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Interview: Daniel Bell

Chinese meritocracy and the limits of democracy

By Emanuel Pastreich

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Daniel A. Bell teaches political science at Tsinghua University and serves as the director of the Berggruen Institute of Philosophy and Culture. As an expert on Chinese intellectual history he has argued that the Chinese system of meritocracy has merits not found in the West. He writes for international media and has published a book through Princeton University Press entitled, *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*.

China as a society, a government, an economy and a culture is quite difficult for us to comprehend today. The changes are so rapid in cities like Beijing and Shanghai and the culture remarkably fluid. What do you see as the defining characteristics of China's culture today and what do you anticipate in terms of China's future role in the international community?

The most striking cultural shifts in China over the last two decades or so has been the revival, both orchestrated and spontaneous, of tradition. The main trope for culture in the twentieth century, especially since 1949, has been anti-traditionalism. As far back as the May 4th movement in 1919, and before, whether it was the financial elite, the liberals, the Marxists, or anarchists they all agreed that China was poor and that one of the causes of that state of affairs was the backward traditional culture.

We have witnessed a dramatic reevaluation of tradition in China, and also in other East Asian countries with a Confucian heritage such as Korea. This part of the world has witnessed rapid growth over the last three decades that has sharply reduced poverty and the region has remained at peace. So when people look around and ask what do all these countries have in common, one answer is their Confucian heritage. So whereas the previous narrative was that



Image Credit: Daniel A. Bell

Confucianism undermined modernization and economic growth, now many argue that it actually helps.

We are witnessing the return of a more historical and humanistic perspective on the world, an emphasis on education, a concern for family across several generations, and a new assessment of the value of China's tradition of political meritocracy. Chinese have long held that the key to a political system is the selection and promotion of leaders with superior abilities, ethical qualities and social and cultural skills who can best lead the nation forward. The perspective has Confucian roots, but it has been modernized and has been the core of the strategy for economic development in China and other East Asian countries such as Korea and Japan. Although Confucian ideology was denounced during the Cultural Revolution, it is taking on a new centrality today. And the promotion of core Confucian values is not limited to the government. We see similar efforts in business and in the non-profit sector.

The promotion of meritocracy is also linked to the negative impact of monetization on society. The search for wealth has made people individualistic and moved them away from higher ideals. So the Chinese government, as well as many intellectuals, want to promote social responsibility and reviving Confucianism serves that purpose. In this age, Marxism offers little concerning such questions.

What questions did Marxism originally address?

Marxism concerns economic systems and the emergence of classes based on economic interests and the resulting ideologies. It does address the problem of materialism and individualistic tendencies in modern societies; that part is true. However, when it comes to promoting a sense of responsibility, and reducing the likelihood that leaders will become corrupt, when it comes to creating a bureaucracy which is committed to serving the public, Marxism has almost nothing to offer. Marxism, especially under Mao Zedong, was about a struggle against a certain class of landlords and capitalists, and not about personal ethics. Confucianism, however, is precisely about ethics and personal responsibility. So whether it's the educational system or the training of leaders, Confucianism is serving as an inspiring moral backbone.

But the terminology used in the West regarding politics can be very misleading when we try to address China. There is a tendency to divide the world between good democracies and bad authoritarian regimes. More often than not, China is lumped together with the latter regimes. But that latter category is just so broad that it's not helpful. It could include anything from cruel, family-based tyrannies like North Korea, to military dictatorships like Egypt. But China is something quite different. Of course you find some authoritarian tendencies, but there are also strong democratic characteristics. In the past thirty years, we have seen unprecedented openness in China, and a willingness to discuss China's problems. In my book *The China Model*, I use the term "vertical democratic meritocracy" to refer to what we find in China. Chinese see the value of democracy at the local level. But the further you move up the chain of political command, the more meritocratic the process of promotion for leadership becomes.

There's still a big gap between the ideal and the reality in China. But this standard of meritocracy has served to inspire significant political reform over the past thirty years. I think Chinese-style meritocracy is a good model to use as a standard in judging political progress and regress. In fact, meritocracy is a better standard for judging long-term progress than Western-style liberal democracy in a Chinese context. As you can imagine, this suggestion has generated a certain degree of controversy outside of China. But within China, the emphasis on political meritocracy is quite mainstream among reformist intellectuals and political leaders.

Some might say that American government has increasingly authoritarian trends as well. The question of democracy is perhaps a slightly more complex issue. What standards do we use to judge?

At the end of the day, my view that there is no one standard for evaluating political progress or regress that is universally applicable. There's different reasonable ways approaching the question of what is a good political society. From Plato on we have seen competing models for society, and for utopia. The American standard for measuring political progress and reform in accordance with the democratic ideals embedded in its Constitution and advocated by its founding fathers have had great impact on many political movements in American history. Of course, there is always a huge gap between the ideal and the reality.

But at the end of the day, the standard for evaluating reality should draw on the leading political ideas embedded in American civil culture.

The same holds for China which has its own complex history of political philosophy and its own ideals. We can trace those ideals back to debates carried out throughout Chinese history, from Confucius and Mencius, over political meritocracy. Chinese thinkers gave much thought to how to select able and virtuous political leaders, which abilities matter and which virtues matter? Chinese pondered about, and experimented with, mechanisms for selecting leaders. And that tradition continues on today. Over the last thirty years in China, the political leadership has been selected first and foremost through examinations, followed by evaluations of performance at lower levels of government. No one rises to the top without extensive experience at all levels. And that approach is quite similar in form to what we have seen throughout much of Chinese imperial history.

I do think that the central political ideas articulated in Chinese culture ought to serve as the standard for evaluating political progress or regress in China. And I do think those values are different from the liberal ideas embraced in the United States. There is a huge gap between the ideal and the reality-that is always the case. But the more fundamental question is what should serve as the standard?

Yet Chinese models for civil service were not totally alien in the West, right? There was a debate in the eighteenth century about good governance in the West that was based upon the ideas of civil service taken from China. The British civil service adopted that system from China in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Certainly. Reforms in Europe that moved governance away from the selection of the aristocrats for public office to rigorous exam-based civil service in England and France was a critical development. And that was specifically influenced by examinations.

But there remained a critical difference. In the United Kingdom, and also in most Western, liberal democratic societies, there has remained a very strong division (at least in theory) between the civil servant who is supposed to be chosen by meritocratic systems, such as exams, and the political leaders, who are supposed to be chosen by elections. And in principle, the civil servants are supposed to implement the decisions of elected leaders in the West.

By contrast, In China that division was not clear and was not even an ideal. Even today, Chinese feel strongly that the leader should be qualified and should be virtuous. But there is no strong feeling that he must be selected in an open election. Traditionally, there has not been a clear division between the implementers and the decision-makers in Chinese political philosophy. The meritocratic mechanisms were intended to be used to select leaders, especially at higher levels of government, and also bureaucrats.

Clearly the Chinese examination system had great influence in the West, but it was implemented only at the level of the implementers. That is of course in theory. In practice civil servants exercised a lot of political power in both the East and the West.

China is increasingly influential in the world and more and more people have hopes that China will be a leader. How are Chinese people responding to the expectations that are placed upon their country?

China has been thrust into this global role very quickly, perhaps far more quickly than anybody imagined, including the Chinese. The relative political and economic weight of China has increased so dramatically as to be disorienting to Chinese.

When people talk about the achievements of China over the past thirty years the most commonly cited one is poverty reduction. About half a billion people were lifted out of poverty, in part due to energizing the people through market reforms. But that process was only possible because there were public officials overseeing the work and they were promoted based on their performance. Political Meritocracy itself is a key to reducing poverty.

But the other achievement of China is that it has not fought a war since 1979. Just compare that record with that of the U.S. So although there are those in Washington D.C. who worry about China emerging as a threatening military power, there is not much basis for that speculation in China's recent historical record.

But the sense of insecurity in China, however, is real. China thinks it is literally surrounded by American military bases, and there are some grounds for that concern. In the long term that sort of a build up, considering China's desire to engage the world in trade and finance, is simply not sustainable for the long term.

It is hard to imagine that the United States will remain the dominant military power in the region in thirty, forty, fifty years' time. From the perspective of history, such anticipation simply does not make sense. It is natural that China will want to exercise more weight in this part of the world, meaning East Asia.

Granted China's increasing economic power, and the fact that United States power is declining in relative terms, regardless of the so called "pivot," such a shift is inevitable. Better for the United States to embrace it and work with China.

Regardless, the U.S. is just going to have to get used to China playing a bigger role.

The long term problem is that the U.S. is not willing to recognize the shifting geopolitical realities and make room for China's increased role in the East Asian region. If in the future North Korea implodes, the regime changes its position relative to its neighbors and integration with South Korea begins, at that point we need to ask why do we need American military bases in South Korea? Well, the honest answer is that we will not.

So why can't the Americans make a commitment to withdraw from South Korea if Korea is unified?

The United States could even increase its presence in Korea after unification or a peace treaty. The issue is rather that the presence needs to shift away from a military one. Or you might even say that granted the threat of climate change, which the conventional military is not equipped to respond to, we had better start shifting America's role in Korea right now.

On all this points I just do not see any indication at all that the U.S. is willing to accept a change in the balance of power in the East Asian region in China's favor.

This change will have to happen, but it will cause tremendous disruption if the United States does not have the vision and the imagination to embrace it.

However, I fear that the ultimate result of this massive external expansion by the United States, the practice of radical interventionism, over the last fifteen years, may be the exact opposite. Disaster could cause the United States to collapse into a more isolationist viewpoint – and there is precedent in American history.

It's certainly possible that in twenty years the U.S. will have no overseas bases. Washington will essentially pull out of the world, not for strategic reasons, but because the emotional response domestically to the catastrophic effects of endless war were so tremendous.

In any case, although there will be significant tensions and conflicts between the United States and China because of differing strategic goals, I don't think that the U.S. and China are likely to be enemies. Compared with fundamentalist Islamic groups, for example, Chinese basically buy into the current system for global governance. They just want to have more say. Fundamentalist Islamic groups, by contrast, imagine a culture that is incompatible with a secular cosmopolitan world. As fundamentalists put it, "You guys value life over death. We value death over life."

It shouldn't be, in principle, that hard for Beijing and Washington to craft a grand bargain wherein stability is maintained but China plays an increasingly large role in the East Asian region.

Sadly, the United States is committed, through budgets and institutions, to very outdated concepts of national security. Politicians and businessmen want to maintain large, theoretical threats to justify factories making Abram tanks even when the military says they don't want them. Ultimately it is tragic and also somewhat comic. Granted the amount of money we are going to have to commit to the mitigation of, and adaption to climate change, this situation is also grossly irresponsible.

Yes, the environmental issue is getting more attention in China these days. Over the past three decades the emphasis was on poverty reduction and economic growth was perceived as the best way to achieve that goal. Everything else took a back seat, including the environment.

But recently there's been this rapid shift in the level of consciousness, not just in government, but in the population at large. Chinese are clearly gearing up for large-scale change. Because the Chinese political system is not democratic at the highest levels, it can make unpopular decisions in the interest of nonvoters or of future generations. And they're doing it now.

Let us consider the recent accord on climate change between the United States and China which has set deadlines up to 2030. Who's more likely to act on those accords? Well, unless the whole political system collapses, we can expect that China will stick to what they have said. But in the U.S., if the Republicans win, then the entire agreement could come apart. In China there is an emphasis on environmental sustainability these days that is important for promotion of public officials and there are big innovations in local government. It is hard to imagine something like that happening in the United States.

In Shanghai, they don't even look at GDP growth anymore. Parts of China are explicitly using environmental sustainability as a criterion for development. And the thinking of average Chinese is changing too. They're so frustrated by the pollution in cities like Beijing that they demand change. So now, every major city in China publicly monitors and makes available the levels of PM-2.5, which puts lots of pressure on the government to take very strong measures to control pollution, although admittedly the United States Embassy's public monitoring of PM 2.5 levels helped to bring about this change. This year in Beijing, has been much better than last year. The levels of PM-2.5 are down 20 percent, apparently. The government is much more serious about dealing with the environment, and that is just the beginning. So there's been a rapid shift over the past few years, which is enough to make one a bit more optimistic.

China has ended up playing a critical role in geopolitics more quickly than anybody had anticipated. Is China able to meet these demands? Do we see China rising to the occasion?

In many fields China is playing a very constructive role. I must confess that I think the United States is miscalculating by trying to undermine China's efforts. China wants to be a team player and most countries in the world accept China as a team player.

The U.S. says to China, "Oh, you guys need to be a responsible stakeholder." But when China tried to do that and play a bigger role in the Bretton Woods system, they were undermined. We see the predictable result in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Ultimately even the British chose to ignore U.S. foreign policy and join as founding members.

So I do see a certain professionalism in China's actions.

But I am uncomfortable by domestic efforts in China to whip up anti-Japanese feelings. That response is unhealthy. The situation is improving over the past year or two, because so many Chinese tourists now travel to Japan and they often find out that they like the place when they get there. There's still a hangover in China from the post-1989 period when the educational system emphasized its so-called "patriotic education." Patriotic education was not just about pride in Chinese history, but also creating a negative impression of Japan. Now there is a lot on social media in China that is more favorable towards Japan.

When I visited Nanjing recently, and I saw a sign on a restaurant that said: "We will not serve Japanese, who are imperialists."

Sometimes taxi drivers in Beijing will say: "I will never pick up Japanese customers." I think it is quite dangerous for the government to encourage that sort of behavior.

Do Chinese spend a lot of time thinking about China's global role?

It's an issue for the Chinese government and intellectuals. Whether they like it or not, what China does "shakes the world" and China must take a more active role in shaping the world. The question is whether it can play this role in way that promotes international peace while allowing for difference. Most Chinese recognize that the world's powers will have different forms of government and we should refrain from pushing any one form of governance. I worry more about the United States side in this respect. Not only does the United States claim that their democratic model is best for them, but it's that it is best for the rest of the world. Some Americans assume that alternative systems are fundamentally illegitimate. Naturally this attitude upsets many Chinese who are committed to good government. They think, who are you to lecture us about political systems, with only a few hundred years of history? You are bound by a constitution that is not fully appropriate for dealing with contemporary challenges.

To my mind, both sides should work on areas of common concern while allowing that there may be justifiable differences regarding forms of government in different political contexts,

Is the new global posture, including the “One Belt One Road” policy of opening up a new “silk road” accompanied by a new sense of idealism and commitment to serving the global community?

Well, maybe not idealism, but it points to a more active effort to build win-win scenarios with neighboring countries in ways that are not determined by the Western powers. The “one belt one road” was partly inspired by the traditional links along the silk road, but it has been updated to include powers such as Russia.

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