

Plato's Party-State: Evaluating China's Political System through the Framework of the Republic

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Abstract

China's political system has long been perceived as a controversial one and as somewhat perplexing to Westerners. In an attempt to understand the stability and success of the system, I evaluate the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) post-Mao society by comparing it to the "just society" described in Plato's *Republic*. Plato's philosophy is an appropriate standard against which the Chinese system can be assessed, because Plato does not believe in democracy and thus does not entertain its "advantages." What's more, the *Republic* is classified as a utopia, meaning a place in which the state of things is perfect. As a result, Plato's society is not affected by certain situational complications that would need to be considered, and would likely cloud the clarity of my argument, should I have chosen to use the political system of an existing country as my benchmark. In this paper, I will ultimately conclude that the Chinese political system satisfies enough of Plato's criteria for a "just society" to be deemed an effective regime. In closing, I will offer my own opinion as to whether or not Plato's model can truly offer a useful lens through which one may better understand the Chinese political system.

Introduction

China's political system has long been perceived as controversial and as particularly "puzzling to most Westerners."¹ In an attempt to understand the stability and success of the system, I will evaluate the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) post-Mao society by assessing how it is similar to and how it differs from the "just society" described in Plato's *Republic*.

Plato's philosophy is an appropriate standard against which the Chinese system can be assessed for a number of reasons. The political theory set forth in the *Republic* is widely respected and influential. Further, Plato does not believe in democracy and thus does not entertain its "advantages." As a Westerner who has been highly exposed to the democratic system, and educated in its "necessary" benefits, I feel that my own bias, and the importance I place on individual liberty, prevents me from adequately evaluating the Chinese system without Plato's guiding reasoning. Additionally, the proposed institution in the *Republic* is classified as a utopia, meaning a place in which the state of things is perfect. Thus, Plato's society is not affected by certain situational complications, such as the effect of globalization on the economy, global warming, or evolving societal norms. These elements would need to be considered, and would likely cloud the clarity of my argument, should I have chosen to use the political system of an existing country as my benchmark.

In this paper, I will ultimately conclude that the Chinese political system satisfies enough of Plato's criteria for a "just society" to be deemed an effective regime. I will arrive at this deduction by presenting a number of parallels between the Chinese society and the utopian society, including censorship and rotational leadership. I will then highlight the differences between the two, such as the existence of corruption and the role of economic growth. Following this, I will argue that these differences are the result of the limitations of a utopian society and will proceed to identify weaknesses that Plato's blueprint neither foresees nor addresses. I will also acknowledge strengths of the Chinese political system that contradict Plato's theories. Finally, I will offer my own opinion as to whether or not Plato's model can truly offer a useful lens through which one may better understand the Chinese political system.

1. Teresa Wright, *Party and state in post-Mao China*, (John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 3.

Similarities between the CCP and the Republic

The most evident similarity between Plato's *Republic* and the Chinese political system is the authoritarian leadership style upon which both societies are founded. Plato does not believe equality is desirable and views hierarchy as a tool to achieve efficiency and organization. Specifically, his "Principle of Specialization" appears to be quite communistic: "more plentiful and better-quality goods are more easily produced if each person does one thing for which he is naturally suited, does it at the right time, and is released from having to do any of the others."² He further justifies his logic by explaining that justice, the core virtue of his ideal society, is not "a matter of fairness" but, rather, "the practice of minding one's own business."³ This definition of justice is defended by equating *injustice* with factions, leading Plato to equate justice with unity.

This basic principle serves to promote many aspects of the Chinese political system that one might otherwise view as weaknesses or criticize as being "unfair," such as leadership politics being a "black box,"⁴ prohibited opposition parties, a lack of meaningful elections at the national and most sub-national levels, repressed political dissent, constricted freedom of expression, and censored media.⁵

In China, the CCP is responsible for upholding the authoritarian leadership style that Plato endorses. Although the Party⁶ and the state are nominally separate, the political reality largely reflects Plato's structure, as the Party controls the state. It is thus no wonder why "the regime is typically referred to as a party-state."⁷ This is illustrated by the breakdown of the membership of the National People's Congress (NPC), the highest state body. According to Wright, "roughly 70% of NPC delegates are CCP members," demonstrating that the ruling regime "works from top to bottom."⁸

2. Plato, *Republic, Ancient Philosophy*, Ed. Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson, 2008), Vol. 1 of *Philosophic Classics*, 210-283, (Book II).

3. Ibid.

4. Susan V. Lawrence and Michael F. Martin, "Understanding China's political system," *Congressional Research Service Report for Congress*, (2013).

5. Wright, *Party and state*, 4.

6. The capital-p "Party" here, and henceforth, refers to the Chinese Communist Party, or the CCP.

7. Wright, *Party and state*, 19.

8. Ibid, 20.

Despite changing leadership, the authoritarian approach has remained consistent; political conservatism was emphasized even under former leader Deng Xiaoping's economic reform and stress on openness. Some are of the view that current president Xi Jinping is "reverting to a more centralized approach."⁹ In the eyes of Plato, this only strengthens the system's effectiveness. True to the philosopher's beliefs, it is this authoritarian nature of the post-Mao party-state that has enabled the positive impact of China's leaders' pragmatism, as it allows the top political leaders to take decisive action in "the areas where goods and services provisions [are] most lacking."¹⁰ An example of this can be seen in the significant efforts made by the party-state leaders to address the severe degradation of China's natural environment and its horrific consequences on the health of all Chinese residents. The 2017 Air Pollution Prevention and Control Action Plan, and existing goals to reduce coal and petroleum since 2006, have made noticeable progress and would not have been possible under a different regime.

Other benefits of an authoritarian government to which China owes its success and stability are long-term policy focus (due to the absence of re-election worries), policy consistency (due to power remaining in the hands of a single political party with consistent ideology), and policy "purity" (due to diminished pressure to accommodate wealthy donors in exchange for funding.) Although Plato never entertains the prospect of wealthy donors, his disregard for the role of money in his "just society" and his emphasis on properly training the next philosopher-king successor demonstrate an intent to prevent such corruption and inconsistency.

This emphasis on training, as a requirement prior to holding a position of government leadership, is another commonality shared between both political structures. While Plato describes detailed and distinct education systems for guardians and philosopher-kings, the CCP equally develops the role of education, particularly in the post-Mao era when "people who occupy leadership positions in the party-state are much more pragmatic and educated."¹¹

An aspect of the arduous education proposed by Plato consists of ten years devoted to studying mathematics, five years devoted to studying

9. Willy Wo-Lap Lam, ed. *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Communist Party*, (Routledge, 2017).

10. Wright, *Party and state*, 188.

11. *Ibid*, 50.

philosophy, and a final five years devoted to studying dialectic. The CCP's post-Mao party school system is not quite as rigid but, likewise, serves to educate (or, "indoctrinate," as Wright states) governing officials.¹² Since 2006, a minimum of three months of training every five years has been required by all Party officials. The CCP's Organization Department determines where each cadre will be trained. Most notable is the Central Party School (CPS) in Beijing, commonly referred to as the Party's main "think tank," which "hosts debates...and oversees most Party schools at lower levels."¹³ Additionally, there are two training academies located in China's interior that specialize in Party history and one training academy located in Shanghai's Pudong area, which specializes in China's reform, innovation, HR management, and leadership methods.¹⁴

Unlike Plato's pre-determined educational trajectory, the Chinese education system can evolve according to the Party's present needs. For example, in August 2013, after media outlets were informed that the "political reliability" of all journalists would be reviewed, 250,000 journalists were sent to a three-month training program that "educated" its attendees in the Party's view of "socialist journalism."¹⁵

Plato explains that the education of the guardians serves mainly to render them "noble puppies," meaning they learn to blindly accept beliefs and behaviors and not to think critically or independently.¹⁶ Although there is no direct equivalent to the class segmentation system used by the CCP, I believe that the same goal of creating "noble puppies" applies to the education system of Party members. (In fact, it should be noted that Jiang Zemin's "Three Represents," which modernized the CCP to be inclusive of the entire population, ultimately served to strengthen Party power.)

The philosopher-kings, the most elite and powerful ruling class in Plato's utopia, can be likened to the Politburo, the Politburo Standing Committee (PBSC), and the General Secretary. According to Plato, this class is required to "watch over and care for the other citizens" by nature of their intellectual and moral superiority.¹⁷ Although the moral purity of the top political leaders in China's system is often questioned, the elite of both the Chinese system and Plato's society are granted more decision-making

12. Ibid, 71.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid, 72.

15. Ibid, 190.

16. Plato, *Republic*, Book III.

17. Ibid, Book VII, 520b.

power than the rest of the population, despite ambiguity in the methods used to arrive at their final conclusions. Perhaps in the case of the CCP, “moral superiority” can be more accurately described as the uniformity and strength in their “belief that in order to maintain CCP dominance of the political system, the system needs to deliver.”¹⁸ Of course, this portrayal of Chinese politics is largely oversimplified; discussion will later focus on the consequences of the role of corruption and the complex reality that leadership in the Chinese system is, in many ways, more like a matrix than a pyramid.

While Plato's society is heavily segmented into three distinct classes (the workers, the guardians, and the philosopher-kings), which, for each person, is pre-determined at birth, membership to the CCP is open to all citizens. Originally, membership within the Party was open only to those with unquestionable class “credentials” and communist commitment, as Mao's CCP prioritized being “representative of China's working class.”¹⁹ However, much has changed since then, and China's governing institutions have since become much more representative of the entire Chinese populace, including capitalists and intellectuals – groups that were once reprimanded and excluded from the Party.²⁰

Deng's emphasis on education is largely responsible for this change, as the Party shifted from seeking out communist ideological purity to expertise in science, technology, and engineering. He has led efforts to bring in both new and younger leaders with more technical skill. As a result, “the percentage of college-educated members of the Central Committee (CC) has grown to nearly 100 percent.”²¹ For Plato, it is the class that possesses the knowledge and that has received the finest and most relevant education that is deemed fit to rule and make decisions on behalf of the entire population. The CCP's emphasis on education post-Mao shares this basic principle, despite differing on Plato's membership qualifications in the sense that the CCP's can be earned and learned.

Similarly, the Party's transition from tolerating to embracing private businesses, which began in the late 1980s, reflects the same value placed on expertise. More specifically, as economic growth has played an important role in China's increased presence and relevance in the

18. Wright, *Party and state*, 194.

19. *Ibid.*, 42.

20. *Ibid.*, 41.

21. *Ibid.*, 51.

global economy, this inclusion further strengthens the CCP and creates a more united China. Notable events that established this change include Deng's "Southern Tour" in 1992, which encouraged and supported the development of China's private sector, and Jiang's "Three Represents" in 2002, which announced the acceptance of China's "advanced productive forces," which include private entrepreneurs.²² While the opportunity for socio-political upward mobility directly contradicts Plato's definition of justice, it enables the CCP member-selection process to be increasingly more meritocratic and regularized, two characteristics that are consistently present throughout Plato's *Republic*.

The statecraft training techniques that both Plato and the CCP require are put in place so that competent leaders come to power rotationally, in order to best serve the interests of the people. In modern terms, "rotation" can be equated with "tenure," which Deng worked to establish as part of his effort to regularize leadership succession at the top of the Party. In addition to establishing a retirement age of 68 years for PBSC members, Deng also created the Central Advisory Committee (CAC) for elderly leaders to transition out of formal positions of power and established a two-term limit (ten years total) for his successor.²³ Additionally, much as how Plato's philosopher-kings are expected to embody the virtues of society, Politburo members are expected to demonstrate integrity and self-restraint – requirements for Chinese leadership – by constructively criticizing both themselves and their colleagues in closed-door sessions.

Since Deng, leadership succession, though not fully institutionalized, has certainly come a long way – especially in comparison to the Mao-era practice of remaining in office until death. At the 16th Congress in 2002, the first "smooth" transition began when Hu Jintao, who joined the PBSC in 1992, replaced Jiang Zemin as Party General Secretary; he then gradually took over as President in 2003 and as CMC Chair in 2004.²⁴ Xi Jinping's 2012 transition at the 18th National Congress was even cleaner, as he became both CMC Chair and Party General Secretary simultaneously.²⁵ While much of the selection process remains unclear to outsiders, "selection of the Politburo and PBSC members broadly follow long-standing

22. David M. Lampton, *Following the Leader: Ruling China, from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping*, (Univ of California Press, 2014), Chapter 3.

23. Wright, *Party and state*, 53.

24. Yongnian Zheng, "The 16th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party: Institutionalization of Succession Politics," In *Leadership in a Changing China*, (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2005), 15.

25. Lampton, *Following the Leader*, 174.

norms,” where members of the Party elite nominate the appointed members.²⁶ This marks another feature that the Chinese system shares with Plato’s model: rulers must bring up, assess, and select their successors, ideally on merit. In Chinese politics, “merit” refers to experience running one or more provinces, demonstrated pragmatic success in implementing policy, and Party loyalty. Much like Plato’s “final trial,” the two leading candidates serve five years in the Politburo as a form of “final assessment,” before formally assuming the top positions of state president and premier.

Perhaps most surprisingly, censorship and propaganda are tactics used by Plato and Chinese political leaders alike. Despite consistently claiming the moral high-ground, Plato endorses censorship as a necessary tool in the creation of his utopia. Specifically, one aspect of educating guardians involves recounting “hero poetry,” in order to immunize the guardians against death.²⁷ In order for this to be effective, the storylines must portray the heroes as graceful and must avoid portraying death as something to be feared. Similarly, his proposed musical education begins with storytelling during the early years of childhood and enforces strict censorship, since young children are malleable and “can’t judge what is hidden sense and what is not; but what he takes into his opinions at that age has a tendency to become hard to eradicate and unchangeable.”²⁸

The Chinese political system similarly believes that ideology must be taught from a young age and must be consistently publicized via all outlets and institutions. In the same way that Plato’s philosopher-kings are the only citizens to possess true knowledge (while all other citizens of the state merely possess belief and habit), Chinese rulers have demonstrated attempts to limit the critical thinking and mold the beliefs of the citizenry. Xi Jinping’s *Document 9* is perhaps the best and most recent portrayal of this censorship, as it warned of the threat of “false ideological trends, positions and activities” and placed new limits on the number of foreign shows allowed to be aired on television (the modified rule now allows one broadcast per year per station and one musical talent show per three months). On a similar note, Xi’s Ideological Purification Campaign, aimed at purifying public thoughts and expressions, called for greater “ideological guidance” at universities and ordered academics to censor

26. Joseph Fewsmith, “The 19th Party Congress: Ringing in Xi Jinping’s New Age,” *China Leadership Monitor* 55, (2018), 17.

27. Plato, *Republic*, Book V.

28. *Ibid*, Book II, 378d.

the following “seven sensitive issues”: “universal values, freedom of the press, civil society, civil rights, past Party mistakes, crony capitalism and judicial independence.”²⁹

In addition to removing potentially consequential information, the CCP also publicizes biased information in order to promote their own power. Plato calls this a “noble lie,” and the CCP appears to agree. Despite the transition post-Mao from an emphasis on “redness” to an emphasis on “expert,” the stability and success of the CCP continues to depend on strong ideological belief. This is best illustrated by Xi Jinping’s *China Dream*, which paints a picture of China achieving national rejuvenation through Party-building and deepened reform. It is also exemplified by Xi’s response to the county’s “unruly Internet culture,” in which he ordered the “Communist Party’s propaganda machine to build a ‘strong army’ to ‘seize the ground of new media.’”³⁰ A more general illustration of the propagandizing tactics used is the requirement that stations broadcast “at least 30 percent of their air time to ‘public-interest’ programming, such as documentaries, educational and ‘morality-building’ shows.”³¹ Likewise, Plato breeds a sense of patriotism into his citizens by telling them that they are all born out of the ground and that their pre-determined class rank can be explained by the *Myth of the Metals*, which clarifies that each citizen is born with a bronze, silver, or gold soul correlating to their rank.³² (While a persuasive legend might settle class satisfaction in a utopia, it is unlikely to do so in reality; perhaps this explains the openness of the previously discussed CCP membership policy.)

Differences Between the CCP and the Republic

While there is a plethora of similarities between the Chinese political system and Plato’s *Republic*, the reality of the CCP does not quite live up to Plato’s standards in more ways than one. First and foremost, corruption, from which Plato protects his citizens by removing money from the state

29. Wright, *Party and state*, 190.

30. Robert Gifford, “Xi Jinping’s vision: Chasing the Chinese dream,” *The Economist* 4, (2013).

31. Jayadeva Ranade, “China: Document No. 9 and the New Propaganda Regime,” *Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies* 4175, (2013).

32. Plato, *Republic*, Book II.

and by depriving the powerful from owning private property and raising families, is endemic in the CCP.

This corruption can be traced back to the very beginning: the recruitment process of the CCP. Despite successful efforts for China's post-Mao political system to recruit and reward leaders based on merit, there continue to be many who are recruited and rewarded based on political connections or, as Wright suggests, outright bribery.³³ Further, Party and state officials are cognizant of the fact that they are evaluated according to their success in promoting economic growth and ensuring political stability in their locality. As a result of this awareness, these considerations "pre-dominate their formulation of preferences and their perception of their most important tasks," and oftentimes even lead them to engage in corrupt practices at the cost of the local populace's needs, in the interest of economic growth.³⁴ Generally speaking, the corruption occurs out of an official's need to maintain their position and rise through political ranks. For this reason, Plato does not allow mobility. Though this corruption begins with CCP recruitment, it certainly does not end there. In fact, according to David Lampton, it has trickled down to the point where "empowered corrupt local officials, crime syndicates, some military leaders, and rogue entrepreneurs engage in behavior that is [not] in the interests of its local citizens."³⁵

Despite the CCP's sharp deviation from Plato's anti-corruption approach, it still recognizes the issue as a pressing one and has actively tried to diminish it in more recent years. Xi Jinping's first major campaign focused on eradicating corruption and explicitly banned lavish expenditures by political cadres, the construction of new government buildings for the next five years, and any "competing for ostentation."³⁶ Xi announced the Anti-Graft campaign as a "year-long effort to rid the Party of 'formalism, bureaucracy, hedonism and extravagance,'" and even went so far as to investigate and punish corrupt officials, most notably targeting the enormous state-owned enterprise PetroChina.³⁷

In addition to corruption, China's political system also largely revolves around money – yet another drastic difference from Plato's money-less society. Deng's reform era marked a shift in focus, with his priority being

33. Wright, *Party and state*, 64.

34. *Ibid.*, 72.

35. Lampton, *Following the Leader*, 74.

36. Wright, *Party and state*, 189.

37. *Ibid.*

economic growth and putting an end to class struggle.³⁸ He adapted China's pride in "self-reliance" to that of "absorbing from other countries," and pursued initiatives such as attracting foreign capital, developing the export industries, and establishing Special Economic Zones.³⁹ As a result, China's GDP growth rates have "rocketed" and created a "hybrid economic system that features both free-market capitalism and state direction."⁴⁰ Specifically, GDP grew 630% from 1980-2005, and the last Five Year Plan objectives announced a desired GDP growth rate of 6.5% and doubled per-capita income from 2010-2020.⁴¹ While this emphasis on economic development also enables corruption (by emphasizing material incentives) and has led to the emergence of significant "domestic economic inequalities," it has also resulted in "virtually all Chinese citizens [experiencing] a dramatic rise in incomes and living standards."⁴² Thus, although Plato saw money as an unnecessary evil, I believe that China's decision to embrace the opportunity for economic growth and become recognized by the global economy was an intelligent political decision and one that has ultimately become one of its greatest strengths.

On another note, the CCP arguably does not live up to Plato's extreme totalitarian leadership ideal. While the Chinese political system can certainly be classified as authoritarian in many regards, it has also evolved to become increasingly more responsive to the public. Wen Jiabao supports this perspective, claiming China's present policymaking "emphasizes solutions to major problems...relevant to...the mass public."⁴³

Specifically, key demographic groups have been satisfied, like private entrepreneurs who feel supported by policy as partners of the state and university students who have been provided job opportunities by the CCP.⁴⁴ Other examples of efforts made by the central government to satisfy the public's need to voice their grievances include the Xinfang "letters and visits" system, Urban Residents' Committees, local elections for rural village councils, and more informal mechanisms such as Internet posts and street protests. The CCP has also incorporated some democratic fea-

38. Lampton, *Following the Leader*, Ch. 1.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Wright, *Party and State*, 185.

41. Michel Aglietta and Guo Bai, *China's 13th five-year plan. In pursuit of a "moderately prosperous society,"* No. 2016-12, CEPII research center, 2016.

42. Wright, *Party and state*, 185.

43. Shaoguang Wang, "Changing models of China's policy agenda setting," *Modern China* 34, no. 1 (2008), 56-87.

44. Wright, *Party and state*, 88-95.

tures at lower levels, such as allowing more candidates than seats in order to enable the CCP to weed out unpopular candidates. Further, livelihood issues now play an important role in dictating policy in modern China, which was reflected in Xi's 2018 New Year Address.⁴⁵

Of course, it should be noted that, as with most things CCP-related, responding to the needs of the public became a priority only when Deng feared the CCP would lose legitimacy and the "sea would capsize the boat."⁴⁶ This was again evident under Hu's leadership when China began to be perceived as a global threat, and the CCP realized that satisfying the needs of its people would ensure the domestic legitimacy that was necessary to secure international legitimacy. The policy changes and available outlets for voicing grievances also work to the Party's benefit. For example, the increase in environmental protests in recent years, including the PX chemical protest in Xiamen in 2007, the Phoenix trees protest in Nanjing in 2011, and the migrant worker protest in Beijing in 2017, has sparked awareness among CCP members to emphasize environmental initiatives.⁴⁷ In return for addressing major public grievances, the Chinese public has "exhibited little desire to upset the political status quo."⁴⁸ A similar line of reasoning led to the much earlier creation of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress, which was "designed to bring together the various political parties and groups...to allow them some input...in the new regime" and to ensure that the "leadership of the CCP is upheld."⁴⁹ Interestingly (and quite contrary to Plato's predictions), the Xi administration's repressive measures, in some ways, may threaten the regime's stability by hindering their ability to respond to the public's needs.⁵⁰

In addition to responding to its populace, the CCP also represents "fragmented authoritarianism" more so than being a true embodiment of

45. Xi Jinping, "2018 New Year Address" (speech, Beijing, China, December 31, 2017), CGTN, https://news.cgtn.com/news/3063444d35637a6333566d54/share_p.html.

46. Lampton, *Following the Leader*, Ch. 2.

47. Christoph H. Steinhardt and Fengshi Wu, "In the name of the public: environmental protest and the changing landscape of popular contention in China," *The China Journal* 75, no. 1, (2016), 61-82.

48. Wright, *Party and state*, 184.

49. *Ibid*, 32.

50. *Ibid*, 195.

an authoritarian regime.⁵¹ Its system is a vertical (tiao) and horizontal (kuai) grid, which creates implementation and governing problems that Plato's ideal society did not face. For example, cadres can only coordinate through hierarchy or preference-counting, resulting in a need for cross-system integrators. Much like the decision to respond to the public, the pluralization of leadership and society was largely developed out of a need for reform and the rebalancing of powers among central and local levels of government. A major advantage to this system, however, is that it allows for policy-testing through decentralized and local experiments, which is useful in a bureaucratic system as it allows for gradual policy change and flexibility.

Weaknesses of Plato's Republic

While not all of the differences between Plato's *Republic* and the Chinese political system have served as positive modifications (e.g., the corruption issue), it is extremely important to recognize that there are shortcomings to using Plato's work as a lens through which one evaluates the CCP. The most obvious issue is that Plato is describing a utopia. Thus, while Plato's model of removing money from society and prohibiting guardians and philosopher-kings from owning private property and having families may solve the issue of corruption, it is also blatantly unrealistic. Frankly, it does not account for the natural human disposition towards possession or the human craving for affection and is thus not a practical solution for China (or any real society) to implement. Similarly, while Plato describes rigid authoritarian rule, Wright points out that all "real-world regimes lie somewhere in between [democracy and authoritarianism]...they are dynamic."⁵² Indeed, I believe China's political system has demonstrated this ability to be dynamic and to adjust its leadership style when necessary.

Further, while Plato does provide strong logical arguments for almost all aspects of his utopia, his theories are not tried and tested – he can only account for and respond to the counters that he thinks to consider. To some degree, the Chinese political system disproves a number of Plato's deductions. For example, Plato is so rigid in his belief that justice depends on each class performing its proper function that he claims that "any

51. Andrew Mertha, "Fragmented authoritarianism 2.0": Political pluralization in the Chinese policy process," *The China Quarterly* 200, (2009), 995-1012.

52. Wright, *Party and state*, 7.

plurality of functions or shifting from one order to another is...utterly harmful” and “the extreme of wrongdoing.”⁵³ However, the CCP’s ability to adapt by making leadership more pluralistic, responding to the needs of its populace, and being more inclusive of demographics has only strengthened its stability – quite to the contrary of Plato’s fears. Xi Jinping’s recent amendment to the constitution to extend his term will serve as another test of Plato’s prediction, but I personally do not foresee it being as “utterly harmful” as Plato warns.

There are also a number of weaknesses of the Chinese political system that Plato’s philosophy does not foresee. In some cases, it is not necessary for him to contemplate these situations as they are byproducts of things like questioning ideology or class, which he disregards from the beginning. Nonetheless, they remain important aspects to consider.

First, a good successor cannot be guaranteed, as they are scouted so far in advance that the decision surely cannot consider whether they are best suited for the era in which they will be called to rule – or even whether the foresight to select them was correct. Second, should an incompetent or corrupt leader come to power, there does not seem to be a way to restrain them or, more generally, to check and balance any leader once they have gained authority. This weakness is perhaps the main shortcoming of authoritarianism and the main selling point of liberal democratic systems, as they are much more effective at banning destructive leaders.⁵⁴

Additionally, Plato does not consider the potential harm in not listening to or keeping up with a nation’s people’s needs. He assumes that the indoctrinated populace will not question their government and that the government will dictate and meet the needs of the people rather than vice versa. (In fact, he does not even explore what motivates the working class to do their job and act as a cog in the machine for the “good of the whole.”) However, the reality of the Chinese government does not reflect this. The landscape is changing in a number of ways and “expectations of the Chinese people are rising faster than the capabilities of the nation.”⁵⁵ Specifically, the GDP, once a metric of success of the economy’s growth, is slowing, and the population, once crucial to the cheap labor that enabled export-based growth, is aging. These changes are largely the result of China’s younger generation becoming more educated and concerned with

53. Plato, *Republic*, Book IV, 434c.

54. Wright, *Party and state*, 195.

55. Lampton, *Following the Leader*, 139.

interests other than just money. Overall, China is struggling to maintain the performance that once served as validation for its legitimacy.

Plato also does not consider that there can be other political powers that exist. However, this is a reality of the 21st century and has contributed to the changing landscape. The Chinese government has thus had to recognize and consider the influence of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), traditional media, large corporations, and universities and research institutions to name but a few.

Closing Remarks

While Plato's ideal is a thought-provoking and persuasive line of reasoning, there remain a number of issues with the basic principles that constitute the definition of justice that he sets forth. Albeit oversimplified, Plato's explanation of "just" is basically synonymous with "class privilege." Further, since his entire concept of justice is built into the state, the theory of morality that he builds his entire philosophy upon is collectivist. As a result, what is good for the state is morally good, and what is bad for the state is morally bad. This rationale accounts for the justification of the aforementioned "noble lie," as it reinforces state unity. Ultimately, Plato is implying that it is the job of the citizen to strengthen and stabilize the state, rather than framing stable governance as the job of the state, as Wright's more popular perspective suggests.⁵⁶ While comparing the two political regimes has certainly shined a light on the plausible benefits of authoritarianism, it has also reinforced my opinion that government ought to bridge the gap between leaders and the populace as opposed to creating a barrier, which I feel both the CCP and Plato's philosopher-kings do more often than not. The CCP has, however, demonstrated a better understanding of the importance of connecting to the populace, as exhibited by Xi's explanation for launching his anti-corruption campaign: "if we don't redress unhealthy tendencies and allow them to develop, it will be like putting up a wall between our Party and the people, and we will lose our roots, our lifeblood, and our strength."⁵⁷

Nonetheless, I do believe that the CCP can be deemed an effective political system based on my comparison to Plato's *Republic*. I believe the strong similarities that both systems share, as well as careful consideration

56. Wright, *Party and state*, Ch. 1.

57. *Ibid*, 189.

of the shortcomings of a utopia as an explanation for the differences, support my judgment.

I also believe my evaluation of the Chinese political system highlights that, perhaps, with more transparency, freedom, and genuine local democracy, a realistic and stable version of Plato's model could theoretically exist.

Ultimately, however, Plato might still be correct in that "there will be no end to the troubles of states, or...of humanity itself, till philosophers become rulers in this world, or till those we now call kings and rulers really and truly become philosophers, and political power and philosophy thus come into the same hands."⁵⁸

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