

Geir Helgesen, *Democracy and Authority in Korea: the Cultural Dimension in Korean Politics*. London: Curzon Press, 1998. 321 pp. ISBN 0-7007-613-5.

This book views the rise, or rather non-rise, of Western democracy in South Korea over the past fifty or so years. It is a work that is ambitious in its scope and interesting in its approach. Specifically, Geir Helgesen contends that a key reason for Western democracy's difficulties in South Korea stems from its inappropriateness to traditional Korean values. Little, if anything, in traditional Korean political beliefs, Confucianism in particular, would provide a fertile bed for Western political values. However, and here may be Helgesen's most interesting points, the failure of Western democracy should not be taken as the failure of democracy in South Korea. If the South Korean state were to adapt certain traditional views and values to popular aspirations among the people 'there will develop a political system worthy of popular support, one that is enduring and workable' (p. 248). That is, an attempt to plant the seeds of Western-style democracy is an exercise in failure, but an attempt to create a 'Korean democracy' could meet with success. With this mind, Helgesen presents an argument that links with historical interpretation, educational policies, current public opinion surveys, and a series of interviews. In this way readers gain an insight not only into the current South Korean views on democracy, but also into the role played by tradition in shaping modern views.

However, the product does not seem to live up its billing. Helgesen's book is also marked by serious contradictions and problems that should leave a reader questioning the author's fundamental assumptions and argument. Helgesen has chosen to explain the relation between Korean culture and democracy via a theoretical model expounded more than thirty-five years ago by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, and thought to be in remission more than twenty years ago by everyone else. Helge-

sen admits to a shortcoming in his approach when he states that the 'political culture approach sought to cross the borders of Western-centrism, but before it succeeded it was out of fashion' (p. 11). He also tells us that within this model, the task of 'operationalizing culture is ... problematic' (p. 13). To his credit, Helgesen does try to alleviate some of these problems by focusing upon the aspects of political culture relevant to 'people living in Korea' (p. 14). However, he never fully succeeds in his attempt to define 'Korean political culture' just as he fails to provide a definition for democracy that is fundamentally divorced from Western values. These shortcomings leave the basic flaws of Almond and Verba's assumptions in place; which means that a great many of Helgesen's conclusions have been constructed on shaky foundations.

To cite one example: after spending five chapters discussing the authoritarian nature of Confucianism, the legacies of Japanese colonialism, the school curriculum filled with lessons on obedience, and recent political regimes bent upon accumulating power, Helgesen finds that the beliefs of South Koreans today express a desire to democratise, as long as it is 'Confucian democracy'. He also finds that Koreans want democracy because 'democracy is almost undoubtedly the goal of the majority of the Korean people' (p. 259). How Confucianism is democratic, or how Koreans could be democratic in spite of the traditions and cultures dedicated to authoritarianism, is not well explained.

Another problem in this book is the practice of inferring democratic intent because it is an assumption of the theory. To take an example from the chapter on the Japanese colonial period: after noting that 'there is widespread agreement among students of Korea that the Japanese colonization ... had an immense impact upon the modern development of the country', Helgesen discusses the links between Confucianism and the March First Movement of 1919 in Korea's political and nation-

alist development. He contends that Confucianism, and hence by implication its practitioners, played a key role in the legitimization of political democracy. This may be so, but he supports his arguments with questionable statements such as 'none of the Confucian leaders participated [in the March First Movement]'. And then he follows this point with 'Confucianism was nevertheless instrumental in triggering the independence movement, since the funeral for the Korean ex-King, Kojong, held on March 3, 1919, was the reason why March 1 was chosen for the release of the Declaration' (p. 25). This trouble surfaces again two pages later. Helgesen states that the Korean 'leaders of the independence movement obviously wanted to make use of Confucian tradition to fight the Japanese authorities, and these authorities likewise tried to exploit the same tradition to defend their policy.' He does not explain how Confucianism, which serves as a vehicle for the democratisation of Korea, may also serve as a vehicle for control and oppression by the Japanese colonial state, and, simultaneously as a forum for ethical and moral debates for Korean nationalists.

Helgesen's basic points are interesting and worthy of consideration. However, his assumptions and approach do much to undermine what might have been a seminal work.

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