Comparing Political Values in China and the West: What Can Be Learned and Why It Matters

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Abstract

Along with China's economic and military rise, its leading political values will increasingly shape both China and the world at large. Hence, we need to understand, compare, and learn from leading values in China's political culture. This review discusses recent efforts to systematically compare three leading values in China's philosophical traditions—meritocracy, hierarchy, and harmony—with leading values from the political culture of Western societies.

INTRODUCTION

A comparative approach to political thinking comes naturally to Chinese students and intellectuals. Notwithstanding the political constraints, most political debates in Chinese universities involve comparisons of leading political values from philosophical traditions in China and the West. Teachers and students read great texts from Western and Chinese traditions and often travel to Western countries to learn about the latest debates in political theory. Western universities, in contrast, seem strikingly parochial. Most departments of political science, philosophy, and law at leading Anglophone universities remain focused on academic debates in Western societies and resist serious exploration of Chinese traditions and contemporary political debates in China.

Why does this matter? One reason is philosophical (or intellectual). Chinese philosophy offers rich and varied traditions and texts for thinking about politics, and Western universities arbitrarily cut themselves off from fascinating intellectual debates. Moreover, the systematic encounter of leading ideas from different traditions can inspire fresh political thinking of lasting value. The other reason is political. For most of the twentieth century, Chinese political theory was marginalized mainly due to the superior economic and military power of Western countries. There was no practical need for Westerners to understand China's political traditions because they did not impact much of the world outside of China. But now we cannot avoid discussing the impact of China's rise. We need to understand China's political values not only because they influence China but also because they influence much of the rest of the world. Dissimilar views about politics in the United States and China, for example, are partly rooted in variant priorities given by each society to key political values and aspirations, not simply in conflicting military and economic interests. Of course both societies share many political values, but the ranking of those values may differ, which matters in cases of conflict. To defuse political conflicts rooted in cultural misunderstandings, it is important to understand diverse political values and respect areas of morally legitimate difference. More ambitiously, comparative work can generate fresh political ideas relevant for thinking about the pressing global issues of our day. Exclusive reliance on political values developed in Western countries when those countries had almost total sway over the rest of the world is far less likely to generate practical insights relevant for today's multipolar world.

The news is not all bad. The West is far from monolithic, and some countries—Norway, for example—seem more internationally minded. Area studies has been a prominent subdiscipline in American universities, and political scientists compare political institutions in developed countries, in developing countries (to a lesser extent), and between developed and developing countries (to the least extent). Political scientists carry out rigorous empirical research comparing political values between different regions and countries (e.g., World Values Survey, Asian Barometer). What is lacking, however, is systematic reflection on what can be learned from political values outside the West, which is in sharp contrast to China, where intellectuals have been debating how to learn from the "best of the West" for over a century.

Of course, the field of political theory aims first and foremost at normative reflection about how society ought to be run and politics organized and justified, and that is where we would expect the most systematic engagement with Chinese political thinking. But progress has been slow. In the early 1980s, I took courses in the "Plato to NATO" mode and graduated without any awareness that there might be anything of normative interest to learn from the non-Western political world. In the late 1980s, Western communitarian thinkers cast doubt on the universal validity of political ideals that stem from the liberal democratic experience, but they did not propose any desirable and politically realistic alternatives. The debates were mainly about the need to deepen (rather than limit) democracy and how to reduce forms of hierarchy (rather than think about which forms are justified), and the value of harmony was almost invisible in these debates. Western liberals

eventually took on board communitarian insights, and the liberal–communitarian debate withered out of academic existence without any serious engagement with leading political values from non-Western societies. More recently, the field of comparative political theory has been slowly but surely making an impact in Western universities (von Vacano 2015). Key works in Chinese political theory have been translated and published by Brookings's Thornton Center Chinese Thinkers Series and the Princeton–China Series. There have been extensive discussions of methodology in comparative political theory (Dallmayr 2010, Godrej 2011, Jenco 2007). Theorists have insightfully compared the ethical and political ideas of great thinkers in the past (Yearley 1990, El Amine 2015). Some works in comparative political theory have more explicit normative concerns (Tan 2004, Jenco 2010). But there have been few efforts in Western universities to systematically compare Chinese and Western political values and to relate those insights to contemporary political problems in a way that is accessible for the public at large. And even fewer efforts take leading political values from Chinese political culture, such as meritocracy, hierarchy, and harmony, as the building blocks for the comparative project.

So what would it mean to compare leading political values in China and the West? Of course, there are substantial areas of overlap. Nobody in China publicly disputes "thin" human rights, such as rights against genocide, slavery, torture, murder, or systematic racial discrimination (Walzer 1994). But other political values dominant in Western societies, such as democracy, equality, and freedom, are intensely contested in China. No doubt Chinese government officials often contest these values—and restrict political debates about so-called Western values—to mask ugly abuses of political power. But that is not the whole, or even the main, story. Many political reformers and independent intellectuals in China as well as experts in Chinese philosophy and political culture outside of China argue that political values such as meritocracy, hierarchy, and harmony contrast with dominant political values in the West and also impact the way political power is organized and justified in China (Bell & Li 2013). Of course, such claims need to be examined with an open mind. It is not sufficient to dismiss them on the basis of a theory of universal moral and political reasoning that draws only on the moral aspirations and social practices found in Western societies. Nor is it sufficient to assert irreconcilable civilizational differences and rule out overlap and the possibility of mutual learning (Huntington 2011). We need to systematically compare political values prioritized in China and the West and explore areas of overlap and areas of difference. Once the contrasts are clearly spelled out, we need to consider the possibility of learning from them. Can we construct a different political morality that draws on the insights of various political traditions and helps us think about political problems in a multipolar world? Or should we reconcile ourselves to key differences? If some differences are irreconcilable, then we would need to reflect ethically on how to negotiate relationships in light of them. To what extent do we need to tolerate or respect a society with sharply contrasting political outlooks? It was possible to ignore these questions in the days when the West exerted overwhelming intellectual influence backed by superior economic and military might, but today we need to engage with the intellectual substance of political conflicts grounded (at least partly) in appeals to different political values in different parts of the world.

This article discusses recent efforts to systematically compare dominant political values in China and the West. There are rich debates in the Chinese language, but for reasons of space I confine myself to discussion of English-language works. I focus mainly on contrasting philosophical perspectives informed by present-day political controversies rather than empirical differences in values between countries and regions, although the latter can shed light on the former. Some of these works have been penned by academics over several years. My own thinking has been influenced by the work of the Berggruen Philosophy and Culture Center (BPCC) between 2014 and 2016 (I was director of the BPCC during this period). The BPCC has brought together leading minds from across cultural and political boundaries to explore the key questions of our

time, with a view to not only improve mutual understanding but also generate fresh insights via extensive mutual learning and to publicize findings and translate them in a language accessible to the broader public in both the West and China. More concretely, the BPCC has focused on themes that (*a*) encompass polarities and tensions both within and between traditions of great long-term political and philosophical significance, (*b*) can generate fresh insights if explored from the perspective of different ethical traditions and disciplines, and (*c*) invite much systematic and comparative research. The objective is not simply to clarify commonalities and morally legitimate differences between political values but also to inspire new perspectives and fresh philosophical thinking. Following extensive deliberation with leading thinkers from different cultures and disciplines, the BPCC prioritized three cross-cultural themes of social and political significance during this period, with special emphasis on the contributions of Chinese political traditions that have been neglected in Western academic debates: meritocracy and democracy, hierarchy and equality, and harmony and freedom. I discuss each of these contrasts—taking leading values from Chinese political culture as the starting point—and conclude with suggestions for future research.

MERITOCRACY AND DEMOCRACY

The debates about democracy (in the sense of government by the people) and political meritocracy (in the sense that the political system should be designed with the aim of selecting and promoting leaders with superior ability and virtue) have the longest history. Plato famously criticized democracy and defended a meritocratic political ideal in *The Republic*. Political meritocracy was influential throughout subsequent Western political theory and practice, although thinkers rarely defended a pure form of political meritocracy. US founding fathers and nineteenth-century liberal elites such as John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville put forward political ideals that tried to combine meritocracy and democracy (Macedo 2013, Skorupski 2013). Today, liberal democracies empower meritocratically selected experts in administrative and judicial positions, but they are accountable, if only indirectly, to democratically elected leaders (Pettit 2013). They are meant to exercise power in a narrowly defined domain and should try to remain politically neutral to the extent possible. For example, British civil servants are meant to serve elected politicians and may need to set aside their own political views as they do so. But the idea that there should be meritocratic checks—say, examinations or requirements of political experience at lower levels of government—on the selection of political leaders who are supposed to exercise political judgment in a wide range of domains has come to be viewed as beyond the moral pale in Western societies. There is almost reflexive attachment to the view that one person–one vote is the only morally legitimate way of selecting political leaders, no matter how large the political community or what the political context. Hence, theorizing about political meritocracy—in the sense of how best to select and promote political leaders who exercise political judgment in a wide range of domains and hold the ultimate power in the political community—has all but faded from modern Western political discourse in the post–World War II period. It is fine to discuss meritocracy in the civil service but not to defend alternatives to elections as a way of selecting political leaders.

That said, there are growing doubts about the quality of leaders in Western countries. Whatever the advantages of electoral democracies—they hold leaders accountable to citizens and ensure that there can be a peaceful transition in leadership—the system will not work well if the voters elect inexperienced leaders who have limited ability and/or are prone to corruption. A key justification for democratic elections is the idea that voters are rational and do a good job choosing leaders, but social scientific evidence shows that people often lack the competence and motivation to make morally informed and rational political judgments (Brennan 2011, Aden & Bartels 2016). Voters often misunderstand their own economic interests (Caplan 2007). They often vote in immoral

ways, according to their short-term or ethnic-group interests, even if doing so imposes severe costs on other groups in the political community (Mann 2005). When they vote for the common good, they typically consider their own interests and not those of future generations, people living outside the state, animals, and others affected by the policies of the government; at the very least, voters are unlikely to sacrifice the interest of the voting community in favor of the interests of nonvoters (such as future generations) in cases of conflict (Mulgan 2011).

In response, theorists have proposed measures designed to increase the likelihood that well-informed and public-spirited voters have more say, similar to John Stuart Mill's proposal that educated people should have extra votes. Caplan (2007) has proposed tests of economic competence for voters. Ziliotti & Bell (2014) propose multiple-choice exams on the political platforms of two political parties, no more difficult than tests for a driving license. Whatever the normative desirability of such proposals, they are unlikely to get a serious hearing in countries that have implemented a one person–one vote system for the selection of political leaders. For better or worse, most people do not want to give up or qualify the right to vote once they get it. Of course, electoral democracies can (and perhaps should) implement measures designed to promote decision making by nonpartisan experts and to improve the quality of the decision-making process in between elections (Berggruen & Gardels 2012). But elected leaders still have the power to decide whether to implement nonpartisan advice. And decisions promoted by experts often lack democratic legitimacy, allowing the rise of populist demagogues who promise to restore power to the people. At the end of the day, it is the people's right to elect low-quality leaders who cannot plausibly deliver what they promise or who promote irrational policies. In this sense, the literature points to a sharp divide between political systems that rely primarily (or ultimately) on electoral democracy and those that rely primarily on meritocratic mechanisms designed to select and promote leaders with superior ability and virtue.

Political meritocracy is a more consistent theme in the history of Chinese political culture. The idea of elevating the worthy emerged in the wake of the disintegration of the pedigree-based aristocratic order of the Spring and Autumn period (770–453 BCE) and proliferated rapidly throughout the Warring States period (435–221 BCE), when it was shared by every major intellectual current (Pines 2013). It would be only a slight exaggeration to say that subsequent political theorizing in China centered on disputes about which abilities and virtues matter for public officials and what mechanisms are most likely to select and promote leaders with those abilities and virtues. Imperial China's great contribution to political meritocracy was the imperial examination system. From the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE) until the collapse of the imperial examination system in 1905, public officials were selected mainly by means of rigorous and ultracompetitive examinations. However, the examinations functioned mainly as a filtering process among elites (Elman 2013), and they were usually followed by performance evaluations at lower levels of government. And emperors could and did exercise arbitrary political power over the whole system.

The question of how to reconcile political meritocracy and democracy came to the fore in the early twentieth century, when Chinese reformers and intellectuals were confronted with China's weakness and made an effort to learn from aspects of the more modern democratic political systems in Western societies. Sun Yat-Sen (1866–1925), who cofounded the Kuomintang and served as its first leader, argued for democratic elections along with an independent examination branch freed from dependence on the arbitrary rule of the monarch. The examination branch would set examinations for public officials, including elected officials, and all must pass those examinations before assuming office (Sun 1994; see also C. Li 2012). The problem with this view, however, is that leaders who win a large share of the vote but fail the exams would still be viewed as more legitimate representatives than those who pass exams but get elected with a far lower share of the

vote. Hence, it should not be surprising that the examination branch was only employed to test civil servants once the Kuomintang took power in Taiwan.

In mainland China, debates about political meritocracy stopped because Maoism valued the political contributions of warriors, workers, and farmers over those of intellectuals and educators. Whatever the top-down political reality, revolutionary leaders claimed they were building a new form of participatory socialist democracy from the ground up, and defenders of political elitism were nowhere to be seen (or publicly heard from) in mainland China. But the country was primed for a revival of political meritocracy following a disastrous experience with radical populism and arbitrary dictatorship in the Cultural Revolution. China's leaders reestablished elements of its meritocratic tradition, such as the selection of leaders based on examinations and promotion based on performance evaluations at lower levels of government, while also establishing democratic elections at the village level. However, there remains a large gap between the ideals of meritocracy and democracy and the political reality in China, and contemporary political theorists have developed their own proposals for reconciling political meritocracy and democracy.

Several thinkers have proposed combining the advantages of meritocracy and democracy at the level of central political institutions. A properly designed constitutional system should have institutions that reflect the need to choose leaders on the democratic basis of one person–one vote, as well as institutions that reflect the need for meritorious leaders with above-average ability and virtue. Jiang (2012) proposes a democratic house of government with members selected on a one person–one vote basis and balanced with a meritocratic House of Exemplary Persons with members selected on the basis of knowledge of the Confucian classics. Bai (2013) proposes a democratic house of the people that allows people's voices to be heard and provides citizens with the psychological benefits of voting, along with a meritocratic legislature consisting of people selected on the basis of superior ability and virtue. The members of the meritocratic house would be chosen by a mixture of exams, votes by members of lower-level legislatures, and a quota system to represent diverse sectors of society. The meritocratic house would have the power to legislate on issues concerned with nonvoters and the long-term considerations of the political community. Chan (2013, 2014) argues that a democratic legislature should be complemented by a meritocratic institution composed of experienced political journalists and senior public servants chosen on the basis of their virtue and competence by their colleagues.

The problem with such proposals is not just they are far removed from the current political reality in China. The deeper problem is that they would be difficult (perhaps impossible) to consolidate even if they were to see the light of day. Once some political leaders are chosen on the basis of one one person–one vote, it is almost inevitable that those leaders will be seen as the legitimate political leaders by the people who elect them, and the powers of the meritocratic chamber are likely to become marginalized over time. It is not just a tendency in Western countries, such as the United Kingdom, that have tried to inject a strong element of meritocracy in a second chamber. Survey data show the Chinese people strongly value political meritocracy (Shi 2015), but other East Asian societies that valued political meritocracy rapidly changed and came to support democracy in the form of one person–one vote once the change was made. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan all came to prefer democracy over paternalistic Confucian legacies after the institutionalization of democracy (Shin 2011, 2013).

So perhaps mainland China, which has yet to institutionalize one person–one vote to select top political leaders, is a more promising context for the institutionalization of a strong form of meritocratic rule. Hence, political theorists have tried to build on the ideal of a vertical democratic meritocracy—meaning democracy at lower levels of government, with the political system becoming progressively more meritocratic at higher levels of government—that has inspired political reform in China over the past three decades (Bell 2015). Zheng (2010) argues that the Chinese

Communist Party has opened its political process by recruiting elites from different social groups. The Chinese Communist Party can and should continue to introduce democratic elements, such as bargaining and reciprocity with other social and political players, to an existing political system short of free and fair competitive elections for top leaders. Yao (2013) argues that a disinterested central government and a rational selection process for government officials have underpinned China's economic success. However, the party-state must find ways to absorb the demands of ordinary people and monitor its own leaders if it is to ensure continued success. He (2016) discusses efforts to reconcile meritocracy and democracy at all levels of government in China but calls for more experiments with deliberative democracy and more emphasis on merit rather than political loyalty in the selection and promotion process for public officials. Xiao & C. Li (2013) argue that one key problem with political meritocracy is that it is easier to measure ability than virtue. Exams can test for knowledge, and performance evaluations can include relatively objective assessments, such as rates of economic growth, but such mechanisms cannot readily filter out corrupt candidates who care more about their own interest than the community's interest. Hence, it should not be surprising that Chinese leaders at higher levels of government tend to be capable administrators but that corruption has worsened as more money has flushed through the political system. Xiao & C. Li (2013) conclude that the Chinese government needs to loosen authoritarian controls to allow more criticisms of the party and alternative paths to contribute to the common good. But can the Chinese government open up without going the way of multiparty rule and democratic elections for top leaders, which means that the people might choose political leaders who have not been through the rigorous meritocratic selection and training process, hence undermining the meritocratic system? Perhaps political meritocracy requires some controls on the freedom of political association so that nonmeritocratic parties and politicians without any political experience cannot readily win political power. It might also require Singapore-style constraints on the freedom of speech to protect the reputation and moral authority (hence legitimacy) of meritocratically selected political rulers. Defenders of political meritocracy who favor a more open society in China may need to make some hard choices. More fundamentally: What, if anything, can justify political hierarchy, and hierarchies more generally, in modern societies that strongly value equality?

HIERARCHY AND EQUALITY

Equality is clearly an important value, and much been written on the ideal and practice of equality as well as on the need to equalize relations between genders, classes, and ethnic and religious groups. But hierarchy, arguably, is equally important, and research on hierarchy has lagged behind. In a purely descriptive sense, a hierarchy is a relation that is characterized by (*a*) difference and (*b*) ranking according to some attribute. Social hierarchies tend to have a normative dimension: They are social systems in which there is "an implicit or explicit rank order of individuals or groups with respect to a valued social dimension" (Magee & Galinsky 2008, p. 354). All complex and large-scale societies need to be organized along certain hierarchies. This point is widely recognized in China but is more controversial in Western countries. There are many questions to explore: Which hierarchies are justified, and which ones are not? What are the commonalities and differences among the ways that various societies and ethical traditions conceive of equality and hierarchy? What are the responsibilities of those on the top and the bottom of hierarchies—in the family and the workplace, between rulers and citizens, between countries, between humans and animals, between humans and artificially intelligent machines—and what are the best ways to promote those responsibilities? What are the roles of empathy, harmony, accountability, and other values and virtues in morally legitimate and productive hierarchical relations, and how can these be cultivated? Can

ideas from past and non-Western philosophical traditions about hierarchy between humans and animals inform our debate on proper relations with artificially intelligent machines in the future?

In short, it is important to think about which forms of hierarchy are justified and how they can be made compatible with egalitarian goals. Complex societies need hierarchies, and any effort to consciously build societies without hierarchies, as in the French Revolution and Cultural Revolution, is likely to lead to arbitrary rule and tyranny. So we need to clearly distinguish between good and bad forms of hierarchy and think of ways of to promote the good forms and minimize the influence of bad ones. There has been some work along these lines in business studies; it seems obvious that large companies need hierarchies of some sort (Mochari 2014). The same is true in international relations; it seems obvious that some states have more power than others and that any theorizing needs to proceed on this basis (Lake 2009). But the question of morally justified hierarchies has been marginalized from debates in Western political theory. This is a rich and potentially productive area for future research.

Whatever the surface resistance against speaking in favor of any kind ofhierarchy, one study (Zitek & Tiedens 2012) found that people like hierarchies at an unconscious level. An abstract diagram representing hierarchy was memorized more quickly than a diagram representing equality, and the faster processing led the participants to prefer the hierarchy diagram. The same study found that participants found it easier to make decisions about a company that was more hierarchical and thus thought the hierarchical organization had more positive qualities. We generally take hierarchies of esteem for granted: It seems obvious that Lebron James deserves his trophy as the Most Valuable Player in the 2016 playoffs by virtue of his achievements on the basketball court. And whatever the disputes about the moral worthiness of particular Nobel Peace Prize winners, few object to the principle that we can and should reward those with great moral achievements of some sort.

Why then do Americans (and other Westerners) usually endorse statements about equality; reject statements about the value of hierarchy (Bellah et al. 1985); and complain that hierarchies are inhumane, immoral, and undemocratic (Leavitt 2004)? The key reason is our unhappy experience with morally bad hierarchies in the form of racism, sexism, and caste-like distinctions between people. Nobody living in modern societies defends hierarchies among classes of humans who are inherently superior or inferior based on noble birth, race, or sex, although such hierarchies were common (and commonly accepted) in the past. In ancient Rome, the penalty for assault on a slave was half the penalty for assault on a free man (Beard 2015, p. 144), but today slavery is (fortunately) regarded as morally obscene. Walzer (1983, p. 313) pointed to the example of Indian villagers who accept the doctrines that support the caste system as an example of a just hierarchy, but this example no longer applies today (if it ever did); intellectuals in India rarely defend the caste system. In Imperial China, successful exam takers were given special exemption from criminal punishment simply by virtue of having passed public service examinations, but I do not know of any modern Chinese thinkers (including Confucians) who seek to revive such forms of inequality before the law. At some level, then, we are all egalitarians. But it does not follow that there are no good forms of hierarchy compatible with equality of basic moral status and equality before the criminal law. And if we fail to consciously distinguish between good and bad forms of hierarchy, we are not doing as much as we can (and should) to promote the good ones and minimize the influence of the pernicious ones. So what are the arguments for hierarchy? Which ones are prioritized in particular forms of social relations? And what are the morally legitimate cultural differences in these respects? Let us discuss these questions in turn.

The most obvious justification for hierarchy is efficiency. Any large company or bureaucratic organization needs hierarchies to function in a more effective way. The need for hierarchical relations is especially evident in the military. Edmund Burke (1999 [1790]) famously criticized

the French revolutionaries for seeking to equalize relations of command and obedience in the military and predicted it would lead to the rise of "some popular general, who understands the art of conciliating the soldiery, and who possesses the true spirit of command," who would "draw the eyes of men upon himself" and eventually become "the master of the whole republic" (p. 332). Today, we accept that military hierarchies are justified in order for armies to be able to win, so long as there is room to dissent in cases of unjust war.

The ancient Chinese philosopher Xunzi (circa 310–219 BCE) provides the basis for another defense of hierarchy. He begins with the assumption that humans are prone to self-interest and the unlimited pursuit of desires, but he argues that rituals can minimize the manifestation of these flaws. Rituals can create a sense of community among participants and civilize (or make civil) forms of human interaction that would otherwise lead to conflict. Xunzi discusses hierarchical rituals that involve people with different degrees of power and status in common social practices that treat people differently. In the twentieth century, Chinese liberals and Marxists denounced hierarchical rituals because they seem designed to benefit the ruling classes of feudal societies and thus are inappropriate for modern times. But this is a misreading of Xunzi's intentions. For Xunzi, hierarchical rituals also have the effect of benefiting the weak and poor; they are essential for generating a sense of community and the emotional disposition for the powerful to care for the interests of the worse off. For example, a village drinking ritual lets the elders drink first, but all participate in the ritual, thus generating a sense of community, with the powerful members of the community caring for those with less power (Bell 2008). In short, an important function of hierarchical rituals is that they not only give recognition to those with power and status but also make them care about the interests and needs of those with less power and status.

That said, hierarchies that are supposed to benefit lower-ranking members should not ossify relations of power and status. Hence, Confucians proposed role playing, such as ancestor-worship rituals that involve role reversals between the old and the young (Puett 2014), as a way of increasing the likelihood that those with more power and status identify with those on the bottom of hierarchies. In the long term, of course, the young will come to take the place of the old and hence move up the age hierarchy in a more natural way. The same goes for teacher–student relationships. These relations are hierarchical in the sense that students are supposed to defer to teachers with more knowledge. Accepting that others know more than we do communicates openness to learning and growth; by deferring to a teacher, we create a space in which we can improve (Angle 2012). But deference does not imply rigid submission; the teacher should also be humble and always open to self-improvement, hence open to the possibility of learning from the student (J. Li 2016). In the long term, teachers should be open to the possibility that students will eventually surpass them. One of the most famous lines of the *Analects of Confucius* is that the young should be held in high esteem because the younger generation may surpass the older (9.23). The purpose of the hierarchy, in other words, is not to dominate those on the bottom of the hierarchy but to enable them to grow in their own powers. Put negatively, a hierarchy becomes dysfunctional when those with more power and status do not identify with and help lower-ranking members, or worse still, seek to exploit and oppress them. In summary, the second justification for hierarchical relations is that they can benefit those with less power and status, so long as (*a*) there are mechanisms for those on top of the hierarchy to identify with those of lower rank, and (*b*) the hierarchies are fluid and allow for upward movement.

A social egalitarian might accept hierarchies of this sort confined to the family and civil society but object to extending these hierarchies to the sphere of politics, where political equality is the only acceptable relationship. Confucians, however, argue that the main point of setting up political authority is to serve those who are governed. Political hierarchy could be justified if those with power effectively serve the well-being of the governed and if the relationship between participants

expresses relations of trust and commitment between the rulers and the ruled (Chan 2014, Tiwald 2012). A defense of hierarchy from the perspective of Confucian ethics would also emphasize relational properties, such as harmony, as foundational (as opposed to more characteristically Western views that normativity is a function of properties intrinsic to the individual, such as autonomy, rationality, or desire) and defend hierarchical relations if they are necessary to prevent discord and foster communion (Metz 2017). If a hierarchical form of government serves the people, establishes relations of mutual trust between rulers and ruled, and promotes harmonious relations between the people while establishing mechanisms to prevent abuses of power, then it is justified by Confucian standards even if it conflicts with contemporary ideas of political equality.

That said, hierarchical relations can also express values that modern-day liberals are more likely to endorse. Taylor (1996) distinguishes between coercive and cooperative hierarchies. In the coercive approach, hierarchical superiors try to control the behavior of subordinates by one-way, top-down, individualized coercion. In the cooperative approach—as in Japanese-style community policing and workplace management—hierarchical subordinates are encouraged to help themselves and are given a sense of control over what they do. The superiors still hold the ultimate power to make decisions, but they also promote values such as autonomy and self-control among the subordinates and rely on mutual trust first and foremost to further the aims of the common enterprise, with coercion and punishment as the last resort (Taylor 1996). There are other ways that hierarchical relations can promote individual autonomy. Advocates of "nudging" or liberal paternalists argue for paternalistic interventions in the external environment and education of citizens that help people to overcome their cognitive biases and ultimately enable them to act more autonomously (Thaler & Sunstein 2009). Moreover, bureaucratic hierarchies can instantiate liberal values, such as the rule of law, that need to be protected against calls from neoliberals (or libertarians) who argue for dismantling bureaucratic hierarchies on the grounds that the decentralized, competitive structure of the market is more economically efficient (Bevir 2010). And hierarchical institutions such as the Supreme Court can promote the rule of law by protecting individual rights against infringements by majorities (Macedo 2013). In short, hierarchical practices and institutions can also promote liberal values, such as autonomy and the rule of law.

Hierarchies, then, can be justified because they contribute to efficiency, the well-being of lower-ranking members, harmonious relations, and/or liberal values. But which justification(s) for hierarchy should be prioritized depends on the nature of the social relation(s) as well as the social context. In a family context, hierarchical relations are justified first and foremost because they empower weaker members, such as children. Parents have authority over children, but they are supposed to put children on the road to adulthood, at which point the children will exercise similar authority. Confucians add that elderly parents should maintain authority over adult children because (*a*) we have life-long responsibilities to thank our parents in exchange for the love and care they provided when we were young and (*b*) those with more experience and knowledge generally can exercise wiser judgment (Bell 2008). In the past, the dominance of husbands over wives was justified mainly on grounds of efficiency (C. Li 2014). Because men were supposed to have superior physical strength, they would engage in socially valued work—hunting, farming, fighting, etc.—and women were confined to the home. Today, most jobs require intellectual and social rather than physical skills, and the efficiency justification for male dominance in the family no longer applies, if it ever did. In the case of business corporations and the military, by contrast, the efficiency justification for hierarchy is front and center.

The idea that hierarchies can be justified if they benefit their lower-ranking members is also central to justifying political arrangements. Rawls (1999) famously argued the inequalities in the distribution of valued goods can be justified if they benefit the worse-off groups in a political community. In international relations, hierarchies between countries can be justified if they provide

security guarantees and economic benefits to subordinates (Lake 2009). Countries like Canada benefit from US hegemony in the sense that they are protected by a US security umbrella and can divert resources from defense to social welfare. X. Yan (2011) argues China should openly recognize that it is a dominant power in a hierarchical world but that this sense of dominance means it has extra responsibilities, including the provision of economic assistance and security guarantees to nonnuclear states.

The hierarchical relation between humans and animals is also justified with reference to the idea that a hierarchy ought to benefit its lower-ranking members. Even defenders of animal rights who strongly oppose speciesism, or the idea that we are entitled to treat members of other species in a way in which it would be wrong to treat members of our own species (Singer 1973), implicitly admit to a just hierarchy between humans and animals when a choice must be made between killing a human and an animal, as in the recent case involving the killing of a gorilla to save a young child (Singer & Dawn 2016). But accepting such a hierarchy does not morally permit humans to exploit animals as they wish, even though that may be the ugly reality (Harari 2015). In principle, humans have an obligation to provide the conditions for decent lives to animals and to represent their interests to the extent possible (Donaldson & Kymlicka 2011). In contrast, the hierarchical relation between humans and machines is justified purely on grounds of efficiency: It is fine to exploit machines so as to make life more efficient for human beings. The risk, of course, is that artificially intelligent machines might surpass our abilities in the future and invert the relationship, turning humans into the slaves of machine masters. Hence, we should do our best to program artificially intelligent machines so that they serve human interests, though one can envisage scenarios where things could go wrong (Shanahan 2015).

Although different kinds of social relations may prioritize different arguments for hierarchy, it is also true that different kinds of societies may legitimately prioritize different kinds of hierarchy. Some societies may object to the whole idea of hierarchy. In English the word hierarchy has become almost invariably pejorative; by contrast, it is easier to talk about morally justified hierarchies in Chinese because the language has words such as *chaxu* (差序) that more readily lend themselves to the idea that not all hierarchies are bad (Y. Yan 2002). But large, complex societies cannot do without hierarchies whatever the connotations of the word. Powerful members of groups typically seek to distinguish themselves from the rest, and societies can respond differently to the challenge of how to make hierarchies work in the interests of those with less power and status.

In the United States, people feel valued by being treated as social equals, and the expression of superior power typically takes the form of wealth. It is fine to address Bill Gates by his first name, but it is also fine for the rich to separate themselves from the poor (e.g., by living in gated communities). And stark material hierarchies are not widely viewed as fundamentally illegitimate (notwithstanding the arguments of liberal egalitarians). In societies governed by hierarchical rituals that express differences of social status, by contrast, the powerful need not rely on material wealth to show their superiority to the same extent. In the Qing dynasty, age-based hierarchies produced a class of political elites that was well stocked with low-income but high-seniority individuals, with the result that gerontocratic hierarchies actually promoted economic equality (Zhang 2014). Reinforcing age-based social hierarchies may be (part of) the solution for reducing economic inequality in China today, but such solutions are nonstarters in Western societies that do not honor the elderly and do not value filial piety to the same extent. In Japan and Korea, workers bow to their bosses at sharper angles, but they go drinking together after work, they often live in close proximity and vacation together, and the bosses are less likely to dismiss employees in economically difficult times. Those with power empathize with their subordinates, and they are also less likely to oppose government measures designed to secure material equality (Bell 2008). Perhaps small, homogenous countries like Norway can promote both social and material

equality, but larger countries need to choose between (*a*) social equality and economic hierarchy and (*b*) social hierarchy and economic equality. What is prioritized depends on cultural outlooks: Western societies tend to favor the former, and East Asian societies the latter.

These differences are grounded in different childhood educational practices (J. Li 2012) and express different cognitive orientations (Nisbett 2003). Such outlooks are difficult, but not impossible, to change. Recent empirical research could help managers in hierarchical business organizations cultivate positive relationships with lower-ranking individuals (Kennedy et al. 2016), and managers from Western societies that value social equality can perform well if they adapt to the preference for social hierarchy in East Asian workplaces (Meyer 2014). From a normative point of view, there is no obvious reason to object to different sorts of hierarchies valued in different societies, so long as they are generally accepted by members of all levels of hierarchies and basic human rights are not violated.

Perhaps the cultural differences are most evident in the political sphere. To the extent hierarchical relations are justified in Western constitutional democracies, they appeal to liberal values, such as autonomy and the rule of law. But adherents of Confucian ethics may worry more about the negative impact of the "I win, you lose" liberal democratic practices, such as campaigns, debates, and competitive elections, on harmonious relations in society. In China, it is especially important to ask how political meritocracy can be improved, and its disadvantages minimized, given that this hierarchical ideal has a long history, has inspired political reform over the past three decades, and is widely supported by the people according to reliable political surveys (Shi 2015). And the justification for political meritocracy centers on the idea that meritocratically selected leaders are best able and willing promote the well-being of the people. But what do we mean by the well-being of the people? Does it refer to personal freedom, to harmonious relations, or to a combination of both ideals?

HARMONY AND FREEDOM

Harmony is central to China's political culture, and individual freedom is celebrated in Western societies. But what does each general idea amount to in political practice, and what do they tell us about the differences and similarities in China and in the West? And what are the areas of overlap and difference between the two ideals? To what extent does the pursuit of freedom undermine harmonious relations, and how do we resolve cases of conflict? How are the ideals of harmony and freedom contested in societies that prize those ideals, and how to prevent abuses of those ideals by government and private interests in practice? Which forms of government can best promote harmony and freedom? How to measure harmony and freedom in different societies? These questions are hugely important, both philosophically and politically, in a world where "Chinese" values will become more influential on the global scene. Much has been written about freedom, but far less (in English) about the ideal of harmony, and even less about the areas of overlap and difference between these ideals.

C. Li's (2014) *The Confucian Philosophy of Harmony* is the first systematic book-length work on the Confucian ideal of harmony in English, and he argues for the importance of the ideal in China's past, present, and future. The Confucian ideal of harmony aims for peaceful order, but it is not just any kind of peaceful order. In the West, the term harmony also tends to invoke the idea of agreement, uniformity, or consensus. From Plato onward, harmony has been taken to mean agreement or adjustment to an underlying fixed cosmic order, and in politics, it brings up sinister connotations of being made to conform to an oppressive order imposed by the ruling class. What Confucians mean by harmony, in contrast, is a dynamic process in which diverse elements are brought into a mutually balancing and cooperatively evolving concept that involves adaptation

to new situations. Far from assuming a uniformity of goods, the Confucian ideal of harmony celebrates a diversity of goods brought together in ways that open new possibilities for humans to flourish. This Confucian view of harmony is widely shared in China today; it is no coincidence that the Chinese character for harmony (*he* 和) was selected as the symbol of Chinese culture in the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. The Confucian saying that exemplary persons should value harmony but not uniformity is perhaps the most widely cited line from the *Analects of Confucius* (13.23). So perhaps a better translation of *he* would be "diversity in harmony" rather than "harmony," which brings up the wrong connotations in English.

That said, the musical term harmony is closer to what Confucians mean by harmony. For early Confucians, music expressed the ultimate harmony of the universe and should serve as the model for other forms of harmony in the world. The *Yueji*, part of *Book of the Rites* (compiled in the early Han dynasty), draws the implication that morally refined persons can and should use the right kind of music to cultivate harmonious relationships in society at large. Harmony then refers not simply to the absence of conflict, hatred, and resentment but also to something more positive, namely a feeling of commonality and commitment among the diverse parts of the relationship. In short, the Confucian/Chinese ideal of harmony refers to social relations characterized by (*a*) peaceful order; (*b*) respect for, if not celebration of, diversity; and (*c*) a special feeling of commonality, if not joy, among the constituent parts.

A society that prizes harmony values cultural diversity, but gross violations of human rights cannot be justified on grounds of respect for diversity because these activities aim to harm and destroy others, and hence they conflict with the goal of achieving harmony. However, some restrictions on personal freedom may be justified on grounds of harmony. In a poor and disorderly society, the government can be justified in focusing on providing the conditions for economic development that underpin peaceful order, even if its efforts involve restrictions on freedom of movement such as China's *hukou* (household registration) system (Bell 2006). Parents can place limits on the freedom of children for the purpose of educating children so that they come to appreciate the value of, and strive for, harmonious relationships (C. Li 2014). A couple that wants to get divorced can be forced to go through informal mediation before resorting to legal means that are more likely to irreparably poison harmonious relations (Chen 2003). Freedom of speech can be restricted, as the illegality of Holocaust denial in Germany, if it is necessary to avoid a culture of hatred that threatens basic relationships of mutual trust and concern among different groups in society. However, a society that prioritizes harmony should also encourage practices that value cooperation and trust among diverse communities, such as schools that promote civic involvement among different classes and ethnic groups (Wong 2011).

It might be asked why harmony should take priority over the value of freedom in political contexts where it is not prioritized as a political value. Isn't freedom a more universal value? But harmony is prized not only in China. In historical practice, Confucianism spread to Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam, helping to explain why all East Asian societies tend to prioritize the value of harmony. Beyond East Asia, many other societies and cultures also value harmony, even if they have not been influenced by Confucianism in historical practice. Ubuntu, the main ethical tradition in sub-Saharan Africa, is strongly committed to harmony (Bell & Metz 2011). *Buen vivir* (good living), an idea rooted in the worldview of the Quechua peoples of the Andes that has gained popularity throughout Latin America, emphasizes living in harmony with other people and nature (Balch 2013). The ethical systems and political culture of North European countries value social harmony in ways similar to East Asian cultures (Helgesen & Thomsen 2006). Canadian political culture was influenced by Loyalists who fled the American Revolution because they valued order and harmony over the aggressive assertion of individual freedom (although economic interests were also at stake). American communitarians argue that the "habits of the heart" of American

people show commitment to families and social relations, although such commitments tend to be buried beneath individualistic self-understandings (Bellah et al. 1985).

In fact, it could be argued that the value of harmony is more widely shared and prioritized in the world's cultures, ethical systems, and religions than supposedly universal values such as freedom. In any case, only a moment's reflection is sufficient to make us realize the importance of harmony: How many of us can thrive without families and societies characterized by peaceful order, respect for diversity, and mutual commitment? A tiny minority of eccentric geniuses or artists may deliberately opt to shut themselves off from family and society if such attachments interfere with the pursuit of truth or freedom (Spinoza is a famous case), but for most people, the key question for human flourishing is how to benefit from and nourish different social commitments. The main reason why freedom appears to be a more universal value is sociological rather than philosophical. The United States has exercised political and economic hegemony in the post–World War II era to such an extent that the dominant value of its political culture—individual freedom—has come to be seen as a universal value, and other values have come to be seen as particular and tied to backward social contexts. To paraphrase Karl Marx, the ruling country's ideas are the ruling ideas. But as the United States loses its sole position as the world's ideological hegemon, harmony as a universal moral ideal may reassert itself in the global discourse about what constitutes human well-being.

That's not to say the *Confucian* conception of harmony is universally shared. In Japan, for example, harmony means something closer to uniformity and consensus. In the sub-Saharan African tradition, harmony has a strong egalitarian bent to it and has been frequently invoked to justify a kind of democracy oriented toward consensus (Metz 2016). But there are significant areas of overlap with the Confucian ideal of diversity in harmony that also have implications for how to think about limits on freedom. Emperor Ashoka, who ruled the Indian subcontinent in 288–232 BCE, advocated for toleration and accommodation despite deep moral disagreement among religious groups. Inspired by Buddhism, he issued edicts that assured each group of its security while interacting with other groups, so that mutual trust and good relationships emerged even in a complex society composed of groups with diverse belief systems. The edicts recommend restraint on speech that has the power to disrupt coexistence, such as speech that humiliates others and that makes others feel small (Bhargava 2014). Ashoka's edicts relied on morality, but similar ideals meant to secure the conditions for communal harmony in deeply divided societies may have legal implications today. For example, the Indian Penal Code (Section 295A) spells out punishments for deliberate insults to the religious feelings of any group.

The overlap between the ideals of harmony in various ethical traditions and societies can underpin an effort to compare (and rank) the extent of harmony in different societies. If harmony is limited to (*a*) peaceful order and (*b*) respect for diversity in forms of social relations key for human well-being, there are reliable global indicators that enable comparisons between countries (it is more difficult to measure extent of mutual trust and commitment). All major global indicators, including the Freedom in the World survey, neglect the importance of rich and diverse social relations for human well-being. To fill this gap, researchers at Tsinghua University devised the Harmony Index and found that country size was the best predictor of overall harmony: the smaller the country, the easier to establish harmonious relations (Bell & Mo 2014). The clear implication is that large countries, such as China and the United States, need to decentralize power to promote more harmonious social relations, which may also have advantages in terms of promoting individual freedom.

CONCLUSION

The effort to compare political values prioritized in different philosophical traditions and to draw political implications for a multipolar world is just getting started. I have discussed efforts to

contrast three sets of political values prioritized in Chinese and Western traditions. But other influential political values, such as self-determination and political unity, can be compared in terms of political relevance. One might also compare the role of ritual in China and law in the West and show how they shape different ways of resolving conflict, or show how different political values affect the foreign policies of different countries. Of course, countries themselves are internally diverse, and one might compare, say, cities in different countries with a strong environmental ethos and draw implications for thinking about subnational ways of dealing with global problems such as climate change (Bell & de-Shalit 2013). And there is no reason to limit the comparisons to the leading political values in Western and Chinese philosophical traditions. There may be good philosophical reasons to explore comparisons with the dominant political values of other societies. Moreover, the political configurations and global power relations can change. In several decades, India may be a dominant global power (Rachman 2016), and then it would make more political sense to compare leading political values in the philosophical traditions of China and India. To make this kind of comparative work more academically productive, the incentive structure in universities needs to be changed so that graduate students and professors are rewarded for insightful cross-cultural and interdisciplinary works of political relevance. Finally, we need to break down the boundaries between universities and the outside world, so that academics learn from and contribute to debates with journalists and policy makers.

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