political realities of the three periods of Japanese history explored in the book, although he spends surprisingly little time looking at the role of the Emperor. Takenaka also offers a thorough overview of his conception of semi-democratic regimes and the problems that can cause their downfall. Some cursory understanding of modern Japanese political history would be desirable before reading Takenaka's work, as at times his historical descriptions can be overly detailed and technical. However, Takenaka does make several adept comparisons with other semi-democratic regimes to make the book more accessible.

Higher Education, Meritocracy and Inequality in China. By Ye Liu. Singapore: Springer, 2016. 221 pp. $99.99 (cloth).

Reviewed by Oldrich Bubak, Department of Political Science McMaster University
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Discussions of meritocracy, whether in its political or economic variant, often start or end with China—a country with a millennium-long Confucian tradition that continues to inform its approach to education as well as to governance. Specifically, it is the Middle Kingdom's past system of civil service examinations, the *Keju*, that opens a unique window on understanding not only Chinese historical dynamics and its present system of political and academic selection, but also the problematics of meritocracy in general. This is also the starting point of Ye Liu's timely new book, *Higher Education, Meritocracy and Inequality in China*, which sets out to understand the rationale for and the effects of the expansion of Chinese higher education, and to study the implications of its (un) meritocratic nature.

Liu's study is guided by two main research questions, "*What is the role of the state in the expansion of higher education, in the particular context of a market economy under the communist regime?*" and "*To what extent has access to higher education in contemporary China been based on meritocratic criteria?"* (p. 6), each with a set of related sub-questions.

To answer these questions, the study takes an interdisciplinary, mixed-method, and multilevel approach. The first part of the book establishes a conceptual and theoretical foundation used in the rest of the study. It thus begins with a historical analysis of the principles and practices of Chinese meritocracy, and conducts a critical comparative analysis of existing theories of meritocracy. The author follows with a multi-level, contrast-oriented analysis—a systematic study of meritocratic approaches to higher education across five advanced economies—as she develops a typology of meritocracy based around different selection practices, the roles of private educational opportunities, and financial responsibilities.

Liu then turns to the exploration of the explanations for the expansion of higher education in China, and observes that the re-introduction of meritocracy was integral to the government's Development and Stability strategy rolled out following the turbulent departure from ideological communism. Having established a theoretical groundwork, Liu moves to the empirical part of the study to address the second research goal: to explore the meritocratic qualities of the selection schemes for entry to the institutions of higher learning. The focus is primarily on the connection between students' social, economic, and demographic factors and their performance on the *Gaokao* entrance examination, allowing for assessment of its meritocratic effectiveness. The study investigates family education levels, cultural capital, gender, and geography, and their impact on higher education choices and performance. Specifically, the goal of the analysis is to test the educational meritocracy hypothesis asserting that "students' destination in types of universities should be determined by their *Gaokao* scores regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds" (p. 116).

Additionally, the study explores gender and social geography, and their relationship to the evolving opportunity structures.

The empirical part of the study uses a mixed-method approach, consisting of a correlational analysis of original survey data and a qualitative component using interview data. The data analysis does not establish a relationship between students' cultural capital (as measured by their exposure to cultural artifacts or events) and educational choices and attainment, but indicates a positive association between students' choices plus performance in higher education and their socio-demographics (gender, geographic origin), as well as their parents' levels of education. Further, the author observes that decentralization allowed institutions and regions to drive their own admissions and recruitment procedures, diminishing the opportunity structures available, particularly to rural students. The qualitative analysis reveals material and attitudinal disparities in students disadvantaged by their socioeconomic condition, gender, or both (resulting in grim views of meritocracy), and uncovers their coping strategies.

In sum, the analyses suggest that applicants and students from professional familial backgrounds, urban areas, and better secondary schools hold an *advantage* in the current system. Importantly, the study brings attention to some reasons why selection mechanisms alone are not sufficient to a robust education-based meritocracy. Overall, Liu's findings are valuable to our understanding of meritocracy, the relationship between its operationalization and its outcomes, and namely its less apparent implications to social inequality. Moreover, the author demonstrates that bringing together literatures from different disciplines and integrating methods is essential, namely to understand the context for policy, as well as for the study of the connections between policy and its outcomes.

To be sure, if there is anything that can be said about China with confidence is that it is a fast-changing country filled with contradictions. And these may also become the key drivers for further research inspired by or responding to Liu's book. Specifically, there are three points to be made in this respect.

First, studies of meritocracy, and namely educational meritocracy, must consider a broader population of the potential, successful, and unsuccessful applicants, as well as those who have gotten through the obstacle course from start to finish. Liu's survey data are limited to young undergraduates who have been admitted to and are attending selected schools, neglecting the analytically important categories of students who had not the fortune to gain, or even apply for, admission to a university.

Second, understanding the attitudes or perceptions is crucial to the study of policy choices. How do applicants, students and graduates *perceive* the current implementation of meritocracy? Which students believe in its fairness and efficacy? And moreover, do the citizens have faith in this system? While Liu explores some students' views of meritocracy in the qualitative component of the study, these are limited to a small subset of female students. Liu otherwise does not capture any perceptions in her surveys hence limiting the scope of the data analyses.

Finally, social science research on China has a unique advantage in the form of a natural experiment, Taiwan. The two polities share the language, culture, and most history, yet depart in their economic and political institutions. Accordingly, including Taiwan in an analysis of Chinese meritocracy and thus controlling for culture, would enhance our understanding of the connections between the social structures, politics, and meritocracy.

Recent speeches of the British Prime Minister Theresa May as well as her counterparts across the Atlantic indicate that meritocracy is an increasingly fashionable concept in the world of high politics. This is also one of the reasons Ye Liu's important contribution received nearly instant attention upon its publication. And Liu exceeds the readers' expectations with a book that not only opens a window on the institutionalization of education throughout the long Chinese history, but also one that engages the difficult politics and practice of meritocracy.

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