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## Bell, D.A. *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

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**Bell, D.A. *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.**

Daniel A. Bell's *The China Model* is a book in which the author's "politics of location" is placed front and center. Bell is a Western-educated political theorist who has long-taught in various East Asian countries and is now at Tsinghua University in Beijing. The book was published in 2015, before the swift rise of various forms of populism in Western Europe and the United States and yet nonetheless remains prescient in its critiques of the limitations of electoral democracy. Despite its current relevance, the book has been controversial since its release, garnering numerous critical reviews, such as the one from Andrew Nathan in *China File*.

Bell seeks to establish a "consequentialist" case for the limits of electoral democracy, noting that while electoral democracy through "one person, one vote" mechanisms has "assumed almost sacred status in modern Western societies" (p. 14), there are innumerable reasons that such a system does not, in practice, necessarily produce "good government" in terms of measures such as selecting "wise leaders," promoting widespread sharing of economic benefits, emphasizing environmental sustainability, or supporting "harmonious ways of resolving conflict" (p. 19). Bell reviews four reasons that electoral democracy falls short on these measures. The first, the tyranny of the majority, examines ways in which voters in democratic countries are often ill-informed and often elect politicians who themselves fail to make policy based on expert knowledge. Bell contrasts the electoral democracy system with the Singaporean system, in which the training and selecting of political leaders includes the candidates' taking of exams and undergoing other rigorous selection procedures; Bell also notes that China, too, is increasingly relying on meritocratic means to select its officials. The next critique of electoral democracy, the tyranny of the minority, examines the phenomenon of increasing wealth inequality and how this taints the political process; Bell argues that in contrast, a meritocratic system may be more likely to promote policies that "curb the power of capitalists" and train leaders who have a greater "sense of community" (p. 44). The third critique, the tyranny of the voting community, examines how electoral democracy does not consider the interests of non-voters, including foreigners, as well as future generations, which Bell considers to be especially important in light of global climate change.<sup>1</sup> Bell believes that a meritocratic system is better suited to protecting the rights and interests of future generations. Finally, the tyranny of competitive individualists makes democratic politics divisive and contrary to the goals of "harmony" that many East Asians seem to desire. Bell argues that "most [Chinese] citizens perceive China as a harmonious society" and that more democracy in China would be more likely to "aggravate social conflict" (pp. 60-61).

Bell lays out a case for the qualities that leaders in a meritocratic system should have, such as proper intellectual abilities, "communicative talent and emotional intelligence" (p. 90), and "the motivation to promote the good of the people" (p. 101). He also lays out possible various exam and performance-based procedures for choosing such leaders. In a subsequent chapter, he does critique the problems of a political system in which its leaders are selected through meritocratic processes. First, corruption is a distinct possibility due to the "absence of independent checks on the power of the government"; "rent-seeking"<sup>2</sup> in transitional economies represents a similarly troubling possibility, as... Also problematic are the low salaries of public officials, begging the question whether individuals would be willing to undergo meritocratic selection processes for such relatively low salaries. Bell finds that Singapore's experience provides a useful rebuttal for this last issue, however, with Singaporean officials being

extraordinarily well-compensated. In the case of China, where corruption remains common, Bell notes that corruption may be “substantially curtailed [but] only if it is seen to be deeply shameful and being clean is seen to be a matter of honor for public officials” (p. 123). Next, “ossification,” or the likelihood of stagnation in the composition of the leadership, is a potential problem. Bell here seems to think that selecting leaders from “diverse social backgrounds” (p. 130) as well as implementing “new ways of measuring merit” (p. 134) could solve this problem. Finally, Bell notes the difficulties of non-democratic systems in establishing legitimacy, though he again provides a rebuttal to this concern, noting that China has succeeded in this area through processes of “nationalism, performance legitimacy, and political meritocracy” (p. 139).

Bell examines three different ways of establishing political meritocracy. The first is through changes in voting procedures themselves, such as by granting weighted votes to those with more education or other qualifications of merit; however, Bell notes how difficult it would be to get citizens to agree to such measures. The second is through the implementation of a “horizontal meritocracy,” a concept Bell has supported through much of his writing career, featuring multiple legislative houses, with the elected officials within some houses being elected through universal suffrage and the leaders in others being appointed through examinations. Here Bell is inspired by the Confucian political thinker Jiang Qing and his ideal of the House of Exemplary Persons, which would promote “transcendent values,” a notion that Bell acknowledges is “highly controversial” (p. 165). Bell also notes that the balance of power between different legislative houses would likely eventually to be swayed toward the democratically-elected one. Finally, Bell advocates a “vertical model,” featuring democracy at local levels and meritocracy at the top. He argues that this is in fact precisely what is occurring in contemporary China, with its mix of village-level democratic elections and rigorous, meritocratic selection of officials at the national level.

In his conclusion, Bell expands on his hypothesized vertical model of democracy to discuss what he views as the actually-existing but still-evolving “China model”—not the supposed one featuring economic openness but political authoritarianism that is often written about by Western observers—but rather one featuring “democracy at the bottom, experimentation in the middle, and meritocracy at the top” (p. 180). He acknowledges that a vertical model system would still contain problems but claims that China is nonetheless currently creating a viable model of political development that deviates from the norm of electoral democracy that other democratic nations might wish to consider adopting.

This book has generated a fair share of controversy. Cynicism regarding the merits of current democracies in the US and UK, for example, certainly make elements of Bell’s argument in favor of a meritocratic means of selecting leadership and achieving a common good quite appealing. Why shouldn’t we want leadership capable of informed, intelligent ruling on behalf of some “common good”? Yet here we can start to see the flaws in Bell’s argument as well as in how he supports it. Should the notion of “common good” be decided upon by educated elites? And even if we can come to some idea of what a common good might entail, Bell fills his argument with so many qualifications that his arguments in favor of a meritocratic model of democracy come to sound hollow. For instance, he notes that Chinese citizens see their country as harmonious, yet on the very next page, posits that increasing democracy in China would also exacerbate social conflict. So is China really harmonious, or does it just appear to be so through repression of social organization and other forms of criticism, which is actually increasing under Xi Jinping? Finally, it may be unfair to critique Bell’s arguments using developments that occurred after he published his book, but the 2016 Brexit vote would seem to challenge Bell’s

consistent support of the use of referenda to facilitate public debate. For example, Bell argues in favor of some national referenda in China to create an even more meritocratic system, saying that referenda “tend to generate extensive deliberation and relatively informed debate” (p. 176); on another occasion, Bell suggests that China would benefit from a referendum supporting greater civil liberties.

Apart from the merits or weaknesses of his individual arguments, Bell never satisfactorily answers the broader question regarding why democracy cannot somehow fix its own problems rather than needing to be replaced. This is evident in many of his discussions, for instance, of the need to create greater senses of community to overcome the dysfunctions caused by economic inequality; arguably, *more* democratic participation and civic engagement, not less, would be the best solution to this problem. He notes that corruption might be best resolved through making it more “shameful,” yet he fails to address how this change in political culture might also be something that can occur through democratic processes.

Because of the arguments presented in this book, Bell might be seen as an apologist for Chinese authoritarianism. I think that charge is somewhat unfair, though there are times when he paints an excessively rosy picture of the political system in China today. Certainly, it should be possible to acknowledge and even celebrate the successes of CCP governance in China without being an “apologist” for the country’s authoritarian ways. And this book begins to do that. Nevertheless, a more measured assessment of democracy’s benefits as well as more empirical discussion of China’s “actually-existing” meritocracy would make its case even stronger.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> He notes that while China has a “disastrous environmental record,” there is a “growing public concern over air pollution,” which has led to the consideration of future generations in the form of more environmentally-friendly policies (p. 52).

<sup>2</sup> Rent-seeking economic behavior broadly describes the allocation of economic resources toward unproductive goals or toward projects that ultimately hamper economic efficiency rather than toward activity that would add economic value to the economy.

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