

REVISITING MERITOCRACY IN ASIAN SETTINGS: DIMENSIONS OF COLONIAL INFLUENCES AND INDIGENOUS TRADITIONS*

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Abstract

Much of the present institutions, practices, systems and procedures, as well as value and behavioral patterns obtaining in public administration and human resources management among countries in the Asia-Pacific region today can generally be assumed as a rich sometimes uneasy blending of Western colonial and indigenous legacies. The impact of meritocracy as a value in administrative systems implanted during colonial times in these countries can be better understood and appreciated in analyzing the context of current practices, as framed within the demands for adaptation to suit the indigenous ethos.

This paper seeks to explore a preliminary comparative study of the evolution and development of meritocracy values in civil service systems among selected countries in Asia that had been under the rule of different colonial powers. In so doing, it conducts research on the provenance of meritocracy values and practices in Asia, and describes the colonial traditions on merit and fitness that had been supplanted in selected administrative systems and adapted to indigenous traditions and to the demands of society.

Key words and phrases: clerk, clergy, Weberian bureaucracy, meritocracy, merit system, indigenous traditions, colonial legacies

*A Paper prepared for the International Conference on “*Uniqueness of ‘Asian’ Public Administration: Claims, Critiques and Contribution*,” Graduate School of Public Administration, Seoul National University, Seoul, Korea, Feb. 14-15, 2013.

REVISITING MERITOCRACY IN ASIAN SETTINGS: Dimensions of Colonial Influences and Indigenous Traditions

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INTRODUCTION

The virtues of merit and fitness in modern bureaucracies remain as cardinal and overarching values upheld today among civil service institutions in both developed and developing societies. The merit and fitness principles, or now generally referred to as meritocracy, remain today as the major overriding template governing appointments of officeholders in modern bureaucracies.

In public administration, meritocracy represents, more or less, that system of government based on appointments determined by individual competence, ability or achievements instead of birth, privilege or other factors not related to skill and talent. It has evolved through the years to its present form and practices.

While approaches and methods for the pursuit and implementation may vary today from country to country, or from one administrative system to another, its fundamental philosophy of ensuring appointments to career positions in government bureaucracies based on capabilities and on aptitude remain firmly well-entrenched and well-established.

Meritocracy as a dominant principle and value in Western administrative systems began to take shape, as will be discussed later, with the decline of monarchial and absolute rule in Europe. While generally associated with Weberian principles of bureaucracy within the framework of the Western tradition, its roots and origins, or manifestations of it, however can be claimed today as extending farther back in time in Asian culture to ancient civilizations. This is particularly evident in China and Korea where competitive examinations and similar merit based practices were already routinely conducted as early as the second century to determine the competence of applicants to civil service positions (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meritocracy>).

Over the years however, with the advent of Western colonial conquest and its influence, if not impact on Asian culture and civilizations, indigenous merit principles in these societies mutated to adapt and adjust to patterns of colonial practices.

In fact, it could be assumed with some degree of confidence if not ambivalence that some flourishing indigenous meritocracy customs observed in East Asian or other similarly situated societies were influenced and somewhat corrupted by colonial powers. Practices such as the unbridled sale of public offices to the highest bidders were introduced mainly as part of the systematic exploitation of the colonies of Western powers. In the same token, if colonial powers corrupted indigenous systems, they likewise introduced their own systems following stormy and difficult periods of reform against patronage and spoils practices in their own administrative systems.

It would thus be appropriate to say that while colonial legacies produced civil services based on meritocracy and competition in some Asian countries, as Burns and Bowornwathana maintain (2001), its origins in others were not exactly derived from the West. It would therefore be incorrect to say that civil service systems based on meritocracy in Asian countries were purely products of the colonial periods. But, to say the least, Asian administrative systems were transmuted during the colonial regimes to adopt administrative practices and processes derived from Western cultures.

As such, much of meritocracy principles today in Asian settings can be described, as what the distinguished comparative public administration scholar, Ferrel Heady referred to, in describing the Philippine case, as “an unusually complete fusion or merger of contrasting systems, whatever typology is used” and which essentially combines “the institutional and behavioral characteristics of both Western and non-Western administrative systems (Heady, 1957: 45; 27; Reyes, 2011b: 1).

This paper seeks to provide a cursory look at the evolution of meritocracy in Asian administrative systems, and in so doing, examine, even superficially, their emergence in modern times. Admittedly, the scope and magnitude of a subject matter such as this deserve a more incisive and expanded treatment. The subject matter concededly is a vast one considering the numerous countries in Asia that has adopted and adapted to merit systems following independence. As such, it is conceded that this study remains to be a work in progress,

To be sure, comparative studies are generally risky business, especially on Asian civil service considering the uniqueness of its evolution and development. This is particularly true because research has to sift to details that compare and contrast systems and policies across different time periods, especially with the concept of meritocracy, which in some Asian societies might as well be said as having shaped since ancient times.

As Burns and Bowornwathana contend, Asian civil service systems “are quite diverse and not easy to classify,” although “generalizations are possible” (Burns and Bowornwathana, 2001b: 16).

This study hopes to contribute to the growing, yet limited literature on Asian administrative systems, and which, hitherto has not been given the attention and treatment it deserves. As such, this paper must be seen as a preliminary comparative treatment of the

tradition of merit systems in selected Asian countries where literature has been made available. The study thus focuses on random cases of civil service systems development in Asian societies.¹

The study asserts that meritocracy practices in Asian administrative systems are not simply products of Western legacies implanted during colonial times. They are instead a curious blending of both adopted policies derived from Western culture and of indigenous practices calibrated or temporized to the demands and vagaries of their respective settings.

Invariably, meritocracy practices in various Asian administrative systems will tend to be idiosyncratic, adapting as they must to the complexities of historical experiences, as well as to the vicissitudes and demands of indigenous and traditional ethos. These systems, as in most administrative configurations today, can roughly be referred to as hybrids – mainly for the lack of a better term.

TOWARDS A BRIEF PARSING OF THE CONCEPT OF MERITOCRACY

To begin with, the etymology of meritocracy as a concept or as a term is of fairly recent origin although its practice or scattered evidences of it have been put in place in ancient times in Asian societies, as pointed out earlier, such as China and Korea, where it has been founded on Confucian ethics and philosophy.

It is however claimed that the term was first used in 1958 by British politician and sociologist Michael Young, who conceived it somewhat derisively when he questioned the selection process and the legitimacy of appointments in the British civil service which he considered as favoring a select or elite group (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meritocracy>).

Since then however, this somewhat negative connotation has morphed into being used in a more positive light. Meritocracy is generally described today as a system of governments ruled by an intellectual aristocracy gifted and enlightened with vision and mission for the common good, or what perhaps the Greek philosopher Plato would depict as “philosopher kings” in *The Republic*. It is however also more used to refer to the policy of appointments to public and even private office and positions based on individual competence, capability, technical skills and intellectual ability.

Today, the usage of meritocracy as a term has therefore been used in a more constructive tone, which, as defined by the Merriam Webster Collegiate dictionary (1995) refers to “a system in which the talented are chosen and moved ahead on the basis of their achievement” and for which the intellectual and technical criteria are considered for the most part.

¹ This paper must be treated as part of a larger comparative study by the author intended to analyze meritocracy in selected Asian countries and administrative systems. Admittedly, the present discussion is a preliminary and tentative account of meritocracy systems as they developed in Asia.

As such the most common and perhaps, the widely accepted meaning of meritocracy, is that it is derived and based on “tested competency and ability” and “measured by intelligence quotient (IQ) or standardized achievement tests.” Among governments and their administrative systems, meritocracy is described as a system “where appointments and responsibilities are objectively assigned to individuals based on their ‘merit,’ namely, intelligence, credentials and education (generally) determined through evaluation and examinations (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meritocracy>).

Klitgaard maintains that “a merit system is ostensibly anti-elitist,” with the purpose of allocating presumably “scarce opportunities to the worthiest aspirants, [and] not to those with the best connections.” Klitgaard further cites the policies for university admissions and the selection of recruits for the civil service as among the widely known practices of merit systems (Klitgaard, 1986: 1).

Although meritocracy is of recent coinage, its practices or semblances of it can be traced back to Asian civilizations, particularly in imperial China as early as the sixth century B.C., where it has served as “a key theme in the history of Chinese political culture,” because Confucian doctrines emphasized and embodied the principle of selection of “leaders with above average ability to make morally informed political judgments, as well as to encourage as many people of talent as possible in politics” (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-a-bell/political-meritocracy-china_b_1815245.html; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meritocracy>).

Meritocracy is therefore a system that could be said as having its provenance in Asian public administration long before Western administrative systems discovered merit and fitness as outstanding values in the appointments of individuals to government positions.

CIVIL SERVICE SYSTEMS AND MERITOCRACY IN THE WESTERN TRADITION

The existing patterns of civil service systems in most countries today basically follow the notion of administrative organizations generally associated with Max Weber’s elaborate theory of bureaucracy. They are generally characterized and marked by formal norms of rules and regulations in behavior and conduct, the culture of written documents and of secrecy in official businesses, hierarchical arrangements, continuity of offices, career systems, standardized salaries classified according to positions and well defined structures of recruitment and appointments, among others.

Civil service institutions in the Western tradition were products of relatively long periods of gestation and development. Raadschelders and Rutgers describe them as institutions of government or state bodies where full-time, salaried and systematically recruited functionaries work within a system of hierarchical relations, observing and upholding uniform rules and

procedures, and with adequate provisions for pension benefits (Raadschelders and Rutgers, 1996: 68).

On the other hand, Burns and Bowornwathana (2001b: 3, citing Bekke, Perry and Toonen, 1996: 2) describe civil service systems “as mediating institutions that mobilize human resources in the service of the affairs of the State in a given territory.”

The rise and acceptance of merit and fitness principles in Western bureaucracies have been marked by long and difficult periods of transition. Its development to its modern form can be traced perhaps to the medieval period, with its roots in the Western world going far back to the 1200s with the emergence of cities and universities, the institutionalization of inter-regional trade and commerce, and the persistent struggle for power between clerical and secular authorities.

It is important to note here that in Europe, the Catholic Church assumed an important role in the development of the modern civil service. From the ranks of the holy orders and the churchmen, the monarchs of the day recruited men of learning to administer and put in order the management of their households. From the clergy, the rulers of the period found an abundant supply of learned personnel, able to read and write, and experienced in the mechanics of scribal service because the Church taught and trained those who enter the priesthood to reproduce the scriptures and other religious documents.

Moreover, the Catholic clergy are not allowed to marry, then and now, thereby freed from the burdens and responsibilities of supporting a family. They are also required to practice celibacy as a vow in the priesthood. They were therefore considered as natural servants in the king’s household, perceived to be dedicated to their religious tasks and duties and for the most part, committed to spiritual virtues more than temporal needs. This made them trustworthy in the eyes of the monarch in administering and managing the state’s coffers and as a trusted safeguard against pilferages and embezzlements.

Moreover, it is also pertinent to point out here that the Church operated within a strict hierarchical structure built and governed by the dictates of protocols, formalities and, most notably, of obedience. The Church demanded strict compliance not only to the established commandments enshrined in the scriptures, but to its rules, with behavior and conduct well-defined and any deviations were sanctioned if not punished severely. Punishment comes in the form of excommunication or expulsion from the Church, or even charged with heresy and put to trial. This would have severe consequences for offenders.

Three important vows in the priesthood – the vows of obedience, poverty and chastity - thus served as the critical requirements, aside from complete allegiance to the Church in recruiting men of talent to perform administrative service to the state. Hence, that familiar word “clerk,” now part of bureaucratic positions and jargons in public administration study and practice has emerged or derivation from that of “clergy.”

It is also from here that we understand today why the Church had so much sway and influence in the affairs of the states in Europe. The Church’s papacy built for itself “a highly

efficient bureaucracy of specialists in various fields,” and from which would somehow serve as a model organization which is why “Church organization would prove to be a great influence on the development of the state” (Raadschelders and Rutgers, 1996: 72; Berman, 1983: 208).

From this structure would thus develop a civil service system or a bureaucracy in Europe that would be rigorously structured, governed by strict adherence to formal rules of conduct and behavior, and would somehow set the stage for appointments to positions based on talent.

This would however only change, as Raadschelders and Rutgers would claim, with the rise of the universities when rulers would begin to recruit “more and more laymen instead of clergymen” (Raadschelders and Rutgers, 1996: 73). Improvements and developments in the system of education resulted in increased competencies among the lay populace.

The evolution of the civil service in Europe was thus marked by advancements in literacy among the populace and which resulted in the recruitment of more and more laymen in state bureaucracies. This subsequently brought attention to the demands for formalized organizations and structures of officialdom and functionaries in support of the state, and which, soon formed into bureaucracies.

Raadschelders conveniently divides the phases of development of the civil service in Europe into three stages: 1) the medieval period circa 1200 to 1500; 2) the early modern period from 1500 to 1780, and 3) the modern period from 1780 to the present (Raadschelders, 2000: 115-117).

From this point, satrapies would emerge and given power and authority to exercise jurisdiction in far flung territories in behalf of the monarch on matters pertaining to the implementation of decrees of the king, tax collection, administration of justice, quelling rebellions, and similar duties among others.

Merit principles in the Western tradition would however emerge only in the last period, when the civil service has been transformed into a professional civil service, emerging as it did, in the eighteenth century from the practice of spoils and patronage, which then were common practices. Open entry then into public office earlier was not upheld, and “in France and Prussia, the main problems concerned the sale of offices and income structure.” The birth of modern civil service in Europe is placed sometime between 1880 and 1930 with the abolition of the practices of sinecures and the sale of offices (Raadschelders and Rutgers, 1996: 77).

In America, decades of practices of patronage and spoils particularly in the federal bureaucracy started from the Jackson Administration in 1828 and came to an end only in 1883 with the enactment of the Pendleton Act which professionalized the civil service in the United States based on merit. In Canada, a non-partisan civil service commission was established only in 1868, which then classified civil service appointments (Raadschelders and Rutgers, 1996: 77).

It is however instructive to note based on these accounts that the civil service systems that enshrined meritocracy were not exactly an exclusive feature that emanated from or derived purely from Western tradition. It could be safely claimed that meritocracy values or some

semblances of these values have been observed and practiced in some Asian civilizations long before the West discovered them sometime only until the eighteenth century.

MERITOCRACY IN ASIAN SETTINGS

The policies and processes that operationalize and pursue meritocracy principles today in both Western and Asian bureaucracies assume different forms. Obviously, meritocracy patterns in Asian civil service systems would be quite diverse mainly because of colonial adaptation and idiosyncratic characteristics largely dictated by the combination of colonial experiences and of indigenous traditions.

As pointed out earlier, it may be difficult to establish common patterns and practices mainly because these may have been characterized by this blending, particularly so in countries that have been colonized for long periods of time or had been dominated by several colonial powers.

Permutations and variants of how merit principles are put in operation in these settings have been understandably configured and reconfigured according to the specific demands and needs of each society. As a general rule however, the overriding principle apparently upheld is that personnel appointments to civil service positions, and therefore, distinct career classes, are to be made on the basis of competence and ability, measured according to certain prescribed standards and qualifications such as academic degrees, formal schooling, experiences or some form of training, and successfully passing competitive examinations.

The early common practice towards enshrining meritocracy principles can be seen in the policy of holding open competitive examinations in the filling up of a specified civil service position, and in which Asian bureaucracies somehow antedate those of civil service systems in the West. This has been likewise reinforced today by set procedures and standards for recruitment, selection, placement, promotion and removal, the recognition of standards of professionalism in office, the respect and recognition for the career service, security of tenure and continuity, well-defined job definitions, classification systems and salary grades for different classes of positions and, to a large extent, that of political neutrality.

As stated earlier therefore, meritocracy patterns in some Asian civilizations, even under absolutist regimes, have been around for a long period of time, evolving as they did, as products of long processes of evolution that marked and attended the histories and colonial experiences of these countries. Others however were recipients of merit principles coming from colonial powers. But these influences apparently have been tempered according to the demands of these societies. It is however unfortunate that scholarly accounts and narratives of administrative systems in Asian systems have not been well documented and circulated as compared to those in the West.

Raadschelders precisely laments this in his elaborate treatise on histories of administrative systems. He points out succinctly that like Africa, “there are no general administrative histories of Asia,” even if there had been several early state studies (Raadschelders, 2000).

This however by no means must be construed as neglect on the part Asian scholars, but rather a gap if not a weakness in putting together their researches and studies in a language that can be readily accessible or understood by a wider range of readership. It is however encouraging that in recent years, there has been a growing number of generally English publications on Asian administrative systems written by Asian scholars based on their own researches and which provide incisive narratives and accounts based on first hand experience or of personal knowledge of their own systems. In a way, these help lift the shrouds of mystique of Asian administrative systems, and contributes to a better appreciation and understanding of the evolution, development, practices and values of Asian public administration.²

Merit principles and their applications in Asian bureaucracies today reflect a congeries of diverse and varying traditions and practices. There maybe weaknesses in the pursuit of meritocracy values in them, but on the whole, they indicate adherence to the rule of merit and fitness.

But like that of the Western tradition, civil servants in societies where ancient civilizations thrived in Asia, emerged from being personal servants of emperors, kings or of the ruling monarchs. Civil servants operated within the framework of strict, centralized and rigid organizations marked by allegiance and devotion to rulers, such as that in India, where appointments to the court were based on loyalty (Mishra, 2001: 119-120).

As suggested by Burns and Bowornwathana, the evidence of their studies of Asian civil service systems indicates that Asian systems followed more or less the patterns of civil servants in the West described by Raadschelders and Rutgers (1996), except perhaps for China where stages or phases of evolution cannot fall into the framework of civil servants evolving from being personal servants of the monarch to becoming a protected, professional service (Burns, 2001).

This is in the sense that civil servants were first ‘servants of the emperor’ and would become and evolve only as ‘servants of the state’ during the periods of reform characterized by the decline in the powers of monarchial rules (Burns and Bowornwathana, 2001b: 4). From then

² Certainly, there had been a number of publications on Asian public administration with special reference to the published compilations generated in the conferences of the Eastern Regional Organization for Public Administration (EROPA), an organization established in 1960 to promote scholarship and research in the discipline. These collections are generally written by Asian scholars and reflect, oftentimes, a first hand, dynamic accounts of their respective administrative systems derived from research. See for instance Zhang, de Guzman and Reforma 1992; Pradhan and Reforma, 1991; de Guzman, Reforma and Reyes, 1989; Ro and Reforma, 1985; Lee and Samonte, 1970. To these, we can add the collection edited by Burns and Bowornwathana, 2001a which provides incisive critiques of civil service systems in Asia. Raadschelder’s “*Handbook of Administrative History*” (2000) also provides an excellent list of literature on Asian public administration, notably of China, India and Japan. There are of course other fairly recent materials that are written by Asian scholars, namely the collection edited by Berman, (2011b) on administrative systems in Southeast Asia and Berman, Moon and Choi, 2010 on East Asia.

on, they would become professionalized and regarded increasingly in modern times as “servants of the people.” This would be the case in China, Korea, India, Thailand and Japan.

Another common experience however is that civil servants emerged as ‘servants of colonial powers’ where they were readily conscripted to serve the interests and rule of foreign authorities as in the cases of Hong Kong, India, Malaysia, the Philippines, Macao, Vietnam, and Indonesia. The colonial powers however built a civil service system in their colonies that was tailored to their needs and interests. In so doing however, they integrated the indigenous population in the bureaucracies they set up only to augment manpower capacities, generally giving them menial and manual tasks that have practically no power.

OPEN COMPETITIVE EXAMINATIONS AND THE MERIT SYSTEM IN ASIA

The accounts on the provenance of meritocracy in bureaucracy as well as of professional civil service systems in Asian civil service systems therefore vary. Perhaps, the early manifestations of merit values in the bureaucracies of Asian societies can be found in the adoption of open competitive examinations for those who seek appointment in the service. Open competitive examinations as expressions of the policy to enshrine merit have a long history in Asia.

Civil service examinations in China for instance was claimed to have been introduced during the Han Dynasty in the second century B.C. This might as well be claimed as the world’s first civil service examinations. The Han Dynasty, founded sometime around 202 BC, developed a civil service system marked and characterized by open recruitment to all who possessed suitable qualities, and which was supported by a rank and salary system, where promotion could be made from the lowest grade to that of the highest. There was also reportedly no demarcation of the civil service between the central and the local governments (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meritocracy>; Hwa, 1991).

It could thus be said here that meritocracy, the template now governing appointments among modern civil service systems in the world today, has its origins in Asian public administration and could have spread out to other societies had it not been truncated by the colonial expansion of the Western powers. A study by the Princeton Encyclopedia of American History points this out succinctly, saying that,

“One of the oldest examples of a merit-based civil service system existed in the imperial bureaucracy of China. Tracing back to 200 B.C., the Han Dynasty adopted Confucianism as the basis of its political philosophy and structure, which included the revolutionary idea of replacing nobility of blood with one of virtue and honesty, and thereby calling for administrative appointments to be based solely on merit. This system allowed anyone who

passed an examination to become a government officer, a position that would bring wealth and honor to the whole family. In part due to Chinese influence, the first European civil service did not originate in Europe, but rather in India by the British-run East India Company... company managers hired and promoted employees based on competitive examinations in order to prevent corruption and favoritism” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meritocracy>).

Other accounts, such as that of Berman, also suggest competitive examinations have flourished in A.D. 587 (Berman, 2010: 5). Jing however claims that as early as 581 A.D., a formal examination system known as “kejuzhi,” was already adopted by the then ruling Sui dynasty, which had the “purpose of recruiting talent and educated literati as governmental officials” whereby the emperor was the examiner in a three stage examination held every three years (Jing, 2010: 35).

Be that as it may, China can be recognized today as having, as Herson maintains, “a civil service of great longevity, existing with relatively fixed form and function for some one thousand years.” This was, continues Herson, an imperial service of centralized direction and control, well-structured and designed towards recruiting men of “undeniable talent into the bureaucracy,” with the objective of having these “talented few” providing *a lifetime of loyal and unimpeded service* for the bureaucracy” (Herson, 1982: 41, *ital.. mine*). These somehow reflected and promoted the upholding of the respected values of professionalism and of careerism in the service, where security of tenure is guaranteed barring any acts of wrongdoing by the office holder.

The civil service was also rooted on the Confucian ethics, serving as it did, as the pivotal and cardinal foundations of public service practice. It was also recognized as the most readily available path to gain political power, so much so that remarkable prestige was attached to those who passed civil service examinations, and which would even result in having an audience with the emperor. In the homes of successful examinees would also be found such banners proclaiming proudly the achievement of the examinee with such words as “*Here resides a successful candidate of the government examination*” (Herson, 1982: 41; 50).³

For these reasons, the imperial examinations were considered not simply a test of intellect but also one of endurance, where candidates were reported to reside in isolated cubicles for seven days equipped with what can be considered as Spartan amenities consisting of “a brick bed and a desk at which to stand and write.” And by about A.D. 1050, the successful candidates of what can roughly be the equivalent of doctorates today supplied half the replacements to maintain the

³It is interesting to also point out here that even in the Philippines then and perhaps even now, particularly in the provinces, placards, posters, banners or framed plaques continue to be prominently displayed outside the houses of successful professionals who have passed government licensure examinations, such as those in medicine, nursing, law, engineering, and accountancy. This represents honor and pride in that one of the residents of that house has successfully hurdled government examinations, so much so that it must be proclaimed for all the village to see.

civil service. Thus, for hundreds of years, the great majority of office holders appointed to public offices were selected through the examination system (Klitgaard, 1986: 10).

It cannot be denied that the influence of China in Asia is far-reaching, being one of the oldest civilizations in the world and having a proud and continuous history of at least 3,500 years, which, claims Raadschelders, “testify to the continuity of Chinese bureaucracy.” This is bureaucracy that has undergone waves of changes and innovations, spanning from the Ch’in dynasty (221-206 BC) to the present (Raadschelders, 2000: 19-20).

Korea perhaps represents one of those Asian societies that had been immensely influenced by China and which has a long tradition of meritocracy in its civil service. Ro points out that “because of its location on a peninsula of the Asian continent, Korea was historically under the dominant influence of China,” and that “one of the greatest influential forces, especially on political and administrative systems, has been Confucianism, which was established as the official ideology of the state during the Yi dynasty” beginning in 1392 (Ro, 1993: 8).

Civil service examinations were reported to have been first administered in Korea in 958 AD, and likewise enforced in an administrative system rooted in the values and principles of Confucianism, mainly influenced and imported, as pointed out earlier, from ancient China. Kim asserts that, as with other East Asian nations, the Korean administrative system “is strongly based on merit as well as oriented toward the elite,” and developed from a ruling class of Confucian intellectuals (Kim, 2010: 452-453; Berman, 2010: 5).

In Japan, the modern civil service system emerged in the nineteenth century under the Meiji Restoration that started in 1868, which, among others, launched Japan’s modernization movement. It was the result of the reforms under this movement that the first modern entrance examinations to the civil service based on merit was introduced beginning in 1887, around the same period when the United States was likewise institutionalizing the merit system in its federal and state bureaucracies (Imanaka, 2010).

Around however the latter half of the seventh century, the civil service of the civil service system in Japan under the Yamato Government (early seventh century) was based on family status where positions are said to be generally inherited. Confucianism “found its way into Japan via China and Korea around the middle of the fifth century,” and along with Buddhism, assumed an indirect influence in formulating new government services and policies, covering presumably the professionalization of the civil service (Tashiro, 2001: 153-154).

In Thailand however, the bureaucracy was used by Siamese monarchs to administer and exercise control over the polity with members of the royal family and the aristocracy being appointed by the king to top positions in the bureaucracy. The principle of merit was however determined subjectively by the king until 1932 when Western-educated military and civilian bureaucrats overthrew the absolute monarch regime to supplant it with a parliamentary system, and in which the bureaucracy gained political power governed by bureaucratic elites (Bowornwathana, 2001). As such, “recruitment and promotion of Thai bureaucrats continued to be a function of both favoritism and merit,” and was not therefore completely “debunked” as

“promotion and movement across certain grades could also depend on the civil servants’ ability and talent” (CPA Research Team, 1984, citing Dhiravegin, 1978).

India perhaps represents likewise a society that has had a long and continuous tradition of civil service organization rooted from the ancient Indian State sometime in 313 B.C. where the Hindu statesman and philosopher Kautilya, in his treatise prescribed and laid down the qualifications of appointments of civil servants based primarily on loyalty and sincerity (Mishra, 2001). The treatise called *Kautilya’s Arthashastra*, prescribed the qualifications of the appointments of civil servant to the court based largely on loyalty and sincerity and provided for provisions for civil service appointments in a wide range of functions such as trade, agriculture, defense, mining and forests, and other such duties. But this has been altered with the coming of British colonial powers.

COLONIAL INFLUENCES AND INDIGENOUS TRADITIONS

To be sure, it is extremely difficult to make liberal and acceptable typologies on the rise and patterns of meritocracy in Asian countries that have been subjected to and influenced by colonial rule. The experiences have been varied and there can be no applicable pattern that can reasonably depict these exhaustively.

It is however an accepted truism that the colonial experience has influenced the administrative formations of countries particularly in Southeast Asia, where almost all countries have been subject to long periods of colonial rule with the exception of Thailand. Indonesia and Malaysia were under the colonial rules of Portugal, the Netherlands, Japan and the United Kingdom, while Singapore was a colony of Great Britain. Hong Kong was likewise a British dependency from 1842 to 1997. Macao was established as a Portuguese trading colony in 1557 and which the latter claimed sovereignty in 1849 and reverted to China in 1999. Burma was also under British rule while the Philippines on the other hand, was ruled by Spain, by the United States and by Japan before it gained independence in 1946. French influence pervaded Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

In this light, colonial influences on Asian civil service systems and the resulting meritocracy values can perhaps be roughly classified and analyzed into:

1) the *Iberian tradition* characterized by the legacies of Spain and Portugal, which had marked influences in Indonesia, Malaysia, Macao and the Philippines;

2) the *Anglo-American* influence which represents that of the United Kingdom and the United States of America and influenced administrative and civil service systems in the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, India and Burma;

3) the *multi-jurisdictional* influences of other European colonizers such as the Netherlands and France which had impact in Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos; and,

4) the *indigenous Asian traditions* which blended with patterns of meritocracy principles from those introduced by colonizers with those coming from Asian countries which also colonized Asian territories such as Korea and China.

These four major traditions perhaps represent today the practices and influences that make up the management of Asian bureaucracies in so far as merit and fitness principles as well as other administrative practices are concerned. Some of these traditions certainly did not implant merit in the bureaucracies that hosted them. Instead, they may have corrupted administrative institutions by introducing anti-merit policies and practices, mainly because the interests of foreign invaders were not, as the case may be, towards developing their colonies to become independent nation states, but as territories whose inhabitants and natural resources needed to be exploited.

In these colonial settings, the colonial powers introduced their own systems with emphasis on “law and order, collection of taxes, and defense of the colonies” (CPA Research Team, 1984: 5).⁴ An earlier study of the CPA Research Team on adaptations of public administration in the Southeast Asian region reinforces and stresses this point quite succinctly:

“...The regime in the colonies was characterized as highly centralized, law or rule oriented, corrupt and unresponsive to the needs of the populace, and discriminatory or condescending towards the indigenous population. The natives were [seen] not fit to govern themselves, a reasoning, which was naturally a self-serving attitude” (CPA Research Team, 1983: 6).

Certainly, some colonial powers have had more impact and influence than others on civil service systems that would subsequently rise during the independence periods. Ostensibly, the colonial rulers also brought with them the idea of a nation-state where they went about delineating geographic boundaries and establishing territorial jurisdictions while containing insurrections and other forms of resistance. Invariably, all these systems of administration would be focused on the desire to exploit and take advantage of the colonies to serve the objectives of the colonial powers. These self-serving objectives would result in corrupt systems but would bring about a systematized administrative organization modeled after the colonial power that absorbed them.

In the process, the colonies were being brought to the ‘modern world’ from the perspectives of the colonizers, but the inhabitants were subordinating their traditional values and culture in favor of the Western norms and structures. Still, it could be claimed that indigenous values continued to persist and made to blend with those introduced by the colonizers. Such traits as familism, propriety, gratitude, respect for seniors and elders, and other values would remain

⁴ CPA refers to the College of Public Administration of the University of the Philippines and which is now known as the National College of Public Administration and Governance.

and would have bearing on how merit principles are to be practiced in the post-colonial period (CPA Research Team, 1983).

The need to introduce a system of administration to impose power and a system of administering over local or native rulers and their followers was a requisite to insure control and contain resistance. Upon the end of the colonial period, “[i]t was inevitable that the administrative institutions of the previous colonial regime[s] would be adopted by or influence the newly independent colonies in their search for these new institutions” (CPA Research Team, 1983: 18).

In strengthening merit values in the bureaucracies of newly-independent nations during the post-colonial era, central personnel agencies were established and considered as among the priorities. Indonesia established its Institute of Public Personnel Administration in 1945 while the Philippines likewise reconstituted its Civil Service Commission in the same year, continuing the agency established during the Commonwealth era. Malaysia established its Federal Establishment Office/Public Services Department in 1957 while Singapore organized its Public Service Commission in 1965 (CPA Research Team, 1983: 24).

Merit principles as the bases for selection and appointments in the bureaucracy would come late if not stunted in these societies. Formal policies upholding merit would evolve during the independence periods although the ascent of these values would also be compromised by administrative systems that have been traumatized by colonial rule and subsequently subjected to the control of political leaders emerging in the post colonial periods.

In time however, these administrative systems that were introduced patterned primarily from Weberian bureaucratic constructs accepted merit and fitness as a template in the recruitment, selection and appointments of office holders in most of today’s Asian bureaucracies. These however have been adapted to the specificities and vagaries of each nation-state and their respective administrative systems so as to fit the demands of their respective societies.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is perhaps from the four traditions identified in this paper can thus be found the particulars and peculiarities of modern bureaucracies operating in Asian administrative systems today. They represent varying policies towards applying merit principles with such ingredient and formulas as open competitive examinations, promotions and appointments based on prescribed qualification standards and predetermined classes of positions as common denominators. They are, in a manner of speaking, “hybrid” systems that have been adjusted and re-adjusted according to influences of colonial experiences with that of accepted indigenous culture and temperament.

In essence therefore, there are no ‘pure’ merit principles that can apply to any system. They are in a way an amalgamation of influences derived from historical experiences and made to suit to the needs and demands of modern bureaucracies. They are or have been reconfigured to suit the idiosyncratic character of the society in which it is to be adopted.

Woodrow Wilson, the 28th President of the United States (1913-1921) and a renowned scholar in his own right, precisely pointed this out in his celebrated treatise in 1887 calling for a formal study of administration in America and propounding a dichotomy between the work of politics and of administration. Arguing for the need for America then to learn from European administrative systems and institutions, he thus wrote by way of an analogy that “we borrowed rice but we do not eat with chopsticks,” or that, “we borrowed our political language from England, but we leave the words ‘king’ and ‘lords’ out of it.” He was even more graphic in a more colorful metaphor by saying that “if I see a murderous fellow sharpening a knife cleverly, I can borrow his way of sharpening his knife without borrowing his probable intention to commit murder with it, and so if I see a monarchist dyed in the wool managing a public bureau well, I can learn his business methods without changing one of my Republican spots” (Wilson, 1887, as reprinted, 1941: 503).

This may as well be the case in the merit and fitness principles policies being pursued and upheld in many administrative systems in Asia today. They are products of both idiosyncratic culture and demands as well as adaptation learned or imported from other influences. In so doing, administrative systems today in modern bureaucracies can be adjudged as being “hybrids” that have therefore assimilated various influences and traditions and made to fit their needs.

It is thus a matter of learning how what these systems are, what meritocracy policies are applied, what variants and permutations have been developed and how they can be adopted to other systems. The issue however is that knowledge, information and access to these practices are not popularized, and there is need today to foster a better circulation of these practices so that they can be better understood and appreciated. Perhaps, this represents for us the value of comparative studies, especially of Asian administrative systems and how they implement merit and fitness principles. They need to be learned because wedged within the interstices of these practices are important lessons that can be learned even as others need to be unlearned.

There is a growing interest in Asian administrative systems today. Certainly much more can be learned from the practices that they have adopted to give value and meaning to merit and fitness as a ‘way of life’ or as standards in the running and managing of bureaucracies. And certainly, much more can be added to this passing discussion of meritocracy in Asian administrative systems.

The point that must be however stressed or emphasized is that meritocracy is not simply a Western innovation as now derived from the well-known propositions and prescriptions of the Weberian construct. As such, there can be no exclusive claims as to the provenance of this value as they shaped in the administrative systems of nation-state today, whether developed or developing.

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