

The China Model

Appendix 2

A Conversation between a Communist and a Confucian

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1. What's Wrong with Electoral Democracy

Daniel: We first met in May 2012, at the first annual Peace and Development Forum held near the Great Wall in Beijing. We have met several times since then, and I've learned much from our conversations and email exchanges. At one point, we planned to cowrite an article on democracy and political meritocracy, but we realized it might be difficult to agree on every point. You then proposed that we write an article in dialogue form, which would allow both of us to maintain our own viewpoints while learning from each other. You reminded me that I had written fictitious dialogues in my academic works, so why not experiment with a real political dialogue? We both read Chinese and English and we can write in the language that allows us to express our ideas as clearly as possible (Chinese in your case, English in mine). What a lovely idea! So let's try! Perhaps we can begin with a discussion of democracy, then we can discuss the ideal of political meritocracy and its practice in China, and we can end with a discussion of Confucian ethics and its relevance for contemporary China. Here's my first question.

Most people in Western countries—government officials, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens—think democracy means that political leaders should be chosen by means of one person, one vote: what I will call free and fair competitive elections. There are disputes about what democracy means beyond competitive elections, but there is a basic consensus that political changes should take place on a foundation of electoral politics. This ideal is also powerful outside the West, and it has influenced political change in much of the world. For example, when family-run dictatorships were challenged and eventually toppled during the Arab Spring, the political systems were all replaced with democracy in the form of competitive elections for the countries' rulers (though not all long-lasting, as we know). Few if any political reformers and revolutionaries had any other ideal in mind. In several Asian countries, such as South

Korea, the transition from “authoritarianism” to “democracy” also meant a transition to competitive elections. In Taiwan, political reform has meant the same thing, and today few if any political forces in Taiwan question the desirability of democracy in the sense of competitive elections. In Hong Kong, when political reformers mention “full democracy,” they really mean that the territory’s chief executive and legislators should be chosen by means of one person, one vote. In mainland China, of course, the top rulers are not chosen by means of one person, one vote, but most people in the West—and perhaps in Taiwan and Hong Kong—think they ought to be. That is, democracy in the sense of competitive elections should serve as the standard for evaluating political progress and regress. But China has not moved toward democracy in this sense, which helps to explain why critics in the West often say that there has been “no political reform” in China over the past three decades or so. Like you, I am not persuaded that democracy in the sense of one person, one vote for the country’s rulers is the best, or only, standard for evaluating political reform. But can you tell me: what exactly do you think is wrong with “Western-style democracy,” and why should it not be used as the standard for evaluating political reform in China?

Bing Bing: Yes, Daniel, I think we are very suitable partners to conduct this dialogue. As you said, we both read English and Chinese. More important, as a Westerner you maintain a profound interest in and have conducted in-depth research on traditional Chinese culture, especially Confucianism. Meanwhile, I have also learned a great deal from Western culture and religions. Both of us are willing to analyze a problem from each other’s perspective, in the belief that it would help us find the true solutions to problems. You are an established theorist dedicated to researching the construction of political institutions, whereas I am a government official, a participant and witness of the political institutions. You are a man and I am a woman. ... In short, we share some similarities as well as differences that allow us to engage with each other’s views as well as learn from each other. The Taiji diagram might be an appropriate symbol for our dialogue: it is like a Yin-Yang fish, which swims all the time and moves in circles. OK, now let us talk about democracy.

In the West, democracy is considered one of the most important values. In China, it is also acknowledged as a key value. It seems that democracy is really a good thing. However, despite the basic consensus that democracy is very important, we do not agree what democracy is and what forms it should take. For example, in the West, competitive elections are strongly endorsed, since the consent of the people and the competition of political parties are believed to be necessary for democracy. In contrast, China prefers rule by a single party, supported by smaller parties and consultative and deliberative democracy, for reasons grounded in history and national conditions. Each culture talks about its own justifications and there are no signs of reaching a mutual agreement.

My own understanding is that democracy in political life is similar to water in the material life, which is indispensable to humankind. But the ways that people obtain their water are different. The reasons might relate to historical culture—for instance, Chinese people like to drink hot water while Westerners prefer ice water. It may also relate to the different phases of human development: babies mainly absorb water from their mothers’ milk, while adults may get water from all kinds of drinks. Most people drink water through their mouths, whereas critically ill patients can get water only through

intravenous injections. It may also closely connect with what's realistic. People living in cities think that water will come as long as they turn on the tap. Various brands of pure mineral water and drinks are available in supermarkets. But in poor areas with droughts and water shortages, the compulsory daily work for a girl may involve walking for 40 to 60 minutes just to fetch a bucket of water that is far from clean.

Personally, I had been drinking Chinese-style hot water until college. At that time, I rarely saw bottled water and could not afford to buy it. When I drank Coca-Cola for the first time, I found the taste fantastic. For quite a long time, I considered drinking Coca-Cola to be a pleasant luxury—not only because of its sweet taste, but also the sense of fashion (compared to plain water). Later on, I also tasted Pepsi after seeing its advertisements. I didn't feel any significant difference between the two brands. As the habit developed, I tended to drink Coca-Cola more often. Later, I began to gain too much weight and occasionally read some nutritional articles, which revealed that Coca-Cola's main ingredient, sugar, has no nutritional value but calories; it increases body weight and tends to make the person habituated to sweet food and drinks in an unhealthy way. For example, people addicted to Coca-Cola tend to drink only sweetened water and not plain hot water, resulting in cavities; the caffeine in Coca-Cola may also cause addiction, leading to higher blood fat, intensified arteriosclerosis and so on.

In January 2007, several soft drink manufacturers were pressured to discontinue advertising soft drinks to children under 12 years old in the European market.¹ The French and Danish governments imposed a 1% fat tax on such manufacturers. According to the data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a total of 90 million Americans—35% of American adults and 17% of American teenagers—were identified as overweight. In 2008, Americans spent 147 billion USD to deal with the problem of obesity. In 2009, to raise funds for the Medicare reform program, the U.S. Congress decided to tax soft drink manufacturers. Thirty states prepared legislation on the grounds of protecting people's health as well as increasing fiscal budgets. Since 2009, Pepsi, Coca-Cola, and the American Beverage Association have spent 70 million USD on lobbying to resist the new tax. The result of the lobbying is that none of the states imposed the tax.² Coca-Cola, as a critical representative of American culture and the daring vanguard in the wave of globalization, continuously gains new teenage consumers through glamorous celebrity endorsements and advertisements. As the popularity of Coca-Cola surges among teenagers, I feel a deep grief about their future troubled by overweight problems. I even think that there should be compulsory alerts, similar to the anti-smoking slogans, to be printed on soft drink bottles. Whatever brand it is, a soft drink is not desirable. The real value of a soft drink should be enabling the people to drinking more plain water through adding some sweetener, or providing another option of the water supplement. The purpose should not be inverted: merchants, out of their own interests, turn something healthy into something unhealthy. What tastes good at first has long-term negative consequences for the consumer.

Watching the U.S. presidential debates in 2012 left me with the impression that I was watching advertisements for Coca-Cola and Pepsi: each candidate was doing his best to

¹ Xie Jian, "Ouzhou ruanyinshang tingzhi dui ouzhou ertong zuo guanggao" [Soft Drink Manufacturers Will Discontinue Advertising Soft Drinks for Children in the European Market], *Sohu Business*, 27 Jan. 2006. Retrieved from <http://business.sohu.com/20060127/n241628092.shtml>.

² Holly Rosenkrantz, "Pepsi Levies a Sin Tax on Its Workers," *Bloomberg Businessweek, Politics and Policy*, 15 Mar. 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-03-15/pepsi-levies-a-sin-tax-on-its-workers>.

ingratiate himself with voters; from appearance to agenda, from voice/tones to gestures, most important of all were the beautiful promises such as greater social welfare and lower fiscal debt. In the meantime, they would take every opportunity to scorn and mock their opponents (coincidentally, the United States has two major parties, just like the two giant cola brands).

Daniel: Indeed. The electoral system often preys on people's weaknesses, and I like the parallel you draw with merchants of soft drinks. At the end of the day, however, we need to ask which political system does a good job of meeting people's basic needs. I agree water is one basic need. Let's stick with other basic physical needs such as those for security, food, and good health. No matter how irrational people can be, they generally have a good sense of what constitutes basic physical well-being. And electoral democracy is founded on the premise that people are rational, at least in this minimal sense. At the end of the day, it's unlikely that political rulers that fail to provide for people's basic physical needs will stay in power for long if people have the right to vote them out of power. That's why democracies generally do well at providing for the physical well-being of the majority of the people, assuming that the elections are genuinely free and fair.

Bing Bing: I would like to talk a bit about my personal experience with the rule of decision-making by the majority. Occasionally, I travel with colleagues via long-distance trains for business. I have the habit of looking out the window without much purpose and writing poems. But some of my colleagues prefer playing cards. It is understandable that one man's meat may be another's poison. But the most worrisome occasion appears when they lack a fourth player (a popular card game requires four players) and need me to join them. If abiding by the one person, one vote and majority rule, I apparently should take part in the game. However, I really have no interest or the ability to play card games. There are many examples where the majority suppresses the minority: Socrates was sentenced to death by a majority; the Jacobins were elected to office by the people in the French Revolution; Napoleon III was crowned in 1852, when he gained 80% of the vote; in April 1932, Hitler obtained 36.8% of the vote during the German presidential election, ranking behind only Hindenburg, who later appointed Hitler to be the Chancellor. Folks, please remember—as forgetting history is a betrayal—it was the people who elected Hitler.

Daniel: Yes, but today, as you know, most democracies have protections for minority groups and individuals. The *liberal* part of democracy is meant to protect the interests of minorities by means of various constitutional mechanisms that restrain majorities from violating the basic rights of people.

Bing Bing: It's not just about protecting minorities within the state. What about future generations, and people living outside the state who are affected by the policies of the government? The democratic system in the West originated in ancient Greek and Roman societies. It was a reactionary system employed by a minority of people to suppress the opposition of the slaves and to strengthen foreign expansion. While the states adopted "democracy" domestically, they continuously attacked other cities, stole foreign land, and gained many slaves and enormous wealth. The cake was made bigger through robbery

rather than legitimate production or fair distribution!

The development of the modern West was very similar to this process, as if they learned it from the same teacher. “The first pot of gold” of the major developed countries originated from barbarian colonization and plunders, including the unequal treaties imposed on China. Today, according to the data of the World Wide Fund for Nature *Living Planet Report 2012*, to globalize the American lifestyle, more than four Earths would be needed to meet the demands of humankind. The report shows that the resources consumed per capita in high-income countries are five times those in low-income countries.³ Our lifestyles have exceeded the resource capacity of the Earth, and we are unequally distributing the unsustainable gains. The people in the most impoverished countries and areas bear more than their fair share of the negative consequences of the increasing resource demand, while developed countries enjoy the majority of the benefits. Future generations of humankind will be faced with resource shortages and deterioration of the environment as well as the resulting conflicts and violence.

Thus, the “high-quality” lifestyles represented by advance spending (ranging from personal debt for consumption to large-scale fiscal deficits), luxury automobiles, houses, and disposable goods are maintained at the cost of overconsumption or waste of other people’s resources, including future generations’ land and energy resources, which may cause generational inequality and intensify geographic differences that provoke social crisis. Considering that there are hundreds of millions of people living in poverty and that the bio-crises of energy and resources are accelerating, if every citizen on the planet had a vote and some people had to be ruled out so that everyone might develop sustainably, which people would be prioritized to be expelled from the planet? Which one is the more fundamental human right, the right to equal existence or the right to free consumption? Just as no matter how sweet the cola is, it cannot replace water. Moreover, the existence of sweetness—the addition of sugar—may exactly touch the heart of the problem. That sweetness can be tasted is relied on the glib and eloquent tongues that promote the products. However, the consequence of consuming too much sugar will have to be jointly borne by other organs—liver, pancreas, and the intestines. If the function of these organs exceeds the limit, illness or even cancer may be provoked. We agree that the manufacturers should have the freedom of producing and selling cola. But at the same time, they should have the responsibility of letting the public thoroughly know about the side effects of those products, so that the consumers may make the right choice for themselves. Likewise, the Western world should not promote Western democracy of one person, one vote as a universal value and dump it on the whole world without warning of its dangers. Therefore, my understanding of the true democratic spirit should resemble water; whatever their gender, wealth, and status, people should be able to obtain their shares of life maintenance and equal development for free. In the meantime, we should take the responsibility of not obstructing other people’s rights, including the rights to water of future generations. The Western electoral system cannot satisfy even the last task, because the candidates are responsible only to their voters.

Daniel: I agree that all human beings share certain biological attributes, and that we need

³ WWF China, *Diqiu bukan zhongfu, pin fu guojia shengtai zuji chaju kuoda* [The Earth Is Overburdened, the Disparity in Ecological Footprints among High-Income and Low-Income Countries Is Increasing], 15 May 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.wwfchina.org/pressdetail.php?id=1349>.

to protect our environment to allow human flourishing. Perhaps a competitive electoral system tends to promote a competitive, domineering approach to nature, which may not be ecologically sustainable in the long term. If Taiwan or South Korea adopt electoral democracy, it's not a disaster for the whole world, but if China goes that route, the consequences could be disastrous. Even if electoral democracy works well, nobody represents the interests of future generations or people living outside the state who are affected by the policies of government, and their interests will lose out if they conflict with the interests of voters. And voters may prefer policies that are harmful for future generations. Think of global warming: to really deal with it, we need a fifty-year time horizon, and how many democratically elected leaders can afford to think in those terms? In short, I agree with you that China should not adopt a political system that encourages U.S.-style per capita carbon emissions. That said, it remains to be seen if China's one-party system can deal better with long-term environmental issues. Looking outside my window today—with pollution levels off the charts here in Beijing—it's hard to be optimistic. If anything, China seems to have adopted a mode of development that pushes even more environmental problems onto future generations.

Bing Bing: I think electoral democracies will find it harder to deal with long-term problems because they tend to be paralyzed by conflicts now. The whole system of Western-style electoral democracy encourages short-term thinking and policy-making. Consider the indifference, opposition, and even antagonism of different individuals and groups caused by polarized politics (and the hidden assumption that human nature is evil). For instance, the transition of two political parties and the separation of the three powers in the United States were much endorsed as the most reasonable political model in the past. As the presidential campaigns became increasingly intense and different interest groups fervently sought profit, the two parties became more and more radical in order to obtain votes and monetary support. The struggle became more and more fierce, making the existing two sides more and more polarized. The two sides lacked basic reasonable communication and tolerable understanding, solidifying political fission and increasing social controversies.

In contrast, I cannot help thinking of the “Six-foot Lane” in a Chinese city, Tongcheng. Here's the story: the family of Zhang Ying, the head of the Ministry of Rites (in the central government) in the Qing Dynasty, intended to remodel his house, but they were involved in a housing boundary dispute with a neighbor. They sued the neighbor and wrote to the Minister, hoping that he could use his power to win the lawsuit. Zhang Ying immediately sent a poem back home, “I wrote this letter, which travels thousands of miles only to address the issue of a wall; what is the harm of giving up three square feet of the land?” His family was ashamed after reading the letter and soon gave away three feet of the disputed land. The neighbor was also touched and gave another three feet to construct the lane, resulting in a six-foot lane. This story shows the benefits of the philosophy of “harmony” in traditional Chinese culture, with its spirit of tolerance and courtesy. Clearly it's better than a system where everybody thinks first and foremost of asserting their own interests.

I still remember when I was young, if two people or families were engaged in a dispute, the most respectable elders would then convene all the villagers and have the disputants publicly voice their opinions. The elders then acknowledged the right opinions

of both sides before pointing out the wrong ones. Sometimes, the onlookers would also comment on the disputes. The final result was usually that both sides admitted where they were wrong and promised to settle the dispute peacefully. Those who gave advice and helped with a successful solution were appreciated and respected by all. SWEET OLD DAYS! However, nowadays, most onlookers maintain an indifferent attitude; more people spend time on posting blogs and merely watching disputes escalate. The only people who might give a hand are either policemen or lawyers: “I could help you with this case; you only need to pay me 200 yuan. After winning the lawsuit, let’s divide the shares equally. Here is the letter of commission.”

Daniel: I agree with you about the benefits of a spirit of harmony. And the informal ways of solving conflicts in a harmonious way still operates today, to a certain extent: I was involved in a car accident recently in Beijing, and a group of onlookers served as a community of impartial mediators, similar to an ancient Greek chorus. I presented my case, the other driver presented his, the onlookers commented, and finally we agreed on a settlement, without any need for policemen, not to mention lawyers (I was basically wrong and I paid a few hundred yuan to the other guy).

I also agree with you that an electoral system encourages competition and direct face-to-face confrontation, which can poison relations and make it harder to solve problems in an efficient and just way. Ideally, people should be civil with one another, try to identify points of commonality, respect different points of view, and learn from dialogue and political deliberation. But it’s easier to implement an ideal model in a small community where people know and trust one another: the family is the ideal model, but the more we extend from the family, the more we have different viewpoints, cultures, traditions, competing economic interests, and the harder it is to solve things in a harmonious way. So the defender of “Western-style” electoral democracy would say, well, let’s just recognize that there is conflict and try to manage it as best as we can; the “losers” will always have another shot at power in the next election, which provides a measure of stability in the political system. The downside, as you say, is not only that social relations will be less harmonious than they might be, but also that decision-making will be slowed down.

Regarding efficiency, I think to what extent we should value efficient decision-making depends on the level of economic development. If the country is very poor, like China a quarter of a century ago, then the political system should focus on the task of poverty alleviation—here both Confucians and Marxists will agree—and there is a case for a strong state that monopolizes power to focus on that aim rather than aiming for a political system that is as open and competitive as possible. Of course, that is China’s great success story: hundreds of millions of Chinese have been lifted out of poverty. The question is, what comes next? Yes, poverty is still a problem, but there are many diverse groups and interests in China now, with different ideas and agendas about the way forward. That’s why many people think mainland China will need to adopt some form of “Western-style” competitive electoral democracy and competitive parties that represent diverse interests in the near future, similar to Taiwan, South Korea, and so on. “Harmony,” in short, may not work so well in large, modern and complex societies.

Bing Bing: The “spirit of harmony” has deeper roots in China and it is still relevant today,

even in a larger, modern, and complex country. In the first stage of prosperous development of the Chinese civilization five thousand years ago, because of the climatic and geographical reasons, agricultural production became the dominant means of production in China, enabling the Chinese people to live in the same place for long periods. Consequently, a number of big families and clans developed, which finally evolved into a country. Basically, it was merely a quantitative change from the grouping of families to the establishment of a country. Therefore, it is easier for us to feel such feelings as, to borrow the words of the opening passage of the *Analects* of Confucius, “Isn’t one of life’s greatest pleasures to have friends coming from afar?” Accordingly, the rites of the family, the village, and even deliberative democracy came into existence, which generated good regulatory effects and reduced disputes among the people to the minimum level. (There is an old saying in China: “Do not sue anyone even if one is aggrieved to death.”) Such a culture that pays special attention to harmony is the fundamental reason for the continuity of the Chinese civilization for 5,000 years.

Whereas in the West, the geographic environment spurred the prosperity of nomadic herding, and commerce, heroism, and the spirit of the knights were easily encouraged. Additionally, family and kinship relationships were relatively loose and individualism pervaded the society, due to frequent wars and the large number of slaves who were originally war prisoners. Compared with the traditional agricultural belief that man is an integral part of nature and that deduces that social relations are like those of “one family,” traveling and doing business by sea was more likely to evoke men’s sense of rivalry against nature; commerce tended to ignite the sense of competition, not to mention wars. Therefore, the Western mind-set tended to favor binary opposition.

At present, even American democracy cannot get rid of this old-fashioned thinking. There exist two major camps, the Democrats and the Republicans. They maintain their own programs and values and elect their own candidates. One wants democracy? Please choose one stance first. You should choose one of the two candidates, support everything of the one that you choose and oppose everything of the one that you oppose. Basically, your actions would have little or nothing to do with what is right or wrong. Therefore, a system that is supposed to mediate disputes turns out to be one that creates opposition, which is enhanced through elections and decision-making by majority rule. And since wealthy groups have the most influence in the political process, they derive the greatest benefits from the competition. The total expense of the 2012 U.S. election went beyond six billion dollars, a figure that equaled the annual GDP of Nicaragua.⁴ The donations, which were mainly made by interest groups, would likely affect future policy directions, and the costs would also be shared by the citizens just as the costs of drinking cola are shared by the consumers. For instance, despite the tragic shootings that frequently occur in American schools and on campuses, gun-control legislation is very difficult to implement because it is blocked by pro-gun rights groups that are active donors to political campaigns. The power-for-money deal prevails; one person, one vote has become one dollar, one vote.

Daniel: I agree that money corrupts the American political process, and that special interest groups have undue influence on outcomes because they use money to influence

⁴ Patricia Zengerle, “U.S. Vote in 2012 Will Be Record, \$6 Billion Election,” *Reuters*, 30 Aug. 2011. Retrieved from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/30/us-usa-campaign-spending-idUSTRE77T3ZX20110830>.

elected decision makers. But that problem is widely recognized in the United States, and just about everyone in that country—no matter what their political colors—thinks the problem can and ought to be fixed without calling into question the idea that leaders should be chosen by one person, one vote. Moreover, many electoral democracies—such as my home country, Canada—do a much better job of limiting the influence of money in politics; laws try to give equal time to the main political parties in the mainstream media, there are strict limits on campaign finance, etc. Perhaps you can argue that we should compare large countries like the United States and China; it is obviously easier to deal with social and political problems in small countries with abundant natural resources. Well then, let's do so.

A common criticism of Chinese politics now echoes the criticism you make of the U.S. political process: that wealthy special interest groups, such as powerful state-run enterprises (SOEs), skew the political system in their favor, with the result that the rich benefit much more than other groups. Hence, the gap between rich and poor is just as bad in China as in the United States. Why do you think the Chinese political system can do a better job of limiting the influence of powerful interest groups, economic and otherwise?

Bing Bing: The government is taking active measures to address the polarization between the rich and the poor as well as the problem of vested interest groups. At this year's [2013] meeting of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (NPC and CPPCC), Premier Li Keqiang's responses to questions from the media emphasized the need to reform state institutions and to transfer their functions. The core of the reform plan is to streamline administration, delegate powers to the lower levels, and clarify the relationship between the government and the market. In a word, all that the market can do well should be delegated to the market. Premier Li used a metaphor: there is a need to change the hand of government into the hand of the market; the government should have the courage to cut its own hand, just as a brave soldier is able to cut his arm if necessary for survival. He further pointed out that the improvement of the people's livelihood could not be separated from the reform of the distributive systems. There is a need to reduce the two biggest gaps: between the cities and rural areas, and between different parts of China. Meanwhile, the state should allow for private capital to be channeled into areas such as finance, energy, and the railways. He admitted that the reform will be difficult, because it had to change the existing patterns of interests. He used another metaphor: "It is even more difficult to touch the vested interest groups than one's soul." He outlined three goals of the government: developing the economy, improving people's livelihood, and promoting social justice. To ensure the realization of these goals, the government must build an innovative, clean, and law-based government.⁵

Daniel: But why do you think the Chinese government will be more successful at dealing with problems such as economic inequality and environmental sustainability than, say, the American government will be? It's fine to have plans, but what is it about the Chinese form of government that makes it easier to realize those plans?

⁵ Premier Li Keqiang's media conference, *Xinhuanet*, 17 Mar. 2013. Retrieved from http://news.xinhuanet.com/video/2013lh/2013-03/17/c_124468068.htm.

Bing Bing: The Club of Rome, after forty years of publishing updates to *The Limits to Growth*, recently published the report *Bankrupting Nature*, which warns that human activities are pushing the Earth to the edge of destruction. The author Anders Wijkman is a Swedish politician and former member of the European Parliament. He argues that “both the economic system and the political system are very short-term in nature. In order for the market system to incorporate long-term risks and long-term objectives, you need political intervention. The market system is not ethical, so if you want it to be ethical you have to design it that way. The political system is very short-term as well. The US is probably the worst, because they have elections every second year. They are 100% dependent on financial contributions from the private sector. You can really question whether it’s a democracy. It’s very tragic to see how different forces are blocking each other. I’ve spent almost 20 years of my life in politics. Today, it’s much more pragmatic, short term—it’s a question of staying in power.” He adds, “Chinese leadership is much more long-term in their thinking and design of policies than we are in this part of the world. So that’s positive. The conditions for responsible decision-making are quite promising. I’ve seen some interesting papers (ahead of the National People’s Congress). I haven’t seen the same kind of policy papers in a European or American context.”⁶

Daniel: Again, I’m trying to understand why you have more faith in the Chinese political system. There may be leaders with good plans for the long term, but they won’t be able to realize their plans if the political system is not stable for the long term. It’s true that American leaders tend to be short-term-minded because they worry about the next election, but the American constitutional system, whatever we think about it, is not likely to change in the next few decades. We can’t say that about the Chinese political system: as the economy modernizes and society becomes more stratified, there will almost certainly be growing demand for a more open, participatory society. Marxists should agree too: I’m sure you know about Marx’s argument that changes in the economic structure of society will lead to changes in its legal and political superstructure. As you know, tens of millions of people air social grievances on social media such as Weibo and Weixin. But many critics still complain about the tight controls on the media and the Internet: it’s not just foreign critics who complain; my own students at Tsinghua often raise such concerns. So I think we can assume that there will be—or should be—more opening up in this respect.

Bing Bing: Yes, Chinese society has changed a great deal: there were 564 million Internet users in China by the end of 2012. They express their own opinions on the Internet; some of them hope the country will adopt the Western electoral system of one person, one vote. This shows that after possessing adequate food and clothing, more and more citizens pay attention to other rights, including political rights. In February 2012, Xi Jinping said that the CCP should tolerate sharp criticism, do its best to correct mistakes, and work harder even if the accusations are false. He hoped that everybody could actively offer suggestions and criticism, help the Party to identify, analyze, and solve problems and hence correct the defects at work. All levels of the CCP committee should proactively

⁶ Corinne Purtill, “No Matter How Much Money You Throw on the Glaciers, They Won’t Stop Melting,” *China Dialogue*, 15 Mar. 2013. Retrieved from <http://www.chinadialogue.net/books/5783--No-matter-how-much-money-you-throw-on-the-glaciers-they-won-t-stop-melting/en>.

welcome supervision from other parties, improve their work styles, and enhance their abilities.

But from our conversation, I see that some of our work is insufficient. Partly, it's a question of time. With the development of the new media, the means of supervision are more available for the people. Things like "photos of the private use of government cars" are well intended and the suggestions on changing it may play a positive role for the government's decision-making. Unfortunately, some people may also take advantage of such events to channel their agony (which I may be able to understand) or even bully others. Some may also exaggerate the reality only in order to increase the discontent of the society. With a population of 1.3 billion and as a country that has walked the path of reform within thirty years (a process that has taken more than a hundred years in the West), one of the consequences of the compression of time and space is an outburst of social controversies. Developmental problems can only be solved through development. We need time and space, both of which require a basis of social stability that is widely consented to by members of the society. Anytime when I am faced with a problem, I would remind myself to "reflect on myself if the actions do not achieve the expected outcome." When I was in college, I often criticized the bad phenomena in society; sometimes those criticisms could be rather radical. It might be time that makes a person's views become more constructive rather than merely critical. The experience in the government, especially witnessing or participating in some decision-making, made me realize that reality is a result of the struggles and compromises by all parties. I try to imagine myself to be the other party and see whether there are better solutions. I consider myself a person with an ideal and who would pursue these ideals, although I would also remind myself not to be an idealist.

We also need to recognize that there are cultural differences. From the perspective of culture, compared with the Western idea that "bad news is good news," China has a tradition emphasizing: "Do not look at what is contrary to ritual propriety; do not listen to what is contrary to ritual propriety; do not say what is contrary to ritual propriety; take no actions which are contrary to ritual propriety." The story of Mencius's mother is still widespread, because she made the right decision of moving out of a bad neighborhood. There is another tradition that the names of those who are respected should not be talked about and good deeds must be spread whereas evil must be punished. Although times have changed very much, 99% of the contents that I have my child see, hear, and learn are still the good things about the society. Too many reports of morally bad things such as crime may increase the likelihood of such things in the future. Of course, I would also like to emphasize that truth is the bottom line of journalism. One incident of dishonesty may cost all of our credibility.

Daniel: Maybe there's a case to be made for publicly funded media that broadcasts, explains, and justifies the government's policies to the people. In my view, there's even a better case to maintain publicly funded broadcasting of "good news" that focuses on the disadvantaged sectors of the population, so that people will learn from positive models and be inspired to do good things. If we just leave it to the market, such news may not be aired. One example is the Paralympics. You'll recall the Paralympics for disabled people held shortly after the Beijing 2008 Olympics. The foreign media basically packed up their bags and didn't report on the Paralympics. A friend for a foreign newspaper told me she

wanted to report on it but her editor told her that there was no market for this sort of news. In contrast, the Chinese media was flooded with reports of heroic disabled athletes. I recall watching the reports with Chinese relatives and they were so impressed, it really changed their minds about what people with disabilities can do, and they had more respect and understanding of disabled people. After the Beijing Paralympics, we saw more disabled people in public. Of course, we need more public policies to provide equal opportunities and special support for disabled people, but the public airing of the Paralympics means that Chinese people will be supportive of such policies. So I do think there is an important role for public broadcasting of “good news” and news about disadvantaged people that wouldn’t get aired if we just left news to the market or even to public broadcasters like the BBC that are supposed to provide balance (they also tend to report bad news first and foremost). That said, I still think most intellectuals in China see a need for more critical media, which are essential to uncovering mistakes and improving society as well as government policies. In any case, let’s turn to a discussion of China’s system for selecting political officials. If one person, one vote is not a good system for China, then what do you suggest?

2. Political Meritocracy as an Alternative

Bing Bing: There is an old Chinese saying: “While the methods may vary, the principle is the same.” Following this logic, perhaps we can agree with Friedrich Hayek that the ultimate end of politics or democracy is good governance and the well-being of the people. You have strong Mandarin skills, and thus you know that in Chinese “to govern the state” and “to cure a disease” share the same character *zhi*, revealing the similarities between these two activities. Socrates once asked: if a person is ill, should he go to the doctor or vote to decide how to get healed? Similarly, in Chinese medicine, there is a viewpoint that the best doctors govern the country with virtue, good doctors unite the people with rites, and the worst doctors cure a disease through punishment and penalty.

This reminds me of a story: 1,000 years ago, a poor young student in China happened to meet a fortune-teller in the street. He asked, “Can you predict whether I will be the prime minister?” The fortune-teller responded, “Aren’t you being too presumptuous in dreaming to be the prime minister at such a young age?” The student was undaunted and continued to ask, “Can you predict whether I will be a doctor?” The fortune-teller was curious and asked, “Why do you want to be a doctor?” (At the time, the pay for doctors was not high because patients decided how much to pay based on their feelings about the likelihood of being cured. Thus, it was understandable to dream to be the prime minister but surprising to dream to be a doctor.) The student answered, “Because only fine doctors and prime ministers can save the people and make the world a better place.” The fortune-teller praised him: “You’ve got the mind of a prime minister!” The young student, Fan Zhongyan, later became a renowned prime minister of the Song Dynasty. In China, people barely remember the names of the emperors of the Song Dynasty. But nearly every student would know Fan Zhongyan. The textbook for primary schools records his saying that he should “worry before the people worry, and enjoy only after the people enjoy themselves,” which encourages every conscientious Chinese. How did he, a poor student without powerful family members, become the prime minister? The answer is through the imperial examination system. Like Fan Zhongyan, a host of

well-educated intellectuals from all kinds of backgrounds and regions entered the ruling class through rigorous exams, representing different voices for discussing how to govern the state with the emperor.

China's imperial examination system was a platform that provided people of ambition with equal opportunity to govern the country. By the standards of the present day, the contents of those exams might be considered to be partial since few tests addressed scientific issues, but it should be acknowledged that this kind of transparent, fair, and equal opportunity is one form of democracy and the system maximized the efficiency of recruiting intellectuals, which is fairly progressive even by today's standards. Thinkers of the Enlightenment such as Voltaire and Diderot all praised it highly. The system lasted more than 1,300 years and is a critical inspiration for the Western system of recruiting civil servants.

Daniel: Please correct me if I'm wrong, but a rigorous public service examination system has been (re)established in China. Is this how you were recruited into government?

Bing Bing: In Western democracy, the real ruling power is held by those elected by the people. This fact usually means that "bureaucratic institutions" are not so important. Therefore, the mediocre might be able to join the bureaucratic system. In contrast, China has a tradition that people who excel in study and exams will choose to become government officials. Also, the political system doesn't make a distinction between "the bureaucrats" and "the rulers." Therefore, ambitious and capable people would not fear entering the political system at a low level, because they have hopes of moving upward. But how can the process of selection and promotion be made fair and transparent? In the early years of the CCP's rule, low-level public servants were chosen from among college graduates (whose jobs would be assigned by the state uniformly), veterans, and other qualified candidates. Such a method lacked an objective standard and a competitive incentive system, which may easily provoke unfair recruitment. In 1980, Deng Xiaoping first proposed that a candidate should be given a position as long as she/he passed the exam. In 1993, the Interim Provisions for State Civil Servants were promulgated, marking the establishment of a public service examination system in China.

As for my case, I worked for an enterprise for five years after graduation from university. In 1997, I joined the office of foreign affairs of Henan Province by passing the public service exam. The position I competed for had an acceptance ratio of 1 in 20. Luckily, I got the second place in the written exam, which counted for 60% in the admission; I also got the first place in the interview, which counted for the other 40%. My overall score was the highest; the evaluation went well. I successfully passed the examination. After the Law on Public Service was passed in 2005, the national exam for public service (known as *guokao*) gained more popularity and became the exam with the lowest acceptance ratio in China. Take the 2011 *guokao*, for instance: according to the reports by the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security, in that single year a total of 9,758 positions were posted with the goal of recruiting 16,205 employees. 1.305 million people passed the initial qualification verification process. The competition ratio was 82 to 1. The recruitment probability was 1.24%. For the most competitive position, the admission ratio was 4,896 to 1. In 2013, more than 20,000 people were needed, with a predicted admission ratio of 90 to 1. I could not imagine whether I would pass the exams

today! Although the critics say that the public sector was monopolized by the social elites—making it more difficult for other sectors to recruit talent and potentially harming the economy and social development—it is irrefutable that *guokao* is a powerful tool to absorb the elites.

Daniel: And how about the promotion process? Again, it would be helpful if you can illustrate the process with your own case.

Bing Bing: Today, there is more emphasis on “open selection,” meaning competition among candidates for higher-level posts, with the public having a say and the whole process becoming more transparent. Local governments have actively started open selection of public servants in recent years, exploring a selective mechanism that is targeted on training public servants at the grassroots. In the qualifications, local governments tend to require that a candidate must have at least two years of work experience at the grassroots level. Since 2008, more than 36,000 officials have been promoted through open selection. 1194 of them were now taking the first leadership at the county or township Party committee. In 2012, 41 departments of the central government promoted 132 via open selection, including 22 division (deputy) chiefs and 110 section chiefs. A number of 9,435 officials across the country signed up for the race. It should be noted that the position of division chief was included in open selection for the first time.

Recently, even the positions of senior diplomats such as ambassadors and consul generals also have been included in open selection. Since 2000, we have promoted 40 senior officials to take the roles of ambassadors and consul generals through three national open selections (in addition to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the officials came from other central government departments, financial institutions, research institutes, universities, and SOEs). For example, an incumbent deputy minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, along with two deputy ministers at my ministry, were promoted because of their good performance in foreign service after standing out in the open competition.

In my case, I was promoted through the internal competition of my work unit in 2004 (30% depending on written exam results, 30% on interviews and public speaking, 30% on public opinion, and 10% on education, seniority, and current position) and became the youngest deputy division chief. In 2009, Liaoning Province held an open selection of officials across the country; the news was announced in the media. Sixty candidates met the qualifications, the top five of whom were asked for further interviews. Based on the test scores (40%) and interview results (60%), the top three were then appraised. (The organizational department of Liaoning Province sent a group of four appraisers who spent a whole day checking my previous records. Eighty colleagues were asked to vote, and more than thirty colleagues were asked to talk with them about my merits and shortcomings.) The appraisal result was then submitted to the provincial Standing Committee of the CCP for review. In principle, the person who scored the highest and whose appraisals were not problematic would be promoted. However, because my university major, work experience, and previous performance were the best fit with the position, I was finally appointed to be the deputy director-general (department chief) of the Liaoning Provincial Foreign Affairs Office, even though my overall score was the second best. And, before the official appointment, there was a seven-day public notice

period. During the notice period, anybody can report to the organization department his/her concerns about my promotion. During my three promotions, I didn't spend any money. All I did was to study and work hard and do my best to be a good person.

In 2013, thanks to an exchange program, I worked in the International Department of the CCP for a temporary period. The temporary system of exchanging officials offers opportunities to learn about different issues in different regions and areas, such as government sectors and SOEs.

The Western political system tends to change the leadership along with the ruling party in a fixed period of time. China tends to change the leadership without changing the ruling party, and dictatorships change neither. These dissimilar models are formed on the basis of long periods of political and cultural evolution in different societies. The system for selecting the highest leadership in China includes single-party rule, national selection, long-term training, restrictions on age, and replacement in a fixed period. Among these features, single-party rule, national selection, and long-term training are inherited from traditional Chinese political culture; restrictions on age are a modern Chinese invention; and replacement in a fixed period is borrowed from the West.

Daniel: Let me first say that I admire those who succeed in this rigorous recruitment and selection process, in fact, more than elected politicians who often get chosen because they can give the same good speech over and over again. I'd like to discuss in more detail what we can call political meritocracy, especially a couple of key issues. First, who decides on the abilities and virtues that are required at different levels of government? Second, what exactly is decided on? That is, which abilities and virtues are required of political leaders at different levels of government, and how are they measured?

Bing Bing: There is a famous quote by Chairman Mao: "Once the political lines have been clearly defined, the decisive factor will be the cadres." Therefore, the CCP highly values organizational construction and the selection and appointment of the cadres. There is a special department managing this type of work, named "the organization department." It was established in 1924 and Mao was the first leader. Nowadays, there is an organization department from the county CCP committee to the central CCP committee. The core responsibilities of the organization department include: first, to conduct organizational management in the areas of grassroots organizational construction, cadres, Party fees, and the working and lifestyle system of the Party; second, the management of the cadres. The department is mainly responsible for the macro management of the leaders and the staff (team building), including the management system, regulations and laws, human resource system reforms—planning, research, and direction, as well as proposing suggestions on the leadership change and the (re)appointment of cadres. In addition, it has the responsibilities of training and supervising cadres.

The cadre selection criteria for the CCP are the following: a person must have "both ability and moral integrity, the latter of which should be prioritized." The evaluation of moral integrity focuses mostly on loyalty to the party, service to the people, and self-discipline as well as integrity. Based on different levels and positions, the emphases of evaluation are also different. For intermediate and senior officials, emphasis must be placed on their persistence in faiths and ideals, political stance, and the coordinateness

with the central party. For high-level cadres, the standards should refer to those of great politicians. Among them, the experience of working at multiple positions plays a very important role. For example, it is a very noticeable attribute that many leaders at the central level of the CCP used to work in a central department or a local province; they may have worked both in an agricultural province and an industrial province, a developed region and a less well-off district.

Take the newly elected leader Xi Jinping as an example: he started from the lowest level of government—similar to the community level in Anglo-American countries—to the first leadership of the government in counties, cities, and provinces such as Fujian, Zhejiang, and Shanghai; then as the vice chairman of the nation, deputy secretary of the CCP, and general secretary of the CCP. These sixteen promotions in different types of work took him over forty years. During this time, he governed a total population of over 150 million people. The new leaders of the CCP rising at the 18th CCP Party practiced various professions at the initial stages of their career, as workers, teachers, and technicians. But each of them rose step by step. Overall, the seven new CCP Standing Committee members have governed half of China. Among them, places like Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Zhejiang, Liaoning, Hubei and Hunan may be equivalent to mid-sized countries in population, GDP, volume of economic activity, and integrated development index.

By means of this selection process, a CCP member should have been aware of China's circumstances by overcoming all kinds of difficulties and tasks before becoming a national leader. Moreover, he should have participated in the decision-making of many critical strategies and policy debates. Hence, despite the fact that leaders may change continuously, China's policies could maintain a steady and stable pace; the national development strategies may also be implemented in the long run, moving forward step by step. This is perhaps one of the "secrets" behind the "Chinese miracle." For the officials at the grassroots, specifically the county and township leaders, the evaluation focuses more on their ties with the people and the fairness in their implementation of government policies.

Specifically in practice, the evaluation may adopt methods such as individual interview (face to face, at least two people on the evaluation team), democratic/popular evaluation (voting, which generally includes simple choices such as agree, disagree, or abstain), and public opinion investigation (fill in complicated forms or publicize an email address and telephone number to solicit opinions). In general, the regular or annual evaluation is much simpler than evaluations that concern promotion or elimination in the process of leadership change and open selection. The content of evaluation may even cover family relationships such as whether the person is filial to his or her parents, especially during individual interviews. I personally feel that filial piety is still an important virtue in modern China. Compared with marital relationships, few officials would have a problem in that regard. For instance, an official from Liaoning participated in the open selection together with me. He ranked first in both written and oral exams. He was unmarried at the age of forty. Since the marital age of ordinary Chinese was younger than thirty, he was asked in the individual interview why he did not get married. His peers or leaders ask whether a candidate has had uncommon relationships with other women and whether his attitude toward marriage was serious. After he gave a satisfactory account of why he was unmarried at a mature age (reasons such as that he had studied

abroad during the best period for getting married), his promotion was unaffected. That would not be the case if an opposite circumstance occurred.

3. Improving Political Meritocracy

Daniel: That's fascinating. On the one hand, the political talent selection and promotion process seems quite traditional: the use of exams and performance at lower levels of government to measure political ability and virtue is similar to the political practice of imperial China. And the kinds of values used to measure virtue seem grounded in Confucian values: the assumption is that one learns about morality in the family and then extends it outside, so if one is not virtuous to family members, there is no virtue to extend outside. On the other hand, the selection and promotion process seems quite modern, with more emphasis on transparency and consultation with the people. The advantages of the system are clear: those without political talent and the ability to get along with others are weeded out of the process, and there is no chance that an inexperienced political leader could exercise political power. In this sense, it's better than imperial China, where a young emperor could be made powerful just by virtue of his family background. And it's obviously a better system than, say, North Korea, which seems more in line with traditional ideas about imperial rule, or even the United States, where somebody like President Obama—however smart he may be—is made president without substantial experience at lower forms of government, and makes many “beginner's mistakes” as a result of his lack of experience. Also, the idea that different criteria should be used to judge different kinds of leaders at different levels of government seems eminently sensible in a large, modernizing country like China; at lower levels, close connection to the people may be important, but different criteria should be used to judge leaders at higher levels of government, when decision-making becomes more complex and political experience matters more. In the West, by contrast, democratic elections in the form of one person, one vote are used to choose leaders at all levels of government, as though there is a “one size fits all” to the question of how to select political talent.

That said, the system of political meritocracy in China seems highly imperfect in practice. Consider what you said about the sorts of criteria needed to select officials with superior virtue and ability. You have placed much emphasis on the need for certain virtues, such as filial piety and being married at the age of maturity. I worry about whether the kinds of virtues you emphasize seem a bit arbitrary. For example, what if an official is a highly competent and compassionate homosexual and doesn't marry for that reason? Would that person be excluded from promotion? To me, it doesn't sound consistent with the meritocratic principle that the system should be designed to choose and promote the best possible people. Of course, we can argue that equal respect for homosexuals is a “Western” idea, but it's only a recent transformation in the West and I'm quite sure the same thing will happen in China. I'm sure you'll agree that ideas about gender equality are also relatively recent, and we can both agree that it's a good thing that both genders are now regarded as equals. I'm almost certain the same thing will happen with homosexuality: we will come to regard discrimination against homosexuals as morally arbitrary and “anti-meritocratic.” Taiwan, in this regard, seems to be ahead of the curve, with an openly gay presidential candidate, and it didn't seem to bother people very much.

Bing Bing: I must admit that the scope of the problem goes beyond my imagination. I have never heard any colleagues or relatives talking about these issues; so frankly, I know nothing about it. My thoughts probably still remain in the stage that “the Dao consists of the feminine (Yin) and the masculine (Yang)” and “neither the feminine nor the masculine alone can give birth or thrive.”⁷ What I do know is that the Criminal Law was revised in 1997: Article 301 no longer punishes sexual conduct. Also, psychiatry deleted homosexuality from its handbook for the treatment of mental diseases.

Daniel: I realize such ideas are controversial, so let’s just stick to the idea that a political meritocracy should aim to choose and promote leaders with superior abilities. Which abilities matter? Besides the sorts of analytical skills tested for in exams, the political system should also aim to choose and promote leaders with diverse sets of abilities, given that any large country such as China is diverse and complex and nobody can be expected to have good understanding of the whole. And here I worry that the political selection system is too narrowly focused on certain kinds of abilities. For example, it’s good to have leaders who go through a rigorous, decades-long talent selection process, but relatively creative and original minds may be weeded out early because they have offended people or challenged the “normal way of doing things.” Hence, there may be unnecessary attachment to the status quo long after it has extended its practical ability, and the risk-takers needed in times of necessary change would already have been weeded out from the power structures. Perhaps this problem can be remedied by allowing for some important government posts (including the Politburo) to be reserved for talented people from other walks of life, such as business or academia. I’d like to hear your views.

Let me add that political ability also means the ability to understand the diverse needs of people in a society, and of all those affected by the policies of the government. And the seemingly uniform character of Chinese political leaders seems a bit odd or, shall I say, anti-meritocratic. For example, not many top leaders have had substantial international exposure. The main task of the Chinese Communist Party is of course to serve the Chinese people. But China is now a great global power, and what it does also affects the interests of people living outside of China, and it needs to be as humane as possible in its dealings with other countries. And such humaneness needs to be grounded in good understanding of people in foreign countries. It is a good sign that officials are sent abroad to learn from the best practices of foreign countries, but perhaps the selection process of high-level government officials needs to place more value on experience abroad and even foreign language skills (of course, I do not mean to imply that other great powers do better in this respect: in the United States, speaking another language is often regarded as a political disability!). My colleague Yan Xuetong argues that the Chinese government should employ more talented foreigners as officials, as in the Tang Dynasty. A utopian proposal, perhaps, but it seems like a good way to promote more knowledge and understanding of foreign societies as part of the political decision-making process.

Even more important, perhaps, there is a need for more diverse political

⁷ This quotation dates back to the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) and is first seen in Bu Yingtian’s *Xue Xin Fu*. Cheng Yunsheng from the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE) also wrote in *You Xue Qionglin, Fufu* [On Husband and Wife]: “Gu yin ze bu sheng, gu yang ze bu zhang, gu tiandi pei yi yin yang” [Neither the feminine nor the masculine alone can give birth or thrive. Therefore, Heaven and earth matches Yin with Yang].

representation within China itself. For example, one is struck by the lack of representation of minority groups at the highest levels of government; perhaps more members of minority groups and religions can be appointed, even if they didn't rise through the political system. Only sincere adherents of a religion can really know what's best for their religion, and meritocratic decision-making would involve more representation by members of religious communities. The scholar Jiang Qing proposes a House of Cultural Continuity composed of leaders of diverse religions with a long historical presence in China, including Confucianism, Tibetan Buddhism, Daoism, and Christianity.⁸ What do you think? I realize the CPPCC is meant to include members of minority groups, but it doesn't seem to have much power relative to other central-level political institutions.

Bing Bing: Regarding China's selection system and its impact on the desire to innovate and the sense of risk-taking among the cadres, I think that practice is the sole criterion of testing truth. In recent years, I found that the percentage of the questions that asked for practical solutions on the examinations for the recruitment and promotion of cadres has been steadily increasing. Especially in those tests for the selection of deputy department chiefs, the cases come from real life and cover all areas: decision-making, research and investigations, emergencies (natural disasters, production safety accidents, food safety accidents, etc.), mass incidents, negative news exposure on the new media. Through written exams, group discussions, interactive conversations, on-the-spot reports, and other testing forms, the integrated skills of the candidates may be scanned fairly well. If my memory is correct, the evaluation indicators for innovative skills took up 15–20 points out of 100, which showed its importance. With regard to risk-taking, I think that taking a risk is not a goal in itself; the ultimate concern is solving the problem. Courage and adventurousness are cardinal virtues in the Western culture. This is quite associated with the nomadic civilization and the history of navigation and expansion. In the Chinese tradition, the most valuable virtues are compassion and righteousness. Compassion reflects the love of the people. The Chinese tradition considers compassionate love as a universal value and expands it from family members to everyone. Bravery is not the most endorsed virtue by the Chinese. In Taoism, it is even resented. Laozi believes that when bravery becomes audacity, the person may commit murder. He predicts that brave people normally do not have a good ending.

Another Chinese value is expressed by the famous sayings, “an exemplary person should be quicker in actions than in speeches” and “peach and plum trees do not talk, yet the footpaths under them exposed their popularity.”⁹ This might be a reason that our leaders retain a low international exposure that you mentioned. Of course, circumstances change, with globalization being a trend. For example, after the new leadership came out after the 18th Party Congress, a series of feature stories about the seven Standing Committee members were publicized as well. For example, Premier Li Keqiang published an article in an Indian newspaper at the time of his visit to India; this is an unusual phenomenon. I think all those practices reflect an awareness of keeping up with the currents of the time. China is such a huge country. Solving all its own problems is not

⁸ Jiang Qing, *A Confucian Constitutional Order* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012), ch. 1.

⁹ Sima Qian (145–87 BCE, Han Dynasty), *Records of the Grand Historian*, Li jiangjun liezhuan [Biographies of General Li].

a small deal. Hence, domestic affairs must be a priority. But as globalization is a general trend, I think we will gradually pay more attention to the world.

Regarding representation by minorities, every province has to make its own arrangements depending on factors such as the percentage of minority groups. In the open selection in which I participated in 2009 in Liaoning Province, one position—provincial committee of ethnicity and religion—allowed registration only of candidates who were ethnic minority members. A Hui minority member finally got the job and we became neighbors. I often asked him about the Koran because I am less familiar with Islamic civilization than with Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. We became good friends. This example illustrates that our system can be improved through systematic design. Also, it is easier to solve the problems through open selection. The Liaoning open selection was actually opened to people with an overseas background. Some positions such as deputy director of the district managing committee or the bureau of commerce may welcome Chinese candidates who studied abroad. There have not been any precedents of foreigners working in government positions. But you know China's development is pretty fast. Maybe someday, those proposals may become reality as well.

Daniel: Let me ask about an issue that may be closer to your heart: the lack of representation of women at the higher levels of government. It's a bit odd that so few women make it to the top of the Chinese political system. Here too, there seems to be an anti-meritocratic principle at work. To the extent there is any politically relevant difference between men and women, I'd argue it's that women are, on average, more compassionate than men. If we agree that compassion—or what Confucians would call *ren*—is an important political virtue, then an ideal political system would have more, not fewer, women in politics. In any case, we don't have to put forward controversial ideas about women's compassion to justify the proposal for more women in government. As Plato argued, a meritocratic system would choose whoever has the most ability, and one would expect at least some women at higher levels of government! In fact, given that policies affect women as much as men, and if we agree that generally women have better understanding of women's needs and interests, about half of the spots at the higher level of government would be occupied by women. But why are there so few women at the higher levels of government in China? Doesn't that seem inconsistent with the principle of meritocracy? I hope that things will improve in the future, but are there any reasons to be hopeful?

Bing Bing: First let me thank you for your attention and support on behalf of the female workers. In 1949, when the People's Republic of China was founded, gender equality was stipulated as a basic national policy. Compared with the feminist movements or liberation in the West, which was characterized by bottom-up activities, the gender equality movement in China was led by the leaders at the top positions and the accomplishments were almost achieved overnight in China. I apparently am a beneficiary: I was able to go to school with my brother right up to the university level. My undergraduate major was German. In a class of fifteen students, twelve of us were women. Of course, this may be a feature of language majors. In general, the percentage of women in science majors was much smaller, like in Tsinghua, the male students were the majority in most departments. Later on, I was able to get a job with the same opportunities as a man, including

participating in open selection. I was lucky. Because, despite the fact that China has made great progress in promoting women's advancement and gender equality, it is clear that gender discrimination still exists in the workforce. The degree of women's participation in decision-making and management is still low. Therefore, after the State Council issued the Outline Program for Development of Chinese Women and Children (2001–2010) in 2001, the state announced the Outline Program for Development of Chinese Women and Children (2011–2020) in 2011, in accordance with the basic principles of the PRC Constitution, the Law on the Protection of Rights of Women and Children as well as other relevant rules, the UN's Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Beijing Declaration of the Fourth World Conference on Women and other international treaties and principles, while keeping in line with China's overall goal of socioeconomic development and the actual circumstances of women's advancement and gender equality. The Outline set seven priorities as major goals and strategies: women and health, women and education, women and the economy, women's participation in decision-making and management, women and social security, women and the environment, and women and the law. Among them, in the part regarding women's participation in decision-making and management, it says that “[we must] strengthen the training and selection of women cadres, and implement the relevant documents about the training and selection of women cadres. Through training and communication, [we can] enable a certain proportion of women to take the leading role in some important positions. We need to pay attention to selecting women cadres from the grassroots level and the production lines, increasing the percentages of women in the backup cadre team.”¹⁰ Here is an example. During the open selection of deputy department chiefs in Henan Province in 2008, fifteen positions of the total sixty places were offered only to women. Another ten positions were offered to only non-CCP members. This is a specific example of making institutional arrangements to increase women's representation in the government.

Daniel: Thanks, Bing Bing. I agree that the socialist revolution did much to improve the status of women, especially in urban areas. Perhaps patriarchy is the “Achilles heel” of Confucianism (though all major traditions and religions were patriarchal in origin, and require a certain degree of reinterpretation or even reinvention to be made compatible with modern ideas of gender equality).

Bing Bing: I do not entirely agree that patriarchy is the Achilles' heel of Confucian thought. Looking back to its origin, Confucius actually discussed very little about how he viewed females. The most famous passage about women in the *Analects* is the following: “Only women and the petty persons are difficult to be tamed.” This sentence is commonly understood as reflecting Confucius's disregard of women. After learning the Four Books for Women, I believe that the original text is greatly misunderstood. About the Four Books in Confucian thought—*The Doctrine of the Mean*, the *Great Learning*, the *Analects*, and Mencius—you must be very familiar with all of these four, but do you know there are four popular books for women as well? They were even exported to the foreign countries in the Ming Dynasty. Those four books are: *Commandments for Women*,

¹⁰ The State Council of the People's Republic of China, *The Outline Program for Development of Chinese Women (2011–2020)*, China.com.cn, 8 Aug. 2011. http://www.china.com.cn/policy/txt/2011-08/08/content_23160230_5.htm.

Women's Analects, Interior Admonishment, and Filial Piety Classics for Women (in the Qing Dynasty, the *Filial Piety Classics for Women* was replaced by *Records of the Exemplary Deeds of Women*). You see, both men and women may study the Four Books. But the Four Books for Women were written especially for women. This reflects an emphasis on women's education, especially their moral education. Some may object: didn't the ancients say that "a woman without talent has virtue?" In fact, the point here is that a woman should place her talent in her "heart." Rather than affirming her talent in an arrogant way, a woman should be humble. What a woman really cares about is virtue. This is like when someone praises me for my looks, I would half-jokingly reply that "being good-looking is not something I'm good at." The actual meaning of my reply is not that I am ugly but rather that I do not really care about whether I am a beautiful woman. A good-looking face is a superficial thing, because any woman will age. In my mind, I place more weight on the maintenance of a good morality and an even temperament. These attributes will never be diminished with aging. Why is a woman's virtue important? It is because that is what a mother might pass on to her daughters and sons. Mencius said, "There are three ways of being an unfilial son; raising no posterity is the most serious one."¹¹ But does having a child imply that a person would have posterity? No. Mencius also said that if a person just knows to "eat full meals, wear warm clothes and live a comfortable life while having little education," he would be no different from an animal. So, who has a greater responsibility of educating the children? The answer is the mother, because the cultural tradition is that "men take control of the external affairs of the family, women take care of the domestic affairs." Biologically, the education of a mother starts from her pregnancy. Modern people argue for gender equality, believing that those who control domestic affairs might be inferior to those who control external affairs. It is actually not the case. Foreign affairs are important to a country, but the construction of internal affairs, including education and development, is actually far more important. Therefore, consistent with the idea of "cultivating the moral self, regulating the family, governing the state correctly, and making the world peaceful" in the *Great Learning*, the Four Books for Women suggest that "to govern the state, morality must be rectified first; to maintain morality, the relationship between husband and wife must be rectified; to maintain the good relationship between husband and wife, the first priority must be given to the virtue of women." Hence, I think that the true meaning of "only women and petty persons are difficult to be tamed" is simply that the education of women and children is very important and difficult. As you live in China, you may follow the custom of calling your wife "Tai Tai" (Mrs.); do you know the origin of the appellation? It originated from three women in the Zhou Dynasty: the grandmother of King Wen of Zhou, Tai Jiang; his mother, Tai Ren; and his wife, Tai Si. The sons of the three women were all sages: King Ji, King Wen, King Wu, and the Duke of Zhou. Therefore, the Zhou Dynasty was the longest dynasty in Chinese history, lasting more than 800 years. The virtue of the three women laid a great foundation. Thus, the title "Tai Tai" is a reminder to all married women that they should learn from the sage mothers to raise sage children who benefit the populace and maintain a great reputation.

Confucius said: "The Dao consists of the feminine and the masculine."¹² In addition, filial piety in Confucianism gives equal value to the father and the mother. Thus I don't

¹¹ Mencius (372–289 BCE, the Warring States Period), *Mencius*, Li Lou Part A.

¹² *I Ching*, Xi Ci Part A. The Warring States Period (476–221 BCE).

think Confucius discriminated against women. Because even from the explanations given by modern ethics, the pursuit of gender equality already developed from struggling against discrimination to giving both genders differentiated treatment based on the enjoyment of equal rights. In other words, true equality means differentiation without having low or high status. Theoretically or practically speaking, men's control of external affairs or women's control of domestic affairs per se cannot prove that men are superior to women, unless we regard external affairs as more important than domestic matters. But such a view is apparently contradictory to the core of the *Great Learning* that "cultivating the self must be the foundation."

Daniel: I agree that Confucians valued family life, more so than, say, ancient Greek thinkers who argued that the good life lies outside the family, in the public sphere. The distinction between the private and the public was picked up by liberal thinkers in the West, along with the not-so-implicit assumption that the good life lies mainly (if not only) in the public sphere. Perhaps Confucians have more in common with modern-day feminist care theorists, who argue that care and justice are first learned in the family, and hence family relations have special value. Still, if the assumption is that women are primarily responsible for family duties, they will likely be discriminated against when it comes to work outside the family, and we can't expect equal representation of women and men in politics. So yes, we should value the family, but we need to question the idea that women, simply by virtue of their sex, are primarily responsible for family work and education beyond what men are biologically incapable of doing, such as being pregnant and breastfeeding.

In any case, let's move on to perhaps the most widely discussed problem with actually existing political meritocracy: political corruption, which has worsened during the same period the political selection and promotion system is supposed to have become more meritocratic. President Xi Jinping himself says corruption threatens the whole political system. That makes sense. If the political leaders are corrupt in a democracy, they can be voted out of power. And if the leaders are still corrupt, the people, to a certain extent, need to blame themselves. The leaders get their legitimacy by virtue of being chosen by the people, and political corruption doesn't threaten the whole system. In a meritocracy, by contrast, the leaders are supposed to set a model of corruption-free rule, and they derive their legitimacy at least partly because they are viewed as having superior virtue. So if they are widely viewed as corrupt, the legitimacy of the whole system is undermined, perhaps fatally. So here's my question: why did corruption worsen along with the "meritocratization" of the political system, and what is the solution to political corruption, in your view?

Bing Bing: When a country is in its "juvenile" period, experiencing fast economic growth and transformation of its social structures, corruption is likely to worsen: (1) rapid economic development generates enormous wealth in a short period, enabling all kinds of temptation to appear in its best shape at a vulnerable time of the people; (2) the shortage or imbalance of resources is intensified with the rent-seeking space increased; and (3) as the time for economic system transformation is short and the speed is fast, it may be unavoidable that matching supervisory mechanisms may be lacking and there are many loopholes. For example, England in the 18th century, the United States in the 19th century,

and Japan and Singapore in the 20th century all experienced outbursts of corruption. Take the United Kingdom, for example: seats in the Parliament were sold for dozens of pounds at the beginning of the 18th century and the price soared to 2,000 pounds by the end of the century and 100,000 pounds in the 19th century. Singapore is now considered a clean government across the world. But the corruption problem during its social transformation period was also severe. Between the 1960s and 1980s, two ministers of the National Development Ministry, one minister of the Ministry of Environment, one chairman of the national workers union, and the chief of the Commerce Bureau were punished for corruption. With thirty years of reform and opening-up, China has embarked on a process that took much longer in most countries. During this period, the overall wealth increased at an unimaginable rate (big temptation); the imbalance of resource arrangement was salient (mass opportunities); the systematic construction of an anti-corruption mechanism was difficult to push forward (low costs). Hence, the problem of corruption became a recurring issue. With a horizontal comparison, if referring to Transparency International's 2012 report, China, as a rising economy with a large population, ranked fourteen places ahead of India (94th), a country that is widely recognized as a democracy.¹³ Singapore and Hong Kong ranked first and second, respectively, far exceeding "democratic" Korea. By the way, among the ten most corrupt countries and regions, nine of them have a multi-party system. There aren't any official statistics that can tell us the likely consequences had China not selected virtuous and capable people. But through my discussions with friends working in anti-corruption affairs, most people believe that the clean-handedness of officials appointed by open selection is higher. One proof is that in publicly reported corruption cases, few related to open selection per se or the officials appointed through it.

To solve the problem of corruption, our prescription combines Western and Chinese medicine: prevention and punishment. Prevention, the basis of Chinese medicine, involves political education, and strict punishment is just like having surgery. I personally prefer Chinese medicine and agree with the saying that "the best doctors treat healthy people; the mediocre doctors treat the people that are going to be ill; the worst doctors treat the illness." The most brilliant medical technique is to "nip it in the bud." We also say "a thing must be rotten before the parasites thrive." Let us get back to the Fan Zhongyan example. Prior to serving in the government, he was so poor that he had to eat porridge and wild vegetables every day. At that time, he lived in a shabby temple. One day, he found a pot of silver. He did not desire it but buried the pot under a tree. Later when he became the prime minister, an old monk wrote him a letter, asking for his help to renovate the temple. Fan Zhongyan then told the monk that he had buried the silver under a tree; that was how the temple funded its renovation. For a poor student, the temptation of the silver (taking it as one's own) must have been very great and the cost must be very low. Why didn't Fan Zhongyan desire it? It is nothing but morality.

Since the anti-corruption task is still in its infancy, I think we need to reflect, not only on enhancing the punishment mechanisms ("locking power into the cage of institutions"), but also on "locking desire into the cage of morality," so that we can fully realize the need to "follow our heart's desires, without transgressing what is right." The CCP pays much attention to education and learning. Not only are there many training institutions (for example, all levels of the Party schools), but there are also multiple means, for

¹³ *World Corruption Index (2012)*, source: Transparency International.

example, an official can receive political education on a weekly basis or become a full-time student for a year. When anti-corruption is involved, we have two opposite methods of education. The positive method is political study meant to appeal to the better side of human nature, such as emphasizing the need to serve the people. Another method involves letting officials see real jails and listen to talks by officials convicted of corruption, to make officials more aware of the costs of corruption.

Daniel: But how can moral education be effective? It shouldn't be too difficult to make officials fear the consequences of corruption by means of harsh punishments, but it's not so easy to educate people so they become more public-spirited and less willing to make use of public resources for private benefit, especially if they are not likely to be caught.

Bing Bing: Last weekend, I visited the Central Party School with more than ten colleagues at the bureau chief level. We had four classes a day with another four hundred officials at the central government. We studied the scientific development theory and investigatory research methods. Personally I felt that two classes were excellent; they were lively and close to the practice. Everyone enjoyed the class; the teacher should have got a high score in the students' after-class evaluation. The other two classes were not so good; someone dozed off. ☺ Hence, the effects of education can be very different. So, how can the level of morality be improved through education? I think we need to advance with the times, and continuously explore new methods. While strengthening the research of the Marxist theory, we should deepen the exploration of the essence of traditional cultures, which should be revealed in a personalized and timely manner. Any empty, formulaic, and condescending moral demagoguery should be avoided. The second point is that the leaders should set themselves as examples, educating their subordinates through their own words and actions.

For instance, I took a traditional culture course a few years ago that started from the teaching of filial piety. At first, the teacher lectured about the topic. Then touching videos and music were broadcasted. In the evening, we were asked to write letters to our parents. I spent two hours writing a six-page letter, in the middle of which I cried. I used to think of myself as very filial. Only when I began to recollect how much love my parents gave me through writing the letter did I realize how ungrateful I had been and how poorly I've done to repay their love. Therefore, I sincerely confessed in the letter that I love them and am grateful to their sacrifices wholeheartedly. Although I couldn't be at their side at all times, I will work very hard to compensate them. (Later my father told me that my mother cried when reading the letter. Whenever she reads it, her tears just flow. Later on, my mother wrote me a poem, which was included in my book *Hong Yi Ji [The Collection of Grand Determination]*. A number of my friends expressed their appreciation of my literary talents. However, it was my mother's poem that made them cry.) The next day everyone shared our thoughts about writing letters or making phone calls to our parents. I still remember a young woman saying that she had hated her father for twenty years because of his divorce. She neglected him for twenty years no matter how hard he tried to rebuild the connection. Through the coursework yesterday, she finally called her father "dad" and reconciled with her father. This story moved everyone. We spent two days in such a warm and friendly environment. By learning from the ancient ancestors (Confucians in particular) and implementing the ideas in our everyday lives—such as

finding out our own mistakes and discovering the merits of others, saying sorry to family members, our hearts were consoled and purified. After the class, we will strive harder to be a good child, partner, and parent, which would benefit our health, family relationships, and team relations. This was the only class I have ever seen where the ages of the students ranged from 10-plus to 70 and 80 years old. Many student-officials pulled in their family members after hearing the lectures by themselves. (Later, I also took my parents and family to the class and the effects were great.) A number of companies took advantage of the class to train their employees. The best example is that the chairman of one large SOE (with more than 80,000 employees and dependents), after hearing the class, first brought it as a lecture to his 400 mid-level managers. He took the education into the company's training plan: twice every month, 200 people at a time. In the summer and winter breaks, some students were invited to study the course with their parents, who were also offered holidays. The local TV station would spend 10 minutes everyday to let the students share their experience. Within a year, the spirit of the employees obviously improved; the criminal rate of the city and familial conflicts greatly decreased; the happiness index increased a great deal.

In the past three years, I completed the elementary, intermediate (applying the spirit of filial piety into the actual life of families, work teams, and the society), and advanced courses (expanding filial piety to the world). Sometimes, I also retook the class by accompanying my parents and friends. (The course encouraged "retaking." The prices for both elementary and intermediate courses were 1,900 RMB. There was a discount for groups. Once you pay the tuition, you can retake the class anytime. In this way, it creates a positive environment to teach people about the faith of how to be a good person. The advanced class is free. The older students are also encouraged to volunteer and help the new students.) Last week, I came to the classroom again at its fourth anniversary, sharing my experience and thoughts with a hundred or so new students as well as teachers. I really felt a lot of benefits from participation. I also advised my class to donate for the people who suffered in the Ya'an earthquake. In a short time, we donated 20,000 RMB. After discussing it with the local charities, we finally bought ten tents (length and height 4.5m*5.6m) and sent them to the earthquake zone. I was deeply moved by that situation.

Because of my own experience in the class, I believe that moral education is indispensable and can be implemented. The key point is whether we can invoke everyone's emotions and let him/her wholeheartedly believe that one good deed deserves another, that is, to be a noble person in morality is the most advantageous choice for an individual.

This may contradict the common feelings of many people, especially in an age when the consumerist culture represented by the cola culture prevails in the society: present sweetness/happiness and being carefree is all a person seeks in the consumerist culture. Abandoning present interests is like asking a tiger for its skin. But let us refer to history, as it is the best mirror. Before Napoleon's death, he said, "I used to command millions of the military men, and now there are none; I used to conquer three continents, and now I have no place to live. Jesus is much stronger than me. Without a soldier or weapon and without conquering any land, his kingdom thrives in the heart of millions of people. There are two forces in the world, the sword and the spirit. In the long run, the sword will always be conquered by the spirit." This insight applies to Confucius as well. When he was alive, Confucius wasn't able to live up to his dreams. While generations of kings and

powerful officials waned with time, the spirit of the Confucius has continued through 2000 years and influenced numberless people. He is esteemed as Su Wang [titleless king]. After more than seventy generations, his families are still respected by ordinary people. Isn't that the biggest benefit? Getting back to Fan Zhongyan, he once bought a house located in Nan Yuan, Suzhou. A geomancer looked at the land and congratulated him that his family would be very prosperous, as many talented people would rise from the place. After hearing the words, Fan immediately donated the land to the state and built a school to educate the young. Four sons of his turned out to be very meritocratic as well, all serving in high positions for the emperors. He constantly made donations during his lifetime and died in poverty. But even 800 years later, the Fan family still nurtures many intelligent people who are respected by society. One of my teachers at college was an heir of Fan Zhongyan.

Daniel: I wonder whether you put too much weight on the importance of moral education as a means of curbing corruption. You mention the Transparency International Index, and if there's one general finding it's that countries at higher levels of economic development tend to be less corrupt. Meanwhile, we need institutional ways of curbing corruption.

Hong Kong and Singapore curbed corruption before they became wealthy by means of an independent anti-corruption agency that had the power to investigate corrupt officials. As you know, the supervision in mainland China is all done within the party structure. More independent media would help to expose cases of corruption (social media have been helpful in that respect), as would higher salaries for government officials and civil servants (again, Singapore and Hong Kong set a good model). Also helpful would be public disclosure of assets at all levels of government, including disclosure of the assets of family members. In China, as you know, the problem is not just the corruption of government officials, but the corruption of family members who draw on political connections to enrich themselves in unfair ways. Of course, it's easier to crack down on corruption in small city-states or territories than in large, complex, and diverse countries such as China. It's hard to imagine any large country in the world today without substantial levels of corruption, whatever the political system. Still, I would think that economic and political incentives to reduce corruption matter more than education in virtue, which is even harder to realize in a large and diverse country with different religions, cultures, languages, etc.

Bing Bing: When moral education cannot fix all the problems, we need to utilize the law and other institutional arrangements to punish the evil and praise the good. Also, since the law's representativeness and its authority imposed on individuals is very strong, it actually undertakes some of education's functions, which should be highly valued. The anti-corruption experience of Singapore has received a great deal of research here in China. There is a general trend of disclosing financial information. I personally believe that the implementation of this ideal may take an incremental approach. For example, it may start with newly promoted officials. Those who are willing to publicize their assets may be given priority in promotion; or it may also start from open selection of officials. In this way, the opposition forces may be smaller and it will be easier for the reformers to advance the cause. When the grand atmosphere is matured, further advancements may then be promoted. To realize the goal of preventing corruption through high salaries, the

first step should be to transform government functions, reduce the institutions (otherwise the taxes will be too heavy) and a series of relevant measures, like the monetization of the covert benefits.

But again, none of this works without morality and a sense of social responsibility. Some time ago, we held an event targeting the containment of the “corruption on the tongue,” focusing on opposing extravagance in meals at the public expense. The event was initially provoked by media criticisms and gradually got the attention of high-level leaders. In the event we organized, the leaders would first make themselves a model. For example, General Secretary Xi Jinping would order four dishes with soup for every meal. The disciplinary department also inspected the cadres’ activities, either openly or secretly. For instance, they may take note of the number of government cars parked at an expensive restaurant. The media also not only sent their reporters to cover the story, but also encouraged whistleblowers at the restaurants to report possible corruption. The effects of the movement were fairly good in a short period of time.

Plus, in a period of rapid transition, there are many gray areas outside the realm of law. With social development, many new things might come into being. But the period of reaching new agreement (mainly concerning the redistribution of interests) and stipulating it through the law will not be short. The process will be filled with blind spots. Additionally, the ruling people or groups may use the lawmaking to maximize their own interests. For the blind spots in the law, we need to add morality to make up for the missing part. To some extent, morality comes from the soft education from Heaven. The law is a hard education created by the human beings. Living in the real world, we should follow the teachings of Dao Dejing: “We should temper our brightness, and bring ourselves into agreement with the obscurity of others. We should blunt our sharp points, and unravel the complications of things.” Only through applying both soft and hard measures will we achieve the best effects. The softest part of the human body is the tongue; the hardest part is the teeth. However, the teeth are the easiest to decay, while the tongue may be the last piece to break down. In the long run, softness outperforms hardness. The foundation of the two is morality.

The United States was founded less than 250 years ago. Such a short period is less than even one dynasty in China, in terms of the length of time. Surely it has achieved a great deal in many respects. But it is way too early to say that the rules applicable in the United States may also be applied to anywhere around the world, if merely based on its current success. Take the recent example of the world financial crisis. First, the two billion-dollar losses of Lehman Brothers didn’t mean that the company had to go bankrupt. When Barclays Bank in the United Kingdom showed an interest in purchasing Lehman, Lehman’s management did not think of rescuing the company first. They thought of using their “golden parachute” agreements to get some money for themselves first. Thus, the eight senior managers requested that Barclays pay them a combined bonus of 2.5 billion USD. How blinded they were by greed! This request was impossible to satisfy, and Lehman Brothers broke down. The bankruptcy of the company led to a financial crisis in the United States, which spilled to the rest of the world as a result of the “butterfly effect.” Why was there a crisis? Did they lack sufficient professionals? Almost all Nobel laureates in economics were born in the United States and European countries. The top management of the financial institutions almost all held M.B.A. degrees from prestigious schools. Was there a shortage of sound laws and regulations? The rules were

actually imitated by all other countries. Was there a malfunctioning economic system? All other nations were copying it. The only thing that they lack is virtue. That type of financial crisis, because of the modern financial system and the status of the dollar (and the printing of too many dollars by the U.S. government), created a negative impact on the world. To some extent, the United States pushed its corruption onto the rest of the world. The sound of the paper currency machines at the Bureau of Engraving and Printing on 14th Street in Washington, D.C., was the background music of the corruption. Just as Adam Smith wrote in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, a market must be guided by morality. Otherwise, dangers may appear in the market. Unfortunately, most people pay attention only to the “invisible hand”—the market—and blindly neglect the other invisible hand, morality.

In conclusion, institutions are important but morality matters more. If an institution is managed by a good person, then, the more advanced the institution, the more benefits it creates for the society. Otherwise, the harm gets bigger. At the present time, the world is still in an economic crisis; this is a lesson that should be learned. Therefore, we should enhance the study and research of these issues, and make our moral education more lively and acceptable, while reflecting more on history and the present.

Daniel: I’d like to agree, but I still think you may be putting too much emphasis on morality. You mention the financial crisis in the United States, but here too I wonder if lack of virtue is really the key problem. Hank Paulson, then head of the U.S. Treasury, who may have triggered the crisis by not bailing out Lehman Brothers, is a religious believer and by all accounts an admirable family person who engages in substantial philanthropy. So are most of the high-level people I know at Goldman Sachs, the investment bank that is often held up as the chief “bad guy” on Wall Street (disclosure—my wife works for that firm). I’d argue that the key problem was not lack of virtue but rather the lack of a regulatory structure to rein in bankers who were doing what they are paid to do and ordinary American home buyers who could buy homes without having sufficient creditworthiness. That said, I’d like to know more about the content of education in virtue in the CCP. I agree with you that traditional value systems such as Confucianism have much to offer in that respect, but I wonder whether Marxism has anything to offer.

4. Toward Communism (or Is It Confucianism?)

Bing Bing: Marxism helps us to analyze what’s wrong with capitalism. Capitalism is a system that bases everything on the value of capital. The ultimate goal of capital is to seek profits, at whatever cost. The economic crisis is not only a subprime crisis; it is a consequence of the long-term monopoly of financial capital. The Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz wrote in his book *The Price of Inequality* that unequal distribution of wealth and wealth gaps in the United States have been steadily increasing since the 1980s.¹⁴ Thirty years ago, the richest 1 percent earned only 12 percent of the national income, totaling one-third of America’s wealth. In 2007 at the dawn of the financial crisis, the richest earned on average 1.3 million USD (after tax) while the poorest 20 percent received on

¹⁴ Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality* [*Bu pingdeng de daijia*], translated by Zhang Ziyuan (Beijing: China Machine Press, 2013), ch. 1.

average only 17,800 USD. The endless pursuit of profits (i.e., greed) led to the deluge of financial capital and derivatives. The banks were more and more separated from the real economy. With the national economy being more and more virtualized, greater bubbles were generated. Ultimately, one indebted financial institution served as the last straw. In addition, to boost economic growth and gain more profits, the governments and capitalists (whose interests closely match each other through elections and political donations) always try every means to encourage high consumption by the society, ranging from burgeoning consumer loans to the enormous fiscal deficit and foreign debt. On the one hand, the consuming bubbles aggravated the economic slowdown and resulted in economic crises. In this case, the crisis also stemmed from a system based on the U.S. currency. Hence, as long as the U.S. economy suffers, all other economies would be involved in the losses. On the other hand, the consumption bubbles brought greater harm to the environment and intensified the ecological crisis. Due to the global institutional arrangements, the biggest victims impacted by these two crises are less developed countries and the poor. (The United States can acquire any goods as long as its money printing machines run. Developed countries pay much attention to the environment protection. Highly polluting industries that also manufacture the necessities are then moved to less developed regions.) In a sense, I think, the root cause of an economic crisis is actually a morality crisis. In such a system, no matter how good-willed a private party may be, it is not enough to change the whole situation. Just as the robber first makes someone become a beggar, and then generously donates one dollar to the beggar.

Marxism also reminds us of the need for community. Professor Lang Xianping from the Chinese University of Hong Kong argues that communism and community are interlinked in English.¹⁵ In English, if someone disturbs his neighbor or is not willing to contribute to the construction of the community, he would be considered as lacking a “community spirit.” The word *community* includes the meaning of what we (in Chinese) would call harmony. “Social harmony” is thus a core aim in the pursuit of communism.

I personally think, in the context of China, that communism basically is the same as “the world of great unity,” the political ideal in the Confucian classic *The Book of Rites*. Influenced by the Soviet Union’s socialization of private assets, the early 20th-century thinker Hu Shi translated the word *communist* as *gongchanzhuyi*, emphasizing the methods but ignoring the original meaning. The more recent idea of constructing a harmonious society is actually a return to the original meaning of communism. The concept of a harmonious world inherited the same pursuit, in accordance with the call of “[building] a great unity, harmonious but different” in Chinese culture. Thanks to these value orientations, we were able to achieve great accomplishments: eradicating poverty among the 70% of the country’s population in thirty years. Compared to the solo fighter in charity work Mother Teresa, whom I admire a lot, the benefit of the system is perhaps irrefutable.

Daniel: Are you saying the communist political ideal is the same as the Confucian political ideal?

¹⁵ Lang Xianping and Yang Ruihui, *Zibenzhuyi jingshen he shehuizhuyi gaige* [The Spirit of Capitalism and the Socialist Reforms] (Beijing: Eastern Publishing Co., 2012), pp. 37–41.

Bing Bing: Of course there are different areas of emphasis. In contrast with the Confucian view of morality—such as compassion, righteousness, rites, wisdom, and trust and other traits stressing personal cultivation—Marx believed that morality is a production of the social economic circumstance of the time. Take what I just said as an example: the top managers on Wall Street may be nice and moral persons, but their value orientation—money, more money—and the speculative actions that incentivized the economic crises and harms to the people are immoral in my view. However, those actions do not break American laws—a consensus authorized through public power. If my understanding is correct, Marx actually placed morality in a specific material circumstance in his thinking. That is not to say that he denied the possibility of moral progress: he was dedicated to a harmonious society where no deprivation or suppression exists (whether suppression by state power or oppression by capital, or gender suppression). I agree with both views of morality: Confucianism places more stress on self-cultivation, as in the saying, “A person’s lifetime pursuit should be making him- or herself immune to bad external influences.” Marxism emphasizes social environment as shaping morality and collective action to better society, putting more weight on “to cultivate a better society, the betterment of everyone should be the ultimate goal.” The two points are just like two sides of a coin. If combined, there would be perfection.

The moral education of the CCP can be summarized as “serving the people heart and soul.” This is our aim. The forms of education vary from daily study to concentrated lectures in the Party school to topical events such as “the educational practice in the mass line of the Party,” which is usually organized by the Central Organization Department. Specifically, a major topic will be clarified for every event, in reference to the problems we face, such as some CCP members not being able to work closely with the people and serve the people. In other words, there are some bureaucratic styles and corruption issues. If a problem occurs, we will raise the issue in particular, make a detailed plan, and circulate it for implementation. Usually, there will be several steps: learn and hear the suggestions, raise the question, analyze the problem, investigate and research, conduct person-to-person talks, hold meetings to gather criticisms (especially requiring that the problems must connect to the members themselves and their work units), correct the problems, make solution plans and institutionalize the evaluation of implementation effects, and then write summaries. Frankly, this kind of education may not always be fruitful. The reasons relate to the tendencies of formalism and dogmatism. Hence, the education could not always touch people’s soul or mind.

Daniel: As far as Marx’s idea of communism, I’m not sure I agree that it’s mainly about establishing a harmonious society. Marx believed communism could only be implemented in a society with material abundance. Even the young Marx was critical of utopian socialists who tried to implement communism in poor societies: without an “absolutely essential material premise,” as he put it in *The German Ideology*, “want is merely made general, and with want the struggle for necessities would begin again, and the old filthy business would necessarily be restored.” If communism is implemented without developed productive forces (advanced technology and the knowledge to make use of it) that underpin material abundance, then it won’t work for long because people will need to compete for scarce resources. So Marx’s ideal of higher communism is mainly about an economically developed society, with public ownership of the means of

production that are put to use for the purpose of freeing people from unwanted labor. In that context, the state would have “withered away”; there would be no need for moral education, no need for the use of law to teach virtue, and no need to worry about choosing political officials with superior ability and virtue.

The Confucian political ideal, as you know, is very different. The ideal of the “Great Unity” (*da tong*) described in the *Book of Rites (Liji)* sounds more like what Marx would call “primitive communism,” since it’s not so much about advanced technology as about establishing a harmonious society in a relatively poor society. But the Confucian twist, so to speak, is an emphasis on the need to select public officials of superior virtue and ability (*xuan xian yu neng*), even in a communist society. In other words, there will always be a need for a state composed of officials with superior virtue and ability, even in an ideal political society. Thus, the ideal of communism differs from the ideal of Confucianism.

Bing Bing: As to the precondition for realizing a communist society, I recall an analysis from Adam Smith: “The great source of both the misery and disorders of human life, seems to arise from over-rating the difference between one permanent situation and another. Avarice over-rates the difference between poverty and riches: ambition, that between a private and a public station: vain-glory, that between obscurity and extensive reputation.”¹⁶ Even after 200 years, these words still carry great significance and implications. For instance, technology overrates the difference between the developed and the backward. Those who sing high praises of technologies never doubt that the development of technologies will necessarily lead to the development of the economy, social progress, and cultural blossoming. What I would like to ask is: despite the fact that technologies are constantly renewed, why is the world economy still trapped in crises, why do the ecological crises intensify year by year, why does terrorism still cast a shadow on the Earth? Take transportation as an example. Which one is more advanced: walking, biking, or driving an automobile? I guess the majority of people would not hesitate to choose the last one. What a miracle invention that gives us unprecedented freedom. To leave the Garden of Eden? No problem; we may freely drive the car to any new world that we long for. However, long before the car owners cool down from the elatedness of the possession, they are soon troubled by the problems the cars bring: congested roads, insufficient parking lots, highly polluted air. ... [A] vicious circle arises due to the growth of automobiles and the demand for them. In the rush hours of many cities like Beijing, even walking would be faster than driving a car. The responsive measures—limiting car licenses, holding license-plate lotteries, and increasing the charges of owning a car—just scratch the surface of the problem. The experience of many cities shows that the key solution lies in the development of public transportation. In order to convenience everyone and benefit their health, people should proactively choose or be forced to give up the freedom of possessing and using private cars; public financing should massively subsidize public transportation. In a broader sense, public ownership may perhaps be restored on this basis: if we can select the meritocratic people, collect the wisdom of the people at the maximum level, borrow the fruits of all civilizations, either

¹⁶ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments [Daode qingcao lun]*, translated by Xie Zonglin (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2008), Part III, “Of the Effects of Prosperity and Adversity upon the Judgment of Mankind with Regard to the Propriety of Action.”

domestic or foreign, present or ancient, and finally realize the Great Unity. On the basis of a highly developed social civilization—in the material aspect, every citizen’s necessary demand (instead of greed) will be met; in the spiritual aspect, all people’s morality goes closer to the highest good—we may advance a step further to realize the state of “governing by doing nothing,” does it also match what Marx meant by the spirit of communism?

Daniel: Again, I worry that you are overlooking key differences between Confucianism and communism. Confucians value social harmony, including harmony with nature, whereas it’s not such a big concern for Marxists. If people need to compete for scarce resources, to repeat, Marx would have objected to “utopian” proposals to promote social harmony. Even in a communist society based on material abundance, it’s not so clear that Marx would have affirmed the value of social harmony. He simply didn’t worry much about improving the quality of social relations. Under “higher communism”—a society of material abundance with developed productive forces—perhaps better social relations would emerge, almost as a by-product, but that’s not why he cared so much about communism. The real promise of communism is that machines would do most of the drudge labor, and the mass of humanity would no longer have to slave in factories and fields. We’d all be free to develop our creative talents—what makes us distinctly human, according to Marx—and to be architects, scientists, artists, and do whatever our imaginations drive us to do. That’s what mattered most to Marx. Maybe we can criticize him for neglecting the importance of social relations for human well-being, as well as for being a technological optimist (to be fair, he couldn’t have anticipated such game-changers as global warming), but I think it’s still a good idea for the economic system to be organized in a way that frees the mass of people from the need to engage in mind-stultifying drudge labor.

But let me ask you—and this is my final question—is the Chinese Communist Party really concerned with the end goal of communism? Is there any evidence of a desire to restructure the economy so that people will be freed from the need to engage in dirty and unwanted work? Certainly that end goal hasn’t been made public. I once heard from an elderly cadre that the CCP still plans to abolish capitalism at a certain stage so that people are freed from the need to engage in drudge labor, but capitalism is necessary now to develop the productive forces (as Marx himself recognized: competition between capitalists is a strong motive to upgrade technology). And since China needs investment to promote capitalism in the short term (50 years?), it can’t be too open about plans to abolish capitalism eventually. But that’s the plan, he told me, and it helps to explain why there aren’t any “complete” private property rights; home buyers do not buy homes for eternity, but only for 50 or 70 years, and after that, it may be time to think seriously about implementing communism. Is that the long-term agenda of the CCP?

Bing Bing: In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx said: “This communism, as fully developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as fully developed humanism equals naturalism.” Thus, the communism of Marx not only indicates the solution of the conflicts among human beings, but also harmony between humankind and nature. Solving the conflicts among people is a precondition of resolving the conflict between human beings and nature. Only through building a communist method of

production can the society maintain an institutional guarantee of sustainable development of the society and completely eradicate the conflicts between humankind and nature, and between some humans.

In other words, Marx did stress social harmony. Of course, Marx also believed that a critical precondition of communism was the high development of production forces or the great abundance of material wealth. But the ultimate purpose for Marx is promoting the free and all-around development of humankind. The main contents of the communist ideal include: oppose alienation and abnormal development (Dao imitates the law of nature); promote that people's actions must be self-conscious, voluntary, and self-dependent; oppose the domination of things over people or the object's domination over the subjects (studying the essence and mastering all knowledge); encourage that man and society and nature should be harmonious (unification of heaven and people); oppose the contradictory phenomena; and encourage that people should make full use of their innovative abilities (clarify the bright virtuous). So, you see, this fully agrees with the core content of traditional Chinese philosophy, Confucian thought in particular. The implications in modern days are: 1. For individuals, they should keep calm, maintain a wise inner sense, fully realize their innovative skills, and develop in an all-around way when facing enormous materialist temptation and external pressure; 2. Whether employing scientific technologies or market mechanisms to advance the economic production, we should maintain a cool nerve about the double-edged nature of the means, endeavoring to use advantages and avoid weaknesses.

Daniel: To me, that sounds more like Confucianism than Marxism. But since we're talking about political ideals, what exactly is meant by the pursuit of the "Chinese dream," as President Xi puts it?

Bing Bing: I think that to interpret and realize the Chinese dream, the most important thing is the pursuit of the Chinese spirit or our views of the core values. Culture is the soul of a person or even a people, and values are the foundation of culture. In other words, a people without culture are like a walking dead body. Without an explicit value that is recognizable by other parties, a person/giant creature may greatly confuse others about his/its behaviors: if not developing well, it would be considered about to "collapse" by others; if developing well, it would be regarded as a "threat." The essence of our values should be: in harmony with the sky, with the land, with the people; there should be harmony of different levels—the great, the middle-ranged, and the basic; it should be the harmony that one may easily stay calm, that people do not argue with one another, that humankind and nature coexist well, and that the world is peaceful.

Daniel: I like the idea that the Chinese dream is about the pursuit of different kinds of harmonious relations (though again, I'd argue that the dream owes more to Confucianism than to Marxism). But didn't President Xi also say that the state should be strong and powerful? That sounds more like Legalism than Confucianism. The emphasis on wealth and power made sense when China was poor and routinely bullied by foreign powers, just as it made sense, arguably, in the Warring States period. But is it really what China needs now? As China becomes wealthy and powerful, with established and relatively peaceful territorial boundaries, shouldn't the talk (re)turn to "soft power," just as the Han

Dynasty shifted the official emphasis from Legalism to Confucianism? Isn't it better to promote Confucian values such as social harmony and Communist values such as the need for creative work and freedom from toil and drudge labor?

Bing Bing: First, let's be clear about what is meant by a wealthy and powerful state. The term "rich and powerful" appeared in the report of the 18th CCP Convention. My understanding of the term contains two characters: rich, meaning that with virtue a ruler can retain the people, with the people a state can retain its land, with the land a country can accumulate wealth, and with wealth the people can be rich. But people must know the moral limits of being rich; being rich and influential but lacking fairness, a person like this would not concern me at all. If the rulers and the ruled all competed for the profits, the country would be in danger! Regarding what it means to be "powerful": people who can beat others may be called strong; people who can overcome the problems of their own may be called powerful. As Heaven's movement is ever vigorous, so must an exemplary person ceaselessly strive. That is to say, only the virtuous can be the rich and powerful.

Daniel: But what about this talk of "revitalizing the nation"? To be frank, it sounds a bit ominous to foreigners, who worry about an increasingly powerful China that aggressively throws its weight around the world.

Bing Bing: We need to ask: what is being revitalized? Do we want to return to the Tang or Song Dynasty or the time of Emperor Kangxi and Qianlong? To a time with the tributary system? Of course not. I think that revitalization refers to the nation's spirits—the spirit of harmony, compassion, fairness, rites, wisdom, and trust. The original meaning of the word *revitalization* is "mutual development." It never means that my rise would cause your diminishment. If we can restore the nation's spirits, then we could unify the people's hearts, gather the people's wisdom, and reach the real status of being rich and powerful. Externally, we may reduce suspicion and misunderstanding with our virtue and compassion for distant people; we may also help to solve the world's economic and ecological crises. This is real revitalization.

Daniel: Sounds good to me. But how to realize this ideal?

Bing Bing: We must give priority to education. Education should not be exam-oriented, nor should it be led by monetary concerns. It should be the education of the sages, starting from the *Standards for Being a Good Student* [a Qing Dynasty Confucian classic], from the teaching of filial piety and rites and respect. To the CCP members, the education should be Marxist theories that may go deep into the people's hearts. If this can be done, we will be steadily advancing to communism. Most important, we must keep in mind the end goal. For Marx, it is the all-around free development of humankind. From a traditional Chinese perspective, it means to be a real person, who may employ all the resources to educate him- or herself, and glitter with the sun and the moon, with his or her calm nature. The person should straighten her mind for the sky and earth, set her aims for the people and all living beings, inherit the knowledge of the past sages, and explore a peaceful world for future generations.

Daniel: When we started this dialogue, I assumed I'd be the Confucian and you'd be the communist, but I'm not sure who's who anymore. At the end of the day, however, labels are not so important, so long as we agree on the ideals and the way of getting there. What is clear is that there is no end of history, if by that is meant a global consensus that normative arguments about political ideals end with the "victory" of liberal democracy after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Clearly China offers some political alternatives, both in theory and in practice. What is also clear is that our dialogue must end at some point, and this seems like a good place. So let me thank you for your stimulating contributions and hope that others take it from here!¹⁷

¹⁷ We are grateful to Liu Yuhan, who translated the written Chinese (Bing Bing's speeches), and to Wei Ran, who helped with the footnotes.