Who rolled the Wheel of Dharma?

Economic Reform and the Rise of Falun Gong in China

1. Research Question

On April 25, 1999, followers of Falun Gong (FLG, literally “Dharma Wheel Practice”), a religion-like movement that heavily borrows Buddhist and Taoist rituals but does not consider itself a “religion”, gathered outside of Zhongnan Hai, the leadership compound of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the central government. This move, which is later seen as the most serious challenge to People’s Republic of China (PRC) government since 1989, caught the Party leadership by surprise. The Party labeled FLG an “evil cult”, and consequently ordered complete ban on it. Large-scale suppression was successfully concluded in the mid-2000s, despite FLG’s continued activities abroad.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Puzzles remain around the rise and fall of FLG. Firstly, FLG drew its followers from Party members, military and government officials and the old “working class” in state owned enterprises (SOE), who were the incarceration of the “people” in Communist ideology and the backbone of the CCP regime. For example, 15.6% of exposed FLG followers were Party members, whereas only about 5% of total population in China belong to the ruling party.[[2]](#footnote-2) Secondly, the ideology of FLG was also very different from most other challengers to the PRC government. China’s student movement in the 1980s challenged the Party with Western ideas, and after 1989, social movements in China usually have been mostly framed against corruption and despotism of local officials.[[3]](#footnote-3) By contrast, FLG movement is ascetic, nationalist, and conservative in nature. FLG depicted itself as world-renouncing, rejecting hedonism and materialism, and vowing to “revive Chinese traditional culture”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This study intends to understand the social and economic reasons behind the rise of FLG. It hypothesizes that FLG is a religious response of the losers of economic liberalization and globalization in China in the late 1990s. On the one hand, opening of domestic market to imports and foreign investment significantly worsened the profitability of state owned enterprises (SOEs), which in turn resulted in economic insecurity among SOE workers. Moreover, the government directed SOEs to layoff redundant workers, which left many not only unemployed, but also without access to basic social security and public health services. On the other hand, the rise of the new rich, namely private entrepreneurs and multinational company (MNC) employees resulted in the re-construction of class structure and decline of relative social status of former Party-state elites, and crony capitalism brought severe moral crisis never seen in the Communist era. Faced with mounting economic, health and moral concerns, China’s old elites resorted to supernatural and embraced FLG.

1. Data sources

This study performs systematic comparison between the socio-economic backgrounds of FLG followers and non-followers. It intends to select cases on the most disaggregated level, namely individual practitioners, and then add them to county- and prefecture-levels. It will utilize archive data on FLG practitioners who were prosecuted or killed from FLG sources, and data provided by the government will be used to conduct robust checks.

Two FLG websites, namely minghui.org and Global Mission to Rescue Persecuted Falun Gong Practitioners, provide information on perished FLG followers in China, and their information is similarly structured. Firstly, one entry webpage is provided for each perished practitioner, on which her personal information is provided. Almost all individual entries provide name, age, location and reason of death of the perished individual. Secondly, on most of the individual entry webpages, hyperlinks to other story pages are provided. These story pages are usually about anti-FLG police campaigns in which this practitioner was rounded up, or fellow practitioners’ recount of their experiences with this practitioner about FLG before 1999. I will hand-code name, age, location, education, occupation, time of start practicing FLG and time of death for all cases.

Independent variables include local exposure to globalization, change in class structure and health crisis. Firstly, to capture the exposure to globalization, this study will collect on SOE employment, wage, asset, debt and profit and urban unemployment from *China Statistical Yearbooks*, *China Labor Statistical Yearbooks*, and National Economic Censuses.[[5]](#footnote-5) Secondly, to capture the change in class structure and relative decline of socio-economic status of old elites, it will gather employment and wage data of the “new rich”, namely private enterprises and foreign investment enterprises employees from *China Labor Statistical Yearbooks* and China Household Income Project.[[6]](#footnote-6) Thirdly, to capture the severity of public health crisis, this study gathered public health expenditure data from provincial *Statistical Yearbooks*.

1. Bibliography

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6. China Institute for Income Distribution. “CHIP Dataset Homepage.” <http://ciid.bnu.edu.cn/chip/index.asp?lang=EN>. Date accessed December 11, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)