

Beijing Does Not Want To Rule The World

Why does the West insist on viewing China through a simplistic "democracy vs. autocracy" lens? Is it possible that China's political system is not a failed version of our own, but something fundamentally different—a unique "political meritocracy" with deep historical and cultural roots? To discuss this and more, today I'm talking to Dr. Daniel Bell, a Professor and Chair of Political Theory with the Faculty of Law at the University of Hong Kong. Professor Bell has written many important works on China, including "The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy". The political system of China and popular misconceptions about it in the West is what we want to discuss today. Drawing on his decades of experience living and teaching in China, we explore the nuanced reality of its three-tiered political system, where different methods of selecting leaders—from local elections to meritocratic promotion—are applied at different levels. We also break down profound cultural misunderstandings, such as the true meaning of 'harmony' (diversity) versus 'sameness,' why China lacks the 'missionary impulse' to export its political model, and how the core legitimacy of its government rests on delivering material well-being to its people. Links: Daniel Bell's recent books: <https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B000AQ2HHS/allbooks> Neutrality Studies substack: <https://pascallottaz.substack.com> Goods Store: <https://neutralitystudies-shop.fourthwall.com> Timestamps: 00:00:00 Preview & Introduction 00:01:40 Key Western Misconceptions About China 00:07:49 How China is Governed: A Three-Tiered System 00:14:20 Leadership at the Top: The Politburo & Xi Jinping's Role 00:21:57 The Politics Behind China's Economic Miracle 00:29:20 A Civilizational State: China's Lack of a "Missionary Impulse" 00:33:19 The Challenge of Unity & Listening to Public Opinion 00:41:07 Why "Totalitarian" is the Wrong Word for China

#M3

Whatever language we use, China is a huge state, but one that doesn't have this missionary impulse. Again, maybe it's a Christian tradition, or maybe more recently, you know, democracies have this view that we want to promote our ideals to the rest of the world. China basically has never had this strong missionary impulse. You know, let's first secure order and harmony and minimize material deprivation in our large state. That's going to be the key issue. And then maybe we could think about working with other countries, especially large, powerful countries, to deal with the world's problems. But the idea that China would want to export its political ideals is just pretty foreign to Chinese political traditions.

#M2

Hello, everybody. This is Pascal from Neutrality Studies, and today I'm talking to Dr. Daniel Bell, a professor and chair of political theory with the Faculty of Law at the University of Hong Kong. Professor Bell has written many important works on China, including The China Model, Political

Meritocracy, and The Limits of Democracy. The political system of China and popular misconceptions about it in the West are what we want to discuss today. So, Dr. Bell, welcome.

#M3

Thank you. I look forward to our discussion.

#M2

Me too, because I've wanted to discuss the Chinese political system for a while. You've written several books about it, not just one, and you've been living in China for the better part of almost 30 years, as you told me in our previous short conversation. Can you maybe tell us what the main misconceptions about China are when we think about it from a Western perspective?

#M3

Well, I guess one main misconception is that we tend to—"we" meaning Westerners—tend to divide the world between democratic regimes and authoritarian or autocratic regimes. And democracies are those that select leaders by means of one person, one vote, and all the others are autocratic or authoritarian. So we don't make a fundamental distinction between, for example, family-run dictatorships like in North Korea, military dictatorships like in Burma, or family-run monarchies like in Saudi Arabia, or whatever is happening in China. Now, I think China is a fundamentally different political animal, so to speak. It's a hugely complex bureaucratic system, and however imperfect, it does have mechanisms aiming to select and promote public officials with superior ability and virtue.

So that's why I use the term "political meritocracy" in Chinese, which goes way back in Chinese history, as a way of characterizing the political system. But it's characterizing an ideal, and there's a huge gap between the ideal and the practice, right? Just like when we think of—well, I'm from Canada, but let's think of the US. It's a democracy, but there's a huge gap between the ideal and the practice. It's similar in China. So I would characterize it as a highly imperfect political meritocracy. But we still need to use this sort of language to differentiate China from other systems that don't use elections to select top leaders. That's one common, I think, misunderstanding.

Another one is that when it comes to the dominant ideals of Chinese political culture, the word "harmony" is often bandied about. For example, in the 2008 opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, this character, which is usually translated as "harmony," was displayed as a central part of Chinese culture. But in English, especially in a political context, "harmony" tends to have somewhat sinister connotations because we tend to think of sameness or conformity. But in fact, the Chinese way of thinking about harmony goes way back to this Confucian ideal, where there's a clear differentiation between what we can translate as "diversity in harmony," and sameness or conformity, which is translated as "tong," which in Chinese is tong.

So there's this—one of the most famous sayings from the Analects of Confucius means that exemplary persons pursue diversity and harmony rather than sameness or conformity, whereas petty persons, these xiaoren, do the opposite. So in Chinese, when you immediately think of harmony, you think, first of all, of difference, diversity, and pluralism. The question is, how can we think of that diversity and difference in a way that allows for some sort of reconciliation, or maybe something even better than the sum of the parts, as an ideal? All the metaphors that are used illustrate that. For example, in the case of soup, they say, well, if you just use salt, then that's tong, that's sameness. But if you want harmony, or he, then you need to have many different ingredients put together, blended in a more beautiful way.

Or in music also—actually, in English, when you think of harmony in music, it's the same as in Chinese: we think of different notes put together in a beautiful way. And in politics, it's very explicit in the text. It means that, for example, in a political context, the ruler should listen to the views of diverse advisors, and that's the only way in which you can identify mistakes and allow for progress. It's very, very clear, as opposed to having only one view. So again, some of the problems or misunderstandings are due to mistranslations of these ideals. To go back to this, when I was watching the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, I was watching on NBC, this American television channel, and the announcer was saying, "Wow, look at all these soldiers marching in unison."

That's harmony, right? Obviously, that's kind of sarcastic. But no, that's not harmony—that's tong, that's sameness and uniformity. That's the opposite of this ideal of he. So that's part of it. I mean, sometimes there are issues with translations. For example, shen chuan bu used to be translated as "Ministry of Propaganda," which, as you know, in English sounds absurd. It sounds so negative, right? You immediately think of 1984 and George Orwell. Now they've realized, well, we shouldn't do that. Now it's translated as "Publicity Department." Even "publicity" doesn't sound so great.

You know, do we really think the government should do publicity? That's why I think if these terms were translated as something like "public engagement" or "communication," then at least it would not immediately send the wrong connotations. So some of the misunderstandings are caused by mistranslations, but some of them are, to go back to my original point, caused by these ways that we think of political systems as divided into only two types. One is democracy, which is politically legitimate, and the other is authoritarian, which is negative and fundamentally illegitimate. I do not think that's a helpful way of thinking about the Chinese political system.

#M2

No, it's not a helpful way to think about the world as divided between good and bad, between democracies and autocracies. It's a very, very narrow, simplistic, and ultimately harmful way of dividing the world. You also pointed out that within these different regime types, we actually have—ultimately—about 195 or 200 or so regimes on the global scale. And if we break that down, we have even more variation within them. The interesting thing you did in your book is that you actually

broke up the Chinese political system into at least three ways in which China is governed simultaneously, depending on the level we're talking about. Could you maybe explain that? Because it's highly fascinating.

#M3

Yeah, so when we think of selecting political leaders in the West, we tend to think there's only one mechanism, and that's elections. And it doesn't depend on the size of the country, and it doesn't depend on the level of public administration. So whether it's the tiniest little community or a huge state, you should use one person, one vote as a way of selecting leaders. In retrospect, you know, thinking about it, it's like, why? I mean, it seems so obvious that when it comes, for example, to a local community, the way of selecting leaders—maybe there, people know who the leaders are. They know who's likely to be corrupt. They know who is capable and who's a nice guy. And maybe then it makes sense to use more, let's say, democratic or participatory mechanisms as a way of selecting leaders.

But in a huge country like China, you know, where the top-level political leaders need, first of all, experience at lower levels of government to make informed political decisions at the top, they need to take long-term decisions that affect not just the current group of citizens but also future generations on issues like climate change. And they also need to think about foreign policy—how the policies would affect not just us, but others. And then, frankly, they need to have lots of knowledge in economics, environmental science, how people's psychology works, international relations, history, and philosophy in order to make informed decisions at a very high level. So that's why there are different—and in principle, when you think about it, there should be different—ways of selecting leaders depending on the level of government.

So there are lots of things wrong with China, but at least in China, they recognize that. So when it comes to the local level, for example, in villages, hundreds of millions of Chinese have used elections as a way of selecting their leaders. I mean, that's highly imperfect sometimes. Sometimes it leads to lots of corruption, or sometimes people vote just according to family ties or family names rather than merit or experience. But overall, there's a much more democratic way of selecting leaders at lower levels of government. At the very highest levels, no matter who's there, you know that they're going to have decades of political experience—being heads of provinces, serving sometimes in state-run enterprises, and having diverse experience in different parts of China: poor parts, rich parts, and so on.

So you know that they have experience, and you know that they would have gone through decades of political hoops, so to speak, before they get where they are. Now, of course, things go wrong in practice. It's not necessarily the best who get to the top. But still, there's a recognition that at least you have to have a good record at diverse levels of government, and then somehow high levels of

emotional intelligence, because when it comes to making decisions, it's not just you—it's collective leadership. Of course, that's been somewhat tempered at the top, but it's still there. But basically, you have to make decisions and you have to persuade diverse stakeholders.

And for that, it requires a high level not just of IQ, but of EQ. And of course, ideally, you want somebody who is not corrupt, who is not going to misuse public resources for family or private purposes. So at the very top, at least in principle, there should be much more meritocratic mechanisms—a way of selecting leaders. I mean, it's not completely foreign to the West. In the West, we tend to divide: when it comes to government, we think you use elections to select those who hold political power, and then we use meritocratic selection mechanisms, such as examinations, to select civil servants who are there to implement the decisions of elected leaders. In China, there's no such distinction; it's almost completely abolished.

No matter what the level of government, you tend to have ways—well, again, except for the very lowest levels, where sometimes you have elections—but other than that, no matter what kind of public official you are, you have to be meritocratically chosen. Now, the question is, what mechanisms do we use to select and promote leaders? Well, that varies with the times, but it also varies at the level of government. That's why at the mid-levels of government now, you have all these experiments going on. Like, what should be the way of promoting officials? Should we use economic growth as a metric? That was used for most of the last 30 years, because that was the basic consensus in the Chinese political system: what we should do, our main obligation, is poverty reduction.

The best means of doing that is economic growth. But now we know that economic growth has all these terrible consequences: environmental damage, a huge gap between rich and poor. So how do we select leaders, then? Well, that's where you have all this experimentation going on, especially at the mid-levels of government. Some places use environmental sustainability as a metric. Others still continue to use economic growth. Others use poverty reduction. Others use innovation. So at the mid-levels of government, you have all these experiments about how to select and promote public officials. And again, we don't exactly know what works. But in a huge country like China, you can do this kind of experimentation. That said, there's been less experimentation in the past few years, which is not a good sign.

#M2

But it's quite interesting, right? Because these political systems are not just systems because they have leader X, but they are systems because they produce leaders like X, right? And they constantly also operate on themselves. And actually, you can clearly observe change over time. And when we talk about, let's say, one of the democracies in the world that constantly touts itself as the model example—the United States—we can see how, at the top level, it's not really an open election, right? It's an election between basically two people who have been preselected within their parties.

The last election, with what happened between Biden and Harris, was presented as a standard example of democracy—of open and fair elections. Yeah, sure, open and fair until the party elites and moneyed elites want to intervene. Now, when we look at China, how do the most powerful political decision-making bodies—let's say the Politburo—how does the theory behind who should get in there work? And let's keep it apart, at least, from the realities, since realities are messier because power politics will always play a role. But in theory, it should be a long process of promotion all the way to the top, right?

#M3

Yeah, exactly. So it should be decades of serving at different levels of government, and also in poor provinces and rich provinces, and sometimes serving in state-run enterprises. So the leaders are expected to have a good record of performance at different levels of government and in diverse kinds of provinces, and sometimes in both the public and semi-public/private sectors. That's the ideal. And ideally, you would have, at this Standing Committee—which now is seven people—you would have diversity as well in terms of outlooks and perspectives, and then there would be some form of collective deliberation, and they would come to some sort of consensus about what is the appropriate policy. Now, the problem is we don't actually know what they deliberate about, so it's hard to assess. I mean, my intuition is that one of the other misunderstandings of China is that people tend to think it's a one-person dictatorship.

I still think there's a collective form of leadership at the top. Of course, there's one leader who has more power than the others, but whether that leader could have his way against the views of the others—I think that's highly improbable. So I do think there's still some form of collective leadership with deliberation at the top. But again, it's hard to be fully confident about that view because we don't really know what goes on.

#M2

Right. It's hard to know. I had this question on my mind for a long time. One of the larger changes in the system was that four years ago, the constitution was changed to allow the top leader, the president, and so on, to serve in this capacity indefinitely. It used to be two terms, which used to mean you have basically four years in office and then four years to train the next guy, right? Because of that handover. How did you interpret that change? Because to me, that made the system actually a little bit more brittle, because it becomes more dependent on an individual.

#M3

Yeah, so I guess people were surprised when it happened. I think there are various issues that may have motivated it. Again, this is speculation because nobody really knows. One is that the anti-corruption campaign, which is so central at the moment, generated a lot of political enemies. Because remember, for each public official who's implicated in the anti-corruption campaign, those

under him or her also see their chances of promotion downgraded. So to maintain continuity, I guess there was a need to have a longer term. On some issues like climate change and so on, there's also a need for a longer perspective.

But again, I'm not as pessimistic as others. I mean, on the one hand, it does send somewhat worrisome messages about unclear succession mechanisms. But on the other hand, it's still collective leadership. If something were to happen to the number one guy, the next, number two, would come from the others on the standing committee of the Politburo. So it's not—it wouldn't lead to huge instability, I think, even if something happened to the number one. Even if, for whatever reason, there was a need for a new leader.

#M2

Yeah, I mean, Xi Jinping is now in his mid-70s. At some point, every leadership comes to an end, right? And then the question is, what does the system produce next? My view is that it doesn't really matter that much who the leader is.

#M3

Before Xi—let's just call him President Xi—assumed power in 2012, what were the priorities at that time? One was that something had to be done about corruption because, again, this goes back to what kind of political system China has. In a system that is supposed to be a political meritocracy, the leaders derive their legitimacy first and foremost by being viewed as serving the public. Because what does it mean to be virtuous? It means you're committed to serving the public as opposed to serving your own private interests, right? So there was massive corruption in the political system, and it did affect—it did pose—I hate this word because it's used all the time in different contexts, but I'm going to use it anyway—it posed an existential threat to the political system. It's not just me who says that.

The leaders recognize that. So there was a need to deal with corruption, okay? No matter who was there. Two, there was a huge gap between rich and poor. Again, there was a need to deal with that, and it's still an ongoing effort. And a third was environmental catastrophe. China has done a pretty brilliant job compared to other large countries at dealing with climate change and green energy. It's very much at the top of the field. No matter who was there, these would have been the priorities. No matter who's going to be the leader in the foreseeable future, it's still pretty much going to be the priorities. Maybe the corruption campaign will wind down eventually—I think that's my own view—because it generates, again, studies show, it has a byproduct of making public officials quite conservative and keeping their heads down.

And part of what—one of the secret, again, I don't like this language, but "magic sauces"—of the Chinese political system is that you had these really talented public officials who were willing to take risks and try new things. But now there's less of that because people are afraid of standing out and

being implicated in the anti-corruption drive, which is not good for China's political system, I think. So maybe if there's a different leader—I don't know, again, this is speculation—my overall view is that the anti-corruption campaign might not be so central going into the future. But the poverty reduction, reducing the gap between rich and poor, emphasis on innovation and environmental sustainability, and also the revival of traditional culture in order to make people proud of who they are—that's all going to happen no matter who's the next leader.

#M2

Right. And we've seen how this system has produced, really over the last 30 years, unprecedented prosperity. I mean, half a billion people or more lifted out of poverty into the middle class. I mean, this is an achievement that is—again, China is second to none in this regard. How do you think the system itself produced this outcome, if we still make this differentiation between the political side and the economic side?

#M3

Yeah, well, there are two schools of thought here. One is that all the government has to do is get out of the way, which is Deng Xiaoping's great contribution. He just said, let's let the Chinese people, who are naturally entrepreneurial and hardworking, go ahead and make money and so on. And that was the key, the ultimate key. But the other school of thought says, well, hold on a second—the government has to have certain policies in place that allow for people's creative energies to flourish, and it has to have certain land policies. I mean, starting from the late 1970s, it wasn't just private land ownership.

In fact, it was going back to the kind of very traditional way of thinking about land, where people could farm their land and sell some of their goods on the market, but also part of it would be given to the public for the non-farming classes. You still had this mixture of private and public land. And you had to have government officials who were supportive too. So again, they were promoted on the basis of economic growth, because that was viewed as key for poverty reduction. You also had to allow for investment from abroad, and for that, you need a certain amount of political stability. Now, here I'm going to say something.

And, you know, of course, part of that was joining the WTO, which helped a lot and encouraged investments. And Chinese public officials went abroad and tried to learn from best practices. Again, there's less of that now. But here I'm going to say something a bit controversial. Even things like the hukou system—which basically means that if you were born in a rural area, you couldn't move to cities and have equal rights in cities—now, on the face of it, is open discrimination against people who are born in rural areas. But it did have the effect that people in rural areas at least would have their plot of land guaranteed.

So no more, you know, as long as they could sell their goods and so on. At least you would have less malnutrition, obviously, and less famine. But it also meant that the cities weren't flooded by poor migrants from the countryside—no shanty towns—which provided a certain order and stability. Investors could come in fairly confident that there wasn't going to be crime and disorder, which also allowed for economic development. Now, the hukou system, because it's so fundamentally unfair, was not meant to be a long-term, permanent thing. And luckily, it's breaking down now, except maybe for Shanghai, two big cities, and Beijing.

For most Chinese cities now, they no longer discriminate against rural migrants. But again, you need to have these policies in place to allow for poverty reduction to this extent in a large country like China. There's still a long way to go. I mean, there's still, you know—who knows—200 million or maybe more very poor people in China. But now public officials are being rewarded. In more recent years, while there have been substantial achievements in poverty reduction, public officials are explicitly rewarded according to how well they succeed in their districts at reducing extreme poverty. And that has succeeded to a certain extent.

#M2

You know, one of the things that fascinates me is that this kind of discourse that I'm hearing from you, I hear from several China experts and Chinese scholars as well: that the whole system is built in a way that the betterment of the general economic and social welfare of people is at the heart of what needs to be delivered. If I compare that with the discourse in Europe and the United States, it's all about where can we cut what kind of costs in order to implement policies that are currently deemed necessary. So if currently the policy is we need to fight Russia, then how do we cut social expenditures in order to finance that? I mean, the idea that it is the inherent obligation of the government to increase the standard of living is kind of—not gone—but it's far removed. There's a different way of reasoning about this. Would you say that the Chinese system overall still has very much that core of "we must deliver for the people" as part of how it works?

#M3

That's fundamental. I mean, again, the legitimacy of the political system doesn't come from the direct consent of the people as expressed in elections. It comes from the faith that people have in public officials having superior ability and virtue. And what does that mean? That they can make informed policies that serve the public. So if that doesn't work, then the whole system breaks down. Again, this idea goes way back in Chinese history. China was the first country, literally, where it was felt that the government had an obligation to deal with poverty. In the West, it's actually quite a recent thing—maybe three or four hundred years.

Before that, you had, for example, in Aristotle, the idea that you had to reduce tension between classes because of political instability. But the idea that the government had a direct obligation to

alleviate poverty and to help those who, for example, lack family members to support them—like orphans, widows, and widowers—goes way back in Chinese history, more than 2,000 years. So this has been quite a constant theme in Chinese history. And also in the Confucian discourse—again, Confucianism is not the only tradition in China, but it's the main, most influential political tradition.

There's been this idea that first you provide people with the basic material goods, and then you can educate them and improve them morally. Nothing's going to work if people are struggling for basic necessities. It's very hard, except for maybe a few brilliant sages. But for the rest of us, if you're struggling for basic goods, you're going to be selfish, potentially criminal. So the government's first obligation is to deal with material deprivation. And then we can think of other things. That goes way back in Chinese history. And I think it's also why the socialist tradition ultimately triumphed, because it echoed these much older ideals and practices in Chinese political history.

#M2

Do you—some people now have a debate about how the new multipolar world is going to work, and China is, you know, the standard example of a civilizational state. Some people now use this framework of civilizational state systems, right? That it's wrong to think they're just deviations from the Western liberal democratic system, but that they've grown through thousands of years; hence, we should look at them as outcomes of that civilizational process. To what extent do you think that the *longue durée* of history impacts systems? What are the main things to understand about China, if you subscribe to that view of political systems?

#M3

Yeah, well, I think to a certain extent, I mean, whatever language we use, China is a huge state, but one that doesn't have this missionary impulse. Again, maybe it's a Christian tradition, or maybe more recently, you know, democrats have this view that we want to promote our ideals to the rest of the world. China basically has never had this strong missionary impulse. Let's first secure order and harmony and minimize material deprivation in our large state. That's going to be the key issue. And then maybe we can think about working with other countries, especially large, powerful countries, to deal with the world's problems.

But the idea that China would want to export its political ideals is just pretty foreign to Chinese political traditions. And so I think that's a fundamental difference with the West, where—I mean, I'm from Canada—I had the same view, you know, that there's only one legitimate way of selecting leaders, and that's democratic elections, even though it's a fairly recent view. But this deeper missionary impulse, I think, is much more deeply embedded in Western culture and history. There isn't that in China. I think it's important to understand that.

#M2

It's often portrayed that way, though, especially in this "China threat" literature—like, "Oh, China will come and make us Chinese."

#M3

Yeah, well, that's why I think it's important to look at what the leaders say and what's being taught in schools. There's a very good study recently by David Kong and others, summarized in a recent article in Foreign Affairs. It shows—well, let's look at what the discourse is and also what's being taught in schools. And none of it is about wanting to replace the U.S. as the dominant global hegemon. You know, it's saying, let's secure our borders, including Taiwan, and try to do well within that area, and maybe collaborate with other interested parties in the rest of the world on issues like climate change. But the idea that China would want to be a global hegemon in the way that the U.S. is now? I mean, nobody says that. Why would they think it if the leaders don't say it and if it's not what's being taught in schools? It's a complete imaginary fabrication by people who are hostile and don't understand China.

#M2

No, no, I agree with you. And I'm sorry that we are drifting towards the international relations part, but also, one of the flaws with the analysis of John Mearsheimer—who I highly respect and who I think is a brilliant analyst—is that it assumes every great power will naturally react the way the great powers in Europe used to act toward each other. So the open question is, will it? I mean, will China necessarily, by virtue of its size, act like everybody else?

#M3

Yeah, I agree. I mean, I have great respect for him as well, but I think that history and culture matter. And when it comes to thinking about how great powers will act, they're not all just machines who operate according to the same principles. Yeah.

#M2

Maybe let's talk a little bit about the setup of China, because it is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-lingual state. I mean, it is so extremely diverse, in addition to its sheer size, right? To keep this together must be a constant struggle and extremely difficult. And we see how even, you know, it took China a long time—a very long time—both Chinas, by the way, both the one in Taipei and the one in Beijing, a long time to even just accept that Mongolia, Outer Mongolia, is not part of China. But the rest was kept together. Now, how large is that threat to China as it stands today? Because the history of the Eurasian continent is also a history of large states falling apart. Is that there?

#M3

I mean, is that... And this is where political culture matters too. I mean, if you look at the Warring States period before China was unified, you had diverse schools of thought. It was called the Hundred Schools of Thought, whether it was Confucianism, Legalism, Mohism, Daoism, and others. But they all shared the same ideal: that the ultimate goal is a large country, one large political community that's unified. Now, the Confucians said that within that, we should have much more diversity. The Legalists said, no, we want order and almost a kind of totalitarian rule where everybody thinks and acts the same way, without room for dissent. So you had different views, but they agreed on this idea that the ideal is a huge, unified political community.

So even when China has fallen apart, so to speak, there's always been this drive to reunify. And then, more recently, in the 1920s and 30s, when China was broken up and almost in civil war, with different warlords and different foreign powers occupying different parts of China, it's a horrible memory. So I don't think—so there's a serious worry about China breaking up. The only major issue, of course, is Taiwan. And if foreign powers, especially the U.S., allow Taiwan to promote its kind of independence view that some people hold, well, that would be, frankly, a disaster that could lead to war because of these memories of China breaking up. And they're afraid that if Taiwan goes, well, other things could happen too. So that's the one worry. But other than that, I don't think there's a major threat or worry that China would break up.

But the real question is—or not the real, but another important question—is, within this unified community, how much diversity should we allow? And again, this tension goes way back in Chinese history, as I alluded to earlier, where the Confucians would favor a much more diverse and pluralistic view, whereas those who are more influenced by the Legalist tradition, Fajia, favor much more sameness and uniformity. And maybe now we're moving towards a more Legalist phase, which is, to my mind, not as desirable since I'm more committed to Confucian ethics. But I don't expect it to last forever, because intellectuals generally—you know, there are tens or maybe hundreds of millions in China—tend to prefer a much more open and diverse environment. Yeah.

#M2

We do see moments in which the general public expresses views. Maybe that's another question: how does this information go up and down? One of the things that surprised me the most in the last five years is that really the only country on earth where mass protests changed COVID policies was China. Mass protest—even violent—and then overnight, within three days, policies changed. I haven't seen that in Western Europe or North America, or anywhere else, but in China it did. So at some level, the top leadership does actually listen to what's happening on the ground.

#M3

Yeah, so on social media, there's tons of criticism, some of which is open and some of which is more veiled. Sometimes people exchange things on WeChat and then it gets shut down, but then you open another account and it continues. So there's a lot in private meetings among intellectuals—I

mean, it's very, very open criticism, usually, especially if they trust you. But of course, I served as dean at Shandong University for five years, and I very much enjoyed it and have great respect for the other leaders.

But the overall trend of increased academic censorship, and also increased censorship more generally, does weigh on intellectuals, and that's not very healthy for the long term. I don't expect it to continue. But you have to ask, why is that going on? I think, again, one reason is, as mentioned, the anti-corruption campaign, which makes the leaders more paranoid because there are more political enemies in the system. But it's also the pressure that's put on China by external powers, especially the US. The US seems to be all bent on curbing China's rise and not allowing China to flourish.

So naturally, some of the leaders in China look at all the military bases around and there's a sense of encirclement, which again increases the levels of paranoia and maybe strengthens the security people in the Chinese government who might have less power otherwise. So that's another reason why there are these unhealthy trends. If we were to be a bit more optimistic in the future on this openness issue, it would require less effort by the U.S. to curb China's rise and more willingness to collaborate on global issues like climate change, regulation of nuclear weapons, regulation of AI, pandemics, and so on. But also, frankly, a winding down of the anti-corruption campaign.

#M2

Yeah. I mean, the pressure on China is quite large. But on the other hand, we do now have a flourishing of Chinese interactions with other states, especially with Russia. And we recently saw the Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting. How do you evaluate these increased relationships with non-Western powers, and also China's position within the BRICS?

#M3

Well, if the U.S. and other Western powers treat China as an enemy and seem to favor China's decline, then naturally the Chinese leaders will try to establish good relations with other states. Whether they're doing it in the most desirable way—we can argue about that—but it's not surprising at all that China, especially with the Global South, would want to establish better relations and promote more trade and exchange. I mean, again, when I was dean at Shandong University, we had a lot of foreign students—almost all were from countries that China has good relations with in the Global South. The Chinese government would sometimes give scholarships for those students to come here as a way of promoting better long-term relations with countries from the Global South. So that's not surprising in any way. And it's a good thing, yeah.

#M2

I agree. Any form of this kind of interaction is good, especially on the people-to-people level, which also seems to be something that China is very interested in promoting—and actually, the Russians as well. Maybe as a last thing to consider: when you hear the word "totalitarian" being used about China, what's the appropriate way to understand how China governs itself?

#M3

Yeah, well, I guess it depends on what we mean by that. But if the same word is used to characterize China's political system now, and during the Cultural Revolution, and in the '50s and '60s when it was led by Chairman Mao, I mean... Of course, there's the same political organization and power, but it's a completely different animal, right? I mean, now it's a much more bureaucratic, meritocratic system. And again, to my mind, it doesn't really matter that much who the leaders are at the top. And there's a lot of room for criticism and for people to travel abroad.

I mean, it's not like North Korea, right? People are actually quite well-informed. If you look at social media, like WeChat, whenever there's an international event, there's immediately a discussion on WeChat where different sides argue with each other. And of course, at least in 2019—the last time I saw the numbers—there were over a hundred million Chinese tourists going abroad. I'm in Hong Kong now, where there are no restrictions on the internet. So the idea that China is totalitarian—I don't think we should use the same word to describe China's political system.

And if totalitarianism means a country where the government controls, or aims to control, every aspect of people's thoughts and actions, maybe that's a kind of older legalist ideal. But I don't think that's what they want to do anyway. And even if that is what they want to do, that's not what's happening—I can assure you. So, I mean, we need to use different language to think of China now versus China in the 1970s, or, for example, China now and North Korea now. And if the word "totalitarian" is used to describe all those situations, then there's something fundamentally missing in this discourse. Yeah.

#M2

No, I think that discourse is relatively flat, especially the one in Western media about what China is and how it works. But yeah, I'm very glad that there are also good Western experts who are taking a very close look at it, and like you, being in China for the last 30 years and also trying to report. Not that we cannot read and also engage with Chinese scholars—that's the other thing, right? Maybe one last thing, since you also speak Chinese fluently: are there issues about how China works politically that are also tightly connected to language? Like concepts—and you alluded to this at the beginning with "harmony"—that are just hard to grasp if your native tongue is a Latin-based one?

#M3

I don't think there's a fundamental problem, but I do think that once you have these mistranslations in place that send the wrong connotations, they're very, very hard to change. So once you have the appropriate translations that are explained in detail, I don't think there's a kind of conceptual problem, I mean, in terms of communicating the message. But why people are not receptive to it—I don't think it's ultimately because of language issues. It's just that it's very hard to challenge this view of looking at the world. For example, there's the idea that there are good democracies and bad authoritarian regimes, and that's it. That's how I thought, and it's very... I mean, I myself thought that, you know, for like 30 or 40 years. So it's very, very hard to change these ways of thinking about the world. But I don't think it's because of the language per se; it's just because of the political values that are deeply embedded in our culture. I agree.

#M2

I agree with that. It's more of a problem of the onlooker than of how it works. Well, Dr. Bell, people would like to read more from you. There are, of course, your books where they can find your analysis. Are there also places where you occasionally publish essays and so on?

#M3

Well, thanks for asking. I think the most important thing is to look at the books, because some of these ideas need to be expressed in a detailed and systematic way. I do publish essays and articles and so on, but when I look at some of the stuff that I wrote 10 or 20 years ago, it already seems out of date—even my books, frankly. But anyway, yeah, sorry.

#M2

But in that case, I will put the links to a couple of your recent books in the description of this video below. And we will talk again when the opportunity arises. Dr. Daniel Bell, thank you very much for your time today.

#M3

Thank you very much for hosting. I enjoyed our discussion.