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The reform of the developmental welfare state in East Asia

Kwon H.-ju The reform of the developmental welfare state in East Asia
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This article examines social policy reforms in East Asia and whether the welfare states in the region became more inclusive in terms of social protection while maintaining their developmental credentials. It draws on findings from the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) project on social policy in East Asia, covering China, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China, Japan, Malaysia, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Taiwan Province of China, and Thailand. It shows that East Asian economies responded differently to the crisis in terms of welfare reform. While Singapore and Hong Kong maintained the basic structure of the selective developmental welfare state, Korea, Taiwan, and, to a lesser extent, Thailand implemented social policy reforms toward a more inclusive one. Despite such different responses, policy changes are explained by the proposition of the developmental welfare state: the instrumentality of social policy for economic development and realization of policy changes through democratization (or the lack of it).

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Key words: welfare reform, economic crisis, developmental welfare state, East Asia, Republic of Korea

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Introduction

There has been a significant reform of the welfare state in East Asian economies since the Asian economic crisis of 1997–1998. The Republic of Korea, Taiwan Province of China, and Thailand, for instance, introduced new programs and extended existing ones in order to protect those who were affected by the economic crisis. Others implemented various social policy measures to confront difficult economic situations. This article will examine the social policy reforms in East Asia and whether the welfare states in the region became more inclusive in terms of social protection while maintaining their developmental credentials. It will draw on findings from the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development UNRISD project on social policy in East Asia, covering China, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of China, Japan, Malaysia, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, Taiwan Province of China, and Thailand. (Note that the scope of the research is focused mostly on the countries that have made significant economic progress. However, to obtain a complete picture of social

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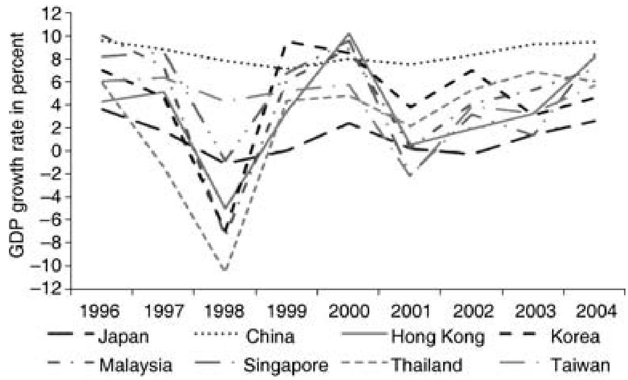

Figure 1. Gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate in East Asia.
Source: Asian Development Bank (www.adb.org/Economics/default.asp; date last accessed September 2004)

protection in East Asia, research into social protection in low-income East Asian countries is necessary.) This project was part of a larger research project entitled Social Policy in the Late Industrializers. The researchers participating in the East Asia project were, for the most part, based in the societies under study, so they were able to provide first-hand observation and in-depth knowledge of their subject. The research project approached social policy reform in East Asia by looking at the political dynamics and the institutional dimensions of welfare developmentalism.

Prior to the welfare reform in the late 1990s, the welfare state in East Asia was set up to be instrumental to economic development. Social protection tended to focus on a small section of the population considered strategic for economic development, such as workers in large-scale enterprises and the public sector, while it excluded the vulnerable in society. After the reforms, the welfare state was extended and strengthened in terms of the level of benefits and coverage, although it still falls far short of the advanced welfare states in Western Europe. This raises two important questions: are recent social policy reforms in East Asia pointing toward a socially inclusive and democratic welfare state? And can East Asia maintain the developmental credentials of the welfare state while undergoing reform? If these questions can be answered affirmatively, it will help policy makers in developing countries to draw policy implications from the East Asian experience. According to an initial observation, it seems that most East Asian economies affected by the Asian crisis had a strong economic recovery (see Figure 1), a fact that warrants thorough research on the social policy dynamics.

However, some scholars are cautious about concluding that there is a significant breakthrough in the East Asian welfare state (Kwon & Holliday, 2007). They argue that it has not changed from its productivist form. It is certainly true that reforms after the Asian economic crisis did not bring the welfare state up to the standards of the Scandinavian welfare state. Nevertheless, one cannot say that it has remained the same: the changes in the welfare state have been important. Perhaps the conceptual framework used by the scholars is inadequate to gauge the extent of those changes. The project on East Asian late industrializers used the concept of the developmental welfare state – divided into the selective and inclusive types – to look into those changes as well as continuity.

The selective form of the developmental welfare state, which was pioneered by Bismarck, was set up in East Asian economies to contribute to economic development, using social policy as an instrument for economic policy (Gough, 2004; Kwon, 1997). Sectors of the population considered strategic for economic development were favored in terms of social protection, whereas those in need were left outside the welfare state. The inclusive form of welfare state places a greater emphasis on the developmental nature of social policy, while giving equal importance to all citizens with regard to social protection. An early example of this form is the Scandinavian experiment with active labor market policy in the 1930s (Dahl, Dropping, & Lødemel, 2001). The European Union's new policy paradigm of the social investment state is also in line with this thinking (Clasen & Clegg, 2006). To sum up, the selective form of the developmental welfare state has the characteristics of productivism, selective orientation, and authoritarian political background, while the inclusive form can be characterized as based on productivism, universal social investment, and democratic governance.

From this conceptualization, we can hypothesize that economic reform that could change the orientation of economic policy would also require different sets of social policies in order to benefit from the developmental credentials of social policy. Given that so much policy emphasis is placed on economics under the arrangement of the developmental welfare state, it is reasonable to expect that social policy reform may take place in tandem with economic reform. The crux of the matter is, however, the direction of social policy reform. Observers with neoliberal tendencies argue that economic reforms amid increasing global competition would render the welfare state marginal (Beck, 2000; Ohmae, 1995). How, then, did economic reform in East Asia result in the reinforcement of the welfare state? Did East Asian economies respond to economic crisis and reform in a similar manner?

Similarities and differences in East Asian welfare states

While East Asian economies share the characteristics of the developmental welfare state, they differ in many respects, reflecting different economic and political backgrounds. The body of literature on East Asia has shown that there are two major clusters of the welfare states in the region (Goodman, White, & Kwon, 1998; Gough, 2004; Ramesh, 2002; Tang, 2000). While social insurance schemes are central to the welfare states in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, provident funds are central to social policy in Singapore, Malaysia, and, to a lesser extent, Hong Kong, where publicly financed social assistance programs are equally important (Chua, 2005). It remains to be seen which of these two clusters China and Thailand will move closer to. China has carried out a reform of the socialist welfare state where a dual system of urban and rural policy operated. Thailand is still at an earlier stage in the development of social policy, compared with other 'Asian tiger economies', but introduced universal health insurance after the economic crisis.

There are also significant differences in the policy paradigm for economic development. In Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, the aim of economic policy was to build a vertically integrated economy where some of the strategic industries were sustained by a strong state regardless of their international competitiveness. Export-oriented economic development was the centerpiece within this framework. In contrast, Singapore and Hong Kong successfully built an entrepôt economy, where international capital was given better infrastructure with less state regulation. They became key centers of international finance, commerce, and trade in East Asia.

Malaysia and Thailand have also been successful in economic development, and their policy frameworks have some elements of both Northeast Asian and Southeast Asian characteristics, as well as their own. For example, Malaysia implemented a New Economic Policy in 1970 (renamed the National Development Policy in 2000), which includes programs to increase domestic capital owned by the native Malays by up to 30 percent. China is also unique in the sense that it introduced a market economy while dismantling the socialist one without radical changes in the political structure.

Welfare reform since the Asian economic crisis

There were considerable downsides in the East Asian developmental welfare state before the Asian economic crisis. The preoccupation with economic development led to the welfare state being predominantly composed of social welfare programs for core industrial workers, while leaving the vulnerable sections of the population outside the system. Social policy tended to reinforce – rather than ameliorate – inequality in income and social strata. In terms of the political context, the developmental welfare state evolved in the context of authoritarian politics. Such attributes led to social grievances among low-income people, including farmers, informal sector workers, and other weak sections of the population. Nevertheless, the system was maintained, partly because of the authoritarian political regimes, and partly because of the sustained economic growth, which eventually trickled down to the lower strata of income groups. At the time of the economic crisis, it became clear that the developmental welfare state could not cope with social challenges in an economic downturn. In particular, the developmental welfare state was not able to tackle high unemployment since it assumed full employment (see Table 1). Against this backdrop, a number of East Asian governments implemented social policy reforms while undergoing the process of democratization.

East Asian economies, however, responded differently to the economic crisis in terms of welfare reforms, though they all tried to maintain the developmental credentials of welfare states. While Singapore and Hong Kong maintained the basic structure of the selective developmental welfare state, Korea and Taiwan have implemented social policy reforms toward a more inclusive developmental welfare state.

In the wake of the economic crisis, Thailand experimented with more universal provision, including a universal healthcare program – the 30-baht scheme (now free of charge) – and income-maintenance programs. The 30-baht health plan allows those who are not covered by existing health plans to have access to the public healthcare system, requiring patients to pay only 30 baht per visit (approx. US$1). The scheme is a kind of tax-financed healthcare system, providing a limited range of treatments because the weak infrastructure of medical facilities was not reinforced in conjunction with the new plan. The scheme was a bold move by now-deposed Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, but, according to the Thai research team, the 30-baht system would not go beyond Thai government budgetary capability (Tangcharoensathien, Teokul, & Chanwongpaisarn, 2005).

Japan had already implemented welfare reforms in response to both an economic recession and an aging population throughout the 1990s, well before the Asian crisis. This stemmed not only from differences in economic strategy between Japan and other East Asian

Table 1. Unemployment rate in East Asia (percent).

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Japan	3.4	3.4	4.1	4.7	4.7	5.0	5.4	5.3	n.a
China	3.0	3.1	3.1	3.1	3.1	3.6	4.0	4.3	4.2
Hong Kong	2.8	2.2	4.7	6.2	4.9	5.1	7.3	7.9	6.8
Korea	2.0	2.6	7.0	6.3	4.1	3.8	3.1	3.4	3.5
Malaysia	2.6	2.4	3.2	3.4	3.1	3.6	3.4	3.6	3.5
Singapore	3.0	2.4	2.5	3.6	3.5	2.8	4.3	4.7	4.0
Thailand	1.1	0.9	3.4	3.0	2.4	2.6	1.8	2.2	2.1
Taiwan	2.6	2.7	2.7	2.9	3.0	4.6	5.2	5.0	4.4

Sources: Asian Development Bank, Asian Development Outlook 2002, 2005. Figures for Japan: Japan Statistics Bureau, Japan Statistical Yearbook 2005, www.stat.go.jp/english/data/nenkan/1431-16.htm [date last accessed April 2006].

economies, but also from political dynamics. According to Peng's (2005) research on the political dimension of social policy in Japan, the concept of the developmental welfare state may have limitations in explaining welfare reform in Japan. She contends that social policy decisions are no longer predominantly taken by elite bureaucrats but that civil society groups, such as women's organizations, are actively engaged in policy making, and economic growth is not the main priority in social policy making. In short, Japan has become a pluralist society in which no particular policy orientation dominates social policy decisions. However, recent policy innovations, such as Long-Term Care Insurance and the Angel Plan (a program to help with child-rearing), are responses to the decline in fertility and population aging, which is seen as a fundamental threat to Japan's economic competitiveness. This shows that the proposition of the instrumentality of social policy for economic policy still seems valid. Peng's argument also opens an interesting debate on other East Asian economies.

With respect to Korea and Taiwan, productivity and international competitiveness deteriorated during the 1990s, due to the rise in costs, such as increase in wages, and competition from other East Asian countries, such as China and Thailand. As for Korea, the wage increases were higher than labor productivity in this period. Social policy remained weak, although the main social policy programs that had started with workers were expanded beyond large-scale workplaces, and public assistance for the poor was limited by means-testing. Prior to the Asian economic crisis, the Korean government implemented reforms designed to move toward a high-technology and productivity-based economy. Political parties, trade unions, and civil society groups strongly opposed it because they feared such economic reforms would lead to social disaster, given the inadequacy of social protection. The Asian economic crisis forced Korean society to accept this reform, and at the same time produced a surprise victory for the center-left opposition in the presidential election at the end of 1997. The new Korean government established a tripartite committee, which was able to produce a broad-based social consensus for economic reform while strengthening the welfare state. Civil society organizations played an important role in this process. For example, the introduction of the Minimum Living Standard Guarantee was helped by the fact that civil society groups played an active role in promoting the program, which was subject to political pressure under the authoritarian government. The Employment Insurance Program, which consisted of unemployment benefits and training schemes, was extended and strengthened in terms of coverage and benefits, and a new social assistance program was also introduced to replace the old one (Yi & Lee, 2005). The fragmented National Health Insurance was also integrated into a National Health Insurance Corporation. Through this process, the notion of social rights – together with economic development – became an important rationale of the welfare state.

Although Taiwan was not as directly nor severely hit by the Asian crisis as Korea, the policy response was no less substantial. Like Korea, Taiwan faced new challenges during the 1990s. Chen's study (2005) points out that Taiwanese investment in China took off early in the 1990s and increased 16 times over the course of a decade. In particular, manufacturing industries searching for cheaper labor moved their operations to China, leading to a rise in unemployment among male workers. In response, technology-intense and high value-added industries, such as the information technology (IT) industry, were promoted as a strategic sector for the economy. The unemployment rate (3–5 percent in 1997–2002) was low by international standards, but for the developmental welfare state, which was based on full employment without unemployment insurance, it posed a serious challenge. Furthermore, it emerged that the unemployed were typically male workers from the manufacturing sectors, and they tended to remain unemployed longer than others.

Table 2. Extension of unemployment benefits (benefit coverage[a]).

	1997	1998	1999	2000	2003	2005
Korea	7.8	26.3	33.1	33.3	18.6	26.6
Taiwan	n.a.	n.a.	13.9	35.9	23.0	32.5

[a]Benefit coverage refers to percentage of unemployed people in receipt of unemployment benefits.
Sources: Korea Statistical Yearbook and Employment Insurance Review (Korea); Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of China and Council of Labour Affairs.

Chen (2005) maintains that the Asian economic crisis triggered a policy response to unemployment. In 1999, unemployment insurance, together with employment promotion schemes, was introduced. However a more active response came after 2000 when the new government of the Democratic Progressive Party came to office. The new government departed from the policies of the previous Kuomingtang government in terms of economic and social policy. After public consultation, the Taiwanese government reshaped the fragmented unemployment benefit systems and introduced the Employment Insurance Program (see Table 2). It is also important to note that National Health Insurance, covering the entire population, was introduced in 1995 before the economic crisis. Wong (2005), who examines the politics of health policy, argues that the expansion of the welfare state is related not only to economic reform, but also to the democratization process. His work clearly shows that the consolidation of National Health Insurance was an outcome of democratization.

In a nutshell, although social policy reform in Korea and Taiwan was triggered by the need for economic development, the newly elected governments carried out the reform with a social consensus and established the idea of social right as the main rationale of the welfare state.

Although Singapore and Hong Kong were not directly hit by the Asian economic crisis, they also suffered because of their economic links with other East Asian economies. With respect to Malaysia, the strict control of international capital movement brought in during the crisis enabled Malaysia to steer out of trouble. However, the tiger economies in Southeast Asia did not carry out major social policy reforms that might have changed the direction of the welfare state. This is also partly because there were no significant changes in economic strategies and partly because political continuity was maintained.

In Singapore, the Central Provident Fund (CPF) is the main anchor of the welfare state as well as the centerpiece of economic policy. It is a mandatory individual retirement saving system to which employees and employers contribute a certain portion of wages (33 percent in 2003). As Ramesh (2005) shows in his research, it has been used as an effective way of capital mobilization, making long-term capital available for economic development. Over the years, it has extended its functions to healthcare and education, for which members could draw a certain amount of money. More importantly they could use those savings toward housing purchase. Improved housing conditions meant better shelter and sanitation conditions, and improved workers' health, which in turn increased labor productivity. However, the system is very selective in the sense that it is strictly individualized with no redistributive mechanism between the rich and poor. Those unable to save regularly still lack a social safety net in times of need.

Despite some restrictive measures on trade unions and internal security, the government of the People's Action Party in Singapore has enjoyed legitimacy due to its economic performance and has been able to continue its economic and social policies (Chua, 2005). For example, during the economic crisis, the government lowered the contribution rate to the CPF from 20 to 13 percent for employers, while leaving the rate of employees at 20 percent. It aimed to ease the financial pressure on business without creating resistance from employees. The system maintained its basic structure and rationale. Singapore's real test will be whether the CPF can provide effective income protection for future retirees. Since most members invested the bulk of their savings in housing, there is a risk that a saturated housing market could make it difficult for retirees seeking to convert their property into an annuity.

Hong Kong went through a handover from the UK to China in 1997, which was a fundamental change in constitutional terms. Under Chinese sovereignty, it became Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. The first Chief Executive, Tung Chee-Hwa, signaled a new direction for social policy in which the state would provide a more generous social welfare while citizens would fulfill their duties under the guidance of Confucian values. Tung projected his government as a 'caring' authority, while at the same time emphasizing the citizens' responsibility for community and filial piety. According to Lee (2005), however, the Hong Kong government abandoned this idea in the wake of the Asian economic crisis. Instead, the government introduced a number of measures that aimed to reduce expenditure on social welfare, which was in clear contrast to its Northeast Asian neighbors.

Expenditure on education, healthcare, and social services has been under tight control. Social protection for the unemployed has not been introduced despite the rise in the unemployment rate. Despite such retrenchment, Hong Kong's public healthcare and social services, mostly free at the point of delivery, are still regarded as maintaining a high standard. However, Pearson's study strikes a somber note: social service in Hong Kong has been unable to overcome the 'otherness' felt by some people in the community (Pearson, 2005). Lee (2005) points out that the Hong Kong government began explicitly to play the role of a developmental state in order to improve its position as international entrepôt.

Developmental welfare states in transition

Despite the different responses of the East Asian economies to the economic crisis in Korea and Taiwan, on the one hand, and Singapore and Hong Kong on the other, policy changes can be explained by the propositions derived from the developmental welfare state: the instrumentality of social policy for economic development and realization of policy changes through democratization (or lack of it). To what extent can the welfare reform in Malaysia be explained? Will the emerging welfare states in China and Thailand be similar to those of their neighbors?

Malaysia adds an important diversity to the developmental welfare state. The historic background and institutional configuration of the welfare state in Malaysia parallels that of Singapore (Chua, 2005). However, the policy regime known as the New Economic Policy (NEP) in Malaysia is unique, not only in comparison with Singapore, but also in the context of East Asia. It was introduced in 1970 after the race riots to raise the Malays' share of the domestic capital to about 30 percent, and it managed to redistribute the share ownership and education opportunities in favor of the Malay population. Although it has been linked with some incidences of corruption and has caused resentment among the Chinese Malaysians, it was not a huge burden for non-Malay communities because it was implemented at a time when Malaysia was experiencing an extraordinary economic growth. The redistributive policy was related not so much to economic development as to political and racial background, which seems to be at odds with the hypothesis of the developmental welfare state. It is true that the NEP as a social policy is unique in East Asia, but one should also remember that other East Asian economies, such as Korea and Taiwan, carried out redistributive land reform soon after the Second World War at a time when land was the main source of wealth. It raises a theoretical question as to whether relatively equal income distribution is necessary in order for the state to pursue a developmentalist strategy while using social policy as an instrument.

It would be a precarious presumption to consider the emerging welfare systems in China and Thailand as developmental welfare states. Guan's (2005) research traces the changes in China. Social policy reform in China has two overarching concerns: reorganizing the welfare system in order to facilitate marketization of the economy, and preserving the stability of the prevailing political order. This clearly follows the logic of the selective strand of the developmental welfare state. This policy orientation has resulted in a dual system of social policy: urban and rural welfare systems. This dual system seems to be unable to reduce inequality, which has continued to grow: between the rich and poor, urban and rural, coastal and inner regions, and private and public sectors. It is also worth noting that the emerging social programs in China are based on the social insurance model, closer to the Northeast Asian cluster (Japan, Korea, and Taiwan), rather than on the provident model of Southeast Asia (Singapore and Malaysia).

In contrast, Thailand achieved a universal health insurance system to which all citizens have access. As in other developmental welfare states, the Thai social security system first protected the relatively well-off, while those without formal employers were left outside the system. This led to social grievance among low-income people, and the Thai Rak Thai Party was able to win a landslide victory mainly due to its commitment to universal health insurance coverage. Through this system, universal health insurance was achieved in 2002, in the wake of the Asian economic crisis which hit Thailand first. The Thai experience shows that the aspiration for universalism in social policy belongs not only to the Northeast Asian economies. At the same time, it is necessary to note that the Thai system has not yet instituted a comprehensive system in other areas of social protection, and that the sustainability of the healthcare system remains an issue.

Conclusion

What emerges from the research on social policy in East Asian late industrializers is that there is a huge variety in welfare systems in general, as well as in social response to the economic crisis. This should not be surprising, considering that East Asia is a large region that includes many different societies with unique cultures and histories. The research shows that there are at least two major trajectories in the developmental welfare state in East Asia. While Hong Kong and Singapore maintain their selective characteristics, in Korea and Taiwan – together with Japan, which has the most advanced welfare system, and Thailand, which has not yet constructed a comprehensive one – the welfare state has moved toward an inclusive model. The second trajectory clearly shows that it is possible to maintain developmentalist social policies while enhancing social inclusiveness.

It is also worth pointing out the context of such reforms. The East Asian economic crisis was a dramatic manifestation of globalization challenges facing fast-growing Asian economies. Contrary to the anticipation of many globalization theorists, social protection was extended in terms of coverage and strengthened in terms of quality of provision in some East Asian economies. There are two underpinning ideas in this response. Social policy was used as an instrument to alleviate the economic risk that most people were exposed to due to economic restructuring. This represents continuity in terms of the developmental nature of social policy in East Asia. As Rieger and Leibfried (2003) argue with respect to Germany, East Asian economies, particularly Korea and Taiwan, took on economic challenges arising from increasing global competition by extending social policy. In Singapore and Hong Kong, only measured social policy changes took place because their economies had already been open to the global market.

Notwithstanding the continuity, the selective nature of welfare coverage gave way to more inclusive coverage in Korea, Taiwan, and, to a lesser extent, Thailand. Social protection for the unemployed and the poor became established in the first two economies. This happened for two reasons. First, middle-class people, who were much less prone to economic risks than the lower-income groups, became more vulnerable after economic reform. They began to provide political support for the expansion of the welfare state. Second, democratization meant that diverse civil society organizations were able to make their voice heard in social policy making. Civil society organizations that advocated social protection for the poor and equity in healthcare took advantage of the political opportunity open to them due to democratization.

In the wider context of development, East Asian experience shows the synergy between social and economic development. In particular, it counters the assertion that policy efforts in social protection hinder economic growth in developing countries. Social policy has proved to be an effective instrument to help avoid economic crises. Through the democratic process, the welfare state can enhance its intrinsic quality of social inclusion. Therefore, it is useful to explore possibilities offered by the developmental welfare state model for other developing countries in light of the prevalent point of view that social policy should remain marginal in the development process.

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