The title of this book points to a volume that aims to make a long-overdue contribution to the analysis of welfare regimes in East Asia by focussing on gender. A number of books have revisited the welfare regimes literature—which has studied European and North American states, originating in the work of Esping-Andersen\(^1\)—in the light of practice in East Asia. Sung and Pascall’s book is the first to aim at a systematic gendering of these arrangements, specifically addressing the question of how the history of Confucian “values and practices of gender difference” (p. 1) shapes current welfare practice in Japan, South Korea, China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Debate among scholars on whether the common features observed in welfare systems in this region can be attributed to their Confucian heritage has been continuing for the last two decades, but there has been little consensus about the reasons for the commonalities observed, with some scholars associating these with "productivist" or "developmental" states for example. It has been rare for countries in the region to be called "welfare states" at all, since East Asian states have historically provided only minimal welfare, or have, as in Japan, achieved welfare goals not through state programmes, but through employment-based entitlements. However, analysis of the gender dynamics of welfare in East Asia has largely been notable by its absence, with a handful of exceptions.\(^2\)

Sung and Pascall’s book begins with a comparative analysis of broad statistical trends regarding gender distinctions in Japan, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea along five parameters—employment, incomes, public provision of childcare, time allocated to paid and unpaid work and “power”, measured through the representation of women in parliaments. They argue that, despite some differences among the five cases, this analysis reveals some common features, notably “a hierarchical model of the family, prioritizing male breadwinners” with “strong assumptions of family, market and voluntary sector responsibility rather than state responsibility”, as well as a “distinctive, vertical family structure” that makes women subservient not only to husbands, but also to parents-in-law (p. 10). Their analysis

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counterposes this “Confucian family system” against an unspecified ideal type of the “Western family”, and sets as the objective of the volume a consideration of “the impact of Confucian culture on gender equality in East Asia” (p. 25).

The seven substantive chapters examine particular aspects of gender practice, including policies and practice relating to work-family balance in South Korea (Sirin Sung) and Taiwan (Jessie Shu-Yun Wu); how gender is dealt with in government in South Korea (Sook-Yeon Won), Hong Kong (Lai Ching Leung) and Japan (Emiko Ochiai and Ken’ichi Johshita); domestic violence and perceptions of gender in Hong Kong (Lai Ching Leung); gender and disability in rural China (Xiaoyuan Shang, Karen R. Fisher and Ping Guo); and Japan’s version of “culture wars” against what is termed “gender freedom” by opponents (Kimio Ito). Most of these chapters are fairly narrow, focussing on a specific subject matter rather than providing a broad overview of the role of culture in shaping the context for social policy and practice in each place.

While these chapters provide useful empirical material on patterns of gender inequality, most fail to address the question of exactly how “Confucian culture” contributes to what they observe. The authors usually begin with some kind of statement about these being Confucian societies, and then go on to detail a pattern of gender inequality that is said to confirm the existence of this Confucian orientation, often without showing in what sense Confucianism is actively deployed by social actors, or the state, in justifying particular arrangements. This is particularly problematic in relation to China and Hong Kong. For example, Leung’s chapter on Hong Kong begins by stating that “Confucianism was the basic philosophy of the colonial government” (p. 116)—the Confucian British?—and has remained at the ideological core of the government’s values until the present. Leung provides a fascinating glimpse of how gendered assumptions about the role of women in precipitating domestic violence remain current among a significant proportion of social workers there, and the implications of these assumptions for the treatment of such cases. Attributing this pattern to “Confucian values” means Leung does not explore the role of class in contributing to these prejudicial attitudes, or examine the relationship between Hong Kong’s minimalist welfare provision and the particular combination of laissez faire mercantile capitalism and hands-off colonial governance that has shaped practice in the territory since British rule began in the mid-nineteenth century. Here, as in a number of other chapters, “Confucian” becomes an umbrella label for all sorts of policies and practices that result in gender unequal outcomes.

In my view, as deployed in this book, this Confucian label serves mainly to obscure, rather than to clarify, the role of culture in the patterns of practices the authors discuss. Most
of the contributors would have done well to heed the warning of Ochiai and Johshita in their excellent chapter, “Prime Ministers’ Discourse in Japan’s Reforms since the 1980s: Traditionalization of Modernity rather than Confucianism.” Ochiai and Johshita write: “We must not be naïve when it comes to using Confucianism as the key factor to explain the contemporary state of East Asia. Confucianism is not simply traditional, but has been imported, reshaped and used to suit the aims of rulers of the era” (p. 155). In this chapter, Ochiai and Johshita describe the complex interaction between nationalist, Confucian and modern discourses and practices, as well as processes of industrial and demographic change, and how these have converged to shape the politics of gender and welfare at particular moments in time. They point out that the mobilization of “tradition” in the Meiji era drew on Confucian doctrines but with an implicit model of the “male breadwinner/female carer” family imported from Europe and North America, in a context where Japanese women already had a relatively high level of participation in economic endeavours.

Assuming a priori that it is “Confucian culture” that is behind patterns of gender inequality leaves many other factors unexplored. What about the impact of industrialization and economic policy, and the particular ways labour has been deployed in state projects? How does social class feature in these arrangements, and what is the role of unions in gender politics? What about demographic change? How have processes of individualization shaped how the family operates in these states? How similar are the expectations of family care and support in the model of what this book calls “Confucian welfare” to the “conservative” family-based system of southern European states described by Esping-Andersen? Such questions should certainly be explored by future work on welfare in East Asia.

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