SYMPOSIUM

THE CHINA MODEL

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A PRÉCIS

BY

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© 2017 – *Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series)*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 3-14
Luiss University Press
E-ISSN 2240-7987 | P-ISSN 1591-0660

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A Précis

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In October 2013, a slick cartoon video of mysterious provenance went viral, with more than ten million viewings in two weeks. The video, released at the time of the U.S federal government shutdown, contrasts the selection of leaders in different countries. It depicts the meteoric rise of President Barack Obama, aided by hundreds of millions of dollars in campaign financing, with victory coming in the form of a countrywide national election on the basis of one person, one vote. This process is labelled "democracy." It also depicts President Xi Jinping's decades-long ascent to the pinnacle of Chinese power: his promotions from leadership in a primary-level office to the township level, the county division, department levels, the province-ministry level, the Central Committee, the Politburo, and then the leading spot in the Standing Committee of the Politburo, with rigorous and ultracompetitive evaluations at each stage meant to test his political leadership abilities. This process is labelled "meritocracy." The clear implication of the video is that Chinese-style political meritocracy is a morally legitimate way of selecting top political leaders, perhaps even better than democratic elections.

The video was likely produced and distributed by a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) organ, but if political meritocracy is so good, why can't the CCP take responsibility for the video? More generally, why can't the CCP officially embrace political meritocracy and openly take pride in its meritocratic system? The

 Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series), Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 3-14
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E-ISSN 2240-7987 | P-ISSN 1591-0660

main reason is that Chinese-style political meritocracy is imperfect in practice. But this leads to the question of what should be the moral standards for evaluating political progress (and regress) in a regime that aspires to be a political meritocracy?

More questions come to mind. The video suggests that political meritocracy and electoral democracy are fundamentally incompatible political systems. But is it possible to reconcile the best of meritocratic and democratic practices, and if so, how? The video says nothing about China's harsh treatment of political opponents. If the system is so great, why is there a need to crack down on political dissent? Is it really possible to structure political meritocracy so that it is seen as legitimate by the people and avoids the abuses of authoritarian rule? My book is an attempt to answer such questions.

Political meritocracy is perhaps the most studied and the least studied topic in political theory. The idea that a political system should aim to select and promote leaders with superior ability and virtue is central to both Chinese and Western political theory and practice. The reason seems obvious: we demand trained and qualified persons in leadership positions in science, law, and corporations; why not also in the most important institution of all? As the distinguished American sociologist Daniel Bell (1919–2011) put it, "one wants men in political office who can govern well. The quality of life in any society is determined, in considerable measure, by the quality of leadership. A society that does not have its best men at the head of its leading institutions is a sociological and moral absurdity." Hence, political thinkers—from Confucius, Plato, and Zhu Xi to John Stuart Mill, Sun Yat-sen, and Walter Lippmann—struggled to identify the ways of selecting the best possible leaders capable of making intelligent, morally informed political judgments on a wide range of issues.

But such debates largely stopped in the post–World War II era. In China, they stopped because Maoism valued the political contributions of warriors, workers, and farmers over those of intellectuals and educators. Whatever the top-down political reality, revolutionary leaders claimed they were building a new form of participatory socialist democracy from the ground up, and defenders of political elitism were nowhere to be seen (or publicly heard from) in mainland China. In the West, they stopped largely because of the intellectual hegemony of electoral democracy. A democracy demands only that the people select their leaders; it is up to the voters to judge the merits of the candidates.

If voters are rational and do a good job choosing leaders, there is no need to agonize too much over what ought to be the qualities of good leaders and which mechanisms can best select such leaders. Political theorists therefore shifted their interests to questions such as how to deepen democracy in politics and other spheres of social life and how to promote fair forms of wealth distribution in the nation and the world at large.

The debates over political meritocracy were revived in the tiny city-state of Singapore. Starting from the 1960s, the country's leaders advocated the institutionalization of mechanisms aimed at selecting leaders who were best qualified to lead, even if doing so meant imposing constraints on the democratic process. They argued that political leaders should take a long-term view rather than cater to electoral cycles, and the political system can and should be structured to prevent the exercise of power by short-term-minded "populist" political leaders. But Singapore's discourse on political meritocracy failed to gain much traction abroad, largely because it was not presented as a universal ideal.

Rather, Singapore's leaders emphasized that the need to select and promote the most capable and upright people is particularly

pressing in a tiny city-state with a small population, limited resource base, and potentially hostile neighbors. Hence, why debate the exportability of an ideal that is meant to fit only a highly unusual city-state?

But two recent developments put debates about political meritocracy back on the global map. For one thing, the crisis of governance in Western democracies has undermined blind faith in electoral democracy and opened the normative space for political alternatives. The problem is not just that democratic theorists came to realize the difficulties of implementing democratic practices outside the Western world; the deeper problem is that actually existing democracy in the Western world no longer sets a clear-cut positive model for other countries.

In difficult economic times, for example, voters often select populist leaders who advocate policies inimical to the long-term good of the country, not to mention the rest of the world. Hence, innovative political thinkers argue that governance in Western democracies can be improved by incorporating more meritocratic institutions and practices.

Equally important, the theory of political meritocracy has been reinvigorated by the rise of China. Since the early 1990s, China's political system has evolved a sophisticated and comprehensive system for selecting and promoting political talent that seems to have underpinned China's stunning economic success. Like earlier practices in imperial China, the political system aims to select and promote public servants by means of examinations and assessments of performance at lower levels of government. Chinese-style meritocracy is plagued with imperfections, but few would deny that the system has performed relatively well compared to democratic regimes of comparable size and level of economic development, not to mention family-run dictatorships in the Middle East and elsewhere. And the world is watching

China's experiment with meritocracy. China, unlike Singapore, can "shake the world." In the early 1990s, nobody predicted that China's economy would rise so fast to become the world's second largest economy.

In twenty years' time, perhaps we will be debating Chinese-style political meritocracy as an alternative model—and a challenge—to Western-style democracy.

Before saying more, let me clarify some terminology. My book is a defense of *political* meritocracy. Liberal democracies empower meritocratically selected experts in administrative and judicial positions, but they are accountable, if only indirectly, to democratically elected leaders.

They are meant to exercise power in a narrowly defined domain and should try to remain politically neutral to the extent possible. For example, British civil servants are meant to serve elected politicians and may need to set aside their own political views as they do so. In contrast, political leaders in meritocracies such as China are meant to exercise political judgment in a wide range of domains. They hold the ultimate power in the political community (including control over the instruments of violence), like elected leaders in democracies. And there is no clear institutional distinction between civil servants and political leaders in a political meritocracy. In short, meritocratically selected public servants in democratic countries are not meant to be political, whereas meritocratically selected public servants in political meritocracies are meant to exercise political power.

It is also important to distinguish between political and economic meritocracy. In English, the term *meritocracy* can refer to a principle governing the distribution of economic resources: meritocracy is a system that distributes wealth according to ability and effort rather than class or family background. Karl Marx

criticized capitalism because it tends to distribute resources according to class background, notwithstanding the myth that people are rewarded mainly according to ability and effort. Communism aims to abolish class differences, and the distribution of resources in the immediate postcapitalist period ("lower communism") will translate capitalist rhetoric into reality: economic resources will be distributed according to the principle "from each according to his ability, to each according to his contribution." Although this seemingly meritocratic principle recognizes no class differences, it is still flawed because "it tacitly recognizes unequal individual endowment and thus productive capacity as natural privileges." That is, people should not benefit from unearned natural talent and it is unfair to penalize those who are less productive through no fault of their own. Hence, society should move on to "higher communism" so resources can be distributed according to the principle "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

John Rawls, the most influential political philosopher in the twentieth century, similarly recognized the danger that seemingly fair opportunity could lead to "a callous meritocratic society." Being born with ability confers no moral right to wealth because what one is born with, or without, is not of one's own doing. Instead of distributing wealth on the basis of productive contribution, Rawls defends the "difference principle" that inequalities are allowed only if they benefit the least well-off.

More surprisingly, perhaps, the world's most powerful central banker, then–Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke, expressed a similar critique of meritocracy in a graduate address at Princeton University in 2013:

> A meritocracy is a system in which the people who are the luckiest in terms of their health and genetic endowment; luckiest in terms of family support, encouragement, and, probably, income; luckiest in terms of educational

> and career opportunities; and luckiest in so many ways difficult to enumerate: these are the people who reap the largest rewards. The only way for even a putative meritocracy to hope to pass ethical muster, to be considered fair, is if those who are the luckiest in all of those respects also have the greatest responsibility to work hard, to contribute to the betterment of the world, and to share their luck with others.

I am sympathetic to these critiques of "meritocracy" as an economic system, but my aim here is not to defend a particular theory governing the distribution of material goods. My concern, to repeat, is to defend *political* meritocracy—the idea that political power should be distributed in accordance with ability and virtue—and I invoke arguments about the distribution of economic resources only insofar as they bear on the issue of how to establish a morally desirable and politically realistic form of political meritocracy.

Outline of the Book

The idea that political leaders should be chosen according to one person, one vote is taken for granted in so many societies that any attempt to defend political meritocracy should begin with a critique of electoral democracy: most readers in Western societies won't even be willing to contemplate the possibility of morally justifiable alternatives to one person, one vote as a means of selecting political leaders, so a book arguing in favor of an alternative must at least raise some questions about democratic elections. Some philosophers have defended the rights to vote and run for office on the grounds that political liberties are intrinsically valuable for individuals whether or not they lead to collectively desirable consequences. These arguments, however, have been vigorously contested. And if the aim is to promote electoral democracy in

China, arguments for democracy appealing to the intrinsic value of voting will not be very effective because political surveys consistently show that citizens in East Asian societies understand democracy in substantive rather than procedural terms: that is, they tend to value democracy because of its positive consequences rather than valuing democratic procedures *per se*. So the politically relevant question is whether democratic elections lead to good consequences. Democracy has had a good track record over the past few decades: rich, stable, and free countries are all democratic. But democracies also have key flaws that may spell political trouble in the future, and it is at least arguable that political meritocracies can minimize such problems.

Chapter 1 discusses four key flaws of democracy understood in the minimal sense of free and fair elections for the country's top rulers, and each flaw is followed by a discussion of theoretical and real meritocratic alternatives. The first flaw is "the tyranny of the majority": irrational and self-interested majorities acting through the democratic process can use their power to oppress minorities and enact bad policies.

Examinations that test for voter competence can help to remedy this flaw in theory, and Singapore's political meritocracy is a practicable alternative. The second flaw is "the tyranny of the minority": small groups with economic power exert disproportionate influence on the political process, either blocking change that's in the common interest or lobbying for policies that benefit only their own interest. In theory, this flaw can be remedied by means of a citizen body that excludes wealthy elites, and China's political system is a practicable alternative.

The third flaw is "the tyranny of the voting community": if there is a serious conflict of interest between the needs of voters and the needs of nonvoters affected by the policies of government such as future generations and foreigners, the former

will almost always have priority. One theoretical remedy is a government office charged with the task of representing the interests of future generations, and Singapore's institution of a president with the power to veto attempts by politicians to enact policies that harm the interests of future generations is a practicable alternative. The fourth flaw is "the tyranny of competitive individualists": electoral democracy can exacerbate rather than alleviate social conflict and disadvantage those who prefer harmonious ways of resolving social conflict. A system based on consensus as a decision-making procedure can help to remedy this flaw, and China's political model has some practical advantages in terms of reducing social conflict.

In short, there may be morally desirable and political feasible alternatives to electoral democracy that help to remedy the major disadvantages of electoral democracy. If the aim is to argue for political meritocracy in a Chinese context, however, we do not need to defend the strong claim that political meritocracy consistently leads to better consequences than electoral democracy. We can simply assume that China's one-party political system is not about to collapse and argue for improvements on that basis

Chapter 2 proceeds on the following assumptions: (1) it is good for a political community to be governed by high-quality rulers; (2) China's one (ruling) party political system is not about to collapse; (3) the meritocratic aspect of the system is partly good; and (4) it can be improved. On the basis of these assumptions, I draw on social science, history, and philosophy to put forward suggestions about which qualities matter most for political leaders in the context of large, peaceful, and modernizing (nondemocratic) meritocratic states, followed by suggestions about mechanisms that increase the likelihood of selecting leaders with such qualities. My findings about which abilities, social skills,

and virtues matter most for political leaders in the context of a large, peaceful, and modernizing political meritocracy are then used as a standard for evaluating China's actually existing meritocratic system. My conclusion is that China can and should improve its meritocratic system: it needs exams that more effectively test for politically relevant intellectual abilities, more women in leadership positions to increase the likelihood that leaders have the social skills required for effective policy making, and more systematic use of a peer-review system to promote political officials motivated by the desire to serve the public. Any defense of political meritocracy needs to address not only the question of how to maximize the advantages of the system but also how to minimize its disadvantages. Chapter 3 discusses three key problems associated with any attempt to implement political meritocracy: (1) rulers chosen on the basis of their superior ability are likely to abuse their power; (2) political hierarchies may become frozen and undermine social mobility; and (3) it is difficult to legitimize the system to those outside the power structure. Given that electoral democracy at the top is not politically realistic in China, I ask if it is possible to address these problems without democratic elections. The problem of corruption can be addressed by mechanisms such as independent supervisory institutions, higher salaries, and improved moral education. The problem of ossification of hierarchies can be addressed by means of a humble political discourse, opening the ruling party to diverse social groups, and allowing for the possibility of different kinds of political leaders selected according to new ideas of political merit. The problem of legitimacy, however, can be addressed only by means of more opportunities for political participation, including some form of explicit consent by the people. The question, therefore, is how to reconcile political meritocracy and democracy. Can it be done in morally

desirable ways without multiparty competition and free and fair elections for top leaders?

Chapter 4 discusses the pros and cons of different models of "democratic meritocracy": more specifically, models that aim to reconcile a meritocratic mechanism designed to select superior political leaders with a democratic mechanism designed to let the people choose their leaders. The first model combines democracy and meritocracy at the level of the voter (e.g., allocating extra votes to educated voters), but such proposals, whatever their philosophical merit, are not politically realistic. The second (horizontal) model aims to reconcile democracy and meritocracy at the level of central political institutions, but such a model will be almost impossible to implement and sustain even in a political culture (such as China's) that strongly values political meritocracy.

The third (vertical) model aims to combine political meritocracy at the level of the central government and democracy at the local level. This model is not a radical departure from the political reality in China and it can also be defended on philosophical grounds. The political model in China, however, is not simply democracy at the bottom and meritocracy at the top: it is also based on extensive and systematic experimentation in between the lowest and highest levels of government. The concluding chapter sketches out three basic planks of the China model and shows how political reform in the post-Mao era has been guided by the principles of "democracy at the bottom, experimentation in the middle, and meritocracy at the top." There remains a large gap between the ideal and the reality, however, and I suggest ways of closing that gap. The legitimacy problem is perhaps the most serious threat to the meritocratic system. At some point, the Chinese government may need to secure the people's consent to the Chinese adaptation of vertical democratic meritocracy by means such as a referendum.

The chapter ends with remarks about the exportability of the China model: while the model as a whole cannot readily be adopted by countries with a different history and culture, different planks of the model can be selectively adopted and the Chinese government can play a more active role promoting its model abroad. This book's central area of concern is the question of how to maximize the advantages and minimize the disadvantages of a political system that aims to select and promote political leaders of superior virtue and ability, particularly in the contemporary Chinese context. Other than arguing for the need to enact policies that benefit the people, I have been deliberately vague about what those leaders should do: China is a large, complex country with different needs and priorities in different times and places, and any informed answer needs to be partly based on what the Chinese people actually want.[*]

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[*] The following is a precis of the *Introduction* to Daniel A. Bell's *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2015, 1-10). *Philosophy and Public Issues* thanks Princeton University Press for permission to reprint.

Debating Daniel A. Bell: On Political Meritocracy and Democracy in China, and Beyond

Jean-Marc Coicaud

There are few books published on political meritocracy. There are even fewer books that present the Chinese political system as a political meritocracy and disregard democracy as a viable option for China. This is what Daniel Bell's last book essentially does. As such *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*[1] is quite unique and, not surprisingly, has been controversial from the time it was published. This is nothing new for Daniel Bell. In the past twenty years or so he has established himself as one of the most visible and controversial philosophers writing on China. After having been trained in moral and political philosophy in Canada and the United Kingdom, he has used the fact that he has spent most of this adult and professional life in Asia (in Singapore, Hong Kong and then, in the past ten years, in Beijing) to reflect and develop an expertise on the present and future of Chinese civilization and society. In the process, as a prolific writer he has put forward arguments that more often than not have been at odds with the Western views of contemporary China, to the point of being at times labeled as a pro-China, if not apologist, Western academic. His latest book, with his presentation of the Chinese political

[1] Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2015).

 Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series), Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 15-51
Luiss University Press
E-ISSN 2240-7987 | P-ISSN 1591-0660

system as a political meritocracy, is likely to only further this reputation.

Yet *The China Model* poses truly important questions on political meritocracy and democracy in China and beyond – important questions which we should take seriously. In this regard, given the now global importance of China and the crisis that democracy is going through in a number of advanced Western democracies, including in terms of crisis of political representation (like in the United States and, in Europe, in France, the United Kingdom and Spain, among others, and even at the European Union level), it is all the more needed to reflect on them.

This is what I try to do in this brief essay, keeping in mind that I am not a China specialist.[2] The essay is organized in five parts. First, the essay argues that contrary to what some commentaries have been prone to say when it was published, the book is rather balanced. Yes, the book is sympathetic to the Chinese political system but it is critical of it as well. Second, for sake of clarity, it summarizes the key argument of the book and outlines the various theses that are developed in connection with this key argument. Third, the essay provides an assessment of the book. While recognizing points of agreement with Daniel Bell, I highlight the aspects of Bell's thinking that in my view are problematic, raising more questions than bringing compelling answers. Fourth, it alludes to the lessons that can be drawn from Bell's approach, including in terms of acquiring a better

[2] Full disclosure requires that I indicate that in the past I have worked on a research project with Daniel A. Bell (see Daniel A. Bell and Jean-Marc Coicaud (eds.), *Ethics in Action. The Ethical Challenges of International Human Rights NonGovernmental Organizations*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007) and that he is not only a colleague but also a friend.

understanding of Western democracy. Fifth, I conclude by stressing that, as they are at the center of the challenges that our social and political modernity is now facing, we need to think further on the issues analyzed by Bell.

I
A Balanced Approach to China

When *The China Model* was published in 2015, a number of commentators mentioned that it displayed a pro-China tendency and that it did not have much to do with the reality of the Chinese political system. How Professor Andrew J. Nathan, from Columbia University, reacted to the book is a good illustration of this state of affairs.[3] In contrast, it seems to me that Bell's approach to the current Chinese political system is a rather balanced one.

On the one hand, it is true that at times Daniel Bells' remarks on the Chinese system appear somewhat questionable[4], confusing[5] and even overlooking some of the harsh realities of

[3] Andrew J. Nathan, "The Problem with the China Model", in *China File*, November 5, 2015, http://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/problem-china-model.

[4] For instance: "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." (*The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy,* op. cit., p. 60). Considering how China is a conflict-ridden society, the idea that China has a low level of un-harmony (as footnote 179, page 217, states) seems somewhat problematic. As for stating that China is more harmonious than India and the United States, this would require extensive and multilayered studies to give a complete answer to this question.

[5] Referring to the document Charter 2008, which called for competitive electoral democracy in China, and Liu Xiaobo, a key person behind the

Chinese rule[6]. It is also true that some of the ideas at the core of the book's argument are more stated than fully explained and justified (at least this is the impression that I had as a reader). This is the case for the rejection at the outset of the possibility of electoral democracy at the top in China, i.e. the election of people holding power at the highest levels of government on the basis of a one person, one vote system. Throughout the book Daniel Bell argues that such a system, while possible at the local level, is a non-starter for the designation of national leaders[7]. But the reason for this state of affairs does not appear to be fully

document, Bell writes: "In a more political environment, independent intellectuals could criticize such documents, and calls for electoral democracy would not gain much support in the court of public opinion. Of course, the line must be drawn at the point that social forces seek to mobilize political support for a multiparty competitive system and electoral democracy at the top: the government should specify clear penalties for such actions (supporters of the Charter 2008 claim that the Chinese constitution allows for electoral democracy at the top; if that's the case, the constitution needs to be changed" (ibid., p. 270, footnote 60). It is not entirely clear why according to Bell electoral democracy would not gain much support in the court of public opinion.

[6] Comparing China to Pinochet's Chile, Daniel A. Bell states: "But the Chinese case is different. For one thing, the country is not ruled by a military dictator responsible for killings thousands of people." (ibid., p. 176). Pinochet's Chile was a dictatorship but China may also be described as a rather authoritarian regime, with its own problems of human rights abuses, as Bell himself recognizes on the same page a few sentences later. To be sure, a few pages later, Bell argues that Chinese political governance "cannot be accurately captured by labeling China a "bad" authoritarian regime similar in nature to, say, dictatorships in North Korea and the Middle East." (ibid., p. 180). Although this is true, there are still authoritarian characteristics at work in the Chinese political system.

[7] "… I will assume that electoral democracy is not a realistic possibility in the foreseeable future; hence I will ask if it's possible to fix what's wrong with political meritocracy without electoral democracy." (ibid., p. 112).

explained. Is it because it is not a realistic option considering that current power holders are adamantly opposed to it, or is it because political meritocracy, in addition to being more suitable China's history, culture and values, is a good system? From Bell's point of view, it is probably a bit of both. But on an issue that is so central to *The China Model*, it would have been helpful to have a clearer answer on the matter than the one we find in the book. Moreover, the way in which Bell dismisses the possibility of democracy in China appears a bit contradictory, even if in the end he indicates that this situation reflects one of the crucial tensions at play for the future of the Chinese political system. Indeed, while he tells us that electoral democracy at the top is not possible in China, he acknowledges as well that democracy has a universal appeal[8] and that democratic features have to be introduced to ensure the sustainability of the Chinese political system.[9] It is in this context that Bell argues in particular for democracy at the bottom.

On the other hand, the book also recognizes and stresses the damaging effects of the current realities, or pathologies of the Chinese system. This is very much the case concerning corruption. In Chapter 3, titled "What's Wrong with Political Meritocracy", Bell sees corruption, much more than the

[8] "It is hard to imagine a modern government today that can be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the people without any form of democracy. We are all democrats today." (ibid., p. 151).

[9] "…(S)ustainable political meritocracy requires features typical of democratic societies: the rule of law to check corruption and abuses of power, and freedom of speech and political experimentation to prevent the ossification of political hierarchies. In principle, there should not be a problem. However, I also argued that political meritocracies will find it difficult if not impossible to solve the legitimacy problem without giving the people the right to political participation." (ibid., p. 152).

ossification of political elites, as a major problem, if not addressed, for the sustainability of the Chinese political system. As such, he alludes to the extent of corruption at the various echelons of governance, at the bottom, at the mid-level and at the top. At the apex of power, especially, he indicates how the extravagant wealth accumulation of the families of the most powerful Chinese leaders can constitute a deadly threat to the whole legitimacy of the regime.[10]

Another illustration of the balanced approach of China displayed in the book is the acknowledgement of the gap existing between ideal and reality. Bell mentions that this gap is particularly at work in relation to what is the central concern of the book - political meritocracy, being understood that Bell defines "political meritocracy" in the following terms:

> The basic idea of political meritocracy is that everybody should have an equal opportunity to be educated and to contribute to politics, but not everybody will emerge from this process with an equal capacity to make morally informed political judgements. Hence, the task of politics is to identify those with above-average ability and to make them serve the political community. If the leaders perform well, the people will basically go along[11]

In light of this definition, Bell recognizes that the reality of political meritocracy in China is far from the ideal. We mentioned

[10] "Perhaps the most serious problem is official corruption – the abuse of public office for private gains. The overall level of corruption has exploded over the past three decades, and it has become a more visible political problem in the past few years due to the glare of social media and more conspicuous consumption by political elites…. Clearly corruption undermines not just the legitimacy of the Communist Party but also the whole aim of building a political meritocracy composed of public-spirited rulers." (ibid., p. 112).
[11] Ibid., p. 32.

earlier the issue of corruption, which, more than any other issue, weakens the credibility of people in positions of power and certainly does not speak in favor of their character. Then there is the selection process itself of leaders. Bell alludes to the rigorous system of identification of future leaders, in the context of elite universities and of the development of a strong track record once on the job in governance circles. But he also acknowledges that loyalty and being aligned with the upper echelons play a significant role in career development and promotion.[12]

More generally, Bell agrees that political meritocracy is not an easy sell, as people are not eager to embrace political meritocracy over electoral democracy:

> Even political cultures that value political meritocracy rapidly change and come to support democracy in the form of one person, one vote once the change is made. People in East Asian Societies that adopted democratic forms of rule – from Japan to South Korea and Taiwan – all came to

[12] "Inspired by China's history of selecting officials by examination and recommendation and (to a lesser extent) by the Singapore model…., (Chinese leaders) devised a sophisticated and comprehensive system for selecting and promoting political officials, involving decades of training and a battery of exams at different stages of their careers. Yet the system is still in its early stages and plagued by imperfections: officials are selected and promoted not just on the basis of ability and morality, but also (if not more so) on the basis of political loyalty, social connections, and family background… The political system is notoriously corrupt and the practice of buying and selling posts at lower levels of government in poor areas has yet to be completely eradicated. More serious (from a theoretical point of view), the ideal itself is not clear: which abilities and virtues should set the standard for the selection and promotion of government officials so that the Chinese political system can be improved? And what sorts of mechanisms and institutions can increase the likelihood that officials are selected and promoted on the basis of those abilities and virtues?" (ibid., p. 67).

develop a preference for democracy over paternalistic Confucian legacies after the institutionalization of democracy.[13]

Clearly this brings about uncertainty concerning the long-term viability of the current Chinese political system. In addition to what seems to be Bell's belief in the higher virtue of political meritocracy[14] and the need to strengthen it, it is what motivates him to call for reforming the Chinese political system by introducing democratic features and fixing what can realistically be fixed.

II
Main Theses of *The China Model*

After having seen that the book offers a rather balanced approach to the Chinese political system, let us review the main theses that it puts forward. Following the premise that electoral democracy at the top is not a possibility in mainland China, *The China Model* has the overall aim of identifying the conditions under which the current Chinese political system, which is

[13] Ibid., p. 166.

[14] Bell tells us that if we are all democrats today, we are also all meritocrats: "Yet it takes only a brief moment of reflection to realize that political meritocracy is also a good thing. Political leaders have power over us, and no rational person would want to be ruled by an incompetent leader who lacks a basic understanding of the key issues that should inform policy making…. In the same vein, no rational person would want to be ruled by an immoral leader. Who would choose a corrupt and murderous ruler over a leader with compassion and integrity? Ideally, our leaders should be committed to the common good, that is, they should do their best to promote policies that benefit all those affected by their policies, and the more they can do that, the better the policy making. In short, it is rational to believe that our political leaders should have superior ability and virtue. We are all meritocrats today." (ibid., pp. 151-152).

defined as a political meritocracy, can be improved. Against this background, the book suggests reducing the gap between political meritocracy as an ideal and political meritocracy as a reality while adding a portion of electoral democracy, which Bell indicates can only take place at the local level.

In order to demonstrate this overall thesis, in Chapter 1, "Is Democracy the Least Bad Political System?", Daniel Bell begins by highlighting four major shortcomings of democracy understood as electoral democracy (one person, one vote). First, there is the tyranny of the majority, in the context of which the majority of voters can oppress the rest.[15] Second, there is the danger of the tyranny of the minority, in the context of which, for instance, "well-funded and organized minority interests can and do get their way against relatively powerless majorities…"[16]. Third, there is the tyranny of the voting community, in the context of which political participation ends at the boundaries of the political community, leaving those outside the immediate community, either in space or in time (future generations) ignored and unattended. Fourth, since (electoral) democracy puts individuals in competition with one another, there is the fact that it is more socially and politically disruptive than able to produce community feeling, a sense of solidarity and responsibility toward one another.

Chapter 2, "On the Selection of Good Leaders in a Political Meritocracy", focuses on the central aspect of political meritocracy, i.e. the selection process of good leaders and the ideal qualities that they should be endowed with in a system of political meritocracy. Here Bell starts by indicating that leadership has to be understood based on context. For example, the qualities

[15] Ibid., p. 21.
[16] Ibid., p. 37.

of a political leader are not the same as those required in a business leader. Focusing then on the qualities required for leaders in political meritocracies, he argues that a good leader "should seek to promote the well-being of the people"[17] and that, in order to do so, he or she should display the following three characteristics: first, intellectual ability, which can be tested and identified through a system of examination, in the school system as well as in the professional setting. Second, there is the need for social skills, that is to say the ability to communicate and connect well with the people whom the leader is supposed to lead, either professional and political peers or society members. Third, there is a fundamental need for political leaders to be virtuous. They are supposed to have a strong sense of ethics and being committed to the fact "that power ought to be exercised in the interest of the ruled, not of the rulers."[18] As a whole, Bell argues that the selection of such leaders should be done by peers and not by superiors, so that loyalty does not become the defining factor of promotion.

Chapter 3, "What's Wrong with Political Meritocracy", stresses the shortcomings of political meritocracy. In this regard, the first and probably main problem of political meritocracy is corruption. For once people are in power, the system of control of leaders is not as strong in a political meritocracy as it tends to be in a democracy (for example, in an electoral democracy, political leaders can be voted out). It is therefore especially tempting for those in a position of power to draw personal benefits from their political position, to hijack their public office and responsibilities for private purposes, particularly if they are lacking virtue. The second danger associated with political

[17] Ibid., p. 79.
[18] Ibid., p. 100.

meritocracy is the one of the ossification of elites, i.e. of political elites monopolizing power and thinking and acting as if they are better and above regular people. The tendency of becoming "arrogant and detached from the rest of society"[19], rather than striving "to be humble and sympathetic to the people"[20], is part of this story. This is all the more a possibility when political meritocracy favors closed and self-perpetuating political elites, more composed of people from privileged backgrounds than of people from disadvantaged sectors of the population.[21] The third challenge for political meritocracy is the one of legitimacy. Bell argues that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has drawn on three sources of nondemocratic legitimacy to ensure its rule: nationalism, performance legitimacy and political meritocracy. On the respective importance of these three sources of legitimacy, Daniel Bell indicates:

> Although all three sources of legitimacy have been important at different times to a certain extent, nationalism was most important in the early days of the regime, performance legitimacy in the first couple of decades of the reform era, and political meritocracy is becoming an increasingly important source of legitimacy."[22]

In the process of alluding to these three sources of legitimacy, Bell disregards the fact that Marxism as ideological legitimacy now plays a strong role: "(N)ow… few Chinese believe in Marxism."[23]

Concerning performance legitimacy, Bell stresses that it has deep roots, much deeper roots than nationalism. The idea that

[19] Ibid., p. 127.
[20] Ibid., p. 135.
[21] See p. 131.
[22] Ibid., p. 139.
[23] Ibid., p. 139

the government has an obligation to improve the people's material well-being and intellectual/moral development is a central part of the Confucian tradition. In this perspective, Bells quotes Mencius, according to whom: "The people will not have dependable feelings if they are without dependable means of support. Lacking dependable means of support, they will go astray and fall into excesses, stopping at nothing…"[24]

Wondering if these three sources of legitimacy – nationalism, performance legitimacy and political meritocracy – are going to be enough to make the Chinese political system sustainable in the long run, Bells concludes the chapter by indicating that the problem of legitimacy "can only be addressed by means of democratic reforms, including some sort of explicit consent by the people".[25] This leads him to say: "The question, therefore, is how to reconcile political meritocracy and democracy."[26]

In order to answer this question, in Chapter 4, "Three Models of Democratic Meritocracy", Bell discusses three possible models of what he calls "democratic meritocracy"[27], i.e. political meritocracy including democratic features. These three models are: "(1) a model that combines democracy and meritocracy at the level of the voter; (2) a horizontal model that combines democracy and meritocracy at the level of central political institutions; and 3) a vertical model with political meritocracy at the level of the central government and democracy at the local level."[28] At this stage of his thinking, Bell believes that the third model is the best for China.

[24] Ibid., p. 143.
[25] Ibid., p. 150.
[26] Ibid., p. 150.
[27] Ibid., p. 152.
[28] Ibid., p. 152.

From Bell's standpoint, the problem with the first model, putting into the hands of voters the power to select able and virtuous political leaders, is that "ordinary citizens often lack the competence and motivation to make sound, morally informed political judgements".[29] The second model, combining the advantages of meritocracy and democracy at the level of central political institutions, is problematic according to Bell because:

> … once some political leaders are chosen on the basis of one person, one vote, it is almost inevitable that those leaders will be seen as the legitimate political leaders by the people who elect them and any proposal to subordinate their power to institutions with meritocratically chosen leaders is likely to be rejected by the people themselves.[30]

The third model, which Bell favors, is based on the idea that democracy works best at the local level, in small communities. To support this view, Bell refers to Aristotle, Montesquieu and Rousseau, who were also of this opinion. In addition, he argues that in the Chinese context, there is widespread support for the idea of democracy at the local level.[31] As such, provided that the Chinese system can curtail the shortcomings of political meritocracy as it exists (corruption, a gap between rich and poor, abuse of power by political officials, harsh measures for dealing with political dissent, etc.) and enhance its positive aspects (like the ability to take a long-term view on the economic issues at hand, which has led to hundreds of millions of people being lifted out of poverty over the past few decades), and that it becomes more meritocratic at higher levels of government, Bell

[29] Ibid., p. 153.
[30] Ibid., p. 166.
[31] Ibid., p. 168.

believes that, once it is combined with exercise of consent at the local level[32], it will be made much more sustainable for the future.

In the conclusion of the book, "Concluding Thoughts: Realizing the China Model", Bell outlines what, in his view, is the China model, i.e. how China is today both from an ideal and a reality standpoint. He tells us that the China model is a three layered one, with democracy at the bottom, experimentation in the middle and meritocracy at the top. Bell indicates that the first level is probably the most studied and well-known. As for the second layer, dealing with "experimentation with different forms of economic, social, and political reform in between the local and central levels of government, including the question of how best to select and promote government officials"[33], it amounts to learning by doing and scaling up what appears to work at this mid-level. According to him, this experimentation approach and eventually its scaling up is "key to explaining China's adaptability and success over the past three decades."[34] As for the third layer, political meritocracy at the top, it is desirable if leaders are selected and promoted on the basis of superior ability and virtue.

At each of these three levels, progress and reform are necessary to make reality match better what is ideal. At the local/village level, elections have to be freer and fairer and people elected should exercise more real power, especially vis-à-vis village party secretaries and townships governments. At the mid-

[32] "At some point in the not too distant future, there will be a need for more freedom of political speech, democracy at higher levels of government, and more independent social organizations. But defenders of political meritocracy need to draw the line at one person, one vote and multiparty competition for top leaders because democracy at the top will wreck the whole system." (ibid., p. 174)
[33] Ibid., p. 185.
[34] Ibid., p. 185.

level, successful experiments should be expanded and failures discontinued more than it is the case at the moment. As for the third level, in a meritocratic system with equal opportunity at the top, one would expect fewer leaders with family ties to past leaders ("princelings").[35]

Finally, Bell reflects on whether or not the China model can be exported elsewhere. If the whole package is difficult to export, he thinks that the various levels of the model can be selectively adopted abroad. That said, Bell ends by saying that the China model can only be attractive to others, as soft power, if it fully practices political meritocracy at home, i.e. if the gap that currently exists between the reality and the ideal is closed in a significant fashion. This entails for the Chinese political system to become less oppressive and more tolerant, so that it is possible to counter the criticism that coercion lies at its center.[36]

III
An Assessment of the Book

In this section, in addition to highlighting what I believe are valuable insights, I refer to some of Bell's arguments which I think are problematic.

As for the valuable insights we can find in *The China Model*, three stand out. One concerns the limits of electoral democracy, another the qualities required for political leadership, and a third one has to do with the issue of legitimacy.

Regarding the limitations of electoral democracy, it would be difficult not to agree with Daniel Bell. This is especially the case

[35] Ibid., p. 193.
[36] Ibid., p. 197.

at a time when in a number of Western countries the fact that democracy is in crisis exacerbates the pathologies Bell identifies. When it comes to the tyranny of the majority, the fact that most people do not vote in support of the common good or do not consider the legitimate interests of other people but factor in first and foremost their self-interest[37], already a trend of electoral democracy (as well as of human behavior) in general, is all the more a feature at work when in a democracy people and their interest (such as their economic interest) are under stress. When this is the case each individual is all the more prone to focus on its own interest and not on that of the community and its members as a whole. And yet, in the process, this attitude undermines the interest of each and the one of the group as a whole. For instance, the security of each can only be truly achieved by taking seriously the security of all. Daniel Bell's argument concerning the tyranny of the minority in electoral democracy is also well taken. This tyranny of the minority is not a new phenomenon. To a certain extent, electoral democracy has always been captured by private interests, be it at the electoral level or at the law-making level. But in a period when democracy is perhaps more than ever both sought after and yet elusive, far from receding this reality seems to be somehow deepening. How the political system in the United States has largely come to be in the hands of private interests is a case in point.[38] The tyranny of

[37] Ibid., p. 23.

[38] See for example the United States Supreme Court 2010 Citizens United decision, which affirmed and extended the equation of spending and speech, making it more difficult to limit campaign money originating from interest groups and large donors. In its Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, the Justices' ruling said political spending is protected under the First Amendment, meaning corporations and unions could spend unlimited amounts of money on political activities, as long as it was done independently of a party or candidate. For more on money and politics in the United States,

the voting community, amounting to excluding non-community members, in the present and in the future, is another serious issue. It is a serious issue for future generations, as the question of climate change indicates. And it is a serious issue for non-community members when the policies endorsed by a national voting community have an influence on them. This is illustrated by the dramatic impact that big democratic power policies, such as with the United States, can have on other countries and their population.

What Bell writes about the qualities required for political leadership makes sense as well. A political leader lacking intellectual ability, social skills and moral virtue is unlikely to be a good leader. In a way, social skills are the ones that are most on display today since the electoral democracy process (campaigning in the context of elections) forces political leaders to rely on public communication. That said, the emphasis it puts on social skills does not necessarily generate a good rapport between governors and governed in the contemporary political culture. As a matter of fact, considering how nowadays people have the tendency to mistrust politicians, there is clearly a problem in this area. Concerning intellectual ability, most political leaders are graduates of elite schools. This provides some basis. However, it is certainly not a guarantee. Genuine curiosity and deep knowledge of issues, intellectual imagination and the associated sense of innovation able to be translated into good policies, all these qualities tend to be a rarity in mainstream power holders. Finally, while virtue is very much needed in political leadership, it is probably what is missing the most today in electoral democracy

consult Martin Gilens, *Affluence and Influence. Economic Inequality and Political Power in America* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, and New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 2012).

(the West) and political meritocracy (China). Limited virtue is on display with officials' corruption. In this regard, the extent of corruption may be greater in a system of political meritocracy than in one of electoral democracy, if only because, arguably, in the former there is less transparency and control of those in power than in the latter. Still, corruption is also significant and, as such, has become a highly sensitive question in Western democracy, for which public opinion shows less and less tolerance.[39] Limited virtue can be at work as well in the ossification of political elites, a problem that once again electoral democracy and political meritocracy share. In this perspective, Bell is right to allude to the monopoly of power by political and administrative elites in France[40]. Incidentally, as in the contemporary era French elites, or so-called "elites" are unable to solve the problems at hand and, at the same time, give the impression of being out of touch with reality and are inclined to project an attitude of superiority and arrogance, it is not surprising that their credibility is so low.

On the question of legitimacy and, more specifically, on the question of the legitimacy of the Chinese political system, Bell's remarks on the centrality of performance legitimacy in China echoes a widely shared view – and rightfully so. Had the Chinese regime not performed well economically and improved the daily life of millions of people in the past thirty years, its credibility, at home and abroad, would certainly be very different from what it

[39] Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democratic Legitimacy. Impartiality, Reflexivity, Proximity* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, 2011), Conclusion.

[40] In France high-level bureaucracy ("haute fonction publique") and politics are often close. For example, the former is frequently used as a launching pad for a political career. In the past decades most French presidents have been high civil servants.

is now, and surely not as high.[41] On the other hand, on "the true nature of the system"[42], as Daniel Bell puts it, his analyses appear problematic and raise more questions than give answers. This brings me to the critical part of the assessment of *The China Model.*

[41] From this point of view, the transition that China has gone through since the late 1970s could not be more different than the one of Russia since the late 1980s, both internally and internationally. Internally, it cannot be denied that China, for all its problems, has made remarkable domestic progress in the past decades. Even the spread of corruption has not curtailed the pursuit of public policies of development to the benefits of millions. As a result, internationally, China is now viewed as a major player. In contrast, since the official end of communism in the late 1980s, the transition in Russia has led to a situation that in many ways is worse than before. Domestically, the spread of corruption has not been balanced by public policies geared toward development. The stealing of the national resources by a few has been all the more damaging considering that Russia, unlike in China where historically it has been a source of society's vibrancy, does not have a deep and widespread tradition of (small) entrepreneurship and trade. While China now is the second largest economy in the word, Russia's GDP is smaller than the one of Italy (For a good book on Russia's first postcommunist decade and how it has set Russia on a wrong path for the subsequent years, Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski, *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms. Market Bolshevism Against Democracy*, Washington, D.C, United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001). As such, internationally, the resentful and aggressive nationalism that has been the trademark of Putin since he came to power is not enough to hide the failures of the transition. Unlike China, now aiming at becoming a comprehensive global power by combining economic, political, military and soft power, Russia's status is significantly diminished. How the world has reacted to its actions in Ukraine with sanctions while China's territorial claims in South China Sea are only rather timidly challenged, is a case in point. That said, despite these differences, China and Russia share an opposition to the spread of democratic values supported by the United States and Europe (Mathieu Duchâtel, *Géopolitique de la Chine*, Paris, PUF, 2017, p. 46).

[42] Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (op. cit.), p. 197.

Concerning the arguments put forward by Bell that are problematic, four come to mind. First, there is the issue of "the true nature" of the Chinese regime and of the extent to which it is truly a political meritocracy. Second, there is the question of why is it that electoral democracy at the top is a non-starter in China. Third, legitimacy is probably a more unsettled problem than perhaps Daniel Bell seems to think. Fourth, and finally, there is the issue of whether or not the China model can be exported.

In the conclusion of his book, Daniel Bell states that, as alluded to above: "As China closes the gap between the ideal and the reality of political meritocracy, the true nature of the system will become more apparent to outsiders."[43] According to Bell, despite all the progress that still has to be made in order to bring reality closer to the ideal, the true nature of the Chinese system is on of a political meritocracy. But is it really the case? Keeping in mind his definition of political meritocracy, is it really the case that everybody has an equal opportunity to be educated and contribute to politics? Is it really the case that the few emerging from the selection process at work in China have above-average ability and the qualities to make morally informed political judgements and serve the community? Is it the case that leaders by and large perform well and that Chinese people basically go along with their decisions and policies? Throughout the book Bell does not hide the problems of corruption that cripples the Chinese political system. While he indicates that he came to realize that China's regime has meritocratic characteristics because his "own high-achieving students at Tsinghua were being increasingly recruited in the CCP"[44], he also points to the

[43] Ibid., p. 197.
[44] Ibid., p. 12.

importance of loyalty and political patronage for career development and professional success in the public sector[45] (and presumably to some extent in the private sector as well since the public and private sectors have close relations). Daniel Bell's own candidness about the shortcomings of the Chinese political meritocracy does not help being totally confident about its essentially positive nature. Now, of course, none of this is specific to China and its regime. We find similarly troubling elements in electoral democracy. That said, one of the differences between Chinese political meritocracy and Western electoral democracy is that in the latter, although the possibility for expressing discontent and challenging the system are not limitless either, they are certainly greater and more accepted (more institutionalized as part of the system) than is the case in the former.

This leads to a second problematic aspect of Daniel Bell's thinking. He tells us that in China electoral democracy at the top is not an option. And it is true that, especially in the short-term, it is unlikely to be in the cards considering how the current leadership is strongly opposed to this path. Moreover, the argument that in societies that have to catch up compared to others, politics and policies from above, provided that the leadership has a commitment to the public good[46], have

[45] Pierre Landry, Xiaobo Lü and Haiyuan Duan, "Does Performance Matter? Evaluating Political Selection along the Chinese Administrative Ladder", in *Comparative Political Studies* (forthcoming). In this article, the authors argue that meritocracy is fostered at the local levels but that at the top of the hierarchy loyalty and patronage play a key role.

[46] In China, unlike in a number of other developing countries, where corruption is essentially predatory as it goes hand in hand with a total disregard for public policy and development, corruption has unfolded as part of public policy and development. On Chinese capitalism, consult Yasheng Huang,

advantages, cannot be entirely dismissed easily. Under the guidance of public institutions and their leaders it can be a good formula to ensure rapid and integrated development. After all, the Chinese story since the late 1970s, with the state in a commanding position and a strong cooperation between the public and the private sectors, is not totally foreign, of course despite considerable differences, to the politics and policies of development in Northeast Asian countries in the post-world War II period.[47] At the same time, it is one thing to state that realistically it is not an option because the current leadership is opposed to it, and it is another one to say that, as quoted earlier, "calls for electoral democracy would not gain much support in the court of public opinion."[48] How can we know for sure that people are not open to supporting electoral democracy if their opinion is not asked, if there is no procedure for them to express their views, if the matter is not even a proper subject of discussion in the public sphere? It is difficult to know what people are willing or not to consent to if the question is not posed to them. In this context, Bell, following the authors Shi Tianjan and Lu Jie, may be right to mention that "the majority of Chinese people endorse "guardianship discourse", defined as the need to "identify high-quality politicians who care about people's demands, take people's interest into consideration when making

Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics. Entrepreneurship and the State (Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[47] Before they transitioned toward democracy, South Korea and Taiwan had authoritarian features in the post-World War II era, which to some extent facilitated a rapid national development. For an analysis of Asian capitalisms in recent years, Robert Boyer, Hiroyasu Uemura and Akinori Isogai (eds.), *Diversity and Transformations of Asian Capitalisms* (Abingdon/New York, Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group, 2012).

[48] Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (*o*p. cit.), footonote 60, p. 270.

decisions, and choose good policies on behalf of their people and society."[49] But what is the evidence of this? How do we really know if asking people's point of view is not an option?

When it comes to the issue of legitimacy, Daniel Bell is right to stress performance legitimacy as a key source of legitimacy in contemporary China. Nevertheless, this does not mean that on the legitimacy front all is fine in the Chinese political system. In this regard, it is not as if the issue of corruption, which does much to undermine the credibility and legitimacy of the system and would certainly amount to a deadly blow if the policies of the Chinese regime had not led to massive development throughout the country and the improvement of the daily life of millions of people, was the only debilitating factor. There are other related elements that Bell seems to overlook and that are equally damaging to the legitimacy of the Chinese system. One of them is the fact that, despite the impressive development of the country that has happened in the past decades, many appear to mistrust the government.

To be sure, today even in democracies mistrust toward public and political institutions tends also to be high. But particularly important in China the fact that the Chinese government does not seem to trust Chinese people – hence, in part, its authoritarian characteristics and its desire to control them as much as possible. Such lack of trust is a especially negative indicator in the context of China. Because the regime continues to some extent to be a command system[50], monopolizes power, tolerates little dissent, and at the same time seeks the support and endorsement of people as a major sign of legitimacy (the Chinese

[49] Ibid., p. 147.

[50] China continues to create five-year plans to outline economic goals and objectives.

political system does not rule and does not want to rule mainly by force), having people not trusting it is destined to introduce doubts and questions about its legitimacy. It indicates a form of relative fragility to which pluralist democracies are less exposed.[51] This may explain the sense of uncertainty that prevails for the way forward. The fact that so many Chinese are eager to emigrate, in particular to the United States, can be interpreted as part of this story. It is possible that the highly competitive character of Chinese society,[52] the Chinese people search for better conditions of living and more opportunities, their pragmatism and willingness to take chances, the attractiveness of the world beyond borders, especially the United States, are some of the elements that trigger emigration.[53] At times it may be encouraged as well by the Chinese government: as the growth of

[51] This is one of the downsides of "strong regimes" with authoritarian characteristics. Because of their (relative) commitment to pluralism, democracies are more equipped to deal with differences of opinion and dissent, and in part more stable for this. Disagreeing with the regime is not a strategic challenge for a democracy. It tends to be the case for a strong/authoritarian regime.

[52] Emigrating presents its own challenges, including competing with new people in a society where an emigrant does not master all the codes, language to begin with. But sometimes, despite the obstacles one faces as a foreigner, one can find more energy and it can be less stressful and less disheartening to compete with strangers than with familiar faces. A new life beginning abroad can bring a lightness of heart and mind that dealing with all the baggage at home may not facilitate. This is also what accounts for the dynamism of immigrants, especially in the United States.

[53] It would be enlightening to find out how Chinese people see the international dimension. Relatedly, for an interesting study on how many people are leaving China each year since the 1980s, who is leaving and why they are leaving, refer to Biao Xiang, *Emigration Trends and Policies in China. Movement of the Wealthy and Highly Skilled* (The Transatlantic Council on Migration, Migration Policy Institute, February 2016), migrationpolicy.org.

the economy slows down domestically, exporting people can be a way to lessen the internal pressure on the system.[54] Still, emigration in significant numbers, as it tends to be the case for China, can also be a way of passing judgment on the country left behind.[55] Among other things it can be the sign of a malaise and worries concerning the years ahead.[56] In other words, the guardianship democracy that Bell tells us the Chinese people

[54] China has a huge development potential domestically (countryside) and can use it to sustain its economic growth. (Japan did not have such a luxury, so to speak). Despite this, it is investing, formally and informally (government and non-government engineered investment), massively abroad and, in the process, is exporting a significant number of its own people. The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road, better known as the One Belt and One Road Initiative (*OBOR*), a development strategy proposed by China's leader Xi Jinping, is part of this story (see (Mathieu Duchâtel, *Géopolitique de la Chine*, op. cit., pp. 59-61).

[55] On this issue, Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty. Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1972).

[56] Biao Xiang, *Emigration Trends and Policies in China. Movement of the Wealthy and Highly Skilled* (The Transatlantic Council on Migration, Migration Policy Institute, February 2016), op. cit.: "… China has become one of the world's leading source countries of migrants. As of 2013, it provided 4 percent of the world's migrants – a testament to its vast population of 1.4 billion rather than of its emigration rate, which remains one of the lowest in the world… High-skilled and high-value emigration from China is rising fast, while low-skilled and unskilled emigration is stagnant – a divergence that has been widening since the late 2000s. The emigration rate of China's highly educated population is now five times as high as the country's overall rate. China's wealthy elites and growing middle class are increasingly pursuing educational and work opportunities overseas for themselves and their families, facilitated by their rising income… In 2014… 85 percent of all U.S. immigrant investor visas (EB-5) were granted to Chinese nationals. Interviews and surveys suggest that while their economic position enables emigration, high-skilled Chinese nationals are motivated by a complex mix of political, economic, and social concerns about China." (p. 1).

value so much, and its future may not be benefiting from a full vote of confidence.

Finally, there is the question of whether or not the China model can be exported. Daniel Bell, who on this issue is brief (he mentions it at the end of the book), argues, conservatively and cautiously, that the China model can mainly be exported in a piecemeal fashion, and if it enjoys domestic credibility. It is true that there is little chance for the China model to be exported abroad if it is not actively and truly endorsed at home, if at home it raises more questions and doubts than it brings solutions. But the likelihood for the China model to be exported does not depend simply upon this. Another consideration is the fact that, as China becomes more and more a strategic competitor for other big powers, those will more and more seek to oppose its global projection. Furthermore, China's cultural and political features are at odds with worldwide norms, international and local, as these continue by and large to be influenced by the West and its paradigms. In this regard, although now the West is weakening and China strengthening, it is still an uphill battle for China in terms of being a soft power that would be easily exportable. It may be expanding rapidly its economic influence across the world, in Central Asia, Southeast Asia, Latin America, Africa, etc. But this alone is not a recipe for global success. Even if China manages to pursue its economic rise and expansion, it remains to be seen whether or not it will be able to translate its global economic power into global political power.

At the time when the West was acquiring its position of world domination, it was no less self-centered and focused on its own interest than China is now. But, in time, an important asset that it had for itself, as important as its economic and military might to explain its global spread, were its values, especially its democratic values. Despite the fact that initially these values were largely self-

serving and a source of hierarchy, put forward to elevate the Western "civilized" world and put down others, later on others made these values theirs. They used their message of equality and liberty to challenge the West and claim their own rights. As such, they became a bridge among cultures, with which many identify.

In comparison, it is not certain that Chinese values can be easily embraced by others, that others can identify with them, and that they can be a source of normative and cultural bridges. China is probably in a better position to address this issue than Japan was a few decades ago. Remember, in the 1980s, in light of the economic rise of Japan, many had come to believe that Japan would become a global political actor. The end of the economic rise of Japan put an end to this way of thinking. But even if Japan had continued to rise economically it is unlikely that it would have been able to translate its economic power into global political power. Arguably it is not simply the negative reputational legacy of its role in World War II and its lack of international experience that would have made such translation improbable. It is as well the fact that at the core of Japan's national values is a sense of being different and unique. This is prone to make it difficult to connect with others, and to be embraced and identified with by others.[57] In contrast, China has a long history of international engagement, at the regional level if not beyond. It

[57] The ambiguous place of Japan on the international stage can be explained in part by this. Often, in the popular perception, on the one hand, Japan is admired and respected; on the other hand, it is viewed as strange and a bit of a mystery, difficult to make sense of. The American movie *Rising Sun*, released in 1993, with Sean Connery as the main actor, is an illustration of this. This does not facilitate identification. For an analysis of the relationship of Japan with the West, in particular the United States, consult for example Masao Miyoshi, *Off Center. Power and Culture Relations Between Japan and the United States* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1991).

probably also has a more pragmatic approach to the world. But at the same time it has a sense of self that is very much self-referential and hierarchical, with seeing itself at the center of the world and superior[58], and not necessarily open to recognize others as equals (which is, despite the differences they also acknowledge and celebrate, one of the strengths of democratic values at their best[59]). After all, although China is itself the product of a cultural melting-pot that spans thousands of years, race and ethnicity contribute to define what it is to be Chinese, what "Chineseness" is. In a recent newspaper article[60], Daniel Bell himself indicates that in principle race is not a barrier to becoming a Chinese citizen. For a foreigner it is legally possible to become a Chinese citizen. It is possible to gain citizenship by marrying a Chinese person. But he has to recognize as well that in practice few do and that Chineseness remains defined by the race, and the look. Bell reminds us that according to the 2010 census, the country's population of 1.39 billion citizens includes just 1,448 naturalized Chinese. In addition, China does not allow dual citizenship, which makes the decision more difficult.[61] All this is

[58] Prior to the contemporary era, the international engagement of China in its region of influence has been based on these ideas of centrality and superiority, and as China becomes a great power again this vision of itself in the world may make a come-back.

[59] This should not lead us to overlook the fact that there is also, of course, an ideological dimension and an instrumental and self-serving use of democratic values, which is not very reflective and respectful of the Other. For more on this, see Jean-Marc Coicaud, "The Paradoxical Perception of Contemporary Democracy, and the Question of its Future" (part IV), in *Global Policy Journal* (forthcoming, 2018).

[60] Daniel A. Bell, "Why Anyone Can Be Chinese", *The Wall Street Journal*, July 14, 2017.

[61] While naturalization is a possibility in Western countries, this does not mean that in them the acquisition of citizenship via naturalization leads to being viewed by the "natives" as a true national, American or French for instance.

an indication of how China and Chinese people see themselves and others. At the political level, in terms of international relations, this is prone to have an impact on how China sees the world and its relations with it, perhaps more sensitive to the gaps between itself and others than to the sense of commonality. This is not an invitation for others to identify with and embrace China as their own and it makes the possibility of a Chinese universality more remote than a Western one.

IV
Lessons Beyond China

Beyond the case of China, what are the lessons that we can draw from Daniel Bell's book and approach, including in terms of better analyzing Western democracy? Three come to mind. First, there is the value of adopting a comparative approach. Second, there is the question of the crisis of political representation in a number of Western democracies, which makes all the more useful to think about electoral democracy and political meritocracy with the somewhat decentered approach that the comparative analysis provides. Third, there is the need to rethink political legitimacy across political systems.

As for the first issue – the value of adopting a comparative approach –, Bell's book is not a full-fledge comparative exercise.

Maybe being viewed as a true national will happen after two generations but most of time a feeling of otherness will continue for at least the first generation of immigrants. Furthermore, in the first generation naturalized people often do not see themselves as true nationals. A difference remains between the legal identity and the emotional/cultural identity as ascribed by others and oneself. On these questions of integration, refer to, among many others, Toshiaki Kozakaï, *L'étranger, l'identité. Essai sur l'intégration culturelle* (Paris, Editions Payot, 2000).

Its main focus is China and the reference to democracy and the United States is mainly used as a counter-point.[62] But it is still comparative enough. In this perspective, it offers three benefits. To begin with, Daniel Bell's work is comparative enough to encourage the reader to look at the world of electoral democracy from afar, somehow with new eyes, and not taking for granted that, despite its shortcomings, it is the best political system. Even if in the end it is difficult to agree with Bell's assessment on political meritocracy in China or political meritocracy in general (that maybe it has more qualities than democracy), such view from afar helps to denaturalize (electoral) democracy and, consequently, to think better about democracy, about its pluses and minuses. By challenging the idea that electoral democracy is a good if not the best thing, and highlighting the virtues, potential and real, of political meritocracy, Daniel Bell forces us to evaluate or reevaluate democracy, its advantages and disadvantages. At a time when democracy is in crisis in a number of Western countries, this can be a useful intellectual attitude. In addition, the fact that Bell's comparative approach entails giving credit to the Chinese system in spite of the listing of its shortcomings, as well as not arguing that it is on the verge of collapse because of its authoritarian features, as is often assumed in the Western literature on China, is a fruitful way to make sense of China today and of its international impact for the years ahead. This is especially important considering China's global influence. The

[62] "… I draw most of my examples from the United States for the following reasons: (1) there is an extensive academic literature on the pros and cons of the American political system, and (2) most Chinese intellectuals and reformers typically compare their system to the American political system on the (implicit) assumption it should set the standard for evaluating China's political future." Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (*o*p. cit.), p. 20.

notion of political meritocracy may not be as real in China as Bell claims it is, or even as he would want it to be in a more satisfactory situation. Yet, attempting to look at the Chinese system, not through a Western democratic evaluative lens but on its own terms, through its somewhat (since it is in part Westernized) sui generis characteristics[63], may be a better position for understanding it and what drives it, domestically and internationally. The third benefit of putting in perspective the Chinese political system and Western democracy is a matter of what we could call the "geopolitics of knowledge". When Western scholars criticize the Chinese regime for not being democratic enough, in a way they also in part criticize it for not being Western enough (in some degree this is what is happening in the democratic critic of China). But in adopting this approach[64], they do not teach us much about the specificity of the Chinese system. We therefore remain rather ignorant of it. This is all the more unfortunate considering that Chinese actors, be it scholars, practitioners, or regular people have a rather good idea (although most of the time it is not a fully accurate picture) of what the West and the various aspects of its culture are about. Because the West, in its different incarnations, has been a dominating global force, Chinese, like other non-westerners, have been exposed to it and therefore, specialists of it or not, have some familiarity with it. The familiarity is all the more real when, regardless of the field of study, a person comes to further his or her education in the West, as it tends to be more and more the

[63] For an overview of the Chinese political system, see for instance Jean-Pierre Cabestan, *Le système politique chinois. Un nouvel équilibre autoritaire* (Paris, SciencesPo Les Presses), 2014.

[64] Incidentally one could argue that Bell, in his critic of electoral democracy, treats electoral democracy as one-sidedly as the critics of the Chinese political system tend to.

case. This is not the situation in which Westerners find themselves vis-à-vis China. This is how an asset (being a dominating force) can have a downside, can become a liability (not knowing much about the other side because not having had to know about it).[65] In the West one has to be a specialist of China to know about China.[66] In the process an inequality of knowledge is being created between what the West knows about the Chinese world, and what China knows about the Western world – an inequality of knowledge that favors China. As the geopolitical competition between Western powers and China is becoming more acute, this disparity is prone to have practical and political negative consequences for Western powers which have little understanding of their adversary. This is one of the reasons why an effort to analyze the Chinese on its own terms, as Bell attempts to do, is valuable.[67]

[65] The same can be said of foreign languages. Because English dominates the world, non-native English speakers are at a disadvantage. In order to overcome this disadvantage, they have to learn English. But once they have learned it, they have an advantage compared to the ones who only speak English. The liability has been turned into an asset.

[66] What we say of the knowledge relationship between the West and China also applies to other knowledge relationships, such as between the West and the Middle East. In the West those knowledgeable on the Middle East are by and large either region or country specialists, not generalists.

[67] Needless to say, there is more to the geopolitics of knowledge than what we mention about it here. As the West is now being challenged, by China in particular, the fact that it knows little about the non-West (China) may become a liability. But, previously, since the beginning of the modern era, Western powers never hesitated to use the geopolitics of knowledge to their advantage. Benefiting from their (economic, military, political, etc.) position of power and seeking to justify it further, they presented Western knowledge (and way of life), to themselves and others, as the most legitimate, if not the only legitimate, in the process imposing their own categories of thinking, classifying and ranking, and devaluating or disqualifying non-western knowledge (and

A second lesson concerns the crisis of political representation. Bell' reflections on political meritocracy and his criticisms of electoral democracy force us to think further about it. This is all the more needed as this crisis is a major issue in a number of Western democracies. Its extent parallels the discredit of mainstream political parties and contributes to explaining the rise of populism in recent years, in Europe and the United States. Without a doubt, people are expecting political elites of a better quality than the ones currently in power. They are expecting them to be more ethical, more committed to the long-term interest of the country and its people, and more capable to produce results. They are also expecting that elections mean something, that they truly bring the improvements politicians always promise but too rarely deliver. That said, this does not mean that people in the West are willing to endorse political meritocracy as *the* structuring principle of political life. The idea of equality and the culture of electoral democracy are too much established and valued for this to happen. To be sure, there is an element of political meritocracy that exists in the Western democracies. People are seeking to elect able people and are willing to recognize them some commanding position based on their ability to deliver results. But this meritocratic feature is unfolding within and controlled by the framework of equality and electoral democracy. This is all the more the case since, in the West, the bureaucratic class, particularly at the highest level, has frequently come to be as

ways of life). Their position of domination did not require for them to be curious of others and to recognize them as valuable on their own terms. Moreover, local knowledges often contributed to demote themselves by accepting the "superiority" of Western knowledge. How in Japan, in the late 19th century, the introduction of Western influence led to identify philosophical thinking with Western philosophy is one among many illustrations to this state of affairs.

disparaged as the political class for seeing itself better than the average citizen and yet, more often than not, unable to address and resolve the problems that democracies are facing at the beginning of the 21th century. Against this background, the idea of extending to the political regime an expertise system that appears problematic at the bureaucratic level is anathema. This leaves Western democracy being confronted with a double crisis of representation, first of elected representatives (electoral democracy) and, second, of selected representatives (bureaucracy). It is a deep problem because the Western contemporary democratic state, its possibility, power to act and credibility largely rest on these two pillars, the political (election) representative pillar and the bureaucratic (selection) representative pillar.

Thirdly, we see that in the end, Daniel Bell's analysis is an invitation to renew our thinking and practice of political legitimacy, in the West as well as in China. If political meritocracy, ideal and real, cannot survive in China on the long run without the introduction, at the local level according to Bell, of democratic features, and if in a number of Western democracies (such as France) it is both two of building blocks of modern representations (elections and bureaucracy) that are under stress[68], what does it tell us about the state of political

[68] In the United States, the state and the bureaucracy never had the kind of legitimacy they have had in France. While the United States is a society-dominated culture (society matters more than the state. From a political and philosophical standpoint, the legitimacy of the state is rather weak), France is a state-dominated society (in a way, traditionally, the state has mattered more than society). More developments would have to be offered to unpack this statement. But, as a starting point and for an enlightening comparison, consult Laurent Cohen-Tanugi, *Le droit sans l'Etat. Sur la démocratie en France et en Amérique* (Paris, PUF, 1985).

legitimacy at the beginning of the 21st century? In the West at minimum this means that the two traditional forms of expression and tools of democratic legitimacy – elections and bureaucracy – are no longer sufficient to express and deliver legitimacy. They are no longer sufficient because they are proving unable to curtail the self-interested attitudes of political and bureaucratic elites. More fundamentally, the ability of these to deliver results for the country and its people has come to be very much questioned.[69] And in China, one wonders if the introduction of electoral democracy, even only at the local level, would not, since it is not functioning well in the West, lead to additional problems of legitimacy.

Hence we are left with a question mark concerning the future of political legitimacy, both in the context of electoral democracy and political meritocracy. Here the irony and paradox is that, despite their differences, electoral democracy and political meritocracy face unresolved questions of legitimacy. This is to the point that it is perhaps beyond these two forms of political systems that reside the need and the possibility to reinvent political legitimacy.

Wherever they live, people have to some extent similar expectations and hopes. Despite cultural differences, their idea of justice is rather similar. People want to be respected. They want to be viewed as counting and being given credit for who they are regardless of who they are. As such, they want political institutions and those in charge mindful of their rights, committed to delivering public services and helping them to live

[69] In France, for example, it seems that the insertion of the country in the European Union framework and, conjointly, the world economy has diminished national politicians and bureaucrats' leverage, their ability to manage the national sphere.

decent lives, for themselves and their family, and not corrupt and acting in an arbitrary fashion. These elements are some the main benchmarks of legitimacy today. Then the question is: what will it take for them to be taken more seriously?

V
Conclusion

Daniel Bell's book *The China Model* is important for at least two reasons. First, it deals with a country, China, which no one can any longer underestimate. Second, on China and beyond, it poses essential questions that are at the center of what at the same time defines and challenges the present and the future of our political culture. In this context, in this article we have shown that the book offers a balanced argument. If only for this it cannot be dismissed. We have summarized as well the key ideas of the book, and have evaluated their positive and problematic aspects. Finally, we have highlighted some of the lessons that we can draw from Bell's thinking for the future of political legitimacy.

But, as we mentioned above, we are left with more questions than answers. It is a testimony of the fluid character of the era in which we currently live and of the political communities and regimes we are members of. This open-ended situation is not a new phenomenon. The dynamic nature of history makes each period in time and the forms of society associated with it a work-in-progress, never entirely stable and in various degrees always changing. That said, our world appears particularly under stress and at the crossroads since, perhaps more than before, it is shaped, at the individual level as at the collective level, by two imperatives that are equally mutually constitutive and yet hard to dovetail – the imperative of individual and collective security, and

the imperative of individual and collective empowerment (which mobilizes both the values of equality and freedom). Indeed, there is no security without empowerment (security without empowerment is no security), and there is no empowerment without security (empowerment without security is no empowerment).

In this perspective, more than ever it is on the combination of, on the dovetailing of security and empowerment that rest today the understanding and possibility of justice, of social, economic and political justice. What we have said earlier of the uncertain future of electoral democracy in the West and of political meritocracy in China, and of their respective legitimacy, revolves in a large part on their inability to bring together and make co-habit these two imperatives. Ultimately, if this issue is one the key questions of our social, economic and political modernity, it is because on being able to tackle and resolve it will probably depend the fate of political community and membership in the years ahead.[70]

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& Fudan University

[70] I would like to thank the *Fudan Institute for Advanced Study in Social Sciences* for the opportunity to work on this article while Distinguished Fudan Scholar at Fudan University (Shanghai) during the academic year 2017-2018, while on sabbatical from Rutgers University.

SYMPOSIUM

THE CHINA MODEL

DEBATING DANIEL A. BELL: ON POLITICAL MERITOCRACY AND DEMOCRACY IN CHINA, AND BEYOND

BY

JEAN-MARC COICAUD

© 2017 – *Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series)*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 15-51
Luiss University Press
E-ISSN 2240-7987 | P-ISSN 1591-0660

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DEBATES ON POLITICAL MERITOCRACY IN CHINA A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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© 2017 – *Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series)*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 53-71
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Debates on Political Meritocracy in China A Historical Perspective

Pei Wang

In his satirical novel *The rise of the meritocracy*, Michael Young, suggests that political hierarchies in meritocratic regimes may become frozen and undermine social mobility. Daniel Bell has argued against this position in his book *The China Model*.[1] We will support and deepen this rebuttal from the perspective of the history of ancient Chinese political thought. In fact, every political hierarchy may become frozen; every society may face the problem of the decline of social mobility. However, the problem may not be the concrete political institutions but the weakness of human nature. Meritocracy is precisely the only treatment of such political bottlenecks, which had been proved repeatedly in the history of ancient Chinese political history. The debates about political meritocracy tend to reappear, with new iterations and interpretations, precisely when the old political hierarchies become ossified. Bell's book should thus be viewed as the latest critical intervention. It is important to discuss the historical background to such debates.

[1] Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, Princeton University Press, 2015, pp. 111-112, pp. 125-135.

 Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series), Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 53-71
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I

The context for debates about political meritocracy

Regarding the word "meritocracy", the first part, mereō ("earn") is from Latin, and the second part, κράτος ("strength, power") is from Greek. These two parts of different origins were put together by Michael Young to create an effect of political irony. In contrast, in ancient Chinese (as well as modern Chinese), the words "**选**贤与能" (xuan xian yu neng), from one of the most important Confucian classics, *The Book of Rites (Eastern Han Dynasty)*, which could be translated as political meritocracy in English, is a political ideal. "选" means select or advance. "贤" means the virtuous. "**能**" means the capable ones. "**与**" means the conjugation, and the whole phrase means that the political system should aim to select or advance the virtuous and the capable ones for public service (ruling for all).

The phrase "Select the virtuous and the capable ones" expresses a kind of temporality. When we refer to "选", select or advance, there is a presumption that before the selection or advancing, the virtuous and capable people haven't yet been given suitable positions. Hence, to select the virtuous and the capable ones could be interpreted as an ideal principle for selecting competent people and applying the principle could be understood as a treatment when political realities do not conform to this ideal.

As a matter of fact, in ancient Chinese history, every occurrence of appealing for meritocracy occurred not when politics was going well but rather when the court lacked political dynamics. Due to different kinds of reasons, political hierarchies became frozen, and the governing body could not function well.

That's when the appeal of meritocracy appeared, repeatedly. It is not meritocracy itself that leads to the freeze of political hierarchies. Quite the reverse, political meritocracy—selecting and advancing the meretricious according to the criteria of "virtue" and "capacity"— is the only solution for improving the political situation.

So the original intention of meritocracy is to solve the problem of ossification of political hierarchies by bringing the dynamics back to politics, although it doesn't mean that meritocracy is a method that could put things right once and for all. We have to continuously fight with the weakness (say, greed or selfishness) of human nature. If an institution keeps aiming for selecting and advancing the virtuous and the capable ones, it expresses recognition of human frailty.

The China Model, by Daniel Bell, appears against a similar background. Along with the anti-corruption drive in China, the debate of meritocracy became important again. How to allow people of virtue and ability to participate in politics in the position where he or she is fit, and to make more politically intelligent decisions? It's the problem of meritocracy. This problem is a recurring theme in Chinese history, and let us discuss some of the institutional innovations meant to restore meritocratic elements in times of decline.

II

The interweaving of recommendation and examination

If we look closely at the way ancient Chinese officials were selected, we will find that the two methods of recommending and testing complement each other, having different emphasis in different times. The most important ways of selecting people in

Chinese history were recommendatory system, nine-rank system, and imperial examination system. We will discuss these various methods, in (roughly) chronological order.

The Recommendation System

The historical background of the appearance and perfection of the recommendation system was the Han Dynasty (BCE202-220), which replaced Qin Dynasty (BCE221-BCE207). At the beginning of the new dynasty, many people were appointed to participate in political governance because of their meritorious military services, which is consistent with the Qin Dynasty. This is the principle of employing established in the Shang Yang reform[2], and also the principle of promoting generals in successive dynasties. However, as the reign of the Han Dynasty going become more stable, the political environment had shifted from a turbulent state of war to a period of relative peace. At this time, the division of work between the ministers and the generals became clearer and there was a need for more ministers. Therefore, Emperor Han Wu Di (BCE157-BCE87) further developed the recommendation system, which originated in the period of his father, Han Wendi. Emperor Wu Di named it "以儒取士" (selecting scholars according to the criteria of the Confucianism).[3] People were selected according to four criteria or "specialties" (**四科**): virtue and conduct, study of Confucian classics, rules of composition and rhetoric, and capacity.

[2] For example, the soldiers were promoted according to the numbers of decapitated heads of the enemy soldiers, which could be regarded as a kind of meritocracy favored by Legalists.

[3] Cf. 劳干："汉代察举制度考" (On the Recommendation system in Han Dynasty) **中研院**历史语言研究所集刊, 第十七册.

The rulers of the Han Dynasty declared themselves different from the rulers of the Qin Dynasty because they aimed to govern the country according to "孝" (filial piety, or reverence for elderly family members). The most important the four specialties is the first, virtue and conduct, and the most important part of moral conduct is filial piety.[4]The influence of *The Book of Changes* was profound in Han Dynasty, including the political aspect. As the **后汉书·荀爽列传** (Biography of Xun Shuang, *History of the Later Han Dynasty*) puts it: "Han is of virtue of fire, fire is born from wood, wood promotes fire, so the virtue of fire is filial piety, the image of which in *The Book of Change* is Li… thus the system of Han Dynasty ordered the whole country to learn *The Book of Filial Piety*, and selected officials by recommendation according to filial piety and clean record." Such ideas be seen as metaphysical justifications for the importance of filial piety in the Han Dynasty.

Filial piety gradually became the most important virtue at that time, which was not only political but also religious. As *The Book of Filial Piety put it*: "**孝，始于事亲**，中于事君，终于立身" (Filial piety, starts with serving parents, unfolds by serving the emperor, and completes itself by establishing oneself in society?") "**故当不义**，则争之" (When the one you serve is unjust, argue with them.) "孝悌之至，通于神明，光于四海，无所不通" (When filial piety grows utmost, it could access to the spirits and illuminate the four seas—it reaches everywhere.) Filial piety demands serving parents and emperor by upright conduct, which is definitely not blind obedience. It is filial to correct the faults of parents and of the emperor. Filial piety is in the light of "正道"

[4]Especially during Eastern Han Dynasty, filial piety became even more significant.

(*orthos logos*), or more precisely, the moral order of universe expresses filial piety.

However, every specific metaphysical problematic comes from current social reality. Many emperors took over the Court at a very young age in the Han Dynasty, and they needed their mother to help them governing the country. During the Han Dynasty, "孝" was used often as posthumous name of emperors. As a consequence, filial piety became an extremely important political element.[5] Ministers, generals, and officials had to learn from the emperor who was filial.

Although filial piety was most important in Han Dynasty, the other three specialties also influenced the selection of scholars. Whereas filial piety relied mainly on recommendations, the other three specialies relied on more on examinations. The words "**察**举" means recommended by examining. The recommendatory system did not purely and simply rely on recommendations. It was a system of combining recommendations with examinations. Local officials recommended a certain number of people to the central government every year. The Court gave recommended people suitable official positions; or, officials and students at all levels of school underwent some sort of assessment or interview to get political positions.

The original motivation of the recommendatory system was to select and promote the virtuous and the capable ones for public service, emphasizing more on examining their virtue and capacity

[5] Cf. 白效咏；"**易学与**东汉政治初探" (On the relation between the study of the Book of Change and the politics in Eastern Han Dynasty)，浙江学刊，2013 年第1期.

rather than "门第" (family status). After the middle of Eastern Han Dynasty (25-220), the more powerful families came to control the main power of recommendation. Most of the recommended people were from those noble families. The recommendatory system lost its initial function of selecting and promoting competent and virtuous officials and degenerated as a way to protect the interests of certain families. Political hierarchies ossified, the rulers ruled for the interests of established elites, and politics lost its dynamics.

The Nine-rank system

To solve the problem of ossification, the nine-rank system appeared in the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties (220-589).[6] The court appointed several local recruiters (中正) to recommend the talents, and the competent men were ranked by three criteria: family status, moral conduct, and capacity. After ranking they would be appointed to suitable positions. The original intention of setting up nine-rank system was to correct a series of problems raised by recommendatory system. As *The History of Liu Song Dynasty* put it: "The nine-rank system aims to classify the competent men by merit, rather than family status."

[6] Cf. 唐长孺: "**九品中正制度**试释" (On the nine-rank system), **魏晋南北朝史**论丛, 中华书局, 2011 **年** 陈琳国: "**两晋九品中正制与**选官制度" (The nine-rank system in the Western and Eastern Jin Dynasty), 历史研究, 1987 **年第3期 胡宝国**: "**关于九品中正制的几点意**见" (A few points on the nine-rank system), 历史研究, 1988 **年第1期 胡舒云**: "**九品官人法性**质辨析" (The nature of the nine-rank system), 东北师范大学报, 2003 **年第6期**.

At the time of implementation, several noble families dominated the recommendatory system, and those from humble families hardly had chance to be recommended. The most important change reform of nine-rank system was that people were to be recommended not by those powerful families, but rather by local recruiters (中正). Although family status was one of three standards, compared to the recommendatory system, men from humble families had more opportunities in the new system.

Unfortunately, the new select system gradually became frozen. In the intellectual history of ancient China, the nine-rank system is often criticized as a backward selection system. The most famous criticism was put forward in T*he History of the Jin Dynasty*: "In upper ranks, no one came from the humble families; in lower ones, no one came from the powerful families."

On one hand, powerful families gradually took charge of the positions of local recruiters, thus entirely controlling the ranking system. On the other hand, the nine-rank system has its own drawback, because "family status" was regarded as a selection standard. However, it's worth noting the political context of education in the Wei and Jin dynasties. Because of incessant warfare, people had to be constantly on the run. Official and private schools decayed, and aristocratic families preserved their particular family education by homeschooling or paternal teaching and influence. Hence, the educational situation of aristocratic families often fits their good reputations. But when the official and private schools were revived, the nine-rank system declined and was replaced by the imperial examination system.

The Imperial examination system

The Imperial examination system was founded in the Sui Dynasty (581-618) and perfected in the Tang (618-907) and Song dynasties (960-1279). The court selected the competent men by imperial examination regardless of family background and without any need for references or recommendations. As a consequence, the monopoly of aristocratic families on the selection of the competent men was almost completely broken, reflecting the spirit of fairness. This is discussed *in The China Model*,[7] but we will complement what he says with some criticisms of the examination system.

In the Song Dynasty, the imperial examination system was substantially improved. But some Confucian thinkers criticized the scholars' motivation for taking the examinations. If scholars lost their original conscience of rightness and truth, and instead took the exam as a profitable way to gain fame and material interests, those selected ones as officials would have no virtue at all. The imperial examination system could select those who are neither virtuous nor capable. Thus they argued for reforming the imperial examination system. For example, Zhu Xi (1130-1200) wrote to the emperor arguing for establishing a separate discipline, called "德行" (virtue and moral conduct), and for abolishing the discipline of "词赋" (composition and rhetoric).[8] The discipline of "virtue and moral conduct" is different from the other disciplines as "**经**、子、史、**时务**" ("Confucian classics, philosophical writings, history, and current affairs"). This new discipline of "virtue and moral conduct" uses

[7] See also Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, Princeton University Press, 2015, p65.

[8] Cf. 李存山: "朱子《学校贡举私议 述评" (On Zhu Xi's comments of chief examiners in school), 中国社会科学院研究生院学报, 2011 年第2期.

recommendation to select the talents, not as "Confucian classics, philosophical writings, history, and current affairs" using examination to select. Zhu Xi regards it as a necessary supplement of the imperial examination system, erecting concrete examples for scholars, and also reminding them the significance of virtue and moral conduct.

Zhu Xi's teachers were even more radical. Cheng Hao (1032-1085) and Cheng Yi (1033-1107), known as "二程" ("The Two Chengs"), were completely against the system of the imperial examination.[9] They argued that the imperial examination system was neither efficient nor politically practical. On the one hand, too few officials few selected by examination, hence not sufficient for the governing body; on the other hand, people selected through examinations may only "博闻强记" ("have encyclopedic knowledge"), but would lack the ability to deal with politics. Hence they suggested replacing imperial examination system entirely by recommendation. First, the elders of the counties and the students of the Imperial College could recommend some candidates. Then, the Court would inspect them, both assessing their abilities as erudite scholars, and also appointing them as provisional officials in order to review their political capacities. In the end, the Court would rank scholars through a debate. After all these procedures, the Court could officially appoint every selected scholar to a proper position. Therefore, more talents could be selected by recommendatory system designed by "The Two Chengs". At the same time, this system could avoid selecting those who are neither virtuous nor capable. The more important innovation is that the Court could

[9] Cf. 潘富恩、徐余庆: "论二程的人才观" (On the Two Chengs' view of talents), 兰州大学学报, 1987 年第1期.

select those scholars who are politically competent through actual political trials. Such suggestions were implemented to a certain extent in later dynasties.

We could clearly perceive the return of recommendatory system, which couldn't be understood as reactionary. "The Two Chengs" proposed the method of recommendation as a proper treatment of malaise of imperial examination. However, the imperial system had been fully developed in Song Dynasty, the suggestions of "The Two Chengs" and Zhu Xi weren't adopted at that time. We could only discuss it as a historical criticism from the Confucianism aspect.

In short, it's not easy to select virtuous people through examination, but it is also difficult for the recommendation system to be fair and to give equal opportunities to candidates without powerful family backgrounds. It's worth asking more general questions. Why do political systems tend to degenerate from meritocratic ideals, and what sorts of prescriptions can restore and reinterpret meritocratic ideals so they fit new political contexts? The pre-imperial debates between Confucian and Legalist thinkers help us to answer such questions. Next, we will discuss the interaction between these two complementary thought systems that are inseparably connected as the two sides of the same medal.

III

Debates on Political Meritocracy between Confucians and Legalists

During the Spring and Autumn (BCE 770-BCE476) and the Warring States (BCE47-BCE221) periods, the monarchs of various states introduced institutional reforms, in order to occupy

more land even unify China again, and they often relied on the talents of Legalis thinkers.[10] The three schools of Legalistic thought laid emphasis on "势" (puissance), "术" (technique), "法" (Law). The leading scholars were Shen Dao (BCE390-BCE315), ShenBuhai (BCE385-BCE337), and Shang Yang (BCE395-BCE338). Shen Dao likened the King and the Puissance to the Dragon and the Dragon needs mist and clouds to fly high. If the mist disperses, the dragon will become a little earthworm. Therefore, a king has to use puissance to guarantee his reign, and the execution of the law as well. ShenBuhai who emphasized technique had a different view. Technique differs from puissance. The one in a high position doesn't necessarily have puissance. In the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States' periods, many ministers killed their kings. ShenBuhai admonished the king to know how to harness his ministers, the technique of which should silently hide in the heart of the king. The laws should be used to govern the civilian population, thus need to be known by everyone. By contrast, the technique should only be used to deal with ministers who are very close thus most dangerous to the king.

However, Shang Yang depended more on written laws. His suggestion to Duke Xiao of Qin was implementation of new laws, demanding all the ministers, officials and the civilian population to follow the laws. If the nobles or ministers violate the laws, they need to be punished as much as the civilians. Although Shang Yang was torn asunder by five carts in the streets after his death because of the draconian enforcement of the new laws, the new laws were not abolished. Among all the political

[10] It is worth noting that the political appearance of Legalism is also in accordance with the Confucian principle of "selecting the virtuous and the capable ones." In this context, it related more to capacities.

reforms in the Warring States period, only Shang Yang Reforms actually made a systematic change in the legal system, which helped the Kingdom of Qin to accumulate and eventually to unify China (BC221) and name himself Qin Shi Huang, First Emperor of Qin.

However, his son, Hu Hai (BC230-BC207)was neither virtuous nor capable, making Qin the shortest dynasty in Chinese history, lasting only 15 years. Many Confucian thinkers argued the law of Qin too strict; the civilians took cruel officials as their teachers. However, the Han Dynasty was also keen to use ruthless officials. There were so many cruel officials in the Han Dynasty that the *The Book of Han* even had a special chapter called "Biography of Cruel Officials."

The essential difference between Han Dynasty and Qin Dynasty is to what extent they also used the political thoughts of Confucianism to govern a country. Qin Shi Huang was famous for burning books and burying Confucian scholars. By contrast, Emperor Wu Di adopted the suggestion of Dong Zhongshu (BC179-BC104)—"罢黜百家, 独尊儒术" ("pay supreme tribute to Confucianism while banning all other schools of thought") -- to educate the people with a unified Confucian ideology. Initially, Emperor Wu Di preferred to use severe laws and punishments, for which Dong Zhongshu admonished him. Dong persuaded him to replace draconian torture with benevolent politics, but Emperor Wu Di still used many cruel officials and complicated names of punishment to assure that the law would be followed. During the reign of Emperor Wu Di, which lasted about fifty years, there were fourteen prime ministers, five of which were executed, and four of which committed suicide or died in prison. Even the ministers were in such a dangerous situation, not to mention the common officials and the civilians. From this aspect, there is no essential difference between the Han Dynasty and the

Qin dynasty in applying legalism to govern the country. However, the Han Dynasty went further by developing a quasi-metaphysical form of Confucianism to provide legitimacy for its rule, which was a step that the Qin Dynasty failed to achieve. On one hand, Emperor Wu Di used the Confucian thought of Dong Zhongshu's philosophy as the ideology and base of domination; on the other hand, he relied on Legalists' law to guarantee the policies being executed thoroughly. Thus, the mutual complementary structure of Confucianism and Legalism was developed,which became the most fundamental political structure in ancient China.[11]

According to 汉书·宣帝本纪 (Biography of Xuan Di, The Book of Han), during the reign of Xuan Di (BCE91-BCE49), the grandson of Wu Di, was characterized by a stable political climate, social harmony, and economic prosperity, which is called "Resurgence of Xuan Di)". However, Xuan Di had the same propensity of his grandfather to rely on severe officials. According to 汉书·元帝本纪 (Biography of Yuan Di, The Book of Han), when the prince (later Yuan Di) suggested that Xuan Di using more Confucians, Xuan Di anwered: "汉家自有制度,

[11] There are some debates on whether it's "the Confucianism in appearance while the Legalist in nature" or "the Legalist in appearance while the Confucianism in nature". "The Confucianism in appearance while the Legalist in nature" means using Confucian ideology as appearance, but Legalism technique as the true political source. "The Legalist in appearance while the Confucianism in nature" means the essential core of political ideology is Confucian, but with reliance on concrete Legalist technique as an external method to realize specific political aims. So we use the term "being inseparably connected as the two sides of the same medal" to describe the relation of the Confucianism and the Legalism.

本以霸王道**杂**之，奈何**纯**任德教，用周政乎?" ("Han Dynasty has its own principle, mixing the Tao of hegemon with Tao of humane authority. How could we simply apply the virtuous civilizing means of the Zhou Dynasty?") Xuan Di figured that the prince couldn't comprehend the depth of his advice, and he sighed for a very long time, then said: "It's going to be the prince who messes up the politics." Tao of hegemon is of Legalist inspiration, while Tao of humane authority is of Confucian inspiration. It's the earliest documented effort to mix Legalism with Confucianism. During Xuan Di's reign, he improved the mutual complementary structure of Confucianism and Legalism to a mature state where they could make up for their own and each other's shortcomings. That's how Xuan Di could revive the Han Dynasty. In contrast, once Yuan Di (BCE74-BCE33) assumed the throne, he used so many Confucians that bureaucracy became too weak to sustain a whole country. The group of emperor's in-laws and eunuchs took the opportunity to crush the group of Confucians. Yuan Di had no ability to save the situation, and the court fell into chaos.[12]

Hence, Confucianism and Legalism are both indispensable for politics in ancient China. Without Legalism, it is difficult to ensure administrative efficiency; without Confucianism setting good aim to politics, the technique of Legalism would be a disaster. The aim of Legalism is to continuously improve the state's capacity and efficiency. But the Legalists where not overly concerned with the question of whether or not the aim itself was just or moral. Therefore, it's clear that the advantage of Legalism is providing means of achieving an end, not a guarantee of

[12] We might think of Qin Dynasty, when the emperor ruled the whole country solely by Legalism the politics sank into chaos as well.

morally justifiable purpose. In contrast, one of the most important contributions of Confucianism is unceasingly persuading the emperor to "Rule for All", which is the good and just aim of politics. "Select and advance the virtuous and the capable ones for public service" is the very principle of selecting the competent and virtuous ones according to the general aim of "Rule for All". The political system should aim to select virtuous and capable people, and appoint them to suitable positions. Those selected ones are the ones who could grasp the way of the humane authority, implement the benevolent policy in the world, and protect the civilians from cruel policies.

Hence, when we criticize meritocracy for corruption and class ossification, we need to think twice that after all the subjects of greed are real people. A good political system should have taken into account the weakness of human nature, and seek to overcome it to the extent possible. Through our narrative and analysis, we could reach the conclusion that the Legalism has no moral authority higher than the emperor, which is why the ethical focus of Confucianism was indispensable to ancient Chinese politics. Properly speaking, "Rule for All, and Select the Virtuous and the Capable Ones for Public Service" was the treatment for the weakness of human nature that Legalist thinkers so much emphasized. The weakness of human nature results in the decay of social mobility, while the meritocratic selection system that can remedy the situation.

Such ideas are not unique to ancient Chinese political thinking. If we regard politics as a career, those who engage in politics need relevant ability, and we can also refer to the discussion on *φρόνησις*, practical wisdom, in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 6. Virtues of character could make the practical aim correct, and practical wisdom could make the aim realized. (*EN* 1140b11-20; 1144a7-9, a20-b1; 1145a5-6; 1151a15-19). Virtues of character

are relevant to every aspect of life, and also to our understanding of the good life in general. Evil will demolish our notion of the good life, but virtues preserve it (1140b11-20, 1144a34-b1, 1151a15-16). The practical problems are specific, variable, and uncertain, and practical wisdom is the very virtue to let an agent do the proper thing in the proper place at a proper time. A person of practical wisdom is a virtuous person, who has went through years of training, and whose desires are in accordance with right reason, and who could set rational aims for concrete ethical practices. If someone could only solve problems but could not set proper aims for his or her life, Aristotle would not regard this person as one with practical wisdom, but rather just one with cleverness. Cleverness, unlike practical wisdom, is a neutral even negative term in Aristotle's terms.

When we refer to the relation between Confucianism and the Legalism as "inseparably connected as the two sides of the same medal", we can understand it in the same way. Legalism emphasizes "cleverness", so Legalists could make accurate judgments on specific practical situations and mobilize all kinds of resources to take measures to solve problems. Confucians pay more attention on setting good aims for ethical practices, whether it's the planning of a good life in general or a perception on specific issue under a certain circumstance. Accordingly, the standard for the selection of the competent men by Legalists is strong and effective execution and relying on power to solve problems for the emperor, although according to the Confucian standard, Legalists often selected villains who have no desire for the justice but only for partial or immoral interests. In contrast, the Confucians aim to select virtuous and exemplary people as public officials, but according to the Legalist standard, those exemplary men have no capacity to deal with politics and administration.

In short, the main difference between Legalism and Confucianism is that the former have no moral authority to appeal to beyond what the rule desires, whereas Confucians aim to follow the way of the humane authority, a moral standard that serves to evaluate the political status quo. If the emperor has desires or implements policies that are not in accordance with morality, every real Confucian has responsibility to directly admonish the emperor. They should never be afraid of the power, but afraid of being away from the Tao. Exemplary persons ask to limit the emperor's unreasonable desires and policies, while preserving justice and peace throughout the all country. When an exemplary person could have the Legalist ability to grasp practical issues and implement the Way, or when a Legalist could be able to pursue justice for all, it would be the complete expression of the principle of "Rule for All, Select the Virtuous and the Capable Ones".

IV

Conclusion

The essence political meritocracy is "Rule for all, select and advance the virtuous and the capable ones." In ancient China, every selection system shared the same initial purpose, namely, to select competent and virtuous men for public service. However, due to the weakness of human nature, the political rulers would tend to degenerate from the ideal of "rule for all", and the selection system would fail accomplishing its mission. When the competent men couldn't be selected fairly and continuously for the governing body, politics would inevitably lose its dynamics and become frozen until the next round of fair selection, hence necessitating reform of the selection system. In ancient Chinese history, Confucians scholars never stopped appealing for a fair

selection system, persuading and admonishing the emperor to rule for all, which repaired the deficiencies, and sometimes tragedies, caused by Legalism. That might be the greatest contribution of Confucian political thought, and also one of the most important features of ancient Chinese politics.

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SYMPOSIUM

THE CHINA MODEL

FROM DEMOCRATIC MERITOCRACY TO MERITOCRATIC DEMOCRACY: WHY POLITICAL MERITOCRACY MATTERS

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Luiss University Press
E-ISSN 2240-7987 | P-ISSN 1591-0660

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From Democratic Meritocracy to Meritocratic Democracy: Why Political Meritocracy Matters

Elena Ziliotti

The attention that *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* is currently receiving in the West is unprecedented for a book on political meritocracy. This topic is indeed both neglected and unappreciated in Western political theory.[1] The reasons for so much interest in the *China*

[1] In introductory courses to Western political theory, political meritocracy is usually discussed in relation to Plato's *Republic*, where it is quickly discarded as based on the false assumption that there is a set of objective moral and scientific truths (Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989, p. 52.). Things are quite different in Confucian political theory and the political debate in East-Asia. For some contemporary works on political meritocracy see: Tongdong Bai, "A Confucian Version of Hybrid Regime: How Does It Work, and Why Is It Superior?" in Bell D. and Li C. (eds.), *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 55-87; Daniel A. Bell, B*eyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Sor-hoon Tan, "Beyond Elitism: A Community Ideal for a Modern East Asia," *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 59, Issue 4, (2009), pp. 537-553; Joseph Chan, "Democracy and Meritocracy: Toward a Confucian Perspective," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 34, (2007), pp. 179-93; Donald Low, "Good Meritocracy, Bad Meritocracy," in Low D. and Vadaketh S. T. (eds.), *Hard Choices. Challenging the Singaporean Consensus*, (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2014); Kenneth P. Tan, "Meritocracy and Elitism in a Global

© 2017 – *Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series)*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 73-87
Luiss University Press
E-ISSN 2240-7987 | P-ISSN 1591-0660

Model may lay more on the audacity of the book and its great philosophical potential. At a time where it is clear that our current democratic systems need to change in order to better cope with new political issues (e.g. globalization, new technologies, climate change) and other pressing problems (e.g. economic stagnation, rising inequalities and the consolidation of power of radical right-wing parties and demagogues), a political principle that promises to improve government efficiency and its accountability to long-term collective interests, may become appealing to a Western audience.

To anticipate my argument, there are good reasons to reconsider the importance of political meritocracy.[2] If we believe that at least *some* political collective goals are quite clear, the idea of developing objective mechanisms to control their actions is appealing. In this regard, the *China Model* encourages Western political theorists to go beyond Robert A. Dahl's stereotype of political meritocracy as "a perennial alternative to democracy"[3] to explore its potential as an *auxiliary* mechanism to democracy to improve the quality of its policy-making. Nonetheless, Bell's 'democratic meritocracy' is a suboptimal model of government for a modern pluralistic society because it falls short of reconciling meritocracy with democracy in an effective way.

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city: Ideological shifts in Singapore," *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 29, Issue 1, (2008), pp. 727.

[2] I assume that *political meritocracy* is primarily a principle under which political offices are filled. It states that leaders must be chosen on the basis of their individual skills and character and their promotion should be mainly based on their performance.

[3] Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 52.

I

A case for Political Meritocracy

Large modern pluralistic societies face several kinds of political issues. There are some issues where it is important for citizens to reach a *correct* judgment or at least to avoid wrong ones—"judgment issues".[4] One of the main judgment issues for our societies is the collective interest to enrich future generations in some ways and guarantee the survival of humankind.[5] Typically, this issue finds expression in *long-term* collective interests in several socio-political aspects, such as climate change, economic growth, security, urban policies, the use of natural resources, the development of a forward-looking education system, and the formation of sustainable energy system. Not all such questions have answers that we can easily reach, but in

[4] Steven Wall, "Democracy and Equality," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 57, Issue 228, (2007), pp. 416 438.

[5] The moral obligation towards future generation is a widely-accepted idea in the Western literature. In the First Treatise, John Locke refers to an idea of joint ownership at the overlap (*Two Treatises of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, in Shapiro I. (eds.), New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2003/1690, § 88). Edmund Burke refers to the idea of a partnership "[b]etween those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born" (R*eflections on the French Revolution*, The Harvard Classics, Vol.24, 1790, part 2). And Thomas Jefferson claims that "[t]he earth belongs in usufruct to the living" (Letter to James Madison, Paris, September 6, 1789). An obligation towards future generations is also expressed in the constitution of several states. For example, the Norwegian constitution (art. L 1110b, al 1) states that "every person has a right to an environment that is conducive to health and to a natural environment whose productivity and diversity are maintained. Natural resources should be managed on the basis of comprehensive long-term considerations whereby this right will be safeguarded for future generations as well". Other examples are the constitution of Germany (art. 20a), Pennsylvania (art 1, §27), Japan (art. 11) and Bolivia (art. 33).

relation to these issues empirical arguments need to be backed up by appropriate reasoning and evidence. Thus, when it comes to judgment issues and long-term collective interests, recruiting and promoting the best people to create and implement an effective political strategy is quite crucial.

Accountability to a mass electorate in some instances can create a troubling problem of competence. In electoral democracy, politicians that are primarily interested is their re-election may use their political power and authority mainly to achieve the collective short-term interests that will give them higher chances of being re-elected, while trying to avoid anything that might affect the present voters negatively. Furthermore, since voters in constituencies of large sizes usually have little interaction with or personal knowledge of the candidates, democratic elections may not provide substantive checks on the ability and integrity of the politicians, augmenting the risk of ineffective governance. [6]

Meritocratic selection mechanisms based on individual skills, integrity and performance, can *balance* democratic institutions by ensuring a further check on the leadership' abilities and effectiveness of the government in relation to the achievement of judgment and long-term collective interests. If meritocratic selection mechanisms are implemented to promote leaders, they could motivate current politicians who aspire to such positions to perform well, in the long-term interest of the country. The

[6] As Stephen Macedo puts it: "The leading public markers of democratic legitimacy are mass elections with universal adult franchise, but regular mass elections in no way guarantee capable government" ("Meritocratic Democracy: Learning from the American Constitution," in Bell D. and Li C. (eds.), *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 233.

legitimacy of these meritocratic institutions will depend on their performance and the results they obtain. Having meritocracy outside the legislative branch, for example in the civil service and other new non-legislative institutions, is not enough. The political leaders are supposed to establish the agenda, the tone and the policy direction. So, if the political leadership is ineffective or corrupt, even the most competent public sector will be affected and develop inadequate policies. Besides meritocratic selections of the members of the public sector, meritocratic mechanisms should also be present in the selection of the legislative branch.[7]

Given the presence of reasons to assess political meritocracy, it is now crucial to understand which *theory* of meritocratic governance could be acceptable and at the same time be responsive to the main pressing issues of modern pluralistic societies. On this matter, Bell proposes a new theory of governance for contemporary China in which democratic

[7] Any defense of political meritocracy must deal with two main issues: the specific qualities that should count as 'political merits' and the moral basis of meritocratic selections. A comprehensive discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper. However, let me briefly say that political merit can be defined only in practice. What makes a candidate fit for the political leadership depends on what works best in a specific socio-economic context. This entails that the selection of politicians with different skills can be carried out in socio-economic contexts which are affected by different political issues. Second, in relation to the moral justification of political meritocracy, a meritocratic selection could be fair only if people have equal opportunity to develop the abilities and expertise that are relevant to the selection. Without a strong principle of equality of access, any meritocratic selection can have deleterious consequences and even risks justifying the perpetration of old discredited hierarchies and social inequalities.

practices balance an extensive system of meritocratic mechanisms: *democratic meritocracy*.[8]

II

The Problem of Democratic Meritocracy

Democratic meritocracy is the idea that democratic institutions and practices should operate only at the local political level, while meritocratic mechanisms function at the national level. Assuming that meritocratic institutions perform better on general and complex political issues, Bell advocates the implementation of one wide-ranging meritocratic agency to deal with national and international politics. The members of this meritocratic agency are selected and promoted on the basis of their intellectual abilities, social skills, and moral virtues.[9] Democratic institutions, on the other hand, are implemented at the local political level. In the villages, the people can freely elect their representatives, who have political authority on the political issues concerning the village. Compared to the checks-and-balances system, in which meritocratic ideas are supposed to guide only the selection of the judiciary branch, democratic meritocracy removes the distinction between democratic and meritocratic governmental agencies with the implementation of meritocratic and democratic means in all three government branches.

[8]As Bell clarifies, the book is indeed a theory of governance for modern China, which aims to defend "the leading political ideas of a society's public culture" (Preface to the Paperback Edition, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press), p. xii.

[9] Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the limits of democracy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 104.

Bell maintains that "democracy at the bottom, meritocracy at the top"[10] is the best political model for contemporary China. Due to its characteristic convergence of political power at the top level, general political reforms are easier to implement in democratic meritocracy than by democratic institutions. For this reason, meritocratic government could even protect the interests of marginal groups from the rule of the majority, and provide quotas for disadvantaged groups throughout the promotion process.[11]

A pressing problem for democratic meritocracy is whether we have sufficient reasons to believe that this model would be sustainable in a developed pluralistic society.[12] Democratic meritocracy is a suboptimal model of governance for a large modern pluralistic society. Meritocratic practices could solve some of the judgment issues and long-term collective interests, but modern pluralistic societies face other kinds of political issues, in relation to which no correct judgment is independent

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 168.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 131.

[12] Several scholars have criticized Bell on the basis that elitism and corruption may undermine a political meritocracy more than democracy, because even if "a political leader is selected on meritocratic basis, the PM [political meritocracy] model has no mechanism in place to ensure that power will not be abused" (Ong L., Review Symposia, "What Exactly Is "The Chinese Ideal?" A Discussion of Daniel A. Bell's The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy", *Prospective on Politics*, Volume 14, Issue 1, pp. 147-161. 2016, p. 156). I believe that the devices proposed by Bell against elitism and corruption are weak, but so, I believe, is the above claim for the need of democracy. Whether democratic institutions are a better way to prevent elitism and corruption is an empirical question, and it would be wrong to venture an opinion on it without fuller empirical research.

from the citizens' preferences—'aggregative issues'. [13] Many aggregative issues relate to the question of what valuable collective interests the society must be pursuing in the *short-term*. Some of these issues concern how the government should distribute resources to particular recipients at the local political level (farm subsidies, cultural heritage sites and local infrastructure such as roads or highways), but also how much resources should be redistributed to one societal group as opposed to another at the national political level (progressive taxation, welfare, land reforms). These kinds of short-term interests characterize modern pluralistic societies more than developing countries, where the pressing issues concern more the survival of the present population. So, as China modernizes, Bell's theory of government for the Chinese context should be able to meet the valuable short-term collective interests of the people.[14]

One aspect to consider is that some of these valuable short-term collective interests, such as welfare, taxation and land reforms, extend beyond the local political level into the national one. As such, in a democratic meritocracy, they would be solved by meritocratically selected policy-makers. Another aspect is that, in large modern pluralistic societies, the unanimous agreement on these issues is almost impossible. These societies are characterized by the citizens' persistent disagreements regarding political and social matters. Under these conditions, any policy

[13] Steven Wall, "Democracy and Equality," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 57, Issue 228, (2007), pp. 416 438.

[14] As Bell explains, "The more serious problem is that the appropriate standard for measuring performance needs to change. Now that hundreds of millions of Chinese have been lifted out of poverty, what should the government do for them?" *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the limits of democracy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 94.

concerning short-term collective interests will satisfy only a segment of the population. Therefore, the leaders of a democratic meritocracy would be forced to favor one view over the other.

The persistent disagreement is not the most pressing problem for democratic meritocracy. If the problem was only to determine the majority's view, surveys or similar mechanisms would be suitable ways to define the public's main interests and needs; practices of electoral democracy would not be needed at the national level. The main problem for democratic meritocracy is that in relation to many public issues reaching a collective decision on what ought to be done is not just a matter of aggregating individual preferences, but also allowing citizens to *develop* their own individual preference. Thus, when it comes to collective valuable short-term interests, identifying the will of the majority is insufficient; political conditions and spaces for the citizens to develop and publicly express their preferences are also required. Since political meritocracy is based on the exclusion of the public from the decision-making process, political meritocracy is not suitable for guaranteeing the conditions to appropriately develop and identify some of the valuable collective short-term interests.

III

A Way out: Meritocratic Democracy

The problem of aggregative issues and short-term valuable collective interests may push for the establishment of democratic institutions where Bell does not want them: namely, at the national political level. If the valuable collective short-term interests of one society substantively depends on the citizens' preferences, the best way for a government to provide for the well-being of its own population is to offer citizens the best

political institutions to develop and express their views in a peaceful way and engage with them in a dialogue about what should be done. In this regard, democratic practices seem to be the best way for a modern pluralistic society to involve the greatest part of the public in defining some of its collective short-term interests.

One way to achieve this is through the public's participation in the decision-making process. This can provide a socio-political context in which some of the needs and the reasons of different groups can emerge and be considered by the politicians and the policy-makers. The political leader who really has an interest in the well-being of her fellow citizens should take their views seriously, by engaging them on their political views. The point I am making here is that deliberation, understood as a different series of social and political communication practices, between government agencies, parts of the constituency and other representative institutions can turn out to be an essential mechanism for policy-making in modern pluralistic societies.

The evolvement of policy-making in Singapore suggests that stronger democratic institutions and a more inclusive political system than democratic meritocracy are required in a modern pluralistic society. As Bell explains, since 1965, every five years or less, Singaporeans choose their representatives through a compulsory voting system. And Singaporeans directly choose their President since 1991. However, the Singapore political system entails influential meritocratic mechanisms. To date, the role of meritocratic selections of both the potential candidates running for Parliamentary election, the presence of non-elected members of the Parliament, and a set of stringent criteria for the selection of the candidates running for Presidential elections have been preserved and so is its principal aim of meeting long-term goals, such as sustainable economic growth and security.

As the needs of the people have changed during the rapid economic growth of the country, democratic practices have become an indispensable part of the process of developing and customizing new policies in Singapore. In the 2011 General Election (GE), the public support for the People Action Party (PAP—the ruling party in Singapore) dropped by 6.46%, while the opposition gained 5 new seats in the Parliament. Most of the analysists believe that the shift in the votes was a quest at large for "a more responsive government that would pay closer attention to the needs of the people."[15]

The results represented a wake-up call for the government. Publicly, the government recognized the public's concerns and its mistakes.[16] After the 2011 GE, the Singapore government showed significant resilience. The government quickly engaged with the electorate on the issues of popular concerns and launched projects to increase civil participation in policy-making. For example, *Our Singapore Conversation* was a national-level public engagement project which consisted of the set-up of over 660 small dialogue groups with the collaboration of 50,000 participants (in both offline and online platforms) to discuss political matters such as housing, healthcare and job security.

[15] Mahizhnan A., ("Rashomon Effect: Introduction," in Tan T. H, Mahizhnan A., Ang P. H. (eds.), Battle for Hearts and Minds: New Media and Elections in Singapore, Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2016), p. 11.

[16] In the aftermath of the general elections, the Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong, made a public apology: "So we didn't get it perfect, and I appreciate and I sympathize with Singaporeans when they tell me and they tell the government repeatedly that this is impacting us, affecting us – do something about it. Well, we're sorry we didn't get it exactly right, but I hope you'll understand and bear with us, because we're trying our best to fix the problems" (Unofficial transcript by Ng E-Jay, May 5 2011). Available at: http://www.sgpolitics.net/?p=6756.

Arguably, the public opinion that emerged through these meetings influenced the government's subsequent decisions to launch several national policy changes for the elderly and other disadvantaged groups in healthcare, several property cooling measures, and solutions to improve public transportation.

The recent events were not a public request for more democracy. As mentioned above, experts believe that the public's dissatisfaction arouse out of the political outcomes and the lack of responsiveness of government to their needs. But, the democratic participation of a large part of the public in the decision-making process on matters of national interests brought the government closer to some of their collective interests. This suggests that political meritocracy may not be enough to fulfil the needs of a modern pluralistic society, requiring the adoption of democratic practices and institutions at the national political level.

It is true that other countries have larger populations and more pressing problems. Singapore is a small country, 'a little red dot' on maps of the world—as former President of Indonesia Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie used to refer to Singapore. Surely, given its land size (720 square kilometers), Singapore's problems are not on the same scale as the ones of other developed countries. Yet, how Singapore deals with complex problems like healthcare, employment policies and housing policies can be of relevance for larger countries with similar problems.[17]

[17] This does not exclude that matters of civil and political rights still remain a crucial issue in Singapore. The Internal Security Act, which empowers the executive to enforce preventive detention of persons suspected of being subversives, is still enforced; although in the 1991 some measures of checks and balance were introduced to forbid the executive power to enactment the International Security Act without the consent of the Advisory Board of the elected President. The continued enforcement of the Criminal Law Temporary

A closer observation of the recent events in Singapore politics also suggests the importance of democratic elections. The events between the 2011 GE and the 2015 GE reveal the ability of the electorate to express their dissatisfaction and consequently to shape the political agenda. This can correspond to the idea that democratic elections can work as 'sanction' mechanisms or *ex-post* devices to punish the politicians who fail to accomplish the planned aims.[18] For this reason, although meritocratic mechanisms can select the policy-makers and even the candidates running for public offices, democratic elections must have a final say.

The preceding considerations are not meant to be exhaustive. The nature of the political issues that modern pluralistic societies face and how democratic and meritocratic institutions are combined in a meritocratic democracy is still unclear. However, they do not fit into the scope of this paper. For the time being, it is sufficient to consider that the above discussion supports the need for democratic representative institutions above the local

Provision Act is also problematic. This statue allows the executive branch to order that suspected criminals are detained without trial from not more than two years, but with possible extension. Concerning the enforcement of statute, the requirement of the elected President's consent has also been introduced. For a detailed discussion of political and civil rights in Singapore, see Kevin Y. L. Tan, "Economic Development, Legal reform, and Rights in Singapore and Taiwan" (in Bell D. & Bauer J. 1999, *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*, pp. 264 284). Critics also maintain that the government exercise a 'soft' control of the press. According to Cherian George, the Singapore government exercises calibrated coercion on journalists, "with periodic reminders of who is in charge, but also enough room to practice some professionally satisfying journalism" (Cherian George, "Consolidating authoritarian rule: calibrated coercion in Singapore," *The Pacific Review*, Vol. 20, Issue 2, 2007), p. 136.

[18] Jane Mansbridge, ("A 'Selection Model' of Political Representation," *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 17, Issue 4, 2009), p. 371.

political level. These considerations require adopting some principle of democratic representation for allowing more inclusive decisional procedures where citizens can—directly or indirectly—form, express and control the fulfillment of their collective short-term interests.

IV

Conclusion

The *China Model* is a pioneering work; as such it deserves thoughtful consideration. Nevertheless, the absence of democratic representative institutions beyond the local political level makes democratic meritocracy an inadequate model of governance for a modern and pluralistic society where people have different needs and divergent interests. In a socio-political context characterized by the presence of multiple actors, some democratic representative mechanisms could provide people with a better chance for defining and expressing some of their collective national interests.

The importance of significant democratic instruments is incompatible with the idea of 'democracy at the bottom, meritocracy at the top', but it is consistent with meritocratic governance in general. Granting some forms of democratic representation at the national level leaves room for powerful meritocratic mechanisms to operate on the improvement of the quality of decision making. More generally, my criticism of Bell's meritocratic models of governance does not undermine the value of political meritocracy, but it objects to one specific interpretation of it. So, while the idea that meritocratic mechanisms for selecting political leaders to provide better

governance remains appealing, an alternative hybrid model of governance needs to be formulated.

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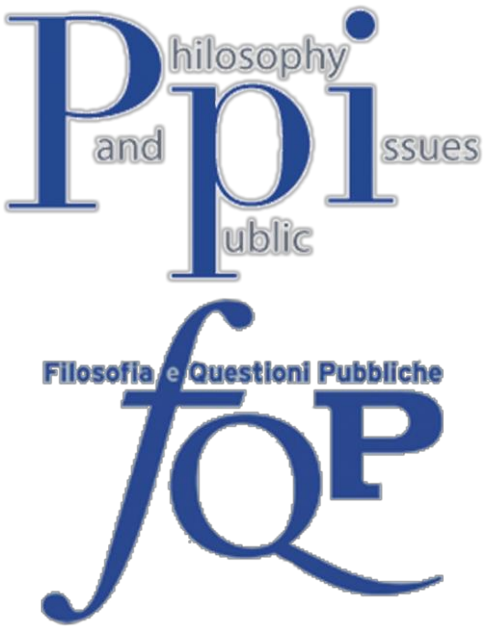

MORE THAN A CHINA MODEL
BELL'S BOOK MIGHT BE EVEN MORE CONSEQUENTIAL THAN ITS AUTHOR THINKS

BY

CRISTOPHER-TEODOR UGLEA

 Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series), Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 89-103
Luiss University Press
E-ISSN 2240-7987 | P-ISSN 1591-0660

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More Than a China Model
Bell's Book Might Be Even More Consequential Than Its Author Thinks

Cristopher-Teodor Uglea

In his most controversial and misunderstood book so far, Daniel Bell[1] makes compelling arguments in favor of political meritocracy, which he aims to set as the new standard for assessing China's progress, rather than the (Western) standard of electoral democracy. Accused by his critics of being an apologist of China's communist regime and a denigrator of democracy,[2] professor Bell is actually neither. In essence, he simply points out that everyone prefers to be led by competent and virtuous politicians, and therefore the quality of a political system should be judged by how well it manages to promote such leaders with "superior ability", not by how many people are involved in the (s)election process.

[1] Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[2] See, for example, "Embarrassed meritocrats, Westerners who laud a Chinese meritocracy continue to miss the point", *The Economist*, October 2012, http://www.economist.com/news/china/21565228-westerners-who-laud-chinese-meritocracy-continue-miss-point-embarrassed-meritocrats/, Andrew J. Nathan, "Beijing Bull: The Bogus China Model", *The National Interest*, October 2015, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/beijing-bull-the-bogus-china-model-14107, James Griffiths, "Democracy is not a perfect system, but the Chinese meritocracy is pure fantasy", *Shanghaiist*, November 2012, http://shanghaiist.com/2012/11/26/democracy_might_not_be_a_miracle_cu.php, accessed 02.12.2017.

 Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series), Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 89-103
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E-ISSN 2240-7987 | P-ISSN 1591-0660

Bell's boldest claim, however, is that China has developed such a system (if still imperfect) of "political meritocracy", that is, the selection of leaders based on merit. In the meanwhile, the Western electoral democracies have raised the flawed dogma of "one person, one vote" to "almost sacred status", as the sole acceptable mechanism for selecting leaders. These assertions could be disturbing for a Western reader, but going through the whole book, one discovers that the Canadian professor's views are actually more complex and carefully nuanced. For Daniel Bell, political meritocracy and electoral democracy are not mutually exclusive, and "the China model" is actually a combination of both. He terms this system a "vertical democratic meritocracy, meaning democracy at lower levels of government, with the political system becoming progressively more meritocratic at higher levels of government".[3]

Rather than discussing the idea that the CCP is consistently selecting China's cream of the crop while the West is busy counting heads instead of merits, the following article takes a different angle. My intervention will address Bell's reluctance to recognize that his theory is fully operational outside China. Bell insists that this "China model" is neither applicable nor replicable in its complete "vertical democratic meritocracy" form anywhere else in the world. This view coincides with the mainstream view in China, which is that Beijing is not seeking to export its political model abroad. Moreover, it is argued, China's system has a very particular series of "Chinese characteristics", rooted in its rich history and culture and impossible to find elsewhere. For Bell, this might also seem like a more solid academic argument, since he is not claiming the universality of his model, but merely that it works well for China.

[3] *The China Model*, p. xiii.

While China's civilization is indisputably unique and impossible to reproduce elsewhere, Bell's idea of a combination of democracy and meritocracy is not necessarily so. The main point of my intervention is to show that it might be counterproductive to firmly state that the model of "vertical democratic meritocracy" is something only China can access fully. Such an approach unnecessarily limits the reach of an extremely solid conceptual foundation – and make no mistake, Bell's book is one of great intellectual force. If political meritocracy in this form is indeed a model (as the title of the book states), and not an accident of history, the reader is entitled to ask what it has to say about other societies. Secondly, the almost exclusive focus on China puts the whole debate on the wrong track. Instead of engaging with Daniel Bell's argument more directly on a conceptual level, most critics have countered by bashing China and praising the West. Rather, a real intellectual debate on the topic should discuss the implications of a possible shift of paradigm in political science from electoral democracy to political meritocracy (with the hybrid version vertical democratic meritocracy somewhere in between).

To prove the relevance of Bell's conceptual framework outside China, I will briefly show that the standard of political meritocracy can be successfully applied to the European Union. Using Bell's model I have been able to shed light on an unknown aspect of the EU, and in the aftermath of my experiment, the claim that the vertical political meritocracy is "China only" might seem a bit unnatural.

I

Daniel Bell's Ideas of Political Meritocracy and Their Self-Imposed Limitations

Although a declared fan of political meritocracy, Bell admits that such a system is impractical in its pure form, because it has a huge problem of legitimacy. No system can simply exclude the vast majority of the people from governance, in favor of a cast of "meritocrats", however selected. Consequently, Daniel Bell recognizes that the ideal model is a combination between democracy and meritocracy, one he calls "vertical democratic meritocracy". Drawing on both Western and Chinese thinkers, Bell correctly argues that democracy seems to work better in small communities, at the local level, where "people have more knowledge of the […] leaders they choose", "issues are relatively straightforward and easy to understand", and "mistakes are less costly".[4] On the other hand, at the top, issues are more difficult to understand by the general public. In addition, "meritocratically selected leaders can make long-term-oriented decisions that consider the interests of all relevant stakeholders, including future generations and people living outside the state".[5] In practice, according to Bell, China's actual system ("the China Model") is not only meritocratic at the top and democratic at the bottom, but also presents a middle level with "room for experimentation". In between the central government and the local authorities, regions or cities implement special economic zones or different political and social reforms, and the country leadership decides which pilot projects are working and will be implemented at a national level.

[4] *Ibidem*, p.168.
[5] *Ibidem*, p.172.

After introducing this strong conceptual framework of a system combining the best of democracy and meritocracy, Bell is surprisingly arguing that "the model—democracy at the bottom, experimentation in the middle, and meritocracy at the top—is unique to China" and that "the whole package [...] cannot be readily adopted by countries with a different history and culture".[6] Stemming from its Confucian tradition, the Chinese society highly values leaders with superior ability, primarily for their capacity to maintain social harmony. This view, Bell argues, is different from the Western tradition of competitive individualism.

Further diving into Bell's arguments about the limitations of this model, we find out that meritocracy is not possible outside a one-party system, ("the whole thing can be implemented only by a ruling organization similar to the CCP")[7] and the electoral cycles in democracies would provide no incentive for experimentation, as pilot-projects would not bring votes immediately. More problematic even, the West can never implement meritocracy at the top. Once people are given the right to vote for top leaders, they will never give that right away, and in a clever twist of Fukuyama's words, Bell states that "democracy in the form of one person, one vote really is the end of history, but in the bad sense that it cannot be improved".[8] If it doesn't have access to "the whole package" then, the West can only try to imitate some of China's practices, like the voters starting to actually vote for people of superior ability (which probably Bell himself also thinks it's unlikely).

[6] *Ibidem,* pp. 180, 195.
[7] *Ibidem,* p.195.
[8] *Ibidem,* p.166.

Finally, why is not China more attractive, if its system is so good? For now, "China is not good enough (in terms of governance), and the United States not bad enough, for China's political meritocracy to exercise much soft power abroad. But things can change and China may pose more of a normative challenge to electoral democracies in the future".[9]

Bell's model, however, is stronger than the author might have thought while writing those lines. Bold when it came to conceptualizing his "China model" or showing the limitations of democracy, the Canadian professor became very prudent when speaking about its exportability. The only extended comparison in the book is that with the United States, but this is also misleading. The Chinese love to compare themselves with the Americans, and their strong belief, both for the Americans and the Chinese, in their exceptionalism, makes it easy to infer that there must be some fundamental factors (cultural or otherwise) determining that concepts that work in China must not be fully operational in the West.

This "model" that is valid just for China, it's replicable only in bits and pieces, and only when the decline of democracy will become more visible, has, it seems to me, some self-imposed limitations. The great French historian Fernand Braudel once argued that models are like boats; you build them in your own waters, and then let them flow in unfamiliar seas, in order to discover their reach. At some point, closer or further away, the ship will sink, showing its limits. There is little value in maintaining from the start that the ship is only good in the "Chinese" waters it was build in, and only bits of it can be used to sail on other seas.

[9] *Ibidem,* p. 36.

II

What the Standard of Political Meritocracy Has to Say About the European Union

Daniel Bell developed his model starting from the premise that democracy does not explain China's rise. The idea to try and evaluate the European Union by the standard of political meritocracy occurred to me when I started asking Daniel Bell's question in reverse. As European, I have lived to hear constant criticism that the EU is not sufficiently democratic. However, by studying its history I realized that there actually seems to be a negative correlation between the two: the more democratic the EU became, the less effective. [10] Is democracy EU's problem, then? The conclusion that the EU should be less democratic was obviously wrong, but it is clear that measuring the EU by the standard of democracy is misleading. Fortunately, Bell's strong conceptual framework provides a way out of this dilemma. What if we judge EU's progress by the standards of political meritocracy, instead of democracy? On this count, I will show that the Union has become less and less meritocratic and this partially accounts for its crisis.

To the extent that my experiment of applying Bell's conceptual framework to the European Union is successful, a new conceptual paradigm is born, one in which political meritocracy (with its version of "vertical democratic meritocracy") is an alternative standard to measure progress, in China and the world. In the next two sections I will judge the EU

[10] Thomas König, "Divergence or Convergence? From Ever-Growing to Ever-Slowing European Legislative Decision Making: Divergence or Convergence?," *European Journal of Political Research* 46, no. 3 (2007): 417–44.

by both standards, democracy and meritocracy and point out what implications this endeavor has for Bell's theory.

The EU Judged by the Standard of Democracy

Since there is no "European nation" and no actual precedent for the EU, the Union is defined by its institutions, and this is why they are disproportionately more important in this case.[11] Therefore, it makes sense methodologically to focus on its institutions in order to assess the democracy and meritocracy at the EU level. One of the critiques that is often leveled against the EU is that it is undemocratic and disconnected from the realities of the citizens it should serve.[12] Nevertheless, an analysis of the EU institutions nowadays shows that, although the integration started with undemocratic institutions, this aspect has radically changed in time.

The institutional history of the European integration can be said to begin in 1951, with the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC**)**. The most important institution was then the "High Authority", a supranational executive branch, led by the legendary Jean Monnet. The powers of the High Authority were huge, and its members were appointed, not elected. As a check on the High Authority's powers, there was also a Common Assembly, with (again) appointed members from national parliaments, but its attributions were very limited. A third institution was the Special Council formed of the ministers of the

[11] John Peterson and Michael Shackleton (ed.), *The Institutions of the European Union*, 3rd ed (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).
[12] Andreas Follesdal and Simon Hix, "Why There Is a Democratic Deficit in the EU: A Response to Majone and Moravcsik," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 44, no. 3 (2006): 533–62.

member countries.[13] The ECSC was, by Western standards, profoundly undemocratic, and the citizens had very little control on the decisions that were made. None of ECSC officials was directly elected by the people. The only type of democracy it could claim ran through the democratic processes in the member states.

The next more than 60 years have seen the gradual democratization of the European institutions;[14] the High Authority evolved into the European Commission, the Special Council into the Council of the European Union (also called the Council of Ministers) and the Common Assembly into the European Parliament. Additionally, a new institution was formed in 1974, the European Council, which reunites the heads of state or of government of all 28 (27!?) member countries. Nowadays democracy in the form of one person, one vote is present at virtually every level of EU institutions. Thus, the European Council consists of leaders that have been elected in their countries, while the Council of Ministers consists of national ministers (voted in national parliaments). The MEPs are directly elected by the European citizens, starting with 1979. Of the main institutions, the only body that can be said to be "less democratic"[15] would be the Commission.[16] However, its members and President are appointed by the member states (that is, by

[13] Also a Court of Justice, which is not directly the focus of this paper.

[14] Christopher Lord and Erika Harris, *Democracy in the New Europe*, The New Europe Series (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[15] Myrto Tsakatika, "Claims to Legitimacy: The European Commission between Continuity and Change," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 43, no. 1 (2005): 193–220.

[16] Stuart A Brown, *The European Commission and Europe's Democratic Process: Why the EU's Executive Faces an Uncertain Future.* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

elected governments), and are confirmed by the directly-elected European Parliament.

Judged by the standard of democracy, the European Union should be thriving, and its legitimacy to EU citizens should be rock solid. Instead, the EU is in crisis at almost every level, and the voices that don't feel represented by Brussels are as loud as ever, if not louder. By the standard, of democracy, the EU should be the success story of the 21st century, while China should be presented as a declining civilization. In fact, it is the other way around, and the model of political meritocracy might explain why.

The EU Judged by the Standard of Political Meritocracy

As Bell shows, democracy and meritocracy can coexist, but not at the top. The real problem was that for the European Union, elective democracy came at the expense of meritocracy at the top. The High Authority (the precursor of the Commission) was initially created as a supranational meritocratic body to exercise the leadership of the European institutions. In time, however, although the body remained supranational and, generally speaking, meritocratic, its powers were greatly decreased, while the power of the democratic institutions increased at the top levels.

Jean Monnet was the first President of the High Authority, and he intended to build the institution as "the engine of Europe".[17] He had in mind a supranational body to transcend national interest. The High Authority was supposed to be the

[17] John Peterson and Michael Shackleton (ed.), *The Institutions of the European Union*, 3rd ed (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).

agenda setter for the European integration. Monnet wanted a leadership role for the High Authority (hence the name), whose members should have been appointed by the member states by merit (two for the larger states, one for the smaller ones, and one President agreed upon by all of them). As such, I think it is fair to assess that Monnet wanted a meritocratic body as the most important European institution. The body contained, however, the seeds of its decline in the selection process (and Daniel Bell spends a lot of time talking about the selection process in a meritocracy). Having the power to appoint the members of the High Authority, the resources and the political legitimacy, the states soon worked together to curtail its powers, fighting under the flag of "more elective democracy" at the European level. Thus, instead of a harmonious mixture, democracy came at the expense of meritocracy.

All this happened gradually. After the Treaty of Rome (1958), two other parallel institutions appeared: the European Economic Community and the European Atomic Energy Community, whose executive bodies were called "Commission", not "High Authority" – a name deemed too grandiose. In 1965, the two Commissions and the High Authority were merged into a "Commission of the European Communities", which later on became the "European Commission". Although the body maintained, in theory, its monopoly on legislative initiative, the other two bodies, the Common Assembly (later on the European Parliament) and the Special Council (later on the Council of Ministers) greatly increased their powers. The Assembly (changing its name to Parliament in 1962), has since received the power to confirm (or not) the Commissioners and the Commission President, its democratic legitimacy being greatly increased by direct election in every member countries for the MEPs. The Special Council that had very limited powers in the beginning evolved into the Council of the European Union, and

its powers greatly increased after the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, now acting as co-legislator with the EP. The European Council's role of "agenda-setter" has also limited, once more, the powers of the Commission to lead the EU.

The narrative above is a much simplified account of events that are very complex, but I think it is safe to conclude that the High Authority, initially conceived as a meritocratic body at the top of the European institutions, has since lost most of its powers. The EU was some sort of China in reverse, in terms of political meritocracy. If we were to take Bell's narrative at face value, China strengthened its process of meritocratic selection of leaders at the top, and its democratic processes at the bottom, while leaving room for experimentation in between. Meanwhile, the EU implemented elective democracy at the top, middle and bottom, with no discernible distinction and little room for experimentation.

III

What My Experiment Proves

As announced above, my brief case-study confirms the explanatory value of Bell's theory outside China, with little reference to the distinct Chinese characteristics of the model. The Canadian political scientist is right to claim that the closer to the top, the less functional democracy becomes (now, Brussels is seen as a faraway place for most of the EU citizens, and its exact attributions are unclear for everyone save a handful of specialists). Bell is also right about the "slippery-slope" effect of the one person, one vote mechanism. Once the European Parliament started being directly elected, it used its legitimacy as a weapon to absorb more powers from the unelected Commission,

and the governments of the member states quite often rest on their support at home to criticize Brussels as illegitimate.

For a start, the standard of political meritocracy theorized by Bell might be able to explain, not only China's success, but also Europe's decline, and that in itself is impressive. Of course, the author will probably claim that this is exactly what he meant when he said that his "China model" is not applicable anywhere else in the world: the Western one person, one vote dogma would wreck the whole system from the top. In a sense, this is exactly what happened with the EU. But here's the catch, two of them.

1. In social sciences, a veritable model has an explanatory power going both ways: if it explains success, it should also explain why others failed, under similar circumstances. For Bell, there seems to be two separate worlds, China and the West. China's raise comes with the model of political meritocracy, the West's decline is due to the decline of democracy with its separate causes. What if both processes are more closely related than initially thought, and, what if, the decline of Western democracies is also partially explained by a decline in their meritocratic institutions or characteristics, under the assault of one person, one vote mechanisms? This hypothesis seems worthwhile to explore in future studies.

2. Nothing in EU's institutional decline was predetermined or unavoidable because of European peoples' incapacity to accept meritocracy. Rather, it was a series of historical factors (the speed and the particular circumstances of EU expansion in a post-Cold War context) and poor decisions of institutional reform which determined it. Recently, the EU Commission rekindled the debate around EU reform by publishing a *White Paper on the Future of Europe*, which offered five scenarios for EU reform. The third option, called "those who want more do more" opens the door for experimentation, where regional

groupings of countries implement measures which could potentially be applied at EU level (somewhat like Bell's middle level in the China model), while the fourth option, "doing less more efficiently" suggest a more clear division between the attributions of the European and national institutions (which could act similar to Bell's top and bottom). There is no fundamental obstacle in the way of the EU implementing a reform involving more meritocracy at the top, one person, one vote at the bottom and experimentation in the middle. There wasn't a clear obstacle to begin with, and the EU could have evolved towards something close to "the China model", were the initial plans for the Commission as the "engine of Europe" to be carried through. In reality Bell is probably exaggerating the "almost sacred" status of the one person, one vote mechanism for the top leaders. The practice of indirect elections, the sometimes massive absenteeism and widespread disappointment in democracies that one's individual vote doesn't really matter anyway, as well as the example of a supranational body such as the European Union, point out that there isn't really such a religious, set in stone, practice of direct elections for leaders. It is rather a perceived lack of viable options that got us here. Now, as in the past, a rational European citizen would probably end up accepting a Union led by meritocrats, as long as there is a trusted system of selecting them and solid democratic practices at a local and national level. Such an option was never explicitly presented, and this is why Bell's book should be read and outside China too.

In conclusion, the main purpose of my intervention was to argue that the "ship" of "vertical political meritocracy" can be let go and sail different seas than the ones in which it was built. I firmly believe that Daniel Bell's *The China Model* is a brilliant book, and there is scope for the model to be applied more

broadly. By claiming that China has discovered a better system to which others only have partial access, Bell has encouraged his critics to take aim at China and deny its political meritocracy, while praising the Western democracy. The conceptual debate needs to go beyond this, and the paradigm of political meritocracy and vertical democratic meritocracy needs to be tested in different waters. This ship is ready to set sail.

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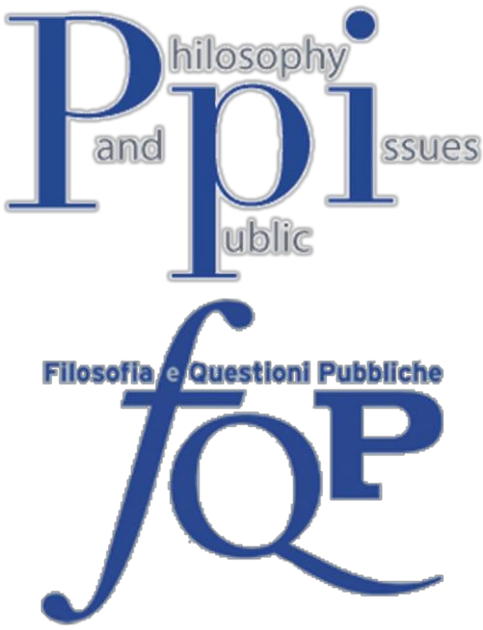

MERITOCRATIC ELITISM, AUTHORITARIAN LIBERTARIANISM, AND THE LIMITS OF THE CHINA MODEL OR: WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT ALTERNATIVES?

BY

PEITAO JIA

© 2017 – *Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series)*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 105-126
Luiss University Press
E-ISSN 2240-7987 | P-ISSN 1591-0660

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Meritocratic Elitism, Authoritarian Libertarianism, and the Limits of *The China Model* Or: What are We Talking about When We Talk about Alternatives?

Peitao Jia

In this article, as a review and critique of the current theorization and defense of political meritocracy (PM), I examine what the factual political issues demand and what the theory of PM has promised and provided. By arguing that PM leads to meritocratic elitism that neglects individual citizens' civil and political rights as well as authoritarian libertarianism that undermines the people's economic, social, and cultural welfare, I shall conclude this discussion with remarks that political meritocracy cannot be a desirable alternative to liberal democracy and on the contrary it requires its own alternatives based on liberal and egalitarian values.

As one of the most important contemporary theorists of political meritocracy, Daniel A. Bell defends this selection-and-promotion system as an "alternative model" to liberal democracy (LD) in his well-argued book *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*.[1]

[1] Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2015), p. 4.

 Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series), Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 105-126
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Any meticulous analysis will show that PM as the alleged "China model" can be most accurately interpreted as meritocratic elitism[2] (ME)—to be brief, it emphasizes competent leadership rather than active citizenship. In the East Asian context, Sungmoon Kim defends "Confucian civil society" as an "alternative to meritocratic elitism", based on political experiences in democratized South Korea and Taiwan.[3] And as a defender of egalitarian liberalism, I further adopt and defend in my own research a type of liberal meritocracy[4] characterized by three institutional elements—public deliberation, democratic accountability, and meritocratic representation—as an alternative to Bell's ME.

It looks like a circle: When we talk about an alternative to an alternative, we might also be reexamining those normative presuppositions challenged by the previous critics. When theorists of PM (not only Bell) regard Confucian PM as a prescription for the limits of LD, readers and audience across the

[2] In fact, "elitism" is also a previously used term in the title of Bell's earlier book chapter "Taking Elitism Seriously: Democracy with Confucian Characteristics" (Daniel A. Bell, "Taking Elitism Seriously: Democracy with Confucian Characteristics," in *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006, ch.6). I will draw on this chapter for a comparison in the third section of this article.

[3] Sungmoon Kim, "To Become a Confucian Democratic Citizen: Against Meritocratic Elitism," *British Journal of Political Science* 43/3 (July 2013), pp. 579-99, p. 579.

[4] By the term "liberal meritocracy", I mean not just to conceive a meritocratic ideal that helps promote liberal moral values such as equality, negative freedom, political and social rights, as well as liberal civic virtues and well-informed political participation by citizens; I also intend to draw on liberal normative theories and institutional designs and to argue that a political meritocracy that is to be both stable and legitimate should improve itself by making the best of liberal instruments and mechanisms.

world had better remain alert to the everyday liberal requirements and the deep diversity in both Chinese and other societies. Besides, the China Model has limits, too.

However, a series of new trends emerging between the publication of this book (2015) and today need be responded and reacted to, which has made PM more desirable than before. Populism[5] and exclusive citizenship, anti-establishment or pro-establishment politics, anti-globalization and the continuous demand for global justice, China's new transnational initiative and new challenges for global governance … All these trends are implying (democratic) citizenship theory in Anglo-American political philosophy since 1990s has not yet succeeded in resolving the problems for which it was conceived. In this sense, the main argument and conclusion of Bell's book on PM seem more meaningful for democratic countries than for China; and for the West, they are more like an expedient measure.

If political meritocracy (or meritocracy in general) is unique and desirable at all, the real problématique has always been which type(s) of meritocracy can be both functional and legitimate. But implementing the China model of meritocratic elitism, to quote a Chinese idiom, is no better than quenching a thirst with poison ("引鸩止渴"). To be specific, the undemocratic society advocating political meritocracy has the risk of degenerating into authoritarian libertarianism—meritocratic elitism ignores individual citizens' right to be or become moral and political beings; authoritarian libertarianism undermines their equal access to more social resources.

[5] In a recent book on populism, Jan-Werner Müller gives a quick comment on the China model as "state-controlled capitalism" and the "new model of meritocracy." See Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2016), p. 3.

Before the following discussion, it is worth noting one of the greatest contributions of this book: it provides guidance for further research and debate in all related aspects. The author's writing is superior, with interlocking sections and a well-built structure which help keep the author's argumentation compellingly persuasive. Reviewing all his books and articles, we could get such an impression that Bell apparently also shares the personal virtues of Iris Marion Young depicted by Martha C. Nussbaum: "intellectual empathy", and the willingness of staying "vulnerable" when encountering with a different culture in order to "promote a more equal type of friendship."[6]

Therefore, I shall present the further comments and critiques with full respect and understanding, wishing to provide more insights into the issues we both care about.

I

What's Really Wrong with Political Meritocracy

Political meritocracy, defined by its major advocates as a system that aims at selecting and promoting good leaders with superior intellectual and moral virtues, has induced two main challenges in contemporary debates in political philosophy where moral egalitarianism remains a presumed conviction.[7]

Moral egalitarianism, which can be regarded as one of the consequences of the "Western" Enlightenment, is a belief that every individual person should have the equal opportunities and duties (in Rawlsian words, equal benefits and burdens) to

[6] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Foreword", in Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011), pp. ix-x.
[7] Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model*, p. 2, p. 10.

be/become a moral being—a morally (and further politically) autonomous and self-responsible human being.

Before completing (or even before starting) its self-justification, the main challenges this meritocratic elitism (the political meritocracy that concentrates narrowly on leadership) has to deal with, include firstly the distinction between "meritocratic" selection and "meritorious" rule and secondly the confrontation between good leadership and active citizenship.

The first challenge lies both in the natural skepticism about political authorities and in the emphasis for the sake of good governance on decision-making processes rather than the selections of decision-makers; while the second challenge originates both from the concern with who should be the political agents and from the interest in what the term "meritocracy" should mean.

Here is a preliminary response to the second challenge—the confrontation between good leadership and active citizenship: first of all, if the meritocratic political agents are better described as "qualified decision-makers" rather than "good leaders", a form of citizenship meritorious rule based on civic virtues and democratic deliberation will be more desirable and less feasible as a solution to failing political systems than meritocratic elitism; moreover, in the terminology of the Rawlsian social-justice theory, political meritocracy can be further referred to as a principle governing or regulating the distribution of political powers and responsibilities, and as a concept being revised by measuring the comparative merits between equality as "careers open to talents" and equality as "equality of fair opportunity."[8]

[8] See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 1999), p. 57, pp. 91-2.

It is considerably notable that the relevant challenges stretch our perspective from the problem with the political and social governance within a political community back to that with the definition of moral and political agents, and even further back to a more fundamental issue about the basic social structure and distributive justice.

To commence the presentation of problematic aspects and the proposal of countermeasures with the logical outset: a promising, comprehensive study on political meritocracy and meritorious politics[9] should start with the understanding of the conflicts between theories of social justice and theories of political meritocracy, then move on to the assessment of the prospect of substituting top-down meritocratic or meritorious leadership with bottom-up public deliberation which is morally more desirable, and next turn to the recommendation for the settlement of the difficulties brought by the co-existence of well-informed public reasonableness and meritocratic authorities.

In a nutshell, two of the liberal approaches to "citizenship meritorious politics" are public deliberation and democratic accountability. The former is beneficial to the elimination of the threats by meritocratic elitism against moral egalitarianism, and the latter efficiently beneficial to the justification for and the realization of the performance legitimacy of a meritocratic mechanism.

Beside the defense of moral equality and the search for performance legitimacy, a third problem to be solved, which

[9] Joseph Chan gives a key distinction between "meritocratic" selection and "meritorious" rule in his "Political Meritocracy and Meritorious Rule: A Confucian Perspective," in Daniel A. Bell and Chenyang Li (eds.), *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy: Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013)

remains more fundamental and deserves more attention, rests on the procedural legitimacy of a meritocratic system. This leads theorists to the discussion of meritocratic representation in order to argue that to what extent and in what sense the meritocratic political agents under the empowerment-and-accountability system, who might act either as meritocratic authorities or meritocratic functionaries or even as random citizens exercising deliberative responsibilities, can be normatively regarded as the representatives of the population, rather than just independent decision-making experts.

II

Liberalism Revisited: Beyond Politics-Focused Political Philosophy

Bell does little (if anything) with the above-mentioned three contemporary egalitarian challenges to political meritocracy in his book, although he does pre-process three major problems with PM in the third chapter in light of Michael Young's characterization of meritocratic system in general: Corruption, Ossification, and (the lack of) Legitimacy.

Comparatively speaking, his chapter shows the sincerity of self-reflection, but does not provide effective dissolution and reconstruction. His chapter is titled "what's wrong with political meritocracy?", and accordingly, the title of the first section of this article is intended to be what's "really" wrong with political meritocracy (or meritocratic elitism).

Among the three problems discussed in Bell's chapter, the anti-corruption section relies on the Singapore's case of high payment against corruption (the famously addressed "高薪养廉"), China's case of Marxist ideology, as well as the author's hope for

the establishment of independent checks without democracy, the independence between the public and private sectors, and the implementation of systematic Confucian moral education. Unfortunately, in a non-democratic country without check-and-balance mechanisms and democratic accountability, even the author who has proposed the ideas above is not quite optimistic: he admits that corruption in a democracy "won't threaten the whole system" but "it can make or break a political meritocracy."[10]

The anti-ossification section draws on a French institution selecting, educating and testing the "intellectual political elite regardless of social background" for public service, which seems desirable but has become a real-world version of Michael Young's rising and ossification of a meritocracy[11]. Bell tends to solve the problems of ossification of political hierarchies by increasing social and meritorious diversity within the ruling party and enabling virtues such as humbleness and sympathy. However, he looks pessimistic once again—he finally recommends elites to "combat the tendency to self-love."[12]

The concept "self-love" here is rather interesting, but I'm afraid it is carelessly and interestingly misused as well. Erich Fromm makes a famous distinction between three key concepts—self-love, selfishness, and narcissism—by arguing that self-love and selfishness are "opposites" because selfish persons are totally "incapable" of loving, no matter whether loving others

[10] Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model*, pp. 121-2, pp. 123-5. "Make or break"—the point sounds tricky, but the original words are exactly like this.
[11] This comment appears having been incidentally made, but it was not. I will revisit Michael Young together with John Rawls in the fifth section.
[12] Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model*, pp. 127-9, p. 135.

or loving themselves.[13] And narcissism is actually a false notion, because it sounds like withdrawing one's love "from others" and turning it "toward his own person", but according to Fromm there are no such withdrawing-and-turning acts like this—once again, selfish persons are just incapable of loving anyone, including self-loving toward himself or herself. I make one step aside to discuss the self-love issue, because in my own work I have referred to "self-love" (rather than the "combat" with it) as a foundation of civic virtues and a remedy for populism and exclusive citizenship.

Returning to the section on legitimacy, Bell's narrative indirectly confirms that (although this is not his original aim) there is only one possibility of legitimacy in a political system that is by no means democratic. It is performance legitimacy. Nothing else. Therefore, philosophically speaking we can do nothing more than return to the moral dilemma of utilitarianism (and consequentialism in general).[14] Moreover, few ruling agents of a non-democratic country in reality are fully motivated and capable of achieving the legitimacy based on pure performance. The entire previous section of this article are dealing with the problem of legitimacy in a political meritocracy—I believe I have sketched a better narrative of political legitimacy than what Bell's book could achieve. And I shall not repeat this work here.

In brief, with reference to the above-mentioned challenges to meritocratic elitism and my liberal critiques of political meritocracy, the problem of corruption can be solved by democratic accountability, and ossification by civic virtues and

[13] Erich Fromm, *The art of loving* (London: Thorsons 1995), pp. 47-8.
[14] Not just utilitarianism in ethics. Also keep in mind those liberal critics of utilitarianism in contemporary political philosophy.

active citizenship.[15] Furthermore, by pondering very carefully the contrast between ossification and equality, we may arrive at a better relationship between good leadership and active citizenship: in an egalitarian society with sufficient mobility, leadership is just a specific case of citizenship.

For a reader from China (or more generally, from an undemocratic society) with liberal and egalitarian beliefs, all books and articles in defense of political meritocracy are too politics-focused. What's more, even apparently purely leadership-focused. This feeling helps explain why I esteem Bell's writing and augmentation, but remain uneasy and restless about many of the points he has made and the cases he has adopted. He and I, we have different starting point when determining the position, laying the tone, and establishing the narrative.

I would like to quote Robert Nozick once again: "moral philosophy sets the background for, and boundaries of, political philosophy. What persons may and may not do to one another limits what they may do through the apparatus of a state, or do to establish such an apparatus. The moral prohibitions it is permissible to enforce are the source of whatever legitimacy the state's fundamental coercive power has."[16]

Nozick's rule for political theorists is not only urgent for libertarians, but also appealing for all liberals and egalitarians and beyond. Rooted in this, modern political philosophy is about how every individual citizen and person should be treated equally as equals. Accordingly, in order to reconcile liberal democracy and

[15] In fact, both corruption and ossification are manifestations of the lack of performance legitimacy. No need to parallel legitimacy with corruption and ossification.

[16] Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books 2013), p. 6.

political meritocracy, I have to start with such interlinking concepts as negative and positive liberty/freedom, moral and social equality, autonomy, social justice, inclusive citizenship, pluralism and deep diversity, meritocratic empowerment, as well as research issues like what every individual deserves, what we owe each other and who "we" are in different contexts.

Egalitarian observers may feel offended upon hearing some untenable and poorly-argued viewpoints from critics of democracy and advocates of meritocracy (sometimes the former and the latter do not belong to the same camp). For example, one author argues that "political participation corrupts" and the people are supposed to have "the right to competent government."[17] Some other authors argue that ordinary people without willingness and motivations to be an active citizen should have the "right to be left alone" and be free from political participation.[18] I confess I feel relieved because I haven't found such misuse of "rights" in Bell's works.

Anyhow, an individual-focused theorization is necessary for every academic writer in contemporary political philosophy, no matter whether in the east or in the west. By "individual", I mean regular[19] individual citizens, not privileged individual social members with or without virtues and merits. Otherwise, why does good leadership matter? Again: politically speaking, leadership is just a specific case of citizenship. Generally speaking

[17] Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2016).

[18] Ruiping Fan, "Confucian Meritocracy for Contemporary China," and Tongdong Bai, "A Confucian Version of Hybrid Regime: How Does It Work, and Why Is It Superior?", in Daniel A. Bell and Chenyang Li (eds.), *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy*.

[19] Regular, common, average, ordinary… I don't know which is the best word; I try to be both respectful and accurate.

in moral philosophy, there is no such virtue that can be or need be well defined solely by leadership—we cannot become a good leader without being a good citizen or a good person at first.

Perhaps, a narrowly defined, leadership-focused meritocracy can, at best, only be regarded as an "alternative" to a narrowly defined democracy. Then it's not surprising that in Bell's book democracy is narrowly referred to as electoral democracy—the system described as "one person, one vote".

In other words, when we talk about liberalism and democracy, political philosophy is rather inclusive; when we talk about meritocracy, suddenly, political philosophy is narrowed down to a theory of leader selection and promotion. As a result, the task of a theory of liberal meritocracy (if we do need conceive such a system) includes: 1. to bring back the inclusive contents; 2. to evaluate and revised the aim of leadership-and-selection-focused political meritocracy.

Just like what I have remarked in the introductory paragraphs of this article, everything looks like a circle when I try to talk about an alternative to an alternative. I am revisiting, reexamining, and re-adopting those normative presuppositions challenged or ignored by Bell's works.

III
A Retreat of the Same Author's Theorization? From a Horizontal to a Vertical reconciliation

A politics-focused political theory tends to fail to capture the actual and complicated situations of individual citizens. A relevant case happens in Bell's own works: in his former book *Beyond Liberal Democracy* which is subtitled as "political thinking for an East Asian context" and contains a lot of caring

observations about democratic education, international human rights NGOs, minority groups, migrant workers, etc., the narratives and theorizations sound more democratic and less "elitist" than those in his book on political meritocracy.

The specific case I intend to mention here has also been emphasized by Bell himself: "I have been a strong defender of the second model for nearly two decades. I have changed my mind, however, and now I think the third model is best." The models are for the reconciliation of democracy and meritocracy, among which the "second" is a horizontal model that combines democracy and meritocracy at the top and the "third" is a vertical model that implements democracy at the bottom and meritocracy at the top.

I regard this as a retreat, or a regression. Bell may not agree with me.

For a theorist of Confucian democratic citizenship, the horizontal model is already seriously problematic.[20] For me, for a Chinese citizen and observer, the most urgent current problem might be that the vertical reconciliation model cannot work well under an authoritarian or post-totalitarian[21] regime—it can only intensify the ossification.

China has inherited at least two political legacies: the Confucian-Legalist tradition (not the ideal Confucian model) and

[20] See Sungmoon Kim, "To Become a Confucian Democratic Citizen: Against Meritocratic Elitism."

[21] There is a precise distinction between the authoritarian and the post-totalitarian regimes in Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimora: Johns Hopkins University Press 1996). I use this two terms just in a historical manner here.

the communist totalitarianism. A real reflection on the combination of the two is the starting point to conceive and revise any pertinent moral and political philosophy for the economic, political, social, and cultural issues in and from China.

A counter-model for making sense of everything in reality in China, in contrast with Bell's "China model" of political meritocracy, is a vertical structure with centralized power at the top and atomized society at the bottom. In a historian's words, this is a "large-community-based" (大共同体本位) system (see Qin 2003) in which there exists only one way of association and unity and all social and private resources are subject to and mobilized for the sole political authority. This large-community model forces us to reconsider communitarianism and its relevance in contemporary China. Besides, this model resembles Hannah Arendt's interpretation of totalitarianism's origins and maintenance in the making of a "classless" mass society.[22]

To be fair, the brief description and comparison above might be indispensable, because personally speaking, Bell's theorization of political meritocracy has a distant root in the liberal-communitarian debate and the related moral pluralism and contextualism (see all his other works) while my critiques of meritocratic elitism has a natural connection with libertarian and republican reflections on totalitarianism[23] and further with liberal-egalitarian reflections on libertarianism and republicanism.[24]

[22] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 1973), pp. 317-8.
[23] See my unpublished undergraduate thesis in 2007.
[24] See my unpublished PhD dissertation in 2014.

IV
Personalization of Academic Writing and Misunderstandings from Readers

It might be also based on moral contextualism that Bell's academic works have a clear "personalization" style, among which the book on political meritocracy seems the least personal. But it still uses quasi-personal experiences as essential sections, which makes the whole argumentation more journalistic and less academic.

It is, once again, his defense of the vertical model of "democratic Meritocracy"[25] that appears problematic. In the most original and decisive section of this book, he draws mainly on a personal interview with Li Yuanchao (then Minister of the Organization Department of the Communist Party of China Central Committee) as the supportive materials.

The advantages of personalization in academic writing (or: writing in general) are obvious. It helps create an information symmetry between the author(s) and the reader(s), and ensures that the readers would not feel too far removed when considering each controversial argument or statement that tends to incur misunderstandings. For normative research, it helps reduce readers' expectation of alleged "truth" or universal knowledge. But personalization is also the source of misunderstanding. When neither the writer(s) nor the reader(s) can deal well with the causation and other relationships between one piece of information and another, redundant knowledge is the burden. In

[25] Bell regards the reconciliation between democracy and meritocracy as "democratic meritocracy" and use this phrase as the title of Chapter 4. But in my opinion, not every reconciliatory model deserves "democratic" as the adjective.

this case, an increased amount of information tends to increase prejudice.

The positive examples in my opinion include Bell's former books on China's "new Confucianism" and on the spirit of cities, and also G. A. Cohen's book that is famously titled as *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich*.[26] And one lesson worth learning I have in mind lies in Ernst Cassirer's comment on why Immanuel Kant could be one of the best readers of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: "Kant regarded Rousseau, although he was Rousseau's immediate contemporary, from a much greater distance than is for us today the case. … He saw in him the author of the *Discourse on Inequality*, the *Social Contract*, the *New Helois*, not of the *Confessions*, which appeared only later when Kant's notion of Rousseau had long been fixed."[27] Based on this, Cassirer refuted Johann Gottlieb Fichte's belief that "what kind of philosophy a man chooses depends upon what kind of man he is,"[28] and also showed all considerate writers and sympathetic readers the importance of moderation and the limits of information.

V
Justifications Left for Meritocratic Elitism: Historical and Theoretical

From Cassirer's point of view, I can no longer have the luck Kant had when he was that unique reader of Rousseau.[29] I know

[26] G.A. Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich* (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2001).
[27] Ernst Cassirer, *Rousseau, Kant, Goethe: Two Essays*, trans. James Gutmann et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1970), p. 58.
[28] Ibid., p. 55.
[29] I believe every philosophy major knows that story about Rousseau, Kant, and taking a walk. Since the discussion has arrived at this (I did not expect it

too much about Bell. And thanks to Bell's writing style, anyone who has read through all of his writings would be as much informed as I am. However, as a reader trying to be sympathetic as well as a researcher trying to be thorough and inclusive, I shall in this final section revisit the main argument(s) about political meritocracy and conceive the historical and normative justifications left for it.

Recent authors and defenders of the theory of political meritocracy have a commitment to institutionalizing PM and embodying its moral values as an alternative to liberal democracy. But the written theories have failed to respond to the real challenges in contemporary political philosophy, and have even evaded all the difficult questions about which liberalism (e.g., theories of social justice and citizenship) and the theory of democracy (e.g., theories of deliberative democracy) have been deeply concerned. We hereby need a further alternative, or the return of liberal values.

The fundamental principles of political meritocracy can be traced back to an old intuition about division of labor: the most competent and potentially competent ones should be selected and trained to take the positions and responsibilities in social and public life. But in this sense, almost all human institutions and organizations have self-expectations and promises about meritorious decision and management. As for the history of human political systems, no matter whether abdicated or hereditary, aristocratic or republican, centralized or decentralized, authoritarian or democratic, every single system always has the actual need for meritocratic selection and meritorious

when starting typing), I would like to dedicate this article to my Muse whose significance for me is like Rousseau's for Kant.

governance, or at least makes self-justifications based on meritorious performance.

Strictly speaking, meritocracy can be better described as a principle or an indication independent from and utilized by all concrete forms of government rather than a specific political model or organization paralleled with other political systems (such as democracy). As an indication of good or bad governance, meritocracy is orthogonal[30] to the distinction between different forms of government. Considering "(be) meritocratic" can be a predicate or attributive of any political system without forming an oxymoron, "meritocracy" need not be a subject term denoting a specific political system.

As a selecting and promoting method, meritocracy becomes and remains an outstandingly fair and just principle whenever the prevailing method is identifying and choosing from candidates based on their social background and connection (openly or secretly). Historically speaking, this sub-conclusion helps explain why (political) meritocracy is desirable as the source of openness and equal opportunities in ancient societies and some contemporary countries.

In Michael Young and John Rawls's works, however, the critiques of meritocracy are substantially the reflections on the self-ownership of one's talent and merits (including political

[30] I borrow the term "orthogonal" from Will Kymlicka's article on the relationship between liberal egalitarianism and civic republicanism, where he argues that "(t)he line between the good and the right is orthogonal to the distinction between identities/virtues and rights/resources." See Will Kymlicka "Liberal Egalitarianism and Civic Republicanism: Friends or Enemies", in *Debating Democracy's Discontent: Essays on American Politics, Law, and Public Philosophy*, Anita L. Allen and Milton C. Regan (eds.), Oxford University Press 1998) pp. 138-9.

talent, virtues and merits) as well as on the libertarian model of free competition and its consequences (including competitions in politics). You may not deserve your talent and merits because they may be or contain morally arbitrary factors.

Bell mistakenly insists that his theorization of political meritocracy differs from what he calls "economic meritocracy"[31] in Rawls's theory of justice, and overconfidently criticizes Young for not distinguishing "clearly between economic meritocracy (people should be rewarded according to their productive capabilities) and political meritocracy (the political system should aim to select and promote leaders with superior ability and virtue)."[32] But from a liberal and egalitarian perspective and an individual-focused attitude, as this article has argued, there is no such distinction between different types of meritocracy.

Throughout human history and the entire democratic-meritocratic debate, there exists one single coherent concept of meritocracy, and this concept remains consistently synonymous in economic and political meritocracy. Bell is better to revise his definition than underlines others' failing to distinguish.

As Rawls put it, the principles of social justice assign both "rights" and "duties", and distribute both "benefits" and "burdens" of social cooperation.[33] Also, he defines one situation of the "equally open" sub-principle of the second principle as "equality as careers open to talents" in contrast to "equality as equality of fair opportunity", and then argues that "a meritocratic society is a danger for the other interpretations of the principles of justice but not for the democratic conception" (i.e., the

[31] Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model*, pp. 5-6.
[32] Ibid., p. 239.
[33] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 4.

difference principle regarding fair opportunity). Specifically, the key problem with the meritocratic "social order" is that it "follows the principle of careers open to talents and uses equality of opportunity as a way of releasing men's energies in the pursuit of economic prosperity and political dominion."[34] In this sense, Bell's political meritocracy shares the same feature and problem.

While liberals (such as Rawls) worry about the origins of meritocratic societies,[35] theorists of political meritocracy worry about the corruption of citizens and the incompetence of active citizenship.[36] It appears more like a debate based on normative orientations. And referring to the conceptual structure and the relevance to contemporary politics, the former do better.

Since the egalitarian critiques of meritocracy are substantially the reflections of libertarianism, egalitarian liberalism provides solutions to a more extensive range of political and economic issues. On the contrary, the undemocratic society promoting political meritocracy has the risk to degenerate into authoritarian libertarianism—meritocratic elitism ignores individual citizens' right to be moral beings and authoritarian libertarianism undermines the right to more social resources.

I have, in the first section of this article, sketched a theory of liberal (political) meritocracy in light of citizenship theory; I can further conceive another theory of egalitarian (general) meritocracy drawing on theories of distributive and non-distributive social justice. Egalitarian meritocracy means, to name

[34] Ibid., p. 57, pp. 91-2.

[35] Rawls's caution about meritocratic societies also helps interpret and remedy, for example, populism.

[36] For example, Daniel A. Bell, "Taking Elitism Seriously: Democracy with Confucian Characteristics," in *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006), ch. 5.

one aspect, if an individual person remains at a disadvantage in a meritocratic competition because of his or her limits of abilities and virtues, he or she should have access to social and educational support funded by the political system.[37]

If the terminology of meritocracy is desirable at all, "liberal meritocracy" and "egalitarian meritocracy" are among the few versions (if any more) of meritocratic rules that can be plausible in general. In particular contexts, libertarian meritocracy as careers open to talents remains a decent principle in any circumstance where the prevailing model is distributing opportunities and resources according to social strata, privileged backgrounds (e.g., gender, race), or other morally arbitrary contingencies.

Regarding political meritocratic elitism alone, two normative justifications are left for contemporary societies: first, the necessity of modern division of labor which leads to efficiency; second, the weakened particularity of public and political life, which guarantee the diversity of conceptions of well-being (εὐδαιμονία). And the common precondition is a sufficient and equally important position of citizenship beside the focus on leadership as well as, once again, the basis of moral egalitarianism and equal opportunities and possibilities for self-realization and self-improvement of every regular person.

In a society that cannot support the openness to the negative liberties of its members, if a theorist deliberately emphasizes the selection and promotion of members with superior leadership

[37] Is sounds not new. It sounds like what is called "moral welfare" in a theory of Confucian democratic citizenship (Sungmoon Kim, "To Become a Confucian Democratic Citizen"), or a capability approach to human well-being (Amartya K. Sen *Commodities and Capabilities* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

and virtues (and even further regards this as a unique, desirable "model"), the argumentation always tends to induce a great deal of misunderstanding and to introduce limited academic resources into plenty of debates that are originally not important at all.

However, personally speaking, in the intellectual adventure of this article I have been reviewing the most thrilling parts of contemporary Anglo-American political philosophy in the colorful light of Bell's theorization of political meritocracy – an inspiring work is supposed to help with this.

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SYMPOSIUM

THE CHINA MODEL

THE CHINA MODEL
POLITICAL MERITOCRACY AND THE LIMITS OF DEMOCRACY

BY

LUIGI CARANTI

© 2017 – *Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series)*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 127-144
Luiss University Press
E-ISSN 2240-7987 | P-ISSN 1591-0660

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The China Model Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy

Luigi Caranti

The book by Daniel A. Bell is intended to be provocative and in large part succeeds.[1] The main thesis is that democracy, narrowly construed as a one person, one vote principle, is not only less perfect and beyond criticism as Western common sense assumes, but intrinsically flawed and comparatively worse than the alternative of political meritocracy. Bell lives in Beijing where he has been teaching for a decade after an academic experience in Singapore. The author thus has firsthand experience of the two political systems that best approximate the ideal of anti-democratic political meritocracy defended in the book. Moreover, he is—I hope he will agree with this characterization—a secular believer in Confucianism, which is not merely the dominant and most widespread moral/religious culture in China, recently rediscovered by the Communist party as a valid alternative to Marxist-Leninist ideology, but itself a system that supports merit as a criterion to select political leaders.

Bell's analysis is particularly welcome because it complements a now rising and perhaps too long awaited debate among Western normative theorists about the possibility that, after all, democracy may not be the "least bad" political system. Bell uses criticisms of

[1] Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2015). Parenthetical references refer to this text.

 Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series), Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 127-144
Luiss University Press
E-ISSN 2240-7987 | P-ISSN 1591-0660

democracy already present in political theory and originally reinterprets them. Democracy has a tendency to prioritize electors' short term interests at the expenses of future generations. It leans towards various forms of tyranny—of the majority famously, but also of the minority, either in the form of wealthy sectors exercising excessive political influence or of various small groups that have a *de facto* veto power. Democracy also seems to be intrinsically unfair to those who are not part of the political community and yet are influenced by the policies decided 'within'. Finally, it promotes a divisive and bellicose public spirit as a result of the competition among parties and individuals.

To counter the limits of democracy the author proposes to pay attention to the experience of political systems that are often more criticized than understood, in particular the form of government that is now in power in the People's Republic of China. Bell's general line of thought is to suggest that—normatively speaking—the best political system, where 'best' is intuitively understood as most efficient at promoting the community's well being, is a system in which democratic elements are combined with 'meritocratic' ones. In particular, we should abandon the one person, one vote principle to (s)elect the central level of government. Only leaders selected on the basis of their proven intellectual and moral abilities should be appointed.

Every standard political theorist of the West has much to learn from Bell's book, at least given his firsthand knowledge of a system we know at best from books and papers (if we do). My task here, however, is more that of highlighting problematic points in Bell's theory rather than praising its numerous virtues. I would like to raise a number of issues that seems to be either not sufficiently developed or clearly stated and yet still problematic. These points are strongly related with one another and what I say

about one will be further clarified and hopefully strengthened by what I say about the others.

To begin with, the comparative assessment of democracy and meritocracy is mainly run by taking the models of the USA and China. I fear that this choice make Bell's case not 'harder', as he says (p. 20), but too easy. On the one hand, of all anti-democratic countries China is certainly not the worst, and even the harshest critic of autocracy could not deny China's great economic success in the last decades, with the eradication of poverty for large sectors of its population. On the other hand, and this is the central point, it is very questionable that the USA is the best democracy one could find out there, especially if one focuses on democracy's shortcomings mentioned above.

Secondly, I would like to question Bell's basic notion of politics. The reader (I, at least) often has the impression that politics is considered all about finding efficient means for pre-established or at least agreed-upon goals. Given this assumption, it is then asked whether democracy or political meritocracy is better equipped to reached those goals. However, it is reasonable to assume that part of the political life is about deciding which goals we want to pursue collectively, not merely who has the best plan to reach unproblematic and largely shared ones. If this is true, then the case in favor of political meritocracy becomes immediately harder. Leaders non-democratically selected will have choose the ends of the political community, and even intuitively their higher intellectual and moral abilities will look too thin as a legitimizing basis to do that. Strictly related is the problem of deciding who is a *moral* leader. It is relatively easy to understand the areas of knowledge a good politician needs to master, but it is less clear what makes a leader ethically up to the task, unless one understands that in the narrow sense of uncorrupt. Who is a moral politician seems to depend on what

goals matter to us as a collective body, which takes us back to the previous point.

Thirdly, if everything Bell says about the flaws of democracy and the virtues of political meritocracy is correct, then one wonders why he still wants, as he does, democracy at the lower levels of government. It may be true, as he says (p.171), that the issues the central governments deals with are both more difficult and more impactful than the ones local leaders usually face. And yet most of the reasons Bell presents to show that political meritocrats would do better than elected leaders seem to be relevant also for the selection of local leaders. After all, it is debatable that the quality of our life does not depend considerably on the kind of leaders we are most in contact with.

Fourthly, I have serious reservations about the referendum against elected democracy Bell suggests to back up the legitimacy of CCP's rule in China. As far as I can see, but I may have missed something because the point is too trivial, the choice Chinese people would have is between leaving things as they are and having 'a more open form of political meritocracy, with more freedom of speech and more freedom to form social organizations, but without one person, one vote to chose top leaders' (p.176). If this is the option, a victory of the yes would count as a support for a non-democratic rule in the same way in which my preference for an ice-cream with some chocolate over one with none counts as my disliking chocolate.

The fifth point, and perhaps most important, is the following. Bell's proposal is similar to the praise of epistocracy (considered as a better alternative to democracy) Jason Brennan has recently put forward.[2] It is similar to the extent that they share both the

[2] J. Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2016).

conviction that the average voter is often uninformed or too partisan (Brennan's categories of 'hobbits' and 'hooligans') and a preference for a government by the most knowledgeable. Bell is therefore vulnerable to all powerful replies Brennan attracted, most importantly the ones by Christiano.[3] We will have to assess these criticisms while deciding whether the point of dissimilarity between Bell and Brennan—the fact that only Bell insists in a non-occasional manner on the necessity that leaders be selected according to moral, not only intellectual merit—is sufficient to render Bell's proposal immune from Christiano's attacks.

I
The Champion of Democracy
Making One's Case Hard or Easy?

Bell's book is a work in political theory with tentatively universal validity. What he says about democracy and meritocracy is meant to apply in general, not only to certain specific political and social contexts. However, the book is also intended a) as a comparative analysis between the political systems of the two most powerful economies currently competing for world leadership and b) as a normative guidance for political reform in China. How harmoniously these two dimensions sit together is in itself an interesting question which I won't be able to pursue here. What I want to ask is whether selecting the USA as the 'champion' of democracy and China as the best approximation to political meritocracy does not weaken the theory. Bell thinks (p. 20) that referring to the USA—the most ancient and solid

[3] T. Christiano, Review of *Against Democracy*, by J. Brennan (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2016), available at http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/against-democracy/.

democracy—makes his case against democracy harder. I doubt that.

Let us focus on the major shortcomings Bell sees in democracy. It will be recalled that, leaving aside for the moment the problems of voters ignorance and of incompetent leadership which we will deal with later, these are: a) a tendency to prioritize electors' short term interests, b) the tyranny of the majority, c) the tyranny of the minority (mainly understood as tyranny of the wealthiest), d) unfairness to outsiders and e) promotion of divisive and bellicose public spirit. My simple question here is the extent to which these 'structural' shortcomings apply to rather egalitarian and European-style democracies such as Sweden or Germany. The European welfare democracies (but something similar could be said for Canada) are significantly different than the USA and on all counts listed by Bell fare much better. Regarding the charge of tyranny of the ignorant, partisan, and/or irrational majority, with its more or less inevitable outcome of incompetent/unfair leadership, both Scandinavian governments and German leaders can hardly be charged with that. Citizens are hardly ignorant given the good functioning of public schools and universities, the free debates on public issues going on TV and largely read newspapers, the uncensored debate going on in social media and a general commitment to the value of pluralism in the source of information. Obviously this is not to say that all or most Germans or Swedes are experts in political matters or have a grip on the complexities of our world. But certainly, unlike most sectors of the American population, they have the means to become informed if they want and to listen to the 'whistle blowing' of experts against charlatans. Think of the way in which most European democracies remained faithful to their commitment to a common currency during the last economic crisis in spite of the many populist forces asking for a return to their national currency. Similarly, think of the way in which these

countries have rejected the rise of racism against immigrants despite the attempt of the extreme right to speculate on people's fears. And finally, think how likely would be for Germany or Sweden to elect someone like Donald Trump as head of the executive. Given the more egalitarian and welfare oriented nature of North-European democracies, it is also fair to say that they are relatively immune from the second of Bell's charges, the tyranny of a wealthy minority. I would add that given their rather well tested and by now old electoral systems, those democracies are also capable of making even difficult decisions (think of the sudden opening of the German borders in 2015 to receive immigrants) without being vetoed by minorities or interest groups. Thirdly, given German, Scandinavian and to a certain extent generally European commitment to issues such as climate change and migrants/refugees' rights, also what Bell calls the tyranny of the voting community does not seem to affect terribly those democracies. This is not to say that national interest at times stands in the way of policies that would favor a more balanced harmonization of interests of the voting community and, say, the human rights of migrants. Think of the belated endorsement by Germany of the principle that refugees arriving to the Greek or Italian shores cannot be a problem for Greece and Italy only. Also think of the questionable decision to outsource to Erdogan's Turkey the duty to evaluate the request for refugee status of migrants – most of whom moving from conflict-prone areas such as Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq. Still, one would have a hard case showing that these democracies are fully under the yoke of a short-sighted and egoistic community of voters. Sweden is after all the country that has the highest refugees/citizens ratio.

Lastly, regarding the tyranny of the competitive individuals and the promotion of a bellicose public spirit, much should be said about the dangers of aiming at a 'harmonious' public sphere.

Here, quite frankly, I simply think China has very little to teach given the systematic clampdown on free press and free flows of information the CCP implements. Incidentally, but not marginally, there is a concrete risk that even the best political meritocracy will have to keep on obstructing the admittedly often irrational orientations of the public opinion. What less violent ways would be in fact open to political meritocracy to silence a rising of a public discontent about the government policies, not to mention a possible discontent about the very meritocratic, anti-democratic nature of the system? But let's concede that the non-bellicose nature of political confrontation is a legitimate criterion for evaluating political systems. While US campaigns usually are rather poisonous and negative advertising against political opponents is heavily used, even a superficial look at the last campaigns in the other democracies we indicated do not seem to signal the degeneration of public spirit Bell alludes to.

If democracies perhaps less ancient and yet demonstrably more inclusive than the USA fare better on Bell's favorite four democratic shortcomings, then one wonders whether the meritocratic alternatives Bell proposes (e.g. the Singapore-style political meritocracy and China's exams system) are that attractive given the compression of individual freedom and civic/political rights they involve (and that Bell readily admits).

II

A Merely Technical Notion of Politics?

A more theoretical point concerns the notion of politics Bell operates with. The reader often gets the impression that for Bell politics is mainly about efficiently implementing pre-established goals. Different political systems are evaluated according to the efficiency in which non-controversial and universal goals such as

the economic development of the society, the eradication of poverty and the fight against unemployment are pursued. Politics is assumed to be about finding the best means for certain goals, not about setting those goals. If this captures the way in which Bell sees politics—more or less consciously—we need to ask how solid this conceptualization is. As political philosophers we know well that even apparent non-controversial political goals such as 'the well-being of the community' or 'the modernization of the society' are indeed ambiguous and controversial. Do we want to pursue the well being of the political community at the expense of the human rights of migrants or not? By 'well being of the political community' do we mean the maximization of societal happiness as measured by the sum of pleasures and displeasures of each member of the society? Many would disagree. These questions attract legitimate and reasonable disagreement which cannot be cured by a better knowledge, but ultimately by a *choice* made by the political community. Surely Bell could reply that not all choices of a political community are moral. Knowledge *and* moral political leaders would know better than a voting crowd how to disambiguate those apparently non-controversial goals. Perhaps not accidentally Bell defines legitimacy as government that is 'morally justified in the eyes of the people."

And yet things are not so simple. To begin with, most countries (and China is no exception) host a pluralism of moral orientations, at the individual and collective level. Hence the very idea of disambiguating in the 'moral' way sounds problematic. Democracies have a less than perfect yet straightforward way of solving the epistemic vagueness of those ecumenical goals. Within the limits set by constitutional guarantees, the majoritarian interpretation becomes the one assumed by political institutions. Political meritocracy, to the contrary, seems to be bound to select the disambiguation dictated by the moral orientation of the ruling class. In fact, this problem is nothing but a specific version of the

general problem, of which Bell is well aware, of whether political meritocracies make any room for moral pluralism. Secondly, there is a problem that is perhaps less serious politically and yet intellectually more intriguing. In the political life of a community, choices are not always between moral and immoral goals or between a moral or immoral disambiguation of 'big goals' such as economic growth or pursuit of national interest. If that were the case, a moral and enlightened elite could make the choice, leaving aside for a moment the problem of pluralism just mentioned. Sometimes the choice is between equally moral or morally indifferent goals (or interpretations thereof). Think of the classical contrast between freedom and security or other instances of conflict of goods *à la* Berlin. If we have the problem to decide how much of our privacy we want to sacrifice to prevent terrorism, neither is there a true or false answer, nor, more importantly, is there a moral or immoral answer. It is just a choice that in democracies we make by having the most popular option win. In a political meritocracy the choice will have to be an arbitrary imposition on the part of the elite.

III

Slippery Slopes: Why Democracy at the Bottom?

Bell's favorite version of political meritocracy is a vertical model that combines democracy at the lower levels with meritocracy at the top level of government. More precisely, the idea is that the system becomes more and more meritocratic as we move up in the hierarchy. My objection, or I should say, request for clarification here is simple. If everything Bell says against the one person, one vote elections is true, and if everything he says about the desirability of selecting leaders on a meritocratic basis is true, then why shouldn't we have meritocracy

also at lower levels? Bell explains the reasons in favor of democracy at the local levels through a reference to few classics in political theory. Aristotle, Montesquieu, Rousseau all famously made the argument that democracy works best in small communities. In addition, two features seem to make 'local democracy' desirable: a) people know pretty well virtues and vices of candidates at local elections, hence they can make responsible, informed choices; b) the issues at stake at local elections have a lesser impact than those for central government. A wrong decision on where to build a road is incommensurably less impactful than a decision to withdraw a major economic power from the Paris Agreement on climate change.[4]

What about these two features, especially if we read them against the backdrop of Bell's reasons in favor of political meritocracy? To begin with, common experience suggests that corruption, nepotism and phenomena of vote-buying are most frequent at the local level. It may be true that citizens know candidates better, but it is also true that what they look for may be something very different than political virtue. While at the level of elections for the central government issues get rarefied and they are usually influenced by ideological commitments, at the local level most of the time people vote for someone who promised a building permit or against someone who issued fines in the past term. So the idea that elections at local level select better is based at best on mixed evidence. Secondly, it may be

[4] Bell (p. 168) also points out that there is widespread consensus on local democracy in China, both among citizens and in the central government. This is however an empirical claim which does not change much the normative picture. Whether local democracy is good or bad cannot be decided according Chinese preference any more than whether democracy at the top is good or bad cannot be decided by the general consensus in Western-style democracies for this form of government.

true that issues at local levels are less impactful *in absolute terms*, but it is questionable if they are so for the people who live under a specific local administration. My life can be rather miserable if I am under a local administration that does not organize well basic welfare services, schools, local police, not to mention if I am targeted as an enemy and therefore constantly fined, denied work permits, showed down in my economic enterprises, just to think of the most obvious examples. Moreover, and more importantly, the point is not whether local administrations are more or less impactful, but quite obviously whether they are better run by elected or selected (in virtue of merit) leaders. If there are reasons to think elected leaders do worse, than the fact that their policies are less impactful (in absolute terms) is quite irrelevant. Now, given that all the reasons Bell provides to convince us that a serious process of selection of leaders on the basis of examinations is better than elections seem to be of universal validity, it is hard not to extend to ban of democracy at the local level. Quite simply, it is better to have a moral person with a high IQ as your mayor (something the examination system should deliver) as opposed to running the risk of having a corrupt representative of a power group inside the local community elected for office—an outcome all but uncommon. This point seems to be further reinforced by the surveys Bell himself cites. At p.138 for example we learn that in 2009 95.9% of Chinese citizens were satisfied with the central government, but only 61.5% were so at the local level where, we learn again from Bell (p. 168-9), democratic elections were made mandatory since 1998. Isn't Bell suggesting to keep democracy at the levels where it already exists and yet enjoys a comparatively low consent?

IV

Legitimacy Through a Non-Grotesque Referendum

Bell is well aware that a system in which political leaders are not chosen by 'the people' but selected on the basis of intellectual and moral merit, no matter how objective this merit is, is under a constant defict of legitimacy. Even if this is defined, as Bell does, as rule morally justified in the eyes of the people, which is of course different that rule shaped/determined by the people, it still seems that citizens, at one point in time at least, should be able to say whether they prefer a meritocratic process to select their top leaders over elections. Bell intersects here a problem similar to the one faced by the theory of human rights when it is asked whether democracy is a human rights. Even philosophers with a solid conviction on the superiority of democracy over other political forms tend to concede that democracy may not be a human right, but insist that there is a human right to self-determination that secures people (or *a* people) the opportunity to chose *in a fully democratic manner* a form of non-democratic rule: a sort of democratic referendum that would reject democracy.[5]

Bell seems to be suggesting something similar for China, but my concern lies with the formulation of the referendum. As noted above, Chinese people would be asked whether they endorse the system as it is with some more opening in favor of civic and political freedom. Hence, top leaders would still be chosen not by the people, local leaders would still be elected and some more civil and political rights, in particular more freedom of speech and a right to publicly dissent would be granted. As

[5] T. Christiano, "Self-determination and the Human Right to Democracy," in R. Cruft, M. S. Liao and M. Renzo (eds.), *Philosophical Foundations of Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015), pp. 459–80.

already announced, this sounds to me like asking whether one wants some more democracy and, having received a distinct yes, interpret the result as a support for a non-democratic form of government. Obviously the referendum should be offering the alternative between democracy *at all lelvels of governement* and democratic meritocracy to have any political meaning. I realize that CCP would never allow this phrasing of the referendum (it is reasonable to think that it wouldn't even allow the rather biased formulation Bell suggests). And yet this seems to be the only formulation the referendum should have if CCP's legitimacy is to be strengthened in a non-grotesque way.

V
Democracy Vs Meritocracy
the (real) terrain of confrontation

The last point of concern I want to raise concerns Bell's point about the voters' ignorance. Much of the entire motivation behind the book rests on the conviction that ordinary citizens in democracies are not informed enough to make rational choices when they select their leaders. Not only are they ignorant, but also they are structurally undermotivated to obtain some knowledge: the influence each single vote has will never compensate the effort and investment it would take to move from a condition of ignorance to one of reasonable competence. As Bell rightly explains, the point is not so much that democratic citizens vote to pursue their personal interests ('they vote their pocketbooks,' as commonsense has it). Actually empirical evidence shows that people vote for the political options that they see as capable of advancing national interest, not directly their self-interest. The problem is rather people's ignorance which results in systematic risk of irrational and low quality decision making. Bell adds to this already quite depressing scenario the

element, borrowed from experimental psychology and sociology, that ordinary people would remain bad at making political decisions even if they were well informed about politics. There is for example the 'pervasive optimistic bias,' noted by the Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman, which leads people to believe themselves to be on average better than other people. But there are also biases that generally lead us to underestimate risk, ignore evidence that disprove our entrenched beliefs and so on. The emphasis on ordinary people's structural ignorance and the suggestion that only those who know better should rule (at least at the top level of government) makes Bell's proposal similar to Jason Brennan's recent book *Against Democracy*. Brennan defends epistocracy as a better alternative to democracy on the basis of roughly the same diagnosis. The average voter is either ignorant about basic political facts (as shown by empirical research, almost 2/3 of voters give incorrect answers to certain significant questions about politics) or partisan to the extent that emotions carry away any objectivity in judging. In sum most voters are, to use Brennan's vocabulary, either 'Hobbits' or 'Hooligans'. To assess the validity of what Bell and Brennan infer from these rather indisputable facts it may prove instructive to look at a recent reaction to Brennan's book by one acute supporter of democracy, Thomas Christiano. Christiano makes a number of interesting points against Brennan but two appear as particularly far-reaching.[6] To begin with, the fact that ordinary people give incorrect answers to basic facts about politics does not mean that they act on bad information. Rather, they might be relying on what Christiano calls 'cognitive shortcuts', that is, other citizens they trust: friends, opinion makers, experts and so on. Moreover, political parties play the role of being gigantic cognitive shortcuts

[6] T. Christiano, Review of *Against Democracy*.

people use to make up their mind. After all, in democracies we do not vote on specific issues except on very limited cases (referenda). We usually either vote for parties or for people supported by them. Democracy in modern times is always representative democracy and parties have always played a crucial mediating role in the whole mechanism. Thus ordinary citizens may afford the luxury of being ill-informed because they legitimately vote following other people they trust. To be sure, trust cannot be blind, argues Christiano, and sometimes there is the need to appeal to independent experts that tell us the truth of some matters (if not unanimously, with a strong majoritarian voice). This is made possible by the availability in democracies of independent entities, such as universities, that at times enter public debate to blow the whistle on charlatans and demagogues. The huge investment democracies make on knowledge and on its diffusion provides a rather solid basis to believe that at the microlevel people make decisions in a way that is less unreliable and irrational than it might appear if one only looks at their specific competence.

Christiano also makes an additional, perhaps more fundamental point against Brennan, which applies to Bell as well. Reasonably high quality democracies (think again of Germany and Scandinavian countries) respond rather well to the interests of the lower strata of the population. It is hard to deny that this has nothing to do with the fact that in democracies all have *some* power—perhaps not the *same* power, if not on paper, but some—to influence political decisions. Taking from the poorest and most ignorant the power to vote for top leaders (what both Brennan and Bell want) appear as a way to make them even powerless than what they are. Autocracies have a rather poor record of poverty eradication. Hence comparatively they score worse than democracies on this crucial point. To be sure, Bell insists that China constitutes a huge counterexample, with

hundreds of million people being lifted out of poverty in the last decades and a better record on malnutrition than democratic India. Moreover, he takes as self-evident that part of the merit for this is to be attributed to the meritocracy that characterizes the selection of political leaders, as opposed, say, to the opening of a country with a critical mass of 1.2 billion people to market economy. As he puts it, on poverty eradication 'the success of meritocracy in China is obvious' (p. 173). At the same time, though, Bell admits (quite surprisingly) that 'corruption, the gap between rich and poor, environmental degradation, abuses of power by political officials, harsh measures for dealing with political dissent, overly powerful state-run enterprises that distort the economic system, repression of religious expression in Tibet and Xinjiang, discrimination against women […] *have become worse while the political system has become more meritocratic*.' (p. 171, my emphasis) Well, this is a rather impressive list which mainly speak to the point Christiano is making. Denying the right to vote to ordinary people and entrusting a self-proclaimed epistocracy risk making the weak even weaker than what they are. *If* that is the case, considering the rather exceptional record of high-quality democracies at ensuring a decent life for everybody, I am afraid China's poverty eradication won't suffice to make political meritocracy look better than democracy, even if one concedes to Bell (and it is a generous concession) that poverty eradication was in fact caused by the meritocratic nature of the Chinese political system.

VI

Conclusion

What remains of Bell's proposal if the above points (or at least some of them) are correct? A lot, to be sure. Much of what he

says to highlight the limits of democracy, including what he says about people's ignorance, remain rather convincing especially if we read it against the backdrop of rising populism and the election of Donald Trump as leader of the most powerful democracy in the world. Equally convincing is the general lesson about the importance of competence for politicians, no matter how they are selected, not to mention the opportunity to balance democratic will-formation with some institutional body capable of introducing professionalism and experience in the final outcome of the law making. Less convincing, perhaps, is the case in favor of a meritocratic system at the top completely severed from the popular control. But in the end, one should not be too exigent. In philosophy, like in life, the *pars construens* is often more difficult than the *pars destruens*. Moreover, it would be truly unfair to say that all we get from Bell's book is a rehearsal of well-known democratic shortcomings, now seen from an 'Asian' perspective, along with an in-depth view of a system we know only from remote. From a normative perspective, his case for *some kind of check* on the competence and morality of top leaders is hard to dismiss as the obsession of a professor's professional disease to evaluate others. His plea for *some kind of* merging between meritocracy and democracy is today more compelling than ever.

University of Catania

SYMPOSIUM

THE CHINA MODEL

ASSESSING CHINA'S POLITICAL SYSTEM: A RESPONSE TO COMMENTS

BY

DANIEL A. BELL

© 2017 – *Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series)*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 145-166
Luiss University Press
E-ISSN 2240-7987 | P-ISSN 1591-0660

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Assessing China's Political System
A Response to Comments

Daniel A. Bell

I would like to express my gratitude to the six commentators. It is a genuine honor for an author to have his words chewed over in such detail by leading minds with different perspectives. The commentators aim not just to criticize, but to move forward. Hence, my "response" is more of an account of what I've learned from their insightful comments that goes beyond what I've written in the book. Let me identify three themes that run through the comments—on method, on the need for democracy, and on the need for political meritocracy—and I will "respond" in accordance with those themes.

I

On Method

Why did I write this book? It comes from my experience living in Beijing since 2004 (I've moved to Qingdao in 2017), especially from my experience teaching at Tsinghua University, the university that trains many of China's political leaders. In the introduction, I wrote that I realized that China's political system has meritocratic characteristics because my own high-achieving students at Tsinghua University were being increasingly recruited in the CCP (p.12). My colleagues devoted a lot of time and energy thinking about political meritocracy, and I was motivated to systematize some of these ideas in book form. Wang Pei's

© 2017 – *Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series)*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 145-166
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comment asks a deeper question: why do political thinkers and actors debate about political meritocracy in particular times and places? Her response, drawing on evidence from Chinese history, is that "debates about political meritocracy tend to reappear, with new iterations and interpretations, precisely when the old political hierarchies become ossified …*The China Model* … appears against a similar background. Along with the anti-corruption drive in China, the debate about meritocracy became important again." This is well put, and I should have made the point in the book. There was a lot of dissatisfaction about actually-existing political meritocracy, and my colleagues and friends agonized over such questions as how to reduce corruption in the political system. Perhaps the system did well selecting and promoting officials with ability (especially at higher levels of government), but clearly it did not do a good job of promoting officials with virtue, since a minimum condition of virtue is that officials should not misuse public resources for their private interests. Wang surveys earlier debates about political meritocracy in China, and shows that they also took place when the gap between the ideal and the reality of meritocracy became exceptionally large, with the consequence that political reformers had to think of ways of reducing the gap. And institutional innovations meant to restore meritocratic elements were devised precisely when actually-existing political meritocracy was not working well.

From my perspective, Wang's insight is particularly valuable because it puts the critical spirit of my book front and center; had I made use of her insights in the book itself, my critics would not have mistaken my book as a defense of political status quo. My question is more historical: is it really the case that debates about political meritocracy tend to appear and reappear precisely when there is a large gap between the ideal of meritocracy and the political reality? Wang's thesis about the history of political meritocracy is worth fleshing out and testing in a more systematic

way against the whole of Chinese political history. It's also worth asking if her thesis applies in other political contexts. Perhaps Plato defended political meritocracy precisely when it seemed furthest from the political reality in ancient Athens, American founding fathers tried to inject elements of political meritocracy in the constitutional system precisely when meritocracy came under sharpest attack, and John Stuart Mill argued that educated voters should have extra votes precisely when the value of education for political leaders was called into question? And there may be a broader point about political theorizing: perhaps political ideals are most strongly defended precisely when the gap is furthest from the social reality? In the case of China, it seems obvious the ideal of harmony was revived, both in official circles (under the Hu Jintao leadership) and by independent intellectuals, precisely when Chinese society seemed to become disharmonious, almost to a breaking point. These hypotheses are worth testing, and I thank Wang for bringing them to the table.[1]

Let me say more about method. As noted in my new preface, my method is contextual political theory, meaning that I try to provide a coherent and rationally defensible account of the leading political ideas of a society's public culture (p.xii). The method is applied to the case of contemporary China, and I argue that the leading political ideal in China – widely shared by government officials, reformers, intellectuals, and the people at large – is vertical democratic meritocracy, meaning democracy at lower levels of government, with the political system becoming

[1] I'd also like to thank Wang for pointing out that arguments about political meritocracy in Chinese history were shaped by both Confucian and Legalist insights. I did note that Confucianism is not the only way to justify political meritocracy (p.10), but I should have highlighted the (explicit and implicit) role of Legalism in shaping historical debates about how to institutionalize political meritocracy.

more meritocratic at higher levels of government (p. xiii). The book discusses the gap between the ideal and the reality and argues for ways of reducing this gap. But I do not mean to imply that the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy should be used to evaluate other political systems that may be inspired by different leading ideals. In particular, I do not think that the ideal should be used to criticize Western societies with a long history of democratic ideals still widely endorsed by the people today. Hence, Luigi Caranti's account of my view as the claim that "we should abandon the one person, one vote principle to (s)elect the central level of government" needs to be qualified. I disagree if "we" refers to societies (such as Italy or Canada) where liberal democracy seems to be deeply institutionalized and endorsed by the people. My argument is contextual, it is not meant to be, as Caranti puts it, "a work in political theory with tentatively universal validity."

But I thank Caranti for forcing me to think more about why the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy should be used to evaluate the political reality in China, but not necessarily elsewhere. There are four reasons. First, size matters: the ideal only applies in a large country. Caranti asks why I tend to compare China with the United States rather than European countries such as Sweden that more effectively realize the ideal of liberal democracy. The reason is that it is much more difficult to rule and manage huge and incredibly diverse countries such as China or the United States, and it is not helpful to compare China with small, relatively homogenous countries endowed with plentiful natural resources.[2] Moreover, at higher levels of

[2] In the same vein, Francis Fukuyama argues that Denmark is the country that comes closest to realizing the ideal of liberal democracy (see his book *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of*

government of large countries, problems are complex and often impact many sectors of society, the rest of the world, and future generations. In large countries, political success is more likely with leaders that have political experience at lower levels of government and a good record of performance. Electoral democracy may be appropriate for small countries or at lower levels of government of large countries; even if things go wrong – say, too much populism small minded navel-gazing at the cost of neglecting long-term planning and concern for future generations and the rest of the world – it's not the end of the world. But it may well be the end of the world if things go drastically wrong at the top of big and powerful countries. Nobody worries about the fact that Nicaragua hasn't signed up to the Paris accord on climate change, but President Trump disregard for the accord may well be disastrous for the world. The policies of leaders at the top of huge political communities shape the lives of hundreds of millions people, including future generations and the rest of the world. Hence, the ideal of vertical political meritocracy is more appropriate to assess the higher levels of political systems of large countries like China.

Second, the ideal of political meritocracy has a long history in China. More than 2,500 years ago Confucius defended the view that exemplary persons (*junzi*) have superior ability and virtue (as opposed to the earlier view that *junzi* have aristocratic family backgrounds), and since then Chinese intellectuals have argued over which abilities and virtues matter for government, how to

Democracy (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015). But it seems absurd to suggest that the political system of a relatively homogenous, well-off country of 5.7 million people surrounded by small, friendly neighbors should be used as the benchmark for assessing political success in the United States (not to mention China).

assess those abilities and virtues, and how to institutionalize a political system that aims to select and promote public officials with superior abilities and virtues. It is no exaggeration to say that ideal of political meritocracy was taken for granted in most political debates in Chinese history. And China's two thousand year history with a complex bureaucratic system can be viewed as a constant effort to institutionalize the ideal of political meritocracy. But the ideal does not necessarily apply in political contexts where the ideal of political meritocracy was not so central, and without a long history of bureaucracy inspired by meritocratic ideals. Moreover, it is extremely challenging to build up institutions inspired by the ideal of political meritocracy, and it takes decades for such efforts to show some success (in contrast, it is not so difficult to institutionalize free and fair competitive elections, even in chaotic countries such as Iraq or Afghanistan; whether those elections lead to good results for the political community is a different question).

Third, the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy has inspired political reform in China over the last three decades or so. A typical trope in the Western media is that there has been substantial economic reform in China, but no political reform. But that's because electoral democracy at the top is viewed as the only standard for what counts as political reform. If we set aside this dogma, it's obvious that the Chinese political system has undergone substantial political reform over the last few decades and the main difference is that there has been a serious effort to (re)establish political meritocracy. The country was primed for rule at the top by meritocratically selected officials following a disastrous experience with radical populism and arbitrary dictatorship in the Cultural Revolution, and China's leaders could reestablish elements of its meritocratic tradition, such as the selection of leaders based on examination and promotion based on performance evaluations at lower levels of government—

almost the same system, in form (but not content) that shaped the political system in much of Chinese imperial history—without much controversy. And since then, political meritocracy has inspired political reform at higher levels of government, with more emphasis on education, examinations, political experience at lower levels of government. There remains a large gap between the ideal and the practice, but the underlying motivation for political reform is still the ideal of vertical political meritocracy.

Fourth, survey results consistently show widespread support for the ideal of political meritocracy (aka "guardianship discourse) in China (see p.147 of my book). The ideal is widely shared, much more so than the ideal of selecting leaders by means of elections. And the idea of political meritocracy is also widely used to evaluate the political system. Corruption became such a big issue in the popular mind at least partly because of the expectation that meritocratically selected leaders are supposed to have superior virtue. But the ideal of political meritocracy may not be an appropriate standard for evaluating political progress (and regress) in societies where the ideal is not widely shared and not typically used by the people to evaluate their political leaders.

That's not to deny there are also more general (universal) reasons to support the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy in the modern world. For example, political meritocracy, with its emphasis on high quality leaders with wide and diverse political experience and a good track record of responding and adapting to changing circumstances, may be particularly appropriate in a time of fast technological change and unpredictable global shocks. It may have made sense for U.S. founding fathers to enshrine a rigid constitutional system that is difficult to amend in the late 18th century because they could be quite sure that society wouldn't change much over the course of the next few decades. It was more important to fix a good political system than to allow

for an ever evolving political system that aims to select and promote different kinds of high quality leaders appropriate for different times. But today, the one thing we can be sure about is that the next few decades will bring about radical changes to our current way of life (think of the challenge of AI), and the quality of leaders will matter even more than the quality of our political institutions (more precisely, our political institutions should be designed with the aim of selecting and promoting leaders with wide and diverse political experience and a good track record of responding and adapting to changing circumstances).

In short, there is a mixture of particular and general reasons to endorse the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy as a standard for assessing the success of political reform in China. But the standard may not be appropriate in societies that lack China's particular characteristics, such as a large size, a long history of political meritocracy, a recent history of political reform inspired by the ideal, as well as widespread support for the ideal among the people.

II

On the Need for Democracy

Another more general reason to support political meritocracy at higher levels of government is that it is compatible with most democratic values and practices, unlike, say, fascism or communist totalitarianism. Elections at lower levels of government, non-electoral forms of political participation such as consultation and deliberation, and the freedom of speech are theoretically compatible with political meritocracy at the top. But political meritocracy is not compatible with competitive elections at the top because electoral democracy for top leaders would wreck the advantages of a system that aims to select and promote

leaders with experience, ability, and virtue: an elected leader without any political experience (such as Donald Trump) could rise to the top (and make many beginner's mistakes), an elected leader would have to spend valuable time raising funds and giving the same speech over and over again instead of thinking about policy, and an elected leader would be more constrained by short term electoral considerations at the cost of long term planning for the good of the political community and the rest of the world.

Still, four of the commentators remain unconvinced by my arguments against electoral democracy at the top. Jia Peitao argues that the right to vote may be an essential part of the good life for morally and politically autonomous and self-responsible human beings. I can't argue against these different starting premises other than to reiterate that most Chinese, according to survey data, do not value individual autonomy as the mother of all values: they care much more about a government that performs well and worry less about how it got there. Voting might be valued if it leads to good consequences, but not if it leads to, say, bullying by foreign powers, civil war and economic collapse. More fundamentally, perhaps, the Confucian ideal of social harmony (*he*) —meaning that social relations ought to be characterized by peaceful relations and respect for diversity—is deeply rooted in China, much more so than the ideal of individual autonomy. There is a large gap between the ideal of harmony and the reality in China, but the United States and other large countries are even less harmonious (for some empirical evidence, see appendix one of my book), and competitive elections are likely to further poison social relations in China. Jia argues that "meritocratic elitism" in China leads to a monopolization of social resources which can further polarize society, but is there any evidence that political systems with competitive elections in large countries such as the United States do better at, say, reducing the gap between rich and poor? It is abstractly

conceivable, but Jia doesn't draw on any social science or history to support his theoretical points.

Elena Ziliotti points to the example of Singapore to critique my view that electoral democracy at the top would be bad for China. Singapore has moved from a rigidly authoritarian form of meritocratic elitism to a much more open society, with more freedom of speech, fewer constraints on the freedom of association, and relatively free and fair competitive elections for political leaders, mainly in response to strong demands for a more open society by the country's citizens. I wholeheartedly agree with Ziliotti's account of Singapore's political progress. Similar demands for a more open society will only grow stronger as China modernizes, and I share Ziliotti's view that Singapore can set a good model for China's political future. But I still think China should draw the line at one person, one vote to select top leaders. Singapore, for one thing, inherited British-style electoral democracy, with its fundamental contradiction: the people can choose a leader who threatens to undermine all the achievements of political meritocracy. There is no reason for China to take such a risk. Plus, Singapore is a tiny city-state, without strong obligations to future generations and the rest of the world. China, in contrast, is a global power, with more responsibilities across time and space. It's easy to see how electoral democracy at the top in China would lead to populist pressures that favor the short term interests of voters but it's hard to see how elected politicians are more likely to promote the interests of non-voters who are affected by the policies of the government.

Jean-Marc Coicaud's comment begins with a lengthy and fair-minded reconstruction of my book's main theses. But even he is not persuaded by my arguments against electoral democracy at the top. He suggests that there is a major legitimacy crisis in China: many citizens do not trust their leaders. Corruption is one

potentially "debilitating blow." I agree, and the fact that China does not have democratic elections as a safety valve makes corruption a deadly threat to the political system. With elections, people have the power, or more precisely, they feel like they have the power, to get rid of corrupt leaders every few years (whether they actually do so is a separate question; other large countries with electoral mechanisms such as India and Indonesia are even more corrupt than China). But political meritocracy is a source of legitimacy in China, and if leaders are viewed as corrupt, it's a problem not just for the leaders, but for the whole political system. The good news is that there may be more pressure to deal with corruption in systems with political meritocracy as a source of legitimacy, which may help to explain why China's leaders launched the most extensive, and arguably, the most effective anti-corruption drive in recent history. But the campaign has relied mainly on fear and harsh punishment which may be not be effective in the long term. At some point, there will be a need to rely mainly on moral education, as well as to increase the salaries of public officials and institutionalize the rule of law.[3]

Coicaud suggests that the authoritarian characteristics of Chinese-style political meritocracy also exacerbate the legitimacy crisis:

> lack of trust is a particularly negative indicator in the context of China. Because the regime continues to some extent to be a command system, monopolizes power, tolerates little dissent, and at the same time seeks to support and endorsement of people as a major sign of legitimacy (the Chinese political system does not rule and does not want to rule mainly by force), having people not trusting it is destined to introduce doubts and

[3] See my article "China's Corruption Clampdown Risks Policy Paralysis," *Financial Times*, May 2, 2017.

questions about its legitimacy. It indicates a form of relative fragility to which pluralist democracies are less exposed.

Put differently, if the CCP is viewed as the sole source of power in society, it will be blamed when things go wrong, which can endanger CCP rule. Hence, there is a need to diffuse power, and to give more opportunities for voice and political participation, if only to diffuse responsibility when things go wrong. And what counts as successful performance is no longer straightforward. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was widespread consensus that the focus should be on poverty reduction, with economic growth as the main mechanism to reduce poverty. Good government meant the promotion of economic growth, and there wasn't a deep need to discuss other purposes of government. But now the costs of the no-holds barred approach to economic development, such as rampant pollution and huge gap between rich and poor, are sources of social discontent and the people need to be increasingly involved in helping to shape and prioritize the policies of government.[4] As people become more educated and urbanized, they will also have different sorts of needs. Hence, there are good reasons for China to progress to a more open and pluralistic society. But I would still draw the line at one person one vote because that would undermine what the advantages of political meritocracy, as noted above.[5] Coicaud

[4] Here I would qualify Caranti's view that politics is not just about finding the best means for certain goals, but also about setting those goals (Ziliotti makes a similar point). It depends on the political context: for example, in times of war, the emphasis will be mainly on the best way to win the war. In modern, peaceful, prosperous, and pluralistic societies, however, I fully agree with Caranti's view.

[5] Coicaud raises the question of whether China is in fact a political meritocracy; if there's no political meritocracy, it would render this whole issue moot. While I think there's a large gap between the ideal and the reality, I do

might reply that more openness wouldn't solve the legitimacy problem so long as people are not given the opportunity to show that they endorse the political system. Carefully controlled polls and surveys won't do the trick. Here too I agree. That's why I proposed the idea of a referendum on vertical democratic meritocracy, with, say, a 30 year mandate for rule by the CCP, along with more civil and political freedoms but short of one person, one vote for top leaders. If there is a strong yes vote, it would quell voices that question the legitimacy of the whole system. The leaders could loosen up controls on society, without worrying that the whole thing will collapse. There might still be emigration to wealthier countries for economic reasons, but such emigration would not be viewed "as a way of passing judgment on the country left behind."

Caranti, however, objects to the way I formulated the proposal for a referendum. I argued for a referendum that would ask the Chinese people to vote "yes" in favor of a more open form of political meritocracy, with more freedom of speech and more freedom to form social organizations, but without one

think that the political system is largely inspired and shaped by the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy. Coicaud points to a study suggesting that meritocracy is fostered at lower levels of government but that hierarchy and loyalty play a key role at higher levels. But such studies in the political science literature typically deploy a narrow definition of meritocracy as good performance in the sense of economic growth. I employ a broader definition of political meritocracy as the selection and promotion of public officials with superior intellectual ability, emotional intelligence, and virtue (chapter 2). Emotional intelligence in politics—meaning the ability to engage with and persuade different kinds of stakeholders – matters more at higher levels of the political system, and it's a good sign if public officials at higher levels have many political allies and friends because it helps them to get things done. So the fact that loyalty and patronage play a more important role at higher levels may be an indication that political meritocracy is working well.

person, one vote to choose top leaders and without the freedom to form political organizations that explicitly challenge CCP rule. I also suggested specifying a time period – say, fifty years – long enough to provide stability for the recruitment and training of meritocratically selected leaders but without binding the people to perpetual CCP-style meritocratic rule (pp. 176-77). But Caranti argues that this formulation is "grotesque" without specifying what ought to be the alternative: democracy at all levels of government. My example of the Pinochet referendum in against electoral democracy in 1988—where a "no" did mean democracy at all levels—was meant to suggest precisely the alternative of electoral democracy at the top. But perhaps the alternative would need to be made explicit in the question itself. Still, there would be two obstacles. One is noted by Caranti—the "CCP would never allow this phrasing of the referendum." Even if the CCP does allow this phrasing, however, there's a deeper worry. My proposal was inspired by my own personal experience living in Quebec during the two referenda on Quebec independence in 1980 and 1995. Political debates at the time were deeper and broader than the debates prior to regular provincial elections. Thus, I held the view that referenda on key constitutional changes tend to generate extensive deliberation and relatively informed debate, compared to regular elections where it's hard to generate the same level of interest and enthusiasm on the part of the voter. I confess, however, that Brexit has changed my mind. If the voters of the world's oldest and most mature democracy can vote recklessly on key constitutional questions without any clear roadmap for the future or deep concern for the fate of "foreigners" affected by the result (voters with less personal experience with Europeans were more likely to vote for Brexit), then it does not set an inspiring precedent for China. So perhaps a referendum on vertical political meritocracy would need some constraints on voter participation, such as a simple multiple

choice exam on the political alternatives set by independent experts. These constraints might come at the cost of some democratic legitimacy, but the task would be to design the referendum so there would be enough increased legitimacy to quell complaints about China's closed political system without recklessly endangering the whole meritocratic system.

III

On the need for political meritocracy

Another critique comes from the opposite direction: that I underestimate the need for political meritocracy in China and elsewhere. Caranti asks the question: if political meritocracy is good at higher levels, then why not at lower levels? He recognizes two of the arguments in favor of local democracy: "a) people know pretty well virtues and vices of candidates at local elections, hence they can make responsible, informed choices; b) the issues at stake at local elections have a lesser impact than those for central government." But he notes that the vices of electoral democracy, such as nepotism and voter buying, are most frequent at the local level.[6] I surmise Caranti is making a theoretical argument that he doesn't personally endorse, but in fact this argument is quite common in China. When I present my book in the West, the most typical response (or source of outrage) is that I should not argue against electoral democracy at higher levels. But in China the typical response has been that I should not argue against political meritocracy at lower levels. Village elections are notoriously corrupt, small-minded affairs, and they need to be checked by meritocratic constraints. In my book I had

[6] Coicaud similarly asks if the same problems of electoral democracy in the West are likely to infect local level electoral democracy in China.

reviewed social scientific literature on the topic, and came to the optimistic conclusion that the quality of village elections has generally been improving. But my experience the last couple of years—talking to academics and political reformers, as well as my own personal experience with village elections in Shandong province—has shaken my faith. The problem of vote-buying is so widespread that the anti-corruption campaign doesn't even bother to try to curtail it, unless the abuses are widely publicized. The campaign is supposed to target both "tigers and flies", but perhaps corrupt village officials are viewed as ants, not as bothersome as flies, and the government has no need (and/or capacity) to stamp them out of existence. Instead, the CCP aims to curtail the power of elected village officials by various means, such as trying to ensure that the elected official is also the party secretary or appointing a party secretary from above to counter-balance the power of the elected village mayor. Non-governmental forces are also skeptical about the value of village elections *per se*. Independent intellectuals in Shandong province, inspired by Liang Shuming's work in the 1920s and 30s,[7] train Confucian moral educators to work in villages, partly in order to reduce the influence of the "petty people" (*xiao ren*) who participate in local politics. A few years ago, political actors and thinkers debated the question of whether village elections should be scaled up to higher levels of government, but now the main question is how to inject elements of political meritocracy from higher levels to the village level. That said, I'm still not prepared to give up on the principle of vertical democratic meritocracy. But it's not all or nothing, with zero meritocracy at lower levels and zero democracy at higher levels; it's a matter of tendencies,

[7] See Guy S. Alitto, *The Last Confucian: Liang Shu-ming and the Chinese Dilemma of Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

with more democracy at the bottom and more meritocracy at the top. There may be a need for some meritocracy at lower levels, and some democracy at higher levels. I didn't make this view explicit in my book, but that's my perspective now.

Let me note another change of mind, this time inspired by my experience talking to leaders in the department of organization, the powerful department that selects Chinese leaders. In my book, I described my meeting with Mr. Li Yuanchao, then Minister of the Organization Department (the following year, he was appointed vice-president of China) and I asked him which criteria they use to select and promote leaders. He replied that the criteria depend on the level of government and that intellectual ability and virtue matter most at higher levels of government. To illustrate the rigorous nature of selection at higher levels of government, Li described the procedure used to select the Secretary General of the Organization Department, who was seated nearby. They rely on a complex combination of nominations, written and oral examinations, and inspections to look into the performance and virtue of candidates, with a final decision made a committee of twelve ministers, eight of whom had to be supportive of the candidate. I replied that the organization department should do more to publicize its procedures and guidelines for selecting officials. If the department is demystified, and people understand the mechanics of Chinese-style political meritocracy, there will be more respect for China's political system.

Since then, the organization department has made some efforts to open up. Its criteria for selection and promotion (and demotion) are more transparent. And it has put on mock interviews for visiting dignitaries from abroad, showing how candidates are selected in the interview process, though without naming real people. But we still don't have any clear idea of why

some candidates get promoted, rather than others who appear to be equally well-qualified. I put this question to leaders of the organization department in Shanxi last June (2017). Shanxi was perhaps China's most corrupt province, and they invited me for a government led tour. The point of the tour, I surmise, was to show that they had successfully replaced corrupt cadres with a new group of clean and hard working leaders. I took this opportunity to ask a leader of the province's organization department why the selection process can't be more transparent. If their leaders are so great, surely it would help them make the case, both to fellow Chinese and to the outside world, to show that the leadership selection process is, in fact, rigorous and meritocratic. The organization department leader asked me how we select candidates in academia. I told him that we have a committee that aims to select the best candidates, and we deliberate among ourselves. He asked me if the deliberations are open. I replied, of course not, that would not be fair to the candidates who are not selected. He smiled and said "the same goes for us." And he told me that the organization department – one of the most selective and prestigious departments in the Chinese political system—selects candidates partly according to their ability to keep secrets.

So we should just accept that lack of transparency is an inevitable cost of any organization that aims to select the best candidates. It's true not just of the CCP and academia, but also of Goldman Sachs and the Catholic Church. That's not to say we can't hope for more transparency in the Chinese political system– the words and actions of emperors were tracked by official court historians for posterity in imperial China, and today we can imagine, say, video recordings of the deliberations of CCP leaders to be released fifty years from now. But full transparency is both

unrealistic and unfair to the "losers" in the Chinese political system.[8]

In short, I now think I may have been underestimating the need for political meritocracy in the Chinese political system. The problem is not just that competitive elections at the top would undermine the benefits of political meritocracy. So would a completely free and fair referendum that does not set any constraints on ignorant voters. And competitive elections at lower levels of government, including the lowest level, also need to be checked with meritocratic constraints. Nor is full transparency compatible with political meritocracy. A defender of political meritocracy might well favor a more open political system – as I do – but s/he also needs to accept that there are several trade-offs with democratic values and practices.

Cristopher-Teodor Uglea's comment is an even stronger defense of the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy: he argues that the ideal can and should inspire political reform not just in China, but also in the European Union. Uglea notes that the "High Authority (the precursor the European Commission) was initially created as a supranational meritocratic body to exercise the leadership of the European institutions. In time, however, although the body remained supranational and, generally speaking, meritocratic, its powers were greatly decreased, while the power of the democratic s institutions increased at the top levels." The increase in democracy at the top may have been motivated a widespread desire for democratization of the EU, but it has paradoxically undermined the legitimacy of the EU because the less meritocratic institutions cannot perform as well. Uglea

[8] This section draws on my article "Why China guards its selection secrets so jealously," *Financial Times*, October 30, 2017.

argues that reform of the EU inspired by the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy—more meritocracy at the top, democracy at the bottom, and experimentation in between—would improve the performance of the EU's institutions and hence the legitimacy of the political system in the eyes of the European people. I hope he's right, but Uglea does not discuss (or speculate about) any mechanism that can bring about the "re-meritocratization" of the EU. What are the potential obstacles? Let us return to the four factors that, together, make a strong case for the view that vertical democratic meritocratic is as an appropriate standard for assessing political reform in the Chinese context. First, China is a huge political community. This factor also applies in the case of the EU, so no problem. Second, there is a long and deeply rooted history of political meritocracy in China, an idea that motivated the development of bureaucratic institutions over 2000 years or so. The EU was initially formulated in line with the meritocracy at the top ideal but – compared to China—the ideal of democracy at all levels is far more central to European political culture, at least since the World War II era. So defenders of meritocracy in Europe may be swimming against the cultural current. Third, the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy has been continuously motivating political reform in China over the past three decades or so; in the EU, it has been the opposite tendency. Fourth—and this may well be the most serious obstacle to the (re)implementation of political meritocracy in the EU—there is strong support for political meritocracy in China. In Europe, by contrast, there is more support for populist politicians and demagogues who oppose rule by "elites" from above. Uglea writes that "a rational European citizen would probably end up accepting a Union led by meritocrats, as long as there is a trusted system of selecting them and solid democratic practices at a local and national level" but it's hard to be optimistic.

IV

Conclusion

I must confess I rushed to get this book out because I worried that the whole Chinese political system would collapse and my arguments in favor of political meritocracy would soon be obsolete.[9] But I was too pessimistic. China's leaders have surprised almost everyone with the length and effectiveness of the anti-corruption drive, hence diluting the main existential threat to the political system. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is perhaps at its strongest point ever, and I predict (always a bad idea) that it will continue to reform on the basis of the ideal of vertical democratic meritocracy over the next few decades. Even if the CCP does collapse, the ideal of political meritocracy will probably reassert itself in some form or other in the Chinese political context. The ideal is deeply rooted in Chinese political culture, and there is an even greater need for rule by talented political leaders with experience and a long term outlook to deal with such global challenges as climate change and AI. Since my book was published, I've been to workshops and events with public officials from such countries as Laos, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Nepal who are directly inspired by the Chinese political model and seek to learn from it, and I expect that more developing countries will jump on board soon. My greater worry now lies with the fate of democratic systems. In chapter one of my book, I discussed the four main flaws of electoral democracy (voter ignorance, rule by the rich, lack of concern for non-voters

[9] I have substantial experience with bad academic timing: I wrote a defense of communitarianism shortly before communitarian insights were absorbed by liberal thinkers, which effectively ended the whole liberal-communitarian debate in political theory, and I wrote about "Asian values" shortly before this discourse become obsolete.

affected by policies of government, and the poisoning of social relations), but since then the election of a vulgar demagogue in the United States, combined the rise of extreme right wing populists in Europe, has exacerbated these four flaws, to the point of undermining many citizens' faith in the whole democratic system.[10] As Nathan Gardels puts it, "unless democracies look beyond the short-term horizon of the next election cycle and find a way to reach a governing consensus, they will be left in the dust by the oncoming future. If democracy has come to mean sanctifying the splintering of society into a plethora of special interests, partisan tribes and endless acronymic identities instead of seeking common ground, there is little hope of successfully competing with a unified juggernaut like China."[11] I certainly hope that liberal democracies can improve based on their democratic foundations while also incorporating some meritocratic characteristics. Our world will be better off if two strong but different political systems cooperate in areas of common concern and compete to gain the hearts and minds of the rest of the world. But Chinese-style political meritocracy with democratic characteristics may well be the only one left standing several decades from now.

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[10] For some evidence from the US case, see https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/national/democracy-poll/?utm_term=.2c9ffdb6dc08

[11] Nathan Gardels, "Weekend Roundup: China's Party Congress is a wake-up call for the West," *The Worldpost*, Oct. 28, 2017.

SYMPOSIUM

THE CHINA MODEL

MODELLING MERITOCRACY. DEMOCRATIC TRANSFERENCES AND CONFUCIAN ASSUMPTIONS IN *THE CHINA MODEL*

BY

JUAN CANTERAS AND JAVIER GIL

 Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series), Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 169-201
Luiss University Press
E-ISSN 2240-7987 | P-ISSN 1591-0660

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Modelling Meritocracy Democratic Transferences and Confucian Assumptions in *The China Model*

Juan Canteras and Javier Gil

In his book *The China Model*, Daniel A. Bell argues for the efficacy and the legitimacy of current Chinese meritocracy.[1] According to Bell, the way of selecting top political leaders based on merits and proven capacities has been one key to China's (and Singapore's) astonishing economic growth over the last decades, but this meritocratic tendency in the contemporary Chinese system deeply relates to the Confucian political culture. Certainly, Confucianism is the school of literates, of Ru scholars and of the Mandarins, i.e. the rulers and public servants appointed by competitive examinations. The officials' appointment system was first implemented during Emperor Wu regency in the 2nd Century B.C. Since then, the selection of ministers and officials characterized China's meritocratic structures. Nevertheless, Bell´s sympathy towards Confucianism is not limited to the institutional arrangements and procedures it can inspire nowadays. During his academic years in China, he has

[1] Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model. Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). When not otherwise indicated, parenthesized references are to this book.

Javier Gil wishes to mention that the research that has resulted in this article has been part of the project *Civic Constellation II: Debating Democracy and Rights* (Spain's National Research Fund, Ref.: FFI2014-52703-P).

 Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series), Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 169-201
Luiss University Press
E-ISSN 2240-7987 | P-ISSN 1591-0660

turned from admiring the Confucian system´s ability to achieve 'good outcomes', to substantively assuming the Confucian notions of 'the good'. As he plainly recognizes, Bell has become a Confucian himself.[2]

In the first two sections of this article, we will discuss some philosophical assumptions that support Bell's attachment to political Confucianism. On our interpretation, the procedural innovations and institutional designs proposed in *The China Model* mobilize a whole series of substantial and comprehensive views. Indeed, Bell's arguments are intertwined with a series of ethical, aesthetic, pedagogical, anthropological and ontological notions that place the model within the Chinese Confucian tradition. The harmony-centered worldview consistently upheld by this tradition does not have room for the prevalence of election and competitive multiparty politics in Western democracies. In the third section we will defend the claim that much of Bell's suspicion of electoral democracy (just as so many Chinese thinkers, politicians and citizens) comes from the harmonist socio-political ideal and not only from the ruinous deficits of the Western regimes that he analyses in the first chapter of his book. Certainly, democracy in the history of the West cannot be understood without its agonistic and deliberative dimensions. On our view, the harmonistic core of Bell's meritocracy highlights his assimilation of the success of the participatory and direct democracy experiments undertaken by the Chinese government during the last decades, with processes of public information, consultation, deliberation and decision. Consequently, in the third section of this paper we will discuss the sophisticated integration of the notion of deliberation in Bell's China Model, and, in the

[2] Daniel A. Bell, *China´s New Confucianism. Politics and Every Day Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), chapter 9.

fourth section, its onto-political incompatibities with the agonistic model of democracy defended by Chantal Mouffe. Finally, we will cast some doubts on the supposed universality and the expected transference of the Chinese 'Model'. We suspect that Bell's proposal is so strongly framed within a narrow sociopolitical context and aligned with culturally thick views that it is highly questionable whether it could also work as a standard to be implemented in a wide range of different contexts.

I

Confucian Harmonism

The China Model advocates for a political reform that aims to strengthen and expand the meritocratic features of contemporary Chinese institutions. A 'model' is offered because those features are supposed to serve as an example for other countries in the belief that 'Western democracies can be improved by incorporating more meritocratic institutions and practices' (p. 3). Bell holds that the benefits of such reforms concern matters that could easily raise wide agreements, 'some standards of good government that should not be too controversial', such as the assertion that 'the government should try to structure the economy so that the benefits do not accrue only (or mainly) to a small group of rich people, leaders should not enact policies that wreck the environment for future generations, and the political system should not poison social relations and unduly penalize those who seek harmonious ways of resolving conflict' (p. 19). Assuming that wide agreements about 'the common good' can be made, it is all about deciding which institutional devices, be they democratic or meritocratic, prove to be more able to produce the best outcomes.

However, previous works by this author show that his turn towards Confucianism does not only involve the adoption of meritocratic procedures, but also, and firstly, a series of substantive choices on ethical, aesthetical, anthropological and pedagogical issues. Let us give an example. In *China's New Confucianism*, Bell recreates a debate between Confucius as a university professor and 'an American-trained Chinese liberal thinker' that has a Socratic perspective on learning and education[3]. In the imaginary dialogue, the memoristic and hierarchical education of Confucianism is confronted with the critical and autonomous methods of the Socratic maieutic. Bell makes a considerable effort to defend the virtues of the former approach, by disconnecting it as much as possible from the authoritarian image that any liberal tends to associate with it. Previously, the whole second part of *Beyond Liberal Democracy* had vigorously and widely argued that the tradition of Confucian thinking about education may have some merit in the contemporary world[4]. In the second chapter of *The China Model*, Bell largely recommends the reintroduction of the Confucian Classics in the education and selection of good leaders because "the classics are a rich repository of cultural knowledge about how to act well in politics (and society more generally)" (p. 89). Pedagogical considerations such as the role of history and arts in the ethical and aesthetical cultivation of the wise leaders or the value of 'humility' for the formation of student's character show that Bell's political proposal has larger implications than a mere reorganization of the political institutions. Certainly, a reform aimed at promoting deep, global and long-term cultural changes

[3] *Ibid.*, chapter 7.

[4] Daniel A. Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy. Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

needs to start by creating the conditions in the background educational context.

One of the central concepts of *The China Model* is that of 'harmony', which was also central in his earlier works. In the aforementioned dialogue on education, Bell's critique of critical thinking responds to the evidence that liberal and maieutic approaches undermine the value of harmony, since they provoke discordance and favour egocentric quarrels among the students. According to him, the exacerbation of criticism makes students adopt belligerent attitudes even before they had the opportunity to achieve a real understanding of the issues in question. The urgency in expressing criticism prevents students from developing sound beliefs and mature opinions and gives cause for pedantic disputations instead of contributing to strengthen a disciplined and robust thinking. Against the insistence of the maieutic approaches on the students' self-esteem, Bell emphasizes on the contrary the cultivation of 'humility'. Humility is presented here both as a sort of harmonistic counterpart and as a correction of a dialectical pedagogical approach.

Drawing on a Confucian sensibility, Bell also locates the value of art, and particularly music, in its enabling of an aesthetic experience of harmony. The moral and political implications of this are obvious and directly inspired by the Confucian classics: 'Confucians have long emphasized the moral benefits of music… Precisely because of its effect in breaking down class barriers and generating feelings of emotional bonding, the right sort of music is essential for harmony and social stability'.[5]

[5] Daniel A. Bell, *China's New Confucianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 63-64. Bell does not hesitate to apply these ideas to

In *The China Model*, the concept of harmony is presented in its more strictly political dimension. The importance attached to it comes to the foreground in the assertion that the 'Confucian-inspired view is that people have a fundamental interest in leading harmonious lives, and hence the government ought to prioritize social harmony' (p. 234, note 145). Likewise, it can be gauged by examining the Harmony Index (in the first appendix published on line) 'that ranks countries according to how well they do at promoting four different types of social relations characterized by peaceful order and respect for diversity [and that] can be used to judge social progress (and regress) in China and elsewhere' (p. 10). In contrast to other indexes that highlight human development or democratic indicators,[6] such an interpretation of social progress translated into levels of harmony again makes it clear that Bell's model does not only take from Confucianism the 'instruments' or 'consequentialist tools' for achieving 'good results', but, beforehand, the comprehension of 'the good' itself. The question underlying the quantitative measurements of this exclusive index is whether the election of harmony as a unilateral or overriding indicator of social progress belong to these matters 'that should not be too controversial' (p. 19). Obviously, a series of highly controversial issues and values that involve cultural backgrounds and historical heritages are involved in such a choice.

Maybe the transversal character of the notion of harmony in all these (pedagogical, aesthetical, anthropological, ethical and

contemporary sociological matters like contemporary karaoke-style prostitution; see *Ibid.*, chapter 4.

[6] See for instance the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy index, where China ranks 3.14 over 10 and is qualified as an 'authoritarian regime': https://infographics.economist.com/2017/DemocracyIndex/.

political) areas reveals Bell's complete assimilation to Confucianism. In fact, he does not only admire the historical effectiveness of Confucian institutions but also embraces the very values and presuppositions of the Confucian worldview. Moreover, the priority of social harmony over freedom or equality highlights that the case by Bell and other Neo-Confucians against democracy cannot be understood just as the outcome of indexings for measuring and comparing 'social progress' among different countries. It is above all the coherentist and comprehensive conception of harmony as the greater good that raises their disagreement and discomfort with the political life of Western-style democracies.

II

Harmonism and Hierarchy

From the Confucian-inspired ideal of harmony, 'electoral democracy can exacerbate rather than alleviate social conflict' (p. 54). Confrontations may be unavoidable to some extent, but they are not something that the system has to encourage. On the contrary, election campaigns, candidates' struggles and militant opposition between members and groups inside and outside the parliament are viewed as highly undesirable and alien encroachments, because competitive elections 'instead of allowing for the flourishing of human goodness that underpins social harmony, almost counteract human nature by allowing for, if not encouraging, the demonization of political opponents' (p. 58).

The inherent agonistic nature of democracy is not welcomed by the Confucian harmonistic sensibility. However, it has not been widely considered as undesirable in itself in the Western tradition, but very often as a major virtue of democracy. Unlike

Bell[7], many authors before him have positively valued the strong connections that the Athenian political culture held with sports competition and war. Amongst modern political philosophers, Hannah Arendt famously understood Greek democratic culture as agonistic and this political agonism as a way of differentiating genuine democratic equality from the disturbing 'homogeneity' of modern mass societies:

> This modern equality, based on conformism, is in every respect different from equality in antiquity. To belong to the few 'equals' (*homonoi*) meant to be permitted to live among one's peers; but the public realm itself, the *polis*, was permeated by a fiercely agonal spirit, where everybody had constantly to distinguish himself from all others, to show through unique deeds or achievements that he was the best of all (*aien aristeuein*).[8]

Agonism is constitutively present in Greek political thought and action, and it also pervades Ancient Greek culture. Many authors have noted that it shapes philosophy as a whole. For instance, in the geophilosophical view of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, the socio-conceptual order of the polis, unlike the 'Eastern empires', was not vertical in accordance with theo-political hierarchies. Democracy was rather the political system of the 'friends-rivals' and the relation of equality and competition between free citizens laid in turn the horizontal conditions of the philosophical argumentation. In their words, 'if we really want to say that philosophy originated with the Greeks, it is because the city, unlike the empire or the state, invents the agon as the rule of

[7] See the fifth chapter of *Beyond Liberal Democracy*, where Bells claims that "a comparison with physical education in ancient China may cast doubt upon the virtues of democratic-inspired physical education as well as the ideal of active citizenship more generally" (p. 121).

[8] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 41.

the society of 'friends', of the community of free men as rivals (citizens)'.[9]

While horizontality is the condition of the agonistic relations that ruled the ancient Greek polis, Confucianism erects vertically hierarchical relations. In contrast to the egalitarian relations of the polis and the foundation of democratic agonism, hierarchical organization is the precondition of the harmonious relations throughout Confucian society. The idea of harmony is as attached to hierarchy as the democratic idea of equality is attached to rivalry.

In this regard, the Ancient Confucian doctrine of virtues is revealing. For Confucius and his followers, society is interwoven and stable thanks to the action of five human relations: those between ministers and officials, those between husbands and wives, those between parents and descendants, those between older and younger siblings and those between friends. A single virtue is needed to interpret and judge the degree of correction achieved by any given relation: *ren*, frequently translated as 'humanity' and, sometimes, just as simple 'kindness'. This virtue oscillates between two senses, depending on the direction of the relationship that is being considered: ren means benevolence and protection (if descending) and respect and loyalty (if ascending). Thus, the father should protect the son and be benevolent with him, while the son should obey his father and be loyal to him. The husband must protect the wife and be benevolent to her, while the wife must respect her husband and be loyal to him, etc. But it becomes apparent that something is underdetermined in this scheme of virtues. Unlike the other pairs (husband/wife, minister/official, etc.), the pair friend/friend seems to reflect or

[9] Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 9.

to establish (at least in principle) a relation between equals. Many differences are obviously possible, but none of them can be deduced from the mere relation of friendship. As a result, friendship arranges itself according to a horizontal disposition that keeps *ren* in a virtual and undecided state. How to tell and judge the top-down and bottom-up aspects of a friendship relationship? How to decide about its correct distribution? How to allocate protection and obedience, benevolence and loyalty? Even though Confucius himself believed that this kind of relation is a fundamental one, it introduces a decisive change of direction in the system of virtues that threatens to undermine it. Being the horizontal relation par excellence between the citizens of the Athenian polis, friendship withdraws from the Confucian scheme and introduces an anomaly into it. Confucianism can offer nuanced descriptions of certain social relations around the axis of benevolence and obedience, but its harmonistic approach faces a limit when it comes to the political interpretation of friendship. As a consequence of its harmonism, Confucian virtues can only be completely practised and unfolded from within unequal and hierarchical relations.

III

Democracy, Meritocracy, and Deliberation

The hierarchical organization of society can be implemented in many ways, and the Western world has tested some of them. In European Middle Age societies, hierarchy reached an ontopolitical status that would probably beat the strictest of the Confucian materializations. At the level of the theory, the Christian ontotheology projected it onto the orders of reality, including of course the 'angelical hierarchies'. The specificity of the Chinese system rests on the fact that Confucian hierarchy has

been organized, since an early stage of the empire, as a long-standing and (at least partially) as a meritocratic one. Confucian verticalism exhibits, therefore, singular features from the point of view of normativity and legitimation. Meritocracy preserves the hierarchical principle and at the same time structures the access to power according to rational, transparent and arguably fair principles. To some degree, the Chinese Mandarinate established a hierarchy that was not grounded on irrational bases, violent impositions, descent or blood relations, or pecuniary criteria. Since then, a lasting meritocratic justification remains, independently of theocratic, timocratic, aristocratic or oligarchic principles. Despite the singularity of this meritocratic ideal, Bell suggests that it resembles that of the American Founders (p. 66): as Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter to John Adams of October 28, 1813, a 'natural aristocracy' based not on 'wealth and birth', but on 'virtue and talents.'[10]

Needless to say, Bell's astonishingly brief account of the meritocratic ideas of Western political thought is excessively selective and reductive. By way of example, we may cite Pierre Rosanvallon's trilogy on modern French democracy because it clearly shows that liberal rationalism -and especially the postrevolutionary figure of François Guizot as representative of doctrinaire liberalism- offered a view on representation and sovereignty that was an alternative to the voluntarism and collectivism of revolutionary predecessors and that emphasized the empowerment of elites as a sort of rational aristocracy founded in merit and virtue, as well as the acceptance of hierarchy as constitutive element of the social order.

[10] For the original letter, see
http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch15s61.html.

But, in any case, why would a Neo-Confucian scholar and a founding father of American democracy be supposed to subscribe in some degree to a similar set of ideas about the legitimate government? In fact, the unexpected affinities go even further. In a previous work that anticipated many of the ideas of *The China Model*,[11] Bell outlined a proposal for a contemporary institutionalization of Confucianism by establishing a bicameral system: an upper house of public servants selected through competitive examinations, and a lower house whose members would be elected by universal suffrage. While the meritocratic camera –called Xianshiyuan (賢士院), the House of Virtue and Talent- would be a high-quality deliberative body composed by the wise and public-spirited elite and assume most of the governmental responsibilities, the democratically elected camera would serve as an advisory and censorial body. This bicameralism bears some similarities with that promoted by John Stuart Mill in *Considerations on Representative Government*.[12] This may not seem entirely surprising if one takes into account that Mill understood the competence principle as complementary to the egalitarian principle and in an enriching and productive tension relationship with it. But, again, how could a major advocacy of liberal democracy that encompasses the meritocratic demand in a wider democratic view have an echo in a Neo-Confucian reconciliation of minimal democracy with elite politics?

[11] See the sixth chapter ("Taking Elitism Seriously: Democracy with Confucian Characteristics") of Daniel A. Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy. Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 152-179.

[12] See *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, gen. ed. John M. Robson (Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press & Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), vol. 19.

Certainly, Bell's defence of meritocracy against competitive electoral democracy has abandoned the proposal of the bicameral legislature in the meantime because it would favour a slippery slope from meritocratic deliberation towards popular election (pp. 167-168). Nevertheless, such a defence should not overlook the meritocratic character of the democratic tradition itself. Electoral processes and deliberative sites were raised in the 18th and 19th representative democracies as a meritocratic restriction to the egalitarian radicalism based on the random designation of public servants in the ancient Greek democracy[13]. 'Pure democracy' was then identified with the regime in which the decisions on public issues were made by randomly appointed citizens. In ancient democracy, the practice of voting was an aristocratic procedure with respect to the genuinely democratic procedure selection by sortition, which was expected to guaranteed the radical equality of the interchange between rulers and ruled.[14] Thus, the modern transformation of democracy as an electoral and representative regime reactivated the aristocratic element of the old democracy. Elections were made fully consistent with the new regime (eventually called democracy) thanks to a meritocratic reform of the representative principle that definitively abandoned the drawing by lot for the balloting and channeled participation of people into the authorization of the representants elected by popular consent. Sortition, whilst still

[13] Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government* (Cambrige University Press, 1986).

[14] As Nicole Loraux said, sortition and *misthophoria* (a small salary that allowed not-so-wealthy citizens to invest time in their political obligations) were a sort of cardinal institutions of the Greek democracy and "the most vulnerable and… the most widely attacked" features. See Nicole Loraux, *The invention of Athens, The Funeral Oration in the Classical City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 175.

effective in small pre-industrial city states during the early modernity, was precluded not only because of the unfeasibility of institutions equivalent to those of the *Ekklesia* and the *Boulé* in the new large-scale societies, but primarily because it was undisputably assumed that drawing lot would have placed the power in incompetent hands. By transforming the representative principle, the electoral-based government retained the aspiration of selecting 'the best' by adjusting it to the standard of political equality demanded by democracy.

Of course, Bell claims that contemporary electoral democracies seem unable to preserve this meritocratic legacy and that it helps to explain why they are being increasingly put into question from within. Democracy, i.e. the form of government that grants ultimate controlling power to elected representatives, has been the hegemonic term in global political discourse since 1945. But, in a time in which the 'one person one vote' principle has become the key of the common understanding of the very meaning of the word 'democracy', it finds a growing number of detractors nowadays. Some question the democratic value of voting; others criticize its meritocratic value. Among the former, some denounce the narrowing of political participation in electoral systems, its reduction to a bare minimum. The act of voting is a punctual and infrequent action and so predetermined in its possibilities and insignificant in its effects that, on its own, it leaves citizens' political participation in a position of irrelevance. Among the latter, some cast doubts on the ability of polls to find the most excellent outcomes or even to promote the formation of capable governments. The evidence of widespread citizen incompetence and, particularly, the irresponsible exercise of the right to vote (for instance, in the absence of an informed reasoning) would undermine any guarantee against the empowerment of incompetent or even corrupt legislators and governments.

There are authors on both sides that share the view that democracy deserves citizens' efforts beyond voting by default and demand, in a way or another, the relevance of deliberation. But it is not necessarily so. Those who judge voting to be insufficiently democratic can urge more participative forms of organization and also the implementation of deliberative venues, the subjection of the political decision-making process to an open exchange of views based on information, contestation and publicity, and so on. However, authors like Chantal Mouffe see no potential in deliberation, but rather emphasise its limitations and counterproductive effects. Those who, on the other hand, hold that voting is insufficiently meritocratic can aspire to counteract the widespread condoning of citizens' political ignorance and misuse of voting and also to implement political reforms intended to improve the deliberative quality in the political system, such as plural voting, citizens exams, experts vetoes, and so on. However, the meritocratic defences behind the critiques of electoral democracy by authors like Bryan Caplan and Jason Brennan openly repudiate citizens' deliberations for the sake of epistocratic solutions. Brennan even holds that, since a majority of citizens inevitably lack time, motivation, and cognitive skills to acquire political knowledge and, what is worse, they are systemically biased and even complacently irrational, any attempt to lead error-prone voters to better functionings will go even worse under real-world circumstances: 'real-life political deliberation could easily corrupt and stultify rather than ennoble and enlighten us'.[15].

[15] Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 62 and 242. For a discussion of this issue, see Javier Gil, 'Abstaining citizenship', in Claudia Wiesner, Anna Björk, Hanna-Mari Kivistö and Katja Mäkinen (eds.), *Shaping Citizenship: A Political Concept in Theory, Debate and Practice*

Bell has much in common with Brennan's approach and his own meritocratic model is, to a large extent, an epistocratic one. He also thinks that 'voting booth—where individuals express their political preferences without any obligation to inform themselves beforehand (i.e., no effort required) and without any feedback from other people or organizations that might be able to check cognitive biases—seems almost designed to maximize irrational decision making' (p. 24). However, while Brennan hardly trusts in deselecting the incompetent and unreasonable voters, Bell has confidence in the amelioration of the intellectual level of rulers. Brennan argues for restricted suffrage by means of a properly administered voting examination system as a way of filtering the intellectual level of voters (and, failing that, for voting lotteries, prescribed as a sort of palliative less expensive and less time-demanding than standard elections). In contrast, Bell argues rather for epistocracy in the sense (accepted in East Asian societies) of rule by the 'knowers' and aims at establishing (and eventually exporting) measures and public policies for selecting and recruiting the competent and public-spirited leaders.

Unlike Brennan, Bell frequently appeals to the potentialities of deliberation. In fact, some determinant aspects of his political proposal rest on a sophisticated adaptation of the idea of deliberation. Moreover, Bell does take into account both kinds of criticism against electoral democracy, and also embraces both solutions, those from the epistocratic and the deliberative

(New York: Routledge, 2018), chapter 4. By epistocracy we can understand not only the rule of those who know, the wise or the experts (Plato), but also the implementation of institutional designs that give 'more power' (and not 'the power') to an instructed minority (Mill) or that disempower a significant portion of citizens because of their alleged incompetence (Brennan).

reforms. To a certain degree, he has found the way paved for these reforms.

Since almost two decades, the Chinese Government has made visible efforts in order to implement deliberative procedures and processes by different experimental ways. A large literature has followed in its wake. Cases like the 2005 deliberative opinion poll in the Zeguo Township of Wenling City, Zhejiang Province are well known.[16] That deliberative poll was organized to decide on the budget allocation. Several political events and changed economic circumstances made it so that the total expendable funds were unexpectedly and significantly reduced, leaving the authorities in the need of having to choose only some of the already-planned projects. It was novel in this case that 'officials in Wenling altered the device by elevating the outcomes of the deliberative polling from its typical advisory function to an empowered status, committing in advance of the process to abide by the outcomes'.[17] Both normative and strategic reasons might be offered for putting the deliberation and eventually the decision as well in the hands of local citizens. Authorities arguably endorsed the deliberative poll in order to make the decision-making process more participative and 'democratic' and, at the same time, to improve their public image and guard against possible future protests. This political experiment has been widely influential and replicated in other places. The conductors of the

[16] Consult, for instance, James S. Fishkin, Baogang He and Alice Siu, 'Public Consultation through Deliberation in China: The First Chinese Deliberative Poll', in Ethan Leib and Baogang He (eds.), *The Search for Deliberative Democracy in China* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 229-244. See also http://participedia.net/en/cases/wenling-city-deliberative-poll .

[17] Baogang He, Mark E. Warren, Mark E., 'Authoritarian Deliberation: The Deliberative Turn in Chinese Political Development'. *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2011, p. 277.

deliberative poll, James S. Fishkin and Baogang He, highlight its singularity, which is also a reason for its success, as follows:

> We believe it is the first case in modern times of fully representative and deliberative participatory budgeting. It harkens back to a form of democracy quite different from modern Western-style party competition... Hence we think that the experiment described here is notable in the context of the long history of democratic reforms in that it shows how governments, without party competition or the conventional institutions of representative democracy as practiced in the West, can nevertheless realize, to a high degree, two fundamental democratic values at the same time: political equality and deliberation.[18]

At the same time that these authors underline the relevant fact that the deliberative polls achieve political equality and deliberation 'without any need for Western style party competition', they trust that these deliberative experiments mark the beginning of a trend of democratization: 'If the process spreads, it may have further effects on the political culture, effects that could facilitate additional democratic reforms over the long term'.[19] In another article, Baogang He and Mark E. Warren stress the ambiguity of what they call 'authoritarian deliberation', insofar it 'frames two possible trajectories of political development in China: the increasing use of deliberative practices stabilizes and streghthens authoritarian rule, or they serve as a leading edge of democratization'.[20] Again, it is this trajectory of democratization that is made possible thanks to the

[18] James S. Fishkin, Baogang He and Alice Siu, 'Public Consultation through Deliberation in China', in Ethan Leib and Baogang He (eds.), *The Search for Deliberative Democracy in China* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 230-31.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 242.
[20] Baogang He, Mark E. Warren, Mark E., 'Authoritarian Deliberation: The Deliberative Turn in Chinese Political Development'. *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2011, p. 269-89.

transformative practice being what is ranked as normatively significant.

Daniel A. Bell thinks otherwise and integrates the already existing deliberative experiments into a different project. In contrast with He and Warren's approach about the 'authoritarian deliberation', Bell's 'meritocratic deliberation' is inspired by Confucian institutions, not in liberal parliaments, and intervenes in the three levels of the China Model (meritocracy at the top, experimentation in the middle, democracy at the bottom). Bell reiterates in the book that, due to the meritocratization of the Chinese political system over the past couple of decades, the political top level should work as a 'public-spirited deliberation among elites' (p. 60). On the other hand, the experimentation in the middle is aimed to design and develop new ways of inclusion and participation and hence to result in higher levels of social harmonisation. It is especially in the basis where Bell finds room for the application of deliberative innovations. In *The China Model*, 'democracy at the bottom' means democracy by consensus at a local level, with small communities directly involved in the matters at issue (such as land distribution, investment priorities, selection of local leaders…). The widespread support in China for the idea of democracy at the local level has been enriched with the new practices of deliberation and consultation among citizens who can be considered as capable of being well-informed: 'the government has backed experiments with deliberative democracy at the local level. Such experiments hold the promise of aiding the democratic education process and securing more fair representation' (p. 169). Deliberative and consultive practices seem to be the best participatory procedures for local-level democracy.

The agonistic and deliberative dimensions are consubstantial to democracy in the history of the West. In Western

contemporary political theory, influential models of democracy have reappraised both dimensions. Consider briefly Chantal Mouffe's view of antagonism as the essence of democracy and of politics in general. According to her, the friend/enemy relation is so constitutive of social life that any attempt of blurring or silencing the real conflicts is suspected of neglecting the specificity of the political. Against rationalistic and universalistic approaches that confuse and dissolve political conflicts by means of ethical and juridical criteria, she points to 'the dimension of the political that is linked to the existence of an element of hostility among human beings'[21] Deliberative democracy theories involve such a neutralization of the genuinely political. Interestingly, the reasons why an advocate of 'radical democracy' like Mouffe repudiates the theory and the practice of deliberative democracy are not so far removed from the reasons why a neo-Confucian theorist like Bell appeals to it: deliberation is able to lessen and tame antagonisms, to dissolve or even disguise them. Chinese deliberative experiments would confirm it by assimilating the notion of deliberation into a radically harmonist approach to the political.

According to Mouffe, those who think that deliberation leads to rational consensus, at least under ideal conditions, and that individuals involved eventually coincide in 'reasonable' common views tend to relegate antagonism as a byproduct or as a distortion due to failures in the communication processes. In this sense, Habermasian and Rawlsian deliberativists would share a harmonist bias that neglects the 'constitutive difference' where the political is originated and threatens the recognition of political conflict. Something similar could be said of the Chinese

[21] Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 2.

Communist Party's reasons for implementing the instruments of deliberative democracy:

> The Chinese national and local governments have encouraged and supported deliberative institutions to maintain local order, as an instrument to maintain local security, as a solution to local community-related problems, as a 'valve' to release the pressure upon China's fast-moving economic machine, and as a form of moderate democracy which avoids radical and substantial political reform.[22]

Bell's selective response to agonism does not only consist in applying a view of political realism on actually existing electoral democracies. Certainly, Bell contrasts China's successes to those of democratic countries with economic, geographic, and population comparable conditions and extent, such as USA and India. But to explain the facts that make China appear as a state and a society that have responded to the challenges raised in the last 40 years and definitively undermine the presumed superiority of electoral democracy, Bell reviews and argues for China's progressive implementation of meritocratic deliberative mechanisms. To be a 'stabilizer' to maintain local order and a 'valve' for turning antagonism into harmony is precisely what Mouffe criticizes in the idea of deliberation and, at the same time, what makes Confucianism attracted to it. Deliberation allows avoiding the agonism of party competition, the rhetorical struggles for the vote and the polarization of ideologies. The Confucian appropriation that Bell makes of it, i.e. the elitist

[22] Ethan Leib and Baogang He (eds.), *The Search for Deliberative Democracy in China* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), p. 7. See also p. 177, where the deliberative institutions are characterized, in addition, as 'a solution to problems arising from the tension between the expanding market and the community and an effective means to develop what President Hu Jintao calls 'a harmonious society' '.

ordering at the top level and the fit of deliberative institutional designs at the bottom, steps further into the harmonistic slope that meritocratic deliberation leads to.

The projection of a rational (or reasonable) consensus by means of deliberation is a way of evicting political agonism, but it also introduces a demand of information and ethics that can easily turned into a meritocratic criterion, suggesting a sort of intellectualistic hierarchization of political participation. The ancient imperial government of the Chinese literati could be reformulated as a deliberative elite, as a Mandarinate that is legitimized by the moral and epistemic merits to preside over political deliberation. Bell refers to this contemporary surrogate by names such as the 'House of Virtue and Talent' and the 'Union of Chinese Meritocrats'[23], while a Neo-Confuncian author as Jiang Qing has proposed names like the 'House of *Ru* [as] an indication of the traditional Chinese spirit of rule by scholarship' and the 'House of Exemplary Persons'.[24] Neo-Confucianism seems to have drawn some conclusions from the Western deliberative theory. First of all, political reason should be driven by the path of deliberation as the paramount way of interchanging and consensuating political positions. But, at the

[23] Daniel A. Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 167, and *The China Model*, pp. 197-98. However, it is symptomatic that Bell goes to far as to say at the end of his book that the CCP's re-naming (because 'the CCP is neither Communist nor a party anymore') should rather be the 'Union of Democratic Meritocrats'. He suggests that the word 'democracy' should be introduced for normative and strategic reasons, but also for propagandistic reasons (p. 198).

[24] Jiang Quing, *A Confucian Constitutional Order. How China's Ancient Past Can Shape Its Political Future* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 65; and *The China Model*, pp. 162-68. See also Bell's introduction to the aforementioned book by Quing, pp. 7-8.

same time, such a process should take place under refined epistemic and ethical conditions. Otherwise, deliberation can be counter-productive from the democratic point of view, more corrupting and stultifying than ennobling and enlightening, as Brennan's maximalist criticism states. Certainly, the epistemic and ethical standards of virtuous deliberation are not easy to meet. Very likely public spiritedness and the necessary knowledge to understand, elaborate and make safe political decisions, including their consequences and costs, are often far beyond the scope of most citizens. That is why minipublics are said to be an imperfect, but reasonable procedure to get the best outcomes while guaranteeing both political equality and representativeness without mass participation[25]. Hence, to obtain all those things that deliberation would be in a position to achieve, it should be less egalitarian and democratic than what most citizens in Western countries (or presumably many of those not randomly selected) are willing to accept. Bell does not negate the postdemocratic point. In his own terms, he argues for an 'elitist deliberation'. In our view, he also practices a sort of 'redescription' that, by paraphrasing Vittorio Bufacchi and Xiao Ouyang, 'abandons the Western original sense and appeal instead to aspects of Chinese philosophy and political culture that can perform a similar role.'[26]

Because of its appeal to consensus and its moral and intellectual requirements, deliberation can be made consistent with the two aforementioned Confucian assumptions: harmonism and hierarchy. Hence, Confucian deliberation renounces the

[25] James S. Fishkin, *When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[26] Vittorio Bufacchi and Xiao Ouyang, 'Hens, Ducks & Human Rights in China', *Philosophy Now*, Issue 118, February/March 2017, pp. 9-11.

democratic idea of political equality, in the sense we have inherited from Greek *homonoia*, the principle by which every citizen has equal rights to participate in the assembly. However, Bell's political model does not disregard all the democratic principles and, particularly, takes quite seriously the idea of 'political participation' and the requirement of accountability. Of course, participation is transformed under the prevalence of the meritocratic component. But we must not forget that representative government initially put into effect a similar restriction. While apparently regretting the loss of this meritocratic turn of modern democracies,[27] Bell believes that his meritocracy model does not minimize democratic participation much more than contemporary representative systems if they only demand 'visiting the voting booth every few years'.[28] On the other hand, the China Model leaves space for another feature of democracy that modern liberal system pushed aside long ago: direct participation. Deliberative polls and other institutional designs implemented by the Chinese government have been gaining an increasing presence in local (rural and district-level) policies during the last two decades. Bell completely incorporates these kinds of decision-making procedures in his political meritocratic model and even regrets that they are not being more quickly applied so as to strengthen the infrastructure of the 'democracy at the bottom'. Unlike other theorists, Bell disregards the expansion of deliberative democracy at a larger scale,

[27] See, for instance, the following comment: 'Had Madison been witness to today's United States, he would likely have been disappointed by the quality of political leaders as well as the relative ease with which well-funded factions ensure that the political system systematically works in their interest' (p. 265, note 39).

[28] Daniel A. Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 151.

considering it simply unfeasible beyond the limits of local politics. In this case, it is noteworthy to remember why Ancient Greeks decided not to surpass the administrative level of the polis. They believed that quality depended on quantity and what they called 'freedom' was something only achievable within the boundaries of a small society. Greek democracy, the participative and egalitarian one, was 'local' as a matter of principle.

III

A Note on Agonistic Onto-Politics

The considerations of the former section leave the question still open: what is wrong with harmonism? Are the suspicions it arouses well justified? According to Mouffe, contemporary onto-politics should embrace the prevalence and the irreducibility of difference, the negative plurality taking precedence over positive identities. These identities are defined one against another, created through their shifting relationship to the 'constitutive outside', so it is their difference that exhibits genuine productivity. Consequently, any attempt to make the difference disappear while conceiving of the social whole in terms of harmony, consensus, objectivity or unity is necessarily founded on exclusion. The construction of an identity can claim to be comprehensive and all-embracing and to reach the 'full realization of a good constituted by a harmony' only at the price of excluding otherness. On the contrary, 'the project of radical and plural democracy is able to acknowledge that difference is the condition of the possibility of constituting unity and totality at the same time that it provides their essential limits. In such a view, plurality cannot be eliminated; it becomes irreducible. We have therefore to abandon the very idea of a complete reabsorption of

alterity into oneness and harmony. It is an alterity that cannot be domesticated.'[29]

Political Confucianism may be seen as an apparent target of this criticism from the agonistic model as a radical democratic politics. Nevertheless, this conclusion may be based on an insufficient understanding of Confucianism and even depend on deficiencies in the agonistic approach itself.

Mouffe assumes the postmodern critique of essentialism and she seems to believe that any harmonistic view is built on an essentialism by which everything can fall as a product of social objectification under the sign of the identical. However, Sinologists and interpreters of Chinese thought like François Jullien and Jacques Gernet have widely shown how far Confucian thought is from any philosophy of the essence.[30] Indeed, Chinese society has not been a fertile soil for the 'metaphysics of presence'. If there is such a thing as a 'Confucian ontology', it is that of immanence and transformation, that of a reality that is never 'present' but made of ever potential tendencies. Only the traces are completely 'presented', whereas reality as such exhibits the distended and un-re-presented nature of duration. Confucian thought, be it applied to politics, military strategy or the arts, relies on the harmonious unfolding of events because it just confers a punctual status to any state of things. Identities, including the political identities, are indeed formed and sustained in a field of multiple intensities, but they also return to this constitutive field and dissolve into it again. In a sense, Mouffe's constant reliance on 'political identities' reveals in turn signs of a

[29] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 33.

[30] See, for example, François Jullien, *Les Transformations Silencieuses* (Paris: Grasset, 2009), and Jacques Gernet, *La Raison des Choses: Essai sur la Philosophie de Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

certain kind of essentialism. The appeal to identities and identifications and the hardening of the conflictive momentum of their opposition arguably disclose the very essence of the political. In this way, far from refusing an essentialist philosophical attitude, the agonistic model of democracy would only change its sign by transferring it from identity and consensus to difference and conflict.

Anyway, Mouffe's overemphasis on agonism seems to disregard the very possibility of a non-essentialist harmonistic approach. Projected over an immanent background, Confucian harmonism is strategic and relational rather than identitarian and its political realizations are built in a continuous revision of the changing, involved forces. From this point of view, agonistic onto-politics somehow reifies pure 'difference' and confuses it with a positive 'antagonism', and only deeply rooted prejudices of Western thought make plausible that mistake. Such prejudices are linked to a particular anthropology that is foregrounded in quotes like the following one from Elias Canetti:

> The actual vote is decisive, as the moment in which the one [contending party] is really measured against the other. It is all that is left of the original lethal clash and it is played out in many forms, with threats, abuse and physical provocation which may lead to blows or missiles. But the counting of the vote ends the battle.[31]

Nonetheless, it can be argued again that an anthropological antagonism is not less essentialist than an identitarian harmonism. From the point of view of Confucianism, difference is rather the 'zero degree' of identity, and hence that the usual and productive dualisms have a constitutive character: ying / yang, active /

[31] Quoted by Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 5.

receptive, function / form, and so on. But that this field of plural intensities finally be arranged and ruled according to agonistic relations is just a possibility, and not the very nature or the template of social relations. Consequently, antagonism is just a particular anthropological and political possibility. In the realm of the political, it would only be an ontic condition, not the ontological dimension, if we prefer to express it in the Heideggerian and Schmittian registers Mouffe used to employ. Far from being constitutive of the practices and institutions through which a social order is instituted, antagonism is susceptible of being generalized only under wrong arrangements and inappropriate policies that are unable to offer better outcomes and deal competently with circumstances.

Bell's communitarian viewpoint considers the individual as the product of certain kind of community, as the result of certain social associations[32]. Certainly, he approves an anthropological thick conception, similar to that once delivered by Charles Taylor, something that curiously Chantal Mouffe said to accept:

> The basic error of atomism in all its forms is that it fails to take account of the degree to which the free individual with his own goals and aspirations … is himself only possible within a certain kind of civilization; that it took a long development of certain institutions and practices, of the rule of law, of rules of equal respect, of habits of common deliberation, of common

[32] Daniel Bell, "Communitarianism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/communitarianism/>.

> association, of cultural development, and so on, to produce the modern individual.[33]

What is true of the 'modern', 'free' individual of liberal democracy becomes even more appropriate for the harmonious members of the Confucian-style meritocracy. According to this view, as we have seen, 'people have a fundamental interest in leading harmonious lives, and hence the government ought to prioritize social harmony' (p. 234, note 145).

Certainly, the concrete proposals for institutionalizing the principle of political meritocrat offered by Bell in his book imply important democratic abdications, but they also dispose arrangements intended to be highly consistent to some democratic ideals. That is particularly so in the case of the direct participation, the deliberative polling and the citizens involvement in the local-level decision-making procedures and outcomes. Insofar as they prioritize the advancement of community and benefits of cooperation in terms of social stability, all these institutional reforms do not renounce to implant some features of modern liberal democracy under the framework of political meritocracy.

IV

Civilizatory Context

The China Model proposes a meritocratic regime that deliberately redefines democratic views and implants democratic arrangements under the harmonistic assumptions of

[33] Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences, Philosophical Papers 2*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 309. See Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 46.

Confucianism. As such, it especially fits the Chinese context and Bell argues that it is already implemented in China, if not completely and with important deficiencies. But Bell also claims that this meritocratic system can be exemplary and transferable (if only selectively) to other contexts, even offering an alternative to the dubious course of the Western-style democracies. However, the fusion of the main words of the book's title cannot hide the essential tension, utterly difficult to surpass, between the ideal and the reality: the Chinese Model is inextricably tied with the history, system of thought and cultural values of the Chinese society and, at the same time, it is supposed to work as a model, i.e. applicable in a wide range of contexts.

On the one hand, it is a proposal projected over the future of China as 'a large, modernizing and peaceful society' (p. 112). While electoral democracy is not a realistic possibility in the foreseeable future, Bell´s political meritocracy seeks to serve as a realistic standard for guiding political reforms in a society that is likely to undergo important changes in the midterm. It hopes to face possible scenarios of contemporary China just because it is directly inspired by Chinese thought and culture, and specifically designed 'for an East Asian context', as the title of one of Bell's books reads. The ambition of 'shaping the future', by paraphrasing another title he edited, has to draw on already existing Chinese institutions, on cultural features of the Chinese society and on political formulas largely proved in the history of Asian nations. The meritocratic reappropiation of 'deliberation' runs precisely on these lines. It has often been pointed out that deliberative polls and other deliberative and consultative designs are easily put into practice and work well in Chinese local contexts due to the cultural and social background of the population involved. In this point, Bell aligns with most theorists who analyze the Chinese deliberative polls. By way of example, Chang Shenyong (quoting Li Shangli) claims that 'traditional

Chinese political culture, which features the concept of harmony, can be thought to provide some (albeit shaky) intellectual foundation and cultural context for deliberative democracy', and James S. Fishkin, Baogang He, and Alice Siu attach part of the success of the first Chinese deliberative poll at Zeguo to the 'local Chinese indigenous deliberative methods'.[34]

On the other hand, the Confucian-inspired meritocratic proposal should reach a sufficient level of abstraction as to be applicable to a variety of national contexts, but only if the appropriate nuances and particularities would be taking into account. However, the strong Chinese dependence of Bell's proposal casts some doubts concerning the presumed ability to become a true 'model'. In consonance with his commitment to communitarian views, Bell appeals to widespread appreciations and values amongst the Chinese population that go beyond the scope of the institutional designs. For instance, he mentions the organic and 'familiar' understanding of the social whole, the wide predisposition to legitimize the empowerment of meritorious individuals and the rejection of the direct exhibition of conflict and competition, the culturally inherited appreciation for rites and, of course, the high esteem in which Chinese citizens hold the value or harmony, and so on. Of course, Bell is fully aware that the main problems his model faces in order to be exported (even selectively and piecemeal) are not the lack of democracy or other normative deficiencies, but the implicit demand that a very specific cultural background in both official and informal settings should go to meet a robust meritocratic implantation. Such a claim is counterintuitive because that cultural background is disappearing even in China. If what Bell proposes involves an all-

[34] Ethan Leib and Baogang He (eds.), *The Search for Deliberative Democracy in China* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), p. 165 and 237-38.

embracing assimilation of Confucian values and not only the recognition of the advantages of meritocracy, he undermines his claim of universality.

The harmonious members of the Confucian-style meritocracy belong to a very specific civilizing context. All the habits, practices, patterns of behavior, rules of conduct and cultural attitudes that align with Bell's model are absent out of the East Asian contexts and, as he often acknowledges, it will not be directly exportable without the improbable transformation of the democratic framework of experience as a whole.[35] The epistocratic appointments, the hierarchized political participation, the ritualistic political aesthetics, all these features that should be institutionalized are context-dependent features of the Chinese culture and society. Perhaps the really worrisome concern for Bell's model is whether this 'kind of civilization' is destined to mutate and to be superseded even in the Sinosphere. Although it is true that communism did not delete every trail of Confucian 'reactionism', the hyper-capitalistic culture of the current and future generations may do it.

The program offered in *The China Model* deserves skepticism regarding not so much the normative consistency as its viability both inside and outside. Bell´s proposal relies on a virtuous Confucian background, the cultural product of the most enduring civilization in history. But it should not be forgotten that Chinese

[35] See, for instance: 'it would be hard to persuade people that they should be totally excluded from political power… It is hard to imagine a modern government today that can be seen as legitimate in the eyes of the people without any form of democracy. We are all democrats today' (p. 151); and 'the sad fact is that citizens in electoral democracies won't even question their right to choose their political rulers, no matter how intellectually incompetent or morally insensitive their political judgment may be' (p. 166).

intellectuals and governments failed in similar attempts even when Confucianism was culturally dominant, after the fall of the Qing Dynasty, and again after the Republican era. It is completely uncertain whether Confucian culture still has enough inertia for leading or even for taking part of the next Chinese revolution. As for its possible impact outwards, the unlikely acceptance of the Chinese model would not only imply the massive recognition of the efficacy of a certain political organisation and its institutional designs. Moreover, it would demand a deeper level of adaptation and even conversion—including ethic, aesthetic, pedagogic and political aspects—to Confucianism, as the one that Daniel A. Bell himself has undergone.

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A Hybrid Model of Democracy with Political Meritocracy in Rural China

BY

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© 2017 – *Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series)*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 203-221
Luiss University Press
E-ISSN 2240-7987 | P-ISSN 1591-0660

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A Hybrid Model of Democracy with Political Meritocracy in Rural China

Di You

Ongoing debates on political meritocracy had been aroused since Daniel Bell's book *The China Model* was published in 2015. Controversy focuses on substantial issues concerning whether political meritocracy is a real thing and whether it is a good thing. Bell gives out positive answers and further justification for both of the issues.

Bell in his book explores China's special political system based on its political culture and political practice, theorizing the China Model as a hybrid system of political meritocracy, experimentation and democracy. For Bell, political meritocracy he emphasizes is in the first place not just an ideal but a real thing which means it is not only a political culture but also a political reality existing in history as well as in the contemporary era. The China Model is exactly a realistic version of political meritocracy, although there is still large gap between the model's ideal and reality, which also happens in democratic regimes. Bell's academic inspiration mainly stems from Confucian tradition, and realizing the meritocratic characteristics of China's actual political practice drives him to theorize political meritocracy in a more reality-directing way.

Also, political meritocracy is a good thing. According to Bell's definition, a political system of meritocracy should aim at selecting and promoting political leaders with superior ability and virtue to serve the people, which means a merits-based mechanism is a core principle for leader selection, and serving the

 Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series), Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 203-221
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public is political elites' ultimate responsibility.[1] From China and Singapore's successful experience in economic and social fields in recent decades, political meritocracy is building its reputation in the practice domain. Bell saw the secret of China's rising, believing that much contribution was made by China's political system.[2] Nevertheless, western observers still question the value of political meritocracy since one person, one vote becomes the only legitimate way to confer political power in the norm of electoral democracy. In this sense, political meritocracy, in its way of leader selection is not readily accepted by western democrats. Bell, with his multicultural background and experience devotes himself to reducing the cultural misunderstanding and ideological bias between the east and the west. He works on disenchantment of the hegemony of electoral democracy in political discourse and defends political meritocracy as an ideal parallel to electoral democracy. What he proposes further is that political meritocracy could be a new independent standard to evaluate political progress or regress.[3]

Much miscomprehension focuses on Bell's sharp critique on the limits of democracy and distorts Bell's original opinion into an extreme one that democracy should be replaced by political meritocracy. That's not true. Bell respects important democratic values and also doesn't want to see democracy collapse.[4] Actually, his expectation is both political meritocracy and democracy could reconcile the best part of each other, improving defective governance by adopting the merits from each other.[5] Therefore,

[1] Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 6, 32, 110.
[2] Ibid, pp. 3-4.
[3] Ibid, p. 180.
[4] Ibid, p. 151.
[5] Ibid, p. 2, pp. 9-10.

what he advocates is not pure political meritocracy but a hybrid system concentrating merits from both political meritocracy and democracy. Indeed, the prerequisite for such a further movement should be taking political meritocracy seriously.

Above is my basic understanding of Bell's book, which I think is quite an insightful and meaningful exploration of a hybrid system of democratic meritocracy exemplified by empirical China. In such a mixed model, Bell argues for different political principles for different levels of government, which suggests that political meritocracy is best suitable for the central government, and electoral democracy for the local society. Where I differ from Bell here is that I think political meritocracy in a hybrid system should not limit its function only to the central level of government. Actually, from what I observed, there is also a hybrid model working in China's rural region which combines democracy with political meritocracy.

I

A Hybrid Model in China's Rural Society

As Bell describes, the first plank of the China Model is local democracy. Support for such an institutional arrangement is motivated by the belief that democracy works best at the local level. It's commonly known that China started village self-governance of electoral democracy in rural areas in late 1980s. Until 2008, it has basically realized the direct elections for more than 99% villages throughout the country.[6] The village committee, the main autonomous body in each Chinese village, is

[6] Ministry of Civil Affairs, *Progress Report of Nationwide Village Elections: 2007* (Beijing: China Society Press, 2008).

elected by all legally qualified villagers to take charge of the public affairs in the local community under the guidance of the village party branch. Therefore, the rural governance in the past decades has been mainly conducted by the two organizations.

However, is there any other possibility for better governance in rural China except for pure democracy? What has happened in recent years shows a new political picture in China's rural society where a hybrid governance model of democracy with political meritocracy is working in many villages. This new model presents hybrid and meritocratic characteristics, and also gains some positive effects on managing public affairs especially on poverty alleviation. Now it shows a tendency toward being popularized in more rural areas as the result of a successful political trial.

In terms of the organizational structure, the hybrid system supplemented the village committee and village party branch with two new mechanisms, which are the first secretary and the village council.

The first secretary refers to the party cadre who comes from upper level of government and is appointed and sent to help the undeveloped rural areas. The first secretary system is actually the upper-level political meritocracy's extension to the rural society as a supplement for local democracy. In general, first secretaries are selected, cultivated or promoted by the system of political meritocracy. Some of them are political officials who have passed competitive civil service exams to get a position in the upper government. Some of them are selected graduates from top universities with brilliant education background or good performances as student cadres when in university. Before they were finally appointed as first secretaries, most of them had to be evaluated on a daily basis. So, there are at least two-round tests before making a first secretary. The upper-level governments send out their outstanding representatives to help out villages

with poverty problem and feeble party organization. In April 2015, the Organization Ministry of the Central Committee of the CPC (CCCPC), the Office of Central Rural Work Leading Group, the Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development of the State Council (LGOPAD) together released the *Notice of Selecting and Assigning Outstanding Cadres to the Villages Serving as the First Secretary*.[7]

The village council is an autonomous organization originally formed spontaneously among villagers at the grassroots level before being formally conducted in more areas. It is a relatively meritocratic organization based on one person, one vote. There are many provinces including Anhui, Guangxi, Guangdong, Jiangxi, Hebei, Heilongjiang, etc. having village councils in their natural villages. In August 2013, the People's Congress of Anhui Province was the first in the whole country to officially confirm the legal status of the village council, outlining in the rules of the *Organic Law of the Villagers Committees of the People's Republic of China* that villagers can build village councils voluntarily through an election process. Now, most village councils in natural villages or village groups are elected by "one person, one vote", a process similar to that of village committee elections. Normally, a village council consists of 5-9 members with a chairman included. Research shows most members are local elites of "the Five Elderly", who are elderly party members, elderly village cadres, elderly exemplary people, elderly teachers and elderly soldiers. Through village meeting, local residents exercise rights of electing council members who are willing and capable to promote public good and help the poor. Some members of the village council are

[7] See Xinhua news on April 30th of 2015, *Notice: Selecting and Sending First Secretaries to the Villages with Poverty and Weak Party Organization*, http://news.xinhuanet.com/2015-04/30/c_1115147291.htm.

even incumbent village cadres in the local village committee, and they play a compatible and coordinating role in the communication between the village council and village committee. In summary, the village council is a new secondary self-governance organization for villagers' self-governance.

The meeting of the first secretary from political meritocracy and the village council from electoral democracy promotes the formation of more mixed way of governance in the rural China. On the basis of universal suffrage at the grassroots level, this new governance model is composed of the villager council, the first secretary, the village committee and the party branch. Then how does the new model work? To be brief, the new model is a cooperation among the four organizations above.

Above all, as both party members of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and upper-level political officials, first secretaries are mainly responsible for settling problems of targeted poverty alleviation and weak party organization. They are "equipped" with both financial and human recourses (working groups). Most of them are ordered to spend at least 4-5 days a week living in the village and to make more scientific and effective plans for poverty relief. Normally, the first secretary will get a general understanding about the current situation of the target village by communication with the village party branch, the village committee and the village council. Next, visiting the villagers' homes and keeping close contact with them would help the first secretary assess the real condition of the villagers' life and get their trust gradually. But still, when the first secretary works out a plan and needs to mobilize the mass, he usually has to negotiate with the village council first. Through the village council, villagers' will and opinion can be collected and conveyed back quickly. If initial ideas or plans are accepted or advocated by the mass, the first secretary is given access to take further action and

cooperate with the village council members to guide the villagers. Besides combating issues of poverty, the first secretary is also in charge of improving the local party organization. In communication and cooperation with the local elites, the first secretary has a good chance to know their ability and virtue, sometimes, some non-party members of the village council with excellent performance in the village affairs might be invited or recommended to join CPC.

As a secondary self-governance organization in the local community, the village council also undertakes more and more work in rural public affairs along with the village committee and plays an increasingly important role in coordination, cooperation and even supervision. The actual duties of the village council include the following:

1. Organizing meetings and discussions with villagers on public affairs to make democratic decisions.

2. Offering public services including road building, cleanliness, infrastructure construction, recreational activity, etc. by motivating and guiding the mass.

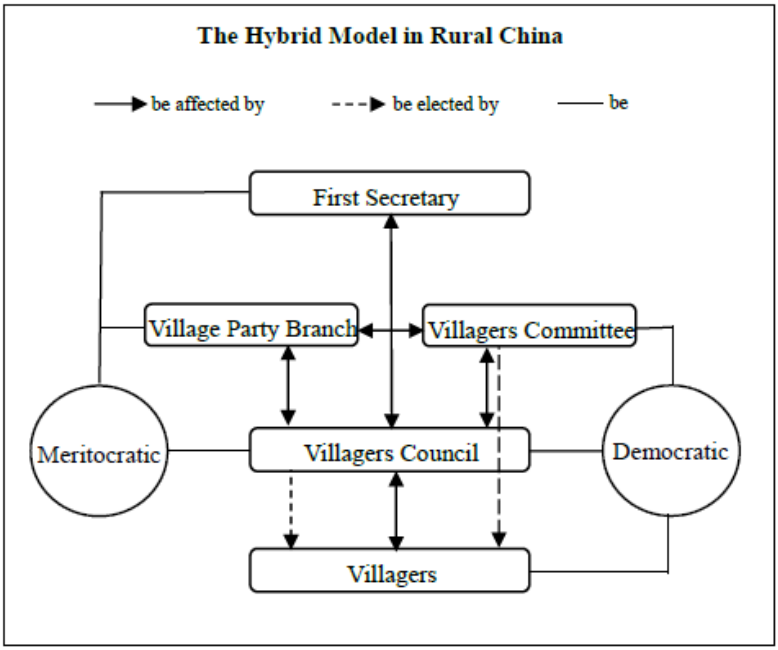
3. Helping resolve neighborhood disputes and conflicts.

4. Coordinating the relationship among the villagers, the first secretary and the village committee.

5. Supervising the village committee and village party branch.

6. Motivating the villagers to help vulnerable people who are elderly, weak, poor or disabled.

The new hybrid model of the relationship between villagers and local organizations can be structured as the graph below.



Consider the following case, which is representative of the way the model works concretely in a poor village.[8] There is an administrative village S with three natural villages located in the rocky desertification region of Guangxi province. Village S is a weak and poor place with harsh natural and agricultural conditions. In addition, other striking difficulties impeding the

[8] Information is mainly from interviews with local cadres of County T.

development of Village S are the very common issues in contemporary Chinese rural society—the hollowness[9]and lack of human resources under the process of urbanization.[10] Before the first secretary Z came to the village from the Agricultural Bureau of County T (where Village S is affiliated) in 2015, Village S has three village councils for each of its natural villages. The three village councils are mainly constituted by local elites. Each village council has about 6-9 members, including rural elites like incumbent village cadre (0-1 for each natural village), villager group leader, retired village cadre, village doctor, village teacher, religious people and venerable elders. These three village councils gain much trust by local residents and effectively unite the villagers to participate in democratic management of the daily routine. After the first secretary Z made an investigation of Village S and its surrounding countryside, he figured out a plan to alleviate poverty by developing sericulture. When he wanted to do propaganda and mobilize the villagers to participate, he found that the local people did not trust him very much since they didn't know him well only in a short time. The villagers felt uncertain about this new cadre from outside the village, so they responded negatively. In this situation, Z decided to start his work by convincing the village council people first. He made a great effort towards explaining the advantages and feasibility of developing sericulture in Village S and motivated the village council people to visit other villages around, where the adoption of sericulture had led to economic advantages for the villagers.

[9] Hollowness refers to a social phenomenon in China that under the binary structure of urban and rural areas, large amounts of middle-aged rural labors moved to the city which resulted in the outflow of talents and population in the rural China.

[10] Guo Zhenglin, *The Power Structure in Rural China* (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2005), p. 105.

Through unremitting efforts, the village council members agreed to have a visit to those model villages mentioned by Z. They together took rented buses to other villages for investigation and reached a consensus on the desirability of sericulture. When they came back, the village council representative explained the details to the villagers and persuaded them to have a try on Z's idea. Then, Z arranged another two visits for some other villager representatives to check again. In the end, almost all villagers agreed to develop sericulture together thanks to the mobilization of the village council and Z himself. Then this important decision was finally made. Soon after that, a sericulture cooperative was built up with several other villages, constructing 650 mu of land to plant mulberry, which later contributed to a substantial increase in villagers' incomes. In late 2015, Village S successfully overcame poverty, becoming a successful governing model in County T. The first secretary Z was appointed to a new position managing more governmental affairs, as a result of his outstanding performance in Village S.

In fact, as well as the story above, there was also much interaction among the two new mechanisms, the village committee and the village party branch. The first secretary Z also had to negotiate important affairs with the village committee and work together with the village party branch to serve party organization. What's more, I learned from a conversation with another local cadre in Guizhou Province that the village council is a potential training platform where the village party organization can find its future party members based on their outstanding performance. On such talent hunting, the first secretary often holds more sway since he has a closer daily contact with those local talents.

To sum up, in the mixed governance model, the first secretary is the role carrier of political meritocracy and the village council

represents electoral democracy. Effective cooperation between each other could happen under appropriate conditions for better local governance.

II

Why Does Meritocratic Democracy Work in the Local Area

The new hybrid model in the rural China can be generalized to a kind of meritocratic democracy where electoral democracy of self-governance plays a major role in local public affairs, and meritocracy offers upper political power with intellectual resources as a supplemental support for local development.

The question of why meritocratic democracy works in the local area can be divided into two issues concerning why democracy works at the bottom and why political meritocracy also works there with democracy.

On the first issue of choosing democracy as the basic way to conduct local governance, Bell outlines three theoretical reasons to justify that democracy is most suitable for local society. First, people are more likely to have a better knowledge of their candidates since they live near. Second, there are more direct interest correlation and mutual influence between local people and local affairs. Third, local societies are more tolerant of mistakes under electoral democracy.[11] These factors are basically in line with the actual situation of rural China. Since rural China is an acquaintance society, the villagers are normally well-informed of other people, including the village cadres and candidates living

[11] Daniel Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 168.

close to them.[12] What's more, village residents tend not to be concerned about upper politics but are more interested in local affairs.[13] So, it's reasonable to say there is an advantage for democracy's working in local society.

Besides the theoretical reasons, there are also practical reasons for the democratic characteristic of the current mixed model. First, the insufficiency of human resources is an urgent situation in the rural China leading to poor governance. With the expansion of village-repeal and town-combination all over the country, the task of public management is becoming much heavier than before. At the same time, the hollowness is more serious than ever. Under such circumstance, many Chinese villages fall into destitution, persistent poverty and disorganization. For example, Luoping Town of Wuning County in Jiangxi Province had about 130 natural villages and reduced its 10 administrative villages to 5 after China's rural tax-fee reform and village-repeal. However, there were only 3-5 village cadres there, which led to much more burden and difficulty in local governance.[14] The situation above is quite popular in many Chinese rural regions, which hastens the birth of more types of autonomous organizations, so that the village committee's heavy burden might be shared and eased.

Second, advancing more forms of democratic governance is beneficial for the whole national reform. According to CPC's guiding advice, modernizing local governance system and

[12] Fei Xiaotong, *From the Soil : The Foundations of Chinese Society* (Beijing: Beijing Publishing Group, 2004), pp. 6-9.
[13] Lang Youxing, *Developing Democracy: Political Elites and villager Election* (Xi'an: Northwest University Press, 2009), p. 158.
[14] Jiu Zuwen, "The Village Council Creates a New Climate", *Contemporary Jiangxi Journal*, 2010, p. 12.

governance capacity is in line with the proper meaning of "deepening the reform in all-around way"[15] goal. In 2012, the former Chinese President Hu Jintao proposed that China should improve local-level democracy by broadening the scope and channels of self-governance and enrich democracy's content and forms to enable people to conduct self-management, self-service, self-education, and self-oversight. Different types of local-level democracy are welcomed in the exploration of the grassroots governance.[16] In 2014, China issued the annual *No.1 Document of the Central Government*, further advancing the initiatives of improving rural governance and exploring effective ways of village self-governance in different conditions. The document suggested rural areas could carry out pilot programs of self-governance based on village community or village group (as the smallest unite) which has the collective ownership of land.[17] In short, the central government creates better policy environment for enhancing local democracy in order to benefit the local and even the whole society.

Nevertheless, local society also needs meritocracy as a supplement for better development. In China, the village is always synonymous with the term, poverty. Substantial development is as significant as procedural democracy, even more urgent. With the aim of substantial improvement of farmers' life, elites' contribution is necessary. Therefore, how to make local democracy more meritocratic becomes a more valuable issue. In fact, with respect to the academic focus on the

[15] See *Communiqué of the Third Plenary Session of the 18th Central Committee of the CPC*, http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2013/1112/c1024-23519136.html.
[16] See *Report to the Eighteenth National Congress of the Congress of the Communist Party of China* on Nov 8, 2012, http://www.xj.xinhuanet.com/2012-11/19/c_113722546.htm.
[17] See http://news.xinhuanet.com/2014-01/19/c_119033371.htm.

grassroots governance, there is a perspective transition from western liberal democracy towards meritocratic consideration. To be specific, in the past, scholars were far more concerned with how to restrict political power and avoid individual's arbitrary behavior, rather than how to make local elites play their parts better to serve the public.[18] But in recent years, more academic research has concentrated on meritocratic governance within local electoral democracy. Some influential scholars even make claims about a "meritocratic path" to democracy in the village, emphasizing the importance of political elites as a theoretical response to the very realistic and urgent situation in the rural practice.[19] The very realistic situation of contemporary rural China as discussed before is the shortage of human resources, especially young talent. In terms of rallying talented individuals, current democratic governance is not sufficient. So, making democracy itself more meritocratic is driven by the actual need in the local society.

Simultaneously, political considerations based on the nature and reality of China's rural society also shape people's further understanding of what democracy means to them. Electoral democracy can be understood as a political mechanism aiming to select more meritorious people to rule the local society with broad political participation by the mass,[20] which is quite a Schumpeterian way[21] to define democracy. In fact, theorists in

[18] Tianyuanshiqi, *Rural Leaders in China: Connection, Cohesion and Agrarian Politics* (Jinan: Shandong People's Publishing House, 2012), p1.
[19] See works written by Tong Zhihui, Lang Youxing, He Xuefeng.
[20] Lang Youxing, *Developing Democracy: Political Elites and villager Election* (Xi'an: Northwest University Press, 2009), P212.
[21] As an influential democratic elitist, Schumpeter's theory of competitive democracy emphasizes more on the instrumental significance of democracy as a mechanism of ruler selection.

favor of a meritocratic path in rural governance don't counterpose political elites and the mass. They put more weight on political elites' leading function, intellectual contribution and responsibility for the people with the purpose of serving the local community.

Therefore, it's not difficult to understand why China's local society needs democracy with more meritocratic characteristics. Also, it's understandable to argue for the second issue of why political meritocracy contributes to the hybrid model. In short, political meritocracy can supplement what local democracy lacks and has advantages in promoting local democracy.

In the hybrid model, the first secretary represents institutional power from political meritocracy. The practical reason to conduct the arrangement of sending first secretaries to rural areas is mainly that there is still a large population of village people living in serious poverty. Actually, before the policy was formally implemented in 2015, many provinces had some successful experience of upper cadres entering the villages to help with development. Therefore, as a formal political action, sending first secretaries is a direct and rational response to China's poverty issues. Admittedly, China has made a great contribution to poverty relief worldwide in the past twenty years, which is also quite outstanding performance for itself. But there were still 128 thousand poor villages with more than 70 million people in poverty according to the latest poverty standard of an annual income of ¥2300 per capita from 2014, which obviously posed a big challenge to rural China's further development and full realization of the national development goal in 2020. Formally from 2015, a large number of first secretaries respectively from the provincial, municipal, county and town organs were sent to the poor villages in almost every province. To be specific, Anhui province has sent 18 thousand first secretaries to the poor villages

since 2001.[22] There used to be more than 120 people being asked for detainment by the village people and village cadres in the fourth group with 2000 first secretaries in 2014.[23] Guangxi Province sent 3000 cadres as first secretaries to the grassroots from 2012 to 2014.[24] The number in Henan Province was more than 14 thousand from 2011 to 2015. In 2016, China selected and sent 18.8 thousand outstanding cadres in total to act as first secretaries to support weak and poor villages. The first secretary system is on the frontline of poverty relief and party organization construction throughout the country.

There might be possibility that the central government conducts such arrangement on the basis of previous successful experience in pilot areas. The current practice further shows the merits of political meritocracy in the local hybrid model.

First, upper political elites can offer their intellectual power, material capital and social capital to promote local governance. As upper political elites, first secretaries being dispatched to the villages can be understood as a supply of rural leadership for the purpose of improving the scarce capacity in leadership at the grassroots level.[25] On what constitutes a good leadership, Bell has discussed the importance of intellectual ability, social skills and virtues which are equally necessary for rural cadres. First secretaries are intellectually competent on average since most of them have a relatively higher education background and formal

[22] Wang Xiaoxia, "To Send Real and Right- The First Secretary Work Investigation in Anhui Province", *China Poverty Alleviation*, Vol.15, 2015.
[23] Liu Limin, Wu Kaizhi, "Take Full Advantage of The First Secretary in the Construction of the Beautiful Village", *Theory Research*, Vol.5, 2014.
[24] See http://www.gxzf.gov.cn/zjgx/jrgx/201509/t20150927_478468.htm.
[25] Wang Yahua, Shu Quanfeng, "The Poverty Alleviation of First Secretary and Leadership Supply in Rural China", *Journal of China National School of Administration*, 2017.

position in the upper government.[26] They're more likely to have wider range of knowledge, broader horizon and richer experience. Additionally, financial and social resources they carry prepare better conditions for them to realize their ideas. The social capital here mainly refers to upper political elites' social network which comprises their social relations with other governments, social and business sectors. Some evidence indicates many first secretaries take advantage of their social capital to get more valuable information and substantial help for fulfillment of local tasks. In sum, excellent first secretaries have many advantages to contribute to local development by their meritocratic power.

Second, upper political elites can exercise a coordination and supervision of the local governance. Since first secretaries are interest-irrelevant with any interest group in the village, their independence makes their authority more acceptable to facilitate the coordination between the villager group and the local cadres. As the first leader of the village party branch, the first secretary has political power and convenience to supervise party members' behavior and attitudes at work.

Third, by the standard of political meritocracy, the first secretary mechanism makes the whole China Model more progressive. Working and living with poor people in poor areas is both education and training for young political elites. Having tough experiences in rural society helps enhance the upper cadres' ability to deal with complex problems and develop their real sympathy for the worse-off. As shown in the survey, among all the local cadres, villagers in County T of Guangxi are most

[26] Ibid, p84. Survey suggests 58.16% of the first secretaries have bachelor degree and 27.55% have master degree. Compared to most local cadres with education lower than high school, first secretaries are intellectually competitive.

satisfied with the first secretaries.[27] Good performance allow the first secretaries to move on in their career, while by contrast, poor performance may cause their recalls which is obviously no good for their future career. [28]

III

Conclusion

The rural hybrid model reveals that political meritocracy as a supplemental strength can reconcile and cooperate with electoral democracy in a harmonious way at the grassroots level. What's more, political meritocracy from upper power is capable to promote local democracy, which shows the inclusiveness and flexibility of the whole China Model.

At the practical level, political meritocracy makes up the deficiency of local democracy and benefits local governance. Political meritocracy transfers large numbers of political talents with material and social resources to conduct national policy for rural areas. Many studies and reports manifest there is positive influence of the first secretary policy besides villagers' satisfaction. Local democratic management also learns much from capable upper cadres with their working groups. Although, there are still imperfections in the current practice including weak participation and some ineffective interaction among local elites and villagers, overall village poverty and feeble organization are substantially improving.

At the theoretical level, political meritocracy takes heavy responsibility for the local community managed by democracy. In

[27] Ibid, p84.
[28] Ibid, p83.

China's Confucian tradition, the government should take great obligation for the well-being of the people.[29] The same goes for contemporary China. Powerful and extensive political actions are only possible when driven by a powerful central government, of which great responsibility for the society is a core feature. Also, political leaders selected by the meritocratic system (exams and tests) are regarded as political talents with superior ability, which leads to their heavier social responsibility than that of normal citizens. When local democracy encounters trouble from both internal and external factors, political meritocracy is both capable and obligated to give a hand.

Therefore, political meritocracy works not only at the central level but also at the local level with democracy. To conclude, a hybrid model reconciling electoral democracy with political meritocracy is possible and desirable for rural China or places with similar situation.

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[29] Tongdong Bai, "A Confucian Version of Hybrid Regime: How Does It Work, and Why Is It Superior?", *The East Asian Challenge for Democracy-Political Meritocracy in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Daniel. A. Bell and Chengyang Li, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p65.

SYMPOSIUM

THE CHINA MODEL

IN FAVOR OF MERITOCRACY, NOT AGAINST DEMOCRACY

BY

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 Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series), Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 223-246
Luiss University Press
E-ISSN 2240-7987 | P-ISSN 1591-0660

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In Favor of Meritocracy, not Against Democracy

Ricardo Tavares Da Silva

Regarding the selection of the legislative representatives, the elective system is the system that most democratic organizations have adopted. It has become so present nowadays that we take for granted the identification between elective system and representative democracy. But is this identification a correct one? I argue that it is not, since the meaning of 'representative democracy' has no reference to a specific mode of selection of the representatives. And, since democracy and other methods of selection are compatible, it should adopted the best one. The criteria of competence for the exercise of the political power ought to be the adopted method of selection, for it is the best one. I too argue that, in the context of division of labor into public and private labor, this is precisely what public representation aims: to leave to the experts the exercise of public labor.

I

Democracy and Elective System

Democracy without elective system

Usually, two identity propositions are thought to hold true: that (representative) democracy is identical with elective system and that meritocracy is identical with aristocracy. But such

© 2017 – *Philosophy and Public Issues (New Series)*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2017): 223-246
Luiss University Press
E-ISSN 2240-7987 | P-ISSN 1591-0660

identity propositions, I argue, are false: a system of government can be both democratic and non-elective, on the one hand, and can be both meritocratic and non-aristocratic, on the other hand. More specifically, I argue that a system of government can be both democratic and meritocratic, *i.e.*, a meritocratic democracy.

I will start with the first of those two identity propositions: there is no identity (or any conceptual relation) between democracy and elective system. This claim divides itself in two more particular claims: i) the concept of (representative) democracy does not entail the concept of elective system; ii) the concept of elective system does not entail the concept of (representative) democracy.

For now, I will focus on i): it is (conceptually) possible for a system to be democratic without it to be elective. In order to support this claim, I will use the traditional distinction between *ownership* and *exercise* of political power.

A system of government is democratic if (and only if) the people *owns* the political power: democracy is a system that concerns the ownership of power. The opposite concept is the concept of aristocracy: not all (only a few) own the power. Following Aristotle's famous remarks in *Politics*, the criteria of identification of a system of government in respect to the ownership of the political power is merely quantitative: if it is universal (in a given society), the system is democratic; if it is particular (in a given society), the system is aristocratic.

Qualitative criteria concerns, not who owns the power, but how it is exercised[1]. Nevertheless, there is still some quantification involved, concerning not who exercise power but

[1] Although some authors, such as Max Weber, have argued the possibility of legitimacy coming from the exercise of power.

who benefits from that exercise: the good exercise of power is the one that benefits (or keeps in mind the interests of) all (it is exercised for the people, one might say); the bad one is the one that only benefits (or keeps in mind the interests of) some. In some sense of the word 'democracy', democracy has to do with the good exercise of power.

But, differently from democracy, the elective system is currently used as a method of selection of the people's representatives: it does not concern those who own but those who *exercise* the power which belongs to the people. On the one hand, representative democracy presupposes the distinction between ownership and exercise: those who exercise the political power are not (all) those who own it. On the other hand, in some sense of the word 'democracy', representative democracies are not democratic (the power is not being exercised by the people, one might say), unlike direct democracies.

In spite of that, the elective system is not specifically about who exercises the political power: that problem is supposed to be solved when one says that only a few, not all, exercise the power which belongs to the people. It concerns specifically how those few, the representatives, are selected. Whenever the power is connected with only a few, one needs a way of selecting those few from the domain of candidates.

Therefore, it is (conceptually) possible for a system to be democratic without it to be elective: one just has to think in direct democracies. But, of course, that is not the point: when one thinks in the conceptual link between democracy and the elective system, one is thinking in the concept of representative democracy. So, why does not the concept of representative democracy entail the concept of elective system?

Because several methods of selection of the people's representatives, besides election, are conceivable. For example: lot (sortition) is historically the most adopted method of selection, still used in some (developed) countries (namely, to select the members of the jury in a court of law). If one is looking for a theoretical justification, David Van Reybrouck's *Against Elections: The Case for Democracy* is a contemporary defense of sortation as a method of selection of the political representatives (moreover, as *the* method of selection).[2]

But there are more. Let us divide the rest of them into two groups: a) the representatives are freely chosen; b) the representatives are selected according to a specific criteria.

Election by vote and nomination belong to a). In the first case, those who are being represented choose their representatives. In the second case, someone else (*i.e.*, not the people as a whole) choose the people's representatives. So, nomination is also a conceivable mode of selecting representatives. Regarding b), there are intrinsic and extrinsic (to the activity) criteria: in the first case, representatives are selected according to their competence for the job; in the second case, selection can be made according to age, gender, economic power, social status, etc..

For the theorist of representative democracy following a kind of authorization definition of 'political representation', representative democracy indeed entails elections because political representation is a *sui generis* one: it distinguishes itself from other forms of public "representation" precisely because the selection of the representatives takes place through the

[2] David Van Reybrouck's *Against Elections: The Case for Democracy*, trans. Liz Waters (London: The Bodley Head 2016).

elective system (in each election, voters grant the necessary authorization for the representatives to decide on their behalf).

But I think this position reverses the direction of the relationship: it is not the case that we have come to the conviction that political representation entails voting by virtue of the definition of 'political representation'; the truth is that the "definition" of 'political representation' has accommodated itself to the settled conviction that political representation entails election by vote.

The meaning of the phrase 'political representation' which has become popular does not coincide with the "correct" one: the use of the word 'political representation' has deviated from its pure meaning precisely because of the widespread social acceptance of the thesis that election is the only way to select political representatives.

Some argue that the way in which the people still decide in a representative system is through the selection of representatives: hence, representative democracy entails election by vote. But with the mechanism of representation those represented have nothing to decide: all their decisions are made by their representatives. That is why we have representation in the first place.

Another argument that can be put forward in favor of the conceptual connection between representative democracy and elective system consists in the following: if those who are being represented decide that they will be represented, they also choose who represents them.

But to have freedom to decide (to do something) does not imply having freedom to choose (what is done). One can decide that there is representation without the choice of representatives being at her disposal: the fact that the granting of "powers" of representation to a person is the subject of a decision does not

mean or imply that the selection of that person as a representative is also the subject of a decision.

Elective system without democracy

The claim that the concept of (representative) democracy entails the concept of elective system is falsified by the fact that there are several modes of selecting the people's representatives. But about the claim that the concept of elective system entails the concept of (representative) democracy?

First of all, the concept of elective system does not entail the concept of democracy: it is possible for a system to be elective without it to be democratic. Just think in the elective system as a method of attributing the *ownership* of the political power to only a few. Historically, this corresponds to what has been called 'elective aristocracy'. And I think that is precisely what the so called 'liberal democracies' are. In the words of Collin Bird:

> … it is worth noting that the association of democracy and election is relatively recent: from antiquity until roughly the eighteenth century, political theorists more often associated voting and election with elitist forms of rule like oligarchy or aristocracy. (…) From this classical point of view, what we now often identify as a form of democratic rule is better described as a kind of elective aristocracy, in which political elites, organized as political parties, compete for votes in regularly held elections. There is therefore scope for debate about how democratic competitive party politics really is.[3]

[3] C. Bird, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), p. 203.

David Miller reinforces this view. While commenting on Mosca's and Schumpeter's elitist theory of democracy, the author says that:

> This is strong stuff, and what it really entails is that the best we can hope for is what is sometimes called 'elective aristocracy', where all that can be asked of the ordinary citizen is that she should be able to recognize people who are competent to make decisions on her behalf (and to vote them out of office if they prove not to be).[4]

With this, it is not just the (conceptual) possibility of having elected aristocrats that is being affirmed: it is being asserted that the elective system entails aristocracy. Even when the elective system is allegedly being used to select those who will exercise the political power owned by all, it is really being used to cover an aristocratic system: there is no *de facto* possibility of election of the representatives in a democratic system, even if this is *de jure* conceivable.

I agree with Mosca when he says that:

> When we say that the voters 'choose' their representative, we are using a language that is very inexact. The truth is that the representative *has himself elected* by the voters, and, if that phrase should seem too inflexible and too harsh to fit some cases, we might qualify it by saying that *his friends have him elected*. In elections, as in all other manifestations of social life, those who have the will and, especially, the moral, intellectual and material *means* to force their will upon others take the lead over the others and command them.[5]

[4] D. Miller, *Political Philosophy. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003), p. 41.
[5] C. Mosca, *The Ruling Class*, transl. Hannah D. Kahn (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company 1989), p. 154.

First of all, only those who have the means to reach the electorate have the real chance to persuade it to vote for them and, therefore, to take political seats. More specifically, the capacity to fund the electoral campaign and the proximity to the media already delimit the universe of potential candidates. And this comes with a price: whoever is elected will have in mind, once in office, the will/interest of those who financed and/or disseminated his message, not of those who he represents.

Secondly, speaking of informal "primaries", one must mention the close relationship between the electoral system and the party system and, hence, once again, the delimitation of the potential candidate universe. On the other hand, it is still the party system that generates the circularity of those in office. The practical result is equivalent to aristocracy: there is no real democracy.

It's not just equality that's missing: there is no real freedom of choice too. At most, those represented have the capacity to block the granting of representation powers (in case of 100% abstention). But there is no real plurality of candidates to choose from. Again, I agree with Mosca on this:

> The political mandate has been likened to the power of attorney that is familiar in private law. But in private relationships, delegations of powers and capacities always presuppose that the principal has the broadest freedom in choosing his representative. Now in practice, in popular elections, that freedom of choice, though complete theoretically, necessarily becomes null, not to say ludicrous.[6]

The existence of political parties is good evidence for the existence of a *de facto* aristocracy, independent of the formal system of government. Regular citizens do not stand a real chance of being at government's office unless they join some

[6] Ibid., p. 154.

political party. Liberal democracy, the sort of "representative democracy" modeled by the "founding fathers of modern democracy", is in fact disguised aristocracy, the bourgeois aristocracy.[7]

And too the concept of elective system does not entail the concept of representative democracy: it is possible for a system to be elective in the context of representative aristocracy. Let us

[7] Liberal representation is the bourgeois equivalent of the Hobbesian representation: the former was thought by and for the bourgeoisie just as the latter was thought by and for the nobility. In Hobbes's model, there is truly no representation: "representatives" are not limited to exercising political power in the name of the people; with the social contract, they become their holders. The Hobbesian model is a mere theoretical artifice to further justify the old aristocratic *status quo*. In the liberal model, elections play the same role the social contract plays in the Hobbesian model, while the party system ensures that only a privileged class of the people (the economic elites – the bourgeoisie) will really have political power (besides economic power). Moreover, given this direct relationship between political and economic power, this model stimulates the promiscuity between both. Rousseau strongly opposed both kinds of "representative democracy", a move that led Mosca to call him the real parent of the doctrine of popular sovereignty. Van Reybrouck beautifully describes the intrinsic connection between the rise of the bourgeoisie and the implementation of the elective system: "We know well enough that the upper bourgeoisie, which threw off the British and French crowns in 1776 and 1789, fought for a republican form of government, but whether it was devoted to the democratic variety of that form of government is open to question. There are certainly plenty of references to 'the people', the revolutionaries repeatedly declaring that they believed the people were sovereign, that the Nation should be spelt with a capital 'N' and that 'We the People' was the start of everything. But when it came down to it they nevertheless had a fairly elitist concept of 'the people'. (…) It soon became clear in both countries that the republic the revolutionary leaders had in mind, and to which they then gave shape, tended more to the aristocratic than the democratic. Elections could help." D. Van Reybrouck, *Against Elections*, pp. 55-56.

imagine that only a few own political power: if there is need that even less exercise it, than those fewer can be selected by election. If election is conceivable as a way of selecting political representatives, then it is conceivable as a way of selecting the representatives of those few who own political power.

II

Meritocracy and Aristocracy

Meritocracy without aristocracy

Now, I will focus on the second of those two identity propositions: there is no identity (or any conceptual relation) between meritocracy and aristocracy. This claim divides itself in two more particular claims: iii) the concept of meritocracy does not entail the concept of aristocracy; iv) the concept of aristocracy does not entail the concept of meritocracy.

Let us start with iii): it is (conceptually) possible for a system to be meritocratic without it to be aristocratic.

First, when the competence or merit criteria is used to attribute the political power's ownership, the output may be the people's ownership: that was indeed Rousseau's belief in *The Social Contract* – the general will is more competent to decide about public affairs. This was the main reason that led him to defend so ferociously direct democracy.[8]

Using such a criterion to attribute the political power's ownership may also result in an aristocratic system, of course.

[8] The phrase 'all men know what is best for themselves' is ambiguous between 'every man knows what is best for himself' and 'the set of all men knows what is best for itself'. I believe Rousseau was not aware of this ambiguity.

That was Plato's project in *The Republic*: only the few that are the most competent to exercise political power are its holders. But this is only a possibility: the meritocratic criteria does not entail aristocracy.

Both Rousseau and Plato share one mistake, I think: they both use the meritocratic criteria as an ownership criteria. But if one says that only those who are competent should exercise political power, one is using an *exercise* criteria, not an ownership criteria. That the most competent to exercise political power, either all or some, should exercise political power is, perhaps, trivially true; but that the most competent to exercise political power, either all or some, should be the owners of political power is surely not trivially true.

If Rousseau is right and the general will is more competent to decide about public affairs, then all of us should exercise political power, regardless of whether the ownership belongs to all or only some. The following situation is then compatible with the exercise of political power by all: a small aristocratic group grants powers of representation to the competent general will. This system is aristocratic regarding ownership ('aristocratic' in its proper sense) and democratic regarding exercise ('democratic' in a non-proper sense).

If Plato is right and only few of us are competent to exercise political power, then only those few should exercise political power, regardless of whether the ownership belongs to all or only some. The following situation is then compatible with the exercise of political power by some: the people as a whole grants powers of representation to a small group of competent individuals. This system is democratic regarding ownership ('democratic' in its proper sense) and aristocratic regarding exercise ('aristocratic' in a non-proper sense).

I was thinking in this last situation when I argued that meritocracy does not entail aristocracy. Since the merit criteria concerns the *exercise* of political power and the democratic principle concerns its *ownership*, political representatives can be selected according with their competence for the job and still be representing the people, the holder of that power. Again, the traditional distinction between ownership and exercise of political power is decisive.

One could argue that when only a few exercise legislative power, then there isn't real democracy. But this is a critique to representative democracy, not to the competence criteria. When legislative representatives are selected by election, there are only a few exercising legislative power: this would be aristocratic too. In any case, we are talking about 'democracy' and 'aristocracy' in a non-proper way: in the sense of the word 'democracy' that concerns exercise and not ownership, representative democracies are not democratic (the power is not being exercised by the people), unlike direct democracies.

One is used to associate meritocracy with aristocracy because one is thinking of the meritocratic method as a method of attributing the ownership of political power. Even though the conceptual association is already illegitimate in this last case, once the meritocratic method is thought as a method of selecting the political representatives, the association becomes clearly over the top.

This misconception is still found in Van Reybrouck's *Against Elections. The Case for Democracy*. For instance, Van Reybrouck says that "democracy is the least bad of all forms of government precisely because it attempts to find a healthy balance between legitimacy and efficiency, resulting in criticism sometimes of one

side, sometimes of the other"[9] and that "politics is more than simply a matter of good government", since "democracy is not just government for the people but government by the people."[10]

The last two assertions are made in a particular context. Van Reybrouck is presenting four diagnostic proposals for what is going wrong in modern democracies. He thinks (and I agree with him) that it is the fault of electoral-representative democracy. But he distinguishes his diagnosis from another one, the technocratic one: using Van Reybrouck's title, 'It's the fault of democracy: *The diagnosis of the technocracy*.'

But the two diagnostics are not incompatible: one can argue it's the fault of electoral-representative democracy and give a technocratic remedy. In fact, I will argue later on that, if one is thinking in the exercise of political power, then politics is really nothing more than simply a matter of good government: what else could it be? Therefore, representative democracy is just government for the people, and surely not government by the people (although of the people). One can have maximum efficiency with maximum legitimacy.

But let us agree that meritocracy does not entail aristocracy (in the proper sense of the word) since it is a mode of selection concerning the exercise of political power. Nevertheless, one may argue, it still is an elitist system. However, this sentence can mean two different things.

On one hand, it may mean that we are discriminating those who are note wise from those who are. However, whenever there is a selection, there is discrimination. Once again, that is not a problem of the competence criteria but of representation. But,

[9] D. Van Reybrouck *Against Elections*, p. 28.
[10] Ibid., p. 34.

since there is discrimination, it has to be made based on factors relevant to the exercise of political power, such as competence. Otherwise, there is inequality. Thus, in a meritocratic system, there is discrimination, but a positive one and, as such, due.

On the other hand, it may mean that we are not letting everybody running for office: one must fulfill some requirements. But this is not a problem: the same holds true for all professions and one does not say that they are elitist or anti-democratic (other than a technical or intellectual sense).

Aristocracy without meritocracy

My last claim is that the concept of aristocracy does not entail the concept of meritocracy: it is possible for a system to be aristocratic without it to be meritocratic.

On one hand, although attributing the political power's ownership to those who are more capable of exercising it would be a straightforward solution, it can be attribute disregarding any quality of the owners; it can be attribute on the basis of numerical identity (to *a* just for being *a*), for example; even through elections.

On the other hand, direct aristocracy is as conceivable as direct democracy: in the absence of any method of selection of representatives, the meritocratic method is not established. Hence, such a system would be aristocratic without being meritocratic. But even in a representative aristocracy, representatives can be selected in other ways besides their merit: they can be elected by those few who own the political power, for instance.

In short. The characterization of a given organizational system as a democratic representation is not related to the way in which

the representatives are selected. The system is democratic if the holder of the political power is the people: the characterizing factor is the identity of the represented—and the people is not less owner of political power if they do not choose their representatives.

Conceptually, there are no reasons to exclude meritocracy from democracy, namely, representative democracy. Neither representative democracy is identical with elective system nor meritocracy with aristocracy: a system of government can be both democratic and non-elective, for example, meritocratic, and can be both meritocratic and non-aristocratic, *i.e.*, democratic. In other words: there is nothing wrong with the concept of meritocratic democracy.

III

Meritocratic Democracy and Division of Labor

The case for meritocracy

Since democracy is as compatible with meritocracy as with the elective system, one must inquire which one of them (or another method of selection of legislative representatives) should be adopted by political institutions. I argue that meritocracy should be the one. Two main arguments will be ahead presented.

I accept the traditional claim that the democratic system must be established as a matter of principle (in order to respect the autonomy of the common decision: what concerns the community must be decided by the community) and not taking into account its consequences, because I place the weighing of consequences on the exercise of political power, not its ownership.

In *Against Democracy*, Brennan contests the traditional claim that the democratic system must be established as a matter of principle. In his words:

> Others think we should value democracy the way we value a person, as an end in itself. But as we saw over the past few chapters, arguments for these conclusions don't work. This leaves us with a final option. Perhaps democracy is valuable the way a hammer is valuable. It's nothing more than a useful tool.[11]

Regarding the ownership of political power, I must agree with Van Reybrouck that politics is more than simply a matter of good government and that democracy is not just government for the people. The ownership of political power has to do with respecting the people's *will* while the exercise of political power has to do with respecting the people's *interest*.

Views such as, as Van Reybrouck calls it, electoral fundamentalism contests weighing of consequences at the level of the exercise of political power: one may argue that the elective system must be adopted just because it is the right one, even if may not be the one that brings more benefits. According to Van Reybrouck:

> Electoral fundamentalism is an unshakeable belief in the idea that democracy is inconceivable without elections and elections are a necessary and fundamental precondition when speaking of democracy. Electoral fundamentalists refuse to regard elections as a means of taking part in democracy, seeing them instead as an end in themselves, as a holy doctrine with an intrinsic, inalienable value.[12]

[11] J. Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2016), p. 204.
[12] D. Van Reybrouck *Against Elections*, p. 45.

However, any method of selecting the representatives can only be judged according to the consequences or the results since individuals are being selected for a particular function: they are not being selected just for the sake of selecting. What would justify the intrinsic value of the elective system? Its intrinsic democratic character? But we have already seen that such a conceptual link does not exist.

So, why merit and not elections? My first argument is this. Since the traditional critique of representative democracy (namely, that the voters do not vote with the required knowledge and rationality and that the elected representatives do not govern with the required competence) is, indeed, a critique of the elective system and since the *cons* of the elective system are the *pros* of a meritocratic method of selection, than meritocracy is the method that, by nature, satisfies such objections.

Two of the main sources of disappoint towards (representative) democracy are really problems concerning the elective system. Thus, the problem is not with (representative) democracy but with the elective system. One of those problems has to do with those who vote: they are not necessarily informed and/or rational in their decisions. It may be the case that the electorate meets those requirements: but this is not guaranteed by the fact that those who are being represented are the ones who select their representatives.

Brennan argues that he has an antidote to this problem. He calls it 'epistocracy': the voters are themselves qualified people. Just those who know how to choose wisely our political representatives are the ones who can vote. But since we are going to impose competence requirements, why not do it with the representatives themselves? It seems simpler to me. On the other hand, why are not the qualified voters elected? Are not the

reasons for defending the elective system for representatives the same for voters?

The second main problem concerning the elective system has to do with the representatives: they are not necessarily good for the job. Of course, here too, it may be the case that, casually, one is elected and competent for the position. But this is not guaranteed by the selection mode in question; it is accidental to it.

A third problem arises from the relationship between who votes and who wants to be elected. This relationship is one of persuasion and/or popularity: election is reduced to a competition that is won by the force of publicity and rhetoric, not by the force of rationality and dialectics.

The growing dissatisfaction of citizens is a result of the growing perception of the defects pointed out. They are dissatisfied with the quality of politicians' work, they are dissatisfied with political parties—independents and civic movements' participation in elections is becoming banal—and they are dissatisfied because they do not feel truly represented. I think that citizens want to be represented but well represented.

The second argument in favor of meritocracy is inspired in the 'analogy with the professions argument' from Plato's *The Republic*: if there is not a voting process to select those who will cure diseases, for example, being instead that job left to trained professionals—who will secure that the job will be well done—, why not doing the same when it comes to government? Isn't that a job that, for its special importance to society, really requires competence for its exercise?

Restricting the analogy to public professions, one may ask: if access to common public office is made on the basis of the satisfaction of competence requirements and not by election, is there any reason the same should not occur regarding public

office of government? If all public workers are selected *via* competence, why are not political representatives selected in the same way? I don't think there is a difference.

The argument can be reformulated as follows: if one can be a legislator without fulfilling competency requirements, then one can be a public doctor, teacher, police, etc., without fulfilling competence requirements. Or, what is equivalent, if one cannot be a public doctor, teacher, police, etc., without fulfilling competency requirements, then one cannot be a legislator without fulfilling competence requirements.

Philip Pettit, in *Meritocratic Representation*, sees two problems with meritocracy as a method of selecting those in office. First of all, I must emphasize that the author criticizes the meritocratic method, not because of its inconceivability as a way of selecting representatives in a democracy, but because of its drawbacks.

The first problem he sees relates to the claim that those in office are, besides talented, virtuous. The ancient system of examinations to the mandarinate, he says, may have worked well as a way of selecting the talented and it could presumably be resurrected in today's world but it is not fit to select the virtuous. We will have to rely on a system that leaves room for more personal assessments of the candidates and, therefore, for bias or favor.

This problem, if it exists, is transversal to all public positions that resort to the criterion of competence; however, this is not a sufficient reason to exchange such a method for elections, for example: we are not willing to have elections to choose the public health system's doctors, among others—that would be ridiculous. And I'm not so sure that merit is a combination of talent and virtue.

The second problem he sees relates to the legitimacy of those in office that are not actually meritorious (not suitably talented or not suitably virtuous). Pettit thinks that it is important that legitimacy should not be tied in this way to performance. But I believe that this will only be a problem for those who, *a priori*, are not willing to accept the criterion of competence. For those who are, there isn't a problem: if those in office are not actually meritorious, then they should leave the office.

Mutatis mutandis, the same holds true for the other modes of selection, such as lot. Lot (or sortition) has one great advantage over election: it is not so especially susceptible to corruption. But better performance of functions is yet not guaranteed; perhaps, such a guarantee is lower.

The division between private and public labor

From this last argument in favor of meritocracy I will proceed to another claim: there is a conceptual connection between representative democracy and meritocracy. More specifically, I argue that there is an identity relation between political (public, to be more precise) representation and division between private and public labor, which entails competence. This claim divides itself in two more particular claims: v) the concept of political (public) representation (and, hence, of representative democracy) entails the concept of division between private and public labor; vi) the concept of division between private and public labor entails the concept of political (public) representation.

If claim v) is true, then it is not just (conceptually) possible for a representative democracy to be meritocratic: it is (conceptually) necessary. Why? Because the concept of division of labor entails the concept of competence, since labor is divided in order to

maximize efficiency and quality in the performance of the social activities and, for that, one needs to be competent.

I support claim v) with the following argument: 'political representation' means 'fewer individuals than the owners exercise political power'; if the owner of political power is the people, then only a few individuals exercise political power; now, those representatives will exclusively exercise that public function and the rest will exclusively dedicate to other activities, like their private jobs; therefore, the public labor of exercising political power is separated from other kinds of labor, like private labor.

Supposing that the people is not the most competent entity to exercise political power of which it is the holder, only some individuals will exercise political power, and they will do so in the context of division of labor, *i.e.*, as specialists in this activity. In Kelsen's words, "differentiation of social conditions leads to a division of labor not only in economic production but within the domain of the creation of law as well."[13] So, if the argument is valid and the premises true, which I think they are, then representative democracy entails meritocratic.

One has to ask the fundamental question: why is there political representation? The most common answer is this: in large and complex societies such as the present, direct democracy is impracticable. But the technological means at our disposal would already allow us to get around this obstacle. Besides that, small groups do not abandon the use of representation mechanisms. My answer is another one: the reason for having political representation is the division of labor, namely, between private and public labor.

[13] H. Kelsen, *General Theory of Law and State*, trans. Anders Wedberg, (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 1949), p. 289.

I support claim vi) with the following argument: 'division between private and public labor' means 'not all individuals carry out private activities nor public activities'; now, let us restrict to political activity, *i.e.*, to the exercise of political power; therefore, only some individuals exercise political power, which belong to all in a democratic system.

Since the concept of division between private and public labor entails the concept of political (public) representation, there is more than a mere analogy between political representatives and public servants: political representation is just a particular case of public representation.

As Pitkin points out in *The Concept of Representation*, in the sense of 'representation' advanced by the *Organschaft* authors (namely, Weber, Gierke and Jellinek), any person who performs a function in the name of the group can be seen as its representative.[14] An official, a representative, is the specialized "organ" of a group. All government officials, all organs of the state, are representatives (both the postmen and the ambassadors represent the people), and representation is necessary in any complex society. Thus, representatives defined in this manner need not be elected to office: the manner of their selection is irrelevant so long as they became organs of the group.

Hence, a meritocratic method of selection is already the adopted one when it comes to selecting public officers, such as public professors and public doctors. The same must be done when it comes to the exercise of political power: for the sake of consistency, political representatives must be selected according with the same criteria other public representatives are.

[14] H. Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1967).

In conclusion: political activity must be carried out by specialists and according to the same professional and deontological criteria as in all public activities. Those who perform public activities on behalf of the people must be selected in the same way, *i.e.*, according to the criterion of competence. Political representatives are the experts to whom we leave the exercise of political power.

The reason for political representation is, on the one hand, the fact that most citizens are unavailable to exercise their part of the political power, because they have specialized in any other activity (usually private), and, on the other hand, the fact that exclusive dedication to political activity by certain individuals warrants the best results in that activity.

Rousseau had already seen this conceptual link between political representation and division of labor: his disapproval of public representation was linked with his disapproval of division between private and public labor, and he disapproved that for the reason that the people is the most competent entity to decide about public affairs. In Rousseau's view, as soon as public service ceases to be the main task of citizens and they prefer to serve with money instead of serving with their person, the state is already close to ruin.

If they have to fight, they pay troops and stay home and, if they have to go to the council, they appoint deputies and stay at home: by force of laziness and money, says Rousseau, they finally have soldiers to subdue their homeland and representatives to sell it. Rousseau sees no legitimate reason for political representation or, which is the same, for giving up public service. Had he not had insisted that the general will is the most competent to decide on public affairs, I

think he would assert something very similar to what I have asserted.

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