

“exceptionalism” in different ways. It is better that exceptionalism is rooted in culturally anchored values rather than weaponized for culture wars. Declaring exceptionalism does less to inspire than to actually *be* exceptional.

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The Dean of Shandong: Confessions of a Minor Bureaucrat at a Chinese University

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Daniel A. Bell’s *The Dean of Shandong: Confessions of a Minor Bureaucrat at a Chinese University* is a unique contribution to our understanding of China’s higher education system and to the field of Chinese studies more generally. Bell, a well-known scholar of Confucian philosophy, was a faculty member teaching courses at the prestigious Tsinghua University in Beijing when he was asked to serve as the Dean of Shandong University’s School of Political Science and Public Administration. Shandong Province is the historical heartland of Confucianism, the birthplace of both Confucius and Mencius. The people of the province hold Confucius and his followers in high regard, and, in fact, the Party secretary of Shandong University at the time of Bell’s hiring was a 76th-generation descendant of Confucius. Bell’s hiring for this position is noteworthy because he is a Canadian citizen with no Chinese ancestry. While many international administrators of Chinese ethnicity have worked at Chinese universities over the past few decades, only a handful of Westerners with no Chinese ancestry have held comparable administrative positions.

As the reference to “confessions” in the book’s subtitle suggests, there is a self-critical and light-hearted tone to portions of the book, especially in Bell’s recounting of his own “bungles and misunderstandings” as an international dean in Shandong (p. 3). This confessional tone is most evident in chapters on hair dye, alcohol consumption and “cuteness,” but it is also evident in the chapter on collective leadership, wherein he states that he lacked the energy for a key component of the dean’s job, to be “always on call and ready for four-hour meetings” (p. 59).

Although the confessional elements of the book are rather light-hearted, Bell’s chief concern is to “de-demonize” our understanding of China’s political system (p. 17) – a timely, serious and challenging task. Bell’s efforts to this end are most evident in the chapters on collective leadership, corruption, censorship and academic meritocracy, which should be read carefully and with an open mind by anyone interested in contemporary China and by Western officials responsible for formulating government policy toward China. In these chapters Bell contends that the Confucian ideal of meritocracy, common to the imperial era although tempered by the strictures of Legalism, is now firmly embedded in the CCP too, and that selection and promotion for leadership positions, whether in China’s educational system or in other government institutions, is determined through merit earned in the performance of one’s duties. Bell argues the effectiveness and legitimacy of China’s form of governance is due to personnel promotion through China’s bureaucratic structures based on selection for talent, skills, hard work, and especially through a dedicated commitment to



the well-being of the people and the nation – a fusion of both Confucian and CCP ideals. For Bell, academic meritocracy is a microcosm reflecting China’s political meritocracy, also referred to as “democratic meritocracy” (p. 111 and elsewhere), which he forcefully argues is a viable and worthy alternative to Western liberal democracies.

I read *The Dean of Shandong* with great interest, fascinated to see the many ways in which Bell’s experience as a college dean mirrored my own experience at a somewhat smaller college in southern China. His discussions of the changing nature of “internationalization” in China’s higher education system, admissions processes, the hiring and promotion of faculty and staff, the many responsibilities of the Party secretaries in his college and the rather endless meetings for collective decision-making all sounded very familiar. I agree that the winnowing process of both faculty and especially staff in China’s higher education system often results in the development and promotion of highly competent faculty and administrators. For example, my former college office manager, a CCP member, is one of the most ethical and competent people I have ever known. My vice deans and Party secretary were very competent, dependable, and a continuous source of good advice. The vice president I most frequently worked with on issues of internationalization, curriculum development and technology-enhanced learning was exceptionally competent, dedicated and always helpful.

I fear, however, that Bell overstates his case for China’s bureaucracies as meritocracies. I certainly encountered university administrators who were anything but ethical or competent. Moreover, I am not fully convinced by Bell’s assertion that the virtues of China’s meritocratic structure in academia also apply to other government bureaucracies. Although he acknowledges the possibility of autocratic rule emerging at the pinnacle of China’s meritocracy, I wish he had more fully considered the dominance of Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping or Xi Jinping, and reflected more deeply on the possible dangers of conflating academic meritocracy with political meritocracy.

Nevertheless, Bell is *not* arguing for the superiority of China’s “democratic meritocracy” over Western liberal democracy. Instead, he provides a strong and coherent argument for recognition by Western nations that China’s largely meritocratic political system is “morally legitimate” and well justified in placing “substantial constraints on the accumulation of private wealth for the sake of the common good” (p. 125). From this perspective, China warrants respect for its capacity to deliver good governance and steady improvement of human well-being on a par with Western liberal democracies.

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Material Contradictions in Mao’s China

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The material culture of Maoist China has long been overlooked, notably because of the scarcity of available commodities. But precisely because objects were rare and difficult to obtain, people attributed significant meanings to materials. This shared assessment led two historians of modern