Vertical Democratic Meritocracy in China: Response to Comments

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Let me first thank editor Benjamin Hammer for organizing this series of exchanges. My book *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* has generated much heat and light. The first two comments—by Huang Yushun and Liu Jingxi—generate heat and the second two comments—by Zhang Yongle and Cao Feng—generate light. I take special pleasure in the comments that generate light because I can learn from them. But I also need to respond to comments that generate heat because it is important to clarify misunderstandings and to spell out areas of irreconcilable differences. Let me begin by discussing the first two comments, and then I will say what I have learned from the last two comments. For reasons of space, I cannot respond to all the detailed argumentation, nor will I engage with the polemics.

1 What’s Wrong with Endorsing Both Political Democracy and Political Meritocracy?

It is important to clarify the relationship between political meritocracy and democracy. Both Huang Yushun and Liu Jingxi argue that democracy should serve as the standard for selecting and promoting leaders, regardless of the level of government and the history and culture of a country. They oppose any form of political meritocracy and propose a one-size-fits-all solution to

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2 The fifth comment—by Fang Zhaohui—is interesting, but I will not respond because it does not involve the topic of political meritocracy or my book on the topic. Let me just say that I agree with Fang’s critique of Lucian Pye’s work.
the problem of political rule that has been the subject of intense debate by political theorists since the age of Confucius and Plato. My view is sensitive to context. The ideal that I defend is “vertical democratic meritocracy”: democracy at the lower levels of government and political meritocracy at higher levels of government, with political experimentation in between. Democracy refers to the idea of politics by the people, and political meritocracy refers to the idea that the political system should aim to select and promote public officials with above-average ability and virtue. In my view, both democracy and political meritocracy are important, and we need to think about how they can best fit together in particular contexts.

My argument is that the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy should be used to evaluate the political reality in China, but not necessarily elsewhere. I then apply this principle to the contemporary Chinese context and show that a large gap exists between the ideal and the reality, and propose measures for reducing this gap. But why should “vertical democratic meritocracy” be employed as the standard for evaluating the political system in China? There are four reasons. First, size matters: the ideal applies only in a large country. It is much more difficult to rule and manage huge and incredibly diverse countries such as China, and it is not helpful to compare China to small, relatively homogeneous countries endowed with plentiful natural resources. Moreover, at higher levels of government of large countries, problems are complex and often affect many sectors of society, the rest of the world, and future generations. In large countries, political success is more likely with leaders who have political experience at lower levels of government and a good performance record. Electoral democracy may be appropriate for small countries or at lower levels of government of large countries; even if things go wrong—say, too much populism or small-minded navel-gazing at the cost of neglecting long-term planning and concern for future generations and the rest of the world—it is not the end of the world. But it may well be the end of the world if things go severely wrong at the top of big and powerful countries. Nobody worries about the fact that Nicaragua has not signed the Paris accord on dealing with climate change, but President Donald Trump’s disregard for the accord may well be disastrous for the world. The policies of leaders at the top of huge political

3 Francis Fukuyama argues that Denmark is the country that comes closest to realizing the ideal of liberal democracy (see his book *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015]). But it seems absurd to suggest that the political system of a relatively homogeneous, well-off country of 5.7 million people surrounded by small, friendly neighbors be used as the benchmark for assessing political success in large countries, such as the United States, India, or China.