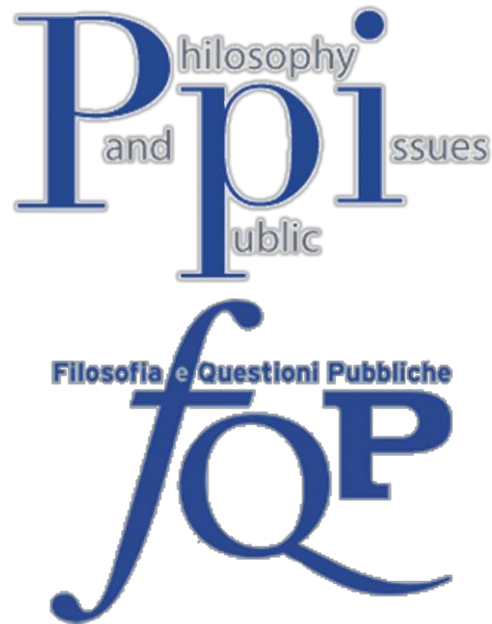


SYMPOSIUM  
THE CHINA MODEL



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

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

Peitao Jia

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

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

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

Any meticulous analysis will show that PM as the alleged “China model” can be most accurately interpreted as meritocratic elitism<sup>2</sup> (ME)—to be brief, it emphasizes competent leadership rather than active citizenship. In the East Asian context, Sungmoon Kim defends “Confucian civil society” as an “alternative to meritocratic elitism”, based on political experiences in democratized South Korea and Taiwan.<sup>3</sup> And as a defender of egalitarian liberalism, I further adopt and defend in my own research a type of liberal meritocracy<sup>4</sup> characterized by three institutional elements—public deliberation, democratic accountability, and meritocratic representation—as an alternative to Bell’s ME.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## I

### **What's Really Wrong with Political Meritocracy**

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

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

<sup>6</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, "Foreword", in Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011), pp. ix-x.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model*, p. 2, p. 10.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

## II

### **Liberalism Revisited: Beyond Politics-Focused Political Philosophy**

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>10</sup> Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model*, pp. 121-2, pp. 123-5. “Make or break”—the point sounds tricky, but the original words are exactly like this.

<sup>11</sup> This comment appears having been incidentally made, but it was not. I will revisit Michael Young together with John Rawls in the fifth section.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model*, pp. 127-9, p. 135.

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

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

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

<sup>13</sup> Erich Fromm, *The art of loving* (London: Thorsons 1995), pp. 47-8.

<sup>14</sup> Not just utilitarianism in ethics. Also keep in mind those liberal critics of utilitarianism in contemporary political philosophy.

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

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

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

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

<sup>15</sup> In fact, both corruption and ossification are manifestations of the lack of performance legitimacy. No need to parallel legitimacy with corruption and ossification.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books 2013), p. 6.

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

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

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

<sup>17</sup> Jason Brennan, *Against Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2016).

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

<sup>19</sup> Regular, common, average, ordinary... I don’t know which is the best word; I try to be both respectful and accurate.

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

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

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

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

### III

#### **A Retreat of the Same Author’s Theorization? From a Horizontal to a Vertical reconciliation**

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>20</sup> See Sungmoon Kim, “To Become a Confucian Democratic Citizen: Against Meritocratic Elitism.”

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

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

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

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

<sup>22</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 1973), pp. 317-8.

<sup>23</sup> See my unpublished undergraduate thesis in 2007.

<sup>24</sup> See my unpublished PhD dissertation in 2014.



#### IV

### Personalization of Academic Writing and Misunderstandings from Readers

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

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

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

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

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

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

## V

### **Justifications Left for Meritocratic Elitism: Historical and Theoretical**

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

<sup>26</sup> G.A. Cohen, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich* (Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press 2001).

<sup>27</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Rousseau, Kant, Goethe: Two Essays*, trans. James Gutmann et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1970), p. 58.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>29</sup> I believe every philosophy major knows that story about Rousseau, Kant, and taking a walk. Since the discussion has arrived at this (I did not expect it

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>31</sup> Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>33</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 4.

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

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

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

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

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57, pp. 91-2.

<sup>35</sup> Rawls’s caution about meritocratic societies also helps interpret and remedy, for example, populism.

<sup>36</sup> For example, Daniel A. Bell, “Taking Elitism Seriously: Democracy with Confucian Characteristics,” in *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006), ch. 5.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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