

Book Review of Daniel A. Bell (2023). *The dean of Shandong*. Princeton University Press.

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Introduction

This looks like a book about how to operate as an academic in China, but it is more. It reminds those of us in learning and education that China, the world's Number 2 economy, should not be ignored. I see textbooks where none of the cases focuses on a Chinese firm or, for that matter, any Asian firm. Those teaching in universities sometimes fail to appreciate "the most spectacular economic growth story in global history", China (Bell, p. 15). Academics should help remedy past shortcomings and say more about the world beyond North America and Europe. Decades ago, Academy of Management's then-President Donald Hambrick said, "If we wish to claim an international mindedness, and if we wish to exhort our students to an international mindedness, then we must show it and reinforce it" (Hambrick, 1994, p. 16). To accomplish this, educators in Nation A must know more about what is going on in Country B. Or Country C, China. This made sense in 1994 and makes sense today. I recommend this book.

Westerners whom I have talked with about this book, including those with considerable experience in and with China, agree there are insights here that we had previously missed, insights we can and will share with our students. Bell, who served as a Dean at Shandong University, brings his experiences to life in this enjoyable readable book. This is much more than a book about university life. There are important lessons here for anyone teaching business. There are factoids here about China that I had never caught despite decades of visits to and living in China. In many areas, China deserves watching. Bell describes a "reverse brain drain" by which many academics trained in the West are now heading back to China (Bell, p. 77). He concludes that in his area, Confucianism, "the center is shifting, once again, back to mainland China" (Bell, p. 8). Might a similar shift be occurring in business, with many of those who work or teach in the West unaware? Even in public health areas, it is a mistake not to see what is happening outside the West. Bajra and colleagues review COVID-19: some nations, including China, "managed to keep their GDP relatively stable in 2020, but their COVID-19 death rates low as well" (p. 511), thus contradicting a view commonly held in the West that the way to halt epidemics would be to shut

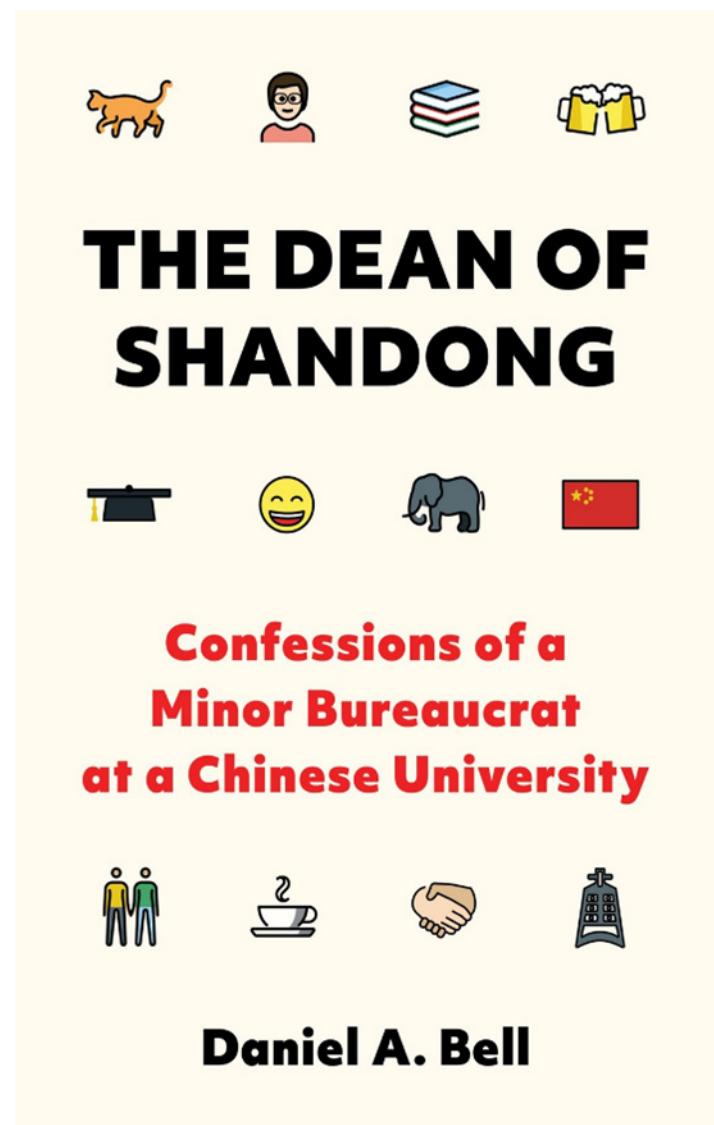


Figure 1. Book Cover.

everything down. As one 2020 paper based on USA data put it, "relaxation of shelter-in-place policies [lockdowns] will result in an *inevitable recurrence of exponential increase in infections* (Shao, p. 549). Bajra and colleagues challenge that assertion, showing data from Asia including China. The point here parallels Bell: We must not ignore China. Certainly in

areas involving technology, from driverless motor vehicles to Artificial Intelligence, any essay which overlooks China is missing important things. Bell successfully drives this point home.

In several sections, Bell describes his appreciation of and fondness towards China. He also points out areas where China would benefit from change. Overall, however, Bell sees China in a positive light. While Bell develops his ideas from his experience as a Canadian in China, some lessons might be relevant to persons involved in education anywhere. Bell's insights might help explain success even outside academia or business. One small example: Bell describes and makes fun of a speech given by an academic: "I once counted 37 subpoints in a speech" (p. 185). Bell hints that messages best have only a few main ideas. This advice might make sense in Chinese university settings such as this book describes, but also in Rotary Club presentations or half-time pep talks by the coach to a sports team.

This book's readability and breezy style might fool one into thinking that this book is not 'academic.' As Bell puts it, he uses a "playful voice" (p. 3). The scholarship may not always be obvious, but this work attains Bell's goal to be "intellectually worthwhile" (p. 18). The Dean of Shandong has many pages of detailed endnotes and references. The endnotes are in a tiny font and thus contain more information than 25 pages of standard text. In my mind, the book's main selling point is the content and the lessons, mistakes and triumphs of Westerner David Bell, appointed dean of an important unit of a respected Chinese university. What Bell says merits attention and reflection. After reading and reflecting on the contents, I tend to focus on three takeaways. I word those subtle lessons colloquially so as to mimic the book's style: 1. Watch the traffic, not the lights; 2. Beijing is very far away; and 3. Relax a bit, enjoy.

More on these three points later, but first, a short conventional book overview. The introduction helps those of us unfamiliar with Confucianism see how these ideas developed, then fell into disfavor, and then reemerged. The first real chapter looks at the "black hair is good" perspective widely held in China. Or, more accurately, "white (gray) hair signals too old."

Chapter 2 helps me understand the "party secretary." I left one job in China because the school's party secretary, the "shuji," seemed to find ways to invalidate decisions that all my higher-ups including this party secretary had agreed to on paper and in meetings. A graduate student once asked my Western boss at my school: "if you are the dean, then what's his job?" The quick response: "to interfere." To those of us non-Chinese in leadership roles, it seemed to us that the party boss had an unofficial network of key followers in every department, often with titles that suggested they were Number Two in their area, but who really called the shots as dictated by the one person they all needed to heed. The term "they followed the party line" seemed more than just colloquial. Bell explains what I missed: The so-called party secretary often plays multiple roles, including chief dispute-settler and even ombudsman. Bell did a better job than I did working with the shuji. I was once quietly informed that in a party-members-only meeting, those assembled

were warned by our university by the shuji to be on the lookout as "the foreigners are trying to control the school." Things I suggested were routinely "agreed" upon but not implemented. I angrily quit. Bell successfully eased up on the accelerator and became the person with the title "dean" while the "super talented executive vice dean" was in fact "the decider-in-chief" (pp. 55-56). I wish I had read this book back then!

Chapter 2 on "collective leadership" is followed by a chapter provocatively titled "What's wrong with corruption?" Bell certainly does not call for a return to the old days when, as in Hong Kong, firefighters had to be bribed before the water hoses would be turned on. Bell praises that "the anticorruption drive has worked" (Bell, p. 67). However, he worries that "ultra-cautious behavior... means that innovative officials won't get promoted and problems won't get fixed" (p. 68). Might "corruption" not always be corruption? I recall one example, not from China, when a student proudly informed me that seven members of his family had flown from the Middle East to America to attend his graduation. And they brought me an inexpensive gift, a prayer rug. I described the situation to my dean, bringing up the university's strict rule against receiving gifts. The dean said accept it, thank them profusely, and go back to work. My dean's advice would set well with the ideas in Chapter 4.

Chapter 5 attempts to describe, with limited success, China's drinking culture. That culture still dictates how big dinners are conducted in China, as illustrated by my participation in a Chinese academic conference in 2024. It amazed me how much serious drinking went on, yet no one seemed to get drunk. And thanks to the availability of taxis and Uber-like ride-hailing services everywhere (Didi and others), I agree with Bell: drunk driving is not common.

Chapter 6 details the challenges of a Western-looking Canadian scholar teaching Confucianism in China. Those wanting to know more about the role of Communism will benefit from Chapter 7. Bell explains that he now expects China's future to be influenced by both Communism and Confucianism. Chapter 8 criticizes the censorship he sees in China but points out that subtle censorship exists in the West, too. Chapters 9 (Academic meritocracy) and 10 (The culture of cuteness) cover a lot of territory, too, but the casual reader who is interested in higher education might skim these. Chapter 11 on "symbolic leadership" is for sure worth reading and thinking about. Now, back to lessons contained between the lines in the book, lessons I will not soon forget.

1. Watch the traffic, not the lights. This conventional recap of the contents of the book above is to be expected in any book review. To me, however, the insights come from reading between the lines. Bell does not literally say watch the traffic not the lights, nor does he say Beijing is very far away. These messages come clear through the examples. He, however, suggests to relax a bit (p. 73).

Taking the first of these ideas, watching what is happening rather than focusing on official announcements, is illustrated multiple times in *The dean of Shandong*. As in traffic situations, there may be guidelines in international

business, often in writing. But as in how many points per speech, it is best not to look only at official guidance. One is not likely to find a rule about the number of points per speech. The "informal norms for Chinese bureaucrats do not have any official justification" (p. 185). One learns "informal norms" by watching and paying attention to what is done and not done. I am alive today because a person I was walking with in Shanghai grabbed me and yanked me back as I started to walk across the street when the light turned green. Microseconds later, a huge truck roared past where I would have been. The lesson has stayed with me: watch the traffic, not only the lights. Bell draws a similar conclusion many times. Find written policies or procedures, and more importantly, watch what people do.

One interesting story relates how Bell had a plan to recruit and bring a specific esteemed scholar into the team. The paperwork, as is typical in academic environments, was slow but seemed doable. Everything appeared to be progressing, with the prize hire joining a research institute of Shandong University, but not yet "the faculty." Finally, Bell noticed or felt "a distinct lack of enthusiasm" (p.169). The faculty hire was never vetoed, but it just did not happen. It was not written rules, rather that it was not yet time for the realization of Bell's lofty ambitions for his university. He learned, over time, that "listening and building trust... is far more important than persuasion and reasoning" (Bell, p. 43). It is often better to build on existing patterns rather than to invent something entirely new.

In China, there seems to be a high status placed on black-haired individuals. White hair (or the Western term "gray hair") suggests irrelevance due to ageing. Bell was becoming prematurely gray-headed and was coerced into dyeing his hair jet-black, even though there are no written words directing deans not to have gray hair. Bell chafed at the pressure, but now, years later, seems to have been converted. The book jacket describes Bell as a Chair Professor in Hong Kong after his stint in Shandong ended and shows a photo with not a touch of white in his black hair.

In a long section, the book describes the importance of who sits where (p. 56) at a meeting or a meal. There are probably no written rules on this, but who sits where is watched and noticed. A powerful business leader once invited me to a fancy dinner in Nanjing, and I was the first to arrive. The staff directed me to the private dining room, where about a dozen empty chairs were placed around the table. Not wanting to appear as the typical brash American, I took the seat farthest away from the room entrance so as to allow others to occupy the 'good' seats, with window views, etc. I should have read this book before that moment. Bell's book helped me realize that I had taken the most prestigious seat where I could see all who entered. I conveyed exactly the opposite of the message I had intended. I should have slowed down a bit and watched what others did. Better yet, come to the dinner and enter the room with a trusted and trustworthy local, not a language interpreter but a cultural interpreter.

2. Beijing is very far away. One does business with individuals, not governments. The ancient Chinese proverb contains wisdom even when not literally the truth. What was in earlier

centuries worded 'the emperor is very far away' contains the same advice: don't worry too much about what a central government may say or do; focus on the micro-world we live in. This was brought to my attention in an unexpected, funny way. I was one of about twenty academics at a faculty member's apartment in Beijing. After the meal, I wandered off to the next room, a den of sorts, where most of the chit-chat was in English. But we could easily hear the animated discussion in the dining room, where the talk was 100% Chinese. The topic seemed to be a general disgust at how China and some Western countries were fighting over tariffs. Then, in English, one female professor rather loudly exclaimed, "Beijing is very far away." This, while we were in Beijing, she made the point that the various ventures they had going could continue, person to person, regardless of what governments said or did. Business is done by and between individuals. Personal connections are often praised in works about doing business in China. The word 'guanxi' is popular in Western writings about operating in China. I did not see this term in Bell's book but many of his examples and stories illustrated the benefit of making contacts and connections. Of course, this idea is not exclusively or uniquely Chinese. But getting cooperation from others was extremely helpful to Bell during his term as dean.

3. Relax, enjoy being involved, learning in or from one of the world's most impressive economies, China. This important piece of advice came from multiple small statements sprinkled throughout the text. At one point, Bell agrees with "the Daoist/Legalist view of leadership that power can be increased by doing precisely nothing most of the time" (p. 158). Further, "public officials" [and perhaps leaders in other sectors, or even parents] "should rule with a light touch... with punishment as a last resort" (p.5). In one particularly sticky situation, Dean Bell "perhaps the first time (in five years!) ... used my authority to issue a direct order" (Bell, p.41). That seemingly innocuous directive was then not implemented by a person higher up, who said, "Let's wait a bit" (p. 41). In the end, delay was the better choice. Or this: as Dean, "at the start I had no idea when to intervene and when not to intervene and eventually learned that I should not intervene 98% of the time" (Bell, p. 169).

In many business decisions, some suggest searching for the best way. Herbert Simon received a Nobel prize for showing that many effective executives do not look for the best solution; rather, they suffice and choose the first workable solution that appears. We aim to find answers that are good enough and satisfy the requirements, "suffice." One reason we do this is that we humans have bounded rationality. Humans simply cannot simultaneously investigate and evaluate all possible options. Fast-forward to the mid-2020s. Increasingly, it seems possible to simultaneously investigate and evaluate multiple options. Machines do not have the equivalent of human intelligence, yet. But literally hundreds of papers document that artificial intelligence, AI, is making impossible things possible. Consider this important question facing many today: how to approach China? Should we find the (one) best way, or identify a portfolio of possible ways? Bell's book, between the lines, suggests that different situations call for different tools.

Global thinking is important and poses questions of strategy and tactics. Westerners, considering China, are given lots of advice. Guanxi, for example, is said to be essential. Is it necessary, sufficient, both, or neither? With the advent and growth of AI, it may become easier to obtain and evaluate various perspectives. I am only one professor and one reader, but I wager that the machines of today and tomorrow will draw on the ideas in *The dean of Shandong*. We should share these ideas now with today's students. To an average professor, what might all this mean? Be aware that the world is big and does not end at the border of whatever country we live in. And certainly, the examples we use in our classes, lectures, cases, and textbooks should include not only North America or Europe. If the text has no examples from China, we can add them. As a start, use examples from *The dean of Shandong*.

Additional references

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