

Book Review: Daniel Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 379 pages.

Confucian Rule in China: In the House of Virtue and Talent

Bruce Gilley

It is the best of times for scholars and policy analysts who propose alternative visions of China's political future. The ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is in the midst of a far-reaching process of identifying exactly how it might remain in power for many decades to come. Chinese society is experiencing rapid value changes that may, from today's vantage point, support any number of forms of political organization. Last but not least, democracy itself, which enjoyed a brief heyday in the 1990s as the only feasible form of political organization, has come under attack from both the left and the right (as it did following its previous heyday in the 1950s), thus relegitimizing discussions of nondemocratic forms of government.

The new alternative modernities of left and right share a disdain for electoral democracy. But they differ substantially in their proposed remedies. Those on the right typically emphasize elite rule, political stability, and the imposition of traditional values. Those on the left typically emphasize direct participation, economic redistribution, and the imposition of progressive values.

In the Chinese case, the eruption of competing left and right visions for the future owes in part to the signals given by the CCP. Since the failure of communism in China and elsewhere in 1989 and the beginning of the 1990s, the CCP has been groping to redefine its future. Official phrases such as "political civilization" and "harmonious socialist society" have been proffered as alternative modernities, but without any clear institutional content. A State Council White Paper on democracy issued in 2005 called for left-wing democratic centralism and right-wing rule by "experts" both at the same time. It is no wonder that the future seems a wide open field, and that many thinkers have rushed in to fill the void.

Daniel Bell is the most prolific, well-read, and high-profile advocate of one type of right-wing alternative modernity, which he calls "Confucian democracy." The outlines, contained in his new book, *Beyond Liberal*

Bruce Gilley is Assistant Professor of Political Studies at Queen's University, Kingston, Canada. <gilleyb@queensu.ca>

Democracy, are simple and yet substantive, and not all of them are necessarily inimical to a reasonably broad definition of democracy itself.

First, Bell's vision calls for human rights that allow for the curtailment of some civil and political liberties to achieve socio-economic goals consistent with local knowledge, conditions, and customs. This takes up the first part of *Beyond Liberal Democracy* and is perhaps its least controversial section. Yet, it is the most interesting one from the standpoint of Bell himself. Bell's 1995 co-edited book, *Towards Illiberal Democracy in Pacific Asia*, was part of the broader emergence of the Asian Values discourse that fell silent after the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998. Back then, Bell was more taken with the claims of Singapore leader Lee Kuan Yew or New York University professor James Hsiung on the virtues of stern rule for Asians. Bell himself is more circumspect about Asian Values today. Many of the claims, he notes, are either empirically wrong (development depends upon authoritarianism, for example) or culturally *insensitive* (China's one-child policy, for example). Rather his argument is that human rights is a pluralistic field with a thinner core than many suppose and where tradeoffs are always being made consistent with local conditions. Few will disagree with his careful and wise discussion of the way that rights are understood and employed in East Asia.

Another part of his vision involves a paternalistic form of capitalism that ensures equality, welfare, and job opportunities through the offices of an intrusive and uncorrupt state. Again, this section of the book will not be particularly controversial. There are many varieties of capitalism within the world (and within the West), consistent with the different social choices of the populations concerned and the nature of their economies. Only the most adamant libertarian will challenge the sensible notions here—limits on property rights, an attention to material welfare for those living below the poverty line, stricter requirements to provide for family members, or more demanding educational standards.

As with the human rights section, however, Bell is weak on the question of how these socio-economic schemes should be realized in East Asia. As a philosopher, Bell argues in part that they are just and/or culturally sensitive and thus *should* be imposed for that reason alone. Yet, the empirical side of the argument suggests that they are already extant to varying degrees and can be expected to expand organically through social choices made by citizens who share his view that they are just and/or culturally sensitive. There is a tension between these two because the latter may be untrue: Japanese and South Korean conglomerates are being dismantled and individual property rights are on the rise in China. If Confucian capitalism does not emerge on its own in East Asia, then Bell would be left arguing that it should be imposed. As with so many philosophers writing on the real world, there is a tension between what Bell thinks is right and what citizens might think is right.

This is where the third part of the book comes in. This is the most controversial, and least reconstructed, section of the book. It covers his

suggestions for the holding and exercising of political power. As with most of his work, it is based on a selective reading of Chinese tradition, which seems to bear little resemblance to the relevant strands of tradition in contemporary China, much less democratic Taiwan, South Korea, or Japan. The key argument is that elite rule is more culturally sanctioned than popular rule in these societies.

Bell follows this with a series of empirical claims that elite rule is more effective as well. “Politicians [in democracies] often get elected by pandering to the short-term interests of the populace” (p.162), he states grandly. Thus, even East Asians who have “imbibed the Confucian ethic of respect and deference toward educated elites” (p. 163) might nonetheless fail to act in their own best interests come election-time by electing Confucianists. In short, “political rulers chosen on the basis of Western-style democratic elections may lack both the motivation and the competence to make sound political judgments” (p. 163).

Even at this stage, the argument is flawed. Democracy indeed *may* lead to bad outcomes in China (as Bell notes) but it also may not (which he ignores). How to decide? Bell, a philosopher, is apparently unaware of the dangers of selection bias in empirical research: he piles up every scrap of empirical evidence weighing *against* advice to democratize China (or to keep Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea democratic), ignoring the equally substantial body of evidence weighing in its *favor*. Without an argument about why the former are correct and the latter incorrect, or without his own new evidence, it means that all this evidence amounts to nothing.

Thus Bell, leaning to one side for no particular reason, proposes rule by elites—a Confucian upper house chosen by examinations that would have the main legislative power in China, leaving a popularly elected lower house to snipe ineffectively. Bell notes that his proposed name for this body—Xianshiyuan, or House of Virtue and Talent—sounds “ridiculous in English.” Perhaps that is because it is ridiculous. Attempts to create such undemocratic bodies in Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia have been a disaster—recluses for cronyism and people-hurting policies.

Bell recognizes that the House of Virtue and Talent might be a nonstarter because it denies equal dignity to citizens. He thus steps back onto the normative side, saying that it *should* have a greater say. To justify this, he comes back to a selective reading of empirical evidence about democracies: they go to war in the process of democratization (Jack Snyder’s now-discredited claim), they do not protect minority rights (generally rejected in most studies), and they cannot achieve common-good policies because of various incentive problems (again in comparative evidence, untrue). In the process, Bell also repeats any number of urban myths commonly circulated in antidemocratic circles: that a United States congressman asked China’s deputy foreign minister during an official meeting in 1997 if he had accepted Jesus Christ as his savior (later shown to have been a dinner conversation in which the two had been discussing religion),

or that Chinese women were raped during Indonesia's 1998 democratization (later shown to be an Internet fraud). Again, he is so eager to "prove" his point that he does not bother to check if any of this is true, much less an argument against democratization.

At best, Bell's argument rests on claims that Confucian democracy *may* benefit China, not that it is *likely* to. He notes that he is arguing for "as-yet-unrealized alternatives" to liberal democracy. Which brings one back to the question of how to get from here to there. Philosophers often have been agents of authoritarian rule because they share the autocrat's disdain for the wisdom of the common people. That is how dictators have typically justified their liquidation of democratic procedures.

Of course, the big question is whether any of this will wash with the Chinese people. CCP rule now is reliant on a particular set of values that other countries have left behind as their economies have developed. If China's people, once income levels rise to the level needed, begin to demand dignity, participation, and expression, it will be increasingly unlikely that a new CCP leader would stand on the Tiananmen rostrum and declare that "the common people are not presumed to possess the capabilities necessary for substantial political participation" (p. 12).

Bell's book is a pleasure to read because he is so well-read in Confucianism, and he is able to find connections between the Confucian heritage of East Asia and its contemporary political, social, and economic practices. There is little doubt that these continue to influence the region in their modern manifestations. Unfortunately, Bell has seen a little too much difference in East Asia and not enough similarities between its developmental stages and the forms that government and the economy have taken over time. Postindustrial Japan and industrial Taiwan and South Korea have thriving democracies because that is what people have demanded as their values changed from subsistence conditions. They also have expansive human rights and increasingly noninterventionist states because that is what those values demand as well. Every indication is that China is following this well-tread path, but until it passes the democratic milepost, the field will be wide open with speculation about exotic alternative modernities that *may* (to use Bell's favorite word) generate better outcomes than liberal democracy.

Certainly all readers, including those in China, will benefit from reading this book. It is the best single "culturalist" statement against democracy in the case of China. Bell also takes up the many criticisms of his work in a final chapter that provides at least some of the debate the book is likely to arouse.

For a democrat, faith is placed in the people. China, in particular, must have a debate on democracy and be exposed to the best worked-up criticisms of it. Bell provides a valuable argument for this debate. As a democrat, I have faith that China's citizens will soundly reject his proposals.