In Focus
29 November 2019

EAI Seminar and Book Launch:
Culture and Governance in East Asia

Professor Hong Hai, Adjunct Professor, Nanyang Technological University, presented his new book titled “Culture and Governance in East Asia” at EAI’s seminar and book launch. In his book, Professor Hong touched on two main themes, the first was that culture “rules” governance and the second was the dichotomy between democratic and authoritarian governance.

In his presentation, Professor Hong discussed the tenets of Confucian culture, stating that it emphasises benevolence, decorum, loyalty, righteousness and filial piety. He also argues that in East Asia, Confucianism is a common denominator in the cultures of China, Japan, Korea and Singapore. Confucian culture extols respect for authority and communitarian values, and a country steeped in Confucian culture is more inclined to accept a more authoritarian form of governance over one that allows unfettered personal freedom.

Professor Hong also argues that democracies vary in a continuum from liberal to authoritarian. He explains that democracy is a form of government in which the people have a voice in the exercise of power, typically through elected representatives. On the other hand, authoritarianism is a system which favours “obedience to authority at the expense of personal freedom”. Therefore, whether it is an authoritarian or liberal government, it must be benevolent and there must be an orderly means to remove a bad leader. Professor Hong uses the example of Singapore, which by most accounts, has been very successful over the last 50 years as a soft benevolent democracy. The example of China as a meritocratic democracy was also brought up: leaders are elected by the 90-million-member Communist Party to look after the welfare of the people.

Professor Hong concluded the presentation with an excerpt from the Dao De Jing which stated that the best ruler is but a shadowy presence to his subjects. The ruler does not utter words lightly, but when his task is accomplished and when the work is done, his subjects will feel that it all happened to them naturally.

This summary reflects the personal opinion(s) of the seminar speaker(s) and should in no way be attributed to the East Asian Institute.