

Sungmoon Kim, *Confucian Democracy in East Asia: Theory and Practice*, Cambridge University Press, March 2014

One puzzling phenomenon in modern political science and political theory is that as democracy has become ubiquitous in many parts of the world and democratic values have become increasingly accepted as universal human values, the term "democracy" has become almost a cliché, losing its definitional political meaning. This is especially so among East Asians who have yet to establish (full) democracy, despite their strong desire for it, and those who have attained it only recently through bloody fights against authoritarian forces. A remarkable study that raises the question: are Asian societies essentially autocratic or are they compatible with modern democracy? If the latter, how can their symbiosis be best understood?

Rejecting the incompatibility thesis, Sungmoon Kim, associate professor of political theory at City University of Hong Kong, calls into question presumed Asian preferences for thick communitarianism (neglectful of individual liberty and social pluralism) and public meritocracy (neglectful of popular accountability), and attempts to single out particular aspects of Asian political concepts, looking particularly at Confucianism, and explores Confucian democracy, which he sees as a more "Asian-based" model in his new book *Confucian Democracy in East Asia: Theory and Practice*. The book is a deep, subtle, and beautifully written examination of two contested concepts, democracy and Confucianism. The result is a rich and provocative work that successfully bridges theory and practice.

Democracy was no less foreign a concept to Europe for most of history. Understanding the plasticity of democracy seems like a more important issue than the debate about which mode of democracy is best. *Confucian Democracy in East Asia* is motivated by the conviction that democracy, properly understood, is desperately needed in East Asia, where political regimes remain authoritarian or only partially democratic.

In this regard, this book shares the faith in democracy enabling a viable and flourishing social and political life for its citizens, with the additional aim of articulating the societal conditions of democracy, originally of Western provenance, under which democracy would work best in East Asian—historically Confucian—societies, accommodating other social goods and values that are not necessarily democratic.

The central thesis of this book is that in East Asian societies democracy would be most politically effective and culturally relevant if it were rooted in and operates on the "Confucian habits and mores" with which East Asians are still deeply saturated, sometimes without their awareness—in other words, if democracy were a *Confucian democracy*.

As Sungmoon Kim shows in this important book, Even though Confucian democracy sounds foreign or even anachronistic to many East Asians, many of whom attribute their sufferings following the "west impact" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to Confucianism, particularly its failure to modernize the state and society, Confucian democracy is hardly a novel idea among East Asian political scientists and political theorists and Western academics active in East Asia. In fact, in the course of refuting Samuel Huntington's provocative claim that "Confucian democracy" is a contradiction in

terms, and Francis Fukuyama's end of history thesis that liberal democracy is the only morally and politically legitimate universal value in the post-Cold War era, scholars from East Asia have actively searched for Confucian democracy as the viable political alternative to Western liberal democracy.

Although the debate remains ongoing as to whether Confucian democracy is possible both in theory and in practice, and if possible what it should look like, a Confucianism worth defending in the complex, multicultural East Asia of today both can and must incorporate a robust form of democracy.

This book, as the author indicates, constructs a mode of public reason (and reasoning) that is morally palatable to East Asians who are still saturated in Confucian customs by re-appropriating Confucian familialism, and using this perspective to theorize on Confucian democratic welfarism and political meritocracy.

Kim bases his careful analysis on a wealth of scholastic arguments about classical Confucianism. He also draws upon political theories and conducts a detailed case study on South Korea, a country both steeped in long-standing Confucian tradition and practicing modern democracy, and examines the theory's practicality in Korea's increasingly individualized, pluralized, and multicultural society by looking at cases of freedom of expression, freedom of association, insult law, and immigration policy.

Through deep and subtle examination, the book makes a case that Western concepts of liberal democracy may have difficulty in East Asian culture since Confucianism and liberal individualism-predicated democracy are contested concepts. But it doesn't mean democracy cannot be achieved in East Asian countries within different frameworks. To some extent, Kim's work has provided an admirable vision to inspire political theorists with more angles to explore democracy.

Kim's aim is to articulate a philosophically credible and politically realistic vision of what Confucian democracy can be in twenty-first-century East Asia. Besides succeeding at that task, Kim reminds us that there are many unexplored possibilities for aligning distinctive identity-conferring beliefs with democratic and liberal political ideals.

It could also remind many political theorists as well as Western governments not to make biased judgments on democratic issues, since the ways to democracy are not limited within Western concepts. It defends the idea that a Confucian civil democracy, though not rooted in Western culture and tradition, can also provide universal freedom, well-protected citizenship and democratic governance.

There is no disagreement here with the conviction that Confucian democracy can offer an important pluralist corrective to global value monism and cultural universalism from the perspective of East Asian particularism (if not parochialism).

It is a must-read for anyone who is interested in the future possibilities of democracy, the development of Confucianism in political studies, comparative philosophers and political theorists.

Dr. FENGQING ZHU, Associate Professor, Harbin Institute of Technology, P. R. China. Email: zhufq54@163.com
