

The New Living-Room War: Media Campaigns and Falun Gong¹

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Ien Ang writes of the “living-room war” as a war, between media outlets, for the market share, operating according to the logic of profitability.² Driven by the logic of global capitalism, this living-room war is constantly infiltrating the living rooms for the “eyeball share” of the audiences. However, there is another aspect in the living-room war that Ang has written about in her audience studies but failed to engage, the “mind share” war. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the mind-share war as a “new living-room war” within the context of propaganda clashes between the Chinese state and Falun Gong (or Falun Dafa), a self-cultivation and quasi-religious practice banned in China since July 1999. I examine the new living-room war as a war of media campaigns between media outlets of two oppositional ideological camps (the Chinese state and Falun Gong). I argue that each side employs various media and deploys multiple strategies in visual representations to convince and persuade audiences in their living rooms in order to win their mind share.

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² Ien Ang, “Living-room wars: new technologies, audience measurement and the tactics of television consumption,” in *Consuming Technologies: Media and Information in Domestic Spaces*, edited by Roger Silverstone and Eric Hirsch, London and New York: Routledge, 1992. Also see Ien Ang, *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

“Media campaign war” refers to the systematic, sustained, and institutionalized propaganda clashes between two parties, through the ideological apparatuses of the media. It dwells upon ideological differences and works on representational conflicts. Both sides can be hegemonic and manipulative in the contestation of visibility.

Most literature on Falun Gong, from both journalistic and academic fields, has been produced in recent years. The Chinese media, pro-government scientists and scholars have ardently denounced Falun Gong as an “evil cult,” and its practitioners “cultists” or innocent people blinded by the cult leader Li Hongzhi for his own personal gains who is aided by international (read: Western) anti-China hostile forces. Falun Gong’s ardent disciples would argue that Li is a modern-day prophet and represents an ultimate truth whose significance and global influence are comparable to that of Jesus, Buddha, and Mohammed. Western media and other third-party organizations, however, tend to associate Falun Gong and the persecution of Falun Gong with human rights and China’s notorious human rights records.³ Scholars of Chinese studies in religion, history, and politics suggest that Falun Gong is an intriguing part of Chinese spiritual continuum, an integral part of Chinese cultural tradition and cultural revitalization movement, and an outgrowth of China’s participation in global capitalism.⁴

My aim in this paper is not to offer any judgment or comment on the discursive contestations on the nature of Falun Gong. Nor do I intend to examine the complex historical, spiritual, religious, and political contexts of the appearance, growth, and transnational appeal of Falun Gong, which can be found elsewhere.⁵ Rather, I take Patsy Rahn’s advice to go “beyond the headlines” to look into the politics of representations of Falun Gong rather than the politics of Falun Gong itself.⁶ In other words, I am not going to focus on how Falun Gong grows and varies within Chinese cultural and political traditions, or why media representations of Falun

³ Human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Human Rights in China immediately responded to the ban. Human Rights in China, “Crackdown on Falun Gong demonstrates clear violations of human rights,” 22 July 1999, available online from http://www.iso.hrichina.org.iso.news_item.adp?news_id=539 (accessed 24 March 2004); Human Rights Watch, “U.N. asked to intervene to protect Falun Gong’s members rights,” 22 July 1999, available online from <http://www.hrw.org/press/1999/jul/china2207.html> (accessed 24 March 2004)

⁴ David Ownby, Transnational China Project Commentary: “Falungong as a Cultural Revitalization Movement: An Historian Looks at Contemporary China”, available online from <http://www.ruf.rice.edu/~tchina/commentary/ownby0398.html> (accessed 25 November 2002); Li Lunsheng, “Falun Gong de shehui zongjiao yinsu” (Social and religious elements of Falun Gong), *Zhengming*, No. 264, September 1999.

⁵ Besides studies done by established China scholars, students of religion, politics, and history are also contributing to the Falun Gong studies. For example, see Matthew John Noonan, “Spinning the Dharma Wheel: Towards a Reinterpretation of the Falun Gong,” MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 2001, chapter three “The Internationalisation of the Falun Gong.” Also see Matthew Glenn Thurgood, “China, Cults and International Relations: The Case of the Falun Gong,” MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 2003.

⁶ Patsy Rahn, “The Falun Gong: Beyond the Headlines,” *Cultic Studies Journal*, Vol. 17, 2000, p. 168.

Gong vary, but to problematize how the media representations of Falun Gong affect the everyday realities of contemporary China.

Media-Campaign-War-Home

Media, war, and campaign are closely related to and readily paired with one another, as in “media war,” “media campaign,” and “war campaign.” *Media war* can mean “media-plotted war” as shown in the “007” movie *Tomorrow Never Dies*, or “cultural war” staged in the media as exemplified in the generational politics of Australian intelligentsia.⁷ It can mean “information war,” the real warfare fought along the grids of technology, war facilitated by (and completely relying on) the technical media to store, transmit, analyze, and compute information of the war.⁸ It can also mean “war in the media” or mediated war, where the technologized gaze of the global media becomes a defining character of modern warfare.⁹ Media war relates directly to political campaign or propaganda. The use of media as a tool and instrument of propaganda and spin, and a dissemination belt for officially managed war information has been an integral part of modern wars.¹⁰

Thus media war can mean *propaganda war* where ideological and moral justifications are sought through *media campaigns*. In the aftermaths of the September-11 terrorists’ attacks, for example, American media were recruited in the arsenal of mass propaganda against terrorism. In the propaganda war that led to the war on terrorism and Iraq, President Bush

⁷ In *Tomorrow Never Dies* (2003, featuring Pierce Brosnan and Hong Kong/Malaysian Michelle Yeoh), a Western media mogul schemes to create a war between China and Britain in South China Sea. The collaboration between a British secret service agent and a Chinese agent uncovers the plot of the media war manufactured by the media mogul and prevents a military confrontation between the two powers. In *Gangland: Cultural Elites and the New Generationalism* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1997), Mark Davis writes that it is in the media that emerges “a Realpolitik of generationalism” where the elite/old generation occupies the trench to defend themselves and where the younger generation occupies a vantage point in their familiarity with new technologies and knowledge of the media and with media’s vulnerability to new ideas and changes. The media work puts the younger generation in a favorable position to intervene in the cultural hegemony that the cultural elites try to perpetuate.

⁸ Friedrich A. Kittler, *Literature, Media, Information systems*, Amsterdam: OPA, 1997.

⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.

¹⁰ Take America for example: Since the debacle in Vietnam when media reports contributed to the anti-war public opinion and reversal of the war policy in the US (Pentagon blames the media coverage for their loss in Vietnam), a virtual merger between the military (government) and the media can be seen in Gulf Wars and War on Terrorism. The White House and the Pentagon have successfully framed media coverage of the warfares. See Danny Schechter, *Media Wars: News at a Time of Terror*, Lanham, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003. The book examines the coverage of September 11 from mainstream US media networks and the government’s approach to manage propaganda during wartimes.

received a “meteoric boost,” as the media presented the President and his administration as safeguards of justice in its newly self-claimed role as the savior of “civilization.”¹¹

“*Media campaign*” is the most familiar strategy to address socio-political events staged and facilitated through the media by the political centers. The Gulf War for example is a media event as well as a propaganda event for the American government and its military.¹² Media campaign/propaganda has been a defining character of Chinese media culture. Mass media have been playing a central role in mass mobilizations since the May-Fourth movements in 1919, the onset of revolutions in modern China. From its earliest days the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has recognized and tried to harness the power of the mass media to propagate its policies, build social consensus, and mobilize the populace for its socialist revolutionary programs.¹³ The media remain a powerful machinery of governmentality and ideological apparatus in propagating the “thought work” even after the “propaganda state” has loosened (not lost) control over the “spiritual civilization” in post-Mao eras.¹⁴ The return of Hong Kong in 1997, for example, can be viewed as a global media spectacle manipulated by the Chinese government as a propaganda campaign for domestic and international audiences.¹⁵

But media are themselves neutral entities and mediums of communication. Following Foucault, we can say that the power of the media resides not with those who design the media but those who use them.¹⁶ In mobilizing large groups of people to take to the streets and squares, to support or oppose certain political agendas, and participate in symbolically charged performances as a group, community, or a nation, the mass media remain effective ways “to challenge or defend the legitimacy of those who claim to embody the political

¹¹ Danny Schechter, *Media Wars*, p. 13.

¹² Philip M. Taylor, *War and the Media: Propaganda and Persuasion in the Gulf War*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, c1992.

¹³ J. Hawkins, *Mass Communication in China*, London: Longman, 1982; B. Womack ed, *Media and the Chinese Public: A Survey of the Beijing Media Audience*, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1986. Franklin W. Houn, *To change a Nation: Propaganda and Indoctrination in Communist China*, East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University, 1961.

¹⁴ Daniel C. Lynch, *After the Propaganda State: Media, Politics, and “Thought Work” in Reformed China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.

¹⁵ Chin-Chuan Lee, Joseph Man Chan, Zhongdang Pan, and Clement Y.K. So, *Global Media Spectacle: News War Over Hong Kong*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002.

¹⁶ The exercise of power in media mobilization can be seen in the student protestors on Tiananmen Square in 1989 who skillfully utilized the popular media at home and Western media to propagate their democracy-champion-turned-victims-of-violence images. A more recent case is the popular use of the media (the new media especially) during the 2003 SARS outbreak in China to advance an agenda of antithesis and promote socio-political changes. (See my article “Talking, Linking, Clicking: The Politics of AIDS and SARS,” *Positions*, forthcoming.)

center.”¹⁷ When a counter media campaign is staged mobilizing a vast range of social and human capital to propagate an alternative system of “thought work,” media campaigns and media wars are merged into a total (media) war, the *media campaign war*.

Media campaign wars are actualized beyond the “three contractual partners” (organizers, media producers and audience) that Dayan and Katz suggest of in media events.¹⁸ There is a fourth one: rivals or opponents. Unlike media events that celebrate reconciliation rather than conflict, media campaign wars dwell upon and highlight differences and conflicts. Both sides can be hegemonic and manipulative in their strategies and performances. And both sides are organizers, producers, and performers in the media campaigns. The systematic, sustained, and institutionalized propaganda clashes between the Chinese state and Falun Gong is such a case in point.

Since April 25 1999, Falun Gong, or rather the persecution of Falun Gong, has made headlines of the world media as “the event” when tens of millions of Falun Gong followers surrounded Zhongnanhai, the Chinese equivalence of Kremlin, in protest of unfair treatments by the official media and police. The April-25 event becomes the onset of continuous clashes between Falun Gong and the Chinese government. The technologized gaze of the media transmits the real politics of the streets, Zhongnanhai, and Tiananmen Square into the living rooms of spectators and transforms the media campaign war into a media spectacle.¹⁹

Postmodern obsession and saturation with media spectacles has seen the blurring of the boundary between the private and the public. Media event, for example, transforms the home into a public space, according to Dayan and Katz.²⁰ The consequence is the blurring between the “domesticated politics” and the “politics of the domestic.” In the former, there is a long tradition of criticism and bemoaning on the transformation of the private individual from a member of the public (citizen) to a private consumer. From the Frankfurt School, Jurgen Habermas to post-Habermas public-sphere critics, modernists have lamented over the loss of the “public citizen” and the “public sphere” in the mass media saturated “society of the

¹⁷ Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, “Mass Media and Mass Actions,” in *Media and Revolution: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Jeremy D. Popkin, The University Press of Kentucky, 1995, p. 214.

¹⁸ Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press, 1992.

¹⁹ Chinese media, Falun Gong, and third-party media (mainly Western media) responded to the clashes between the State and the “cult” with numerous “headline” reports. The electronic media have especially played an important role in transmitting the Realpolitik of the streets into a media spectacle in the domestic. In this paper I focus on the constructing (and performing) the media spectacle by the Chinese state and Falun Gong. I examine Western media’s role in constructing the media spectacle in a separate paper.

²⁰ Dayan and Katz, *Media Events*, pp. 127-133.

spectacle,”²¹ where the Realpolitik is dominated by the logic of capitalism and becomes domesticated.²² At the same time there are others who celebrate the arrival of the latter, the politics of the domestic. J.B. Thompson for example writes of the rise of mediated quasi-interaction and mediated publicness as new options and new dynamics offered to an individual for self-experimentation and social intervention.²³ John Fiske, following the everyday politics thesis of Michael de Certeau, celebrates the popular culture based on the pleasure of consumption in the domestic.²⁴ What the postmodernists suggest is that it is the media’s mediation of political life and public affairs that constitutes the significant factor of a private consumer-citizen’s relation to the society and the world as a whole. It is in the everyday life of the living room that “[a]gency and modernity (and post-modernity) meet” and “that meeting is expressed in the ideology and activity of consumption.”²⁵

Consuming media spectacles becomes the defining feature of our postmodern everyday realities of the domestic. In the postmodern media culture, targeting the “living rooms” is both for the “eyeball share” (market share) and the “mind share” (public opinion). The wars for “eyeball share” and “mind share” are in fact integrated in the political economy of the postmodern media culture. But the singularity of the media campaign war between the (Chinese) State and Falun Gong rests not in the integration but in the split of the “mind share” war and the “eyeball share” war. As discussed in the following, presenting the war to audiences in their living rooms is less about the consumption of the media and voyeurism than the manipulation of the media and the play on visibility politics on the part of the Chinese state and Falun Gong for their moral and ideological justifications.²⁶

The State’s Media Campaign

The Chinese government has staged a massive media campaign against the “cult” since July 1999. The living rooms of the Chinese were bombarded with messages from both print and

²¹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, New York: Zone Books, 1994.

²² There is a huge body of literature on the emergence of domesticated politics. Jurgen Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989) is a piece of masterwork to start with.

²³ John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995.

²⁴ John Fiske, *Television Culture*, London and New York: Routledge, 1987.

²⁵ Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life*, London and New York: Routledge, p 174.

²⁶ It should be noted that, while the Chinese state regards Falun Gong as a “cult,” Falun Gong also talks of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a “cult.” The media campaign war between the two parties is therefore a war on “cults.” An example on the CCP as a cult can be found in “special edition” of *New Epoch* (a Falun Gong weekly in Australia), “yige qinghua xuexi de diedang rensheng,” [life of a Qinghua graduate: Awakening from the lies of Red Dynasty—To all Chinese fellowmen] written by Zhao Ming (handout during the 5th anniversary of April-25 incident, 2004).

electronic media, especially in the first few months after the banning on Falun Gong on 22 July. The Chinese government has mobilized all sorts of media to demonize Falun Gong and reiterate its anti-cult themes, while arresting thousands of Falun Gong followers who refuse to renounce their beliefs. Television, radio, and print media join the media campaign on cults, with China Central Television (CCTV) and *Peoples Daily* taking the lead. Television plays a central role in the anti-Falun Gong and anti-cults media campaign.



Cartoons on Li Hongzhi and Falun Gong from Chinese official publications:

Left: "The entire world must heed me, otherwise it's nothing. If I cannot save you, no one else can."

Right: In an accident, one person shouts "Let's rush him to hospital!" The female Falun Gong follower blocks the way of the ambulance and medical worker, "Don't worry about him. Master Li will protect him." Available from <http://www2kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Reln270/FalunGong/22.htm> (accessed on 20 March 2004)

In the weeks following the crackdown, thirty-minute evening news became one-hour anti-Falun Gong special reports, followed by more lengthy investigative news and news analyses to strengthen the "keynote tune" (zhu xuanlu) of the major news reports. Wherever one turned there were posters and signs denouncing the "cult;" on every channel one tuned to there were reports to de-legitimize Falun Gong as an "evil cult" or "killer cult" and discredit its leader Li Hongzhi as an archetypal doomsday cult leader with an under-rated educational level, a criminal and corrupt swindler amassing a large fortune (on which he did not pay taxes), and a pawn of international forces hostile to China and Chinese. The Chinese government uses strategies that combine exposing Falun Gong's unscientific nature with anti-cult pronouncements borrowed from the counter-cult movements in other countries to denounce Li and Falun Gong. A barrage of media reports link the "cult" to the Branch Davidians, the

Japanese Aum Shinryko, Jim Jones' Solar Temple, and the "Restore the Ten Commandments" sect in Uganda to justify the banning on Falun Gong.²⁷

In the mean time, the Chinese government is increasingly using the Internet to attack Li and Falun Gong. It has set up anti-Falun Gong websites and encouraged major Internet service providers to set up anti-Falun Gong web pages. Extensive articles have been written and transmitted over the cyberspace.²⁸ These web sites or pages are generally the electronic versions of the mainstream media, with hyperlinks to other anti-cult sites and more detailed descriptions of state regulations and statements. At the same time, all Falun Gong and pro-Falun Gong websites are blocked and inaccessible from China. Anybody who uses the Internet to disseminate pro-Falun Gong messages or provide email services to (suspected) Falun Gong activists is arrested under the crime of "subversion of the state." Noticing that users can circumvent its firewall by using a proxy server, the government is making every intelligent attempt to control the "uncontrollable" by strengthening the team of cyber-police to regulate Internet cafes and find cyber-dissidents.²⁹ It invests time and money in acquiring and developing new software and hardware to control the Internet content,³⁰ and even employs hackers to attack Falun Gong websites.³¹

²⁷ As claimed by the Chinese government, the banning of Falun Gong "not only complies with international rights instruments but also follows the common practice of all other governments in the world regarding cults". See "Chinese Ambassador defends government banning of Falun Gong," Xinhua News Agency, 21 March 2000, available online from <http://ppFalunGong.china.com.cn/baodao/200322/01e.html> (accessed 9 January 2004)

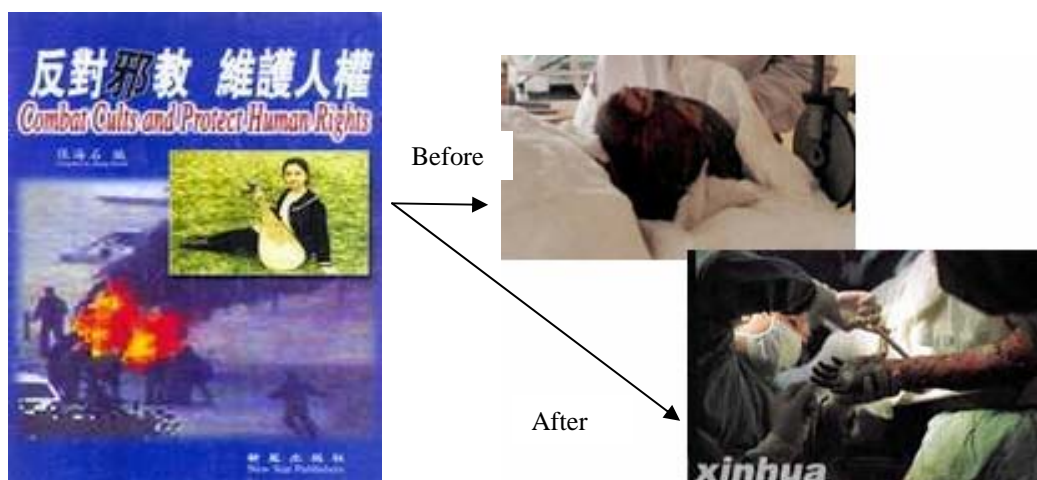
²⁸ See official anti-cults and anti-Falun Gong websites in "Appendix."

²⁹ Cyber-police arrest democracy organizers, human-rights activists, Falun Gong members, scholars, and other cyber activists. See Nina Hachigian, "China's Cyber Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 80, March/April 2001, available from <http://www.rand.org/nsrd/capp/cyberstrategy.html> (accessed September 2002). CCTV reported that in November 2001 five Falun Gong diehards were arrested and sentenced for illegally setting up a Falun Gong website, dissemination of Falun Gong literature and compact disks in Xinjiang, available from www.yangqing.com.cn/1m/851/12/74229.html (accessed November 2003)

³⁰ Greg Sinclair, "The Internet in China: Information Revolution or Authoritarian Solution?" available from <http://www.geocities.com/gelaige70/FalunGong.pdf> (accessed 15 March 2004)

³¹ Hacking and counter-hacking are inglorious actions that neither party would admit openly. Despite the denial from the Chinese government, there are reports in western media that Falun Gong websites experienced hacking, and many of the hackings were found originated from Chinese police bureau or the Public Security Ministry. See, for example, AP, July 31, 1999. Regarding Falun Gong hacking Chinese official websites, I have not seen any report so far. But my experience working as a journalist in Chinese official media tells me that there are cases of Falun Gong hacking Chinese official websites. The website of the television station I once worked with (www.jstv.com) was hacked once by Falun Gong, but the hacking incident was kept at a low profile, and only stayed with the IT administrator, the station boss, and provincial public security bureau.

The “market logic,” stressed repeatedly in the commercialization of the media and cultural industries, has given way to the “party logic” in the virulent media campaign on “cults.”³² It carries a high price tag: millions of dollars, time, and people have been involved in the anti-Falun Gong and anti-cult campaign. CCTV alone lost more than 60 million yuan (approximately USD 7.5 million) of its revenue from advertisements in the anti-Falun Gong campaign in July 1999,³³ which did not include the hours, people, equipment, and money spent to produce the media bombardment. The high price of the media war on Falun Gong, however, is not without paid-off results. Visual media have tremendous power to influence public opinions. Television images of victims of Falun Gong and their testimonials created a direct impact on television audiences. The images of deformed bodies of self-immolators at the Tiananamen Square in January 2001 further dispelled doubt, indifference, or even antagonism to the anti-cult campaign in many Chinese living rooms. Television images of emotionally charged hospital scenes of victims of self-immolation, repeated (contrasting) images of the college student and the primary-school girl before and after the incident rang true to many audiences that “the nature of Falun Gong is cult that destroys lives” and “the Party’s decision [to ban Falun Gong and other cults] is wise, correct, and timely.”³⁴



Book cover of “Combat Cults and Protect Human Rights,” from CCTV official website www.yangqing.com.cn (accessed 20 March 2004); photos of burnt face, hand and arm are from www.mingjing.com.cn (accessed 20 March 2004)

Observers view the vitriolic media campaign against “cults” as “a saturation-propaganda offensive, reminiscent in its intensity to the strident sloganeering of the Cultural Revolution,

³² For a study of the “market logic” and the “party logic,” see Yuezhi Zhao, *Media, Market, and Democracy in China: Between the Party Line and the Bottom Line*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998.

³³ Zhang Yong, “From Masses to Audience: Changing Media Ideologies and Practices in Reform China”, *Journalism Studies*, vol. 1, no. 4, 2000, p. 626.

³⁴ From CCTV’s investigative news program “News Focus” (jiaodian fangtan): “Cult Nature, Life Destruction,” broadcast on 30 January 2001.

in which millions were punished for being of the wrong class or consciousness.”³⁵ The expansion from the anti-Falun Gong campaign to a broader anti-cult campaign that encompasses a wide range of unofficial religious and spiritual groups and heterodox sects indicates how seriously Chinese officials view any obstacles to its vision of economic and social progress, order, and legitimacy.³⁶ In face of numerous criticisms from world leaders and human rights organizations, China’s media campaign on cults has increasingly resorted to universally recognized terminologies such as human rights and the rule of law.³⁷ As the title of the feature program from CCTV’s anti-Falun Gong website suggests, China’s war on Falun Gong is staged within the bounds of law and international practices to “combat cults and protect human rights.”

Falun Gong’s Media Campaign

In face of the victimization and persecution from the Chinese government, Falun Gong stages a counter media campaign, to reveal the “truth” about itself and “what’s happening in China.” Raising awareness of Falun Gong and the persecution of Falun Gong in China to world audiences has become the gist of the “Fa-rectification,” a term that has been widely used by Falun Gong followers to incorporate “studying and validating the Fa” (Falun Dafa), “clarifying the truth,” and “sending forth righteous thoughts” (spreading the Fa and offer salvation to all human beings).³⁸ Li Hongzhi and his followers are media savvy and highly media conscious. They utilize their own global media networks of the Internet, newspapers, magazines, media production studios, radio and television broadcasts to produce and distribute newsletters, leaflets, booklets, and VCDs to individuals and households, so as to “send forth righteous thoughts” to the world.

Inside China Falun Gong followers have changed their strategies from a high-profile showdown in protests and demonstrations outside state media institutions and on Tiananmen Square to a guerrilla media warfare with the regime. They send a barrage of mysterious, automated voice messages praising Falun Gong to mainland phones; they slip pro-Falun Gong content into official Chinese newspapers; and they break into local terrestrial television broadcasts and sabotage local cable TV transmission lines to relay their own printed

³⁵ Danny Schechter, *Falun Gong’s Challenge to China*, p. 11

³⁶ Nancy N. Chen, “Healing Sects and Anti-Cult Campaigns,” *The China Quarterly*, 2003, pp.505-520. Jason Kindopp, “China’s War on ‘Cult’,” *Current History*, Sep 2002, pp. 259-266.

³⁷ Ronald C. Keith and Zhiqiu Lin, “The ‘Falun Gong Problem’: Politics and the Struggle for the Rule of Law in China,” *The China Quarterly*, 2003, pp.623-642.

³⁸ E.g. “To Fellow Practitioners (updated September 7, 2002)” from <http://clearwisdom.net/emh/msg11.html> (accessed 23 March 2003)

material.³⁹ They hijack the Sinosat satellite signals to insert pro-Falun Gong videos and slogans to the mainland audiences. CCTV and CETV (China Education Television), the only two national television networks, were both hijacked. During the World Cup soccer finals between 23 June and 30 June 2002, nine CCTV channels and at least ten provincial TV channels were hijacked by Falun Gong. Since then on almost every important occasion, such as the anniversaries of Hong Kong's return to China, the National Day, the Spring Festival, and more recently celebrations on China's first spaceman project, Falun Gong has broken into the state media vectors to stage a high-profile counter media campaign.⁴⁰

Falun Gong members justify their actions as a “truth clarification” war against the “evil” Jiang (Zemin) regime that lies and fabricates news to Chinese and international audiences, even though they directly result in more virulent media campaigns against Falun Gong from the Chinese government using the satellite hijacking as a “new evidence of crime” to reiterate anti-Falun Gong themes—Falun Gong is anti-society, anti-human, anti-science, anti-China, and anti-international standards and rules.⁴¹



One of a series of caricatures on “Evil Jiang Zemin.” Second man on the left: “Chinese government has killed more than 270 Falun Gong practitioners. Where are Chinese people’s human rights?!” Jiang Zemin (in the middle) answers: “Our country is in its best human rights period in history.” First man on the left: “You are so shameless!” From <http://www.clearwisdom.net/emh/articles/2001/9/5/13558.html> (accessed 20 March 2004)

³⁹ Since 2002 Falun Gong followers had broken into local terrestrial television broadcasts in North-east China and hacked into cable television networks in half-a-dozen different cities including Laiyang, Yantai, Chongqing, Changchun and Harbin. David Murphy, “China—mixing signals”, *Far Eastern Economic Review* 11/07/2002. Also see “Falun Gong saboteurs nabbed in Jilin,” *People’s Daily*, available from <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/> (accessed on 20 January 2004)

⁴⁰ For Chinese official account of Falun Gong satellite hijacking incidents, see “special reports” from <http://www.zhengqing.net.cn/weixing/index.htm> (accessed on 24 March 2004).

⁴¹ “New evidence of crime of the Falun Gong cult,” *People’s Daily*, 9 July 2002. Also see “feifa ganrao, ruyi pohai” [Illegal disruption and intentional destruction] and “Falun Gong caici gongji wo xin nuo weixing” [Falun Gong attacks our Sinosat again], broadcast on 8 July 2002 and 24 September 2002 by “News Focus,” CCTV.



On news fabrication in Chinese media. Nurse: "We will waive your medical bill if you say the words written on the paper." The paper on the body of the patient reads: "I practice Falun Gong." A cameraman is ready to record it as the "1400th truth on Falun Gong." From <http://www.clearwisdom.net/emh/articles/2001/12/18/16916.htm> (accessed 20 March 2004)

Outside China, Falun Gong keeps a close eye on the Western media by encouraging Western media outlets to use less pejorative language (as in changing terms "cult" to more neutral ones such as "sect" or "movement") and to present a favorable image of it. At the same time it is vigilant of Chinese media coverage and refutes every accusation on itself and its members by producing alternative explanations and audio-video materials on the same event or issue through dissecting Chinese official news programs. "A Staged Tragedy: Self-Immolation in Tiananmen Square—Analysis of CCTV's Video Tape of January 23, 2001," one of Falun Gong's "truth clarification" series, is such an example. It dissects CCTV news footage on the Tiananmen self-immolation incident to refute accusations by the Chinese government and use it as evidence of news fabrication by the Chinese state media to stage a counter media campaign around the world.⁴²

In the counter media campaign, Falun Gong poses itself not only as a media-watcher, analyst, and dissector but also a self-promoter and public relations expert. Falun Gong followers seek every opportunity to gain moral support from international organizations, local governments, businesses, and the general public by making themselves visible in public places and on public occasions. They put up signs on campuses, set up booths and do their slow-movement practices in public places, pass out flyers, participate in parades, organize and attend press conferences, obtain Falun Dafa proclamations from local governments, talk to anyone who is willing to listen about Falun Gong and the persecution of Falun Gong by the Chinese government. They organize global vigilance and march for victims of persecution by the Chinese government; they put former Chinese president Jiang Zemin on trial. What Falun Gong shows is an opposite story from the Chinese official media: Jiang Zemin is a big liar and his media machinery makes news based on lies.

⁴² The video is made into VCD and distributed free around the world. It is also accessible from major Falun Gong websites. For example: www.minghui.org/mh/articles/2001/10/1/17092.html, www.clearwisdom.net/emh/special_column/self-immolation.html (accessed 20 March 2004)

Falun Gong's counter media campaign poses a threat and challenge to China's state-centered media culture. Its highly transnational visibility differentiates it from other religious/qigong movements in China. Its global vision and visibility directly relate to and result from its strategic use of the media, especially with the Internet.

Many observers have noted Falun Gong's high-profile presence on the Internet.⁴³ Danny Schetcher, for example, points out that the Falun Gong story appears to be "as much about technology as it is about religion; it offers a fascinating glimpse of an ancient religious tradition that is mutating rapidly as it makes the leap into cyberspace."⁴⁴ The extensive use of new media and communication technologies distinguishes Falun Gong from earlier popular (religious) movements. Falun Gong's Internet savvy is a crucial factor in its ability to survive and even prevail over the persecution by the Chinese government both in and outside China. Since its first website established in 1995, the number of Falun Gong websites has grown quickly. Falun Gong is now thoroughly wired, with websites all over the world in major languages (the majority are in both English and Chinese).⁴⁵

The Internet is a tool of teaching, communicating, organizing, and mobilizing global membership, as well as counteracting the Chinese government's propaganda war. The April 25 (1999) mass congregation at Zhongnanhai is said to be such an incidence of cyber-organization for concerted actions.⁴⁶ Cyberspace also constitutes an important part of being a Falun Gong practitioner. Noah Porter's ethnographic study of Falun Gong practitioners in America finds that they either look at Falun Gong sites regularly (ideally on a daily basis), or read articles of the sites via subscribed emails when they do not have direct access to the sites, especially for those living in China.⁴⁷ Because of the centrality of the Internet in its operation,

⁴³ For examples, see John Wong, "The mystery of Falun Gong: Its rise and fall in China," in *The Mystery of China's Falun Gong: Its Rise and Its Sociological Implications*, Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co., 1999; Stephen D. O'Leary, "Falun Gong and the Internet," in *Falun Gong's Challenge to China: Spiritual Practice or "Evil Cult,"* a report and reader by Danny Schechter, New York: Akashic Books, 2000; Lin Man, *Social Capital: A Theory of Social Structure and Action*, Cambridge University Press, 2001; Noah Porter, "Falun Gong in the United States: An Ethnographic Studies," MA thesis, University of South Florida, 2003;.

⁴⁴ Danny Schechter, *Falun Gong's Challenge to China*, 2000, p. 190.

⁴⁵ See Appendix for selected Falun Gong websites.

⁴⁶ Lin Nan, *Social Capital: A Theory of Social Structure and Action*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p.224.

⁴⁷ Noah Porter, "Falun Gong in the United States: An Ethnographic Studies," MA thesis, University of South Florida, 2003, p. 227.

Falun Gong is described by Karaflogka as a kind of “New Cyberreligious Movements,” (NCRMs)⁴⁸ and by Thornton a kind of “new cybersects.”⁴⁹

The tactical integration of the oldest means of communication (oral and print media) with the newest media (the Internet) has sustained Falun Gong as “the movement” in the postmodern culture of the media. Whether as “the event” or “the movement,” Falun Gong has inaugurated a new era in Chinese political media culture. Never before in the history of the PRC has any organization, group, or party been able to pose such an open challenge to the regime of the CCP through the power of transnational visibility as Falun Gong does.⁵⁰ For third-party audiences, this war of representations may look like another spectacle China presents at the turn of the new millennium (similar to watching Tiananmen violence in 1989). But to the two parties involved in the warfare, especially to Falun Gong, presenting the war to transnational audiences is more than meeting their voyeurism. It is a strategy of “flexible accumulation” in terms of social capital.⁵¹ As Nan Lin points out, Falun Gong serves as “a vivid contemporary illustration of how social networks and capital provide the mechanisms and processes by which an alternative ideology, challenging prevailing ideology and institutions, can be institutionalized.”⁵² Falun Gong’s concerted and consistent efforts to stage the counter media campaign with the Chinese government is an illustration of how an oppositional group is institutionalizing its ideology through social and media networks, of how cybernetworking can mobilize and accumulate social capital over space and time, and sustain an alternative ideology in a global context.

The Continual War

Falun Gong’s counter media campaign—through its own media production, cybernetworking, news analysis and dissection, media infiltration and hacking, combined with extensive PR

⁴⁸ Karaflogka’s definition of NCRMs is: “New because they address issues using a new medium and introducing new possibilities; Cyberreligious because they mainly exist and function on-line; Movements because they can, potentially, mobilize and activate the entire human population.” Anastasia Karaflogka, “Religious Discourse and Cyberspace,” *Religion* 32, 2002, p. 286.

⁴⁹ Patricia M. Thornton, “The New Cybersects: Resistance and Repression in the Reform Era,” in *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*, edited by Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden, London and New York: Routledge, 2003 (2nd ed.).

⁵⁰ I have a separate paper on the visibility politics of Falun Gong.

⁵¹ “Flexible accumulation” describes the new modus operandi of late capitalism as opposed to the rigidity of Fordism. Since David Harvey proposed the concept in 1990, it has become one of the central terms to map political, economic, and cultural conditions of transnational capitalism. Aihwa Ong’s conceptualization of “flexible citizenship,” for example, is a successful attempt in appropriating Harvey’s “flexible accumulation” for her human-agency-centered “cultural logics of transnationality.” See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Blackwell, 1990; Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999.

⁵² Nan Lin, *Social Capital*, p. 225.

efforts—makes itself a declared oppositional force to the ruling of the CCP in China. In attacking and counter attacking (such as the Internet and satellite hackings), both sides bring their media campaigns upfront in seeking and justifying their ideological legitimacies. China's war on the "cult" started from the media, mouthpiece of the Party, long before the crackdown on Falun Gong.⁵³ Falun Gong's war with the Chinese state also started with the media, long before the news-headline event of the April-25 Zhongnanhai demonstration in 1999, which is itself a counter-measure of Falun Gong against the state media disinformation.⁵⁴ The confrontation between Falun Gong and the state grew into a media campaign war after July 1999, whereafter the State becomes more virulent and tactical in demonizing Falun Gong and Falun Gong more political and oppositional towards the State and its ideological apparatuses.

The war has mixed effects on audiences at the home terminals. A survey by "The Voices of China" finds that overseas Chinese in America generally hold negative opinions about Falun Gong, especially about its founder and leader Li Hongzhi, though they are equally critical of Chinese government's actions against Falun Gong.⁵⁵ Due to the lack of access and data, there has been no survey done on mainland Chinese's opinions on the (anti-)Falun Gong campaign, except for observations and speculations. Many people in the West doubt the effectiveness of the Chinese state's media campaign.⁵⁶ However, my observations during my trips to China in 2002, 2003, and 2004 suggest that the majority of my respondents are either indifferent to or support the government's crackdown on Falun Gong and cults. The massive media campaign

⁵³ The state regulation of religion and qigong practices is mainly maintained in the balance between autonomy and loyalty (to the Party and socialism) and it has issued new regulations and laws to control beliefs since the 1980s. The state media has been instrumental in propagating the state policies. Since 1995 the attack on qigong among intellectual (scientific) circles has expanded into the state media, who, as mouthpieces of the ruling elite, join the state-sanctioned scientific efforts to identify scientific qigong and anti- or pseudo-scientific qigong. For regulations of religion, see Pitman B. Potter, "Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China," *The China Quarterly*, 2003, pp. 317-337. For intellectual anti-qigong accounts, see Jinan Xu, "Body, Discourse, and the Cultural Politics of Contemporary Chinese Qigong," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 58: 4, 1999, pp. 965-66.

⁵⁴ Falun Gong has been media conscious and sensitive to criticism by the media. Falun Gong staged several large-scale protests against unfavorable media coverage in Tianjin, Beijing, Jinan, and other cities when it still legally existed in China. Falun Gong followers also made repeatedly phone calls and visits to journalists who were responsible for the unfavorable articles, forcing them to change phone numbers or hide away. The April-25 demonstration in 1999 is a direct result of an article written by He Zuoxiu, a physicist, who warned the youth against practicing Falun Gong. Falun Gong followers demonstrated outside the publishing house demanding a withdrawal of the article and an open apology from the author and the journal. The police came in and arrested several Falun Gong demonstrators. The whole event led to the Zhongnanhai demonstration in Beijing, which triggers the subsequent crackdown on Falun Gong and anti-cult campaigns.

⁵⁵ Mei Lu (The Voices of Chinese), "The Controversy about Falun Gong: What Do Chinese People Think?" available online from <http://www.voicesofchinese.org/falun/surveyrpt.shtml> (accessed 17 May 2004). The survey is done via email correspondence among educated Chinese studying or working in the US (most with a university degree).

⁵⁶ John Schauble, "Chinese tire of anti-cult media blitz," *The Age*, 10 February 2001, p. 27.

on the self-immolation tragedy of January 2001 was effective in winning more people over to the official line, especially those who held doubt and antagonism over the Party's overreaction in the beginning. Considering the fact that patriotism-cum-nationalism has been the central theme of media campaigns in China for more than two decades now and that Chinese media are still characterized by "many mouths but one voice,"⁵⁷ it is understandable that conservatism characterizes the popular response toward the campaigns on Falun Gong (and cults in general).

My observations conform to those of some Western observers such as Barend J. Ter Haar and Schechter who note that, though many in China are sick of the media campaign against Falun Gong, many others have been bought into the ceaseless one-sided propaganda.⁵⁸ The current Chinese government is turning its attention to trade and international disputes and domestic developmental problems, and trying to keep the Falun Gong issue in a low profile in the public sphere. But Falun Gong remains a sensitive issue in the public discourse.⁵⁹ The media keep a constant alert to Falun Gong infiltration, especially after the satellite hijacking incidents, making most journalists wary and weary of Falun Gong.⁶⁰

It appears that "China's war on 'cults' has only just begun,"⁶¹ and that the war has increasingly staged on the transnational level, targeting paradiasporic audiences. After the ban on Falun Gong in China in 1999, Falun Gong has become a transnational force and face of globalizing Chinese cultural tradition and political dissidence at the same time. As a result, the state's anti-cult media campaign has also gone offshore. There are lots of reports from Falun Gong literature (both online and offline) on the harassment of Dafa practitioners, supporters, and sympathizers in oversea countries (including document thefts and jamming of

⁵⁷ I have written on the political culture of Chinese media and journalism in the new "media industry" reforms in a separate essay. I argue that Chinese media may have many mouths singing different tunes in non-news and non-political sectors but voicing the same tune coming from the same head of the CCP on political issues.

⁵⁸ Barend ter Haar, "Falun Gong: Evaluation and Further References," available from <http://sun.sino.uniheidelberg.de/staff/bth/falun.htm> (accessed 15 October 2003); Danny Schechter, *Falun Gong's Challenge to China*, pp. 74-75.

⁵⁹ People are generally sensitive to the topic of Falun Gong in China. Whenever I mentioned Falun Gong in China (especially when I said I was doing research on Falun Gong), there were either weird/puzzled or alert expressions on their faces. My family and friends in China refuse to mention Falun Gong on the phone for fear of phone tapping by the security offices. Falun Gong is a taboo even in academic conferences. My mentioning of Falun Gong at an international conference in Beijing in June 2004 caused a wave of uneasiness among Chinese participants.

⁶⁰ After the satellite hijackings, all broadcasting outlets in China are required to have a "responsibility system:" anyone who allows pro-Falun Gong news piece or comments to slip into the programs (especially live broadcast and audience participation/talk radio programs) faces several punishment that normally leads to the loss of job/position, self-criticism sessions, and a deterrence to career development and promotion.

⁶¹ Jason Kindopp, "China's War on 'Cults'," *Current History*, Sep 2002, p. 266.

phone calls) by Chinese embassies and intelligence staff, and on curtailments of Falun Gong activities by their host country governments under pressures from the Chinese government. Both Falun Gong and Chinese embassies around the world deliver free video and print materials and organize “truth” media conferences to justify their moral, legal, and ideological stands. The recent “mind-share theft” incident of the New Tang Dynasty Television (NTDTV) by the CCTV during the 2004 Chinese New Year celebrations is an illustration of how the media campaign war becomes integrated into Beijing’s cross-border media campaigns.⁶² Beijing’s clashes with Falun Gong reverberate “here” at home both inside China and outside China.

The media campaign war between Falun Gong and the Chinese state continues to tell a tale of two representations and two narratives. Both camps mobilize and resort to new media and communication tools to attack and counter-attack. The media campaign war has become a site of “maximum turbulence” and “maximum visibility” in which the social, cultural and political dimensions of Chinese modernity are maximized and magnified.⁶³

Appendix: selected websites from Chinese official sources and Falun Gong

Chinese official anti-Falun Gong and anti-cult websites

www.zhengqing.net.cn (provides useful links to all major anti-Falun Gong sites in China, including the following links; also included are “News Focus” (CCTV) anti-Falun Gong series reports)

www.yangqing.com.cn (owned by CCTV)

www.qiming.org.cn (owned by People’s Daily, also accessible from

www.people.com.cn/GB/other6902/index.html)

www.mingjing.org.cn

www.zhihui.com.cn (a solely English anti-Falun Gong site)

www.anticult.org

www.gmw.com.cn/z_zhuanti/flg/flg.htm

⁶² On the night of 24 January 2004 between 12pm to 3am Washington-based Channel 56 (a Chinese language TV channel) saw its much-advertised inaugural Chinese New Year Global Gala programs produced by NTDTV replaced by the CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala. It is later found out that a media spy of the Chinese state had infiltrated Channel 56 and facilitated the “mind share” theft incident. See “Zhong gong shentou meiti, hua fu 56 tai xin tan ren jiemu bei ‘diaobao’” [The CCP infiltrates the media, NDTV programs on Washington-based Channel 56 ‘swapped’], *The New Epoch*, 6 February 2004.

⁶³ The two terms are borrowed from John Fiske, *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, p. 7.

Falun Gong's websites

www.minghui.org and its English version <http://clearwisdom.net> (authoritative and “official” Falun Gong website based in the US)

www.falundafa.org (provides links to other major websites of Falun Gong, including a comprehensive listing of Falun Gong websites around the world, see

<http://www.falundafa.org/eng/local.htm>)

www.faluninfo.net

www.pureinght.net