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China’s War on “Cults”

JASON KINDOPP

The Chinese government’s nationwide campaign to exterminate the Falun Gong meditation group has inaugurated a new era in Communist Party rule. The 1990s were shrouded by the shadow of Tiananmen, but today it is the campaign against “evil cults,” or as most Westerners view it, religious repression, that casts the shadow. But the regime’s war on cults extends far beyond the Falun Gong. Dozens of unofficial religious and spiritual groups have sprouted across the country in recent decades, creating followings of up to several million adherents. China’s central government has labeled at least 15 such groups “evil cults,” yet most continue to operate and even to expand.

As the ongoing assaults on the Falun Gong illustrate, a high-profile showdown between the regime and unofficial social groups carries significant political implications. While these groups could never launch an effective uprising against the state’s apparatus of coercion, their ability to stage large-scale concerted actions poses a serious threat to the regime’s symbolic order, which presents an image of a society unified under its rule. Symbolic acts of resistance present formidable challenges to the regime’s legitimacy, and require an official response. They may also encourage emulation by other aggrieved social groups, igniting widespread social unrest.

China’s leaders realize these dangers, and are treading much more carefully in their struggle against other “evil cults” than they did against the Falun Gong. There is even evidence that the party is exploring ways of accommodating large segments of unofficial religious life, most notably the Protestant

Christian congregations widely known as “house churches.” But are these measures too little, too late?

RELIGIOUS RESURGENCE AFTER MAO

Among the sweeping social changes to occur in post-Mao China, few have been as dramatic as the resurgence of religious activity. Religion appeared moribund in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. All religious venues had been closed or destroyed, and few visible signs of religion’s survival remained. Yet by 1997, China’s government reported that over 200 million religious believers worshiped in 85,000 approved venues. Crossing geographic and demographic boundaries, religion and spiritual disciplines have once again become deeply knit into China’s social fabric.

As with all organized social activity, the party-state has sought to preserve control over religious groups. Official regulations require religious bodies to register with the government and to come under the control of the officially authorized “patriotic” religious organizations, over which the state preserves tight control. A dense web of provincial and local regulations further constrains religious activities and networking capabilities by forbidding religious activities outside officially registered venues, and by imposing tight geographical restrictions on clergy movement. The regulations are enforced by the party and the government, with violators brought before the Ministry of Public Security.

The regime’s tight control over official religious institutions has compelled many adherents to seek alternative ways to practice their faith or spiritual disciplines, which range from recycled folk beliefs and practices to relatively recent foreign imports, such as the Protestant house churches, to amalgams of traditional practices and beliefs bound in super-

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ficially modern packages, such as the Falun Gong. In most cases, the unauthorized activity occurs in a nebulous social space outside the boundaries of official regulations, yet also beyond the regime's ability or willingness to enforce them. For example, many local officials have tolerated unregistered house churches, provided that they remain small, avoid contact with other house churches and foreign bodies, and do not "disrupt social order."

The desire of religious groups to organize, however, has proved stronger than the regime's determination or ability to resist them. Unofficial religious and spiritual networks have formed across the country, including not only the Protestant house church networks but also quasi-spiritual *qigong* groups (which practice traditional Chinese breathing exercises) and secretive millenarian cults. As with the Falun Gong, many have grown into formidable movements, claiming up to several million adherents and spanning provincial boundaries.

THE POLITICAL STAKES

Achieving such organizational virtuosity under Communist Party rule may be impressive, but do these unofficial religious and spiritual groups pose a threat to the regime? Before the government's campaign to eliminate the Falun Gong, few outside observers would have thought so. But the Falun Gong's ability to catalyze the country's most serious political crisis in a decade calls for a more careful analysis of the political power of autonomous social groups under authoritarian regimes.

The political power of social groups stems primarily from their ability to mobilize large numbers of people to take concerted action against political authorities. In both Chinese and Western history, no social phenomenon has matched the ability of religious groups—particularly those animated by messianic or utopian visions—to foment popular uprisings against the state. As C. K. Yang observes in his classic study of religion in Chinese society, "religious rebellion crowded the records of every decade after the middle of the eighteenth century," adding that "very few political rebellions of any appreciable proportions were totally unconnected with some religious element or organization."¹ The same holds true in Western history. With the exception of twentieth-century revolutionary Marxism, Protestantism has

been central to more political transitions than any other movement, religious or political.

Religion's political force does not rest on its ability to foment violent rebellion, however. Within the context of modern authoritarian rule, even seemingly innocuous acts can present formidable challenges to the regime's authority and potentially impair its ability to govern. Religion's power to mobilize acquires a unique political force against regimes that rely heavily on preserving a projected "symbolic order" to sustain their claims to legitimacy. And as Václav Havel argued forcefully in his classic essay *The Power of the Powerless*, the reliance on symbolic imagery is particularly strong in communist states, where the ruling party's claims to possess the objective laws of history confer a set of official prerogatives that encompass all social reality.² Formulating an equally expansive symbolic order requires the regime to engage in myth making on a massive scale, woven together by the ruling party's ideology. As Havel points out, the regime's success does not depend on its subjects believing its mystifications—they must merely act as if they do, by following the "prescribed ritual." Conversely, challenging the regime does not require an assault on its institutions of coercion, but merely acting in a way that violates the prescribed ritual.

The cornerstone of the Chinese Communist Party's symbolic order after Mao has been social unity under party rule toward the common goal of socialist development. While the regime has sanctioned a measure of social diversity—such as ethnic minorities and religious believers—it is bound by demands for unswerving loyalty to Communist Party rule and acceptance of the party's leadership.

Such high demands for society's subservience leave the regime vulnerable to affirmations of social autonomy or expressions of dissent. This vulnerability explains the seeming arbitrariness in the party's patterns of social control. Although the regime is quite lax in enforcing its own policies regarding social organization, allowing thousands of illicit groups to form in violation of official regulations, it has also been ruthless in cracking down on such disparate social actors as aging Catholic bishops, individual political dissidents, and lone labor activists. This apparent dichotomy suggests that political authorities are willing to take their chances on the physical control of social organization if they are reasonably confident that the emergent social groups are neither inclined nor capable of challenging its symbolic order. For those that pose such a threat, the

¹C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), p. 219.

²Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe*, John Keane, ed. (London: Hutchinson, 1985).

party remains determined, to use Jiang Zemin's words, to "nip [them] in the bud."

FALUN GONG REDUX

The regime's campaign against the Falun Gong is best understood in this light. The group emerged in a nebulous area of social control. Not so much a religion as a physical and spiritual discipline, *qigong* groups such as the Falun Gong were able to cohere initially outside direct government control. The Falun Gong used its limited social space with surprising effectiveness. Its founder, Li Hongzhi, forged an amalgam of spiritual doctrines to supplement the *qigong* practice, spiking it with a strong dose of apocalyptic millenarianism and supernaturalism. The group's somewhat antimodern message was disseminated through distinctly modern mass media—publications, videos, and the Internet—as well as time-valued methods of personal testimonies to family, friends, and neighbors. Base groups cohered through the collective practice of Falun Gong's disciplines in public spaces and through regular group study of "Master Li's" writings. The groups were then organized into hierarchies through an effective communications network.

The Falun Gong's ideological cogency and organizational virtuosity combined to make it a potent social force. The group's ideological certainty, enhanced by the specter of apocalyptic change, mobilized Falun Gong adherents to defend its image against public criticism, while the group's organizational virtuosity gave it the means to do so. Falun Gong adherents staged several large-scale protests against unfavorable media reports of the group between 1996 and 1998, and each time local authorities pacified them in an attempt to prevent a conflagration.

But the April 25, 1999 demonstration in front of the Zhongnanhai leadership compound in Beijing went too far. The challenge was entirely symbolic, posing no material threat to the regime, and the demonstrators did not amass sufficient numbers to interrupt the regular flow of life, as the democracy protests did during the spring of 1989. Yet the Falun Gong's request for official recognition violated the party's foundational principle of social control, while its high-profile method of doing so

punctured the regime's symbolic order of social unity under Communist Party rule.

Within the regime there was never a question of whether to respond to the Falun Gong's challenge, only how.³ But less severe options were also considered. A more moderate approach called for public criticism of the Falun Gong's "superstitious" beliefs while confining active measures to undermine its influence to within party-state organs. In the end, President Jiang Zemin personally sent down orders to eliminate the group entirely.

China's leaders failed to anticipate the Falun Gong's tenacity. The campaign's immediate impact was a loss of face for the millions of people who had openly practiced the Falun Gong and touted its virtues. Many newcomers or casual adherents quickly fell in line and distanced themselves from the group, while others remained faithful quietly. Only a small minority continued to defend the Falun Gong's image publicly.

Even this fractured response was enough to keep the regime in full battle mode for two years. Declaring the Falun Gong an "evil cult" and a scourge to society required its eradication, and every public display of the Falun Gong's continued resistance brought into question the regime's

ability to do so. The government escalated the campaign, mobilizing its entire propaganda apparatus and bureaucratic machinery to crush the Falun Gong's resistance and root out even closet adherents.

The campaign carried a large price tag. The regime expended millions of hours of cadre work time and billions of dollars in propaganda production to crush the Falun Gong. The campaign's domination of the political scene distracted China's leaders from pressing policy issues. The campaign's damage to the party's legitimacy was even more costly, both at home and abroad. Public sentiment within China was decidedly opposed to the government campaign, at least until several Falun Gong adherents—including a mother and daughter—immolated themselves in a January 2001 protest in Tiananmen Square. China's international prestige also suffered enormously, as the rest of the world saw the campaign as a massive violation of human rights.

A CORNUCOPIA OF "CULTS"

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³Author interview with a prominent scholar involved in discussions on how to respond to the Falun Gong.

expansion. Members give generously of their savings, banking on the promise of reaping heavenly rewards. They also volunteer by the thousands to become itinerant evangelists, and are dispatched to remote corners of the country to proselytize local populations. Their fervor is often enhanced by apocalyptic doctrines, mobilized by the belief that the end of time is near. Growth is further fueled by a waxing despondency among China's have-nots in the new economy, which increases the appeal of utopian solutions.

Most of the groups have refrained from overtly political actions, but their apocalyptic visions are inherently at odds with the regime's symbolic order. Many of the groups espouse explicitly antiregime views, referring to the Chinese Communist Party as a "red-clothed monster," or identifying it as the Red Dragon from the book of Revelation.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to the groups' coherence is their own tendency to factionalize and produce splinter groups.

New groups form and change names at a pace that confuses even the most assiduous outside observers. Divisiveness is a double-edged sword, however. While offshoots have kept the average group size down, reducing their ability to take large-scale action, fractionalization has been a boon to the "cult" industry overall. Each new group cultivates its own leadership structure and acquires its own élan. Rapid reproduction also keeps the regime off balance, since authorities usually prefer to conduct thorough investigations of a group before taking action against it.

Another concern for the regime is the groups' apparent trend toward radicalization. Each new generation tends to be more extreme than its progenitor, both doctrinally and in its antipathy toward the regime. For example, the Little Flock, the indigenous Chinese Protestant group mentioned earlier, emerged in the 1920s as a mildly charismatic and antibureaucratic reaction to Western denominations. Its founder, Ni Tuosheng, opposed the communist revolution, thereby inviting repeated attacks against the group during the Mao era, but the Little Flock has had relatively few conflicts with authorities in recent decades. However,

⁴Li Shixiong and Xiqiu (Bob) Fu, "Religion and National Security in China: Secret Documents from China's Security Sector" (February 11, 2002). Available at <www.freedomhouse.org>.

a leading member of the Little Flock, Li Changshou, broke off during the 1960s and founded the Local Church, a more sectarian group based on Li's own highly subjective biblical interpretations and a more charismatic worship style. China's authorities labeled the group a cult in the early 1980s, due largely to Li's overtly anticommunist rhetoric and the group's overseas headquarters. The Local Church's doctrinal subjectivism and emotionally charged services, in turn, have proved fertile ground for its own splinter groups. In the past decade, disgruntled Local Church members have established several radical offshoots, such as Eastern Lightning and the Established King, which may more accurately be characterized as personality cults.

The regime's strategy for dealing with these "cults" is detailed in an extraordinary collection of internal documents leaked by current and former officials within the Ministry of Public Security.⁴ The documents contain directives issued at the highest levels

of party and government leadership to conduct comprehensive investigations of all illicit "cults" and ultimately to eliminate them. To execute the directives, officials

within the ministry are to direct local organs to compile personality profiles of leading religious figures and improve intelligence networking among official agencies, mobilize reconnaissance teams to infiltrate religious groups, coerce members to spy for them, and ultimately, to arrest "all members in one blow."

TOO HOT TO HANDLE?

The biggest question mark in the regime's war on "cults" is China's mainstream Protestant house church networks. They are "mainstream" because they identify primarily with the global evangelical Christian movement, not an individual charismatic leader or a set of doctrines unique to a particular group. While they vary along the charismatic-evangelical spectrum, the differences are more of emphasis than fundamentals. The broader house church movement includes thousands of relatively autonomous churches and at least several dozen networks that span provincial boundaries. The ten largest networks alone claim 80 million adherents, although these figures are undoubtedly inflated. Still, the number belonging to the large networks certainly is in the millions, and the number of house church Christians more broadly reaches tens of millions.

The Communist Party's moves toward liberalizing control over China's burgeoning religious groups may be too little, too late.

Like the Falun Gong, house church networks have built effective organizational structures. Most are divided geographically and hierarchically, with each ascending level overseeing progressively larger districts. Leaders are often itinerant to avoid detection by authorities and to preserve authority over subordinates. The networks also operate a vast complex of underground seminaries and printing presses to train grassroots leaders and evangelists, and to supply their flocks with Bibles, hymnals, and educational materials. Member offerings are one of the networks' primary sources of funding, and many adherents give all but subsistence-level income to the church. The church's ranks also include a growing cadre of commercial elites, who now underwrite many of its operations. For example, one wealthy businessman from a southern coastal city personally finances 15 house church seminaries, each with a 40-student capacity.

Evangelism is the house church movement's highest priority. This evangelical fervor is partly a direct product of official repression, which compels house church Christians to build up their strength in numbers. Their illicit status also prevents local congregations from pouring their resources into elaborate churches. Yet the networks are also mobilized by their vision, which is truly global in scope. Not only do they seek to convert China's vast population to Christianity, they also aspire to continue westward through the Buddhist and Hindu lands of South and Southeast Asia and the Islamic terrain of the Middle East, finishing the global circumference of Christendom with a triumphant "return to Jerusalem." This feat, they believe, will precipitate Jesus' second coming.

Their global outlook is both a basis for and a product of the house church networks' extensive ties with overseas mission organizations. Emerging primarily in rural areas, the house churches' semiliterate leaders sought to deepen their grounding in the Christian faith, as well as to obtain support in building up their movements. Mistrusting the official church, which they viewed largely as an arm of the government, house church leaders developed ties with Western and indigenous mission organizations based in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and increasingly, South Korea. The initial contacts have developed into close working relationships, and overseas mission organizations now provide house church networks with

considerable funding, materials, training, logistical support, and even strategic advice.

Overseas partners have also coaxed network leaders into more cooperative and less competitive relations with one another. Top leaders of the largest house church networks now meet regularly and have begun to collaborate on leadership training, the production and distribution of materials, and evangelism. Their achievements have also given house churches the confidence to forge relations with leaders within China's official Protestant organization, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, albeit usually at lower levels. Official church leaders, feeling the perpetual squeeze of government control, increasingly welcome the opportunity to collaborate with the house churches. For example, officials in the State Administration for Religious Affairs (formerly the Religious Affairs Bureau) impose strict limits on the

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number of training courses the official church can hold for its grassroots clergy. As a result, greater numbers of local

clergy in official churches now receive their training in underground seminaries run by the house church networks. Since one of the official church's primary functions is to assist the government in implementing official regulations—which includes alerting cadres to illicit religious activity—building solidarities across official-unofficial boundaries significantly weakens the regime's ability to obtain information on the house churches.

Perhaps the most disconcerting development for China's leaders is the resistance the house church movement has developed to the regime's repressive tactics. Although the more sectarian groups tend to form around charismatic leaders and often dissolve on their arrest, the mainstream house church networks' identification with the global evangelical Christian movement has endowed them with formidable regenerative power, even after repeated official attacks on their leadership structures. Their global vision cuts the party-state down to size in a figurative yet powerful sense, reducing its repressive tactics to a relatively minor obstacle to the realization of their cosmic vision.

Even more, official persecution has not only created individual martyrs, but has cultivated a theology of martyrdom that shapes the entire movement. In contrast to most unofficial religious groups in China's history, which promise supernatural strength and wealth, China's house church Chris-

tians identify with a savior who suffered unto death. Seasoned activists no longer fear their inevitable arrests and beatings, but view them as a form of spiritual discipline. As one 20-year-old veteran evangelist put it, "The first time the police arrested me for spreading the Gospel, I was terrified. The first time they beat me, I thought they would kill me. But this has happened so many times that I am no longer afraid of being arrested. Nothing they can do frightens me anymore." The young woman then added, "In fact, I never feel as alive spiritually as when I am in jail." House church networks have incorporated the spirit of martyrdom into their organizational culture, making individual persecution into a valuable form of personal capital—to the extent that leadership candidates are often ranked by the number of times they have been arrested.

For the most part, the mainstream house church networks have kept a low profile, focusing on their primary mission of evangelism. But continued success in attracting new converts, growing organizational prowess, and a dwindling fear of regime repression have emboldened them in recent years to challenge the official order. In August 1998, leaders of ten major unofficial Protestant groups jointly issued an open letter to the Chinese government. In the letter, the groups claimed that with more than 80 million adherents—compared to the official church's 10 million members—the house church movement constituted the mainstream of the Chinese church. The statement's authors then demanded that China's leaders "readjust their policies on religion lest they violate God's will to their own detriment." Specifically, they called on authorities to release unconditionally all house church Christians in labor camps, to redefine cults in accordance with international standards, to end attacks on house churches, and to enter into a dialogue with them.

Three months later, leaders of four other large house church networks jointly issued two open statements, this time inviting several foreign journalists to the reading of the statements to ensure that the event obtained international exposure. The first was a "Statement of Faith," which drew theological lines between the house church and the official Three-Self church with the subjective teachings of the more sectarian offshoot groups. In the second statement, the authors explained why China's

house churches refused to register with the government, enumerating the various ways that official regulations violated biblical principles.

The regime responded to the challenges with a series of crackdowns against the perpetrators. The spate of large-scale arrests of house church Christians reported in the media in 1999 and 2000 was an attempt to target the leadership structure of signatory groups. For example, on August 24, 1999, two days after the first letter was issued, 40 leading members of the China Fangcheng Church of Henan were arrested. Almost one year later, on August 13, 2000, the regime conducted another mass arrest of 130 of its members, presumably to discourage the house churches from making the open letter an annual event. Similar measures were taken against the other signatory groups.

The punitive attacks had little effect. Most of those arrested were soon released, a few after serving terms in labor camps. Other leaders within the hierarchy quickly rose to fill the vacated positions of arrested leaders, and the networks continued to operate largely as before. Indeed, many house church leaders reported enjoying more latitude to maneuver as political authorities became increasingly focused on the campaign against the Falun Gong.

While the house churches have not repeated their challenge to the regime, they remain capable of taking large-scale concerted action. One Taiwan-based missionary with close ties to the house churches claimed, for example, that "these leaders could mobilize over a million people in one place. . . . They are so organized, it would take just a word."⁵

TREADING CAREFULLY

China's leaders are well aware of the dangers of precipitating a Falun Gong-style campaign against another religious group, and appear eager to avoid doing so. Stung by the Falun Gong's tenacity and exhausted by the extraordinary measures required to flog its adherents into submission, they no longer have any illusions about the difficulty of wiping out religious groups that specialize in producing righteous martyrs. In addition, broader social discontent continues to grow, fueled primarily by endemic official corruption, and cases of large-scale protests are on the rise, raising the prospect that a high-profile standoff between the state and any social group could ignite widespread popular uprisings.

Another large-scale assault on religious groups would also have serious repercussions for China's external relations, particularly with the United States. Concern about religious persecution in

⁵Statement by Jonathan Chao, quoted in Bay Fang, "China's Christian Underground," *U.S. News & World Report*, April 30, 2001, p. 35.

China has emerged to become a leading issue in bilateral relations in recent years. President George W. Bush raised the issue with Chinese President Jiang Zemin during their first meeting at the annual Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in October 2001, and religious repression was a prominent issue during Bush's later visit to China the following February. A future campaign against a religious group—particularly one that targeted China's house church Christians—would seriously damage bilateral relations, and would further tarnish China's international image.

Given the dangers of another protracted struggle against defiant religious groups, China's leaders appear to be groping for alternative arrangements. Government cadres are in increasingly frequent contact with leading figures in the house church movement. According to house church leaders, the cadres have become more solicitous recently, inquiring how the government can make their situation more "comfortable."

Yet the party appears to be divided over how to handle its unofficial religious groups. Last October, internal sources began leaking word that authorities had drafted a revised law on registering religious groups. The new law would allow religious groups to circumvent the unpopular "patriotic" religious organizations and register directly with the government. Prime Minister Zhu Rongji reportedly confirmed the rumors to a visiting American televangelist, Pat Robertson, in Beijing in January, adding that the government would unveil the new regulations soon. Yet almost a year later, party leaders have not adopted the new law. Visible cracks have also emerged within the party's upper echelons over its stand on religion. In December 2001, Pan Yue, a high-ranking official within the State Council, pub-

lished an article in several state-run newspapers criticizing the party's outdated stance on religion. Conservative party elders quickly lashed back, accusing Pan of trying to become China's "Yeltsin."

The regime must walk a thin line in dealing with many of its unofficial religious groups. A number of the more extreme cults, if left unchecked, would challenge any political system's ability to preserve social order. Even so, they are largely products of the political environment created by the Communist Party's totalistic rule, which demands complete allegiance and represses alternative loyalties. Now, many emergent religious groups are as totalistic in their own outlook as the party is in its governing style. Moreover, Beijing's dismal record of repressing all forms of autonomous religious expression and fabricating justifications for doing so gives China's leaders little political capital to work with in dealing with unruly cults.

The Communist Party's moves toward liberalizing control over China's burgeoning religious groups may be too little, too late. As long as the party continues to prohibit genuine social group autonomy, it will remain vulnerable to attempts by these groups to assert their right to exist independent of official control. Halfway measures, such as permitting direct registration with the government, fall far short of accommodating the mobilizing visions and objectives of China's unofficial religious groups. Indeed, their interests are diametrically opposed—control versus autonomy, restricting growth versus active proselytization, and preserving the official symbolic order versus visions of global conversion and revolutionary change—putting them on a collision course with one another. It appears that China's war on "cults" has only just begun. ■