address the issue and to have it work towards the benefit of the individual and of society. The policy, meant to keep students with less academic abilities in school has worked successfully with a three percent attrition rate in schools, providing an adequate answer to the issue of universal education.

While one can argue that this system maintains the dignity of society at large by ensuring that no one falls by the wayside as a result of poor academic performance,

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228 Ibid.
there is a great degree of social stigma attached to being in the lower educational streams. This is the trade-off of exalting elite education and the exclusivity of government scholarships, such that being in a lower educational stream would mean that one has “failed” and would no longer be able to succeed in a system with very clearly defined internal boundaries. Similar to the imperial times, one’s social standard is still very much linked to one’s educational achievements. However, what is different now is that educational achievement has a larger goal of getting a well-paying job as opposed to achieving scholar status for the sake of its name as in imperial China.

3.3 POLARIZING SOCIETY

Problem

Meritocracy does not have a direct translation in Chinese but the closest approximation to it is ‘elite politics’ (精英政治). This translation provides insight into the way the meritocratic concept is perceived in East Asian societies, as being one in which society is literally led by the elites and where the effectiveness of the system is predicated on explicit distinctions within the societal structure. Paternalism features strongly in these societies where the majority is left under the care of a talented few. Donald VanDeVeer described paternalism as a concept in which “one person, A, interferes with another person, S, in order to promote S’s own good.”229 On the other hand, we see the majority at the mercy of power concentrated in few hands. The very efficiency of a meritocracy is based on an inequality of talent and

virtue and the Confucian ideal is to combine these two qualities for the benefit of society as a whole.

However, critics have condemned meritocracy and its associated elitism as entrenching those that are already privileged in their positions at the upper crust of society. As Harlan Beckley argues, meritocracy is really “a ruse to protect those favored by the current pattern of outcomes” by legitimizing a system that works to their advantage.\textsuperscript{230} There is thus a large amount of power invested in a small group of people, unchecked by democratic mechanisms, since the system does not really function as a popular sovereignty. Furthermore, social divisions also often tend to be drawn along lines of race, language or religion, aggravating an already economic divided situation and eroding the sense of trust within society. Such a system is self-serving and sustained at the expense of the marginalized minorities and the individuals who fall through the cracks of the system, failing to achieve any Confucian societal harmony.

Meritocracy of the Confucian tradition has potential utility in promoting economic growth and reducing poverty in certain societies. However the inevitable internal inequality that results, even if society as a whole is economically better off than before, is a cause for concern. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett put forth a convincing evidence-based argument that economic inequality within a society, as opposed to overall wealth or cultural differences, fosters societal breakdown.\textsuperscript{231} Meritocracy can do well in increasing the overall material standard of living for a

society but it does not help alleviate the status anxiety that is a byproduct of the resulting economic inequality – doing well in life is not enough, doing better than others is what satisfies.\textsuperscript{232} This innate desire for recognition reminds us of the beginnings of inequality in Rousseau’s parable of human nature where “public esteem acquired a price…the most skilful, or the most eloquent came to be the most highly regarded, and this was the first step at once toward inequality and vice: from these first preferences arose vanity and contempt on the one hand, shame and envy on the other.”\textsuperscript{233}

Greater income inequality results in reduced social mobility as the social structure of society grows rigid and material differences become overlaid with cultural markers of social difference, which become matters of snobbery and prejudice.\textsuperscript{234} The combination of capitalism and meritocracy encourages a strong sense of individualism and individual responsibility where one either “shapes up or ships out” and where if one fails in life it is entirely one’s fault, much like the imperial examination system. As Lee Kuan Yew succinctly puts, “look they have got to work harder or they’ll become stupid.”\textsuperscript{235} Wilkinson and Pickett assert that in order to gain further improvements in the real quality of life, there is a need to shift

\textsuperscript{232} This point is aptly illustrated by Joseph Epstein cited by Wilkinson and Picket: “Snobbery, says Epstein, is ‘sitting in your BMW 740i and feeling quietly, assuredly better than the poor vulgarian…who pulls up next to you at the stoplight in his garish Cadillac. it is the calm pleasure with which you greet the news that the son of the woman you have just been introduced to is majoring in photojournalism at Arizona State University while your own daughter is studying art history at Harvard…’ But snobbishness and taste turn out to be a zero-sum game. Epstein points out that another day, at another stoplight, a Bentley will pull up next to your pathetic BMW, and you may be introduced to a woman whose son is studying classics at Oxford. The ways in which class and taste and snobbery work to constrain people's opportunities and wellbeing, are in reality, painful and pervasive.” \textit{The Spirit Level}, 165.

\textsuperscript{233} Rousseau, \textit{Rousseau}, 166.

\textsuperscript{234} Wilkinson and Pickett, \textit{The Spirit Level}, 163.

\textsuperscript{235} Lee, “Transcript of Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew's Interview with Mark Jacobson (For National Geographic Magazine Jan 2010 Edition).”
attention from material standards and economic growth to ways of improving the psychological and social wellbeing of whole societies.\textsuperscript{236} Here, we are reminded of the Confucian emphasis on virtue and self-cultivation over practical talent and material wealth.

Young argues that the inequality in meritocracy will eventually regress to a hereditary form for efficiency’s sake, where as a rule, “a high-I.Q. man who mates with a low-I.Q. woman is simply wasting his genes.”\textsuperscript{237} Frighteningly enough, this eugenic notion is echoed in the Singaporean institutions set up by the government to increase birthrates and marriages and to ideally produce smart babies – the Social Development Unit promotes marriage among single graduates, and the Social Development Services promotes marriages among non-graduate singles.\textsuperscript{238} Tan describes elites as being an internally homogenous group, in the sense that they succeed via a common path à la a meritocratic system, they are often autonomous and not accountable to the people for their decisions, and thus able to perpetuate their position of privilege at the expense of the masses, undermining the notion of government by the people.\textsuperscript{239}

This corresponds with Sen’s criticism of the tendency to personify meritocracy along racial or ethnic lines especially in light of multiracial societies and increased immigration flows, where certain racial groups are stereotyped as being more hardworking or lazy.\textsuperscript{240} Christopher Tremewan condemns Singapore’s

\textsuperscript{236} Wilkinson and Pickett, \textit{The Spirit Level}, 4.
\textsuperscript{238} As of January 28, 2009, the two units were merged to reap economies of scale, enlarge the outreach, and provide more opportunities for singles to meet. http://www.lovebyte.org.sg/
\textsuperscript{239} Tan, “Beyond Elitism,” 543.
\textsuperscript{240} Sen, “Merit and Justice,” 12.
meritocracy as “legitimat(ing) Chinese domination and a racist state” since the majority of the government bureaucracy is Chinese and policies that exist based on racial lines in the name of stability marginalize minorities.\textsuperscript{241} McNamee and Miller and Michael D. Barr point out the logical weakness in the meritocratic justification of distribution in US and Singapore society respectively: if merit were the sole cause of achievement, one would wonder why the vast majority of leadership positions in key institutions are dominated by Caucasian males and the Chinese in each respective society.\textsuperscript{242} It is disturbing to consider the mentality of elitism that arises both independently and along racial lines, often accompanied by a false sense of moral superiority that is linked to social status and economic achievement.

As discussed previously, the link made between talent and virtue is a fallacious one according to Confucian philosophy. Xunzi points out that a scholar-official can be like “a wolf”—untrustworthy yet knowledgeable and capable at the same time .\textsuperscript{243} However, there is a natural tendency towards establishing this link both in the Imperial Model and in contemporary society, since measuring virtue alone was always a problematic affair. Left on its own, meritocracy can result in a potentially ruthless and uncaring society that would consequently neither encourage harmonious relationships nor stability. Robert Klitgaard articulates this problem where the elite class develops an exaggerated “in-group” sense of superiority, dismissing all those who do not belong to the group and developing a heroic sense of responsibility for the

\textsuperscript{242} McNamee and Miller Jr., \textit{The Meritocracy Myth}, 40; McNamee and Miller Jr., \textit{The Meritocracy Myth}.
\textsuperscript{243} Xunzi, \textit{Xunzi: A translation and study of the complete works}, 261.
well being of the “foolish” masses in a delusion of superiority.²⁴⁴ What results is a dysfunctional value system that brings out the more Legalist legacies of the Imperial Confucianism tradition that is brutally pragmatic and bereft of benevolence — a system where the elites would find it morally justifiable to treat the “foolish” masses as means to ends, rather than ends in themselves. Meritocracy allows elitism to transcend racism to become a dangerously rational discriminating feature in society.

One case reflecting this phenomenon is a 2006 elitism scandal in Singapore. In response to a blog post by a white-collar worker in his thirties that lamented the job insecurity and age discrimination in Singapore, a student from one of the top Junior Colleges²⁴⁵ in the country, made some disparaging remarks in her blog about his views that caused a public outcry against the increasing elitist tendencies of certain social groups. In Nietzschean fashion, the high school student vehemently asserted, “we are a tyranny of the capable and the clever, and the only other class is the complement…if people would prefer hiring other people over you, it's because they're better…derek will read this and brand me as an 18-year old elite, one of the sinners who will inherit the country and run his stock to the gutter. go ahead. the world is about winners and losers,” and then finishing off with a flourish of “please, get out of my elite uncaring face.”²⁴⁶ It also so happened that her father was a member of parliament. While one may easily dismiss this as the naïve ranting of an eighteen year old, or the ungrounded complaints of a thirty year old, it reveals the harsh truth about how a meritocracy functions, as a system that is often justifiably unforgiving to the

²⁴⁵ Incidentally, my own.
less capable that needs other institutions to save it from itself. It also draws attention to the problem of a developing gulf between the privileged and less privileged, between those with university degrees and those without. Intellectual snobbery is certainly no sign of virtue, but a mistaken link drawn between academic excellence and moral superiority.

Elitism is a byproduct of the nature of meritocracy, but as Tan points out, “If power is inevitably concentrated in the hands of a select few, then any society is faced with a choice not between the presence and absence of elites, but only of different elites, whether and how their role might be transformed or enhanced to benefit rather than harm society.” In the case of an elite-type that is self-centered and seeking self-perpetuation, the civil service would be rife with nepotism and corruption, resulting in an unsustainable state of affairs where society is only stable through the oppression of the masses and the protection of elite status. The problem with despotic rulers is not their lack of ability but their lack of morality that often results in the use of violent coercion in a society.\textsuperscript{247} The degree of Tan’s view of an inevitable despot or despotic group is questionable since constitutions, laws, and public accountability limit the actions of the elite. Even Confucius offers a solution to the problem, emphasizing a moral civil service over a talented one, advocating the structuring of societal rituals and norms such that the talented can be channeled towards actions that bear semblance to genuine virtuous rule. The function of ritual in the modern polity will be further discussed below.

\hspace{1em}\textsuperscript{247} Tan, “Beyond Elitism,” 545; 546.
Imperial Model response

In the Imperial Model, while scholar families existed and a clear elite class was evident, constituted of those who passed the civil service examinations and became officials, the civil service elite was meant to be guided by Confucian virtue instead of materially self-enriching motivations. Confucian communalism and the notion that everyone should be valued as moral agents rather than economic units ideally served as a counterweight to the anti-social tendency of meritocracy. Additionally, there were mechanisms put in place to prevent corruption and nepotism from taking place. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the high turnover rate as a result of the examination system prevented cliques from forming while the recommendation system contained numerous measures to prevent nepotism and corruption through a rigorous investigation of the relationship between recommender and candidate. Nevertheless, ethnic representation and ethnic domination in the bureaucracy was reflected by a quota system in the number of jinshi degrees awarded. Looking at the 1333 jinshi roll, we find that quotas for the one hundred jinshi were divided equally among four ethnic groups: 1) Mongols, 2) se-mu, 3) Han Chinese in north China, and 4) southerners. Mongols and se-mu answered different examination questions from the Han and had fewer examination sessions, giving them further advantage in the already limited competition.248 Since only a small percentage of the ranked bureaucracy was chosen from jinshi degree holders, recommendations and hereditary privilege allowed both the Mongols and the Manchu to retain dominant control of the bureaucracy.249

248 Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China*, 34-35.
249 Ibid., 35.
In the imperial court, the emperor was restricted from acting despotically by ritual and the scholar official’s role in court was to keep the court accountable while challenging status quo policies for effective political administration. Inequality was also justified by the welfare policies implemented by the jinshi, some of whom as history has shown, were genuinely concerned about the public welfare and implemented effective disaster relief and famine aversion policies. The Mandate of Heaven framework ensured that the interest of the populace was looked out for as it was the duty of the officials to report to the emperor the state of affairs in society, and it was the ultimate responsibility of the emperor to ensure that there was harmony under heaven. Poverty was a sign of bad government and provision for the populace served to legitimize the bureaucracy and the imperial meritocracy, quelling any general unrest or discontent against the ruler. The imperial government often approached welfare provisions from a decentralized position, developing existing grassroots welfare organizations into localized state-supported institutions that could serve the community effectively.

**Contemporary Application and Elaboration**

It is idealistic to think of virtue as something that can be determined and judged via the civil service examination system and that government officials are primarily driven by moral incentives. Virtue can at best be encouraged by a system but it cannot be quantified and tested for. Modern techniques of evaluation via psychometric tests and interviews are simply better approximations at assessing personality but not morality. Tan argues that one should not adopt such “unviable
idealism” when considering a contemporary society with a Confucian framework, since as long as materialistic incentives are needed to attract talent, it can no longer be categorized as the Confucian “rule of virtue.” Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, a Confucian approach would structure a meritocracy in such a way where the values that define success are tied not only to material growth but also to social justice objectives and the promotion of virtuous behavior. In this sense, it is useful to consider the Mandate of Heaven framework as a value system where the general populace is a thermostat that determines whether or not the ruler and his officials are virtuous.

The key problem that most critics have with meritocracy and the associated elitism is that it reinforces inequality, resulting in a whole host of problems. Looking back to the Analects, Tan highlights that Confucius saw “uneven distribution” (不均) as being a bigger problem than poverty, which finds parallels in Wilkinson and Pickett’s central thesis, and that it was a jun zi’s duty to help the distressed and not to promote the wealthy. This resonates with Sen’s argument that merit should be defined in the context of an aversion to economic inequality as an objective function of society. However, Tan also postulates that Confucius does not advocate complete equality, since harmony is to be achieved through a certain hierarchical ordering, but rather disapproves of unjustified inequalities. This was something that participants of the Imperial Model were keenly aware of and accepted as legitimate.

252 Sen, “Merit and Justice,” 41.
253 Tan, “Why Confucian Democracy?”
A modern day goal should seek to find a balance between the brutal utility of meritocracy and the emphasis on Confucian social justice.

In the Imperial Model emphasis is placed on ritual to counteract the less desirable traits of meritocracy. Instead of legislating virtue, the Confucian approach should create conditions that encourage virtue and stability. Xunzi’s vision of ritual fits into this approach as it fulfills the criteria of being grounded in tradition, involving emotion and behavior, specifying the different treatment of people, and finally being both noncoercive and socially legitimate. These principles of ritual hold certain utility when we consider modern day implementation that should ideally be a natural outgrowth of society and be easily internalized by the populace.

Bell argues that rituals need not emerge from some cultural tradition but should be associated with reverence for a larger common ideal. He cites Angle in that this “reverence (should) be reserved for ideals of perfection that lie beyond our full ability to grasp.” This corresponds to the discussion of establishing the social good by defining in idealistic terms the shared values of a society. Rituals held in awe by both weak and powerful alike can effectively serve the purpose of generating a sense of commonality among participants, especially in multicultural societies. Bell argues that social inequality can actually contribute to economic equality through the appropriate application of ritual that protects the weak and vulnerable. In the same manner as a teacher cares for a student or a boss is concerned about employee welfare, Bell asserts that while social inequality exists, society must constantly be reminded of

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254 Bell, *China's New Confucianism*, 40-42.
255 Ibid., 47.
256 Ibid.
257 Ibid., 43.
why it exists and of its functional aspect, and in doing so enable it to work towards the advantage of all.

This resonates with Sor-hoon Tan’s assertion that a Confucian community should have functional differentiation, where judgment of superiority and inferiority must be situation-specific and not part of a single definitive ranking list. Michael Walzer’s theory of the diffusion and separation of spheres of power exemplifies this. Walzer argues for complex equality, whereby “no citizen's standing in one sphere or with regard to one social good can be undercut by his standing in some other sphere, with regard to some other good,” such that domination is not possible. Complex equality finds compromise between a functional hierarchy and social justice objectives. Walzer further asserts that it is not only power that should not be transferable but basic privileges as well, such as access to superior medical care or better schools for one’s children. Coincidentally, material egalitarianism features prominently in Modern East Asian societies.

Modern East Asian societies are both rigidly hierarchical and strongly egalitarian as they observe material equality above social equality. Instead of approaching moral wellbeing and social justice directly, emphasis is placed on developing practical material grassroots conditions that promote these goals. This point can be illustrated via comparisons of economic development between Latin America and East Asia. While Latin America industrialized much earlier than the East Asian countries of Taiwan and South Korea, the East Asian countries were able

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258 Tan, “Beyond Elitism,” 548.
260 Ibid.
261 Bell, *China's New Confucianism*, 38; 39.
to overtake Latin America in terms of social stability and sustained economic growth due largely to land reform that encouraged the egalitarian nature of East Asian societies and prevented the accumulation of wealth and political power by large landowners. Economic growth before political liberalization is the common banner of the East Asian Miracle and it resonates again with Mencius’ idea that people need a fixed livelihood, without which they will tend towards crime and rebellion.

One of the first priorities of the Singapore government during independence was the provision of public housing and specifically, the goal of a fully home-owning society aimed at building and maintaining socio-economic and political stability through an egalitarian society. The Singapore Housing Development Board (HDB) built a total of 765,052 housing units from 1960-94 and increased the proportion of the population residing in its apartments from 9 percent to 86 percent. A fully home-owning society is one that clearly contributes to the narrowing of social gaps, the enhancement of individual dignity, a sense of investedness in society, and quite naturally, loyalty to the political party that made it so.

Considering the balance between material equality and social equality, Bell compares the socially egalitarian US, where different economic classes live in separate neighborhoods with little interaction between rich and poor, and socially inegalitarian Japan where little geographical separation between rich and poor exists. By structuring society in such a way where rich and poor are in constant

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265 Bell, China's New Confucianism, 52.
interaction, as in the Japanese case, emotional attachments would ideally develop as
the rich would naturally desire to care for the interests of the poor, because the
marginalized no longer exists as a statistic but becomes a familiar face, a neighbor or
a shopkeeper that one sees daily. We are reminded of the emotional and behavioral
emphasis in Xunzi’s criteria for ritual mentioned earlier. HDB housing estates are
also deliberately designed to ensure a mixture of races and income groups in
accordance with this logic. As outlined in a 2006 speech by the Minister of National
Development: “There are racial quotas to ensure a balanced mix of households of
different ethnic groups in each HDB block. Each precinct is built with flats of
different sizes so that households of different income and social profiles live together.
Common spaces and shared facilities such as playgrounds and fitness corners
facilitate interaction among neighbours.”

The grassroots approach to social stability combined with ritual encourages
self-regulatory agents in society that act in a mutually beneficial way in a system of
effortless rule. In the Imperial Model, most community granaries started from a local
level with the goal of reducing dependence on the state. Where the state was involved,
 attempts were made to avoid direct government handouts as seen in the Qing policy
of work relief. The decentralized approach to welfare in Singapore can be
exemplified in two areas: 1) privatized family welfare, and 2) mandatory savings.

Firstly, the family exists as natural privatized welfare in Singapore, as in most
Confucian-based societies. Relying on family members for moral and financial
support instead of official institutions lowers government welfare expenditures. In

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266 Bow Tan Mah, “Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy’s Second Anniversary Public Lecture:
“Public Housing: Homes, Communities, Nation”, Ministry Of National Development, August 17,
1996, the Singapore government passed a law requiring children to provide financial maintenance to their parents in old age, codifying moral obligation and minimizing welfare expenditure.\textsuperscript{267} While this seems quite absurd from a western viewpoint and certainly not in the spirit of genuine filial piety, it reveals the changing values in society and the conscious attempt at maintaining a Confucian model of social organization and strong familial relations based on differentiated love. However, one should not ignore the negative side of \textit{guanxi}, and its association with corruption and nepotism, which shall be discussed later in this chapter.

Secondly, the government’s view that social welfare might lead to an unhealthy dependence on the state and serve as a disincentive to initiative and enterprise has resulted in the creation of the Central Provident Fund (CPF), a mandatory social security savings plan drawn from an individual’s monthly income.\textsuperscript{268} The original intent of the CPF was to ensure that each individual would have enough money upon retirement and would consequently not need to rely on government handouts. Today the fund can be used by individuals for private investments, healthcare bills, health insurance, and the financing of a house amongst other things. This approach ensures almost universal healthcare as well as facilitates home ownership. There are undoubtedly strains of paternalism in the CPF, a sense that the government does not trust people to manage their own money, however, there is also certain truth to this notion. The decentralized approach to welfare of the imperial model and in modern meritocracies like Singapore avoids the problems that plague the welfare states of developed countries.

\textsuperscript{267} Tamney and Chiang, \textit{Modernization, Globalization, and Confucianism in Chinese Societies}, 72.
In ritual, there is also both centralization and decentralization of the law. In Singapore, through extensive racial harmony propaganda, a Sedition Act that punishes any tendency “to promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes of the population,” and the emphasis on the historical context of race riots, there is a good degree of self-censorship in the populace, which one could say is a modern manifestation of a virtue-promoting ritual in society. Thus one would be sensitive when dealing with racial issues and exercise necessary political correctness to avoid offending any ethnic group. On the flip-side of things, Singapore society has become so legalistic in the interest of harmony that a great deal of political censorship and defamation law suits have originated from the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) whenever a third-party publicly challenges the integrity of the government. It has learned to protect itself so well that it is propping up an unsustainable legitimacy that works to silence important criticisms rather than to address them. Ezra Vogel labels this as macho-meritocracy, where a special awe for the top leaders is created, providing a basis of discrediting less meritocratic opposition regardless of content of its arguments. As such, while many Singaporeans complain daily about the government in their taxi commutes, many of them would not hesitate to vote in the ruling party in the next election.271

271 As a Singaporean doing research for this project, I could not help but feel a sense of “scandalousness” (for the lack of a better word) whenever I came across any particularly harsh critiques of the Singapore government in academic literature. While I am not representative of the Singapore psyche, it does show to some extent, the political mental obstructions in place as a result of a culture of self-censorship.
To some extent, there is a muted fear under the Singaporean harmony, a phenomenon that Confucius points out in *Analects* 2.3, where if a government rules by regulation and punishment rather than virtue, people will become evasive and have no sense of shame.272 We are reminded of the quote from Lee Kuan Yew at the beginning of this chapter where he laments that official policy can only “discipline” rather than “improve” character. People act out of obedience to the law rather than out of some deeper sense of morality or virtue, setting society on fairly shaky ground.273 Legitimacy is a two-way street and it would do well for a meritocratic government to sustain this traffic of ideas for its own benefit.

Legitimacy is also fostered via a transparent and clean government, serving both the interest of the bureaucracy as well as the populace, and saving the meritocracy from itself. Promoting virtuous behavior through anti-corruption policies is essential for the legitimacy of a meritocracy and to prevent the abuse of power by the political elite. Susan Rose-Ackerman argues that “a tough, independent anticorruption agency can be a potent tool so long as it represents a credible long-term commitment and can avoid being misused for political ends.”274 In Singapore, government ministries are required to review their work processes to aim to reduce corrupt incentives with strategies including the reduction of delays, rotating officers, and increased supervision. In addition, the Corrupt Practices Investigations Bureau (CPIB) has been an effective policing organization to detect and deal with any

273 In the same vein, Lee was quoted as saying “If you can select a population and they're educated and they're properly brought up, then you don't have to use too much of the stick because they would already have been trained. It's like with dogs. You train it in a proper way from small. It will know that it's got to leave, go outside to pee and to defecate.” Quoted in Daniel A. Bell, *East meets West* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 217.
instances of corruption, and rectify any structural features that represent moral hazards in the system.²⁷⁵

Furthermore, the high salaries of Singapore civil servants, comparable to the pay of similar executive positions in the private sector, not only functions to prevent the brain drain to the private sector but structures incentives to remove conditions that facilitate corruption. According to a recent report, Singapore’s Prime Minister is one the highest paid politician in the world with a basic annual salary of $2.47 million.²⁷⁶ Incidentally, Singapore is also one of the least corrupt countries in the world according to the 2009 Corruption Perception Index report.²⁷⁷ As then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew asserted in 1985, “Pay political leaders the top salaries they deserve and get honest, clear government or underpay them and risk the Third World disease of corruption.”²⁷⁸ Such pragmatic approach is without the illusions of Confucian political duty as evident in the Imperial Model. Kenneth Tan argues that “it is no longer reasonable for contemporary Singapore to expect its talented citizens to choose politics and government as a career out of a sense of passion and altruism, since the opportunity costs of such a choice will continue to rise” as more lucrative ventures open in the private sector.²⁷⁹ While the bureaucracy of the Imperial Model did have numerous anti-corruption structures in place, corruption was still incredibly prevalent. It is thus the recognition of material over moral incentives in contemporary civil

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 160-161.
²⁷⁹ Tan, “Meritocracy and Elitism in a Global City,” 19.
service, and the understanding of the mechanics of motivations and opportunities in the workings of corruption that will encourage moral government.

Nevertheless, there is the need to constantly justify the high salaries, and to ensure that the government is providing the means for the public to hold it accountable in order to promote its own political legitimacy. The imperial bureaucracy allowed the examination process to be as transparent as possible, responding swiftly to any public complaints to reinforce its legitimacy. The same principle must follow in contemporary times in terms of high salaries. Furthermore, Kenneth Tan points out that the use of monetary incentives as an anti-corruption mechanism might draw people into politics for the wrong reasons producing a “dangerously intelligent and self-interested class of political elites.” Governance in Singapore, he argues, is “precariously built upon faith in good and wise men rather than good and wise institutions.” Ideally, good and wise institutions will create good and wise men.

Multiculturalism in a meritocracy generally tends towards exacerbating differences between ethnic groups, and is an issue that requires a profound balancing act that can easily degenerate into irrational racist sentiments. Even in the Imperial Model, there were racial quotas and different standards for different ethnic groups. The basic notion of discrimination in this sense seems to go against the egalitarian grain of meritocracy, highlighting the point that effort is only one factor in explaining social mobility and success in society. However, it would be foolish to assume that cultural historical circumstance has no bearing on the way participants of a meritocracy behave. Discrimination has a function in society, much in the same

\[280\] Ibid.
manner that ritual in social hierarchy tells us that we cannot treat everyone in the same way if we want to achieve harmony. The case of Singapore demonstrates a deliberate attempt at instituting structures that work towards racial harmony. In addition to the basic provisions of housing and healthcare that has worked towards closing income gaps, other policies include the legislated use of English as a common neutral working language, the racial quotas in public housing, and the constitutional recognition of the special position of the Malays and the need to safeguard their interests.

However, the largely Chinese dominance in positions of political and military power has drawn much criticism to the seeming racist tendency of meritocracy. While it is natural for more Chinese to fill the elite ranks considering they are the majority ethnic group in Singapore, Michael D. Barr highlights some discrepancies between meritocratic theory and reality in Singapore. Between 1987 to 2005, there has only been one non-Chinese President’s Scholar and the Malays in general have been discriminated against especially in sensitive military positions on account of their racial and ethnic affinity with Malays in Indonesia and Malaysia. In my own experience serving in the Singapore Navy, I have never seen a single Malay naval serviceman—meritocracy it seems, applies to certain groups more so than others.

Nevertheless, every morning, thousands of Singapore students of all races pledge themselves to a society based on “justice and equality” when the disparity in reality is evident if one looks closely enough, where the meritocracy is meritocratic

only up to a point, but where, oddly enough, there is peace.\textsuperscript{282} Perhaps it is the other institutions and mechanisms like clean governance, public safety, world-class education, and subsidized healthcare amongst other things that have made this injustice an acceptable one. Yet one wonders if injustices like these, based on ethnicity, can be sustainably justified in an age of an empowered public, one wonders how long this apparent stability will last.

The Imperial Model clearly cannot and should not be directly transplanted into a contemporary meritocracy. Considering how the Imperial Model stood up to the three main contemporary criticisms of meritocracy, we find that the Imperial Model does not provide satisfactory guidance on how to ensure justice and harmony in societies today. Nevertheless there is value to be reaped from understanding the Imperial Model in the context of contemporary challenges as it does provide some important principles of what is needed to sustain a meritocracy.

The competing definitions of the social good and how to achieve them are perhaps the most fundamental source of tension between classical Confucian ideals and modern meritocracies. Nonetheless, the Imperial Model does point out that the definition of the social good is a moving target and that a meritocracy is only a tool to achieve it. Today, the social good is defined in terms of national objectives like social justice, economic growth, and closing income gaps. An important role of modern meritocracies is to convince people of what this social good is rather than taking it as a given. Evidently, the articulation process is a more challenging one in a heterogeneous society with different cultural values. Only after articulating the ‘social
good’ can society measure government performance in terms of the associated objectives that if achieved, validate the meritocracy.

In leveling the playing field, the Imperial Model cannot adequately address questions of contemporary social justice. The Imperial Model was generally more interested in identifying talent fairly than in rigorously taking active steps to develop a talented populace. It is no longer enough to create a fair meritocratic system like the imperial examination system and expect people to be able to actively participate in it on their own accord. Today, the demands on government are significantly greater, especially in an age where the stirrings of popular sovereignty are evident even in authoritarian regimes. The dynamic of political power changes when a populace that believes it has certain basic rights that it deserves from the government. Governments are expected to actively help people participate in the meritocratic system while also highly incentivizing the civil service in order to attract talent. Today the civil service is far from being the preferred choice for upward social mobility in this age. This is a result of the emergence of more playing fields in the areas of business or the arts, an effect of the parallel value systems that work towards diffusing the unhealthy societal competition of a single value system.

The Imperial Model justified a polarized society with the belief that the political elites deserved their positions as they proved to be more virtuous than anyone in society and naturally ranked higher in the social hierarchy. Today such virtue politics no longer holds much sway with social priorities placed instead on the practical effectiveness of government and its ability to deliver on material promises. Nevertheless, the Imperial Model does present a framework with which to mitigate
the destabilizing effects of a polarized society, namely through rituals that check power and benefit society, the national priority of provision and disaster relief, and the grassroots approaches to welfare. We find parallels of such a framework in contemporary meritocracies. The Imperial Model was not a perfect system but it worked towards ensuring harmony in society. The same may be said for modern meritocracies with their associated institutions, which, while falling short of achieving social justice objectives, deliver on their material promises that justify the meritocracy.

Having addressed these specific criticisms of meritocracy, I now briefly consider some of the broader implications of meritocracy and Confucianism with respect to its continual relevance to the political and social organization of states. In the face of the contemporary challenges brought about by globalization and capitalism, meritocracy works towards bringing together the brightest in society to solve the toughest of national problems. However, it needs to sustain the element of dynamism and adaptability that Confucianism has invested in it to avoid becoming a self-serving, unwieldy and anachronistic institution. On a macro level, there are also certain universal principles that can be drawn from the Confucian framework bereft of any cultural association since it is ultimately a philosophy that strives to create stable societies based on harmonious human relationships without any required specific belief in the divine.

With an increasingly educated and empowered middle-class, the government of a meritocratic state can no longer treat the people like sheep as in the Imperial Model. Educated sheep are not as easy to placate or deceive. The same
authoritarianism used to harness and push society forward is no longer as viable in the modern context, where technology has empowered people with free access to information and knowledge of alternatives. Thus when we consider the principles of a sustainable meritocratic state, it is the maintenance of universal dignity and mutual respect that should be the primary principles that guide policy and keep the government in check.

Economic growth alone is insufficient to sustain harmony in an already developed and prosperous society since the financially empowered populace has greater leverage and demands on the government. I do not argue for a liberal democracy, as I recognize the political effectiveness of meritocracy. I simply propose that the task of government in a modern meritocracy is a lot more challenging with a financially and information empowered educated populace that demands a more participatory element in order to function well. The excessive muzzling of public opinion through legislation is not something that may be as easily achieved today despite the best efforts by the government nor is it desirable. This would entail things like a freer press, respecting public criticism of government and legitimately addressing their concerns, and a stronger opposition. There is a greater need for the values that promote a genuine Confucian harmony to ensure an appropriate balance of paternalistic tendencies and commitments to the preservation of dignity. The government must exercise circumspection and know when to shepherd and when to listen to the public.

Political legitimacy is based on mutual respect between the people and the government. In a meritocracy the populace naturally trusts the government to make
decisions on its behalf as the ranks of the bureaucracy are filled with virtuous and
talented civil servants, this being the ideal of Confucian society. However in reality,
governments and peoples are never perfect and today this political trust has to be
deliberately built and maintained through a two-way dialogue. This firstly brings up
the idea that it is in the government’s interest to develop a healthy society both
physically and morally in order to enrich itself. Secondly, the government elite should
not just be dictating what they think is best for society but should actively be seeking
feedback from the public: it is no longer just a case of measuring the public
‘thermostat’ and divining the public mood but encouraging actual participation.

VanDeVeer points out that “respecting a person must involve, in some fashion,
not undermining that person's decision-making capacities, his decision-process, or
rendering the latter impotent to eventuate in chosen outcomes.”283 This complements
Irene Bloom’s definition of human dignity as “the dignity that human beings have by
virtue of their humanity.”284 Both these ideas are in line with the Confucian value
placed on individuals as moral agents and the need for government to respect this.

However, Angle reminds us not to exaggerate the status of the people in
Confucianism as “they are not a source of sovereignty, only its sign.”285 As such,
there is a need to look beyond the standard definitions within Confucianism;
contemporary Confucian philosophers thus face the need to further develop or
reconstruct Confucianism. One key revision that Angle highlights is that “the people”

283 VanDeVeer, Paternalistic Intervention, 5.
284 Irene Bloom, “Fundamental Intuitions and Consensus Statements: Mencian Confucianism and
can no longer function as passive indicators of the will of Heaven but should be seen as being valuable individuals that “recognize and respond to ethically salient aspects of the world.”

Nevertheless, there is still a role for paternalism, which is a natural feature of meritocracy, and is one area that is often looked upon negatively as limiting freedoms and being situated the slippery slope down the hill of authoritarianism. Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein point out that people would often “choose not to choose,” and this resonates with JM Buchanan’s idea of being “afraid to be free” whereby liberties carry with it responsibilities not many people want to bear. Instead, people “seek order rather than uncertainty” and readily bear the opportunity cost of paternalistic direction. Rather than argue for freedom and liberty, sometimes it is better to recognize that the average person does not know how or want to fully use this liberty, warranting a state perfectionism, where a state promotes “valuable conceptions of a good life on the part of its citizens, rather than leaving it entirely up to its citizens to seek.”

For this reason, Confucian meritocracy should ideally uphold Rawls’ ‘publicity principle’ that prevents government from adopting a policy that it neither is willing nor able to defend in public. Should a government choose to do the opposite, it fails to respect the public and will suffer from considerable political

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286 Ibid., 18-19.
288 Buchanan, “Afraid to be free,” 24.
embarrassment. This fits well with the “paradox of power” notion in Confucian “shame-based” societies. Martin Schoenhals argues that in a Confucian society a person of superior status gains his reputation and loses face based on what others think of him and therefore bears the burden of greater scrutiny and evaluation of any immorality and incompetence. In meritocracies, the government’s legitimacy is based on its moral high ground of virtuous ministers and virtue promoting institutions and needs both public and official scrutiny to keep it in check. This reverberates with the transparency and the moral rigor of the imperial civil service examination that both the bureaucracy and public scrutinized carefully and that granted the imperial government a good deal of legitimacy.

Libertarian Paternalism, as put forth by Thaler and Sunstein, adds another dimension to paternalism where the freedom of choice is preserved and governments are permitted to legitimately steer people’s choices in directions that will improve their lives. They define the process of the “nudge” as a feature of choice architecture that alters people’s actions in predictable ways without limiting their options or change their economic incentives. For example, a nudge to promote a healthier society would be something like locating the candy shelf away from the checkout counter in a supermarket or convenience store. The beauty of the nudge lies in its ability to make people act on their own accord to what has been defined as a socially and morally appropriate choice by the government. A nudge is not legislated morality but is something more like virtue promoting structures that convince people to act

292 Thaler and Sunstein, *Nudge*, 5; 6.
morally rather than forcing them to do so. It is through this process that the public trust can be earned, public dignity maintained, and government legitimized.

A meritocracy thus requires the validation of the peoples as much as it validates individuals. For all the ills and inconveniences of free speech like fear mongering and partisan politics, a meritocratic government needs an open discussion of problems in order to stimulate change and creative solutions for modern day problems, and to keep it in accountable. In a society where the best and the brightest do not necessarily enter the civil service, and where the populace is increasingly educated, there is much to be gained from drawing upon public opinion, more so than in the Imperial Model.

Throughout this paper, I have argued for the value of a Confucian meritocracy primarily focusing on Confucian East Asian societies. I want to conclude by highlighting the universality of Confucian political ideas. Tu Weiming argues in *Cultural China: the periphery as the center* that the Chinese communities outside of China continue to develop and shape the Chinese identity divorced from the current communist Chinese state. In these communities, Confucian tradition remains a common feature that affects and shapes their modus operandi and forms of life.293 Yang Yao recently argued in a *Foreign Affairs* article about China that, “As the Chinese people demand more than economic gains as their income increases, it will become increasingly difficult for the CCP to contain or discourage social discontent by administering the medicine of economic growth alone.”294 The same can be said about Singapore where, in addition to the thriving meritocratic system and the

293 Tu, “Cultural China,” 165.
vigorous pursuit of wealth, there is an increasing call to encourage creativity and political participation, to promote genuine multi-party competition in the political sphere, to permit greater freedom of speech, and to shake off legislated morality.

Nevertheless, while Confucianism is very much tied up with East Asian cultures, the reason why it was able to proliferate into such vast geographical areas of diverse cultures within and outside of China, in addition to being adopted by a succession of foreign rulers was primarily due to its neutrality and utility as a political theory. Unlike the major religions of the world, Confucianism is not technically a religion in the sense that it does not have the barrier to entry of belief in a divine narrative, nor does not exclude. As Tan points out as well, the Confucian legacy is different from Western Enlightenment heritage as “it is not burdened with any project “to find a new, comprehensive worldview which would replace God with Nature and Reason”.”

One can be a Christian and still subscribe to filial piety and the practice of ritual. Robert Neville argues in *Boston Confucianism* that it is possible to be Confucian without being East Asian highlighting the fact that that while the Chinese way of farming and diplomacy may be shaped by Chinese religious practice and symbols, they are ultimately really about growing food and politics.

According to Neville, Confucianism promotes harmony in contemporary society through “concrete positive social habits and deference to diverse cultures” that encourages a more humane articulation of egalitarianism that recognizes and reinforces equal rights to

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women, ethnic minorities, and persons of lower class, while also addressing persons with unique positions and roles.\textsuperscript{297}

Meritocracy is a powerful tool of government that can only be sustained if it adapts with the times and develops in tandem with other institutional and societal features that ameliorate inequality and build trust between the government and public. Hierarchy and virtuous government cannot be taken as a given, but needs to be constantly justified and legitimized via institutional structures that check power and that allow an active dialogue between government and public to take place. As societies become more globalized and multicultural, the organization of government can longer be seen in absolutes, as East versus West or as socialist versus democratic, for there is much utility to be drawn from each, and cultural stubbornness is no longer a viable solution. The main thing that a meritocracy should fear is tunnel vision and a resistance to change. Nothing is too sacred that it cannot be improved upon, not even Confucian tradition or a functioning meritocracy.

\textsuperscript{297} Ibid., 16.


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