Confucian Democracy in East Asia

This book explores a mode of democracy that is culturally relevant and socially practicable in the contemporary pluralistic context of historically Confucian East Asian societies, by critically engaging with the two most dominant theories of Confucian democracy – Confucian communitarianism and meritocratic elitism. The book constructs a mode of public reason (and reasoning) that is morally palatable to East Asians who are still saturated in Confucian customs by reappropriating Confucian familialism, and using this perspective to theorize on Confucian democratic welfarism and political meritocracy. It then applies the theory of Confucian democracy to South Korea, arguably the most Confucianized society in East Asia, 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.

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Confucian Democracy in East Asia

*Theory and Practice*

SUNGMOON KIM

*City University of Hong Kong*
to my parents
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Nowadays, political theorists are under immense pressure to choose a certain, highly technical, type of political theory or clarify the genre of their work, most often between analytical political philosophy, history of political thought, or critical theory. In this milieu, increasingly, to write a book that does not fit neatly in one particular genre of political theory often proves to be a liability: methodological impurity, the fit problem with leading journals, and, ultimately, the identity problem – a political philosopher, a political theorist, an intellectual historian, or a social critic? But, traditionally, political theory has always been in part normative-analytical, in part evaluative-descriptive, and in part historical-textual, and as a discipline it has long resisted being identified with one particular genre precisely because of what it deals with, that is, the entirety of political life, which requires skills and insights from all subgenres of political theory to make holistic sense of our political life. This is what my teachers at Yonsei and Maryland taught me, and although as a student I was sometimes frustrated by their methodological eclecticism and strong emphasis on the supreme task of political theory (particularly democratic theory) – to articulate and help improve what the citizens of a theorist’s concern are already doing – I now realize and appreciate the deepest intellectual debt I owe to them.

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