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Missing Links in *The China Model*

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Daniel A. Bell’s recent book *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* makes a significant contribution to political theory, political philosophy, and China studies. The book has already drawn a variety of responses (e.g., see [Bai 2016](#), [He et al. 2016](#), [Nathan 2015](#), and [Horesh 2016](#)), some of which I believe are due to utter misreadings and misunderstandings. It is therefore important for us to spell out explicitly what kind of work we are dealing with here before we dive into other substantive issues. We should not take this book as an apologetics for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) even though it offers both positive and negative assessments of the Chinese communist regime, as any fair-minded work should. There is a tendency among scholars to avoid discussing certain topics in order not to be perceived as politically motivated to help governments with a less than commendable reputation. For example, when the Chinese government was

using harmony as a leading motif for policies, while some people would say anything in praise of harmony in order to please the government, there were also many who chose to turn their back on topics related to harmony in order to avoid being perceived as dancing to the music of the government.

So the bandwagon goes both ways. This is unfortunate because scholarship should retain its own integrity and should not be influenced by politics. Professional ethics requires academics to say what a thing is as it is, regardless of what the government says or wishes us to say or not to say. In our case here, if we shy away from speaking positively of Chinese political meritocracy just to avoid being perceived as sleeping in the same bed as the Chinese government, which after all has a questionable reputation to say the least, we fail our professional responsibilities as serious academics. In the case of the CCP and China, I think the fact that the CCP survived the catastrophic Cultural Revolution and the devastating backlash of the June 4th incident in 1989 demands that serious scholars find out what the CCP did right more than what it did wrong. I am not saying that scholars should speak positively of political meritocracy even if they do not believe in it. However, if one studies political meritocracy and believes in its positive value, he or she should speak up, regardless of whether the Chinese communist government practices it well or not, and if the Chinese communist government does well as a political meritocracy we should find out more about this. Contrary to those accusing Bell as an apologist for the Chinese communist government, I think his book is a testimony both to Bell's integrity as a serious scholar and to his personal courage.

Let me be explicit in saying that I am sympathetic to an integrated model of democracy and political meritocracy. I do not agree with a rather widespread assumption that the more democratic a society is the better it is. Besides the general and empty notion of "good," there is hardly anything of which it can be said that the more of it there is the better. Michael [Sandel \(1998\)](#) has argued that the appropriate amount of justice in a society depends on the circumstances of justice. Similarly, I believe the appropriate amount of democracy in a society depends on the circumstances of democracy. The circumstances of democracy should include the need for meritocracy in society. As Bell maintains, there should be a balance between democracy and meritocracy.

However, I argue that Bell's model needs to be strengthened in two major areas. First, it lacks a mechanism of checks and balances on political power. Second, as a Confucian thinker, Bell needs to integrate (more of) the Confucian idea of "governance by virtue" into his model. Confucian governance by virtue is not merely about virtuous rulers; it is also about fostering a culture of virtuous behavior in government as well as in society at large.

Let me first turn to the issue of checks and balances in government. After arguing for the need of both democracy and meritocracy, Bell examines three models that integrate these two forms of political institution. The first model combines democracy and meritocracy at the level of the voter. Its

hope is for voters via general election to select the wise and virtuous to rule. The weakness of this model, Bell argues, is that ordinary citizens lack the competence and motivation to make sound and morally informed political judgments. Bell cites historical lessons and recent empirical studies to support his point.

The second model combines democracy and meritocracy at the level of central political institutions. Bell characterizes this model as “horizontal” because it requires public officials at the level of central political institutions to be selected through both popular vote and meritocratic mechanisms such as examinations. Bell argues that the weakness of this model lies in an inherent tension between the two means of selection. Once candidates are selected on the basis of “one person, one vote,” the meritocratic aspect of selection will be regarded as anti-democratic and will lose ground.

The third model is called a “vertical” model because it has meritocracy at the level of the central government and democracy at the local level (Bell 2015, p. 152). Bell argues that democracy at the local level can work effectively because local issues often directly concern voters’ lives, voters can have a clear understanding of what they are voting for, and voters can know candidates well. Bell cites research data to show widespread support for the idea of democracy at the local level in China.

At the top level in a country as big as China, however, Bell argues that a “one person, one vote” system will not carry the advantages it has at the local level and is unlikely to generate virtuous and effective leaders. Meritocracy is more appropriate at the top level, as Bell describes the practice in China:

The advantages of “actually existing” meritocracy in the CCP are clear. Cadres are put through a grueling process of talent selection, and only those with an excellent record of past performance are likely to make it to the highest levels of government. The training process includes programs for public administration at various levels of government, consulting experts, learning from best practices abroad, [and] rotational career postings through different sectors, as well as the cultivation of virtues such as compassion for the disadvantaged by means such as limited periods of work in poor rural areas. (Bell 2015, p. 172)

The anticipated result of such a practice is the promotion of experienced, competent, and effective leaders to the top levels of government. Meritocratically selected leaders do not have to worry about the next election, and they are not vulnerable to the lobbying of powerful special interests. Such protections enable these leaders to make long-term-oriented decisions that consider the interests of all relevant stakeholders, including future generations and people living outside the state (Bell 2015, p. 172).

Opponents may be quick to dispute whether China’s current political system actually does as Bell claims (see Nathan 2015). I think Bell’s reading of the system can be justified, at least to some extent. Bell readily

acknowledges that the system is not perfect and that it does not always achieve what it purports to (I think the same can be said of democracy in the United States and many other countries). Others may challenge Bell's model on its legitimacy. Bell has responded to such criticisms in various places. If we place the matter in a Chinese cultural context, legitimacy is not a big problem. China has a tradition of closely associating democracy with *minzhu* 民主, namely "people as masters." In this conception, government officials are the people's servants. For many people, it matters less how they have acquired their servants, as long as the servants perform their duties well. In other words, political legitimacy in the Chinese context is based more on performance than on origin.

My concern with Bell's model, however, is structural. In Bell's model of meritocracy at the top there is no mechanism for checks and balances of power at the highest level. The Standing Committee of the Politburo of the CCP is at most a self-policing institution, and this is far from adequate given the amount of power in its hands. In a broad sense, the Chinese have struggled with the issue of checks and balances of power at the very top level since antiquity. In ancient times, the ruler was not elected by the people. How could rulers' behavior be regulated within a reasonable scope? One mechanism in China's history was the state historian system (*shiguan zhidu* 史官制度). The state historian was responsible for truthfully recording the ruler's behavior, and the ruler would be judged by history. The idea was that rulers would not want to leave a bad name in historical records and would self-police their own behavior under someone else's watch. In order for such a system to work, it required an extremely high degree of dedication and professionalism from state historians.

In 548 B.C.E., the minister Cui Zhu 崔杼 of the state of Qi 齊 murdered his king, Zhuanggong 庄公. The state historian recorded that Cui Zhu had committed "regicide." Cui Zhu became angry and had the state historian killed. When the state historian's younger brother succeeded to the post, he recorded the same version of events. He was then also killed by Cui Zhu. The third state historian recorded the same version yet again. In the end, Cui Zhu had to accept the account in the state historical record. We are told that there was another historian who was prepared to succeed the third state historian in the event Cui Zhu struck again. In 642 during the Tang dynasty, the state historian Chu Suiliang 褚遂良 served as a minister of admonition (*Jianyi Dafu* 諫議大夫), with the responsibility of raising issues with the emperor when the latter acted inappropriately. One day, Emperor Taizong 太宗 wanted to see what Chu wrote about his behavior. Chu replied that it is a tradition that the ruler cannot see the record. The emperor then asked, "would you record it if I did something bad?" Chu replied that it was his duty to record everything that the emperor did and he dared not omit anything. Another minister also present added that even if Chu Suiliang had missed anything, everyone in the world would still remember!

In addition to the state historian system, later dynasties also implemented a self-regulating mechanism of rules-by-ancestors (*zuxun* 祖訓), in which the founding emperor established rules that were binding on emperors of later generations. Needless to say, the efficacy of these ancient mechanisms were quite limited. Rulers often assumed excessive power, and there were no effective institutional means to curb it. In contemporary China, the ruler's absolute power achieved its acme under Mao Zedong during the Cultural Revolution. More recently, political observers have also expressed concern with President Xi Jinping's consolidation of power in his first term in office by making himself the chair of every key "small group" (*lingdao xiaozu* 領導小組) that was established after his accession, thus allowing him to take charge of virtually all major aspects of the central government. The recent Nineteenth Party Congress gave Xi virtually unchecked power and wrote "Xi's Thought" as the party's guiding ideology into the party constitution. It would have been fine if Bell's meritocratic system always selected the wise and virtuous to the top leadership roles *and* if the moral integrity of leaders was guaranteed not to deteriorate after they took office. Unfortunately, the fact of the matter is that all systems can malfunction and all good people are vulnerable to corruption and moral decay.

A meritocratic system may at times produce leaders who are either unvirtuous or ineffective or both. Virtuous and effective leaders are nevertheless human and susceptible to corruption, as a large number of corrupted officials in China have demonstrated. Many, if not the vast majority, of disgraced corrupt officials in China today started as virtuous and effective, until they succumbed to various temptations. During World War II, a group of American journalists visited the CCP bases in Yan An and then afterwards told Madame Soong Mei-ling 宋美齡 how impressed they were with the cleanness and uprightness of the CCP. Madame Soong responded, "I take it that what you said is true but that is only because they have not tasted the flavor of real power." I believe there is truth in what she said. Lord Acton famously remarked, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Studies show that power not only can corrupt the character and behavior of those who hold power, but also can physically alter their brains. In studies spanning two decades, Dacher Keltner, a psychology professor at UC Berkeley, found that subjects with access to power became more impulsive, less risk-aware, and less adept at seeing things from the point of view of other people. Keltner has dubbed the phenomenon the "power paradox"; once people have power, they lose some of the capacities they needed to gain power in the first place, and in fact demonstrated symptoms of traumatic brain injury. Another researcher Sukhvinder Obhi, a neuroscientist at McMaster University, compared the heads of the powerful and the not-so-powerful under a transcranial-magnetic-stimulation machine, and found that power actually impairs a specific neural process, called "mirroring," that may be a cornerstone of empathy ([Useem 2017](#)). In Bell's case, no

matter how virtuous and exemplary some leaders have been, what could prevent them from deteriorating after they reached the pinnacle of power?

One would hope that personal moral character would prevent susceptibility to corruption, but society cannot rely on this. An often quoted line given by recently fallen high-level corrupt officials in China when they repent is, “I started as a son of peasants.” “A son of peasants” is usually associated with the virtues of innocence, honesty, and hard work. Their admirable backgrounds clearly did not prevent these people from becoming corrupt after taking office. Institutional arrangements are therefore needed. A political theory says that democracy is not so much about enabling people to select good leaders as about giving people the power to remove bad leaders at every election interval. Bell’s meritocratic model may enable people to get good leaders, but what would happen if leaders become bad? Perhaps for the purpose of checks and balances, it would not be a bad idea after all to have a second chamber of government, whether a greatly revised form of Jiang Qing’s chamber of great scholars (Jiang 2013), or Joseph Chan’s chamber of colleagues (Chan 2014), or Bell’s previous model of chamber by examination (Bell 2006), even though each of these solutions is burdened by its own share of difficulty. While I do not have a specific solution to the problem (for an entirely different approach, see Li 2012), I raise the issue here for Bell to consider a remedy.

The second major area in Bell’s model that is in need of strengthening concerns the need for a virtuous institutional culture. Without a good institutional culture, any social institution is vulnerable to malfunction. This is so with democracy as well as meritocracy. President Xi Jinping has gained respect as a strong leader largely because of his success and effectiveness in fighting corruption. Before his time, corruption in China was extensive and had reached a dangerous level. In the early stage of China’s economic reform, corruption was tolerated because it was considered the necessary grease to keep the wheel of economic development turning. But then it simply got out of hand and posed a direct threat to the rule of the CCP. Few people, however, thought it possible to effectively stop corruption in China until Xi Jinping launched his unprecedented anti-corruption campaign. Prior to this, whatever could be done in that regard had been widely considered as too little too late. But then miracles happened. Xi Jinping along with his able right-hand man Wang Qishan managed to reverse the seemingly unstoppable trend of corruption in China. A large number of corrupt officials were punished (leave aside the question of whether a political power struggle was involved). Those who did not heed anti-corruption warnings were also severely punished. It is safe to say that in China today government officials rarely dare to take bribes, a development few could have conceived of just a few years ago.

While Xi’s efforts and subsequent success should be congratulated, one cannot help wondering what would have happened if Xi and Wang had not

been so resolute and so effective in their anti-corruption campaign. Society should not be so completely dependent on the effectiveness of good leaders, who only appear once in a great while. A more reliable answer to the problem is to seek institutional solutions. As discussed above, some kind of institutional apparatus of checks and balances is needed, and indeed Xi's leadership has made some institutional arrangements to prevent corruption. For example, the party's inspection departments (*jiwei* 紀委)—which are mainly in charge of anti-corruption—at the provincial and county levels now report directly to the inspection departments of higher levels of party committees rather than to the secretaries of the party committee at the same level, as used to be the case.

While the need for institutional mechanisms is absolutely necessary, I believe we also need to foster a healthy institutional culture to ensure that good institutional arrangements are effectively implemented. By culture, I mean the shared ideas, customs, and social-behavior patterns of an institution, people, or society. It is a known fact that corruption exists in democratic societies as well as non-democratic societies. If Xi Jinping's successful anti-corruption campaign tells us anything, it shows that it is possible to keep corruption at bay in a political meritocracy (as Bell calls it). If corruption can be controlled in democracies as well as in meritocracies, and if corruption can become rampant in both democracies and meritocracies, what makes the difference is culture. Culture determines what is accepted or tolerated regardless of what is on the books. Without the software of "culture," institutional hardware is hardly useful. The CCP leadership has been trying to establish a social environment of "three not's," namely: officials are not able to, do not dare to, and do not want to take bribes (不能貪、不敢貪、不想貪). While these "three not's" must have institutional mechanisms as a "hardware" basis, they also demand the "software" of a good institutional culture of non-corruption. While "not able to take bribes" may have more to do with institutionalized regulations, "not dare to take bribes" and "not want to take bribes" have more to do with fostering a culture at the institutional level as well as in society as a whole.

This is an area in which Confucian philosophy can make an important contribution to Bell's model of political meritocracy. The Confucian project from the very beginning has been primarily a "culture" project rather than a political one. The focus has been more on creating a culture in which people are virtuous and society is harmonious than on picking right rulers. In this Confucian view, if there is an institutional culture within a government where bribery is not acceptable, it is less likely or even unlikely for people to bribe government officials. If such a culture runs strong in a society, government officials will be psychologically less inclined to take bribes, and the people will be less likely to commit bribery.

I should clarify that, while I am using Confucian philosophy to make my case on this point, the culture in an institution or a society does not have to

be Confucian to make a difference. It can be a culture of any moral tradition. Once I had a conversation on corruption in China with a couple of Indian friends. They told me their story. When they first returned to India after studying in the United Kingdom many years ago, they received a government clerk visiting their home for some necessary paperwork. After learning that my friends were professors, the clerk said that he would not take bribes from teachers and doctors. Naive as they were, my friends did not offer him anything as a bribe. The clerk left. And nothing was done. Later, when my friends told their friends the story, they were told that when the clerk said he would not take bribes from teachers, he was actually inviting a bribe from them, and they should have given him something in order to get their paperwork processed. Evidently there was a bribe culture that dictated what was expected in social interactions. In India, a non-corruption culture can be fostered within the Indian context. In a society heavily influenced by Christianity, it would be the influence of a good and clean Christian culture that helps to prevent corruption. Further, the importance of culture is not confined to Bell's China model of political meritocracy; it is applicable to any form of political meritocracy (as Bell thinks the model has implications beyond China). Moreover, the importance of culture even extends beyond political meritocracy, because the political institution of democracy also needs a culture of democracy in order to function well.

Perhaps these two areas of concern, namely "checks and balances" and a culture of clean and effective government, can be seen not so much as points of opposition to Bell's model as a whole, but rather as specific areas for significant improvement in Bell's democratic meritocracy. On the one hand I invite Bell to be more democratic in providing checks and balances in his model, and on the other I invite him to apply more in the way of Confucian philosophy in his political meritocracy in order to strengthen institutions by providing a strong dose of the cultural element in his model. I am interested in seeing whether Bell's model can be strengthened in both areas.

Notes

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