Introduction to *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy*

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The idea that political leaders should be chosen according to one person, one vote is taken for granted in so many societies that any attempt to defend political meritocracy should begin with a critique of electoral democracy: most readers in Western societies won’t even be willing to contemplate the possibility of morally justifiable alternatives to one person, one vote as a means of selecting political leaders, so a book arguing in favor of an alternative must at least raise some questions about democratic elections.¹ Some philosophers have defended the rights to vote and run for office on the grounds that political liberties are intrinsically valuable for individuals whether or not they lead to collectively desirable consequences. These arguments, however, have been vigorously contested. And if the aim is to promote electoral democracy in China, arguments for democracy appealing to the intrinsic value of voting will not be very effective because political surveys consistently show that citizens in East Asian societies understand democracy in substantive rather than procedural terms: that is, they tend to value democracy because of its positive consequences rather than valuing democratic procedures per se. So the politically relevant question is whether democratic elections lead to good consequences. Democracy has had a good track record over the past few decades: rich, stable, and free countries are all democratic. But democracies also have key flaws that may spell political trouble in the future, and it is at least arguable that political meritocracies can minimize such problems.

¹ Reprinted from *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* by Daniel A. Bell (Princeton University Press, 2015), with permission. Daniel A. Bell has published several books on East Asian politics and philosophy and he is the founding editor of the Princeton-China series. His works have been translated into 23 languages.
Chapter 1\textsuperscript{2} of the book \textit{The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy}\textsuperscript{3} discusses four key flaws of democracy understood in the minimal sense of free and fair elections for the country’s top rulers, and each flaw is followed by a discussion of theoretical and real meritocratic alternatives. The first flaw is “the tyranny of the majority”: irrational and self-interested majorities acting through the democratic process can use their power to oppress minorities and enact bad policies. Examinations that test for voter competence can help to remedy this flaw in theory, and Singapore’s political meritocracy is a practicable alternative. The second flaw is “the tyranny of the minority”: small groups with economic power exert disproportionate influence on the political process, either blocking change that’s in the common interest or lobbying for policies that benefit only their own interest. In theory, this flaw can be remedied by means of a citizen body that excludes wealthy elites, and China’s political system is a practicable alternative. The third flaw is “the tyranny of the voting community”: if there is a serious conflict of interest between the needs of voters and the needs of nonvoters affected by the policies of government such as future generations and foreigners, the former will almost always have priority. One theoretical remedy is a government office charged with the task of representing the interests of future generations, and Singapore’s institution of a president with the power to veto attempts by politicians to enact policies that harm the interests of future generations is a practicable alternative. The fourth flaw is “the tyranny of competitive individualists”: electoral democracy can exacerbate rather than alleviate social conflict and disadvantage those who prefer harmonious ways of resolving social conflict. A system based on consensus as a decision-making procedure can help to remedy this flaw, and China’s political model has some practical advantages in terms of reducing social conflict.

In short, there may be morally desirable and political feasible alternatives to electoral democracy that help to remedy the major disadvantages of electoral democracy. If the aim is to argue for political meritocracy in a Chinese context, however, we do not need to defend the strong claim that political meritocracy consistently leads to better consequences than electoral democracy. We can simply assume that China’s one-party political system is not about to collapse and argue for improvements on that basis. Chapter 2 proceeds on the following assumptions: (1) it is good for a political community to be governed

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\item This and all subsequent references are to chapters in \textit{The China Model}, not to specific content in this issue of \textit{Journal of Chinese Humanities}.
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