The Meaning of “Evil Cults”

On the Labelling and Designation of Falun Gong by The Chinese Communist Party

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1. Introduction

Religion has frequently been a central point of conflict in Chinese history. The White Lotus Panic, the Taiping Rebellion, and the open battles against "Redemptive societies" reveal how the self-declared atheist state of today has had a history of responding to religious movements with systematic persecution and at times open warfare. The most recent induction into this canon of conflicts has been the ongoing persecution of the Falun Gong movement. Founded by Li Hongzhi in the early 1990s, it has become one of the most significant New Religious Movements stemming from Asia with a self-declared, although highly disputed, membership of 100 million. Eventually outright banned in China and declared an "evil cult," the group has continued activities covertly in China while openly spreading its beliefs and theories, primarily in America, with its popular although similarly controversial theatre group *Shen Yun* and their far-right newspaper, *The Epoch Times*. Dodging any agreed upon definition whether it be new religious movement, cult, political organization, "way of healing," or any combination of these definitions, it has become part of modern (inter-)national conflicts and dialogues on China's hostility to religious organizations and how such groups become political movements and institutions of their own. [1]

The aim of this article is to analyze both how and why the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) codified Falun Gong as a "cult," the techniques utilized in this coding, and what it says about the country in the post-Mao era and of modern authoritarian states. Accompanying this will be a series of comparisons regarding how these methods of codification both corresponded with and deviated from terms used to define cults in the wider "anti-cult" movement. As cults still today remain part of the public consciousness through their continued existence in the form of movements such as QAnon and the continuation of "cult studies" it remains important to remember that what is defined as a cult is both a result of what is classified as an "other" by normative societies and through a combination of signs and signifiers for what is deemed undesirable. Contextualizing these dialogues with a large-scale state project to brand a movement as a cult can give significant insight into such a historical process and recontextualize it for modern understandings. The aim of this paper is not to answer whether Falun Gong fits the

[1] Erping Zhang, Interview with Charlie Rose, *Charlie Rose*, PBS, July 27, 1999 https://charlierose.com/videos/13795.

definition of a “cult,” but to understand why certain actors designated it with that label and the consequences of this for both for the CCP and Falun Gong.

1.1 Definitions and Barriers

For this paper it is important to clarify the terms and definitions used. There has been a long debate in studies of New Religious Movements (NRM) as to what terms are best used to define more fringe or radical sects, combined with a significant language barrier that molds definitions when understood outside of their original cultural context. For most of Chinese history there has not been a term equivalent to the western conception of “religion.”[2] Instead there have been distinctions between legitimate or illegitimate forms of worships, ones which are dependent on ruling powers and degrees of toleration. Although “heterodox teachings” or Xiejiao, is not directly equivalent to the western term “cult,” more often translated as “evil cult,” it will be used as a point because of how it fits a similar mold in modern discourses, and because of its usage in describing NRMs in China. This paper will also use the terms cult and NRM interchangeably depending on the surrounding discussion and the nature of the groups discussed. Cult is a loaded term which is often used as a pejorative because of its association with terroristic or abusive groups such as the Manson Family, Scientology, or Aum Shinrikyo, often described as “Destructive cults” by scholars.[3] For the sake of this paper, cult will be used to refer to the way groups such as Falun Gong were described due to the usage of this term in referenced materials.

Alongside this there is a substantial debate on how “cult-like” Falun Gong itself is, with authors such as David Ownby outright rejecting it while others feel it is suitable because of the organization’s structure. Whether or not Falun Gong fits this definition is not so much the focus of this paper. It is instead interested in trying to understand why the CCP and actors it directed framed the organization as a cult and the significance of this coding to understand how China post-Mao organized itself in relation to religious institutions, and its ability to direct discourses on groups which it saw as a threat to its legitimacy and social stability.

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[2] David, Ownby, *Falun Gong and The Future of China.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.
[3] Eugene V. Gallagher, “Compared to what? “Cults and “New Religious Movements,”” *History of Religions*, 47, No. 2/3 (November 2007/2008), 213. https://doi.org/10.1086/524210.

1.2. Literature Review and Limitations

The most significant limitations on this paper are a language and source barrier. As I cannot read Chinese I am missing out on a significant amount of information, be it domestic research and reporting, primary sources such as newspapers or TV interviews, and personal accounts. I am limited to those sources translated or discussed in English research on the topic. This analysis is also somewhat hampered by the fact that the extreme polarization between the two conflicting actors, Falun Gong and the CCP, results in misinformation being rampant as both significantly weaponize propaganda to totally delegitimize the other. How much of this may leak into this paper or others is hard to estimate, and the possibility of unintentional bias should be noted. Despite this limitation, due to the way this paper assembles different works of research from academics and attempts to synthesize it into a new understanding of the significance of the "cult" label, I believe the paper is still with merit and provides something original.

There is a substantial amount of literature on Falun Gong which this paper is in debt to. Most of the focus has been on ways Falun Gong expresses itself as an NRM with specific emphasis on both how and why the CCP sought to remove it from public life and the propaganda utilized to denounce it. Within this have been a conflicting number of theories as to the reason behind labelling Falun Gong a cult but most agree it is rooted in a desire to delegitimize the movement, the developing distinction between "cults" and "religions," and the meanings within this distinction. The most significant work which this paper borrows from and hopes to compliment is David Ownby's *Falun Gong and The Future of China.* Through a complete retelling of the origins of Falun Gong in the qigong fever of the 70s and 80s complimented by interviews with members of Falun Gong, Ownby documents the specific points of conflict between the movement and the CCP. He interprets the use of the "cult" label as being two-fold, split between a strategy of delegitimization using concepts from western anti-cult groups and a history of activities in China in opposition towards religions which pose a threat to state legitimacy, such as the "White Lotus" movements. Interpreting editorials prior to and after the ban of Falun Gong he remarks that they are "A mixture of traditional Chinese Suspicions of unregulated religions or quasi-religious organizations and language and concepts drawn from the anti-cult movement in the modern West."[4] Both Peter Sandby and Ming Xiao similarly agree in

[4] Ownby, *Future* 178

their analysis that the cult designation came into power as it first off signified that Falun Gong was not a "religion." The cult label "established a boundary between religion and cult" which both delegitimized the movement and "allowed for the focus of the campaign to move away from the group's lack of registration and its disruption of public order and on to those negative characteristics that made the group a "cult organization" as defined by the government."[5] [6] Patricia M. Thornton agrees with these interpretations but proposes complimenting them an understanding that delegitimizing Falun Gong was also done with an awareness and intention to legitimize the party as "Not only the legitimate representative of the collective interests and will of the people but also as the repository for modern scientific rationalism in the face of resurgent "feudal superstitions" and "pseudo-scientific fallacies."[7] Although there are discussions on the significance of the branding of Falun Gong as a cult and the significance of it within the mentioned literature, it has rarely been the central focus of the works. This paper borrows greatly from these works and will attempt to synthesize them with additional research and primary sources as well as works within cult studies to demonstrate a new interpretation of the "cult" label and show new strategies used by modern authoritarian states in response to religious movements.

2. Cadres, Comrades, and Charisma: Qigong Fever in Post-Mao China and Falun Gong's Fate

For most of the 20th century, the CCP saw religious faith as an obstacle to overcome for the progress of the state and its people. "Feudal superstitions" were a hinderance which would fade with modernization yet at times it had to be overcome through force and reeducation. The first large scale operation against "heterodox teachings," also at the time called "Secret societies and superstitions sects," was against the Yiguandao (Unity Sect) movement of Northern China,

[5] Peter Sandby Thomas, *Legitimating the Chinese Communist Party since Tiananmen: A Critical Analysis of the Stability of Discourse.* Routledge China Policy Series. (New York: Routledge, 2011): Chapter 4, e-book, doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195365825.001.0001.
[6] Xiao Ming, *The Cultural Economy of Falun Gong in China: A Rhetorical Perspective*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press: 2011), 78. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv6wgmf9.
[7] Patricia M. Thornton "Manufacturing Sectarian Divides: The Chinese State, Identities, and Collective Violence." In *Identity Matters: Ethnic and Sectarian Conflict*, edited by Patricia M. Thornton, James L. Peacock, and Patrick B. Inman,(Brooklyn: Berghan Books, 2009),186. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qchmz.15.

with the Northwest CCP bureau issuing a directive against them on the 25th of September 1950.[8] Due to the group's collaborations with the Japanese occupiers during the Pacific War and its continued support of the Kuomintang, it was judged as both a social and political opponent. Initially punishments were instructed to be rather lenient, with the primary goal being to "prosecute the leaders, ask no questions about the followers, and reward those who rendered service."[9] Eventually persecution intensified with executions being deemed necessary as not punishing enemies of the people was seen as itself, "cruel to the Chinese people."[10] These operations, which continued into the Cultural Revolution, may give the false impression that for the party as a whole religion was totally undesirable, yet contemporary reports complicate this. Party cadres were frequently found to have engaged in local spiritual practices, often without the punishment the party otherwise promised. Steve A. Smith's paper on how local cadres engaged in and aided in pilgrimages for holy water concludes itself that "Feudal superstitions [were] a relatively low priority of the party-state," and that "it was an issue on which local cadres were likely to compromise with their constituents."[11] The CCP saw religion as a legitimate challenge preventing modernization and continued revolution, but it was a lower priority in comparison with its other contemporary goals.

The attack on spiritual institutions and practitioners alongside public renunciation of beliefs should also not be interpreted as their wholesale eradication or entirely sincere given the rapid rise of belief following the liberalization in the post-Mao era, indicating that, to a degree, religious beliefs continued but were held either in private or on the fringes of Chinese society. This was especially true in rural areas far away from core establishments of the CCP, areas which suffered especially from the turmoil and uncertainty that came with the cultural revolution. Smith documented how religious practice continued, despite party instructions, with many falling back on ancestor worship or traditional rituals for food or shelter security during tense times,

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[8] Chang-tai Hung, "The Attack on A Popular Religious Sect: Yiguandao and Mass Mobilization," in *The Politics of Control: Creating Red Culture in the Early People's Republic of China,*(Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press: 2021) 64. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv16t66h4.9.
[9] Hung, *Popular*, 69,
[10] Hung, *Popular*, 69.
[11] Steve A. Smith, "Local Cadres Confront the Supernatural: The Politics of Holy Water (Shenshui) in the PRC, 1946-1966," *The China Quarterly* 188 (2006), 1009-1010. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20192702.

particularly "in [the] period of recovery" from famine.[12] During the cultural revolution a great deal of "feudal superstitions" remained practiced and taught, both in and outside of the party by its cadres, even as it frustrated leadership and administrators. One of these came in the form of Qigong healing, first "discovered" or "invented" in the 1950s, a development of "Traditional Chinese Medicine" which sought to cast off the "feudal" label in response to the westernization of Chinese medicine.[13] From this and the establishment of Qigong research institutions, it became established as a legitimate form of "self-cultivation" and a "fever" ensued throughout the country. Qigong research, sponsored directly by the CCP and its cadres, gave legitimacy to the spiritual belief system, yet it was reframed in new fashion to fit the Scientist state being established by placing the "traditional Chinese culture" within a "hard outer shell of western science and technology."[14]

2.1 Qigong Legitimacy

For the CCP, it was extremely important that Qigong not be seen as a form of religion but as a legitimate, particularly Chinese, science.[15] Qigong was not simply a spiritual force, but a real material substance which had practical applications in science, medicine, and mental healthcare. This distinction from "spiritual" beliefs enabled the adoption of the teachings and tenants of religious movements while maintaining the party's outward stance on materialism conquering idealism. It was also a uniquely "Chinese" concept and force, one which leant itself to the unique nationalistic form of Marxist-Lenninism being developed during the cultural revolution. It enabled both the embrace of traditional Chinese beliefs and teachings while also espousing a distinct "essence" which China could teach the rest of the world, leading the way for other communist states.[16] Unique cases of it healing untreatable cancers, enabling children to read with their ears, and other seemingly supernatural feats were published and shown as a way for the regular to become powerful through traditional teachings.[17]

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[12] Steve A. Smith, "Talking Toads and Chinless Ghosts: The Politics of "Superstitious Rumors in the People's Republic of China 1961-1965," *The American Historical Review* 111, No. 2, (April 2006), 409 https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.111.2.405.
[13] Ownby, *Future,* 10.
[14] Ownby, *Future,* 62
[15] Ownby, *Future,*12
[16] Ownby, *Future,* 56.
[17] Ownby, *Future* 62.

Qigong was not universally beloved by the party, with some seeing it as pseudoscientific or another new expression of "feudal superstition," but it was largely legitimized and seen as a force to utilize for the betterment of the health of both the individual and the country. This fascination with Qigong also brought with it a new type of celebrity "down out of the mountains," the Qigong Master.[18] Being a qigong master was a legitimate way to generate both a form of income and status as celebrity, which many accordingly did. These teachers would demonstrate powers and give extensive seminars, some lasting upwards of twelve hours, on the powers of qigong and the mystical teachings imbued within it.[19] This fever for qigong did eventually diminish by 1990 with concerns over the masters gaining too much influence and having the potential to take the reins of Chinese nationalism away from the party, with this new regulations and divisions were established to maintain control.[20] Controversies had come with the fever, including a thirty-eight-year-old having a heart attack and dying at one of Yan Xin's conferences, the scientific legitimacy of qigong being reevaluated, and scandals of masters like Zhang Xiangyu utilizing their social status to prey on women and generate donations, which weakened the legitimacy of the qigong movement as a whole.[21] A split had been established between "legitimate" scientific or materialistic qigong and the feudalistic superstitions of "pseudo-qigong" in the eyes of the leadership and public with masters now being required to register themselves with authorities to be allowed to practice.[22] The legitimate was based in Chinese tradition, a form of self-cultivation which healed and gave the person, although perhaps not supernatural, some form of spiritual energy which helped them live healthy and strong lives. Pseudo-Qigong was rooted in more religious claims, incredible feats of healing and salvation, and charismatic leaders who fostered wide followings that were not directly hinged on a relation with the CCP. These divisions aided in the control of figures and narratives as those which deviated from directed teachings could be expunged as frauds while maintaining the legitimacy of those which allied with state ideas.

[18] Thornton, "Sectarian," 178.
[19] Ownby, *Future*, 69.
[20] Ownby, *Future*, 13-14.
[21] Ownby, *Future*, 165.
[22] Ownby, *Future*, 165-166.

2.2 Falun Gong's Arrival and Consequences

Falun Gong was part of this fever, itself a latecomer, but was still able to develop a stronger foothold and greater following than most. Although there is no clear date of founding, it is determined that Li began his teachings in the early 1990s and spread them throughout north-eastern China.[23] By this time many other Qigong masters had lost their credibility, being seen as illegitimate charlatans or charismatic abusers. Pundits backed by the CCP like Sima Nan took the opportunity to humiliate Qigong masters live on television by recreating their supposed supernatural feats, showing them as simple parlor tricks, anyone could do with the right technique and tools.[24] This created a "popularity vacuum" which was taken over by Li with his writings and speaking events garnering large followings, and a particular clientele. The majority of those attracted to Falun Gong were vulnerable members of society, including the elderly, sick, marginalized, and a significant portion of women.[25] Academics like Ching and Xiao trace this to the Cultural Revolution's consequences. The "ideological vacuum" created by the Cultural Revolution gave significant momentum to Falun Gong as people had grown disillusioned with Communist ideology.[26] This rapid growth, reaching at least the millions within only seven years of existence, made Falun Gong a major factor in Chinese religious life and a source of controversy.[27] It had shown the consequences of a weakened ideological framework for the CCP to build around, and how its power was not permanently secured, but had to be maintained and fought for against other factions.

Falun Gong eventually took a dramatic turn in its teachings with Li publishing his self-declared opus, *Zhuan Falun*. Xiao notes this as Falun Gong's switch from a more practical form of Qigong self-development to a more religious identity.[28] Li, through supernatural powers, was capable of planting Dharma wheels in his followers which could pause and control the positive and negative karma they had which would aid humanity in escaping the continued degradation of humanity as in the previous "Eighty-one near annihilations."[29] Eventually, when an inevitable

[23] Ming, *Economy*, 8.
[24] David A. Palmer, "Modernity and Millennialism in China: *Qigong* and the Birth of Falun Gong," *Asian Anthropology*, 2 (2003), 97. doi:10.1080/1683478X.2003.10552531.
[25] Ming, *Economy,* 15
[26] Sandby citing Ching and Xiao, *Legitimating,* Chapter 4
[27] Sandby, *Legitimating,* Chapter 4.
[28] Palmer, "Millennialism," 90.
[29] Sandby, *Legitimating,* Chap 4.

doomsday would arrive, only those who had been instructed in the techniques Li had developed would be saved, with the rest of the world doomed with no chance of salvation. Such teachings transformed the group's internal relations dramatically, with Li now being a divine prophet of sorts, but also externally in its relationship with the CCP and wider Chinese populace. The group had taken on a self-declared moral authority with specific teachings from the works of their supernatural leader who was the only true source for moral and religious liberation in the world. Falun Gong was now a group with a distinct internal culture which separated itself from the wider populace. One was either a member of Falun Gong or not, and this difference defined their relations with Li and others. This form of social division comes with all religious practices but to varying degrees and with varying social effects. For Falun Gong it invited significant controversy and a far more tense relationship with wider "mainstream" society in general and the CCP especially.

2.3 Heightened Tensions and Eventual Banning

While Falun Gong maintained decent terms with the CCP, hostilities spiked following Li Hongzhi leaving for America in 1995. In 1996, *The Guangming Daily* published a piece declaring Li Hongzhi's "opus" as "spurious science" and its followers "idiots."[30] This saw a rapid response in the form of a ten-thousand-word letter to the party center demanding legitimacy as an organization and noting that *The Guangming Daily* "represents the opinions of certain people in the government."[31] Protests outside the offices of newspapers publishers who sought to criticize Falun Gong were a common occurrence, with demands for retractions and apologies accompanying them.[32] Along with this were numerous attempts to be registered as a "social organization," with three attempts at three different ministries which were all were denied which also resulted in the dismantling of the Falun Dafa Research Society.[33] The social legitimacy Falun Gong was demanding was not reciprocated by either the media which it was protesting or the government it was appealing to. Falun Gong had also lost its registration as a Qigong institute in 1996 for "advocating superstition," and a TV program featuring Chinese psychiatrist He Zuoxiu accused the group of being a "cult" whose teachings put one of their own

[30] Thornton, "Sectarian," 178-179.
[31] Thornton, "Sectarian," 179.
[32] Palmer, "Millennialism," 101.
[33] Ownby, *Future,* 167.

Qigong researchers in a mental asylum.[34] These critiques spawned reactions from Falun Gong members who protested outside offices and demanded criticisms be retracted again. From here the relationship between the media/CCP and Falun Gong became actively hostile, but no individual institution took on the responsibility for persecuting or suppressing Falun Gong, even as it remained a technically illegal institution.

The climax of these hostilities came in April 1999, with 10,000 Falun Gong members protesting outside of the Zhongnanhai, the government compound which serves as a living space for CCP leadership. Though the protest was peaceful, its main demand being for the group to be recognized as an official religion, it was interpreted as a serious threat to Chinese leadership and social stability. That such a protest was occurring so close to Tiananmen Square gave significant symbolic meaning to the protest and would do the same to any retributive action towards it. It was deemed "the most serious political incident since 1989."[35] At the time, although estimates measures are hard to find, even the lowest from the CCP placed membership numbers for Falun Gong at two million with a potential 15.6% of party members being Falun Gong followers.[36] These hostilities then did not come without significant consequences regarding alienation of a wide swath of the population, including party members, at a time of already high tensions between populace and state.

2.4 Legislation and Persecution

On the 22nd of July 1999 the CCP banned Falun Gong, declaring it an "evil cult" and outlawing practice by both civil servants and the wider populace, the establishment or continuation of branches, encouraging membership, distributing literature, and any other action which spread the group's teachings.[37] This was followed up by the issuing of an arrest warrant for Li and the arrest of "key" Falun Gong members who lead local branches or were responsible for proselytizing further while those who practiced Falun Gong for personal health reasons were mostly spared.[38] Amnesty International's report from 2001 highlights that those who "refuse to mend their ways despite repeated education" were to be punished and that their stated goal was

[34] Sandby, *Legitimating,* Chap 4.
[35] Sandby, *Legitimating,* Chap 4.
[36] Sandby, *Legitimating,* Chap 4.
[37] Hongyi Lai, *China's Governance Model*: *Flexibility and Durability of Pragmatic Authoritarianism*," China Policy Series, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 179.
[38] Lai, *Governance*, 179.

to “educate and save hoodwinked people and criminal elements who have repented and rendered meritorious services.”[39]

By November of 1999 wider legislation has been established that prohibited the proliferation or establishment of “evil cults,” or Xiejiao, classified as such if they fell into the categories outlined, marked with a term implying them to be a “perverse or evil force.”[40] Protesters in Tiananmen or other public areas were arrested and by August 2000 “at least 151 Falun Gong followers had been convicted of leaking state secrets, creating chaos, or other crimes.”[41] Several Qigong institutions such as Xiang Gong, Guo Gong, and Zhong Gong saw their founders arrested, with them now only being tolerated if they do not “[generate] problems such as spreading feudalism, superstition and pseudo-science” or “spread publications [which] fool people into giving them money and setting up branch organizations at will.”[42] Stricter rules were now put into place for religions which were no longer regulated for being antithetical to communistic thought, but instead in the name of social order and the health of the populace. With this begins the CCP’s more direct persecution and eradication of Falun Gong from public life, alongside further prohibition on religious expression that did not align with established and tolerated religious orders, and a new system of legitimation post-Mao and Tiananmen.

3. “Only a cult exhibits such features”: The denunciation of Falun Gong and its coding[43]

Accompanying the outright ban of Falun Gong were a series of public declarations from the CCP comparing the group to popular “cults” in other parts of the world, an active media campaign seeking to discredit the group and its followers, and propaganda distributed to solidify Falun Gong as a “cult”. The main point of comparison in press releases from the CCP on Falun Gong were “Destructive Cults” from other parts of the world such as the Branch Davidians of

[39] Amnesty International, *People’s Republic of China: Crackdown on Falun Gong and Other so-called “Heretical Organizations,”* (London: England, March 2000), 17-18.
[40] Sandby, *Legitimating*, Chap 4
[41] Lai, *Governance*, 179.
[42] Amnesty, *China*, 13.
[43] Thornton, “Sectarian,” 182.

Waco Texas, or Aum Shinrikyo of Japan.[44] These organizations had become notorious internationally for their ability to "brainwash" inductees, and for their apocalyptic beliefs which inspired terrorist attacks and tragedies whose trauma remained for decades within the public psyche. This came with the formation of the public ideal of a cult, that of a fanatical, anti-social, and dangerous group whose core structure was founded on the worship of a leader who professed an ability to save others. This new concept brought with it heavy debate in the studies of New Religious Movements, with some arguing against the term's usage entirely because of how it implicitly attacks groups from the get-go with "New Religious Movement" being the generally preferred term.[45] Putting aside these discourses, the main takeaway is how these studies serve as a point of reference to analyze the rhetorical strategies employed by the CCP and its subordinate institutions, and how they correspond or deviate from them.

Both before and after the Zhongnanhai protests there arises a consistent narrative on Falun Gong in the Chinese press, both in terms of what is communicated domestically and abroad. Newspapers such as the People's Daily elaborate on how Falun Gong follows a structure similar to a cult, listing six characteristics which are emblematic of cult behavior.[46] These points of comparison are strikingly similar to ones used by academics such as Margaret Singer, perhaps the most significant researcher on cults and whose ideas were most significant in the formation of the brainwashing idea. who had her own "Six Conditions of Mind Control."[47] Another potential source for these Six characteristics could be the ones described by Tom Robbins and Dick Anthony.[48] Regardless of the origin of these, the "six" points listed demonstrate an influence from western writings on cults being used to denigrate and delegitimize Falun Gong. Remarks specifically on the horizontal structure, nature of belief, and methods of proselytization, ones made without corroborating evidence, show the same frameworks utilized in western countries to analyze and contextualize cults being used on Falun Gong. This is corroborated with stories of people taking "extreme measures such as cutting open their stomachs in an attempt to find the Falun wheel or refusing medical treatment in the belief that it would promote bad

[44] Ownby, *Future,* 23.
[45] Gallagher "Compared"105.
[46] Thornton, "Sectarian," 182.
[47] Margareth Thaler Singer, Janja Lalich, *Cults in Our Midst: The Hidden Menace in Our Everyday Lives,* (San Fransisco: Joey-Bass Publishers, 1995), Chap 1: *Defining Cults.*
[48] Gallagher, "Cults" 212.

karma."[49] The "Dirty secrets" of Falun Gong and horrific stories of self-harm in "blind adherence" were published in a nationwide campaign, presenting followers as so detached from their own wellbeing they knew neither right nor wrong.[50] David Ownby points out that such stories presented in books and articles rarely explain "how the author amassed [their] information and no explanation is provided for why no action had been taken earlier."[51]

3.1 Examples of Codification and Comparison

Two recordings from the AP Archive available on YouTube serve as practical examples for the transformation of the public perception of Falun Gong into a modern day western-style Cult. In one, it shows a group of primary school children reading a pinboard outside their school about the evils of Falun Gong. Accompanying the messages are photos of Aum Shinrikyo members and of the victims harmed in the 1995 Tokyo Sarin Gas attacks.[52] Although Falun Gong have never orchestrated a terrorist attack comparable to any of the famous "Destructive cults," they are frequently compared to them in such coverage. Falun Gong is then synonymous and comparable to such groups and given its membership numbers could be understood as a far greater threat. Another features a press conference from the Government Religious Affairs Director, Ye Xiaowen. He states that Li is like other cult leaders who coerce members to suicide and neglect their health. He then shows the press a video with an English narrator titled *Falun Gong, - Cult of Evil*. It features dead and mutilated human bodies, supposedly of former members of Falun Gong who had been coerced by the group to harm themselves and others. Afterwards a rolling list of names of declared victims is shown to add significance and identity to those shown previously.[53] How these people died specifically is not elaborated upon and no corroborating evidence to support these claims is given. The focus on dead bodies and the almost hypnotic spiral of the group's logo reinforces the idea that these are not acts people have done themselves but are a result of seduction and coercion by Falun Gong and its leaders. The English narrator as well shows that it is meant for an international audience, with the spinning (counterclockwise) swastikas in the cult's logo having extreme connotations related to Nazisism

[49] Sandby, *Legitimating,* Chap 4.
[50] Lai, *Governance*, 179
[51] Ownby, *Future,* 177
[52] AP Archive, "CHINA: FALUN GONG: LATEST CRACKDOWN" July 21, 2015, (Feb 20, 2001), New Coverage, https://youtu.be/novbq5ujzdo?si=Q43ztz7Pla3NhXq7.
[53] AP Archive, "CHINA: FALUN GONG CULT MEMBERS DEFY BAN" July 21, 2011, (Nov 4, 1999), New Coverage, https://youtu.be/NwLTLLqrwjs?si=VuniBWAb0E9iuRxy.

abroad, while in China and other parts of east-Asia they are moreso tied to Buddhist practices and beliefs. The absence of context and deliberate framing in coverage show both an awareness of the audience the piece is being shown to whilst defining Falun Gong as a "brainwashing" group, like the Manson Family or Jim Jones' People's Temple. By the time of the press conferences and public statements on Falun Gong, China had not given any conclusive evidence of Falun Gong's capability to brainwash members, with the only substantial examples being their impressive mass organization capabilities. Self-harm practices tied to Falun Gong are not without precedence, but it was not until 2001, with the self-immolations at Tiananmen Square performed by practitioners, that a clear example of orchestrated self-harm occurred with Falun Gong members in a public setting, which was used "as vivid evidence of the cult as a suicidal evil in the eyes of the public."[54]

3.2 Significance

The evidence shown above indicates a key part of the theory proposed in this thesis, that being that China consciously borrowed and reworked concepts tied to "cults" from western, specifically American, culture and media, seeking to legitimize persecution of Falun Gong by forcing them into the western mold of a "cult," even at times reworking evidence and ideas to fit it. Based on the language describing Falun Gong in many official statements and the imagery used, there is a deliberate effort at coding the organization. It is not a traditional Chinese redemption-based society nor is it a case of just misguiding people towards "feudal superstitions," it is a fundamentally immoral organization which coerces its members into harming themselves and others in horrific ways. This break in continuity reveals two significant things. First, that the CCP was consciously aware of other cults around the world, as not only did they explicitly reference them in comparison with Falun Gong, but also utilized similar symbols and imagery to classify Falun Gong as their contemporary. Aum Shinrikyo is a cult, Falun Gong is a cult, thereby they operate in similar ways and are similarly dangerous. Secondly, they were aware of how they were reported on, and parroted this language to describe Falun Gong not as a political threat but one that is of a social and psychological nature. Rather than legitimizing the oppression because of the threat it posed to the party and its ideology, it was argued necessary due to the danger it posed to the Chinese populace itself and social stability.

[54] Lai, *Governance*, 179

4. Victims or Villains? The Politics of "Brainwashing"

The evidence above demonstrates that the CCP made an active effort in the 90s and 2000s to transform the perception of Falun Gong and to make them synonymous with modern notions of cults. They drew on infamous destructive cults in western countries and utilized the same psychological theory in discussing their method of addressing them. This historical process itself is significant as it shows the CCP being more than willing to borrow narrativizing techniques following the post-Mao era while utilizing them in a far grander system of repression and narrativization. Falun Gong was not simply a social threat or even a psychological contagion, but a fundamental threat to Chinese society and values on a massive scale. The secondary argument of this thesis then is to explain why China borrowed these ideas of cults to frame Falun Gong. That this label has stuck to a group composed of at the very least two million is remarkable and has significant implications for understand modern relations between state and religion and the capabilities modern governments have in transforming perceptions of them.

The simplest answer to why this reframing was done would be to say it was to discredit Falun Gong as a movement given its size and its willingness to oppose the CCP and institutions it upheld. With its religious associations and esoteric practices, like how past Qigong practitioners were denounced as frauds on television or arrested for misleading others through coercive charisma, the cult label was the most practical and would help denounce the movement in wider international circles, giving more legitimacy to the suppression. Just as America had begun to develop public campaigns against movements deemed cults or anti-social and dangerous, culminating in movements such as the Satanic Panic, the CCP sought to create its own campaign following similar patterns directed by the state rather than individual actors. The international element here is also worth considering. Many newspaper reports and interviews with Falun Gong representatives question their status as a cult. In an interview with Charlie Rose Erping Zhang is asked about the nature of Falun Gong and to what extent it is rooted in a faith-based structure.[55] Much effort is made to deny that it is, instead being just a set of practices anyone can do to improve their health. Whilst Falun Gong sought to present itself as a secular organization, China sought to frame them as actively religious, and faith based. Given how Marxist theory and communist ideals had lost much of their power and significance in a post-Tiananmen and Mao

[55] Zhang, *Rose,* 1999.

era, the attempt to deny them the label of secularism to delegitimize them seems a pragmatic choice. The label suited an effort to legitimize and mobilize a populace against a movement that composed a significant part of Chinese society without declaring an attack which could result in deeper conflicts which could further destabilize a regime that was already struggling with legitimacy issues. Rather than enemies of ideology, they were enemies of security and safety, and could be persecuted on those lines rather than ones carved on the weakened ideological line.

This theory is compelling, especially given party directives on Falun Gong during this time, yet it obfuscates a great deal as well. Labelling a movement at least a million strong as a "cult" is not without serious consequences given how it dissociates a massive amount of people from the party and state. Significant here I believe is complimenting this cult theory with an awareness of the weakened ideological legitimacy of the CCP in this period. After the Tiananmen Square Incident and the continued liberalization of the country, much had been lost. Communist ideology was weakened with China and its contemporary bloc allies continuing to liberalize with new market reforms.[56] In place of this ideological vacuum, new techniques had to be utilized to maintain and legitimize government authority. Falun Gong coincides with this period and shows new methods utilized in this continuation to maintain power and authority. Important then is to analyze the specific concepts associated with cults and how they were used in public discourse, and how they coincide with post-Tiananmen China.

4.1 Cult Paranoia and Brainwashing

Key to the framing of Falun Gong and cult/new religious movement discourses in this era is the notion of "brainwashing." Originally, the term was first used during the Korean War by American journalist Edward Hunter to describe how the Maoist regime was able to manipulate the population into "mindless, communist automatons."[57] Although his writings are today dismissed as biased and propagandistic, the idea of being able to manipulate someone into mindlessly following orders against their own interests and wellbeing took hold and was further expanded upon in the realm of studying New Religious Movements. At the height of "Cult-

[56] Cheng Chen, *The Return of Ideology: The Search for Regime Identities in Post-Communist Russia and China,* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2019), 99. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.8811778.
[57] Lorraine Boissoneault, "The True Story of Brainwashing and How it Shaped America," *Smithsonian Magazine,* May 22, 2017, Accessed may 6th, 2024 https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/true-story-brainwashing-and-how-it-shaped-america-180963400/.

Paranoia" or "Cult-Scare" during the 60s and 70s, fears of the potential for people to be brainwashed into mass ritual suicide or deviant behavior peaked.[58] This continued on into the 80s and 90s with the then mainstream explanation for how groups such as the People's Temple, Branch Davidians, or Aum Shinrikyo were able to amass such large followings was that through psychological manipulation, often framed as brainwashing, be it advanced charisma, torture, or extreme pressure, cult leaders were able to make their members do whatever was desired, making "[movements] so total in its domination of members' minds that it could lead them to self-destruction."[59] Followers then did was asked not because they wanted to, but because they psychologically *had* to and as such cult members had to be "Freed" from their mental states and their leaders removed from wider society. One of the key implications of the brainwashing framework, specifically in the "involuntarist theory," is that it, to varying degrees, absolves members who have followed the group from responsibility for their actions.[60] When a person is brainwashed, they are, on some physical or psychological level, unable to deny orders from leadership within the cult, which then places responsibility on the one issuing the demands. These interpretations place then the core blame on leadership and central members rather than any followers. It "medicalizes," the psychological state of the person, thus defining their behavior as "a medical problem or illness mandating or licensing the medical profession to provide some form of treatment for it."[61] The impetus is then placed on the state to care for those persons, not punish them. It provides "a diagnosis of the Chinese body politic that assigns moral responsibility for somatized social ills to the party state."[62]

The structure and operations of the 6-10 office in the years following the ban of Falun Gong correspond with the notions implied by the originally American brainwashing theory. With followers declared brainwashed rather than judged and sentenced for counterrevolution or disturbing of the peace, rehabilitation was the framing used for those investigated and detained.

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[58] Hugh B. Urban, *New Age, Neopagan, and New Religious Movements: Alternative Spirituality in the Contemporary America*, 1st ed. (Oakland, University of California: 2015), 252 http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctv1wxrsk.
[59] Urban, *New Age*, 257.
[60] Benjamin Zablocki, "5. Towards a Demystified and Disinterested Scientific Theory of Brainwashing," in *Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field*, eds Benjamin Zablocki and Thomas Robbins, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001) 168 https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442677302-008.
[61] Joseph Laycock, "Where Do They Get These Ideas? Changing Ideas of Cults in the Mirror of Popular Culture," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 1 (2013), 84 https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfs091.
[62] Ming, *Economy,* 19.

Initially most were requested to demonstrate their reeducation through professing outwardly them abandoning their faiths and following the materialist doctrine the CCP espoused. More intense forms of treatment were also administered, most controversial of these being the "deprogramming" system. Deprogramming, itself another borrowed term and framework from western and Japanese studies of cult behavior, came in the form of medicalizing and institutionalizing present and past members of cults, although the CCP employed a far more intense process that employed the state and its institutional powers.[63] The same language and concepts were being used to frame Falun Gong as those abroad, yet they also came with a more authoritarian framework. According to the 2000 Amnesty International report and later studies, Falun Gong followers are one of the largest populations featured within Chinese labor camps and being sentenced to it as a form of rehabilitation from their beliefs via intensive labor and education.[64] There is an argument to be made that this form of imprisonment is more of a smokescreen for legitimacy than a sincere policy attempt, that this is done more for public perception than out of genuine care for the persons. Yang Yong, a spokesperson for the Changguan police station where fifty "extremist" followers were held, said they were "not patients, they are there to be reeducated."[65] While this may be the case, the medicalization of Falun Gong followers maps far more onto the idea of a pragmatic system of legitimization than one built on ideology.

4.2 "Hoodwinked People Lead Astray"

The contrast between the crimes alleged against Falun Gong and how its followers have been described is significant here as well. Rather than being fanatical or murderous counterrevolutionaries, they are led astray by a "pied piper," who compels them to act in anti-social or dangerous ways.[66] The goal to "save hoodwinked people" presents at the least an intention to present themselves as wanting to treat those who followed Falun Gong devoutly as victims of a false prophet rather than criminals who acted with the intent of undermining society. This matches early reports on Aum Shinrikyo prior to the Sarin attacks of '95. Parents of

[63] James T. Richardson, "Deprogramming: From Private Self-Help to Governmental Organized Repression," *Crime, Law and Social Change,* (2011), 329 https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-011-9286-5.
[64] Amnesty, *China,* 8.
[65] Amnesty, *China,* 32.
[66] Description borrowed from Helen Hardacre's "Aum Shinrikyo and the Japanese Media: The Pied Piper Meets the Lamb of God," *History of Religions,* Vol. 47, No. 2/3 (November 2007/February 2008) 184, https://doi.org/10.1086/524209.

children who had joined Aum were mortified that they had been allured at all and sought to hold Soko Asahara, the head of Aum, primarily responsible, viewing him as having corrupted their children into anti-social behavior rather than performing it willingly.[67] All responsibility and malice was placed on leadership and educators rather than followers themselves. Given this I argue that one of the goals of the "cult" narrative of Falun Gong is that rather than condemning followers of the movement, even those who had taken on leadership roles, the CCP took on a paternalist "rehabilitation" to take care of those deemed "too far gone" while punishing those in more key roles. This tactic helped the party in a fundamental manner which I argue represents the pragmatic nature of the state post-Mao.

The rehabilitation strategy aided in eradicating Falun Gong from public life while minimizing the degree of exclusion people would feel from both the party itself and wider society if they were then a present member of Falun Gong. A more intense persecution of Falun Gong, dragging down those who had repented or followed Li's teachings, could have brought with it serious resistance given the group's dedicated and large following. Although there were protests, they were relatively peaceful and without much public conflict.[68] The awareness of foreign cults demonstrated in the public statements mentioned earlier also indicates an awareness over the controversies in their handling. The Branch Davidians for example were almost entirely wiped out in the Waco Siege with dozens of women and children dying in the ensuing fire. Although most condemned the group and believed it to be dangerous, the aggressive action taken by the ATF became a point of political division between political parties' and religious groups that lasts to this day.[69] [70] An aggressive outward stance brought with it the death of eighty-two people, something many still mourn and give strong sympathies for the Branch Davidians. That the CCP then took on a paternalistic character where rather than directly attacking followers of the cult, it presented itself as "freeing" members from the oppression of brainwashing and the self-harm it inspired. Once again, rather than a political threat, Falun Gong was framed as a social and psychological one which was exploited by its leaders to harm others for personal gain. This narrative works to both legitimize the oppression and institutionalization of Falun Gong

[67] Hardacre, "Pied Piper" 184.
[68] Ownby, *Future*, 14-15
[69] Paul Renfro, "How the Right Got Waco Wrong," *The New Republic,* January 31, 2023, https://newrepublic.com/article/170283/right-got-waco-wrong-kevin-cook-book-review.
[70] Andrew Crome, "Waco: How the Siege Became a Symbol of Government Oppression," *Manchester Metropolitan University,* April 19, 2018, https://www.mmu.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/story/7593.

members and gives reason to expand security operations within China to address political opposition. This seemingly benign approach legitimized the expansion of security services in a framework based on health and safety rather than ideology. Cults were a threat because of their irrationality and anti-social behavior, not because they were in opposition to the party's ideals or ideology.

Taken together the evidence presented shows an effort of narrativization, one which borrows substantially from western media descriptions of cults and legitimizes institutional oppression based on public health and security needs. Although the worries over threats to Communist ideology are present still, a far greater emphasis is placed on how "evil cults" can coerce members into harming themselves and others without any intent on their part. Falun Gong was presented as a threat to social order and the health of the populace rather than the continued political power of the CCP. The declining strength of the ideological legitimacy for the party created a vacuum to be filled with a new form of legitimacy, that being one based on self-declared rationality and social wellbeing. The persecution of Falun Gong fits the pattern described and shows how the state navigated such issues in the 21st century.

5. Conclusion

The "cult narrative" theory proposed here works to demonstrate the capacity and decision making of the CCP in the post-Mao era to adopt western notions and rhetorical strategies for their own interests, and its ability to maintain stability whilst excluding wide groups of people from its institutions. It is true that the campaign against Falun Gong may have failed in many ways. The 6-10 office has been shut down and writing from the group indicates that Falun Gong followers remain active in China and are well connected despite best efforts from security services. Stories of personal TV networks sending messages and private email servers to discuss and share literature come out and show legitimate attempts at opposing state preferences and institutionalization. Yet that Falun Gong, a group reported to have numbered in the millions, was able to be nearly eradicated from public social life so effectively and rapidly without mass opposition given its size is remarkable, especially given China's history of religious revolt, even in the 20th century. The theory also demonstrates how terms such as cult, or in this instance Xiejiao, are far from politically neutral and carry significant weight in discourse. That so many

reporters parroted the language of the CCP, whether in support of Falun Gong or not, which this paper itself contributes to in practice, shows how such terms intentionally direct dialogues between parties and the consequences of it. Such fashioning of society being done on more secular and pragmatic terms than outright political ones invites reconsideration of the symbols and meanings of politics post-Mao. Enemies were not determined by their status in relation to ideology, but in relation to political stability or social order, and defining what was and was not a risk to stability was itself a conscious choice. Falun Gong has today become an incredibly political organization, yet this only came because of the politicization the CCP imposed onto them and other qigong movements, intentional or otherwise. Ideological terms, although present, were not the primary ones used to describe Falun Gong, instead discourses were based on the health of the social and political body, reshaping attitudes towards deviant social behaviors and beliefs. The example of Falun Gong here is used to demonstrate how Post-Mao, the CCP and Chinese State have had to abandon ideological purity as a form of state legitimization and instead have pivoted towards techniques and narrative strategies found in the west to carve out a society more easily controlled and organized, at the expense of religious minorities and those who fall outside of mainstream society.

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