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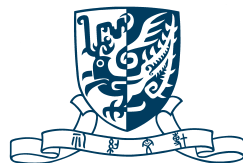
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Chinese Religions on the Edge:
Shifting Religion-State Dynamics



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Special Issue

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*Doctrinal Innovation, Resistance, and Falun Gong's Politicization**

Yunfeng Lu, Yuxin Su, and Na Zhou

Abstract

This article examines how doctrinal innovation led to the politicization of Falun Gong, a new religion in China. After it was outlawed in 1999, Hongzhi Li (李洪志), the charismatic leader of Falun Gong, developed a theory of resistance focusing on the strategy of “Clarifying the Truth.” Guided and justified by the theory, FLG practitioners engaged themselves into various forms of collective activities against the Chinese government. The theory also helped Li to mobilize social resources overseas. Most importantly, the process of doctrinal innovation enabled Li to interact with his followers frequently and thus keep his charismatic authority in the group. In sum, the formulation of the “truth” theory not only led to FLG’s politicization but also sustained the group’s vitality by means of justifying the resistance, mobilizing social resources, and maintaining Li’s charisma.

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The two statements below were made in different periods by Hongzhi Li, charismatic leader of Falun Gong (hereafter FLG); they perfectly reflect FLG's politicization in the past two decades, the theme that will be probed in this article. Specifically, we discuss how Hongzhi Li develop a theory of "Clarifying the Truth" (講真相 *jiang zhenxiang*) and how the theory led to FLG's politicization through legitimatizing the organization's resistance, mobilizing social resources, and keeping the leader's charisma. Theoretically, our discussion is related to how doctrinal innovation exerts influences on the evolution of religious groups.

Some students are discontent with society and politics; they learn our Dafa (大法 Falun Doctrine) with this strong attachment that they don't abandon. They even attempt to take advantage of our Dafa to get involved in politics—an act born of a filthy mindset that desecrates Buddha and the Fa. They certainly won't reach Consummation if they don't abandon that mindset.¹

The truth is, mankind's "politics" was not designed for the persecutors' use. If "getting political" can expose the persecution, if "getting political" can stop the persecution, if "getting political" can help clarify the facts, if "getting political" can save sentient beings—if "getting political" can do all of this good, then why not do so?²

1. Doctrinal Innovation and the Transformation of Religious Groups

Sociologists of religion have noted that doctrinal innovation plays a vital role in the formation and transformation of religious firms.³ When people want to gain rewards that do not exist in this world, they tend to "formulate and accept explanations for obtaining the reward in the distant future or in some other non-verifiable context."⁴ This explanation, which is called "otherworldly rewards" by Stark and his collaborators, distinguishes religious groups from secular organizations. They argue that doctrinal formulation can lead to the birth of religions and that there is a tendency for secular groups transforming into religions. These arguments can be partly supported by some empirical observations in Chinese societies. For example, both the "three in one" sect (三一教 *sanyi jiao*) in Fujian province and the *Liumen* sect (劉門教 *Liumen jiao*) in Sichuan province were originally academic groups.⁵

In order to sustain organizational vitality, a religious firm has to preserve its core teaching and promote adaptive innovations of doctrine,

which may result in the transformation of the religion.⁶ There are two directions of such transformation: one is from sect to church, the other from church to sect. Generally speaking, sects are in high tension with their surroundings at the beginning. As time goes by, it happens that sects reconcile themselves with the environments and throw away some controversial doctrines that belong to subcultures. These efforts, driven by the increase of group size, the upward social mobility of memberships, and the succession of later generations, lead a sect to turn into a rather tolerant church. This kind of transformation is labeled as “sect-to-church” transition, and sufficient cases are available to testify the process.⁷

Doctrinal adaptation can also lead to “church-to-sect” movements. Under certain conditions, religious groups may “shift in the direction of higher tension with their environment.”⁸ In order to increase members’ commitment and sustain organizational vitality, many religious groups give up liberal teachings and become even more demanding with their followers. These groups include Roman Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Unitarian-Universalists, and Reform Jews.⁹

Similar observations can be made in the case of FLG. In the past two decades, Hongzhi Li intentionally increased the tension with the Chinese government through formulating the theory of Clarifying the Truth. In this article, we explore how doctrinal innovation led to the politicization of FLG and the resistant logic beneath it.

Data analyzed in the article mainly come from two sources: the publications of FLG and the Chinese news reports about it. In case there are conflicting versions of description of the same event, we present their content and clarify the differences. We collected 431 published papers and speeches made by Hongzhi Li between 1992 and 2012; the total number of Chinese characters is about 1.52 million. This content, which can be downloaded from FLG’s websites, is called *jingwen* (經文 scripture) by FLG practitioners. These firsthand texts are of great help for us to trace Li’s changing attitude toward the Chinese government and the interactions between them.

2. Formulating the Theory of Resistance: Clarifying the Truth

a. The Politicization of Falun Gong

In 1990s when FLG was in its early stage, Li was more interested in recruiting followers than in politics. However, in 1996, after FLG was

dropped from China Qigong Scientific Research Association (CQSRA, the official institution in charge of *Qigong* organizations at the time), Li began to encourage his followers to put pressure on the mass media and scientists who criticized FLG. Between June 1996 and April 1999, FLG practitioners launched about 300 protest events, many of which involved more than 1,000 participants.¹⁰ The series of protests reached its peak on 25 April 1999 when more than 10,000 FLG practitioners launched a mass sit-in outside *Zhongnanhai* (中南海), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) top leaders' working site. This protest, which was the largest one in China since the prodemocracy student movement in 1989, led to the government's prompt crackdown on FLG organizations around the country. On 22 July 1999, the government banned FLG officially. On 30 July, a warrant for Hongzhi Li was issued for propagating superstitions, deluding people, creating chaos, and threatening social stability.¹¹ Since then, FLG's *jingwen* have given up the spirit of "forbearance" (忍 *Ren*), which was one of the three core values (真善忍 *Zhen-shan-ren*), and have developed a theory of resistance—Clarifying the Truth.

Previous research has analyzed FLG's transformation from a secular healing organization to a new religion centered on salvation in the early 1990s.¹² The publication of *Zhuan Falun* (《轉法輪》 *Turning the Wheel of Dharma*) in 1994 witnessed "Offering Salvation (度人 *duren*)" becoming the main mission of FLG. After 1999, however, Clarifying the Truth gradually took the place of "Offering Salvation." In order to visualize this transition, we combed through Hongzhi Li's published *Jingwen* in Chinese from 1992 to 2012. Statistically, the total number of Chinese characters is about 1.52 million, 750,000 characters before the July 22nd Prohibition (hereinafter referred to as the Prohibition) and 770,000 after it. When retrieving words of the two parts, we found that before 20 July 1999, the word "truth" appeared 56 times; and the frequency increased to 1,086 times after the Prohibition. According to the calculation, the lexical density of the word "truth" is once per 13,327 characters before and once per 711 characters after the Prohibition; its density ratio is about 18:1. "Salvation" appears 164 times before 20 July and 102 times after; and the lexical density is once per 4,551 characters and once per 5,921 characters, respectively, an insignificant difference.

So far, we can hold that if "salvation" was the organizational objective after the first transition of FLG, Clarifying the Truth served as the substitute after the second transition. The wide disparity between the lexical densities of two phases supports this argument.

Table 1: Frequency and Lexical Density of “Salvation” and “Truth” in Hongzhi Li's *Jingwen*

	1992–1999 (total 746,347 characters)		2000–2012 (total 771,770 characters)	
	Frequency (times)	Lexical density (characters per time)	Frequency (times)	Lexical density (characters per time)
Salvation (度人)	164	4,551	102	5,921
Truth (真相)	56	13,327	1,086	711

Most of the academic literature assumes that FLG was apolitical until the repression in 1999, and its politicization happened closely thereafter as self-protection in the battle with the CCP.¹³ We partly agree with this point. We can identify two facets of FLG's politicization: at the doctrinal level and at the behavioral level. At the doctrinal level, we hold that the doctrinal politicization of FLG was triggered by the suppression in 1999. But at the behavioral level, we must keep in mind that FLG practitioners had frequently engaged themselves with protesting activities since 1996, when it was expelled from CQSRA. These anti-CCP events held by FLG practitioners after 1996 best illustrate FLG's politicization on behavioral level.

Like most scholars, we consider 1999 a significant turning point for FLG. After that, the charismatic leader Hongzhi Li changed the doctrine into a more militant one and clashes between FLG and the Chinese government continuously escalated. We argue that the theory of Clarifying the Truth contributed much to the politicization of FLG.

b. What Is the “Truth”?

What is “truth” in FLG? Setting Prohibition as the dividing line, we can find that “truth” has completely different implications in Hongzhi Li's theoretical system. The initial meaning of the “truth” was referred to the mystical “universal truth.” At that time, Li thought that the universal truth was a myth and ordinary people could hardly access to it.¹⁴ Later in 1995, Hongzhi Li stated that “ordinary people are in a maze, and they can't see the true picture or the true principles of things.”¹⁵ Ordinary people cannot see the truth of the universe due to their “attachment” to the secular world. Because FLG practitioners were “continually enlightening to heaven's secrets” and giving up attachment, it is possible for them to understand “many different manifestations of the truth.”¹⁶

Ordinary people learn the truth of the universe by practicing FLG, but only Master Hongzhi Li knows the entire truth. However, he cannot

tell the truth directly to his disciples because “it will be hard to cultivate after the truth is revealed, as the requirements for people will be very high, the cultivation form will be strict, and people won’t progress as fast.”¹⁷ When one of his disciples tried to enquire into the truth of the universe, Hongzhi Li reprimanded him sharply: “You will never know how enormous this universe is. . . . So you can merely talk about it. . . . Everything is constructed by Zhen-Shan-Ren.”¹⁸

We can see that “truth” before 1999 mainly referred to the “universal truth” or “gospel” in Hongzhi Li’s theory. The meaning of “truth” was mystical and Li chose to keep it as a secret: “If I were to disclose the truth, I would be teaching an evil practice since there would definitely be those who learn the Fa because of this.”¹⁹ Li stated,

It’s just as I said: Although what I’ve told you are truths of levels so high, I’m still only telling you their surface meaning. You aren’t allowed to know the real things. Even if you knew about them, it would still be hard for you to cultivate.²⁰

After the Prohibition, Hongzhi Li did not appear in public for almost ten months. On 22 May 2000, Li published one of his *Hong Yin* named “The Knowing Heart,” which was said to be written on 12 October 1999: “Follow Teacher closely, steadfastly cultivating Dafa. . . . When the day of Consummation arrives / the great disclosure of the truth will leave the world in amazement.”²¹

This is the first appearance of the word “truth” after the prohibition of FLG. At this time, “truth” still seemed to have similar meanings as “universal truth” in the last phase of FLG. It implies that the truth will not reveal itself until practitioners’ “consummation.” But follow-up development indicated that it was not the case. Ten months living in seclusion allowed Hongzhi Li to think carefully about the strategy of FLG’s development. Since May 2000, Li had published a large amount of texts centering on Clarifying the Truth. Meanwhile, the meanings of the “truth” began to change. In addition to the mystical nature of universe, the term “truth” includes at least three facets: the persecution FLG suffered, the “wickedness” of the CCP, and the goodness of FLG.

The first dimension of “truth” in Li’s theory is the fact that FLG suffered “unprecedented, the most severe, persecution in history.”²² In a speech in 2000, Hongzhi Li indicated explicitly,

But when someone comes to persecute the Fa, what should you, a disciple, a particle of Dafa, do? Shouldn’t you let the truth be known and make people

aware of the facts? This is looking at it in terms of you. You are a particle of Dafa, so you should play this role.

The meaning of the “truth” is fairly concrete: the fact that FLG is persecuted. As for Hongzhi Li, those FLG practitioners who are not willing to oppose the Chinese government do not deserve to be “*Dafa* disciples.” He said,

Most students have, in various ways, stepped forward to validate Dafa, clarify the truth, and save the world's people. Some of them have been arrested, beaten, or have died from the persecution . . . those who haven't stepped forward, have hidden themselves, and have sided in their understanding with the evil beings—how could they still be Dafa disciples?²³

For the sake of the continuity of his elaborations, Hongzhi Li told his followers that only FLG practitioners could comprehend the truth of the universe; those who do not practice FLG systematically can never understand these “profound *Fa*.” It is “destroying sentient beings” not “saving them” by telling these ordinary people “high-level truth” directly.²⁴ Therefore, his disciples should tell some concrete affairs instead of profound *Fa* when they are telling the truth. Making people aware that FLG is persecuted by the CCP should come first. “But when you clarify the truth to an average person, just tell him that we're being persecuted and that we're only doing exercises and trying to be good people, and they'll be able to understand.”²⁵

The second dimension of the “truth” is the “wickedness” of the CCP. According to Li, the CCP persecuted not only FLG practitioners but also Chinese people:

You only need to talk about the persecution of Dafa disciples, how the evil party has been violating the human rights and the freedom of belief of the Chinese people, how historically the evil party has persecuted the Chinese people . . . and how it is persecuting Dafa disciples today in the same way.²⁶

Li held that it is necessary to disclose and criticize the CCP's “villainy” when clarifying the truth. Li regarded the CCP as his implacable foe after his comeback in 2000. He called the CCP as “the wicked party” or “the evil party,” which also became FLG practitioners' lingua franca. Li warned his disciples, “Don't harbor any false hopes about the evil CCP. This sinister demon came here to destroy mankind. As you clarify the facts, you must get the world's people to see its nature clearly.”²⁷

Third, when clarifying the truth, FLG followers should tell people that Falun Dafa is good. What is FLG? According to Hongzhi Li, the question is relatively complex and explaining too much would not help but confuse people's mind. FLG introduced themselves in one of their propaganda materials:

Falun DaFa is Buddha Dharma. The practitioners learn to be good men according to the traits of the universe “truthfulness, compassion, forbearance”; it helps improving their moral level and has great effect on healing and fitness. Falun Gong has spread more than 100 countries and regions. And there are hundreds of thousands of Falun Gong practitioners in Taiwan alone.

As we have mentioned above, the meaning of Clarifying the Truth extends gradually since 2000. From telling how FLG was “persecuted,” to disclosing “villainy” of the “the evil party” and describing FLG positively, Li had summarized the significance of the “truth” up to 2012 systematically:

When I was just speaking about “the truth,” ...we're referring to how we tell people about the evil's cooking up lies in order to persecute Falun Gong; to what the wicked CCP is really all about; to why Falun Gong is being persecuted; and then there's the topic of what exactly Falun Gong is. . . . What people don't believe in will be shown to them. People are truly going to experience an unforgettable, massive change as never seen before in all of history.²⁸

Before the Prohibition in 1999, “truth” in Hongzhi Li's theoretical system had obvious religious overtones, and it was mysterious as well as ambiguous; after that, the word “truth” was given strong political implications, concrete instead of mysterious. Now it consisted of three parts: first, the Chinese government “persecutes” FLG; second, the CCP practices other “villainy”; third and finally, Falun Dafa is good. Li limited his disciples' preaching tasks on the first three; thus there are still many unknown truths waiting to be clarified by FLG practitioners in the future, among which “people are truly going to experience an unforgettable, massive change as never seen before in all of history” represented the initial mysticism in the course of the first transition of FLG.

c. The Goal of Clarifying the Truth

According to Hongzhi Li's theory, Clarifying the Truth is helpful to “save” the souls of people (救度 或 救人 *jiudu* or *jiuren*). In this way, Clarifying

the Truth consequently has the implication of religious value. Over time, Li made use of the Clarifying the Truth theory to cope with the changing environment. He underlined that FLG practitioners should value three things, including “studying the Fa and doing the exercises” (學法練功), “Clarifying the Truth” (講真相), and “sending forth righteous thoughts” (發正念).

Clarifying the Truth should be the priority within the three tasks because both “studying the Fa and doing the exercises” and “sending forth righteous thoughts” serve for “resisting the persecution.” Sending forth righteous thoughts is “to eliminate the evil that persecutes and interferes with Dafa, and persecutes Dafa disciples, and is to eliminate all factors that persecute the Fa.” Meanwhile, studying the Fa and doing the exercises are helpful for practitioners to “keep a clear head. When a cultivator’s mind departs from the Fa, the evil will find its way in.” Finally, Hongzhi Li gave a verdict that “clarifying the truth is extremely important” among the three things.²⁹ Since 2001, frequency of demanding FLG practitioners to do the three things well has increased in Hongzhi Li’s speeches. Clarifying the Truth appeared frequently on almost every Fa conference. In 2012, Li intentionally published “The Ultimate Goal of Clarifying the Truth” to justify and direct FLG practitioners’ protests:

No matter how evil the persecution is, Dafa disciples are still heading towards Consummation amidst the evil’s tests; whereas the world’s people, who have been instilled with the wicked Party’s lies. . . . And this is the reason Dafa disciples are to clarify the truth. The goal is to get rid of the evil’s lies, to enable people to see the CCP’s true face, to clear away the sins committed by people against Gods and Buddhas, and to thereby save the world’s people.³⁰

As the quoted passage mentioned above, the goal of Clarifying the Truth is to “get rid of the evil’s lies,” to “save the world’s people” and thus for Dafa disciples, “heading towards Consummation.” Apparently, Li was mobilizing his followers to protest and fight against the CCP through Clarifying the Truth, which he advocated. Li’s *jingwen* had overt political intentions against the Chinese government and the CCP; they served for his political mobilization. Nevertheless, Li’s political mobilization was distinct from traditional mobilization that utilized discourse system as “freedom” or “democracy.” Differently, he constructed a series of religious doctrines to mobilize his followers to commit themselves into the political confrontation against the Chinese government and the CCP.

d. The Audience of Clarifying the Truth

In the view of Hongzhi Li, not everyone is appropriate to be told the “truth.” He classified contemporary human society into three types of groups: FLG practitioners, ordinary people, and “evil people.” “Evil people” suppress and prohibit the development of FLG; they defame FLG through various channels. Consequently, some ordinary people accept this cognition and thus they are deceived by “evil people.”

These deceived ordinary people are the potential audience of Clarifying the Truth. Therefore, the task of FLG practitioners is to persuade ordinary people to believe that they are “good people” and they are persecuted. In this way, FLG could save “the sentient beings poisoned by the evil’s lies” and help them learn the true *Fa* again.³¹ Nevertheless, there are still parts of ordinary people like those who live in Hong Kong “where people are obsessed with money and material wealth”; they do not break the *Fa* or deceived by lies, though they are still “aren’t good, or not so good.”³² For these people, they still have the opportunity to position themselves before “the *Fa* rectifies the human world” and thus they could be left alone for a moment.

With regard to the evil people, they are doomed to be eliminated, as the result of which, no truth is required to be told to them. There are two ways of elimination; one is through “sending forth righteous thoughts” from FLG practitioners, and the other is “heaven punishing people.” The latter was emphasized in 2003, the fourth year of the prohibition of FLG, when the unprecedented calamity of SARS broke out on the Chinese mainland. In order to collaborate with Clarifying the Truth, Hongzhi Li described SARS as a plague. Those who died in the plague was “those who don’t deserve to be saved, who are impossible to save while Dafa disciples clarify the truth, and who aren’t useful to the evil rotter spirits.”³³

Despite all these distinctions, Li still encouraged his disciples to clarify the truth to as many people as possible in later development:

You’re wrong if you become selective in terms of saving people. As long as he is someone you run into, you should save him, regardless of his position or social status, or whether he be the president or a beggar. In the eyes of gods, beings are equal. Social status is just a distinction made in human society. . . . If you can be like you have just begun, all the way from the beginning to the end, you will surely achieve Consummation.³⁴

e. The Methods of Clarifying the Truth

Li keeps attaching great importance to the task of Clarifying the Truth. He supports practitioners to clarify the truth by various methods: media, networks and televisions, leaflets, going to consulates, phoning people, sending emails, and so on:

Looking at it from another angle, I want the media outlets to have a firm footing in society and become normally-operated companies. And only by operating with a positive cycle can they be more helpful in clarifying the truth.³⁵

In the Fa conference at the meeting with Asia-Pacific students, Li even publicly agitated, “Clarifying the truth directly and clarifying the truth via the media complement each other . . . directly clarifying the truth in person. . . . You’re using multiple forms together.”³⁶

Clarifying the truth is what we need to do at this time. Do it on a large scale . . . as long as something can save the people, go do it. It doesn’t matter if what you do is expose the evil, or if you use all sorts of approaches...as long as you can have people recognize this persecution, you are saving them, and you are extraordinary.³⁷

Hongzhi Li made every effort to encourage his disciples to “clarify the truth.” Meanwhile, he also proposed that some aspects in the process of Clarifying the Truth should be noticed for better effects.

First, one would encounter different people with different social status during the process of Clarifying the Truth, like senior officers, scholars, and ordinary people. Practitioners ought to ignore their status and lay stress on their nature of “human” alone.

Second, relations between one’s job and Clarifying the Truth should be handled properly. As for a practitioner, Clarifying the Truth is essential, yet working for financial support also counts. Only in this way can “it makes things easier in your work of validating Dafa and clarifying the truth.”³⁸

Third, it is more necessary to clarify the truth to the Chinese in foreign countries, since the goal of Clarifying the Truth is to save more people and “those who have been poisoned the most severely are none other than the Chinese people.” Consequently, “You [Dafa disciples] should go where there are a lot of Chinese people.”³⁹

Finally, when clarifying the truth to relatives, FLG disciples should take them as sentient beings instead of families. Li told to his disciples that as a cultivator, “you can’t be mired in the kind of concept ordinary

people have of being related to someone.”⁴⁰ Only in this way can *Dafa* disciples clarify the truth successfully without being mired by ordinary people’s feelings anymore.

We can briefly look back on the formation of Clarifying the Truth theory, a theory of resistance. Previously, “truth” in Li’s theory was related to mystical facets of universe. After the harsh crackdown in 1999, Li redefined the term, emphasizing that Clarifying the Truth was to tell people the persecution which FLG suffered, and “wickedness” of the CCP as well as goodness of FLG. He also explained why, how, and to whom the practitioners should clarify the truth. These efforts finally develop a set of theories on Clarifying the Truth. As we would find later that the “truth” theory is helpful for Hongzhi Li to mobilize social resources, keep his charisma, and legitimize FLG’s resistant activities.

3. Resistance Logics Beneath the Politicization of FLG

a. Legitimizing Resistance

Sociologists have noticed that ideology can justify collective action and sustain organizational vitality; this argument can be extended to the case of FLG.⁴¹ The theory of Clarifying the Truth not only encourages FLG practitioners to take part in collective actions against the Chinese government, but also justifies the resistance.

When Clarifying the Truth was established as the new organizational objective of FLG, Li and his followers developed various forms of protests. We briefly analyze three major protesting forms: propaganda movements against the CCP, parades overseas, and continuous protests in Chinese mainland.

FLG have launched many large-scale propaganda movements overseas to protest against the CCP. For example, in November 2004, FLG published a series of editorials, *Nine Commentaries on the Communist Party* (《九評共產黨》), which was followed quickly by English version. This series includes nine editorials: “What the Communist Party Is,” “The Beginnings of the Chinese Communist Party,” “The Tyranny of the Chinese Communist Party,” “How the Communist Party Opposes the Universe,” “The Collusion of Jiang Zemin and the Chinese Communist Party to Persecute Falun Gong,” “How the Chinese Communist Party Destroyed Traditional Culture,” “The Chinese Communist Party’s History of Killing,” “How the Chinese Communist Party Is an Evil Cult,”

and “The Unscrupulous Nature of the Chinese Communist Party.” When talking about the communist regime, *Nine Commentaries* write that “the essence of the communist regime opposes nature” and the CCP is “an evil specter opposes human nature,” which “attaches to every single unit and cell of the Chinese society...and thus the Party controls and manipulates society.” There is a chapter titled “How the Chinese Communist Party Is an Evil Cult,” in which the CCP is defined as “an evil cult that harms mankind.” All these strong emotions of hatred reflected in the editorials clearly expressed the growing hostility which FLG holds toward the CCP.

Along with *Nine Commentaries*, FLG initiated a project to encourage people to quit the CCP's organizations, including the Party, the Youth League, and the Young Pioneers. The practitioners labeled it as *Three Quits* (三退 *Santui*). People can do it via emails, hotlines (available in America and Canada, and there is a special hotline for overseas officials), faxes, local service centers and mailboxes that are designed specifically for “quitting the CCP and its affiliated organizations” activity, and a local newspaper office of the *Epoch Times*. All the statements are required to be passed on to the *Epoch Times* website and statistical data are displayed on the home page as “there are xxx people quitting the Communist Party (Youth League/the Young Pioneers) since November 3rd, 2004.”⁴² The statistical number includes the sum total, monthly total, weekly total, yesterday total, and today total. And the growing number of people “quitting the CCP and its affiliated organizations” was frequently mentioned by Hongzhi Li in his speeches. On the Global Quitting the CCP Service Center” (全球退黨服務中心) website, it is estimated that over 300 million Chinese people have quitted the three groups.⁴³

It's obvious that FLG is trying to use these figures above to imply the gradual collapse of the CCP. Nevertheless, these astonishing numbers of population are too big to be accepted, and people's names shown on *tuidang* statements (退黨聲明) are highly repetitive and with regularities. For instance, people with the name “Ping'an” (平安 safe and sound) appear every once in a while in the statements; and people with “Fu” (福 happiness, blessing or good luck) in their names show up in almost every statement.⁴⁴ Not to mention names like Sister Wang and Old Zhang, only through these *tuidang* (退黨 quitting the CCP) statements could we infer that the number of people quitting the CCP groups presented on FLG websites may lack facticity and require further verification.⁴⁵

Except from persuading people to quit the CCP and its affiliated organizations, FLG practitioners also set booths at some famous scenic spots overseas, especially in Hong Kong and Taiwan. These booths are called “truth spots” and their potential audiences are Chinese tourists. The practitioners often wear yellow gowns, with yellow flags in their hands, standing in front of booths and distributing leaflets to the passers-by. Some booths even become registering places for the *Three Quits*.

What’s more, FLG expresses their opposing opinions through various ways like “truth notes” (真相幣), “truth calls,” spot radios and televisions, emails, leaflets and pamphlets, open letters, and so on. The so-called “truth notes” are actually pieces of RMB with the word “Truth” printed on them. On the back of the notes, a phone number like “001-416-361-xxxx” is printed on the top left; and in the bottom right is a lotus with “Falun Dafa Hao” (法輪大法好 Falun Dafa is good) above and “Foguang Puzhao” (佛光普照 Buddhist light illuminates everywhere) below. These printed words are stamped so deeply that they could be discerned from the other side of the note. People who are interested could phone the “truth call”; yet people’s home phones are also expected to be called by these unexpected “truth calls” in Chinese mainland.

Spot radios and televisions are as well protesting measures taken by FLG practitioners in Chinese mainland. Reportedly, Chongqin FLG practitioners utilized technological means to insert FLG advertising videos for more than 90 minutes on New Year’s Day 2002; in May 2002, Hefei FLG practitioners broke into cable television networks to insert advertising videos for more than half an hour;⁴⁶ in May 2012, Hainan province, FLG practitioners hacked into a village’s emergency horn by web phone and broadcasted for several minutes; in August 2012 in Hunan province, FLG practitioners turned on a village’s flood warning horn and broadcasted FLG contents.⁴⁷

b. Mobilizing Resources Overseas

Theoretical inducement can largely increase a movement’s capacity to mobilize.⁴⁸ By means of formulating the “truth” theory, FLG became the most active organization protesting the Chinese government; its mobilization capacity increased dramatically in the first decade of the century.

Take the media system run by FLG as an example. Since 2000, FLG has established a complex media system that includes Internet media, audio, video, magazine, newspaper, and websites. These media could be

classified into two types: “Dafa” media and “layman” media. Websites like *Minghui* (明慧網), *Yuanming* (圓明網), *Zhengwunet* (正悟網), *Guangming* (光明網), *Zhengjian* (正見網), *XinSheng* (新生網), FGM TV (放光明電視製作中心), Taiwan FGM (台灣放光明), *Minghui* Radio Station (明慧廣播網), and *Minghui Weekly* (《明慧週刊》) are called “Dafa” media, which are in charge of communicating orders from Hongzhi Li and FLG headquarters. “Layman” media, including *The Epoch Times* (《大紀元時報》), NTD.TV (新唐人電視), *Aboluowang* (阿波羅網), *Renminbao* (《人民報》), *Secretchina* (《看中國》), Sound of Hope International broadcasting station (希望之聲國際廣播電台), Shenzhou Film (神洲電影製片廠), and so on, are responsible for anti-CCP propagation.⁴⁹

As one of the most important newspapers and online media of FLG, the *Epoch Times* was first published in New York in May 2000, with its web launching in August 2000. It publishes “in 35 countries across five continents” and offers print and web editions in eight different kinds of languages, as well as web versions in another 21 different kinds of languages.

What’s more, there is also the New Tang Dynasty Television, which is started in February 2002. At that time, Hongzhi Li realized that propagated FLG through traditional carriers of words did not suffice. Therefore, it was necessary to diversify the forms of clarifying the truth:

You’ve seen how New Tang Dynasty TV’s programs are more and more on the right track, but in many regards there are still improvements to be made. Its music and performance programs aren’t that rich still. You don’t want your audience to feel that your TV programs are boring. So you have to think of a way to make your TV programs attract more viewers. If you are to do even better at clarifying the truth, you have to have a lot of people watch, and that means you have to suit the general public’s tastes. Only that way can you be more effective clarifying the truth.⁵⁰

Cooperating with the New Tang Dynasty Television, there is also Shen Yun Performing Arts (short for Shen Yun) established in New York in 2006. Before its founding, FLG holds performances after every Fa Conference. Actually, early in 2011, in the Fa Teaching Given at the 2011 Washington DC Metro Area, Hongzhi Li said to his disciples that “if the composer is a Dafa disciple and the song itself isn’t in any way political, then it’s fine and that at present it’s hard to gauge these things.” Shen Yun Performing Arts has four subsidiaries, including New York Shen Yun (performing in North America), International Shen Yun (performing in

Asia-Pacific Area), Tour Shen Yun (performing in Europe), and the newly established Global Shen Yun (newly set up in December 2003). Each of the four teams has its own large live orchestra. According to the *New York Times* in August 2010, Shen Yun had toured more than 100 cities all over the world.⁵¹

FLG performance and New Tang Dynasty TV have facilitated the activities of Clarifying the Truth and have become significant mobilizing resources for FLG overseas. Put the artistry of these programs and performances aside, it is no doubt that FLG took political clout and economic aids by means of propaganda overseas.

c. Maintaining the Leader's Charisma

Hongzhi Li's charisma played a vital role in the development of FLG.⁵² According to Dawson, "Charisma is not a characteristic of a person but is a social relationship . . . with the leader's authority dependent on recognition by followers of her extraordinary gifts."⁵³ He emphasized that devotees have "near-absolute trust in the leader," as the result of which devotees would define their interest according to the doctrines of the leader. When developing the ideology of Clarifying the Truth, Li frequently interacted with his followers and such interaction is helpful to keep his charisma.

Chan explores the reason why Li retained his charisma after he failed to fulfill his followers' expectations and lead the organization into crisis. Chan considers that the belief system in which the followers strictly adhere to Li's teaching benefits the leadership. Even when he obviously failed to protect his followers, "this ideology became a cultural resource for them to make sense of the crisis and to interpret his absence in a biased manner through a positive halo."⁵⁴ Similarly, Junker viewed the Li's charisma from follower's perspective.⁵⁵

We conclude that there are mainly three methods for Hongzhi Li to maintain his charisma authority. First, he modeled himself as a quasi-god through his doctrines. There are two phases of Li's god-making process. The first phase is before 1999 during the period of *qigong* fever; Li published *Zhuan Falun*, in which he proclaimed that he had "spiritual bodies" (法身) to protect and heal his followers:

Many past teachers could only mentor one student at a time, for that was all that they could protect. Most wouldn't attempt to take on and protect as many as we have. But as I have indicated, I can do this due to the countless spiritual

bodies I have, each of which is endowed with the same great powers of the Way that I have, and they can exercise these with the force of the Way...you have the protection of my spiritual bodies. So no harm will come to you.⁵⁶

Adding up with the stories that Li healed many people with incurable disease, his charisma formed. Therefore, many of his followers believed that Li owned supernatural power and was Maitreya Buddha's reincarnation. The second stage is after June 2000, when Li described himself as a messianic figure. *Minghui* statements reinforced Li's centrality for the movement by claiming that, during Li's absence, he had engaged in cosmic battle and succeeded in destroying "huge evil elements . . . using his powerful energy potency."⁵⁷

Second, Li made prophecy about the doomsday. He claimed that the world has entered a cosmic period of historical cleansing: era of *fa*-rectification.⁵⁸ During the *fa*-rectification, dafa disciples shall be saved and reach their consummation while "the evil will soon be completely eliminated . . . and sins can no longer be allowed."⁵⁹ To make his prophecy more creditable, Li fabricated relation between the SARS and *fa*'s elimination in 2003. This has been discussed before, so we would not go into further details here.

Third, Li tried to convince his followers of continuously new successes they had made in the process of Clarifying the Truth. Charismatic authority depends on the display of the prowess and virtues of the leader. This means that the leader has to sustain the creation of new successes, both concrete and spiritual.⁶⁰ For instance, on the homepage of *Minghui.org*, there is a panel that presented numbers of people who claimed to quit the CCP groups. It could be deemed as the success in eliminating enemies. Along with this kind of concrete success, there is also spiritual triumph—the apocalyptic prophecies of the *fa*-rectification in which the souls of the believers could be saved.

People normally think that the maintenance of a leader's charismatic authority requires constant effort, but Hongzhi Li's case offers a counter-example. In July 1999 when FLG organizations in the Chinese mainland were facing the unprecedented crisis of being repressed, its charismatic leader Hongzhi Li disappeared for about a year without any explanation. Surprisingly, Li regained his power soon after his return to the public in June 2000 with an even more thoroughly apocalyptic doctrine.⁶¹

Dawson explained this kind of "disappearance" as "the crucial element of mystery"; he thinks that "access to the leader is restricted to

those who are especially . . . loyal” and too much exposure of a leader may “delegitimize the leader.”⁶² This means that Li still had contact with his senior disciples during his disappearance and was controlling the organization remotely. Contrarily, Andrew Junker suggested that Hongzhi Li was taken as a symbol by FLG practitioners to encourage themselves to go through the campaign against them. It means Li’s charisma was preserved due to his previous efforts of modeling himself as a quasi-god. Similarly, Chan holds that the interaction and collective interpretation of the followers helps them to romanticize the charisma of their missing leader.⁶³

In sum, by means of maintaining personal charisma, Li owns absolute organizational leadership and great ability to command FLG practitioners. More important, we could find that through various forms of propaganda, legitimizing FLG’s movements as resistance against the CCP and keeping leadership charisma, FLG has become a well-constructed organization and it is on its way of politicization further and further.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The religious economy model proposes that, under certain conditions, religious firms would increase the tension with their environment by means of doctrinal innovation. This argument can be appropriately applied to the politicization of FLG. After FLG was repressed by Chinese government in 1999, Hongzhi Li formulated a set of theory on Clarifying the Truth. He explained what the truth is, why it is necessary to clarify the truth, how to clarify it, and who the audiences are. Guided and justified by this theory, FLG practitioners engaged themselves into various forms of resistance, including propaganda movements against the CCP, the movement of quitting the CCP and its affiliated organizations, setting protesting booths in scenic spots overseas, and sending protesting messages in the Chinese mainland by means of spot videos, emails, cell phones, and “truth notes.”

The formulation of the “truth” theory not only mobilized FLG practitioners to resist Chinese government but also offered FLG’s politicization an irrefutable spiritual excuse, at least from its practitioners’ perspective. Last but not least, doctrinal innovation enabled Li to interact with his followers frequently and thus keep his charisma. In conclusion, although the formulation of the “truth” theory increased the tension

between FLG and the CCP and led to FLG's politicization, it was beneficial to sustain the organization's vitality by means of justifying the resistance, mobilizing social resources, and maintaining the leader's charisma.

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