

Introduction

The student-led democracy movement of 1989 and Falun Gong are famous cases of popular opposition movements in reform-era China, but scholars do not typically see them as belonging to a common class of social phenomenon. The 1989 student movement, which was part of a broader Chinese democratic movement known as *Zhongguo minzhu yundong* or just “Minyun,” is seen as a progressive social movement and a pivotal turning point in modern Chinese history. Before and after June 4, 1989, domestic Chinese politics were starkly different. For better or worse, the significance of Minyun for contemporary Chinese history is widely recognized. The Falun Gong case, by contrast, more often than not goes unseen. When it is beheld, it is usually noted as a reactionary, semireligious aberration in Chinese politics-as-usual. Falun Gong¹ had spectacular, but ephemeral, importance in 1999 and shortly thereafter, but today remains a topic left mostly to the rare subfield specialist. This book takes the unconventional stance that these two movements ought to be appraised together. The stance is unconventional, but not unprecedented. In June 1999, Chinese President Jiang Zemin famously also adopted this stance, declaring that Falun Gong was the “most serious political incident” to threaten the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since the democracy protests of 1989 (Tong 2009: 6; Zong 2002: 66). Seeing Falun Gong and the democracy protests of 1989 as similar threats had enduring and influential consequences for Chinese politics and policy. For example, in February 2001, Jiang Zemin convened over 2,000 CCP

¹ In keeping with the scholarly literature, I use the term “Falun Gong”. Today, the Falun Gong community generally refers to itself as Falun Dafa.

leaders for “an extraordinary, closed-door meeting” to shore up party unity. According to *The New York Times* (Eckholm and Rosenthal 2001), “Mr. Jiang wanted to make sure that the ruling party remained firmly unified on two divisive issues: the campaign to crush the Falun Gong spiritual movement and the correctness of the party’s decision to use troops against the 1989 pro-democracy protesters in Tiananmen Square.” All seven members of the politburo Standing Committee – the seven most powerful men in China at the time – “stood up one by one to endorse the anti-Falun Gong campaign as an urgent necessity and to justify the 1989 crackdown.” The meeting illustrates that seeing Falun Gong and the Chinese democracy movement as a common object for consideration is not unprecedented nor out of keeping with historical context.

Why Western scholarship has generally not seen the democracy movement and Falun Gong together is due in part to Falun Gong’s peculiar status within China studies and social science generally. Two factors in particular have distorted our apprehension of the new religious movement that was banned in China in 1999: first, Chinese state propaganda and severe repression have turned Falun Gong into a pariah community within the Chinese popular imagination and, indirectly, within academia. Even a neutral scholarly analysis that avoids rights advocacy, as found in this book, risks severe professional sanction for simply being out of keeping with CCP policy and propaganda. Falun Gong and the democracy movement are two of the most taboo subjects in China – in conducting serious research on them, both Chinese and non-Chinese researchers accept many risks, including lost job opportunities and access to China (see also He 2014: 29–31). Second, secularist biases within modernist social science incline scholars to see Falun Gong only as a curious sideshow to the real forces of history. The combined result of these two factors is a kind of blindness. As we try to stand outside the historical episode of Falun Gong and peer in, it is as if one of our eyes has been poked out by the Chinese state, whereas we cover the other eye with our own hand.²

The reason we disable our own vision is related to the unstable theoretical position of religion in social science theory. Even though secularization theory has been debunked, many still take its premise as the paradigmatic frame for understanding history. As Susanne Rudolph put it, “Modernist social scientists cannot imagine religion as a positive force, as practice and worldview that contributes to order, provides meaning,

² Thanks to Dan Slater for this vivid metaphor.

and promotes justice” (1997: 6). Following a similar line of critique, Craig Calhoun argued that “the secularism of academics particularly and post-Enlightenment intellectuals generally may have made collective action based on religious and other more spiritual orientations appear somehow of a different order from the ‘real’ social movement of trade union-based socialism or from liberal democracy” (Calhoun 2012: 254). In misunderstanding “the relationship of tradition and resistance to social change” (2012: 8), Calhoun argued that social theorists have failed to see that “the most effective challenges to the established social order often come in the name of tradition.” As Calhoun also pointed out, a tradition-inspired, ideologically reactionary movement may not “always shape a better future, but it can” (2012: 8, 21). Actual outcomes are contingent, but there is no *a priori* justification for excluding tradition-inspired radicalism from the stream of social movement analysis. Even if the ideological project of the group is envisioned as recovering values and institutions under assault by the disenchanting and immoral forces of modernity, the form that collective action takes and its actual consequences might be a source of progressive social change. Progressive and reactionary potentialities are simultaneously present. In the case of Falun Gong, contemporary Chinese state propaganda and entrenched social science habits of interpreting the world have converged to make it harder to see Falun Gong’s effects and potentialities with theoretical and empirical clarity.

If social science is disinclined to see Falun Gong as a politically significant social movement, then which Chinese protest movements are regularly examined? Much Western scholarship and journalism have focused on movements that are more appealing to scholars than Falun Gong. The Tiananmen protests of 1989 have been, and continue to be, intensely scrutinized.³ Another major focus has been on “the weak and disadvantaged left behind by China’s economic boom” (O’Brien 2008: 21). Such research includes studies of aggrieved and laid-off workers; rural protesters using “righteous resistance” (O’Brien and Li 2006); *wei-quan* “rights defense” lawyers (Al Saud 2012; Pils 2006, 2015); and *xinfang* petitioners who appropriate official complaint channels for “trouble making” tactics (Chen 2008, 2012; Hurst et al. 2014). Still other common topics are the expansion of civil society and critical public debate through grassroots nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)

³ Publications on the 1989 Tiananmen protests include: (Black and Munro 1993; Brook 1998; Calhoun 1995; Han and Zhang 1990; He 2014; Lim 2014; Nathan and Link 2001; Saich 1990; Wasserstrom and Perry 1994; Zhao 2001).

(Spires, Tao, and Chan 2014; Spires 2011, 2012), environmentalism and environmental NGOs (Sun and Zhao 2008; Yang 2005), and online activism by “netizens” (Yang 2009). Similarly, elite dissidents, like Liu Xiaobo, Xu Zhiyong, or Ai Weiwei, have commonly attracted international media attention.

These more or less familiar cases all share a common feature lacked by Falun Gong: they are all movements that can be represented to the Western community in a valorizing light. They reinforce a tacit teleology common in the modernist imagination, depicting a world historic progression from tyranny to freedom and from tradition, with its fusion of religion and politics, to modernity. Modernity, in this view, includes public politics fully differentiated from private religion and scientific knowledge fully differentiated from private belief. All the movements previously described are easy to represent in harmony with core liberal political ideals. Perhaps because of this political and aesthetic compatibility, such Chinese movements have been widely studied in academia and reported on in the press. They harmonize with the taken-for-granted association between social movements and progressive social change.

The Falun Gong case runs entirely against this grain. Like the “rooted radicalism” described by Craig Calhoun, Falun Gong “radically challenged both the existing social order and liberal agendas for ‘progressive’ change” (2012: 4). Its inability to be reduced to the progressive narrative left it stuck in a kind of blind spot in the prevailing Western political imagination. “Blind spot” may, in fact, be an understatement. In researching Falun Gong in the field, at times it has felt to me like the movement is in a black hole – all light cast in its direction gets sucked in rather than bounced back, rendering the community invisible to those outside of itself.

Many features of the Falun Gong case lead to its exclusion: it is a new religious movement, founded only in 1992, and, therefore, does not enjoy the acceptability that might accompany true affiliation with any world religion. It is led by a living man, Mr. Li Hongzhi, whose authority is based not on tradition or formal statute, but on the belief by his followers that what he declares is true. According to Max Weber, this kind of authority is “charismatic,” meaning that it is ultimately based upon the “extraordinary and personal *gift of grace*” that followers attribute to the leader (Weber 1958 [1946]: 79). Many Falun Gong practitioners regard their leader as fully enlightened, set apart from others, and, thus, divine. Although many of his teachings emphasize being honest, acting with integrity, and cultivating one’s spirituality, scholars, journalists, and

critics have often emphasized his more exotic claims, such as about miracle healing, supernatural powers, aliens, and an ancient nuclear reactor in Africa.⁴ Moreover, as the movement evolved after repression began in 1999, it increasingly relied upon charismatic leadership and a totalizing and transcendent ideology to extract extraordinarily high levels of commitment from its members. Janja Lalich cites that particular combination of qualities as characteristic of a “cult” (2004: 5) – a label that is arguably apt, but politically troubling. The Chinese government has systematically used the term “cult” to justify severe repression, widely said to have included detention without due process, brutal and frequent torture to “de-convert” practitioners, and several thousand deaths.

Another reason for Falun Gong’s invisibility is that it has cultural roots in a centuries-old form of Chinese religiosity that is not widely understood, even among scholars of China. Although Falun Gong is certainly a product of modernity, globalization, and China’s socialist era, it also has deep historical precedents in China’s marginal traditions of salvationist movements and apocalyptic sects (Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Ownby 2003a, 2008). This class of indigenous Chinese movements has not been inspired by modern ideals of justice or freedom – or, indeed, much else that can be represented as being in harmony with either the liberal democratic political imagination or even the more familiar world religions (Masuzawa 2005). These characteristics set Falun Gong apart from the narrative of social movements-as-progressive, making it difficult to see how Falun Gong’s protest activism conforms to our social science model of the modern social movement, or what I consider to be the “social movement-ness” of the Falun Gong case. Moreover, these same biases have caused us to generally underestimate the objective importance of Falun Gong for contemporary Chinese politics and history. I make this point in Chapter 3, where I discuss Falun Gong’s importance to the rise of China’s security state and the Article 23 controversy in Hong Kong.

If Falun Gong is not usually seen as a social movement engaged in contentious politics, then how is it typically categorized? The most common way is to see it as a kind of hiccup from the past. Imperial Chinese history, it is commonly noted, was punctuated by sectarian religious groups that occasionally emerged to become existential threats to the empire. As a sectarian uprising, and combined with the perception that Falun Gong’s organizational form resembled that of the early days of the

⁴ For a discussion of these New Age elements, see Benjamin Penny’s book, *The Religion of Falun Gong* (2012), especially chapter 4.

CCP,⁵ Chinese leadership saw the religious movement in 1999 with a kind of “historical resonance” (Perry 2001: 169), harkening back to the Taiping Rebellion that nearly felled the Qing Dynasty, or the Yellow Turban Rebellion that nearly did the same for the Han in 184 AD. This historical association helps to explain why the CCP reacted with such ferocity to what was, in fact, a nonviolent and semireligious community of enthusiasts for taichi-like exercises and spirituality. Elizabeth Perry, among others, argued that the central leadership’s “real fear” of Falun Gong was “that the movement would turn into the sort of sectarian-inspired rebellion for which Chinese history is famous” (2002: xx).

Whatever the empirical plausibility of such a fear, the sectarian rebellion interpretation itself provides a different vantage point from which to appreciate the puzzle of Falun Gong’s actual mobilizational form. The religious group did not become a violent rebellion. Instead, it became something that was undoubtedly impossible for a sectarian uprising to become in China’s imperial age: a modern social movement using voluntary grassroots association, media, and nonviolent tactics to defend itself against repression and to widely advocate for an alternative vision of what Chinese society should be. This book will offer an explanation for just how a neo-traditional sectarian Chinese religious movement made this “social movement turn” and appropriated for itself the collective action repertoires of modern social movements.

The consequences of Falun Gong’s social movement turn have been significant. Without exaggeration, Falun Gong might be the most well-organized and tenacious grassroots Chinese protest movement *ever* to challenge the CCP. Its participants have also paid dearly for their ideal commitments in terms of lives lost, traumatized survivors, careers ruined, and families separated. Without a doubt, Falun Gong ranks as one of, and by some measures perhaps the most, severely persecuted groups in the reform era. Moreover, multiple third-party sources have alleged that the CCP consistently singled out Falun Gong for extraordinary degrees of state violence and coercion (Chinese Human Rights Defenders 2015; Gao 2007; Human Rights Watch 2002, 2015; Matas and Kilgour 2009; Noakes and Ford 2015; UN Commission on Human Rights 2006; US Department of State 2007).

Yet in spite of this objectively remarkable history, the academic library shelf has surprisingly little to offer about “the Falun Gong problem,” as

⁵ I emphasize this was a perception and not a reality; the ethnographic studies of Falun Gong in diaspora provide little support for such a perception.

Chinese leadership initially referred to it. Falun Gong is known everywhere, but understood almost nowhere. We might say that Falun Gong suffers from an asymmetrical visibility dilemma: the CCP sees the Falun Gong through a lens of exaggerated threat, as if using binoculars to look at something nearby; and the Western academy, using the same binoculars but looking through the wrong end, sees Falun Gong only as distant, tiny, and peculiar in its aspect. One side sees Falun Gong too much, the other not enough. If there is a cautionary lesson in this, it could be told thus: woe be to any people who dare to both reject the hegemonic vision of the CCP *and* the liberal West's progressive alternative, for the dissenting group faces defamation and violence from the first and mute apathy from the second.

Along with the way that political and disciplinary sensibilities have converged to erase Falun Gong from view, practical and methodological issues add even more challenges. Researching the Falun Gong is a difficult task. At the most practical level, it is hard to collect data on a group that is thinly diffused across tens of countries around the world, severely repressed in China, skeptical of academic researchers and journalists, institutionally invested in shaping its public narrative, and rigidly private about some aspects of its organizational infrastructure, as are the leaders of the Falun Gong's only religious temple. Difficulties further compound when one considers that the literatures on Chinese religion, on the sociology of new religious movements, and on political social movements all can and should contribute to our understanding, but they are quite distinct from one another. Furthermore, to understand Falun Gong's diaspora mobilization requires grasping the movement in its own cultural and historical context that began in China, but then rearticulated and changed through migration and transnationalism across multiple national contexts. Any researcher committed to some variant of methodological nationalism, in which the research object is defined in reference to a single national context – e.g., “protest in China” or “Asian–American movements” – will necessarily fail to grasp the sweep of the case. There is no way to adequately grasp the Falun Gong case without fully embracing a global perspective. Terminologically, I address this difficulty by adopting the phrase “global China,” which refers to the loose, but real, Chinese cultural unity that stretches across contemporary political and territorial boundaries. Empirically, I address the problem by looking broadly across the globe for sites of activism and by interpreting events in relation to one another, across national and territorial boundaries. I will say more about global China as a research frame in Chapter 2.

The existing literature on Falun Gong overcomes aspects of these various research challenges, but none have created a coherent narrative that accounts for the form and trajectory of Falun Gong's mobilization in reference to contentious politics. On Falun Gong, the three best scholarly books in English are David Palmer's (2007) study of qigong, which covers the movement in China, but does not follow it overseas; David Ownby's (2008) book on Falun Gong, which considers Falun Gong as a religion and as a political movement, both in China and overseas, but does not engage with any social science literature on contentious politics; and Benjamin's Penny's book (2012) on Falun Gong as a religion, which self-consciously tries to isolate the religious from the political, sometimes at the cost of obscuring their coevolution. In addition to these three book-length studies, there are many articles and one influential MA thesis published on the topic.⁶ As a companion work on Falun Gong, UCLA political scientist James Tong's (2009) book, *Revenge of the Forbidden City*, examines the Chinese government's repression of Falun Gong. Tong's book says little about Falun Gong as a religion or movement, but it is the only book-length analysis concerning the repression in China. Recent scholarly work has begun to advance beyond Tong's book (Noakes and Ford 2015; Tong 2012). These demonstrate that, as of 2015, and counter to widespread assumptions, Falun Gong had not disappeared in China, repression remained active and ongoing, and Falun Gong continued to be a significant concern to the Chinese state.

Although several articles consider Falun Gong from the perspective of social movement literature, none of the book-length studies develop those themes and none construct a research program around the question of the relationship between Falun Gong as a religion and its formal adoption of social movement activism. In using the Chinese democracy movement as a contrast case, one finds many sources on Minyun in China, but little regarding the movement's less influential overseas efforts (but see Chen 2014; He 2014). As a result, this book also provides a brief narrative of the overseas Minyun history that cannot be found elsewhere in English.

Researching movements that are thinly spread around the globe, volunteer based, vigorously suppressed, and justifiably suspicious of outsiders

⁶ Ackerman 2005; Bell and Boas 2003; Burgdoff 2003; Chan 2004, 2013; Chen, C. H. 2005; Chen, N. N. 1995, Chen, Abbasi, and Chen 2010; Edelman and Richardson 2003; Fisher 2003; Junker 2014a, 2014b; Lu 2005; McDonald 2006; Ownby 2003a, 2003b; Palmer, D. A. 2008, 2009a; Palmer, S. J. 2003; Penny 2002, 2003, 2008; Porter 2003; Thornton 2002, 2008; Tong 2002a, 2002b, 2012.

presents unique challenges. I have attempted to meet these challenges by using multiple methods, including comparative historical, ethnographic, and archival approaches, and then by triangulating data from the variety of sources to strengthen the validity of my conclusions. I have gathered data through interviews and observation in the USA, Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong; I conducted four months of participant observation in one US city; and I have extensively analyzed materials published by both Falun Gong and the democracy movement online and in print. I began field visits on the project in 2006 and maintained such visits periodically through 2015. My analysis of published activism narratives in both movements used the method of quantitative narrative analysis, for which I received a National Science Foundation Dissertation Improvement Grant (#0961624) from the Methodology, Measurement, and Statistics (MMS) Program. I synthesize these various materials into a comparative historical analysis that addresses the governing questions of the research. A more detailed methodological description is provided as an Appendix.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

The book is organized into three parts. Part I, titled “Thinking Comparatively,” explains why it is beneficial to compare Falun Gong and Minyun as political protest movements. Chapter 1 introduces the cases and the governing research question, Why did Falun Gong outperform diaspora Minyun as a ‘modern social movement’? Advocates of Chinese democratic reform in diaspora wanted their efforts to become a sustained and energetic political movement, and yet it failed to become one. Practitioners of Falun Gong, by contrast, only wanted to defend their religious community and stay out of politics, but what they became was a sustained and energetic protest movement. Why these different outcomes? And what might the answer imply for our theories of social movements? Chapter 2 in Part I explains the logic of comparing these two cases and will be of greater interest to readers concerned about comparative historical methodology; other readers may want to move immediately to the third chapter. Chapter 3 makes the strong thesis that, in terms of its impact on Chinese political history, Falun Gong is roughly analogous in importance to Minyun. To support the claim, I examine two episodes in which Falun Gong’s real significance has been overlooked or forgotten.

Part II, titled “The Cases,” consists of three chapters separately examining Falun Gong and Minyun in detail. Chapter 4 describes Falun Gong in

largely synchronic terms – what it is, what its religious beliefs are, and what characteristics of the religious community made it especially adept at engaging in political protest? Chapter 5 is a diachronic account of Falun Gong’s politicization, spanning from its earliest confrontation with the Chinese state in 1996 to its mobilization as a protest movement and finally to its dilution by millenarianism. Chapter 6 describes the overseas Minyun case in contrast to Falun Gong. Since there is little written in English about the 1989-era Chinese diaspora democracy movement, this chapter provides an original analysis and survey. A major implication of Part II is that, even though supporters of both movements attempted sustained campaigns against the Chinese government from overseas, the Falun Gong not only outperformed Minyun in terms of organizational intensity and tenacity over time and place, but in some ways Falun Gong’s mobilization form had more “social movement-ness” than Minyun. This was true even though Minyun participants consciously imagined themselves as mobilizing in the form of a social movement and Falun Gong practitioners did not.

Part III, titled “Making Social Movements in Diaspora,” consists of two chapters that seek to delineate how these different mobilization outcomes came to be. Chapter 7 uses quantitative narrative analysis to inventory and compare the tactical repertoires of both movements over analogous periods of two years. By looking at the different tactical repertoires, I show that the two movements oriented themselves to their publics in quite different ways. Falun Gong’s activism depended on seeing the public as a source of political power, whereas Minyun’s activism embodied an older, tribune-like protest model in which the public is passive and elites speak on their behalf. I argue, following Charles Tilly’s analysis of the role of the public in social movements, that this different orientation on the public is a key reason that Falun Gong can be seen as having more “social movement-ness” than Minyun diaspora. Further, these different orientations on the public contradict our expectations regarding which movement is progressive and which conservative. The neo-traditional religious movement, at least in this respect, better fulfilled the inherent democratic potential of social movements because it emphasized the agency of the public and grassroots participation. By contrast, the democracy movement reproduced elite, paternalistic politics under the banner of democracy.

Chapter 8, the final, empirically focused chapter, examines the coevolution of the social movement form and the charismatic religious culture of Falun Gong. This transformation initially involved a proto-democratic

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turn through which movement participants defended their minority rights against the state through protest movement tactics. This turn to social movement activism was carried out in a diffuse, decentralized, and bottom-up way motivated by Falun Gong's religious ethic of activism. The charismatic leader did not direct the mobilization. Instead, the followers "led" by transforming themselves into a modern, nonviolent protest movement. Yet, the story did not end there. When the charismatic leader did reassert his interpretative authority over the movement, he "spiritualized" (Melton 1985) the framing of the repression and resistance movement. One of the various consequences of this spiritualized interpretation was that it diluted the movement of its focus on rights or other political arguments and reorganized the purpose of activism toward "saving" the souls of the public before divine punishment arrives. The apocalyptic turn in framing had the effect of both marginalizing the movement and diluting its political character.

The final chapter reappraises the findings in light of the original research question and draws out their implications for several areas of scholarship, including theories of religion, charisma, and contentious politics. I also reflect on what the Falun Gong case suggests about the complex and unstable relationship between a religious movement and progressive, democratizing change. Finally, I note directions in further research suggested by the study and pay a brief tribute to the practitioners who generously shared their experiences with me as I researched this book.