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Trends. Declarations on Civil Rights, Freedom, and Social Justice: Chinese Sophistry and Sophistication

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Five human rights advocates who reside in the People's Republic of China (PRC) have initiated the circulation of two documents (in English) on the Internet and by fax. One--Declaration on Civil Rights and Freedom--asserts that human rights are innate, inalienable, nonnegotiable; that everyone is born free; that freedom is an end in itself to all humans who are conscious of their own value. The other--Declaration on Civil Rights and Social Justice--asserts that "fairness" and "justice" are prerequisites for the protection of human rights. Both documents assert that much remains to be done before there is a benign human rights environment within the PRC.

PRC political authorities might well concur with the above assertions-- although not with the accompanying examples that seem intended to illuminate the authorities' causal malignancy. So both sides might concur, yet there is danger in the air. The signatories risk evermore intrusive monitoring, arrest, and imprisonment at the hands of the authorities. For even with concurrence, two contentious issues remain: (1) moral relativism versus dogmatism and, ultimately, (2) control of political power.

The authorities advocate the relativism that human rights are different and look different dependent on political, social, cultural, and historical criteria. The signatories contend a dogmatism that human rights transcend these criteria--that the only criterion is one's humanity. (Of course, the authorities' relativism may itself be a dogmatism that does not embrace the dogmatism of the signatories. As well, the dogmatism of the signatories may actually embrace all variants of relativism--save for the relativism of the authorities.)

The authorities seem to view control of political power as the be-all and end-all, the sole Truth or Virtue or Certainty. Here "political" may well comprise all of life with the accompanying assumption that all of life involves infinite need and finite resources to meet the needs. The signatories seem to view "political" in a narrow sense of formally prescribed rights--even if these rights may be enjoyed in all of life's spheres. The signatories' be-all and end-all is a trans-political notion of rights that ultimately is not prescribed for these rights exist in nature much as the Physical Laws of Nature. These rights can be prescribed only as much as "America" was discovered by Europeans as opposed to being first perceived (and, thus, discovered) by its own indigenous peoples. Admittedly, the signatories' stance is both more elegant and proto-paradoxical than that of the authorities.

So, authorities and signatories both have rights, profess rights, and can be right through tenets of moral dogmatism and moral relativism. Yet and, actually, a conflict remains. Its only three resolutions encompass the manipulation of symbols, the controlling of supplies, and the application of violence. In the near-term it seems probable that at least to one of the "rights," might still makes right. (Declaration on Civil Rights and Freedom, <http://www.dfn.org/asia/freedom.html>; Declaration on Civil Rights and Social Justice, <http://www.hrichina.org/documents/english/justice.html>; Jennings, T.E. (1996). The development dialectic of international human-rights advocacy. *Political Psychology*, 17, 77-95; Macek, P., Osecka, L., & Kostron, L. (1997). Social representations of human rights amongst Czech university students. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 7, 65-76; Staerkle, C., Clemence, A., &

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Doise, W. (1998). Representation of human rights across different national contexts: The role of democratic and non-democratic populations and governments. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 28, 207-226.) (Keywords: Civil Rights, Human Rights, People's Republic of China, PRC.)