Preface

This book focuses on modern, highly developed East Asian societies and their social issues, particularly ones that are related to family and health. The examples are from Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Myanmar, Singapore, and the Pacific Islands, while references are made to contrasting examples in other Asian societies, especially China, because of its regional and global importance as well as its cultural importance in the region. Since discourses on the delicate balance between private and public sectors are very much global and based primarily on the experiences of the affluent societies in Western Europe and North America, we have also taken a look at parallels with relevant counterparts elsewhere. In short, the East Asian discourses and developments have been deeply influenced by developments elsewhere while East Asian societies are bound to influence other societies, due to the global reach of East Asian economies and the increased political weight of East Asian societies. This book shows that the East Asian discourses have raised new concerns, and quite often the distinctive features are connected with local social and cultural traditions. However, the traditions are constantly being reinterpreted and surely there is nowhere any simple and coherent East Asian model that would be based on shared cultural traditions. Instead, tradition itself is a highly contested terrain, and the demarcation between private and public spheres in East Asia needs to take into account the changing meanings attached to all relevant institutions.

HISTORY AND CONCEPTUAL RICHNESS OF “PUBLIC” AND “PRIVATE”: FROM EUROPE TO EAST ASIA

The concepts of public and private themselves are very much Western in origin and are closely associated with particular historical developments in Europe. The fragmented and culturally diverse Greek ancient system of governance produced much of the foundation of Western philosophy and political science, from politeia (organized politics within poleis) and démokratia (democracy) to koinônia politikê (community politics, the ancestor of civil society) and koinôn (commonwealth or rapidly changing political league among poleis). It is the Greek world that left the heritage of critical thinking about the best possible solution to the practical issues of governance. The model also tied together the idea of manliness (adreia) and politics. It was the free men who took care of managing the public sphere and responding to all challenges in a rational manner after frank discussions. Aristotle also makes the observation that the hoplite warfare made it possible for many men to achieve military virtue while it was far more difficult to achieve the whole range of human virtues. There have always been limits on political participation, but some of the Greek poleis went the extra mile to encourage participation, Athens being the most
The consequences have been important for the European thinking on political participation and also on thinking about politics/society and gender roles. However, it was Aristotle who discussed in an honest manner the importance of maintaining the rule of law (nomos) while warning about the practical difficulties of choosing the wisest action or praxis (practice) in a specific context. The laws (nomoi), after all, are universal and as such (too) abstract. The sphere of politics for Aristotle is one of the prime examples of (many) paradoxes of human life: the actual politics involves an endless succession of compromises that will never do much justice to real philosophy and the beauty of laws, on which the whole activity is built (for more, see, Salkove, 2009, pp. 232-241).

While the thinking of Aristotle gives a good idea about the flexibility of the ancient Greeks to respond to changing social and political situations, the ancient Greeks also had more than their fair share of conservatism when it came to political ideas and attitudes. The concept of revolution was often expressed by “neòtera pragmata” (too new affairs) and the opposite of “new,” and potentially threatening ideas was seen to be ta patria, the ways of the ancestors. The real Greek patriotism meant more or less the same as keeping to the tradition (Cartledge, 2009, p. 87). The different Greek poleis were not mentally prepared to modify their ta patria, which was one of the main reasons why the poleis could never truly unify and ultimately protect their way of life against the other civilizations.

Much of the vocabulary and cultural package has been passed to the English language from Latin, and in the process, it was shaped by the experiences of the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire presented a model of a ruthless centralized authority that was capable of ruling huge areas with diverse cultures and traditions. The Roman thinking was very much based on earlier Greek ideas, but the Romans created a long-lived empire that developed further (or simplified) the ideas and made them a permanent fixture of the European scene. In terms of public/private distinction, it was the Roman Empire that established a well-functioning and unambiguous legal system that clearly defined the public and private spheres and what kind of legal principles applied to both of them. The idea of autonomous legal systems for different spheres was later only strengthened in Europe by the important role that the church carved for itself as an independent actor. However, the Roman Empire also kept alive some ideals of its Republican origins.

Res publica and societas civilis both are associated with the serious ideals of the Roman republic: the Roman civil duties and rights were a basis that made Rome a superpower and distinguished it from its neighbors. Even in eroded forms, they continued to inspire people for centuries, and, for instance, the French revolution in politics and art found great inspiration from the Roman republic. Of course, Imperial Rome with its excesses and military repression (or glory) has also inspired many subsequent European political systems. The modern state with its emphasis on effective administration, rule of law, and homogeneity in terms of culture owes much to the example of the Roman Empire.

In the field of the private sphere, the key concepts owe much to an understanding shaped by the Greek oikos (home, house), which still serves even in English as the root of such terms as economy and ecology. Oikos stood in clear contrast to public sphere and the specific ideas about political participation that were discussed above. Furthermore, oikos established a clear differentiation of gender roles within the unit. Meanwhile, domus is the Latin for house or home and normally refers to a range of houses from a palace to city houses that the wealthy and middle classes owned. The masses, the vast majority of people, in Rome lived in insulae, incredibly cramped apartment blocks, while many wealthy people lived in countryside villas. The Roman domus was interestingly multifunctional, as there was no clear distinction between rooms meant solely for private use. Public rooms and front rooms were sometimes even rented out to merchants if the house was next to a busy street. As the slaves took care of most household tasks (and slept outside), the original, quite elitist domus is a strange root for modern
understanding of “domestic” as a unit that isolates the “family” from the rest of the society. What we can learn from the Roman domus is that people of different classes and gender did have a remarkable variety of life styles and that the Romans had little reason for making a strong separation between their domestic and (other) social life. However, it was the state, through legislation and strict enforcement of that legislation, which clearly distinguished the public and private spheres.

The elitist interpretation of the family unit in the sense of domus/domestic is by no means restricted to only English and other European languages, which operate with the words related to the Latin original. Japanese counterparts ie and kateinai use, in a very similar manner, a concept of house/household that is associated with a quite restricted concept of suitable “house” as a unit for social life. Originally, the Chinese kanji for house stood for an affluent house that could keep a pig/swine under its roof. By definition ie (house) in Japan came to signify a kind of model family, which was relatively well off and in good esteem. The Confucian thinking in its great variety in Japan, Korea, and China has always added a lot of weight to the continuation of the family unit, although in these societies and during the centuries, the unit itself has been interpreted very differently. It should also be noted that with modernization the ie system (ie seido) was elevated by legislative means into a state policy in Japan. Furthermore, the uniform paternalistic family register system with the “heads of family” (usually men) with their official duties was a key component of the Meiji ie system, and it has survived all the democratization and other changes in Japanese politics and society until these days (cf. Merviö, 2008). This book has many articles (section 2) dealing with the issue of family institution in East Asia and the easiest way to introduce the variety of experiences is to state that family continues to serve as the basic unit of society and culture in East Asia. However, this does not mean that families would be immune to social transformations and policy changes. Furthermore, Yoshimi Kataoka’s chapter provides a very insightful discussion about the specific pressures that the ie institution is facing in Japan.

When we move to the East Asian scene, it becomes evident that societies have developed in different ways in different cultural, political, social, and economic contexts. In addition, academic disciplines are developed differently, and both the key concepts and fields of study are often understood differently. This book demonstrates how public policies in East Asian societies tend to reflect both the cultural traditions and dynamic changes in society and economic conditions. Having discussed above the origins of public sphere in Europe, there is a clear contrast in East Asia in terms of traditional ideas about social participation and activism, and about the social rules that grew up in Europe to support that kind of behavior. Among these are equality (among peers), openness, tolerance, and all the small niceties of civilised behavior on which civil society is built. It would be an enormous mistake to dismiss East Asian democratization as a doomed cultural implant, which has no chance of success. It would also be dishonest to use a reconstructed tradition of a mixed bag of Western ideals and use it as a proof that the Western societies have made these ideals part of their social DNA and cannot go wrong with these issues.

For instance, Japan has, due to its history of modernization, a political tradition of central state dominating social development. Civil society remains weak in the Western sense of the word, and, for instance, Japanese politics leaves little room for NGOs in anything resembling “high politics,” and the expectation is that this realm belongs to the government. In addition, the business sector and media are all too happy to seek close cooperation with the government rather than defend their autonomy. On the other hand, the family institution continues to play an important role in Japan, as well as in all East Asian societies. In fact, the states prefer to leave many policy areas for the families to take care of. However, there are limits to how much the family institution can be stretched to respond to new and all needs alike.
SCOPE OF THE BOOK

This book includes discussions of many different related topics, all adding to understanding the delicate interplay between the public and private spheres in East Asia. In section 1, the authors analyze the mechanisms and reality of public and private spheres, with a special reference to East Asia. This section analyses the theoretical ramifications of distinguishing the public and private spheres in the context of East Asia and its cultural and social traditions. This book helps to transcend all kind of boundaries, including the national boundaries and boundaries of academic disciplines to search explanations to developments in East Asia. East Asia-specific discussions, of course, are linked to developments elsewhere, but there is also a need to analyze the impact of local traditions without becoming blind to changes in these traditions.

In section 2, the book takes the issue of family institution in the East Asian context and proceeds to analyze family-related policies and social issues in different societies in the region. Of course, family is the key institution of any society, but in the East Asian context, it has played and continues to play a particularly important role in social development, often adopting roles that elsewhere belong to other social actors and institutions. Furthermore, in reference to public and private spheres, the family institution in the East Asian context provides a good chance to test how these spheres interact and how East Asian models are evolving.

In section 3, the book moves to health and care-related issues and policies. These issues often inhabit the grey area between the private and public spheres. Furthermore, families are still very much involved in these issues, as the East Asian examples clearly demonstrate, and in many ways, this section builds on the discussion in the preceding chapter while the issue of health finance tends to place these discussions more to the realm of public policy.

Section 4 deals with the modern societies facing social problems and social risks. While societies have modernized and people have become aware of the risks and global connectedness of the modern global society, the particular modes of “risk societies” are rather varied, reflecting various cultural and social traditions. The chapters in the preceding sections already discussed at length the particular problems and social risks that accompany social development in different Asian countries, especially the fields of family, health, and care. In this section, the book continues to areas where social development has been going astray for reasons that may have something to do with domestic developments, but also with dramatic developments and occurrences of risks that have posed challenges to the usual methods of social development, such as the parliamentary democratic process. For instance, the chapter by Lih-Rong Lillian Wang, Yun-Tung Wang, and Peishan Yung introduces the idea of using social quality as a framework for analyzing social development in Taiwan. Of course, the approaches focusing on social quality provide very different perspective than ones that emphasize primarily economic and political development. Once again, this study shows the importance of the family institution in the Taiwanese context. Furthermore, it shows that Taiwanese social development and social quality itself has taken its own path that is quite different from the European one (which gave rise to the use of social quality as a concept and indicator within the context of the European Union).

However, among the societies covered in this book, Japan is different from all societies in the region and elsewhere, while it shares so many social problems—and risks—with the rest of the world. In many ways, Japan, with its experiences and problems, is paving the way for a very different kind of modernity and relationship with risk—and the limitations of public policy. Japan was unfortunate to encounter the impact of highly improbable catastrophe, or more precisely, a triple catastrophe, in 2013. Furthermore, Japan stands alone in its corner of the world, politically more isolated from its neighbors than any other
highly developed affluent society. In times of sudden crisis, it is easy to see how societies cope very differently in their response and how the rest of the world perceives and reacts to the same event. After the crisis, Japanese politics have rapidly turned to more nationalistic in their orientation and distanced themselves from the traditions that gave birth to and nurtured democracy, civil society, and direct social participation. After gaining political support largely to its economic initiatives and strong posture against Chinese aggression, the Abe cabinet decided to spend its political capital to push through a vaguely phrased secrecy legislation, which surely highlights how different Japan is from its last remaining allies. While the baffling legislation was pushed through the Diet the number two LDP leader, Secretary-General Shigeru Ishiba, likened peaceful public protests against the new secrecy bill being introduced by his government to “acts of terrorism.” The message was clear: politics belongs to politicians while transparency and too many questions or making noise are not part of the genuine Japanese political tradition. While the government may not want to immediately use the law to silence the media and make everything secret in the legislation, there are too many similarities with the pre-war Japanese laws and politics that did not end well. Surveys have indicated that the majority of Japanese people did not see much need for such a legislation but few worried about civil liberties either. The cabinet was right in calculating that most people do not like noisy demonstrators or media anymore than whistleblowers shaking the social order. The Japanese policy choices and strong continued support for the Abe administration so soon after the triple catastrophe surely look unusual. Nuclear power enjoys government support while the situation in Fukushima is far from being under control. Meanwhile, the government appears to equate basic civil liberties and freedoms as subversive activities. Of course, these opinions would find much support in neighboring countries like China, North Korea, and Russia.

Nassim Nicholas Taleb (2010) uses the term “black swan” to discuss such events in social development and (human) history. The real insight of Taleb’s book is that a naïve projection of the future from the past is often pointless and misleading. Taleb’s example of the turkey’s feeling of safety based on consistently good experiences of human race (until the big surprise; Taleb, 2010, pp. 40-41) has a lot in common with the complacency and security that people in Japan have felt as long as it seemed that modern orderly society and a well-functioning public sector can prepare for anything. Japanese society has gone through such catastrophes of epic proportion as the Hiroshima/Nagasaki bombings and the triple shock of 2011, which help to teach the lesson that there is no such thing as perpetual social progress and infallible leadership. Human life is fragile, and unexpected dangerous things happen all the time. Human societies often deal with the very basic issues of organizing themselves. Politics rarely are successful in meeting the changing needs of people or even guiding societies to their chosen policy goals, but for the first time in history, there is emerging some kind of understanding that people of the world share a common planet and increasingly similar social problems. Cooperation and learning would always beat other more “traditional” policy choices, no matter which level of policy choices we focus on.

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REFERENCES

