In this talk, I will make the following assumptions: (1) it is good for a political community to be governed by high-quality leaders; (2) China’s one-party political system is not about to collapse; (3) the meritocratic aspect of the system is partly good; and (4) it can be improved.

The debate about political meritocracy – the idea that a political system should aim to select leaders with superior ability and virtue – was revived by Singapore, but it has a long history, both in the West (from Plato onwards) and in China (from Confucius onwards). The debate in Singapore did not have much influence abroad, if only because political meritocracy was often presented as a unique response to Singapore’s particular context (a tiny country in a difficult geo-political environment without natural resources and a small talent pool, hence the need to institutionalize a rigorous system to select and promote political talent).

But China – partly inspired by its own history, and partly by the case of Singapore – has implemented a system of political meritocracy starting from the early 1990s that involves decades of training and a battery of exams for officials at various stages of their career.

These meritocratically selected leaders have overseen an economic boom that has lifted several hundred million people out of poverty. At the same time, however, problems like corruption, inequality, environmental degradation, and repression of political dissent and religious expression have worsened.

In order to reverse these trends, China needs to implement democratic reforms aims at checking abuses of power. It also needs to develop its meritocratic system further: government officials should be selected and promoted on the basis of ability and morality, rather than political loyalty, wealth, or family background. But which qualities – abilities, skills, and virtues – matter for political leaders? And what sorts of mechanisms and institutions can increase the likelihood that officials are selected and promoted on the basis of those qualities?

1. Leadership in Context

The traits of leaders differ from context to context. For example, religious leaders need be able to live a spiritual life. Business leaders need to focus on the profitability of the firm. Political leaders are supposed to serve the people and they need to be sensitive to the interests of diverse stakeholders, including disadvantaged members of the political community. Today, the leader of a political community, no matter what the form of government, needs to be from that community (vs. business leaders).
The desirable traits of political leaders will also vary from context to context. What works for leaders in times of war may not work for leaders in times of peace (consider the history of war time heroes who proved to be disastrous leaders in times of peace). The traits of leaders will also vary depending on the type of political system – the qualities appropriate for leaders in democracies (e.g., the ability to think quickly on one’s feet, to give partisan speeches in the campaign season and switch to a more inclusive discourse after election victory) – may not be appropriate for political meritocracies. In a political meritocracy, desirable traits will also vary depending on the level of government (e.g., intellectual ability matters more at the higher levels). In this talk, I will assume the context of a relatively peaceful, modernizing political meritocracy, and will ask the question what are the qualities required of political leaders selected by non-electoral mechanisms at higher levels of government. I will assume that the leaders are supposed to promote the good of the people, but beyond that I will not say anything much more specific about the purposes of government (because the purposes will vary in different situations, the purposes depend at least partly on what the people want, and my discussion of the qualities required of leaders is meant to be compatible with many different theories about the purposes of government except for theories that say electoral democracy has intrinsic value).

2. On the Need for Intellectual Ability

In times of incessant warfare, physical abilities were important, but in today’s world, intellectual abilities matter more. A political leader concerned needs to understand complex arguments and make decisions based on knowledge of latest developments in a number of interconnected disciplines that bear on the policy-making process: economics, science, international relations, psychology, and so on. In addition, sound decision-making requires a global outlook. Globalization and technological innovation in the past few decades have made the world increasingly interconnected, with the result that financial, political, social, and environmental shocks spread faster and become more disruptive. To ensure social stability and sustained growth, political leaders need to be adaptable, agile and responsive to looming global risks. Hence, it is insufficient to rely on well-crafted national political institutions and laws: an ability to understand the world and respond to rapid changes in a risk-prone world in an informed and intelligent way is an essential requirement of what it means to be an effective political leader today, and arguably the qualities of political leaders matter more than ever before in human history. But how can such leaders be selected?

The practice of using exams as a mechanism to identity political talent is used in Singapore and China and it has deep roots in Chinese political culture. The idea of political meritocracy was shared by every major intellectual current in the pre-Imperial period. The establishment and institutionalization of the examination system to select public officials in Imperial China provided an influential answer to the question of how to choose meritorious officials. The examination system had
several advantages: (1) it was relatively fair and impartial compared to the system of choosing officials based on family connections; (2) it allowed for more social mobility compared to less meritocratic systems; (3) it contributed to social and political stability; and (4) it served to limit abuses of power. But critics doubted that exams could really test for the right qualities required of political leaders. Today’s public service exams in China are more like IQ tests designed to filter out those without superior analytical skills. But they should also test a wide range of knowledge and disciplines relevant for political decision-making at the highest levels of government, such as economics, environmental science, international relations, history, psychology, and knowledge of the Confucian classics. Still, exams cannot test as well for the social skills and virtues required of political leaders.

3. On the Need for Social Skills

Intellectual ability is important for political leaders, but it may not be the most important quality. The intellectual abilities required for serious academic research – the need to publicly engage with the best counter-arguments available, the willingness to challenge orthodoxy, to make mistakes if they help to push the boundaries of what we know, and to articulate original ideas even if they are misunderstood or underappreciated at the time they are made --- are not necessarily the abilities required of political leaders. We are familiar with the stereotype of the academic nerd who cannot deal with people in a ‘normal’ way. The academic nerd is not likely to be an effective political leader. Here too, Singapore’s political meritocracy is an instructive example. In the past, leaders were selected mainly according to high performance in disciplines such as economics and engineering. But the wooden and bookish manner of its political leaders alienates much of the population, especially the youth that has been energized and politicized by new social media. In response, a growing number of critics argue that the ruling party needs to expand its narrowly technical and academic notion of merit, in part to recognize the importance for political success of communicative talent and emotional intelligence

FDR: a second-class intellect but a first-class temperament. He appointed brilliant advisers and was sufficiently intelligent to at least recognize what counts as a good argument for the purpose of policy-making. He also had excellent social skills.

Which social skills matter in times of peace? Research in business studies shows that the most effective leaders all have a high degree of “emotional intelligence” (self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, motivation, and ability to build rapport with others and move them in the desired directions). EI matters more than cognitive skills, especially at highest level of the company. To the extent there are differences between the requirements of leadership in business and govt, they may reinforce the case for EI (e.g., political leaders need to deal with an even larger and more comprehensive group of stakeholders).
Which mechanisms can increase the likelihood of choosing leaders with superior social skills? Exams can help (e.g., test for ability to answer questions from different perspectives, and can test language skills), but exams not sufficient. Need evidence of good performance at lower levels of government, but what counts as good performance is controversial (before, economic growth, but need multiple indicators now). Also need more objective ways of assessing social skills: social scientific research shows that social skills improve with age, and women generally do better than men. China does take into account of age, but there is a need for an increased proportion of women in govt.

4. On the Need for Virtue

A leader must be committed to the common good; otherwise superior intelligence and social skills can be used for immoral purposes.

Confucians (and most political thinkers) argue that power ought to be used for the interest of the ruled, not the rulers.

What sorts of mechanisms are most likely to produce political rulers with the motivation to promote the good of the people?

In a political meritocracy, the power of speech is less important. Study of the Confucian classics can help, but virtue can be faked on examinations. China now: worried about smart but corrupt officials, hence more need for character checks. At minimum, should deselect those who clearly harmed the community (e.g., officials with criminal records, corrupt officials, unfilial children). Can reward those who sacrificed for their country (but harder to tell in times of peace). Willingness to stick to one-child policy (but will soon change). Low salaries (but that may be a cause of corruption). Most important: selection by peers rather than by superiors because moral character is best assessed via close acquaintance and careful observation over prolonged periods in different settings. But the views of superiors and subordinates should also count. Peers can be envious of talented colleagues, in which case the views of superiors (who have less reason to feel jealous) should be given some weight. And subordinates can be in a good position to observe features of moral character due to their position in the hierarchy: for example, they can notice if candidates are amiable and deferent to superiors and rude and unhelpful to subordinates, implying that the candidate cares more about personal ambition than about treating others well.

Given the need for a more rigorous and systematic way of assessing moral character, it might be best to settle on something like a 60:20:20 ratio for assessment of moral character, with 60 percent of the weighting given to peers and 20 percent given to superiors and subordinates. While this ratio (or any ratio) is somewhat arbitrary and may be difficult to enforce to the letter (or the number), the advantage of a clear and transparent system of assessing moral character is that it reduces the possibilities of even more arbitrary assessments that characterize actually-existing political meritocracy in China.