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## Daniel Bell, The China model: political meritocracy and the limits of democracy

**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Jenco, Leigh K. (2016) *Daniel Bell, The China model: political meritocracy and the limits of democracy*. [Perspectives on Politics](#) . ISSN 1541-0986

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Available in LSE Research Online: August 2016

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

Daniel Bell's newest book continues the line of research he began more than twenty years ago, when he called for greater attention to the normative implications of Chinese approaches to politics. Unlike his earlier work, however, Bell does not here promote particular readings of the Chinese tradition in order to defend more communitarian approaches to public life. Although such readings remain clear undercurrents in *The China Model*, Bell focuses more on the contemporary practices of the Chinese party leadership to defend their model of meritocracy as a credible (albeit qualified) alternative to democracy, particularly for Chinese heritage societies but also possibly for the rest of the world. Bell's larger goal is to undermine unquestioned faith in democracy as the only normatively defensible political model. In many ways Bell's approach is refreshing because it is too little seen among Anglophone political theorists: he takes a non-Western, non-democratic political model seriously enough to draw out its normative and institutional implications within broader debates about good governance. For the most part he successfully avoids reductive essentialisms about East Asian culture by considering how the "China model" of centralized meritocracy, once suitably integrated with local democratic mechanisms, might produce a legitimate alternative to electoral democracy.

Unfortunately, his argument is unlikely to convince anyone already committed to democracy, for at least two reasons. First, the evidence for the problems with "democracy" that Bell offers seem more precisely attributable to specific aspects of the contemporary American two-party political system than to democratic government itself. Bell defines democracy somewhat simplistically throughout his book as "one person, one vote," (14 *et passim*) and draws examples almost exclusively from the United States (20). Despite this focus, his sweeping critique of democracy conflates differences both between federal, state, and township election systems in the United States, even as his meritocratic proposal insists on differentiating federal from local practices in the Chinese case (171). He also gives no account of alternative institutions, despite the fact that he draws on attempts to reform the British House of Lords (one example of how popular power is distributed and checked differently in different democratic systems) as evidence of the sacred power held by "one person one vote" (161). Finally, he offers no sustained discussion of why the well-known problems of American-style electoral democracy—such as tyranny of the majority—are better solved with meritocracy specifically, rather than more or different kinds of democracy, including deliberative practices at the local and national levels or proportional representation to replace American two-party electoral democracy.

Second, and more importantly, many of these criticisms of democracy—and by extension, Bell's defense of meritocracy—turn on a problematic conception of knowledge as a body of always-expanding but nevertheless fairly objective information. Meritocracy is thus defined as a system that can somehow effectively determine, and ensconce with power, those few rational individuals who properly grasp that knowledge. If we accept this conception of knowledge, Bell's claim that "voters should do their best to select wise leaders" would indeed be as uncontroversial as he assumes (19), as would the meritocratic conclusions stemming from the observation that "not everyone is equally able and willing to vote in a sensible manner" (156)—for which Bell cites John Stuart Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government*. Bell interprets resistance to such conclusions as political, not

philosophical: that is, they make rational sense but they are politically infeasible because no one these days would willingly accept disenfranchisement (156, 159).

This unironic use of Mill, paired with Bell's continued insistence that popular participation is necessary only as a practical measure to secure "democratic legitimacy" to a regime otherwise ruled by meritocrats (151), elides not only the justification of colonialism implied in Mill's remarks about "distinctions and gradations" in knowledge (156), but also the alternative views that emerged in critical response to just such a colonial, androcentric discourse of knowledge that registered difference as inferiority or deficiency. To his credit, Bell acknowledges (again citing Mill) "new sources of merit" and "differentiated standards of merit" (134-5) that may emerge in response to new circumstances, but these are not integrated with his recognition of the need to include persons of different genders and socio-economic background into meritocratic processes. For Bell, this inclusion simply addresses the possibility that "politicians are more likely to fight for the interests of people from their own background when faced with competing considerations" (129). However, for most feminists and multiculturalists, these inclusions are necessary precisely because knowledge itself—particularly political knowledge—is not a body of objective information that can be assessed by and for experts, but rather a contested field of claims to truth that implicitly privilege certain groups over others. One reason to support (a version of) democracy, then, may be to resist the elevation of any one criteria of knowledge—as well as, of course, the group of people that body of knowledge implicitly privileges—to a status beyond meaningful political critique. That is, contrary to Bell's assumptions, democracy may not be a failed system for choosing "superior" political leaders (9), but rather a system that encourages interrogation of the very idea of superiority in politics.

Without addressing this more subtle relationship between power and knowledge, Bell's argument will not convince many contemporary scholars of politics. Nor would it necessarily be compelling to the historical Chinese thinkers that Bell occasionally cites in support of his claims: thinkers such as Zhu Xi and Su Shi did subscribe to a unitary view of moral and political knowledge, but they were emphatic that access to such knowledge remained irreducibly personal and differentiated. To them, one's conversance with it could never be adequately assessed by any kind of objective selection or examination system. Although Bell's book does devote much-needed attention to an otherwise overlooked alternative to democracy, his broader thesis is overshadowed by these evidential shortcomings.

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