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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Walking a Tightrope

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It is a distinctive feature of Bell's writings that he makes use of his own experiences to substantiate particularly designed arguments for theoretical frameworks.[1] This has added weight to his underlying thesis, and provided a unique insight into the value of political Confucianism for modern life. His deliberations are particularly helpful to those who have little experience in and about China, and may explain why he would be regarded as a "public intellectual of China" by some in the Western media.

The Dean of Shandong illustrates various dilemmas he was involved in and tried to solve by drawing on traditional wisdom. Some chapters are both theoretical and entertaining, for example, why most of the Chinese bureaucrats tend to dye their hair (chapter 1), how drinking in accord with the (supposed) ritual would facilitate administrative work (chapter 5), and what "cuteness culture" implies for political theories (chapter 10), while others delve into complicated theories from a perspective of the so-called "minor bureaucrat" in the administrative hierarchy.

While the book is supposed to lend support to his theory of "China's model,"[2] I am surprised by Bell's frank confessions of his predicaments when confronting politically sensitive issues and his complaints about the "paranoid political system" (71), openly critical of certain policies (e.g. 'censorship' and suppression of 'free speech') that are seen in a Chinese university. Most of his "confessions" are, however, reasonably positive, supporting or confirming, one way or another, his belief in political and academic meritocracy. He seems to be confident that the five years working as the dean of the faculty in a university gave him opportunities to test his thesis concerning the value of "Confucian meritocracy."

[1] See, for example, Daniel A. Bell, *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[2] Daniel A. Bell, *The China Model: Political Theory and the Limits of Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

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For some, the Chinese administrative structure is like a huge machine which would transform "bureaucrats" into simple "bricks" to fit in their own positions. Amazingly Bell was in it, for five years, without suffering huge damage to his integrity, and seems to have come out of it in a reasonably good order. Appointing leading foreign academics as the heads of faculties used to be a politically right thing for Chinese universities to pursue. The reasons for this varied. In some cases, it was regarded as useful to enhance internationalization or international reputations; in others, it was taken as the way to attract genuine "talents" from the Western world; but in other situations it might be simply a way to break the stalemate in which none of the existing candidates supported by different factional groups of faculty members could be accepted. However, the tide changed a few years ago and the practice has been discarded, considered now contradictory to ideological guidelines, no longer politically correct. In this sense, Bell may well be the last non-Chinese academic serving as the real (not honorary) head of a humanities and social sciences school.

The core of his book lies in deliberations on the possibility of applying the so-called "ideal" of political meritocracy to academic administration. It seems apparent that Bell has found evidence from his own experience to support his speculations. According to him, political meritocracy based on the Confucian tradition means "equality of opportunity in education and government, with positions of leadership being distributed to relatively virtuous and qualified members of the political community" (119). Few would deny these values as essential for modern life. But there are a number of difficulties concerning "equality of opportunity" and who would have the power to "distribute," which have made them almost impossible to be actualized in political and academic administration. In addition, this kind of meritocracy does not specify how the power should be structured, and by what criteria the "virtuous" and the "qualified" can be assessed, and how to enable the autonomous "community" to function.

In theory, meritocracy might sound good: whoever demonstrates hard work, physical abilities, and intellectual capabilities would be placed in appropriate positions. In reality, it causes more problems than it could solve, particularly if we examine this issue in light of the administrative procedures currently adopted in Chinese universities. First, strictly top-down administrative procedures stiffen rather than empower academics; secondly, the one-way decision-making process tends not to encourage or even permit changes and progress but keeps, explicitly or implicitly, the status quo unless the upper level has specifically instructed otherwise; thirdly, a strict hierarchical order would make academics reluctant to take responsibilities or to make initiatives; and fourthly, merit-based competition may create tension among colleagues rather than harmonize them into an academic community. Bell repeatedly claims that his model of meritocracy is an ideal, not yet a reality, but risks arise when the contexts are changed at will between the ideal and the reality, leading some to suspect that he is defending current practices in academic administration in the name of meritocracy.

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Political meritocracy is historically tarnished by favoritism, nepotism, cronyism, corruption, and personality cults. It did not work well in ancient China and failed to achieve what it was supposed to, either in the form of recommending "filial and frugal people"[3] to government posts in the Han dynasty or in terms of the civil service examinations after the Tang dynasty. Nor would it work in today's selections of "talents" in academic administration where the university tends to design various ways to award different titles ("caps") and creates schemes to differentiate academics. While this intensifies competition between hard-working academics, it has, in many cases, inevitably led to short-sighted eagerness for quick success and instant benefits with regard to academic work.

For any kind of meritocracy scheme to work, it has to presume that there was a top boss overseeing the whole structure and this top boss was just, intelligent, wholeheartedly for the good of a community rather than for his own power, and would bring to justice any subordinate who violated certain rules, presumably set up by the boss himself. Unfortunately, meritocracy lacks effective mechanisms to prevent one charismatic leader from becoming a tyrant and from fostering his own personality cult. Between absolute loyalty and capabilities, loyalty would always be regarded as the first "merit" to be rewarded. The same would also be applicable to the lower levels of administration, for example, in a university or a faculty. Despite Bell's applause, there is no concrete measure in place to prevent the "first among equals" (61) from becoming a "big brother," because embedded in this system is a tendency to turning the decision-maker from "a good listener" to a "dictator" had he gathered sufficient merit and support.

Bell is fully aware that his political meritocracy is "an ideal, not the reality," and intends to "expose the gap between the ideal and the reality and propose ways of minimizing the gap" (121). However, even these good ideas sound wishful—in politics, good wishes without a solid foundation often bring more problems than benefits. Equally, the four elements Bell has presented for good "collective leadership": hard work, efficiency, good inequality, and free expression (60–62) are, as Bell recognizes, "a blind hope" or utopian imagination for a larger scale of administration. "Political meritocracy with flaws" (121) might not be easily amended, as whatever one wishes, one cannot be perfect. Self-monitoring or self-disciplining is not reliable. In terms of historical lessons, any reasonable blueprint for administrative structure would require a mutual checking scheme, but this scheme is exactly what political meritocracy is short of—it relies too much on so-called virtuous and capable persons. If ancient Confucians such as Dong Zhongshu (d. 179 BCE) of the Western Han dynasty saw this, and proposed the five departments of the government based on the mutual overcoming relations of the Five Agents theory, today we would have benefitted from "mutual checking systems" guaranteed by the rule of law and improved democracy rather than by the so-called rule of persons, however virtuous these individuals might be.[4]

[3] Hanshu, *The History of the Former Han Dynasty* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), 10.

[4] See Stephen C. Angle, *Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy: Toward Progressive Confucianism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012); Chenyang Li, *Reshaping Confucianism: A Progressive Inquiry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

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It is particularly intriguing to read chapter 9 on 'Chinese Styled Academic Meritocracy' (127–37) as it outlines the application of meritocracy to academic life. Its presentation of ordinary academics' work, worries, and hopes at the level of departments and schools is made by drawing on Bell's personal observation and experience. While feeling better about academic meritocracy than political meritocracy, I doubt it would ever work in real university lives either. What should be counted as "academic merit"? By what criteria is this evaluated? In actual situations answers to these questions are often up to those in power. Nothing would prevent those in authority from advancing weird schemes to judge academics, and using these schemes as tools, not to promote high-quality academic work but to strengthen their own positions and show their "merit" in managing the university's or the school's academic progress.

To "walk a tightrope," one must keep adequate balance, which is partly a test of ability to deal with difficult and uncertain situations and partly requires patience, mindfulness, and concentration. It seems that Bell has maintained his balance between overt confessions and implicit criticisms concerning his own experience as well as in his overall evaluation of the administrative structure of a Chinese university. Bell has made efforts to walking on the tightrope between an apologetic defender of (flawed) political policies, often in the name of traditional Confucian discourses, and 'an independent scholar' (121) with a critical perspective, drawing from time to time on liberal traditions in the West (for example, "freedom of speech" against censorship (106, 178), attempting to keep his balance between "too pro-the CCP" (97, 177) and "too conservative to support the CCP" (105). What remains to be seen is, however, how Bell continues to do this when he is being torn by the contradictory roles he tries to play, namely as an idealistic political theorist for a utopia-styled meritocracy who searches for solutions to the current problems, and as an "apologist" for the "imperfect" Confucian political practices that are overall rejected by the majority of modern English readers.

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