

Framing Dissent in Contemporary China: Irony, Ambiguity and Metonymy*

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ABSTRACT Social movement theorists have posited that it is not simply the existence of grievances but the manner in which they are interpreted and transmitted that contributes to the mobilization of dissent. Research conducted largely in liberal Western polities suggests that successful social movement “frames” clearly define problems, assign blame to a specific agent and suggest courses for remedial action. Yet dissenters in repressive authoritarian or totalitarian regimes face very different risks and political opportunity structures. Two popular contentious practices in contemporary China – ironic or ambiguous doorway hangings, and the body cultivation techniques of the recently outlawed sectarian group *falun gong* – demonstrate that ironic, ambiguous or metonymic frames represent adaptive strategies for the articulation of dissenting views in the face of repressive state power.

Popular contention, in the form of strikes, riots and protests, appears to have risen in China in recent years. Reports of tax resistance, rural protests and work stoppages have not only grown more frequent, but the apparent discontent does not seem to be limited to a single group or social class. Instead, Chinese news sources now record large public demonstrations against tax burdens and environmental pollution in the countryside, sit-down strikes in urban factories, and explosions of ethnic violence in areas with high concentrations of minorities.¹ Even the intellectual ferment that fuelled the 1989 student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, muted for several years following the June crackdown, has begun to reassert itself in the proliferation of voluntary cultural and scholarly associations, and by voicing alternative perspectives in non-establishment journals.²

Official responses have varied, ranging from violent repression to the begrudging settlement of some contentious claims. New institutions designed to stem the rising tide of popular participation have been either

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1. On collective action during the post-Mao reform period in general, see Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Selden (eds.), *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2000), David Shambaugh (ed.), *Is China Unstable? Assessing the Factors* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), and Thomas P. Bernstein, “Farmer discontent and regime responses,” in Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar (eds.), *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

2. Merle Goldman, “The emergence of politically independence intellectuals,” in Goldman and MacFarquhar, *Paradox*, pp. 281–307; Mary G. Mazur, “Public space for memory in contemporary civil society: freedom to learn from the mirror of the past?” *The China Quarterly*, No. 160 (December 1999), pp. 1019–35.

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created or subsumed under the regime's umbrella, including new business associations, popularly elected village committees and mechanisms aimed at conflict arbitration and civil litigation.³ Yet despite evidence of "creeping democratization" and an emerging "rights consciousness" among Chinese citizens,⁴ the CCP steadfastly maintains its monopoly on political organization and moves decisively against attempts at independent organization, quickly putting down, for example, would-be autonomous labour unions and political parties.⁵ The relative dearth of independent political organization, coupled with the periodic and sometimes unpredictable shifts in local and central government responses to popular contention have shaped patterns of protest in post-Mao China in particular ways, some of which share characteristics with strategies of social mobilization in other illiberal political contexts.

Without denying the significance of the trend toward liberalization in the post-Mao era, or the rise in social protest during the recent period of reform, this article considers two disparate social phenomena – the public posting of subversive "doorway couplets" (*menlian*), and the body cultivation practices of *falun gong* – as adaptive strategies for the expression of dissent in contemporary China. While neither is the sort of collective action generally addressed by social movement theorists, both doorway couplets and sectarian practices have been linked to more overtly oppositional social movements in modern Chinese history and therefore should be considered as part of the overall process of social mobilization. Furthermore, as unrelated as the two practices appear on the surface, both deploy strategies of "framing" – the deliberate interjection of critical and dissenting views into the public sphere – that rely upon a measure of indirection for their success. The appearance of such phenomena, particularly against the general backdrop of rising social unrest in the PRC, supports the findings of Li and O'Brien, Zweig, Dickson and others that the general trend during the reform era is towards the deployment of mixed repertoires of protest and dissent,⁶ in which ironic, ambiguous and metonymic frames play a potentially important, albeit previously little understood, role.

3. Bruce Dickson, "Political instability at the middle and lower levels: signs of a decaying CCP, corruption and political dissent," in Shambaugh, *Is China Unstable?* pp. 40–56; and David Zweig, "The 'externalities of development': can new political institutions manage rural conflict?" in Perry and Selden, *Chinese Society*, pp. 120–142. On the dramatic rise in petitioning and civil litigation, see Li Lianjiang and Kevin O'Brien, "Villagers and popular resistance in contemporary China," *Modern China* (January 1996), Vol. 22, No. 11, pp. 28–61; and Kevin O'Brien and Li Lianjiang, "The politics of lodging complaints in rural China," *The China Quarterly*, No. 143 (September 1995), pp. 756–783.

4. Pei Minxin, "'Creeping democratization' in China," in Larry Diamond, Marc F. Plattner, Yun-han Chu and Hung-mao Tien (eds.), *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 213–227; and Pei Minxin, "Rights and resistance: the changing contexts of the dissident movement," in Perry and Selden, *Chinese Society*, pp. 20–40.

5. See Ching Kwan Lee, "Pathways of labor insurgency," in Perry and Selden, *Chinese Society*, pp. 41–61; and Merle Goldman, "The emergence of politically independent intellectuals," in Goldman and MacFarquhar, *Paradox*, pp. 281–307.

6. Li and O'Brien, "Villagers and popular resistance"; O'Brien and Li, "Lodging complaints"; Zweig, "The 'externalities of development';" Dickson, "Political instability."

Social Movement Frames

Borrowing from the work of sociologist Erving Goffman, who argued that cultures generate “primary frameworks” that render particular social acts meaningful, theorists of collective action have recently focused on social movement “frames” as a primary factor contributing to the success or failure of collective action. A social movement frame is “an interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one’s present or past environment.”⁷ Successful framing enables social movements to “mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists.”⁸ Frames contribute to the formation of a social consensus when they “resonate” with a population not only by mirroring existing values or beliefs, but also by clearly defining and assigning blame for a particular problem to an agent or agencies, and then offering solutions.⁹ By proposing feasible strategies for action, compelling frames can rally the troops behind the cause and inspire political action, particularly when they coincide with shifts in “political opportunity structures.”¹⁰

However, the literature on framing collective action is based largely on research conducted in the Western Europe and the United States, and is therefore primarily shaped by historical patterns of contention in liberal polities. Clearly, “political opportunity structures” differ widely across the political spectrum, and dissenters in repressive authoritarian regimes face very different obstacles to movement organization, risk and opportunity structures and more limited resources for the dissemination of their views than do dissenters in democratic polities.¹¹ It therefore follows that the process of articulating and framing dissent in such systems is likely to be forged by such constraints and to manifest in ways that are

7. David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, “Master frames and cycles of protest,” in Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller (eds.), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 137. Elsewhere, Snow and Benford argue that it “is not merely the presence or absence of grievances, but the manner in which grievances are interpreted and the generation and diffusion of those interpretations,” and that social movements not only “frame the world in which they are acting,” but also social problems. David A. Snow, E. Burke Rochford, Jr., Steven K. Worden and Robert D. Benford, “Frame alignment processes, micromobilization and movement participation,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (1986), pp. 465–66.

8. David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, “Ideology, frame resonance, and participant mobilization,” in Bert Klandermans, Hanspeter Kriesi and Sidney Tarrow (eds), *International Social Movement Research: Volume I* (London: JAI Press, 1988), p. 198.

9. To the foregoing attributes, Gamson notes that successful frames furthermore contain an “identity component” that defines a collective adversarial agent, a “‘we,’ typically in opposition to some ‘they’ who have different interests or values.” William A. Gamson, *Talking Politics* (Boston: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 7.

10. Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 17–21.

11. See, for example, Peter Houtzager and Marcus J. Kurtz, “The institutional roots of popular mobilization: state transformation and rural politics in Brazil and Chile, 1960–1995,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (April 2000); Teresa Wright, “State repression and student protest in contemporary China,” *The China Quarterly*, No. 157 (March 1999), pp. 142–172, as well as her *Perils of Protest: State Repression and Student Activism in China and Taiwan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2001).

fundamentally different from patterns in liberal polities. State socialist systems, even those undergoing political and economic reforms, exert considerable organizational control over society and effectively monopolize the resources available for social mobilization in ways that liberal democratic polities do not, effectively delimiting the opportunities for overt social contention to arise. As Tarrow notes, “where power is centralized and conditions are homogenized, once opportunities are opened – as they were when Gorbachev began his reforms – framing and organizing a social movement are facilitated.” However, in the absence of extraordinary “openings,”

The systematic repression of collective action in nonrepresentative systems lends a political coloration to ordinary acts. Listening to Verdi’s operas during the period of Austrian control of Italy, or to rock music in the former Soviet Union, took on a symbolic importance that was difficult to repress or even recognize.¹²

Subtle methods of framing dissent have been observed in several repressive political contexts¹³; in contemporary China, ironic or symbolic framings have been observed both prior to and concomitant with more familiar repertoires of popular contention. For example, Zweig noted that in recent years protesting villagers have chosen to adopt a mixed protest strategy, alternating between the “policy-based resistance” repertoires involving legalistic manoeuvring documented by O’Brien and Li, and civil disobedience, typified by mass sit-ins.¹⁴ Zuo and Benford argued that in the case of the 1989 demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, deliberate nonaction and strategic restraint were both used as collective action frames in and of themselves, earning widespread sympathy and support for the students from Beijing city residents.¹⁵ In their analysis of the same movement as a form of “political theatre,” Esherick and Wasserstrom documented the Chinese tradition of putting forth contentious claims in the form of petitions for the official redress of collective grievances.¹⁶ Finally, Zhou details numerous historical cases of what he refers to as “collective inaction” among Chinese peasants to register popular disap-

12. Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, p. 93.

13. For examples of subtle, ironic or ambiguous social protest frames in illiberal regimes, see Melvyn C. Goldstein, “Lhasa street songs: political and social satire in traditional Tibet,” *The Tibet Journal*, No. 7 (1982), pp. 56–66; Maryjane Osa, “Creating solidarity: the religious foundations of the Polish social movement,” *East European Politics and Societies*, Spring 1997, Vol. 11, No. 2, pp. 339–366; Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Elena Zdravomyslova, “Opportunities and framing in the transition to democracy,” in McAdam, McCarthy and Zald. (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives*, pp. 126–27.

14. O’Brien and Li, “Lodging complaints”; Zweig, “The ‘externalities of development’.”

15. Zuo Jiping and Robert D. Benford, “Mobilization processes and the 1989 Chinese democracy movement,” *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (1995), p. 146.

16. Joseph W. Esherick and Jefferey Wasserstrom, “Acting out democracy: political theater in modern China,” in Jefferey N. Wasserstrom and Elizabeth J. Perry (eds.), *Popular Protest and Political Culture in Modern China* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 36, 44–47. See the related discussion on the tradition of remonstrance in Andrew J. Nathan, *Chinese Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 24–30, as well as O’Brien and Li, “Villagers and popular resistance.”

proval of post-revolutionary state agricultural policies before concluding that,

Clearly, collective action in the Chinese context manifests itself not only through open resistance and demonstrations, but also in more subtle forms of noncompliant behavior that fall outside the conventional scope of collective action. Unlike other social contexts, however, in China these forms of resistance share the characteristics of collective action. In a sense, collective inaction is an invisible “sit-in” in the Chinese political context. Its message is loud and clear, even without symbolic actions.¹⁷

Whereas the success of protest frames in liberal polities is often measured by the degree that they are capable of inspiring long-term mobilization for overt political action,¹⁸ in repressive systems in which overt challenges are often quickly countered with overwhelming and brutal repressive measures, the broad public circulation of a carefully encoded subversive message can succeed in nibbling away at the boundaries of hegemonic state control. Expressions of dissent such as these differ from the so-called “hidden transcripts” described by Scott – those “critiques of power spoken behind the back of the dominant” by subordinated groups – in that they are not “specific to a given social site and to a particular set of actors,”¹⁹ but instead operate in the public sphere in full view of the authorities, but at the boundaries of what is politically permissible in repressive regimes. In such environments, relatively subtle transgressions – such as the reproduction of the banned Norwegian flag on Christmas cards circulated in Nazi-occupied Norway,²⁰ or the reproduction of Mao-less Mao badges during the Cultural Revolution²¹ – signal obliquely that dissenting pockets have managed to evade the repressive hand of the state, representing conceptual, if not organizational, “free spaces” within which collective identities and agendas may be forged.²² As demonstrated below, the range of popular responses to official censorial power in contemporary China clearly includes frames of dissent that are ambiguous and ironic by design, whether as an adaptation to current

17. Zhou Xuegang, “Unorganized interests and collective action in communist China,” *American Sociological Review* Vol. 58, No. 1 (1993), p. 67; see also Daniel Kelliher, *Peasant Power in China: The Era of Rural Reform, 1979–1989* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

18. Gerhard Jurgen and Dieter Rucht, “Mesomobilization: organizing and framing in two protest campaigns in West Germany,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 98, No. 3 (1992), pp. 555–596.

19. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. xii, 14.

20. Kathleen Stokker, “Anti-Nazi card tricks: underground Christmas greetings in occupied Norway,” *Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. 31, No. 1 (1997), 189–197.

21. Melissa Schrift and Keith Pilkey, “Revolution remembered: Chairman Mao badges and Chinese nationalist ideology,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (1996), pp. 169–197.

22. Both doorway couplets and *qigong* cultivation techniques can be considered cultural “free spaces” of the sort that Francesca Polletta describes. However, whereas Polletta argues that such spaces play a “minimal role in igniting insurgency,” I contend that these practices contribute markedly to the construction and maintenance of broad collective identities, a precursor to more overt mobilization against authorities. See Francesca Polletta, “‘Free spaces’ in collective action,” *Theory and Society*, Vol. 28, No. 1, pp. 1–38.

repression, or as part of a protest repertoire established in an earlier period.

The first form, the doorway couplet, involves a strategic combination of ambiguity and irony to register and frame contentious claims, a poetic form of what Wierzbicka has termed “linguistic self defence” in totalitarian or semi-totalitarian states: a way of using language to “[give] expression ... to those emotions, attitudes, and preoccupations which in a country dominated by severe political controls cannot be expressed openly.”²³ In the case of the second form, that of popular *qigong* discourses, the outlines of the frame are somewhat less clear, but perhaps even more powerful insofar as they evoke broader and more fundamental normative claims outside of the “realm of state-approved cultural values.”²⁴ *Falun gong* texts involve a challenge to the state’s claims on the bodies of individual practitioners, elaborate an alternative hierarchy of values and detail a set of practices designed to realize these goals.²⁵ The political dimensions of this process become clearer when one views the prescriptive elements of such texts as metaphorical discourses on the nature of the Chinese “body politic.” The inherent power of both forms rests in their ability to encapsulate a set of moral critiques of state power from within the boundaries of hegemonic state control.

As such, both potentially represent examples of what Humphrey has called “evocative transcript”: texts that are “*intended* to elicit or evoke a particular interpretation beyond the surface meaning.”

Evocative transcripts are ambiguous by design. They come to the fore in political quasi-hegemonies, when the previous codes of classes and ethnic groups are suppressed and two pervasive new kinds of discourse are maintained throughout society by force and fear: a highly ideological, stilted, and mostly written official discourse, and “all the rest,” which may be oral and informal but nonetheless must maintain a semblance of conformity in public.²⁶

Ironically, under such conditions, the most viable form of dissent may well be that which masquerades as the politically irrelevant beneath a mask of compliance.

Doorway Couplets

Doorway couplets – commonly referred to as *menlian*, *duilian* (“parallel couplets”) or *chunlian* (“spring couplets”) – consist of two counterbalanced phrases, often poetic in nature, written on narrow strips

23. Anna Wierzbicka, “Antitotalitarian language in Poland: some mechanisms of linguistic self-defense,” *Language in Society*, No. 19 (1990), p. 8.

24. Thomas Ots, “The silenced body – the expressive *Leib*: on the dialectic of mind and life in Chinese cathartic healing,” in Thomas Csordas (ed.), *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 133.

25. On the contrasting representations of *qigong* in state and popular discourses, see Jian Xu, “Body discourse, and the cultural politics of contemporary *qigong*,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (November 1999), pp. 961–990.

26. Carol Humphrey, “Remembering an ‘enemy’: the Bogd Khaan in twentieth-century Mongolia,” in Rubie S. Watson (ed.), *Memory, History and Opposition under State Socialism* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1994), p. 23.

of paper that are then used to frame the main entrance to a residence or official building. Most commonly displayed during the Chinese New Year, they may also be posted to mark other prominent occasions, such as weddings, birthdays and the opening of new businesses.²⁷ The phrases are identical in length, and are parallel insofar as the pronunciation, tone and meanings of the characters in the phrases relate to each other, sometimes in complex ways. In some cases, the balancing of the phrases revolves around a simple repetition of a single character, while in others the phrases are linked by the use of a similar image or metaphor.²⁸ The structural integrity of the couplet as a composition is defined by either the fundamental agreement or contrast of the two lines, and the centrality of a single idea expressed differently by its two members.²⁹ With respect to doorway couplets, to these two counterbalanced lines a third (*hengpi*) is sometimes pasted on the horizontal lintel above, complementing or uniting the antithesis.³⁰

The custom of hanging doorway couplets appears to have talismanic origins, and many scholars agree that they originally embellished the fierce likenesses of guardian spirits painted around doors and gates as a protection against evil.³¹ Over time, the couplets themselves came to be viewed as amulets of a sort, presaging auspicious outcomes for the forthcoming year and celebrating the successes of the recent past. In this capacity, they have come to serve a range of political purposes for Chinese authorities. One study comparing doorway couplets posted in Taiwan and on the Chinese mainland during the early to mid-1960s found that whereas Taiwanese couplets tended to invoke traditionally auspicious themes of wealth and good fortune, political themes dominated couplets on the mainland.³² In the People's Republic today, booklets of state- and Party-approved doorway couplets are widely available for purchase throughout the country each year as Spring Festival approaches, helpfully suggesting pithy sayings for framing the doorways not only of state and Party offices and classrooms but of private homes as well. Suggested couplets from one such booklet from the late 1980s include the following examples:

State policies pave the road to good fortune/ Labour breaks down wealth's door
(*Zhengce puchu xifulu/ laodong dakai zhi fumen*)

27. Ronald G. Knapp, *China's Living Houses: Folk Beliefs, Symbols and Household Ornamentation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), p. 94.

28. Gu Xiangyang, "Zhongguo duilian gailun" ("Introduction to China's parallel couplets"), *Zhongguo duilian dadian (Canon of China's Parallel Couplets)* (Beijing: Xuefan chubanshe, 1998), pp. 4–5.

29. Kao Yu-kung and Tsu-lin Mei, "Meaning, metaphor and allusion in T'ang poetry," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (December 1978), p. 323.

30. Yang Cangshu and Wang Shufu, *Duilian xiucixue (The Rhetoric of Couplets)* (Beijing: Kaiming chubanshe, 1991), pp. 94–95.

31. Xinhua chubanshe, *Duilian xinpian (New Compilation of Parallel Couplets)* (Beijing: Xinhua shudian, 1985), p. i; Knapp, *China's Living Houses*, p. 94.

32. Hsieh Jiann and Ying-Hsiung Chou, "Public aspirations in the New Year couplets: a comparative study between the People's Republic and Taiwan," *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (1981), p. 129.

A lifetime of devotion to the Party and the state/ All wisdom and compassion to the people

(*Yisheng gandan xiang dangguo/ quanbu zhici wei renmin*)³³

Many households eschew the mass-produced versions in favour of composing their own verse, and examples of such couplets are occasionally cited by Party and state officials as rough barometers of public opinion, particularly when they laud or find fault with particular policies.³⁴ For example, one frustrated deputy to the National People's Congress pointed out that between October 1993 and April 1994, the CCP Central Committee had convened two national conferences on rural work, both of which resulted in new rounds of exhortations and policy statements, but neither of which produced substantive measures to ameliorate the "peasant burden" problem. Charging that "attaching importance to agriculture" had degenerated into mere sloganeering, he cited one doorway couplet composed by a resident of his rural district, which read: "Today a meeting, tomorrow a meeting, we have a meeting everyday," and "You also speak, I also speak, and everybody speaks" along the door's vertical posts. The horizontal term of the couplet posed the question/challenge: "Who is going to carry out the plans?"³⁵

More subtle critiques sometimes direct the reader's attention to that which remains unspoken or unsaid, either by invoking the first half of a well-known aphorism or saying, or by omitting one or more words from a natural sequence. In fact, the practice of omitting the final word or few words of a well-known literary phrase (sometimes referred to as *cangci*, or "hidden words") is not uncommon in modern Chinese literature and is considered an artful language game. A similar literary genre, "enigmatic folk similes" (*xiehouyu*), evokes a metaphorical image without fully articulating the resolution of that metaphor. According to Rohsenow, both constructions became increasingly popular in post-1949 China, and particularly during the Cultural Revolution when Red Guards derided arrogant cadres by likening them to "a tiger's backside" ("[they think they] cannot be touched").³⁶ The popularity of such forms during this period is no doubt a result of the highly charged political atmosphere of the times and the overarching tutelage of Maoist totalitarianism. The unspoken part of the phrase is clearly evoked in the mind of the listener, but because it is never actually uttered, both the speaker and the listener are protected in a sort of collusive communicative act, such as when in English a person might comment to another as a third enters the room: "Speak of the devil ..." and the listener clearly "hears" the second half of the aphorism in his or her own mind.

33. Xinhua chubanshe, *New Compilation*, pp. 4, 7.

34. For more examples, see Patricia M. Thornton, "Insinuation, insult and invective: the threshold of power and protest in modern China," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (July 2002), pp. 597–619.

35. Cao Shaoping, Jiao Ran and Wang Yanbin, "After the warning alarm is sounded," Beijing Xinhua Domestic Service (25 February 1995), FBIS-CHI-95-043.

36. John Rohsenow, *A Chinese–English Dictionary of Enigmatic Folk Similes (xiehouyu)* (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press), pp. ix–xv.

One couplet that appeared over the dormitory doorway at rural commune in Hunan's Yichang county employed such a literary device to deride the so-called "Dazhai big cooking pot" system of allocating workpoints without regard for the amount of labour actually completed.³⁷ Yichang county commune members apparently privately regarded the new workpoint system as the cause of an overall decline in agricultural output, despite an endless stream of local press reports lauding the new system and predicting a bumper harvest that year. In an act of defiance, a group of the commune members affixed an "enigmatic" (*yinyu*) doorway couplet to the dormitory entrance that read on one vertical post "2, 3, 4, 5" (*er, san, si, wu*) and "6, 7, 8, 9" (*liu, qi, ba, jiu*) on the other. Across the threshold a sheet simply read: "south, north" (*nan, bei*). The riddle-like meaning of the couplet resides in the missing elements of the verse, but was nevertheless obvious to the commune members entering the gate: a "one," a "ten," an east and a west. By replacing the "one" and "ten" with the homophonous characters for "clothing" and "food," and reading "east" and "west" as a compound word, the resulting phrase meant that those residing within had neither clothing nor food, and therefore nothing at all (*que yi shao shi, mei you dongxi*).³⁸

In a related instance during the same period in Sichuan's Chengdu, normal production and shipping practices were so disrupted that tobacco was a relatively rare commodity. The only cigarettes in steady supply included a brand from Tianjin known as Ocean River (*Haihe*), a brand produced in Inner Mongolia known as Dawn's Light (*Shuguang*), and a locally produced brand which was considered particularly undesirable known as "Economy" (*Jingji*). One clever smoker composed the following commentary in the form of a doorway couplet:

Tianjin's Ocean River flows into the Jin Jiang/ Inner Mongolia's Dawn Light
illuminates Rongcheng

(*Tianjin Haihe liu Jinjiang/ Neimenggu Shuguang zhao Rongcheng*)

Across the lintel, the horizontal term wryly proclaimed: "Economy takes command" (*Jingji guashuai*), a bold perversion of a popular state-endorsed campaign slogan at the time (*zhengzhi guashuai*, "politics takes command"). Yet for smokers familiar with the low quality of the tobacco sold under that brand name, the doorway couplet also served as an ironic reminder of the inefficiencies inherent in centralized economic planning under the Maoist regime.³⁹

Couplets deriding the conduct of officials also have a long history in China, and the moral censure of a mocking verse over the main gate of home or public building can be an effective way of lodging a public

37. On the campaign to "emulate Dazhai" and the implementation of "Dazhai" or "egalitarian" workpoints, see David Zweig, *Agarian Radicalism in China, 1968–1981* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

38. Yu Chuanjiang, *Wenge xiaoliao ji* (*Humorous Incidents from the Cultural Revolution*) (Chengdu: Sichuansheng xinhua shudian, 1988), p. 141.

39. *Ibid.* p. 141.

protest while avoiding retribution.⁴⁰ Official and popular concern over the lavish consumption habits of some cadres – and in particular the use of public funds to underwrite orgies of so-called “big eating and big drinking” (*dachi dahe*)⁴¹ – spawned waves of ironic parallel couplets. One popular couplet simultaneously mocked the political sloganeering of the Party elite and their southern accents: by switching a single homophonous character, the Mao era slogan “Socialism is good” became “Under socialism, booze is good”; and the Chinese People’s Republic became the Nation of Chinese People Collectively Drinking.⁴² In a similar vein, in January 1992 the *Wenzhai bao* carried the report of a retired schoolteacher who had opened a restaurant in Jiangsu’s Suining county but had grown tired of the unending stream of cadres wining and dining on public funds visiting his establishment. In protest, he therefore posted the following couplet around his own door:

No matter if business is going well or poorly, drink up/ No matter if you are poor or rich, get drunk.

(*Xingyeba shuaiyeba heba/ qiongyeba fuyeba zuiba*)

The horizontal term wryly suggested a new name for his establishment: “Confusion Cafe” (*Hutu fandian*).⁴³

In some cases, derisive couplets may be posted anonymously as a public indictment of a particular individual or group. The Xinhua News wire recently circulated a photograph taken by a reporter on an early morning walk in Anbu township, in Guangdong’s Chaoan county. Passing by a brand new home, he noticed that someone had framed the front door with a couplet that read:

Business is thriving, no need to hire employees/ Income is flourishing, no need to pay taxes

(*Shengyi xinglong wu gugong/ Caiyuan maosheng mian jiaoshui*)

The horizontal term announced: “[Shop closed:] Taking inventory today” (*Jinri pandian*). The homeowner turned out to be a village cadre whose rent-seeking practices had purportedly been so lucrative that the neigh-

40. E.P. Thompson writes eloquently of the trend of anonymous acts of resistance in rural folk communities in “The crime of anonymity,” in D. Hay *et al.* (eds.), *Albion’s Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: 1975), pp. 255–344.

41. See Hill Gates, “Eating for revenge: consumption and corruption under economic de-reform,” *Dialectical Anthropology*, No. 16 (1991), pp. 233–249.

42. This was accomplished by switching the “jiu” in “*Shehui zhuyi jiu shi hao*” to the character for liquor, and by using the character for the word “to drink” (*he*) instead of the homophonous one used in the word “republic.” The switch also apparently mimics the manner in which both slogans are rendered in the Sichuanese accent of Deng Xiaoping, as well as Mao’s own Hunanese dialect. Li Jie, *Laobaixing de zhihui* (*The Wisdom of the Masses*) (Taipei: Maitian chubanshe, 2000), pp. 183–84.

43. A Nanjing eatery during the same period displayed a variation of the same couplet, with the first line reading: “We don’t give a damn about this and we don’t give a damn about that pub” (*Qi buguan ba buguan jiuguan*); the repetition of the character *guan* (“official,” but also “to care” or “to manage”) underscores that cadres were the main target of the critique. Li Jie, *Wisdom*, p. 184.

bours envisaged him or her staying home to count up ill-gotten gains instead of attending to public duties.⁴⁴ Like the anonymously posted libellous bits of verse that circulated in English towns during the 18th century recorded by E.P. Thompson, the potency of this form of protest rests in the power of public censure to impose a collective moral standard within a community.⁴⁵

By any of the current standards that prevail in the collective action literature, the examples cited above do not measure up well as protest frames. Most do not clearly define a problem, assign blame to a particular agent, or offer feasible solutions to social or political ills. Many lack clear “identity components” delineating collective adversarial agents. Perhaps most significant of all, there is little evidence to suggest that any of these doorway couplets have directly inspired groups openly to confront state authorities, demobilize their adversaries and press their claims forward. However, they are suggestive of a very different, but no less important, set of dynamics underlying the articulation of political dissent under an authoritarian regime. The strategic use of irony and ambiguity in these subtly subversive framings serves as a kind of protective cloak shielding both the speaker/author and the listener/reader from the penetrating gaze of the state while simultaneously delivering a political critique. The prosaic quality of such minor subversions contributes to their utility in the authoritarian political context. As Scott has aptly noted, apparently innocuous low-level forms of resistance can indeed register a cumulative effect over the long term.⁴⁶

At the same time, couplets have frequently appeared at the sites of more overt oppositional mobilization against state authorities. Sectarian rebel groups dating to the late imperial period, such as the Taipings and the Triads, were known to post seditious couplets portending apocalyptic ruin, and early 20th-century activists often used derisive and mocking couplets to shame national political leaders and forward their agendas.⁴⁷ More recently, one parallel couplet that was reproduced anonymously on posters around Tiananmen Square during the 1989 student demonstrations took aim at absolute monopoly on political power enjoyed by the central authorities:

44. “Fubai duilian tieshang men; tanwu cungan bu zhixiao” (“Corrupt couplet pasted on door; crooked village cadre unaware”), *Jin wanbao*, 8 May 2001.

45. Thompson, “The crime of anonymity,” pp. 255–344.

46. “Everyday forms of resistance make no headlines. But just as millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef, so do the multiple acts of peasant insubordination and evasion create political and economic barrier reefs of their own. It is largely in this fashion that the peasantry makes its political presence felt. And whenever, to pursue the simile, the ship of state runs aground on such reefs, attention is usually directed to the shipwreck itself and not to the vast aggregation of petty acts that made it possible.” James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. xvii.

47. Compilations of such couplets are extremely popular in the PRC today; for some older examples, see Zhongguo renmin daxue qingshi suo (ed.), *KangYongQian shiqi chengxiang renmin fankang douzheng ziliao (xiace)* (*Information on Rural Peoples’ Resistance Movements in the Kangxi, Yongzheng and Qianlong Periods (second volume)*) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), pp. 727–729; and Dong Jianzhi, *Huaji lianhua (Humorous Linked Couplets)* (Shanghai: Zhongyang shudian yinxing, 1937).

If they say you're okay, then you're okay, and even wrong is right/ If they say you're not okay, you're not okay, and even right is wrong

(*Shuo ni xing, ni jiu xing, buxing ye xing/ Shuo ni buxing, ni jiu buxing, xing ye buxing*)

The horizontal term proclaimed: "Not going along [with them] is not okay" (*bufu buxing*).⁴⁸

Falun Gong

The movement known as *falun gong* first received widespread international attention in April 1999 when over 10,000 of the group's members staged a mass sit-in in front of Zhongnanhai, residential compound of the Party elite. This act of collective defiance represented the largest spontaneous public gathering in the area since the June 1989 crackdown, and clearly surprised central Party and state officials. The demonstration furthermore seemed to be at odds with the overtly spiritual and quiescent agenda of the group's leader, Li Hongzhi, who has repeatedly eschewed any political ambitions whatsoever. Indeed, the central tenet of Li's writings is the cultivation of three primary virtues – *zhen* (truth), *shan* (compassion) and *ren* (forbearance) – through an integrated practice of self-study, meditation and a series of yoga-like movements designed to rebalance the flow of energy (*qi*) through the body. As a set of articulated beliefs, *falun gong* incorporates influences from sectarian Buddhism and Daoism with traditional body cultivation practices (*qigong*) that had enjoyed a revival in mass popularity in the PRC over the previous decade.⁴⁹

Yet *falun gong* and other *qigong* groups that have enjoyed surging popularity over the past few years are clearly perceived as serious political threats by Chinese leaders.⁵⁰ Although the organizational capacity of the group, demonstrated by their April 1999 sit-in, has long been a source of grave concern to authorities, official criticisms of the sect in the early stages of the crackdown focused most forcefully on the ideological and ideational core of the *falun gong* message.⁵¹ The centre of this perceived threat is the fact that such groups commonly propagate esoteric beliefs and bodily practices that are at odds with the Marxist orthodoxy of the state on several levels. First, many advocate occult beliefs that are widely askew with the conception of science commonly

48. Li Jie, *Wisdom*, pp. 136–37.

49. Benjamin Penny, "Qigong, Daoism and science: some contexts for the qigong boom," in Mabel Lee and A. D. Syrokomla-Stefanowska (eds.), *Modernization of the Chinese Past* (Sydney: Wild Peony, 1993), pp. 166–67.

50. Elizabeth J. Perry, "Reinventing the wheel? The campaign against Falungong," *Harvard China Review* (Spring/Summer 2000), pp. 68–71; see also Nancy N. Chen, "Cultivating qi and body politic," *Harvard Asia Pacific Review* (Winter, 2000), available on-line at <http://hcs.harvard.edu/~hapr/winter00%20millenium/Falungong.html>.

51. *Qigong* masters were singled out for special surveillance in the days and weeks following the 4 June 1989 crackdown. See Elizabeth Perry, "Challenging the mandate of heaven: popular protest in modern China," *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2001), p. 170.

invoked to legitimize the authority of the party-state. By offering non-traditional and non-medical methods of healing and promoting the cultivation of paranormal capabilities among their adherents, such groups are implicitly critical of “scientific Marxism” and the material basis of historical evolution, principles to which the current regime espouses loyalty. Secondly, *qigong* groups redefine what has long been hotly contested terrain in the context of both pre- and post-revolutionary tradition: the meaning of the human body and its significance to the political order. Modern *qigong* practices begin with the assertion that the body of the practitioner constitutes a private realm or “open space” disengaged from the familiar boundaries of the state, and then proceed to elaborate a new hierarchy of values radically disembodied from state control.⁵² These goals and practices differ significantly from those of the regime, and as such, have provoked charges that such beliefs “harm social stability, run counter to prevailing social mores, promote ignorant superstition, deify the founders [of such heretical sects] or harm citizens’ physical or mental health.”⁵³

Finally, and perhaps most significant for the study of collective action frames, many *qigong* texts use the body as a metaphoric or metonymic frame within which to register alienation, disaffection and protest, and to articulate alternative political realities. The deployment of the body as a frame for dissent is particularly compelling in the Chinese context in part because of the prevalence of “somatization” – “the expression of personal and social distress in an idiom of bodily complaints and medical help seeking” – in popular culture. In their study of individuals suffering from depression in Human, the Kleinmans discovered unusually high levels of somatized complaints associated with social stress brought on by large-scale political, economic and institutional change among Chinese patients, who commonly saw themselves as powerless in the face of such pressures.⁵⁴ Inordinate numbers of patients presenting physical complaints in the absence of defined organic pathology, primarily headaches, dizziness and insomnia, were diagnosed with and then treated for neurasthenia (*shenjing shuairuo*) by Chinese health professionals. The Kleinmans attributed the prevalence of this diagnosis in large part to “the universe of symbolic meanings that comprises the Chinese cultural tradition.”

The core principles of this cultural world view center on the harmonizing of interpersonal relations, the sociocentric orientation of the self, and for these reasons the constitution of affect as moral position in a social field of reciprocal behavior.

52. Nancy Chen, “Urban spaces and the experiences of *qigong*,” in Deborah Davis *et al.* (eds.), *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1985), p. 358.

53. Amnesty International, “People’s Republic of China: the crackdown on *Falungong* and other so-called ‘heretical organizations’” (Report ASA 17/11/00), 23 March 2000, <http://www.amnesty.org/ailib/aipub/2000/ASA/31701100.htm>

54. Arthur Kleinman, “Somatization: the interconnections in Chinese society among culture, depressive experiences, and the meanings of pain,” in Arthur Kleinman and Byron Good (eds.), *Culture and Depression* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 430, 473, 475.

Denial of dysphoria is also of course a neutral and safe position to hold in an ideological context in which depression signifies potentially dangerous political implications: disaffiliation, alienation and potential opposition. Here, as a complementary process to disease causation, we have the cultural construction of illness.⁵⁵

“Somatized” disorders – neurasthenia, depression, recurring disequilibrium and sleeplessness – were especially common among three groups: former victims of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, patients who were particularly vulnerable within the sociopolitical structure, and those whose access to local resources was blocked in some way.⁵⁶ Relatedly, Ots documented dramatic increases in the numbers of spontaneous *qigong* practitioners with somatized disorders gathering in public parks in the wake of campaigns to reassert CCP orthodoxy throughout the 1980s. Many of the participants drawn to these practices claimed to be suffering from thoracic depression (*xiongmen*) as a result of fear and repeated repression of dysphoric emotional states.⁵⁷ Thus, whereas most *falun gong* practitioners may not see themselves as politically defiant, Party and state officials have long regarded them as at least potentially so, in part due to their perceived alienation, depression and vulnerability within the current political system. At stake for both practitioners and officials is the public recognition that widespread social ills and dissatisfaction do exist, that they are often expressed as physical symptoms and that the current health care system is unable to address this problem adequately.

The official perception of *qigong* practitioners as potentially subversive is bolstered by the claims of some *qigong* masters linking the perceived “symptoms” of their followers to pressing social problems. Many modern *qigong* practices treat such symptomatic social disorders by recognizing the body as a microcosm of the larger body politic and strive to redirect or alter the flow of universal energy through both the personal body of the practitioner and that of the state. *Falun gong* texts are particularly explicit in this regard, first presenting a diagnosis of the Chinese body politic that assigns moral responsibility for somatized social ills to the party-state, and then prescribing a course of treatment which implicitly pits the individual practitioner against the moral foundations of the regime. As such, *falun gong*’s bodily cultivation techniques – at least as they are described and explained in authorized texts by the group’s enigmatic founder and leader – can be read as a type of evocative frame registering a series of highly contentious claims against the present regime. Like the ironic doorway couplets discussed above, the power of Li Hongzhi’s subversive message resides precisely in the ambiguous manner in which its contentious claims are framed: by deploying the bodies of individual practitioners against the hegemonic practices of the state, *falun gong*

55. *Ibid.* pp. 468–69.

56. Arthur and Joan Kleinman “Suffering and its professional transformation,” *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (1991), pp. 275–301.

57. Ots, “The silenced body,” pp. 130, 134.

texts can be read either as a metonymic attack on state power, or as a set of quasi-sectarian discourses on mystical body cultivation techniques.⁵⁸

Li Hongzhi, the former grain official who is *falun gong*'s official leader, emphatically asserts that modern scientific knowledge, upon which the CCP has traditionally based its claim to legitimate rule, is by definition limited and narrow. His elaborate critiques of the officially sanctioned view of human history underscore apparent contradictions in the scientific analysis of various artifacts. Proposing that his paranormal investigations have revealed that the current universe is "an entity compounded after nine explosions" and that the earth has been destroyed and recreated many times, Li's account of human history rejects both current scientific methods and the theory of evolution.⁵⁹ Rather, Li embraces "Buddha Law," which he equates with the "Dao" force of Daoist belief, capable of revealing "the secrets of the cosmos, time and space and the human body. It can genuinely distinguish between good and evil, right and wrong, and establish the right view by eradicating all fallacies."⁶⁰ Party officials have responded to Li's claims by branding them as "pseudo-science" and "feudal superstition," politically potent terms against which the state has been defining its core tasks throughout the reform period.⁶¹

Yet Li's challenge to regime legitimacy does not rest simply on a rejection of modern science in favour of "religious superstition" (*zongjiao mixin*). At a deeper level, the fundamental transformation of the human body by *qigong* practice directly engages the practitioner in a metonymic act of subversion of orthodox state authority, a complex association between body and nation that is embedded in religious and philosophical traditions. More recently, the correspondence between the individual human body and the larger body politic reappears as a frequent theme in the works of early 20th-century modernizers; as Uberoi pointed out, the prescriptions of Mao and other New Culture Movement proponents to encourage broad scale physical training can read as a form of "somatic nationalism" that "attempts to reform the nation and resist external

58. A distinction must be made between *falun gong* texts, produced largely – if not solely – by Li Hongzhi, and the beliefs of individual practitioners. The focus of this article is the subversive dimensions of the former as a metonymic frame, which must be distinguished from the intentions of current practitioners, whose motivations for practising, as well as understanding and accepting the official texts, may vary widely.

59. For example, Li asserts: "According to Darwin's theory of evolution, humans have evolved from apes, and [human] civilization is not yet 10,000 years old. Yet we have discovered artifacts [including] a fresco in a cave in the European Alps more than 250,000 years old that have very high artistic and aesthetic value unsurpassed by [what] people [can do] today. The National Peru University Museum has a large rock, on the face of which there is an engraving of a person holding a telescope to observe heavenly bodies. This figure already has a history of more than 30,000 years. Everyone knows that in 1609 Galileo invented a telescope [that magnifies] 30 times, which does not yet date back more than 300 years, so how can there have been a telescope over 30,000 years ago?" Li Hongzhi, *Zhongguo falun gong* (*China Falun Gong*) (Hong Kong: Falun fofa chubanshe, 1998), pp. 2–3.

60. Li Hongzhi, *Zhuan falun* (*Turning the Dharma Wheel*) (Hong Kong: Falun fofa chubanshe, 1998), p. 1.

61. Ann Anagnost, "Politics and magic in contemporary China," *Modern China*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (January 1987), pp. 41–61.

pressure through bodily discipline.”⁶² Brownell characterized “Maoist body culture” as markedly egalitarian, militaristic and proletarian in its practices and aims: “In the Maoist order, the body was to serve socialism primarily through labor and military service. The goal of physical culture was to promote public health, increase productivity, and prepare the people for national defense.”⁶³

In keeping with this tradition, Li promises that contemporary practitioners of *falun gong* will also fundamentally alter their physical bodies by changing the molecular components of their “true being” (*benti*). True cultivators are thus protected from the ageing process and from illnesses,⁶⁴ and on those grounds, Li asserts that he is deserving of praise for building a stronger and better political community. In a June 1999 statement, he decried:

I, Li Hongzhi, unconditionally help practitioners improve human morality and keep people healthy, which stabilizes society; and with their healthy bodies, people can better serve society. Isn't this bringing good fortune to the people in power? ... [But] instead of recognizing it and showing appreciation to me, why do they want to push more than 100 million people to side in opposition to the government? What kind of government would be so inconceivable ... What has actually happened to the leadership of my beloved country?⁶⁵

One source of anxiety for central Party and state officials is that Li's writings embed an elaborate critique of contemporary China within the frame of *qigong*-inspired somatic practices. Involving what Snow and Benford have described as “diagnostic” and “prognostic” frames, *falun gong* texts offer a morally charged analysis of contemporary Chinese society that implicates the current regime for the failings of the official order. Using the bodies of individual practitioners as metonymies for the body politic, Li revisits current and recent political phenomena, and proposes to treat them as manifestations of various social ills. Acknowledging, for example, that “unhealthy tendencies” have emerged in the aftermath of the recent free market reforms, Li enjoins his followers:

Every kind of complicated social phenomena, countless vulgar and unhealthy things, those [appealing to] the “seven emotions and six desires,” there is never a minute when these aren't interfering with practitioners. Television, movies, written materials published by the media, these attract you to do things to become a stronger or more practical person among the ordinary (*changren zhong*). If you cannot overcome the lure of these things, the distance between you and the nature (*xinxing*) and mental state of a practitioner and the skill (*gong*) that you will acquire will be lessened.⁶⁶

Li's writings and addresses make repeated reference to Lei Feng, the

62. Patricia Uberoi, “Body, state and cosmos: Mao Zedong's ‘Study of Physical Education’ (1917),” *China Report*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (1995), pp. 128–29.

63. Susan Brownell, *Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic of China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 58.

64. Li Hongzhi, *China Falun Gong*, p. 41.

65. Li Hongzhi, “A brief statement of mine,” 22 July 1999, http://www.falundafa.ca/library/english/jw/jw9907221_e.html.

66. Li Hongzhi, *China Falun Gong*, p. 43.

PLA officer/moral exemplar popularized under Mao during the Cultural Revolution period, in order to emphasize the current moral decline he notes in contemporary Chinese society. Contrasting the ethical fidelity of the *falun gong* community of believers to the widespread disaffection and cynicism prevalent in the wider society, he proposes that he is responsible for restoring a sense of ideological coherence and moral rectitude that is lacking in the “socialist spiritual civilization” of today.⁶⁷ At the same time, however, a simple shift back to the Maoist model is no longer a feasible solution. One result of the current Party embrace of free market reform is a society motivated largely by greed, excessive consumerism and raging competitiveness in the race to get ahead:

Of course, moral criteria in contemporary human society have already undergone a change, and standards have been twisted and perverted (*niuqule*). If a person were emulating Lei Feng now, perhaps we’d have to say that s/he is mentally unsound. But in the 50s and 60s who would have said he was psychologically ill? Mankind’s moral standards are in a great decline, public morals are declining day by day, and people are bent on nothing but profit; if it benefits them, they are willing to harm others, and strive to overtake each other for personal gain by fair means or foul.⁶⁸

Li is equally critical of the policies of the pre-reform period, and argues that the Maoist moral order left widespread and profound somatized scars on the Chinese body politic. In particular, Li diagnoses an epidemic of what he refers to as “Eastern” (*Dongfang*) or “Asian” (*Yazhou*) jealousy among the Chinese, which he associates with a particular set of physical manifestations similar to the “paradigmatic symptoms” recorded by the Kleinmans in the repertoire of somatized social ills in contemporary China.⁶⁹ Li traces the proximate cause of this disease to

the absolute egalitarianism (*juedui pingjun zhuyi*) we went for in the past [that] completely messed up people’s minds ... Now, under the reforms, basic inequalities have caused extreme envy in those not benefiting from the reforms, causing many to feel “psychologically unbalanced” and to repress their emotions to an unhealthy degree. Those who do not understand that such successes are predetermined by the amount of “virtue” (*de*) which inheres in an individual. Those who fail to recognize this compete and contend their whole lives, and suffer emotional wounds. They feel bitter, tired and mentally unbalanced. They do not eat or sleep well. They are disappointed. By the time they are old, they are in poor health and come down with all kinds of illnesses.⁷⁰

In response to the charge levelled against him by the current regime

67. See, for example, his mention of Lei Feng in Li Hongzhi, *Falun Dafa, Explication* (English translation). 1997 draft version, Research Society of Falun Xiulian Dafa Translation Group, p. 39.

68. Li Hongzhi, *Turning the Dharma Wheel*, p. 113. Virtually all of Li’s explicitly political references do not appear in the official versions of his writings circulated after the late summer of 1999, when *falun gong* was branded an illegal organization; his early comments on Maoism and Lei Feng have been largely expunged from the current versions (both on-line and printed) versions of his work.

69. Arthur and Joan Kleinman, “How bodies remember: social memory and bodily experience of criticism, resistance and delegitimation following China’s Cultural Revolution,” *New Literary History*, No. 25 (1994), pp. 715–16.

70. Li Hongzhi, *Turning the Dharma Wheel*, pp. 128–130.

that he is propagating “feudal superstition,” Li retorted by implicating the Party in the widespread disaffection common today, a direct result of past mass mobilization campaigns:

In fact, those who have undergone every kind of political movement possess very strong analytical ability. They had beliefs, had disappointments, had blind worship (*mangmu chongbai*), and they had lessons they learned from these experiences, especially during the Cultural Revolution, when their very souls (*xinling*) were touched in an unforgettable way. How is it possible for this type of person to believe things indiscriminately? That these so-called “superstitions” that are in reality cooked up (*chaoshu*) by high-ranking politicians, the people of today are most capable of discerning.⁷¹

The core of Li’s proposed cure for these social and somatic ills involves the implantation of a rotating dharma wheel in the lower abdomen of the practitioner, an event which many believers claim have cured them of a variety of health problems. The wheel emits energies that adjust and then fundamentally alter the body of the believer in order to prolong life and deter ageing. Ultimately, when combined with proper cultivation techniques, *falung gong* practices culminate in the realization of a “milk white body” for the practitioner in a higher dimension of reality, and the opening of the “heavenly eye,” a vehicle of enhanced paranormal perception.⁷² These practices produce complete physical and spiritual healing for the traumas of the past and the confusion of today on both an individual and sociopolitical scale.

Thus, the heart of Li’s ideological subversion is not only his diagnosis of the current regime and its policies as the source of widespread social ills, but also his promise to dispense a set of immediate and long-lasting cures for those crises which are therefore more compelling than those provided by the formalized institutions of the body politic. Li offers followers a refuge that not only overcomes the devastating wounds inflicted by the party-state, but also promises to protect the private citizen from future crises: “When you encounter a tribulation, the benevolent compassion will help you overcome it. At the same time, my law body (*fashen*) will look after you and protect your life”;⁷³ he also advises the faithful to chant his name (which itself has close links to Daoist esoteric traditions associated with messianism) in order to obtain additional protection and relief. To the great numbers of citizens who still suffer the long-term ill effects of losses incurred during the Cultural Revolution, not to mention those without access to adequate health services since the dismantling of the commune clinics, Li’s message has powerful appeal, regardless of its more subversive dimensions. The symbolic framing of his dissenting vision serves simultaneously to address a variety of issues

71. Li Hongzhi, “Zailun mixin” (“Further comments on superstition”) 13 July 1999; previously available at http://www.falundafa.org/book/chigb/jw_28.htm, this article appears no longer to be available on any of the official websites, although cached versions are still accessible.

72. Li Hongzhi, *China Falun Gong*, pp. 24, 77.

73. *Ibid.* p. 38.

and cater to a multitude of needs, not the least of which is the inculcation of a new sense of solidarity, although not one based on the moral authority of the current regime. Coupled with the considerable organizational and institutional capacities of *falun gong*'s global network, as manifested in part by the frequent demonstrations involving practitioners in the PRC and elsewhere, the metonymic framing of Li's alternative vision presents a pointed challenge to the already weakened ideological dimensions of the legitimacy of the current regime.

Conclusion

The political contours of illiberal regimes, even those undertaking liberalizing reforms like those seen in contemporary China, create particular challenges for the articulation and mobilization of dissent. Whereas the collective action frames studied in stable liberal polities by Snow, Benford and others are regarded as successful to the degree that they are capable of inspiring long-term and sustained mobilization for overt political action, such measures in repressive systems all too often spell an early, and sometimes tragic, end to dissenting movements, as was the case in the 1989 student movement in Beijing. Admitting that the "availability of evidence and locations of scholars have imparted a strong bias toward contemporary Western Europe and North America in existing work on political contention," prominent collective action theorists have noted the need for more information on precisely how protest is articulated, organized and pursued in the non-Western world.⁷⁴

Indeed, an expansion of interest in the field of collective action has led not only to more intensive study of social movements and political dissent in the contemporary context, but also to the development of new models of contentious politics tailored to the study of protest in illiberal and authoritarian contexts. In the Chinese case, recent contributions have demonstrated that opportunity structures and organizational constraints under authoritarian regimes created similar outcomes in student movements in Taiwan and mainland China; that one outcome of the organizations and processes associated with state socialism in the PRC has been the creation of large groups of individuals with like interests and experiences that may be mobilized (and demobilized) with relative swiftness to pursue a variety of goals; and that, in certain contexts, restraint and non action in the face of aggression from state authorities can themselves constitute a sort of frame for social protest.⁷⁵ This article contributes to this effort by broadening the current understanding of the framing process to include a positive appraisal of the utility of ambiguous, ironic and metonymic frames for the expression and mobilization of political dissent in highly repressive political contexts.

74. Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, "To map contentious politics," *Mobilization*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1996), p. 28.

75. Kelliher, *Peasant Power*, Wright, *Perils of Protest*; Zhou Xuegang, "Unorganized interests;" Zuo and Benford, "Mobilization processes."

As argued above, when overt challenges are most often quickly countered with overwhelming and brutal repressive measures, the sustained articulation and elaboration of alternative and oppositional discourses requires measures more complex than the organizational and identity markers currently employed by Western social scientists studying political dissent. Such tools, while certainly useful for assessing the success of collective action movements in liberal democratic contexts, are simply not fine enough to discern the very nearly subterranean rumblings caused by the broad public circulation of carefully encoded subversive messages in authoritarian regimes. In the face of extraordinary repressive capacities, irony, ambiguity and double entendre represent adaptive strategies for contentious claim-making. In the two cases discussed above, indirection, imagery and allusion serve to create conceptual “open spaces” within which collective identities may be forged and political agendas refined.

There is, furthermore, a good deal of evidence to suggest that the deployment of irony and indirection to frame dissident views has been on the rise since the 1990s. Barmé described a “dissident genre” of cultural products emerging during the 1990s that sought to irritate state censors sufficiently to provoke their rebuke, but without moving them to go so far as actually to ban the material. According to Barmé, the disapproval of the censors imparts a niche-market value to such products unrelated to their artistic value, resulting in an explosion of “bankable dissent” in the public sphere, a development Barmé himself regards as “deeply disturbing.”⁷⁶ However, as Dutton pointed out of such critiques,

The fact that we may not like the particular form dissent takes, or approve of it being offered for sale, does not alter the dissident nature of the act, nor the delegitimising effect it has on the government ... The process is productive in so far as it does not simply cater for a market, but actually produces it, by manufacturing desire.⁷⁷

By creating or engendering a public appreciation for such expression of alternative views, regardless of ultimate aims of the creators and purveyors of such products may be, the possibilities for future resistance are expanded. Thus, as the market for such products takes root, ironic, ambiguous and metonymic frames for the expression of dissent may well be on the rise in post-Deng China, even as liberalizing reforms result in the overall relaxation of ideological controls.

Yet indirection and irony are by no means the only tools available to protesters in the face of repressive regimes. As many students of collective action have already demonstrated, protest movements can and do succeed even in highly repressive political contexts, and in fact often do so by deploying a mix of strategies and repertoires to advance their cause, many of which would appear to be suboptimal, counterproductive or simply ineffective in stable democratic systems. The simultaneous emerg-

76. Geremie Barmé, “Soft porn, packaged dissent, and nationalism: notes on Chinese culture in the 1990s,” *Current History*, No. 93 (September 1994), pp. 270–75.

77. Michael Dutton, *Streetlife China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 6.

ence of subtler framing strategies with more overtly oppositional forms of collective mobilization – contentious doorway couplets along with rising waves of rural tax protests, and *qigong* cultivation techniques deployed alongside mass civil disobedience – suggest that the ambiguous, ironic and metonymic framing strategies support and advance social mobilization in contemporary China. As shown above, long-term “subterranean rumblings” have, over the course of the post-Mao reform period, provided a low-level accompaniment to the more dramatic punctuated outbursts of overt dissent and protest in the form of riots, strikes and mass demonstrations. The point of this article is not to overlook the latter in the careful process of excavating the former, but rather to demonstrate more fully the broad range of protest frames in contemporary China. By placing ambiguous, ironic and metonymic frames in high relief, it seeks to demonstrate that the act of framing dissent in illiberal polities can involve the careful appropriation and deployment of officially sanctioned hegemonic forms in ways that simultaneously mask and evoke political meanings beneath a protective veil of ambiguity. The apparently non-political nature of the popular practices discussed above – the hanging of traditional doorway couplets, and the bodily cultivation techniques advocated by *falun gong* and other *qigong* groups – provides discursive spaces which are shielded from the gaze of the authoritarian Party-state, and encourage collusion between those who dare to dissent, and those who dare to hear them.