

ACTUALIDAD EN ASIA 2021-2

Meritocracy: China's form of democracy



S-F / Shutterstock.com



Juliana Jiménez Arcila
Universidad EAFIT
jjimenez@eafit.edu.co

Abstract

This article illustrates China's meritocracy in light of political, social and cultural differences accounting both for Western and Eastern standards thought to define political systems and governmental regimes. It also shows the factors that make meritocracy a potential "democracy" with Chinese characteristics, explaining the elements of meritocracy throughout history together with the roots of the system in the country. In the process, the article defines both meritocracy and democracy and presents certain factors that may suggest that meritocracy can -for now- be acknowledged as a democracy even when it does not fully agree with Western standards. Throughout academia it is understood that there is no single form of democracy and that each country adapts the system to its own characteristics; making it possible that Chinese meritocracy -with the cultural shifts made- can be better comprehended and accepted as one of these primary forms of democracy.

Key words

Meritocracy, government, Democracy, political system, political differences, political organization, China

Resumen

Este artículo ilustra la meritocracia de China a la luz de las diferencias políticas, sociales y culturales que dan cuenta de los estándares occidentales y orientales que se cree definen los sistemas políticos y los regímenes gubernamentales. También muestra los factores que hacen de la meritocracia una potencial “democracia” con características chinas, explicando los elementos de la meritocracia a lo largo de la historia junto con las raíces del sistema nacional. Este artículo define tanto la meritocracia como la democracia y presenta ciertos factores que pueden sugerir que la meritocracia puede -por ahora- ser reconocida como una democracia incluso cuando no está completamente de acuerdo con los estándares occidentales. En toda la academia se entiende que no existe una forma única de democracia y que cada país adapta el sistema a sus propias características; haciendo posible que la meritocracia china -con los cambios culturales realizados- pueda ser mejor comprendida y aceptada como una de estas formas primarias de democracia.

Palabras clave

meritocracia, Gobierno, democracia, sistema político, diferencias políticas, organización política, China

Introduction

Since the beginning of time, civilizations across the globe and throughout history have created, searched for and perfected forms of social, economic, and political organization. The world has been witness to the beginning and end of those civilizations: civilizations that have not survived the passage of time, the intervention of another bigger or more stable society, or things as apparently simple as conflicting internal powers or resource distribution and harnessing. Forms or systems of government and their regimes make up the world's social history and are still important today. These systems of government are at the root of the nature of humanity and its evolution through territories, together with people's evolution through them, and could probably make up the concepts we hold so tightly to as culture. They might also have played a determining role throughout history in the existence or disappearance of societies. We should keep in mind that, as humans, we have changed the world through socialization, and that this particular way of resolving our needs has developed outstanding methods for organizing societies, from the most basic to the most complex institutions for economic, political, and social power distribution.

After studying the Asia-Pacific region for international relations purposes, it became clearer that cultural differences between the Western hemisphere and Eastern hemisphere were not just geographical. Their socio-cultural features also determined the attributes of their political and economic systems. These differences, determine -as was said before- the way different societies transition to, participate in, and accomplish forms of organization that true to them, their customs, their history, and their background. This paper intends to shed a light on a subject that is slightly “taboo” here in the West but which we all know a little about, namely, the lack of democracy and the profound establishment of Meritocracy as a form of government in Communist China.

Having analyzed the different factors mentioned above, and so as to tackle this subject as best as possible; the following question is proposed:

¿Can China's meritocratic system be considered their/a form of Democracy?

To answer this question, and after stating an initial hypothesis, this academic article will use the following structure. First and foremost, a literature review will be performed, going over the definitions of democracy and meritocracy and what has been said and written about them. This article will also define what a form of government is, and the various ones recognized over time. Second, this paper will address meritocracy in an international context it can serve as example of the history of this particular form of government in China and its evolution. Then -and having clarity on these notions- the author will propose a small comparison between democracy and meritocracy noting the differences and similarities of the systems given the contexts in which they are embedded, and complementing this with information on countries that use some form of meritocracy. Finally, this text will present an analysis of the question and the conclusions resulting therefrom.

Methodology

This article and its analysis were approached using a qualitative study, meaning that a search and analysis of different secondary sources mentioning democracy and meritocracy as a political system was required to provide information on a real-world issue and to assess whether meritocracy in China can in fact be understood as a unique form of democracy. The data was collected through an analysis of information contained by texts written on the history of democracy and meritocracy, definitions of systems of government, the application of one or the other within different contexts and sectors, and its analysis through a comparison of historical and academic records. As data appeared in secondary sources, they were recorded to find similarities, differences, and common ground that would enable assessing each form of government and, as a result, obtaining a potential answer to the question defined above, helping to corroborate or reject the hypothesis that meritocracy can be understood as China's form of democracy. The rationale behind this method of information gathering and analysis resulted from of a question regarding the best way to address this issue, given the elements learned in the International Relations program and their unique historical and qualitative structure. The way in which we speak about these concepts hereunder seeks not only to provide an understanding of the subject as a whole but to provide insight on its specificities and the specificities of the two different systems looked at by this article.

Literature Review

The literature reviewed for this article was related to the application of democratic and meritocratic approaches to systems of government and the use of these concepts in civil processes. It is also worth noting that very little has been written about our hypothesis, which is that meritocracy can be understood (given the context) as a form of democracy, as it relates to China and its historical-political context. Although this hypothesis was not found to have been addressed extensively, there is the specificity that several articles do talk about political democracy building from a Chinese perspective, or, in other words, about the way in which the specific context sheds light on the perspectives of democracy within the nation-state and on relations between the government and the people. What was found in our literature review was extensive writing on non-western democracy, or Chinese democracy.

On the other hand, a search for literature on democracy as a Western construct provided ample examples and articles showing the different types of

democracy, the definitions given to each depending on the country's political structure, its definition depending on territory and the population distribution, and comparative differences between one and another. To understand democracy as a social construct with differences in each context it is sufficient to state that there are "*as many different forms of democracy, as there are democratic nations in the world*" (European Council, 2021); this is also an indicator that provides insights for our hypothesis, which we intend to address.

In the literature on China's democracy there is also an issue of definition of context, history, and knowledge of its people that translates into a statement very similar to that conjured up by the European Council, which is: "*countries and regions in the world differ in social conditions, history, culture and levels of development, and they achieve democracy in different ways and forms*" (Chinese Embassy, 2021).

After a review of the literature it is clear that the specificities of each nation-state need to be understood for their political and government system to be described as democratic or not; and that the definition of democracy does not ultimately disregard meritocracy as a type of democracy, given that it is also used in many democratic systems as a form of decision-making.

To understand the foundations of this article we must first understand democracy and meritocracy as individual concepts and provide them with definitions.

Democracy

The origin of the word democracy includes a historic overview of its meaning and manners of implementation throughout the world today. Democracy, comes from the Greek words "demos" and "kratos" that mean "people" and "power" respectively. Together, these concepts allow interpreting meaning of the word as "the power of the people" or "power to the people" (Issitt, M. 2019); entailing not only a historical form of social organization in Greece but also in contemporary times.

Democracy today is defined, at its core, as a "*political system based on majority rule, in which all citizens are guaranteed participatory rights to influence the evolution of government*" (Issitt, M. 2019); dependent on the two key principles of individual autonomy and equality, and safeguarding in some states the opinion of minority groups who, as citizens of modern states, also have rights to decide within their own system, but which remain bound to the majority components of democracy. Another important component in democracy is its almost identical structure in all of the nation-states that have adopted it: 3 branches of power divided into the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches, which serve as checks and balances for each other and guarantee the effectiveness of the principles of democracy.

It should be noted that, as was stated before, many different types of democracy exist, and these depend, once again, on the context in which they are developed. Over 40 forms of the democratic system can be found, with direct democracy and representative democracy as two of the more popular currents. These can be understood as follows. Direct democracy is where the people directly deliberate and decide on legislation, and representative democracy is where the people elect representatives to deliberate and decide on legislation, such as in parliamentary or presidential democracies.

What we need to keep in mind from here on out is that, although these are the most popular forms democracy takes, they are not the only ones, leading to the existence of *Social democracy and democratic socialism*, forms of the system that have also been known as democracy and are or were described as a different because of special conditions related to time, history, democratic institutions, and characteristics of the population and the economy.

On the other hand, to move on and engage in determining whether or not meritocracy can be understood as one of these forms of democracy, we need

to first look at its definition and characteristics.

Meritocracy

As with democracy, the word meritocracy has its origins in the Greek language, as the union of the Greek words “meritum” and “kratos”, meaning “reward” and “power” respectively. This sustains a development in definition equal to “power to those better capable” or “power as reward”. Given its Greek origin, its implementation in Greek culture was very similar to today, where power was given to those better prepared, and was advocated by both Plato and Aristotle in their respective philosophical works. It was defined in *The Republic* as the system whereby “the wisest rule” and whose rulers were “philosopher kings” or those with the most knowledge (Platón, 1986).

Although this meaning makes sense, it needs to be understood within the current social and political context. Thus, meritocracy is now defined as “a form of government or modality of public and institutional control which is taken upon by individuals or social groups whose dominant positions are based on merit and whose hierarchy structure is derived from their accomplishments in different levels of society, education, or competitive aptitudes” (Sanchez Galan, 2021) (MERITOCRACY, 2018).

The common ground related to meritocracy and its uses, is that it is understood as a virtue in most political systems including the United States and its democracy, because most times meritocracy guarantees higher levels of efficiency in decision making as it facilitates access to power by individuals who are more suitable and better prepared for different posts and positions within a political, economic, civil or social structure. Meritocracy should also be understood as described by Javier Duque Daza, where the system in itself is defined through factors of liberal thinking and has components that respond to individual liberties, equal of opportunity, and human capital (Duque Daza, 2020); all necessary components for fair competition, election, and the self-determination of people, which are specific, defended rights in liberal economies and democratic nations.

Meritocracy: A form of democracy?

As stated above, democracy is constituted and designed differently in different nation states depending on the specific characteristics of their territories, social relationships, and economic development. This allowed us to determine very early on in this text that there is no one true democracy and that, although its components vary, they do so to represent its citizens, and ultimately its base, as faithfully as possible.

There has been one problem with Chinese meritocracy: It is inserted in a socialist system and, thus Western views of its political system have considered the nation an undemocratic state, questioning its application of democratic principles, its transition to democracy, and the mechanisms by which its citizens participate in their country’s decision-making and governing. To understand that meritocracy might play the role of political democracy in the country, it is necessary to understand that, in China, its history plays a prime role in the structure of its society and the implementation of social organization.

Chinese people have strong beliefs in ancestry and a deep respect to those who came before; a social cultural trait that not only determines their way of living as individuals but can be understood as a virtue allowing them to recognize their history and its impact upon the position of their territory, their rebirth as an economic power, and their common advocacy of discipline and ethics regarding people and words. These cultural traits can be defined as civilization according to Samuel Huntington, given that,

“Civilization is a cultural entity(...) and is thus the highest cultural grouping of people, and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species.” and that it is defined “both by common objective elements, such as language, history, religion, customs, institutions, and by the subjective self-identification of people.”

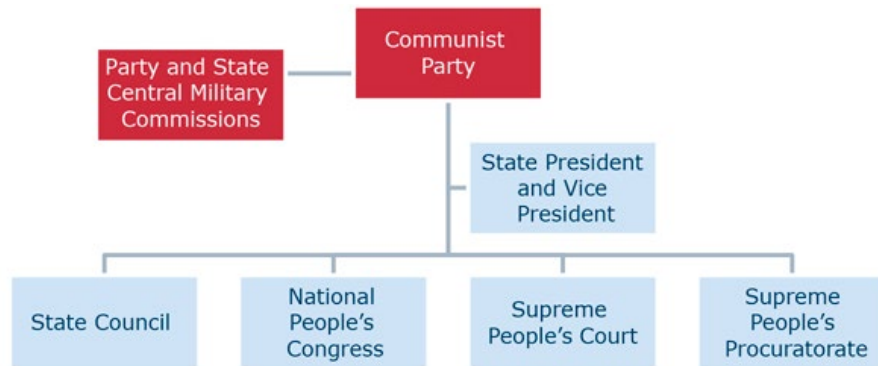
These traits and this definition are important because together they indicate that the contemporary Chinese population also has strongly rooted ideals regarding its forms of functioning, participation, and government, respecting first and foremost the notion of administrative democracy that was installed in ancient China throughout the sixth century B.c and advocated for by Confucius. As a result, this administrative democracy so happens to develop democracy with Chinese characteristics.

To better understand this, the philosophy advocated for by Confucianism was a belief system that focused on the importance of personal ethics and morality and stated that “this moral character was achieved through the virtue of *ren*, or ‘humanity,’ which ultimately led to more virtuous behaviors, such as respect, altruism, and humility (...) believing in the importance of education in order to create this virtuous character and essentially using education to instruct the appropriate forms of conduct” (Society, 2020). This belief system would imply that, although China and its people have politically been transitioning to -Western- democratic characteristics its population is not yet ready for a major efforts towards democratization because they are invested in the importance of a government that is true to their beliefs as a civilization and their history and they have no past democratic traditions or practices to serve as examples.

China’s Democratic Institutions?

Having understood these social characteristics it is now time to talk about China’s democratic history. We begin with the success of their New Democratic Revolution and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. For the first time in history China was free from feudal monarchy and from foreign occupation and could focus its efforts on recognizing democratic practices and representation mechanisms for the country’s people. To do this, they adopted Socialism a political system and defined it as “people centered” (Chinese Embassy, n.d).

The Chinese version of Socialism has since developed into a system of governmental that, as in a democracy, has a structure that represents would be the executive, legislative, and judicial branches from a Western point of view, although these are referred to as the State Council, National People’s Congress, Supreme People’s Court and Supreme People’s Procuratorate.

Figure 1. China's Political System : National Level

Source: The American Bar Association (ABA) (2019)

It should also be mentioned that, like democracies, China has a recognized constitution where the power of the State is vested in the people through its institutions, and that two of the above-mentioned institutions have the authority to enforce the constitution and its laws at national, provincial, municipal, and county levels. This is similar to certain democratic institutions in the West where decision-making power over the most minimal territory is given over to the people's will. This is recognized in article two of the Chinese constitution:

All power in the People's Republic of China belongs to the people. The organs through which the people exercise state power are the National People's Congress and the local people's congresses at different levels. The people administer state affairs and manage economic, cultural, and social affairs through various channels and in various ways in accordance with the law (Chinese Constitution, 1982).

In another similarity to western democracy, in China political parties participate in the spheres of government. The difference that China is not a multi-party or bi-partisan nation-state in terms of competition, but neither is it a one-party country-wide system. China defines its political system as a "Multi-party Cooperation and Political Consultation System under the leadership of the Communist Party of China(CPC)" (Chinese Embassy, 2021); meaning that other parties exist and are part of the system of government but only one holds national-level leadership. With this, we can understand that 9 different political parties exist in China, all of which have a say regarding the way in which the power of the state is exercised and the management of state affairs, and who sit on the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) Committees which "are established at national, provincial, municipal, county levels and are composed of members of all parties, personages without party affiliation, representatives from non-governmental organizations, ethnic minorities and all walks of life; allowing different sectors of society to exercise the functions of political consultation, democratic supervision and participate in the administration and discussion of state affairs"(Chinese Embassy, 2021).

Although these mechanisms are in place and multiparty participation is a part of China's decision making and administration; Western democracy describes the nation as one that has only one national political party whose own members hold positions in power and serve as representatives of the state for the people. It is in this particular aspect where I personally believe lies the problem with accepting Chinese democratic characteristics and, therefore

where meritocracy finds relevance within this text, proposing the hypothesis that although only one party is in leadership its meritocratic process can be understood as election process in a democracy, with the specificity that the election competition does not potentially include any individual in society, but rather includes every individual within a political party and thus every party in the national arena. This means that the democratic process would include those individuals who have sufficient accomplishments to become a member of a political party and that the ruling party would then be that one which -as a whole- contains the most meritorious people and is therefore better positioned in terms of knowledge, experience, culture, and notion of representation. Meritocracy would thus determine that the Chinese participation and democratic process is not determined by who rules, but by how they rule. In other words, democracy from a Chinese perspective is shaped not by the mere process of participation throughout suffrage but by a life of effort, achievements and knowledge of the people, its context, and its needs. From a personal perspective, it requires rising through levels of society and participating in them through committees, advisories, congresses and education. As in a democracy, the person elected is an individual who has grown to know more about its system, but, unlike in a Western democracy, that same individual not acting as a single person but as a compound of people, whose experience and respect is the same but whose virtues are exalted and awarded the honor to represent that people in leadership positions.

What they are in fact doing is filtering their democratic process to the point where only people who are really capable of effective representation and with governing capacity compete through a system of parties that represent the different ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds in and of the country as a whole. The party in leadership, and which has been there since the beginning, can be understood as the party whose members have a greater knowledge of history, customs, beliefs, and the people and, for this reason, is the party that remains in positions of power and leadership. This factor, though, raises the question of inequality and a lack of opportunities for those with less means (which we can understand as the other 8 parties), and while this is a criticism of it is not the fundamental analysis of this paper. What can be said about this is that, from a Western point of view, a lack of opportunity is visible and significant and related to people's backgrounds and strata, we cannot be sure that Chinese society is structured in the same way and, as a result we cannot adhere to that notion and will only assume it is so if we view the political parties as competing as individual entities and not as part of a system.

Meritocracy in China is like in any other democratic country including the USA: a system where the best are chosen for the best positions, and where effectiveness seems to determine the success of the decision-making process. The only criticism other democratic systems have towards China, is that there is no "participation" of the people in most of their state affairs and decisions. However, given the existence of different congresses and committees at ALL levels of the state this popular participation is truly just provided through other mechanisms. Finally, to address one last criticism of meritocracy regarding the people's right to participation, it is fair to say that, like all developing democracies, China is not exempt from nor acquitted of the issues its population can undergo within its territory, including, for example, issues related to human rights and the development of individual rights. These are also issues that are historically and culturally determined, and will only change when the people are ready -as as happened historically- to seek their position as is completely relevant to their own personal and political evolution and progress.

Conclusion.

China's transition to a political democracy needs to respect its own context and the specificities thereof, this not just because of its historical and cultural background, but because this is the way in which it honors their people and helps them create new forms of participation and adopt new historical achievements. Having said this, it is possible that meritocracy, as a system of government, is not entirely different from a form of democracy. It has the fundamental characteristics of democratic systems, including political structures, value for the people and the implementation of individual autonomy and equality as key principles. The latter two can be explained in the sense that people choose to pursue meritocracy and participate through it and in it, acknowledging the fact that they are all worthy of participation and eligible to do so through merit. The fact that there are as many forms of democracies as there are democratic nations in the world also means that meritocracy can be considered a valid form of democracy, more so with the awareness that, although China is an economic power, it is still in the process of transitioning towards political democratic ideals and that, given that specificity, China is developing new political values within the population as a whole. Recognizing meritocracy as a form of democracy with "Chinese characteristics" is one way to acknowledge that it might not yet be the final product of democracy, but that it is in fact one of the means by which the country can transform, as a political and economic society, towards broader interdependence and trust in international relations and the international community. In other words, meritocracy is not the final product but the vehicle through which day participation, the development of human rights, and the development of political institutions -that favor and support the people- adhere to the Chinese DNA, its history and its customs, marking a path towards a future of relatively improved and more efficient national decision making. In the future, this will allow China to improve the international acceptance of its policy making and governance, while allowing them to accustom its population to historic change and rapid transition. Recognizing its specificities will not going to define the system or change it, but can surely acknowledge the steps made towards it and possibly change the relationship the country and its people as a whole have with democracy.

Bibliography

- Angerame, L. (2019). Meritocracy. *Salem Press Encyclopedia*.
- Definition of MERITOCRACY. (2018). Merriam-Webster.com. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meritocracy>
- Eugenio Bregolat. (2015). China y la democracia liberal. *Política Exterior*, 29(167), 22–26.
- GÉLVEZ RUBIO, T. A. (2019). ¿Qué Frena La Democracia en Hong Kong? Entre Élités Económicas Y Sombrillas Amarillas. *Foro Internacional*, 59(2), 399–436. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.eafit.edu.co/10.24201/fo.v59i2.2545>
- Huntington, S. P. (1996). *The clash of civilizations and the reamking of world order*. . <https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~lebelp/1993SamuelPHuntingtonTheClashOfCivilizationsAndTheRemakingofWorldOrder.pdf>
- Issitt, M. (2019). Democracy. *Salem Press Encyclopedia*.
- Javier Duque Daza. (2020). MERITOCRACIA Libertad, igualdad de oportunidades y competencia. *Dictamen Libre*, 27. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.eafit.edu.co/10.18041/2619-4244/dl.27.6650>
- Sanchez Galan, J. (2021, April 27). *Meritocracia - Definición, qué es y concepto*. Economipedia. <https://economipedia.com/definiciones/meritocracia.html>
- Society, N. G. (2020, August 19). *Confucianism*. National Geographic Society. <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/confucianism/>