

that have shaped Chinese hybrid identity and political culture. *Confucian Marxism* closes this gap and manages to situate Confucian philosophizing within contemporary political discourse. In particular, there is a significant overlap to discussions in postcolonial studies. By presenting conceptions of legitimacy in contexts that are significantly different from, yet shaped by, Euro-American cultural contexts, *Confucian Marxism* forces the reader to rethink whether, and in what form, liberalism can be globalized and detached from its cultural roots. For this reason it will serve as an indispensable reference point for anybody who is concerned with addressing peripheral liberal deformation in a Chinese, as well as global, context.

China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy. By Daniel A. Bell. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015. Pp. xii + 318. Hardcover \$29.85, ISBN 978-0-691-16645-2.



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Politicians' decisions affect not only the lives of their fellow countrymen but also the lives of people living in other countries, the global economy, financial markets, the environment, and ultimately the lives of future generations. Therefore, if a cordial human existence depends in part on the quality of political decision making, the system adopted by societies to choose their political leaders is of crucial importance.

However, are democratic elections the best way to select political leaders? Not according to Daniel Bell's recent book, *China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*. The book attempts to cover China's political system from two perspectives: on the one hand it aims to challenge the common assumptions of democratic theories that elections are a precondition for good government (p. 19), and on the other it intends to offer an evolved political model for contemporary China (p. 10).

In general, "political meritocracy" is the idea that only the most praiseworthy should rule. Meritocratic principles motivate the selection of the members of political institutions—such as the Federal Reserve and the Supreme Court of the United States—that, even in contemporary democratic political systems, are required to resolve matters in specific domains. Bell argues for an extension and inclusion of meritocratic mechanisms into the political domain. For the Chinese context, Bell proposes a meritocratic system to select and promote political leaders on the basis of their intellectual abilities, social skills, and moral virtues—such as their disposition to sacrifice their private interests for the common good (p. 104). The proposed meritocratic model is drawn partly from the civil service examination system developed and adopted in Imperial China from the time of the Han dynasty, so

Bell is confident that some meritocratic features already characterize the Chinese political system.

The instrumental defense of political meritocracy is strengthened throughout the book. By drawing from studies on American elections, chapter 1 argues that the flaws of electoral democracy can lead to the implementation of political decisions based on the average voter's short-term interests, augmenting social inequalities and neglecting necessary long-term and proactive policies. Chapter 2 investigates the appropriate standards needed for a meritocratic selection of political leaders for contemporary China.¹ Chapter 3 proposes the use of free speech, rule of law, and anti-corruption agencies and peer review to prevent corruption and elitism and to guarantee the legitimacy of the political system. Assuming that meritocratic institutions perform better for the solution of general problems, chapter 4 advocates the implementation of one wide-ranging meritocratic agency to deal with national and international politics, and the limitation of the authority of democratic institutions to policies at the local level. Thus, "Democracy at the bottom, meritocracy at the top" is concluded to be the best political model for modern China.

China Model is one of the first serious contemporary works exclusively dedicated to the concept of "political meritocracy." In this regard, the book indisputably has the merit of both disclosing some of the potentialities of meritocratic mechanisms and, more generally, contributing to focusing more attention on the importance of the quality of political decision making.² However, by focusing exclusively on the consequentialist case for democracy, Bell overlooks defenses of democratic institutions that are based on non-instrumental arguments. For example, the idea that political egalitarianism is the *summum bonum* and that democratic elections are intrinsically valuable representations of political equality are quite popular in the Anglo-American debate on democratic theory.³ Thus, the absence of a serious engagement with these doctrines arguably weakens Bell's critique of electoral democracy.

Clearly, one of the attractive features of political meritocracy is the perceived likelihood that meritocratic governments can make better political decisions. In this sense, Bell's proposed approach risks being unachievable in a large, pluralistic modern society, at least. The desires of people living in a modern industrialized society can be more heterogeneous, and therefore more difficult to identify and fulfill.⁴ This can be a serious limitation of Bell's meritocratic project because the political leaders of a meritocratic government, despite their skills, will have to favor one particular conception of the good over the others.⁵ In regard to this point, Bell argues that the criteria should adapt to the increasing complexity of people's needs and the political priorities of the time (p. 108). However, enlarging the conception of merit to include leaders' social skills and their abilities to connect and serve the public may not solve the problem. Most likely, even the decisions made by a compassionate leader could asymmetrically benefit one portion of society more than others. Consequently these decisions may be perceived by the public as biased. Thus, if political neutrality is almost impossible in a large, modern, pluralistic society, then people themselves

might be the best trustees for people's interests. Such a consideration can seriously limit the rule of the guardians, since it requires adopting some principle of political equality, allowing inclusive decisional procedures where citizens can—directly or indirectly—represent their own interests.

However, if the importance of significant participatory instruments at the national level is incompatible with the “Democracy at the bottom, meritocracy at the top” model, then this is consistent with meritocratic governance in general. Granting people equal availability of political resources to express their interests indeed leaves room for powerful meritocratic mechanisms to operate on the improvement of the quality of the decision making, or the creation of new meritocratic agencies to deal with the pressing issues of the time (climate change, for instance). In this sense, democracy and political meritocracy—as Bell suggests—are certainly compatible. But how to strike the right balance between the two ideals seems to remain open to question.

Notes

- 1 – According to Bell, the increasing complexity of Chinese society calls for a broader conception of merit. In this regard, Bell thinks that his proposal of selecting Chinese government officials on the basis of their social and intellectual skills and their ability to connect and serve the public differs strongly from the current selection methods, which focus mainly on the level of economic growth in an official's district (p. 108).
- 2 – The issue of the quality of political decision making has received little attention in democratic theory. Phillippe Van Parijs is probably one of the few Western political theorists strongly advocating measures to improve the outcomes of political decision making. See his “The Disfranchisement of the Elderly, and Other Attempts to Secure International Justice,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 27, no. 4 (1998): 292–333, and *Just Democracy: The Rawls-Machiavelli Programme* (Colchester: ECPR Press, 2011), for a sense of Van Parijs' proposals.
- 3 – For some of the most important non-instrumental defenses of democracy, see Thomas Christiano, “Is Democracy Merely a Means to Social Justice?” in *Real Libertarianism Assessed: Political Theory after Van Parijs*, ed. Andrew Reeve and Andrew Williams (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Christiano, *The Constitution of Equality: Democratic Authority and its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Christopher G. Griffin, “Democracy as a Non-instrumentally Just Procedure,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 111, no. 1 (2003): 111–121; Joshua Cohen, “Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy,” in *The Good Polity*, ed. Alan Hamlin and Philip Pettit (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989); Cohen, “Democratic Equality,” *Ethics* 99, no. 4 (July 1989): 727–775; Harry Brighouse, “Egalitarianism and Equal Availability of Political Influence,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (1996): 118–141; Brighouse, “Democracy and Proportionality,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18, no. 2 (2010): 137–155; and Elizabeth S. Anderson, “What is the Point of Equality?” *Ethics* 103, no. 9 (1999): 287–337.
- 4 – As Bell explains, “Now that hundreds of millions of Chinese have been lifted out of poverty, what should the government do for them? The task of the government becomes more

complex, with more diverse interests and values and greater demands for political participation, and the unqualified pursuit of economic growth is no longer the widely accepted criterion for good governance" (p. 94).

- 5 – With meritocracy "The problem, however, is that the more holistic the standard, the more controversial it becomes. The government can and does make extensive use of polling data and relies on social media to stay well-informed about public opinion . . . , but what if different groups of people prioritize different needs and the majority's priorities conflict with expert views about governmental priorities?" (p. 95).