

The Religion of the Nonreligious and the Politics of the Apolitical: The Transformation of Falun Gong from Healing Practice to Political Movement

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Abstract: This article applies the conflict-amplification model to the development of Falun Gong. Falun Gong emerged in the early 1990s as a health-enhancing practice and part of the state-sanctioned *qigong* movement in China. Faced with increasing state suspicion of *qigong* and fierce competition from other groups, it metamorphosed into a new religious movement in the mid-1990s. State efforts to keep Falun Gong out of the political realm had the effect of releasing the group's political potential and led to its campaign of "truth clarification," which further alerted the state to its ideological challenge and capacity to mobilize. Through a process of mutual feedback, the antagonism between the two parties culminated in religious violence and in Falun Gong's transformation into a political movement. The organizational evolution of Falun Gong is an illustration of the religion of the nonreligious and the politics of the apolitical in an authoritarian state.

INTRODUCTION

The meteoric rise and fall of Falun Gong in China raises two puzzling questions for social scientists and historians: First, why did the state perceive Falun Gong, a health-enhancing practice that celebrated

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“truthfulness, compassion, and forbearance,” as a political threat? Second, why did Falun Gong engage in political confrontation rather than reconciliation? In the following pages, I argue that these two questions are inextricably interwoven, and that an answer to the one must take the other into account. In addressing these questions, I aim to show how the evolution of this healing practice leads to the center of the political landscape in an authoritarian state, how the state’s definition of religion profoundly shaped Falun Gong’s trajectory, how Falun Gong transgressed the boundary between science and religion, how Falun Gong’s persistence in informing the state of its disinterest in politics culminated in state repression, and how the state’s intention to eliminate perceived hidden perils inadvertently released Falun Gong’s political potential.

Falun Gong in its original conception did not presuppose opposition to the state; on the contrary, there was a brief period of harmonious coexistence. This pattern of a “honeymoon turned sour,” with a catastrophic denouement, has been explored in other sociopolitical settings using a model of deviance amplification (Wallis [1976] 1977; Wilkins’s 1964, 87–94). As Wallis (254) states:

[W]hen relatively unsystematic and transient deviant behaviour becomes the object of moral crusading and severe stigmatization, one possible outcome is that those so stigmatized experience a sense of outrage and injustice which alienates them from conventional norms and from the agents of the conventional order, and leads to the elaboration of new norms in defense against attack. The new norms and the behavior to which they give rise are seen by the moral crusaders as further evidence of deviance and justification of their initial diagnosis.

This article employs and builds on the deviance-amplification model in order to explain the political transformation of Falun Gong. It differs from the approaches of Wallis and Wilkins by arguing that religious deviance — albeit an integral step in the sequence — and individual delinquency cannot sufficiently account for the interactive process that caused a minor conflict to spiral into political confrontation, polarization, and violence; hence the revised term “conflict-amplification.” In addition, the amplification trajectory was conditioned by the fact that the counterparty to the conflict was an authoritarian communist state, rather than the democratic society of Wilkin’s and Wallis’s studies.

The study of Falun Gong has been hindered by a lack of reliable data, since the Chinese state has consistently refused to allow independent

investigation. The political sensitivity of the issue makes it impossible to conduct extensive fieldwork or independent surveys in China. Falun Gong's quick rise and fall, along with the politicized nature of the accounts available from both its practitioners and the state, create extra difficulties when reconstructing the history. Although the primary sources from both parties are extensive, discrepancies between these sources are not uncommon, and such gaps — which are sometimes enormous — often leave the researcher questioning their reliability. However, the pitfalls should not deter the study of such a group, for scholars like Ownby (2008) and Palmer (2007) are able to construct systematic historical accounts from limited first-hand information. Furthermore, since my analysis focuses on the movement's interaction with exogenous political forces, the available data are indeed solid enough to support my arguments.

More specifically, I consulted several data sources for the purposes of the present research. Regarding Falun Gong's teachings, I relied on the founder's books and lectures, and websites maintained by Falun Gong. While I read and compared the sources in both Chinese and English, when citing sources I chose those translated by Falun Gong itself when possible. Except for obvious grammatical errors, I stuck to the quotations as originally given. Where several translations existed, I examined them and then chose the most accurate version. To construct a narrative of the events, I attempted to compare the accounts of Falun Gong and the state. This often entailed resorting to the best available scholarly treatments and major English-language media reports, such as those from the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Time* magazine. I also drew information from the reports of major international human rights agencies such as Amnesty International. In addition, I interviewed and had conversations with Falun Gong practitioners and Chinese democracy activists in exile, and complemented the secondary data with primary sources as needed.

STATE-RELIGION RELATIONS IN COMMUNIST CHINA

Marx's dismissal of religion as the "opium of the people" has had a formative influence on state-religion relations in communist China. Chinese communists have regarded religion as a residue of feudalism and as an emblem of superstition, as well as a means of international hostile forces. State control and repression have mostly characterized the

history of religion in China since 1949, along with intermittent periods of relative tolerance. Faced with political uncertainty in their first few years in power, the leaders of the new state sought the political support of the religious establishment. From 1949 to 1966, the state sought to incorporate religious leaders and adherents into its “united front,” and allowed a few tightly controlled religious organizations to remain operational. Meanwhile, the state announced that only five institutional religions—Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism—were “authentic” religions worthy of legal status, a policy that remains in force today. With respect to various new religious movements (NRMs),¹ and in particular those with organizational structures, the state’s attitude has been much more hostile. Nevertheless, until the mid-1960s, although the state purged many urban NRMs, because of its preoccupation first with regime consolidation and economic recovery and later with intraparty purges and campaigns to build a socialist utopia, it permitted many village-level NRMs to exist and operate.

This relatively tolerant religious policy was reversed during the turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, when religion was the target of attacks, or even eradication, by both the state and the Red Guards. Many religious sites were ransacked, believers were persecuted, and belief systems were shattered.

Post-Mao China has witnessed substantial upsurge of religion. With the focus of the state shifting to economic growth and the decentralization of decision-making, many spiritual systems have emerged or reemerged. According to a recent survey, 31.4% of the entire adult population could be classified as religious adherents (Xinhuanet 2007). Another national survey conducted in 2007 came to a more stunning conclusion: 85% of Chinese adults held supernatural beliefs or had recently been engaged in religious practices (Yang 2012, 119).

Since 1954, China’s constitution has guaranteed freedom of religious belief on paper. However, religious activities have never enjoyed such constitutional protection. Religion has been equated with churches, and religious activities have therefore been confined to registered venues. Religious organizations must fit state-defined criteria, avoid “politics,” and open their organizational structures and activities to state supervision (Kipnis 2001, 36). The state’s tight control over religious activities has subdued religious fervor to some extent, but religion has proven itself a resilient historical force. Consequently, religious adherents have had to look for substitutes in the religious market, as reflected by the rise of NRMs. The revival of NRMs has hardly gone unnoticed. In 1979, the

People's Daily, an official publication of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP),² made a distinction between religion and superstition, classing among the latter all religious activities outside the five major religions and stating that these “must be suppressed resolutely.”³

QIGONG FEVER

A number of scholars have noted Falun Gong's close ties with the *qigong* movement that swept China in the 1980s and the 1990s (Chang 2004; Ownby 2008, 45–77; Palmer 2007, 219–40; Penny 2012, 8–18). Routinely taught by a charismatic leader via a master/student lineage, *qigong* is a holistic health-enhancing technique that combines controlled breathing, meditation, and physical movement. *Qi* refers to the vital energy of the body, whereas *gong* denotes power or practice.

Qigong was not a completely new phenomenon in communist China; in fact it has deep roots in traditional body techniques dating back as far as 4,000 years. Many of its elements were widely practiced in Chinese society before 1949. But it was not until the late 1940s and the early 1950s that *qigong* emerged as a single category and was then able to spread to the wider society (Palmer 2007, 8). With the notable exception of the Cultural Revolution era, the state not only tolerated *qigong*, but also indeed consciously promoted it as a symbol of “glorious Chinese civilization.” By emphasizing *qi*, the state sought to exorcize *qigong*'s spiritual ingredients by portraying it as a “socialist science.” In the 1950s and the 1960s, the upper echelons of the state leadership in many cases practiced *qigong* or received *qigong* treatment. The national craze for paranormal abilities in the late 1970s and the early 1980s provided a further opportunity for *qigong*'s dizzying rise in popularity. Aware of the state's definition of religion and its hostility toward NRMs, the *qigong* circle downplayed its spiritual dimension, and actively sought recognition from the scientific community by labeling itself as a “somatic science” that would lead to an epistemological breakthrough.

In the 1980s and the early 1990s, *qigong* expanded into a movement. By the mid-1980s, there were between 60 million and 200 million *qigong* practitioners, and more than 2,000 *qigong* groups nationwide (Ownby 2003, 233–234). In 1986, the *Qigong* Science Research Society of China (QSRAC) was established. The creation of QSRAC was a landmark in the development of *qigong*: it was a national-level organization sanctioned by the state and supported by such prominent

figures as Wang Zhen, then China's vice president, military leader Zhang Zhenhuan, Wu Shaozu, then political commissar of the Commission for Science, Technology, and Industry for National Defense, and Qian Xuesen, known as the father of Chinese rocketry. "*Qigong* has left religion and folklore to enter the Temple of Science," proclaimed *qigong* advocates (Palmer 2007, 76).

FALUN GONG'S RISE AS A HEALING PRACTICE

Falun Gong, literally the Practice of the Wheel of the Law, did not directly emerge from the religious resurgence; rather, it emerged as a member of the state-sanctioned *qigong* movement. Li Hongzhi, its founder, was born into an ordinary family in northeast China in the early 1950s. In 1992, having worked as a security guard for many years, Li founded the Falun Gong Research Society (FGRS), and began to offer classes and give lectures.

From May 1992 to December 1994, Li taught 56 classes with a total of approximately 60,000 attendees (Clearwisdom.net 2004a). Lasting 7–10 days, and aimed at helping the participants practice Falun Gong and maintain their physical health, the classes usually started with Li treating the participants' physical diseases and clearing their meridians, and then proceeded with him installing an invisible Law Wheel in their lower abdomens and in other parts of the body (Zhang and Qiao 1999, 61). During this period, Li consistently distinguished Falun Gong from religion by promoting its health benefits.

In 1993, having cultivated a good relationship with the local government, Li moved to Beijing, and embarked on a national tour to promote his practice. Falun Gong still appeared to be nothing more than a *qigong* practice. In his lectures, Li not only avoided political issues, but also advised practitioners to preserve social stability and respect the law, and even appeared to be nationalistic (Ownby 2005, 208). As Li ([1995] 2005, 1) himself acknowledged, "In the beginning, we spread the practice by teaching the *Fa* in the form of a low-level *qigong* that was for healing and keeping fit. That was because we needed to allow everyone a period of time to get to know it."

Li's strategy proved very effective, and a great number of practitioners found Falun Gong appealing solely for its health benefits. Indeed, it was not until the crackdown that most of the practitioners were shocked to learn that their daily practice was anything more than another traditional

health-enhancing technique. Even today, many overseas practitioners come to Falun Gong for health reasons alone.

Li appeared to be well aware of the importance of being legitimized by the state. In 1993, the FGRS became a direct-affiliate branch of the QSRAC, an official recognition enjoyed by only 11 *qigong* groups. In addition, Falun Gong donated to state-sponsored charities and spent lavishly to entertain state officials and others it deemed significant (Ye 1999). Li offered free disease treatments to high-ranking state officials, as well as to persons decorated by the state. In turn, Falun Gong and its health benefits were recognized by the state. The official newspaper of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) reported that most who received Li's treatment "saw remarkable improvements," and Li received a letter of thanks from a state-sponsored foundation (Clearwisdom.net 2004a). In 1992 and 1993, Falun Gong participated in the annual Oriental Health Exposition and created a sensation (Zhang and Qiao 1999, 76–78). Falun Gong even received approval and support from the top of China's power ladder (Fang 1999, 46).

FALUN GONG'S TRANSFORMATION INTO AN NRM

Despite the state's effort to confine *qigong* to the category of physical fitness techniques, as well as the *qigong* community's conscious self-promotion as a somatic science, the line between *qigong*'s healing attributes and its spiritual ingredients had never been impermeable. While on the surface the practice of *qi* merely appears to be controlled breathing, it can also refer to a certain type of mentality or state of consciousness. Moreover, *gong* in various forms throughout Chinese history has often contained more or less spiritual elements associated with Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, popular religion, and mysticism; many *gongs* cultivated the vital energy of the body with the ultimate goal of spiritual attainment. As Palmer (2007, 284–285) maintains, "[Q]igong leads inevitably to chains of belief; its organisation builds itself outside of medical institutions to take on an increasingly religious form." Yang (2012, 113) goes further by claiming that "most *qigong* groups and practices are a form of implicit religion."

Although Li and his practitioners repeatedly claimed that Falun Gong was not a religion,⁴ in the mid-1990s it underwent a dramatic transformation into an NRM. Li started criticizing other *qigong* masters and distancing Falun Gong from the *qigong* community. While spirituality had never

been completely lacking, in the early stage it had fallen into the gray zone of morality and character; now it became the central message of Li's teaching. Scholars have proposed two explanations for this metamorphosis. Lu (2005) focuses on Li's entrepreneurship and views Falun Gong's transition as a result of Li's strategy of differentiation. Palmer (2007), by contrast, emphasizes the inherent spiritual nature of Falun Gong. If we treat the *qigong* community as a quasi-religious market, each of these perspectives contains some truth; yet when taken alone, they miss the whole picture. Without strong intervention from the state or other political authorities, a society's religious preferences tend to be pluralistic and rooted in a competitive market. As Stark and Bainbridge (1985, 508) note, "No faith can inspire universal, voluntary acceptance, except, perhaps, in tiny, primitive societies." By the mid-1990s China had indeed developed a dynamic religious market, and Falun Gong had to compete with approximately 20 major *qigong* groups. As Li's statement in the preceding section shows, Falun Gong's differentiation from the other popular *qigong* groups by reference to its spiritual components was a conscious strategic move.

On the one hand, since China's market-oriented economic reforms took off in 1978, laments for the loss of morality had permeated people's daily conversations. In the 1990s, out of the shadow of Maoism and the 1989 Tiananmen incident, the demand for religion was rapidly growing. On the other hand, because of the state's tight control of the official religions and its suppression of the unofficial ones, seekers attempted to meet their spiritual needs with alternatives that fell between the sanctioned and the unsanctioned. The demand-supply imbalance propelled the formation of a huge gray market for quasi-religious religious products (Yang 2012, 85–158). Li did not shy away from condemning the perceived moral slide and Falun Gong was particularly appealing to the many Chinese who viewed the present social order as anomic (Chang 2004, 133–140).

However, Falun Gong's spiritual and organizational transition was far from a sudden opportunistic step. First, spirituality had always been an integral part of Li's teaching. While Li initially spoke of Falun Gong as a type of *qigong* and repeatedly stated that it was not a religion, in *Falun Gong*, published in 1993, he explicitly required its practitioners to "make cultivation of character their top priority and regard character as the key to developing *gong*" and stated that character "contains much more than virtue" (Li [1993] 2006, 28). Second, the messages in *Zhuan Falun*, which contains many more religious and eschatological themes than *Falun Gong* and Li's earlier lectures, were not completely new to the practitioners upon the book's release in 1994 — it is a collection of

lectures that Li gave between 1992 and 1994. Third, the change took place in the context of increasing state suspicion and scrutiny of the *qigong* community. The state's unease with *qigong* began as early as the 1980s, but for a long time its policy toward *qigong* was "no promoting, no criticizing, no disputing." When Falun Gong emerged in the early 1990s, the state began to enforce control by appointing several former high-ranking CCP officials to the leadership of the QSRAC. It was decreed that *qigong* groups had to register with authorities, and CCP branches were established within these groups to distinguish "false" *qigong* from "scientific" *qigong* (Ownby 2008, 166; Yang 2012, 116–117). Fourth, in part because of the state's restriction of constitutional protection to only five institutional religions and tight control over civic groups, Falun Gong had to disavow its religious traits; and, as will be discussed later, it unsuccessfully sought to align itself with various religious and nonreligious establishments. Therefore, Falun Gong's spiritual transformation was just as reactive — if not indeed more so — as it was proactive.

Falun Gong's transformation into an NRM can be analyzed in terms of eight aspects.⁵ First, Li consciously differentiated Falun Gong from the rest of the *qigong* community. During this period, Li more than once accused other *qigong* groups of charlatanry and chided them for their obsession with *qi* to the neglect of the higher cosmic power, represented by *gong* and *fa*: "Falun Dafa disciples aren't allowed to do [healing] ... When it comes to true higher things, among the masses of *qigong* cultivators nobody really has a clue, no clue at all. Starting today, what we're going to explain are all Laws of high levels" (Li [1994] 2003, 2, 4, 43–44).

Second, Li explicitly stated that Falun Gong was not a *qigong*, and changed its formal name to Falun Dafa, the Great Way of the Law Wheel, in an effort to emphasize that the practice went far beyond physical exercises by increasing spiritual awareness. Moreover, Falun Gong formally seceded from the *qigong* movement by withdrawing from the QSRAC.⁶ Li ceased to teach in person in China in 1994 and overseas in 1995, in order to spread his spiritual messages at a higher level (Ye 1999).

Third, Li sanctified *Zhuan Falun* as the primary scripture: "[N]o matter how many more scriptures we publish, they are merely supplementary materials to *Zhuan Falun*. Only *Zhuan Falun* can truly guide your cultivation. It contains inner meanings that go from the level of ordinary people to incomparable heights" (Li [1995] 2002). "[I] have left man a ladder to heaven — *Zhuan Falun*" (Li [1996] 1999).

As previously mentioned, the content of *Zhuan Falun* was not completely new in relation to Li's previous teaching. It takes no close reading to discern that the book's religious overtones are much stronger than Li's earlier lectures and the teachings of the other *qigong* masters. It was largely the sanctification of *Zhuan Falun* that led to Falun Gong's rupture with the *qigong* milieu. After 1994, the "reading, rereading, and eventual absorption of Li's teachings through his written materials ... constituted the core of Falun Gong practice" (Ownby 2005, 205). Most practitioners read *Zhuan Falun* every day, and many could recite it flawlessly. During the 1999 Tianjin and Zhongnanhai demonstrations, almost every sit-in protestor had a copy of *Zhuan Falun* at hand to read the entire day, sometimes aloud. Moreover, Li ([1994] 2005, 176) forbade the practitioners to make any marks on his books, and especially not on sentences written by Li himself, claiming that his words are "beaming with golden light, and ... every character is a Law Body of [his]." My conversations with Falun Gong practitioners confirmed that they all followed this commandment literally, and many insisted that they could see the golden light in Li's words.

Fourth, Li developed a theological system in *Zhuan Falun*. Drawing largely on spiritual elements from Buddhism and *qigong*, Falun Gong also blended ingredients from Daoism and NRMs. Its central tenet was the cultivation of one's character guided by *Zhen* (truthfulness), *Shan* (compassion), *Ren* (forbearance), the fundamental components of the universe. Character included "the transformation of virtue ... and karma ... the abandonment of ordinary human desires and attachments, and the capacity to endure the toughest hardships of all" (Li [1997] 2006, 3). Li held that "when someone dies ... only the ... layer of the largest molecules [of the dimension of his is] shed, while his bodies in other dimensions aren't destroyed" (Li [1994] 2003, 15). Li incorporated apocalyptic themes by asserting that "there have been 81 times when mankind lay in total ruin" and that another cycle of destruction and renewal was imminent (Li [1994] 2003, 11, 58).

Fifth, salvation became the central message of Li's teaching. Li claimed that Falun Gong was "saving all sentient beings" (36). To the practitioners, Li was the way and the truth: "If I can't save you nobody can" (161).

Sixth, Li's status was elevated to that of a god- or messiah-like figure. As Wallis ([1976] 1977, 248–250) observes, authority based on extraordinariness is contestable and therefore highly insecure. To convert extraordinariness into charisma and accord his authority a transcendental legitimation, Li penetrated the realm of the supernatural by transforming

his status from a magician to a mystagogue (Weber [1922] 1993, 46–59), and eventually to a god. In the early 1990s, Li identified himself as an ordinary human teacher who had received guidance from more than 20 mysterious masters (Penny 2012, 79–85; Zhang and Qiao 1999, 33–44). Li's status quietly changed in *Zhuan Falun*, however, wherein he claimed that he had achieved the highest level of cultivation. According to government records, Li was born on July 27, 1952. Li has insisted, however, that his real date of birth is May 13, 1951, which in the lunar calendar is the Buddha's birthday. Falun Gong also widely distributed photos in which Li is seen dressed in a Buddhist saffron robe and sitting in the lotus position. In 1998, Li ([1998] 2004) further proclaimed, "No matter how vast this Dafa is, I am not within it, while all of you beings are within it."

Li's self-deification appeared to peak in 1999 in an interview with *Time Asia*:

Time: Are you a human being?

Li: You can think of me as a human being.

Time: Are you from earth?

Li: I don't wish to talk about myself at a higher level. People wouldn't understand it (Dowell 1999).

Indeed, many Falun Gong practitioners regarded Li as a true god and therefore above all other gods. Minghui.org includes numerous personal testimonies of Li's magic power. A practitioner told me that he survived a car accident because of Li's blessing.

Seventh, Li's authority was monopolized (Lu 2005, 181–182). Seemingly cautious about the danger of schism and subversion for NRMs, Li forbade the teaching of Falun Gong in another person's name, disapproved of other master-disciple relationships, and insisted that spiritual connections could only exist between the practitioners and him.

Eighth, Falun Gong established a pyramidal organizational structure. At the center was the FGRS in Beijing with Li as president. In the mid-1990s, Falun Gong established 39 principal assistance centers and tens of thousands of assistance centers in cities, counties, and villages, all with heads and assistants. The FGRS managed all relevant affairs and appointed the main leaders of the assistance centers, accompanied by a series of written rules and regulations.

Within a few years, Falun Gong rose to become arguably the largest *qigong* group in China (Palmer 2007, 219), attracting more than 100

million practitioners worldwide, according to Falun Gong's own figures. Although the accuracy of this figure is questionable,⁷ considering that it had been in existence for less than a decade, Falun Gong's success was indisputable. Li's first public lecture in Changchun in May 1992 was attended by merely 180 students. The number increased to 1,500 in his class in Beijing only five months later (Clearwisdom.net 2004a). By September 1994 Li was confident that there existed hundreds of thousands of practitioners' nationwide (Li [1994] 2002, 22). In 1996 alone, *Zhuan Falun* sold hundreds of thousands of copies, and became a best-seller in China. By 1999, it had been translated into nine languages. A comparison of the "questions and answers" sections of Li's pre- and post-*Zhuan Falun* lectures reveals that the practitioners were once preoccupied with health enhancement, and that salvation had subsequently become their major concern. In other words, the publication of *Zhuan Falun* threw into sharp relief the religious messages of Faun Gong and marked the latter's transformation from a health practice into an NRM.

FALUN GONG'S METAMORPHOSIS INTO A POLITICAL MOVEMENT

Falun Gong's huge success as an NRM foreshadowed the end of its honeymoon with the state and was the prelude to the crackdown. Arguing that regime type influences the interplay between state repression and movement mobilization, Gupta et al. (1993) maintain that in authoritarian nations, severe sanctions can impose an unbearable cost. The Falun Gong case appears to be much more complex, since in the second half of the 1990s, Falun Gong's level of contention largely correlated with the state's level of repression. While I chronicle the conflict-amplifying process below, it helps first to lay out my theoretical arguments. First, as Thornton (2003, 253) points out, in the 1990s, "while operating outside the realm of state-recognized orthodoxy, [Falun Gong was] by no means uniformly anti-dynastic or politically subversive in intent." However, there had never been a clear-cut boundary between the political and the apolitical in the case of Falun Gong, as its ostensibly apolitical spiritual messages were ultimately political within a communist state. Second, Falun Gong's decision to "take on" the state was a response to a series of small-scale frictions between the two parties. Third, an authoritarian state such as China is characterized by a deeply ingrained sense of insecurity and vigilance, as well as a relentless tendency to search for

subversives, which explains its efforts to curb *qigong* groups in the early and mid-1990s. Fourth, Falun Gong's style of actively engaging the political authorities was rooted in its doctrine and its (mis)perception of the political opportunities. Fifth, the eventual crackdown can be viewed as the result of conflict amplification. More specifically, the state's efforts to keep Falun Gong away from the political realm induced the latter to act like an interest group and try to persuade the state of its apolitical nature. This in turn was perceived as highly political in the eyes of the authoritarian state. The state thus became aware of Falun Gong's capacity to mobilize and present an ideological challenge, and the state's repression eventually released Falun Gong's confrontational potential and led to its open political defiance.

A brief examination of the evolution of state legitimacy in China will clarify the interactive nature of the conflict between Falun Gong and the state. During the 1980s, after a series of reform efforts, the state's political legitimacy largely resided in its perceived moral justice. Disillusionment with rampant corruption within the state was an important inducement of the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. State-society relations underwent profound transformations in the 1990s: the state rehabilitated its political legitimacy and shifted its bases from ideological orthodoxy and moral authority to economic performance, nationalist rhetoric, and social stability. This transformation had three implications. First, the state continued to be an authoritarian actor. The state continued to penetrate nearly every corner of the society, which gave it a strong mobilization capacity in quelling popular unrest in the name of social stability. Second, the state tightened its ideological control and became highly sensitive to any ideological challenges, especially those that might question the CCP's legitimacy as a ruling party. Indeed, China's economic growth had impeded its democratic transition, for the switch of political legitimacy from ideology to economy strengthened the state's capacity to suppress challengers by weakening their popular support. Third, civil society was handicapped. Civic organizations were still fragile and their survival depended on the legitimacy granted by the state.

Although superficially harmless, Falun Gong's spiritual teaching posed a great challenge to the symbolic order of the authoritarian regime. What set it apart from many other potential subversives was its challenge to all three of the aforementioned bases of state legitimacy. In particular, Li disdained the utilitarian ideology and instrumental rationality promoted by the state in the 1990s, and more than once castigated the perversion of moral standards he associated with materialist consumerism. Falun

Gong's cosmology went far beyond the prevailing narrow nationalism and ethnocentrism, and Li repeatedly asked practitioners to abandon all earthly attachments — let alone national and ethnic pride. While the state's high mobilization capacity enabled it to react swiftly to overt political subversives and crush nascent challenges, the perceptible, yet intangible, threat posed by a quasi-religious *qigong* practice was much more difficult for the state to quell in the name of social stability. Even though Li was careful not to condemn the political authorities prior to the crackdown, he was unwilling to take part in the symbolic order of the authoritarian apparatus (e.g., Falun Gong's withdrawal from the QSRAC). Unlike the greengrocer described by Havel ([1978] 1985, 27) in "The Power of the Powerless," Li refused to "place the communist slogan in his window," which was as political as could be. As Shue ([2004] 2010, 57) eloquently comments:

However peacefully [the Falun Gong practitioners] practice their meditation exercise and however much they may regard "politics" as being beneath them, those swept up in the Falun Gong phenomenon never had a chance of remaining 'apolitical' in China. With its slogan ... "Truth, Goodness, and Forbearance" ... Falun Gong makes almost a perfect counter-hegemony. Truth — but not the state's narrow empiricist truths. Goodness! — but not the state's dubious versions of benevolence. Forbearance! — but not the state's vulgarly assertive "wealth and power" concept of what it means to attain transcendent glory.

It is impossible to know with certainty whether Li intentionally set out to change Falun Gong from a *qigong* group into an NRM, and later into a political movement. After all, most *qigong* masters carefully paid ritual obeisance to the state. In the global context, NRMs for the most part use tactical reaction and adaptation in response to tensions with political authorities and wider society, which often leads to reconciliation, rather than confrontation (Wallis [1976] 1977). However, aside from Falun Gong's intrinsic religious and political dimensions, several facts are noteworthy. First, as stated above, Falun Gong enjoyed certain backstage connections with political authorities. Falun Gong had the protection of the center of state power, such as Zhu Rongji, then China's premier (Zong [2001] 2002), and Qiao Shi, the previous leader of the National People's Congress (NPC) (Ownby 2008, 168–169). Furthermore, some of its high-ranking members were important state or party cadres. For example, three of the four founding vice presidents and the secretary of

the FGERS were high-ranking local CCP officials (Zhang and Qiao 1999, 70–71); Ye Hao, one of the key spokespersons for Falun Gong, was a retired MPS bureau chief. In a country such as China where social connections are integral to the political order, the importance of such backstage support could not be overestimated. Second, Li drew confidence from the rapid growth and high mobilization capacity of Falun Gong. In 1999, after the April 25 incident, Li ([1999] 2005, 3) argued, “[T]he number of people who went [to Zhongnanhai] wasn’t large at all ... [T]here are 100 million people practicing Falun Gong, and only ten thousand plus went — could you say that’s a lot? There was no need to mobilize people: with 100 million some people, if one person wanted to go and so did the next, in no time there would be over ten thousand people.” Third, the state’s repressive capacity — or at least its willingness to deploy it — appeared to have been weakened. In the 1990s, the state appeared to be obsessed with its unprecedented economic growth, in which decentralization had played a crucial role, and therefore seemed unwilling or unable to attend to spiritual affairs. The *qigong* community’s relative autonomy and the state’s ostensible restraint prior to the crack-down may have further strengthened Falun Gong’s perception of immunity. In addition, the year 1999 coincided with the anniversaries of four historic events, namely, the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the Tibet uprising in 1959, and the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. This might have given the state scruples about launching a nationwide campaign against Falun Gong. All of these factors might have contributed to Falun Gong’s misperception of the political opportunity.

The state’s first measures against Falun Gong took place in 1994. Zhang Zhenhuan’s death in March marked the collapse of a major pillar of *qigong*’s support from the center of power. His letters to the major figures of the *qigong* circle mere days before his death warned that the opposition to *qigong* was about to go on the offensive (Palmer 2007, 170). In October, the Ministry of Civil Affairs (MCA) and the MPS disbanded the International Federation of Qigong Sciences, an important organization chaired by Wu Shaozu, and arrested its founder. In December, the CCP called for the authorities to “unremittingly and lawfully fight” against “pseudoscience.” The state-controlled media quickly responded and started a campaign in early 1995. Many stories were published about Falun Gong practitioners’ psychosis, and parallels were drawn between *qigong* and Aum Shinrikyo, an NRM that had recently carried out the Sarin gas attack in Japan. He Zuoxiu, a prestigious

physicist, and Sima Nan, a well-known journalist, who had both criticized *qigong* as pseudoscience, escalated their attacks on *qigong* and its supporters within the political establishment (Palmer 2007, 170–174). Later that year, the municipal authorities of Hangzhou, a major city in southeast China, for the first time banned the teaching of Falun Gong (Penny 2012, 52; Zhang and Qiao 1999, 105). An examination of Li's lectures during this period, however, showed that he appeared to be self-possessed and opposed to any aggressive response from Falun Gong practitioners. When asked about the appropriate action a practitioner should take in response to attacks, Li ([1994] 2005, 146) replied plainly, "Just ignore them. There is no need to argue or fight with them." In addition, Li ([1994] 2002, 29) explicitly forbade practitioners from participating in demonstrations and other political activities: "[The practitioners] can't meddle in a country's politics and laws, and they shouldn't interfere with everyday people's affairs ... Aren't [actions such as marching] attachments that a cultivator should get rid of?"

Indeed, *Zhuan Falun* offered systematic theological explanations for hardship. First, a person's suffering resulted from the misdeeds of a previous life, and was therefore cosmic justice: "[The tribulations are] all caused by your own karmic debts ... So from here on out, when you run into a conflict you shouldn't think that it's just by chance" (Li [1994] 2003, 75–76).

Second, forbearance heralded the nonviolent gestures of Falun Gong: "To be a practitioner you should ... be able to 'not hit back when attacked, not talk back when insulted.' You have to endure" (190).

Third, when adverse circumstances arise, forbearance would bring virtue to a practitioner and get rid of his or her karma: "The worse [a persecutor smears] you ... the more virtue he loses, and that virtue is all given to you ... [Y]our own karma will get transformed ... and it [will all turn] into virtue" (78).

The political storm erupted in 1996. In June, the *Guangming Daily*, an influential national newspaper controlled by the CCP, published a pseudonymous commentary accusing *Zhuan Falun* of being a pseudoscientific book that spread feudal superstition. It was later disclosed that Pan Guoyan, a high-ranking official of the General Administration of Press and Publication, under the administration's authorization, wrote the commentary (Duan 2006). More than 20 major newspapers quickly followed suit. This wave of attacks proved fatal, because Falun Gong and the whole *qigong* movement had gained official sanction and popular support largely under the guise of somatic science. With this identity in question, and in

particular its estrangement from the scientific establishment, Falun Gong lost its legitimacy and protection. In July, the state promulgated an order banning the distribution of major Falun Gong publications. In September, the QSRAC issued a statement accusing Li of “wantonly deifying himself, wantonly spreading feudal superstition, and wantonly fabricating political rumors” (Zhang and Qiao 1999, 108), and in November announced its revocation of Falun Gong’s registration. Since October, Li had spent a substantial amount of time in the United States (U.S.), and he eventually emigrated to and was granted permanent resident status in the U.S. in 1998. In 1997 and 1998, the MPS twice ordered investigations into Falun Gong’s activities.

Li was clearly aware of the unfavorable situation. In August 1996, he said, “From the incident with the *Guangming Daily* until now ... some [disciples] have ... circulated rumors without any concern for Dafa’s stability, worsening factors that undermine the Fa” (Li [1996] 2001, 31). However, Li still showed restraint: “I have repeatedly stressed that we have nothing to do with politics, that we are absolutely not meddling in politics, that we are absolutely not involved in politics. If Li Hongzhi were engaged in politics, what I am spreading today would be an evil practice” (Li [1996] 2007). Deprived of the protection of the QSRAC and the scientific establishment, Falun Gong decided to seek legitimacy through other channels. Between April 1996 and late 1997, Falun Gong successively applied to the Ethnic Affairs Committee of the NPC, the Buddhist Association of China, and the United Front Work Department of the CCP Central Committee, for registration as a “nonreligious Falun Gong academic mass association,” a “nonreligious Buddhist cultural group,” and a “nonreligious Falun Gong academic association,” respectively. Each application was rejected (Ye 1999). Faced with an adversarial climate, Falun Gong began to loosen its organizational structure (Tong 2002, 641–642).

However, from the outset, Falun Gong practitioners had reacted to the attacks in a swift and serious manner. Immediately after the *Guangming Daily* incident, Falun Gong launched a letter-writing campaign that flooded the newspaper with thousands of letters in protest. The campaign received Li’s endorsement in August, praising those who “wrote without reservation to the authorities for the sake of Dafa’s reputation” and who “spoke out against the injustice done by the irresponsible report.” More important, Li started to frame the political turbulence as a test of a practitioner’s character (Li [1996] 2001, 31–32). The most significant activity within Falun Gong’s repertoire of contention, however, was

demonstrations. Between June 1996 and April 1999, the practitioners mounted more than 300 peaceful demonstrations against the perceived media bias, demanding that “erroneous” information about Falun Gong be corrected (Ownby 2008, 169). However, up until May 1998, all demonstrations were limited to small gatherings. While praising those practitioners engaged in activism, Li ([1996] 2001, 31) also spoke highly of those who “were determined to steadfastly cultivate” and stayed at home.

The first major demonstration was staged in 1998 in response to He Zuoxiu’s claim in an interview on Beijing Television (BTV) on May 24 that a doctoral student from his institute suffered from psychosis induced by Falun Gong. In the ensuing eight days, thousands of Falun Gong practitioners visited or wrote letters to BTV demanding “clarification.” While insisting that “Dafa absolutely should not get involved in politics,” Li ([1998] 2001, 49) changed his tone and framed the Beijing practitioners’ protest as helping “the media understand [the] actual situation and learn about [Falun Gong] positively so that [the media] would not drag [the practitioners] into politics.” Moreover, Li ([1998] 1999) began to reprimand those who stayed home: “What do you mean by [steadfast cultivation]? ... Do you mean that you didn’t participate in it, and that you ‘steadfastly did actual cultivation’? It sounds like you’re trying to find excuses and justifications for missing an opportunity to reach Consummation. You’re being crafty even with me.” At this point, Li began referring to the activism as “guarding the Law,” which is indicative of how protest had become an essential aspect of cultivation (Palmer 2007, 253).

While Falun Gong was not the only *qigong* group to publicly protest against perceived media misrepresentation, the persistence and visibility of its activism was readily apparent. It should also be noted that during this period, Falun Gong’s protests more often than not achieved their goals. For example, after the eight-day demonstration, the director of BTV apologized in private, fired the journalist who interviewed He Zuoxiu, and promised to air a positive report on Falun Gong (Zhang and Qiao 1999, 201). A number of newspapers which had criticized Falun Gong later issued statements of apology. A reflection of Falun Gong’s tremendous social influence, these temporary and modest achievements in turn fed into Falun Gong’s more aggressive activism. Between April 1998 and July 1999, Falun Gong launched at least 20 large demonstrations, each with more than 1,000 participants (Palmer 2007, 254–255).

This period of heightened activism reached its apogee in response to the publication of an essay by He Zuoxiu on April 11, 1999, entitled “I Do

Not Approve of Teenagers Practicing *Qigong*” in a popular science magazine run by Tianjin Normal University. In the period April 18–24, more than 10,000 practitioners went to the university and other government agencies to “clarify the truth,” with approximately 6,300 practitioners present at the climax. He Zuoxiu was inundated by telephone calls from practitioners demanding a “debate.” On April 24, 45 practitioners were arrested and the police reportedly beat some. When requesting the release of their detained fellows, the practitioners were told by the local police that they required approval from Beijing. On April 25, an estimated 10,000 to 30,000 practitioners assembled outside the CCP headquarters compound at Zhongnanhai in Beijing, and staged a 13-hour silent sit-in protest demanding the right to practice Falun Gong and an end to police harassment. It was the largest demonstration in China since the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 and had significant political repercussions.

Remarkably, from 1994 to the summer of 1999, most of the activists believed that the state was just misinformed, and their sole purpose was simply to inform the state that “Falun Dafa was good.” They first sought out local governments, and upon learning that the local officials were only carrying out the state’s orders, decided to seek justice from the center. Ironically, a direct but unintended consequence of these protests was the consolidation of the state’s vigilance over Falun Gong’s mobilization capacity and potential to mount an ideological challenge, in particular as displayed in the protest of April 25. Distinct from most other challengers, Falun Gong’s mobilization was both cross-sectional and cross-regional, as it was able to recruit practitioners from different regions and social strata; this swiftly conjured up images of other religiously inspired uprisings of the past two centuries, such as the White Lotus and the Taiping Rebellion. Regarding the ideological challenge, the “siege” of the CCP headquarters inevitably “projected the image of a powerful alternative order ... not afraid of the [CCP]” (Palmer 2007, 295). While the practitioners boasted that “tens of thousands [of them] were [in Zhongnanhai] for one whole day and left no trash; not even a small piece of paper” (Xia 2010), the perfectly peaceful and orderly nature of the collective action demonstrated that it was carefully calculated, and had specific goals. In this sense, state repression did not come completely unexpected.

Three months later, the state officially outlawed Falun Gong. Labeling Falun Gong an “evil cult,” the state escalated its campaign and mobilized its entire bureaucratic machinery to arrest the protestors, purge the

practitioners, and crush the resistance. Falun Gong books, audiotapes, videotapes, and other paraphernalia were confiscated and destroyed. The propaganda apparatus was mobilized to denounce Falun Gong, alongside other quasi-religious groups and “fraudulent” *qigong* masters. Between July 22 and October 30, the police detained 35,000 Falun Gong practitioners in Beijing alone and sent approximately 2,000 practitioners to labor camps.⁸ The first instances of Falun Gong members dying in police custody were reported on October 7 (Amnesty International 1999, 3). The crackdown also marked the collapse of the entire *qigong* sector.

Notably, even immediately before and after the crackdown, Falun Gong took every opportunity to try to convince the state of its “apolitical” nature. In June 1999, a month prior to the ban, Li ([1999] 2005, 2) claimed, “[B]y no means do I want to get involved in ordinary human affairs, much less do I desire someone’s political power.” Li’s (1999) statement on July 22, two days after the ban, still conveyed the same message, even at the cost of contradicting his previous statements with respect to Falun Gong’s relationship with *qigong*: “Falun Gong is simply a popular *qigong* activity ... We are not against the government now, nor will we be in the future.”

As the crackdown was underway, Li began to take an activist stance and responded more directly. The major task of practitioners changed from cultivation to “clarifying and spreading the truth” (Rahn 2002, 54): “[I]f the evil hadn’t persecuted us, we wouldn’t need to explain the truth to people whatsoever ... When being treated unfairly, people should be allowed to speak — this is a human being’s most basic right” (Li [2000] 2002, 4).

In June 2000, Li began to directly criticize the CCP and Jiang Zemin, then China’s highest political leader, who was widely believed to be directly responsible for launching the crackdown. Portraying the CCP as “evil wretches” (Li [2000] 2005a, 20) and Jiang as the “King of Terror” prophesied by Nostradamus (Li [2000] 2005b), Li started calling on practitioners to rectify (Li [2001] 2005) the Great Law, and castigated the bystanders:

I feel sorry for those people who aren’t able to step forward ... There are also some people who say, “Why doesn’t Master finish this sooner?” ... These people aren’t even ashamed to say this! ... While Dafa encounters persecution, while disciples are being arrested, persecuted, and beaten to death ... what are they doing? While their Master is being slandered,

what are they doing? ... No matter how he “persists in studying the *Fa* and doing the exercises” at home, he is being controlled by demons and is “enlightening” along an evil path (Li 2000).

In 2001, Li began to call on the practitioners to overthrow the communist regime:

As long as the evil isn't completely eliminated ... we still need to keep doing even better. We must expose and eliminate the evil. Chinese people have been the biggest victims amidst the evil's damage. All the methods employed by the evil political gang of scoundrels in the Chinese government are the most despicable, the most evil, and unknown to history — they have reached the extreme, they couldn't possibly be worse (Li [2001] 2002, 15).

Li's speech in 2003 was virtually a fully-fledged anti-communist manifesto:

[I] don't want to defeat you, Communist Party, you're not worth it. It's you ... [who] has caused your collapse while you have persecuted the people and the masses ... How wicked — could this regime still be allowed to exist? ... [F]or those of you who haven't done well or who stepped forward late ... you must seize the final chance ... (Li 2003).

In her study of the link between millennial beliefs and religious violence, Wessinger (2000) distinguishes between progressive millennialism and catastrophic millennialism with respect to the vision of the end of the world and the accomplishment of the millennial kingdom. The evolution of Li's teaching from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s clearly exemplifies a dynamic trajectory from progressive to catastrophic millennialism. When Falun Gong enjoyed a relatively prominent and comfortable position in society, the overall tone was that “humans working in harmony with a divine or superhuman plan can progressively build the millennial kingdom” (Wessinger 2000, 9). Conversely, when political disaster was perceived as imminent, dark and catastrophic themes took over, and Falun Gong practitioners started to “draw sharp boundaries between themselves as elected ones destined for salvation and those immersed in earthly evil” (Al-Rasheed and Shterin 2009, xxv). By the early 2000s, Falun Gong had evolved into a high-profile anti-CCP political movement. By asking the practitioners to let go of their “last attachments” (Li [2000]

2005a), Li began to lead Falun Gong's struggle along a revolutionary course.

Furthermore, the questioning of political authorities often marks the beginning of religious violence. At this stage, political activism had become a necessary — if indeed not the only — path to salvation, and Li's teaching had a huge influence on the practitioners' defiance of the state. As Johnson notes, “[I]nterviews with Falun Gong members in recent months reveal [a] more subtle source of pressure: the demands of ... Li. [Li's recent writings have] stressed unwavering activism and opposition to the state ... While few complain, they say they can meet Mr. Li's requirements only by sacrificing everything, in a desperate ... bid to force the government to lift its ban.”⁹ The practitioners had found in Li's teaching the “mytho-logics” which structured their emancipatory and anti-communist discourse. In other words, religion had become an effective tool for political mobilization against persecution, and politics and religion could not be separated any longer. Li (2007) acknowledged the political nature of Falun Gong in 2007: “If people can be saved through politics ... then we can make use of that form — what would be wrong with that?”

FALUN GONG IN THE POST-CRACKDOWN PERIOD

The state's full-scale attack has proved very effective. At present, Falun Gong only exists as a small underground force in China. According to Falun Gong sources, by 2009, more than 3,000 practitioners had died as a result of abuse in police custody or from other forms of persecution (Falun Dafa Information Center 2009).¹⁰ However, Falun Gong in exile has evolved into the largest anti-CCP political force with its own transnational organizations, lobby groups, websites, publisher, publications, newspapers, television networks, and radio stations. Since 1999, Falun Gong has challenged the state in a number of ways.

Falun Gong has continued its mission of “clarifying the truth.” Although sporadic rather than systematic, public protests have been a regular occurrence in Tiananmen Square and throughout the country. In the first few years after the crackdown, Falun Gong practitioners secretly put up anti-CCP posters in nearly every public arena. Practitioners hacked into state-controlled cable television and broadcasting networks several times in 2002–2005, and inserted Falun Gong and anti-CCP contents in Chongqing, Changchun, and other regions. Falun Gong encourages

such actions and calls them “a citizen’s right” (Soundofhope.org 2010), and even has instructions on its website regarding how to carry them out. Falun Gong practitioners have often sent mass e-mails and made robocalls accusing the CCP, and affixed anti-CCP seals on bank notes. In 2006, they launched the Global Internet Freedom Consortium (GIFC) to create and distribute freely downloaded circumvention and proxy server tools to combat Internet censorship in China. In 2003, Falun Gong founded the World Organization to Investigate the Persecution of Falun Gong, an international NGO with headquarters in the U.S. The organization has released many investigative reports on a variety of issues related to the CCP’s alleged persecutions of Falun Gong practitioners, as well as lists of people responsible for the persecutions. Since 2006, Falun Gong has accused the CCP of allowing and engaging in the systematic harvesting and selling of the organs of living Falun Gong inmates, as well as administering a concentration camp for more than 6,000 Falun Gong practitioners. Third-party investigations have been unable to corroborate these allegations, but there has been no shortage of outrage from the international community.

Falun Gong has established a number of multi-lingual, multi-national media outlets to criticize the CCP and report on human rights abuses in China. Falundafa.org contains many of Li’s writings, lecture transcripts and recordings, weekly practice schedules, and local contact information. The Chinese website Minghui.org and its English counterpart Clearwisdom.net are primarily forums for the practitioners to communicate their experiences of practice. Available in 21 languages, Epochtimes.com is a comprehensive website with the news section heavily focusing on anti-CCP reporting. The *Epoch Times* also exists as a freely distributed newspaper that circulates in 35 countries in 12 languages. While the accuracy of its reporting has often been questioned, the *Epoch Times* has become an influential source of political news, especially in expatriate Chinese communities. Falun Gong practitioners also founded a television broadcasting company, New Tang Dynasty, with the stated mission of bringing “truthful and uncensored information into and out of China.” The station is well-known for a variety of cultural outreach programs, the most famous of which is its annual Chinese New Year Spectacular. While ostensibly apolitical, these programs serve to contrast the “authentic” Chinese culture with the one “distorted” by the CCP.

Falun Gong has started a series of global political campaigns. Its practitioners have regularly passed out flyers in busy neighborhoods,

participated in sit-in demonstrations in front of Chinese diplomatic offices, and held rallies and protest spectacles against alleged persecution in major cities worldwide. They have established a number of research and advocacy organizations to report the state's human rights violations, and to lobby for the support of foreign governments and international organizations. Their efforts have achieved some notable successes, with the United Nations, several foreign governments, and major global human rights organizations (such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch) launching investigations or expressing their concerns about Falun Gong's allegations. In 2010, the U.S. House of Representatives overwhelmingly passed a resolution calling for an end to the CCP's campaign to persecute Falun Gong practitioners. In 2003, Falun Gong launched the Global Coalition to Bring Jiang to Justice, and as of 2011 had sued Jiang in more than 50 criminal and civil cases in more than 30 cities and regions worldwide. It has also undertaken legal actions against more than 30 other state leaders through the World Court and other international organizations. Indeed, Falun Gong has filed more lawsuits for human rights violations than any other organization in the world (Ownby 2008, 219). In 2009, a judge of the Spanish National Court decided to indict Jiang and four other high-level state leaders for the alleged crimes of genocide and torture against Falun Gong practitioners under the principle of Universal Jurisdiction. In the same year, an Argentine federal judge ordered the arrest of Jiang and another top state leader for "crimes against humanity" for the alleged persecution of Falun Gong. In addition, the practitioners have consistently confronted high-ranking state officials in public on their visits to foreign countries. In 2011, Falun Gong practitioners filed a federal lawsuit against Cisco Systems for allegedly developing and maintaining China's Internet surveillance and censorship project. In 2004, the *Epoch Times* published a lengthy editorial series, "Nine Commentaries on the Communist Party," which systematically attacked the CCP and particularly its legitimacy as the ruling party. A mere glance at the editorial's subheadings reveals the polemical tone and political motivation: "On What the CCP is," "On the Beginnings of the CCP," "On the Tyranny of the CCP," "On How the CCP is an Anti-Universe Force," "On the Collusion of Jiang Zemin with the CCP to Persecute Falun Gong," "On How the CCP Destroyed Traditional Culture," "On the CCP's History of Killing," "On How the CCP is an Evil Cult," and "On the Unscrupulous Nature of the CCP." In the first year after publication, Falun Gong sent approximately 100 million e-mails, 12 million letters, 10 million faxes, and

made 50 million phone calls to promote the editorial (Morais 2006). It has served as an anti-CCP manifesto and has been widely circulated and discussed in the Chinese-speaking world. Shortly after its publication, the *Epoch Times* started a campaign of “Quitting the CCP,” urging members of the CCP to withdraw from and denounce it. Li (2005) issued a public statement of withdrawal from the Communist Youth League, and the *Epoch Times* has set up a website on which people can symbolically renounce their CCP membership. Tables or kiosks with banners in which Falun Gong practitioners invite people to quit the CCP have become commonplace in major cities worldwide. The campaign has attracted the participation of some noted defectors. According to the *Epoch Times*, from December 3, 2004 to November 30, 2012, 128,308,766 individuals signed up to the campaign.¹¹ This figure is a gross exaggeration because of the anonymous and therefore unverifiable nature of participation. Nevertheless, there is no denying that the state regards the campaign as an extreme provocation.

Falun Gong has worked with other anti-CCP forces. Embodying the adage “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” a political alliance has been forged between Falun Gong and other anti-CCP groups in recent years. Prior to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Falun Gong and Tibet independence groups worked together to disrupt the global torch relay and hold many demonstrations along the route. In tandem with Beijing’s torch relay, and with the assistance of Tibet independence and Taiwan independence groups, Falun Gong organized the Global Human Rights Torch Relay spanning 150 cities in Europe, North America, Asia, and Australia to raise global awareness. In 2011, Falun Gong, a human rights group, and a pro-Tibet group jointly launched the “No CCP Villains” campaign. In a short time, the campaign compiled a list of more than 11,000 CCP officials accused of involvement in human rights violations, with the aim of pressuring foreign governments and NGOs not to invite or receive these officials. Moreover, Falun Gong has reached out to human rights groups in other parts of the world. For example, the GIFC has supplied its anti-censorship technologies to human rights groups in the Middle East and Burma, and played a significant role in the Iranian uprising of 2009 (Lake 2009). In 2002, France Tibet, a French pro-Tibet group, released a statement in support of Falun Gong’s stance against Article 23 of the Basic Law of Hong Kong. Rallies and conferences organized by Falun Gong have often been attended and joined by other pro-democracy groups as well as pro-Tibet groups, Uyghur nationalist groups, Taiwan independence groups,

and other human rights groups. The Dalai Lama has more than once criticized the CCP's persecution of Falun Gong. My conversations with a few overseas human rights activists confirm that while not all of them view Falun Gong favorably, many activists see an alliance with Falun Gong as a positive strategic step.

Falun Gong's persistent campaigns overseas have fed the fear of the Chinese communists for the possibility and likelihood of the intervention of the U.S. government, which can be discerned in the numerous reports in the official Chinese media asserting the latter's alleged use of Falun Gong to interfere in China's internal affairs.¹² In casual conversations, many ordinary Chinese citizens, and even some mid-level officials, attempted to convince me of the role of the U.S. government in the Falun Gong movement, even when I pointed out the lack of supporting evidence.

CONCLUSION

Many internal and external characteristics can predict the engagement of NRMs in political conflict. Rather than seeking a covering law, this article takes a mechanism approach and locates the clustering and sequencing of events as part of the causal structure. As Zhao (2010, 459) points out, "Contentious politics in democratic and authoritarian states [share] many similarities. Their major difference lies in the mechanism." I view Falun Gong's trajectory as a conflict-amplifying process in which the interplay between the group as a religious actor and the state policies and apparatus of religious control led to the eventual crackdown. After the founding of the PRC, the state's policies toward religion and civic organizations created a unique niche for *qigong*. In the early 1990s, after *qigong* successfully opened up a space in the gray zone between state and society, Falun Gong adopted a strategy of accommodation and emerged as a naturalistic, "scientific" *qigong* practice eschewing explicit spiritual teaching. In the mid-1990s, faced with increasing state suspicion of *qigong* and fierce competition from thousands of *qigong* groups, Falun Gong brought its spiritual dimension to the fore and became an NRM. This proved a huge success as it met the needs of spiritual seekers in the gray market. Unsettled by Falun Gong's ideological challenge, the state began to take measures to keep Falun Gong out of the political realm. However, the minor irritations that ensued convinced the practitioners that the state was merely misinformed. To convince the state of its "apolitical" nature, Falun Gong launched a persistent "truth

clarification” campaign, but the small-scale demonstrations further warned the state of Falun Gong’s defiance of its symbolic order. The linkage and clustering of the events eventually exploded into the massive Zhongnanhai protest of 1999. Shocked by Falun Gong’s mobilization capacity and ideological challenge, the state officially banned the group and has since harshly purged its practitioners. But the crackdown only served to fully release Falun Gong’s political potential. While Li previously only vaguely referred to evil, the crackdown polarized and intensified Falun Gong’s apocalyptic message, which now unequivocally views the CCP as a nefarious force. Falun Gong in exile has become a major anti-CCP force that has launched waves of political activities aimed at the overthrow of the CCP.

The conflict between Falun Gong and the state brings us to the question of what is political under authoritarian rule, as the escalation of the level of conflict can be seen as a result of conflicting interpretations of what counted as “political” (and “religious”). In communist China, the political (and the religious) is never a separate sphere in society, but always intersects with other social phenomena; politicization is not an event, but a process in flux (Kipnis 2008, 139–156). This case also reveals the importance of interpretations of social reality and the significance of the institutionalization of a certain interpretation. As Weller (1994) maintains, authoritarianism does not preclude independent interpretations; moreover, official interpretations are ultimately thin and feeble. The politicization of Falun Gong was a direct consequence of the state’s effort to control the interpretive community. Falun Gong grew explosively under interpretive ambiguity. The confrontation was triggered by the state’s imposition of official interpretations of Falun Gong’s religious and political nature, which culminated in the latter’s complete metamorphosis into a political movement. An authoritarian regime is characterized by a fluid line between political and cultural resistance, with political resistance having clear cultural roots, and cultural resistance having the potential of developing into a political movement, and the attempt by authorities to institutionalize and monopolize a new interpretation can be a catalyst for political resistance (Weller 1994).

In retrospect, the story of Falun Gong is one of unintended consequences. First, to a certain extent, the state’s sanctioning and promotion (in the early stage) of *qigong* sowed the seeds of disaster for itself, although the *qigong* groups, including Falun Gong, did not intend to challenge the state prior to the crackdown. Second, Falun Gong’s transformation into an NRM had much to do with the state’s growing unease

with *qigong*'s tendency toward "superstition" and "pseudoscience," an inevitable development because of *qigong*'s borderline status between state and society, and between science and religion. Third, while Falun Gong was celebrating its popularity as an NRM, the state sensed open defiance and a potential threat, and began to curb its activities. Fourth, Falun Gong's political militancy was directly triggered by the state's policies of preventing civic associations from being religious and *qigong* and other quasi-religious groups from being political. Fifth, before the crackdown, the intention of Falun Gong demonstrations was merely to "clarify the truth," given that the state was the sole arbiter of legitimacy. However, in the authoritarian context, the persistent civil disobedience only worsened the situation. Sixth, it appeared that the more desperately Falun Gong tried to persuade the state that it was "apolitical," the more likely it was that the state would perceive it as "political"; and the more efforts Falun Gong practitioners made to appear nonviolent, the more they alarmed the state. Seventh, the state's suppression became the driving force of the open confrontations between Falun Gong and the state, for the practitioners regarded political adversaries as tests of their inner nature and as a means of enhancing one's virtue. Eighth, the crackdown in 1999 led to the metamorphosis of Falun Gong from an NRM into a major political movement. Religion provided a system of shared meanings and symbols that Falun Gong has used to legitimize its resort to contentious tactics. Deeply entrapped in the interactive loops of recrimination and antagonism, Falun Gong and the state were inexorably moving toward political militancy, until the conflict-amplification process spiraled out of control and culminated in violence. The key message, then, is that the boundaries between the religious and the nonreligious, and between the political and the apolitical, are much more blurred than generally assumed. In this sense, the story of Falun Gong can be understood as the religion of the nonreligious and the politics of the apolitical.

NOTES

1. I adopt a relational perspective, defining NRMs as religious or quasi-religious groups that differ significantly, in terms of beliefs or practices, from the religious, social, or cultural establishments in which they are located.

2. While the official name is "the Communist Party of China," "the Chinese Communist Party" is the conventional usage abroad.

3. Renmin ribao, "Zongjiao he fengjian mixin" [Religion and superstition], *Renmin ribao*, March 15, 1979.

4. Falun Gong appears to have softened its stance and now acknowledges that it can be considered a religion in the western context (Clearwisdom.net 2004b).

5. Falun Gong in the mid-1990s can be treated as a religious movement because different from the earlier years, it now sought collectively produced goods that provided supernatural and otherworldly compensators (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 23). I use the term “new religious movement” to describe Falun Gong in this period based on two considerations. First, despite its eschewal of the label “religion,” Falun Gong manifested a pattern of tension with the institutional and symbolic order of society, which makes it consistent with my relational definition of an NRM. Second, the differentiation of Falun Gong from the “authentic religions” profoundly reveals how the Chinese state used religion to regulate religion and why the contested definition of religion matters in communist China.

6. Falun Gong and the state have issued conflicting statements regarding FGFRS’s withdrawal from the QSRAC. The state maintains that the QSRAC expelled FGFRS in November 1996 because of Li’s fraudulent conduct (Zhang and Qiao 1999, 104–106), whereas Falun Gong insists that it voluntarily severed its affiliation with the QSRAC in March 1996 on the grounds that Li had stopped offering classes and intended to devote himself exclusively to the *fa*, and that he was dissatisfied with the QSRAC’s manner of operation (Ye 1999). My comparison of a number of accounts indicates that Li did announce many times (as early as September 1994) that Falun Gong was no longer affiliated with *qigong* before the QSRAC officially revoked Falun Gong’s registration. In addition, a statement from the QSRAC in September 1996 indicated that Falun Gong had “withdrawn of its own accord from” the QSRAC (Zhang and Qiao 1999, 111). Furthermore, the two accounts are not completely irreconcilable. Whichever side of the story one chooses to believe does not affect the point I am making here.

7. The number of Falun Gong practitioners is disputed. Unlike many other religions and NRMs, Falun Gong has no formal ritual of initiation or withdrawal from its community of practitioners (Penny 2012, 7; Porter 2003, 126–128). Falun Gong estimates that in 1999, at the outset of the crackdown, it had 100 million practitioners in more than 30 countries, and more than 70 million in China alone (Falun Dafa Information Center 2009). Since February 2001, the state has claimed a starkly different figure of 2 million Falun Gong practitioners, but Falun Gong sources insist that the state’s internal estimate at the end of 1998 placed the figure at 70–100 million (Amnesty International 2000). I believe that Falun Gong’s own claim is grossly exaggerated, whereas the state’s estimate of 2 million is a serious underestimate. Palmer (2007, 259–261) compares and analyzes the conflicting estimates, with the conclusion that 10 million is a more reasonable number.

8. John Pomfret, “China Said to Detain 35,000 in Sect,” *Washington Post*, November 30, 1999. The state insisted that it only arrested approximately 150 Falun Gong practitioners, including those being sought (Schoof 1999).

9. Ian Johnson, “Burden of Belief,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 27, 2001.

10. This figure has generally been accepted as accurate by major international human rights agencies (Ownby 2008, 162).

11. <http://tuidang.epochtimes.com> (November 22, 2012).

12. Benbao pinglun yuan, “Jingti xifang didui shili liyong ‘Falun Gong’ de zhengzhi tumou” [Be vigilant against Western hostile forces’ political plots using Falun Gong], *Renmin ribao (haiwai ban)*, January 9, 2001; Renmin ribao, “Waijiaobu Fayanren fabiao tanhua, qianze Meiguo zongjiao ziyou weiyuanhui ganshe Zhongguo neizheng” [Foreign Ministry Spokesperson’s comment on the Annual Report concerning China issued by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom], *Renmin ribao*, May 7, 2006.

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