



March 2000

*The East Asian Welfare Model: Welfare Orientalism and the State.* Roger Goodman, Gordon White and Huck-ju Kwon (Eds.). Reviewed by Kwong-leung Tang, University of Northern British Columbia

Kwong-leung Tang  
University of Northern British Columbia

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Social Welfare Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Tang, Kwong-leung (2000) "*The East Asian Welfare Model: Welfare Orientalism and the State.* Roger Goodman, Gordon White and Huck-ju Kwon (Eds.). Reviewed by Kwong-leung Tang, University of Northern British Columbia," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol27/iss1/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [maira.bundza@wmich.edu](mailto:maira.bundza@wmich.edu).



Roger Goodman, Gordon White and Huck-ju Kwon (Eds.), *The East Asian Welfare Model: Welfare Orientalism and the State*. New York: Routledge, 1998. \$90.00 hardcover, \$29.99 papercover.

This collection of papers examines five Asian countries (namely Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and South Korea; China is included as contrast) and attempts to answer the question whether there is an East Asian welfare model. There are two other research questions: First, how does one explain the structure and dynamics of East Asian welfare systems and second, is the East Asian welfare experience worthy of emulation in other countries facing the challenge of welfare reform? In its attempt to answer these questions, the book is divided into three parts: an overview on Welfare Orientalism, a review of East Asian welfare systems, and country case studies.

The book reveals that the East Asian countries constitute a distinct welfare experience with some common elements but they are far from homogeneous. They find that: "with regard to its relevance to Western societies, and Britain in particular, we are comparing chalk and cheese." (p. 20) Cultural explanation for welfare development in terms of Confucianism is dismissed as unhelpful and ideological. Welfare programs are often introduced by those in power with political motives. Welfare spending is considered wasteful by the governments and funded systems are set up to get financial resources for investment in industry and infrastructure.

The relevance of this collection should be placed in the current ideological context. Under the challenge from neo-liberalism, the welfare state in the advanced industrialized countries has been in disarray. This has driven policy-makers and researchers to seek policy alternatives. With very spectacular economic development since 1970's, the East Asian countries have impressed the world. Not surprisingly, their successful welfare system is brought up by the both the Conservative Party and Labour Party in Britain as possible model for emulation.

For a long time, comparative policy analysts who theorize rigorously on the basis of research findings from the advanced western countries have completely neglected East Asian countries, either treating them as developing societies which fall outside

their scope of analysis or contending that these countries will sooner or later be like the industrialized countries in all respects. There is thus a lamentable void in comparative social policy analysis. Seen in this perspective, this book is most timely. As it stands, it is an invitation to the emerging field of social welfare in Asia and a pioneering guide to this relatively unknown terrain.

This book has a number of strengths. The two introductory chapters are particularly interesting. The first by Goodman and White set the stage by thoroughly and perceptively reviewing their idea of Welfare Orientalism. The cultural explanation of welfare development is extensively reviewed. They find that it only imbues certain basic societal features with a sense of timelessness and serves to marginalize other forms of explanations. The importance of the state cannot be overemphasized: "Most notable is the strategic role of states in directing a process of economic development with distributive as well as growth objectives, resulting in a relatively egalitarian pattern of income distribution compared with other industrializing regions such as Latin America." (p. 13) The second chapter by Huck-ju Kwon is a comparative analysis of their welfare development. Rejecting the relevance of public expenditure approach, this paper rightly focuses on the role of the state and the political dynamics of the evolution of the individual welfare systems.

The main criticism of this volume is one that can be directed at many edited books: its struggle to integrate the chapters under a central theme. This is particularly true for the six country case studies. Although Kwon promises that: "The directions in which they are likely to go—and implicitly whether they are likely to go along similar paths—is the subject of the individual country case-studies" (p. 67), most chapters (except Tremewan's and Goodman's chapters) only look at one particular welfare policy. Christopher Tremewan in Chapter 3 gives an analysis of social welfare development in Singapore, emphasizing the manipulation of welfare by an authoritarian regime. Chapter 4, written by Huck-ju Kwon, shows the South Korean pension program as a means of legitimation and the impending financial problems. Yeun-wen Ku examines Taiwan's National Health Insurance in Chapter 5 and attributes its development to democratization, a decline of Kuomintang (the party in power) authority and social

movement. Roger Goodman in Chapter 6 looks at *minseitin* system in Japan which represents a compromise between professional and voluntary institutions. Next, Nelson Chow examines Hong Kong's social security and surmises that a provident fund will be introduced by the new government. Finally, Gordon White looks at China's pension reform and concludes that China seems to converge toward the East Asian welfare system which emphasizes self-sufficiency, personal savings and hard work.

Moreover, while some contributors blend comparative literature with their country studies, other supplies no more than an insider's cursory look at his own social welfare development. Overall, labor welfare, a key element which carries much political connotations in Asia, is not sufficiently explored. Despite these shortcomings, there are two chapters which are thought-provoking. White breaks new ground in his discussion of China's social security reform by linking this issue up with the social development perspective. Tremewan's analysis of Singapore is a fine example of how critical thinking is applied to examine welfare development of an Asian city-state.

Overall, this is an important addition to the field of comparative social policy. It is the best one on East Asia that is available. A theoretical introduction to comparative social policy analysis and discussion of the various models of social welfare would make it more readable. A spate of comparative reports on Asian welfare is on the horizon. The quality of this volume will ensure that it will be an essential reader for many years to come. As the leading text, it will provide insights to researchers who examine the nature and development of East Asian welfare.

Kwong-leung Tang

University of Northern British Columbia

Jonathan Gruber and David A. Wise (Eds.), *Social Security and Retirement Around the World*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999. \$62.00 hardcover. [June 1, 1999].

The relationship between social security programs and labor participation rates of older persons has been a subject of considerable attention in cross-national research for the past several