



Something America and China Could Do Together

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Abstract

Neither China nor America has a system of governance geared to solving 21st century problems. To discover governance models that can deal efficiently and wisely with imminent technological and global challenges, experiments could be conducted, in both countries, and in tandem, in realms such as academia, healthcare, and business. By the time efficient global governance becomes crucial to human survival, China and America could have developed and tested models of organizational governance that show us how to proceed at national, regional, and global levels.

It may be an exaggeration to say that as Chinese-American relations go, so goes the world, but it's probably not far from the mark. I'm not only thinking of China's and America's common interest in avoiding war on the Korean peninsula, but looking ahead to a time when, if the two twenty-first-century superpowers trust each other well enough to act together, the world could take an irreversible step away from the twin perils of environmental degradation and war.

At the moment, the greatest threats to China and America come not from each other, but from flaws in their own systems of governance. Chinese and Americans alike are burdened by political systems that are not keeping pace with the times.

In the spirit of trial-and-error, why couldn't the two giants conduct experiments designed to discover forms of decision-making that are better suited to deal with the technological, environmental, and political challenges that we face?

Each nation would draw on its own traditions and could borrow from the others. As many have noted, the political philosophies of Confucius, Mo Zi, and Huang Zongxi are as rich as those of the Founding Fathers.

Confucius taught that a harmonious relationship is one in which both partners take care to protect each other's dignity. To affirm dignity is to confirm belonging and grant a voice in decision-making while disallowing exclusion, paternalism, and coercion.

Dignity is a universal desire, not something liberals favor and conservatives oppose, or vice versa. So too, every faith and every political system supports equal dignity in principle, if not in practice. This suggests that instead of choosing between libertarian and egalitarian models of governance, we should seek a dignitarian synthesis that incorporates both Jeffersonian and Confucian principles.

Though he didn't call it dignitarian governance, Confucius was one of its earliest advocates. Confucianism argues that rulers should be chosen on the basis of merit, not entitlement, and that the governing class is not above the law, but rather, honor-bound to serve not their own but the people's interests.

Interpreted in today's language, good governance means honoring legitimate rank, but abjuring rankism – abuse of the power inherent in rank. Dignitarian governance – be it academic, corporate, or civic – rests on precisely that distinction. Rankism, not rank, is the source of indignity, so by barring rankism, dignity is secured.

Though many subspecies of rankism – corruption, cronyism, favoritism, predatory lending, insider trading – are unlawful, these laws are nowhere consistently enforced.

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Western democracies cannot ignore the fact that many of today's issues are too complex to be settled at the ballot box. “One person-one vote” style democracy may have been up to the tasks of governance in an agrarian age, perhaps even in an industrial age, but it is no match for the intricacies and perils of hi-tech, knowledge-based societies.

It can be argued that humankind has come this far only because science was in its infancy and we lacked the means to destroy life on Earth. But now, avoiding irreversible damage to the planet and to each other is too important to leave to autocrats, ideologues, or amateurs. Society pays a steep price when its leaders learn on the job, much as it does for on-the-job training in business, education, and medicine.

But there's the rub. Wherever accountability is weak, rulers may be tempted to use the power of their office not to serve others but to strengthen their own hold on power, if not to enrich themselves. Put the other way round, any model of governance that would substitute expertise for popular elections must have a solution to the age-old conundrum of holding accountable those to whom authority is entrusted. Be it the “experts”, Confucian sages, Platonic philosopher kings, or highly trained professionals, the burden of proof is on those who would make light of the warning implicit in William Buckley, Jr.'s remark: “I should sooner live in a society governed by the first two thousand names in the Boston telephone directory than in a society governed by the two thousand faculty members of Harvard University.”

Dignitarian governance offers an alternative to traditional democracy by providing accountability through layers of governing bodies comprised of a fine-tuned mix of professionals and representatives chosen by those who have a stake in the decisions of those bodies.

Take academic institutions as an example. In the university, dignitarian governance means that students, staff, faculty, alumni, administrators, and trustees all have a voice and

a share of the votes. Votes on policies affecting distinct aspects of academic life are apportioned according to the responsibility that constituencies bear for those aspects. Thus, the faculty holds a majority of votes on educational policy, students hold the majority on issues of student life, and administrators hold a majority, but not a monopoly, on budgetary issues. Trustees, in consultation with the other constituencies, periodically choose new leadership for the institution, and hold fiduciary responsibility, but they delegate day-to-day internal governance to faculty, students, and staff.

Many of the issues facing our globalized hi-tech world call for technical solutions, not political compromises. It would be naïve to suggest that effective mechanisms of accountability already exist, but it's not too soon to begin designing and testing alternatives to find ones that work. Much experimentation will be needed to learn how to apportion votes among stakeholders so as to optimize the overall quality of decision-making while ensuring accountability.

We could begin in education and healthcare, and then apply what we learn to management and business. As we gain confidence in the capacity of dignitarian models to bring more knowledge to bear on decision-making without weakening accountability, we can introduce them into civic affairs, first in municipal government and then at the state, regional, national levels and even at the global level.

Democratic governance took time to develop, and so will dignitarian governance. But we must try because the only way to create and maintain the global harmony that will protect us from self-destruction is to create forms of self-governance that ensure dignity for everyone.

Both China and America have traditions and institutions that hold vital lessons for modernizing decision-making. While it's a stretch to imagine either country undertaking fundamental reforms in the near term, it's not quite so hard to imagine them doing so in the context of a loose partnership. As for our global future, what could be more auspicious than the two current superpowers working in tandem to invent governance tailored to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century?

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