

# Foreign-born 'Dean of Shandong' explores Chinese traditions in modern context

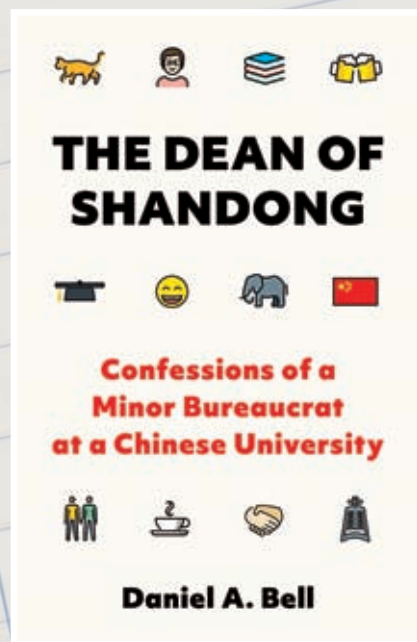
Daniel A. Bell is a Canadian-born theorist who has written extensively about Chinese politics, Confucianism and the relationship between the individual and the community. He is currently chair professor of political theory at the University of Hong Kong Faculty of Law, previously taught at Tsinghua University in Beijing and served as dean of the School of Political Science and Public Administration at Shandong University in east China. His 2023 book "The Dean of Shandong" draws on that latter experience. He sat down for an interview with Wan Lixin.

**Q: How did your friends respond to your job as a dean at Shandong University from 2017 to 2022?**

**A:** There were different reactions. My Chinese friends generally thought it was an excellent opportunity to learn about the Chinese system from the inside because I had written a book about the idea of political meritocracy. But it was more based on my experience at Tsinghua University, where many academic discussions were about how to train future leaders. So finally, I was given this wonderful opportunity to learn about how these kinds of ideas of how political meritocracy or academic meritocracy might work from the inside.

It's also, perhaps, a Confucian-influence view that a desirable form of life involves serving the community, or sometimes, we say in Chinese, *wei renmin fuwu* (serving the people). For Confucians, the highest form of life involves serving as a public official. That's probably why, generally speaking, in Chinese academic institutions, it is considered to be an honor serving in the university as an academic administrator. The term *yuanzhang* (dean) sounds very positive, even to non-academics.

In English, the term "dean" doesn't really have the same



positive resonance, and actually, many academics in the West would much prefer to have free time to read, write books and teach — often seeking to avoid administration. So that's why many of my Western friends were actually saying: "Why would you want to do this? It will take time away from your research." They didn't quite get it.

**Q: From your experience as a professor and dean at Chinese universities, do you have advice**

**for Chinese universities eager to pursue global prestige?**

**A:** I think there's sometimes a bit too much emphasis on global prestige and global rankings. In the hard sciences, I guess people prefer to rank themselves internationally, and there's one kind of widely accepted standard for what counts as good research, and you publish in the leading journals, like Nature and so on.

But in the humanities, sometimes it's important to have a very good understanding of one's own culture. It's hard to mark that against international standards. China is one of the few countries in the world where there's more support and funding for the humanities. Partly, it's because for much of the 20th century, China's own traditions were devalued, and it came time to re-evaluate them in academic research.

It's still important to compare one's own traditions with other traditions abroad, so there is much comparative work we can do. For example, how Confucianism compares with liberalism, socialism, feminism and so on.

Now back to your question. Well, Chinese universities do try to improve their international rankings. Sometimes that means professors feel pressured to publish in leading

English journals that often are viewed more favorably in these international rankings.

Now that's both good and bad. Some professors are not really trained in English, and so it's harder for them to compete. On the other hand, we are lucky that China has such a large academic market. We have our own way of assessing journals and academic contributions in Chinese.

**Q: You mentioned in your book that the West has a strong missionary impulse, dating from the early days of Christianity, to export ideas of morality and politics abroad. What do you think is a more sensible approach?**

**A:** The mainstream Chinese approach to religion and tradition is actually much more inclusive. Though it could be Confucian, Buddhist, Taoist or even Christian, it's not necessarily viewed as all or nothing.

Over the course of one's life, one could prioritize different kinds of cultural traditions in different stages. But in the West, there's a view that typically comes from the Christian tradition that there's only one true and universal religious system.

If you partake of that view, then