

Unofficial Religions in China: Beyond the Party's Rules

Monday, May 23, from 2:00 – 3:30 PM

Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2255

Statement of Professor Patricia M. Thornton

The dramatic resurgence of popular interest in religious traditions and spiritual practices during the post-Mao reform era has been a continuing source of concern for both central and local authorities in the PRC. The opening of Chinese markets to foreign goods and Chinese borders to international exchanges, the dismantling of Mao-era institutions and general relaxation of central political controls, all helped to set the stage for widespread religious revival. Syncretic sects of various types have emerged in large numbers in recent years, many with ties to traditional religious groups that were largely suppressed during the early years of Communist Party rule. At the same time, the development and availability of high technology resources—including fax machines, cell phones, text messaging systems as well as the internet—has created new resources that facilitate both communication and social mobilization, culminating in a new type of threat to the current regime. Pre-revolutionary spiritual traditions, resurrected, remixed and retransmitted to a larger audience via new information technologies, have resulted in unique hybrid form of social mobilization that I refer to as cyber-sectarianism.¹

In the eyes of many Chinese authorities, the confluence of these three trends during the post-Mao reform era—the simultaneous relaxation of political controls on a number of fronts, the resurgence of popular interest in spiritual and religious practices, and the development of new information technologies—has created a virtual “perfect storm” for internet-based dissent against the current regime: highly sophisticated transnational networks of committed political and religious dissidents that continue to expand and diversify as they challenge the leadership of the Party and the state on several fronts. The most successful of the new Chinese cybersects combine web-based strategies of text distribution, recruitment and information-sharing strategies with multi-faceted international media campaigns and periodic but high-profile episodes of protest both in- and outside the PRC. Funded at least in part by overseas Chinese communities based in other Asian and Western nations in which they operate more openly, some of these sects are pooling their resources, both with other like-minded religious or spiritual groups as well as with other dissident organizations based abroad. Like the internet itself, upon which they have relied upon so heavily in their recent development and expansion, the new cybersects have morphed into far-flung transnational networks in which political and religious dissidents seek and secure the support of international authorities and non-governmental organizations to frame issues and pursue various political agendas. Elements of their organizational structure and modes of operation are also in evidence in other marginalized or illegal organizations across the globe, including underground criminal gangs, terrorist networks and religious fundamentalist sects of all stripes. Yet what is unique about these new Chinese cybersects is their reliance upon the internet and related high-tech communication strategies to blend spiritual or religious concerns with anti-regime messages and activities.

The ability of these new cybersects to pursue their goals rests in large part upon the existence of highly dispersed small groups of practitioners that remain anonymous within the larger social context and operate in relative secrecy, while still linked remotely to a larger network believers who share a set of beliefs, practices and/or texts, and often a common devotion to a particular leader. Overseas supporters provide funding and support; domestic practitioners distribute tracts, participate in acts of resistance, and share information on the internal situation with outsiders. Collectively, members and practitioners construct viable virtual communities of faith, exchanging personal testimonies and engaging in collective study via email, on-line chat rooms and web-based message boards.

Perhaps the best-known Chinese cybersect is the group commonly referred to as the *Falun Gong*, also known as *Falun Dafa*, which at its height claimed an estimated 70 million adherents in mainland China. Li Hongzhi, the enigmatic founder of the movement, created his unique system of *qigong*—a traditional form of meditation involving particular postures and bodily movement—by incorporating lessons from both Daoist and Buddhist teachers. By his own account, Li retired from his position at the Changchun Cereals and Oil Company in 1991 and began teaching his method to the broader public the following year, at the peak of what was widely acknowledged to be a *qigong* craze in mainland China. The main principles of the movement include the cultivation of the virtues of *zhen, shan, ren*—sincerity, compassion and tolerance—combined with daily *qigong* practice sessions in order to eliminate bad karma from body.

Despite the fact that Li moved the United States in 1996, the movement was virtually unknown outside of mainland China until April 25, 1999, when ten thousand *Falun Gong* practitioners staged a mass sit-in in front of the walled leadership compound in Beijing. The massive but peaceful demonstration appeared to take the police by surprise, who appeared to be at a loss as to how to handle such a large group. The protest lasted for more than fourteen hours before the practitioners voluntarily vacated the site. Weeks later, when Li was asked how the group managed to pull off such a large-scale event, he confirmed that the group had relied on the internet to organize the protest.²

Not surprisingly, central leaders officially banned *Falun Gong* less than two months later, launching a major campaign to wipe out all “heretical sects” (*xiejiao*). Two of the less well-known sects also targeted during the crackdown, which continues in full force to this day, are the *qigong* sect *Zhonghua Yansheng Yizhi Gong* [hereafter *Zhong Gong*], and the Surat Shabd Yoga- or Sant Mat-inspired *Quan Yin* Method, better known in China as *Guanyin Famen*. Prior to the 1999 ban, all three of these groups had established formal corporate offices in mainland China, either under the guise of privately owned companies or research societies. Some of these corporations produced and sold goods associated with the spiritual practices of the group in question; Chinese government officials have accused these enterprises of turning excessive profits at the expense of believers. During the crackdown that officially began in July of 1999, the offices, schools and other facilities of all three groups were forced to close down, their assets confiscated and their key personnel detained or arrested.

Two of the groups in question quickly turned to high-tech methods to protest the ban. Zhang Hongbao, the *Zhong Gong* founder, responded with the so-called “Action 99-8” campaign, encouraging his supporters to fax, post and distribute two letters of protest against the ban apparently penned by *Zhong Gong* members who were also public security personnel. In a move reminiscent of the mobilization strategies used by pro-democracy supporters during the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations, in August 1999 the two documents were distributed to a hundred thousand local police substations, two thousand county police offices, three hundred municipal public security bureaus, thirty-one provincial public security departments and ten thousand departments in the judiciary as well.³ Shortly thereafter, Zhang Hongbao and an associate fled to Thailand and then to Guam, where both applied for political asylum in the US. Likewise, *Falun Gong* practitioners continued to stage public protests, increasingly around state-planned celebrations of major holidays and/or other high-profile political events.

As the repression of so-called “heretical sects” intensified on the Chinese mainland, all three groups shifted the brunt of their organizational work in the PRC to virtual reality. The Foreign Liaison Group of the Falun Dafa Research Society had established a protocol for monitoring *Falun Gong*'s presence on the web as early as 1995, and relied increasingly on the internet in the aftermath of the ban;⁴ the main *Zhong Gong* group site was established some five years later, in April 2000, and carried information on the situation of its followers during the crackdown. The group known as *Quan Yin* also established a ring of websites that publish and archive newsletters on-line, all of which carry regular updates of their activities both in- and outside of mainland China.

Over the past several years, all three groups have developed elaborate virtual locations where they house

downloadable texts of lectures and speeches, often in multiple languages by their leaders, photographic images of both leaders and practitioners, and information about the situation of their practitioners in mainland China. Some maintain electronic bulletin boards and email distribution lists that provide interested parties with newsletters and updated news information. These continue to serve as the central source of information for practitioners across the globe, helping to organize collective actions of various kinds, as well as to provide venues for sharing religious experiences within the community of the faithful. Despite the attempts of mainland authorities to block access to the websites, practitioners continue to evade controls by using untraceable web-based email accounts accessed in internet cafes, proxy servers and new anonymizing software. Most of the websites in question provide instructions on how to evade official surveillance by using proxy servers to log on in order to view or download banned information.

Several of these sites link on-line to networks of members of other suppressed religious or ethnic minorities, and political dissidents. For example, when *Zhong Gong* leader Zhang Hongbao began a hunger strike to press for his release from detention in Guam while awaiting transfer to the US, several overseas Chinese dissident organizations-- including the Free China Movement, the Chinese Democracy Party and the Joint Conference of Chinese Overseas Democracy Movement-- rallied to his cause, organizing a press conference to draw attention to his plight.⁵ After winning his bid for political asylum in the US, Zhang returned the favor by joining forces with the banned Chinese Democracy Freedom Party, and by establishing an organization designed to push for the release of political dissidents from mainland Chinese jails.⁶ The virtual links between *Zhong Gong* and other overseas organizations, most notably Liu Siqing's Hong Kong-based Information Centre for Democracy and Human Rights, were quite close in the past.⁷

With the struggle between Chinese authorities and these syncretic organizations moved at least in part to virtual reality, the banned cybersects have adopted what some have called "repertoires of electronic contention"⁸ -- including the use of websites and email to mobilize participants for conventional demonstrations, as well as "hactivism" (tactics of disruptive electronic contention) and even cyber-terrorism (which may involve physical harm done to groups and individuals by the disruption of power grids, traffic control and other systems of resource delivery and public safety). With the help of supporters based abroad, underground *Falun Gong* cells in greater China have managed hack into and hijack the satellite uplink feed to Central China Television [CCTV] on numerous occasions and broadcast pro-*Falun Gong* video messages television stations across the PRC. In recent years, Chinese authorities have accused members of various undergrounds sects of sabotaging or defacing public transportation systems, and even of obstructing the government's attempts to control the spread of SARS. Chinese public security officials have also responded in kind: for example, within days of the July 1999 decision to ban the movement, several *Falun Gong* website operators abroad complained that they were being targeted by a "denial of service" attack that was shown to have originated from the Beijing offices of the Public Security Ministry's Internet Monitoring Bureau.⁹ *Falun Gong* followers and other dissidents have also accused Chinese officials surveilling and penetrating on-line sites where dissenters tend to congregate in order to engage in various forms of cyberespionage and entrapment schemes.

This increased level of surveillance and repression has not only not eliminated the new Chinese cybersects, but has in fact intensified their reliance upon web-based high-tech strategies of contention, which has arguably made them more capable of carrying out difficult, ambiguous and complex tasks. Research on similar covert networks has found that they are far more effective than the secret societies of decades ago precisely because of the advent of computer-based communications tools: whereas in the past, communication and coordination within covert networks required the use of buffers to maintain secrecy at the cost of lowering communicative effectiveness, the information-processing capabilities of current technologies, combined with the anonymity of virtual reality, has eliminated this obstacle.

Yet the move to virtual reality has not been without cost to the Chinese cybersects in question. The high-speed efficiency and decentralized organizational capacity of web-based communications has created some institutional casualties, even within the enormously popular *Falun Gong* network: the decentralization of the

web-based movement has likely contributed to splintering and fragmentation of its membership. Some underground *Falun Gong* cells in mainland China have purportedly been overtaken by charismatic "tutors" or "facilitators" to whom practitioners can more readily relate, or now follow scriptures neither written nor approved by Li.¹⁰ Some thirty-odd members of *Falun Gong's* Hong Kong chapter experienced a collective revelation on Buddha's birthday that a thirty-seven year old activist in their midst was in fact the "Lord of Buddhas." A former owner of a trading company, Belinda Pang announced that all of Li Hongzhi's most recent revelations must be false because he had already clearly left to "quietly watch the practitioners and people in world" perched atop a cliff somewhere in the United States, presumably leaving her in control.¹¹ Since he was granted asylum in the US, *Zhong Gong* leader Zhang Hongbao has been engaged in an on-going string of lawsuits against a variety of his former associates, claiming that they have attempted to wrest control over the movement's membership and assets. While such power struggles are by no means unheard of in more traditional religious orders, such issues seem destined to revisit the banned cybersects in the future, particularly as adherents across the globe are encouraged to post and share their personal revelations, visions and experiences on movement websites alongside those of their leaders.

In conclusion, the internet may indeed invite broad-based participation by dissolving formidable boundaries, but it erects others that are no less imposing. The unequal distribution of technological expertise allows alternative hierarchies to emerge, creating a condition some have referred to as crypto-anarchy.¹² Within newly emerging cybersects, technical and media wizards play a much greater role in defining the movement, sometimes rivaling that of the spiritual leadership. One astute observer noted that having been driven underground and on-line, *Falun Gong* had undergone "a dark evolution" that involved the emergence of "a hard core of radicalized followers" who were no longer dependent upon Li's guidance for the movement to grow.¹³ The high level of technological and public relations expertise required to keep such a group in working order requires considerable organizational skill that may well be in short supply among charismatic mystics, and the marriage between technological expertise and spiritual vision may not always be a harmonious one.

Notes

1. "The New Cybersects : Resistance and Repression in the Reform era," in Elizabeth Perry and Mark Selden, eds., *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance* (second edition) (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 247-270.
2. Transcript of Li Hongzhi's meeting members of the press in Sydney, Australia on May 2, 1999, at <http://www.falundafa.org/fldfbb/news990502.htm>.
3. Guan Kaicheng, "Zhong Gong '99-8' quanguo xingdong neimu baoguang" [Exposing Zhong Gong's behind-the-scenes national '99-8' action] (February 2, 2000), <http://www.zgzs.net>; see also Wei Zhen, "Zhong Gong '99.8' quanguo xingdong zhuandi de xin zhi yi," [The first letter transmitted by followers to the whole country during Action '99.8'] and Li Kejiang, "Zhong Gong '99.8' quanguo xingdong zhuandi de xin zhi er" [The second letter transmitted by followers to the whole country during Action '99.8'], and other relevant documents at <http://www.zgzs.nets>.
4. The Foreign Liaison Group of the Falun Dafa Research Society, "Falun Dafa's Transmission of Internet Notice" (June 15, 1997), <http://www.falundafa.org/fldfbb/gonggao970615.htm>.
5. US Newswire, "'Campaign to Free Master Zhang Hongbao' to Hold Press Conference Dec. 20," (December 19, 2000).
6. The group established by Zhang Hongbao and Yan Qingxin, the colleague who secretly fled the mainland with him, is "The Chinese Anti-Political Persecution Alliance" [Zhongguo fanzhengzhi yapo tongmenghui]; for

information on Zhong Gong's involvement with the Chinese Democracy Freedom Party, see <http://www.zgzg.net>.

7. The Information Centre was established by former Tiananmen Square student activist Liu Siping after he fled mainland China in 1989.
8. Sasha Costanza-Chock in "Mapping the Repertoire of Electronic Contention," in Andrew Opel and Donnalyn Pompper, eds., *Representing Resistance: Media, Civil Disobedience and the Global Justice Movement* (Praeger, 2003).
9. Peter Svensson, "China Sect Claims Sites Under Attack," Associated Press online report, July 31, 1999.
10. Craig S. Smith, "A Movement in Hiding."
11. Craig S. Smith, "Split Develops on Leadership of Sect," *The New York Times*, August 3, 2000, p. 10; Linda Yeung, "A Buddha Called Belinda," *South China Morning Post* (July 27, 2000), p. 13.
12. For examples, see several of the essays in Peter Ludlow, ed., *Crypto Anarchy, Cyberstates and Pirate Utopias* (Cambridge, Massachusetts The MIT Press, 2001).
13. Susan V. Lawrence, "Faith and Fear," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 20, 2000, p. 16.