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Cults

Fa Lun Gong

Ten years after tanks rolled into Tiananmen Square, China had n become the new home of the Asian economic miracle. Its trade surplus with USA is not far behind that of Japan, and Made in China goods flood world markets, affordable even to struggling East Europeans and South Asians. All the major cities are booming. The exiled leaders of the June 4 movement, who escaped earlier in the evening while encouraging their followers to stay and die, were all but discredited. Hongkong was successfully returned under the One China Two Systems policy.

But a new protest movement had arisen, gaining sudden prominence when several thousand followers of Fa Lun Gong (Law Wheel Power), a form of Qi Gong (Air Power) or breathing exercise, suddenly appeared one day outside the Zhong Nan Hai compound, the residence complex of the top leaders. Before long, the organization was denounced as an evil cult and a nation wide ban was declared on its activities. Many were arrested, and in January 2001 five of the cult followers tried to commit suicide in Tiananmen Square by setting themselves on fire. Supposedly a movement for good health, Fa Lung Gong has become highly hazardous to one's physical well being.

What is Qi Gong? It is believed that by taking a articular posture and doing a carefully regulated regime of breathing, a person can cause some form of energy movement inside the body, thus increasing health and strength. Many practitioners claim that the exercise made them feel more relaxed and happier, which sounds realistic in today's fast paced, highly stressed nvironment. This could also have some carry-on effects on their physical well being, but claims beyond the level are made, and this is where problems arise.

These additional claims relate to two other long standing practices: the meditation exercises of Zen monks, and the more recent Gongfu stories that talk about numerous forms of ``inner power" (Nei Gong). In both, the meditative posture and inner efforts are supposed to bring on some communion with the force of nature, to promote enlightenment in one, and develop fighting power in the other. Fusing these two into one, there is much folklore about the legendary fighting power of Shaolin monks, and the celebrated ``One Finger Zen" story:

"A great Zen master answered all questions about enlightenment by raising a finger. One of his disciples began to imitate him. When the master saw it, he chopped off the disciple's finger. As the disciple ran away bleeding, he looked back at the master, who raised a finger; at that moment he was enlightened"

was confused with the Gongfu claim of being able to disable a person by poking a finger at his critical points.

This then got fused with another Chinese tradition: Tao priests claim that by drawing talisman figures and incantation, they could move spirits and invoke natural forces, whether to bring rain during a drought, shift mountains to build roads or canals, etc. If Qi Gong can invoke the forces of nature to strengthen one's body, it should also go the other way, allowing one's body to control nature. With that kind of thinking, the claim that Fa Lun Gong would build a Law Wheel inside your body, which you can turn to do all kinds of wonderful things, would not seem to be far fetched.

So we can understand Fa Lun Gong being adopted by poorly educated people unfamiliar with modern scientific ideas; we can even understand that some of them are easily incited by local leaders of Fa Lun Gong practice groups into sit-in protests against critics of the groups and then against officials who try to restore order and enforce laws against trespassing and illegal assembly. What is more puzzling is why so many educated people, in particular students and faculty in US and other overseas universities, would suspend their disbelief and use the world wide web to propagate the claims, even endorsing them as scientific. In fact, without such overseas endorsements, it is unlikely that the laims would have enjoyed the widespread

acceptance in China among the politically conscious groups.

It is said that the economic liberalization of China has destroyed the ideological system, leaving a vacuum for something new. While that might explain what happened to some party members, does anyone seriously believe that Fujian peasants and Chinese students in Stanford used to find comfort in Marxist sociology and Mao's theory of revolution, and once these are abandoned by the Chinese establishment, have to turn to superstition? The peasants have probably believed in one kind of superstition or another all along, and something that promises not only surviving doomsday and afterlife in an oriental heaven (in parallel with the Christian heaven for caucasians), but also good health without medical bills in this life, must be quite appealing to them. The intriguing question is about the Chinese living in the west.

The vacuum they face is not so much in ideology, as in culture as a whole. What part of Chinese culture can an overseas Chinese hold onto in a meaningful way? The answer is: curiously little.

Take the example of Confucianism. For it to have survived that long, and to be able to continue its well entrenched status in East Asian political systems, it must possess some real strengthes. Yet, almost all connotations of Confucianism are negative in some way: authoritarian, morally conservative, resistant to change, obscure, comical... Lu Xun is generally acknowledged as the greatest modern Chinese writer, but while his contribution in exposing the dark side of traditional Chinese society is undeniable, it is far harder to see what constructive ideas about organizing the modern Chinese world he could be credited with. Now if a Chinese cannot explain to a westerner what is so great about Confucius or Lu Xun, what can he say to get across the grandeur of Chinese culture? How does a parent convince a child that their cultural roots are worthy of an effort to retain?

New migrants frequently suffer from discrimination and exploitation, and for them, psychological comfort lies in the twin thoughts (a) I make sacrifice for the next generation; and (b) one day I will go home and it would all be worthwhile. But if one feels that the next generation would be culturally unrecognizable, and home has nothing attractive to return to, then the pain becomes hard to bear. It is in this light one must view the incomprehensible willingness of well educated academics to believe that breathing with half closed eyes would not only keep them healthy without medicine, but also survive the total destruction of world war three. The very outlandishness convinces a believer that a Chinese invention can be superior to anything anyone else has to offer.

Yet, the commentaors are after all correct: with China adopting capitalism and economic incentive as official doctrines and state enterprises dying away, some opposition ideology emphasizing equality and concern for the down trodden will need to emerge. One cannot but be impressed at how quickly health consciousness and mystical beliefs got mixed up with economic discontent and civil protest, which rapidly escalated, cumulating into the large scale, supposedly peaceful but nevertheless menacing demonstration in Beijing. While the Chinese leaders might encourage free enterprise, accept the disintegration of the state economic sector, and allow some artistic expressions, well organized movements that seek to be alternative power centres claiming the right to direct the life and ideas of their followers, are quite another matter. No crises of faith can be allowed to become crises of control, which they threaten to be in the absence of a system of orderly establishment-opposition dialogs. As before, when Taiji fails, the iron fist.

(This was written in 1998 - since then Chinese self esteem has considerably risen with successful economic development, but the crass materialism coming with it reveals that the cultural psyche remains fragile, and the prospect of a good synthesis of old with new, east with west, control with democracy, change with stability, and so on, remains a project under implementation)

Conversation With a Living Buddha

we talked to one of the well known religious leaders of our time, Mr Li of Fa Lun Gong:

We: let's start with your main thesis, that we can improve our life by breathing exercises.

He: that's obvious; if you stop breathing, you die; if you can breath forever, you live forever; bad breathing gives bad life; good breathing good life.

We: is that why breathing can save us from the end of the world?

He: sure; if the world ends, we all stop breathing; but if breathing continues, then the world has not ended.

We: since the world will end, do you plan to give away all your money?

He: no, but people have been giving money to me.

We: why would a living buddha need money?

He: you can promote many good causes with money.

We: such as?

He: I have started Wan Lo Gong, to help beautiful women of the world find husbands; we guarantee success.

We: now that's impressive; can I join?

He: sorry; members must be below 29 years in age, height between 5'2" and 5'6", pass a nice looks and personality test; I dont think you qualify...

We: I also heard about Shou Xing Gong; is that another one of your societies? He: oh yes; join and you'll live forever.

We: what do members have to do to achieve this, besides breathing forever? He: eat forever; we have different branches like Tom Yum Gong, Mi Tian Gong and Mo Yum Gong...

We: but Mi Tian Gong? that means in Mandarin... (throws up on the Living Buddha, which brings the interview to an end)

The ICult of IApple

all countries have their own particular cult preferences, but Americans seems to be most prone to massive cults that quickly sweep across the nation and then subside - the movements met some sort of psychological/spiritual need, but not necessarily with any sustained logic; they had the hippies in the 60s, the TV evangelicals (several of whom had sex scandals BTW) in the 70s and 80s, the dotcom craze in the late 90s; many well educated Americans took up Falungong, whereas in China the followers tended to be from lower classes; right now the Obama movement shows all signs of being a cult - the followers seem to be intoxicated by the goodness of the movement itself, rather than any specific political programme

I have felt for some years that Apple is a cult rather than a technology business. Apple computers, MP3 machines and phones are over priced and poor value compared to alternative products, but Apple lovers are oblivious. While the products have their good points, the advantages, especially considered relative to the price premium one has to pay, seem to me insufficient to justify that kind of devotion their users reveal. Mac computers, I phones, even I pods, are loved not so much for performing better or providing better value, but simply because having one makes a person feel better

I guess the recent \$200 iPhone price drop gave people a more severe jolt than Apple anticipated: after all, early adoptors overpaying for new products is, as Steve Jobs initially insisted, nothing new in high tech, but in the cult world there are die hard followers and there are fellow travellers. The former could accept anything, but to the latter, the price drop revealed (a) Apple's planning was deficient (b) the product is not as great as it was thought to be (c) their prophet Steve Jobs did not love them as much as they thought - they were just customers. I do not know to what extent the subsequent \$100 voucher helps them to return to the fold.

In fact, these days American businesses behave like Chinese propogandists, with executives, employees, customers,

journalists all mouthing the same talking points, and like during the cultural revolution, one day company X (say Dell a few years ago, HP today) could do no wrong, and another day they could do no right. I guess that's globalization!

Millenium Bug

Eight years have passed and the millenium bug is forgotton - only human that we prefer not to remember our own stupidities.

There was a genuine problem; for example, some of the NY celebrations had 1999 up in big lights, but at the stroke of midnight the number changed to 19100 rather than 2000 - I am sure many pieces of software had the same problem. However, precisely because computer programs are so complex and no one knows where all the problems are embedded, system designed would have built various layers of code to handle unexpected situations, including 1999 incrementing to 1900 or 19100 or some other equally "logical" outcome. The near total panic was unnecessary, but it happened because of the way promotors do business these days: they use "Chinese" propaganda methods, and people believe them.

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万字半日写,千丝一手挥,独怜杜秋娘,曲尽人憔悴

Favorite quotes:

"History repeats, first time as tragedy, second time as farce" - Marx 历史重复, 一次悲剧, 一次闹剧 - 马克思

"Those who forget their history are condemned to repeat it" - Santayana 忘记历史注定重复历史 - 山塔亚那

"Those who remember their history are also condemned to repeat it" - Yuen 记得历史也注定重复历史 - 阮宗光

"Oscar Wilde was wrong about cynics knowing price not value; cynics know value is always less than price" - Yuen

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