For over a decade, Daniel Bell has been a pioneering figure in the study of democracy and human rights in an East Asian context. This remarkable book takes his study to a new level. Bell offers a critical examination of the “uniquely parochial” Western liberal democracy, which has been promoted to various parts of the world as universally valid regardless of local conditions. Based on years of first-hand experience and knowledge of East Asian societies, Bell proposes a rather ambitious alternative model of democracy that would suit a land under the long-lasting influence of Confucianism.

The book opens with a critical reflection on Ronald Dworkin’s 2002 visit to China. During that visit, Dworkin “unilaterally believed that his China tour was a valuable opportunity for China to be privy to his ideas of liberty” (2). He showed no sensitivity to China’s cultural tradition and demonstrated no knowledge of China’s social context and its recent substantial improvement of legal practice. In the meantime, he was taken for a ride by the Chinese government to showcase China’s new freedoms. Dworkin’s case is a good example of showing the superficiality of some Western scholars’ attempt to force their “parochially developed” ideas of Western liberal democracy on East Asia in a “one size fits all” style. It calls urgently for a close examination of democracy and human rights in the Chinese context, an examination that comes not out of ignorance and arrogance. Calling for a culturally sensitive approach, Bell offers this much needed alternative. He argues that there are morally legitimate alternatives to Western-style liberal democracy in the East Asian region. Democracy in East Asia does not lie simply in implementing Western political ideas and practices; it involves drawing upon East Asian cultural resources and political realities. The art on the cover of the book says it all: an American Statue of Liberty holding a copy of Confucius’s Analects!

The book is divided into three parts. Part One discusses human rights in an East Asian context. Part Two explores democracy in an East Asian context. Part Three investigates issues of capitalism in an East Asian context. The book ends with the author’s responses to critics, an interesting addition to the main body of the book. Following the Introduction, Part One begins with Chapter 2 on general Confucian principles of good government and
just war theory, and their implications for the contemporary world. The author differentiates the Confucian ideal world and non-ideal world. In the non-ideal world, Confucius and Mencius would approve practical maneuvers conducive to the good society, including warfare. There has been little, if any, serious study of the Confucian theory of just war; Bell’s discussion of Mencius’s theory of just war alone makes a unique contribution in this regard. Chapter 3 reflects on the East–West dialogues on human rights and the so-called “Asian values” debates (Bell calls it “values in Asia” to make it a more accurate description). Being a veteran on these matters, Bell draws on his rich experience and knowledge in arguing for the legitimate differences in value prioritizations between the West and East Asia. Political actors, both intellectuals and officials, in East Asia typically endorse a set of fundamental human goods somewhat different from their counterparts in Western societies. They may opt for different trade-offs when human values compete with one another. Bell concludes that East Asian conceptions of vital human interest may well justify deviations from the human rights standards typically endorsed by Western liberal theories. I find his argument powerful and persuasive. Furthermore, Bell argues for the need of strategic considerations in promoting human rights in East Asian societies with local cultural sensitivities in mind. For example, attempts to promote human rights by posting a stark choice between peoples’ religion and human rights, as opposed to reconciling religious insights with human rights, may turn people away from the human rights movement. Given these considerations, cultural dialogues on human rights are essential. Chapter 4 brings readers to practical issues of human rights, looking into the ethical challenges to international human rights NGOs in their efforts to promote human rights. Bell concludes by urging human rights practitioners and theorists to engage each other for their common cause.

Part Two is the most challenging and ambitious part of the entire book. It moves on to the issue of democracy in East Asia and makes a case that Confucianism can shape “rule by the people” in ways that may be appropriate for the modern world. This part begins in Chapter 5 with a comparative study of physical education in ancient Greece and ancient China. Bell’s finding indicates that whereas the Greeks found it necessary to develop systematic state-sponsored programs of physical education to train soldiers for wars, their Chinese counterparts of the Warring States period did not develop such programs to the same extent. One of the reasons, Bell suggests, lies in political differences in the two societies: whereas ancient Greece was characterized with citizenship politics, ancient China from early on was characterized with elitist politics. Bell also aptly cites Hannah Arendt that, “Historically, it is very likely that the rise of the city-state and the public realm occurred at the expense of the private realm of family and household” (144). I find this observation pertinent and plausible. As I have argued elsewhere, no pursuit of value is without costs. Different considerations of these costs may justify different configurations of values (“The Confucian Ideal of Harmony,” Philosophy East & West, 56.4 [2006]: 583–603).

Chapter 6 is the most provocative and exciting chapter of the entire book. It proposes a “democracy with Confucian characteristics.” Bell argues for taking not just one, but two important values seriously, namely democracy and political elitism. Confucian political elitism is the “rule of the wise.” It is the ideal that “the best and the brightest” should exert more influence in order to build the good society. On the one hand, this kind of political elitism may be distinctly appropriate for today’s “knowledge-based” societies; on the other, Bell argues, there is an equally profound need to institutionalize the democratic virtues of accountability, transparency, and equal political participation. Balancing these two considerations leads Bell to propose his version of “modern Confucian democracy.”