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## Something of value: the religious response to de-Maoization in China<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

The title of this paper is taken from a novel written by Robert Ruark several decades ago concerning the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya. Ruark's contention was that when the British conquered and colonized Kenya, they destroyed the indigenous culture but failed to replace it with an alternative. The result was an ineffective search by the native population for a value system and the barbarism of the Mau Mau uprising. A similar phenomenon has been occurring in China over the past nearly 25 years.

Following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and the end of the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping became China's paramount leader. He launched a series of economic reforms which allowed for a limited capitalism. This required formal ideological justification by the Communist Party of China (CPC). The Resolution on CPC history in 1981 was duly adopted. It attempted unsuccessfully to separate Mao Zedong Thought from Mao Zedong the man. Consequently, the Party's legitimacy rests solely on economic success and power. However, many people in China find this lacking and are searching for new belief systems. This paper seeks to establish the hypothesis that this search is the primary reason for the formation of new religious movements in China (Christian and other, such as Falundafa) which have not been officially recognized and accepted.

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### 1. Preface

A statement concerning the methodological limitations of this piece is in order. To do a thorough investigation of this subject, fieldwork on the Chinese Mainland is required. Primarily, this would involve extensive interviewing. Collection of documents not available in Hong Kong

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would also be helpful. However, there are several problems preventing undertaking such an approach. First, many of those who could provide helpful information are under threat by the Chinese Government. Even if they could be reached for interviews, doing so might reveal them to officialdom and lead to their imprisonment. Such was the case when Shen Tong, a survivor of the Tiananmen Massacre, returned to the Mainland to meet dissidents who were trying to keep a low profile. He thought he was acting surreptitiously but the authorities were aware of his activities and caught those he visited (Chen, 1992; Kwan, 1992; Smith, 1992).

In addition, during the past two years, a number of Hong Kong-based and other scholars engaged in research on the Mainland have been arrested while there. Foremost among these are Gao Zhan, Li Shaomin, and Xu Zerong. The latter is still in prison. Admittedly, all were ethnic Chinese but the risk to others is real. Therefore, prudence dictates a more limited approach to this investigation. Documentary evidence, as well as an interview with an active member of Falundafa, have been obtained only in Hong Kong. Hopefully, in the future, more thorough investigation of the subject will be possible.

## 2. Introduction

In 1955, Robert Ruark published a novel on the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya. In it, he contended that when British colonizers took over Kenya, they destroyed the indigenous culture and failed to replace it with a compelling system of values. The result was a syncretic agglomeration of various ideas culminating in barbarism and a revolutionary movement with religious overtones.

One can see a similar phenomenon in China. By 1976, Marxism–Leninism Mao Zedong Thought (generally abbreviated as Mao's Thought) had become accepted as ideological orthodoxy in the People's Republic of China. During the 10 years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) it had completed its displacement of the Confucian ethos.

The end of the imperial system in 1911 served to delegitimize traditional Confucian values but political figures still sought to make use of them afterwards (Meisner, 1988, pp. 13–14). The power of this Confucian ethos represented by these values can be seen by its survival in China even after the Communist takeover up until the Cultural Revolution. This ethos placed the individual into the moral context of a series of hierarchical relationships imposing a system of mutual obligation.

China's pre-Cultural Revolution President, and the greatest victim of that upheaval, Liu Shaoqi, sought to reconcile Confucianism with Marxism. In a well-known essay entitled *Xiuyang* [Self-Cultivation] and published in English as "How to Be a Good Communist" (1939), Liu stated that in order to serve the public properly, it was incumbent on Party cadres to constantly strive to maintain not only the correct ideological perspective but to maintain control over their egoistic drives. The moralistic concept of *Xiuyang* is a well-known Confucian one. It was given great attention during the Socialist Education Movement just prior to the Cultural Revolution.

Even Mao sought to take advantage of the power that Confucius and his ideas still held over the Chinese mind. As late as 1964, just before the Cultural Revolution, Mao sought to make use of Confucius to criticize the educational system being promoted during the Socialist

Education Campaign. As indicated by Meisner (1988, p. 380), Mao pointed to Confucius as the exemplar of what education should achieve: the “all-round” man. Confucius reached great heights without reliance on formal schooling and so should the Chinese of Mao’s time (Mao, 1964, pp. 203–208). Mao advocated learning from experience outside school which is why he promoted the *xiafang* (sending students down to the countryside to work with the peasants) policy that intensified during the Cultural Revolution. The efforts made by both Mao and Liu to make use of Confucius and his ideas testify to their resonance with the Chinese public as late as the 1960s.

Confucius and his ideas were totally repudiated during the Cultural Revolution. Mao’s Thought, instead, provided the value system towards which people of all ranks oriented their lives. Government policies required justification in terms of the value system. Personal choices were made according to the value system. Individuals would forego private gratification in order to ‘serve the people’ in accordance with Mao’s Thought. All crimes were considered political crimes because they all were seen as egoistic. As such, they were in violation of the official Maoist ethos.

However, following the fall of the Gang of Four which ended the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping was officially rehabilitated. Not long after, he reached the position of paramount leader of China while eschewing the official titles which would have formalized this. Deng’s ambition was to make China strong both militarily and economically. He realized that economic and technological modernization compose the foundation of military modernization so he launched the Four Modernizations (science and technology, agriculture, industry, and in lowest priority national defense) program (Deng, 1978, p. 102). Modernization though faced certain obstacles, namely the communes in the countryside and state factories in the cities. Deng realized the need to allow elements of a market economy to develop in China. In the countryside, this led to the breakup of the communes and in the cities enterprise autonomy. Private rural and urban businesses developed alongside surviving dinosaurs of the old state collectivist economy.

There was ideological resistance to such change in the Communist Party. To overcome this, Deng led the Party in a reassessment of Mao and his Thought. This culminated in 1981 in the Resolution of CPC History. In it, Mao was criticized for much that went wrong in China after 1957. Therefore, the most radical and repressive campaigns including the 1957 Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward from 1959 to 1961, and the Cultural Revolution were disavowed. The successful economic recovery between the Great Leap and the Cultural Revolution was credited to the collective leadership of the Communist Party. The aim was to exalt a spirit of pragmatism in policy-making that would support Deng’s economic reforms without destroying Mao’s Thought as the legitimating ideology of China. The document sought to do this by separating Mao the man from his Thought, crediting the belief system to the genius of the Communist Party as a whole. This did not work. As some became very rich, Deng praised the private accumulation of wealth. However, many were left behind. The transformation of the rural economy left many peasants dispossessed. They migrated to the cities in search of work and often were not successful. To this day, China has a serious surplus worker problem in its cities. For these people primarily, as well as others in China, Mao’s Thought is devoid of any meaning other than as a cruel joke. It provides no answers to their problems.

Deng’s ‘Socialism with Chinese Characteristics’ does not provide them either. Nor does ‘The Thought of Jiang Zemin’. Jiang is aware of the adverse effects of the prosperity that

Deng has wrought, such as increasing disparity of wealth, crime, and corruption. He calls for a 'spiritual civilization', education stressing the renewal of patriotism, and fighting against corruption (Wang, 2002, pp. 56–63). However, in the face of a reality of surplus workers, exploitation as fierce as any Marx described, and rampant corruption, Jiang's arguments fail to arise above the level of slogans. For example, corruption has reached the pinnacle of power in China. Japan's *Kyodo News Service* reported in 2000 that Politburo member Jia Qinglin's wife Lin Youfang has been implicated in the big Xiamen Yuanhua scandal. However, while many other heads have rolled, hers has not (Ostrov, 2002).<sup>1</sup> What would give meaning to Jiang's slogans and transform them into a value system would be the prosecution of this woman or even her husband. Jiang, like those before him, has provided no real answers to the people of China who are starved for not only material but spiritual sustenance. They are searching for new answers (Yang, 1998).

### 3. The search for new values

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, China has seen a remarkable growth in the number of believers in what the Party refers to as superstition.<sup>2</sup> This term takes in religion in general. At first, the Party was not hostile to this development, taking the pragmatic view that religion would help to keep people content, maintain stability, and even encourage productivity (Guanfang wei, 1990; *Zhongguo zongjiao*, 1988). This tolerance has its limits. No religious group can be part of an organization with its leadership transcending China's borders.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, Catholics in China cannot be Roman Catholics and cannot accept Papal Infallibility nor look to the Vatican for inspiration or to solve problems. Instead, they would have to belong to the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. The same principle applies to other religious groups. Protestants must belong to the Chinese Christian Council and the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. Muslims must belong to the China Islamic Association, Buddhists the Buddhist Association of China, and Daoists the Chinese Daoist Association (*China Official Annual Report*, 1981; Fu, 1994).

However, this attitude of pragmatic and cautious tolerance changed in the mid-1990s. First there was the assumption by the Party leadership of a connection between the participants in the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989 and Christianity (Chinese Pastors, 1997; Corpus, 1989; Fu, 1994; Revival, 1994). There was also a belief that the growth of religion doomed the Soviet Union and its satellites (Gao, 1994). Later, the rapid growth and effective organization of some, especially Falundafa, led the Party to view them as a threat and condemn them. This has carried over even to Hong Kong, supposedly autonomous until 2047. Its Chief Executive has branded Falundafa as an evil cult and security officials have been considering legislation that would outlaw it (Bosco, 2001; Chan, 2001; Cheung & Lee, 2001a; Li, 2001; Manuel, 2001; Staff, 2001).<sup>4</sup>

### 4. Millennialism

It is remarkable that despite official opposition, people in China have been turning to religion, especially outside the accepted channels recognized by the state. This phenomenon obviously

begs for investigation. Many of the religious groups, both Christian and other, that people have joined are tinged with Millennialism. As Olson aptly puts it, “Millennialism is that activity arising from anticipation of the end-time (1982, p. 14).” Obviously then, Millennial Movements share a common ideology marked by this anticipation. It postulates that the world is in a period of decline and that the end of the present historical era is imminent, at which time an apocalypse will occur. The result will be that the chosen people (the sect) will, through some form of supernatural mediation, triumph over all non-believers to arrive at a renewed world order. Afterwards, a new golden age and historical era will ensue. It must be noted here, though, that this collective salvation of the faithful and world renewal will be terrestrial. This means that it will be realized on this Earth, not in some other-worldly heaven (Cohn, 1970, p. 15).

One may have reservations about the use of the construct of Millennialism to search for insight into the case of the re-emergence of religious groups in late 20th century China. One may think Millennialism is limited to a particular historic epoch, despite some similarity to these religious groups. However, the phenomenon of Millennialism has had a widespread occurrence throughout history. Millennial Movements have not been limited in place and time. They have existed in various historical settings including late medieval and early modern Europe (Cohn, 1970, pp. 1–285; Scholem, 1973, pp. 2–898), pre-modern China (Naquin, 1976, pp. 1–270; Overmyer, 1976, pp. ix–261), the contemporary U.S. (Beckford, 1975, pp. 1–264; Schwartz, 1970, pp. 1–260), Japan (Shimazono, 1986, pp. 55–86) and colonial Africa and India (Fuchs, 1965, pp. 1–304; Rotberg, 1971, pp. i–225).

A common explanation for massive enrolment in groups like these is a response to suffering. For example, Worsley in his work on Melanesian Millennial Cults (1957, pp. 225–226) views the Millennial sect simply as a function of real or perceived oppression. Populations conducive to the rise of a Millennial sect would include those subject to alien incursion and colonization as well as those which are in a highly hierarchical agrarian, especially feudal, state.

In the latter case, Worsley adopts a Marxist tone as he depicts these sects as the forerunners of proletarian class parties. To clarify the way in which these groups look to messianic figures he likens the phenomenon to Karl Marx’s view of how a disorganized, atomized French peasantry looked to Louis Bonaparte to protect their interest, to have authority over them, as an unlimited governmental power that protects them against the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above (Marx, 1963, p. 124; Worsley, 1957, p. 229).

Worsley believes that under socioeconomic conditions divergent from those in 19th century France, where there is much greater cultural backwardness, peasants may look to a religious prophet for deliverance instead of a secular savior like Louis Bonaparte (1957, p. 229). However, everyone goes through some suffering in their lives. Such an explanation paints with too broad a brush.

A riposte to this kind of analysis can be found in Cohn (1970) who asserts that in general, peasants, while generally oppressed, did not provide the base of support for Millennial sects in Medieval Europe. The sect was an urban phenomenon. In an amazing historic parallel to the uprooted Chinese peasantry of the late twentieth century, the Medieval peasants who supported Millennialism were mostly those who were uprooted and forced into cities by excessive population growth. The groups that supported Millennial sects were united not by the common experience of oppression, but by their lack of integration into medieval society. The rural peasantry was just as oppressed as the urban proletariat, but while the proletarians

had no support groups to fall back on and consequently became disoriented, the peasants were given material and emotional support by the large family kinship group's network of social relationships.

As Weber notes, many social scientists link the development of such movements and the Apocalypticism that animates them with social change but that this is always present so it reveals little Weber (1999, p. 31). However, although social change is a continuous ever-present process, there are varying degrees of it. The kind that is ever-present proceeds imperceptibly to those experiencing it. Another type of social change is anything but imperceptible. Indeed, it is highly disruptive to those whom it affects. This is the kind of change uprooted peasants who became the first urban proletariat experienced in late Medieval Europe. Weber is too quick to dismiss this possibility.

Weber also notes that social scientists attribute the rise of Millennial Movements to political crisis but dismisses this as ever present. Here he confuses crisis with stress. Certainly stress is always present in some degree. Crisis, political or otherwise, is a more extreme phenomenon. It is not imperceptible nor something to which one can easily adapt. It often occurs in relation to highly disruptive social change.

Sarkisyanz (1965) demonstrates this when analyzing the clash of cultures which occurred when Britain colonized Burma. His interpretation is summed up in the following passage:

The more political reality under the declining Burmese monarchy was departing from the Buddhist ideal and the less the ideal Buddhist state was realized by the actual rulers of Burma, the more this ideal became a vision anticipating a glorious future. It was particularly after the British India Company had annexed lower Burma (1852) that folk notions about Buddhism's decline had made expectations of the future Buddha politically explosive. (1965, p. 155)

To elaborate, the weakening of the structure of authority, i.e., the declining Burmese monarchy under the impact of British expansion, brought the structure of knowledge into question. People became very aware of a disparity between the actual state of affairs and the ideal Buddhist state. Uncertainty ensued and, in the attempt to reduce it, an ideology which could provide predictability and reconcile contradictions was formed. It incorporated many elements of the indigenous Buddhist tradition from the cultures symbol system to present new structures of authority and knowledge. These structures were encompassed by a Millennial ideology which, through the theory of the inevitability of Kalpic decline, accounted for the weakening structure of authority in Burma.<sup>5</sup> This Millennial ideology reassured those who subscribed to it that the disparity between the ideal and real would be resolved in an apocalyptic cataclysm which would usher in a new Kalpa (historical era). Thus, this Millennial ideology provided a new structure of knowledge by which its adherents could make sense of the world around them. Burridge (1969) in his analysis of Melanesian Millennialism uses a similar approach that highlights the importance of uncertainty stemming from societal disruption.

The analysis need not be limited to cases involving imperialism or a clash of cultures. Beckford (1975) employs a similar approach when analyzing the growth of The Watchtower Society (Jehovah's Witnesses). In this case, instead of the collective societal disruption and major change which is experienced collectively due to one phenomenon (clash of cultures), these processes and a sense of crisis are experienced individually for a variety of reasons which are not part of routine living. Therefore, they cannot be easily dismissed like stress

which occurs on a daily basis. A typical example of such crisis would be a broken home due to divorce, abandonment, or the imprisonment of a parent.

Conversion can lead to resolution of the uncertainty resulting from the crisis and adjustment to a new stage of life. According to Burrige, the Millennial sect and religion in general not only enable a people to perceive the truth of things, but [guaranteeing] that they are indeed perceiving the truth of things (1969, p. 8). He also analyzes the structure which maintains sect adherence, i.e., insures that the truth of things is conveyed to people and believed by them.

Beckford refers to this pattern maintenance mechanism of the sect by a term taken from Peter Berger (1973, pp. 53–54), plausibility structure. By plausibility structure, Beckford and Berger mean a primary group, such as the family or sect, which holds certain moral values and ideas about reality and reinforces its members belief and adherence to these ideas and values. The plausibility structures therefore determine one's world-view (Beckford, 1975, p. 130).<sup>6</sup> A change of plausibility structures is linked to a change of world-views. Beckford's conclusion is that a disturbance in plausibility structures is the cause of peoples entrance into sects, each with their own world-views (1975, p. 171). Plausibility structures are disturbed when the social groups they are rooted in are disrupted. Those who are affected by this disruption will then be susceptible to the appeals of other plausibility structures with their corresponding world views.

Time can exacerbate the sense of crisis and resultant uncertainty. Weber (1999) notes how the phenomenon of *Fin de Siècle* is often associated with Apocalypticism, a key element in the belief of these groups. The timing of de-Maoization and the societal disruption it caused reinforced each other, generating a sense of crisis and uncertainty in many.

Crisis and uncertainty have sparked violent opposition in the past as analysts of Millennialist uprisings have shown (Cohn, 1970; Naquin, 1976; Overmyer, 1976; Sarkisyanz, 1965). Indeed, Millennialism has often been viewed as revolutionary in contrast to other religions and the conventional view of religion (Burrige, 1985, p. 221). This revolutionary dimension is further emphasized when one considers that secularized Millennialisms have also existed. For example, Strozier finds Millennialism in Nazism with the chosen people represented by the Aryans, the golden age by the thousand-year Reich, the apocalypse by the Second World War, and the role of supernatural mediator taken by Hitler and the Nazis (1990, pp. 213–215). The implication is that while Millennialism is revolutionary, other religions are status-quo oriented.

However, not all Millennial Movements culminate in revolutionary uprisings. Some, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Tenrikyo and Honmichi of post-Meiji Japan, while having the same type of ideology as the more violent sects, shift energies of discontent away from revolution into nonviolent activities (Beckford, 1975, pp. 1–224; Schwartz, 1970, pp. 1–260; Shimazono, 1986, pp. 55–86). So instead of threatening the social order, the same Millennial ideology, in the hands of a different movement, can serve to maintain it. This would be the case as long as the social order does not attempt to repress the movement.

## 5. Groups with the solution

Although there have been many religious groups, both old established ones and new ones, to attract new members, this study is limited by time and resources. Only four will be briefly discussed. They are The South China Church, The Family, Falundafa, and The Real God

Movements. Of these, all but Falundafa are avowedly Christian-oriented. Falundafa, while springing from Buddhist roots, is kathenotheistic. It admits the legitimacy of revelation and insight from other sources such as Christianity (Ching, 2002).

The Family was founded in 1968 in California by David Brandt Berg. The original name of the group was The Children of God. Berg taught a kind of pre-Millennialism. This involves beliefs that the world is engaged in a Manichean struggle, the apocalypse is imminent, and that Jesus Christ would return at the end of history to lead the forces of good and usher in the millennium. During this period of 1000 years, Satan would be bound. At the end of this time, he would be loosened and one final struggle between good and evil would ensue with the former eventually triumphant (The Family, 2002). These beliefs justified the call to dedicate one's life to Jesus Christ and to aggressively proselytize. Eventually, proselytism took a sexual orientation in what the group called 'Flirty Fishing'. The group justified this as a means of 'witnessing' God's love (Jones, 2001). Group members practiced a communal life-style. The group spread to Hong Kong in 1981. It was later banned there and moved to Macao by 1984. Eventually, it spread to the Mainland. There, it was very successful in gaining new members but was easily vilified by the authorities due to its sexual practices. By 1986, over 100 of The Family's missionaries had penetrated universities in China. Police in China made massive arrests that year and claimed to have eliminated the group from their country (Macdonald, 1986). Although the group had abolished Flirty Fishing in 1987 because of the risk of transmitting sexual diseases, it could not escape the stigma outsiders had attached to this practice.

The Family's beliefs closely resemble those of Evangelical Christianity. It is not surprising that they are Millennial. As Baumgartner notes, "early Christianity is the . . . template of Millennial cults (1999, p. 5)." All that sets The Family's beliefs apart from those of Evangelical Christianity are its earlier use of sexual contact in proselytism and its emphasis on communal living. The latter is an attempt to return to what Berg believed was the actual character of the early Christian community (The Family, 2002). These distinctive features likely account largely for its successful growth. Clearly, not only do The Family's religious beliefs possess the power to attract people but its style of living is a powerful inducement. Those who feel lost can find in The Family's communal life-style a surrogate family.

The Real God Church is considered by the Chinese authorities to be part of the indigenous House Church Movement. 'House Church' is the term they use for non-sanctioned illegal underground churches. This one is a Protestant church with connections to the underground Roman Catholic Church. They also believe it to have ties with those who were student leaders at the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989. The Real God Church was started by Zhao Weishan in Heilongjiang Province as an offshoot of the Evangelical group called The Shouters.<sup>7</sup> The Real God Church was banned by the Heilongjiang branch of the Public Security Bureau in 1991. Zhao then went to Henan where the group spread. From there it extended to the rest of the country. The group tries to maintain security and secrecy to avoid repressive actions by the authorities. Such efforts are enhanced by its highly hierarchical organizational structure (Li, 2002). Proselytism by the Real God Group has successfully penetrated inner circles of the Communist Party and is causing great concern to the authorities. The authorities refer to its religion as a form of Charismatic Christianity (Report Analyzing, 2002). It is questionable whether they understand what this entails. However, if this is accurate, it

means that their beliefs are similar to those of Evangelical Christians and share the apocalyptic and millennialist elements of their beliefs. What sets Charismatic Christianity apart is the emphasis it places on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, such as glossolalia (speaking in tongues) and prophecy.

The South China Church is another Evangelical House Church. It was founded in 1991 by Gong Shengliang as an offshoot of Peter Xu's All Ranges Church (Quan Fan Wei). Currently, Gong is in prison awaiting execution. He has been accused of a number of crimes, including fraud. According to Chinese authorities, he urged his followers to give all their money to a Bank of Heaven he started because, he claimed, a great war is imminent (Li, 2002). This correlates with the Apocalypticism of such groups.

The execution may not be carried out. All together, five leading members of the Church have had their death sentences revoked on appeal. However they, along with twelve other members of the Church who had received lighter sentences at the original trial in December 2001, are now being retried (Liu, 2002).

Like the Real God Church, The South China Church is hierarchically highly organized (Li, 2002). It is estimated to have 100,000 members across 10 provinces (Hutzler, 2002). Another source credits it with about 50,000 members across 8 provinces. However it is highly respected within the underground Christian community (Li, 2002; Report Analyzing, 2002). Perhaps it is for this reason that the Chinese authorities feel so threatened by this group. After all, 50,000 or even 100,000 people out of 1.2 billion is only a drop in the bucket.

Falundafa (better known as Falungong, a term that refers specifically to the type of Qigong it promotes) was founded in 1992 by Li Hongzhi. Initially it was introduced as a type of Qigong. Qigong is a traditional form of Chinese exercise which melds movement with meditation. It was banned during the Cultural Revolution but was allowed to be revived after the fall of the Gang of Four.

Li Hongzhi then added moral and theological overtones to his variant of Qigong. He depicts history as being like a revolving wheel ('zhuan'—thus the title of his 'Bible' for the group, Zhuan Falun). According to the movement of the wheel, this age of history is in decline. This can be seen through the decline in moral standards and society. Now we are moving to a beautiful future where evil will be extinguished (Li, 2000, pp. 8, 61, 87–88).<sup>8</sup>

Falundafa and its beliefs did not become overtly political until the movement became the target of Government repression. Though deriving from Buddhist origins, Falundafa drew insight from other religious traditions. Following its ban by Chinese authorities, the movement became more political not just in its protest activities but in the content of its message. It found resonance in elements within Christianity, especially the Book of Revelations. An interpretation of Revelations 13 and the Book of Daniel (Chase, 2002) demonizes China and its Communist Party, and places them into a Christian millennialist eschatological context.<sup>9</sup> This commentary equates the 'Red Dragon' from Revelations 12:3 with both Satan and 'Red' China. Then, it makes reference to St. George, whom it equates with George W. Bush. The juxtaposition clearly indicates the hope and belief that President George W. Bush will "defend the world" from the latter-day Red Dragon, China (Chase, 2002). For Falundafa, this would mean liberation from oppression. Falundafa has also incorporated purely secular criticisms of the Chinese authorities into its overall viewpoint, claiming that they no longer believe in Communism but just use the Party as a tool of domination.

There are other examples of external factors acting on Millennial sects so as to radicalize them. In the case of the Watchtower Society, for most of its existence, it has been a pacifist organization completely opposed to violence. In 1925, the Society's director, J.F. Rutherford urged all Witnesses to avoid controversies, . . . not participate in radical movements, [and] live a peaceable and quiet life (Beckford, 1975, p. 37).

But in 1933, as a result of repression in Europe, Rutherford encouraged sectarians to resist Catholic Action, Fascism, Nazism, and attempts to prevent Witnesses from spreading their gospel. Rutherford even went so far as to permit his followers to use violence if they deemed it necessary. He instructed them to fight back through the deployment of a large number of supporters (Beckford, 1975, p. 37).

As can be seen from the statements above, the environment in which the sect finds itself can have a significant influence on what course the Millennial Movement takes. In the absence of repression, as has usually been the case in the USA, the sect will tend to remain in a pacific state. Yet when it exists in a locale where it is not tolerated, the sect can become overtly political, if not militant, as has Falundafa.

Falundafa likely became the target of Chinese authorities in 1999. On April 25, 1999 around 10,000 Falundafa believers appeared outside the Chinese leadership's Zhongnanhai compound in Beijing. Contrary to general belief, this was not a protest against the Chinese Government. It was a request for legal recognition and defense against attacks made by a physics professor He Zuoxiu. Prof. He had made a second career as a debunker of what he regarded as pseudoscience and bogus beliefs. He wrote a critique of Falundafa in the April issue of *Science and Technology for Youth*, an obscure Chinese magazine. The Falundafa protest was in response to this (Eckholm, 2001).

On July 22, 1999, Falundafa was officially banned. Its members are imprisoned and subjected to extreme physical and mental abuse aimed at getting them to recant their beliefs and denounce Falundafa founder Li Hongzhi (Johnson, 2001, p. A11). It is generally thought that the Chinese regime reacted with hostility because it had been caught by surprise by the group. This is contested by Falundafa members. They claim to have been watched and had their phones tapped prior to the April 25 demonstration (Ching, 2002). If so, it is more likely they were targeted for three reasons, at least two of which apply to the other groups discussed here:

1. Falundafa is an autonomous organization. Despite the partial allowance of a free market in China, the regime keeps a tight reign on the political sphere. It will not tolerate the development of autonomous groups that can have any political impact. Thus, the only churches or religious organizations tolerated are those which are mass organizations. This means they are organized under the auspices of the Chinese Government and Communist Party. They can have no loyalty to organizations or individuals transcending these bodies.
2. Falundafa is extremely well-organized. It had to be to be able to organize a demonstration of 10,000 people coming from all over China to Beijing. The group makes extensive use of the Internet to enhance its organizational ability. Considering how spread out the Falundafa membership in China is, and the Chinese regime's suspicion of the free dissemination of information within its borders, this is necessity. The South China and Real God Churches are also said to be well-organized but one must wonder whether they would have the ability to organize such a protest.

3. Falundafa has become so successful in attracting members that it has gained public notice. This invites the interest of the authorities. Together with the autonomy of the organization, this factor makes the regime perceive the group as a threat.

The group profile is notable in that it cuts across class, status group, and educational level.<sup>10</sup> Falundafa members include Party officials and PLA officers. Such a profile is what the analysis of Millennialist Movements would lead one to expect. Group membership does not consist solely of the poorest, most oppressed, or most uneducated. Those who join are people whose lives have been disrupted by some type of crisis and are seeking a new system of values to give their lives direction and eliminate uncertainty.

A profile which cuts across all barriers can be found in numerous other Millennialist Groups. For example, membership in both the Watchtower Society and Seventh-Day Adventists includes both lower and middle class individuals (Beckford, 1975; Schwartz, 1970).

Group membership which cuts across boundaries can even be seen in those movements which turn to violence. In early 19th century China, the Eight Trigrams Sect, emerging out of the White Lotus tradition, was active near Beijing and sought to overthrow the Qing Dynasty. Its membership included Chinese and Manchus, the destitute and wealthy, urban and rural people, Manchu nobles, medium and low-ranking military officials, holders of the lowest military examination degree, district yamen (government) clerks and runners, and ordinary folk.<sup>11</sup>

Scholem (1973, pp. 5–6) depicts a similar pattern of sect membership for the Jewish Sabbatian Messianic Movement of the mid-17th century. In his book *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, Scholem asserts that the sect consisted of people from very diverse backgrounds. The very prominent and prosperous as well as the poor were greatly involved in the Sabbatian Movement. As a whole, the ruling class among Jewry generally supported the movement.<sup>12</sup>

Scholem and Overmyer directly address the question of what attracts people to join these movements. They do not consider factors external to the group in question such as status deprivation, to be significant. Factors such as these would indicate a membership consisting of the downtrodden. Overmyer and Scholem instead emphasize an element inherent in the sect to account for its growth. They point to the power of the sect's messianic vision, a vision which overlaps with the long-lived Millennial tradition existing within the culture.

## 6. Conclusion

The thesis developed here is not unique. Other commentators have a similar interpretation (Da, 2001; Su, 1999). What is significant is that some in the Chinese leadership are also beginning to think this way. In various *Renmin ribao* (People's Daily) articles, a distinction is made between evil cults or illegitimate religions, and legitimate religions. Religion is put in a good light and perceived to have the potential to be of benefit to society and the state (Jinmi, 2001; Xin, 1999).

Since the Tiananmen Massacre, there seems to have been an implicit contract between the Chinese authorities and the public. In return for submission to the regime, the public would enjoy an improved standard of living. The regime seems to recognize that economic success is a preferable means of control than coercion. However, as demonstrated by a *Renmin ribao*

editorial in December 1999, the rise of religious groups appears to be leading to a new awareness by the regime. Beijing seems to recognize that for many, a life devoted to material acquisition that it promotes in the absence of freedom is not enough (Jia, 1999).<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

1. Some might suggest that Lin was not prosecuted because she was not guilty. However, an informant in Hong Kong told this writer that the investigation was dropped to avoid collecting evidence confirming the guilt of Lin.
2. Gauging the growth in the number of adherents to religion in China since 1979 is difficult since figures, reliable or otherwise, on such people in 1979 and the early Eighties are hard to come by. However, it was estimated by a leading Chinese Protestant official that in 1983 there were 1.5 million Protestants in the Mainland (Scherer, 1983). In 1999, according to Chinese Government statistics, the figure had grown to 10 million Protestants (Jiang et al., 1999). The actual number was probably far larger since the official figures exclude those practicing in secret outside the officially sanctioned religious bodies. See below. Yet, if we accept the official figure, the number of Protestants increased by about 567%. During the same period, China's population increased from 1,024,950,000 (*China Statistical Yearbook, 1984*) to 1,259,090,000 (*China Statistical Yearbook, 2001*). This represents an increase of 23% which is far smaller than the increase in the number of Protestants. Clearly, the growth rate in Protestants far outstripped the population growth rate in general. While not perfect, this figure does convey a meaningful sense of the phenomenal increase in the growth of religion in general in China.
3. This distrust of organized religion precedes the birth of the Peoples Republic of China. It originated in the Rites Controversy which began near the end of the Ming Dynasty in the 1630s and was settled early the next century during the reign of the Qing Dynasty Emperor Kang Xi (Cordier, 1999). In the 1630s, missionaries from the Dominican and Franciscan orders arrived in China to find the Jesuits already well-entrenched and even acting as advisors to the Emperor. A dispute arose between the newcomers and the Jesuits over the latter's accommodating attitude to Chinese customs. For example, the Jesuits did not insist that Chinese who converted to Christianity cease ancestor worship. The Jesuits reasoned this was not truly worship but a display of respect for ancestors. The Franciscans and Dominicans disagreed and appealed to the Pope. The Jesuits also appealed to Rome to settle the dispute (Cordier, 1999). In doing so, they asserted the primacy of the Pope over China's Emperor (Reischauer & Fairbank, 1960). From the perspective of the Emperor, these appeals should have been directed towards him since he was the ruler of China, not the Pope. The loyalty of these missionaries as well as Christians in general became open to question since the appeals to the Pope showed they had a loyalty that transcended the Chinese state. Consequently, in the early 18th century, Christianity was banned from China. It was only when China's weakness was exposed by defeat in the Opium War that Christianity returned.
4. Not long ago, the Hong Kong Government was embarrassed when it claimed to be modeling such legislation on anti-cult legislation in France. However, a French official

- concerned with this legislation stated that in his country Falundafa would not be in violation of the law (Cheung & Lee, 2001b; Hon, 2001).
5. These elements, such as the idealized once and future monarch Setkya-Min and the messianic Buddha Mettaya, were culture symbols. Culture symbols like these were reorganized in such a way as to produce an ideology which depicted the world as being morally corrupt and in inevitable decline. Therefore, revolution was justified and even encouraged (Sarkisyanz, 1965, pp. 151–156).
  6. The plausibility structure need not be a warm emotive group providing emotional support. Within the Watchtower Society, there is a dearth of affective bonds among the members of the sect due to the overriding pre-eminence of the sect's goal of massive proselytization as well as its bureaucratic organizational structure. So emotional support from fellow religionists is only of peripheral importance to the plausibility structure. However, emotional support originating within the individual himself exists due to the sense of security he derives both from acceptance into a primary group and the discovery of a belief system which answers all his questions (1975, p. 170).
  7. Li Chang-shou (Li Zhangshou) founded 'The Shouters' in the USA in 1962. This group penetrated China in 1979 (Lev, 2002; Li, 2002).
  8. These views come from Li Hongzhi's (2001) commentaries on a poem by Shao Kangjie. Shao Kangjie is regarded by Falundafa believers as the Chinese Nostradamus (Ching, 2002).
  9. It is not clear that the source of these views is a Falundafa member. However, Falundafa members endorse the views in this commentary. I received this article from Fiona Ching and in our discussion she made it quite clear that Falundafa members agree not only with the content of the article but also the mode of analysis.
  10. This profile likely applies to the other groups in this study. However, there is insufficient data available to make such an assertion.
  11. The only thing all these groups had in common was that none possessed degrees obtained through the Confucian Civil Service Examination System. So one can say that the traditional elite did not support these sects. This is only logical since the goal of these sects was to overthrow the traditional structure of authority on which the Confucian bureaucratic elite thrived (Naquin, 1976, pp. 38–39; Overmyer, 1976, p. 18). The White Lotus tradition, like the Burmese Setkya-Min movement, emphasized the concept of Kalpic decline and the appearance of the Maitreya (future) Buddha, a messianic figure. He would aid the forces of good in their final battle with the forces of evil.
  12. In the mid-17th century, the Chmielnicki Cossack Massacre of Jews in Poland and Russia ushered in a period of great repression of East European Jewry (Scholem, 1974, pp. 244–245). A sense of crisis ensued, messianic expectations rose, and a sensitivity to inward spirituality was enhanced. At this time, Sabbatai Zvi claimed to be the Messiah Jews had long been awaiting. He would be ushering in the return of the Jews to Israel and the culmination of the apocalypse. One could perhaps say that Jewry at this time, as a whole, represented a single social group which was oppressed by hostile Christian and Islamic worlds. While in some sense actually constituting a single group, in spite of the class divisions within it, such a position on these Jews would be misleading because many did not suffer persecution. There were many Jewish centers which enjoyed peace

and prosperity. Furthermore, the Sabbatian movement had just as much momentum in these areas as in those where persecution, or a potential for it, had existed (Scholem, 1973, p. 3). Therefore one cannot claim, as Worsley does, that the formation of Millennial sects is a function of oppression.

13. Others outside China have taken note of this new awareness by the regime (Aikman, 2000).

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