Books & Arts

John Fitzgerald

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Books | Political philosopher Daniel A. Bell wants us to see China as a meritocracy-in-progress, writes John Fitzgerald. But is he really defending autocracy?

A question of maths: preparations for the closing session of the Twelfth National People’s Congress at Beijing’s Great Hall of the People in March this year. How Hwee Young/EPA

The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy
By Daniel A. Bell | Princeton University Press | $55.95

When Tony Abbott defended the underrepresentation of women in his cabinet by claiming his appointments were based on merit, he was hardly the first Western leader to use this argument to explain how key office holders are selected. However implausible his claim, though, he certainly wasn’t trying to contrast selection by merit with selection by popular election. In the West, merit is seen as the alternative to patronage or prejudice rather than a substitute for electoral politics. It would rarely occur to political leaders to contrast merit-based selection of public servants with the elections that brought them to office as political representatives.

This is the leap that Canadian political philosopher Daniel A. Bell asks us to take in The China Model. He invites us to consider the distinction between selecting political leaders by merit and selecting them through public election as a key point of difference between China’s system of government and systems practised in the liberal West.

China, Bell argues, is a developing meritocratic state. On the strength of the country’s achievements, which he attributes to its meritocratic style of government, he makes a number of strong claims in favour of meritocratic rule in contrast to one-person one-vote electoral democracies. Some of these claims are based on his reading of the Singapore model, which he considers transferable to China.

Bell argues that a system of leadership selection and promotions based on merit, rather than public election, is especially well-suited to China’s national conditions. More than that, he believes that China’s practice of merit-based appointments under single-party authoritarian rule represents a distinctive model that places China on the “right side of history.” He sets out to correct Western misrepresentations and set the record straight more broadly by offering what he terms “Chinese perspectives” on matters of government that receive little attention in the West.

Readers wishing to weigh Bell’s arguments about China as a political meritocracy will be disappointed by the limited evidence presented to warrant the claim. The book offers no information on the structure of China’s nomenklatura personnel system; no data on examinations conducted as a condition of appointment or promotion; no time-series findings or analyses of patterns of actual recruitment, appointment or promotion to office; no correlation between appointment methods and performance in office – indeed, little evidence anchored in the actual world.

A few lightly spliced data points are introduced about performance-based promotions and the examinations that officials routinely sit before promotion, but they are not critically examined. Official examinations for promotion appear to be subverted readily and often, if efforts by Communist Party schools to ensure that officials take the
exams themselves rather than command their subordinates to sit for them are any guide.

Still, there is no gainsaying China’s achievements in recent decades. Bell highlights these throughout the book. He also provides many examples of the shortcomings of liberal democracies. While offering little evidence of meritocracy at work, and no more than a theoretical argument in its defence, he present evidence and arguments in favour of single-party authoritarian rule over liberal democracy as a sensible option for China in its present stage of development. Meritocracy or not, highly centralised authoritarianism seems to work for China.

Judging from the evidence that Bell does marshal, his subject is not meritocracy but autocracy, or more particularly single-party authoritarian rule under the Communist Party of China. He introduces arguments about meritocracy to rescue Communist authoritarianism from itself.

In the absence of concrete evidence of meritocracy in practice, Bell invites readers to reflect on continuities in political theory linking imperial China, as a meritocratic state, and the authoritarian single-party state that is China today. In making his case, he draws on selective readings of scholarly and bureaucratic writings from the corpus of Confucian statecraft, as well as readings from the Classical age and the Enlightenment in Europe, but he largely overlooks the vast corpus of Marxist-Leninist Mao Zedong Thought that forms the core of political training in China. He ignores these works on the ground that Marxism is “dead” as a motivating ideology in China, even though it underpins the autocratic party’s sense of its own legitimacy as master of an authoritarian state.

The questions of who governs China, and how they do it, are certainly serious ones. Still, a selective reading of classical ethical and political texts only takes us so far in answering them. Arguably, the critical constitutional question facing China today is not the choice between meritocratic autocracy and electoral politics but the question of who constitutes the political nation and who, therefore, is entitled to participate in public political life. Conservative responses to this larger question frame Bell’s celebration of meritocracy as an ideal in China’s modern political history and, indirectly, his own historical reflections.

Bell is quite right to highlight political continuities from imperial to Communist China. In any country that has undergone a revolution, elements of constitutional thinking survive the transition from the old regime to the new. China was no exception. At a time of acute fiscal crisis in the late Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), important constitutional assumptions of imperial governance came under scrutiny. Although these contentious arrangements continued in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Bell ignores the most important of them. Basically, the Qing regime found that its tax revenues were insufficient to govern the empire effectively at a time when commoners were already in revolt over what they saw as excessive taxes. Something had to give. The problem was compounded by inefficient county bureaucracies and by tax middlemen who siphoned off revenue for private use before it reached the centre.

One of the constitutional issues that emerged in the debates about this fiscal crisis was how to deal with the unprecedented role prominent local families were playing in county and township administrations. Family heads were allowed to manage the affairs of their villages and towns but only on the strict condition they not interfere with imperial administration based in higher-level county towns and prefectural capitals. By the late nineteenth century a number of powerful families were ignoring this constraint and extending their networks into county towns, with the result that county magistrates no longer appeared responsive to higher government direction. At the same time, growing revenue demands compelled imperial officials to drill down into China’s rural townships and villages, extending their authority and tapping resources in areas once the domains of local families. These two powerful trends converged when local elite power, extending upwards, met formal state authority penetrating downwards.

In the late Qing era, the question arose of whether the power of local elites should be formally recognised through constitutional reforms that would bring local communities, along with their townships and villages, into the formal structures of state. The alternative was to suppress them in order to confine the political nation to the state bureaucracy and the scholar gentry (from which the bureaucracy was recruited “on merit”).

This question was debated in the language of Confucian statecraft, a language sufficiently broad to
accommodate talk of local elite nomination of political leaders and also of central appointments based on bureaucratic merit. Constitutional reformers who favoured a more inclusive political nation pointed to earlier indigenous models of local administration that favoured local elite participation in state affairs. They were opposed by constitutional conservatives who urged extending the bureaucratic system to every village – that is, placing a centrally appointed bureaucrat in every town and village, presumably selected on merit.

One reformer, Feng Guifen (1809–74), argued that placing a bureaucratic officer in every village would require training, examining and appointing 25,000 functionaries for every county, roughly equivalent to twenty million centrally appointed officials across the country. To his mind, a more practical solution was to graft a measure of local government authority onto the old family roots of village communities. His opponents responded that central bureaucratic decision-making would be compromised if self-appointed locals were permitted a direct say in government in place of selected officers of the emperor.

It is important to recall that all voices in this debate were Confucian, and that the idea of co-opting village elders into government through local self-selection was not an outlandish ideological position. It was put forward as a cost-effective and administratively rational option for the reform of territorial administration in order to bring the village into the national state and solve the revenue crisis. It would have the incidental effect of expanding the size of the political nation beyond the class of officials to include members of the village and township communities they supervised. This was not acceptable to the central autocrats; as far as they were concerned, central bureaucracy (and hence “merit”) ruled.

This ongoing argument between champions of inclusive political participation and diehard defenders of central autocratic authority survived the fall of the Qing to become one of the paradigmatic debates dividing revolutionaries and reformers in twentieth-century China. Both the KMT Nationalists and, later, the Communists favoured the centralist authoritarian model of top-down appointment and intervention. Their liberal opponents favoured a decentralised model built on local election to political office.

The Nationalists and Communists won the historical struggle and in winning momentarily settled the debate. KMT Nationalists would only admit community leaders into the political life of the nation through membership of the Nationalist Party itself. The Communists went a step further and eliminated all community leaders, executing them by the millions, and in time replacing them with twenty million new-style regime bureaucrats, much as the Confucian reformer Feng Guifen had feared a century earlier. The result was to make every bureaucrat – all twenty million – a party politician while allowing no one but a party politician to participate in politics.

Appeals to “meritocracy” in China only start to make sense when we appreciate that the alternative to meritocratic appointment is not electoral politics but any kind of politics at all outside the party system. These appeals remain premised on the assumption that ordinary people are excluded from politics.

China’s historical claims to meritocracy are in any case not especially strong, at least in the modern period. Bell reminds us that China’s imperial meritocracy operated through an official examination system and that examinations for appointment to office were held routinely until the closing years of the Qing Dynasty. He fails to note that examinations were increasingly removed from official appointment and promotion. By the mid nineteenth century, those positions were widely bought and sold to raise revenue and return favours.

The trend to appointing by imperial fiat rather than examination emerged most strongly in the appointment of county magistrates (today’s county secretaries), arguably the key position in the territorial administration of empire. By the mid nineteenth century, the post of county magistrate was widely available for purchase, with the result that higher levels of government churned over county appointments incessantly to maximise their income from the sale and resale of positions at the shortest possible intervals. By the early Republic (1912–49), the average tenure in office of a county magistrate in Guangdong Province had fallen from around three years in the early Qing to nine months in the 1920s.

Significantly, this churn slowed dramatically with the introduction of elections for the position of county magistrate in Guangdong in 1921. Elected officials served longer terms than their predecessors, who were appointed through purchase or patronage, simply because their appointments were not decided “on merit” by higher officials alone. Elections offered an institutional solution to system failure.
The system of official appointment and promotion faces similar challenges today. Once appointments become particularistic and dominated by local strongmen in collusion with powerful local interests, Leninist command systems are prone to degrade as rapidly as old imperial ones. At a certain point, official positions are traded, corruption spreads from individual acts of petty bribery to large-scale collusive behaviour, and officials start padding departmental payrolls with phantom employees and pocketing their salaries.

The clandestine buying and selling of office is one sign of system degradation. Last month the Communist Party expelled Guo Boxiong, former vice-chairman of the country’s peak defence agency, the Central Military Commission, on a charge of accepting bribes to promote officers to senior positions in the military. Before his demotion, Guo sat at the apex of a vast military appointment and promotion machinery that profited from selling leadership positions. Those who bought their positions did so in the expectation of recouping their investments many times over by onselling promotions within their own domains, and by profiting from the equipment, housing and services contracts they administered.

An anti-corruption campaign over the past two years has exposed similar appointment and promotion malfeasance across many government agencies, including education, health, housing, police, prisons and public security generally. Leadership positions in local city police forces have been trading for roughly $60,000, positions in the prison system for around $10,000, and posts as school principals for between $20,000 and $200,000 depending on a school’s potential for under-the-table graft. An investigation into phantom employees in one local government office identified 55,000 cadres employed without working. Extrapolated nationally, there could be one million non-existent meritocrats on the state payroll.

Another problem with Bell’s argument is that of commensurability. The category “political leader” refers to different things in China and the West. In liberal democracies, the claim of merit-based appointments generally applies to public service appointments rather than to offices associated with political leadership. Only a tiny fraction of government officers in liberal democracies are elected – around 0.1 per cent at the federal level in Australia – while the vast majority are recruited competitively through open advertisement, assessment of qualifications, and performance in examinations. Relatively speaking, as many officials are appointed through meritocratic selection in Australia as in China. The same is probably true of other liberal democracies.

In China this distinction between public servants and elected political leaders is meaningless, not simply because there are no popularly elected leaders, but also because there are no public servants. All of the country’s twenty million or so party and government cadres are political appointees. Every minor official counts himself (as in Australia, men almost invariably win merit-based appointments) a “representative of the people.” He represents the people not through a contractual relationship that real people can periodically terminate, but in perpetuity, much as a painting represents its subject. There is nothing the subject people can do to change the picture.

While acknowledging the distinction between the public service ethic of liberal democracies and the universal political nature of official appointments in China, Bell doesn’t explore the implications of the distinction for his argument. The prospect of popular elections for twenty million political appointees in China is a non-starter. It’s even a non-starter for the country’s seven million “leading cadres.” Every political position in party and government from top to bottom needs to be filled by the party’s Organisation Bureau simply because there are so many political appointments to be made from one day to the next. It’s not a question of political preference – meritocracy or election – it’s a question of maths.

To be sure, there are things that can be said about meritocracy in China that are not trivial. One is that if the Communists are truly intent on running an authoritarian single-party state and excluding people from participating in decision-making in perpetuity, they should ensure that their authoritarian behemoth is meritocratic or it will face a legitimacy crisis. Meritocracy in this sense is a condition of the social contract governing authoritarian Communist Party rule in China, and fosters expectations that official appointments and privileges should be awarded on a competitive basis rather than through patronage networks.

Bell concedes that this condition is far from met in China. No national autocrat ever gained appointment on
merit, anywhere, and none in China has been able to sustain a meritocratic system of official appointment and promotion untainted by authoritarian patronage. Contrary to his initial claims, it is not meritocracy in China but its absence that chiefly concerns Bell.

The author spends half the book explaining to readers, and to Chinese officials if only they would sit up and listen, how China could improve its performance and standing as a meritocracy in order to survive as a Leninist state. In other words, China has to lift its game if it’s to remain a plausible authoritarian state. For Bell, the “good news” is that the party doesn’t need to introduce free and fair popular elections to achieve this. All it needs to do is practise the meritocracy it has thus far failed to demonstrate.