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Davos in Dalian

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By Daniel A. Bell

Last weekend, the World Economic Forum held its third ["Annual Meeting of the New Champions"](#) in Dalian. Known as "Summer Davos," the event brought together over a thousand business and political leaders from around the world (a [Telegraph story](#) about Premier Wen Jiabao's keynote speech can be found [here](#); [sina.com](#) has complete coverage of the weekend [here](#)). China Beat contributor Daniel A. Bell attended the meeting, and shares his experiences as a lone philosopher in a sea of CEOs and political leaders.

My Davos experience did not get off to a good start. After a week-long research trip to Singapore, I barely had time to greet my wife and kid before I was jetting off to Dalian, host city of the third annual "Summer Davos" meeting. Yes, it was business class, but they ran out of wine and I had to nurse an uninspiring Yanjing beer. The plane landed at midnight, we were shepherded to a bus and told to wait for other passengers. A couple of Americans complained – in Chinese – that they would rather get off and take a taxi. I joined the chorus of complaints, and finally the bus took us to our hotels. After a few hours sleep, I was waken at 5:30 am by the sound of pounding jackhammers outside. I tried to make sense of what was going on, but there was a power failure in our hotel. After an hour of staring at the ceiling and blocking my ears with five-star fluffy pillows, the lights finally came on.

Over breakfast, I met a friendly government official from Tianjin, who was confident that the next Summer Davos would be held in his city, where the forum had been held the previous year. Later, I met an official from Dalian, who was equally confident that his city, which had hosted the first meeting, in 2007, would be selected as the permanent site of the Summer Davos. Clearly there was intense competition between the political leaders of the two cities, though they are supposed to be members of the same party.

Off to the conference site. Our electric-battery powered bus drove in a special lane, with policemen and women on every block. It was the first time I had experienced such VIP treatment. The Davos crowd is supposed to be composed of the world's most politically influential people; I noticed from the program that I was the only participant listed as a "philosopher" and naturally I wondered how I managed to slip under the radar.

The first session was an "ideas lab" hosted by Oxford University. Experts in such fields as stem cell research and nanoscience discussed how their research might solve such problems as Alzheimer's Disease. My wife and I had already worked out a detailed strategy of five-year plans designed to keep our minds active in order to postpone the onset of the disease (learning Italian at fifty, bridge at fifty-five, etc.), but perhaps science will come to our rescue instead.

Next, it was my panel on "Chinese Civilization: The History of Change". This year, the Summer Davos had inaugurated panels on culture and the room was packed. I discussed the roots of the Confucian revival along with its future prospects. I argued that China's future political evolution will likely take the form of some mixture of democracy and meritocracy, and that the Chinese media will likely open up while retaining an element of Confucian-style paternalism. The other panelists, all Chinese, engaged in the debate from other perspectives. The high-ranking government official on my panel quoted the Confucian line about exemplary persons seeking harmony instead of conformity. He added that people tend to prefer their own foods and cultures and we should not try to impose them on others. Switching to Chinese, I replied that I actually prefer Chinese to Canadian food and that China's soft power is already influencing the world in the form of its food and culture, but that the country would have to practice what it preaches before its soft power has political impact. After my talk, I was supposed to meet a BBC journalist, but he never showed up, perhaps put off by my less-than-wholehearted endorsement of democracy and liberty. A few Chinese journalists, however, gave me their name cards.

Following a brief lunch, I attended another “ideas lab” on the future of cities. Creative architects and scientists discussed inventions for improving city life, such as a biodegradable tracking device that would let people know what happens to their garbage, thus promoting awareness of sustainability issues. At that point, I was dead tired and decided to return to the hotel. Yes, I’d miss Premier Wen Jiabao’s plenary address, but figured I’d read about it the next day. I hopped in a taxi and the driver told me that the whole city had implemented a system of odd and even license plates during the Davos forum, such that half the cars were off the road at any one time. No wonder the traffic was so smooth! He also told me that Dalian is famous for its entertainment scene, but that the city’s “xiaojie” (young women who mix singing and sex in karaoke bars) had been sent on vacation during the forum. The driver provided some political gossip as we drove by more policewomen, who seemed to get taller and more elegant the closer we got to the local communist party headquarters. I thought to myself that I’d learn more from taxi drivers than by listening to high government officials.

Back at the hotel, I switched to a room on a less noisy side and went for a swim. After half an hour, however, I was kicked out because the pool area had been reserved for a party of “Young Global Leaders”, under-35s selected by the Davos organization as future leaders. Previous batches included the young Vladimir Putin, Angela Merkel, and Bill Gates. I retreated to my hotel room and recalled what my Confucian friend Jiang Qing once told me – that he only attends conferences if he’s sure he will meet old friends. Perhaps I should adopt a similar principle, I thought to myself, and I decided to change my ticket to leave earlier than planned.

Finally, a good night’s sleep! That morning, I went right to the travel agent at the conference site to change my ticket. At first, I could tell that they were experiencing some difficulty, but the agent told the person on the phone that she was dealing with a high government official and things went smoothly after. Then I joined an organized visit to Dalian’s port facility. On the boat tour, I met an English entrepreneur who had been trained in the Greek and Latin classics. I asked him if such training had been helpful for his work and he said Latin’s complex grammatical structure had improved his analytical ability. He added that learning ancient Greek and Latin also helps with writing, and he knows right away when he reads something by an author trained in the classics, even if they don’t use Latin or Greek words. I asked for an example and he mentioned a book by Boris Johnson, London’s mayor. At that point, I confessed I had never studied Greek or Latin and that perhaps it was a mistake to have skipped straight to classical Chinese. I also wondered if learning Latin would have improved my writing style.

Later, I was asked a question about the port facilities by a kind young Davos participant. I replied with the little I knew and told him I was a “just” a philosopher. I asked about his occupation, and he said he works for Schindler, the elevator company. I somehow (mis)remembered that the company had been started by Schindler of *Schindler’s List* fame, and he said no, the name Schindler is a common German name, like “Smith” in English. I then asked about his panel at the conference, and he said he’s related to the World Economic Forum. My face must have expressed puzzlement, because he went on to add that he’s the son of Klaus Schwab, who started the whole thing. I said, “Oh, congratulations!”, and immediately regretted my silly response. We continued to chat, discovering that we both have Chinese wives.

Back for lunch, I ran into a colleague and friend Yan Xuetong, perhaps China’s most influential foreign policy analyst. I also chatted with an award-winning social entrepreneur who helps foreign domestic workers in Singapore to improve household financial management. Then I met an old friend, Parag Khanna, and I learned that he had been selected as a “Young Global Leader”. I first knew Parag when he was doing his PhD at the London School of Economics and researching a book titled *The Second World*. I had been impressed by his charm and brilliance but wondered if such a young scholar would really manage to pull it off. As it happens, his book became an international best-seller and Parag now offers geo-strategic advice to political actors around the globe. His next book will be titled “How to Run the World”, and I thought to myself that Parag will probably be serving as secretary of state next time we meet. Our conversation shifted to more personal matters; I enjoyed our talk and began to regret that I had changed my ticket.

After lunch, I attended a stimulating panel on Chinese contemporary art. Then it was my turn for another performance as part of a panel on “The Great Books of China”. Two distinguished Chinese

intellectuals discussed the books that had shaped their outlooks, and I discussed some classics in the Confucian corpus, emphasizing that different books are meant to serve different purposes. A member of the audience asked about Yu Dan's book on the *Analects of Confucius*. One panelist said that Yu Dan is a good friend and went on to make some polite remarks. Switching to Chinese, I said that she is not a friend of mine and proceeded to criticize her depoliticized interpretation of the *Analects*. After the talk, I was interviewed by Dalian television, and the reporter asked about my personal life and why I became interested in Confucianism. The sound was muted and we had to redo the interview. For some strange reason, I became more animated and sincere the second time around. Then it was time for a magnificently luxurious "Cultural Soirée" hosted by the Dalian Municipal Government. I had a couple of glasses of wine with Parag and returned to the hotel in a much better mood. On the bus I met a friendly Canadian techie who had invented something called "ThingMagic". At the hotel, I headed to another Davos party but mistakenly stumbled upon a company party where I met a hockey mate from Beijing. Another glass of wine, and then off to sleep.

The next morning, I headed straight to the travel agent where I asked for a change back to my original ticket. They were surprisingly polite in the face of such irrational demands. I attended an early morning session on the rise of mega-cities and learned about the different experiments in ecological sustainability in various Chinese cities that are competing to show prowess in wind and solar power, hoping to attract investment in those areas. Later I met with a leading American environmentalist, and he expressed frustration with the "crazy" Republicans and the Democrats in Congress who stall progress on global warming because of coal interests and organized labor's hostility to China. I told him about my own research – jokingly referring to a "five-year plan" for a book on the history and philosophy of meritocracy – and he replied that he's beginning to see the advantage of such five-year plans in non-democratic contexts.

One final panel on "Groundbreaking ideas for social change". We started off by floating various ideas for social change and then broke up into small groups led by influential "social entrepreneurs". One participant mentioned that people in rich countries are leading immoral lives in the sense that we'd all "to go hell" if people in China and India were to lead similarly wasteful lives, so we urgently need to change our ways. I joined a group headed by a software entrepreneur, that was entrusted with the task of coming up with ideas that would encourage people to lead more ecologically sustainable lives. After about forty minutes of brainstorming, we settled upon the idea of a game that would reward people over the course of their lives for reducing their carbon footprints, giving tax breaks to the relatively successful and honors such as "Sir" and "Lady" to the very best. Instead of seeking gratification in material goods, people would compete in our game, called "More For Less". Everybody would be part of the game but those worried about privacy issues could opt out. Our leader did a magnificent job of presenting our idea to the whole group, speaking with complete confidence as though it were just a matter of tinkering with the details of a proposal already endorsed by the rest of the world. I suggested that such competition might take place at the level of cities in a country like China where people are more group-minded and carbon footprints might be easier to measure. I left the meeting with a new sense of optimism.

Rush to the airport. I board the plane, and this time they serve wine in business class. I have time for a second glass just before reentry to the real world.

Daniel A. Bell is professor of ethics and political theory at Tsinghua University (Beijing). His latest book is [China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life for a Changing Society](#) (Princeton University Press, 2008).

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