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The Future of Meritocracy: A Discussion of Daniel Bell's *The China Model*

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Abstract

Compared to Wang Shaoguang's approach to re-interpret the old concept "democracy" to overcome the Schumpeterian model of political legitimation, Daniel Bell's *Political Meritocracy* takes a more challenging path, attempting to build a new discourse of legitimacy centering on the concept "meritocracy" and incorporating elements of ancient China's traditions, the socialist revolutions in the twentieth century, and the system of competitive elections common in the Western world today. This inspiring work is full of incisive arguments, but could be improved by further considering the tension between the Confucian tradition and the revolutionary tradition in the twentieth century.

Keywords

Meritocracy – democracy – *The China Model* – Daniel Bell

The end of the cold war was followed by a failure of political imagination. In 1989, Francis Fukuyama's famous essay "The End of History?" although criticized by many, presented a belief (or at least a wish) commonly held in the West: the idea that any political system other than Western liberal democracy is doomed to failure.

This belief is seriously short of historical sense. In the 1950s and 1960s, just as socialism was becoming increasingly influential, the United States—in the midst of the quagmire of the Vietnam War and domestic racial conflict—was

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hardly qualified to speak in defense of electoral democracy. A generation of American intellectuals sought to understand what had gone wrong. But in the wake of the cold war and the resulting unipolar world, the West, and the US in particular, came to monopolize the definition of democracy. Western political scientists deemphasized the principle of economic and social equality, which had been a priority of socialist countries. In its place, they emphasized elections and competition between elite interest groups seeking to influence the selection of political representatives as the primary features of democracy. This is usually called the Schumpeterian definition of democracy. It followed that even a society with a rigid caste system could claim to be a democracy as long as it met these criteria. Societies that did not were seen as authoritarian even if their political systems were effective and responsive to the needs of the people—perhaps as well-ordered authoritarian countries, at best.

In the post-Cold war unipolar international system, the Schumpeterian definition of democracy seems to have become a handy conceptual weapon to negate the legitimacy of China's political system and practices. No matter how much consensus building and consultation are involved in China's political system, and no matter how many people have been pulled out of poverty or how far its economy has advanced, it will always be viewed poorly on the basis of this standard. In China, many suggestions have been made on how to remedy the poverty of discourse in political legitimation. Among them is Wang Shaoguang's attempt to place the concept of democracy in a historical context, arguing that Schumpeterian democracy by no means represents the essence of democracy. True democracy, he contends, must emphasize political output and responsiveness to popular demands.[1] If more emphasis were placed on substance, rather than procedure, many aspects of China's system would be viewed in a much more positive light, such as the practice of reaching political consensus through consultation.[2] Wang's method draws on concepts and vocabulary popular in Western and US academia, but he strives to use them in a more nuanced and complicated way.

Daniel Bell's *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (originally published in English by Princeton University Press and later translated into Chinese)[3] represents a second approach to remedy the poverty of discourse in political legitimation. Instead of offering a different

1 Wang Shaoguang 王紹光, *Minzhu si jiang* 民主四講 [*Four Works on Democracy*] (Beijing: Joint, 2008).

2 Wang Shaoguang and Fan Peng 樊鵬, *Zhongguoshi gongshixing juece* 中國式共識型決策 [*Chinese-style Consensus Model Policies*] (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2013).

3 Daniel Bell [Bei Danning 貝淡寧], *Xianneng zhengzhi: Weishenme shangxianzhi bi xuanju minzhuzhi geng shihe Zhongguo* 賢能政治: 為什麼尚賢制比選舉民主制更適合中國

interpretation of the existing vocabulary, he proposes a new vocabulary, drawing on the discourse surrounding the concept of legitimacy, to use as a standard for evaluating political systems and their governance. In the Western context, this second method is more challenging than the first. It is not difficult for Wang Shaoguang to draw upon a wealth of native resources in Western discourse, including the discourse of socialist experiments beginning in the nineteenth century. Bell's method, by contrast, has fewer native Western discursive resources available to draw upon. For example, the word "meritocracy" is rarely used in English to describe an overall political system, except perhaps in an ironic sense. Because of this, Bell is forced to rely more on a combination of Chinese historical discursive traditions and contemporary China's political practices, which has led his work to be accepted more widely in the Chinese context. With a far longer history of meritocracy in China, the Chinese word for "meritocracy" [*shangxian zhi* 尚賢制, or *Xianneng zhi*, 賢能制] has richer connotations than the English word. According to Confucian thought, even in the world of "great harmony" [*datong* 大同], political power would still be exercised by sages. In addition, China has over one thousand years of experience with the imperial examination system, so the idea that society should select those who are both virtuous and capable for public service has embedded itself in the cultural consciousness and even set the stage for modern China's various examination systems. For the Chinese public influenced by the Confucian legacy, the selection of the virtuous and capable could undoubtedly play the role of "higher law" to assess the legitimacy of the Chinese political system.

However, the political ethos of contemporary China is the product of multiple historical influences. Besides the Confucian meritocratic legacy, the political standards established after the revolutions of the twentieth century, as well as the now-popular concept of Schumpeterian democracy, all made their mark on the public consciousness. Bell recognizes these historical complexities. As a Canadian scholar who has put down roots in China, he values promoting dialogue between Chinese and Western theories, as well as reconciling China's historical tradition with modern-day practice. He also borrows and synthesizes theories of "the China model" or "the China path" from modern-day Chinese scholars, forming a rich theoretical system with a broad vision and ultimately attracting a broad readership from both East and West.

In *Political Meritocracy*, Bell attempts to combine these three different heritages, advancing multifaceted criteria for evaluating political systems: he calls

[*The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*], trans. Wu Wanwei (Beijing: CITIC Publishing Group, 2016).

for the top level of political leadership to be formed through a meritocratic process but believes that lower-level bureaucrats can be selected through a more democratic process. He argues that a country should curb the power of private capital, reduce economic inequality, build a broad pool of talent across all strata of society, and even enact minority quotas in politics and education. Many of these suggestions embody his recognition of the revolutionary legacy of the twentieth century. But, in light of China's experience in the twentieth century, it is also worth asking what other potential policies and practices have been excluded from his political package. Although the legacy of Confucian meritocracy and twentieth-century China's socialist revolution seem to have similar ways of choosing political leaders, the two systems differ sharply in ethos. In this article, I will first review the central arguments in *Political Meritocracy*. Then, I will proceed to reveal similarities and tensions between the two legacies and offer a historical perspective through which to consider *Political Meritocracy*.

1 Norms and Standards of Political Meritocracy

In practice, the Chinese word for "meritocracy" has much richer connotations than its English counterpart. Although the word "merit" in English has the broad connotation of "a praiseworthy quality",[4] "meritocracy" in everyday context is oriented toward achievement with a functional understanding of talent or ability. The English word emphasizes promoting individuals based on their talents and abilities, rather than means or family origin. Therefore upon scrutiny, the commonly understood English meaning of "meritocracy" centers on achievements and talents. In comparison, the Chinese word consists of the characters for "ability" [*neng* 能] and "virtue" [*xian* 賢]. Ability is usually defined in terms of a functional relationship, but virtue can transcend practicality and efficiency, even coming to represent a political community or a civilization's idealization of the model human.[5]

Perhaps due to the meager connotations of the English word for "meritocracy", although scholars often use it in the context of business or public management, the word is rarely used as a key term to refer to an overall political system. The limited usage is often expressed in a satirical sense. In 1957

4 *Webster's Dictionary*, 9th ed. (Beijing: World Books, 1988), 743.

5 Of course, the virtuous person is not the highest ideal of Confucianism. The sage supersedes the virtuous person, but, for most people, becoming a virtuous person is a more attainable goal.

the English sociologist and socialist activist Michael Young published his novel *The Rise of the Meritocracy*, which offered a biting parody of the idea of meritocracy.[6] In Bell's opinion, the book identifies three problems with meritocracy. The first is the potential for leaders chosen through a meritocratic system to be corrupt or misuse their power. The second is the possibility that a meritocratic system will lead to an ossification of the political system and decrease social mobility. The third is the problem of legitimacy. Because Young's book was so influential, the idea of meritocracy took on a negative connotation for several generations of Western political scientists.[7] In order to defend meritocracy, Bell has to respond to Young's theories.

First, Bell sets out to define his vision of meritocracy:

> The basic idea of political meritocracy is that everybody should have an equal opportunity to be educated and to contribute to politics, but not everybody will emerge from this process with an equal capacity to make morally informed political judgments. Hence, the task of politics is to identify those with above-average ability and to make them serve the political community. If the leaders perform well, the people will basically go along.[8]

This definition appears to be a watered-down version of the idea that "politics is education," which holds that politics is not only about securing the private interests of the people but also about increasing the quality of participants in the system through education. But Bell clearly knows that the classical belief in "the great chain of being" has been very thin in the contemporary world. In a society where multiple comprehensive doctrines compete with each other, groups with different belief systems may have diverse understandings of virtue and the model human. Consensus is more obtainable on the functional need in governance.

To further the goal of establishing meritocracy as a legitimate political system, Bell has no choice but to challenge the doctrine that electoral democracy is the only legitimate model. He acknowledges that the ability to vote can be satisfying, to the extent that, once obtained, it is difficult to get people

6 Michael Dunlop Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction, 1958).

7 What were political scientists concerned about at the time? Bell writes: "Starting from the 1960s, the key issue for theorists became the question of how to promote a society of equals." Bell, *Xianneng zhengzhi*, 96. To connect this with the historical context, around this time the victory of the socialist movement over capitalism led to tensions in the academic world. This also coincided with the rise of the civil rights movement in the US.

8 Bell, *Xianneng zhengzhi*, 21.

to relinquish it. But does electoral democracy result in good governance? To answer this question, Bell has to respond to Winston Churchill's maxim "Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others." In Bell's opinion, electoral democracy can easily have a number of negative results: the tyranny of the majority, the influence of money on elections, so-called negative voting, conflicting identity politics, and the divisive social effects caused by all these phenomena. In these respects, China's and Singapore's governance can offer some counterexamples. Of course, these counterexamples cannot definitively prove that meritocracy is superior to democracy, but Bell's goals are more modest than that. He only seeks to persuade readers of the many problems associated with electoral democracy—problems that, in an ethnically and religiously diverse large country such as China, could well prove fatal. As long as reader could accept this premise, he could move on to delving into the standards by which political leaders are evaluated.

Chapter 2 of *Political Meritocracy* is dedicated to a discussion of how to select good leaders in a political meritocracy. In this chapter, Bell cites a number of studies of leadership and emphasizes that leadership takes place under different social and political circumstances. He considers Max Weber's discussion of charismatic statesmen in *Politics as a Vocation*, in which Weber writes that statesmen must have "passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion."[9] But Bell emphasizes the importance of considering context when evaluating the standards of a meritocratic system. In a modern and peaceful society under collective leadership such as China, the qualities of a good leader are perhaps closer to the qualities of a civil servant. Bell proposes three requirements for a good leader: intellectual ability, social skills, and virtue. He then outlines a system to select for these qualities.

Perhaps because the book primarily aimed at Western readers who are unfamiliar with China's history and political system, Bell's discussion of China is limited to which system could well serve the selection of a particular quality. But, in practice, how does China's political system select for these qualities? It is a very broad question, but I believe several convenient starting points exist for answering this question. China has a more complicated method of evaluation than the three basic qualities mentioned above, particularly in terms of the posthumous titles of political leaders. The ancient text "Table of Posthumous Titles" [*Shi fa biao* 諡法表] mentions a series of positive and negative qualities of emperors and political elites. There is a similar, albeit less complete, system

9 Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 115.

of posthumous titles in contemporary China for political leaders. An important function of China's official dynastic histories, often presented in a series of biographies, was establishing standards of virtue for officials and scholars seeking political careers. In light of these resources, intellectual ability, social skills, and virtue can be used as starting points for introducing the reader to the study of the character of politicians, but after this line of inquiry has begun, these qualities are unable to move the study along, and we have to enter the more detailed and complicated "politics of exemplar."

On a theoretical level, I have reservations on Bell's response to Weber's theory of the qualities of good political leaders. Bell believes that Weber's so-called charismatic statesmen are well suited to times of war or domestic instability but are not necessarily suited to a modern nation-state in times of peace, which would likely do better with a bureaucratic politician. In making this argument, Bell draws a distinction between the requirements of times of war and times of peace. But this dichotomy may be vulnerable. We live in a world where the boundary between war and peace has been blurred. Wars are often invisible, and peace is rife with tensions and states of emergencies. A statesman/stateswoman unable to deal with a state of exception or emergencies cannot maintain peace and order effectively. Moreover, whether in peacetime or in wartime, governing cannot be viewed as a purely administrative job. Economic and social change are constantly breaking the balance of power among various social groups, leading to a variety of competing perspectives on the social order and social identity. Even though the mission of statesmen/stateswomen is to maintain the existing social order, they must closely monitor these changes. In addition, statesmen/stateswomen need to have political qualities (a word commonly used by the Chinese Communist Party) that are different from those of bureaucrats. Although those qualities do not necessarily result in charisma, they are indispensable in the making of a "real statesmen/stateswomen". This is why it is necessary to draw a distinction between meritocratic politics and meritocratic administration.

After addressing the standards for virtue, Bell responds to Young's three criticisms of meritocracy. On the charge that meritocracy leads to corruption, Bell contends that even elections are ineffective in stamping out corruption and that, in a meritocratic system corruption will eventually present a challenge to the legitimacy of the regime, motivating it to fight corruption to ensure its survival. On the charge that a meritocratic system will eventually lead to ossification of the political system, Bell argues that the proper meritocratic ideal is that political leaders be chosen from a wide-ranging pool of talent. He proposes a quota system for social vulnerable groups, but also believes that the

permanent cure lies in the equalization of social wealth. Meanwhile, the criteria to assess talents should maintain a certain level of plurality and flexibility. This may make it necessary to draw talents from various social groups.

On the question of legitimacy raised by Young, Bell synthesizes several examples from China to respond to the criticism. He notes that "the degree of legitimacy of the Chinese political system is very high"[10] and argues that this legitimacy comes from three sources: nationalism, political performance, and meritocracy. Of course, Bell's theory emphasizes the limitations of the first two sources of legitimacy: civil society groups can put forward their own understandings of the national interest and can call for increasingly higher standards in areas such as poverty reduction, economic development, and responses to crisis. Because of this, Bell emphasizes the importance of the third source of legitimacy. He mentions the findings of a study by Shi Tianjian et al.[11] on political culture, concluding that the Chinese people approve of the leadership of high-level politicians.

In chapter 4, Bell discusses three different models of democratic meritocracy: the electoral model, the horizontal model, and the vertical model. John Stuart Mill's plural voting scheme is representative of the electoral model. The defining characteristic of this model is that voting rights are allocated on the basis of so-called political ability. Bell points out that this model is impracticable at the moment, because attempting to select "rational voters" from the general populace would be "rough and unreliable."[12]

The second model is the horizontal model, which would have elected bodies at the central government level in parallel with a meritocratic system vested with more power. Bell also discusses Sun Yat-sen's proposed examination branch, Friedrich Hayek's second chamber system, and Jiang Qing's tricameral legislature. However, Bell believes that because nondemocratic meritocratic institutions have more power than democratically elected institutions, the legitimacy of these institutions would be continually questioned.

After dismissing the first two models, only the vertical model remains, of which China is presented as an example. Bell describes the Chinese model as "democracy on the bottom and meritocracy at the top," with room for experimentation in the middle. He believes that the lower levels of Chinese government contain comparatively more democratic elements. Of course,

10 Bell, *Xianneng zhengzhi*, 121.

11 Tianjian Shi, "Democratic Values Supporting an Authoritarian Regime," in *How East Asians View Democracy*, eds. Yun-han Chu et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 229-231. See also Tianjian Shi and Jie Lu, "The Shadow of Confucianism," *Journal of Democracy* 21, no.4 (2010).

12 Bell, *Xianneng zhengzhi*, 140.

here Bell's democracy does not refer strictly to a system of competitive elections. He also views public consultation as a form of democracy, for example. The room for experimentation in the middle of the system is necessary for governing a large country, but it has other functions as well. For example, it can be used to experiment with different standards for meritocratic selection. A meritocratic government by definition cannot have democratically selected leaders at the highest level, but it can be compatible with democracy at the lower levels, non-electoral political consultation and deliberation, transparency, citizen referendums, and other political practices often associated with democracy.

Bell's discussion of China's vertical model emphasizes the question of how to recruit individuals to fill different roles in the government. *Political Meritocracy* spends relatively little time on institutions related to the further cultivation, training, and testing of civil servants and statesmen. In the Chinese system, a graduate of a top university who enters the state bureaucracy has a long process ahead of him or her to reach the top levels of government leadership. He or she should work hard to enter the visual field of organizational department of the party to be listed as a candidate for further cultivation; he or she would be put on different type of posts in order to gain comprehensive political experience and ability; once he reaches the provincial level, he may be lifted from one province to another, from an agricultural province to an industrial province, from hinterland to coastal area, from Han area to ethnic minority area, so as to gain a comprehensive curriculum vitae record and rich experience of leadership; sometimes he or she would be appointed to high risky areas or posts to receive severe test; their performance in the face of major political incidents is also the concern of the organizational department of the party. If they could not pass the test, their political career could be impeded, or even terminated. It is not easy to define these mechanisms, but examining the employment history of various senior cadres could be a good starting point. We hope future revisions of *Political Meritocracy* could add this aspect in order to provide a more complete picture of the vertical system.

Could the vertical system spread to other countries? Bell's view is quite clear: the system only suits larger states, because in smaller ones it is more difficult to promote experimentation at lower levels of the government; it is not suited to electoral democracies and governments with frequent political changes either, because people are often reluctant to give up their existing voting rights, and because it is difficult to sustain a political experiment over the long term in an unstable system. Finally, it would also be problematic to implement such a system in a country without an existing tradition of meritocracy.

At this point, we have established a basic understanding of Bell's evaluation of electoral democracy: a democratic electoral system could be easily

established and remain self-sustaining even in the absence of good governance outcomes, because even if the people are dissatisfied with the current system, they find it difficult to think of other possibilities. In contrast, a meritocratic system must result in good governance, because the basis of its legitimacy rests on the superior quality of the incumbent politicians, and only the outcome of good governance can prove the superior quality of the leaders. It could be further inferred that as long as good governance is indispensable for the legitimation of meritocracy, theorists of meritocracy must pay close attention to various infrastructural capacities and institutions of the state, because good governance not only needs good leaders, but also requires the existence of a series of institutional infrastructures as its safeguard. Here Bell's work intersects with that of Wang Shaoguang, whose research focuses on the infrastructural power of the state.

Another aspect of Bell's book that is worth mentioning is his evaluation of the relationship between meritocracy and democracy, as he points out: "Ultimately, the only way is to show without a shadow of a doubt that the people support political meritocracy. In other words, democracy may be necessary to legitimize meritocracy."[13] Bell's concept of "democracy" here is not necessarily referring to electoral democracy but to a system in which consent comes from the bottom up in general. From Bell's point of view, it may be hard for a meritocratic system, in establishing its legitimacy, to hold up virtuous statesmen/stateswomen as models because it may not sit well with those who are shut out of the system. Here, again, meritocracy appears to depend on the discourse of democracy. This is where Bell and Wang again cross paths. However, on this issue, do they agree on everything?

2 How a Meritocratic System Obtains the Consent of the People

How does a meritocratic system go about obtaining the consent of the governed? Logically, there should be two steps. The first is agreeing on a set of standards for the system, and the second is ensuring that politicians are motivated to effect good governance in line with the standards they have set out. Public education needs to emphasize virtue and ability, in order to maintain a sense among the people that the career of a statesman/stateswoman requires special talents and training, and perhaps suits only a minority of the people. However, the average person can still participate in public affairs at the grassroots level and even have outstanding achievements recognized by the public

13 Bell, *Xianneng zhengzhi*, 131.

and the state. Historically, Confucian education was able to achieve the former but fell short of the latter because of its insistence on ordering society in terms of traditional distinctions among scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants. Only with the changes brought by China's revolution in the twentieth century were average people fully integrated into the political life of the state. But do the new traditions brought about in the twentieth century constitute meritocratic traditions?

If we consider the 1950s and 1960s, the mainstream political discourse in China paints the following picture. On the one hand, the discourse emphasized that cadres should act as vanguards, taking on more responsibility in society and serving as models for ordinary people. Such "advanced elements" were to be identified and funneled into higher positions. But the selection process was not based upon competitive election. The honor was awarded most often to so-called frontline workers; nearly all well-known model workers came from this population. Shi Chuanxiang, a manure digger in Beijing, was lauded as a national model worker and was recognized by Chairman Liu Shaoqi, who shook his hand and said: "As a manure digger you are a servant of the people, and as chairman of the state I also am a servant of the people, the difference is only in the revolutionary division of labor." In analyzing the legitimacy of meritocracy, Bell notes that discrepancies in political power often go hand in hand with efforts to promote a sense of political equality, perhaps in order to encourage the common people to aspire to types of work other than politics. There are perhaps no better models of this than the interaction between Liu and Shi.

The difference between that era and modern China is that the earlier period had no distinction between insiders and outsiders. Those who were selected as model workers often were able to use the opportunity to enter the political arena, which helped to forge the common belief that ordinary jobs can offer valuable contributions to society and even the possibility of being conferred with a leadership position. This was exemplified by the adage *you hong you zhuan* 又紅又專, literally, "both red and specialized," used to refer to talents who were politically conscious as well as professionally competent.

But does this constitute meritocracy from Bell's perspective? The answer is perhaps negative. When Bell discusses meritocracy, it is in connection with the period after the reform and opening up, and he focuses mainly on graduates of top universities competing for leadership positions. From this, we can draw a conclusion as to his thoughts on historical events up to that point. He does not associate *you hong you zhuan* with virtue. In order to understand his position, it may be necessary to return to the connotations of the English word for meritocracy. Even though "merit" can be understood in a quite broad sense,

"meritocracy" demands performance requirements. An engineer who develops a more advanced machine for digging manure would be considered to have contributed more than Shi Chuanxiang, so he or she would fulfill the selection requirements of a meritocracy. As for Shi, he was politically conscious along the lines of the revolutionary ideals of the time, which means he was considered virtuous. However, his contributions were limited in scope. From the Party's point of view, he represented the spirit of "working hard and diligently," so by definition he was virtuous. Therefore, to borrow a concept of Susan Shirk's,[14] honoring Shi Chuanxiang was representative of the spirit of "virtuocracy"—that is, rewarding and promoting the virtuous, but not of meritocracy in the Western sense.

Thus it makes sense here to acknowledge the tension between the Chinese words for "virtue" and "ability", which are combined with the characters representing politics to make up the word for "merit." Contemporary China's political thought has been influenced by two major traditions, the native Confucian traditions and the newer traditions that arose out of twentieth-century socialism. Both emphasize *xianneng* 賢能—which can be translated as either "sage" or "talent," and neither accepted competitive elections as the major means of selecting a country's top leadership. Twentieth-century socialism brought with it a great promise of social equality, meanwhile China had to industrialize as soon as possible so as to survive in a dangerous international environment. This led to tensions between the two goals as economic growth resulted in greater income inequality. *Youhong youzhuan* emerged in response to these tensions, calling for a semblance of balance between the two competing forces. But from the point of view of traditional Confucianism, such a balance has already ignored the importance of professional output and the role of educated intellectuals.

After China shifted to a policy of prioritizing economic development, the focus on performance increased and model workers were increasingly selected from among management and professional and technical personnel rather than frontline workers. This tendency has been so excessive that it finally incurs doubts whether it has deviated from the original intention of the institution. In response, in recent years there was an emphasis on selecting more model workers from among frontline workers. But after all, Chinese society is increasingly educated and literate and more in line with Western meritocratic standards. Among party and government officials, we can find the largest group of doctorates in China.

14 James L. Watson, eds., *Class and Social Stratification in Post-Revolution China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 56-83.

Of course, this does not mean that the traditions of the twentieth century have already become obsolete. The basic framework of China's political system has been stable since 1949. What is open to consideration—returning to Bell's assertion that "democracy may be necessary to legitimize meritocracy"—is whether the new tradition of the twentieth century can enhance the legitimacy of the existing meritocratic system.

The greatest resource for maintaining legitimacy perhaps is still the "mass line," which stems from the revolutionary era. The mass line, the Party term for a policy aimed at cultivating contacts with the common people, emphasized the idea of coming from the masses and going among the masses. It represents opposition to the idea that a minority of elites should be able to pursue top-down policies. Instead, it argues that the discovery and understanding of truth is a process that is constantly being revised through collective practice and that close contact with the masses is necessary for reaching a more realistic understanding of the country's situation, which in turn is critical for formulating the correct Party line and policies. Therefore, the mass line can be viewed not only as a political belief but also as a system of organization. It calls on the Party to emphasize cadres' rapport with the masses when making employment decisions, as well as mass-line work and research in the training process.

To put the concept of the mass line into practice, the primary step is to "find the masses." This not only requires the cadres to go out into the masses but also necessitates a certain level of organization of a grassroots society, in order to create stable connections between the grassroots, policymakers, and the executive branch of government. With these connections, policymakers can hear the voice of ordinary people and improve the responsiveness of their policies. Although the mass line does not conform to the definition of democracy in the Schumpeterian sense, it fits Wang Shaoguang's substantial definition of democracy. When cadres go out into the masses, in Wang's view, this is one type of "adverse participation" in democracy.[15]

In *Political Meritocracy*, Bell uses China and Singapore as examples of meritocracies. However, the book does not discuss the similarity in the practice of the mass lines of the two countries. Singapore's People's Action Party (PAP) drew on the Chinese Communist Party's experience with the mass line, which allowed it to explain government policies from the top down, provided an avenue for citizens' concerns to be transmitted from the bottom up, and facilitated grassroots organization and mobilization. The PAP established networks at the ground level in order to connect the ruling party with the government

15 Wang Shaoguang, *Zhongguo zhengdao* 中國•政道 [*China and the Way of Governance*] (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2014), 10-14.

and the masses, forming countless connections that allowed for a large percentage of society's elite to be absorbed into this system and to take on some of its public functions. This allowed Singapore's policies to be relatively responsive to the needs of the people while also reducing the pressure to introduce a system of competitive elections. Wang Shaoguang and Ou Shujun describe this history in their most recent book, *Small City-State, Good Governance: State-building in Singapore*.[16]

The idea of the mass line originated in China, but it flourished in Singapore, where its development in turn could have an important influence on China. What does this mean for the narrative of meritocracy? In my opinion, it shows that the Confucian tradition is not sufficient to explain contemporary China's meritocracy. It is also necessary to understand the history of the Leninist party model and the ways in which it was adapted to China. Compared to the Russian Revolution, the Chinese revolution lasted much longer and encountered more difficulties, which forced revolutionaries to rely upon the grassroots people in order to survive. Ultimately, the mass line played a more central role in the political system that revolutionaries created. The highly elitist Soviet Union ultimately was unable to remain a cohesive state, while China and Singapore with their closer connections to the people were able to remain stable. If meritocracy ultimately depends on the consent of the people, then it cannot live without the discourse of democracy in a substantial sense. Although the egalitarian spirit may have tension with the hierarchical assumption in the meritocratic discourse, there could be productive intersection. In the twentieth century, the "adverse participation "conducted by the vanguard party through mass line secured popular support for its political leadership, and constitute an alternative to competitive election. The experience merits continued study and may provide a valuable intellectual resource for further inquiries into democracy and meritocracy.

3 Conclusion

Although the unipolar system after the Cold war greatly limited our political imagination, all signs indicate that we are now entering a period of global change. As the global economic landscape shifts, Fukuyama, who declared

16 Ou Shujun 歐樹軍 and Wang Shaoguang, *Xiao bang da zhi: xinjiapo de guojia jiben zhidu jianshe* 小邦大治:新加坡的國家基本制度建設 [*Small City-State, Good Governance: State-building in Singapore*] (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2017).

that 1989 was "the end of history," has recently returned to the topic of political decay, in particular the growing concern about the decline of the US as a world power.[17] President Donald Trump, who tries to preserve the hard power of the U.S., is much more reluctant to invest on regime change in other countries in the world. China's rise also encourages many developing countries to consider alternatives to the western models. The space of institutional imagination has been enlarged through the years.

Daniel Bell's *Political Meritocracy* is the result of this historical moment. It argues boldly to a Western audience that electoral democracy is not the only possible endpoint of political development and puts forward meritocracy as a potential alternative. It lays out the criteria for selecting political leaders in a meritocracy, discusses the challenges inherent in the system, and further refines the various models of meritocratic government. It offers proposals that incorporate elements of ancient China's traditions, the socialist revolutions in the twentieth century, and the system of competitive elections common in the Western world today.

Bell also recognizes that the legitimacy of a meritocratic system in contemporary society ultimately depends on the support of the people and cannot rely on more traditional belief in a universe of hierarchical order. It is on this point that his approach to raise a new political concept could be echoed and supplemented by the aforementioned approach to reinterpret an existing concept—democracy. The latter approach expands our understanding of democracy beyond the narrow definition of a system with competitive elections, and explores different paths to expand political participation and the responsiveness of public policies. The communist revolutions in the twentieth century led to the creation of China's mass line, which in turn influenced the governing style of Singapore's PAP. Perhaps future studies of China's and Singapore's meritocracies can reconsider the twentieth-century revolutionary legacy that connects the two countries. This legacy and the differing degrees to which it affected the two countries gave rise to differing possibilities for meritocracy and for democracy. History has not yet run its course, and the future remains uncertain; therefore it is crucial to remain open-minded as we move into a new historical era.

17 Francis Fukuyama, "America in Decay: The Sources of Political Dysfunction," *Foreign Affairs* 93 (September/October 2014).

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