

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

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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*<sup>1</sup> 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

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

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.<sup>2</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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<sup>4</sup>, confusing<sup>5</sup> and even overlooking some of the harsh realities of

<sup>3</sup> 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>.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Referring to the document Charter 2008, which called for competitive electoral democracy in China, and Liu Xiaobo, a key person behind the

Chinese rule<sup>6</sup>. 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<sup>7</sup>. But the reason for this state of affairs does not appear to be fully

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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.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> "... 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 to 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<sup>8</sup> and that democratic features have to be introduced to ensure the sustainability of the Chinese political system.<sup>9</sup> 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

<sup>8</sup> "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).

<sup>9</sup> "...(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.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>

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

<sup>10</sup> “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).

<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

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

<sup>12</sup> “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.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> 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

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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...”<sup>16</sup> 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

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> *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”<sup>17</sup> 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.”<sup>18</sup> 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

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>18</sup> *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”<sup>19</sup>, rather than striving “to be humble and sympathetic to the people”<sup>20</sup>, 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.”<sup>22</sup>

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.”<sup>23</sup>

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

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>21</sup> See p. 131.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>23</sup> *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..."<sup>24</sup>

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".<sup>25</sup> This leads him to say: "The question, therefore, is how to reconcile political meritocracy and democracy."<sup>26</sup>

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"<sup>27</sup>, 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."<sup>28</sup> At this stage of his thinking, Bell believes that the third model is the best for China.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>28</sup> *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".<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup> 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

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

believes that, once it is combined with exercise of consent at the local level<sup>32</sup>, 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”<sup>33</sup>, 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.”<sup>34</sup> 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-

<sup>32</sup> “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)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 185.

<sup>34</sup> 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”).<sup>35</sup>

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.<sup>36</sup>

### 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

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>36</sup> 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<sup>37</sup>, 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.<sup>38</sup> The tyranny of

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>38</sup> 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

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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.<sup>39</sup> 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<sup>40</sup>. 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

<sup>39</sup> Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democratic Legitimacy. Impartiality, Reflexivity, Proximity* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, 2011), Conclusion.

<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, on “the true nature of the system”<sup>42</sup>, 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*.

<sup>41</sup> 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 world, 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).

<sup>42</sup> 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.”<sup>43</sup> 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”<sup>44</sup>, he also points to the

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

importance of loyalty and political patronage for career development and professional success in the public sector<sup>45</sup> (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<sup>46</sup>, have

<sup>45</sup> 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.

<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> 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.”<sup>48</sup> 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

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

<sup>47</sup> 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).

<sup>48</sup> Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (op. cit.), footnote 60, p. 270.

decisions, and choose good policies on behalf of their people and society.”<sup>49</sup> 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<sup>50</sup>, 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

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup> 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,<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup> At times it may be encouraged as well by the Chinese government: as the growth of

<sup>51</sup> 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.

<sup>52</sup> 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.

<sup>53</sup> 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](http://migrationpolicy.org).



the economy slows down domestically, exporting people can be a way to lessen the internal pressure on the system.<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55</sup> Among other things it can be the sign of a malaise and worries concerning the years ahead.<sup>56</sup> In other words, the guardianship democracy that Bell tells us the Chinese people

<sup>54</sup> 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).

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

<sup>56</sup> 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.<sup>57</sup> In contrast, China has a long history of international engagement, at the regional level if not beyond. It

<sup>57</sup> 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<sup>58</sup>, 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<sup>59</sup>). 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<sup>60</sup>, 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.<sup>61</sup> All this is

<sup>58</sup> 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.

<sup>59</sup> 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).

<sup>60</sup> Daniel A. Bell, “Why Anyone Can Be Chinese”, *The Wall Street Journal*, July 14, 2017.

<sup>61</sup> 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.

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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.<sup>62</sup> 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

<sup>62</sup> "... 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* (op. 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<sup>63</sup>, 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<sup>64</sup>, 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

<sup>63</sup> 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.

<sup>64</sup> 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).<sup>65</sup> In the West one has to be a specialist of China to know about China.<sup>66</sup> 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.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>65</sup> 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.

<sup>66</sup> 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.

<sup>67</sup> 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's 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

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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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 21st 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<sup>68</sup>, what does it tell us about the state of political

<sup>68</sup> 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.<sup>69</sup> 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

<sup>69</sup> 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.<sup>70</sup>

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SYMPOSIUM  
THE CHINA MODEL



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

BY  
JEAN-MARC COICAUD

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