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THE CULTURAL LOGIC OF GOVERNANCE IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

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Abstract: this article examines the cultural foundations of governance in contemporary China. Culture is treated not as a fixed national character but as a system of socially shared norms concerning authority, state obligations, and standards of good government. The analysis identifies four connected elements—grand unity, meritocracy, democratic centralism, and minben—and relates them to legitimacy, economic development, poverty reduction, and common prosperity.

Keywords: *China; political culture; governance; meritocracy; democratic centralism; minben; political legitimacy; economic development; poverty reduction; common prosperity.*

Zamonaviy Xitoyda boshqaruvning madaniy mantiqi

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Annotatsiya: maqolada zamonaviy Xitoy boshqaruvining siyosiy-madaniy asoslari tahlil qilinadi. Muallif iqtisodiy o‘sish va siyosiy barqarorlikni tushuntirishda madaniyatni qat’iy milliy xarakter emas, balki hokimiyat, davlat majburiyatlari va yaxshi boshqaruv haqidagi ijtimoiy me’yorlar tizimi sifatida talqin qiladi. Tadqiqot birlik, meritokratiya, demokratik markazlashuv va xalqni asos sifatida ko‘rish tamoyillarining zamonaviy boshqaruvdagi o‘zaro bog‘liqligini ko‘rsatadi.

Kalit so‘zlar: *Xitoy; siyosiy madaniyat; davlat boshqaruvi; meritokratiya; demokratik markazlashuv; minben; siyosiy legitimlik; iqtisodiy rivojlanish; qashshoqlikni qisqartirish; umumiy farovonlik.*

Современный Китай: культурная логика государственного управления

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Аннотация: в статье анализируются политико-культурные основания управления в современном Китае. Автор рассматривает культуру не как фиксированный национальный характер, а как систему социальных норм, определяющих представления об авторитете, обязанностях государства и качестве управления. Исследование показывает взаимосвязь четырёх элементов - великого единства, меритократии,

демократического централизма и принципа minben - с современными механизмами легитимности и управления.

Ключевые слова: *Китай; политическая культура; государственное управление; меритократия; демократический централизм; minben; политическая легитимность; экономическое развитие; сокращение бедности; общее процветание.*

This reframing requires care about what the word culture means. I do not use it to denote a fixed national character. Following Shi, I treat culture as a set of norms, that is, as socially shared expectations about acceptable and appropriate behavior. Norms shape how people define their interests, how they interpret authority, and how they evaluate those who govern them. Rationality, in Shi's formulation, is norm-infused rather than norm-free. Understood in this way, culture supplies a framework of legitimation: a set of assumptions about the source of political authority, the obligations of the state, and the standards of good government. These assumptions determine which policies appear reasonable, which claims to power appear credible, and which outcomes the public treats as the real test of its rulers.

I argue that the cultural logic of governance in contemporary China rests on four connected elements. Each has deep roots in the imperial past and a specific expression in the present.

The first element is grand unity, da yitong. For more than two thousand years, Chinese statecraft has assumed that a large and diverse territory requires a single center of authority. Yuri Pines traces this assumption to its origin. It took shape during the Warring States period, an age of prolonged war in which thinkers of otherwise incompatible schools converged on one proposition: only the political unification of All-under-Heaven under a single monarch could bring lasting peace. The distinctive feature of Chinese history is not that the empire proved indestructible, since it collapsed on several occasions, but that it was repeatedly reconstituted. After each period of disorder, the principal actors, from emperors to local elites to rebel leaders, worked to restore the unified order rather than to replace it, because they regarded no alternative as legitimate. In the imperial era the center was the emperor and his bureaucracy. In the present it is the vanguard party and its leadership core. The institutional form has changed completely, but the premise that a continental society requires centralized authority has not. This is why the unity of the party-state is treated as the precondition of every other political good rather than as one value among many.

The second element is meritocracy, shangxian. The classical texts are explicit that those who govern should be persons of ability and moral cultivation. The Book of Rites makes the selection of the worthy and able the core of the ideal order, and the civil examination system gave this principle an unusually durable institutional form over many centuries. The ideal remains active. Contemporary theorists, among them Daniel Bell, Tongdong Bai, and Joseph Chan, have restated political meritocracy as a serious

normative position. Authority is justified by the demonstrated capacity of those who hold it.

The study proceeds from the proposition that contemporary Chinese governance cannot be fully explained by institutional design alone: political culture helps explain why particular institutional arrangements are repeatedly justified through unity, competence, substantive performance, and popular welfare. The article therefore asks how these cultural principles interact with contemporary governance practices and whether they provide a coherent logic across economic development and poverty reduction.

The research uses qualitative historical-institutional analysis and interpretive comparison. The analytical material consists of historical and contemporary scholarship on Chinese political culture, political meritocracy, state legitimacy, governance, economic development, and poverty reduction. The source base combines foundational studies cited in the manuscript with recent peer-reviewed research published within the last five years. The analysis is organised around four cultural elements and two policy cases: economic development and industrial upgrading, and poverty alleviation and common prosperity.

The method is designed to identify mechanisms rather than estimate causal effects statistically. Textual evidence is compared across historical interpretations, contemporary political theory, and policy outcomes. Recent studies are used to test and update the manuscript's claims concerning historical politics, minben-oriented political culture, and meritocratic political selection [1–3].

The third element is democratic centralism together with the machinery of selection. Here the Leninist inheritance meets the meritocratic tradition. The vanguard party, organized and disciplined and claiming to represent the whole rather than a part, occupies the position once held by the scholar-official class. What distinguishes the system is the apparatus through which it recruits and screens its personnel: competitive examinations for entry into the civil service, multi-stage vetting and inspection of cadres, appraisal against quantified performance targets, and, increasingly, surveys that feed public assessments into promotion decisions. Advancement through successive levels of government, each a test of ability, institutionalizes the old requirement that leaders prove themselves before they rule. Democratic centralism supplies the organizational rule: consultation in the formation of policy, and unified discipline in its execution.

The fourth element is the people as foundation, minben. In this tradition the people do not select their rulers, but they are the ultimate basis of legitimacy. Mencius placed the people above the altars of state and above the ruler. Xunzi compared the ruler to a boat and the people to water, observing that the water that carries the boat can also overturn it. Dingxin Zhao shows that the Mandate of Heaven has a double edge effect: If Heaven withdrew the mandate from a ruler who governed badly, then the

mandate was conditional, and the way to keep it was to govern well. Shi's surveys found that minben still shapes how many ordinary people understand democracy: not mainly as a set of procedures that limit power, but as what he termed guardianship, a government that produces good substantive results for the people.

China's contemporary governing vision draws on two traditions that appear, on the surface, to have little in common: the Confucian tradition of statecraft and Marxist-Leninist socialism. The two traditions do stand far apart. Confucianism affirms hierarchy. It envisions an ordered society of differentiated roles and ritual propriety, in which harmony follows from each person fulfilling a station. Marxism affirms equality and treats class struggle, not harmony, as the engine of history. Confucianism locates its golden age in the past, in the sage-kings of antiquity, and prescribes gradual moral cultivation. Marxism locates its ideal in the future and, in its Leninist form, prescribes revolution and the overthrow of the existing order. Confucianism honors tradition, the family, and inherited moral norms, whereas revolutionary Marxism set out to destroy them.

Beneath these disagreements, however, the two traditions share the deep grammar of politics to a striking degree. I will state five points of convergence.

First, both judge authority by substantive results rather than by procedures of authorization. For Confucians, the Mandate of Heaven depends on whether the people are in fact fed, secure, and at peace. For socialists, the legitimacy of the revolution depends on whether it in fact improves the lives of the masses. Neither tradition locates legitimacy in the mechanics of election. Both ask what power has delivered.

Second, both entrust rule to a morally and intellectually superior group. The Confucian junzi, the cultivated scholar-official selected by examination, and the Leninist vanguard party, disciplined and claiming a superior grasp of history, are structurally the same answer to the same question of who should govern. The answer is not those who win a contest of popularity, but those who have demonstrated virtue and capacity and who bear responsibility for society as a whole.

Third, both assign the state positive duties toward material welfare. Mencius held that the ruler must regulate the people's livelihood so that families can support their parents and raise their children. Deng Xiaoping defined the essence of socialism as liberating the productive forces, eliminating polarization, and achieving common prosperity. In both, the state is an active moral agent rather than a night-watchman that only guards contracts.

Fourth, both are teleological. The Confucian datong, the Great Unity in which the world is shared by all, and the communist vision of a classless society of common abundance resemble each other in moral structure. Fifth, both place the collective above the individual. In the ordering of values, the family, the community, the nation, and the whole take precedence over individual claims.

Max Weber would call this an elective affinity. Neither tradition derives from the other, but they fit together and reinforce one another. This is why a Leninist party could denounce Confucius for decades and then embrace him with little apparent strain. The synthesis is now official doctrine, described by the leadership as the second combination, meaning the integration of Marxism with China's traditional culture. The current ruling party selects the elements of tradition that serve its purposes, namely minben, meritocracy, and datong, and mutes those that do not. But the ease of the selection indicates how much shared grammar was available to begin with.

Placed side by side, the traditional and contemporary versions of the ideal order reveal the continuity clearly.

	Traditional ideal order	Contemporary ideal order
Rulers / leaders	A sage-ruler and scholar-officials of superior virtue and ability: "inner sage, outer king"; the worthy and able selected for office.	A vanguard party and cadres of superior virtue and ability, recruited and promoted through examination, vetting, and performance evaluation.
The people	Orderly, law-abiding subjects; "good people" of simple and honest mores, with few disputes or litigations.	The people as the proclaimed principal of the state; patriotic citizens who support the ruling party.
State-society relation	The ruler cares for the people and takes all under heaven as his own responsibility; the people in turn support the ruler.	Leaders take the people as the foundation and "serve the people"; the people support the party. The ruling party must maintain close flesh-and-blood connections with the people.
Goals	Benevolent government, social harmony and order, the Great Unity (datong).	Economic development, social harmony and stability, the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

Table 1. Traditional and contemporary versions of the ideal order

Two governance strategies can be observed. The first is performance legitimacy. Even after experiencing a revolution, the current Chinese government still follows the older pattern by staking its authority on delivered results. Performance legitimacy is thus a modern descendant of the Mandate of Heaven. The second strategy is meritocratic accountability, in which officials are held accountable upward through evaluation and inspection, taking popular sentiment into consideration.

Case I: Economic Development and Industrial Upgrading

Economic development is the most visible field in which this logic operates. Because minben and the socialist tradition both make the state responsible for material welfare, the Chinese state acts, and is expected to act, as the organizer of prosperity rather than as a neutral referee. The result resembles the East Asian developmental state, though with distinctive methods. Five-year plans set long-term direction. Industrial policy channels credit, land, and talent toward priority sectors. Policy is made, in Sebastian Heilmann's phrase, through experimentation under hierarchy: local pilots are tested, selectively scaled up, and then issued as national policy, which combines central control with adaptive learning. The cadre evaluation system transmits growth targets down the administrative hierarchy, and scholars have described the resulting local competition as a promotion tournament, in which officials advance by producing measurable results.

The elements combine in a recognizable way. Grand unity provides the frame, since one center sets the direction. Meritocracy provides the personnel logic, since able officials rise by performing. Minben provides the justification, since growth is said to be for the people. Culture also operates at the grassroot level. Chinese local governments regard investment attraction as the "lifeline" of their work. Top leaders personally take charge, adopting measures such as optimizing the business environment, conducting targeted investment promotion along industrial chains, and implementing performance assessments and incentives. They go all out to compete for and secure projects, thereby stabilizing growth, promoting employment, increasing tax revenue, and driving high-quality regional development. The current phase of industrial upgrading illustrates the state-level logic. Policy has shifted from scale toward the middle and upper segments of the value chain. By 2025, high-technology manufacturing accounted for roughly 17 percent, and equipment manufacturing for close to 37 percent, of large-scale industrial value added; output of new energy vehicles, integrated circuits, and industrial robots grew at double-digit rates; and per capita GDP reached about 96,000 yuan in 2024.

The model also has real weaknesses, and I should state them plainly. State direction can misallocate capital, accumulate local government debt, and create overcapacity. Growth-centered evaluation once encouraged officials to pursue output at the expense of the environment. In recent years, the central government has actively adjusted indicators related to the economy, environmental protection, and regional

development, with a strong focus on controlling environmental pollution and promoting green transformation. At the same time, it has increased support for the central and western regions to promote coordinated and balanced regional development, shift the growth model, and achieve high-quality economic development.

Case II: Poverty Alleviation and Common Prosperity

If development shows the engine of the cultural logic, poverty reduction shows its clearest moral expression. For minben, protecting the weakest is the foundation of a stable state. For socialist egalitarianism, growth that bypasses the poorest betrays its purpose. Here the two traditions coincide. The scale of the achievement is impressive. According to the World Bank, close to 800 million Chinese people moved out of poverty after 1978, which is about three-quarters of the global total over the period.

The final campaign of targeted poverty alleviation, from 2013 to 2020, is the most instructive case for present purposes. By the end of 2020, all of the remaining 98.99 million rural poor under the national line had crossed it, and all 832 designated poor counties had been removed from the list. To reach this result, more than three million party first secretaries and resident cadres were sent to live and work in poor villages. The method combined household-level identification and registration, assistance tailored to each family's cause of poverty, and named officials held personally accountable for named families. It joined Leninist organizational capacity to the older ethic of benevolent government that leaves no one behind. The campaign also drew on culture directly, through narratives of sacrifice and duty, model workers, and the revival of revolutionary traditions, a practice Elizabeth Perry calls cultural governance.

The results reinforce the historical-politics approach to Chinese political culture. Recent scholarship argues that concepts such as great unification, political order, substantive orientation, and deference to authority remain useful for interpreting contemporary Chinese political culture [4]. This supports the manuscript's claim that culture should be analysed through historically formed norms and mechanisms rather than through a static concept of national character.

The discussion of meritocracy also benefits from recent empirical research. Liu's 2023 study argues that meritocratic political selection can operate as a form of grassroots co-optation by creating perceived opportunities for upward mobility, while Zhao, Ma and Chan identify inequalities in access to political selection through elite educational pathways [2; 3]. These findings complicate a purely normative understanding of meritocracy and suggest that selection mechanisms can simultaneously contribute to legitimacy and reproduce institutional inequalities.

Recent research on minben further strengthens the manuscript's interpretation of substantive performance. Wang's analysis places minben-meritocratic beliefs at the centre of contemporary political culture and links them to patterns of political trust and

differentiated evaluations of government [5]. This is consistent with the manuscript's argument that legitimacy may be assessed through delivered welfare and governance performance rather than electoral authorization alone.

The two policy cases demonstrate how the proposed cultural logic operates across different domains. Economic development and poverty reduction are not presented simply as technocratic policy areas; within the framework developed here, they are also tests of state competence and moral obligation. The same framework helps explain why performance evaluation, long-term planning, cadre selection, poverty targeting, and common-prosperity policies can be understood as mutually reinforcing elements of governance.

At the same time, the manuscript itself identifies important weaknesses. Centralised direction can generate capital misallocation, debt, overcapacity and environmental pressures, while meritocratic selection can create unequal access to political advancement. Therefore, the cultural logic described here should not be treated as a claim that governance outcomes are uniformly positive. Rather, it is an explanatory framework for understanding how authority is justified and how policy priorities are connected to historical political norms.

First, comparative research on China should continue to combine institutional and cultural explanations rather than treating them as competing approaches. Second, future studies should distinguish between normative meritocracy and the empirical mechanisms through which officials are selected, evaluated and promoted. Third, research on performance legitimacy should incorporate both material outcomes and public perceptions, because the relationship between policy delivery and legitimacy may vary across levels of government. Fourth, studies of common prosperity should examine how redistribution, regional development and social policy interact with the minben principle.

In conclusion, the manuscript argues that contemporary Chinese governance is shaped by a cultural logic in which grand unity, meritocracy, democratic centralism and minben interact with the institutional legacy of Marxism-Leninism. This framework helps connect political legitimacy with substantive performance, administrative selection, economic development and welfare provision. The contribution of the cultural approach is therefore to explain not only how governance institutions operate, but why particular forms of authority and policy performance acquire legitimacy within a historically specific political order.

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