



Book review

The Evolution of Tiger Management: Korean Companies in Global Competition, Martin Hemmert.
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The Evolution of Tiger Management: Korean Companies in Global Competition begins with the Korean legend of “The Sun and the Moon” to explain the choice of the animal metaphor behind Korean management (p. 3). According to the legend, a hungry tiger devoured a woman and, disguised in her clothes, went to the woman's house to eat her children. The book compares this fierce animal to the management style of Korean companies that have, despite strong competition, risen seemingly from out of nowhere to leading positions in key industries. The book proposes to learn from Tiger Management by analyzing its six core strategies: ambition, aggressiveness, resilience, strong leadership, speed, and flexibility. Interestingly, the author chose to treat only the first part of the legend depicting the hungry tiger. The remainder, wherein the tiger is punished by the heavens, is omitted. In the following review, I will attempt to relate the full story by addressing the potential theoretical contribution of this book to international management studies.

The book's introduction begins with a puzzle: Korean companies have met with great success in the last fifteen years, long after their disastrous failure during the Asian financial crisis of 1997, and yet there is relatively little interest in international management literature to explain or to learn from their success. The main question posed by the book is: “What can we learn and adopt from Korean firms?” (p. 5). In pursuit of the answer, the book faces an important challenge—that is, to balance international management literature by bringing forth overlooked stories and marginalized voices from non-Western organizational landscapes. The strongest feature of this book is its extensive review of relevant secondary resources, one that is rich in examples, up-to-date statistics, and based on both the English and Korean sources. It also offers a wider historical, cultural, and institutional context to understand the environment in which Korean companies have grown and succeeded. In addition, while the majority of studies on the Korean economic miracle have focused on the macro state-level intervention policy into the Korean private sector, the author takes a multi-level approach in dealing with the government, companies, and individual actors. International management literature usually lacks such a broad view due to the methodological or space constraints that encumber the conventional article format.

This well-organized book includes 14 short chapters spanning four parts. After the introduction, which explains the study's main goals, the second part offers a chronological presentation that tries “to grasp it all” from the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948 to the present day. Moreover, in Chapter 2, the book details the “seeds” of Tiger Management, which range from the Confucianism that came to Korea 1000 years ago, to Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), through to the American and military-style industrialization's influences of the last 70 years. Chapters 5 and 6 explain the reasons behind the failure of Korean companies during the Asian financial crisis and their later recovery and revitalization. The third part of the book examines in detail the core strategies of Tiger Management by reviewing the leadership and human resources style directed toward “Tiger Employees.” The final part addresses the evolution and future of Tiger Management in the face of globalization-related challenges.

The book is an updated version of the 2015 edition and includes two additional chapters: Chapter 7, on “New Tigers,” or venture firms and start-ups; and the concluding Chapter 14, on future advancement of Korean management. With the goal of emphasizing that Tiger Management is common to the majority of successful Korean companies, Chapter 7 shifts the major focus of the book on the top Korean *chaebols*—large, family-owned and -controlled conglomerate enterprises, such as Samsung, Hyundai, and LG—to small- and medium-sized enterprises. This is an important enhancement to the prior edition, since Samsung Group, which provided the majority of the examples throughout the book, stands out not only among Korean companies but also among other top *chaebols*, due to its enormous economic success.

While the main goal of the book is to learn from Tiger Management, the added Chapter 14 proposes different ways to fix its flaws. These include urging Korean companies to modernize, democratize, globalize, decentralize, and professionalize—in other words, to become more Western in general. According to the book, Korean companies still suffer from over-diversification, aggressiveness, unjustified risk taking, lack of transparency, hierarchy, nepotism, and conservatism. This updated version therefore balances the previous idealization of Korean management by bringing forward a more critical view. It underlines the need for change since, because of “Korea's evolutionary transition from an emerging market to a developed country [it needs to update itself to] advanced country status” (p. 192). The depiction of Tiger Management in general as an evolutionary process is reflected in the wording of most of the chapter titles—“emerging,” “globalizing,” or “advancing tigers,” rather than “emerged,” “globalized,” or “advanced”—thereby

representing Korean management as “still a work in progress” (p. 171).

This representation, though, constitutes only the first part of the Korean management success story stemming from a functionalist approach aimed at practitioners, rather than an academic readership. I would like to offer a second part that will bring forward its untold half. While the updated version has been significantly expanded to address the issues of over-generalization and over-idealization, the book tends to be somewhat disengaged from current theoretical discussions in international management studies. For example, it leans on the Hofstede legacy of cultural dimensions from the 1980s, though the relevance of this theoretical framework today is hotly debated (see, for example, [Holden et al., 2015](#)). The Hofstede approach can be challenged here by posing the question: What is Korean in Korean management? Since, in Chapter 2, the book contextualizes it as an outgrowth of Chinese, Japanese, and American “seeds,” these “seeds” can explain any cultural dimensions from Confucian high distance, hierarchy, and collectivism, to American low distance, absence of hierarchy, and individualism. As the author states himself on p. 162, “[r]egardless of the influence of Confucian work ethic and the desire for economic success, which induced Koreans to work very hard, workers now expected to be paid better and to be granted more rights.” Due to such a mixture of external cultural influences, as well as to the dynamism of Korean society itself, the question as to what is Korean in the Korean management remains open.

Moving beyond a culturalistic perspective, Chapter 2 also mentions the institutional legacies of Japanese colonial rule and military dictatorship that have played a crucial role in Korean firms' management and internationalization. As comparative institutionalist studies have pointed out, in a “state-organized business system” the role of government in the shaping of historically grown institutional features such as ownership relations, non-ownership coordination, employment policies, and labor management is overwhelming (see, for example, [Whitley, 1999](#)). The institutional perspective might also be expanded in this book, as when telling the story of Korean management since 1990s, including controversial corruption scandals; state pressure for reforms as well as for regulation and monitoring of *chaebols*' management and structure; and the governmental support for small- and medium-sized enterprises to balance the unpopular dominance of *chaebols* on the Korean economy.

Regarding the issue of transferability of Tiger Management, in something of an unflattering comparison to the West, Korean cultural and institutional baggage is represented as a challenge. In Chapter 11, which treats the internalization of Korean companies, the author argues that “egalitarian Western countries [may find some features of the Korean management] hard to accept” (p. 151). Chapter 13 revisits the question of transferability, arguing that the transfer of Korean management knowledge beyond Korean borders is possible but limited. It will be more compatible to knowledge-intensive assembly industries in emerging countries and to culturally similar East Asian countries (p. 180). In other words, according to the book, the flow of non-Western managerial knowledge to Western countries is less feasible due to cultural distance and a developmental gap. Finally, Chapter 14 calls on Korean companies to Westernize in order to meet the challenges of globalization.

In conclusion, this well-intentioned book raises an important question as to why, in 2018, so little attention is being paid to the success of Korean companies. Being practice-oriented, it familiarizes a wider public with Tiger Management's main strengths to learn from. Its extensive overview of secondary sources may provide a good basis for future research on core managerial strategies of Korean companies. On the other hand, its contribution to the current theoretical discussion in international management studies is rather limited. Its use of Hofstede's culturalistic approach poses questions regarding the relevance of cultural dimensions to Tiger Management. In addition, the institutionalist perspective on the complex state-chaebol relationship can be further expanded toward a deeper understanding of economic success but negative image and lack of interest in Korean companies.

References

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