The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy. By Daniel A. Bell.
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The China Model explores the potential and abilities of meritocratic political systems, specifically in reference to China's own meritocratic process of selecting political leaders. Daniel Bell asks if it is possible to combine the benefits of democratic and meritocratic processes into one system and, furthermore, whether China's political meritocracy can be seen as legitimate by the people and avoid abuses of power with its authoritarian rule (p. 2). *The China Model* is a "defense of political meritocracy" (p. 4). Bell asks: If we demand that the leaders of science, law, and business be trained and experienced, why do we not hold political leaders to the same standard (p. 2)? In China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) aims to select and promote public servants through examinations and assessments of performance at lower levels of government (p. 4). Although the Chinese system is not perfect, Bell believes that it exhibits significant advantages in comparison to typical Western democratic elections for political leaders.

The book is in five chapters, the first of which focuses on the four flaws that Bell diagnoses in electoral democracies: tyranny of the majority, tyranny of the minority, tyranny of the voting community, and tyranny of competitive individuals (p. 7). For each flaw Bell offers both a theoretical and a practical solution used in either the Chinese or Singaporean meritocratic system. The second chapter discusses what qualities a leader must possess in political meritocracies, and Bell evaluates these traits within the Chinese meritocratic system. Bell suggests that China should include more exams to test intellectual abilities, promote more women to top leadership positions, and increase the use of a peer-review system (p. 93). In the third chapter, Bell analyses three key problems of political meritocracies and asks, specifically for China, whether it is possible to fix them without incorporating elements of electoral democracy. While the first two problems—potential abuses of power and "ossification of hierarchies" (p. 9)—can be fixed by anti-corruption measures and political experimentation, Bell argues that the third problem, that of legitimacy, will remain troublesome without granting more extensive political participation (p. 152). The fourth chapter considers three political models where meritocracy can be reconciled with widespread participation; Bell deems the first two of these models to be politically unrealistic. His preferred model is one of political meritocracy at the level of the central government and democracy for the local government. Indeed, Bell argues that a single electoral model should not be used for all levels of government, as each one meets different needs (p. 168). This third model, with the addition of an "experimental" middle level, is Bell's representation of the Chinese model (p. 182).

In his conclusion, Bell recognizes that the Chinese model is a unique product of China's historical experience (p. 195), and he ends with words of warning to China about its need to set a good example for others if it intends to inspire political meritocracy. Indeed, Bell cogently notes that the CCP's oppression of political participation diminishes the merits of the system for other countries.

The China Model exclusively focuses on a comparison between the political systems of China and Singapore and the US system as a way to demonstrate their disparities. It summarizes a large body of academic work by social scientists, including philosophers, historians, and political scholars in English, French, and Chinese. This culminates in a daring synthesis of Eastern and Western academic thought. For example, Bell mobilizes arguments made by both Confucius and Plato in favor of political meritocracy and the exclusion of the majority from political power (p. 152). Bell also relies on the findings from two conferences held on the subject of political meritocracy,

one in English and the other in Chinese, and interviews with political leaders from both Singapore and China to further understand the meritocratic system.

The book is provocative for Western political theorists and has noticeable strengths. First, it promotes a deeper understanding of political meritocracy as an ideal and as a partial reality in the Chinese political system (p. 12). Second, with his challenge to electoral democracy and his identification of fixable flaws that are generally overlooked and downplayed, Bell calls for improvements to the way electoral democracy currently functions. Third, he provides both theoretical and practical solutions to these problems, on the basis of careful analysis. Finally, Bell's hybridization of Eastern and Western academic thought strengthens his argument of how political meritocracy can be incorporated theoretically into Western political systems.

However, the book presents an ideal type of political meritocracy that may not give a full understanding of the current Chinese political system. China's political system is also a Leninist regime with powerful tools of repression. Current political and social realities in China seem to undermine some of the theoretical lessons that the book intends to draw for democracies. Bell also notes that it takes 20 years to become a vice-minister (p. 186) and that increased promotion of women is needed within the system (p. 93). What are the implications of this skewed demographic representation in the Chinese political leadership?

Overall, Bell addresses a larger debate about the processes by which political leaders are selected and suggests an alternative to elections which can be captured by populist leaders. Could a meritocratic system filter out such demagogues? This book questions the West's relentless and unwavering belief in electoral democracy, which can prevent it from noticing its flaws, and provides alternatives that appear potentially reasonable in the face of the global ascendancy of populist political leaders. With tensions rising between China and the United States, though, it is hard to believe that *The China Model* will ever have the impact Bell intended. The ideological aversions between China and the US suggest that if any country in America's sphere of influence were to take on some meritocratic characteristics in their political system, it would meet with powerful pushback.

Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present. By Frank M. Snowden. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020. 582 pp. $36.40 (paperback).

Frank M. Snowden's book, *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present*, situates infectious disease within the "big picture" of human history. With Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Avian Influenza, and Ebola as recent reference points, Snowden explores the impact of epidemics on public health, human behavior, intellectual history, and war. The key lesson is that contagions are predictable products of societal vulnerabilities stemming from our relationships with the environment, other animals, and one another. In the preface to the book's 2020 paperback edition, Snowden is rightfully critical of the "who would've thunk it" rhetoric of leaders and institutions in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially with SARS still fresh in our minds. He discusses society's tendency to "lapse into forgetfulness" in the intervals between epidemics, resulting in the dangerous misrepresentation of infectious diseases as random or accidental events. Time and time again, *sales populi supreme lex esto*—public health as the highest law, has taken a backseat to the laws of the marketplace. As COVID-19 has reminded us, ignoring public