

MEDIA RESOURCES

Film Review: *Human Rights in China: The Search for Common Ground*

by Raymond Olson

Sacred Mountain Productions, 2004. 64 minutes.

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Human Rights in China: The Search for Common Ground, by Raymond Olson, professor emeritus of sociology from the College of DuPage, is remarkable for three reasons. First, as discussions involving the protection of human rights in China are complex and emotional, the film manages to put forward different views and perspectives and presents a genuine and poignant dialogue without being overwhelmed by the usual sound and fury that surrounds such discussion. This by itself is a great feat.

Second, the film hosts distinguished voices from various academic disciplines such as Roger Ames (philosophy), Jia Qingguo (international studies), Anthony Yu (humanities), Richard Smith (history) and Jack Donnelly (international studies). John Kamm, the influential executive director of the Dui Hua Foundation, and two Falun Gong practitioners also appear in the film. This collection of remarkable people should be exciting to a student audience who might have read their views but has never seen their faces.



Falun Gong Demonstrators

The debate between Roger Ames and Jack Donnelly is the highlight of the film. The two disagree on almost every point,

and their thinly disguised mutual impatience with one another is a treat for audiences at all levels.

Third, while clearly articulating *general* lines of controversy (such as the debate between universalism and pluralism, and the proper ordering of political versus social and economic rights), the film gives due prominence to two *individual* issues

that are of great significance to sinologists and Asian specialists: China's one-child policy and the persecution of Falun Gong. Allen Zeng, a Falun Gong practitioner, comes off as an articulate and fair-minded speaker and has made a succinct but powerful point about the need for a religious movement based on the persecution of individual citizens. Wang Jiexiang, a female professor of Beijing Foreign Studies University, should be, to

an American audience, a surprise advocate for the one-child policy. In arguing for the policy, she seems "calculated" but deeply passionate at the same time, fittingly revealing the emotional complexity of a sensitive issue.

In terms of the persuasive force of the views represented in the film, Roger Ames' pluralism and Jian Qingguo's argument for the priority of second generation rights (social, economic rights such as the right to an education and to employment) over first generation rights (such as freedom of speech and religion), seem to have an upper hand in contrast to Jack Donnelly's universalism. This is not necessarily Donnelly's fault. The film's linkage of universalism to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is unfortunate and puts Donnelly at a disadvantage because even for many universalists, the Declaration is a messy document. It is more of a political statement than a coherent theoretical position. Jack Donnelly is practically the lone fighter for universalism in the film. He could have been joined by a few intellectual allies who would have been even more effective had they come from within China. In fact, universalism is not necessarily inconsistent with the hierarchical view of rights. If the film conceded the point, universalism would have looked more plausible and less absolutist.

For more information or to purchase a DVD/VHS of *Human Rights in China: The Search for Common Ground*, email brolson@pacifer.com