Book Review


In this ambitious and daring intellectual endeavor, Daniel Bell and Wang Pei fearlessly defend an unpopular idea in the minds of their English-language readers: hierarchy can foster moral and just practices in modern progressive polities and societies. In support of this position, they draw on philosophical deliberation of political thoughts throughout history in the East and West, findings of modern social sciences research, as well as their own observations and experiences in their lifeworld embedded in China. As hierarchy results from society's needs for complex organizations, attempts at completely eliminating hierarchy in human history has often ended in disaster. Therefore, the "choice today is not between a society with no hierarchies and one with hierarchies, but rather between a society with unjust hierarchies that perpetuate unjust power structures and one with just hierarchies that serve morally desirable purposes." (p. 14)

What is in need, therefore, is good research on hierarchy, which lags behind because it is a taboo in progressively-minded intellectual circles in the West. Such knowledge would modernize hierarchy and hierarchical practices according to socially progressive aspirations. It would also help us to think about solutions to the challenges the world faces today, which range from connections among friends, lovers and family members, to reciprocity between nations in international relations, and to the role of animals and AI in human society. With passion and compassion, Bell and Wang offer insightful responses, most of which are inspired by and derived from the Confucian thoughts and practices of hierarchy. Their arguments demonstrate how Confucianism could be actively and even proactively utilized to improve modern societies and cultures. As the authors argue, modernized hierarchy should not just be tolerated; it should be endorsed and enjoyed by societies because of its benefits.
The first order of business is to distinguish morally just and unjust hierarchies and to examine various grounds of moral justification. The first two chapters investigate hierarchies in two areas that students of Confucianism are familiar with: human relations and individuals’ role within a polity. In intimate relations (among lovers, friends, parent-children, and families and their domestic help), while hierarchy with fixed positions could perpetuate unhealthy power relations, hierarchy with shifting roles enables the stronger and wiser parties to take care of the weaker and more needy ones and thereby promote the overall wellbeing of the collective. Drawing examples from ancient Indian erotic texts as well as traditional and modern practices in Chinese society, the authors show that the role shift takes place naturally in some cases (such as in parent-child relations) yet may require certain techniques in some other cases (such as among lovers), but when practiced well, such hierarchies could add humor, passion and compassion to these relationships. Housekeepers’ relationship with their employers’ family in modern Chinese life is used as an example. Referred to endearingly as “auntie,” they are integrated into the family relational structure, albeit a hierarchical one, but with it comes graded love and accommodation, as well as long-term relationships, love and care.

Chapter Two opens by noting that, regarding political institutions, it is not enough to justify a hierarchical system purely on its efficiency. Such efficiency needs to serve the benefits of the ruled, a requirement stipulated by both Plato (427–347 BCE) and Confucius (551–479 BCE). The case to be made here is that the specific institutions and practices in China’s hierarchical political system can indeed produce high quality leaders who can enhance the system’s performance and be held accountable for their commitment to serving the people. The recommendation system solicited nominations from local notables for political candidates based on their moral principles and practices. Meritocracy, with necessary renovations to inject new energy into the system when it slips into ossification, has largely demonstrated its capacity in selecting and promoting political talents. The authors’ vivid discussion on the success of Xi’s anti-corruption campaign, the potential effectiveness of moral education promoted by the government, and China’s incremental democratic reforms provide modern illustrations of these ideas. Here, the reader not only learns of ideas and practices of hierarchy, but also encounters vivid accounts and analysis of everyday Chinese life.

While Chinese scholars have been applying Confucian concepts to contemporary international relations in recent decades, Bell and Wang bring this effort closer to the Western perspective. The authors begin Chapter Three by conceptually distinguishing three types of international relations: weak reciprocity based solely on self-interest such as money diplomacy, weak reciprocity plus,
such as China's Belt and Road Initiative which is also grounded in self-interest but is more stable, and strong reciprocity that is embedded in a sense of community. The moral justification for hierarchy lies in the argument that the powerful in the hierarchical community should and do help the less powerful. Hierarchical rituals contribute critically to community-building through including both the powerful and the vulnerable in their practice and fostering commonalities in their performance. For example, the village wine ceremony, where the old and young drink from the same cup, manifests social distinction and, at the same time, helps to overcome it by “fostering commonalities.” (p. 121) China's tributary system is used as the main illustration to examine hierarchical rituals in international relations. Different frequencies of sacrificial offerings proportionally reflected the strengths of the mutual commitment between the Chinese Empire and its tributary states. Practicing these rituals, continually and performatively, manifested and reinforced the hierarchical relations, which, in the end, obligated China to defend the weaker members of its alliance system.

Chapters Four and Five take us into terrains to which Confucian thoughts are not typically applied. After a brisk discussion of the development of Western notions of human-animal relations – all the way from traditional Christian theology (animals have no souls) and Descarte’s (1596–1650) view (animals are mere machines) to advocacy of animal welfare voiced by thinkers such as Singer, Donaldson and Kymlicka, Bell and Wang launch their argument for a relationship of “subordination without cruelty.” The Confucian principle of graded love is well illustrated here by a quote of Wang Yangming (王陽明 1472–1529): “we love both human beings and beasts, but the heart can bear to slaughter beasts to feed family, to make sacrifices, and to treat guests.” (p. 171) Confucianism relies on humans’ natural affectionate inclinations and emotional reactions to distinguish proper relationships and behaviors from improper ones. On this basis, Bell and Wang argue for a hierarchy of compassion: we owe less compassion to animals than to humans, but we still owe them some compassion.

In Chapter Five the discussion takes another intriguing turn towards moral justification for a master-slave relationship between humans and their machines. The Marxist view that machines, in higher Communism, can free humans from mundane work so that they can realize their creative capacity, is found to be rather narrow. The “other-regarding morality” in Confucianism teaches us that we owe the most to people who have done the most for us. Only a society thriving on rich and meaningful human relations can come close to the Confucian ideal. Therefore, AI could be used to contribute to areas where it can help humans to maintain and nourish their meaningful relations with
other humans, but moral utilization of such technology should stop there. The employment of AI should also be fine-tuned to incorporate the values of the cultures and societies it operates in: driverless cars in Lhasa should be programmed to reflect Buddhist values that embrace animal life.

The language used in this work exhibits merits that deserve attention independent of the book’s content. Stripped of unnecessary academic expression, this language aids the authors in their efforts at explaining Chinese concepts and realities in the most plain way possible by leaving out Western conceptualization as much as possible. This less-is-more policy helps maintain the meaning and flavor of these Chinese concepts and practices. At the same time, the kind of fluidity, clarify and playfulness of a language, which only emerge when it is used as the mother tongue, is on full display here. By presenting a nearly seamless blend between the East and West conceptually and linguistically, this book, like Bell’s earlier works, encourages the reader to let go the various binaries that conventionally divide them. Rather, the reader’s gaze, mind and heart are directed to those aspects that bind them together as human communities, progressive societies, and forward-looking polities. Here, on the theme of hierarchy, the East is introduced and presented to the West with ease, grace, and transcendence; its notions and practices are observed and analyzed with Western sensibility and Confucian virtues.

Introducing the East to the West is one matter; bridging and connecting the two is quite another. For scholars who take it upon themselves to facilitate cross-cultural understanding between the East and West in today’s world, the challenge we face is that the lifeworld of contemporary Westerners provides very little cultural basis for comprehension in this direction and perhaps rather weak motivation too. In the East, harmony is to be preserved and consensus rightfully serves as the starting point, whereas in the West, conflict is a valued method of political and social organization and consensus and harmony often appear suspicious. The different life experiences conceptualized, normalized and justified by such different political ideologies and cultural schemas are all reinforced and perpetuated through socialization, education and media on a daily basis. It is truly ironic that larger amounts of information and faster speed of its transmission seem to have pulled the East and West further apart and left them more firmly entrenched in their respective positions.

In this context, since many justifications offered in the book rest on the acceptance of values such as harmony, consensus, meritocracy, graded love, and differential social order, the persuasive power of these arguments is likely to be much higher in Confucian societies where these values are already embraced than in others. The authors readily acknowledge so. Yet, as a major work that breaks new ground on an important concept in English-language
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To persuade readers in the West is the main task, and therefore it deserves greater effort. In the West, the past few centuries have witnessed repeated and relentless efforts at tearing down the hierarchy in all domains of human life. The Western mind has questioned its very existence and justification from divine and humanistic angles; the Western person keeps rectifying its abusive habits and dominating inclinations with political and artistic methods. In this context, despite the book’s illuminating arguments and enchanting style, the most open-minded reader would probably still find it difficult to place its arguments into a proper place in the current Western epistemology. To help the reader to relate to and categorize the knowledge presented in this book, it is perhaps necessary for the author to lay out their conception on the relationship between hierarchy, assuming it can be modernized in theory, and it is indeed being modernized in reality and the already widely embraced modern aspirations for equality and equality. Can they co-exist? Are they reconcilable? To sway the reader towards positive responses to these questions might already present a mission impossible. In this sense, Bell and Wang have adopted a wise strategy. However, even if it is wise to stay away from direct confrontation, exploring some nuanced but critical questions on this spectrum of “hierarchy-equality” might help bringing all parties closer. What are the existing mechanisms of checks and balances in just hierarchy and how should we best modernize them? How can we fine-tune the practice of hierarchy to prevent abuse and dominance that have so plagued it in the past? After all, the East has also been trying to reform its centuries-old traditions.

In modern Chinese life, notions and practices of hierarchy have changed radically in the past few decades. Take child-parent relations as an example. In the book, Bell and Wang examine how and when the roles between parents and children shifted, but such a discussion is situated more in the general and abstract cultural guidance than in in-your-face concrete realities. As many children have migrated from villages to cities, from small cities to mega-cities, from China to abroad, and as their journeys have placed them in professional and social environments that are so drastically different from those experienced by their parents, the presumed qualities of the parents and the cultural assumption that the parents always have something to teach their children are facing serious reality checks. Cultural change on such a scale and speed can be cruel because it forcefully shakes up cultural assumptions and throws people out of their assigned social roles. The disempowerment of parents in Chinese families has caused disharmony but it does not warrant the reinforcement of hierarchy. The normative power endowed in parents often prevents them from seeing realities clearly and recognizing their children’s legitimate needs willingly. We often read reports from all kinds of sources of the Chinese-style
parental forms of power abuse, from chiding their children for not getting perfect grades to insistently interfering in marriage and family affairs of their adult children. In such circumstances, the most effective way to save the hierarchy entails nuanced and realistic analysis of real-life situations embedded in China’s social and cultural changes, and serious revisions of the assumptions and practices of hierarchy so as to modernize it. Here, the authors may have missed a good opportunity to examine these changes and issue advice.

In a similar fashion, the gaps between important Confucian ideas and their actual practice in history are also left under-explored in some places. With regards to hierarchical rituals in China’s traditional tributary system, for example, a brief review provides a glimpse into scholarly debates on their practices, usefulness, and, to a certain extent, their very existence. With such controversy, the authors nevertheless argue that “[E]ven assuming a large gap between the ideal and the reality of the tributary system in imperial China, however, it doesn’t follow that the ideal is not worth defending today.” (p. 128) This claim might be convincing from a purely theoretical perspective, but the authors obviously intend to cast these ideas further onto today’s international relations, especially in regards to the Sino-U.S. relationship. If a grand- and noble-sounding idea did not even work in its own historical era, how realistically can we expect it to take force in our modern time and in an international political environment where it carries very little legitimacy? For more practically or empirically minded readers, the argument would need to be further developed to realize its effectiveness and usefulness to the fullest extent.

This work brings out a brave new way of envisioning the role that China and the Communist Party of China (CPC) can play in the world at present and in the near future. In the last chapter, for example, the authors weigh different options that enable the world to monitor Silicon Valley’s relentless pursuit of AI technology. In the end, they contend that the CPC would be a better candidate than the U.S. government for the job. Support for this position is drawn from the Party’s commitment to using policies and technologies to serve the people, its recent actions in organizing and advocating for international collaboration, and its already manifestly prudent approach towards AI technology. This perspective offers a sensible and optimistic vision where China plays an active and positive role on the global stage. Given the widespread skepticism towards Chinese politics in the West and the discrepancy between political rhetoric and political action that exists in politics of all shapes and forms, the reader may naturally wonder about the strength of such support. Sharper analyses on the performative versus the functional aspects of what the Party says and does might provide a necessary remedy.
In the terminology of hermeneutics, a true cross-cultural understanding must involve the fusion of horizons of the East and West. To help our readers, we might try to locate the appropriate area, direction, or niche in their existing knowledge system for the new concepts and realities that are coming their way. This is a common challenge for all of us who are engaged in scholarly exchanges across horizons. Is just hierarchy a counterpoint, or an alternative, to the Western conceptions and experiences? Or, is it altogether a universalist principle rooted in human existence? The current, binary conception of China versus the West creates a rigid frame of mind that is hard to escape from. In this book, Bell and Wang respond to the challenge with a Confucian spirit: to ask difficult questions and try one’s best to answer them, to aspire to accomplish missions that are impossible to accomplish, and to address an intellectual rival in a gentlemanly way. To offer a moralistic, pragmatic, and practical account of human society, the gentleman and gentlewoman fully exhaust their intellectual capacity not only by drawing on political ideals and empirical knowledge but also by invoking their own deepest and truest reflective understanding of life. This is indeed the Confucian way.

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