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THE CHINA MODEL



FROM DEMOCRATIC MERITOCRACY  
TO MERITOCRATIC DEMOCRACY:  
WHY POLITICAL MERITOCRACY  
MATTERS

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© 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

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# From Democratic Meritocracy to Meritocratic Democracy: Why Political Meritocracy Matters

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**T**he 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.<sup>1</sup> The reasons for so much interest in the *China*

<sup>1</sup> 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, *Beyond 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

*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.<sup>2</sup> 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"<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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”.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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

<sup>4</sup> Steven Wall, “Democracy and Equality,” *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 57, Issue 228, (2007), pp. 416–438.

<sup>5</sup> 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” (*Reflections 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 in 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.<sup>6</sup>

Meritocratic selection mechanisms based on individual skills, integrity and performance, can *balance* democratic institutions by ensuring a further check on the leadership's 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

<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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

<sup>7</sup> 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*.<sup>8</sup>

## 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup>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.

<sup>9</sup> 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”<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>12</sup> 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'.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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

<sup>13</sup> Steven Wall, "Democracy and Equality," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 57, Issue 228, (2007), pp. 416–438.

<sup>14</sup> 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 evolution 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 analysts 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.”<sup>15</sup>

The results represented a wake-up call for the government. Publicly, the government recognized the public’s concerns and its mistakes.<sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> 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.

<sup>16</sup> 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 arose 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.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> 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 1990s some measures of checks and balance were introduced to forbid the executive power to enact the Internal 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.<sup>18</sup> 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

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Provision Act is also problematic. This statute allows the executive branch to order that suspected criminals are detained without trial for 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.

<sup>18</sup> 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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