

Studies as well as lay readers; moreover, the relaxed pace of narration through time and space, laced with thought-provoking ideas, has made this an worthy addition to any collection on China.

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DANIEL A. BELL, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton, NJ Princeton University, 2015), pp. 318 + xii, \$17.97, ISBN: 9780691166452 (hardcover).

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In varying degrees, China seems to fascinate, perplex and even terrify observers across the world. We confront today a deluge of writing on China's future, in which such emotions are often intermingled with prognostication. A key question persists regarding the nature and quality of China's governance structures, and flowing from this, the deeper issue of survival of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and of the Chinese model. Daniel Bell offers us his sympathetic portrayal of a China steeped in its Confucian heritage. Far from being defensive, Bell posits meritocracy, rooted in China's history and as practiced by the CCP, as the uniquely appropriate core of its system, virtually a permanent feature of that country. This short work is pungent in its arguments, buttressed with long endnotes and references.

The flaws of electoral democracies in other countries are repeatedly contrasted with Confucian ethics in their idealised form. The principal defects of electoral democracies, set out in the first chapter, are the tyranny of the majority; second, the tyranny of the minority; third, the tyranny of the voting community; and finally, the tyranny of competitive individualists. Examining each of these, Bell contrasts the shortcomings of the Western model with the norms of Confucianism, but not in essence with the existing Chinese practice. It is interesting that the author makes no mention of Buddhist values, surely also part of the composite Chinese heritage. Bell writes: 'China 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). Some would regard this as a rosy view.

The author's central thesis is that China's governance system is a *political* meritocracy, which he distinguishes from meritocracies that are either bureaucratic or economic. He holds that this system has thrown up three features: at the bottom, it is mainly democratic; in the middle, it is undergoing experimentation; at the top, it is a successful meritocracy, despite its defects. This trilogy recurs repeatedly in this book,

China Report 52, 2 (2016): 151–178

and is summed up best in the final chapter. Village and resident communities first emerged in the constitution of 1982, but it was the law of 1987 that gave shape to the method, specifying secret balloting, which was further consolidated in the 1998 law that provided for free and fair elections. ‘... democracy at the local level is perhaps the most widely researched plank of China’s political reform... that has received the most international attention’ (p. 182). At the middle level, that is, county, town and city administration, policy experimentation has taken several forms, the most notable of which was the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone. As of 2007, 72 cities had the status of ‘experimental center for comprehensive reform’; some experimented with renewable energy and others with different ways of reducing income gaps. Foshan city gave the public a direct role in evaluating the performance of officials, translating into incentive payments and penalties. The third plank is meritocracy at the top, which is for Bell China’s unique feature. ‘In the early 1990s, the government established ultracompetitive public service examinations (including written and oral tests) ... Out of 7 million leading cadres only one in 140,000 makes it to the province/ministry (vice minister) level’—and this process typically takes 20 years (pp. 185–7).

Bell asserts repeatedly that China is similar to Singapore in its attachment to merit as the guiding principle in the selection of its leadership, and the rigour with which objective criteria are applied in this process. But this is a flawed comparison on several counts. Experiments can be implemented and monitored in a city-state in a way that is impossible in a country of continental size. People management too is radically different; we often forget how much the nimbleness of ‘Singapore Inc.’ owes to its minuscule leadership team. Moreover, Singapore’s absence of corruption is the very antithesis of what obtains in China—or in India for that matter. Singapore has opted to pay its ministers and officials salaries that are indexed against the top emoluments in the private sector, which translates into annual payment to ministers and permanent secretaries in the range of US\$1.2–1.6 million, levels undreamt of in other countries. Bell acknowledges that for China ‘money per se is not sufficient to deter corruption’ (p. 122). Some similarities notwithstanding, I wonder if Singapore would rejoice in the way Bell brackets it with China, as a meritocratic ‘non-democracy’.

How rigorous and transparent is China’s meritocracy system? This is central to the Bell thesis, and he acknowledges the flaws that persist, in what has become a hierarchical, multistage examination-based selection process that is quite unlike what any other communist regime has ever practiced. Bell describes at length the top cadre selection process as narrated to him by a minister heading the CCP’s Organization Department (pp. 170–4). Acknowledging that in a meritocratic system there should be fewer leaders with family ties to former leaders, Bell rationalises: ‘the princelings began to rise before the institutionalization of the examination system for public officials in the early 1990s’; he adds that they were selected because of their level of education and reformist leanings, and ‘such conditions are unlikely to be reproduced in the future’ (p. 193).

Elsewhere Bell closely examines the French *Ecole Nationale d'Administration*, and notes that in like fashion, the CCP tends to select 'highly educated overachievers' (p. 131).

Upper level cadres are 'typically expected' to have a university education (p. 78). That is a good feature of the Chinese system, but in fact the education norm goes deeper, as other observers have noted. Aspirant top grade leaders stand to benefit if they hold a doctorate. I recall a leading US analyst of Chinese leadership explaining 3 years back that a particular rising star had gained his doctorate while serving as a provincial governor, and how in that analyst's view that was unlikely to have been genuinely based on his own work, given the heavy work commitments of that post. Bell is not bothered with such fine details relating to actual practices.

The author is rightly concerned with the role of virtue, since leaders selected only on the basis of intellect and ability will not serve the public good. But here again, Bell is strong in his historical and philosophical examination, and weak when it comes to telling us about the current practices.

At heart, Bell intermingles the analytical with the normative. The deficiencies of democratic societies are presented with precision, often in harsh fashion. But when it comes to the defects of the Chinese system, the normative takes over. For instance, while closely examining corruption in China (pp. 112–25), Bell declares that in a democracy corruption will not threaten the entire system, but it can make or break a political meritocracy. He concludes: 'a more systematic program in Confucian education can help eradicate corruption' (pp. 124–5). This is a shallow prescription, which ignores the existing patron–client nexus that is at the heart of the China's leadership–business alliance, almost a permanent feature of that system.

Bell says that China's political meritocracy cannot be debated with those he calls 'democracy fundamentalists'. This leads to a bold assertion: 'If the aim is to propose suggestions for improving China's political system, we can simply assume that China's one party system is not about to collapse and argue for improvements on that basis' (p. 61). The book suggests that the Chinese system will be self-perpetuating.

Overall, Daniel Bell presents a comprehensive case for political meritocracy, which is a unique Chinese system. But questions persist. Is long prevailing repression of dissent, which he does not examine, an adjunct to its operation? Is the princeling phenomenon an aberration of a particular phase or an inevitable feature of governance by elites? And despite all the exhortations of Confucian virtue, does meritocracy without an external discipline authority tend to produce leaders who place themselves above the law? We may wonder: can traditional values and harmony ideals, both in conception and the way actually delivered in China, produce long-term legitimacy and stability, which democracy offers, despite its flaws?

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China Report 52, 2 (2016): 151–178