

**ESADE**

Ramon Llull University

ESADEgeo- CENTER  
FOR GLOBAL ECONOMY  
AND GEOPOLITICS

**E**

**59**

**Book reviews  
on global economy  
and geopolitical  
readings**



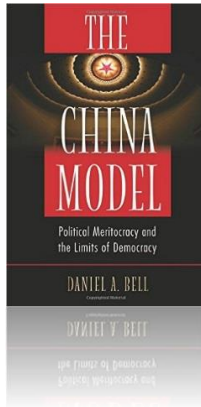
Fundación  
**REPSOL**



Obra Social "la Caixa"



# The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy




**Bell, Daniel A., (2015), Princeton University Press, New Jersey.**

*“There are many ways of exercising power – in workplaces, schools, hospitals, prisons, and so on – and the natural assumption is that prior experience is necessary for the exercise power by top leaders... Yet political power is an exception: it’s fine to pick a top leader with no prior political experience, so long as he or she has been chosen on the basis of one person, one vote.”*

## Summary

Westerners tend to divide the political world into “good democracies” and “bad” authoritarian regimes. However, in Daniel Bell's opinion, China's political model (*“The China Model”*) does not fit neatly in either category. Over the past three decades, China has evolved towards a political system which, according to the author of *The China Model*, may best be described as a “political meritocracy”. The idea of advocating a political system that aims to select and promote leaders with superior ability and virtue is central to both Chinese and Western political theory and practice. The reason seems obvious: we demand qualified and experienced persons for leadership positions in the world of science, law and corporations; why not also in the most important institution of all?

Political thinkers from Confucius, Plato and Zhu Xi to John Stuart Mill, Sun Yat-sen and Walter Lippmann sought to identify ways of selecting the best possible leaders, who would be capable of making intelligent, morally informed decisions about a wide range of issues. But such debates came to an end after World War II. In China they stopped because Maoism values the political contributions of warriors, workers and farmers over those of intellectuals and educators. In the West, they stopped because of the intellectual hegemony of electoral democracy. A democracy demands only that the people select their leaders; therefore, it is up to the voters to judge the merits of the candidates. But two recent developments have put political meritocracy back on the map. On the one hand, the crisis of governance in Western democracies has undermined blind faith in electoral democracy and made way for political alternatives. On the other hand, political meritocracy has been reinvigorated by the rise of China.



Although the author recognises that the China model is plagued with imperfections, the world is watching China's experiment with meritocracy. Among those who are following the evolution of this model very closely is Bell himself, who makes a provocative criticism of the “one person, one vote” system as a means of selecting the principal leaders, while defending political meritocracy as a solution to many of the problems currently faced by Western democracies.

In *The China Model*, Bell outlines why he considers that Western democracies have serious deficiencies, analysing the advantages and pitfalls of political meritocracy, and offering an evaluation of China's political model and its implications for the rest of the world. But above all, Bell seeks to contribute to a more informed debate about the guidelines required to judge political progress (and regress), inspire meritocratic reforms and offer greater symmetry of information. In the author's opinion, despite the freedom of information enjoyed by Western democracies, they do not tend to be very familiar with the Chinese meritocratic model – something that cannot be said of China with respect to the Western democratic model.

## The author

**Daniel A. Bell** is Chair Professor of the Schwarzman Scholars Programme at Tsinghua University in Beijing and director of the Berggruen Institute of Philosophy and Culture. His books include *Spirit of Cities*, *China's New Confucianism*, *Beyond Liberal Democracy* and *East Meets West*, and he is the editor of the Princeton-China series.

## Key ideas and opinion

The idea that political leaders should be elected according to the principle of one person, one vote is taken for granted in so many societies that, in Bell's opinion, any attempt to defend political meritocracy should begin with a critique of electoral democracy. **Is democracy the least bad political system?** According to Bell, the answer to this question is not so unequivocal if account is taken of the key flaws of electoral democracy: the tyranny of the majority, the tyranny of the minority, the tyranny of the voting community, and the tyranny of competitive individualists.

### The principal problems of electoral democracy

In an electoral democracy, voting power translates into political power. Perhaps the most common criticism of democracy is that **the majority of voters can use their vote to oppress the rest**, and that voters should not be so selfish: they ought to exercise the right to vote thinking not only of themselves, but also of the other members of the political community. However, Daniel Bell considers that the main problem is that **most voters seek to maximise their self-interest**. And not only that: the majority often lack the knowledge that would allow them to do so. This said, it is not just a matter of a lack

E of time. Acquiring knowledge is costly and difficult. Therefore, if you knew that your vote was going to be decisive, you would invest more time and effort into acquiring political knowledge. Nevertheless, **even if voters had the time and the motivation to learn about politics, they still might not avoid the errors of reasoning** that distort our understanding of the world, such as **over-confidence** (for example, thinking that we are always in control of the situation) or **excessive optimism** (tending to believe that we are superior or better than the majority). The author supplements these arguments citing the fact that **we can go to the voting booth without any obligation to inform ourselves beforehand**. 79% of American voters, for example, cannot identify their state senators. The solution to this ignorance is clear: educate the voters. The problem, as Bell recognises, is that there is no evidence that public education programmes can eliminate cognitive biases. Moreover, these programmes are expensive, and in the context of the current (anti-government and anti-elitist) political culture in the United States, it is difficult to imagine them being implemented.

On the other hand, **the influence of money in politics is the scourge of most democracies nowadays**, and the United States is perhaps the most extreme case. Since the end of World War II, inequality in the US has steadily increased to the point that in 2009-2010, when the economy was recovering, 93% of income growth was captured by 1% of the population. The reason for this, the author states, lies in a long series of policy changes in government that have overwhelmingly favoured a few to the detriment of many. If the democratic system can be captured so easily by organised groups that promote the interests of the elite, can measures to reduce inequality be taken without questioning electoral democracy? Bell considers that **the electoral model of popular government fails to hold political elites accountable**.

Even if electoral democracy were to work as it should, political equality ends at the boundaries of the political community: those outside are forgotten. **The problem is that the policies of a government also affect non-voters, future generations and foreigners**. But there is a serious conflict of interest between voters and non-voters, and the former will almost always have priority. Finally, in Bell's opinion, **electoral democracy can exacerbate rather than alleviate social conflict**. Negative campaigning is a feature of many elections, with politicians and political parties making false and unfounded allegations in order to attract a greater number of voters. In the worst cases, political leaders represent the interests of majority groups and appeal to ethnic and racial solidarity to tyrannise the minority. **In a society composed of competitive individualists, the disruption of social harmony tends to be the outcome**. I fight for my interests or my understanding of the common good, you fight for yours, and may the best person win. Democratic optimists put forward solutions to improve a behaviour that takes others into account and safeguards social harmony. The problem is that there is nothing to prevent politicians from taking advantage of such tactics and little evidence that the arguments of well-intentioned political theorists have succeeded in promoting a political discourse that holds back competitive individualism.

**E** By emphasising the flaws of democracy today, the author does not intend to take up a position in favour of political meritocracy as opposed to electoral democracy, but rather his aim is to demystify the ideal of “one person, one vote” in an attempt to show that electoral democracies do not necessarily perform better than political meritocracies. **At the very least, the style of political meritocracy should be seen as a grand political experiment with the potential to remedy some of the key defects of democracies.** With this approach, it is not surprising that Bell should argue that: 1) it is good for a political community to be governed by excellent leaders; 2) China's one party system is not on the verge of collapse; 3) the meritocratic aspect of the system is partially good; and 4) it can be improved.

### How to select good leaders

In the author's opinion, which abilities matter for public officials depends on the context. In ancient times of incessant warfare, physical abilities were most important. However, **in today's world, intellectual abilities matter more.** A political leader must understand complex arguments and take decisions based on knowledge of the latest developments in several interconnected disciplines: economics, science, international relations, psychology, and so on. The idea of using **exams as a mechanism to search for political talent might seem strange to Westerners, but it has deep roots in Chinese political culture.** It is true that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Western world began to embrace meritocratic examinations as a means of modernising its political systems. However, the examinations were employed to select civil servants responsible for implementing the decisions of political leaders. **Today, examinations testing for government positions in China are more like IQ tests, designed to filter out those candidates without superior analytical skills.** In fact, Bell stresses, **politicians like Sarah Palin or Toronto's former mayor, Rob Ford, would be unlikely to pass such an exam.** These examinations also ask policy-related questions in order to identify those candidates who can look at complex matters from different perspectives rather than through a rigid ideological lens. Although the exam system also has flaws, **in a large-scale society, examinations constitute the best way to identify those who do not have the intellectual abilities required for decision-making.**

It is important that political leaders should have intellectual ability, but perhaps this is not the most important quality. It is fairly unlikely that an “academic nerd”, to use Bell's term, will prove to be an effective political leader. **Besides intellectual ability, above all, social skills are needed.** In the business world, empathy is an essential quality. The fact that political leaders of large countries need to deal with an even larger group of stakeholders than most business leaders means that social skills may be even more important in politics. **One of the advantages of democracy is that it is difficult to be elected without superior social skills.** According to the author, in China, the performance of leaders on a local scale is an important indicator of the social skills required to achieve good results at higher levels of government. However, given that

the principal indicator of performance is the reduction of poverty, there is a need for more objective ways of measuring these skills to be introduced.

**Nevertheless, a leader with superior intellectual and social skills is potentially the worst kind of leader, because he or she can find ways to pursue immoral purposes. This is why Bell advocates virtue as the main quality of a leader.** The question, then, is how to increase the likelihood of selecting leaders with the motivation to promote the good of the people, and with what type of mechanisms. In societies with a Confucian heritage, verbal fluency is not held in high regard: whereas the power of oratory has deep roots in the history of Western civilisation, in East Asia the emphasis is on action rather than words. **In a political meritocracy without democratic elections and without a tradition of eloquent speech, which mechanisms are at hand to increase the possibilities of choosing leaders who seek to promote the good of the people?** The author considers that a minimum condition must be to prevent those who have a criminal record from gaining access to public office. Another condition is to value volunteer work undertaken in poor and remote rural areas. Furthermore, Bell proposes introducing a section into the exam that tests knowledge of the Confucian classics and **introducing a system of evaluation by superiors, peers and subordinates to determine the moral character of the candidate**, with emphasis on peer revision, so that candidates have a greater incentive to devote their time to the common good and not to their promotion process.

### The issues with meritocracy and how to address them

In theory, political meritocracy sounds like a good idea, provided that it is designed to choose leaders with superior ability and virtue. However, good ideas can be disastrous if they are put into practice by imperfect people with different values and interests competing for scarce resources. Therefore, the fundamental question raised in *The China Model* is whether it is possible to implement political meritocracy in ways that won't go wrong, and whether it is possible to overcome the challenges it presents – once again, based on the Chinese context. **Bell finds corruption to be the most important problem. If leaders are not chosen by the people, and if the people cannot change them, what prevents the leaders from serving their own interests instead of the interests of the community?** It is not surprising that corruption in China is mostly prevalent among public officials, a state of affairs that has been a genuine political problem in recent years.

**The principal cause of corruption is the absence of independent checks on the power of the government.** In China, the CCP's Central Discipline Inspection Commission is the most important institution for rooting out corruption. Over the last few years, it has taken aggressive action: in 2011 alone it investigated 137,859 cases that resulted in disciplinary actions or legal convictions against party officials, nearly four times as many cases as in 1989. But clearly, substantial changes are needed lest corruption pose a **threat to the survival of the regime**. Thus, in Bell's opinion, **the first step would be to**



**E** **institutionalise an independent anti-corruption agency**, like the one that exists in Hong Kong, beginning with independent institutions at lower levels of government (given the difficulty of monitoring public officials at a national level in a country as vast and diverse as China).

**The second cause of corruption can be found in the state control of the economy and China's privatisation process, which increases rent-seeking activities.** In a public-private economy, officials have the power to veto and approve applications for land acquisition and construction projects. For their part, state-owned enterprises fight to maintain their monopolistic position and spend billions of dollars in order to spread and advance their agendas. A drastic measure would be to limit social interaction between public officials and the business world. Policies that inject more competition into markets could also help to reduce corruption. Moreover, what appear to be corrupt practices should be legalised: that is to say, clear limits and guidelines need to be established with respect to the gifts that leaders can receive.

**The third cause of corruption lies in the low salaries of public officials.** The annual salary of China's President Xi Jinping is \$19,000, whereas US President Barack Obama receives \$400,000. The former president Wen Jiabao received a similar salary to Xi Jinping, but this did not prevent his family from accumulating wealth of \$2.7 billion. This is why, emulating the system in Singapore, which offers salaries that compete with those in the business sector, Bell proposes raising salaries to reduce the temptation to engage in corrupt practices. However, money alone is not sufficient to deter corruption: ethics are also important. This leads Bell to advocate the revival of Confucianism in the education of public officials.

**The second problem that Bell observes with political meritocracy is ossification.** According to the meritocratic ideal, everyone should have equal access to public office, regardless of their origins. However, **Chinese political hierarchies are increasingly composed of a small elite**, which causes several problems. Firstly, talent is being lost in the selection process. Secondly, a political elite that is convinced it has been elected on account of its inherent superiority may end up looking down on all the others around it. To redress this situation, Bell proposes reducing differences in salaries and opportunity, so that people from wealthy families have fewer opportunities in the meritocratic competition for power. The fact is that political meritocracy depends to a great extent on an egalitarian economy. Nevertheless, even if leaders come from different backgrounds, the problem of ossification remains if they continue to be selected according to rigid definitions of merit. For this reason, the author of *The China Model* defends the fact that the CCP promotes multiple avenues of reaching the top levels based on different ideas of merit.

**Finally, political meritocracy comes face to face with the problem of legitimacy.** It may be easier to justify strong government when most of the leaders and the people share a key priority: the elimination of poverty. But what happens after the government

successfully secures the basic material welfare of the population? **In the long term, as the variety and complexity of interests increases, the need to replace the monopolistic structure of interests with a competitive structure will also increase.** In the short term, the good performance of the leaders alone is not likely to provide stability for the country, and so the opinion of the people in the form of institutionalised participation will become more necessary. Of course, the meritocratic system also needs to be more transparent, so people will have a better understanding of the system and greater respect for those who succeed in the ultra-competitive talent selection process. For the moment, China's approach towards the political reforms required has focused on a version of a **vertical model of democratic meritocracy, with democracy at the lower level**, where the leaders are elected by the people; **experimentation at the middle level**, where policies are tested on a regional scale prior to application to the rest of the country; and **meritocracy at the top**. At some stage in a not-so-distant future, this approach that the author defines as “the China model” will have to include freedom of expression, democracy at higher levels of government, and greater independence in social organisations.

**In Bell's opinion, China's model of meritocracy at the top level of government and democracy at the lower level is the best way to reconcile political meritocracy and electoral democracy in such a vast country.** Although there is a large gap between the theory and the reality of meritocracy in China, if the country implements the proposed reforms, this gap can be reduced without having to resort to electoral democracy in central government.

### Exporting the China model

This said, **is it possible to export this model?** The main limitation noted by the author is that the China model is the hybrid product of the country's history. Electoral democracy was invented and borrowed from the West and experimentation at local levels was carried out in imperial China, but it was the CCP which systematised it. The idea and practice of political meritocracy is central to Chinese culture and it re-established itself in the reform era. **According to Bell, it is a model than can work in a vast and diverse country, committed to peaceful economic and social development under the guidance of meritocratically selected leaders.** But the model, with its differences depending on the level of government, **can also be adopted selectively by countries with a different history and culture.** In fact, Bell stresses, the positive characteristics of political leaders in meritocratic systems can inspire voter preferences in democratic systems. However, perhaps the greatest hope for defenders of political meritocracy is the fact that many countries have yet to consolidate electoral democracy at the upper echelon of government. In these cases, China can help them to put meritocratic rules into practice. **Ultimately, Bell concludes, China's political meritocracy will work as a “soft power” only if the country sets a good model for others. In other words, it must practise meritocracy at home.**