Do hierarchies lead to a stronger society?

Drawing on China and Confucian culture, two books make the case against political equality via top-down rule and meritocracy

President Xi Jinping meets senior officers stationed in Kunming, capital of China's Yunnan province, in January this year © Xinhua News Agency/Eyevine

Rana Mitter JANUARY 23 2020

A century ago, Zou Taofen was one of the most widely read journalists in China. "Not every person's natural intelligence or strength is equal," he wrote in 1927. "But if each person develops his mind toward service and morality . . . then he can be regarded as equal. That is real equality."

Zou's observation captured the contradiction in early 20th-century China between the desire to become modern by instituting ideas of equal, individual rights shaped by western influence, and the longing to look to the traditional ideas of ethical behaviour drawn from thinkers such as Confucius that valued good moral conduct over egalitarianism.

Now, in the early 21st century, in a China run by the world's most influential communist party, that debate is making a return. Daniel Bell and Pei Wang's *Just Hierarchy* and Tongdong Bai's *Against Political Equality* make a case increasingly heard today in China: that instead of making a fetish of equal democratic participation, countries might do better by stressing that some hierarchies can help strengthen and stabilise society. It's a view that would make Mao Zedong, who advocated permanent revolution to break down hierarchy, turn in his mausoleum.

But does it work better under the rule of Xi Jinping? Both books draw heavily on Chinese traditional philosophy, as well as citing examples from today's China. However, they also argue that the principle they share — that equality is not necessarily an appropriate goal, and that hierarchies can serve a real purpose in fields from social relations to diplomacy — could be a powerful new influence on liberal societies too.

Bell and Wang are political scientists, the former one of the best-known western advocates of the idea that "meritocracy", as seen within the Chinese Communist party (CCP) in its ideal form, can be superior to electoral democracy. Some of the most impressive parts of their book, which is written in the form of a lively conversation with plenty of provocative examples, compel the reader to understand the cultural value of hierarchy in Asian societies.
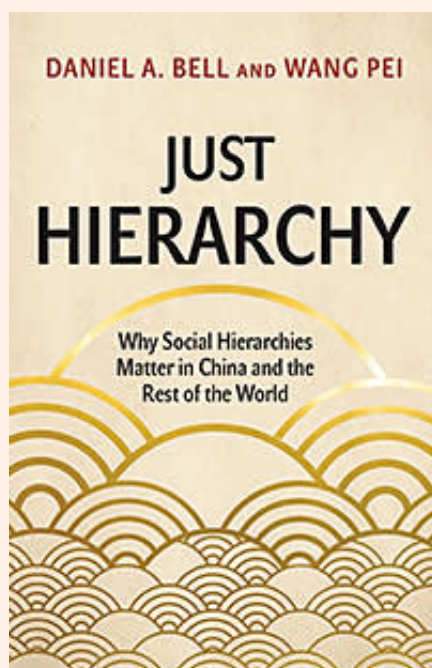
Arguing for a need for a clear definition of the hierarchy between humans and machines, they suggest that Confucian thought should be used to reshape the ethical basis for artificial intelligence (AI). Writing about the development of driverless cars, they point out that many of the Silicon Valley assumptions about AI being able to "read" a car owner's preferences simply extrapolate the current American assumption that the norm is individual automobile ownership. Chinese or Japanese drivers may be more accepting of collective ownership, and cars may be programmed in "Confucian" ways to emphasise lower speeds to allow traffic to flow constantly, creating a state-defined hierarchy where safety trumps individual desires to zoom to the edge of the speed limit.

Whether you agree or not (and anyone who has seen rush-hour drivers in Shanghai might doubt just how Confucian they are), Bell and Wang have identified a key issue: ethical use of AI, like all other types of ethics, will have to be culturally inflected in other societies by norms that may be very different from those of the US. This is an important debate that is only in its early stages.

Their arguments about China's political system are more controversial. They do not defend the system in its entirety, arguing strongly that "democracy is necessary to save political meritocracy in China", and pointing out that "repression can work in the short term but there must be more deliberation and participation in the long term". Nothing there that any liberal would dispute.

However, they add an important caveat to their definition of democracy: "competitive elections at the top would wreck the advantages of the meritocratic system". Therefore, the system would have to become democratic without drawing on elections for the top party leaders.

This idea does actually have precedents in Chinese history. Mao Zedong was very keen on encouraging popular participation through the tactic of the "mass line". Party cadres would ask citizens what they thought about policy issues and relay their views back to the top leadership, who would debate them and then send down the final "line" against which there was no further comeback. Ordinary Chinese did not get to choose their leaders, but (in theory) they were able to feed their views into the party through regular consultation and thereby affect policy.

Yet to make this work, other systems of checks and balances are needed. Bell and Wang also argue against a fully transparent selection process for CCP officials. They make a comparison with academia, pointing out that universities appoint professors without public declaration of who all the candidates are, to spare the blushes of those who are not chosen. "We should just accept that lack of transparency is an inevitable cost of any organisation that aims to select the best candidates," they conclude.

But this is not how academic selection in the liberal world operates. Most of the candidates are known to the community they are hoping to be hired by; it is now commonplace that students and other potential colleagues listen to and comment on the candidates. One good reason for this is the old system had a way of finding that the "best" candidates were, almost invariably, male.
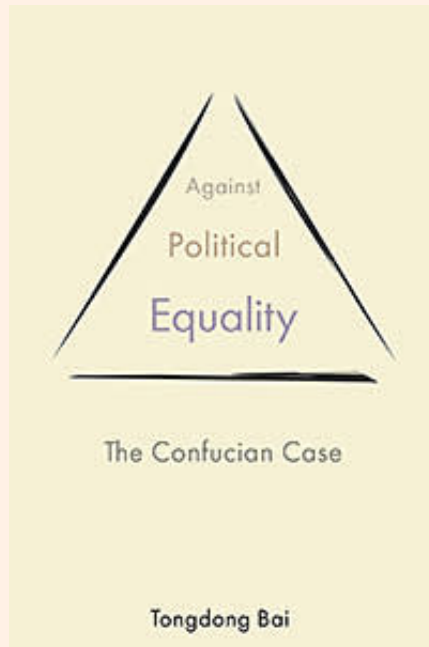
> **We cannot assume that an egalitarian viewpoint based on individual rights is necessarily the right one for all societies**

Bell and Wang point out that there are other hierarchical, meritocratic organisations that lack transparency, such as Goldman Sachs or the Catholic Church. Again, these are entities not noted for gender diversity. Bell and Wang do grant that there is a "gap" between the rhetoric and reality of gender equality. But the lack of women in senior roles in the CCP shows something more complex than a gap; it brings into question the whole idea of "merit" and "the best" as a socially constructed term, since the winners are overwhelmingly Han Chinese and male. Of course, liberal societies also have gender prejudice. But if Bell and Wang's case is that meritocracy needs neither democratic choice of top leaders nor transparency of selection of bureaucrats, it has to be held to a higher standard to show that the results are genuinely the "best" choice possible. In an organisation like the CCP that claims to be representative but does not tolerate openness, it is not enough "just [to] accept" its lack of diversity.

There is a danger at times that the book sets up unlikely scenarios that are designed to show the Chinese system in the best light. Their final chapter imagines a world where Google has invented a malign form of AI that threatens to take over the world. In such a world, where China will have done much more to create a hierarchy of human control over AI than a lackadaisical US, "for the sake of humanity we need to pray for the victory of the CCP". Yet in practice there are plenty of other actors who could step in to curb American excesses, notably the EU, which has proved one of the most successful global forces in reining in the power of US tech companies.

More importantly, the use of an extreme scenario skates over real ethical dilemmas that come from the top-down hierarchy that untrammelled party power has created in China — and which is enabled by AI. In China itself, there is growing public unease about the way that the "social credit" system allows a cyberstate to scoop up huge amounts of data on its citizens with no independent checks. That may be a more immediate concern than a possible future war of the cyberworlds.

Still, Bell and Wang have identified an important point: we can't assume that an egalitarian viewpoint based on a liberal conception of individual rights is necessarily the right one for all societies at all times. What idea should take its place? The distinguished Chinese philosopher Tongdong Bai's book is an answer to that question. His title, *Against Political Equality*, sounds like an echo of Bell and Wang's case for hierarchy — but in fact the book is clear that it does not seek to destroy liberalism but to redefine it. "Though critical of many aspects of liberal democracy," he argues, "it is the democratic . . . parts that cause the problems . . . while the liberal part should be defended."

Much of the book is a sophisticated reading of classical Chinese texts, primarily Confucius and his follower Mencius, informed by important western thinkers on equality such as John Rawls. Yet its basic argument is quite simple. Too much concentration on "one person, one vote" can lead to illiberal democratisation. Instead, liberalism "in the form of rule of law and the protections of liberties and rights" should be the priority. He mordantly points out the nervousness that this causes in the current Chinese political system, where the term "democracy" is not always censored by the CCP, whereas "constitutionalism" and "judicial independence" usually are. Bai draws instead on a Confucian idea of "humaneness" as an ethical core that could create this social contract that is less democratic but more liberal in practice.

Today, China endorses "Xi Jinping thought", which is explicit about its desire to stress social stability over what it regards as a dangerous individualism. While there is no sense that these books are officially authorised, they do provide an insightful guide to a mode of thinking becoming ever stronger in a China that has turned strongly against liberalism. Regardless of whether you agree with it — and especially if you don't — it is important to understand China's case against participative political equality. Both of my copies of these books are covered in Post-it notes, a sure sign that they are powerful and lively contributions to a major debate that has a long way to go.

Just Hierarchy: Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World, by Daniel Bell and Pei Wang, *Princeton University Press, RRP$29.95 / £25, 288 pages*

Against Political Equality: The Confucian Case, by Tongdong Bai, *Princeton University Press, RRP$39.95 / £34, 344 pages*

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