

What Exactly Is “The Chinese Ideal?”

A Discussion of Daniel A. Bell’s *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*

The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy. By Daniel A. Bell. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015. 336p. \$29.95.

China, also known as “the People’s Republic of China,” is indisputably the world’s most populous country and also a rising superpower on the world economic and political stage. In *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2015), Daniel A. Bell argues that China also represents a distinctive “model of governance” that is neither liberal democracy nor authoritarianism—a “political meritocracy.” Expanding on themes developed in a number of previous books, Bell outlines the logic of this “model;” compares it, rather favorably, to liberal democracy, especially as a regime well suited to Chinese history, culture, and political experience; and also considers, briefly, its more general relevance to the politics of the 21st century. The issues he raises are relevant to students of comparative politics, democratic theory, world politics, and U.S. foreign policy. And so we have invited a range of political scientists to comment.

Baogang He

doi:10.1017/S1537592715003291

The China Model engages with the grand task of reconciling democracy and meritocracy, which is significant for both China and the rest of the world. The book begins with an examination of four tyrannies of electoral democracy (Chapter 1), followed by a discussion of an alternative model of political meritocracy (Chapter 2), and the problems associated with political meritocracy (Chapter 3). After arguing that both electoral democracy and political meritocracy alone are deeply problematic, Chapter 4 recommends a hybrid model of democratic meritocracy. (I feel that Bell should write a new Chapter 5 to further examine the internal tensions of democratic meritocracy.) The great strength of this book, in comparison to current mainstream political thought, is that it articulates an ideal model of democratic meritocracy using political imagination that is not constrained by reality. It is full of political wisdom, insights, and valuable judgment.

The book provides a sympathetic understanding of China’s political development using the language of

political meritocracy. Rather than adopting the language of *authoritarianism* to criticize China, the book uses political experience and experiments in Singapore, China, and the rest of the world to criticize electoral democracy. Thus, Chapter 1 will be extremely irritating for some liberal democracy believers. A deeper reading of his book, however, reveals that the book is not conservative, nor is it an apology for the CCP, as some commentators often assume. The book is radical in that it revives the Confucian tradition of political meritocracy and develops an ideal model of democratic meritocracy, against which the current political system and practice can be measured and criticized.

To follow the Confucian tradition of *remonstrating friends*, I offer an empirical-based conceptual critique of Bell’s work. I believe that an ideal model of democratic meritocracy ought to be empirically based. Bell acknowledges that his method is based on “extensive reading in the social sciences, philosophy, and history” (p. 11)—that is, he relies on secondary sources. His book would be a classical work if it had solid empirical evidence and support. Bell examines a number of mechanisms such as examinations, the peer rating system, and social skill, but overlooks a number of mechanisms and local innovations in China such as the three-ticket system, public recommendation, and elections in China. These experiments demonstrate China’s efforts to reconcile democracy and

Baogang He (bghe@ntu.edu.sg) is Professor of Public Policy and Global Affairs at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

meritocracy. They are fertile ground for substantiating the author's theoretical project of realizing reconciliation between democracy and meritocracy. They also demonstrate a set of new problems associated with democratic meritocracy experiments. Below I will first provide a brief description of China's political experiment followed by my conceptual critique.

Chinese local officials are searching for political meritocracy, and modifying the electoral system by introducing a watered-down style of elections or so-called democratic evaluation. Take the example of the three-vote system: This system was invented by Chinese local officials in Zhengzhou city and involves a public nomination vote, a quality assessment ballot, and a final competitive election (Zhang Wang, *Three Tickets System Elects Officials*, 2007). This three-vote system applies to all Zhengzhou city cadres above the departmental level. The first step of the selection process is a democratic recommendation meeting, where the public nominates 10 candidates from a field of 64 by anonymous ballot. The second step is the quality assessment ballot, which involves the candidates being assigned grades for a knowledge test and a question and answer session to test the candidates' overall quality. After this test there is a clear score that determines which candidates will make the shortlist for the final vote. For the final step, the party standing committee (which can be understood as a sort of 'electoral college') votes for two candidates from the final short-listed candidates, who then face a vote of the whole party committee to decide the winner. These two rounds of voting are secret ballots.

A similar experiment is the "public nomination direct election system" (*gongtuiaizhixuan*) (Tsai, Wen-Hsuan and Peng-Hsiang Kao (2012), "Public Nomination and Direct Election in China: An Adaptive Mechanism for Party Recruitment and Regime Perpetuation" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 52, No. 3, pp. 484–503). Apart from examination, this system has two key elements. Firstly, public nomination offers people an opportunity to nominate candidates. The methods vary and range from casting votes, to filling in a democratic evaluation form with a scale of scores. The function of this public recommendation is to screen out unpopular leaders if they cannot get sufficient "votes," but not to decide who gets the position. Secondly, direct elections let party members elect the party secretaries of local governments. In some experiments, there are two rounds of direct elections, ordinary party members cast votes to narrow down a list of candidates, and then the standing committee of local party organizations, a small group of local elites, casts a final vote.

The public recommendation and direct election system was tested in Pingchang, Sichuan province, and then in several places in Jiangsu province. It has spread from township to city, and to national governmental posts. Public service officials such as the deputy heads of

departments in the Beijing city government have to go through this process. Such an experiment has been reproduced across China in all sectors including for the leaders of cities, counties, townships, universities, school leaders, and even SOEs in 2015. Unfortunately, Bell has not updated his work to include this new development (see p. 192).

The political hybridity discussed above can be seen as a form of *authoritarian meritocracy with some democratic characteristics*. Bell would reject the term authoritarianism; however, "authoritarian meritocracy" is a more accurate term to describe China's experiments than Bell's term of democratic meritocracy. While the CCP tries its best to become a modern organization reflecting a Human Resource department, its operation is still authoritarian in that political loyalty is ultimately valued more than merit. Often the results of "public nomination" are not open to the public, which creates the perception that the Party still controls and manipulates the whole process. In 2003 Ya'An party organization officials informed the author that at the end of day, the Party has a unique weapon, namely, "party discipline" to coordinate the intra-party election activities. The result of the civic examination is not final either; that is, those who are ranked number one following the examination may not get the position they want. It is complex as there are three competing criteria: talent determined by examinations, popular opinion, and the vote of the party committee members. At the implementation state, it is too flexible to be blended. The system is very costly in terms of time, preparation, and process, and it is often subject to manipulation. Moreover, it dilutes the influence of direct elections as it presents "democracy," but not genuinely enough.

Based on the above brief discussion of Chinese experiments, I will now comment on Bell's three models of political meritocracy. Bell's first model focuses on the electoral system and in particular on the one person one vote issue. He acknowledges that an extra voting mechanism for the most highly educated leader proposed by Mill "is a nonstarter" (p.152). If so, would it not be better to examine real issues in real life in China? Is focusing on this aspect therefore a waste of resources when searching for reconciliation between democracy and meritocracy? The Chinese have explored different mechanisms to select and elect the wisest or most virtuous leaders through electoral rule (screening out potentially bad or even criminal leaders), electoral campaigns, and different voting weighting systems. Essentially Chinese practices honor the one person one vote principle, but deal with some issues raised by Bell through an institutional design in which voting is only one component at one stage, and has about 20–30 percent weight in the whole decision process. Xi Jinping, the current President of China, wrote an article in 2003, ("Not to be Officials who Win all Votes," *Zhejiang Daily*

on 21 July 2003), that advocated that local leaders should not focus too much on winning all votes when he was the party secretary of Zhejiang Province.

Bell's second model is very strong and he proposes an innovative and alternative institutional design, examining, in particular, Jiang Qing's proposal for a Tricameral Legislature (pp. 162–167). This model makes an important contribution to Confucian political philosophy and its institutional design. However, it is weak at the empirical level, and overlooks the practices of a type of "Tricameral Legislature" that has been developing in China. Major policies are first discussed and passed by the national Party Congress and they are then subject to further deliberation in the yearly meetings of the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Consultative Conference. While there are serious deficiencies associated with this kind of decision-making process, it is *tricameral with Chinese characteristics*. Moreover, apart from political meritocracy, deliberative democracy is another alternative to electoral democracy. The widespread deliberative democracy experiments across China (Baogang He and Mark Warren (2011), "Authoritarian Deliberation: The Deliberative Turn in Chinese Political Development" *Perspectives on Politics* 9(2): 269–89) should be taken seriously as they reveal that decision-making that solely relies on techno-bureaucrats and expertise is the source of the problem that invites many social protests; that merit itself should not be best understood as virtuous or belonging to capable people alone; and that the value of the citizen and the value of "ordinariness" itself should be a foundation of the decision-making process. A detailed study of these experiments and problems associated with them will cast doubt on the elite-oriented model of political meritocracy and call for a citizen-based political meritocracy system.

Bell's third model of "democracy at the local" and "meritocracy at the top" (p. 168) is deeply problematic. The idea comes from Li Yuanchao's replies to Bell's question (p.170). However, Li's casual comment does not bear scrutiny at both the empirical and normative levels, and thus should not be conceptualized as a model. The Chinese experiment of "public recommendation and direct election" applies to all levels of government. These practices, such as the nomination process of selecting the Secretary General of the Organization Department of the CPC Central Committee, are framed by Bell as "peer rating" (p. 107, pp.170–71). This is a narrow conceptualization of the experiment. It is best conceptualized as authoritarian meritocracy with some democratic characteristics. Importantly, these experiments *from the top to the bottom* demonstrate that China is struggling to reconcile democracy and meritocracy at all levels of government. China needs a hybrid model of democratic meritocracy *at both the top and the bottom levels*. Even Bell's proposal of referendum implies that the adoption of political meritocracy against electoral democracy itself needs to be backed by nation-wide votes (p. 175).

In summary, it is too early to propose a "China model." Such a model has not matured enough although it does have the potential to improve the Chinese political system in particular and the democratic system in general. Despite my criticism, I think that this book is a must-read text for all political scientists, in particular, for those who study democracy and democratization. It can open their eyes and help them to move out of their comfort zone to examine the tough and pressing issues in the real world in which democracy and meritocracy must be combined to improve democratic government and solve many practical issues. Finally, Bell ought to be highly praised and admired for his work that challenges the domination of Western political philosophy and takes East Asian philosophy seriously as an equal partner. His acknowledgment of around 119 Chinese scholars (pp. x–xii) is very impressive, revealing his deep appreciation of and profound engagement with Chinese culture and people.

Victoria Tin-bor Hui

doi:10.1017/S1537592715003308

In *The China Model*, Daniel Bell champions Chinese meritocracy and lambasts “Western democracy” defined as “one person, one vote.” He recognizes that meritocracy has its flaws, but believes that it is perfectible while democracy “cannot be improved” (Chapter 3; Concluding Thoughts). However, Bell’s detailed discussions contradict his overall argument, suggesting that the “vertical” combination of “meritocracy at the top, experimentation in the middle, and democracy at the bottom” makes China fall victim to the worst of both worlds. Bell draws his inspiration from Singapore and Hong Kong, but meritocracy is already decaying there. Bell’s analysis inadvertently demonstrates the necessity of buttressing meritocracy with democracy.

Bell contrasts the “crisis of governance in Western democracies” with the “stunning economic success” in China (Chapter 1). Although Bell contends that China has avoided what he calls the “tyrannies” of American democracy, the details suggest otherwise (Chapter 2). (Bell at times retreats from the strong claim that political meritocracy “consistently leads to better consequences than electoral democracy” to the weak one that “China’s one-party political system is not about to collapse” and so he merely “argue[s] for improvements on that basis” (pp. 8–9). However, arguments about authoritarian resilience have been around for two decades).

The first “tyranny”—that of the majority—is familiar. Interestingly, although Bell applauds village elections as “democracy at the bottom” (p. 169), he laments that Chinese farmers and village officials alike are of low quality like American voters (pp. 15, 189). Second, the “tyranny of the minority” involves money politics and income inequality. Unfortunately, China does not fare any better (p. 43). In village elections, candidates need the party’s blessing and may resort to bribes or threats to win votes (p. 189). Third, the “tyranny of the voting community” points to the lack of representation for foreigners and the unborn. Remarkably, Bell observes that China not only exhibits anti-foreign “bellicose nationalism” (p. 141), but also “wreck[s] the environment for future generations” (p. 19). Fourth, the “tyranny of competing individuals” suggests that elections “exacerbate rather than alleviate social conflict” (p. 55). Although Bell claims that China is “a harmonious society,” he notes that, “China relies on force to prevent the open articulation of diverse interests” (p. 60). In short, undemocratic China is not immune to democracy’s “tyrannies.”

China is double hit by meritocracy’s troubles as well. The first problem of corruption, which is the very antithesis of meritocracy, has become so structurally entrenched that it presents “a mortal threat to the political system” (p. 108). The second problem of ossification is “just as threatening to the system” (p. 135). Although civil service examinations are “theoretically open to all,” they disadvantage poor families that cannot afford extra tutors and classes (pp. 85, 131). Meritocracy depends on a high degree of economic equality (p. 132), but the growing “tyranny of the minority” has effectively rendered meritocracy a code word for “elite arrogance” (p. 126).

The third problem of legitimacy—based on meritocracy, nationalism, and performance—is likewise mixed. Meritocracy has its own problems of corruption and ossification. Nationalism incurs the “tyranny of the voting community.” Bell puts his bet on performance legitimacy but wonders if that is sustainable (p. 145). Although Chinese leaders are not subject to electoral cycles and should be able to make long-term planning, they have used “short-term economic growth” to measure “successful” performance, regardless of the social costs” (p. 95). While economic growth is “an essential condition for the reduction of poverty” (p. 93), its “unqualified pursuit” has deepened inequality (p. 94). Bell also reckons that Chinese leaders have the “ability to anticipate and respond to natural and social disasters” (p. 53), but they have covered up disasters like the Wenzhou train crash (pp. 145–6). Bell nevertheless praises the party’s leadership for avoiding the financial crisis of 2007–08 (p. 172). However, economists argue that the investment-driven stimulus package only provided a short-term boost to GDP growth but created unsustainable levels of debt that have since haunted the long-term health of the economy. Beijing’s mishandling of the stock market crash in the summer of 2015 has also left global investors doubting the competence of the Chinese leadership.

Despite such staggering problems, Bell still has confidence in the “China model” because meritocracy is perfectible while democracy is not. Nevertheless, Bell’s detailed analysis shows that the critical link of “experimentation in the middle” is blocked. Self-correction requires that successful local experiments are “replicated and scaled up to other parts of the country” (pp. 190–3) while failed experiments are dropped. Unfortunately, top-level decisions are more guided by “an intensely politicized process driven by competing interests, ideological frictions, personal rivalries, tactical opportunism or ad hoc compromises” (p. 190). Even successful experiments “can be relabeled as failures and discontinued with a change of central government leadership” (p. 192). Experiments that meritocratize the selection and promotion of officials face particularly “acute” obstacles from current leaders with “vested interest” in the status quo (p. 193). The “most glaring gap” between the ideal and the reality of meritocracy is “the political

Victoria Tin-bor Hui (thui@nd.edu) is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Notre Dame.

dominance of princelings” (p. 193). Regardless, Bell remains faithful, reasoning that meritocratic arrangements were introduced only in the 1990s and so it is only a matter of time before it reaches perfection.

What has the passage of time accomplished for meritocracy in Singapore, the prototype of the China model? Singapore instituted meritocracy since its founding. In discussing the problems of meritocracy, Bell extensively draws examples from Singapore. If even Singapore could not prevent meritocracy’s flaws and self-correct them, what makes China more perfectible?

Bell should also pay more attention to Hong Kong, which provides the closest window to how “democracy at the bottom and meritocracy at the top” function on Chinese soil. Bell believes that China can develop Hong Kong-style independent social organizations and free speech to correct for meritocracy’s troubles (pp. 118, 191). Bell narrowly defines democracy as only “one person one vote,” presuming that it is separable from civil freedom. When political scientists discuss “democracy,” they mean “liberal democracy” with the entire package of freedoms including the rule of law, the independent judiciary, and the free press. Hong Kong’s model of “freedom without democracy” worked before 1997 only because Britain, the then sovereign power, was itself a democracy. Since the handover, the model has been broken (Victoria Tin-bor Hui, 2015. “Hong Kong’s Umbrella Movement: The Protest and Beyond.” *Journal of Democracy* 26(2): 111–21). “Meritocracy at the top” means that the chief executive is screened and chosen by a 1,200-member Election Committee dominated by pro-Beijing business and professional elites. The chief executive, in turn, appoints loyalists to ministerial positions and advisory boards. The result is the “tyranny of the minority” that has chipped away administrative meritocracy, police neutrality, judicial independence, academic freedom, press freedom, and even the Independent Commission Against Corruption that Bell holds dear (p. 118). Without democracy at the top, “democracy at the bottom” is likewise subject to top-down control. Elections to District Councils are largely free but not necessarily fair. Pro-regime councilors command the majority partly because they have resources to offer heavily discounted tours and free festive goodies. If Hong Kong’s long-standing meritocratic and independent institutions have wilted under Beijing’s watch, what makes the rest of China more perfectible?

If meritocracy decays in semi-democratic Singapore and Hong Kong, meritocracy functions reasonably well in Western democracies. Indeed, Bell praises Britain’s civil service and House of Lords, France’s *Ecole Nationale d’Administration*, and America’s Supreme Court and Federal Reserves (pp. 27, 127, 161). Bell’s sharp dichotomy between Chinese meritocracy and Western democracies rests with a definitional sleight of hand. He

lumps together “professional civil servants and political officials” and treats “the Secretary General of the Organization Department of the Communist Party” as part of the political leadership in analyzing Chinese meritocracy (pp. 170, 186), but excludes meritocratic “judicial and administrative agencies” in examining Western democracies (p. 27). Bell is correct to search for “democratic meritocracy” and conclude that Chinese meritocracy must ultimately be legitimized by the people’s consent—though he remains mistaken to think that a one-off referendum is sufficient (Chapter 4).

In sum, Bell’s “China model” is self-contradictory in theory and has failed in practice. Without full democracy, meritocracy at the top is corrupted, democracy at the bottom is stifled, and experimentation in the middle is blocked.

Leigh Jenco

doi:10.1017/S153759271500331X

Daniel Bell's newest book continues the line of research he began more than 20 years ago, when he called for greater attention to the normative implications of Chinese approaches to politics. Unlike his earlier work, however, Bell does not here promote particular readings of the Chinese tradition in order to defend more communitarian approaches to public life. Although such readings remain clear undercurrents in *The China Model*, he focuses more on the contemporary practices of the Chinese party leadership to defend their model of meritocracy as a credible (albeit qualified) alternative to democracy, particularly for Chinese heritage societies but also possibly for the rest of the world. The author's larger goal is to undermine unquestioned faith in democracy as the only normatively defensible political model. In many ways, his approach is refreshing because it is too little seen among Anglophone political theorists: he takes a non-Western, nondemocratic political model seriously enough to draw out its normative and institutional implications within broader debates about good governance. For the most part, he successfully avoids reductive essentialisms about East Asian culture in considering how the "China model" of centralized meritocracy, once suitably integrated with local democratic mechanisms, might produce a legitimate alternative to electoral democracy.

Unfortunately, Bell's argument is unlikely to convince anyone already committed to democracy, for at least two reasons. First, the evidence for the problems with "democracy" that Bell offers seems more precisely attributable to specific aspects of the contemporary American two-party political system than to democratic government itself. He defines democracy somewhat simplistically throughout his book as "one person, one vote," (p. 14 et passim) and draws examples almost exclusively from the United States (p. 20). Despite this focus, his sweeping critique of democracy conflates differences among federal, state, and township election systems in the United States, even as his meritocratic proposal insists on differentiating federal from local practices in the Chinese case (p. 171). He also gives no account of alternative institutions, despite the fact that he draws on attempts to reform the British House of Lords (one example of how popular power is distributed and checked differently in different democratic systems) as evidence of the sacred power held by "one person one vote" (p. 161). Finally, he offers no sustained discussion of the reasons that the well-known problems of

American-style electoral democracy—such as tyranny of the majority—are better solved with meritocracy specifically, rather than with more or different kinds of democracy, including deliberative practices at the local and national levels or proportional representation to replace the American two-party system.

Second, and more importantly, many of these criticisms of democracy—and by extension, Bell's defense of meritocracy—turn on a problematic conception of knowledge as a body of always-expanding but nevertheless fairly objective information. Meritocracy is thus defined as a system that can somehow effectively determine, and ensconce with power, those few rational individuals who properly grasp that knowledge. If we accept this conception of knowledge, his claim that "voters should do their best to select wise leaders" would indeed be as uncontroversial as he assumes (p. 19), as would the meritocratic conclusions stemming from the observation that "not everyone is equally able and willing to vote in a sensible manner" (p. 156)—for which Bell cites John Stuart Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government*. He interprets resistance to such conclusions as political, not philosophical; that is, they make rational sense but are politically infeasible because no one these days would willingly accept disenfranchisement (pp. 156, 159).

This unironic use of Mill, paired with Bell's continued insistence that popular participation is necessary only as a practical measure to secure "democratic legitimacy" to a regime otherwise ruled by meritocrats (p. 151), elides not only the justification of colonialism implied in Mill's remarks about "distinctions and gradations" in knowledge (p. 156) but also the alternative views that emerged in critical response to just such a colonial, androcentric discourse of knowledge that registered difference as inferiority or deficiency. To his credit, Bell acknowledges (again citing Mill) "new sources of merit" and "differentiated standards of merit" (pp. 134–35) that may emerge in response to new circumstances, but these are not integrated with his recognition of the need to include persons of different genders and socioeconomic backgrounds into meritocratic processes. For Bell, this inclusion simply addresses the possibility that "politicians are more likely to fight for the interests of people from their own background when faced with competing considerations" (p. 129). However, for most feminists and multiculturalists, these inclusions are necessary precisely because knowledge itself—particularly political knowledge—is not a body of objective information that can be assessed by and for experts, but rather a contested field of claims to truth that implicitly privilege certain groups over others.

One reason to support (a version of) democracy, then, may be to resist the elevation of any one criteria of knowledge—as well as, of course, the group of people that body of knowledge implicitly privileges—to a status beyond meaningful political critique. That is, contrary to

Leigh Jenco (L.K.Jenco@lse.ac.uk) is Associate Professor of Political Theory at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Bell's assumptions, democracy may not be a failed system for choosing "superior" political leaders (p. 9), but rather a system that encourages interrogation of the very idea of superiority in politics.

Without addressing this more subtle relationship between power and knowledge, Bell's argument will not convince many contemporary scholars of politics. Nor would it necessarily be compelling to the historical Chinese thinkers that Bell occasionally cites in support of his claims. Thinkers such as Zhu Xi and Su Shi did subscribe to a unitary view of moral and political knowledge, but they were emphatic that access to such knowledge remained irreducibly personal and differentiated. To them, one's conversance with it could never be adequately assessed by any kind of objective selection or examination system. Although *The China Model* does devote much-needed attention to an otherwise overlooked alternative to democracy, Bell's broader thesis is overshadowed by these evidential shortcomings.

Andrew J. Nathan

doi:10.1017/S1537592715003321

The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy, is not an account of the real China. Just as Western thinkers for centuries have constructed images of China to wield as weapons in their polemics with one another, so too Daniel A. Bell presents a fictional China as a rhetorical platform from which to continue a long-standing debate internal to Western political thought—the debate between communitarianism and liberal democracy.

Bell's China model has three features: "democracy at the bottom, experimentation in the middle, and meritocracy at the top" (p. 9). Most important to the China model in his view is this last feature, meritocracy: "My book," he says, "is a defense of *political meritocracy*" (p. 4, italics in original). But although he gives a good description of formal recruitment procedures in the Chinese civil service (tough written examinations and oral interviews) and at the political level (through secretive inner-party processes that evaluate cadres on numerous criteria throughout their careers), his conflation of the Chinese political system with meritocracy is misleading in major ways.

First, as he acknowledges, many other factors enter into success on the greasy pole of Chinese politics, including personal relationships, corruption, and factional in-fighting. His characterization of the rise to power of China's current leader, Xi Jinping, as a process of meritocratic selection, will read to China specialists as naïve (p. 107).

Second, although top Chinese leaders are often impressive individuals, it is questionable whether they are superior to leaders in democratic systems. As former U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson writes in his recent book, *Dealing with China: An Insider Unmasks the New Economic Superpower* (2015), "[T]he Party's system of cadre selection and promotion, heavily based on political considerations and personal ties, can, with some notable exceptions, produce unfortunate results" (p. 322).

Third, to identify the Chinese political system with meritocracy is to focus solely on recruitment, whereas the key feature of the Chinese system is not how leaders are selected but how they rule—through the unconstrained exercise of power. When Bell says, "The most obvious problem facing any system of political meritocracy is that meritocratically selected rulers are likely to abuse their power" (p. 112), he commits an elementary error. The abuse of power does not arise from the way power holders

are selected. It arises from the way in which their power is, or is not, checked and balanced by independent forces in a society.

Bell argues that although political meritocracy as practiced in China today is not perfect, its superiority can already be judged from its delivered performance. He draws attention to four criteria of performance:

"[V]oters should do their best to elect wise leaders, the government should try to structure the economy so that the benefits do not accrue only (or mainly) to a small group of rich people, leaders should not enact policies that wreck the environment for future generations, and the political system should not poison social relations and unduly penalize those who seek harmonious ways of resolving conflict." (p. 19)

It would seem difficult to argue that the Chinese system performs these four functions better than the American, or even the Indian, system. But Bell does so in two ways. First, drawing on his communitarian values and his interest in Confucianism, he identifies performance with a value he labels "harmony." Yet China is one of the most conflict-ridden societies on the planet—understandably so, given that its citizens have been put through a dizzying process of economic and social change in the course of three and half decades, wealth is distributed increasingly unequally, the environment is severely damaged, the official ideology is bankrupt, and corruption is widespread. These are all problems that Bell acknowledges. But he seems taken in by a surface impression of social harmony. "China," he says, "has many problems, but most citizens perceive China as a harmonious society and the country is more harmonious than large democratic countries such as India and the United States" (p. 60). "Of course," he goes on, the social harmony that has been achieved in China "relies on force to prevent the open articulation of diverse interests..." (p. 60). But a political system that uses force to impose harmony is precisely a system that "poison[s] social relations and unduly penalize[s] those who seek harmonious ways of resolving conflict."

The second way in which Bell assesses Chinese performance as superior to American or Indian performance is to compare apples and oranges—the imagined potential performance of a meritocratic system with the actual performance of liberal democracies. He is disarmingly frank about the flaws of the Chinese system "in practice" (p. 2, *passim*). They include "corruption, the gap between rich and poor, environmental degradation, abuses of power by political officials, harsh measures for dealing with political dissent, overly powerful state-run enterprises that distort the economic system, repression of religious expression in Tibet and Xinjiang, [and] discrimination against women" (pp. 173–174). But Bell does not believe that these problems disqualify China as an example of what meritocracy can achieve, because he views the China model as "both a reality and an ideal" (p. 180).

Andrew J. Nathan (ajn1@columbia.edu) is Class of 1919 Professor of Political Science at Columbia University. Note: My longer review of the same book appears in The National Interest November-December 2015.

When it comes to liberal democracies, however, he considers their flaws as inherent to the model. For example, he says that in the United States, “electoral campaigns can be so poisonous that reasonable accommodation of differences becomes almost impossible” (p. 55)—but nothing is said about the fact that in China, Liu Xiaobo is serving year six of an 11 year jail term for “inciting subversion of state power” and Uyghur scholar Ilham Tohti, who used his writing and teaching to warn the regime about the risks of its repressive policy toward ethnic minorities, is serving a life sentence for “inciting ethnic hatred.” In this and other examples, he treats the flaws of liberal democracies as inherent to their model, and the flaws of the Chinese system as merely contingent on the way the model is implemented.

Bell’s theoretical version of the Chinese system can exist only in the imagination, however, and not in the real world, because it is a political system without politics. When Bell proposes that the Standing Committee of the Chinese Communist Party Political Bureau—the apex of power in China—should include not only Communist Party members but “a younger person with excellent understanding of modern technology, . . . an expert on foreign cultures, . . . [and] a capitalist who has proved good at money-making” (p. 133), one wonders what he thinks the Politburo Standing Committee does. When he proposes a “meritocratic house” of a future parliament (p. 51), he imagines that its members will act unselfishly and that the rest of the political system will yield to their decisions. The trick to imagining such miracles is to posit that the meritocratic elite is a “moral” elite, which will rule in the public interest and command unstinting obedience. But Bell proposes no mechanism by which the Chinese system can plausibly be pushed to adopt the reforms that he proposes, or by which any political system can be induced to operate on the basis of moral virtue alone.

Bell’s quarrel ultimately is with the liberal conception of human nature. This is clear when he remarks, “competitive elections, instead of allowing for the flourishing of human goodness that underpins social harmony, almost counteracts [*sic*] human nature” (p. 58). We see here again Bell’s conflation of the ideal with the real: the human nature that Bell believes is counteracted by competitive elections is a perfected human nature, not an actual human nature. Liberal democracy, by contrast, is rooted in the view well stated by James Madison in *The Federalist*, No. 51: “If men were angels, no government would be necessary.” Given human nature as it is, liberal democracy for all its flaws is a better system than dictatorship, no matter how meritocratic.

Lynette H. Ong

doi:10.1017/S1537592715003333

Daniel Bell of Tsinghua University has written a thought-provoking book about a controversial subject, arguing that “the China Model” based on “political meritocracy” is a superior and credible alternative to liberal democracy. The model, as Bell has claimed, is best exemplified by the city-state of Singapore, and it increasingly characterizes China. The book is written by a western political theorist who has intimate knowledge of Asia, having taught in various prestigious universities in the region. Compared with typical writings by political theorists, this volume is written in surprisingly accessible prose, with a balance of political philosophical theories and empirical analyses from the discipline of political science.

Bell’s “China Model” embodies three central features, which are “democracy at the bottom, experimentation in the middle, and meritocracy at the top.” He argues that this is the best combination because grassroots democracy provides political leaders with legitimacy, experimentation with various governance models in the intermediate levels allows for potential improvement, and meritocracy in the apex of powers select individuals who do not only have the virtues of great leaders but also the far-sightedness that their democratic counterparts typically lack.

Because of space constraints, I will focus my critique on the concept and application of meritocracy. Bell argues, “Political meritocracy” (PM) is “the idea that political power should be distributed in accordance with *ability* and *virtue*” (emphasis in original). Following that logic, he further asserts that PM is superior to electoral democracy because the latter may not necessarily or always produce the most capable or virtuous leaders. In Bell’s own words: “There are morally desirable and politically feasible alternatives to electoral democracy that can help to remedy major disadvantages of electoral democracy. . . Chinese-style political meritocracy can be viewed as a grand political experiment with the potential to remedy key defects of electoral democracy.”

Let me focus on two key elements of the model: leaders’ virtue and replacement. I assume that the question of leaders’ ability—that is their ability to govern, manage and deliver—is taken care of by a carefully designed meritocratic system. The remaining questions are, how do we ensure a) a supply of *virtuous* leaders, and b) that the current leaders will voluntarily cede control in a bloodless power transfer? How do we ensure we will always get “good emperors” such as Lee Kuan Yew or Tang Taizhong (AC 599–649) who oversaw one of the strongest periods in

Chinese history, assuming that such leaders can be held up as models of capable *as well as virtuous* leaders? One’s virtuosity, after all, unlike knowledge or even capability, is not something that can be detected by a series of meritocratic assessments. The model renders the advent of this essential characteristic of a leader to chance or sheer luck. The other issue is, without democratic institutions in place, there is no guarantee that those in power will voluntarily step down when they are unable to perform. This is the problem of succession in a non-democratic system.

Yet, a graver problem with the PM model is the lack of checks-and-balances and accountability. A democratic system is as much about selection of political leaders as it is about creating institutional checks-and-balances that *make* them accountable to the people. Granted, a democratic system is not without its flaws; the system could be hijacked by the majority or the minority, and it could ossify over time, as Bell has argued. However, once a political leader is selected on meritocratic basis, the PM model has no mechanism in place to ensure that power will *not* be abused. This goes beyond the problem of corruption that Bell has acknowledged. Power could be abused not only for private financial gains; unbridled power concentrates all prerogatives in the hands of an individual to the extent that he could take away legitimate power of the other meritocratically selected leaders. In other words, when a leader’s power is unchecked, he could undermine the integrity of the very system that put him in power. These three problems—leader’s virtuosity, succession, and lack of accountability—are in my mind inherent flaws in the PM model that render it inferior to electoral democracy.

The other issue with non-democratically elected leaders in the PM model is legitimacy, which pertains to the stability and longevity of such a system. What are the sources of non-democratic legitimacy? I do not believe PM in itself can be a source of legitimacy. Selecting leaders on the basis of meritocracy maybe less contentious than other non-democratic means, such as kinship ties or military dictatorship, but meritocracy *per se* does not provide moral or political legitimacy. Looking at the prototype of PM model, Singapore, the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) has derived its legitimacy from two sources: performance and nationalism. Under PAP’s leadership, Singapore has transformed itself from a third-world entrepot to a first-world city-state within a short timeframe. Being the only developed nation among the Southeast Asian countries, Singapore’s citizens enjoy living standards as high as those of the Scandinavian and Western European countries. As a predominantly Chinese island-state surrounded by Muslim countries of Indonesia and Malaysia that have a long-tradition of institutional discrimination against the Chinese, the PAP government has been able to craft a narrative of “credible threat” that

Lynette H. Ong (lynette.ong@utoronto.ca) is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Toronto.

advances its state-building efforts and strengthens nationalism. However, with rising cost of living and influx of immigrants in the last decade, the PAP has seen declining popularity, which is most clearly manifested in the losses in the 2011 election (but it regained a foothold in 2015 due to a range of factors, among which is the Lee-Kuan-Yew dividend). Chinese emperors in ancient times might have been able to anchor their legitimacy on the “mandate from heaven,” but Chinese leaders in modern times, even if they were meritocratically selected, must be able to deliver prosperity. When Chinese economic growth falters, as all high-performing economies eventually will, how are the leaders going to derive their legitimacy? By relying solely on nationalism?

In the remaining space let me address how China *actually* selects its political leaders. There is a large body of literature that empirically examines the selection of leaders at various administrative levels drawing upon individual biographical data and locality-specific information, such as GDP growth. At the risk of over-simplifying, there are three schools of thought: delivery of GDP growth, factional ties, and both. First, Li and Zhou argue that selection of provincial leaders is based on their ability to deliver strong GDP growth (Li, Hongbin, and Li-An Zhou. 2005. “Political Turnover and Economic Performance: The Incentive Role of Personnel Control in China.” *Journal of Public Economics* 89(9–10):1743–62). Second, Shih, Adolph & Liu contend that central committee members advance their careers based on factional ties (Shih, Victor, Christopher Adolph, and Mingxing Liu. 2012. “Getting Ahead in the Communist Party: Explaining the Advancement of Central Committee Members in China.” *American Political Science Review* 106 (1):166–87). Third, drawing on biographical data of leaders across a few administrative levels, Landry *et al.* show that performance matters at lower levels, but political loyalty or factional ties is more important at higher levels (Landry, Pierre, Xiaobo Lu, and Haiyan Duan. *Does Performance Matter? Evaluating the Institution of Political Selection along the Chinese Administrative Ladder*. Unpublished manuscript). These are important studies based on rigorous methodology and published in top-ranking political science journals that I think from which Bell’s PM model could have greatly benefited.

“The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy” is a serious intellectual work that deserves to be read by scholars who are interested in the merits and limitations of liberal democracy. While I agree with Bell’s assessment of the failings of electoral democracy, I believe scholarly efforts would be better rewarded if we focus on improving the working of the current democratic systems, rather than discarding them altogether in favor of a completely different alternative.

Thomas L. Pangle

doi:10.1017/S1537592715003345

This book is a deeply stimulating contribution to normative political theory. Its core argument is that China instantiates (imperfectly) a meritocratic “ideal” that is a superior alternative to contemporary liberal-electoral democracy. This “ideal unique to China” (p. 180) is a practical “model” and a “standard,” with “the potential to remedy key defects of electoral democracy”: “China can assist other countries seeking to build up meritocratic rule” (pp. 61, 79, 195, 197). Yet “from a theoretical point of view,” the “ideal itself is not so clear” (p. 67). My aim is to assist readers in clarifying the ideal.

The ideal “unique to China” must be viewed over and against the “basic idea of political meritocracy” (p. 32) as it runs through Western republican political thought. The fountainhead text is Plato’s *Republic*. But Daniel Bell is impressed with Allan Bloom’s interpretation of *The Republic* as ironic (p. 111). A more straightforward capital text is Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, with its argument for an unelected ruling class of highly educated civil servants mediating between a monarchic executive and an elected, corporatist legislature (p. 59; reflected in today’s French civil service, emerging from the École Nationale d’Administration (ENA) p. 128). Hegel conceives this as the culmination of the Western tradition of the Aristotelian “mixed regime,” which tempers popular sovereignty with major elements of aristocratic governance, above all in the independent judiciary.

Against this stands the “unique” Chinese “ideal,” which more realistically confronts the “*contradiction* between meritocracy and democracy” (p. 33; my italics). Less bluntly put, the Chinese ideal is “substantively” rather than “procedurally” democratic: Precisely because it seeks “guardian” government “*for* the people,” it eschews government “*by* the people” (pp. 147, 162).

We are given our bearings by Max Weber’s famous essay “Politics as a Vocation,” and its strife-ridden dialectic, between “rational-legal legitimacy,” instantiated in unelected Hegelian-type civil servants, and “charismatic legitimacy,” instantiated in “the great demagogue in parliament” who “dominates by virtue of the devotion of those who obey, because they believe in him.” Charismatic leadership is what Weber regards as the true “vocation of politics”—not least because it is “prepared to use morally dubious means for good results.” In contrast, the Chinese ideal of political leadership, while not ruling out charismatic leadership as necessary “in times of warfare or violent

civil strife,” is “closer to the characteristics of what Weber calls the ‘civil servant’” (pp. 75–77, Bell quoting Weber; and p. 173). The Chinese ideal is reactive against Maoism, and diverges from Marxism in all the latter’s forms, since Marxism is essentially antimeritocratic, and “offers little insight into ethical behavior by public officials”—indeed, the effect of forced study of “the Marxist classics” is to make officials “more cynical” (pp. 124, 146–47, 182, 197). The Chinese ideal is deeply moralistic, and harmonistic, and rule- or even “ritual”-governed: for the Chinese ideal is grounded in Confucianism.

Although the roots of Confucian political theory are distinctively Asiatic, the normative claim has always been “global” and even transglobal—as opposed to nationalistic and temporary (pp. 140, 143). Confucian political theory broadens the scope of governmental concern “for *the people*” to include responsibility to ancestors and for future generations—of foreigners as well as nationals. What is more, governmental responsibility extends beyond humanity, to the natural environment, viewed as not undetached from “a transcendent ruling will, and a sacred sense of natural morality” that subordinates “earth” to “heaven” (pp. 163–64). Within humanity, great attention is given to distributing a modest prosperity universally—but with a moderating higher purpose: “[P]eople must be educated so that they can develop their moral natures” (p. 143). Crucial to the latter aim is limiting or forestalling “competitive individualism” while promoting “rich and diverse, harmonious, social relations” centered on the family and “filial piety,” as well as on “voluntary associations and community groups” (pp. 55, 59).

Equally distinctive are the neo-Confucian principles by which, and the modes through which, the rulers (seen as “the highest” members of society; p. 149) are rigorously selected and severely judged. Intellectual ability and knowledge is prized, but is ranked third, behind moral virtue and empathetic social skills. The latter two are fostered by a demand for intimate familiarity with, and capacity to apply, the lessons of “statecraft,” and of personal virtue in officials, found in the great books of the Confucian tradition. Formal competitive exams play a key role. Still more important are regular evaluations by peers as well as superiors and subordinates. Essential are years of tested, experiential ascent through a variety of challenging posts requiring collective decision making. “Eloquent speech” or popular oratory (as opposed to clear writing and rich dialogue) is suspect: “[V]erbal craftiness is viewed as an impediment to moral self-cultivation” (p. 101) and as fuel for the grave vice of arrogance, overwhelming the high virtue of humility, which should arise out of and culminate in ceaseless collective self-examination, self-criticism, and conspicuously unhedonistic self-restraint.

How, then, is the “Chinese ideal” more than “neo-Confucian?” The answer is simple: In today’s world, “the

Thomas L. Pangle (tpangle@austin.utexas.edu) is Professor of Government at The University of Texas, Austin, and the Joe R. Long Chair in Democratic Studies.

whole thing can be implemented only by a ruling organization similar to the CCP/Communist Party” (p. 195); without this organization’s discipline and control, the regime would be swamped by the forces of modern populism (unknown to Confucian tradition). Here we encounter the problematically unfinished character of the “ideal,” for the CCP is burdened with the populist/democratic Marxist ideology. But since “Marxism is basically dead,” Bell is confident that this baggage is being jettisoned: “in fact, the CCP is neither Communist nor a party”; “it is a pluralistic organization” of the “meritocratically selected”; “the party has yet to take the formal step of officially replacing Communism with Confucianism,” but “a more accurate name might be the Chinese Meritocratic Union” (pp. 124, 197).

In the contemporary era, however, *Demos* needs to be not only guided but somehow placated, by being involved in rule. After wrestling with and showing the unrealistic character of proposals for a mixed Confucian regime at the top, Bell settles for elective democracy at the local level (only)—carefully supervised by party cadres. The feebleness, and desperation, of this suggestion indicate the Achilles’ heel of “the Chinese ideal.”

Joseph Wong

doi:10.1017/S1537592715003357

Daniel Bell's *The China Model*, provides a synthesis of normative political theory and empirical research on the current state of China's political economy. In Chapter 1, Bell cleverly dismantles the democratic ideal—specifically the West's commitment to the institution of one person, one vote—by demonstrating its flaws in practice with a critique of the greatest champion of democracy of all, the United States. He in turn makes the case in Chapter 2 that political meritocracy is not only best suited for China, given its political cultural traditions, but is also a model that has performed, at least in China, better than democracy has elsewhere.

Political meritocracy, for Bell, entails a system of selecting the smartest, best qualified, and most virtuous politicians to lead a large and complex nation such as China. Normatively, Bell argues this is a theoretically superior way to select political leaders because it mitigates the problems of “irrational” voters and near-sighted politicians he sees in democracy. Empirically, Bell hinges his claim in favor of political meritocracy on the phenomenal socio-economic development that China has experienced since the start of the reform period.

But Bell is not naïve. He recognizes the “gap” between the ideal of political meritocracy and the realities of how it is practiced in China, thus establishing an empirical baseline from which to evaluate China's development since the end of the Mao era. His book makes an important contribution to the empirical study of China by asking: *Just how big is this gap?* Bell points to economic growth and the fact that since the reform period began in the late 1970s hundreds of millions have been lifted out of poverty as proof the gap may not be as large as China's critics often conclude. He also rightly points out that China's political system has not been rigid and that it has undergone significant reform; indeed, today's China is not Mao-era China. However, by establishing such a lofty baseline—that is, the ideal performance of a theoretical political meritocracy—Bell's analysis also points to many areas in which China's political economy is very problematic. Bell, to his credit, acknowledges these empirical realities. Inequality is growing. Administrative schemes such as the *hukou* system are proving difficult to reform. Political sycophantism, more than merit, is critical for promotion in the one-party state. The state-owned enterprise (SOE) sector needs to be reformed. Local governments are saddled with huge amounts of debt. Corruption remains rampant. And citizen mobilization is on the rise.

Joseph Wong (joe.wong@utoronto.ca) is Professor of Political Science at the University of Toronto.

While Bell concedes the myriad challenges China's political economy currently faces, his defense of political meritocracy hinges on the claim that this gap between ideal and reality *is narrowing*. Yet I see little evidence of this in Bell's interpretation of the current situation. In Chapter 3, for instance, he acknowledges corruption in Chinese politics, the ossification of the leadership ranks, and the challenges of sustaining political legitimacy. But he also seems to be suggesting things *are getting worse*, not better, under political meritocracy. He writes: “Equally obvious, however, some problems in China—corruption, the gap between rich and poor, environmental degradation, abuses of power by political officials, harsh measures for dealing with political dissent, overly powerful state-run enterprises that distort the economic system, repression of religious expression in Tibet and Xinjiang, discrimination against women—seem to have become worse while the political system has become more meritocratic” (p. 173). It thus seems difficult to claim the gap between ideal and reality in China's political meritocracy has narrowed or is expected to improve, when trends, by Bell's own admission, suggest things have actually “become worse.” It is not clear to me how this is evidence of either the theoretical or empirical superiority of the Chinese model of meritocratic authoritarianism.

And yet *The China Model* makes a compelling case that popular support for the government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) remains very high today. Bell provides a battery of survey results which show how Chinese citizens view the government and the CCP favorably. He predicts that a democratic opposition would have difficulties making a case that it is a better alternative than the CCP.

So then, let me take Bell's argument to one *possible* logical end: What would happen if democratic elections were held today in China? Bell provides a very convincing case that the CCP would win such elections, and likely win quite comfortably. This is precisely the argument Dan Slater and I make in our 2013 *Perspectives on Politics* article (“The Strength to Concede: Ruling Parties and Democratization in Developmental Asia,” *Perspectives on Politics* 11:3, 717–33), in which we present an alternative route to democracy—democracy through strength. Theoretically speaking, conceding democracy from a position of strength is incentive-compatible for authoritarian regimes precisely because they can expect to politically survive, and even thrive, in democracy. Empirically, we show in our article that democracy through strength has in fact been the modal pathway to democracy in most Asian cases, including Taiwan, South Korea, and Indonesia; and in our forthcoming book we suggest that we are seeing the same thing occur in even the most unlikely cases, such as Myanmar.

Bell would surely have some responses to this argument. First, as he says, the CCP “will not enact reform likely to lead to the party's demise” (p. 180). He is

absolutely right that the CCP will not choose a reform path that contributes to its own defeat, just as the conservatives in Japan did not concede a democratic constitution in 1946 to lead to their demise nor did the KMT in Taiwan concede democracy to hasten its own political obsolescence. As Slater and I stress, *conceding democracy is not tantamount to conceding defeat*. Therefore, it is possible—and even very likely, given Bell’s defense of the CCP’s record and the popular support it apparently enjoys—that the Chinese ruling party could concede democracy without any threat of it giving up power. Second, Bell acknowledges our argument in a footnote, and he responds to it by noting how democratic elections would undermine political meritocracy because the CCP would have to hew to the electorate rather than cultivate and select the best leaders for the long-term (see footnote 56, p. 286). It is not clear, however, why the CCP could not both maintain a meritocratic system to promote within its ranks the best, most virtuous and most skilled leaders and contest elections at the same time. In fact, it would seem to me the CCP’s meritocratic institutions would select the best leaders with the most compelling long-term visions for China, which is what would get them elected. And finally, Bell might ask why the CCP would concede democracy now, when it remains so powerful, so popular and when there is no immediate threat to its political survival. That is precisely the point Slater and

I make: Conceding democracy from strength ensures the ruling party a far better fate than conceding reform when the party is weak, de-legitimated, unpopular, and when it has no other choice but to give up power. Democracy through strength, we contend, ensures democratic parties their political longevity, as we see with the LDP in Japan and the KMT in Taiwan. We do not see this political longevity in nations where the ruling party is forced to concede when weak, such as in the former Soviet Union.

The political science literature, especially the strand concerning political transitions, has by and large tended to approach the China case by anticipating either the regime’s durability or its coming collapse. For those who see the durability of China’s authoritarian regime—and I would include Bell’s defense of the China model as part of that camp—China will not, and need not, democratize because the regime is unlikely to collapse. On the other hand, those who foresee the regime’s collapse expect tumultuous political reform. In both camps, China’s political future will be determined by the possibility (or impossibility) of a *crisis and collapse scenario*. It seems, however, that Bell’s arguments for the China model portend a possible alternative scenario, one in which the virtues, strengths and confidence generated by the CCP’s meritocracy might in fact compel the party to concede democracy, rather than resist it.