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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.

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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

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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.