

国家主义和种族 Nationalism & Ethnicity EAST2580 –  
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*“The Falun Gong, or the Qigong movement as a whole, are contemporary incarnations, with numerous and important alterations, of a popular religious tradition, or a number of related traditions, that date back in their organized form to the middle of the Ming Dynasty.”<sup>1</sup> (David Ownby)*

**Do Falun Gong’s origins in popular religious tradition provide an alternative definition of ‘Chineseness’ which threatens the Communist Party’s present construction of nationalism?**



(picture taken from [www.falundafa.org](http://www.falundafa.org))

<sup>1</sup> Professor David Ownby , “Falungong as a Cultural Revitalization Movement: An Historian Looks at Contemporary China”, Talk Given at Rice University (USA), David Ownby is Professor of History at the University of Montreal. He has written widely on religion and secret societies in China.

In the post-Mao age China's Communist government has, in its drive for legitimacy, re-invented itself as a nationalist regime. As well as returning to its roots by reminding the Chinese people of its primary role in defeating the Japanese fighting for national unity in the 1930s and 1940s, it has also placed much emphasis on recent aims and achievements. These are the country's acknowledged rise as an international power and with this its task of overcoming the humiliations of nineteenth-century colonialism by reuniting Hong Kong, Macau and, it hopes, Taiwan with the motherland. The Communist Party has in this period been playing its nationalism card to oust voices of dissent. From Democracy Wall in 1979, through the Tiananmen Square Uprising in 1989 to the more recent China Democracy Party, the official press (the mouthpiece of the Communist Party) has "vigorously denounced the regime's adversaries as the tools of foreign interests, and, at least implicitly, as traitors to China."<sup>2</sup>

On July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1999 the Chinese government officially banned Falun Gong 法轮功 describing it as an "evil cult" and has more recently described it as a tool of "Western anti-China forces" and a product of 'alien cultural infiltration'.<sup>3</sup> It is not difficult to understand why democracy movements are labelled as being foreign, Western or alien because to the Chinese democracy is a foreign concept and has never been a part of their cultural tradition. However when applying these labels to something that is very much a homegrown phenomenon it can result in some confusion. Indeed Jacques deLisle believes that these "accusations seem to ring hollow when directed against a strikingly indigenous enterprise espousing heavily non-Western doctrines."<sup>4</sup> The Falun Gong draws heavily on both Buddhism and Daoism as well as elements of a larger "popular religious tradition" that Professor Ownby talks about (discussed later). Is it possible for something that both outside foreign observers and Chinese Falun Gong practitioners themselves view as being grounded in ancient Chinese spirituality to be a tool of the anti-China lobby in the West? This seems like quite a tenuous connection to be made, especially by the same government that several years ago was

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques deLisle, "Who's Afraid of Falun Gong?", article first distributed by the Foreign Policy Research Institute. Jacques deLisle is Professor of Law at the University of Pennsylvania Law School and a Senior Fellow of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, where he is a member of its Study Group on U.S.-China Relations.

<sup>3</sup> Descriptions of Falun Gong as an "evil cult", as "anti-China" and as "alien" can be seen in most of the official Chinese sources such as the China Daily ([www.chinadaily.net](http://www.chinadaily.net)), People's Daily ([www.peopledaily.com.cn](http://www.peopledaily.com.cn)) and Xinhua ([www.xinhuanet.com](http://www.xinhuanet.com)).

<sup>4</sup> Jacques deLisle, "Who's Afraid of Falun Gong?".

enthusiastically publicizing the Qigong 气功 movement as a unique Chinese tradition and conducting experiments to scientifically prove the benefits of what it called ‘ancient Chinese wisdom’. When the government describes the movement itself as being ‘anti-China’ that can be understood. There has been a history of suppression of ‘religious’ movements throughout Chinese History. In reality few of these movements actually had rebellion in mind, the ones that have become famous such as the Taiping Rebellion and the Boxer Uprising have done because they caused such a stir, and neither were ‘anti-China’ so much as being opposed to the situation at the time. The ‘Taipings’ became a movement against the Qing government while the ‘Boxers’ were actually fighting ‘foreign devils’. Nonetheless the historical precedent is there and it could be argued that the Communist Party views anything that is in its opinion against the current situation in China as being ‘anti-China’. The fact that these rebellions have traditionally occurred towards the end of a dynastic period when the emperor had lost the mandate of heaven is clearly at the fore of the present government’s mind. However not only does the Chinese government claim that Falun Gong and its leader Li Hongzhi have become “pawn[s] of international anti-China forces”<sup>5</sup> but also that the Falun Gong is not a Chinese phenomenon which does not seem to hold much weight. Frank Ching of the Far Eastern Economic Review asserts that the Falun Gong “is as Chinese as can be, being but the latest of a string of such movements since at least the Ming dynasty.”<sup>6</sup>

This essay suggests that the reason that Falun Gong was banned has little to do with its alleged desire to overthrow the government, and even less to do with its “heterodox” and dangerous activities. However it has more to do with its alternative definition of ‘chineseness’ which threatens the agenda of the elite in the Communist Party who promote traditional Chinese values as long as they serve to make China a rich and powerful nation and are apprehensive about more mystic elements of traditional culture. Indeed Jacques deLisle worries that “campaigns against Falun

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<sup>5</sup> Xinhua, “Cult an anti-China tool”, China Daily, 19<sup>th</sup> April 2000 (<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/ndydb/2000/04/d4-1cult.419.html>).

<sup>6</sup> Frank Ching, “Falun Gong: Giant vs. Ghost”, Eye On Asia – Far Eastern Economic Review, 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2001 ([http://feer.com/0102\\_22/p032eoa.html](http://feer.com/0102_22/p032eoa.html)).

Gong or similar groups risk exposing a gap between such elite agendas and authentically Chinese popular proclivities.”<sup>7</sup>

The first part of this essay will be looking at China’s official stance which maintains that Falun Gong is an ‘anti-China’ movement and look at the state media’s grounds for describing the movement as a tool of Western ‘China bashers’. I will then discuss Falun Gong and the Qigong movement as a whole in the context of Chinese religious history. This will illustrate that the emergence of Falun Gong is not unprecedented but is similar to movements that have surfaced on a regular basis in an organized form since the Ming dynasty and that certain aspects of cultivation and elements of what Li Hongzhi talks about can be found in the very earliest Buddhism and Daoism. The essay will then go on to discuss the circumstances in which Falun Gong appeared, its anti-Western philosophies and indeed its relevance to Modern China. I will look at its scientific discourse which seems to reject the blind faith in the Western science that was going to save China from foreign imperialism in the late nineteenth century and turn her into strong modern nation, through the scientific ideologies of Communism, in the twentieth century. Finally one can see how Falun Gong, while remaining unconditionally Chinese, can nonetheless be considered a serious threat to the Communist Party’s monopoly on defining Chinese nationalism.

### ***Instrument of the anti-China forces?***

The Chinese government has accused the Western ‘anti-China forces’ of using Li Hongzhi for their own ends and has at the same time accused Li Hongzhi of using the Western ‘anti-China forces’ for his own ends. Since the Chinese government banned Falun Gong in 1999 it has become increasingly concerned with the activities of Falun Gong practitioners in the West and its exiled leader Li Hongzhi. It has also embarked upon an extraordinarily vigorous propaganda campaign, the like of which has not been seen since the height of the Cultural Revolution, to condemn the movement. Shortly after the banning of Falun Gong the campaign focussed on exposing the movement as a “cult” and ridiculing Li Hongzhi’s prophetic ideas, declaring them as unscientific and dangerous for society. Throughout the campaign the idea that Falun Gong had intentions to overthrow the government has been expressed, but not until

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques deLisle, “Who’s Afraid of Falun Gong?”.

more recently has the government turned its attention to Falun Gong's connections in the West and its possible anti-China motives. While it can be assumed that a large part of this has been propaganda for the purposes of discrediting the movement in China by playing on the people's nationalist feelings, it cannot be completely dismissed as such. Li Hongzhi, since moving to New York, has built up a great deal of support for the Falun Gong cause and the movement has been mentioned by Western politicians in regard to human rights and freedom of religious belief issues in China. However, while the coverage of China's official press has been biased so too has the Western press' coverage. The movement is mentioned in the Western press in connection with China's human rights and suppression record. I have found very little in Western journalism written about Li Hongzhi's activities in the United States such as the lobbying of the United Nations. This is not to suggest that it has not happened but that it is not considered to be as interesting as the Chinese crackdown. It has been difficult to assess how justified China's fears are due to the type of coverage that the issue is given in the West. It is unfortunate that examples of China's fears have come mainly from China's official press.

According to the 'Xinhua News agency' and the 'China Daily' the Western "anti-China forces [have] accepted, for their own political needs, Li Hongzhi and the Falun Gong cult."<sup>8</sup> While many Falun Gong practitioners have dismissed this as paranoia the Chinese government have not simply plucked these accusations out of the air. There is definitely some substance to these claims. The 'China Daily' makes reference to US Congressmen lobbying the Clinton administration to criticize China over its treatment of the movement and the decision by San Francisco immigration authorities to grant political asylum to Falun Gong practitioners.<sup>9</sup> Measures such as these, while seen as completely innocent in the West, are viewed by the Chinese government as 'anti-China' measures. Likewise the accusations that Li Hongzhi is using the 'anti-China' forces are not completely groundless. Li, together with Western Falun Gong supporters, has made overtures to the US government, the United Nations and various human rights groups, which again are seen as completely innocent and justified in the West but as politically motivated by the Chinese government.

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<sup>8</sup> Xinhua, "Cult an anti-China tool", China Daily, 19<sup>th</sup> April 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

The Falun Gong movement had an impressive infrastructure in China; it made use of the Internet, mobile telephones and pagers to organize on a large scale outside Zhongnanhai<sup>10</sup> in April 1999. Its present infrastructure is even more impressive. It has countless websites all over the world and Li Hongzhi has many powerful acquaintances and supporters in the United States. His official spokesperson is a New Yorker called Zhang Erping but he is also represented by Gail Rachlin who is head of a powerful New York PR company and is herself a Falun Gong practitioner. They have, through Falun Gong's official websites, publicized the many 'awards' that Li has been given in the United States. These include proclamation of 'Li Hongzhi day in Baltimore City', 'Washington D.C.'s Falun Dafa week' and 'Chicago Master Li Hongzhi day'. These 'awards' could have been misinterpreted by both Falun Gong practitioners in China and by the Chinese government as United States government support for Falun Gong. However they are routinely given out in large numbers and are rather easy to obtain. Patsy Rahn, in her article 'The Falun Gong: Beyond the Headlines' points out that "you can also fax in your request, sending them a sample proclamation which they will then use... They are 'rubber-stamp' documents meant for public relations purposes only."<sup>11</sup> The Falun Gong has said that these awards are "profound" and represent society's understanding of Falun Dafa. It is not difficult to see how these routine proclamations have been taken out of context intentionally by Rachlin's publicity machine and unintentionally by the Chinese government, who have interpreted them as official declarations of support for the Falun Gong against the Chinese Communist Party.

After the NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, "Beijing was particularly concerned that Li might get involved with anti-China dissident organizations and human rights groups abroad."<sup>12</sup> Jiang Zemin has been reported to have said that the Falun Gong had "international background" including hostile foreign forces who wanted to see an end to Communist rule in China.<sup>13</sup> The Chinese press has been painting Falun Gong with the same brush as other dissidents and

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<sup>10</sup> A compound housing the government offices and residences in the centre of Beijing.

<sup>11</sup> Patsy Rahn, "Falun Gong : Beyond the Headlines", 28<sup>th</sup> April 2000, (<http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/bth/FalunRAHN.htm>).

<sup>12</sup> John Wong, "The Mystery of *Falun Gong*: Its Rise and Fall in China", in John Wong, William T. Liu, "The Mystery of China's Falun Gong: Its rise and its sociological implications", p16-17, Singapore University Press, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> "Sect must be watched says Jiang", Hong Kong Standard, 29<sup>th</sup> June 1999.

supporters of Taiwanese and Tibetan independence. In doing this they are drawing upon nationalist sentiment in China. It is unclear whether they really do feel that Falun Gong threatens the unity of the motherland but they have routinely said things like “Li Hongzhi, Wei Jingsheng<sup>14</sup> and other advocates of ‘Taiwan independence’, ‘Tibet independence’ and a ‘democratic movement’ have been lobbying [the UN Commission on Human Rights] for the US-sponsored anti-China proposal.”<sup>15</sup> Pro-mainland newspapers in Hong Kong have also said things like “the chieftains of Falun Gong cult and Taiwan independence movement are acting in the same vein and colluding with each other.”<sup>16</sup> This supports China’s claim that Taiwan’s Vice President Annette Lu is using the spiritual movement to promote the island’s independence. The Chinese government has often accused Lu of being anti-China and is taking the fact that the movement has not been banned in Taiwan to mean that the Taiwanese government are using it for their own separatist purposes. While it is unlikely that when Miss Lu spoke at a conference organised by Falun Gong it was for ‘her own separatist purposes’ it is certainly something that worries the Chinese government.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the extensive media campaign the Chinese government has also been able to draw on the fact that Li is living in the West. By withdrawing his Chinese passport they are making it difficult for him to travel at will. It is increasingly likely that he will require a United States passport, if he has not acquired one already, which will make him a ‘foreigner’ to the people of China.<sup>18</sup> It may be a topic of some debate whether or not the Chinese government’s fears are reasonable but it can be understood how it has arrived at these fears. The Chinese government is extremely hostile to criticism from abroad and would view the support that Li Hongzhi has in the West as particularly threatening. What makes far less sense is the Chinese government’s claim that the Falun Gong is a product of ‘alien cultural infiltration’.

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<sup>14</sup> Famous dissident from the 1979 Democracy Wall protests. He called for the Fifth Modernization (democracy) to add to Zhou Enlai’s Four Modernizations.

<sup>15</sup> Xinhua, “Cult an anti-China tool”, China Daily, 19<sup>th</sup> April 2000.

<sup>16</sup> He Chong, “Falun Gong cult has degenerated into an anti-China tool for the West”, Zhongguo Tongxun She, Hong Kong, 21<sup>st</sup> January 2001 (<http://www.arts.ubc.ca/polisci/chab/p321/private/flg.htm>).

<sup>17</sup> Damian Grammaticas, “Taiwan accused over Falun Gong”, BBC News Online, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2001.

<sup>18</sup> John Wong, “The Mystery of Falun Gong: Its Rise and Fall in China, p19 (footnote 27).

## ***Falun Gong in the context of Chinese religious history***

In his book ‘Zhuan Falun’ Li Hongzhi talks about the origins of Qigong and claims that people only began referring to it as Qigong towards the end of the Cultural Revolution but the tradition has existed since ancient times; “in the past, it was just called cultivation practice”<sup>19</sup>. Professor Ownby, who has written widely on Chinese religion and secret societies, believes that aspects of cultivation probably go back to the beginning of Chinese civilization. Elements of Li’s speeches and scriptures can be found in very early Daoism and Buddhism. However cultivation did not really become such a familiar organized phenomenon until the second half of the Ming dynasty. It is in this organized type of cultivation or popular religion that one can find strong connections with Falun Gong and can see that it is extremely unlikely that it came about as a product of ‘alien cultural infiltration’.

One term used, both in the Chinese official histories and by Western historians, to describe the antecedents of Falun Gong is ‘White Lotus’. This term historically came from a set of folk Buddhists lay practices that began in the Song Dynasty. It was initially only designed for lay people deeply interested in Buddhism but not to the extent that they would join a monastery or devote their whole life to the religion. The characteristics of the ‘White Lotus’ have been described as moral behaviour, the chanting of mantras, the use of health promoting talismans, and the undertaking of certain meditative breathing practices used to cure illnesses and remain healthy. These groups often had scriptures which would usually describe a type of universal salvation, an idea that most people could be saved. There was often the mention of the Eternal Venerable Mother, a goddess that created mankind and waited to welcome the saved back to heaven. They also referred to the Buddhist theory of history which saw time passing in ages or epochs known as kalpas or “jie” in Chinese. A lot of these groups believed the final kalpa to be coming and with it would arrive the Maitreya (future Buddha). Most of these scriptures would have been written by group leaders who would not have been orthodox clergy but by lay figures. The main emphasis of these scriptures was on morality and magic. White Lotus groups have often been implicated in rebellion. There were of course groups that did seek rebellion and groups that did rebel but it is highly probable that the vast majority were peaceful. Alan Hunter and

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<sup>19</sup> Li Hongzhi, “Zhuan Falun”, p20.



Don Rimmington maintain that “the religious sects were primarily evangelical, not esoteric: they were geared to the long term practice of religion in peace time, not to the life of political rebellion.”<sup>20</sup> The term “White Lotus” in Chinese (state) historical documents is used to refer to groups the state did not like. Descriptions of the White Lotus in documents and literature had little to do with the real activities of the White Lotus groups (e.g. the way the Christian Church talked about Jews in the past had little to do with the way the actual Jews behaved). It is not easy to discover what these people were really like from Chinese records because they are records of suppression. White Lotus practitioners would be arrested and tortured into answering questions about leadership and rebellion. Scriptures were destroyed and those copied into the records were the strangest parts and probably most inflammatory parts. All moral elements were ignored because they were not considered interesting. It is difficult to find out about these groups that might have been “peacefully” cultivating in a way similar to Qigong or Falun Gong because sources are limited due to the preoccupations of the Chinese state.<sup>21</sup>

Another term that may be used to describe the origins of Falun Gong is ‘Folk Buddhist Sectarianism’. Academics have borrowed the idea of sectarianism from Western religious tradition. However it is unclear which tradition the cultivators are branching off from. It is certainly not from Orthodox Buddhism, which had its own sectarianism. Cultivators would not have been recognised by the Buddhist organizations. There is a much larger tradition from which these groups are branching off which has never been given a name but has been assumed and accepted without further discussion. In order to understand where Falun Gong came from we are left either with fragments of information left by the Chinese state or a construction of a tradition founded on theories of sectarianism from the West.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Alan Hunter and Don Rimmington, “Religion and Social Change in Contemporary China”, taken from Alan Hunter and Don Rimmington, “All Under Heaven”, Uitgeversmaatschappij J.H. Kok, Netherlands, 1992, p32, (they make reference to Overmyer, op. cit., pp. 55-70).

<sup>21</sup> David Ownby, “Falun Gong as a Cultural Revitalization Movement.”

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

## ***Twentieth Century Developments***

The history of twentieth Century China is understood to be the history of revolution. This is perfectly understandable in the light of events that have happened with the Nationalist Revolution in 1911, the May Fourth Movement of 1919, the Communist victory in 1949, the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution being the principle examples. These are without doubt the most significant events in recent Chinese history and it is no surprise that historians want to focus on these concerns. However textbooks of modern Chinese history have very little space, if any, set aside for the discussion of religion. This is particularly true of the Republican period. When mentioned it is only with regard to foreign missionaries and Chinese Christians. With the blooming of the Qigong movement in the 1980s and 1990s, the banning of Falun Gong in 1999 and the international community's current curiosity about eastern mysticism and concerns over religious freedom the omission of twentieth century indigenous religious movements from academic research has been rather short-sighted; the concentration on Christianity slightly arrogant. Indeed Ownby points out "there were dozens of new religious groups founded during this period."<sup>23</sup> Hundreds of branches were probably formed reaching out to millions of people. Many of these religious practices took on a lot of the direction of the White Lotus groups. The majority of these groups dropped the mention of gods but kept the notion of the world coming to an end, that moral behaviour will save you. These groups also added charitable work to their practices. Membership of these groups had previously been dominated by poorer people but was now in the Republican period becoming increasingly dominated by the middle class and even the upper class. The state was no longer able to regulate religion, indeed it were often encouraged by both politicians and warlords determined to claim legitimacy.

These groups were suppressed on a wide scale with varying effectiveness from 1950-1953/4. There were in fact a number of rebellions (possibly hundreds), news of which has understandably been censored, between around 1955 and the beginning of the Cultural Revolution by these suppressed groups. With the opening up of society in the post-Mao period many of these groups were allowed to flourish and many of the previously arrested leaders were released from custody. Many groups such as the

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

Yiguandao (one of the least liked groups in China) emerged at the time. There is a lot of writing about the revival in the 1980s and 1990s of Christianity and Daoism but Western academics have been less interested in the revival of traditions described earlier.

The greatest instance of this revival has in fact been the Qigong movement of which Falun Gong is a recent branch. Qigong started on a small scale before the end of the Cultural Revolution but did not become widespread until the 1980s. The Chinese government was at first supportive of Qigong not only because of the belief that one can channel certain forces through exercise and that these practices are good for the health but also because it was something specifically Chinese. The Chinese State conducted experiments into the capabilities of Qigong masters and practitioners in what was a Chinese science. Nancy N. Chen points out that intellectuals collaborated with masters in experimental research into *teyi gongneng* 特异功能 (paranormal activities).<sup>24</sup> There was a pride in an ancient Chinese wisdom that has come back and could be presented to the world, and at the same time make people healthier and the hospitals emptier. Qigong became extremely popular with masters travelling the country giving lectures and even travelling to Hong Kong and Taiwan. A lot of money was made with this phenomena growing in a similar way to televangelism in the United States. The Qigong craze 气功热 (Qigong re) was popular both on college campuses and in the *danwei* 单位 (work unit) where qigong masters would be invited to hold “mass sessions including healing and altered states of consciousness.”<sup>25</sup>

Early Qigong writing contained a lot of symbolism and practical advice such as how to exercise correctly but little else. Within this larger movement people such as Li Hongzhi started to build up extensive bodies of ‘scriptures’ which had much more of a moral and religious tone to them than the original Qigong books. All of these groups have things in common. They share ideas about the body which by going through a certain practice will cease to suffer and will become healthy. This includes the idea of limitless human potential, something central to Chinese culture whether it be the

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<sup>24</sup> Nancy N. Chen, Urban spaces and experiences of qigong, taken from ed. Deborah S. Davis, Richard Kraus, Barry Naughton and Elizabeth J. Perry, Urban Spaces in Contemporary China (The potential for autonomy and community in post-Mao China), Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp 347-361.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

incredible feats of the ‘Monkey King’<sup>26</sup>, the magical and superhuman powers seen in the many Gongfu films, or the power of the Qigong masters. Another important common factor is that this physical change is undertaken through moral behaviour. These two discussions of the body and morality are central to these groups.

These two discourses take place within a greater concept of “exile and return”. This is the idea that people were once good and happy, the world has become a bad place and people should return to the original place. This relates to ancient mythologies such as the renewal by Maitreya (the future Buddha) and the coming of the final Kalpa. These beliefs, while inflammatory on occasion, are, much like the idea of the Second Coming of the Messiah in the West, not taken particularly seriously. People believed it but could quite happily go about their normal everyday lives. “The Chinese government has acted as if the Falun Gong made them up, or recycled an unknown, esoteric discourse. This is simply historically ungrounded.”<sup>27</sup> Ownby believes that almost everybody in China would have known about these ideas and the amount of people who would have taken them seriously would be approximately the same as in the West. “These discourses, mythological or cosmological, were heavily indebted to institutionalised religions such as Buddhism, particularly Buddhism, and to Daoism, as well as to common sense moral discourse. In other words they did not create a lot of new moral precepts. They drew heavily on what existed already.”<sup>28</sup>

Something else that unites these groups is creation of scriptures. These scriptures whether the ‘Precious Scrolls’ of the Ming and Qing period, the morality books written on sheets of sands whilst in a trance, or the transcripts of Li Hongzhi’s speeches are completely free from regulation by a religious establishment or the government. Various groups would simply choose elements they liked and ignore ones they did not. Because there has been no recognition of this tradition the people belonging to it have not recognized it either and will often accuse another group that are part of the tradition as being heterodox. Just as Falun Gong has been branded heterodox by the present regime so it has in the past branded other Qigong groups as heterodox.

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<sup>26</sup> From *Journey to the West*, a mythological novel based on many centuries of popular tradition.

<sup>27</sup> David Ownby, “*Falun Gong as a Cultural Revitalization Movement*”.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Falun Gong did not simply re-organize the beliefs of the White Lotus but all of these groups including Falun Gong and the White Lotus belong to something larger and this kind of popular fundamentalism was neither inconsequential or self conscious dissent but was rather widespread and spanned all divisions of society.<sup>29</sup> These types of movements have occurred on a large scale throughout Chinese history and do not appear to collect anything from the world outside China. Rather they are of a completely indigenous tradition. The content and message of Falun Gong and Li Hongzhi, despite the spread through the West, remains very Chinese. He has talked about the glories of Chinese civilization and the superior power of ancient Chinese medicine and there is a great deal of cultural pride in his work. He has often made bold statements like “You cannot really understand the meaning of Zhuan Falun or any of my writings unless you read in Chinese” lending little credence to the Chinese government’s view that the Falun Gong are a product of ‘alien cultural infiltration’. Instead this has a hint of the “heavily non-Western doctrines” that Jacques deLisle was talking about.<sup>30</sup> As BBC Correspondent Fergal Keane explains in an article for The Independent “the cult emphasises a traditional, almost puritanical morality. It is suspicious of Western cultural influences and is deeply ethnocentric.”<sup>31</sup> One of the most obvious Western cultural influences has been the culture of science and with this the scientific theory of History central to Marxism. Since the mid nineteenth century science has been fundamental in aiding and defining Chinese nationalism.

### ***Science in Chinese nationalism and Falun Gong’s alternative scientific vision.***

Regardless of whether one subscribes to the view that modern Chinese nationalism was a reaction to foreign colonialism and imperialism it is largely undisputed that Western science has played a major role in contributing to Chinese nationalism. The idea of using Western science to make China stronger first came about during the ‘Qing Restoration’ of the 1860s when some modern arsenals were set up and textbooks in technology translated. Western science became more relevant to Chinese nationalism during the ‘Self Strengthening Movement’ that followed. It was assumed

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques deLisle, “Who’s Afraid of Falun Gong”.

<sup>31</sup> Fergal Keane, “China showed weakness in accepting Mr Bush’s regrets”, Comment Page, Weekend Review p3, The Independent, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2001.

that the foreigners' domination of China was based on the superiority of their weapons and that the only way to drive them out would be to learn how to make and use Western machinery so that they would be competing on an equal footing. Naturally it was impossible to apply this new technology and knowledge without making fundamental changes to Confucian society and the Self Strengthening Movement ultimately failed. However the ideas behind it remained and became stronger in the early part of the twentieth century when many different political ideas, such as anarchism, fascism, democracy and socialism, joined science as the saviour of China. The political idea that ultimately drove the Chinese Communist Party to victory in 1949 was Marxism which, based on Hegel's dialectic, espoused particularly scientific theories of history. The idea of determinism is very closely linked to Chinese ideas about fate. Many of the founders of the Communist Party had been part of the modernization drive initiated by the 'Self Strengthening Movement'. Chen Duxiu, one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party, had been educated in Naval science. The idea of success through the application of science was particularly large during the 1950s when literature had a science-fiction feel to it and talked about how through proper planning, such as bringing tractors to the countryside, lives would be revolutionized overnight. Indeed the Great Leap Forward is the greatest example of the romance of science; people had blind faith in the terribly flawed and un-researched science that Mao proposed. The application of science has been paramount in expanding communications across China. The Communist re-unification of the motherland, torn apart through 'warlordism' would not have been possible without the construction of roads and railways and the expansion of industry.

In the post-Mao age nationalism is once again heavily indebted to science as China expands its military might and tests nuclear weapons in central Asia, embarks upon grandiose schemes like the damming of the Yangtze river and the proposed railway in to Lhasa, and encourages its expanding Information Technology industry. Falun Gong presents a challenge to something that is central to Chinese nationalism. Li Hongzhi's writings stress the blindness, arrogance and limitations of modern science. He has said things like "the guiding ideology for today's human science is confined only to this physical world in its research and development"<sup>32</sup> and "ancient Chinese medicine was

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<sup>32</sup> Li Hongzhi, "Zhuan Falun", Lunyu, p3.

very advanced, and the extent of its progress was beyond present medical science.”<sup>33</sup> In fact his rejection of medical science and view that illness is created by immoral actions is a topic of much controversy in China today. One of the Communist Party’s main propaganda weapons is the allegation that Falun Gong practitioners will not go to hospital when they are ill because they believe that their activities can cure everything. The official press regularly publishes accounts from ‘victims’ of Falun Gong’s disregard of science. Liang Yong, the daughter of one of the ‘victims’, said “if my father had not practiced Falun Gong, he would have taken medication or gone to see a doctor when he was ill. But because he practiced Falun Gong, he refused to do either.”<sup>34</sup> Aside from the debate over whether Falun Gong encourages people to avoid hospitals (Li Hongzhi says that it does not) the movement does point out the inadequacies of modern science in a way that worries the current regime immensely. It comes as no surprise that the first person to officially speak out against Falun Gong was a prominent scientist, He Zuoxiu, who criticized the movement in a Tianjin magazine. By announcing the limitations of modern science and introducing his own scientific vision Li Hongzhi presents a challenge to one of the most important building blocks of modern Chinese nationalism – science.

### ***A redefinition of Chineseness***

The Chinese government’s concern about Falun Gong’s connections in the West and claim that it has become “a pawn of international anti-China forces”<sup>35</sup> may be seen as rather paranoid accusations in the West. These concerns are also seen by some Western observers as unimportant when discussed alongside the rather brutal suppression of the movement in China. However this essay is not a discussion of human rights in China and does not attempt to enter in to the argument of whether or not the Chinese government was correct in its actions. The suppression of the movement is as energetically denounced in the Western press as it is supported in the Chinese press and this essay is not intended to contribute to that debate. The Falun Gong has been banned in China and I have looked at some of the reasons the Chinese government has cited for this ban within the context of Chinese nationalism.

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<sup>33</sup> Li Hongzhi, “Zhuan Falun”, lecture 7, p168.

<sup>34</sup> “True Picture of ‘greatest Buddha’”, China Daily, 24<sup>th</sup> July 1999.

<sup>35</sup> Xinhua, “Cult an anti-China tool”, China Daily, 19<sup>th</sup> April 2000 (<http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/ndydb/2000/04/d4-1cult.419.html>).

The Chinese government has called Falun Gong an ‘anti-China’ movement. Since its suppression it has, for whatever reasons, become politicised and the Chinese government’s concerns, while arguably self-inflicted, are understandable even if they are not justified. It is interesting that many of the Falun Gong websites have recently begun to refer to Jiang Zemin as a ‘mogui’ 魔鬼 (devil). This indicates how the movement has become politicised. China is concerned that the Falun Gong may begin to claim the banner of nationalism and, as David Ownby points out, “once another group claims nationalism then the Communist Party will have a very hard time in China because it has been their only remaining banner for some time.”<sup>36</sup>

Ownby also points out, from his discussions with North American Chinese Falun Gong practitioners, that it “has reacquainted people with aspects of Chinese cultural tradition that have been ignored since the Communist revolution in 1949.”<sup>37</sup> I have looked at Falun Gong’s origins in popular folk tradition and the emergence of the qigong movement of the 1980s, encouraged by the government, and have found the Chinese government’s claim that the Falun Gong is a product of ‘alien cultural infiltration’ to be rather flawed, if not completely unfounded. It has made these claims perhaps because the movement was becoming so popular and was redefining ‘chineseness’ in a way that the government felt threatened by. Li Hongzhi has always made mention of Falun Gong’s roots in ancient Chinese tradition and while he has taken his ‘religion’ to the West, still asserts that it is a Chinese phenomenon; indeed his first book which is simply titled ‘Falun Gong’ was originally published under the name ‘China Falun Gong’. Falun Gong has offered a return to a different kind of Chineseness from the one that the government is promoting. It rejects modern science in direct contrast to the government’s definition of nationalism and modernity and supports traditional Chinese values in contrast to modern Chinese materialism. Falun Gong provides an alternative meaning of Chinese tradition that threatens the state’s monopoly of defining what it is to be Chinese.

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<sup>36</sup> David Ownby, “Why China’s Falun Gong Shakes Communist Rule”, International Herald Tribune (written for the New York Times), 16<sup>th</sup> February 2001.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.



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