Manufacturing Sectarian Divides
The Chinese State, Identities, and Collective Violence

Patricia M. Thornton

In the predawn hours of 24 April 1999, an unusual group slowly began assembling before Zhongnanhai, the highly guarded and gated compound that houses the elite national leaders of the Chinese party-state. Appearing to arrive nearly simultaneously in small bands from all corners of Beijing, they silently congregated before the compound gates and formed a neat grid only a few blocks from famed Tiananmen Square, the site of the massive student demonstrations that had been brutally suppressed almost exactly ten years earlier. By noon, the crowd had swelled to over ten thousand and occupied at least three streets surrounding the perimeter of the compound, with most participants silently standing in meditation or reading the written works of Li Hongzhi, the venerated founder and leader of the quasi-Buddhist movement commonly known as Falun Gong (Practitioners or Cultivators of the Wheel of Law). Many of the participants had packed food and water to sustain them during their long vigil, and some even vowed to spend the night.

Despite a week of unrest orchestrated by Falun Gong practitioners in nearby Tianjin, the Beijing police were caught off guard by the demonstration. After stationing uniformed police officers every six meters around the perimeter of the protesters’ grid, police authorities took well over twelve hours to disperse the group. Most left voluntarily around 8:30 pm after police threatened to herd them all onto eighty buses waiting behind the nearby Great Hall of the People. Opting instead for public transportation, they disappeared peacefully into the crowds on Beijing’s streets.¹

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The 24 April demonstration was striking for a number of reasons, including the size of the group, the silent and peaceful nature of the protest, and the strict discipline observed by the participants. During the protest, most of the petitioners refused to speak with nonparticipants; however, when a foreign reporter asked about their unusual organizational tactics, one participant purportedly responded: “We communicated by telephone and other networks from all over China, to gather here this morning” (Agence France-Press 1999). Several weeks later, when Master Li Hongzhi, the enigmatic founder and leader of the group, living in exile, was asked how the protestors had managed to pull off such a large-scale event without alerting Beijing’s formidable public security network, he confirmed the importance of information technology to the group’s tactics: “You know, there is the Internet; they learned about it from the Internet.”

Weeks later, Chinese party and state officials branded Falun Gong an “evil and heretical sect,” and outlawed the group’s meditative practices, the sale of Master Li’s writings, and any public display of the movement’s slogans or symbols. The organization’s assets were confiscated, its offices and practice sites—including 39 branches nationwide, 1,900 subunits, and some 23,000 places where it purportedly held gatherings—were sealed and placed under heavy police surveillance (O’Neill and Lam 1999). A March 2000 Amnesty International report on the crackdown noted that in the months that followed, tens of thousands of Falun Gong practitioners were arbitrarily detained by police, some of them repeatedly, and put under extreme pressure to renounce their beliefs (Amnesty International 2000). Falun Gong sources based abroad claim that literally hundreds of practitioners in mainland China have been either tortured or beaten to death while imprisoned. More recently, evidence has surfaced that as many as six hundred practitioners are being held in specially constructed psychiatric hospitals, collectively known as Ankang (Peace and Health) facilities administered and run by the Ministry of Public Security, diagnosed with highly dubious “mental illnesses” (Munro 2000). Not surprisingly, those who have spoken out publicly about the persecution of practitioners since the ban have suffered harsh reprisals.

The treatment of Falun Gong and other qigong practitioners by Chinese officials raises several key questions about the nature of sectarian identity, social conflict, and the modern nation-state. The consensus view in the scholarly literature is that modern states seek to broaden popular support and therefore the legitimacy of those in power by engaging in a variety of nation-building activities, which are inclusive by design. Ethnic and sectarian tensions may become inflamed due to social dislocation, economic distress, or external pressures that undermine the allegiance of minority groups to the “imagined community” of the nation-state and threaten its continued survival by disen twining its internal cohesiveness. According to this view, subnational ethnic, sectarian, and cultural acts of violence are primarily antimodern, antistate, and anticivic expressions of aberrant and primordialist rage.
In this study, I adopt a different approach. Instead of assuming the interests of state elites in building social unity and consensus, I argue that the roots of ethnic and sectarian conflict lie in the foundation of physical violence that is part and parcel of the modern state-making process, which cordons off and claims specific strata of subject populations as legitimate targets for coercion and control. Through an analysis of Chinese legal documents and policy statements, I attempt to recover the elided history of exclusive nationalism and demonstrate that modern nation-states, when stripped of the pretense of civic inclusiveness, are at best little more than loosely organized machines of social violence that frequently resort to rituals of classification, coercion, and compulsion to better control their subject populations. Yet as Falun Gong’s successful transition from spiritual group to outlawed cybersect shows, the information technologies that allow contemporary state officials to classify, surveil, and control their citizens can also be used by those same citizens to resist the incursions of the state. One key to the continued survival of groups accused of antistate agendas today may well be new information technologies, such as the Internet, cellular phones, and instant text messaging systems, which afford such groups some ability to evade the traditional controls and coercive measures of the state.

States and the Monopolization of Violence

The imbrication of modern state building with overt expressions of violence has figured prominently in political and social science theory at least as far back as Max Weber, whose definition of the modern state is now axiomatic in the field. It is “a compulsory political organization with continuous operations” in which an “administrative staff successfully upholds the claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force” within “a given territorial area” (Weber 1978: 54). More recently, Charles Tilly has argued that modern nation-states are first and foremost war machines. According to Tilly (1975, 1990), the bloody and brutal history of Western European state building involved, on the one hand, the elimination or subordination of internal political rivals and, on the other, the creation of differentiated, autonomous, centralized organizations designed to forcibly mobilize and extract resources for war. In the final analysis, Tilly (1985) concludes, the modern nation-state resembles nothing so much as a far-flung protection racket, which extorts resources—sometimes violently—from its subject populations in the name of protecting them against presumably even more dire and violent exploitation at the hands of external enemies.

Yet the protection provided in the name of citizenship is not extended to all who reside within the physical boundaries of the state. Rather, citizenship has most often been distributed on a preferential basis to the select few (Marx 2002: 106). As Bowman (2001: 31) has pointed out, the centralization of power inherent in the institutional architecture of the modern state strives
to “enclose an ‘I’ or a ‘we’ and exclude—oft times violently—others.” The sometimes subtle distinctions between those included and those excluded from the nation’s “imagined community” have been shown by Hobsbawm and others to be deliberately constructed categories, often based upon invented traditions that serve the shifting interests of those in positions of power at particular historical junctures (Hobsbawm 1983; cf. Berman 1998; Suny 2001). Partha Chatterjee has famously argued that the colonial state owes its existence as a modern regime of power in no small part to “the rule of colonial difference” based upon various socially constructed forms of exclusion tied to race, language, religion, class, and caste. The liberal-democratic ideology promulgated by the postcolonial Indian state was reinforced by an elaborate series of internal boundary-drawing exercises, separating the public from the private, and acknowledging some differences while simultaneously suppressing others. Yet the modern nation’s proclaimed indifference to certain distinctions was “and continue[s] to be, overwhelmed and swamped by the history of the postcolonial state” (Chatterjee 1993: 10–11).

If we presume, as much of the political science literature on state-led nation building does, that images of internal homogeneity and broad popular inclusion bolster domestic unity and therefore support for a regime, then why does modern nationalism so frequently resort to exclusivity? Anthony Marx proposes that exclusive nationalism may emerge when state elites attempt to strike bargains either to mend the slights and ruptures of the past or to avert threatened disunity among those viewed as members of a state’s core constituency. In the process of state making, central leaders have rarely faced unified and internally homogeneous societies. Historically, state makers have confronted a complex series of nested challenges. Aspiring sovereigns have frequently adopted strategies designed to avert alliances between competing groups, often forging alliances with one group that are solidified by the deliberate exclusion of a rival group or groups (Marx 2002: 112). As Bowman noted, the historically successful strategy of divide and exclude

culminates in the emergence of modern state formations wherein some agents of the state appropriate to themselves the power to perform violence against outsiders as well as against “deviant” forces within the society the state controls while others constrain and direct the non-deviant citizenry, so that it serves to perpetuate and reproduce the order characteristic of the state…. [H]enceforth “constructive” violence comes to be seen as pedagogy and conformity while repressive state violence appears as the legitimate expression of the “will of the people” … [part of] the state’s responsibility to protect the citizenry it represents from the illegitimate violence of the people’s enemies (external enemies of the state, criminals, revolutionaries, mad persons, etc.). (Bowman 2001: 31)

The projection of the image of the internally coherent, united, and integrated nation-state constitutes an important resource of power for reigning central authorities, even as they continue to pursue strategies of internal
fragmentation. As Philip Abrams once noted, the institutionalized forms of coercive power claimed by the agents of the modern state gradually become encoded, not as the expressions of coercive violence that they clearly are, but instead as the indispensable instruments of a unified, centralized social order: “[A]rmies and prisons … as well as the whole process of fiscal exaction … are all forceful enough. But it is their association with the idea of the state that silences protest, excuses force and convinces almost all of us that the fate of the victims is just and necessary” (Abrams 1988: 76–77).

Maoist Narratives of Inclusion and Exclusion

Official narratives of collective membership and segregation are therefore central to the processes of both state making and identity formation. The involvement of the state in identifying and repositioning subjects in narrative frameworks—of rendering them “legible” to the agents and designs of the political center (Scott 1998)—is central to the expression of modern political authority. The process by which identities are officially recognized typically involves not only the classification of groups and individuals into specific categories—racial, ethnic, religious or sectarian, professional or socioeconomic class-based—but also a determination regarding the political status of such groups. At minimum, newly recognized collectivities must be defined in relationship to the conceptual boundaries of the state, with those falling within those boundaries hailed as “citizens” and accorded the rights and responsibilities attendant with such status. But as Marx (1998: 5) notes: “[B]y specifying to whom citizenship applies, states also define those outside the community of citizens, who then live within the state as objects of domination.”

How did the process of defining legitimate political subjects and separating them from in-dwelling objects of political domination unfold in post-revolutionary China? Official concerns about precisely who was to be counted among the people within the new People’s Republic of China (PRC)—and who was to serve as an object of domination—date back to the official founding of the republic, which was constructed as “a state of the people’s democratic dictatorship.” In a 1950 speech, Chairman Mao Zedong asserted:

The people’s democratic dictatorship has two methods. Toward the enemy, it uses the method of dictatorship: namely, it does not allow them to take part in political activities for certain necessary periods; it compels them to obey the law of the people’s government and compels them to work and remodel themselves into new men through labor. Toward the people, it is the opposite; it does not use compulsion, but democratic methods: namely, it does not compel them to do this or that but uses democratic methods in educating and persuading them. (Mao Zedong 1950: 25)

The fundamental distinction between the “people” on whose behalf the state would rule and the “enemies” who would be ruled underwent a series
of permutations over the period of Mao’s leadership. Reflecting back on the meaning of the “people” some forty years later, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee member Bo Yibo noted:

I think its meaning is quite obvious. “People” (renmin) is not the same as “nationals” (guomin). In the past, we generally used to say that “nationals” included the landlords and other antagonistic classes. In any case, persons (ren) living on the national soil are all [sic] “nationals” and are all called “nationals.” Then there is another term, called “citizen” (gongmin). “Citizens” are different from “nationals” and from “People.” Politically and legally there are such things as “citizen’s rights,” the most important of which are the right to vote and the right to be elected. So much for “citizens.” With “People” it’s different. For example, the People’s Democratic Dictatorship with the worker-peasant alliance as its main body: here “People” includes workers, peasants, the urban poor, intellectuals, etc., but certainly not landlords and comprador bourgeois elements. (Schoenhals 1994: 1)

Nearly every successive mass mobilization campaign after the founding of the PRC state in 1949 interpellated a new class of objects for political domination. For example, in 1956, Mao readily identified five subcategories that would be targeted for struggle in future mass campaigns: “bandit chieftains, professional brigands, local tyrants, special agents, and leaders of reactionary secret societies.” To these five he added another ten categories of political “non-people,” collectively referred to as “other bad elements,” who were designated by the Central Committee of the CCP as legitimate objects of political struggle by the people (Schoenhals 1994: 4). One study of CCP terminology of the early 1950s uncovered well over a hundred commonly used “keywords” associated with “enemies of the people” in New China, which regularly appeared in the state-run media. These early enemy labels designated targets of political struggle that tended to fall into five main categories: imperialists and their collaborators, feudal forces, bureaucratic capitalists, counterrevolutionaries, and unaffiliated adversaries, such as class enemies and “public opinion oppressors” (Wang Cheng-chih 2002: 85–87).

As the first decade of the new People’s Republic neared its end, terms of political exclusion and approbation took on an increasingly dehumanized coloration, suggesting an intensifying level of political violence. Indeed, by the advent of the “Anti-Rightist Campaign” in New China, Chairman Mao had taken to hailing presumed enemies of the people as yaomo guiguai (evil spirits and monstrous freaks). The following year, this term of excoriation gave way in Mao’s parlance to what would subsequently become a commonly invoked label of political abuse during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution—niugui sheshen (ox-monsters and snake-demons) (Schoenhals 1994: 6).

This trend continued throughout the convulsive onset of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. Schoenhals notes that then-president of the People’s Republic, Liu Shaoqi, delivered a speech in which he expressed his hope that the emancipation brought about by Marxism might one day even include “landlord elements,
rich-peasant elements, reactionary elements, and hooligans.” President Liu’s listeners promptly responded that such groups “count as human beings (ren) but not as people (renmin).” President Liu remonstrated with them, arguing: “They count as humans. They are not animals…. Humanity includes proletarian laborers as well as the sons and daughters of the exploiting classes and any [members of those classes] not executed…. Human beings not yet executed are still human beings” (Schoenhals 1994: 10). The hostile audience demanded an apology from the president; he was later forced to submit a written self-criticism recanting his error (a mistake of “putting the incidental before the fundamental”). Months later, he and his spouse were both detained, subjected to public criticism, and repeatedly harassed by a group of university and high-school students, who taunted him with his earlier comments. Deposed in disgrace, exiled, and imprisoned, he died not long after his confinement.

Mao’s death in 1976 was followed by the return of the formerly deposed Deng Xiaoping, who called for an end to the Maoist pursuit of permanent class struggle. Yet even as the Dengist regime oversaw the rectification of literally thousands of cases of former “struggle objects” and their reintegration into the ranks of the citizenry, its policies created new classes of undesirable elements that would find themselves interpellated and repositioned by the center outside the margins of political inclusion. The overriding Mao-era concern with continuing class struggle was replaced by reform-era narratives with an interest in “seeking truth from facts” that valorized scientific inquiry over ideological purity. However, the vigorous pursuit of “scientific materialism” by the reform-era state ultimately served to create new categories of nonpersons, and the coercive machinery of the Chinese state once again reinvented itself as the will of the people.

From Reform to Spiritual Revival

The dismantling of key Mao-era institutions, the relaxation of centralized political control, and the opening of Chinese markets to foreign trade under Deng’s rule all contributed to a proliferation of spiritual sects and popular quasi-religious practices in the years following Mao’s death. Visitors to the Chinese countryside after 1978 noted the widespread revival of shrine building, temple fairs, geomancy, and rituals of exorcism. In the cities, a phenomenon known as qigong re (qigong fever) took hold in the 1980s, resulting in a popular fascination with traditional techniques of breath control, meditation, and healing. The Dengist state sponsored campaigns in 1980–1982 to eliminate fortune telling, witchcraft, and other “feudal superstitious activities” in rural Shaanxi, Hainan, and Anhui. Yet even as the state moved to stem the tide in rural areas, the 1980s nonetheless witnessed an explosion of interest in the paranormal among Chinese urbanites. New print media, testing the waters of relaxed censorship,
eagerly competed for the attention of the reading public by seizing upon a succession of self-proclaimed qigong masters who “came down out of the mountains” to demonstrate their paranormal abilities and spread their teachings.

A rapid proliferation of new teachings—such as Daziran Zhongxin Gong (Nature-Centered Gong), Taiji Qigong (Taiji Gong), Bagua Qigong (Eight Tri-grams Qigong), Guo Gong (National Gong), Xiang Gong (Fragrant Gong)—appeared, many of which drew upon either remembered or reconstructed traditions for inspiration, but were no less popular for their syncretic roots (Thornton 2003). Into this rich milieu of spiritual practices, one group emerged that focused their spiritual attention on what they called the Practice of the Dharma Wheel (Falun Gong), which interwove Buddhist, Daoist, and post-revolutionary themes and practices. Li Hongzhi, a worker at the Changchun Cereals and Oil Company with an interest in qigong, developed a unique system of five basic meditative exercises designed to assist in the removal of bad karma by visualizing a rotating dharma wheel in the abdomen. In 1991, Li retired from his factory job and began to teach his system to a receptive audience.

Yet Li’s timing left much to be desired. Following the 1989 crackdown against the student movement, CCP and state leaders grew uneasy with the seemingly ceaseless parade of qigong masters and the huge audiences they drew on a near-nightly basis in China’s major cities. Stringent new regulations were imposed on social organizations and large public gatherings, resulting in closer government surveillance of popular qigong sects. Some qigong leaders and their adherents chafed under the new regulatory regime: Falun Gong practitioners, who numbered nearly seventy million in mainland China at the movement’s height, became increasingly defiant in the newly repressive atmosphere of the mid-1990s. When articles critical of Li Hongzhi and his teachings appeared in the press, Falun Gong practitioners responded by staging mass protests around the offices of media outlets that published or broadcast reports, sometimes involving more than a thousand participants per gathering. Some reporters and government officials complained of being harassed by phone calls from defiant practitioners; a few claimed that their residences were being targeted by Falun Gong activists for protests (Xia Ming and Hua Shiping 1999: 87–90). When a popular science magazine published in April 1999 an article that referred to Falun Gong as “sham qigong,” literally thousands of loyal Falun Gong practitioners descended in protest upon the offices of both the magazine and the Tianjin municipal government, resulting in a spate of arrests. With several Tianjin practitioners still in police custody, a group of more than ten thousand Falun Gong activists gathered to stage the silent protest before the leadership compound in Beijing described in the opening paragraphs of this chapter. The official response was to ban Falun Gong and similar groups and to single out practitioners unwilling to renounce their beliefs with coercive measures designed to isolate them from the people.

Yet the implementation of such a ban was anything but simple. One problem faced by the regime was its own promotion during the reform era of the qigong
movement as a healthy and positive social development. The popular enthusiasm for qigong sects was initially not only tolerated but even encouraged by CCP and PRC leaders. One Hong Kong periodical claimed that each of the “Eight Elders” of the Party’s Central Committee during the late 1980s (including Deng Xiaoping himself) personally retained four to five qigong masters for regular specialized treatments and, in some cases, private soothsaying sessions. By the summer of 1990, over 200 qigong adepts were purportedly on the payroll at the Zhongnanhai leadership compound (Li Da 1990: 14–15). Thus, the process by which charismatic qigong masters and their masses of enthusiastic practitioners were excised from the Chinese body politic resembled an operation akin to delicate political surgery. The interpellation, stereotyping, and scapegoating of qigong practitioners necessarily invoked a series of complex internal boundaries that repositioned these subjects outside of the margins of the people and targeted them for special handling by the state.

Constructing the Cult

In an August 1999 statement, the “Ten-Thousand Word Letter to the Party Center,” loyal Falun Gong practitioners argued that the process by which they were being systematically transformed from loyal and law-abiding Chinese citizens into deviant members of society began well before the formal ban imposed on the group at the end of July 1999. Citing the 1996 article published by the Guangming Daily that referred to Li Hongzhi’s magnus opus, Turning the Dharma Wheel (Zhuan Falun), as “spurious science,” and Falun Gong practitioners as “idiots,” the followers charged: “It is well known that the Guangming Daily is the mouthpiece of the State Council, and that a signed commentary probably represents the opinions of certain people in the government.” The “Ten-Thousand Word Letter” also charged that a notice circulated by the Public Security Bureau in 1998 “was labeling citizens as law-breakers and criminals before a conscientious investigation had been made or before any hard evidence had been obtained” (Xia Ming and Hua Shiping 1999: 73–74).

The 1998 circular was followed by an intensification of repressive activities surrounding the group, its members, and its texts. While reports on the qigong movement that appeared in the 1980s and early 1990s overwhelmingly lauded its leaders and adepts for pushing the boundaries of scientific knowledge by testing concepts and ideas loosely related to particle physics, by the mid-1990s, party and state authorities had clearly begun the process of introducing and policing new discursive boundaries that were gradually shifting the qigong movement to the margins of political credibility. By 1998, increasing numbers of newspaper and magazine articles were intimating that some branches of qigong were related to wei kexue (pseudo-science) or, perhaps even more ominously, to fengjian mixin (feudal superstitious beliefs).
The official announcement of the ban on Falun Gong on 22 July 1999 drew a series of linkages between the group and other organizations previously targeted for repression and elimination by the CCP. One legal and discursive strategy deployed by Chinese officials linked Falun Gong to other illegal and unauthorized social organizations, like those the regime claimed had been behind the 1989 unrest ("counterrevolutionary rebellion") centered in and around Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Following the crackdown, a wave of legislation required that all social organizations undergo a process of official review and registration. A decade later, the Ministry of Civil Affairs charged that Falun Gong failed to register “in accordance with the relevant stipulations of the Regulations and Management of Mass Organizations” established in 1989. Accordingly, a Ministry of Public Security notice published alongside the document prohibited “activities that support or publicize Falun Dafa (Falun Gong) such as holding gatherings, parades, or demonstrations in the form of sit-ins or appeals to higher authorities,” as well as any “activities that incite disruption of public order by such means as creating fabrications and distorting facts, intentionally spreading rumors, or other means.”

Two days later, an article appeared on the front page of Fazhi Ribao (Legal System Daily), outlining the legal basis of the state’s case and listing no fewer than nine laws and regulations that the organization had already broken, effectively criminalizing the group and placing it outside of the bounds of state law.

A second discursive and legal strategy employed in the ban accused the Research Society of Falun Gong, its founder Li Hongzhi, and key personnel with “propagating superstition and fallacies.” The term “propagating superstition” recalled the various local-level campaigns to suppress “feudal superstitious activities” pursued in various provinces during the early and mid-1980s. The discursive linking of Falun Gong and related qigong groups with such organizations—including secret societies, sworn brotherhoods, and religious sects not recognized by the state—cast a pall that invoked memories of the campaign to suppress counterrevolutionaries of the early 1950s, and of the violent efforts of the ultra-leftist Red Guards to destroy the “Four Olds” during the Cultural Revolution.

With this legal and discursive groundwork in place, the delicate political surgery required to excise qigong practitioners from within the Chinese body politic proceeded apace, beginning with a purge of ranking officials. The first page of the 23 July 1999 issue of the People’s Daily reprinted a circular from the CCP’s Central Committee, explicitly forbidding members of the Communist Party of all ranks from practicing Falun Gong; also reprinted was a notice from the Ministry of Personnel forbidding state employees from doing the same. Employing nearly identical language, both documents enjoin party and state officials to “strictly observe policy demarcation lines” and engage in “study and education” activities designed to promulgate the new policies banning the organization and to bring about the conversion of Falun Gong practitioners within their ranks. The timing process by which these changes
would be effected was to be “relatively concentrated,” involving a round of meetings—“heart-to-heart talks” among party and state officials—to be followed by a round of criticism and self-criticism sessions.

The documents further outlined the delicate political microsurgery that would split targeted party and state officials into four categories. Those who participated in Falun Gong in a general manner were told to expect no repercussions provided they refrain from practicing Falun Gong of their own volition. “Core” members of Falun Gong who played roles of in the sect’s organizational structure “of an ordinary nature” were ordered to provide an account of their participation and to publicly denounce the organization, after which they could expect to escape without punishment. “Core” members who participated in the organizational structure and propagandizing activities, on the other hand, were promised only administrative punishments if it were determined that they had made “serious mistakes” in the course of their participation. Finally, the documents noted the existence of a “very small minority of backstage personages who harbor political intentions and the planners and organizers who must be resolutely expelled” from the ranks of officialdom. The latter group would either be purged from the party and have their names stricken from the rolls or be released from government service (in the case of state officials) and subjected to serious punishment. Party and state officials who had participated in Falun Gong activities in the past and were willing to withdraw from the group but “for the time being, are unable to set things straight in their minds … may be allowed a period of time to recognize matters and effect the ideological transition.”

One month later, another published circular outlined the manner in which “policy demarcation lines” would be set for Falun Gong practitioners among the general public. All work units and grassroots organizations were instructed to make the same fourfold distinctions among their members: general Falun Gong participants were expected to cease their participation; “core” members of an “ordinary nature” were instructed to report their activities to their work units or grassroots organizations, and denounce Falun Gong; “core” members who may have committed errors were expected to make a “conscientious confession of their participation” and “actively expose the inside story of the Falun Gong organization” before they could be promised leniency; and a “very small minority of core elements who have organized and plotted behind the scenes” would be charged with crimes and punished accordingly. Like those that preceded it, the circular advocated leniency but warned that those who refused to comply would find themselves designated “objects of political domination” and “struggle targets” by the People’s Republic (Xia Ming and Hua Shiping 1999: 52–55).

An editorial published in the People’s Daily on 27 October 1999, entitled “Falun Gong Is Nothing But a Cult,” signaled a crucial turning point in the ban and ushered in a new phase of elevated political exclusion. Whereas the earlier published circulars and notices counseled leniency for the contrite under the rubric of “curing the illness to save the patient,” the October editorial painted a far starker portrait of the group and its leader than had previously appeared in
the official press. Noting that previous documents from party and state officials had already determined that Falun Gong was an “illegal organization” that had propagated “superstitions” and “fallacies,” the new editorial further denounced the group as a “cult” or xiejiao (evil and heretical sect).

[W]hen the fraudulent nature of Li Hongzhi’s teachings was fully revealed, Falun Gong organizations fell apart, and the absolute majority of Falun Gong practitioners became determined to make a clear break with their past. However, a handful of practitioners, who were still deluded and entranced by Falun Gong’s deceitful doctrines, and who refused to face the appalling facts of the tragedies that belief in it had caused, persisted in allowing themselves to be controlled by Li Hongzhi from afar…. How on earth can Falun Gong exert so strong an evil influence on its followers’ minds? Only a cult exhibits such features. (Renmin Ribao 1999: 1)

The article listed six characteristics that define cults as a specific type of harmful and illegal organization—a tightly organized, hierarchical structure; a reliance on “mind control”; the fabrication of “heretical ideas to deceive and entrap the people”; participation in money-making schemes; a basic secrecy of association; and practices that endanger social order—and described how Falun Gong manifested each of the six traits. Likening the group to others around the globe, including Jim Jones's People's Temple, the Branch Davidians, and Aum Shinrikyo in Japan, the article placed the ban in a global context by comparing it to measures taken by other governments to suppress cultic activities among their citizens. In conclusion, the “policy demarcation lines” described in earlier articles were transformed into a hardened boundary, with readers being urged to pay “close attention to the applicable scope of relevant policies with a view to uniting the vast majority and isolating the tiny minority of diehards.”

The central government stressed shortly after this campaign started that different policies should be applied to different people so as to unite, educate, and convert the vast majority of practitioners, while at the same time isolating and cracking down on the tiny recusant minority. Those wire-pullers, organizers, and core members of the Falun Gong organization who refuse to mend their ways, follow Li Hongzhi, antagonize the people, and violate the law should be punished severely. The majority of practitioners, who were deceived and victimized due to a lack of knowledge about the heretical nature of Falun Gong have now broken with Falun Gong. Governments at all levels should help … these people … rather than confuse them with the diehard cult followers. (Renmin Ribao 1999: 1)

The editorial signaled the deepening of the “conflict discourse” against the designated sect, as evidenced by the stereotyping of the out-group’s members and the dehumanization and scapegoating of its continuing practitioners. By portraying practitioners as a small group who had abandoned their own families and all semblance of reason so as to “antagonize the people and violate the law,” the article attempted to unite the law-abiding people in a “grave, complicated and fierce struggle … to eradicate the evil forces of Falun Gong” (Renmin Ribao 1999: 1).
State-Sanctioned Violence

There are few reliable statistics on the extent of the state-sponsored violence enacted against Falun Gong practitioners, as well as members of other similarly targeted groups on the Chinese mainland. However, one commentary dated 7 September 2003 lauded the success of the government’s campaign to eradicate Falun Gong, initiated in July 1999 “by the urgent demands of the broad masses of the people, and carried out in accordance with the law.” The commentator noted with satisfaction: “The entire country, from top to bottom, appears to have responded to the evil heretical organization Falun Gong, which scurries through the streets like rats being beaten by masses of screaming people…. We must exterminate the cult, and the evil must be totally eradicated.”

Recent Amnesty International reports estimate a death toll of over seven hundred practitioners due to torture or ill-treatment at the hands of Chinese authorities (Amnesty International 2003). A Human Rights Watch Asia (2003) report noted that a localized crackdown on the prestigious Qinghua University campus in Beijing—often hailed as China’s MIT—resulted in the detention of some three hundred staff and students suspected of being Falun Gong practitioners or sympathizers. In December, a Beijing court sentenced six academics to terms of up to twelve years for distributing Falun Gong materials. Another nineteen Falun Gong members were tried for hacking into television stations in the cities of Chongqing and Changchun to broadcast information about the organization; these individuals received sentences ranging between four and twenty years (Amnesty International 2003).

For its part, Falun Gong has been driven largely underground on the Chinese mainland, but scattered reports suggest that the organization continues to cling to a tenuous existence despite the ban. As overt state-sponsored violence against the sect continues, it is unclear what types of violent measures, if any, the group has been willing to deploy against the state and its agents. The best-known episode authored by alleged Falun Gong practitioners was corroborated by a CNN news crew based in Beijing: the self-immolation of a group of five alleged practitioners in Tiananmen Square on 23 January 2001. Timed to take place on the auspicious first day of the Chinese (lunar) New Year, a group of seven people, including a mother and her twelve-year-old daughter, made their way from the small city of Kaifeng in north-central China to Beijing. Once in the capital, the group appears to have wandered about the city for several hours before turning up in Tiananmen Square late in the evening, carrying soda bottles that were in fact filled with gasoline. One middle-aged man appeared to signal the group, and they took up various physical postures associated with the practice of Falun Gong after dousing themselves with the gasoline and then setting themselves alight. Two would-be members of the group, for whatever reason, were not successful in immolating themselves, but of the five that were, only the mother died at the scene. The other four were surrounded by police officers, who extinguished the fires and transported them...
to a local hospital for treatment. The twelve-year-old, who was filmed in the hospital and evoked a groundswell of horror and sympathy from the Chinese public, later died of her injuries. Falun Gong sources abroad have expressed skepticism about the incident, claiming that the participants were not in fact practitioners, and have furthermore made available on their Web site a video documentary purporting to show police officers clubbing to death the burning woman who expired on the scene. Falun Gong spokespersons argue that the incident was staged to discredit the group and incite popular support for the crackdown (Vermander 2001: 4–6).

Driven even further underground in the aftermath of the collective self-immolation incident, Falun Gong practitioners resorted to more technologically elaborate means of subverting the state’s ban. In the months following Master Li Hongzhi’s move to the United States in 1994, the Foreign Liaison Group of the Falun Dafa Research Society gradually shifted the brunt of their organizational work to virtual reality. The movement developed an elaborate Web ring linking together approved Falun Gong sites, some with electronic bulletin boards and e-mail distribution lists, all in an impressive range of languages.

Falun Gong activists abroad have continued highly public forms of political activism, such as engaging in mass protest demonstrations and parades, and lobbying foreign governments for support. Mainland Chinese practitioners, by contrast, have resorted to a highly secretive cell-like structure, and continue to employ Web-based communication strategies. Using untraceable Web-based e-mail accounts accessed in Internet cafés, erecting firewalls that detect signals from computers attempting to identify particular users, and logging on to banned Web sites via proxy servers, some mainland practitioners have apparently managed to elude detection. The most technologically savvy among them use encryption programs and frequently switch Internet accounts, operating systems, hard-disk drives, and telephone lines to conceal their identities while disseminating information and texts to other believers. Several Falun Gong Web sites provide instructions on how to evade official surveillance by using proxy servers to log on in order to view or download banned information. Practitioners still in China continue to use the Internet to upload information on the ongoing crackdown to those abroad.

The initial response of Chinese authorities to Falun Gong’s leap into cyberspace was the creation of a ring of anti–Falun Gong Web sites to broadcast the state’s official view of the group. However, the effectiveness of this measure was uncertain at best, as it was unclear how many Internet users were actively seeking and visiting sites broadcasting anti–Falun Gong messages. More recently, Chinese officials have focused on controlling and surveilling Internet use. Throughout the 1990s, Ministry of State Security agents routinely visited the offices of Internet service providers to install updated monitoring devices in order to track e-mail and filter access to Web sites. The list of banned sites continues to grow and now even includes some search engines.
that permit users to view “cached” versions of documents without linking directly to specific sites. For two weeks in September 2002, officials blocked access to the search engine Google, diverting Internet traffic instead to sites providing officially approved content. When access to the search engine was restored, users reported selective blocking that was effected in part through use of “packet sniffers”—devices that are capable of scanning Internet transmissions to block text containing sensitive word combinations. Yahoo’s China site escaped blockage when the company agreed, along with some three hundred others, to sign the “Public Pledge on Self-Discipline for the China Internet Industry.” The signatories voluntarily remove information from their Web sites that might possibly jeopardize state security, disrupt social stability, or spread superstition (Human Rights Watch Asia 2003). Yet such measures have not put an end to all Falun Gong Web traffic, and Chinese newspapers routinely carry news of individuals arrested and tried for uploading or downloading materials related to the group.

**Conclusion: Transnational Sectarianism and Exclusive Nationalism**

While many both inside and outside the scholarly community continue to see the modern nation-state as the unfortunate target of divisive and secessionist ethnic and sectarian conflict, I have attempted to demonstrate that episodes of collective violence can also arise directly from the larger state-making process. The forces of exclusive nationalism, by which state authorities define specific strata of subject populations as legitimate targets for coercion and control, can and do create racial and ethnic tensions that are used to divide and regulate the societies over which they preside. Anthony Marx (1998) demonstrated this process in his comparative study of the racial and ethnic categories used in the United States, South Africa, and Brazil. Gyan Pandey (1992) and Partha Chatterjee (1993) have both persuasively argued that the British colonial regime in India generated ethnic- and caste-based communalist discourses that were later used to legitimate exclusionary policies that supported elitist development.

Sectarian divides, too, can be created by state elites and then wielded by them for a wide variety of ends. Ussama Makdisi’s (1996) study of postwar Lebanon has shown that “[w]hile the nation is projected as inclusive, stable and democratic, sectarianism is depicted as exclusionary, undemocratic and disordered.… ‘Sectarianism,’ however, is a neologism born in the age of nationalism to signify the antithesis of nation; its meaning is predicated on and constructed against a territorially bounded liberal nation-state.… In the modern reconstructed nation, sectarianism serves as a metaphor for the unwanted past.”

As the case of Falun Gong demonstrates, a similar process involving exclusive nationalism and the invention of sectarianism is at work today in China.
Collective sectarian identities associated with specific qigong practices did not exist as such until the reform-era state created them. Legal and discursive strategies were used to create “sects” and then to transform them into dangerous antistate “cults” in 1999. At the heart of the mass campaign to eradicate “evil and heretical sects” was a state-sponsored and state-generated effort to delineate members of a target group and reposition them with respect to the political center: not as one with the people, on whose behalf the state claims to act, but instead as an in-dwelling group targeted for control, violence, and abuse, and as legitimate objects of political struggle. In so doing, central officials sought to bolster the state’s image, not only as the legitimate representative of the collective interests and will of the people, but also as the repository for modern scientific rationalism in the face of resurgent “feudal superstitions” and “pseudo-scientific fallacies.” The violence that has since ensued, overwhelmingly originated by the agents of the state, has sought out practitioners and their sympathizers as its primary targets.

This violence and repression have produced a unique hybrid form of politico-religious mobilization that I have referred to here and elsewhere as cybersectarianism. Targeted groups like Falun Gong use extensive Web-based strategies of text distribution, recruitment, and information sharing to fashion transnational media campaigns with the goal of maintaining pressure on the Chinese state. Partially funded by overseas Chinese communities in nations where they operate more openly, some groups have pooled resources to lobby international authorities for support. One result of this dynamic has been the creation of small groups of practitioners who remain highly dispersed and largely anonymous within the larger social context and who operate in relative secrecy while still being linked remotely to a larger global network. Overseas supporters provide funding and support, while domestic practitioners distribute tracts, participate in acts of resistance, and share information on the internal situation with outsiders. In the case of Falun Gong, a reliance on the Internet and other high-tech resources has created a viable virtual community that transcends political borders, allowing members to engage in collective study via e-mail and to use online chat rooms and Web-based message boards to pursue their collective spiritual goals. However, some cybersects, including Aum Shinrikyo in Japan and the apparently wide-ranging al Qaeda, do engage in what some refer to as “repertoires of electronic contention,” using Web sites and e-mail to mobilize participants for protest and contention, as well as “hactivism” (acts of electronic disruption) and even cyberterrorism (acts of physical harm caused by the disruption of power grids, traffic control, and other systems of resource delivery and public safety) (Costanza-Chock 2003).

This is not to suggest that the Internet has ushered in a brave new epoch of organizational freedom across the globe, or that the advent of the information era spells the beginning of the end of traditionally repressive state structures. Ronald Reagan’s 1989 prediction that “the Goliath of totalitarianism...
will be brought down by the David of the microchip” has certainly not come to pass, and the Web has done little, as of yet, to measurably weaken authoritarianism—in China or elsewhere (Kalathil and Boas 2003). Yet what the case of Falun Gong and other cybersects suggests instead is that new technologies have provided new opportunities, both for state authorities who seek enhanced control over their subject populations and for those who seek to subvert them.

Notes


3. A classic work in the field in this vein is Gellner (1994). Widely read studies on the concept of citizenship, including those by T. H. Marshall (1991) and Reinhard Bendix (1964), agree that citizenship rights may be allocated preferentially to certain individuals or groups, and that the extension of universal citizenship may experience various delays and lags, but that the trend toward universal inclusion is the norm, and permanent and deliberate exclusion the exception to the rule.

4. Both documents were published in Renmin Ribao (People’s Daily), overseas edition, 23 July 1999, 1.

5. “Qudi ’Falun Gong’ you fa keyi” (The Ban on “Falun Gong” Has Legal Basis), Fazhi Ribao (Legal System Daily), 25 July 1999, 1. However, as one recent article propounded, the state’s deployment of law in its crackdown “is rooted in its historical preference for an ‘instrumentalist’ approach to law and social control … and the regime’s response … has adversely affected internal debates concerning the importance of judicial independence and the substitution of judicial interpretation for legislative responsibility in the justice system” (Keith and Lin 2003: 627).


9. In 2006, as this essay goes to press, Google, Yahoo, and other Internet-based firms are being roundly criticized for their willingness to cooperate with Chinese censors.
References


