

## Reimagining Human Rights for the Twenty-first Century (Review)

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## **Reimagining Human Rights for the Twenty-first Century (Review)**

Reviewed by: [Gregory Bracken](#)

### **Reviewed item:**

[Confucianism and Reflexive Modernity: Bringing Community back to Human Rights in the Age of Global Risk Society](#)

Sang-Jin Han. 2020.

*Confucianism and Reflexive Modernity: Bringing Community Back to Human Rights in the Age of Global Risk Society*

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*Confucianism and Reflexive Modernity: Bringing Community Back to Human Rights in the Age of Global Risk Society* by Sang-Jin Han, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Seoul National University, is published as part of the Post-Western Social Sciences and Global Knowledge series by Brill. It is an insightful critique of Western modernity, as well as East Asia's embrace of it. It also notes that East Asia's modernisation has been achieved at a far faster pace than the West's, where there were centuries, not generations, to adapt. One of the book's main points is that East Asia's rush to modernization saw military-like interventions and the development of abusive and hostile human relationships where the ethics of respecting and caring for each other have disappeared, replaced by anomie in society. Another side effect of the rush to modernization is the focussing on immediate, tangible results, meaning that society has got damaged by no one taking long-term responsibility for their actions.

Theoretically strong and empirically grounded, this book is dedicated to Jürgen Habermas, whose work has strongly influenced it (as has the work of Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, and

Scott Lash, all of whom (including Tu Weiming) were interviewed by the author over a number of years, with the transcripts appearing in the appendix).

This book proposes something new and interesting: a reflexive understanding of Confucianism that could offer fresh perspectives on human rights and which could therefore also address the global risk society in which we live.

Global risk society is defined as a place where ordinary individuals face increasingly serious risks, anxieties, dangers, and uncertainties thanks to the remarkable successes of modernity. These risks are the unintended consequences of modernity's progress in industrial growth, scientific revolution, global capitalism, etc. The book uses the concept of reflexive modernity (popularised in social theory by Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, and Scott Lash in the 1990s) to address these issues, and extends them to East Asia, where historical patterns of change, from traditional society to modernity, can be more easily seen than in other non-Western regions. The book begins with a discussion of the concept of 'paradoxical modernity', arguing that East Asia can "respond to global risk society in its own creative way" (p. xii). This is seen as distinct from "the typical global south perspective or the old-fashioned authoritarian collectivism in Asia or the individual-centred liberal approach as found in the West" (p. xii).

### **Paradoxical modernity**

The first section lists 10 points of paradoxical modernity, each of which is important, but the ones listed here are perhaps the most interesting: 1) modernity is associated with the rise of the nation state, yet the nation state and its institutions are no longer able to resolve conflicts; 4) modernity is synonymous with seemingly boundless faith in science and technology, yet these are no longer synonymous with progress and emancipation; 5) modernity reinforces representative democracy, yet there is a high degree of dissatisfaction with it and people are seeking more direct ways of participating politically; 6) the nuclear family, and the relationship between the sexes on which it is built, are undergoing fundamental transformations, leading to the question: can (and should) East Asian countries follow Western patterns? and finally, 10) Communism has fallen, and human rights are now seen as universal and natural, yet individual freedom has grown out of all proportion to collective responsibility, meaning that the very idea of community is under threat.

As the author explores these issues, we learn that societies where increasing numbers of people who are 'individualized' find themselves separated from social frameworks of protection and people therefore become even more isolated. The author advocates bringing back the role of community into debates around human rights because, as he states, "we cannot solve the root problem of risk society with [a] one-sided focus on individual empowerment alone" (p. xxiv).

The author also questions the Western idea of 'universal civilization', pointing out that it is "at odds with the particularism of most Asian societies" (p. 27). He also points out that it is simply not true that the idea of human dignity, or the institutions of human rights that relate to them, are derived solely from Western traditions. In light of the ever-individualising focus of human rights in the West, Asian sensitivity to social relations and community should not be treated as antithetical. One of the book's key questions is "how to reincorporate both dimensions into a

balanced theory of human rights” (p. 61) because “[i]ndividual rights can become real in a socially significant way only when they are well-supported socially” (71).

### **A post-Confucian perspective for human rights**

To square this circle the author suggests taking up a ‘post-Confucian perspective’, where “a balance between individuality and social relations is crucial” (p. xxiv), and he “explores the communitarian aspect of human rights from a post-Confucian perspective, defending not only the right to individual freedom, but also the right to a healthy community” (p. xxiv) where the validity of Confucian moral relationships can be explored, freeing them from privileged authority and rendering them amenable to “discursive processes through which individuals and groups put the validity of such relations to the test” (p. 93).

Whereas he sees reflexive modernity as “deconstructive in that it breaks away from the very assumptions under which risk society is produced. It is reconstructive as well, in the sense that it opens up a new potentiality from within” (p. 148). Taking a reflexive stance on Confucianism could be equally fruitful, where we could have “a complex system of thought [that] has nurtured post-Confucian orientations – or a reflexive Confucianism – that can match well with the Western idea of reflexive modernity” (p. 199). Doing this could be very worthwhile because “[t]he future depends on our capacity to work out an alternative vision of development and reactivate the normative potentials of tradition in support of reciprocal human relationships, citizens’ participation, and discursive democracy” (p. 162).

One of the book’s most significant contributions is its highlighting of Confucianism’s potential for enabling us to rethink our concept of human rights. The author usefully differentiates (in Chapter 8) different understandings of human rights: where the West focusses on civil and political ones, and the East, on economic, social, and cultural ones. Rethinking these from a post-Confucian perspective could enable a deconstruction of traditional interpretations of Confucianism (which tend to be too authoritarian and hierarchical) and could lead to a *reconstruction*, where new light is shone on normative traits conducive to Confucianism’s potential for participatory and deliberative development. This could significantly reinvigorate the concept of human rights, uniting their various strands, East and West, and make them truly universal.

By focussing on the rights of individuals, the West has compromised the power of society to offer proper social protection to those individuals, thereby damaging their rights. As the author says, “individual empowerment with no attention to flourishing community as a condition for individual development is a mistake that we should avoid” (p. xix). This is further exacerbated by the Internet, which “tends to promote short-sighted emotional behaviours without consideration for others” (p. xix) and where “the online community fostered by the Internet is based more on individual choices and decisions than offline organizations” (p. xx).

One final note, “it is neither the market nor the state, but civil society backed up by the enlightened public that can serve as the main locus and the engine of a distinctively post-Confucian reflexive modernization” (p. xix), and this book’s exploration of how to achieve a balance between individual freedom and a flourishing community, both conceptually and practically, is perhaps its most important contribution to this increasingly important subject.

