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## Indirect Resistance and Religious Rhetoric: A Review of Ming's *The Cultural Economy of Falun Gong in China*

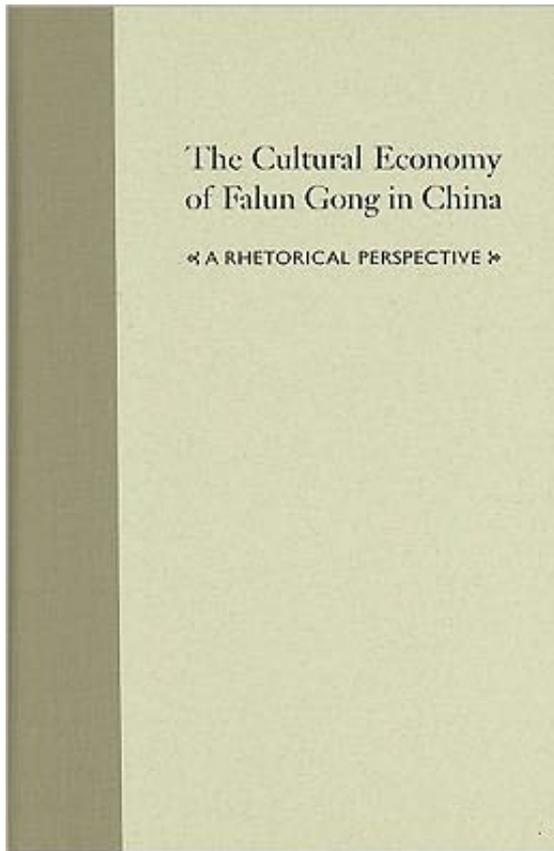
Review of *The Cultural Economy of Falun Gong in China: A Rhetorical Perspectiv*

by Xiao Ming 2011; University of South Carolina Press  
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Since Wendy Hesford's call for a global turn in composition and rhetoric, the field has directed more attention to non-Western rhetorical practices and theories. Following Xing Lu's interrogation of classical Chinese rhetoric, the rhetorical practices of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and Lu and Herbert Simon's examination of political slogans in China, Xiao Ming offers a critical examination of how Falun Gong—a Chinese folk religion designated by the government as a dissident group—uses subtle medical, cultural, and sociological claims to challenge the fundamental values of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As a former Chinese diplomat and an official of the Chinese Ministry of Culture, Xiao is privy to particular cultural information and political understandings of the CCP and its rhetorical strategies for suppressing dissidents and constituting the ideal citizen body. Situating the rhetorical practices of the CCP and Falun Gong in social, historical and economic contexts, Xiao examines the rise of Falun Gong as a rhetorical response to social and political problems caused by China's entry into the global market economy. As the Party-State struggles to adapt its rhetoric in order to unify its citizens, Falun Gong offers a rhetorical alternative and a different social reality. Xiao argues that while Falun Gong does not mount an explicit political proclamation against the regime, it successfully challenges the CCP by undermining the basic assumptions of "Marxism, authoritarianism, and scientism" (7). Through a rhetorical analysis of Chinese political rhetoric and Falun Gong's discursive strategies for indirect resistance, *The Cultural Economy of Falun Gong in China* provides us with a useful theoretical framework for understanding how the global market economy produces new citizen subjects and gives rise to different forms of rhetorical practices of nationhood and political resistance.



Tracing the rhetorical interactions between the CCP and Falun Gong from three main angles—culture and history, discourse, and audience—Xiao demonstrates how both organizations repurpose classical traditions and historical maxims to accommodate an audience that is increasingly vocal about its dissatisfaction with the regime. Xiao emphasizes that “by using ‘cultural economy’ as an umbrella term,” she can “discuss how culture relates to and functions as an organizing system of history, religion, politics, ethics, and medical anthropology that impacts the struggle of Falun Gong” (7). The first chapter offers a thick description of the rhetorical context and sociopolitical situations in China; it also explains the fundamental ideologies behind the CCP’s rhetoric and how the Party maintains its control through language. The second chapter then analyzes the rhetorical strategies Falun Gong uses implicitly to challenge the dominant regime, and why this folk religion is seen as threatening by the Party-State. This is followed by a chapter that provides further context to explain why Chinese citizens find Falun Gong particularly attractive, given their surrounding political and socioeconomic situations. Chapter 4 then examines how tropes and ideographs are used by both Falun Gong and the CCP for their respective purposes. Finally, in the last chapter Xiao traces the rhetorical history of radical political changes in China since the Cultural Revolution to illuminate the changing subjectivity of the Chinese audience has given rise to Falun Gong and a more participatory and vocal citizenry. Though this book is oriented toward communication scholars interested in the political and religious rhetoric of China, its examination of the changing rhetorical strategies under the global market economy would appeal to many rhetoric scholars interested in how nation-states and grassroots organizations cope with neoliberalism by discursively creating and mobilizing their constituents.

For readers unfamiliar with the context of Xiao’s study, most chapters Xiao offer in-depth descriptions of the sociopolitical and economic conditions of China that situate Falun Gong and its rhetorical practices. Most of Xiao’s original analysis of the dissident group can be found in chapter 2. Here, Xiao examines how the CCP rhetorically calls the ideal citizen into being using Marxist materialism, authoritarianism, and scientism. These discourses create a community based on a supposedly emotionless set of political rules that emphasizes the role of science and technology in solving social problems. The Party’s rhetorical strategies, Xiao argues, have been

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largely successful in creating citizen subjects who reinforce and collaborate with the regime. However, as China enters the global market economy, these discourses are no longer sufficient to explain large-scale social problems, such as the uneven distribution of wealth and the lack of public welfare for many marginalized populations. Exposed to different information on the Internet, Chinese citizens are becoming increasingly more vocal about their public opinions. This rhetorical situation gives rise not only to new discursive strategies among Party leaders, but also to grassroots dissident groups like Falun Gong, which deploys arguments with “subtle and complex moral, cultural, sociological, and medical anthropological roots” (17). Using Kevin O’Brien and Lianjiang Li’s concept of “rightful resistance,” Xiao argues that even though Falun Gong operates within legal boundaries, it remains subversive by rhetorically undermining the ideological assumptions of the CCP (20).

Started as a grassroots organization promoting mental and physical health, Falun Gong discursively links physical illnesses to social problems and suffering; in other words, private bodily pain is represented as “the internalization of societal issues in human bodies” (19). Xiao argues that Falun Gong becomes politically threatening to the regime because “the somatic discourse of Falun Gong members becomes a form of social critique” (19). Tracing the rhetorical roots of the group to traditional Chinese medicine while drawing on Western theorists such as Donna Haraway and Arthur Kleinman, Xiao demonstrates how Falun Gong uses classical tropes and traditional values to provide comfort and social empowerment for populations that feel alienated by the new market economy in China. In addition to creating subjects who “transcend inwardly directed self-interest to focus on societal issues, becoming social or cultural agents” (68), Falun Gong also challenges Marxist materialism and scientism by emphasizing emotions and self-nurturing gestures dissociated from Party interests, and by revealing the inadequacy of technology for solving social issues. Using “alternative moral discourse encoded in theological terms” (1), Falun Gong is able subtly to undermine the fundamental ideological assumptions that ground the current communist regime. This book demonstrates that resistance against the dominant regime does not always resort to explicit political proclamations. Rather, it may be more effective for dissidents to deploy rhetorical actions that, while falling within the boundaries of authorized channels, subtly promote non-compliant behaviors and subversive ideologies. This argument calls for a broadened definition of the rhetorics of resistance, and a renewed understanding of how one can deploy subversive rhetorical strategies. Indeed, Xiao appeals to scholars interested in transcultural rhetoric by asking them to consider critically how the “interplay of culture and rhetoric in each context assumes different forms and experiences” (102).

Xiao’s emphasis on rhetorical contexts and history plays out most prominently in the final chapter—“Wildfire Won’t Wipe It Out—Spring Wind Blows It Back.” Here, Xiao offers a historical analysis of “the transfiguration of the political sensibility of the Chinese people” (83) from the Red Guards in 1966 to the current generation, which argues for human rights over Party interests. This chapter demonstrates that as China enters the global market economy, the CCP is too slow to adapt its rhetorical strategies for a more agentive and disgruntled audience. As a result, Falun Gong emerges to fill the void, using ideologies that contradict the Party’s bedrock philosophies. Xiao argues that such a shift in political power under the market economy demonstrates the need for the state to cope with the changing meaning of collectivity prioritizes the individual over the social unit.

Through her emphasis on Chinese rhetorical history and how the current economic condition influences the rhetorical practices of Falun Gong and the CCP, Xiao also illustrates that we as rhetoric scholars must interrogate the interconnectedness between the text and its cultural context, and also recognize that “texts are infused with multithemed ideological import” (4) warranting a critical examination of how history is being repurposed for different rhetorical goals. Xiao’s focus on rhetorical networks and situatedness is particularly important in the study of comparative rhetoric. For example, in “The Economies of Writing Writ Large: The Rhetoric of Cultural Nationalism,” LuMing Mao has argued for the importance of studying tropes as they move across multiple contexts and are rebranded by different agents. Similarly, in order fully to interrogate how different social forces and material conditions produce new rhetorical responses and how those responses simultaneously alter social reality, Xiao draws not only on Western methodologies of rhetoric, but also on theories from medical anthropology, religious studies, sociology, and political science. Echoing Mao’s most recent discussion of methodology in comparative rhetoric, Xiao’s diverse methods point not only to the inadequacy of Western methodologies for analyzing non-Western discourses and artifacts, but also to the possibility of integrating

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different fields of research to reach a more comprehensive examination of a less commonly studied topic.

Despite the author's nonacademic background and position, this book offers a sophisticated theoretical framework and methodology in analyzing primary texts from a non-Western rhetorical tradition. Through *The Cultural Economy of Falun Gong in China*, Xiao offers a new interpretive framework for understanding how nation-states and dissident groups alike rhetorically adapt to the global market economy—and in particular, how they make use of the new rhetorical situation to constitute and appeal to different kinds of citizen subjects by repurposing historical narratives and classical tropes. This book is particularly germane for scholars of Chinese rhetoric who seek to understand how the communist regime copes with an increasingly vocal citizenry who subscribes to neoliberal values such as individuality and plurality. In fact, with the turn toward studying transnational rhetorical practices, Xiao's work also opens up discussion of how and what rhetoric scholars should theorize when they encounter non-Western discourses and artifacts. This book will join the ranks of the burgeoning study of comparative rhetoric in expanding our canon both in terms of methodology and the objects of study.

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