# An Insider's Look at China's Outside Reality: On Daniel Bell's "The Dean of Shandong"

RELATIONS BETWEEN China and the United States have been deteriorating for a few years now. While the emphasis in mutual criticisms is often on large issues, such as political institutions, territorial boundaries, and human rights, we should take a more nuanced perspective, in which we should include small things as well. Sometimes big differences can be meaningfully engaged with, or even dissolved, when our small similarities are noticed, and more mundane issues appreciated. Enter Daniel Bell's new book, *The Dean of Shandong: Confessions of a Minor Bureaucrat at a Chinese University*. The book's major strength lies precisely in bringing alive some of the larger and more difficult-to-understand aspects of the Chinese world even as Bell addresses what it means to work as a "minor bureaucrat" in the country's university system.

Daniel Bell served for five years as the dean of the School of Political Science and Public Administration at Shandong University. A Canadian by birth, he has spent nearly his entire professional career in Asia: Singapore, Hong Kong, mainland China, and now Hong Kong again. In addition to having a unique professional profile, Bell is a noted public intellectual. For years, he has written for popular news outlets aimed at providing constructive perspectives on China, alongside the requisite scholarly papers and books, which have gained him an esteemed academic reputation as a political philosopher.

*The Dean of Shandong* wonderfully weaves together Bell's deep knowledge of Chinese thought, political institutions, and everyday life in an extremely accessible style. And while he does an excellent job at

discussing some of the more mundane aspects of China, we may wonder if, in his jocular manner, some of the seriousness with which we should consider these issues is not lost.

The initial chapter of Bell's book contains his very first confession, one of many to come: he admits to having dyed his hair black for many years. A somewhat silly way to begin a book that should address more serious matters, you may think. Hair dye in China *is*, however, a serious matter. Politicians dying their hair black is neither about being attractive nor looking younger. As Bell explains, nearly all Chinese officials (including professors) dye their hair, and this has been going on for nearly 2,000

years. Black hair is a sign of vigor and health; it indicates an individual's ability to continue working hard and serving the people. So much so that when an official no longer dyes their hair, when white hairs are prominently shown, this can signal a request to be done with public office, or a plea for mercy when criminally charged.

Here Bell demonstrates two rather important facets of Chinese culture, often underestimated by those living in non-Asian societies: appearance matters, and it matters, as many things do here, in a socially determined context, not an individualized one. Keeping up a certain appearance, or what is more commonly known as "face," is important for maintaining the social fabric. A well-functioning community can rely just as heavily on a polished exterior as a robust interior. To go back to our initial example, officials with white hair might look aged and tired, so they dye their hair black to assure others that they are up to their duties. Personal vanity has nothing to do with the practice, it is entirely about the glue that holds the social whole together.

A good grasp of this issue helps explain many perplexing practices in China. Censorship, for example. As Bell relates, when it comes to teaching, there is actually not much one cannot say. There is almost no comparison with the United States. When I teach in the US, I am constantly walking on eggshells; often I don't even know what the latest sensitive issues are, much less what I should say about them. In my Chinese classroom, in contrast, I say whatever I want. Where we do, however, see much censorship in China is in the media and in the publications covering politics. Bell outlines these issues, and does not hold back in criticizing the state's influence in news, online blogs, and the like.

When it comes to publishing books on political issues in China, Bell has more experience than most, and what he says can be surprising. Censorship of his own work in China has often been about suggestions he makes for renaming certain government branches or policies. For example, Bell recommended that the Xuanchuanbu, which is officially translated in English as "Propaganda Department" (and which has recently been renamed the "Publicity Department"), be referred to as the "Department of Communication" or "Department of Public Engagement." Such proposals are nearly all censored by the Chinese government. This may seem strange. After all, they are made by a native speaker with only good intentions. Yet when we reflect back on hair dye, we glean a coherent line of thinking. Appearance is important, and the most important thing about it is that it holds the society together. If a government cannot even name its own departments properly, how could

it ever run them?

Another example is tackling climate change. As with other pressing issues, including human rights or territorial claims in the South China Sea, appearance and its impact on social stability is a large part of the core thought process. The Chinese Communist Party cannot be seen as easily folding to, or even being advised by, foreign powers. To do so would mean "losing face." So, while Western politicians might pride themselves on (the appearance of) cooperation, which demonstrates a move away from purely (selfish) nationalistic intentions, the Chinese approach differs. Xi Jinping asserts his political legitimacy by saying that China will develop its own plan, and not allowing other nations to impose, or even suggest, their measures. Regardless of what exactly it means for China to follow its own path, or how much foreign influence will be involved, the appearance of China handling its own affairs in a Chinese way remains paramount. It is the black hair of the government.

Delving into central aspects of Chinese academia, Bell balances a nod to the importance of appearance with pointed criticisms. For instance, he describes the role of the "party secretary" assigned to each department. This person directly represents the Chinese Communist Party, and on certain issues holds far more power than the dean. Indeed, they have so much influence that they have to be moved to a different department every five years so as to avoid favoritism. Bell paints an animated picture of what these people do, but does come down rather sharply on some of their ideological duties.

Elsewhere, he looks at how the Chinese universities, like much of the Chinese government, are quite democratic on many levels. Contrary to what some might believe, there is a good deal of meaningful voting in China—and this is based more heavily on merit than in many Western versions. However, in China, a vote is not always binding. When deciding on whom to hire or make a dean, all professors in the department vote, but only a few at the top actually decide. The results of the vote are taken into consideration, and often followed, but not always and not necessarily.

As a dean in a Chinese university in Shanghai myself, I have two critiques to level against *The Dean of Shandong*. First, the elaborate "reimbursement (報銷)" system in China, which is especially prominent in universities but can be found in many walks of life, is never discussed in Bell's book. Reimbursement in China is a hyperbureaucratic process that produces strange, almost Orwellian feelings, often leaving one feeling extremely confused and frustrated. For example, a research grant for

writing a series of scholarly articles or translating a book will be given as money that needs to be reimbursed. To get the grant money, one needs to provide receipts—some real, some fake—for anything from taxi rides and plane tickets to office supplies and conference fees. The system is clearly problematic as there is no clear correlation between the months I spend translating a book and the receipts for four laptops and 10 copies of a biography of Einstein that I use to get my grant money. There is much to be said about this system, and Bell would have been in a position to provide an insightful and entertaining discussion.

A more serious critique is that, in his book, Bell leaves out the darker side of China. When he speaks of hardworking party secretaries, elaborate dinner arrangements, and drinking rituals, he focuses on how well they function, how people identify with their roles and enjoy participating in their duties. This is all Confucianism and yang-based. But there is also the darker, "Daoist" and yin-based side (the "darkness" of corruption notwithstanding). This darker side is often not well appreciated, even though without it, the Confucian-yang part could not exist. For example, most party secretaries dream of acquiring better academic reputations—many hold PhDs in philosophy—and nearly all of them hope to advance in government (nearly every official starts by holding one of these posts, and is gradually promoted). For those who fail in these aspirations, the work of a party secretary is usually less than fulfilling; they can neither pursue their own academic research nor advance beyond a low-level official. Rather than feel like a Confucian failure, they can then turn, as countless others have throughout Chinese history, to Daoist thinking, which has been an invaluable resource for those who fail to meet various social expectations.

In his chapter on "cuteness," Bell describes how funny emojis are used even in the most serious communications between high-level bureaucrats. They can express politeness or deference and help soften strained discussions. Bell speculates that in Confucian societies, where a person experiences all sorts of social pressures, a "culture of cuteness [...] has an important role to play in legitimizing alternative avenues for socially valuable ways of life." This is certainly true today, but while "cuteness" might be a newly popular expedient, Daoism has long played this role, and with comparatively more depth. In Confucian societies, Daoist thought offers people not only new paths to legitimization but also alternatives to seeking social legitimization itself. Concentrating too much on the brighter Confucian parts, including cuteness, Bell tends to overlook the darker Daoist side of things, and perhaps underestimates its importance. Ironically enough, what *The Dean of Shandong* has to offer is itself something Daoist in nature.

Over 20 years ago, Bell arrived in China with a dream of becoming a Chinese politician. Now that he has achieved it, he reflects that he is not really up to the task. The vice dean, Bell claims, did most of the work, while he was more of a "symbolic" figure. A "dean in Shanghai" here begs to differ. Though Bell may have seen his role as more of a novelty than a position of actual leadership, I doubt that those around him felt the same. Foreigners often play cute or symbolic roles in China, but that does not eschew their having real significance. Just as communication between Chinese politicians at the highest level can include cute emojis, and appearance is paramount in governing, a symbolic dean may do much more than he thinks he does. Indeed, in his last chapter, Bell himself provides a compelling argument for symbolic leadership. He does not seem to have realized his own merits here.

When compared with Bell's other works, including *The China Model: Political Meritocracy and the Limits of Democracy* (2015) and *Just Hierarchy: Why Social Hierarchies Matter in China and the Rest of the World* (co-authored with Wang Pei, 2020), his contributions in *The Dean of Shandong* may appear somewhat casual. There are chapters focused on seemingly trivial issues like hair dye and cuteness, told through a series of personal anecdotes. Yet the book, ultimately, is about how appreciating the role of appearance opens us to better understand a world where such a concept truly is substantial.

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