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Chapter 12

CT China's Meritocratic Examinations and the Ideal of Virtuous Talents

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Emphasis on both moral character and talent in selecting government officials has been an intrinsic part of China's meritocratic tradition.¹ From early on, mainstream Chinese political philosophy, particularly of the Confucian heritage, has promoted such an ideal. This quest, however, has also encountered perennial challenges in practice. In this chapter, we examine in historic context the ideal and practice of integrating moral character with talent in selecting government officials. We show that, despite difficulties, searching for virtuous talent in China today has evolved into the most comprehensive and sophisticated process of its kind in history. The first section of this chapter retrieves the history of China's civil examinations and its problems. The second section investigates recent evolutions of China's public servant recruitment as a stepping stone into officialdom. The third section focuses on China's recent reform in the selection of government officials. Finally, we examine to what extent the reformed system causes corruption in China.

A I. A Brief History of China's Civil Service Examinations

The long and complex history of China's civil service examinations has been studied extensively.² We do not intend to present a comprehensive or balanced history here. Building on work by others, we highlight some points and aspects to set the stage for our argument.

The ideal of selecting people of both moral character and talent to serve in government has its roots in ancient China. Moral character, or *de*, symbolizes virtuous personality. Talent, *neng* 能 or *cai* 才, refers primarily, but not exclusively, to a person's ability in discharging official duties. Persons equipped with both traits are called *xian* 贤, the worthy.³ It has long been believed that government should recruit virtuous and talented people to serve the country.⁴ This ideal was gradually established during the Spring-and-Autumn period⁵ and subsequently implemented as government policy. Ancient thinkers, however, have attributed such practice to the earliest periods of Chinese history. The Confucian classic *Book of History* records a story of the early king Yao looking for a senior minister. He passed over his son Zhu and a talented minister Gonggong. According to the text, Zhu was smart but immodest; Gonggong successfully controlled devastating floods but was irreverent toward Heaven (*tian*). Then local lords insisted on appointing Gun. Yao reluctantly agreed, although he regarded Gun as disobedient. It turned out that Gun did not do a good job.⁶ This story suggests the importance of moral character for selecting government officials; without moral character, talent alone does not produce good results. When King Yao was to select a successor, he asked local lords for recommendations. They suggested Shun. Living in a dysfunctional family, Shun's father lacked virtue, and his stepmother was inconsiderate. He also had an arrogant and obnoxious brother. Yet Shun managed to maintain harmony in the family and to remain a filial son and a caring brother. Therefore, Yao chose Shun as the candidate to succeed to the throne. Shun was first appointed as the general

minister. He did well: the people emulated his virtues, government officials followed his directions, and guests from all quarters received by him rendered their respect. When he was stationed at the foot of the mountains, he did not go astray even amid tempests of wind, thunder, and rain. After three years, Shun proved himself as an able leader and was given the throne. This story indicates the Confucian ideal that government should be in the hands of people of virtue and talent.⁷ Two points in this story are worth noting. First, the Confucian view does not separate “private” virtues from public morals. So-called private virtues are taken as good indications of a person’s character and, hence, his (or her) ability to be a good public figure. Second, the ability to harmonize one’s family is a key virtue in Confucianism and has been accorded primary importance in evaluating a person’s character. The assumption is that if a person does not do well within his own family, it is difficult, if not impossible, for him to work well with others beyond family. Both viewpoints hold to this day (see Section 2 of this chapter).

The historian Qian Mu’s study shows that selecting government officials became a systematic practice during the Western Han dynasty (202 B.C.E.–9 C.E.). Government selected officials mainly in three ways. The first was to look for virtuous talents (*xian liang* 贤良). For this category, the emphasis seemed to be on talent, provided that those selected were also virtuous. Candidates included both government officials at lower levels and those without a government post. Upon recommendation by government agencies at various levels, candidates were interviewed or tested on government policies. When successful, they were then

appointed to government posts. The second category was for people who were filial at home and for government employees, usually at low ranks, who were honest and clean on their job (*xiao lian* 孝廉). The emphasis in this category was on moral character. This practice was meant to reward people with good morals. During the Wudi period (141–87 B.C.E.), whether local governments could find such people in their districts was taken as an indication of the effectiveness of government performance, on the presumption that such people exist in well-governed society. During the Eastern Han (25–220 C.E.), examinations for talent were added to screening candidates of this category to ensure competence on the job. The last category of selecting government officials took place when there was a need for special talents, such as flood control experts and envoys to foreign countries. This category appeared to focus more on talent than moral quality. Selections of all these categories were conducted through recommendations by incumbent government officials.⁸

According to the *Wangzhi* chapter of the classical *Book of Rites*, in ancient China the selection of scholar-officials began at the level of local districts (*xiang*). Top scholars at that level were awarded the title of “Excellent Scholar” (*xiu shi*). When they became selected at an upper level, they were given the title of “Select Scholar” (*xuan shi*) and the responsibility of teaching others. Those exceling as “Select Scholars” were further educated to become “Outstanding Scholars” (*jun shi*). The highest achievers were “Accomplished Scholars” (*zao shi*). Both “Outstanding Scholars” and “Accomplished Scholars” were granted the privilege of exemption from draft to labor for the state.⁹ The text also indicates that for all

good talents to serve in government, they should be discussed (*lun*) and examined (*bian*) before they were assigned to appropriate posts. This record indicates a general philosophy of not only how virtuous talents should be selected but also how they should be rewarded.

During the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) periods, selection by recommendation was replaced with selection by examinations (*keju*). The Tang system of selection comprised two steps. The first was examination for candidacy. The second step involved government appointments made from the candidate pool.¹⁰ Benjamin Elman's study shows that under the Tang emperors Gao-zu (r. 618–26) and Tai-zong (r. 627–50), candidates first took qualifying examinations (*ju*). To enter officialdom, they had to undergo a selection process (*xuan*) that evaluated candidates' moral character and determined the level of appointment. Selection criteria included candidates' deportment, eloquence, calligraphy, and legal knowledge. The entire qualification and appointment process was called *xuanu*,¹¹ a term that has evolved to mean election.

Civil service examinations continued through subsequent dynasties. The examination system had far-reaching consequences in history. For one thing, it provided a channel for the aspirations of men of ability (women were excluded) from almost every social stratum. Although success in the examinations was easier for people with well-off family backgrounds, poor scholars also succeeded in their ambitions, although to a lesser degree. Pertinent information in this regard is largely unobtainable. Available records, however, indicate the possibility of impressive social upward mobility through civil service examinations. In 1148 during the Song dynasty, for example, 330 people successfully passed national

civil service examinations (*jin shi*). Of the 279 graduates with family information on record, 157 had no forebears in civil service versus 122 with forebears who had served in government. The year 1156 witnessed 601 examination graduates. Of the 572 individuals with family background information on record, 331 did not have forebears in civil service as opposed to 241 with forebears in civil service.¹² Those without forebears in civil service may have come from economically well-off families. But given that social status in ancient China was gauged heavily on government positions, entering civil service through successful passage of examinations was undoubtedly a major upgrade in social status for individuals and their families. Another major effect of the examination system is to enhance social stability. The possibility of moving up the social ladder through examinations, although a mere dream for the vast majority, nevertheless provided people with ambitions some hope in life so they would not seek deviatory means in pursuing aspirations. This feature was particularly salient during transitions between dynasties. When a new dynasty called to recruit the “virtuous and talented” to serve in government, it also required people’s submission to the new ruler. An unintended consequence of the civil examinations, as Benjamin Elman’s study shows, was the creation of legions of classically literate men (and women), who used their linguistic talents for a variety of nonofficial purposes, from literati physicians to local pettifoggers, from fiction writers to examination essay teachers. There we find a healthy degree of social mobility (or “circulation” as Elman calls it) for members of the lower classes to rise in the social hierarchy.¹³

According to Qian Mu, examination subjects during the Tang period were mainly in two areas: poetry and rhymed prose, and the classics.¹⁴ The

presumption seems to be that people who were good at these subjects would be competent in government posts. It is questionable, however, whether such persons also possessed moral character and practical skills for the job. Some ancient thinkers seemed to consider this kind of examinations adequate for selecting virtuous talents. The prominent scholar-official Han Yu (768–824), for example, held that learning to write is itself a moral exercise, a matter of nourishing one's *qi* (vital energy). He wrote:

[EXT] *Qi* is water and words are floating objects. When the water is great, all floating things, large or small, float equally. *Qi*'s relationship to words is similar to this. When one's *qi* is flourishing, the length of his words and the pitch of his voice are all fitting. . . . (The cultivated person) places his heart in the moral way and behaves appropriately. When he is in office, he applies the Dao to people. When he has quit office, he teaches the Dao to students and passes his writings to later generations as a model.¹⁵

For Han, writing is not an isolated technique or skill. It is a dimension integral to a person's whole being, which manifests the state of one's cultivated *qi*.¹⁶ Just as objects float only when there is adequate water,¹⁷ a person writes well only when adequate effort has been exerted in successfully cultivating his *qi*. The ability to write well is therefore a good indication of holistic self-cultivation. Accordingly, examining a person's writing ability would at the same time reveal his moral quality and talent.

Han may have overstated the linkage between writing and personal cultivation, however. Although good writing skills may indicate discipline and an

important ability for performance in governmental office, they are not reliable measurements for either moral character or administrative competence on the job. Examinations in themselves did not provide necessary preparations for these qualities, nor did they adequately measure them. To recruit people of both moral refinement and practical talent, additional measures were needed to complement literary examinations. Qian Mu noted that, in early periods, candidates were mostly from established families. Their family backgrounds provided them with adequate knowledge and familiarity with rules of politics (e.g., office practice) and ritual propriety (*li jiao*). By the time of an appointment, they were already fairly well equipped with these necessary qualities and skills for the job. Examination graduates without adequate family education in politics and ritual propriety, however, were ill prepared for effective performance on the job.¹⁸

Subjects of examinations remained largely unchanged during the Song period (960–1279). Although examinations provided a platform for upward social mobility and thus aspirations for people at various layers of society, their flaws were obvious. Cheng Yi (1033–1107) lamented that the formal, detailed, legally prescribed literary requirements in preparation for the examinations were of no use in evaluating the moral worth of the students.¹⁹ Zhu Xi (1130–1200) also criticized that state academies failed to evaluate students' moral quality or actual ability on the job; they only encouraged students' desires for personal gains rather than moral rightness.²⁰ In an essay on the civil examination, Zhu proposed reforming the system to take into consideration candidates' ability in job performance:

[EXT] [Zhu] wanted his candidates to think, and to know how to think for themselves; in studying the Classics, they should study not only the classical texts but also the commentaries of different schools of interpreters, and in answering a question should be prepared to cite different opinions, concluding with their own judgment.²¹

In Zhu's view, these critical-thinking qualities are important for problem solving in practice, and they are part of a person's integrated self-cultivation. Zhu believed that if his proposal were to be adopted, "men's minds would be composed and there would be no spirit of hustling and striving; there would be actual virtuous conduct and none of the corruption of empty words; there would be solid learning and no unusable talent."²² Without such a reform, civil service examinations were unable to generate virtuous talents to serve the country and would be detrimental to it. Zhu said, "[I]f the government wishes to recapture the lost land in the Central Plan, it must stop the civil examination system for thirty years!"²³

Zhu's worry was not unusual in the history of China's civil service examinations. David Nivison's study shows that the idea of doing away with the examinations, and of filling the ranks of government officials by recommendation of the "virtuous" from below, was resurrected from time to time in Chinese history. Nivison writes,

[EXT] The surprising fact is that throughout all this we find the examination-education complex, the function and effect of which was to

ensure the dominance of the Confucian classical tradition, criticized precisely by appeal to Confucian moral, aesthetic, and political values.²⁴

Critics of examinations seemed to have focused primarily on their ineffectiveness in selecting people who were both virtuous and talented, particularly the former. The Song scholar-official Wang Anshi (1021–1086) complained that, under the examination system, when children should concentrate on learning the moral truth in the world, they were made to study poetry and rhymed prose behind closed doors; and when they were in government office, they had absolutely no experience with affairs in the real world. “This examination system destroys talents and makes today’s world pale in comparison with ancient times.”²⁵ Later, the Ming scholar Wang Tingxiang (1474–1544) also lamented, “today’s examination system does not look into people’s moral character and conduct, and merely selects individuals on their writing. No wonder it only selects people of poor quality for offices.”²⁶

It was not that only Confucian scholars of the time were concerned about the moral inadequacy in the examination systems. Benjamin Elman’s study of the examinations in the Ming (1368–1644) and the Qing (1644–1911) shows that the moral cultivation of the literati was a perennial concern of the imperial court because it sought to ensure that the officials it chose in the examination market would serve the people in the name of the ruling family.²⁷ In reality, however, the examination system as practiced in history fell far short of the ideal of selecting people who were both virtuous and talented.

Because of this failure, throughout the history of civil examinations, recommendation on the basis of both ability and moral character has been a recurring theme. As indicated earlier, the practice of government recruitments on recommendation has a long history. According to a study by E. A. Kracke, Jr.,

[EXT] From the earliest clearly historical times, recommendation was not merely sanctioned as an open practice; the recommendation of worthy and able men became at least a moral obligation, possibly reinforced by penalties for its neglect. By the early second century B.C., if not earlier, recommendation had assumed institutional form.²⁸

From King Yao looking for his own successor to the Han court's selection of the filial and the uncorrupt for government posts, recommendation on the basis of moral character has been an important way of selecting virtuous talent. During the Song period, the method of recommendation for civil service was used in complementing competitive examinations. The government identified qualified sponsors, primarily on their personal quality, especially moral character. Sponsors then recommended candidates for promotion to more important positions in civil service on the basis of several criteria. Among these were vigor, discipline, caution, and noncorruption. Candidates must have demonstrated firmness and confidence. They must be free from presumption, impropriety, or the misuse of authority. Caution was considered the third important quality as it is for anyone with considerable responsibilities. Finally and most important, candidates must also be free from corruption and penal offense.²⁹

Although these were not testable on examinations, recommendation provided a useful way for selecting suitable people. Once a recommended candidate was appointed to a government post, his sponsor served as a mentor and was held responsible for his protégé's job performance. Records are unavailable regarding how many or what proportion of people were promoted to senior positions in government via recommendation during the Song dynasty; recommendation as a supplement to examinations, however, appeared to have played a significant role in promoting people to senior positions in civil service during that period.³⁰

Recommendation was a useful means to supplement and strengthen the examination method, but it placed a great amount of power in the hands of sponsors. This would work well only if sponsors were reliably virtuous people whose only interest is the good of society. From today's perspective, this method has at least two problems. First, it opens doors to nepotism. If it were practiced today, sponsors would likely fight for opportunities to place their own protégés. Second, in the modern context of individuality, it is difficult to determine the recommender's responsibility when his protégé fails. For example, how much responsibility should the recommender bear if his protégé, after an outstanding start on a new job, becomes corrupt five years after taking office? What about ten years later or even longer? Although recommendation may still play a role in selecting government appointees, it cannot play as important a role as it used to in history. The search for reliable ways to select people who are both virtuous and talented continues.

A II. Current Civil Service Examinations

The imperial examination system was abolished in 1905, but examinations remain big affairs in China today. There are two major examinations. One is the university entrance examination, called *gao kao*, or the “examination for entrance into higher education.” According to *China Education Online*, from 1977 to 2010, 152 million contestants participated in the *gao kao*, and 66.61 million were admitted to universities.³¹ In 2011 alone, 9.33 million people took the *gao kao*, and 6.75 million were granted university admissions. The *gao kao* is also called *da kao*, meaning both the “examination for university entrance” and the “big examination.” For Chinese families with children, this examination is indeed the greatest affair in their lives. Acquiring a university seat is not only important for receiving an education, it is also a crucial move in upward social mobility, for which a good university degree is a requirement, with few exceptions, for obtaining good jobs, especially highly competitive civil service jobs, and for future promotions.³² Success in the *gao kao* is the first step in climbing today’s meritocratic social ladder.

The other major examination is for civil service (*gongwuyuan kaoshi*). Civil service examinations take place both at the national and local levels. Examinations at the national level are called *guo kao*, the “examination for national civil service” or simply the “national examination.” The *guo kao* is an examination for appointments in the central government and its direct branches. Others are for civil service posts at the provincial level (*sheng kao*) and below. These examinations draw participants from all walks of life to compete for particularly desirable posts at various levels of government. These jobs are highly

sought-after not only because they come with job security, excellent benefits, social prestige, and potential personal advantages often associated with government offices, but also because they are the primary passage for promotion to more important offices in government. In China, there is no difference between the tracks of professional civil servants (*shiwu guan*) and political appointees (*zhengwu guan*). With few exceptions, all senior positions have to be filled by candidates from the pool of civil servants.³³

Today, more people than ever attempt to climb the social ladder through examinations. Approximately 1.5 million people registered for the 2013 national civil service examinations, competing for 20,800 posts,³⁴ up from 2012 when more than 1.3 million people registered, competing for 18,000 positions.³⁵ Two of the most sought-after posts drew 9,411 and 9,175 examination participants, respectively.³⁶ These situations have given rise to the expression, “a colossal army passes through a bridge made of a single log.”

In addition to the high desirability of these positions, the overly competitive situation is in part due to a large pool of qualified candidates looking for employment. In 1977, when China’s universities first reopened after the Cultural Revolution, 4.8 percent of 5,700,000 university examination participants, or 270,000, were admitted to universities. In 2011, 72 percent of 9,330,000 participants, or 6,750,000, were offered admissions. Increasingly, large numbers of university graduates place tremendous pressure on the job market; civil service examinations offer at least a nominal hope, even though the majority of applicants know that they have little chance of success in the competition.

Today's civil service examinations differ from the ancient *keju* in several ways. Contents of the examinations now include general and specialized subjects. Under general subjects are general civil knowledge, administrative abilities and aptitudes, and problem-solving essays. Specialized subjects are discipline- (or position-) specific. Those passing written examinations successfully are then interviewed before final selections are made. During the Tang dynasty, success in the *keju* gave candidates only the qualification for official posts; examination graduates only made it to the pool from which actual appointments were to be made by the ministry of personnel. During the Song dynasty, all successful candidates from examinations above the provincial level were automatically appointed to government offices. Success in today's civil service examinations likewise means immediate appointment in government offices, because the success rate is set at the exact number of available openings. Unlike the Song practice, however, these appointments are usually office staff positions rather than senior positions. In most cases, staff appointments admit candidates into a select pool for further competition down the road in pursuit of more important government positions.

Although the government commands a "buyer's market" in selecting civil servants and professional training of public servants may have significantly improved over the years, the moral quality of civil servants appears to have deteriorated. Since its reforms and opening-up in late 1970s, China has been increasingly infested with corruption, particularly among government officials. With power and influence attached to government offices, occupants are prone to abusing public trust and to becoming primary targets for bribes. Every year, a

large number of government officials are arrested at every level for corruption. From October 1997 to September 2002, ninety-eight officials at the minister-governor rank (*sheng-bu ji*), 2,422 officials at the rank immediately below (*si-jü ji*), and, further down, 28,996 officials at the level of county mayor or ministerial office director (*xian-chu ji*) were penalized for corruption.³⁷ In 2002 alone, 3,269 corruption cases involved government officials at or above the level of county mayor or ministerial office director.³⁸ In 2010, 139,621 corruption cases were investigated; 146,517 government officials were disciplined by the Communist Party internally, and 5,373 of these were handed over to the court.³⁹ It is believed, however, that these are merely the tip of the iceberg. Fighting corruption has become a matter of life and death for the ruling Party.⁴⁰ Moral deterioration in society, particularly among government officials, has caused serious concerns with the moral quality of public servants in general.

It is against this backdrop that the government recently proposed measures for ethical screening in the *guo kao* and for ethics education of civil servants. In October 2011, the State Administration of Civil Service announced that future recruitments will take candidates' moral quality into consideration. According to one report, future civil service examinations will be based first on candidates' moral character, followed by their talent and interview performance: "Candidates who lack political integrity, a sense of social responsibility, and a willingness to serve the public will not be allowed to become civil servants."⁴¹ So far, no formal policies have been put in place for screening candidates' moral character in civil servant examinations, and it is unclear how this is actually to be implemented. It would surely be difficult, if not impossible, to test personal moral quality with

examinations. Following the announcement, the *Xinhua Net* conducted an online survey, finding that only 14 percent the 7,200 respondents approved the proposed measure, whereas 86 percent feared that it may be abused for opening “backdoors” in recruiting civil servants.⁴²

In the meantime, the State Administration of Civil Service also published “Outlines for Professional Ethics Training of Civil Servants,” making ethical education part of the ongoing maintenance of civil service personnel. The outlines aim to enhance civil servants’ “professional ethics.” These include ten basic areas of moral knowledge and four themes:

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1. The meaning and function of ethics and professional ethics.
2. The meaning and function of professional ethics for civil servants.
3. Civil servants’ responsibility, duty, and discipline.
4. Civil servants’ worldview, view of power, and view of career.
5. Ancient Chinese view on cultivating virtuous government officials.
6. The main contents of socialist core values.
7. The government’s requirements of anticorruption and integrity-building among civil servants.
8. Main contents, features, and measures of professional ethics for civil servants in other countries.
9. The significance of professional ethics enhancement among civil servants.
10. Principles and methods of professional ethics enhancement among civil servants.

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The four themes are

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1. Loyalty to the Country
2. The Fundamental Goal of Serving the People
3. Dutifulness
4. Fairness and Noncorruption⁴³

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Embedded in these are both moral and political connotations. The item of “socialist core values,” for example, obviously has a political overtone. The definition of “loyalty to the country” includes “firmly upholding the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party” and “maintaining uniformity with the Party in thought, politics, and action.”⁴⁴ This reflects the persistent pattern of the PRC government’s longtime conflation of the party and the country. Disloyalty to the party is portrayed as disloyalty to the country. It should also be noted that the emphasis on “uniformity with the Party in thought, politics, and action” goes directly against the traditional Confucian value of “harmony with differences (*he er bu tong*).” Confucian classical teachings explicitly emphasize the importance of different voices in the government. The *Shaogong 20* chapter of the *Zuozhuan*, for instance, spells out that, when the minister always keeps in uniformity with the ruler, there is only sameness rather than harmony; harmony requires a healthy interaction of different opinions.⁴⁵

The majority of the guidelines, however, are of an ethical nature. For example, “enhancing responsibility consciousness,” “honesty,” “integrity,” and “seeking no personal gain in office.” Moreover, there are even items about

“promoting traditional virtues” and “abiding by social ethics and family ethics.”⁴⁶ The guidelines set the goal of placing every civil servant through such training during 2011–2015.

Whether this kind of training is effective remains to be seen. We can hope, however, the training can serve at least as a reminder to civil servants of their duty and ethical obligations on the job. It is far from clear whether these guidelines, or similar material, will be used for future civil service examinations, and if they are, whether they can be a meaningful measure of professional ethics of civil servants.

A III. Recent Reform Toward “Scientific and Democratic” Selections

China’s current civil service system in effect separates recruitment from promotion. Although currently there is no specific requirement on candidates’ moral character for civil service examinations besides absence of criminal record, promotion of public servants is more demanding in this regard. After decades of evolution and reform, promotion within civil service today takes into consideration candidates’ qualifications in multiple dimensions, including civic knowledge, professional ability, moral character, and political reliability.

In 2004, the government implemented a policy of “Promotion through Competition (*jingzheng shanggang*),” institutionalizing competitive promotion of civil servants, up to deputy directors at the departmental level in ministries or provincial governments (*fu-ju ji*).⁴⁷ The policy stipulates that promotions must be carried out on the principles of openness, fairness, and justice, on the basis of a combination of examinations and inspection by upper administration. Article 27

of the policy states that there must not be any “pre-chosen internal candidate,” that procedures cannot be altered in the middle of the process, that unpublicized information and contents of the examinations are strictly kept confidential, among other stipulations.

The promotion process takes several steps. First, when there is a vacancy, interested individuals must submit applications and pass qualification screenings. The policy does not specify criteria for qualification screenings; it refers to another government document published in 2002, “Regulations regarding Promotion to Party and Government Leadership Positions.”⁴⁸ That document contains specific guidelines for promotion of civil servants. For example, applicants for positions at the level of county mayor or ministerial office director (*xian-chu ji*) must have had working experience at a level immediately below it (Article 6). It also stipulates that candidacies may be generated through “democratic nominations,” a process that includes self-nomination and nomination by others. In the second stage of the promotion process, candidates must take written examinations and must pass interviews successfully. These examinations are localized and usually position-specific. Examinations are important as the scores determine whether a candidate can move forward in the process and his or her ranking vis-à-vis other candidates. Unlike civil service examinations in ancient times, however, these examinations are not the sole determining factor in securing appointments. They are only one of the several steps in the process of selection. The 2002 policy stipulates that subjects of the examinations and interviews must include job-related knowledge and skills (Articles 14 and 15). The interviewing committee must consist of at least seven

members, including upper-level administrators, human resources staff, and professional experts; it should also include members from outside the agency. Individuals with conflicts of interest are to be recused. To maintain transparency, interviewing processes are open to public observation within the same agency (Article 16). Third, there will be a “democratic assessment” and inspection by human resources officers. During the “democratic assessment,” public input is solicited (Article 19). Background checks are then conducted. Finally, appointment decisions are to be made by the party leadership in the institution or its supervising agency (Article 24).

The 2004 policy marks a major move toward a comprehensive scheme in selecting civil servants for senior positions. Although the practice inherits traditional methods of examinations and selections by superiors, new mechanisms are incorporated. Article 1 of the policy states that promotion processes must be “scientific, democratic, and institutionalized.” To be “scientific” means to be realistic and relevant to job qualifications. This is manifested mainly in two ways. First, examination subjects are on knowledge and skills closely related to the job. In this regard, it signifies a meaningful departure from ancient examinations. Ancient Chinese civil service examinations focused mainly on Confucian classics. Although the significance of these classics is not to be underestimated, they can at best provide moral and political guidance but do not help with specific skills for job performance. The second main area of the “scientific” move is in requiring professional experts and individuals familiar with the position to serve on interviewing committees. This makes interviews more pertinent and more reliable. One of Max Weber’s characteristics of modern bureaucracy is that

modern office management requires expert training.⁴⁹ The “scientific” turn in the policy in part answers to that requirement. It enhances the mechanism for search after talents.

Whereas the “scientific” characteristic focuses mainly on the “talent” side of the search, the “democratic” dimension covers moral character as well as talent. The selection process is an “open” one; it includes “democratic nominations” as well as “public input and feedback.” This practice reduces nepotism and makes it more likely to select candidates with a broad base of support. To induce employees’ wide participation in the process, Article 18 requires an 80 percent participation rate in “public input and feedback.” Article 21 states that candidates who receive low ratings in the process will not be promoted. Article 19 states that public assessment of candidates focuses mainly on five areas: moral character, ability, dedication, accomplishment, and noncorruptness. These qualities can be readily sorted into two categories: moral character, dedication, and noncorruptness concern moral virtues; ability and accomplishment are indications of talent. Moral character, or *de*, is listed notably as the first among the five focuses in consideration. This is consistent with a long-held party line⁵⁰ as well as the ancient tradition of placing virtue prominently in the selection process.

We should note, however, that in these documents, *de* is used in a broad sense to encompass both moral virtues in the traditional sense and political loyalty to the Party. Article 6 of the 2002 “Regulations” stipulates that occupants of leadership positions “must be equipped with the necessary level of Marxism-Leninism, Mao Thought, and Deng Xiaoping Theory.” These requirements apply

even to those who are not members of the party; Article 4 states that the document also applies to promoting non-Party members in leadership positions.

Although this political requirement strikes us as an unreasonable imposition because it is binding to non-party members, it is almost irrelevant to the vast majority of candidates. Nowadays, there is hardly a clear official interpretation of these ideologies. In most cases, the requirement is no more than a matter of lip service. It becomes relevant, however, when individuals openly express political dissidence. Most candidates, of course, are unwilling to do so.

For good moral character beyond political loyalty, Article 6 of the 2002 “Regulations” includes the following qualities: “Seeking truth from fact,” “uprightness without corruption,” “diligence in serving the people,” “being role models,” “thriftiness and simplicity,” “close connectedness to the people,” “receptiveness to criticism (from the Party and the people),” “self-respect, self-reflection, self-caution, and self-encouragement,” “opposition to bureaucratism,” “opposition to all abuses of power and to using office for self-interest,” and “solidarity with colleagues.” It is noteworthy that most of these are new expressions of traditional values in China. For example, the formulation of truthfulness in terms of “seeking truth from fact” can be traced to the Han dynasty;⁵¹ “uprightness without corruption” has been a perennial value in Chinese social philosophy, especially in Confucianism.

There is little specifics as to how exactly these criteria are measured in the selection process. Presumably, during the period of “democratic assessment,” everyone with an opportunity for input can gauge candidates by his or her own

interpretation and assign candidates with appropriate scores on respective virtues accordingly. Furthermore, pertinent considerations are factored in the deliberation process when the Party leadership makes the final decision for appointment.

The 2002 and 2004 documents do not include special provisions for ethnic minorities. China has 56 officially registered ethnic groups, with numerous minority autonomous regions, districts, and counties. Adequate representation of ethnic minorities in government leadership positions is undoubtedly an important issue of fairness and social stability. Such a mechanism regarding selecting government officials is guaranteed legally in the form of the “Law for the Autonomous Governance of the Ethnic Minorities Areas of the People’s Republic of China.”⁵² Article 17 of the law stipulates that presidents of the autonomous regions, districts, and counties must be members of the respective ethnic minorities, and other governing officials in these governments must include respective minority members as well as members of other minorities. Article 18 further stipulates that respective minorities and other minorities must be reasonably represented in the governments of these ethnic minority areas. These laws set the parameters within which the 2002, 2004, and other related policies operate. They provide a remedy for potential social inequalities that meritocratic practice may engender.

The current system of selecting civil servants for leadership positions is the most comprehensive and sophisticated in China’s history. The goal by and large remains the same: to select people who are both virtuous and talented for government positions, even though definitions of these two qualities have evolved. Mechanisms in the process have also changed. Compared with practices

in ancient times, the current system is indeed (more) “scientific” and “democratic,” and it has definitely been institutionalized. The “scientific” turn helps make selection processes more skill-pertinent by designing and conducting examinations and interviews to actually measure job-related knowledge and skills. The “democratic” aspect gives the public some say in the selection process, not only regarding candidates’ professional ability but also moral character, providing a way to remedy a persistent failure of traditional examination systems. Finally, the ultimate decision power lies with the party leadership in the institution. This, if it functions well, provides a possible corrective to populism or manipulation by public opinions.

All these, of course, are managed in the context of the absolute leadership of the party. The decision power by the party has been maintained as the ultimate principle in the entire process of reform. In ancient times, although candidates were evaluated, judged, and selected in various ways, the ruling family of the empire was not to be challenged. To a large extent, China’s selection system remains the same in this regard. In ancient times, loyalty to the ruling family was considered a primary virtue; today it is loyalty to the party. The absolute leadership of the party determines that the system inherently rewards party loyalty more than anything else. Although personal moral character and records of accomplishments are taken into consideration, loyalty to the party trumps all other criteria. Today’s increasingly diverse society has presented various challenges to the monopoly of the one-party system. If we recognize that the interest of the country and that of the party do not necessarily coincide, and if we regard governmental pursuit of any interest other than that of the country as corruption,

then this element of the selection process may well be the greatest corruption of the current system. Correction of this defect will require replacing the authority of the party with that of the nation in the form of government not monopolized by any political party.

A IV. **Connections with Individual Corruption?**

We have shown that China's current system of selecting government officials has evolved into a comprehensive and sophisticated one, although its general goal for selecting and retaining virtuous and talented officials, broadly speaking, remains intact.

So what does it take if someone wishes to climb the meritocratic ladder and become a government official with leadership responsibility? Normally, first he (or she)⁵³ needs to pass the university entrance examination and secure a place at a good university. After graduation, he needs to pass a civil service examination and acquire a government post. He then needs to pass another specialized examination(s) to compete for a particular leadership position, along with other required screenings. After these accomplishments, with luck, he becomes a government official with leadership responsibility. Down the road, he may be further promoted to higher positions by repeating the last process again and again.⁵⁴ Thus, becoming a government official in China is one of the most difficult career paths in the world. For some, perhaps many, it is also the most valuable career path, because it brings job security, social prestige, and sometimes wealth.

Toward the end of the last section, we raised the issue of corruption associated with the party's monopoly of power. We may call this "collective corruption," as opposed to corruption of individual persons. Individual corruption, however, is a widespread problem in China. Here we turn to the issue of individual corruption. Because the current Chinese selection system coexists conspicuously with severe corruption in society, one cannot help asking the obvious question: does the current selection system contribute to these problems of corruption? It would indeed appear paradoxical to have a comprehensive and sophisticated selection process coexisting with serious corruption in the government. Our view is, however, that although China's civil servant selection and promotion system is by no means perfect and is subject to abuse (particularly abuse of the final decision power of the party), the mechanism itself is not a cause of corruption, in the sense that it does not encourage corrupt officials. For the most part, it provides a countering force against it; without it, corruption would be even worse.

There are several reasons for thinking this way. First, we must note the social context of the system. China's opening up in the past few decades has brought economic prosperity, but it also witnessed severe moral deterioration in society. Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic philosophy as it has been promoted contains two main doctrines. The first is that "getting rich is glorious."⁵⁵ The second is his "cat doctrine," that is, "a cat, white or black, is good as long as it catches mice." Although these doctrines have promoted economic development, they have also led to a social mentality of achieving one's goal at any cost, particularly if the cost is intangible, such as a moral price. The result is a morally debased society.⁵⁶

The civil service selection reform has been developed in such a social background and is meant to counter corruption. Even though corruption sometimes penetrates the civil service selection processes, the method itself is not a mechanism for corruption. Admittedly, within such an unfortunate social climate, any procedural method is likely to be ineffective in fighting corruption. The final decision process of the appointment by the party leadership at a higher level, for example, can be, and definitely has been, used for nepotism or taking bribes, even though it is not supposed to be. This, however, is not an inherent character of the system, just as corruption in many democratic countries cannot be considered an inherent character of democracy or judges taking bribes an inherent aspect of legal systems. When upright people take charge, presumably, they will make uncorrupt decisions, whether in a democracy or in the current Chinese system.

Second, if corruption is the norm, as is commonly believed to be the case in China, even the finest selection method cannot produce clean candidates; it at best yields candidates who are less corrupt than others (this is not to deny that there are uncorrupt officials in China). An ancient Chinese saying goes that “sometimes generals have to be selected from among dwarfs.” Generals (in ancient times) are supposed to be tall and strong. But when they have to be selected from an army entirely comprising short men, generals are just relatively tall dwarfs. Similarly, when candidates for higher government positions have to be selected from a pool of largely corrupt individuals, even well-selected appointees can at best be less corrupt, rather than uncorrupt, individuals.

Third, selection methods, no matter how effective, can only choose qualified candidates and yield suitable appointments at the time of selection; they

cannot prevent appointees from becoming corrupt in office. Additional measures are needed to fight corruption after candidates take office. Within the context of the Chinese political system, the main problem for corruption of the officialdom is not the selection system but the lack of effective watchdogs to keep government officials under close scrutiny. China's current watchdog system is an internal one; the party has its own inspection department at all levels. Although it has caught a large amount of corruption, including some dishonest officials at the national level, these are believed to be merely a fraction of the actual corruption that is widespread throughout the government. The solution to corruption lies in an effective mechanism of close supervision through checks-and-balances of power; the current political system in China does not have an adequate mechanism.

It is our opinion that, under normal circumstances, when social morality is not as widely deteriorated as it is today, the kind of selection process developed so far may serve as an effective way to generate good candidates for government positions. It is reasonable to think that much of China's current selection system can be continued, more formally than materially, as a key component of meritocracy after major changes take place in the country and as the nation's exploration of improved mechanisms for virtuous and talented leaders moves forward.

Footnotes

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² For example, see Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Civil Examinations in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), and the chapters by Benjamin Elman (Ch. 7) and Yuri Pines (Ch. 6) in this volume.

³ The 漢語字典 (Chinese Dictionary, http://zidian.teachercn.com/xian/Word_17127.html) defines 賢 as 有德行，多才能 (virtuous and talented; accessed on July 14, 2012). This is also the way the word is used in the *Shang Xian* chapter of the *Mozi*. In the *Book of History*, the *Book of Zhou Rituals*, and the *Book of Rites*, classic commentators Zheng Xuan and Kong Yingda have interpreted *xian* (primarily) as the virtuous or the morally good (e.g., *Thirteen Classics with Commentaries* (hereafter TTC, 1985) 《十三經注疏》 (Beijing: China Shudian 中國書店), 171, 175, 874, 1463).

⁴ TTC, 134.

⁵ See Yuri Pines's chapter in this volume.

⁶ TTC, 122.

⁷ These stories are in the *Yaodian* and *Shundian* chapters of the *Book of History*. The authors thank Joseph Chan for the reference in the *Shundian*.

⁸ Qian Mu 錢穆, 《國史新論》 *New Studies of Chinese History* (Taipei: Dongda Publishing Company, 2004), pp. 242–4.

⁹ TTC, 1342.

¹⁰ Qian, op. cit., p. 246–7.

¹¹ Elman, op. cit., p. 7.

¹² E. A. Kracke, Jr., “Family vs. Merit in the Examination System,” in Johanna M. Menzel, ed., (1963), *The Chinese Civil Service: Career Open to Talent?* (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company), pp. 1–8.

¹³ See Elman's chapter in this volume.

¹⁴ Qian, op. cit., p. 248.

¹⁵ 氣，水也；言，浮物也。水大而物之浮者大小畢浮，氣之與言猶也，氣盛則言之短長與聲之高下者皆宜... (君子) 处心有道，行己有方，用則傳諸其徒；垂諸文而為後世法 (Qu Shouyuan and Chang Sichun 屈守元、常思春 eds., 《韓愈全集校注》 *Annotated Complete Works of Han Yu* (Chengdu: Sichuan University Press, 1996). The authors gratefully acknowledge William Nienhauser for suggestions in revising our English translation.

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- ¹⁶ For a Confucian view of a person's being and the cultivation of *qi*, see Chenyang Li, "Confucian Moral Cultivation, Longevity, and Public Policy," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, vol. IX, no. 1 (2010), pp. 25–36.
- ¹⁷ Han obviously had in mind objects lighter than water.
- ¹⁸ Qian, *op. cit.*, p. 249.
- ¹⁹ David Nivison, "The Criteria for Excellence," in Johanna M. Menzel, ed., (1963), p. 98.
- ²⁰ 今郡縣之學官，置博士弟子員，皆未嘗考其德行道義之素，其所受授，又皆世俗之書，進取之業，使人見利而不見義。Zhu Jieren et al. 朱杰人 ed., 《朱子全書》 *Complete Works of Zhu Xi* (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Press, 2002), p. 3783).
- ²¹ Nivison, *op. cit.*, p. 99.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ Qian, *op. cit.*, p. 252.
- ²⁴ Nivison, *op. cit.*, p. 94.
- ²⁵ 北宋王安石也說：“今以少年時，正當講求天下正理，乃閉門學作詩賦。及其入官，世事皆所不習。此科法敗壞人才，致不如古。”（《宋史·選舉誌一》）
Twenty-five Histories 《二十五史》 (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Press, 1986), p. 467.
- ²⁶ 明代王廷相也說：“今之選舉，不問其人品德行何如，徒以文章合格而舉之，無怪乎其入仕之狼狽也。”（《王廷相集·王氏家藏集·雅述下篇》，see Wang Tingxiang, 《王廷相集》 *Collected Works of Wang Tingxiang* (Beijing: Zhonghua Books, 1989), p. 860).
- ²⁷ Elman, *op. cit.*, p. 371.
- ²⁸ E. A. Kracke, Jr., "Sponsorship and the Selection of Talent," in Menzel, (1963), pp. 84–5.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 86. This is undoubtedly far from a complete list. From a Confucian perspective, such personal qualities as fondness of learning, trustworthiness, and family virtues are also indispensable.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ Available at http://gaokao.eol.cn/baogao_11480/20110428/t20110428_608004.shtml (accessed November 7, 2011).
- ³² A government regulation concerning promotions of civil servants, published on 23 July 2002, states that candidates "usually should have university degrees

(<http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/16/20020723/782504.html>). Accessed on 7 November 2011.

³³ These exceptions include direct selection from outstanding college students, selective recruitment from veterans, and selection of leadership officeholders from state-owned companies.

³⁴ *China Daily*, November 26, 2012, 4 Nation.

³⁵ 《京华时报》 *Jinghua Times*, October 26, 2011, A03.

³⁶ 《新京报》 *Xinjing News*, October 25, 2012.

³⁷ China's current cadre system assigns each government office a rank (*ji*) so that a minister in the central government is on the same rank as a provincial governor and so forth.

³⁸ 倪星, 王立京 (Ni Xing and Wang Lijing), “中国腐败现状的测量与腐败后果的估算 (Assessing Current Corruption in China and Its Consequences),” 《新华文摘》 *Xinhua Wenzhai*, 2004;3.

³⁹ See <http://www.mos.gov.cn/mos/cms/html/3/65/201102/2025.html> (accessed November 7, 2011).

⁴⁰ A widespread saying is, “fighting corruption will lead to the demise of the Party; but not fighting corruption will mean the demise of the nation” 反腐败会亡党;不反腐败会亡国.

⁴¹ See http://bj.lgwy.net/StudentDoc-content_4506.html (accessed November 7, 2011).

⁴² “Can Civil Service Examinations Place Moral Character First?” (公务员招考能否考出“以德为先”?) 《宁波晚报》 *Ningbo Evening News*, October 16, 2011, A15; available at http://daily.cnnb.com.cn/nbwb/html/2011-10/16/content_373680.htm (accessed November 7, 2011).

⁴³ 《公务员职业道德培训大纲》, the State Administration of Civil Service (http://www.scs.gov.cn/Desktop.aspx?path=Desktop.aspx?PATH=gjgwyj/gjgwyjsy/xxllym&gid=b897e8a0-cebd-4777-8f68-66fb3ef4facf&tid=Cms_Info). Accessed 7 November 2011.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ TTC, 2093.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ 《党政机关竞争上岗工作暂行规定》 (<http://law.51labour.com/lawshow-82265.html>). Another pertinent document, China's Civil Service Act (《中华人民共和国公务员法》), enacted on January 1, 2006, stipulates that civil servants at the office staff level should be recruited through open, competitive examinations (Article 21) and that promotions up to deputy directors at the departmental level in a ministry or a provincial government are through two channels: (1) selection through competition among candidates at lower positions within the same administrative system (*jingzheng shanggang*) and (2) selection from candidates in all sectors of society (*gongkai xuanba*, Article 45). A vast majority of promotions in the government have been through competition among candidates at lower positions within the same agency. *China's Human Resources Paper* reported that, within China's Ministry of Human Resources, 95 percent of promotions were made through open competition among internal candidates (《中国人事报》 August 20, 2007). The government does not formally publicize this kind of data. Because the Ministry of Human Resources is likely to lead the trend in this regard, we have reasons to think these data have broad representation.

⁴⁸ 《党政领导干部选拔任用工作条例》 (see <http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/16/20020723/782504.html>).

⁴⁹ H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 198.

⁵⁰ Section 5.1 of the 2009 "Resolutions of the Party's Fourth Plenary Meeting of the 17th Congress" explicitly states a policy of "both virtue and talent but virtue first" (德才兼备、以德为先).

⁵¹ 实事求是, *Twenty-five Histories* (Vol. 1), 226.

⁵² 《中华人民共和国民族区域自治法》, available at http://www.gov.cn/test/2005-07/29/content_18338.htm, accessed January 15, 2012).

⁵³ Although there is still sex inequality, especially for government positions at higher levels, there has been significant progress in sex equality in access to university education in China.

⁵⁴ Currently, promotions to the directorship at the departmental level in a ministry and above go through a different channel.

⁵⁵ The saying has been widely attributed to Deng Xiaoping, although its origin remains unclear.

⁵⁶ For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Chenyang Li, “Contemporary Challenges for Confucianism,” *Journal of East-West Thought*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2012) pp. 53–68.