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The Mobilization of China's Legal System and Religious Bureaucracy as a Means
of Combating the Threat of the Falun Gong

By Cooper Reves

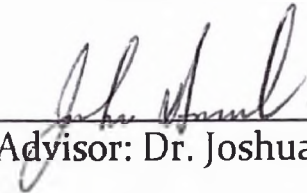
A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for completion
of the Bachelor of Arts degree in International Studies

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Introduction

In 1992, Li Hongzhi, an obscure man from the northern Chinese province of Jilin, introduced to the world a set of five Qigong exercises which would form the basis of the Falun Gong movement. In the years that followed, the Falun Gong quickly grew to an estimated 100 million practitioners worldwide that expeditiously spread from China to the rest of the world. Though the group was pacifistic in its ideology, the Chinese government was never quite comfortable with the Falun Gong's presence, and in 1999, the government began a widespread effort to discredit the Falun Gong, culminating in the arrest of thousands of Falun Gong members after a government protest held outside of the central government compound, Zhongnanhai in Beijing. Immediately following the arrests, the Falun Gong was officially labeled a seditious cult and its special brand of Qigong was deemed illegal to practice. Today, religion in China remains a tightly managed institution with strict legal controls placed on both its practice and its very existence.

Although the Falun Gong appears on the surface to be a religious faith, spiritual leader and founder Li Hongzhi insists that instead, it constitutes a “cultivation practice rather than a religion.”¹ Li Hongzhi professes beliefs in “higher beings,” but this is not a major focus of the belief system. Instead, the most emphasis is placed on cultivating one’s moral qualities through group exercise and meditation. By cultivating oneself in this life, one could ostensibly achieve peace in the next life. According to Falun Gong beliefs, this cultivation consists of practicing five particular sets of exercises. In practicing these exercises, Hongzhi believed that one could “improve one’s xinxing (literally, heart nature), which he defines as “mind nature” and “moral quality.” In addition, one must relentlessly study Falun Gong texts to increase one’s knowledge of Li Hongzhi and his beliefs. As the practitioners continue to cultivate their minds and bodies, they will eventually begin a transformation of sorts culminating in tremendous changes, gaining intimate knowledge of the world and transcending the physical realm.

Although Li Hongzhi professed belief in certain higher beings, the nature of Falun Gong belief established Hongzhi himself as a deity of sorts. Maria Hsia Chang asserts that “If Li Hongzhi’s disciples can become gods by engaging in Falun Gong, it stands to reason that the founder of this cultivation practice must himself be a deity.”² This centralization of belief and authority with Li Hongzhi at

¹ Maria Hsia Chang, *Falun Gong: The End of Days* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004): 60.

² *Ibid.* 87.

the center would later draw the ire of the Chinese government, and the nature of Falun Gong ideology would prove to be a great threat to the Chinese leadership.

While China currently has only five officially recognized religious faiths, many others exist outside of this tightly controlled group, and Chinese history contains many instances of religious faiths outside of the norm gaining prominence and widespread acceptance. The government, threatened by the widespread popularity of the movements and its own inability to control them, branded these groups heterodox religions, or *xiejiao*. The term *xiejiao* has come to mean “heretical cult” and refers to these religious groups that the government deems outside of the norm and worthy of criticism. In persecuting these heterodox movements, the Chinese government has followed a strict model of first branding a movement a *xiejiao* and then using that negative moniker to carry out a public campaign to eliminate the group and reduce its influence.

Since the late Qing period, China has experienced an enormous growth of what China Scholar David Ownby calls “redemptive societies,” all of which drew the ire of the Chinese government for their heterodox beliefs which ran counter to the agenda of the leadership.³ In this classification, Ownby groups the Falun Gong with the Qigong societies of the 1980s and also includes groups from the Republican era such as the White Lotus Society. These groups have many things

³ David Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China* (New York: Oxford UP, 2008), 25.

in common, but most important is their history of oppression at the hands of the Chinese government. From 1796-1804, the Qing dynasty was forced to confront a challenge to its legitimacy in the form of the White Lotus Rebellion. Founded in Hubei province in the 1790s, this religious movement rebelled against the Qing leadership, but was met with heavy resistance. The Qing government deemed the White Lotus Society a heterodox group with an ideology counter to that of the state, so the campaign waged against practitioners should come as no surprise.⁴ Another Republican era group with a history of government oppression is the Yiguandao; in the city of Tientsin, a religious movement called the *Yiguandao* came to prominence in the 1940s. The tenets of this movement promised alleviation of the suffering of individuals, and thusly its ideology greatly appealed to much of China's urban citizenry which existed in conditions of extreme poverty. In the late 1940s, the Communists realized that the ideology of the Yiguandao competed with the ideology of the Communist Party, and on December 15, 1949, the city government of Tientsin banned the practice of Yiguandao by its citizens.⁵ In the months that followed, the government carried out a structured defamation campaign intended to reduce the number of practitioners, prosecute the leaders, and recover funds supposedly stolen by the group. As one can see, the term *xiejiao* has been effectively used throughout Chinese history to oppress popular movements that threaten government

⁴ For more information on the White Lotus Rebellion, see Kwang-Ching Liu's chapter "Religion and Politics in the White Lotus Rebellion" that can be found in "Heterodoxy in Late Imperial China" written by Kwang-Ching Liu and Richard Shek.

⁵ Kenneth G. Lieberthal, *Revolution and tradition in Tientsin, 1949-1952* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1980).

legitimacy, and the Falun Gong is only the most recent manifestation of this pattern.

The Falun Gong is a movement that can be unilaterally traced back to the mind of Li Hongzhi. Originally based around five exercises independently created by Li Hongzhi, the movement began to gain momentum when its founder visited Beijing in 1992 to present these exercises to the Qigong Research Association of China.⁶ The presentation was accompanied by lectures explaining the origins of the exercises and drawing together ideas from Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucian thought. In the ensuing days, Li Hongzhi gave a series of similar lectures to ever-increasing crowds. His popularity as an emerging Qigong master grew to such proportions that in 1995, he released a wildly popular book, *Zhuan Falun*, which outlined his set of beliefs.

Though the popularity of the Falun Gong continued to increase, growing governmental suspicions in regards to the practice of qigong threatened to derail the Falun Gong movement. In November of 1996, the China Qigong Scientific Research Society disaffiliated itself with the Falun Gong, leaving the movement struggling for legitimacy. Efforts to affiliate with other already recognized

⁶ According to David Ownby, Qigong is “a general name describing physical and mental disciplines based loosely on traditional Chinese medical and spiritual practices.” Qigong combines traditional Chinese medicine with structured meditation and regimented exercise with the goal of providing balance to one’s life-force or Qi. Chapter 3 of Ownby’s book “Falun Gong and the Future of China” gives an informative overview of the Qigong movement and ties it into the rise of the Falun Gong.

organizations failed, but this did not stop the Falun Gong from continuing to increase its membership numbers both within China and abroad.

By early 1999, criticisms of the movement were commonplace in newspapers, but the Chinese government stopped short of outright banning the organization. On March 25, 1999, growing unrest amongst Falun Gong supporters prompted many Chinese to protest outside of Zhongnanhai (an area in which the leading Communist party officials both work and reside) in central Beijing. The protesters' demands for a meeting with Premier Zhu Rongji were met with steely disregard, and soon after, mass arrests of Falun Gong supporters began. Some suspect over 35,000 Falun Gong members were arrested by the end of the year, though no official figures exist.⁷ Regardless, the National People's Congress passed a law in late July banning all heterodox teachings (*xiejiao*) which included the Falun Gong amongst other, less popular new religious movements. In the ensuing years, the Chinese government has continued its campaign of repression against the practitioners of Falun Gong including alleged torture, imprisonment, and forced relocation of supporters to labor camps. At present, the status of the Falun Gong within China remains the same, and the state has continued its campaign of repression. Though outspoken support for the Falun Gong within China has lessened to a degree,

⁷Maria Hsia Chang, *Falun Gong: The End of Days* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004).

much of the protest movement has moved overseas, relocating in large part to the United States and Great Britain.⁸

China has in the past been notoriously harsh towards organized religion, and the government bureaucracy reflects that reality. Within the bureaucracy of the Communist Party, the Bureau of Religious Affairs was established in 1954 with the purpose of addressing all religious concerns that may arise, though its name was later changed to the State Administration for Religious Administration. According the Chief of the Department of Policy Research and Legislation within the State Administration for Religious Administration, the purpose of the organization is:

to implement the policy of freedom of religious belief; examine and promote the implementation of religious policy and relevant rules and regulations; support the patriotic religious groups to independently conduct work according to their respective characteristics and within the scope of the Constitution and laws; to ensure democratic consultation and effective cooperation between the government and religious groups; to coordinate relations between religious and non-religious groups in their friendly exchanges with foreign religious groups in accordance with the principle of independence and self-reliance; to fight against the permeation of hostile overseas religious forces; to educate religious believers in patriotism and socialism; to consolidate and develop the patriotic unity with religious groups, and to unite all people in religious groups of all nationalities so as to promote the socialist material and cultural civilization.⁹

⁸ Kevin McDonald, *Global Movements: Action and Culture* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006)

⁹ Foster Stockwell, *Religion in China Today* (Beijing: New World Press, 1993).

Although the Constitution of China guarantees freedom of religion, this is relative because the State Administration for Religious Administration exercises great control over the establishment of religions and tightly regulates the activities of those religions already approved by the government. While the Falun Gong is a modern phenomenon, the roots of this movement extend deeply into Chinese history, encompassing both religious and political events. Religious activities in China tread a fine line between the rights of individuals to freely practice their religion and the state's insistence upon control over these actions. Although the Chinese state has always sought to sanction and control religion, in the years since the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party, religion has been policed and regulated to an overwhelming extent. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, religion was considered part of the "four olds" that had to be abolished in order for the advancement of the goals of socialism. Temples, churches, monasteries, and mosques were repossessed or simply burned while followers of these faiths were subject to persecution and government "reeducation efforts." In the years following the Cultural Revolution, this overwhelming animosity towards religion has faded into a tolerance on the part of the government, though the Communist Party still maintains strict control over both those establishing places of worship and those who worship there. In 1982, the government issued "Document 19" which revised the means by which the government controlled religious groups and places of worship, making it more difficult to establish new areas for the practice of religion and

placing tighter regulations on religious leaders.^{10 11} While the Constitution of China explicitly states that citizens have the right to freedom of religion, the Chinese people do not necessarily enjoy the same level of religious freedom that we experience in the United States.

Regulation of religious practice in China predates the crackdown on the Falun Gong, but in the years since the incident at Zhongnanhai, the Chinese government has become impassioned in its crusade against heterodox groups. Though control of religious activities seems to extend into every sector of the faith, the practice of a religion is far from illegal. In a bid to consolidate power, the government has created special offices within the bureaucracy tasked with the oversight and regulation of religious affairs, and these agencies work closely with the state-sanctioned religions to enact policies handed down by the government. While this process seems as if it would lend itself to a coherent and concise policy towards the regulation of religious affairs, there are many inequities present that cannot be easily explained away. Religions steeped in Qigong practices such as Buddhism and Daoism are allowed to flourish, but the Falun Gong has been nearly choked out. The questions of how and why this has occurred are central to this thesis, and the answers will show the lengths to which the Chinese government has gone to utilize the religious bureaucracy to control the Falun Gong.

¹⁰ Beatrice Leung, "China's Religious Freedom Policy: The Art of Managing Religious Activity," *The China Quarterly* 184 (2005): 903.

¹¹ For more information on Document 19, see Chapter 3.

The Chinese government campaign against the Falun Gong has proceeded in several ways, the first of which was to use the religious bureaucracy to speak out against the movement. In the early years of the Falun Gong movement, the government perceived Li Hongzhi and his followers as a minor threat, and instead of crafting new policies to combat the Falun Gong, the Chinese government used systems already in place to attempt to quell the growing movement. Although the Falun Gong had in 1996 disassociated from the Qigong Research Association of China (which was a part of the religious bureaucracy), it was not exempt from the influence of the religious bureaucracy. The Chinese government used the Buddhist Organization of China in an attempt to discredit the Falun Gong and to discourage Chinese citizens from joining the ranks of believers. Though the regulations implemented by the religious bureaucracy may seem to the untrained eye to be violations of China's stated commitment to religious freedom, if one examines the history of religion in China, this commitment is shown to be hollow and merely a tool to be wielded by the government as it sees fit.

The second and by far most expansive means by which the government has attempted to control and discredit the Falun Gong is through the manipulation of the Chinese legal system. When compared to the use of the religious bureaucracy to discredit the Falun Gong, the changes made to the legal system were a much more reactionary tactic, a tactic that was often used ex-post facto to convict Falun Gong members of crimes that were not illegal at the

time of their committal. By shifting the legal definition of “heretical cult” and passing laws which make past acts illegal, the Chinese government was finally able to effectively retard the growth of the Falun Gong movement. These highly specialized regulations excluded many similar religious movements from punishment and instead focused solely on the Falun Gong, which was perceived as the most severe threat the government. By examining the government’s use of the legal system to prosecute Falun Gong members, one is able to gain a greater understanding of the precarious position organized religion inhabits within the Chinese legal system. By examining certain laws and analyzing relevant statements of Chinese leaders, this thesis will show the constraints imposed on religious practice and how the state defines what is acceptable and unacceptable religious practice..

Previous research on the Falun Gong has focused in large part on the founding of the movement and the administrative makeup of the organization in its early years. Scholars such as Maria Hsia Chang and David Ownby have exhaustively researched this topic and provided insight into both how and why the movement arose in the early 1990s. David Ownby posits that enthusiasm for the Falun Gong grew out of the late-century Qigong craze, and the texts offered by these scholars have provided an important contextual background to my thesis. Another prevailing narrative found in Falun Gong research is describing the events surrounding the government crackdown on the Falun Gong and the human rights abuses suffered by practitioners. These alleged abuses are well-

documented by international advocacy organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International as well as documented by the Falun Gong movement itself. My approach to the Falun Gong focuses instead upon the government policies adopted to quell the growth of the Falun Gong and the motivations behind these policies.

The sensitive nature of these topics made any subjective research based in China quite difficult. By analyzing the statements of government officials and reviewing the laws used to prosecute the Falun Gong, I was able to analyze the subtext of the documents and discover the reasons behind the government biases. Although the outcome and effects of the government crackdown on the Falun Gong movement are vital to an overall understanding of its place in Chinese society today, it is also important to understand the reasons why the government and its bureaucrats felt so innately threatened by the movement. In exploring this topic, my thesis not only endeavors to explain the reactions of the government to the Falun Gong threat, but also the motivations behind these actions. By fleshing out the motivations of the Chinese leaders, it is easier to understand the reasons behind the immediacy and severity of the government crackdown on Falun Gong believers.

Chapter 1 explains the history of popular protest in China and contextualizes the movement in terms of the protests that have preceded it. In addition, this chapter introduces the threat represented by the Falun Gong and

explains which characteristics of the movement make it more dangerous to the establishment than those that came before. In writing this chapter, I utilized several secondary sources by noted historians and sociologists to help place the Falun Gong movement in the broader context of modern China. *Falun Gong: The End of Days*, written by Maria Hsia Chang, meticulously details the administrative makeup of the Falun Gong organization before the government crackdown, while David Ownby's *Falun Gong and the Future of China* explained the organizational capacity of the group in modern times, including the movement's strong internet presence and the continuing relevance of Li Hongzhi as a spiritual leader.

Chapter 2 focuses on the Buddhist Association of China and demonstrates how the Chinese government brought the full force of the religious bureaucracy against the Falun Gong. *Making Religion Making the State* by Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank proved to be an invaluable resource by detailing the history of the Buddhist Association and explaining how it was founded; the chapter also discusses the two periods of Buddhist criticism of Falun Gong ideology, both before the government became involved in the Falun Gong issue and after. In order to determine government policy towards the group, I utilized several memorandums which discussed meetings of the Chinese government to draft official Falun Gong policy. Press releases and official documents of various Chinese consulates across the globe were also used as

they represented the Party line and were often insightful glimpses into the government's policy-making efforts.

Chapter 3 discusses the efforts of the Chinese government to limit the growth and prosecute the members of the Falun Gong movement. In this chapter, I analyze relevant sections of the Constitution of China and subsequent amendments to the legal definition of religious freedom in China. In the years after the government crackdown, Chinese leaders have shaped China's fledgling legal system into a coordinated organization which both actively prosecutes Falun Gong practitioners and continues to act to slow its domestic growth. Human Rights Watch, an international non-governmental organization produced an excellent paper detailing the ways in which the Chinese legal system has been used to limit the rights of Falun Gong practitioners, and I heavily rely on its research and data in this chapter.

While the groups and events that I discuss within have been adequately documented by historians, I diverge from the previous in several important ways. My research differentiates itself from others by using the Falun Gong and the government's reaction to its meteoric rise in popularity as a case study to demonstrate the capacity of the Chinese government to harness the power of both the religious bureaucracy and the legal system to mount a national campaign against heterodox religions. Although the Falun Gong seems at a cursory view to be a modern anomaly, the Chinese government has a history of

responding to threats to its legitimacy by pseudo-religious movements by branding the movements heretical in nature and indicting them on this charge.

Chapter 1

Popular Protest and the Threat of the Falun Gong

While protest movements seem contrary to the nature of an authoritarian government, China's history is steeped in the tradition of popular protest. Tracing its roots back to the Chen She Rebellion of 209 B.C.E. in which Liu Bang overthrew the Qin empire to found the famous Han dynasty,¹² China's history of popular protest has played an integral role in the ebb and flow of the empire. Popular protest is an important aspect of Chinese history because of the deeply entrenched concept of the "Mandate of Heaven," a concept which states that governments must maintain the Mandate to rule by adequately fulfilling their moral obligations to the nation. If a government is proven to have "lost" that mandate whether it be through protest or political scandal, it loses its legitimacy, and a new leader is installed. This concept has carried over into modern times and has deeply influenced the decisions of Communist leaders and officials. Legitimacy based upon the outcome of popular protests is an alarming

¹² Elizabeth Perry, *Challenging the Mandate of Heaven: Social Protest and State Power in China* (M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 163.

concept that carries with it profound consequences in modern day China, especially considering the abundance of anti-government protests in the years since the founding of the People's Republic of China. Although adamantly opposed to expressions of disloyalty toward the government, the Chinese leaders have tolerated most protests without a focused government response.¹³ This is not true for the Falun Gong movement, as shown by the intense anti-Falun Gong campaign carried out since late-1999. The differences between the Falun Gong movement and other protest movements are important to understand as they represent the true fears of the Chinese government. The Falun Gong threatens the mandate to rule of the Communist leaders and risks the legitimacy of the entire government, but it is important to ask why the government feels so threatened by the Falun Gong especially considering the prevalence of protest movements in the history of China.

During the 20th century, China has faced many protest movements that have threatened the legitimacy of the government, but none have elicited the same response as the government's reaction to the April 1999 Falun Gong protests. Although the government remains adamantly opposed to any anti-government sentiments, it has willfully allowed many of these protests to continue with some level of government supervision. Despite the non-violent means in which the Falun Gong protested (the overwhelming majority of

¹³ This does not include the student protests of 1989 in Tiananmen Square. The protest's focus on democratic reform, the dedication of the students involved, and the protest locale (in the center of China's capital) differentiated this protest from others mentioned.

protesters outside of ZhongNanHai in April of 1999 were elderly practitioners incapable of much violent protest), the movement elicited a swift and violent response from the government and the military. Why is this so, and what kind of threat does the Falun Gong represent to the Chinese government? I argue that the evangelical aspect of Falun Gong ideology coupled with the unique organizational capabilities of the group were a direct threat to the Communist leadership and were responsible for the harshness and swiftness of the government's response.

Government response to popular protest has generally depended on both the type of protest and the participants involved. Elizabeth Perry asserts that "moral economy" protests, or those that were launched in response to issues of personal livelihood and subsistence have generally been ignored or at the very least tolerated by the national government.¹⁴ These were seen as indicative of local problems rather than issues affecting the country as a whole and thus were left to local officials to assess and deal with. Demands for increased livelihood were tolerated as long as they were limited in scope to the local or even provincial level:

In short, the central government—like its predecessors in imperial and Republican China—had demonstrated a certain degree of tolerance and even sympathy toward economically-driven

¹⁴ Elizabeth Perry, *Challenging the Mandate of Heaven: Social Protest and State Power in China* (M.E. Sharpe, 2001), 167.

protests, provided that they remain clearly bounded in both scale and aspirations.¹⁵

The government also sees fit to endorse other types of protests which serve the interest of the state. The most glaring example of this is the government support behind the student protests following the May 8th, 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. The central government provided television coverage of the event and buses to transport students both to and from the protest site. Perry states that "Jiang Zemin....risked being accused of failing to protect Chinese sovereignty unless he seemed to be responding at least as vigorously as the student to this affront to national pride."

¹⁶ To the contrary, "jingoistic student movements" that seem to encourage fierce nationalistic tendencies are fiercely opposed by the establishment which fears these movements for their ability to link up several social groups into a unified, anti-government movement. The response to the Falun Gong movement in some ways mirrored the government response to that of the Tiananmen Square riots, but the threat to the government differs in many ways.

One aspect of the Falun Gong that was alarming to members of the Communist Party was the rapid and continuous expansion of the organization despite concerted efforts to retard its growth. Falun Gong classes were free to attend and did not require registration fees as these were expressly forbidden.

¹⁵ Ibid. 168.

¹⁶ Ibid. 169.

Although attendees at speeches given by Li Hongzhi were often charged a large fee, it was decidedly against Falun Gong protocol to charge attendance fees for regular classes. This greatly appealed to the Chinese, making the spiritual practice easily available to both the rural and urban masses. This practice was in stark contrast to *qigong* classes which all charged fees and which led to a greatly reduced retention rate of practitioners.¹⁷ By keeping most things free of charge, the Falun Gong was able to first recruit new members and then to encourage their return, thus creating practitioners extremely educated in the ways of Falun Gong practice.

Falun Gong ideology also included an evangelical aspect, though not as pronounced as those seen in Christianity or Islam. Once Falun Gong practitioners became regulars at their respective practice sites, they were strongly encouraged to speak out in their community about the great benefits of the Falun Gong. They were encouraged to invite neighbors and friends to accompany them to Falun Gong events to spread the message of the group. Additionally, the organizational structure helped to spread its message throughout every level of Chinese society. In addition to the establishment of practice sites at the local, provincial, and national levels, practitioners in most cities established Falun Gong bookstores to propagate the literature of Li Hongzhi. The overtly evangelical aspect of the movement is largely the reason

¹⁷ Nancy N. Chen, "Healing Sects and Anti-Cult Campaigns," *The China Quarterly* 174 (June 2003), 511.

for Falun Gong's unbelievably rapid expansion. Though official figures vary (with the Falun Gong alleging over 100 million practitioners worldwide and the Chinese government alleging only two million)¹⁸, it is undeniable that the Falun Gong was able to spread its influence throughout China perhaps more effectively than any other organization in recent memory.

Though the Falun Gong originated in China, its base of operation moved overseas in 1995 when Li Hongzhi moved to Flushing, NY. Facing increasing opposition from the Chinese government, Li Hongzhi decided to leave the country while he was still able, though outright condemnation was still years away. Li Hongzhi proclaimed that his mission in China was at an end, and consequently, he launched a worldwide tour meant to spread the message of the Falun Gong.¹⁹ This world tour resulted in an impressive Falun Gong following of Chinese living in Taiwan, Southeast Asia, Australia, Europe, and North America. This coterie of foreign practitioners were generally Chinese-born expatriates who had left the country in recent years and who were now both well-educated and financially well-off. These expatriates provided immeasurable support to Li Hongzhi both in 1996 when he was resettling in the United States and after the beginning of the government's anti-Falun Gong campaign when they championed the cause of the Falun Gong in the Western media. Their decision to oppose the Chinese campaign to eradicate the movement was instrumental to

¹⁸ Ibid. 511.

¹⁹ David Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China* (New York: Oxford UP, 2008), 125.

its survival. Falun Gong scholar David Ownby asserts that had the Falun Gong movement arisen in earlier years, when the government was more closed to the world, the movement would have been crushed instantly without much attention given from the national media and press. Instead, Falun Gong practitioners abroad have continued to press Western media organizations for continued coverage of the Falun Gong, making them both one of the group's greatest assets and one of its greatest threats to the government attempts to silence the movement.

One of the most unique aspects of the Falun Gong was its ability to respond to government criticism with near immediate protests outside of key media and government buildings throughout the country. Compared to earlier forms of Chinese *qigong* which had hundreds of variations but produced few, if any, government protests,²⁰ the Falun Gong fostered an unprecedented number of protests throughout the country. Chang states that this was possible through the network of assistants at each practice site which “convened regularly to discuss the development of the sect and to plan periodic mass events. Station chiefs communicated with the sect’s nerve center in China—the Falun Dafa Research Society...[which] took its orders directly from Li Hongzhi.”²¹ Though Li Hongzhi has repeatedly emphasized the lack of organizational structure apparent in the Falun Gong, various practitioners have insisted that there was in fact a

²⁰Nancy N. Chen, “Healing Sects and Anti-Cult Campaigns,” *The China Quarterly* 174 (June 2003), 511.

²¹ Maria Hsia Chang, *Falun Gong: The End of Days* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004), 112.

strict organization system which used telephones, fax, and internet message boards to send messages from Li Hongzhi to the masses.

The organizational structure of the Falun Gong movement provided solidarity in the face of oppression from the Chinese government, and the group's ability to quickly and effectively organize against any perceived outside threat was its greatest strength. Although the Falun Gong asserts there was no administrative centralization in the sense that the Falun Gong network did not distribute titles or administrative functions, had no official buildings or offices, and did not centrally manage its money, there was a definite centralization of belief and authority which allowed the group to quickly mobilize in the face of government oppression. The most potentially threatening aspect of the Falun Gong organization was its ability to quickly organize, and this was accomplished through a strict chain of command and the innovative use of new media to expedite orders from above. Li Hongzhi stood as the central, authoritative figure of the movement, and his speeches given at Falun Gong symposiums as well as Falun Gong literature determined the ideological progression of the movement.

Although the Falun Gong showed no visible signs of rank or hierarchy among its membership (besides an absolute reverence of Li Hongzhi), it was structured in much the same way as the Communist Party with groups to oversee decisions at both the local and provincial levels. China scholar Maria Has Chang asserts that the Falun Gong organization of Chongqing was indicative

of the group's organization as a whole. Chongqing was organized into five levels. The top level was the general station, with subbranches below. Under these were first-level and second-level instruction centers, and at the bottom of the structural hierarchy were the exercise centers which catered to practitioners' everyday spiritual needs.²²

The Chinese government has accused the Falun Gong of operating 39 general instruction offices, 1900 ordinary instruction offices, and over 28,000 practice sites,²³ but scholars of the Falun Gong movement disagree with these assessments. China scholar W.T. Liu calls the movement "a non-organization organization" and asserts that it consists of "a core of believers directing a mass of followers."²⁴ Although this may be true, the ways in which the Falun Gong recruits followers and develops their beliefs are the subject of much government suspicion. Every practice site employed "assistants" who were advanced Falun Gong practitioners responsible for guiding people and relating the teachings of Li Hongzhi to the masses.²⁵ Although they had the independence to individually interact with practitioners, they were only allowed to relate the teachings of Li Hongzhi. Interpretation of his teachings was out of the question, and Li Hongzhi insisted that "assistants must absolutely not see themselves as masters, or

²² Ibid. 112.

²³ Danny Schechter, "Li Hongzhi and the Falun Gong 'Network,'" *Falun Gong's Challenge to China: Spiritual Practice or "Evil Cult"?* (New York: Akashic Books, 2001), 65.

²⁴ Ibid. 65.

²⁵ David A. Palmer, *Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China* (New York: Columbia UP, 2007), 243.

harbor the slightest illusion of personal authority.”²⁶ Lectures in which assistants would individually speak to an audience were forbidden; practitioners were instead encouraged to meet in groups for the purpose of reading the writings of Li Hongzhi or listening to audio recordings of his speeches. In addition, assistants were barred from collecting money at practice sites or asking members for registration fees, as this practice was left only to Li Hongzhi. Li Hongzhi, during an exchange with an assistant, once remarked:

The general training stations...do not have permission to use money. All these things are controlled by the Falun Dafa Cultivation Research Society, which does nothing without my permission. Any personal action for whatever pretext is unacceptable, it is a violation of rights and forbidden by the laws of society.²⁷

These practices greatly alarmed the Chinese government, as they saw it as a great centralization of authority. The power to influence the decisions of tens of millions of Chinese citizens laid in the hands of a single man, a man whom they considered dangerously unstable, and after seeing the astounding organizational power of the Falun Gong during the April 1999 protests outside of Zhongnanhai, the Chinese government felt that the Falun Gong was a very real threat to government legitimacy.

Although Falun Gong ideology is deeply rooted in ancient Chinese beliefs, its organizational apparatus is decidedly modern, especially its methods of communicating messages to practitioners. The Falun Gong’s strong internet

²⁶ Ibid. 243.

²⁷ Ibid. 244.

presence presented a unique challenge for the Chinese government, one which ultimately resulted in an overall increase in government oversight and censorship of the internet. The Falun Gong's use of the internet allowed the group to quickly convey messages from Li Hongzhi to the masses and to organize protests nearly overnight. In addition to mobilization, the internet was also used as a method by which the Falun Gong could publicize its information, free of the censorship of the Chinese government. Sites such as minghui.net, falundafa.org, and faluninfo.net allowed the Falun Gong to both provide resources for current members and to publish literature to recruiting new members to the organization.²⁸ The websites served the needs of the Falun Gong quite well, and overall, the internet provided a way for Li Hongzhi to remotely connect with his followers without the need of establishing a strict ground organization that would have been needed in years past. The ability of the Falun Gong to publish information to the masses without censorship proved to be a great threat to the Chinese government.

The organization of the Falun Gong and the ways in which leader Li Hongzhi communicated to his followers proved to be a great threat to the legitimacy of the Chinese government. Faced with a swiftly growing and well-organized movement that appealed to a broad base of the Chinese population, the government felt it had no choice but to quickly react to the threat. Though the organizational savvy of Li Hongzhi was certainly seen as threatening by the

²⁸ David Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China* (New York: Oxford UP, 2008), 201.

Chinese government, it was the ways in which the Falun Gong used the organization efficiently communicate its message throughout the world that fueled the paranoia of China's leadership. This fear was further heightened by the evangelical ideology of the Falun Gong which fostered growth unmatched by any of the movements that preceded it. By the late 1990's, the Falun Gong claimed over 100 million practitioners worldwide, and with a movement of that scope, the government felt it had to act in self-defense to preserve social order and its legitimacy to rule.

Chapter 2

Harnessing the Power of the Religious Bureaucracy: China's Fight against the Falun Gong

Beginning in 1996, the Buddhist Association of China launched the first organized effort to discredit the growing Falun Gong movement in China. Facing looming government scrutiny, the Falun Gong had recently severed ties with the China Qigong Scientific Research Society, and the Buddhists seized this chance to begin a concerted effort to discredit the organization's ideology. The Falun Gong had recently toned down its presence in China, with leader Li Hongzhi emigrating to the United States to continue his development of the organization, and the dismantling of much of the organizational structure of the group, leaving the Falun Gong in a relatively weak position. Critiques by the Buddhist Association represent the earliest cohesive effort to vilify the Falun Gong in China, and the circumstances surrounding these events reveal several key insights into China's constant struggle with religion in modern society.

Before delving into policies of the Buddhist Association of China, it is important to understand the historical context that brought about its existence and to understand its unique place within Chinese domestic politics. After the Nationalist Party took power in the 1920s, the Guomindang launched a movement to ban “superstition” and “sorcery” by reigning in religion. The movement was led by modernly educated youth cadres fixated on the relationship between democracy and the promotion of scientific beliefs over superstition, known as the Smashing Superstition Movement.²⁹ The movement entailed the destruction of both the places of worship in the forms of shrines and temples and the items of worship in the form of various religious idols. A Nationalist Party publication of the time asserted that:

We must make the people thoroughly understand the exercise of the rights of the people and propel them toward the rational way so as to completely free them from the trap of old conventions. Divine authority is an obstacle to the development of the people’s rights and the societal evolution. A society based on divine authority can never coexist with the new society based on the Three Principles of the People.³⁰

Buddhism and Daoism were particularly targeted for attack because they were perceived as containing “premodern, unenlightened superstition.”³¹ Though the Nationalist government issued guidelines concerning the protection of shrines and temples, these guidelines only protected areas of historical and scientific significance which left most Buddhist sites open to persecution.

²⁹ Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, *Making Religion Making the State* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), 49.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 50.

³¹ *Ibid.* 50.

Launched at the same time as the Smashing Superstition Movement, the Convert Temples to Schools Movement oversaw the confiscation of temples and shrines for the purpose of conversion into vocational schools and libraries. Though the movement was intended to assist China in mandating compulsory education across the country by providing the infrastructure needed to school the masses, it achieved its goal at the expense of a millennium old religious practice. This egregious violation of the rights of Chinese Buddhists finally stirred practitioners into action. Buddhists throughout the country voluntarily began to found their own organizations to combat the drastic changes being forced upon them by the Chinese government. In 1912, the Chinese Buddhist Association, established by the monk Jing'an, became the first nationwide organization in China with the explicit purpose of protecting Buddhist assets and property. Though this organization was expeditiously dissolved by the state, local Buddhist organizations remained and in the late 1920s, Chiang Kai-shek supported the creation of the All-China Buddhist Representative Conference which inaugurated a new Chinese Buddhist Association sanctioned by the state.³² The effect of the Smashing Superstition Movement and the Convert Temples to Schools Movement was to spur the Buddhist establishment to organize as a collective group that could negotiate with other societal groups to oppose policies that were harmful to the practice of Buddhism in China. Buddhism had coalesced into a defined entity that could resist the power and influence of a state that was

³² Ibid. 54.

increasingly embracing secular interests instead of those of the religious community. This important development exists as a precursor to the Buddhist Association of post-1949 China and helps to explain today's religious climate. Yoshiko Ashiwa, co-author of Making Religion Making the State argues that "the institutionalizing of religion that involved the Chinese Buddhist Association in the 1920s and 1930s through its challenges to and negotiations with the state is proceeding now through the Buddhist Association of China. Both associations represent significant linkages between the state and Buddhism."³³ Although China's religious climate drastically changed once the Nationalists were ousted from power in 1949 by Mao Zedong's Communist revolution, these self-organized Buddhist organizations provide an interesting look at the beginnings of institutionalized Buddhism and its interactions with the state.

In 1953, the government of China established the Buddhist Association of China at the urging of party cadres eager to see Buddhism with a place in the Marxist-socialist order. Staffed by both Buddhist monks and lay people, the central office in Beijing was charged with analyzing Party policy that affected Buddhist practices, communicating these policies to the country's Buddhist practitioners, ensuring that China's Buddhists properly complied with the pertinent laws, managing relations with foreign Buddhist organizations abroad, and publishing *Chinese Buddhism*, a journal that presents the most recent

³³ Ibid. 65.

Chinese scholarship regarding Buddhism.³⁴ In 1957, local Buddhist organizations were established to help the national Buddhist Association of China better implement policy and monitor Buddhist practitioners on the local level, and China finally found worth in religious groups through these organizations. The state found that the local associations, led by directives issued by the national Buddhist Association, were an effective means of mobilizing the people for country-wide economic and political campaigns. The government could mandate that local Buddhist temples hold classes to instill patriotism, and it also utilized the Buddhist clergy to start business enterprises based out of the temples.

As these religious associations were once again coming to fruition in the early 1950s, the early Maoist government established a branch of the government to oversee all religious activities, the Religious Affairs Bureau. Established in 1954, the Bureau informed the various religious organizations of state policy and oversaw that these policies were implemented properly by the religious associations. Much like the rest of the Chinese bureaucracy, this Bureau spread throughout the countryside and established offices at every level of government. Though the Buddhist Association and the Religious Affairs Bureau (now called the State Administration for Religious Administration) seem to carry out many of the same functions, *Document 19* delegates different roles

³⁴ Ibid. 130.

to each of the organizations.³⁵ According to the document, “All places of worship are under the administrative leadership of the Religious Affairs Bureau, but the religious organizations and professional religious personnel are responsible for their management.”³⁶ This means that the Buddhist Association handles the “management” of Buddhism while the State Administration for Religious Affairs is in charge of “administration.” The similarities in these group’s goals are striking, and because *Document 19* is so vague on the roles of these two organizations, there are often jurisdictional disputes over who handles certain affairs.

During the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong banned the various religious associations as part of the “Four Olds” campaign to rid China of what he saw as its “feudal” past. Chinese history is steeped in Buddhist ideology, therefore, Mao considered it and the other religions a hindrance of China’s industrialization and modernization efforts. Mao banned all religious associations at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, and these groups were not reestablished until 1979, shortly after Deng Xiaoping’s reformist regime came to power. Buddhism in the post-Mao era is regulated in much the same way as the state regulates the other four orthodox religions allowed in China. Currently, the administration of religion in China is governed by the 1982 government document *On the Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the religious Question during our*

³⁵ Ibid. 131.

³⁶ Ibid. 131.

Country's Socialist Period (Also known colloquially to Chinese scholars as *Document 19*)³⁷. This document is a statement issued by the Chinese government in 1982 that introduces the normally incongruous policies of freedom of religion and the concept of religion acting in service to the interest of the state. Buddhism is an orthodox belief in China, and thusly must follow the regulations enumerated within this document. As shown by the relatively quick adoption of *Document 19* (just three years later), Deng was quick to reestablish governmental links to the orthodox religious groups, most likely because he saw the benefits that the relationship could provide. These benefits manifested themselves in the form of Buddhist support for the government's anti-Falun Gong campaign during the late 1990s.

Buddhist criticisms of the Falun Gong can be divided into two separate groups designated by the time period in which the criticisms were originally leveled. The first group represents criticisms before the government truly became involved with suppression of the Falun Gong. In his essay "The Falun Gong, Buddhism, and 'Buddhist qigong,'" Benjamin Penny asserts that these early criticisms were entirely self-motivated as indicated by the lengths that Buddhist Association of Harbin vice-chairman Chen Xingqiao³⁸ went to in 1996

³⁷ *Ibid.* 126.

³⁸ Chen Xingqiao was vice-secretary of the Buddhist Association of China of Harbin, and was the editorial chief of *Voice of Dharma*, the journal published by the Buddhist Association of China. After attending a speech by Li Hongzhi in 1994 which addressed the ideology of the Falun Gong, Xingqiao became angered by what he considered egregious misinterpretations of Buddhist teachings by Li Hongzhi, and he launched a campaign to combat these misinterpretations by Li Hongzhi and the Falun Gong.

order to learn about and criticize the Falun Gong. Chen's criticism (which included the publication of several essays condemning the movement's misappropriation of Buddhist ideology) is of note because it represents a criticism untainted by the "ideological imperatives of the government-ordered campaign that ha[d] taken place since mid-1999."³⁹ The government had yet to fully commit itself to a campaign against the Falun Gong, so these actions taken by Chen (and later by others, as well) were entirely self-motivated and rooted in a perceived threat to the continued existence and growth of Chinese Buddhism.

In addition to the fear of the Buddhist Association of losing practitioners to the Falun Gong, they were also afraid that the state would take notice of the similarities between Buddhist beliefs and the beliefs of the Falun Gong. This had the potential to create a threatening situation for the Buddhists, with the government possibly shifting its criticisms from just the Falun Gong to criticisms of the ideology of the Falun Gong that the two groups shared. The Buddhist Association's swift criticism of the wanton borrowing of Buddhist ideology by Li Hongzhi represents their fear. Though the Falun Gong did not become politically active as a group until late in its existence, anti-Falun Gong publications began to appear as early as 1996 from the Buddhist Association of China. In early 1996, the Falun Gong disaffiliated itself from the China Qigong Scientific Research Society, and soon after, the Buddhist Association began its criticisms. Several

³⁹ Benjamin Perry, "The Falun Gong, Buddhism, and 'Buddhist qigong,'" *Asian Studies Review* 29.1 (2005): 35-46.

articles critical of Falun Gong practices were published in “Taizhou Buddhism,” a publication that was sponsored by the Buddhist Association of Taizhou.⁴⁰ In 1997, the President of the Buddhist Association of China, Zhao Puchu, was asked to write an article for 1997’s second issue of the Buddhist Association publication “Research Update”, and Buddhist leader Chen Xingqiao again wrote an article critical of the Falun Gong that was serialized in the Buddhist Association publication “Voice of Dharma.” The provocatively titled essay “A Collection of Destroying Evil and Exhibiting Orthodoxy” was circulated in Buddhist circles throughout the nation and encouraged a more open criticism of the Falun Gong. In addition to these articles, several high-ranking officials within the Buddhist Association filed formal complaints with the Chinese government over the inappropriate use of Buddhist ideology by Li Hongzhi and his followers. According to leading Buddhists of the time, Li Hongzhi had borrowed the ideas of both “Falun” and “dharma” and used them in contexts inappropriate to their original meaning to serve the needs of the Falun Gong. In 1996, Chen Xingqiao published “Discovering the True Colors of Falun Gong—a New Folk Religion” which outlined his criticisms of the group’s ideology and revealed the fears many Buddhists held of the Falun Gong and its swiftly growing popularity.⁴¹ Xingqiao focused particularly on Li Hongzhi’s distortion of the Buddhadharma which was a

⁴⁰ Consulate-General of the People’s Republic of China in Chicago, “Falun Gong has long been denounced in the Buddhist circle,” 30 Oct. 2009.

<<http://www.chinaconsulatechicago.org/eng//zt/z83/t623727.htm>>.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

basic misunderstanding of Buddhist philosophy, and his criticisms reflected the thoughts of many Buddhist leaders at the time.⁴²

The second wave of Buddhist criticisms of the Falun Gong came once the Chinese government began its anti-Falun Gong campaign in earnest. In the years that encompass the brunt of China's campaign against the Falun Gong, it seems that the Buddhist Association was appropriated into the state's propaganda apparatus to a large extent. In order to understand the current ways in which the Chinese government has used the resources of the Buddhists to further its own agenda, it is important to understand the social context of the Buddhist Association in China and the cultural role Buddhism plays. Because of the strict control of the Buddhist organizations by the state, the Chinese government has been able to use the Buddhist Association as a tool in its campaign to discredit the Falun Gong and to diminish its influence throughout the country. Buddhism is a highly revered belief system in China because of its lengthy history in the region and the influence that it has had on the development of Chinese culture, so the actions of Buddhists throughout the country carry great weight with the Chinese people. For this reason, the Chinese government has been extremely clever in utilizing the Buddhist Association and many of its high-ranking members to disseminate anti-Falun Gong propaganda.

⁴² For more information on Xingqiao's anti-Falun Gong beliefs, see "Chen Xingqiao: Falun Gong is a typical heretic adhering to Buddhism and pseudo-Qigong" at www.facts.org.cn

In China, the national newspapers remain one of the greatest most effective means to disseminate government propaganda. The absolute control over what is printed is used to its greatest potential in publishing anti-Falun Gong propaganda, and the credentials of the Buddhist Association are used to bolster the plausibility of anti-Falun Gong articles. A notable example of this came in 1999 during the tenure of Zhao Puchu as President of the Buddhist Association of China. On August 1, 1999, shortly after the decision of the Chinese government to label the Falun Gong as a cult and ban it from the country, an article appeared in the newspaper *China News* which praised the Central Government for banning the cult. Within the article, Zhao Puchu stated his firm support for the ban on the Falun Gong and reiterated the misappropriation of Buddhist ideas into Falun Gong beliefs, calling the Falun Gong "the biggest and most harmful heretic adhering to Buddhism."⁴³

This same tactic was used after the appointment of a new chairman to the Buddhist Association of China in late 2003. Venerable Master Yi Cheng said in November 2003 that the Buddhists of China were united in their opposition to the "Falun Gong evil cult."⁴⁴ He describes the organization as an opportunistic group that deluded the people of China by disguising itself as Buddhism and misappropriating many classic Buddhist ideas. In addition to a condemnation of

⁴³ China News. "Zhao Puchu: Falun Gong is an evil cult and demon's teaching." 1 Aug. 1999. <<http://english.kaiwind.com/krs/vorc/200712.t72293.htm>>.

⁴⁴ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Australia, "New China Buddhist Association head voices opposition to Dalai Lama, Falun Gong cult," 24 Nov. 2003. <<http://au.china-embassy.org/eng/zt/jpflg/t46165.htm>>.

the Falun Gong, Yi Cheng also spoke of Buddhist opposition to the Dalai Lama of Tibet, another issue of extreme importance to the government. After declaring Yi Cheng's opposition to these two groups, the article piles praise upon the Buddhist master in an attempt to bolster his credibility and consequently give credence to the allegations leveled against the Falun Gong and the Dalai Lama.

Once again, the Chinese government had used a very respected man within the Buddhist establishment to condemn the activities of the Falun Gong. Other religious leaders also issued statements condemning the Falun Gong in the days after the group was made illegal.⁴⁵ High ranking officials from all of the five orthodox religions of China issued statements that disparaged the beliefs of the Falun Gong including officials from the Taoist Association of China, the China Advanced Institute of Tibetan Buddhism, the Islamic Association of China, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee of Protestant Churches of China, and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association.

In addition to simple statements condemning the Falun Gong, the Buddhist Association has often moved past simple rhetoric towards the implementation of specific policies aimed at the group. On March 11, 2007, the People's Daily newspaper reported on a heated debate that was taking place during the ongoing annual session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress (CPPCC). Master Gen Tong, vice chairman of the Buddhist Association

⁴⁵ China Daily, "Chinese Religious Leaders Slam Falun Gong Cult," 10 Nov. 1999. <<http://english.kaiwind.com/Voice/200707/t57376.htm>>.

at the time and also a member of the CPPCC advocated a toughening of China's anti-cult laws, a set of laws aimed at further delegitimizing the efforts of the Falun Gong.⁴⁶

The Buddhist Association of China has also hosted several forums and symposiums to discuss the negative aspects of the Falun Gong and how they relate to issues within the Chinese Buddhist community. In August of 1998, the Buddhist Association of China held a forum in Beijing to spread awareness of the ways in which the Falun Gong has misappropriated the teachings of Buddhism and synthesized them into its own teachings.⁴⁷ Buddhist Association officials gave impassioned speeches condemning the Falun Gong and thanking the central government for its commitment to quelling the spread of the Falun Gong throughout China. Though this was before the government crackdown of 1999, the Chinese government had already begun to limit the ability of the Falun Gong to practice within the country, and the Buddhist Association officials praised these policies and encouraged the Communist Party to continue such actions.

In January of 1998, the Buddhist Association of China held a high profile symposium on the topic of Falun Gong that represented the most serious response of Chinese Buddhists to a perceived threat by the Falun Gong.⁴⁸ The

⁴⁶ XinHua, "Chinese political advisors call for early formulation of anti-cult laws," <http://english.people.com.cn/200703/11/eng20070311_356429.html>.

⁴⁷ Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China in Chicago, "Falun Gong has long been denounced in the Buddhist circle," 30 Oct. 2009. <<http://www.chinaconsulatechicago.org/eng//zt/z83/t623727.htm>>.

⁴⁸ Facts.org.cn, "Memorandum of 'Symposium on Li Hongzhi and Falun Gong Issue,'" Jan. 1998. <<http://english.kaiwind.com/krs/vorc/200806/t80973.htm>>.

event was attended by a great majority of high level officials within the Buddhist Association including Wu Limin, head of China Research Institute of Buddhist Culture, Chen Xingqiao, and You Xiang, vice secretary-general of the Buddhist Association of China. The level of officials present signaled the seriousness that the Buddhists placed on the issue of the Falun Gong. The symposium drafted a memorandum entitled “Memorandum of ‘Symposium on Li Hongzhi and Falun Gong Issue’” that acted as an informal call to arms for Buddhists across China to condemn the pseudo-scientific organization of the Falun Gong, and this memorandum found that the Falun Gong “not only borrows Buddhist terms but also belittles and slanders Buddhism, severely distorting Buddhadharma for its own purposes.”⁴⁹

Chen Xingqiao made perhaps the most revealing statement of the symposium in his opening remarks. When speaking about his relationship with the Falun Gong over the past few years, he asserts that the Falun Gong was “not only distorting and slandering Buddhism, greatly hurting the feelings of the Buddhists, but also wavering the orthodoxy belief of some followers.”⁵⁰ The last half of this statement reveals the true fear that Xingqiao and the Buddhists have towards the Falun Gong. Not only are they angry over misuse of Buddhist terms and ideologies by Li Hongzhi’s organization, but they are also afraid of its apparent power over the Chinese people and the allure that this represents. The

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Buddhist Association was afraid that the popularity of the Falun Gong was drawing practitioners away from Buddhism and towards Li Hongzhi and the Falun Gong. The state shares this fear, which is one of the reasons that they so vehemently oppose the existence of the Falun Gong. If more people continue to be drawn away from orthodox beliefs such as Buddhism and towards heterodoxy, the state will have no way of controlling their actions.

The Buddhist Association of China has played a powerful role in the condemnation of the Falun Gong on an independent level and as a player in the state's propaganda machine. To this day, articles continue to be published which cite top-ranking officials of the Buddhist Association that remind the citizens of China of the various evil acts perpetrated by the Falun Gong. The Buddhist Association and its officials have become an integral part of the state's crusade against the Falun Gong.

Chapter 3

Legal Regulations on the Falun Gong and the Movement towards “Rule by Law”

In the years since Deng Xiaoping made the decision to reform China’s economic system and open its society to Western ideas and influences, China’s leaders have made a concerted effort to build up the Chinese legal system. This has in part been a reaction to citizen-led initiatives to have local problems be adjudicated within a centralized court system, but an important consequence of the increased emphasis on rule of law has been the ways in which the Chinese government has used China’s fledgling system of law to curb government discontent and to halt the growth of anti-government organizations that pose a perceived threat to the government. China’s legal and judicial system has often come under fire from foreign organizations such as Human Rights Watch for “being driven by the aims of the ruling party, for failing to uphold international legal standards and applying new laws *ex post facto*, [and] for standards that are

so broad and vague that they invite arbitrary application.”⁵¹ These criticisms continue to follow the Chinese government despite recent efforts to allow adjudication of conflicts with potential political implications. In much the same way that the resources of the Buddhist Organization were mobilized against the Falun Gong, the Chinese government utilized aspects of the legal system to dismantle the organizational structure of the Falun Gong and discredit the group in the eyes of the Chinese people. Through constantly shifting legal provisions and the *ex post facto* application of laws to previous events and happenings, the Chinese government has been able to legally limit the existence of the Falun Gong organization in China.

Although the use of the legal system is now the Chinese government’s preferred method of containing the Falun Gong movement, this was not always so. There were in fact several factors that led to the government’s decision to move away from bureaucratic controls and towards legislative efforts to quell the Falun Gong movement. The rise of the Falun Gong in the early 1990s is evidence of the failure of the Chinese religious bureaucracy at controlling the rise of new religions outside the government’s control and at containing their influence over the Chinese people. This bureaucratic failure can be traced back to mistakes in the management of religion throughout the 1980s.⁵²

⁵¹ “Dangerous Meditation: China’s Campaign against Falun Gong,” *Human Rights Watch* (2002): VII, 4.

⁵² Beatrice Leung, “China’s Religious Freedom Policy: The Art of Managing Religious Activity,” *The China Quarterly* 184 (2005): 904.

During the early 1980s, the Chinese government made the decision to bring religion under the strict rule of the government yet again. In the 5 years before, Deng Xiaoping's reform-minded government modernized China's economy and at the same time allowed relatively unregulated growth of religious belief. Heralding the new era of restrictions was Document No. 19. Document No. 19 was enacted in 1982 by the Party and adhered to the basic precept of becoming "a long term policy and one which must be carried out until religion totally disappears."⁵³ This document was the government's attempt at again bringing religion under the administration of the state while not outlawing its existence outright. Party officials were painfully aware of the widespread influence of religions such as Buddhism and Daoism, which were anchored in Chinese culture, and Christianity, which was quickly spreading due to the influence of Western evangelical missionaries. The Party had been aware of this reality for many years, and this policy harkens back to an article in the People's Daily in 1950:

So long as a part of mankind is technologically backward and hence continues to be dependent on natural forces and so long as part of mankind has been unable to win its release from capitalist and feudal slavery, it will be impossible to bring about the universal elimination of religious phenomenon from human society. Therefore with regard to the problem of religious belief as such, any idea about taking coercive action is useless and positively harmful.⁵⁴

⁵³ Ibid. 903.

⁵⁴ Yoshiko Ashiwa and David L. Wank, *Making Religion Making the State* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), 10.

In other words, China's leadership even in the 1950s realized that the country and its people were not ready to fully relinquish their religious ties. Document 19 would begin the slow process of diminishing the influence of religion on the Chinese people.

The main focus of China's newly implemented religious policy under Document 19 was to encourage Party loyalty among the religious clergy. In doing so, the Party could ensure the absolute adherence of religious groups to the decisions handed down to them from the Party leaders. On an administrative level, Document 19 "prohibited grants of 'feudal privileges' to religious organizations and otherwise limited their capacity to recruit, proselytize and raise funds."⁵⁵ Through its various regulations, the document mainly served to train young clergy in such a way that they would remain loyal to the Party and abide by its religious directives.

Although Document 19 outlines relatively clear and consistent rules for the governing of religion, there were several inconsistencies that ultimately undermined the authority and limited the efficacy of the government's religious bureaucracy. The document demanded that all church property that was in the past managed by the religious groups themselves be turned over for government oversight. This precept was egregiously violated and ignored by the local religious groups with many refusing to turn over property to the state. These

⁵⁵ Potter B. Pittman, "Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China," *The China Quarterly* 174 (June 2003): 320.

conflicts undermined the relationship between religion and the state while also encouraging suspicion amongst the local clergy. Another of the problems brought about by the government's religious bureaucracy was that the policies that most affected the local religious leaders were seldom decided by these leaders and instead were created by aloof Party cadres ignorant of local problems and conflict. According to reports, these religious cadres were very inadequately trained to deal with issues of religion, partly because of their low social status among their often militantly atheist colleagues.⁵⁶ Due to these bureaucratic inadequacies, religious leaders were able to take advantage of several loopholes which allowed Chinese religious life to experience a revival of sorts. The Qigong religious movement took full advantage of these easily-circumvented religious policies, and in the 1990s, the Falun Gong would thrive in a similar environment of reform and relaxed religious regulations.

Though Document 19 was implemented with the intent of weakening the influence of religion on Chinese life, its implementation had quite the opposite effect. During the early 1990s, Chinese Party officials began to take notice of the proliferation of religious activity during the late 1980s, and as evidenced by several intra-Party communications, their worry over this began to increase. In 1991, recently retired leader Deng Xiaoping wrote in a letter to leader Jiang Zemin of his concerns over the rise of religious fervor in China. His concern was

⁵⁶ Beatrice Leung, "China's Religious Freedom Policy: The Art of Managing Religious Activity," *The China Quarterly* 184 (2005): 904.

that religion in China would come to usurp the power of the central authority in much the same way it had in parts of Communist-ruled Eastern Europe.⁵⁷

Though this situation did not come to fruition, it is undeniable that the influence of religion had multiplied in the years since the implementation of Document 19. In the 1980s, only 300 Catholic churches were registered in China, but by 1987, there were over 2,100. This number continued to expand until it reached over 5,000 in 1997.⁵⁸

In her essay on freedom of religion in China, scholar Beatrice Leung asserts that in addition to the inadequacies of Chinese religious policy at this time, the government-supported philosophy “to get rich is glorious” was in a large part responsible for the rise in the influence of religion. As party cadres became more concerned with the acquisition of material wealth, the older Marxist morals were discarded. These cadres instead began to gravitate towards religious ideals instead of the traditional morals advocated by the strictly atheist Chinese government. This in turn caused a great upsurge in religious activity among low-level party cadres and local officials.⁵⁹

The alarming rise in religious activity discussed above coupled with increased political unrest amongst Chinese youth started by the Tiananmen Square protests prompted Jiang Zemin to reevaluate China’s policy towards organized religious activity. Zemin redefined Chinese policy towards religion by

⁵⁷ Ibid. 905.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 905.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 907.

moving away from a system of bureaucratic controls and towards a system combining accommodation and “rule by law.”⁶⁰ China’s previous attempts at restricting religious practice came off as cruel and harsh to those in the international community, so in order to regain international economic and political support, China could not be seen as attacking basic human rights. Jiang had to stay away from the politically divisive tactics used to quell religious fervor during the Maoist era and move towards a more politically acceptable means of containing religion. In order to avoid drawing the ire of the international community, Jiang Zemin chose to enact legislation limiting the powers of religious organization. He utilized the newly minted court system to limit the scope of religious activity within the Chinese borders. Zemin and his advisors formulated the country’s new religious policy, which would consist of regulations limiting the registration of religious groups with the Ministry of Civil Affairs, regulations severely limiting Party cadre involvement in religious activities, and regulations requiring religious leaders to partake in classes to educate them on church-state policy cohesion. Zemin and his advisors determined a timetable for the implementation of these regulations and hoped to initially implement the policies by 1996 with the implementation of several special programs arriving in the five following years.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Ibid. 908.

⁶¹ Ibid. 908.

Two national laws were passed in 1994 that encompassed the Party's new set of religious regulations. Document No. 144 ("Regulations from the State Council on managing religious activities") and Document No. 145 ("On the State Council's management of foreigners staying in the People's Republic of China") became the cornerstones of Jiang Zemin's new religious regulations, and these laws were implemented on both the municipal and provincial levels to ensure their efficacy throughout the country.⁶² Document No. 145 established regulations for the registration of religious bodies. By strictly controlling which religious groups were able to register and how they were to register, the government was able to impose much more stringent regulations than they had before. The Religious Affairs Bureau further interpreted these laws making it much more difficult for religious groups to circumvent these legal regulations and to utilize legal loopholes to their advantage.

The regulations on religion were originally broad in nature and did not focus on any group in particular, but the Chinese government soon realized that the threat posed by the growth of folk religion and fringe religions was equal to if not greater than the threat to the regime posed by the five established religions. Consequently, the legal regulations implemented under the regime of Jiang Zemin began to focus more heavily on the Falun Gong organizational structure and its supporters.

⁶² Ibid. 909.

In March of 1999, the Chinese Constitution was amended to include a provision stating that “The People’s Republic of China shall be governed according to law and shall be built into a socialist country based on the rule of law.”⁶³ This amendment was brought into law just days before the April 25th demonstration that began the government crackdown on the Falun Gong organization, and its inception would set the tone for the Chinese government’s response to this threat for the next few years. China’s emphasis on advancing the “rule of law” in pursuit of the construction of a “socialist country” would have far-reaching consequences for Falun Gong practitioners and their leaders. After the crackdown on the group began, the Chinese government began their systematic attack on the Falun Gong from several angles. The Falun Gong was first labeled a *xiejiao* in official government documents, and the accusation was quickly proliferated through the various government controlled media organizations. This term heavily resonates with the public as both the imperial and the modern Chinese officials have used the term to label groups like the Yiguandao and the White Lotus Societies deemed anti-government because of their protest activities against the state.

After the label of *xiejiao* was applied to the Falun Gong, the Chinese government wasted no time in applying a myriad of restrictions to all groups falling under this term, thus beginning the regulations on the Falun Gong

⁶³ “Dangerous Meditation: China’s Campaign against Falun Gong,” *Human Rights Watch* (2002): VII, 7.

organization. These retroactive applications of the law show the lengths that the government is willing to go to in order to render the Falun Gong lifeless. In addition to the application of the term *xiejiao*, the Chinese government also pursued other legal methods for regulating the Falun Gong and prosecuting those in power within the organization, both criminal and non-criminal. By appealing to regulations on public assembly and the maintaining of public order, the government was able to bring non-criminal charges against many Falun Gong protesters. In addition to these, provisions within the body of PRC Criminal Law have been deceptively used to prosecute the Falun Gong. In the days after the Falun Gong was labeled a *xiejiao*, China promulgated several documents explaining the position of the law in regards to the Falun Gong; this process continued under the guise of “clarification of the law,” and China’s shifting legal system continued to be used to prosecute and sentence Falun Gong practitioners.

The most specialized of regulations placed on the Falun Gong are those regulating internet use and the usage of other types of electronic media. After the government crackdown limited the ability of Falun Gong practitioners to protest outside of government buildings and media headquarters, the Falun Gong moved the bulk of their efforts online, launching a sophisticated and effective media campaign that utilized the growing influence of the internet on Chinese culture to the group’s distinct advantage. During the late 1990s, the internet was largely unregulated by government officials, and the Falun Gong

leaders were able to successfully disseminate their message through the use of websites, specialized message boards, and email campaigns. The government responded by immediately issuing legal regulations on the use of the internet in order to curb the online influence of the Falun Gong. These stringent regulations show the governments practice of changing legal definitions and guidelines in order to retroactively prosecute Falun Gong practitioners.

The Falun Gong has been on a hazy legal ground ever since its inception in 1992. Though it does not consider itself a religion, the Chinese government does, and under Chinese law, the group would need to be legally recognized and regulated in order for its activities to continue. The Falun Gong skirted these regulations in its early years by claiming it was a Qigong group and affiliating with the China Qigong Scientific Research Society, but by 1996, they were forced to withdraw from the group, thus ruining their chances at official government recognition (need reference). From 1994 to 1996, the Falun Gong attempted to establish itself as more than an exercise group by attempting to register as a social organization. Its attempts proved futile as applications for recognition under the National Minorities Affairs Commission, the China Buddhist Association, and the United Front Department all were rejected.⁶⁴ As a result, the group was forced to decentralize its organizational structure, coming to rely only on individual, localized groups of supporters to keep the movement alive. Its inability to gain official registration and recognition would come back to play

⁶⁴ Ibid. II, 1.

an important role in the legal case against the Falun Gong during the early days of the government crackdown.

The massive Falun Gong protest outside of Zhongnanhai on April 25th, 1999 served as the breaking point for the government's tolerance of the group and its practitioners. Before the government could prosecute the Falun Gong for their alleged crimes, the group had to be deemed an illegal organization. This feat was accomplished through the government's accusations that the Falun Gong was not a lawfully registered body according to the "Regulations on the Registration and Management of Social Organizations."⁶⁵ As previously stated, the Falun Gong was repeatedly denied registration rights despite continued efforts from 1994 to 1996. Though they were deemed illegal for their lack of registration, the group was unable to register. Article 4 of the regulation states that:

Social organizations should abide by the Constitution, laws, regulations, and the state's policy. They are not allowed to oppose the basic principles defined by the Constitution; endanger the state's unification and safety and national unity; damage the state's interest, public interests of society, and legal rights and benefits of other organizations and citizens; [or] go against social ethics and habit.⁶⁶

This clause so vaguely outlines what a social organization is prohibited from doing that it could be used to deny registration of any organization contrary to the state's interests. The Falun Gong was viewed by the government as

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

“endanger[ing] the state’s unification and safety and national unity” though there was little evidence to support this assertion. Under these restrictions, the Falun Gong would never have been given the chance to register as a social organization. Under this statute, they were declared an illegal organization by the government which immediately opened the Falun Gong up to legal prosecution by the Chinese authorities. Though this accusation stood on shaky ground, it was meant only as a temporary solution to the problem, and in the waning months of 1999, the Chinese government would continue to change the laws to better fit their efforts to eradicate the Falun Gong.

In addition to the illegality of their registration, the Falun Gong was prosecuted under the guise of several other laws in place that were immediately available for use by the authorities. The Chinese Criminal Code had several regulations already in place that limited the people’s freedom to assemble, including the “PRC Law on Assembly, Procession and Demonstration” and the “Regulations for the Implementation of the Law of Assembly, Procession and Demonstration of the People’s Republic of China.”⁶⁷ These laws require the possession of a permit in order for large groups to engage in any type of protest activity. The Falun Gong was clearly unable to obtain permits of this sort for their protests, especially the immense protest outside of Zhongnanhai on April 25th, 1999 because permits could be denied if it could “infringe upon the interest of the state, society and collectives” or could possibly “endanger national

⁶⁷ Ibid. II, 2.

unification, sovereignty or territorial integrity...or seriously undermine public order.”⁶⁸ The government used this unlawful gathering as quantifiable evidence of the Falun Gong’s flouting of government regulations during the early days of the government crackdown, though allegations of “infringing upon the interest of the state, society and collectives” seem dubious, at best.

In an effort to win over public support, the government dealt with everyday practitioners differently than the leaders of the Falun Gong organization. The vast majority of protesters were given fines, short jail sentences, or recommended for reeducation instead of the harsher, more stringent punishments dealt to those members whom the Chinese authorities considered leaders in the nation-wide organization. The “PRC Regulations on Public Order Control and Punishment” were routinely used to prosecute those Falun Gong organizers and practitioners who were not involved in widespread, anti-government efforts. These regulations reside outside of the immediate realm of criminal law. They are only able to impose fines and short jail sentences, but what renders them so effective is that neither a court nor prosecutors are needed to convict someone under this statute. Authorities have cited Articles 19 and 24 within the “PRC Regulations on Public Order Control and Punishment” to recommend punishment for an individual who “disturbs public order in an organization...to the extent that work, production, operation, medical treatment,

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

education...cannot operate as normal but serious losses have not occurred.”⁶⁹

The statute designates “public security bureaus and sub-bureaus” as the enforcement mechanism, meaning that the local police become the ultimate authority in cases of this type. By applying these regulations, the government was able to swiftly and effectively issue short jail sentences and fines for those practitioners who are caught protesting. These regulations were particularly effective in the months after the initial crackdown when Falun Gong practitioners were still flocking daily to Beijing to protest the government directives against their group.

Though many Falun Gong members were prosecuted apart from the court system, the Criminal Law of the People’s Republic of China swiftly became the government’s greatest tool against the organization. Article 300 of China’s Criminal Law states that:

Whoever organizes and utilizes superstitious sects, secret societies, and evil religious organizations or sabotages the implementation of the state’s laws and executive regulations by utilizing superstition is to be sentenced to not less than three years and not more than seven years of fixed-term imprisonment; when circumstances are particularly serious, to not less than seven years of fixed-term imprisonment.⁷⁰

This Article has been in place for many years before the crackdown on the Falun Gong began because of fears of the influence of other religious sects, and its existence was the backbone for many of the anti-cult laws that would follow.

⁶⁹ Ibid. II, 3.

⁷⁰ Ibid. II,9.

When the Falun Gong was first banned, it was because the group had failed to register itself as a social organization. This allegation was the government's immediate response to the perceived threat of the Falun Gong, but several months later, the allegations increased in severity. The Chinese authorities hurriedly passed a series of laws and regulations which would retroactively convict the Falun Gong of being a heretical cult, though no ban on the practice existed previous to this time.

During October and November of 1999, the Chinese authorities took several steps to ensure the Falun Gong and its practitioners could be easily prosecuted under existing (though obviously new) PRC Criminal Law statutes. On October 8th and 9th, the Supreme Court released "Explanations...Concerning Laws Applicable to Handling Cases of Organizing and Employing Heretical Cult Organizations to Commit Crimes," a manuscript that defined the term *xiejiao* as,

those illegal organizations that have been established under the guise of religion, Qigong or other forms, deifying their leading members, enchanting and deceiving others by concocting and spreading superstitious fallacies, recruiting and controlling their members, and endangering the society.⁷¹

This ruling served to define *xiejiao* in the context of the Falun Gong movement so that the group and its practitioners could be properly prosecuted under pretense of the law.

⁷¹Ibid. III, 4.

An article was released in the *People's Daily* on October 27th, 1999 which made the government's case for classifying the Falun Gong as a *xiejiao*. The article further commented that because of the text of October 9th's "Explanations...", the Falun Gong was subject to a government ban. Three days later, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress passed the "Decision...on Banning Heretical Cult Organizations and Preventing and Punishing Cult Activities."⁷² After this resolution was passed, the legal framework was in place for complete prohibition of the Falun Gong. Instead of banning the group for failing to lawfully register as a social organization, the authorities could now prosecute the Falun Gong for violating the ban on "superstitious sects" in Article 300 of the PRC Criminal Law, for violating the ruling of October 9th, and for violating the "Decision...on Banning Heretical Cult Organizations and Preventing and Punishing Cult Activities."⁷³ Following this decision was a circular promulgated by the Supreme Court which instructed lower courts on how to prosecute criminal cases related to heretical cults and religious sects.⁷⁴ The Chinese authorities had artfully crafted a legal environment which could quickly and effectively move against the Falun Gong, and in the ensuing months and years, the government has prosecuted thousands of Falun Gong supporters under these aforementioned provisions.

⁷² Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. "Extended Response to Information Request." <http://www.novexc.com/stand_comit_cult_activ.html>.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ "Dangerous Meditation: China's Campaign against Falun Gong," *Human Rights Watch* (2002): III, 5.

According to an explanatory article published in Xinhua, the resolution of October 30th helped the people's courts "to integrate severe punishment with lenient treatment...and severely punish an extremely small number of criminal elements."⁷⁵ Though the government framed the resolution as a way to differentiate between the vast majority of everyday Falun Gong practitioners and the small number who were seen as leaders of the group, a report by the Agence France Presse stated that the resolution actually "greatly widened the scope of police and judicial powers to crack down on the group, with the government indicating that the decision can be used retroactively to prosecute Falungong actions before the July 22 ban."⁷⁶ As evidence of this, the report cited the case of three practitioners from Jilin province accused of printing and distributing Falun Gong materials who were later prosecuted under this resolution. On November 3rd, 1999, the Chinese authorities began to first utilize the above resolutions in prosecuting the Falun Gong. Immediately, they reneged on their word to harshly prosecute only those in leadership positions and those responsible for widely propagating the Falun Gong philosophy. On that day, court proceedings began to charge four Falun Gong practitioners who were accused of organizing an illegal gathering in Hainan Province. The leader of this

⁷⁵ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. "Extended Response to Information Request." <http://www.novexc.cn/stand_comit_cult_activ.html>.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

group was convicted on November 13th of “using an evil cult to violate the law,” and he was thusly sentenced to twelve years in jail.⁷⁷

In addition to pursuing legal means for limiting the influence of religion, Jiang Zemin also stressed the importance of accommodation between religious groups and government policies. In 1997, the State Council adopted the “White Paper on Freedom of Religious Belief in China” which stated that “religious should be adapted to the society where it is prevalent” and that the religions must “conduct their activities within the sphere prescribed by law and adapt to social and cultural progress.”⁷⁸ These statements established a system of rule in which religious groups and practitioners could be rightfully punished if their activities infringed upon the activities of the government or were considered a danger to “the normal life and productive activities of the people.”⁷⁹ The Director of the Religious Affairs Bureau, Ye Xiaowen in an October 2000 essay on political theory and policy implementation stressed adherence to Jiang Zemin’s “three sentences,” which included the enforcement of Party policy on religion, the management of religion according to Chinese law, and the adaptation of religion to socialist ideals and norms. In several of Jiang Zemin’s speeches, he stressed the need for the adaptation of religion to the ideals of socialism. In a December 2001 speech to the National Work Conference on Religious Affairs, he

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ “Freedom of religious belief in China,” *White Papers of the Chinese Government. 1996-1999* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2000), 227-257 and 246-47.

⁷⁹ Potter B. Pittman, “Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China,” *The China Quarterly* 174 (June 2003): 322.

reiterated this policy to those in attendance and summarized official government policy in regards to the Falun Gong movement.⁸⁰ Jiang Zemin stressed that Party officials should accept religion as an integral part of Chinese culture for the time being, but he also insisted the Party and state guide religion into conformity with the needs of socialism and the Chinese state. While the rhetoric of Jiang Zemin might suggest a lessening of Party control over religious activities and practitioners, this is not so. Recent protests in Tibet by religious activists and Muslim unrest in Kashgar have prompted an increase in governmental oversight over religion. Party officials continue to be worried over the convergence of religion and ethnic nationalism, particularly in the regions of Tibet and Xinjiang. Many regulations are targeted particularly towards the Muslims of Xinjiang with prohibitions on activities that interfere with state administration and activities that “split the motherland or destroy unity among nationalities.”⁸¹ Though it may seem as if Party regulations have undergone some degree of liberalization, this is not proven to be true, and control over religious groups remains strong.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 324.

⁸¹ “Provisional regulations on the administration of religious activities in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region.” (1990), Human Rights Watch/Asia, *Freedom of Religion in China* (1992): 64-65.

Conclusion

In modern China, religion and politics exist within a delicately intertwined system of laws and regulations. While freedom of religion exists on paper in numerous government documents, this is not true in practice. As represented by the plight of practitioners of Falun Gong, the Chinese people are not free to believe what they wish. Instead, their choices are rigidly confined by the existence of a government religious bureaucracy meant to curb dissent and tightly regulate religious practice. Religious freedom has experienced some measure of ebb and flow in the last century as China oscillated between hard-line leader Mao Zedong and those leaders more open to reform (such as Deng Xiaoping), but since the campaign against the Falun Gong began in earnest, the Chinese have seen a great tightening of government regulations on the practice of religion.

The research question of my thesis involved both the how and why of the government crackdown against the Falun Gong. How did the government go about its systematic dismantling of the Falun Gong apparatus in China, and what

motivated them to do so? The reasons motivating the swift and overly harsh ways in which the government persecuted Falun Gong leaders and practitioners are central to my argument and answer the “Why?” question. My assertion is that the Chinese government was threatened by both the ideology of the Falun Gong movement and their organizational capabilities as demonstrated by their meteoric rise to prominence in just seven short years (1992-1999). In Chapter 1, I address this issue and assert that there were several threatening factors recognized by the Chinese government. The ideology of the Falun Gong included an evangelical aspect that encouraged practitioners to recruit both friends and family; coupled with the fact that the overwhelming majority of Falun Gong events were free of charge, the movement was able to grow at an unprecedented rate, quickly gathering millions of followers throughout China. Additionally, the Falun Gong was organized in a structured and efficient manner which lent it both strength and flexibility when protesting government policy. The 10,000 strong government protest outside of Zhongnanhai in April 1999 finally tipped the scales against the Falun Gong as this quickly organized demonstration showed just how efficient the Falun Gong were at both organizing and executing protest movements. Through a strict organizational system consisting of offices at every level of Chinese society, telephone trees, and internet message boards, the Falun Gong proved time and again that it was more than capable of organizing a formidable protest movement overnight.

The “How?” of my thesis is more complicated as it involves a historical tradition of persecution that stretches back at least 200 years. As discussed during the Introduction, China has a rich history of labeling as heterodox those fringe groups it sees as a direct threat to government legitimacy. The White Lotus Societies of the early 1800s were able to quickly mobilize against government threats, and the Yiguandao of Tientsin was able to grow its numbers at an alarming rate that made the Chinese government nervous of its rising influence. The Chinese leadership of the time recognized the threat these groups represented to the legitimacy of their government, and acted accordingly, in many cases, violently. The Falun Gong is a modern manifestation of these groups (what David Ownby called “redemptive societies”⁸²), so it should come as no surprise that the Chinese leadership would follow a similar pattern in persecuting the Falun Gong. In all of these cases, the Chinese government has identified a threatening group, labeled it a heterodox tradition, and persecuted it according to that designation. By rigidly distinguishing the Falun Gong from the five orthodox religious traditions accepted under the umbrella of the religious bureaucracy, the government was able to isolate the Falun Gong and demonstrate that its beliefs were outside the norm of acceptance in China. I argue that the government has a history of labeling groups that run counter to the needs of the Party as heterodox, and the Falun Gong is a recent manifestation of this tradition.

⁸² David Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China* (New York: Oxford UP, 2008), 25.

In carrying out its campaign against the Falun Gong, the Chinese leadership utilized two main avenues to retard and eventually halt the growth of the organization. The first was harnessing the power of the religious bureaucracy and turning it against the heterodox group. Buddhism is a widely respected tradition in China due to the longevity of its existence and the richness of its cultural heritage. The government used the respect that many Chinese held for Buddhism as a way of legitimizing their campaign against the Falun Gong. Many Buddhists felt personally threatened by the heterodox ideology of the Falun Gong and the misappropriation of Buddhist beliefs by Li Hongzhi, so the allegiance of the Buddhist Association of China was not hard to muster. The second avenue used by the government was the burgeoning legal system of China. During the late 1990s, Jiang Zemin oversaw continued the growth of the Chinese legal system, and once the government anti-Falun Gong campaign began in earnest, the court system implemented new regulations on religions and incorporated them with many that were already in place to create a legal system overtly hostile to the existence of the Falun Gong. By utilizing the legal system to legislate persecution of the Falun Gong, the Chinese government was able to quickly and effectively institutionalize their campaign against the group and begin systematically diminishing the influence of the Falun Gong in China.

In the years since the government crackdown began, the Falun Gong has in many ways disappeared from China. Although Falun Gong protests have mostly left China for good, the government continues to produce propaganda

disparaging the character of Li Hongzhi and the organization that he founded. The base of operations for Falun Gong has joined Li Hongzhi in America, and most activity is now seen in Western countries such as the United States and parts of Western Europe. The overall program of systematically removing the Falun Gong from China has been a success, and this reality speaks to the absolute efficiency and effectiveness of the government efforts to rid the country of the movement.

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Conclusion

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