

CHAPTER 13

Falun Gong, Identity, and the Struggle over Meaning Inside and Outside China

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During prime time on March 5, 2002, the eight-channel Changchun municipal cable television network in Northeast China was hacked by practitioners of Falun Gong, a quasi-religious movement that has been the target of massive Chinese state repression since July 1999. For nearly one hour, Falun Gong propaganda replaced state propaganda on the television screens of a major Chinese provincial capital. Two videos were successfully broadcast into more than 300,000 households: One glorified Falun Gong and celebrated its global legitimacy and popularity; the other exposed another exposes Chinese state brutality against the movement, turning state propaganda on its head. Contrary to state propaganda about the attempted self-immolation of Falun Gong extremists in Tiananmen Square, the Falun Gong-produced video deconstructed CCTV footage frame by frame, concluding that the whole spectacle was conspired by the Chinese state in an effort to discredit the group. The whole city, the birthplace of Falun Gong, was stunned. The result was extensive global media coverage and the Chinese state's intensified prosecution of Falun Gong members in the city.

This is not an isolated incident but, rather, one of many dramatic episodes in a sustained struggle over representation between Falun Gong and the Chinese media. What is Falun Gong? How did it suddenly burst onto the Chinese and global political stage? What explains the intensity of the struggle? What does it say about the politics of representation inside and outside reformed China? Moreover, Falun Gong is not an exclusively Chinese phenomenon. From its nascent Chinese origin, it has been quickly globalized, with Chinese and non-Chinese adherents throughout the world and a transnational network of websites and individual practitioners as local contacts. The Chinese state's outlawing of the movement in July 1999 dramatically intensified the interactions between Falun Gong's overseas networks and its underground elements inside China. The two videos broadcast in the above-mentioned hacking incident, for example, were produced overseas. And the Internet postings put up by overseas Falun Gong members quickly reached underground members inside China. These observations lead us to a final question: In what ways do all of these episodes expose the contradictory nature of "network" communication—as impressively practiced by Falun Gong—which is heralded as liberatory and progressive yet, in this specific case, not only facilitated an

unprecedented challenge against a repressive state but also engendered a quasi-religious fundamentalist movement with apparent conservative sensibilities?

Falun Gong presents itself as a virtuous form of self-cultivation and spiritual enlightenment. The Chinese state denounces it as an anti-humanity, anti-science, anti-social evil cult. My purpose in this chapter is to clarify how Falun Gong emerged as an alternative meaning system in China's tightly controlled media environment and to examine its communication patterns from a domestic as well as global perspective. I first address the broad political, social, and cultural context in which Falun Gong exists within China. I then explain the particular ideological and media environment that gave rise to Falun Gong and its contestations over mainstream Chinese media representation, culminating in its famous demonstration in Beijing on April 25, 1999. Finally, I analyze the structural and discursive aspects of Falun Gong's multifaceted media activism and discuss its implications.

Falun Gong and the Dialectic of China's Reforms

Falun Gong's complexity begins with its name. Both its popular name, Falun Gong, and the movement's own preferred name, Falun Dafa, highlight its practical and spiritual dimensions. Falun Gong literally means "Dharma Wheel Practice," which refers to a series of five stretching and meditation exercises aimed at channeling and harmonizing the qi, or vital energy, that supposedly circulates through the body. Theories about the flow and function of qi are basic to traditional Chinese medicine and health-enhancing qigong exercises. At the same time, because traditional Chinese culture assumes "a profound interpenetration of matter and spirit, body and soul" (Madsen, 2000: 244), Falun Gong, as with other forms of qigong, emphasizes the unity of physical and spiritual healing, in contrast to the Western distinction between medicine and religion. To bring about health benefits, the physical exercises must be accompanied by moral cultivation and spiritual exercises as a way of focusing the mind. For Falun Gong, the virtues to cultivate are "truthfulness," "benevolence" and "forbearance."

The religious aspect of Falun Gong is underscored by its integration of folk Buddhist and Taoist discourses in its physical-spiritual exercises. This is the context in which Falun Dafa assumes its meaning. Falun Dafa literally means the "Dharma Wheel Great Dharma," a phrase in which "Dharma" is the Buddhist term for both the cosmic laws and the revelatory doctrines taught by the Buddha. Thus, whereas Falun Gong emphasizes everyday practices, Falun Dafa highlights doctrinal aspects. Following the tradition of Chinese folk Buddhism, Li Hongzhi, the founder of Falun Gong, has written books about cosmic laws. This kind of folk religion, often containing a millenarian element that condemns the corrupt nature of the world and predicts its imminent end, has a long history in China—one that has even inspired massive rebellions.

Falun Gong claims supernatural powers in curing incurable diseases, levitation, and clairvoyance through a "third eye." Drawing upon oriental mysticism and traditional Chinese medicine, it criticizes the limits of modern science, viewing traditional Chinese science as an entirely different, yet equally valid, knowledge system. Con-

comitantly, it borrows the language of modern science in representing its cosmic laws. Thus, Falun Gong is not conceptualized as a religious faith; on the contrary, its members, which include doctorate holders from prestigious American universities, see it as “a new form of science” (Madsen, 2002: 244).

Falun Gong, then, is a multifaceted and totalizing movement that means different things to different people, ranging from a set of physical exercises and a praxis of transformation to a moral philosophy and a new knowledge system. Its proliferation in China in the 1990s reflected the profound contradictions of the Communist Party’s technocratic-oriented modernization drive. Although various forms of qigong had flourished in China in the 1980s, it is no coincidence that Falun Gong, the most influential and extreme form, emerged in 1992. Indeed, it was responding to the deep and widespread ideological and identity crises that followed the 1989 suppression of an elite-led prodemocracy movement. In 1992, Deng called for an end to debates about the political and social meaning of the economic reforms, and urged the entire population to plunge into the sea of commercialism and engage in the pursuit of material wealth and national power. Falun Gong, in contrast, insisted on the search for meaning and called for a radical transcendence of materialism in both the mundane and philosophical senses.

Falun Gong does seem to address the multifaceted concerns of a population undergoing a drastic social transformation. One such concern is physical health, which assumed a new sense of urgency after 1992 when the collapse of the state socialist health-care system made care increasingly unaffordable to a large proportion of the population. The processes of modernization and urbanization, which accelerated after 1992, have led to drastic social dislocations and created an increasingly atomized society. But Falun Gong’s group exercise activities build affinities and provide a sense of community among its participants. On a moral level as well, Falun Gong—with its celebration of the virtues of truthfulness, benevolence, and forbearance, and its condemnation of corruption, moral decay, excessive materialism, and ruthless pursuit of wealth and power—offers a powerful critique of the ideological and moral bankruptcies of the reform program. Contrary to the wholesale condemnation of the state socialist experience by liberal intellectuals, Li Hongzhi’s writings display nostalgia for the socialist morality of the 1950s and 1960s and comment on the corrosive impact of commercialization.

Falun Gong is a Chinese manifestation of a worldwide backlash against capitalist modernity and a testimony to the importance of meaning. It underscores the “power of identity” (Castells, 1997). Though Falun Gong is grounded in Chinese cultural traditions and responds to unique post-1989 Chinese realities, it addresses universal concerns, asking humanity to take a “fresh look” at itself and reexamine its dominant value system. It is partly for this reason that Falun Gong appeals to some non-Chinese people in the West. Although the Chinese government condemns Falun Gong as having fallen prey to premodern superstitions, the movement actually articulates a mixture of premodern, modern, and postmodern sensibilities. It has established a “resistance identity”—one that resists prevailing pursuits of wealth, power, scientific rationality, and, indeed, the entire value system associated with the project of modernization. True to the observation that such an identity is generated by “those actors that are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and

survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society” (Castells, 1997: 8), Li Hongzhi addresses precisely the actors and aspects of subjectivity bruised by the ruthless march of Chinese modernity—from bicycle riders struck by reckless car drivers to unemployed workers—and provides an alternative meaning system within which individuals can come to terms with their experiences. The multiple unfolding struggles over this resistance identity match, in both speed and intensity, the wider social transformation in China.

In a complete reversal of the events of 1989, which were characterized by an outpouring of desires for political participation, many people turned to Falun Gong precisely because they saw it as an apolitical response to their individual and social concerns. By focusing on self-cultivation and individual moral salvation, and by urging its members to take lightly or give up “attachments” to the desires, ambitions, and sentimentality that ordinarily rule modern human life, Falun Gong is reactive, defensive, and politically conservative. Like many forms of religious fundamentalism, it is not a purveyor of “a social project” (Castells, 1997: 106). Yet, it turns out to be the most politicized and highly mobilized form of social contestation in post-1989 China. No other disenfranchised social group, including overtaxed farmers and laid-off workers, for example, have been able to stage a mass protest near Zhongnanhai, the symbolic heart of Chinese politics since 1989. Similarly, although the post-Mao Chinese state attempted to avoid ideological struggles, it ended up having to wage a Maoist-style ideological campaign against the movement. Such is the dialectic of China’s “economic” reforms.

Falun Gong, the Chinese State, and Media Politics

If the contradictions of the Chinese reform program provided the broad social and cultural conditions for the rise of Falun Gong, the partial retreat of the Chinese state in social and cultural life and the unique political economy of the Chinese media system made it a reality. Falun Gong was initially legitimated by the Chinese state, which tolerates and sanctions various traditional cultural practices. It was then spread by the highly commercialized and competitive book and audiovisual sectors of the Chinese media system and supported by a massive underground publishing and distribution market. As part of China’s rapidly expanding post-Mao quasi-autonomous civil society, various qigong societies, including Li Hongzhi’s Falun Dafa Research Society, were established under the umbrella organization, China Qigong Research Society, which is affiliated with the State Sports Commission and thus incorporated into formal state structure. The involvement of a significant number of people from all social strata across the country—as well as the participation and support of officials at the top and middle levels of the Party state hierarchy in Falun Gong, which has its strongest bases in China’s industrial and agricultural heartlands and among the late-middle-aged people who have witnessed the most drastic social transformations—increased Falun Gong’s legitimacy and popular appeal.

Li Hongzhi, a middle-aged clerk with a high school education, began to introduce Falun Gong in 1992 through public lectures. The practice spread quickly through word

of mouth and the demonstrative effect of the spectacle of group exercises in public parks. By 1996, Falun Gong had attracted millions of followers.¹ Reform-era China's unique media and ideological environment provided the necessary communication and cultural infrastructure. On the one hand, the Party state maintained tight control of both media structure and content. On the other hand, the media system underwent a process of rapid commercialization. Both processes were intensified in the years after 1989: A massive post-June 4th media purge aimed at retaining ideological control was followed by the further unleashing of market forces in the media in 1992 (Zhao, 1998, 2000, 2001; Lee, 2000). In contrast to the Maoist approach of politicizing popular culture and waging society-wide ideological struggles, Dengist reformers more narrowly restricted the ideological field to explicitly political doctrines espoused by elite intellectuals and tried to limit ideological campaigns within the Party. The Party state kept a close eye on political and ideological challenges from both the left (i.e., those who opposed further capitalistic developments) and the right (i.e., those who advocated Western-style liberal democracy along with economic liberalization), while leaving considerable leeway for "nonpolitical" content, best symbolized by both Western-inspired entertainment-oriented popular culture *and* traditional Chinese folk culture, including qigong. At the same time that the state retained tight control of the news media and suppressed politically oriented alternative media outlets—from elite intellectual journals to newsletters published by disenfranchised workers—it promoted the rapid diffusion of printing, audiovisual, and telecommunication technologies throughout society, and allowed the development of a vibrant private book distribution system and an audiovisual industry of popular educational and entertainment products. Rampant commercialism led state publishing houses, with waning state subsidies, to print whatever would sell.

Several official publishing houses served as first-wave promoters of Li Hongzhi's ideas. Between 1994 and 1996, at least seven official publishing houses were involved in the publication of his books, compiled hastily and sometimes incoherently from his lectures. Most significantly, in late 1994 China Radio and Broadcasting Press, the publishing arm of the State Administration for Radio, Film, and Television, published Li's main book *Zhu Falun*, which contains core Falun Gong doctrines. Meanwhile, two major provincial audiovisual publishing houses in Northeast China released audio- and videotapes of Li's lectures and exercise instructions. The involvement of official publishing houses, like the participation of elites in the practice, ensured the initial legitimacy of Falun Gong. By early 1996, *Zhu Falun* had become a bestseller in Beijing.

The market appeal of Falun Gong publications led to the involvement of China's powerful underground book publishing and distribution network. This unofficial network consists of official publishing houses that have book numbers (that is, book registration numbers or ISBNs, distributed only to state-sanctioned publishing houses) but are unable to find marketable manuscripts and are therefore willing to sell the book numbers for cash; print shops hungry for any business opportunity at all; and underground book distributors and vendors eager to cash in on marketable books. The financially struggling Qinghai People's Publishing House, for example, illegally sold book numbers to book vendors who had been authorized by Li to publish his work. These vendors managed to produce 3.51 million copies of four more books by Li ("Three Major Cases," 1999).

The underground market also supplied numerous pirated versions of the officially published books. These books benefited from the coordinated promotion of Li's Beijing-based Falun Dafa Research Society and Falun Gong's network of local organizers. With the official ban against all Falun Gong publications in mid-1996, the production and distribution of Falun Gong materials went entirely underground through businesses run by agents authorized by Li. For example, between 1996 and April 1999, Falun Gong's Wuhan director, through her husband's business outlet, sold millions of Falun Gong books and audiovisual products, as well as tens of thousands of exercising accessories, badges, pictures, posters, and banners, with a total sale of 91.24 million yuan (US\$11 million) and a profit of 27.45 million yuan (US\$3.4 million) ("Three Major Cases," 1999).

The Chinese news media, which is more tightly controlled, had a different relationship with Falun Gong. The spectacular rise of Falun Gong received scant journalistic attention. But by mid-1996, articles critical of Falun Gong began to appear, a sign that China's media and ideological establishment were considering Falun Gong's influence on society. On July 24, 1996, the State Press and Publications Administration issued an internal circular banning the further publication and circulation of Falun Gong material ("The April 25 Event," 2001).

A number of factors were involved in the souring relations among Falun Gong and the Chinese state and the news media, including infighting between China's qigong establishment and Falun Gong (Schechter, 2000: 42–43); speculation over blackmailing and lobbying efforts on the part of Li's qigong opponents and scientists-cum-ideologues with political motives and affiliations with competing central Party leaders, which caused the shift in the state's position; and, between June 1996 and July 1999, intense struggles among Falun Gong, the mainstream media, and the Chinese power elite over the status and treatment of this movement. While Falun Gong had some elite support (Liu, 2000) and was implicated in the elite power struggles, given that it was fundamentally at odds with official ideology, there were individuals within the scientific, ideological, and political establishments predisposed to attack Falun Gong in the media. Factional struggles aside, the ruling elite as a whole had three main reasons to be concerned with Falun Gong: There were more Falun Gong believers than Party members; there were Falun Gong members inside the state's military, security, educational, and media establishments; and Falun Gong operated with an organizational structure that was incredibly effective in its ability to penetrate Chinese society.

Elite debates over the Falun Gong were reflected in the Chinese media. Despite sporadic negative articles, many in local and market-oriented papers, there was no systemic and large-scale campaign against Falun Gong in the official media between 1996 and April 1999. In fact, various media outlets offered occasional positive stories. What was significant, however, was Falun Gong's consistent response to any negative media story and its relentless counterattack against the responsible outlets. Falun Gong members were by no means the first victims of the Chinese media's symbolic violence. Nor was Falun Gong the only group that protested against media representation. Nonetheless, it was by far the most mobilized and steadfast in its response to negative media portrayal. Between April 1998 and mid-1999, Falun Gong members initiated more than 300 protests over negative media representation ("Falun Gong," 1999; "The Po-

litical Objectives,” 1999), with strategies ranging from exercising in front of news organizations to harassing individual editors and reporters. Falun Gong’s aggressive tactics had an impact. For example, in May 1998, after a sustained campaign against Beijing Cable Television over a negative documentary, Falun Gong members successfully pressured the station both to broadcast a positive program (“The April 25 Event,” 2001) and to discipline a responsible producer. According to a Falun Gong source I interviewed,² Beijing propaganda authorities subsequently imposed a blackout against any critical media material about the group. Consequently, He Zhouxin, a member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Falun Gong’s chief critic in Beijing, had to publish his critique of the group in a small publication in Tianjin in April 1999.

The three-year struggle between Falun Gong and the Chinese media over representation reached its apex in April 1999, with six days of protests by Falun Gong members over He’s article in Tianjin, leading to a peaceful demonstration by more than 10,000 Falun Gong members near Zhongnanhai in Beijing on April 25, 1999. In these protests, not only were specific claims disputed, but there was also an insistence on positive reporting of the movement. As the protests would demonstrate repeatedly, at stake is not a matter of evidence and opinion but, rather, a matter of “truth,” which is precisely what Falun Gong’s revelatory doctrines allowed the group to attain. This decidedly institutional approach to “truth” is underscored by the fact that, unlike an increasing number of Chinese citizens who have taken individual media outlets to the courts in libel cases, Falun Gong did not entertain any notion of separation between media organizations and the Chinese government. Despite its explicit demand that the government lift the publication ban against Falun Gong books, Falun Gong demanded more than the right to reply to media criticism: It demanded the censorship of opponents’ views in the first place. Falun Gong, then, may be understood as a movement of resistance, but it is one that offers no resistance to either the theory or the practice of censorship. Indeed, the movement actually urged the Chinese government to use its powers of censorship to muzzle the opponents of Falun Gong. Perhaps the movement’s intimacy and comfort with the notion of absolute “truth” and with authoritarian state powers of censorship can be more easily understood if we remember that China’s older socialist generation comprises the core Falun Gong membership. From the perspective of this generation, the government is responsible for slanderous content in the media as well as “responsible for preventing their publication through its powers of censorship” (Madsen, 2000: 247). Just as the Party does not allow negative critiques of its doctrines and is averse to ideological pluralism, Falun Gong does not abide any refutation of its claims and negative comments. Thus, although the Party and Falun Gong oppose each other, they have in common their “unitary value orientation” (He, 1999: 24).

Falun Gong and Its Global Media Activism

Though Li Hongzhi began to lecture overseas in 1995 and attracted overseas followers, mostly among Chinese students and new immigrants, Falun Gong’s global dimension did not assume significant proportions until July 1999, when the Chinese

state outlawed it and began its campaign of repression. This compelled overseas Falun Gong members to assert their presence and mobilize international opinion, pressuring the Chinese government to stop the persecution. If Falun Gong members before July 1999 were audiences of an alternative discourse and the most aggressive negotiators over mainstream media content, state suppression made many of them media activists in an all-out “truth clarification” campaign.

It is with Falun Gong’s post-July 1999 media activism that its hybrid and contradictory constitution becomes clear: It is one that combines a “rhizomatic” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) global communication network characteristic of information-age “grassrooted networks of communal resistance” (Castells, 1997), with a disciplined and quasi-Leninist organizational structure of local groups linked through cadres of leaders in contact with their counterparts at different levels of the network—a form of organization long used by Chinese peasant rebels and the Chinese Communist Party during its insurgency in the 1920s and 1930s (Madsen, 2000: 246). Falun Gong’s interactive network of multilayered media activism encompasses several aims: to sustain the global media spotlight on the Chinese state’s ongoing prosecution; to gain direct access to media outlets while at the same time blocking negative views; and, most important, to produce and distribute its own alternative media. Falun Gong’s challenge against the Chinese state initially received sympathetic international media coverage, but the story soon lost its freshness. While appeals by Chinese citizens in Tiananmen Square were widely covered by foreign media in the first few months after the July 1999 ban, “day-to-day media coverage dwindled, with interest rekindled only on special holidays or, more recently, during demonstrations by foreigners” (Falun Dafa Information Center, May 9, 2002). To keep the story in the news, Falun Gong members have organized news conferences both inside and outside China, staged demonstrations and exercise spectacles at all kinds of international occasions, and created various news events. And in the United States, Falun Gong members have initiated lawsuits against visiting Chinese officials including Ding Guan’gen, a politburo member and the Party propaganda chief (Falun Dafa Information center, May 17, 2002).

Falun Gong has tried all means to gain direct access to established media outlets outside China. One strategy was to acquire a regular programming slot in public-access cable channels. While Falun Gong has gained limited success in some U.S. cities, one Vancouver activist acknowledged that this has not been an easy route. Vancouver’s Shaw Cable, for example, simply responded that Falun Gong material was too controversial. Another strategy was to purchase access on ethnic Chinese media outlets. In addition to paid advertising, one form is to exchange bulk purchase of newspapers for editorial space. In Vancouver, for example, Falun Gong runs a regular Saturday “Falun Gong Special Page” in the *World Journal*, an overseas Chinese-language newspaper with an anticommunist ideological legacy. Falun Gong has also been very aggressive in launching defamation lawsuits and seeking court injunctions to stop the publication of unfavorable material in the overseas ethnic Chinese-language media. Newspapers that have been targeted by the group have included *Les Presse Chinoises* in Montreal and the *China Press* and *Sing Tao Daily* in New York.

Falun Gong produces an extensive range of alternative media content. If books and audiovisual tapes were the main carriers of the Falun Gong message in its early years in-

side China, the Internet has been instrumental to its more prominent emergence as a transnational global community. This association between Falun Gong and the Internet is indeed “a marriage made in the web heaven” (“Fulan Dafa and the Internet,” 1999). Falun Gong has a massive and extremely sophisticated presence on the World Wide Web. Hundreds of websites, maintained by practitioners throughout the world and in multiple languages, promulgate a wide range of content and strategies: Examples include the online teachings of Li Hongzhi, testimonies about Falun Gong’s benefits and the personal experience of practitioners, news of government crackdowns in China, counter-propaganda against the Chinese media, and online forums and announcement of all kinds of Falun Gong activities. Falun Gong’s ability to develop such a sophisticated virtual communication presence is explained, in part, by the fact that most overseas members are Chinese students and scholars who have both easy access to the Internet and the requisite cultural capital and technical capabilities. If one logs on to the global multilingual network—www.falundafa.org—one ends up at many university addresses. In Canada, Simon Fraser University, University of Toronto, and Concordia University serve as the network’s Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal nodes, respectively.

Falun Gong’s interconnected network consists of several major websites and publicity outfits with specialized functions; www.falundafa.org serves as the point of entry and introduces the organization worldwide. Li Hongzhi’s books and audiovisual publications, which were banned, shredded, and burned in the millions in China after July 1999, can be freely downloaded. The New York–based Falun Dafa Information Center (www.faluninfo.net), established in 1999, is the equivalent of an official press office. It hosts a sophisticated multilingual network of public relations and Web design experts serving as the movement’s spokespersons. The Center provides news releases; feeds a weekly English-language newsletter to governments, news media, and other interested parties; and publishes the journal *Compassion*. The Chinese-language www.minghui.org, or Minghui Net, and its English equivalent, www.clearnet.org, are at the core of Falun Gong’s multimedia production and distribution. Minghui Net acts as the official voice of Falun Gong, serving up what in another context might have been called the “Party line.” Li Hongzhi issues new teachings exclusively through the Minghui Net. Minghui’s editorial department resembles the combined role of the Party’s propaganda department and the *People’s Daily* in the Chinese media system. It issues calls and instructions on carrying out the “truth clarification” campaign, identifies campaign priorities, releases authoritative editorials that maintain the “correct” Falun Gong line, publishes daily news and webzines, and screens web postings. Among Falun Gong’s other major websites, the multilingual Zhengjian Net (www.zhengjian.org in Chinese or www.pureinsight.org in English) is a highbrow site, catering to members with higher education levels and carrying articles ranging from archaeology to new findings in biomedicine and astronomy. Xinsheng Net (www.xinsheng.org), on the other hand, is considered a “lowbrow” site that specializes in the exposure of evil and darkness.

This extensive network of websites not only serves powerful communication, organizational, and community-building functions but also acts as the depository of, and the resource for, other forms of media production and dissemination by Falun Gong members. These include World Falun Dafa Radio, a short-wave radio launched in July 2001 that reaches central and northern China, and Falun Gong’s video production

arm, Faguangming TV (FGMTV). Both produce a wide range of news, features, music, and other types of programming and have their own websites. Relying on Falun Gong's global membership as regional producers and local stringers, these operations have expanded their production capacities enormously in the past few years. FMGTV, for example, webcasts a daily news program that shares a name with CCTV's most authoritative prime-time newscast, "Joint News Broadcast" (*Xinwen lianbo*) and features stories related to Falun Gong activities worldwide. FGMTV's most influential production is the video "Self-Immolation or Deception?" This was the aforementioned video successfully broadcast in the Changchun hacking incident. First posted on the Minghui Net in March 2001 and distributed widely on cassettes, the video has been one of the most accessed pieces on the Falun Gong networks. Falun Gong members have also circulated videos on selected current-affairs topics. One such video, for example, critiques Chinese foreign policy and, again, reveals Falun Gong's contradictory affinity with the modern state form. This video claimed that Jiang Zemin made tremendous territorial concessions to Russia over disputed lands behind the back of the Chinese people in undisclosed bilateral agreements between the two countries.

Falun Gong members have also published various newspapers in an effort to carry their "truth clarification" campaign to the general public in a more accessible form. In Canada, for example, the first Chinese-language Falun Gong tabloid was published in Montreal in October 1999. Members in Toronto, Ottawa, and Vancouver quickly followed suit, putting out local papers in Chinese, English, and French. These papers are either print versions of webzines on the Minghui Net or irregular newsprint versions of various Falun Gong fliers and brochures. Regardless, the bulk of their content is downloaded from various Falun Gong websites.

The emergence of New York-based *Epoch Times* in August 2000 marked a significant development in Falun Gong-related media. The *Epoch Times* website (www.epochtimes.com) and the *Epoch Times* group of newspapers have grown into one of the largest Chinese-language news websites and newspaper groups outside China in the past two years, with local editions in more than thirty U.S. states, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Indonesia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and major Western European countries. Localized versions of *Epoch Times*, a free weekly newspaper drawing upon content from the *Epoch Times* website, are distributed worldwide and claimed a weekly circulation of 400,000 to 500,000 copies in August 2002 ("About *Epoch Times*," July 26, 2002). While mainstream newspapers typically treat Web versions as an extension of the already-existing print version, the *Epoch Times* website serves as the master for all its worldwide print papers. All a local "franchise" needs to do is choose content from the website and add local material. On August 12, 2002, *Epoch Times* launched its first daily in Washington, D.C.

Although *Epoch Times* displays an indisputable ideological and organizational affinity with Falun Gong, and an editor of an earlier Canadian version of the paper has confirmed that it is both produced and distributed by Falun Gong members or individuals sympathetic with Falun Gong, the *Epoch Times* tries to present itself as a "public interest-oriented comprehensive medium" that is "independent of any political and business groups, free of any country government and regional interests, and objectively and fairly reports facts and truth" ("*Epoch Times* Publishes," August 12, 2002). In

contrast to specialized Falun Gong media, the *Epoch Times* presents itself as a comprehensive journalistic outlet with news, current affairs, and entertainment content. Notwithstanding its claims of objectivity, *Epoch Times* concentrates heavily on negative news of the Chinese government and sympathetic special pages about Falun Gong. Thus *Epoch Times* represents a major step in the evolution of Falun Gong–related alternative media. Instead of focusing on promoting Li’s doctrines or the narrow objective of “truth clarification,” this paper can be seen as a more Gramscian public organ, articulating the Falun Gong perspective on a wide range of issues. Indeed, through *Epoch Times*, one can discern how Falun Gong is building a de facto media alliance with China’s democracy movements in exile, as demonstrated by its frequent printing of articles by prominent overseas Chinese critics of the Chinese government.

The Discursive Strategies of Falun Gong Media

As both a networked structure that is constituted by dispersed nodes united under one leader with a common belief system, Falun Gong’s media activism displays tremendous efficiency and flexibility. It combines both centralized command and grassroots initiatives. It takes advantage of both Internet-based virtual communication and on-the-ground mobilization. The fact that the community is both virtual and real, both transnational and local, with fixed group-exercise times and locations, makes it extremely resilient and effective. Just as each individual can download material from Falun Gong’s websites, so they can contribute to Falun Gong’s ever-expanding multimedia production and its collective knowledge of media production, distribution, and subversion. This mixture of the Internet and other media forms, regular group-exercise sessions, annual international and regional experience-sharing conferences, and mobilization of individual members as foot soldiers of media activism makes Falun Gong an unprecedented force in contesting and subverting Chinese state media power. Despite the Chinese government’s relentless campaign of suppression—from jamming Falun Dafa World Radio to banning, blocking, and hacking Falun Gong websites and arresting any individual caught displaying Falun Gong signs or distributing leaflets—the movement’s massive media activism is growing in scope, sophistication, and intensity. The resulting onslaught of Falun Gong material has been overwhelming. Every public space—from cyberspace to Tiananmen Square to the local shopping center and street corner, not to mention China’s media system—has become a site of struggle for representation. By late September 2002, Falun Gong had repeatedly hacked not only into China’s cable television networks in various cities but also into the Sinosat state satellite, disrupting CCTV programming and many other provincial television channels, and into Sina, China’s most popular commercial website. Never before has there been so sustained, pervasive, and costly a challenge against a dominant media regime. Hundreds of activists have been arrested and jailed for distributing Falun Gong literature inside China and for media hacking.

Falun Gong media material shares a number of common discursive strategies. First and foremost is its aforementioned “truth” claim. Falun Gong media conflate two levels

of truth: the truth of Falun Gong—that is, Falun Gong’s worldview as absolute truth—and the truth about Falun Gong, particularly its benign nature and the Chinese government’s prosecution of Falun Gong. Since Falun Gong does not make any distinction between “facts” and “values,” the statement that “Falun Gong Is Good” is, from this perspective, as true as the fact that so and so has been beaten by the police. This, against a background of the Chinese state’s brutal prosecution and graphic images of police brutality, gives Falun Gong’s “truth clarification” campaign an extraordinary moral power.

Second, Falun Gong material makes extensive use of personal testimonies. These include endless personal testimonies of Falun Gong’s magic powers and the Chinese government’s persecutions. Since Falun Gong’s truth is beyond the normal logic of rational argumentation, aside from Li Hongzhi’s original insights, individual experience of Falun Gong’s physical and spiritual powers becomes the predominant mode of Falun Gong’s truth telling. This general approach is extended to its exposure of Chinese government prosecution, through both first-person and, more often, third-person accounts.

Third, Falun Gong makes every effort to gain legitimacy from established authorities of all kinds. Countless statements of endorsements by foreign governments and political and civic leaders, sympathetic news reports by the international media, even positive news reports by Chinese media before the 1999 crackdown, are frequently cited as evidence of its legitimacy.

Fourth, Falun Gong makes extensive, though highly selective, use of associations and historical analogies. While it shuns any comparison to popular religious movements, such as the historical White Lotus movement in China and the contemporary struggle for religious freedom by China’s underground Catholic church (Madsen, 1998), Falun Gong fosters its image as a victim by drawing comparisons between its members and those who underwent the Cultural Revolution, the 1989 state repression in China, and even the Holocaust.

Fifth, while Falun Gong has been careful not to foreground its leader, Li Hongzhi, it has been relentless in demonizing and attacking Chinese leader Jiang Zemin, insisting that its opposition is directed against him and his operatives, not against the Chinese state or the Chinese Communist Party. In fact, Falun Gong plays into discourses of Chinese nationalism, presenting itself as patriotic (implicitly distinguishing itself from the Dalai Lama’s Tibetan independence movement) and painting a picture of Jiang Zemin as a traitor (but only in terms of the regime’s relationship with Russia, not the United States).

Finally, like many other media discourses associated with social movements, Falun Gong’s media approach is one of activism. Notwithstanding *Epoch Times’s* lip service to objectivity, Falun Gong makes no pretense to be objective in the conventional sense. As an editor of the Canadian edition of *Epoch Times* said in an interview, his paper combines news and commentary, interpreting the world through a specific perspective. For example, in Falun Gong’s view, a natural disaster is always a sign of punishment for human evil. Almost all natural disasters in China in the past few years have been reported within this framework.

Though Falun Gong is the antithesis of the Chinese state, and its media structure differs from the Chinese state’s traditional structure, there are considerable structural and discursive similarities between the two symbolic systems. Like the Party, Falun Gong maintains a “correct” ideological center and permits neither alternative nor neg-

ative interpretations of its doctrines. Minghui Net, for example, has apologized for failing to be vigilant in its censorship function after posting “articles with gravely mistaken views” (“Statement of Clarification,” 2000). Similarly, although Falun Gong has correctly pointed out that the Chinese media use Cultural Revolution language in their propaganda campaign against the movement, Falun Gong’s discourse is also not free of the symbolic violence typical of the Chinese official discourse (He, 1999: 24). Minghui editorials, for example, have a discursive style resembling those in the *People’s Daily*.

Conclusion

The massive spread of Falun Gong and its sustained global media activism is no doubt the most dramatic episode in the contestation over media power in the Chinese-language symbolic universe. The fastest and most spectacular program of modernization involving the world’s largest population over the past two decades has produced an unprecedented, if contradictory, backlash against modernity. In short, one of the most tightly controlled modern media systems in the world has bred one of the most powerful counter-ideological and -communication networks. Compared with the 1989 prodemocracy discourse, Falun Gong’s challenge against the Chinese media system and state power is more profound in its substance, more widespread in its societal reach, more globalized in its structure, and more sustained and militant in its efforts. Whereas the challenge against the dominant media system from intellectuals and students in 1989 was predominantly an ideological contestation from within a modernist paradigm (between authoritarian and liberal democratic versions of capitalistic modernity and between capitalistic and socialistic modernity), Falun Gong challenges the dominant meaning system both from without and within. What is most remarkable about this challenge is Falun Gong members’ insistence on the public and collective nature of their practices, their imperative to gain positive representation, their refusal to privatize their dissent, and their willingness to fight for their beliefs at any cost. The Chinese Communist Party once glorified its martyrs for sacrificing their lives for their beliefs; Falun Gong’s list of martyrs who refuse to denounce their beliefs to the Chinese Communist Party grows by the day. And yet, though Falun Gong is unquestionably symptomatic of the malaise of Chinese modernity, and though it won the hearts and minds of many followers, its ideological closure and single-mindedness are fundamentally incompatible with any notion of democratic discourse. The fact that Falun Gong is the target of a repressive Chinese state should not lead to knee-jerk reactions about the inherently progressive nature of the movement. As Félix Guattari commented in the context of mass subjective revolutions elsewhere in the world, “large movements of subjectivation don’t necessarily develop in the direction of emancipation” and emancipatory aspirations are often intermingled with “retrogressive, conservative, and even fascist, drives of a nationalistic, ethnic, and religious nature” (1995: 2). There are Chinese who genuinely believe that Falun Gong is a problematic belief system and who were critical of many forms of qigong, including Falun Gong, long before the Chinese state singled it out (Rosenthal, 1999). These individuals are

entitled to their views in the Chinese media without harassment. Given Falun Gong's insistence on "positive propaganda" and the impossibility of debating and settling with it, the issue of whether freedom of the press in the context of a liberal media regime is "the only way out" (Zhang, 2002) and satisfactory to Falun Gong's representational demands remains an open question.

Although Falun Gong's accelerated media activism continues to test the limits of media control in China, the sustainability of this movement is by no means guaranteed. Despite both the Chinese state's inability to process the demands of Falun Gong and the existence of a Chinese "media culture" (Couldry, 2000) that fosters "oppositional reading" (Hall, 1980) of official propaganda, the Chinese state remains powerful, with a core constituency that identifies with its modernist and capitalistic reform program. Indeed, despite widespread reluctance and cynicism, many Chinese are either apathetic to Falun Gong or complicit with the Chinese state. Outside China, Falun Gong has won considerable global sympathy, but this is conditional upon a number of factors. Given the global political-economic elite's vested interest in achieving further economic integration with China and the global media conglomerates' own interest in reaching Chinese consumers, it is unlikely that foreign governments and the global media will go beyond sympathetic promulgations and the occasional media story to seriously pressure the Chinese government to legitimate Falun Gong inside China. Nor is Falun Gong as a belief system compatible with dominant Western religious and secular discourses. The escalation of Falun Gong's media tactics is a sign of both determination and exasperation. Whatever the fate of Falun Gong's militant media activism, its implications are profound both inside and outside China.

Notes

1. Falun Gong claimed that a government survey had reported 70–100 million practitioners in China by the end of 1998. The Chinese government, upon the banning of the movement in 1999, claimed only 2 million Falun Gong members.
2. A number of interviews were conducted with Falun Gong activists in Canada between April and August 2002. I have withheld the names of these interviewees.

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