At one level of analysis, all social entities are ‘historical individuals’ (Streeck & Yamamura, 2001), defying generalisation and requiring a thorough reconstruction of their evolution, as well as a description of their peculiarities, in their own terms. Social policy or welfare regimes are no exception. There are probably no two systems of welfare provision around the world that are exactly alike. This observation gives occasion for the rejection of any categorisation of such systems in terms of overarching regime types. For once particular systems are subjected to close scrutiny, it becomes apparent that no pure type exists in the real world, that all systems are syncretic composites of mostly rather heterogeneous elements, whose development simply does not follow any clear-cut logic, as the language of regime types would seem to imply (Kasza, 2002). However, the observation, while correct, is not without its own quandaries. For even if we abstained from fitting particular systems into broader typologies, we would still have to spell out the sense(s) in which these systems are unique, and their uniqueness becomes visible only through comparison. But as soon as we start to compare, we will detect similarities and differences; more similarities with some and greater differences from other systems, and in order to capture and express them, we have to categorise our various systems. Some categorisation is therefore inevitable. To analyse, we need concepts, and concepts categorise. There will, of course, always be differences among the chosen representatives of a given (ideal) type, but, if our concepts are well construed, then these differences will be family differences, less significant than those the group at large exhibits vis-à-vis the members of some other group. If, on the other hand, our concepts turn out to be flawed or too simplistic, then we must revise them. But we cannot discard them altogether, for if we did, we would be stepping out of (social) science itself.

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It is with these provisos in mind that the present paper speaks of East Asian welfare capitalism as a distinct variety of welfare capitalism. East Asian welfare capitalism is a relatively recent arrival, having emerged in the real world only during the past 40 years or so, and hitting the radar screens of social analysts even later. True, Japan had begun to modernise much earlier, and given its spectacular success, particularly after the Second World War, its rise had not gone unnoticed even in Europe—quite the contrary. The same happened with the no less phenomenal rise of the four little ‘tigers’—South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore—which set in a few decades later. But it was only with the publication, beginning around the mid-1980s to early 1990s, of various studies that grouped all five countries together that the notion of East (or Southeast) Asian welfare capitalism gradually began to take root in the literature. Now, it has become increasingly clear that neither Japan’s rise, nor that of the four ‘tigers’ were isolated phenomena. Rather, these countries were spearheading the development of a whole region, paving the way, first, for a third generation of Asian growth economies (comprising mainly Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia) and later, even a fourth such generation (China and Vietnam), set to lift themselves right into the centre of the world economy, and thus eventually to transform the whole world order. Moreover, the countries in question seem to be following relatively similar patterns of development, not unlike those of earlier ‘late’ developers in continental Europe, such as Germany in the 19th century, with the State playing a substantial role as nurturer and ‘governor’ (Wade, 1990) of the market, as well as of other institutional sectors of society.

The present paper deals exclusively with social policy arrangements found in the region, and it restricts itself to the five presently most advanced exemplars of East Asian welfare capitalism, i.e. Japan and the four ‘tigers.’ Both the history of the respective policies and their main characteristics are well documented by now (see, e.g. Jones, 1993; Goodman et al., 1998; Ramesh, 2000; Holliday & Wilding, 2003; Walker & Wong, 2005; Aspalter, 2006). Less clear are these systems’ future prospects in the face of mounting adaptation pressures. All economically advanced countries have sophisticated welfare mechanisms in place that address the (basic) needs of their citizens. But some of these mechanisms perform better and/or seem more sustainable than others against the background of growing external competition and internal problems, thus offering more lessons for the designation of viable reform options. Following a brief discussion of the key com-