

**Religiosity and Social Movements in China:
Divisions and Multiplications¹**

PRE-PUBLICATION VERSION

Published in Gilles Guiheux and Khun Eng Kuah-Pearce eds.,
Social Movements in China and Hong Kong: the Expansion of Protest Space.
Amsterdam: ICAS/Amsterdam University Press, 2009, pp. 257-282.

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To include religion in a discussion of emerging social movements in China would seem to be a natural thing to do: after all, one could argue that in China, the social movements with the greatest numbers of followers, the most efficient mobilizing ability, and the greatest capacity for resistance to government repression are religious ones. From the underground churches to Tibetan and Muslim movements to Falungong, organized popular resistance in China has frequently taken religious form since the late 20th century.

And yet, an uncritical application of the sociological concept of the ‘social movement’, with its emphasis on conflict and a state-society dichotomy, to China’s religious sphere – and perhaps, by extension, to Chinese society in general -- risks blinding us to the true location and dynamics of social agency in China. While it is not difficult to identify religious movements of resistance in China, such phenomena merely represent a small but attention-grabbing portion of a broader process of the redeployment of religious networks and communities in their relation to society and the state.

When we look closely at the theoretical literature on social movements, however, we come to the quick conclusion that, following the definitions given, strictly speaking, religion cannot constitute a social movement; even less so in China; in fact, it would appear that under China’s traditional and contemporary social and political structure, there can simply be little social movement of any sort. Considering this question, then, we risk repeating the

debate of the early 1990's about civil society in China, which did not reach a meaningful consensus (See the special issue of *Modern China* 19:2; Vandermeersch ed. 1994; Chevrier 1995, Brook & Frolic eds. 1997; Weller 1999). If, as argued by Alain Touraine, civil society is the arena within which social movements occur, and which social movements seek to expand (Cohen 1996: 185-186), the results of that debate are highly relevant to the present discussion of social movements. One of the contributions concerning Chinese religion to that discussion, made by Kenneth Dean, underlined the growing social role of religion in rural Fujian, but critiqued the applicability of the concept of civil society to describe the public spaces opened up by the popular religious revival (Dean 1997). In another vein, Richard Madsen, in his sympathetic study of China's Catholics as an incipient civil society, came to the sobering conclusion that although Chinese Catholic communities, particularly in the underground Church, engage in organized activity that is effectively outside of government control, 'this independently organized social activity does not necessarily lead toward social self-governance in a pluralistic society. It sometimes leads to fragmentation and, potentially, anarchy' (Madsen 1998: 127). Robert Weller, on the other hand, stressed both the resilience of informal social resources which could be mobilized by traditional religious communities, while stressing the split between amoral cults that accommodate themselves to the instrumental individualism of the market economy, and the voluntarist moralism of Taiwanese sectarian societies and new religious movements, which come closest to approximating civil society associations (Weller 1999: 83-84).

In this chapter, I will therefore begin with a critical discussion of the concept of 'social movements' as understood in the sociological literature, with an eye to its relevance to the Chinese case, and argue that any fruitful consideration of social agency in China will have to question some of the assumptions underlying Western paradigms of religion, resistance, and historicity. I will then examine the social dynamics of the resurgence of Chinese popular religiosity in two distinct forms in post-Mao China: the revival of temple cults in the rural areas, and the *qigong* movement in the cities. Data for the former are derived from a review of ethnographic case studies, and, for the latter, from participant observation and analysis of documentary materials produced within the *qigong* milieu (Palmer 2007). I will then conclude by arguing that social agency in these movements has expressed two types of social logic: *lines of division* between distinct social actors in confrontation, approaching the classical social

movement paradigm, and *zones of multiplication* of complex relationships between social actors, undermining the boundaries between them.

Questioning ‘social movements’

A quick perusal of the sociological literature on social movements reveals a widespread amalgam between notions of ‘movement’ and ‘protest’, ‘resistance’, ‘challenge’ or ‘conflict’ with the state. Alain Touraine defines social movements ‘as organized conflicts or as conflicts between organized actors over the social use of common cultural values’ (Touraine 2002: 90). For Sidney Tarrow, a movement is defined as ‘collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interaction with elites, opponents, and authorities’ (Tarrow 1994: 4).

Common to all these definitions is the focus on conflict as a defining characteristic of a social movement. Another underlying assumption is that social movements are expressions of agency, of the ‘autonomy of social actors’ (Touraine 2002 : 92): they are the result of groups of people acting freely and collectively to achieve a common goal of social change or resistance to change. And yet, one wonders: is there no agency when there is no conflict? Is there no possibility of *movement* outside of protest? For Touraine, it would appear not: looking at Latin America, he concludes that ‘there are no social actors in this part of the world’. Turning his gaze to Eastern Europe, he finds, as well, ‘no new actors’ and that ‘the capacity for social agency in the present situation is much lower than we expected’ (Touraine 2002 : 94). He would, no doubt, be even more disappointed if he considered China: classical social movements, in the sense of the labour movement, womens’ movement, environmental movement, and so on, are indeed very restricted in their capacity for ‘challenging’ action in China.

Should we then conclude that there is little or no space for social agency in China? I would like to argue that on the contrary, in a context of tight state control, religious groups and networks have demonstrated a high degree of resourcefulness in opening and creating a space for the attainment of their objectives. Elizabeth Perry, in her study of rural violence in socialist China, has stressed that the organizational base of popular rural protest has not followed the same evolutionary trajectory as in Europe, where reactive violence (food riots, tax revolts) of communal groups aiming to defend traditional prerogatives against an

expanding state, gradually gives way, when the state and market gain the upper hand, to 'associational' organizations such as trade unions which engage in 'proactive' collective action such as strikes (Perry 2002: 276, quoting Tilly 1975) – sectoral mobilization that could be considered 'social movements' in the classical sense. Rather, she notes, rural China in the reform era has witnessed the reconstitution of traditional social units with a religious component. But her presentation of religious movements in terms of popular revolts against the state and inter-communal violence, may obscure the complexities and ambiguities of popular religious groups in their relations with the people and the state. To adequately perceive their agency, it will be necessary to abandon two preconceptions commonly found in the literature on social movements: *first*, the assumption of a radical discontinuity between state and society; *second*, the assumption that conflict is essential to social agency. We will then be able to see religious groups deploying a wide range of creative strategies to protect their interests, expand, and effect or resist change, in rare cases exhibiting some characteristics of full-fledged social movements, but in most cases consciously avoiding conflict with the state, rather sharing zones of multiplication with the local state and other social actors.

Beyond issues of conflict and resistance, it will be fruitful to consider the underlying utopianism and historicity of social movements. Be they class-based labour movements or culturally-based environmental or feminist movements, the actors in social movements share a common explicit or implicit utopian horizon indissociable from the unfolding of Western modernity, a progressive evolution towards greater social progress through a historical dialectic in which societal change is triggered by underclass or subaltern groups challenging the centre or privileged classes, thereby forcing a re-ordering of social relations which moves society closer to the utopian ideal. It is through such a dialectic that a common social field comes into being, within which opposing protagonists interact and 'battle for the control of historicity' (Cohen 1996: 182; Touraine 1981: 31-32, quoted in Oommen 1996). In other words, the protagonists situate themselves on the same historical trajectory and clash over the control of its unfolding. Such historicity, however, is entirely foreign to Chinese religion. What happens, then, when Chinese religious sacralities and cycles intersect with the linear unfolding of rationalized 'society'? To what extent can the mutual interferences thus produced be compared to social movements?

Temple revivals in the Chinese countryside

Let us begin with traditional Chinese religion – often called ‘folk’ or ‘popular’ religion, which, over the 20th century, has largely disappeared from most mainland Chinese cities, but has undergone a significant resurgence in several rural parts of the country. The focal point of Chinese religion is the temple, which is simultaneously a sacred spot, a public space, and a social organization (Goossaert 2000). Two types of temple concern us here: temples for the cult of local gods and saints, which typically bring together all residents of a particular village or district; and temples for ancestors, called lineage halls, which are reserved for members of the same patrilineage. Communal worship at deity temples is held at regular festivals such as the god’s birthday or cyclical rites of cosmic renewal (*jiao*). Temples and festivals – which require a complex logistical organization -- are managed by lay committees whose members and officers can be chosen through a variety of procedures including selection by consensus, drawing lots, divination, or rotation among households. Troupes of local priests, who typically claim a Taoist and/or Buddhist affiliation, are often hired to perform the required rituals. All village residents or lineage members are expected to contribute financially to the construction, restoration, or expansion of a temple, as well as to the organization of ritual events and festivals. Temple and festival committees collect and manage these funds, as well as the funds collected in donation boxes and through the sale of incense for daily worship. As we will see, these funds may be spent for public or social services in addition to ritual activities.

It is important to bear in mind that in Chinese religion, each temple represents an independent cult which has no institutionalized relationship with other temples or, for that matter, any other social organization. Temples do, often in a most dynamic fashion, cultivate relationships and maintain ritual alliances with other temples and social organizations, but never as part of a nested, institutionalized hierarchy. Furthermore, belonging to none of China’s five officially recognized religions², most popular temples have no natural link with the state religious affairs bureaucracy, and are technically illegal. In some areas, there has been a trend to register such temples as Taoist or Buddhist, thereby, through giving them membership in local state-sponsored religious associations, integrating them in the state’s system of religious management. But, as I will discuss further below, the implications of such membership are far from representing simple subordination.

With Chinese temples, then, we are faced with a phenomenon of hundreds of thousands of associations, largely independent of the state and of each other, which, in many villages, have become one of the main forms of local social organization. The extent of the phenomenon is hard to measure. Since it is not a unified, self-conscious national religious community – this type of religiosity does not have a self-recognized collective name and does not even traditionally refer to itself as ‘religion’, nor does it have any criterion for membership based on belief, it is impossible to compile statistics of ‘numbers of believers’ which could be compared to those of, say, Catholics, Muslims, or Communist Party members. It is possible, however, to quantify, [at least in some better documented locales](#), numbers of temples and the frequency of their ritual activities, which are the main occasions in which temples play a significant role in social organization, community gathering, cultural production, and circulation of resources. One quantitative indicator of popular participation in temple life is the percentage of households in a given village who have contributed money, labour or materials to temple reconstruction projects.

No national statistics are available, but one prefecture government report counted over 10,000 temples in Yulin district, Northern Shaanxi province, for a population of 3.1 million in the mid 1990’s—an average of one temple per 315 persons (Chau 2005b: 21). In Southeast China, through a painstaking field survey of the Putian region of Fujian province, Ken Dean and Zheng Zhenman identified some 1,639 temples in the 600 villages of the region: 2.7 temples per village of 1,200 inhabitants on average—which amounts to one temple per 444 inhabitant. Furthermore, temple reconstruction ushered a renewal of community celebrations: in the area studied by Ken Dean, ritual events and festivals occurred within walking distance of the average village over 250 days per year (Dean & Lamarre 2003).

These figures are significant because they can be compared to a China-wide estimation of one temple per 400 inhabitants in 1900 (Goossaert 2000). To be sure, Fujian arguably had a higher than average temple density, while the number of temples was very low in other regions, where local state agents were much less amenable to temple reconstruction and a renewal of ritual activities. But the high number of temples in the impoverished, landlocked North Shaanxi belies the assumption that popular religion flourished only in the more prosperous and liberal coastal areas (Weller 1999: 85-86). Such figures can only give us a limited idea of the extent of temple religion, since they make no distinction between large monasteries and small shrines, nor do they give an indication of temple activity: some may be dormant and others flourishing. In other parts of China, superficial observation indicated a much lower incidence of temple life: there were significant variations, not only between regions, but even from one village to another. The overall data, however, points to the

exceptional resilience and dynamism of temple religion in some parts of mainland China, where it would seem to have reached levels of activity comparable to those prior to the early twentieth-century anti-superstition campaigns.

This is all the more remarkable given that temple religion has been the object of repeated campaigns to destroy popular religion since the late 19th century, for both ideological reasons – the struggle against superstition – and practical ones – the expropriation and conversion of temples, which were usually the largest buildings in a town or village, into the infrastructure of an expanding modern state: schools, tax collection departments, police stations, army barracks, or government offices. The political significance of converting temples, as self-organizing nodes of local society, into the specialized branches of a centralized bureaucracy, was not lost on local residents and modernizing activists alike, who, throughout the first decades of the 20th century, often clashed over the uses and appropriations of temples (Prazniak 1999; Duara 1991; Goossaert 2006).

After 1949, the new socialist regime, which was able to penetrate deep into every village, had the means to effectively carry out, for the same ideological and practical reasons, what had been the longstanding Guomindang policy of eradicating superstition, to which was now added the additional stigmatizing label of ‘feudal’. And yet, while the general trend and political atmosphere of the first decade of the Peoples’ Republic made it increasingly difficult for temples to operate, and encouraged their confiscation or destruction by local activists and authorities, CCP policy was to focus on struggles against ‘landlords’, ‘class enemies’, and ‘counterrevolutionary elements’ – who were often active in temple management – rather than on attacking temples themselves (Gong 2003; Feuchtwang & Wang 2001: 36-37). The press on occasion criticized fanatical activists who desecrated temples and ancestral halls, upsetting the people and thus causing them to support the landlords (Aijmer & Ho 2000: 147). In parts of North China studied by Adam Chau, the social stability and economic recovery brought about by the new regime actually stimulated a new flourishing of popular religion and the reconstruction of temples destroyed by the Japanese or during the civil war, with the impetus now coming more from the peasants than from the overthrown landlords and rich merchants, who had been the traditional sponsors of temples (Chau 2003: 41-42, see also Perry 2002: 289). It was only in the mid 1960’s, with the Socialist Education Campaign of 1964 and the 1966 ‘Smash the Four Olds’ campaign of the Cultural Revolution, that rural popular religion and its temples were almost completely eradicated for more than a

decade – although deity statues and sacred objects were often buried or hidden by temple activists, and low-key, secret ritual activity continued.

With the more open climate at the end of the 1970's, temples began to resurface. While the process involved the rebuilding and reopening of temples that had previously existed, the social context in which temple religion was reviving was completely different from that in which its traditional organizational forms had developed. The land endowments which had previously sustained temple operations had been appropriated by the state and redistributed to the farmers, and the gentry society and traditional political economy through which temples had played their social role at the centre of what Duara has called the 'cultural nexus of power' (Duara 1988), no longer existed. If, in the first half of the 20th century, temples could be seen as organic emanations of the old, 'feudal' order against which social movements mobilized peasants, workers, and women, the tables were reversed in the post-Mao era: while the socialist order retreated from its revolutionary voluntarism, it was temple construction which mobilized people around new projects, often virtually from scratch and in an agonistic relationship with the state. It is in this limited sense that we can compare temples in the reform-era PRC with social movements.

Typically, the first sign of temple revival was the increase in the numbers of worshippers who, sensing the more open political atmosphere, came to burn incense at the spot where the temple had previously stood – whether the original buildings were completely destroyed, dilapidated, or taken over for other purposes. Gradually, people would, in an unorganized fashion, clear the premises, install deity statues, and do makeshift repairs. The turning point occurred, however, when one person took the initiative to launch a full-fledged rebuilding project – an undertaking requiring significant organizational capacity as well as the ability to mobilize networks of support among villagers, donors, and officials. Each situation is unique and these individuals had a range of backgrounds and motivations. Specific examples mentioned in the literature range from a devout farmer and old soldier (DuBois 2005: 56) to an unpopular local Party secretary seeking to regain his lost legitimacy (Jing Jun 1996: 89). A common case was individuals who had been stigmatized with a bad class background during the Mao years, and for whom temple building represented a way of reclaiming and reasserting their identity and dignity, and regaining social status (Aijmer & Ho 2000: 207-209; Eng & Lin 2002: 1272). For example, a temple manager I interviewed in Lianshan, Northern Guangdong, was a retired primary school teacher whose landlord class background had

caused him to be persecuted as a 'Rightist'; with no place to stay in the village, he had taken up residence in the ruins of the local temple. Feeling that the god had protected him during those terrible years, he had arisen to rebuild the temple in the 1990's. Another typical case of temple reconstruction occurred after cadres who had desecrated a temple or divinity statue were struck by sudden death or strange illnesses, prompting villagers to speculate that the god was exacting revenge, or when someone had a dream of the village god expressing resentment at not having a proper home (Feuchtwang & Wang 2001: 63).

The group of people who helped the initiator of the temple project would evolve into the temple management board, in which the initiator may or may not continue to play the dominant role. The people most commonly active on temple boards are typically senior villagers interested in local customs and history, retired local government leaders and Party members with good connections and organizational experience, and younger entrepreneurs who treat temple activity as spiritual, symbolic and social capital.

The most visible sign of a temple's activity and influence is its festivals. The size, length, and occasion of temple festivals varies greatly, always following local custom. Occasions include traditional yearly festivals such as the Lantern Festival (*yuanxiaojie*), the birthday of a major temple god, or cyclical rituals of cosmic renewal (*jiao*) which occur every one, three, ten, or sixty years. A festival may last between one and ten days, and includes continuous rituals conducted by troupes of religious specialists, traditional opera performances (sometimes replaced by action film screenings) (Aijmer & Ho 2000: 214 n.7), a deity procession around the territory of the temple's 'jurisdiction', competitive rites such as lion dances, dragon boat races, or rocket firing (*siupao*), and plenty of economic activity on the side. People participate in festivals both as individuals – worshipping the gods and enjoying the festive atmosphere -- and as representatives of sub-segments of the community such as lineages, villages, local businesses, or government departments. The atmosphere is one of 'hot and noisy' (*renao*) sensory overload, with total attendance, in some cases, reaching the hundreds of thousands over several days (Chau 2005a, 262). During and after the festival, gossip among villagers will evaluate the success in drawing and entertaining large crowds, and compare the festival with previous ones or those organized by neighbouring temples, putting the face and prestige of the organizers, and by extension of the whole village, at stake (Eng & Lin 2002: 1274). A temple festival is often the most significant and memorable event in the life of a rural community, becoming an important moment in the creation and

enactment of local identities, and often the subject of intense rivalries between communities vying with each other to build the most resplendent temple and hold the most spectacular festivals. Indeed, the revival of a temple and its festivals often stimulates neighbouring villages to do the same, both to enhance their status and to build ties between villages through participation in each others' rituals and festivals (Dean 1993: 9).

All of this occurs in a political context in which most temples are technically illegal, and their customs and festivals stigmatized as 'feudal superstitions'. Negotiation and tension with agents of the state is thus an inescapable feature of temple life, and has been described in detail by several scholars. A recurring picture emerges in several of these studies, of a constant 'tug-of-war' (Yang 2004b) over the uses and appropriations of public spaces. Ann Anagnost thus cites the example of hundreds of rebuilt temples which were expropriated in Fujian in the 1980's and converted into school dormitories, childcare centres, recreation centres, television-viewing centres, youth clubs, rest stops, and rain shelters (Anagnost 1994: 221), and the confiscation of festival funds to build a reservoir. At the same time, the *Fujian Daily* denounced the conversion into temples of a noodle factory, primary schools, food-processing plants, and cattle pens -- showing that the dynamic of temple revival and that of temple conversion occur in parallel, with buildings and spaces becoming the sites of an ongoing struggle between the state and local populations -- in some cases expressed through demonstrations and riots led by spirit mediums and festival organizers against local Party offices, and in other cases expressed as a more subtle popular reappropriation, such as when old ladies disrupt school discipline by burning incense and worshipping in the midst of classroom activities (Anagnost 1994: 241-245). Ken Dean has described police interference in the 1986 and 87 procession of the Patriarch of the Clear Stream in Penglai township, Fujian, during which some Taoist priests were arrested and the procession disrupted. The authorities were unable to bring the festivities to a halt, however, and triggered such strong popular resentment that they were hesitant to interfere again (Dean 1993: 104-117; Dean 1998: 269). One line of analysis has been to see this tension as an expression of popular resistance to state power. Anagnost thus states that labeling popular religion as 'feudal superstition' has invested it with a 'potent means of expressing counterhegemony, a subaltern conception of the world, or system of value' ... 'Ritual clearly becomes oppositional in that it reasserts local meanings and local identity against the more universal claims of the state' (Anagnost 1994: 42, 245).

Other studies, however, present a more nuanced analysis of the forces at play³. The theme of ‘microstruggles over space’ is further developed by Mayfair Yang, in her studies of popular religion in Zhejiang province. Yang stresses the overlapping uses of the same spaces by the state and religious cults, citing, for example, the case of a Wang lineage hall in rural Yongchang Township, which had been turned into an elementary school in the Republican era. In the early 1980’s, faced with the imminent demolition of the building, still occupied by a school, to make way for road construction, lineage members organized themselves as an archaeological relic preservation team, and successfully petitioned higher levels of government to have the site protected as a Cultural Relic. Both the state and the lineage then simultaneously invested the buildings with competing significations which coexisted side by side: at one time, ancestral portraits vied with political banners for the attention of the schoolchildren still studying in the building. Later, the school moved out when the local government turned the structure into a museum, dedicated to the building as an example of ancient architecture, but *not* as a hall for ancestor worship – in which, nonetheless, lineage members continued to hold their annual sacrificial rites. In 1998, the museum’s theme was extended to become a ‘Base Area for National Defense Education’, charging entrance fees for exhibits on military history and displays of tanks, fighter planes, and warships placed on either side of the main altar for the ancestor tablets. A giant white statue was erected in the hall’s courtyard, depicting two Wang brothers who led the anti-Japanese defense in the Ming dynasty. Thus, while at one level, the building appears as the site of a ‘tug-of-war’, ‘a place for the competitive display of national sacrifice versus adherence to local kin and community’, at another level, the competing uses ‘perfectly encapsulate the convenient conflation of honoring lineage ancestors with paying homage to patriotic heroes who resisted foreign invasions of national space’: the state-employed managing committee of the museum is dominated by members of the Wang lineage, who are proud to have so much official recognition for their lineage hall, which is even designated as a provincial-level tourist attraction, with government funding to build an amusement centre for playing billiards and video games (Yang 2004b: 720, 734-738). Transforming temples into museums becomes a way for the state to appropriate local culture while freezing it (Dean 1998: 270). The state appropriates the space for its ideological uses, while the lineage hall obtains state legitimation and protection: these wills ‘coexist in an uneasy state of cooperation, tension, and interpenetration’ (Yang 2004b: 738).

In their study of a stretch of road in Sichuan along the route towards Tibet, anthropologists John Flowers and Pamela Leonard explore the place of temples in the negotiation of local peoples' memories and moral worlds in the face of successive civilizing projects (Flower & Leonard 1998; Flower 2004). Rejecting the discourse on 'everyday forms of resistance', they see a relationship of 'mutual cooptation' which they contrast to cases of peasant riots and angry confrontations which were recurrent in the same region in the 1990's (Flower & Leonard 1998: 274-277, 280-287). They describe the reopening in 1992 of a temple to Chuanzhu -- the Lord of Rivers, who protects the community from flooding -- whose statue was destroyed by township government officials a few days before the god's annual festival was to be celebrated. Just afterwards, a flood swept through the area, destroying many houses, the main road, and the township high school, a disaster which was interpreted by the people as divine retribution for the desecration, proving the efficacy of the god, increasing popular support for rebuilding the temple, and undermining the legitimacy of the local government. The anger of the god, a divinized figure of the 'upright official' Er Lang of the early Han dynasty, focalized popular resentment against the corruption of the current local officials. Later, when the local leadership team was changed, new Party Secretary Gao supported the temple in order to restore the government's legitimacy, and had the government finance the renovation of the temple, on the condition that it be promoted as a tourist attraction and be integrated into state bureaucratic structures by being designated as Buddhist, with nuns from the state-sponsored Buddhist Association appointed to manage the temple. The temple enthusiasts were happy to participate in this cooptation, to a point: they accepted the categorization of the temple as a resource for economic development, while simultaneously holding to the legend of Er Lang as a moral criticism of the commercialization and commodification of society; and they accepted the Buddhist nuns, but had them accommodated in a new hall dedicated to the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy (Guanyin), preserving the original cult to Chuanzhu. A few years later, Party Secretary Gao was recalled, and the local government once again attempted to restrict the temple; Gao's name, however, was inscribed on a new stone tablet in front of the temple, from then on to be forever associated with the upright virtues of the god Chuanzhu. From this account, the temple appears as a site where real conflicts between the state and local society are enacted and negotiated, and where universal civilizing discourses are intertwined with local memories and appropriated by the residents: 'The temple gave [the farmer] hope not because it was

‘traditional’, but precisely because it was a place where the subject of civilizing discourse could be engaged, instead of written out of the narrative’ (Flower 2004: 681). Feuchtwang and Wang have likewise noted how the image of temple gods and managers as righteous servants of the people, has come to combine village history and tradition with the collective values of public duty previously inculcated by the CCP (Feuchtwang & Wang 2001: 77).

Turning to Northwest China, we can consider the case of the Kong lineage of Dachuan village, Gansu, studied in detail by Jing Jun (1996). This village had doubly suffered during the Mao years, firstly on account of the ‘feudal’ and ‘reactionary’ background of its dominant lineage, descendant of Confucius, and secondly since much of the village, as well as most of its graves, had been permanently flooded and forcibly resettled for the building of a reservoir. For the members of the Kong lineage, rebuilding their lineage hall and reviving its ancestral cult was a way of reclaiming their memory and rebuilding their shattered identity. While the temple rebuilding project was initiated in the 1980’s by an unpopular Party secretary hoping to regain legitimacy, he was driven out of office by younger Party members who were active in an (unsuccessful) campaign for compensation for the land lost to the reservoir, and who became, together with some old men who had received classical Confucian training in their youth, the core of the group of temple activists. In order to ensure legitimacy for the temple, its original purpose as an ancestral temple restricted to Kong lineage members, was doubled with one as a hall to commemorate Confucius as a sage of the Chinese people, and therefore a public site for the promotion of Chinese culture and national pride. However, the installation of a statue of Confucius, crafted in the manner customary of popular divinity statues, caused the temple to be viewed by most villagers as a popular god, able to answer prayers and cure illnesses, making the Confucius temple one of the major centres of folk religion in the area. Here, the temple was clearly a site for the expression of local tensions and political conflicts, but these were diffused by juxtaposing Kong clan identity, the state’s civilizing project, and popular religious culture.

In his study of the Black Dragon King temple in Yulin district, Northern Shaanxi, Adam Chau paints a picture of the emergence of a new type of local elite which draws its power from moral authority and access to tradition, in constant negotiation with two other types of local elite: business entrepreneurs and agents of the local state. His study focuses primarily on the latter, showing how temple boss Wang successfully ensures the legitimation and protection of the temple by having its old stone gate designated a cultural relic, by providing

cash payments to police patrolling the huge annual temple festivals, as well as tax and income streams for the local commercial and electricity bureaus, and spending temple revenues on environmental and educational projects recognized and praised by the forestry and education bureaus. He finally succeeds in having the temple officially registered as a Taoist place of worship, at a ceremony scheduled to coincide with the high point of the Dragon King's birthday festival, with the best opera performances in all of Northern Shaanxi and thousands of local festival-goers present. The ceremony brings into each others' presence, mutually recognizing and acknowledging each other, the personal charisma of the temple boss, the divine power of the god, the political authority of the state representatives, and the communal energy of the crowds (Chau 2005a: 269)⁴. An illegal temple and an unpopular local state leadership thus used each other in order to obtain the legitimacy they respectively lacked: legal and political for the temple, popular and divine for the local state agents.

Using the surplus funds raised through incense donation boxes, the Dragon King temple launched a reforestation project which won international acclaim as the only non-governmental arboretum in China, and built a primary school which, with generous funding from the temple and excellent facilities, quickly became the best primary school in the entire district (Chau 2005a: 258-259). Indeed, in a context in which, throughout the 1980's and 90's, the state increasingly disengaged itself from the village level, providing few resources to cash-strapped village governments and Party branches whose main function often came to be limited to the unpopular activities of tax collection and enforcing birth control policies, temples have frequently emerged as alternative centres of resource collection and allocation, to which villagers willingly contribute funds, which in many cases are spent by the temple board on local infrastructure such as the construction and repair of roads, bridges, schools, and even basketball courts (Yang 2000: 486-489). In her comparative study of four villages in Jiangxi and Fujian, Lily Lee Tsai concludes that single-lineage villages which practice village-wide rituals or with an active temple association, 'provide broad community networks that village officials can draw on for public services' (Tsai 2002 : 9). She notes that the committees formed to rebuild temples and lineage halls often evolved into 'community councils' that organized religious, social, and philanthropic activities. While villagers would not contribute to appeals for funds by village cadres, they 'willingly and universally' contributed to public projects when solicited by temple boards. In one village, the temple

committee's revenue was four times higher than that of the village government, and had taken over all of the road building in the community (Tsai 2002 : 10, 11). Local cadres often sought the support of temple boards for their projects, and downloaded responsibility for social services to them, although they continued to take credit for their achievements when reporting to higher levels of the administration (Tsai 2002: 21-23). Thus, Ken Dean has claimed that popular religion has become a 'second tier of local government' in many parts of rural China (Dean 2001; 2003). In a township I visited in Northern Guangdong, temple board members were said to be 'more powerful than the Party', and, by circulating a petition signed by over 20,000 residents, had successfully campaigned against the local government's plan to change the name of the township. And yet, relations between the temple board and the local state were cordial and cooperative, cemented by a father-son relationship: the son was the Office Director in charge of the day-to-day management of the township government, while his father, a retired primary school teacher, was the leading member of the temple board. In a case described by Feuchtwang and Wang, a lineage hall committee, which had been provided with an office in the village government building, ended up occupying its entire ground floor (Feuchtwang & Wang 2001: 64).

Many studies have stressed the support given to temples and lineage halls by local and regional governments eager to promote tourism and to attract investment by overseas Chinese. In her research on the role of Singaporeans in the revival of religious activities in their ancestral villages in Southeast China, K. E. Kuah-Pearce has noted that while village cadres tended to support the revival of ancestor worship for sentimental reasons, officials at the county level also encouraged such activities for instrumental reasons, hoping that the ties thus created with Singaporeans would lead them to contribute funds to schools and hospitals and invest in infrastructures benefiting the entire county. Large scale religious festivals for the Patriarch of the Clear Stream, who was worshipped by most Singaporeans on trips to their hometowns, and whose temple was renovated with local government support as a designated tourist attraction, were staged with the active cooperation of the local authorities, which declared the festival a public holiday and had the schools closed, while pupils performed dances and musicals and were provided with dress, drinks, and pocket money by the festival organizers (Kuah-Pearce 2000: 167,185,190).⁵ In other cases described by Göran Aijmer and Virgil C. Y. Ho, temple activists and enthusiastic local cadres successfully 'used' Hong Kong connections to press for recognition by higher levels of government, asking

their Hong Kong kin to intervene with the authorities, and even to threaten – successfully -- that they would destroy the roads they had funded if a Provincial Work Team, sent down to supervise an anti-superstition campaign in 1993, insisted on confiscating two modest village temples (Aijmer & Ho 2000: 224).

Some local cults have also been used by state agents to promote China's political reunification: most notable has been the use of the cult of Mazu, billed in the Chinese press as the 'Sea Goddess of Peace in the Taiwan Strait' (*Peoples' Daily Overseas Edition*, April 22, 1987, quoted in Liu 2005: 3). Taiwanese temples contributed financially and organized large-scale pilgrimages to the ancestral temple in Meizhou, Fujian – activities legitimized by state agencies' encouraging the organization of academic conferences on local gods to which local scholars, temple activists, and overseas donors were invited (Dean 1993: 92) -- although, as noted by Yang, rather than leading to political unification, 'cross-strait Mazu pilgrimages are creating a regional ritual space and religious community of Chinese coastal peoples that do not conform to existing political borders' (Yang 2004a: 216). Attempting to replicate the Mazu model and hoping to build ties with Hong Kong and Macau residents, the Shenzhen Cultural Bureau rebuilt the Chiwan Tianhou temple in 1992 as an uneasy hybrid of secular museum and place of worship (Liu 2005). This case, of a temple built by the government itself, is also increasingly common, as local authorities attempt to appropriate the popularity of religious activity and profit from its revenue streams, either by building new temples or taking over existing ones⁶. The temple of the Patriarch of the Clear Stream, mentioned above, was even the object of a struggle for control between local and provincial levels of government (Dean 1993: 126).

From the cases studied above, it is obvious that rural temple revivals do express conflicts over what Touraine calls the 'appropriation of historicity' (Touraine 1988: 68), or the respective roles and powers of social groups in the collective development of society. While social movements are struggles over conflicting interpretations of shared universal norms and utopian values, and are thus contests taking place between actors within the same linearity of history, temple revivals disrupt the centralized, developmental historicity of the nation-state, rewinding local communities into overlapping cyclical time-frames of festivals and ritual events. And yet, in their relations with the nation-state and its civilizing projects, by participating in the local elaboration and appropriation of developmental discourses and

practices on patriotism, the economy, tourism, cultural preservation, and education, they do open up a peculiar type of 'public sphere' which is highly charged by the tension between incommensurable specialities and temporalities. Thus, while they clearly express the assertion of local identities, they fit into neither of the extreme models of identity identified by Touraine as disqualifying a group as a social movement: their behaviour is not one of seeking 'pure identity' through withdrawing from active engagement with social change; nor do they display the 'purely strategic' model of groups competing for power and privilege within a social structure which is not contested (Cohen 1996: 183). A temple is not an interest group but a type of social, spacial, and temporal organization which can be invested by different groups, networks, and even the state itself in the pursuit of their respective interests. While temples do not explicitly challenge the political order, rather, when necessary, trying to inscribe themselves into it through the legitimacy provided by the labels of 'cultural relic', 'tourist site', 'designated site for religious activities', 'patriotic education', or 'economic development', the interpenetration of the temple and the modern state as mutually alien forms of social organization, can only lead to changes in the local political order.

It is an interaction in which several logics may operate at the same time. From the perspective of the totalistic ideological discourse of the state, which operates on binary dichotomies between the developed and the backward, the modern and the superstitious – what I term *lines of division* -- the reality in the field can only appear incongruous, and only three options are conceivable: to rename the phenomenon, as mentioned above, by inscribing it into legitimate categories; to ignore it; or to eliminate it. There can be no surprise, then, that whenever popular religion is not ignored or renamed by the official media or policy, it is always denigrated and attacked with anti-superstition discourses and campaigns – and that the earlier studies which have relied primarily on Chinese official newspaper reports – notably Perry's and Anagnost's – have thus focused on dimensions of repression, conflict, and resistance.

But later researches in the field have uncovered a more subtle dynamic⁷, which could be termed as one of *zones of multiplication*. Multiplication can be understood in terms of increasing numbers of new autonomous units often connecting with each other in 'rhizomatic networks' (Deleuze & Guattari 1980: 20, 31), which is how the spread of temple religion can be described, as opposed to the growth of a single social body. It can also be understood as the multiplication of relationships between beings of a different nature: gods,

humans, state agencies, producing an entirely new reality each time a term of the equation is modified. As shown by Adam Chau, the temple blasts open the state's monolithic discourse about itself, revealing a profusion of 'linking and articulating channels' between the temple and different local state agencies, while the latter likewise establish channels with multiple individuals and popular organizations, through which circulate healings, money, gifts, status, protection, tributes, deference, and legitimacy (Chau 2005a: 268-69). Ken Dean has suggested thinking of a 'floating signifier' released into the sociopolitical system by Taoist ritual, which provides 'lines of flight' from the 'despotic signifier' of Imperial power (Dean 1993: 184, 185). The multiplying logic of the temple also operates in the relationships between divinity statues, temple managers, local worshippers, state officials, overseas pilgrims, geomancers, business entrepreneurs, and priests – each of which enter the sacred space with differing sets of motivations, cosmologies, and pantheons, producing an infinite range of intersecting connections and dissolving all attempts to impose fixed lines of division.

The *qigong* movement

Turning to *qigong*, we can see a similar interplay between lines of division and zones of multiplication, but in which there was a conscious attempt to invest the unfolding historicity of modernity, producing a phenomenon which came much closer to resemble a social movement. The modern category of *qigong* was devised at the end of the 1940's in the nascent health bureaucracy of the 'Liberated Zone' of South Hebei, and established as a sub-discipline of Chinese medicine within the medical institutions of the new Peoples' Republic during the 1950's. Defined as 'breath training' and including body, breathing, and mental exercise regimens, the category aimed to integrate, standardize, and secularize the vast array of traditional body cultivation and meditation techniques, which had typically been practiced in religious settings and transmitted through 'feudal' master-disciple relationships, but which were seen as having positive benefits for health. Following the logic of lines of division, the project of *qigong* was to separate the physical body techniques from the dross of feudal and superstitious symbols, customs, and social relations, turning them into a scientific clinical practice that could be harnessed at low cost to train the healthy bodies of New China's people. In practice, during the 1950's and early 1960's, *qigong* clinics provided relief for the

mentally stressed Party elite at hospitals and sanatoria such as the Beidaihe beach resort (Palmer 2007: 29-45).

During its first phase, *qigong* was entirely instrumentalized by the state and could hardly be considered a movement. But, after more than a decade during which the *qigong* institutions had been closed during the Cultural Revolution, *qigong* reappeared in the late 1970's and increasingly took the form of a popular movement. Operating outside of the medical institutions, some *qigong* activists created their own standardized sets of exercises, which were practiced by groups of people in parks. Thousands of charismatic '*qigong* masters' emerged from obscurity, claiming to have secretly nurtured their powers during the Cultural revolution, and now 'came out of the mountains' to heal the sick and save humanity from suffering. Laboratory experiments which appeared to prove the material existence of the vital force or 'external *qi*' emitted by masters towards patients from a distance, gave a scientific basis to the mysterious powers of the masters, and pointed to *qigong* exercises as the key to unlocking the paranormal abilities which lay latent in every human being. This tantalizing possibility was enthusiastically taken up by key members of China's scientific elite, especially within the military and nuclear technology establishments, who enlisted leading figures in the CCP to support the dream of a new 'somatic science' which would trigger a new worldwide scientific revolution under Chinese leadership (Palmer 2007: 46-85).

The standardized sets of *qigong* exercises, called *gongfa* in Chinese, each had a name, such as 'Xianggong' ('aromatic *qigong*') or 'Zhinenggong' ('intelligent *qigong*') and were associated with a *qigong* master, who was the author or inheritor of the method. Although a *gongfa* technically referred to a set of exercises, in practice each *gongfa* was the basis of a training network linking the master to hundreds, thousands, or even millions of practitioners. Each *gongfa* was transmitted to the mass of practitioners by networks of trainers in local practice points throughout a region, the country, and often even abroad. As networks, they involved both vertical communication between the master, his disciples and trainers, and the practitioners, as well as horizontal communications between network members. Most *gongfa* networks registered as 'research societies' under the umbrella of state-sponsored national, provincial, and municipal federations which were typically led by well-connected retired government and party leaders who practiced *qigong* themselves, and which operated under the patronage of government ministries (health and sports) and official Science and Technology associations (Palmer 2007: 183-218). Newspapers reported the

healing miracles of the masters as phenomena at the frontiers of cutting-edge science, while best-selling books on the ‘grandmasters’ such as Yan Xin and Zhang Hongbao, spawned a publishing industry.

By the second half of the 1980’s, *qigong* had become a mass phenomenon, promoted and carried forward by several distinct groups of people: the *qigong* masters, the paranormal scientists, the retired Party leaders, the health and sports officials, and the multitudes of ordinary practitioners. It is hard to estimate the number of persons who practiced *qigong*. While the figure of over 100 million is often mentioned, it would be more realistic to consider that regular practitioners at the peak of the *qigong* craze numbered around 10 million, while several times as many people practiced occasionally, attended healing sessions, or had other direct experiences of *qigong*. Given that *qigong* was largely an urban phenomenon, and that the majority of practitioners were women and seniors, this figure still represents a significant proportion of those categories of the population⁸.

The leading figures among those who practiced, studied, and promoted traditional Chinese body technologies under the name *qigong* described themselves as the ‘*qigong* sector’ (*qigong jie*). They were active in a social space I call the ‘*qigong* milieu’: a nebula of networks and associations which expanded massively in the 1980’s. The *qigong* milieu was a space of relative freedom in which, between 1979 and 1999, many types of popular activities and networks flourished: the group practice sessions in public parks, the therapeutic encounters and healing sessions, the training workshops, the academic conferences, and the ritualized meetings of state-supervised associations; the interconnected networks of *qigong* associations, organizations, and institutions; and the popular *qigong* magazines and books through which *qigong* discourse was elaborated, debated, and diffused. Within the *qigong* milieu, people exercised their bodies and minds, practiced divination and laboratory experiments, and discussed subjects as varied as Buddhism, Daoism, the scientific method, health maintenance, and the progress of Chinese culture. Thousands of masters competed in an emerging market for *qigong* health, healing, and spiritual arts, each proposing his own package of exercises and theories. Debates raged on the effects and powers attributed to *qigong*. The training and practice networks founded by hundreds of masters may well have formed China’s greatest collection of popular associations during the period, and, in the words of Zhu and Penny, ‘probably the greatest mass movement in modern China that was not under direct government control.’ (1994:3). The groups within the *qigong* milieu were characterized

by extreme diversity and fragmentation, but this centrifugal tendency was countered by, firstly, a mystical and syncretistic outlook that encouraged tolerance and mutual receptivity, and secondly, a sense of cultural marginality bordering on the heterodox, leading to a common consciousness of the need to justify themselves in relation to the ridicule that could be directed at them from the perspective of conventional Western scientism and orthodox Marxism⁹. These counter-centrifugal tendencies facilitated the circulation of people and ideas between diverse groups.

When we look at the relationship of the *qigong* milieu with the larger society, *qigong* can in some ways be seen as a social movement. *Qigong* was characterized by social mobilization, in which there was increased communication and common action between people from different backgrounds, social spheres, and regions, on a national and even global scale, as they promoted their common goals. What started with decentralized, non-coordinated initiatives in the mid to late 1970's quickly took a life of its own and acquired organizational capacity within a few years, with a core network of influential political leaders, scientists, and masters who were able to assume leading roles within the movement and to articulate and promote a common vision and discourse. The social goals upheld by the movement included improving the health of the masses, bringing about a renaissance of traditional Chinese culture, and triggering a Chinese-led scientific revolution which would lead to a paranormal utopia. These goals were formulated as fitting within, and even as potentially spearheading, the unfolding of the Marxist teleology of national progress: *qigong*, which had been the source of Chinese civilization in its Golden Age, had been restricted, exploited, and driven underground by feudal powers and religious dogmas for over 2000 years, but it was now reviving, flourishing, and triggering scientific breakthroughs and a cultural renaissance in the new era opened by the Chinese Communist Party (Palmer 2007: 86-101).

From the beginning of the movement in 1979, this utopian vision of *qigong* and its scientific premises was attacked by a number of scientists and ideologues, and polemics on both sides of the issue were often aired in the press (Palmer 2007: 158-182), producing what we might call a conflict over the interpretation and control of historicity – and yet, until the second half of the 1990's this conflict was largely restricted to the press, and was hardly expressed as a struggle between opposing social groups. On the contrary, certain state agencies and political networks were actively supporting the movement, making it as much a top-down as a bottom-up phenomenon. The *qigong* movement was termed by commentators as a *re*, a

‘fever’ – one of the countless cultural crazes which swept post-Mao China in the 80’s and 90’s, ranging from ‘culture fever’ to ‘Mao fever’ to ‘stock market fever’. The ‘fever’ can be situated somewhere between the political campaigns or ‘movements’ (*yundong*) of the Mao era, and the fully commoditized consumer fads of capitalist societies: a ‘fever’ is a form of collective effervescence which occurs when official policies and informal signals sent from above correspond with, open the space for, and amplify popular desire, which appropriates these spaces in unexpected ways, simultaneously complying with, appropriating, disrupting, and mirroring the projects of state hegemony. Thus, in *qigong*, the official campaign to promote science and technology as the foundation of Deng’s Four Modernizations, was enthusiastically taken up by the *qigong* milieu and recast as a call to encourage the mass propagation of breathing exercises as a stage in China’s cultural and scientific renaissance. As ‘moments when an entire cultural area (often all of urban China, sometimes the nation as a whole) is unified by a common activity’, as described by Ellen Hertz (1998: 82),¹⁰ fevers create a social sphere in which, unlike temple revivals, all the actors operate within the roughly corresponding spatial and temporal frames of the nation and its historicity.

The *qigong* episode thus forces us to abandon a conflictual model that places state authority in opposition to the autonomy of individuals and popular groups. It shows a movement that developed through the interpenetration of networks, groups, institutions, practices and conceptual systems, in which it is impossible to fully separate the state and popular groups as distinct entities. An image of the state as a monolithic entity makes way for a landscape of interconnected persons, networks and institutions that advance, retreat, cross each other and turn around, link up, pass each other, collide, expand and influence each other, reaching to the edges of society, without ever completely covering it. It is difficult to draw a clear line between what is within the state and outside of it. ‘The extra-institutional is co-extensive with the state, [...] it is structuring, not only deforming.’ (Chevrier 1995: 171). It is within such a system, and not outside of it, that *qigong* groups were formed and expanded.

The case of *qigong* thus reveals a dynamic that is often contrary to the processes of individualization and institutional differentiation characteristic of Western paradigms of modernity. This begins with the dispositions and orientations nurtured by the body practices themselves. Western sports and physical training produce power at the point of friction between discrete material bodies. Muscles are trained against the resistance of external

objects. The body's power is measured against disembodied targets. Physical, mental, emotional, and moral abilities are the subject of separate training regimens. Chinese body technologies, on the other hand, reveal an opposite tendency: the concentration of all forms of power into the cosmic centre of the body, usually named *dantian*, the elixir field beneath the navel, evoking metaphors of the alchemical furnace in which heterogeneous elements are forged into a single elixir, itself a sign of the primal unity of the Dao. Collecting, cultivating, and concentrating energies leads to an inner connection with the ultimate cosmic Power. The energies to be collected are not only inside the body but outside as well, including the powers of the sun, of the moon, of trees, of animals, of other people, and of symbols: hence the attempts to draw on and fuse the different traditions of Daoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Martial Arts, Medicine, and Science. Power is generated, not through friction, but through fusion, through entering into a mutually transforming resonance with the object: absorbing the energy of a tree, for instance, does not involve pushing against it: rather, relating to the tree in such a manner that the flow of energies within it passes to the body of the practitioner. In *qigong*, the body becomes the ultimate multiplier, enabling the practitioner to combine, through direct practice and visceral experience, domains as varied as physics, physical exercise, mysticism, calligraphy, illness narratives, science fiction, the refinement of saliva, martial arts heroism, medicine, archaeology, the comparative study of civilizations, enhancing and/or controlling sexual potency, biology, physiognomy, workplace stress management, scientific methodology, national essence, and regulation of the digestive system, among other things. Each line of division applied to *qigong* by modern discourses, each of which had its corresponding institutions, such as those which separate the categories of science, tradition, religion, sports, medicine, and national defense, only served to open new zones of multiplication between them, producing dense networks, not only of signification, but also of social relationships between people from different social spheres.

The intermediate space of *qigong* was not autonomous. It was simultaneously co-opted by the state and popular groups: each tried to use *qigong* for its own ends. If the state encouraged the development of *qigong* circles and gave them institutional support, it was as an instrument of its objectives in health, science, and national identity. Its support for the construction of a unified national *qigong* community aimed to co-opt and control it. In exchange, popular *qigong* groups obtained an institutional legality and legitimacy that

permitted their massive expansion. *Qigong* could thus prosper by combining the institutional support of the state and the dynamism of popular groups.

But the multiplying logic of the *qigong* movement is perhaps what led to its own dissolution and to its polarization through the Falungong episode. By the mid 1990s, the trend towards wholesale Westernization and capitalism had become so overwhelming in China that *qigong* dreams of reconciling science, tradition, and utopian ideals fell by the wayside. Interest in creating a distinctive Chinese science faded, as power in the Chinese scientific community shifted from the more nationalist military establishment to civilian institutions increasingly engaged in international exchanges and interested in applying universally-recognized standards and methods (Wang, Yeu-Farn 1993: 115-141). The idealized body was now that of the hedonistic consumer of fashion, beauty products, plastic surgery, and sexual pleasure (Brownell 1998; Johansson 1998). Traditional culture became a commodity, a resource to extract and package for the booming markets of tourism, leisure, and health (Cingcade 1998).

In the new context, the *qigong* movement was led to a point of bifurcation, reflecting what Weller has called a 'split-market culture' in which religious groups, in the transition to a capitalist market economy, either accept or reject its amoral individualism (Weller 1999: 83-105). Much of the movement followed the trend of the times, towards increased commodification and commercialization within a framework of bureaucratic regulation. The market for *qigong* was considerable – but the entrepreneurial business practices of many *qigong* masters triggered controversies over 'fakes', 'forgeries', and 'swindling'. Such issues were concerns of public discourse about most types of market commodities in China, at a time when consumer rights and principles of business accountability and integrity were still new to the emerging Chinese economic culture. Such practices dissolved the utopian élan of the *qigong* movement, making *qigong* masters appear no different from other profit-hungry businessmen. Tainted by controversy and under renewed attack by the scientific community, political backing for commercialized *qigong* dwindled.

In this context, Li Hongzhi, who had founded Falungong as a *qigong* method in 1992, attacked the overall direction of the *qigong* movement, calling instead for a rejection of hedonism and for a morality that invoked both the asceticism of ancient spiritual masters and the altruism of the Maoist era. The primary goal of practice became spiritual accomplishment and entering the 'Falun world', while this world became the stage of an

apocalyptic moral battle between demonic forces and the Great *Fa*. Where *qigong* allowed the multiplication of practices and fantasies of health, prosperity, and spirituality, and involved opening the body to the diffused energies of the cosmos -- 'collecting *qi*' from nature, sending and receiving *qi* between practitioners, dabbling in all types of techniques, symbols, and concepts -- Falungong drew lines of division between sensual pleasures and the spiritual rewards, through suffering, of exclusive cultivation. Falungong appealed to widespread concerns about morality and corruption and proposed a radical alternative to mainstream hedonism and materialism.

In Falungong practice, the moral line of division became the *dominant* theme, structuring the body discipline itself, and tying it to an apocalyptic eschatology which resonates with medieval texts describing the imminent destruction of the world before the appearance of the True Lord Li Hong, who will inaugurate a new era of joy and longevity¹¹. To the body exercises and spiritual concepts of *qigong*, Li Hongzhi added a social critique based on moral fundamentalism. Where the simple, honest and virtuous person was often ridiculed and abused by his co-workers, Falungong raised his suffering to the level of a heroic spiritual struggle in which he was to resign himself and bear the blows, each insult and each wound being a gift of 'white matter' which would help him to move a step higher toward celestial perfection. All the more so if a Falungong practitioner was verbally or physically abused while defending the *Fa*. Morality was now the central issue, displacing the typical *qigong* concerns with science, paranormal abilities, and tradition. The evolution toward moral predication reinforced the tendency to politicization. Falungong discourses of morality extended beyond body discipline to social criticism, social problems being perceived in China as the result of a decline in the morality of the people in general and of government leaders in particular.

While the *qigong* movement promoted ideas that were deviant or even heterodox by the standards of Marxist orthodoxy, the public behaviour of most *qigong* advocates, masters, and practitioners had followed the norms of orthopraxy¹², multiplying webs of reciprocal relations with officials, and publicly displaying deference to the social and political order. Falungong, on the other hand, broke this logic of interpenetration. By the mid 1990's Falungong began to cease participating in the ritual organization of the post-Mao state system. After coasting on the *qigong* boom and benefiting from the political legitimacy and networks of the state-sponsored China *Qigong* Research Society, which had played an

instrumental role in launching him as a national celebrity in *qigong* circles, Li Hongzhi, having attained a sufficiently large following and reputation, withdrew from the association in 1996. By putting an end to his collaboration with state-sponsored *qigong* associations, he placed himself outside the circuit of personal relations and financial exchanges through which masters and their organizations could find a place within the state system. Instead, he sought to establish an autonomous social body, the great body of the Dharma or *Fa*, in which each disciple becomes a *Fa*-particle, in which the practitioners' bodies were the theatres of both personal spiritual struggle and of the apocalyptic battle between the demonic old world and the righteous *Fa*.

While refusing to engage with the state according to its rules, Falungong endeavoured to remain at centre stage, offering the power of its *Fa* to society and even to the state, organizing spectacular public 'experience-sharing' gatherings and, through its protests against critical media, opposing any attempt to diminish its social influence. Falungong sought to replace the interpenetrating flows of power of the multiplication paradigm with a unidirectional flow, from the cosmic power of the *Fa*, through Li Hongzhi and outward to society.

Where the multiplying logic of *qigong* scrambled the lines of division within the state, revealing and reinforcing its own multiplying tendencies, the state's response to Falungong mirrored the latter's logic of division, the one reinforcing the other. This polarising dynamic confirmed the vision of a world divided between the 'saved' disciples of Li Hongzhi and the world possessed by demons. And the repeated protests by followers, both before and after the official crackdown beginning in July 1999, at newspaper offices, around Zhongnanhai, on Tiananmen Square – which led to a hardening of the CCP's lines of division – drew official power into a moral battle pitting the demonic oppressor against suffering martyrs. And in return, in the years following the repression, Falungong became further radicalized, launching a movement to haemorrhage the CCP to death by encouraging mass defections of its members. This campaign was spearheaded by the media outlets managed and staffed by Falungong activists, notably the overseas Chinese newspaper *Epoch Times*, which widely distributed a series of anti-CCP tracts (Epoch Group 2005).

Although one emerged from the other, *qigong* and Falungong are thus two distinct movements with their own logic within distinct sets of historical and political circumstances. While *qigong* and Falungong are clearly both social and both movements, they offer

fascinating cases for questioning assumptions about dichotomies between ‘state’ and ‘society’, illustrating the dynamic interplay between zones of multiplication and lines of division.

Conclusion

This essay was written with the hope that applying the concept of social movements might help us to better understand the relationship between religiosity and society in contemporary China. The two cases I have examined, of temple revivals and the *qigong* movement, though very different from each other, represent two ends of the wide spectrum of Chinese popular religiosity. Neither clearly fits conventional definitions of ‘religion’, and both have, more often than not, found their continued existence and legitimacy by adopting the labels of cultural heritage, tourism, economic development, medicine, sports, or science. Nor do they fit conventional definitions of social movements. But applying the concept of social movements has been useful, not merely to conclude, as is inevitable when categories derived from Western history are applied to other parts of the world, that the category itself should be questioned, but to help us to derive models of social agency that would better describe the dynamics at play when Chinese religious groups find themselves in agonistic relationships with the state. This paper has suggested that two types of dynamic can be observed around Chinese religious practices of the body and the temple: ‘division’ and ‘multiplication’, showing that the two often coexist asymmetrically, with ever-extending arborescent lines of division ironically opening ever more zones of multiplication. On the other hand, the symmetrical mirroring of lines of division by the Chinese state and popular movements collapses the possibility of a *social* resolution and polarizes into an apocalyptic struggle in which each side tries to exterminate the other.

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Index terms

temples

qigong

Catholics

Touraine, Alain

ritual

religion

gods

Buddhist

lineage

Falungong

apocalypticism

utopianism

¹ I am grateful to Gilles Guiheux and K. E. Kuah-Pearce, and the participants at the conference on emerging social movements in China, for encouraging me to look more deeply into the relations between Chinese religion and social movement theory. I am also indebted to Kristofer Schipper, Ken Dean, Vincent Goossaert, Mayfair Yang, and Adam Chau for many insights and stimulating discussions which have helped to shape the ideas discussed in this paper.

² Buddhism, Taoism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam.

³ For a critique of the notion of peasant resistance as applied to China, see Weller 1994.

⁴ A similar encounter is described in Dean 1998: 266. See Feuchtwang & Wang 2001 for an in-depth study of the charisma of temple managers.

⁵ On government sponsorship of festivals, see also Siu 1990a, 1990b.

⁶ See Lang, Chan & Lagvald 2005 for several examples of state-sponsored construction of Wong Tai Sin temples in mainland China.

⁷ Constraints on field research in China may be a factor accounting for the fact that most field studies have focused on relatively successful cases of temple-state relations, rather than on cases of overt conflict.

⁸ For a detailed discussion on the difficulties in estimating numbers of practitioners, see Palmer 2007: 258-261.

⁹ This understanding of the *qigong* milieu is taken in analogy to the Western 'cultic milieu' categorized in Campbell 1972: 122.

¹⁰ See Hertz 1998: 71-93 for a discussion of the notion of the ‘fever’ in relation to the stock trading craze of the early 1990’s.

¹¹ Falungong’s apocalyptic doctrine can be traced back to the Buddhist eschatology of the *kalpas* or universal cycles, which, in Chinese heterodox sects, have pointed to social chaos and corruption as foreboding the end of the present kalpa inaugurated by the Sakyamuni Buddha, and have preached paths to salvation and preparation for ushering in the new kalpa. On the Li Hong prophecies, see Seiwert 2003: 82-84, 86-89; Seidel 1969-70; and Zürcher 1983: 3.

¹² Anthropologist Erika Evasdottir, in her study of Chinese intellectuals (Evasdottir 2004), defines orthopraxy as ‘the express formulation of *action* to conform to commonly held standards’. Based on Evasdottir’s conceptualization, I take orthopraxy to mean the collective performance of political order – an order which is not the product of an outside or transcendent law, but the fruit of the harmonized *performance* of the actors themselves, including both the rulers and the ruled. In orthopraxy, order ceases to exist when the actors themselves cease to perform it.