

Trilogy on Modernization

JAEYEOL YEE | SEOUL NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Alternative Discourses on Modernization and Development: East Asian Perspectives. By Kyong-Dong Kim. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Pp. 271.

Korean Modernization and Uneven Development: Alternative Sociological Accounts. By Kyong-Dong Kim. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Pp. 286.

Confucianism and Modernization in East Asia: Critical Reflections. By Kyong-Dong Kim. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Pp. 267.

The Korean model of development is regarded as an exceptional achievement in the recent history of modernization. For overseas observers, the Korean model of modernization is highly impressive, both in economic growth and in political democratization. But most Koreans regard their motherland a country suffering from the paradox of affluence and democracy. People feel less happy now than those who lived in the underdeveloped era decades ago, and the suicide rate is the highest in the world. Discontent in the young generation is more serious and growing social conflict threatens social harmony. All these experiences raise the questions: what is the major driving force of Korean modernization, what has happened, and how can we explain the paradox.

Kim Kyong-Dong's trilogy provides a wonderful answer. This three-volume series is a magnificent synthesis of questions and debates over modernization, development, and Confucianism in the context of Korea and East Asia. The trilogy is composed of interrelated topics: the first volume deals with the theoretical and definitional issues of modernization and development, the second volume pursues specific historical issues and trajectories of Korean development, and the third volume covers the cultural

impact of Confucianism in East Asian development. Let me briefly recapitulate the main arguments of each volume first.

The first volume appraises the history and reformulation of the traditional and Eurocentric theory of modernization by critically reformulating it from the vantage point of East Asian societies. His idea of modernization is summarized as a “tilted acculturation from the historically advanced specific mode of modernity.” In this process, he emphasizes the active role of the hosting countries, wielded by political and cultural selectivity. His argument on modernization naturally resonates with the idea of multiple modernities. Modernization is an adaptive change, not necessarily a smooth transition from traditional to modern society, and often results in political conflicts and moral disorder. As a logical step, he raises the question of “What is development.” He argues that, contrary to historical modernization, development is a generic and trans-historical process; thus, it can be and must be measured by core development values, both at the personal and community levels. Personal happiness, conditioned by the quality of life and life opportunities, reveals the level of self-fulfillment; and community-level happiness, habituated by cultural-moral flourishing, can be measured by structural flexibility and social quality. His idea of cultured development resonates with Confucian idealism, represented by benevolence for others, righteous social order, harmony, and social trust. It is very interesting that his ideal-typical image of a cultured, advanced society is a revival of the ancient Confucian utopia, a responsible and voluntary welfare society, governed by “decentralized plural communitarian collectivism.”

In the second volume, the author applies his theoretical and conceptual framework to Korean modernization. Compared to the preceding explanations given by state-centered political scientists or institutional economists, as a sociologist Kim emphasizes more of the cultural aspects of modernization, such as aesthetic sensibility and cognitive orientations. Although Korean modernization was heavily conditioned by the country’s position in the world system, and her institution-building was triggered by the US, Korean modernization was heavily stimulated and constrained at the same time by internal factors. In other words, habits of the hearts of Koreans, such as personalism, connectivism, collectivism, particularism, ritualism, hierarchical authoritarianism, and status-power orientation did not change, and exerted fundamental influence on the whole process. Judging from his theoretical framework, the role of political and cultural selectivity was crucial to this adaptive change. Considering the abruptness of social change in terms of quantity and quality, exemplified by the collapse of the traditional dynasty,

abrupt liberation, division of the country, tragic war, political upheaval, and rapid urbanization, Korean modernization cannot be explained without mentioning the deliberateness of mobilization and organization by political elites. From the vantage point of decades of observation, the author enlists what has transpired in the process of Korean modernization, both achievements in a positive direction and problems in a negative direction. In wrapping up his detailed discussion of social change, he introduces the *Yin-Yang* dialectic to explain the nature of international acculturation, internal adaptive change and changing positions of different cultural elements. He explains the changing value positions of economic prosperity versus democracy, economic values versus other social values, industrialism as opposed to agrarian values, and materialistic values versus spiritual values. It is also very interesting that he calls Korean democracy a myth, a culturally and structurally lagged phenomenon. What he finds is a striking resemblance between traditional and contemporary political culture. After reviewing the working of political parties, political process and practices, decision-making in politics, and political participation, he concludes, "it is rather mysterious that political actors are unable to shed such outdated, irrational, and unethical modes of action, stubbornly clinging to the old cultural patterns and getting stuck in anachronistic structural mechanisms." He finds the answer for this kind of conundrum in a lack of public-mindedness and public accountability.

The final volume deals with Asian values, represented by the influence of Confucianism. The author compares Korea, China, and Japan in the two waves of modernization, the first from the 19th to early 20th century, and the second after World War II. By placing Confucianism as a reference point, he shows there is a wide variation in and among the three countries. He interprets the volatile process with a selective-adaptive model of modernization. After a meta-theoretical review of existing literature on Confucianism and modernization of East Asia, he finds that the perceptions and viewpoints of previous authors have swung from one extreme to another, and back again. He asks whether Asian values betrayed the development, or changed economic situations triggered by financial crisis betrayed Asian values. The author's position on Confucianism is rather eclectic. Confucianism has many faces, from a religious and philosophical system to the lifestyles practiced by ordinary people in everyday life. The strength and weakness of Asian values are selectively materialized by series of choices and historical conditions. He is very kind in enlisting both sides, but less kind in explaining the generating mechanism of this dynamic process.

After reading this trilogy, I was overwhelmed by the scale and scope of the argument. I was also impressed by the sense of balance penetrating the work. First, he maintained the concept of modernization, which is regarded as an outmoded paradigm by the left who favor world systems or dependency perspectives. Yet he restricts some criticism by including negative effects of modernization as a part of his model. Second, he generalized his theory of development by conceptualizing “developmental values” both at the personal and community level. His proposal resonates with recent operational efforts, including the Better Life Index (OECD) and National Wellbeing Accounts (NEF). Third, the author expounded his argument on multiple modernities by incorporating cultural elements and historical background. Modernization theory has often been criticized as ahistorical by nationalist-minded social historians, but he advanced a history-laden and culture-blended modernization theory, and thus successfully distinguishes himself from atheoretical social historians. Finally, he demonstrates the possibility of an Asian way of scholarship on the issue of modernization and development. By vigorously combining domestic concepts, such as *nunchi*, *han*, *kibun*, *sinparam*, etc., and by utilizing Confucian concepts, such as *tao*, *yin-yang*, *chung-yung*, etc., he broadens a new frontier for a culturally indigenous theory of development. In sum, the trilogy is a great accomplishment not only for the author, but also for the Korean sociological community, channeling their distinctive experience of modernization with global academia.