

Zachary M. Howlett. *Meritocracy and Its Discontents: Anxiety and the National College Entrance Exam in China*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2021. 266 pp.

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We live in an age of meritocracy, when inheritance is morally suspect and individual merit has an alluring aura. From Silicon Valley to the Forbidden City, stories of achievement feed off popular imagination about success. The rewards of life, as the myth goes, must be distributed based on skill and diligence rather than on the lottery of birth. Lobbyists, politicians, and public-relations experts would have us believe that a meritocratically selected elite prevents liberal democracy from falling prey to angry populists. With the reemergence of elite education and the growing income inequality, however, critics warn about the dangers of “hereditary meritocracy” that pays lip service to social mobility while consolidating elite privilege and power (p. 37). If such is the case, then why do ordinary people still believe that they can transform their destinies through virtuosic displays of merit?

Zachary Howlett explores the paradox of meritocracy in China’s standardized college entrance exam, *gaokao*. Chinese high school students, parents, and head teachers devote years preparing for this consequential and chancy “final battle,” trusting that *gaokao* is a fair, objective, and scientific measurement of their individual merit (p. 4). Building on fieldwork conducted in China’s Fujian province, Howlett looks at how those who take the *gaokao* strive to personify cultural virtues, achieve social recognition, and transcend established social hierarchies in the heat of the final fateful moment. Examinees and their families regard *gaokao* as an even playing field despite being painfully aware of the great divide in China between those more and less favored in educational opportunity and advancement. Howlett deploys the phrase “fateful rite of passage” to capture the dialectic of consequentiality and chanciness that drives a long series of rituals and trials surrounding *gaokao* (p. 201). On the one hand, attendees earn social recognition by displaying their superior moral character—diligence, persistence, and self-control—through six years of arduous training. Yet they also resort to magic, popular religious belief, and the notion of luck to come to terms with the uncertain result. Hence, a remarkable combination of agency and chance enables participants to downplay the unfairness of the system and pledge allegiance to the fairness of educational credentialism.

Each of the main chapters focuses on one specific aspect of the exam as a fateful event. The high stakes lie in the ideology of developmentalism. Students see *gaokao* as highly consequential because it delivers the promise of social mobility: for example, moving from the countryside to the city and acquiring the status and stability associated with urban modernity. However, the highly stratified, score-based hierarchy creates a degree of mobility while controlling and limiting it to avoid large-scale redistribution of social resources. Hence, *gaokao* champions the rural virtue of diligence as the cornerstone of the exam-oriented system but also pleases the urban middle class by highlighting education for quality reforms. Although the urban-rural divide undermines the fairness of *gaokao*, people still have an optimistic, if not inflated, view of their examination chances. Head teachers, parents, and relatives constantly encourage students to overcome external constraints and focus on developing the internal or personal factors of success: attitude, composure, and morale.

Overall, Howlett’s book belongs to a collective scholarly endeavor to rethink the legacy of meritocratic examination in contemporary China. In contrast to the May Fourth iconoclasts’ rejection of Confucian meritocracy, eminent historians such as Benjamin Elman have forcefully argued that the imperial civil examinations served as well-oiled educational gyroscopes that maintained a delicate balance between the imperial court and the literati-gentry elites for more than five hundred years. Recently, proponents of the “China model” have celebrated the efficient selection and promotion of political talent by means of examinations and performance assessments as the key to China’s economic miracle (p. 230). By contrast, Howlett seeks to illuminate the deeply paradoxical character of Chinese

meritocracy—as a combination of ideal and ideology, promise and false promise, sincerity and cynicism. *Gaokao*, in other words, still bears aspirational significance despite the fact that its promise of transformation is deeply flawed and mythical.

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Moshe Halbertal. *Nahmanides: Law and Mysticism*. Trans. Daniel Tabak. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2020. 434 pp.

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“You seem to think, and I believe rightly, that the time has now come for letting the cat—or rather her 10 invisible kittens—out of your old sorcerer’s bag.”¹ So opens a March 1959 letter from Leo Strauss to Gershom Scholem, making reference to the ten Sephiroth that are at the heart of the kabbalistic speculations to which the latter devoted his life. “I like the auras and the inaudible purrings,” Strauss continues, “but they do not feel at home with me . . . I myself am entirely comfortable with them because the dogs and hares which are my teachers had already taught me the exciting things with which your kittens are trying to tease me.”² Foremost among Strauss’s “dogs and hares” was the twelfth-century philosopher Maimonides, whose Aristotelianism marked one intellectual pole in medieval Judaism, set against the mysticism of the kabbalists. In another letter, written a quarter century earlier, Strauss tells Scholem that the dispute between Maimonides and the kabbalah will have to be repeated—a repetition that would come to be embodied in the forty-year exchange between these two great German-Jewish thinkers. Because they both agreed “that modern rationalism or enlightenment with all the doctrines peculiar to it and in all its forms (German idealism, positivism, romanticism) is finished,” Strauss and Scholem revived a medieval dispute that modernity was supposed to have rendered obsolete.³

Thanks to Moshe Halbertal’s splendid new book, we now possess an insightful, articulate, and erudite guide to that medieval dispute between philosophy and mysticism. Rabbi Moses b. Nahman (1194–1270), known in English as Nahmanides, is remembered today primarily for his biblical commentary and participation in the Barcelona Disputation of 1263. Nahmanides emerges from Halbertal’s account as a thinker of the first order, who articulated a comprehensive alternative to Maimonides’s philosophical teaching. Halbertal shows how the kabbalah, no less than philosophy, employed esotericism as a vehicle for replacing rabbinic tradition’s anthropomorphic conception of God with a causal-systemic one. “There are, to be sure, stark differences between these esotericists,” Halbertal admits, “but they stem primarily from the different causal and cosmological schema each one chose as the foundation for his reinterpretation of tradition” (p. 5). With piercing analytical lucidity, Halbertal walks the reader through the key components of these opposing schemata. The book covers such major themes in Nahmanides’s thinking as law, sin, death, redemption, miracles, revelation, and history; Halbertal elucidates

1. Leo Strauss, letter to Gershom Scholem, 23 Mar. 1959, *Hobbes’ politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften—Briefe*, vol. 3 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Heinrich Meier and Wiebke Meier (Stuttgart, 2001), p. 738.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Strauss, letter to Scholem, 11 Aug. 1960, *Hobbes’ politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften—Briefe*, p. 740.