At the turn of the 21st century, the strenuous conditions of social existence in China offered up plenty of cause for popular protest. The further dismantling of the old socialist system, the deepening marketization of economic relations, and the startling redistributions of property rights were all contributing to social change and disruptions on a grand scale. Tens of thousands of state-sector workers were being laid off from their jobs without adequate benefits and without much prospect of re-employment. Tens of millions of poor migrant laborers, many of them still children, were streaming into the cities from rural areas to compete for jobs, but were left more or less entirely to fend for themselves, and could survive, often, only by enduring appalling living and working conditions. Those who opted to stay on the land, and they amounted still to a majority of the total population, were frequently denied a fair price for their crops even as they were too often subject to brutally inequitable tax assessments and other arbitrary levies by local officials. The poverty became so desperate in some rural areas that medical investigators sent back reports about whole villages full of people, many dying of AIDS, who had become infected with HIV when they had resorted to selling their own blood to survive. Women of childbearing age all over the country lived under relentless, sometimes vicious, official insistence that they limit their pregnancies even as they had to endure, for all that, painful family pressures to produce more sons. Artists and intellectuals, becoming ever more enmeshed in corrosively commodified relations of creative work and production, were at the same time still denied full freedom of expression, and remained subject to the rigors of a system of state censorship which, though it was clearly eroding, could nonetheless exert itself in ways that ranged from risibly obtuse to odiously oppressive. Ethnic minority groups with grievances against the Party and the state were subject to wary official surveillance and were still denied meaningful opportunities to express their views in public. Thus, nearly voiceless, minority peoples in the western regions of the country looked on in mounting anger and frustration as incoming waves of Han migrant settlers threatened to engulf them in their own homelands. Meanwhile, massive damage to China’s natural environment – to the air, to the water, to the forests, and to the land – the
effects of pesticide mismanagement and of over-rapid and under-regulated processes of industrialization and urbanization, literally sickened the brains and bodies of many unwitting victims and threatened the health and safety of millions more.

There is abundant evidence that, throughout the decade of the 1990s, numerous episodes of popular protest against such conditions of life did in fact take place in China – protests often directly aimed against state policies, state practices, and state officials. Work stoppages, sit-ins, tax refusals, complaint petitions, public demonstrations, suicides meant to shame officials into action, riots, terror bombings, and an even richer repertoire, licit and illicit, of more covert measures of resistance and evasion have all been reported over recent years and on up to the present. Most of these actions have remained local or otherwise limited in scope, however. The police, the secret police, the military, and the civil official hierarchies, ever watchful, have all worked hard to contain such incidents, defusing crises when necessary with some measured concessions, and decapitating in embryo as many groups or units as they deemed might develop into the organizational skeletons for larger-scale collective actions. Thus, in China since that paroxysm of state violence on 4 June 1989, we have seen many popular protests, some limited protest “waves” perhaps, but no major social movements – no sustained movement of popular opposition from workers, migrants, poor farmers, women, students, intellectuals, ethnic minorities, or environmentalists. No opposition movement, that is, until (of all things) Falun Gong.

Falun Gong: history and heresy
In the spring of 1999 near Zhongnanhai, a throng (estimated at something over 10,000 – not a tremendously large number in the Chinese context) of qigong meditation practitioners staged a mostly silent and composed, cross-legged, one-day sit-in. They were protesting having been slandered and harassed for their beliefs by a few secular-science activist intellectuals and publicists and some municipal government officials in Tianjin who were apparently trying to dissuade young people from the practice of qigong. This dramatically resolute, peaceful “appeal” to the government for a redress of grievances apparently so shocked and surprised state leaders that they hurriedly launched an intensive investigation of the Falun Gong group and its leader, Li Hongzhi. Less than two months later, after the investigation was completed, top officials declared Falun Gong to be an “heretical sect,” and its believers and their activities to constitute nothing less than a fearful and profound threat to China’s social peace and stability. They banned the group, then ordered and relentlessly carried out a nationwide campaign to dissolve its network of teachers and disciples and to discredit Li Hongzhi and his
followers. The official assertion that this previously nearly unheard-of group of non-violent, mystic popular religionists, who liked to gather in public parks to practice their meditation exercises, posed a threat of the gravest kind to social order, peace, and political stability in the country seemed incongruous to many. Yet precisely that claim formed the ultimate basis and the justification for the reign of terror that ensued. And the state’s campaign of suppression – which still goes on – has been so intense, so embittered, and so harsh as to have shocked and surprised, in its turn, numerous observers in the West. With so many other structural reform crises and plausibly pressing causes for protest on the social agenda in China these days, few of us working in the field would have been likely to predict ahead of time that the first serious social protest movement to challenge the authority of the state since Tiananmen would crystallize around issues of spirituality, *qigong* meditation, and mystic syncretism. But should we all have been taken quite so much by surprise?

As the Falun Gong events unfolded, students of modern Chinese history naturally pointed to some of the more obvious past parallels. Syncretic popular religious sects and secret societies have been implicated more than once before in challenging state power and provoking political crises in China. White Lotus rebels shook the last dynasty at the end of the 18th century; the armies of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom nearly brought the sagging dynasty down in the middle of the 19th; and the bloody violence of the Boxers contributed both directly and indirectly to the final collapse of the Qing at the beginning of the 20th. The implication that was meant to be drawn by those who reacted to the Falun Gong phenomenon first of all by pointing out the historical parallels was plain enough. Contemporary Chinese leaders, it can be presumed, know their own history; or at least they have been taught some version of it. When, to their horrified astonishment, in the closing hours of the 20th century, they discover budding in their very midst what appears to them to be a cult-like sect of popular religionists who practice curious healing exercises, who meditate with the aim of acquiring certain supernormal powers, and who use millennial-sounding language, a sect complete with a charismatic teacher for a leader whose actual organizational base may be rudimentary but who claims to have millions of followers – well, the historical resonances in all of that are just too rich to be ignored. Such a group, however much it may insist that its motives are benignly apolitical, must, by these facts alone, be counted as a political threat, because groups like it have effectively threatened sitting states in China before and have brought chaos and instability in their wake. Everyone who has been taught even a little bit about China’s modern history knows what such groups have been capable of in the past. Thus, the chilling warning to people in power contained in that single Falun Gong
demonstration, the insinuation of the possibility of potentially devastating social 
insubordination, was palpably and directly intelligible to any Chinese, however meekly it may 
have been delivered by middle-aged ladies milling around in padded jackets.

Still, pointing in this fashion to historical parallels, however correctly drawn and 
symbolically potent they may be, can take us only part of the way toward understanding. 
History does not, as we know, simply repeat itself. An association with what was powerful 
once in the past need not prove powerful today. The governing apparatus in China has 
changed profoundly since late-imperial times, for one thing. It has far greater organizational 
capacity and control over domestic affairs than could possibly have been commanded by the 
precariously overextended late-Qing civil and military hierarchies that were so badly rocked 
by sectarian rebellion in earlier times. And Chinese society has changed profoundly as well. 
People in China who are attracted, for their health and general well-being, to qigong meditation 
regimens and the like nowadays get their lessons from cassette tapes and videos or from the 
Internet, and they schedule their meetings with one another via cell phones. Though in some 
ways their beliefs and actions may be plainly reminiscent of past social protest movements, 
the mental and the material worlds that today’s Falun Gong practitioners inhabit are not by 
any means the same as those of the Boxers or the White Lotus rebels. Comprehending the 
symbolic politics of the present in light of what is known and remembered about the past, 
thinking as Charles Tilly has taught us, in terms of an only-very-slowly-evolving repertoire of 
protest,11 can indeed help us to understand why certain distinctive political modes and tactics 
keep seeming to reappear within a society, even as they are also updated to meet the needs of 
changing times. Yet there would seem to be, even beyond this important insight, a still more 
fundamental issue waiting to be considered. Why was it that China was prone to produce 
precisely this form of popular protest in the first place? And why is it that rather than 
appearing merely as a quaint anachronism, this form of protest can be made so salient in the 
present moment? What is it about popular transcendental spiritual sects that makes them such 
a good mode for the expression of oppositionist sentiment in Chinese politics? Or, to turn 
the question around, what has it been about the systems of authority and domination that 
have arisen in China that provokes opposition in the form of mystic religious sects and 
movements?

The logic of legitimation (and opposition)

As Max Weber observed, different systems of domination deploy different logics for the 
legitimation of their rule. And the specific logics of legitimation that are advanced have
consequences for the concrete forms of compliance that are required of citizens and subjects, as well as for the forms of political contention that arise in different societies. As Weber succinctly summarized this basic insight,

    every … system [of domination] attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy. But according to the kind of legitimacy which is claimed, the type of obedience, the kind of administrative staff developed to guarantee it, and the mode of exercising authority, will all differ fundamentally.  

And as more contemporary students of political authority and contention, such as E.P. Thompson and Jim Scott, have further made clear, the very bases on which claims to legitimacy are advanced provide “the raw material for contradictions and conflict” in a society. Scott, for example, has argued that

    the very process of attempting to legitimate a social order by idealizing it … provides its subjects with the means, the symbolic tools, the very ideas for a critique … For most purposes, then, it is not at all necessary for subordinate classes to set foot outside the confines of the ruling ideals in order to formulate a critique of power.  

Or, to put it another way, embedded in the very logic of legitimation advanced by a system of domination we can find the grammar that may be used most effectively by citizens and subjects in making statements in opposition and in resistance to that system. The legitimacy of most systems of domination is subject to continuous contestation. This is a point to which we will return. For the moment, I wish to argue only that by examining closely the specific grounds on which the legitimacy of a system is alleged, we will better appreciate why it is that certain kinds of counter-allegations – particular forms of opposition and protest – are the ones that can be used most potently against that system. Let us consider, then, what have been the main claims made in Chinese logics of legitimation.

Looking at the present regime, many analysts would surely be tempted to offer the opinion that the Chinese state’s main claims to legitimacy rest in its economic achievements, in an improving standard of living, in “growth” or in “development.” Some such working assumption about state legitimation is frequently made in both journalistic and scholarly writing on China these days. The pressing question that starting from just such an assumption inevitably leads analysts to pose then becomes: “What if the Chinese economy cannot keep
on growing at its recent unprecedented rates? What legitimacy would the government in power then have left?” But this approach to the matter, in my view, is seriously flawed. For while recognizing that steady economic growth or the lack of it may well act as an important conditioning factor influencing the popularity of a government, we also know beyond doubt that economic success alone is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for political legitimacy.

In China, furthermore, it is important to note that now, more than ever in recent memory, central state authorities are ill-positioned to claim direct credit for whatever economic advances are in fact taking place. The heart of the post-Mao reform project, after all, has been to pry away what is figured as the “dead hand” of central state planning from its stranglehold on the economy. Since the reforms first got underway in earnest in 1978, much of the responsibility for economic development has been reallocated away from central power-holders. It has settled in two quite different quarters. First, economic responsibility now resides much more in communities, localities, and at lower levels of the governing apparatus, since these units have been given far greater resources and broader discretion with which to craft and pursue localized strategies of growth and development, or not.16 And secondly of course, under the post-Mao reforms, much more power has been granted to (or is now exerted through) the workings of markets. The vaunted magic and the notorious vagaries of markets now account for much more of the actual economic growth and change that takes place in China than was the case before. And this new reality serves even further to obscure the question of who might rightly take the credit for growth – or take the blame for economic failure. As legitimate responsibility for the economy has been dispersed and, to some extent, obfuscated in this way, so we have seen that popular protests arising out of the economic and social pain of the transition in China have likewise been dispersed. Suffering state-sector workers and peasants have been prone to frame their protests in localized and limited ways, taking as their protest targets not the architects of central reform policy but local “bad” officials, “incompetent” firm managers, and “heartless” employers. The combined effects of decentralization and marketization have worked to the advantage of the central state, then, making it somewhat easier for the center to contain and quell those protests that have arisen while simultaneously sustaining its own appearance of legitimacy.17

This is not to say that central authorities either can or would even want to wash their hands entirely of responsibility for economic performance. Official trumpeting of glowing statistics remains a part of the trappings of rule in China now, as it was under Mao. But central state responsibility for the economy has now become once-removed from what used
to be called “the production front.” Beijing authorities claim a kind of credit only for their excellent and enlightened general policies (zhengce 政策) today – policies that permit and encourage the economy to flourish. The maintenance of the conditions in which the economy does develop and the people do enjoy more prosperity – this, I believe, comes much closer to capturing the actual core of the contemporary Chinese state’s claims to rule legitimately. What, then, are held to be the general conditions the maintenance of which will most likely produce such happy effects? Those conditions are, in a word, the conditions of stability – the conditions of social peace and order. The present regime stakes its legitimacy, as I read it, not on its technical capacity to steer and to grow the economy, but on its political capacity to preserve a peaceful and stable social order under which, among other good things, the economy can be expected to grow.

Deconstructing stability: the ideals of Truth, Benevolence, and Glory

The idea that good government is about taking responsibility for maintaining harmony with the natural cosmos and peace in the social order has an ancient genealogy in China – a genealogy far too long and too subtle to be traced to its earliest sources here. Fortunately, however, the work of H. Lyman Miller, on the later imperial era, can provide us with a more manageable historical starting point for considering the role that ideas about order and stability had, by that time, come to play in Chinese political thought:

China in the late imperial period was governed by a bureaucratic monarchy. The seat of political authority resided in the person of the emperor. The emperor’s purview was in principle comprehensive, and so his pronouncements were authoritative in every arena of human thought and action … His authority was legitimated by a Confucian cosmology that placed him at the pivot between the cosmic natural order and the human social order – the “Son of Heaven” … [T]he emperor’s character and behavior – particularly his observance of proper rituals and ceremonies – and by extension the ethical conduct of the officials of his regime ensured harmony between and within the natural and social orders. If the emperor’s character was upright, if he performed the proper rites, and if his administration was just, then peace and order would prevail … By the same token, deficiencies of the emperor and his government in any of these respects could be expected to bring disorder in the natural and social worlds: floods, droughts, earthquakes … in the former, and social disorder and rebellion in the latter. In hindsight, the collapse of a dynastic house and its
replacement by another could be understood and so legitimated in terms of this moralistic cosmology.19

In the long tradition of Chinese statecraft that endured into the early part of the 20th century, the legitimacy of a sitting government was linked to the preservation of social order and this, in turn, was linked to the emperor’s and his bureaucrats’ true knowledge of and participation in a moralistic cosmology, an ethical science of the universe encompassing both its human and its natural elements. Rule was legitimated first and foremost by the ruler’s claim to possess this true knowledge, as this knowledge was revealed through study and learning, through divination, and through the perfection of certain arts and sciences such as music and astronomy. Governance that was legitimate was also conceived as suffused with ethical goodness which expressed itself in the magnanimity of the emperor and his officials. Good government was characterized by benevolence – by taking responsibility for the welfare of the people and showing a degree of compassionate care for them. Good government – legitimate rule that was based on true knowledge of the universe and characterized by humane benevolence – was, furthermore, itself taken to be the embodiment and the exemplification of the very superiority and glory of the Sinic culture. The best rulers and officials, those who governed in accord with universal truths and manifested the proper benevolence toward their subjects, might hope and expect to preside over a stable and harmonious order, and the very florescence of economy, the arts, and of philosophy that would emanate from such an enviable order would, in turn, engender awe on the part of all those who beheld it, and would thereby further glorify the Sinic civilization and all the lands and peoples under the sway of the empire.

Thus, three of the key components in the logic of legitimation and the pursuit of harmony and stability were Truth, Benevolence, and Glory. These three do not constitute an “exhaustive list” of all the possible elements of state legitimation in imperial times. They were, I think it safe to say, however, certainly among the very most important constitutive concepts in the complex constellation of Chinese thought relating to state power and to legitimacy.20 China’s imperial rulers diligently made great display of their own and their court’s earnest pursuit of these very high ideals. Emperors maintained whole academies of learned scholars and scientists, for example, dedicated to searching out the natural and the ethical truths embedded in the way of the cosmos. Armed with the moral truths discovered through study and self-cultivation, the entire apparatus of the Chinese state went on to take “moral instruction as a basic aspect of rule,” and “aimed to shape the education of both elites and
The goal of the imperial state was not merely to discover and to act itself in accord with the truth, but to spread the truth throughout society, to “shape popular beliefs and reduce the appeal of heterodox thought.”

In pursuit of the ideal of benevolence in its rule, also, the late imperial state made enormous commitments of effort and wealth. On the premise that good government required “supporting the people and regulating their livelihoods,” state officials intervened extensively in what R. Bin Wong refers to as “ecological and economic matters.” As he recounts,

The search for social order led to state policies designed to stabilize the supply of various goods, especially food … During the Qing dynasty, a sophisticated system of food-supply management was created in which the central government gathered information on grain prices, weather, and rainfall from local officials in order to predict when and where in the empire serious food shortages might occur and to react to difficulties when they did appear. The centerpiece of state efforts at intervening in food-supply conditions in both routine and extraordinary ways was a granary system which stored several million tons of grain. Located mainly in county seats and small market towns, granaries represented official commitments to material welfare beyond anything imaginable, let alone achieved, in Europe.

Grain shortages and famines could not always be averted, of course. The state’s efforts to ensure and promote the popular welfare often failed, however much more precociously this value appeared as part of the logic of legitimate rule in China than it did in the West. Still, legitimation for local officials and members of the elite may have depended more, at times, on the display of benevolent concern itself, rather than on the actual saving of lives. Through the granary system and through a whole array of formally and informally state-and-local-elite-supported orphanages, widow homes, and public relief projects, the late imperial system of domination made a point of displaying the virtue of charitability.

As for the goal of enhancing the glory of Sinic culture and civilization, Qing emperors pursued a policy of territorial expansion, subduing militarily a number of regions and peoples in Inner Asia. They vigorously sought to expand and reproduce their conception of civilization and their vision of social order through space whenever possible. And when their military forces were inadequate for further conquest, which was the case a good deal of the
time, they relied instead on the tribute system as a means to assert their cultural superiority and to project the glory of China outward into the world beyond. According to Wong again,

Despite [military] weaknesses, or perhaps in part as a response to them, the Chinese state succeeded in creating a framework for its international relations that placed other countries in a tributary status, a ritual position confirmed by the presentation of tribute, the presentation of gifts by the Chinese to the emissaries, and various agreements on a set schedule of visits every several years … From the Chinese point of view, the tribute system met the challenge of ordering the Chinese world with the Chinese state at the center … Foreign governments generally allowed the Chinese to promote this view without necessarily accepting it themselves.27

In the imperial logic of legitimation, securing the domestic order and stability came first. From a stable order at home might follow the necessary revenues and the other means for making further territorial conquests. But if not by conquest, then by cultural splendor and the projection of a confident superiority itself, the empire could still manage to command the respect of those powers on its periphery and beyond that might otherwise pose a threat, and literally awe them into cautious symbolic subordination.

By the mid- to late 19th century, however, China’s military and technological weaknesses made this older vision of a world order centered on Sinic civilization very difficult to sustain. China’s cultural superiority became harder and harder simply to assume, and her national glory came to be measured not in its radiant splendor, but in painful comparisons with other rising empires and competitor states. By the end of the century, the legitimating ideal of national “glory” had been redefined by Chinese philosophers and statesmen. Glory came to be understood no longer primarily in terms of civilized behavior and cultural florescence, but in the more vulgarly material terms of “wealth and power.” Tributes and other polite forms of ritualized respect from foreign powers would remain sensitive issues, extremely important to 20th- and 21st-century Chinese rulers. But by the time the last dynasty fell, the ideal entailed in projecting the glory of Sinic civilization out into the rest of the world had been infused with more modern meanings – military might, advanced technology, industrialization, and (to return to an earlier point) more modern-day conceptions of economic “growth” and “development.” The old values of Truth, Benevolence and Glory were never conceded. They were, rather, stretched by modernity to encompass some new contents and meanings – new knowledges, new social projects, and new measures of grandeur.
Possession of a special knowledge of transcendent truth, benevolent care for the common people, and the conscious glorification of the Chinese nation were each to exhibit remarkable endurance as ideals of good government, however, despite the 19th century’s deep shocks to the last dynasty and even long after the final ruin of the imperial system. Most of the key realities of government and politics in China were to be radically altered, as we know, during the turbulent course of the 20th century. Yet these three basic themes in the rhetoric of state legitimation were not, by any means, to vanish from the scene. Far from becoming simply outmoded or being erased by newer ideas, in fact, these three legitimating norms have been revived again and again, in new and different guises. The specific content of their meanings has been continually adjusted and altered to suit the needs of changing times. But the ideals of Truth, Benevolence, and Glory have been constantly renewed in Chinese discussions around the subject of good governance and in China’s modern politics of state legitimation and opposition. These three were plainly visible as governmental claims to authority under Mao. And it is one of the chief contentions of this essay that they remain central themes in the state legitimation project of the post-Mao era.

The doctrines of Truth nowadays professed by Chinese leaders are no longer those of Confucian learning and Daoist cosmology, of course. The official standards for judging what knowledge is “true” knowledge now are those of modern scientific rationalism and pragmatic empiricism. “Seek truth from facts,” as Deng Xiaoping so memorably put it. Scientific knowledge and technological know-how are presented by the state not only as exhibiting and belonging to a universal set of established, non-falsifiable truths; they are figured also as morally sound and good because, through science and technology, modernization will be achieved. The transcendently positive ethical value attached to the teleology of attaining modernity suffuses the scientific empiricism accepted and promoted as the only allowable epistemology by the Chinese state today.

The state today also continues to base its legitimacy in part on its claim to practice humane Benevolence toward its subjects. The requisite governmental care and concern for the poor and for those at risk are no longer expressed in what were some of the more paternalist policies associated with the Maoist past. But they now take many other new and interesting forms, ranging from numerous small acts of patronage undertaken individually by sitting officials, to massive government-led efforts at mobilizing charitable relief through nationwide foundations and emergency funds. It remains imperative in the contemporary logic of governmental legitimacy that both national-level officials and local office-holders be seen to take the lead in mobilizing the charitable provision of social support for those in dire
need. Helping to underwrite orphanages and old-age homes has once again become a prominent vehicle for the expression of official benevolence. But the repertoire of magnanimous gestures has been updated, too, to include such modern “good causes” as providing scholarships for needy students and organ donations for the sick, and for the sake of science.31

As for the enhancement of the nation’s Glory, the present government, as we have all had occasion to note, associates itself most vigorously with the vision of a newly “rising China,” a China that will no longer tolerate the bullying or the disdain of other nations, a China that will one day definitely outstrip the accomplishments of all other competitors.32 Assertively nationalistic official posturing about the glories of Han culture have been so pronounced since the 1989 debacle, in fact, that some observers have been tempted into believing (incorrectly, in my view) that patriotic sentiment has become the only popular value on which the contemporary state now bases its appeals for legitimacy. As with promoting the nation’s economic growth and development, protecting and enhancing China’s international prestige and military prowess should not be supposed to be an independently or comprehensively legitimating value in itself. The alternating expressions of pride and anxiety we find in China concerning these two grand ambitions are better understood, rather, as continuing sub-themes within a larger saga – the saga of upholding the Glory of the Sinic civilization. It is important to appreciate that the state’s logic of legitimation today is not a reductionist or a singular one; it remains, much as it was in imperial times, multifaceted and composed of intricately interlaced assertions about cosmological truth, humane benevolence, and the glories of China’s past and China’s future.

Reading the logic of legitimation backwards

To return to our earlier analytic hypothesis, then, in any system of domination’s own logic of legitimation we should be able to find encoded the basic grammar for protest, the “raw material” that is available to be used most powerfully in opposition to that system. If legitimate authority is claimed on the basis of bloodlines and royal descent, opposition politics can be expected to revolve heavily around family genealogies, cloak-and-dagger plots and counter-plots inside the court, and the real or imagined bona fides of pretenders to the throne. If a state’s legitimate authority is claimed on the basis of holy writ, opposition political movements will likely coalesce around alternative versions of the sacred texts and canons, and differing interpretations of the heavenly will revealed in them. If a state’s legitimate authority is claimed on the basis of democratic elections, charges of vote tampering, election fraud, and
illegal or unwholesome campaign finance practices will be likely to figure prominently in the politics of opposition. If, as argued in the preceding section, in China some of the most central claims to legitimacy have rested on the combined ideals and values of Truth, Benevolence, and Glory, then what sorts of counterclaims would serve most powerfully to contest that legitimacy and galvanize political opposition?

The assertion that state actions are enhancing the national glory may be countered in several powerful ways. Charges of traitorousness at top levels, of selling out the nation and the people can be made, as indeed they were so devastatingly against the “alien” Manchus during the closing decades of the Qing, and against the warlord government that signed the Versailles Treaty in 1919. Popular movements and demonstrations arising out of incensed national pride have been a common and highly effective form for the expression of political opposition in China for well over a century. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed many national-cultural patriotic outbursts in Chinese cities, and the politics of national pride remains a highly sensitive area for state legitimation and de-legitimation today, as the essays by Rosen and Kraus in this volume both show very well. Chinese leaders can never afford to be outflanked by social forces that manage to portray themselves as more ardently patriotic than the government. Yet the government’s own intense official nationalism, projected through the media and other forms of propaganda, often only serves to raise the ante where the passionate defense of national glory is concerned. This is a potentially dangerous political syndrome, a somewhat volatile dimension along which we can expect to continue to see the legitimacy of the contemporary Chinese state called into question by opponents of the system.

The assertion that the state behaves benevolently toward the people is also open to challenge on several grounds. Most prominent among these perhaps, rampaging popular discourses on the subject of official corruption in China have served, time and again, to galvanize political opposition and give the lie to the officially cultivated mystique of benevolent governance. Official claims to be carrying out the business of the state in the spirit of humane and magnanimous charity have almost always been contested in the Chinese people’s critiques of their rulers, where cynical reference is so readily made to the corruption, the venality, and the self-serving behavior of sitting officials. That officialdom can and must be expected to be shot through with nepotism and corruption is, in fact, an axiom of Chinese popular political culture. But when ordinary people in China allege, as they so frequently do, that corruption is rampant, they are not merely pointing the finger at some particular guilty officials; they are challenging the authority of the entire state system that stakes a claim to legitimacy on the basis of official selflessness and benevolence. Popular disgust and protest
over corrupt practices were factors leading to the collapse of many a former dynasty and
regime, not least visibly in the dramatic withdrawal of public support that led to the expulsion
of the Guomindang government and the victory of the Communist Party on the mainland. In
the vigor and the unrelenting din of popular discourse on corruption in China today, then, we
hear again the ruled speaking back to the rulers on the subject of benevolence. The critique of
power being levelled at the contemporary Chinese state along this dimension undeniably
constitutes another one of the most salient and powerful challenges to its legitimacy and to its
capacity to rule authoritatively.33

If in the angry and bitter popular discourses on official corruption we find
oppositionist challenges to the legitimacy of the state’s claims to be governing humanely and
benevolently, and if in the melodramatic indignation of popular discourses on national
strength and national humiliation we find oppositionist challenges to the legitimacy of the
state’s claims to be upholding and advancing the glory of China, where then do we find
popular challenges to the state’s claims to be acting in accord with the highest of moral truths
to be found in the way of the cosmos? We find these most powerfully, I would suggest, in the
discourses and practices of popular religion. Contemporary popular religious sects, with their
syncretic systems of thought and action, posit an even higher, more all-encompassing, and
more potent ethical and epistemological order than the one embraced by the state. They insist
on a mystical moral order that transcends the modern-rational scientific mode of knowing
what is true. Chinese popular religious beliefs and practices invoke a universe of ghosts and
deities, of animal spirits and immortals, whose positive power to affect the human condition
cannot be explained by modern science, and whose ethically based motives for action and
inaction do not fit comfortably with the norms and values intended to guide human choices
that are put forward for the edification of the people by the Chinese state. In this lies the
special potency of sectarian religion as a vehicle for denying the authority of the state and for
mobilizing protest against it.

The state’s claim to “truth” and the challenge of popular religion
In imperial China, unlike medieval and early modern Europe, there was no autonomous
system of church schools taking care of the basic education and the moral training of the
social and political elite. There was no separate organization of the guardian faith to conduct
inquisitions and suppress heterodox popular religious beliefs and practices. Moral training for
the elite and the suppression of popular religious heresies were the affair of the state in China.
As James Watson has argued,34 the imperial state maintained its own approved pantheon of
recognized deities, and it attempted to “standardize the gods” throughout the realm by encouraging the worship only of those spirits admitted to the official pantheon. It promoted its own preferred deities, encouraging their worship by ever-wider circles of the populace. But the state also at times co-opted into its official pantheon pre-existing popular deities who had acquired important followings, taking advantage for itself of their prestige and presumed potency while, at the same time, avoiding a stand-off between official and non-official religion, and blurring the lines between the two. The state maintained the final word on what did and did not constitute true belief. But in practice, any given deity might come to symbolize different (and sometimes competing) values to different groups in society, and the state exercised only a loose control over the actual content of belief. It exerted its authority in social life through what Prasenjit Duara has conceived of as a broad “cultural nexus,” an interlacing of official and non-official roles in local society which included the participation of state bureaucrats in the life of religious temples and shrines. In this complexly multi-stranded cultural nexus linking state and society, much productive ambiguity about the bases of temporal and supernatural “power” was deliberately sustained. The state, on the one hand, authorized the worship of certain deities. And yet, the mystical power these local gods and spirits were already believed by the people to possess also adhered, in a way, to the state’s own officials as they acted out their leading roles in the rituals and ceremonies of village and small-town life. State officials had the power to validate popular deities, and popular deities had the power to validate the state.

As Duara has argued, the productive ambiguities of ruling through the cultural nexus were relentlessly broken down in China by the processes of modern state-making that took place after the Qing collapse. Facing up to the challenges posed by imperialism – the confusing and terrifying jolts delivered by foreign military and technological superiority, alien religious and secular philosophies, and Western conceptions of modernity and power – the educated classes of Chinese gradually turned their backs on the resources for rule that were embedded in popular religious god and ghost worship. Both the Guomindang and the Communist Party-states launched repeated campaigns to try to get people to give up popular religious beliefs and ritual practices. These came to be labelled as mere “superstition,” something shameful to be eradicated and not eligible to be incorporated in the modes of modern governance. If peasants and petty urbanites continued, well on into the 20th century, to venerate gods and ghosts, to propitiate spirits with offerings, to make pilgrimages to holy mountains, and to consult geomancers and shamans, these practices could be comprehended by state officials and by members of the Chinese intelligentsia alike only as the lamentable
markers of continuing Chinese backwardness. And as Duara has further pointed out, contrasting some of the choices made by 20th-century Indian intellectuals with those made by their Chinese counterparts,

the consuming commitment of Chinese intellectuals to the narrative of modernity … has obscured the vitality of popular culture, religion, and their associational life and delegitimated the critique of modern ideologies originating outside of modern discourses. Despite the repeated persecution of the intelligentsia by the Chinese state, it is this shared narrative [of modernity] which has thrown so many of them repeatedly into the arms of the state and at the same time alienated both from the living cultures of the “masses” and of “tradition.” While the state has made effective use of the narrative of modernity to expand its own powers, the Chinese intelligentsia has robbed itself of alternative sources of moral authority which it might have found in history and popular culture.37

After 1949, secular-scientific Marxism and Mao Thought ascended to become the new official cosmological “truths” upheld and purveyed by the state. Marx’s universalist teleology of progress, leavened by the moral sensibilities of proletarian class struggle and the Maoist ideals of revolutionary virtue, were relentlessly pressed upon the people. Alternative popular histories, cosmologies, virtues, and beliefs were denounced and driven underground. Shrines and temples were destroyed. Shamans were put through forced re-education. State suppression of popular heterodoxies was, for a generation or so, extremely intense. In recent years, a state-orchestrated public re-evaluation of Mao Thought and of the Marxian theory of history has taken place in China. Some of the older interpretations given to Marxist verities have had to be dropped or, anyway, very sharply bent in order to accommodate the present government’s new guiding theory of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” But the post-Mao period has seen no official backing down from the secular-rational empiricist-modernist values embedded in Marxism. Popular religious belief and practice remains, according to the state’s truth, mere superstition. Insofar as people still believe in gods and immortals, make offerings to appease the ghosts of the departed, or think about their moral choices in terms of karma and the transmigration of souls, the state has failed in its pedagogic project of building “spiritual civilization” and in its modernizing effort to civilize the subaltern.38 In the state’s view, and in the view of most of China’s intelligentsia, widespread popular religious practice
can be evidence only that the “quality” (suzhi 素质) of a large proportion of the population still remains deplorably “low.”

Yet, in the various social spaces opened up by the post-Mao reforms, there has emerged nothing short of a vigorous popular religious revival in China, one that embraces Buddhism, Daoism, and a host of syncretic sects. Kenneth Dean has characterized this revival as “an extraordinary renaissance of reinvented traditional forms of ritual activity”:

Hundreds of thousands of temples have been restored, rebuilt, and reconsecrated. Millions of people have taken part in ritual events which have become more frequent each year as well as more complex and multifaceted. This activity has been most intense in southeast China, particularly in Fujian, Guangdong, and Zhejiang, but there is increasing evidence that local religious practices are spreading all across China.

Some of these reinvented traditions, including the ones that Dean has studied, are tied closely to localities. They are spiritual expressions, often, of community-based collaborations and competitions. In sects of this type, popular religion can be “the pivot for a complex network of forms of local social organization that counterbalance state interventions from above: family, lineages, village, regional alliances of villages.” Their ritual practices may work to “interrupt the downward flow of state signification aimed at reforming the individual.” They can, as Dean argues, be regarded as a somewhat contained form of resistance or opposition to state domination and an expression of the ongoing human effort to “achieve autonomy and self-definition.” Even so, state officials, and especially local state officials, may find it expedient to tolerate and even encourage their activities. Their performances and gatherings, their shrines and processions, can be good for local business. They can even attract tourists from Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and Hong Kong, bringing in with them foreign currency, donations, and investments. These local religious activities can have “picturesque” and “exotic” qualities that fold well into the commodification of certain Chinese cultural performances and artifacts that also forms part of the contemporary state’s agenda for dealing with social diversity. For reasons such as these, some localized popular religious sects may be able to find official shelter and support in the ambiguities of the local “cultural nexus” of state and society now being reconstructed in some parts of the country.

The Falun Gong phenomenon, however, does not fit this more tolerable type of religious sect. Not localized at all, it has proven to be eminently transportable, spreading throughout China and, via the Internet, around the world.
has cultivated a charismatic image and, in the wake of the state’s campaign against him, has adopted a combative demeanor toward the government in Beijing and toward China’s high officials. Falun Gong websites have referred to those who arrest and suppress believers inside China as “monsters” and “demons,” and have carried cartoons lampooning top party-state leaders. Nor does Li’s ethical philosophy fit well with the consumerist values of the commodity culture that the Beijing government broadcasts. Master Li teaches his followers to try to let go of all earthly attachments, and he castigates as demonically evil the corrosive values of the market place.47 Li not only rejects the ideals of the socialist market economy which the Chinese state now seeks to foster; he also rejects the claims to cosmological truth that are accorded by the state to the demystified rationality of modern science. Li claims knowledge of a higher science, one that is not yet comprehended on earth. He utilizes the language of modern science and medicine in his teachings at times, speaking of tumors, of time-space dimensions, and the like. But this, as he explains, is simply because these terms and categories are the only ones that will be widely understood by people on earth at this time. Li’s cosmology is, his disciples are given to understand, much greater than the scientistic official cosmology. It features a host of paranormal possibilities, from predatory fox spirits that can inhabit human bodies, to contacts with extraterrestrials. Li’s standards of morality are also far more demanding than the official ones. His followers must cultivate goodness for its own sake. They must turn away from all desires for fame and fortune, or they will not be saved.

The challenge posed by popular religious beliefs and practices like those of Falun Gong cuts right to the heart of the Chinese state’s own logic of legitimation. Falun Gong teaches people to disdain, as rigid but patently imperfect, the whole modernist, secular-scientific understanding of the cosmos in which the state roots its governing authority. And Falun Gong teaches people to regard as pitiably misguided the poor conception of morality and goodness that has come to characterize Chinese society under the state’s own program of market socialist reform. The teachings of Li Hongzhi thus stand in the profoundest possible opposition to the present political order. They assail the ethical truths on which the entire political construct is meant to rest. However peacefully they practice their meditation exercises and however much they may regard “politics” as being beneath them, those swept up in the Falun Gong phenomenon never had a chance of remaining “apolitical” in China.48 With its slogan, “Zhen, Shan, Ren” (真, 善, 忍) – “Truth, Goodness, and Forbearance” – Falun Gong makes almost a perfect counter-hegemony. Truth! – but not the state’s narrow empiricist truths. Goodness! – but not the state’s dubious versions of benevolence.
Forbearance! – but not the state’s vulgarly assertive “wealth and power” concept of what it means to attain transcendent glory.

Precisely because Falun Gong does represent such an absolute challenge – a challenge to the very foundations of the state’s authority and legitimacy – government officials insist on complete extermination of the threat. It is one thing to demonstrate for lower taxes or better benefits. These are goods the state can, if it will, (benevolently) confer upon those who can show they have righteous claims to consideration. The people’s demand itself implies the power and the authority of the state to satisfy the need. It is quite another thing, however, to demonstrate for Truth, Goodness, and Forbearance. The demand itself implies the lack. An assault like Falun Gong’s, on the legitimating foundations of state authority, is thus perceived as a threat to the entire existing system of domination – a threat to order and stability. And the enormity of the threat itself is, in turn, used to justify the draconian severity of the repression. Intimidations, arrests, tortures – the crackdown has been a hard one, carried out by “a hard lot of men.”49 This is the apt phrase used by E.P. Thompson (in the passage from which the quotation that begins this essay is drawn) to characterize Walpole and the Hanoverian Whigs of the 1720s and 1730s, as they pushed through the cruel punishments of the “Black Act” to crack down on hunters, whom a nervous state, fearing armed sedition, wished now to classify as “poachers.” As Thompson strives to remind us, it has been in the name of safeguarding “stability” that some of history’s nastiest political terrors have been excused.

The logic of state legitimation in China makes popular religious practice and belief a challenge to authority – because it celebrates a higher truth. It is the state’s own logic of rule that endows popular religious movements with their political salience and makes them potent vehicles for the expression of opposition and protest. When such popular religious sects and movements are content to operate furtively and on the margins, or when they remain explicitly locally bounded in their activities and scope, or when they seek and secure protections from local officials who hope to gain something from their existence, the heresies and the other dangers entailed in their beliefs are often, somehow, found to be tolerable. But when, as in the case of Falun Gong, such a sect goes overtly “national,” making a bid for broader public sympathy and staging its rituals and demonstrations in nationally/symbolically sacred spaces such as Zhongnanhai and Tiananmen, then syncretism will be officially equated with sabotage. The legitimacy of the entire system, which rests on the preservation of a stable public order, will then be seen to depend utterly on the obliteration of heretical beliefs among the people.50
Until and unless the Chinese state moves on to a newer repertoire of legitimation claims – one that does not include official knowledge of ultimate ethical truths – we can expect popular religious belief and practice to continue to be perceived always as a potential, and sometimes as an active, counter-hegemonic danger to stability and order. And we can expect the high value accorded to stability, by the great majority of the rulers and the ruled alike, to contribute to the sanctioning of Inquisition-like trials and terrors to suppress China’s new-style old believers.

But, the question can be plausibly asked: Is the Chinese state not now at last, perhaps, actually moving on to just such a new repertoire of legitimation claims? Since this essay was first published (in this volume’s 2004 edition), its central message – underscoring the various complexes of interrelated concepts and moral values that have been and still are involved in striving to create and maintain political legitimacy in the Chinese context – has not been very widely embraced. Most commentators on the subject have continued, as they had done before, to argue more simply that the party-state has rested its claims to legitimacy throughout the reform era not on any such complexes of historically-resonant noble ideals or values as those posited here, but primarily on its good performance in the here and now in delivering welcome growth and relative economic prosperity to millions of still-poor and struggling people. Still, there have been at least a few observers who have not been content so to reduce the party-state’s arguments for its legitimacy and its fitness to rule to matters of economic performance alone. David Shambaugh, for example, has lately given us an extended discussion of what he sees as the complex ‘ideological work’ that has had to be done within the party in recent years, in the effort to “win the hearts and minds of its members and the public”51. And others, like Thomas Heberer and Gunter Schubert52 have suggested further that the party-state’s rather strenuous efforts to reform and reinvent itself (both normatively and institutionally) have in fact been having important positive effects on its “regime legitimacy”. They propose that some serious study of these ongoing reforms in Chinese political thought and practice may contribute substantially to our understanding of the apparent continued resiliency of one-party rule in China. Heberer and Schubert, responding in part to this essay, argue in particular that ongoing reforms promoting greater ‘accountability’, ‘transparency’ and popular ‘participation’ at the local level in China are making important contributions to building and maintaining the party-state’s legitimacy. “Benevolence, glory, stability and accountability,” they therefore conclude, “might …be the formula for ensuring continuous one-party rule in China…”53
Interesting and welcome as this positive intervention by Heberer and Schubert is, however, it may be worthwhile, in reply, to record here my own view that the values of accountability, transparency, and of broadening popular participation cannot in fact logically be put on a par with those of benevolence, truth and glory. Although expressed here – no doubt quite inadequately, in mere short-hand terms like humane ‘benevolence’, moral ‘truth’, and civilizational ‘glory’, such grand complexes of ideals as lie behind these condensed concepts need to be understood as first-order philosophical principles: they are meant to signify, that is, values and virtues regarded as self-evidently good, ones to be pursued for their own sake. Accountability, transparency, and broadening participation are not first-order, but only second-order principles. They are to be pursued, not for themselves, but as tools and techniques, organizational and behavioral habits, that are very helpful in the attainment of yet another, quite different, grand normative ideal of governance – that of rule in accord with the expressed ‘will of the people’. I offer this distinction – which I trust will not appear to be merely a petty one - between first- and second-order philosophical principles as a way to raise the further question of whether, in adopting now some of the language and some of the practices of accountability, transparency, and participation, the Chinese party-state is (or is not) aiming to reinvent itself in line with the inspiration provided by that other grand ideal of legitimate government as ‘government conducted in accord with the expressed will of the people’.

If, as suggested by the work of Heberer and Schubert, accountability, transparency, and regularized popular participation are ideals now being promoted and pursued within the Chinese polity almost entirely at the local and lower-mid-levels of the system, then I would want to suggest that the ‘will of the people’ has not in fact been admitted at the top as one among the most fundamental first-order philosophical principles of regime legitimation. If popular elections, and citizens’ suits filed under the administrative litigation law, and press monitoring and exposure of official corruption and malfeasance remain almost entirely confined to local offices and low-level officials – if there are few regularized and effective institutions of participation or accountability, in other words, that can be brought to bear at central or national levels – then the case could not be well argued, I believe, that the party-state now rests its legitimacy on achieving or on heeding the popular will. If this new governance rhetoric, these interesting emerging legal-bureaucratic practices and apparently rising good-discipline regimes of accountability, transparency, and popular participation are, instead, primarily deployed by the centre in a tutelary spirit -- as part of a cadre-restraining project or part of a popular-pedagogical project of mimicking modernity – then we will need
to be careful in assessing what the probable long term effects of such reforms may actually be where the legitimacy of the self-reinvented party-state is concerned.

In short, if grand inspirational first-order principles of legitimization like ‘benevolence’, ‘truth’, ‘glory’, ‘stability’, or ‘harmony’ remain the province of central authority, while only mid- and lower-level party-state officials are expected to heed the expressed ‘will of the people’ by demonstrating their accountability, transparency, and openness to popular political participation, then the actual perceived legitimacy produced in the eye of the citizen-beholder may end by being quite unevenly (and perhaps quite ironically) distributed across different levels of the political system. By underscoring the gulf that is posited to exist between the centre’s transcendentally grand moral governance ideals and its own lower-order officials’ pusillanimous need to be kept constantly accountable to society and the people, central power holders may well now be attempting to make a very deft move to retain for themselves the popular support they require to command loyalty, and even sacrifice, from the people. But if, as they wave the banner of more democratic accountability, these central power-holders perpetually resort to calling into question the dependable legitimacy of their own agents in local offices around the realm, to the point eventually of hollowing out the perceived political legitimacy of those agents, they may ultimately rob themselves of the capacity they require to govern China’s modern society in the orderly manner they so desire.

A crisis of legitimacy or two cheers for ambivalence?

I have argued here against giving in to reductionist conceptions of what is entailed in having, and in holding onto, political legitimacy in contemporary China. In China, as in other modern political systems which have grown gradually out of older and prior forms of polity, the legitimacy claims of the state are layered deep historically, multi-stranded, and complex. I have also suggested that, in the patterns of contentious politics that surround state legitimation and de-legitimation in the Chinese context, it is the government’s capacity to sustain stability and social order that is generally held up as the touchstone value. The very goodness that is imagined to be attendant on social order is, further, closely related to certain very particular high ideals – ideals of seeking and promoting the epistemological and moral Truth, of governing with a degree of humane Benevolence, and of protecting and enhancing the national Glory. The state’s antagonists in society, those who doubt or deny its legitimacy, I have further argued, “speak back” to power with charges and counterclaims that tend to be constructed along these very same dimensions of value. State claims to be advancing the national Glory are met by popular counterclaims of leadership weakness, vacillation, or
betrayal. State claims to be governing with Benevolence are met by popular counterclaims of callousness, corruption, and venality. And state claims to be promoting the demonstrable empirical and moral Truth are met by powerful alternative epistemologies, popular counter-truths, and counter-moralities such as those of Falun Gong.

Each one of these three hallmark patterns of contentious politics – so clearly related to the processes of state legitimation and de-legitimation in China – is broadly and prominently in evidence today. And this has no doubt contributed to the penchant of many observers these days to speculate, somewhat loosely, about an ongoing “crisis of legitimacy” in China. The arguments that have typically been advanced along these lines, often simplistic ones, are surely already familiar, so they may be summarized very briefly. Belief in Maoism and Marxism are said to be “dead” in China today, killed off by the market reforms and the transparently self-serving behavior of power-holders at all levels of the system. The resultant sudden crisis of faith is so severe among the people of China, who are supposed previously to have lived in thrall to the official ideology, that the state has had to scurry to find some other doctrine to fill the void. By most such accounts, official nationalism is that chosen new doctrine, and patriotism has thus been pumped up by the state to take the place of the old ideological commitment in the minds of China’s hapless masses. On this view of things, one whole coherent set of relatively uncomplicated beliefs about the state’s legitimacy is imagined to have been pulled out of people’s heads, while another whole set of even more uncomplicated principles has been plugged in to fill the empty slot. Functionalist analyses like these, in my view, grossly misread the complexity of the lived world of belief most human beings encounter. Such approaches to questions of legitimacy downplay human agency and creativity and ignore the multiplicity of the worlds of value we all inhabit.

Citizens and subjects, as students of popular resistance and protest have taught us, almost never swallow whole the legitimacy claims of their rulers. Even at the most totalizing of authoritarian political moments, popular dissent and disbelief are commonly expressed as people negotiate the precise terms on which they will give their obedience to the state. As Karen Petrone has concluded in her noteworthy study of official holidays and mass celebrations during the high-Stalinist era, “While citizens within reach of Soviet discourse were bombarded with carefully censored messages, they interpreted these messages in a wide variety of ways and used the discourse of the state to create alternative visions of their worlds.” Likewise, during the most radical of radical moments in China, the Cultural Revolution, we clearly witnessed people calculatedly and creatively deploying the state’s own rhetoric of “class struggle” to pursue interests, values, and identities of their own. On closer
inspection, then, ordinary people rarely turn out to be the gullible true believers that states (and some social scientists) may imagine. Or, to quote E.P. Thompson once again, this time making reference to the sartorial habits of the British court system, “people are not as stupid as some structuralist philosophers suppose them to be. They will not be mystified by the first man who puts on a wig.”56 They will, much more commonly, take the raw material that state logics of legitimation offer them and do their best to bend these to ends and visions of their own.

Yet I submit that while citizens and subjects may, most often, not be mystified by the prevailing legitimacy claims of states, neither are they always consciously and systematically engaged in countering the state’s hegemony – as some of the literature on “everyday forms of resistance” might lead us to expect. Most people, most of the time, I would suggest, are quite appropriately ambivalent about the legitimacy of the system in which they find themselves. They know – through their own experiences, through the trusty testimony of others, through rumor, and through humor – of plenty of good reasons to accept and plenty of good reasons not to accept their state’s authority. Their multi-stranded knowledge and experience of living in society teaches them that some officials are, after all, honest, well-meaning, or efficient; that some claims made by governments do, in the end, prove out. They know these things to be true even as they also know that numerous other officials are venally abusing their trust and that governments frequently lie. The inhabitants of complex societies sustain correspondingly complex and highly inflected understandings of their own social reality and of social possibility. This is true even of those who are scarcely literate and who live in remote regions.57 The very experience of domination most often marries objection with acceptance. It is bivalent, and so people are ambivalent.

The state in China today strives continuously, agonistically, as all states must strive, more or less perpetually, against antagonists, to validate and revalidate their authority. In China, no doubt due to the very breadth and magnitude of the grand social and economic transformations that are currently underway, the pressures being brought to bear in this contest and the stakes of the game may seem higher than usual. The level of contention over authority is elevated throughout society. And so, not unexpectedly, is the expressed level of popular doubts and ambivalences about power. This palpable heightening in the expression of mixed feelings on the part of the people has contributed, I think, to the view some hold that the state in China now faces “a crisis of legitimacy.” But the condition of human ambivalence experienced amid a swirl of claims and counterclaims about the legitimacy of power should not in itself, in my view, be taken as evidence of crisis. Living in a state of acute
ambivalence might be considered, rather, quite the most common fate for citizens and subjects everywhere who must confront what Max Weber called “the generally observable need of any power, or even of any advantage of life, to justify itself.”58
Notes

1 My thanks to four indulgent colleagues, Marc Blecher, Kenneth Foster, Dorothy Solinger, and Sidney Tarrow, for reading and offering challenging comments and criticisms on an earlier draft of this essay. I wish it were possible to respond adequately to each one.


4 This is the office and residential compound used by high Party-state officials, adjacent to Tiananmen Square, in the heart of Beijing.

5 The general term qigong refers to regimens of breath and body exercises that may be studied and practiced, individually and in groups, by those in pursuit of greater physical, mental, and spiritual self-control and well-being. The initial article assailing the Falun Gong group of qigong practitioners, which appeared in a teen science and technology journal published in Tianjin, was written by He Zuoxiu, a leading physicist and member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. See Danny Schechter, Falun Gong’s Challenge to China: Spiritual Practice or “Evil
As Elizabeth Perry has noted in *Challenging the Mandate of Heaven: Social Protest and State Power in China* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), p. xix, “The [Falun Gong] gatherings were nonviolent and remarkably disciplined. While the government insisted that these demonstrations were the most serious political threat since the 1989 student uprising, it was hard to see why.”

As Patsy Rahn points out in “The Falun Gong: beyond the headlines,” “Most people in the West see the campaign as unnecessarily exaggerated and harsh, similar to political campaigns waged during the Mao era.” And many inside China clearly joined in with this view. As Perry, *Challenging the Mandate of Heaven*, p. xix, reports, “judging from discussions with people in China at the time, this particular campaign was not a resounding success … The draconian nature of the campaign was suggestive of a deeply frightened and insecure central leadership. People wondered out loud: Had crimes so serious as to warrant the arrest of thousands really occurred?” See www.let.leidenuniv.nl.bth/FalunRAHN.htm (2000, p. 1), accessed 9 July 2001.


For an attempt at a dispassionate summary of some of the content of Master Li’s teachings and a consideration of why these particular moral teachings could pose a threat to the state, see Vivienne Shue, “Global imaginings, the state’s quest for hegemony, and the pursuit of phantom freedom in China: from Heshang to Falun Gong,” in Catarina Kinnvall and Kristina Jönsson (eds.) *Globalization and Democratization in Asia: The Construction of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2002). The best introduction to Falun Gong philosophy can be found in the Master’s own writings: Hongzhi Li, *Zhuan Falun*, 2nd ed., English version (New York: Universe Publishing Co., 1998).


“Read backwards,” as John Sidel puts it, “legitimacy claims specify what exactly, in a given setting, is considered dangerously illegitimate.” Sidel’s insightful analysis goes on, in a manner that Weber would no doubt have well approved of, to illustrate how several different grammars, or what he calls “languages of legitimation,” may be operative within a single system of domination. See John Sidel, “The Philippines: the languages of legitimation,” in Muthiah Alagappa (ed.) *Political Legitimacy in Southeast Asia: The Quest for Moral Authority* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 139.
For a discussion of some of the consequences of this new concentration of economic power and dynamism at local levels, see Marc Blecher and Vivienne Shue, “Into leather: state-led development and the private sector in Xinji,” China Quarterly 166 (2001).

I owe this particular insight to some very thoughtful comments made by Sally Sargeson at the workshop entitled “Mapping the local state” convened by Richard Baum and Tony Saich at UCLA, June 2001. For an excellent discussion of the limitations on the framing of recent workers’ protests in China, see also Lee, “Lost between histories.”

Its roots are to be found in the major streams of thought, Confucianism and Daoism, that emerged (after the decline of even more ancient forms of Chinese religion) during the period known as the Eastern Zhou Dynasty, 771–221 bce. On the interplay of these and other strands in very early Chinese political thought, interested readers may consult the magisterial study by Benjamin Schwartz, The World of Thought in Ancient China (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1985).


For a much deeper consideration of all the issues raised here and more, see the rigorous comparison of European and Chinese patterns of state-making in R. Bin Wong, China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

Ibid., p. 96.

Ibid. Making the interesting comparison with Europe, Wong here argues that “There is no early modern European government equivalent to the late imperial Chinese state’s efforts at dictating moral and intellectual orthodoxy, nor were such efforts particularly important to Europe’s state-making agenda, as they were in China. Early modern European states did not share the Chinese state’s view that shaping society’s moral sensibilities was basic to the logic of rule” (ibid., p. 97).

Ibid., p. 93.


A close and revealing study of these charitable institutions can be found in Angela Leung (Liang Qizi), Shishan yu Jiaohua: Ming Qing de Cishan Zuzhi (Charity and Enlightenment: The Charitable Organizations of the Ming and Qing) (Taipei: Lianjing, 1997).

Wong, China Transformed, p. 89.

This assertion really requires lengthy supporting elaboration, which I cannot pause to develop here. In brief, I believe it makes sense to see the Maoist Party-state’s claims to legitimacy based on its possession of a transcendent universal ethical Truth to have been manifested very clearly in the heavy-duty moral instruction of the masses that accompanied the propagation of Marxist theory and Mao Thought during that era. The Party-state’s claim to Benevolence in those days took such forms as “iron rice bowl” guarantees of livelihood, cradle-to-grave subsistence needs met within the capsulized life of the danwei (单位), and repeated fervent expressions and demonstrations of state solidarity with the proletariat and the “poor peasantry.” The state’s claims to be promoting national Glory then took many interesting forms as well, from the cleansing and militarization of Chinese culture itself, to
the obsessions with industrialization, anti-imperialism, and China’s pretensions to international leadership within the context of the Third World.

29 On the ethical value accorded by the state to science and to modernity, see Ann Anagnost, *National Past-times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

30 A discussion and analysis of some of the many contemporary forms of state-led charity can be found in Vivienne Shue, “State power and the philanthropic impulse in China today,” in Ilchman et al., *Philanthropy in the World’s Traditions*, pp. 332–354. State-led charitable programs and projects such as Project Hope and many others have been ceaselessly, didactically publicized in the Chinese media under Deng and Jiang.


33 For one major study of corruption and communism in China, see Xiaobo Lü, *Cadres and Corruption: The Organizational Involution of the Chinese Communist Party* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). The pervasiveness of the oppositionist popular discourse on corruption in China today has been widely noted in journalistic and scholarly accounts. In fact, anyone who lives in China, even for a short time, inevitably hears the angry and sometimes threatening complaints made openly by common people against corruption in government.


38 For an analysis of the state’s discourse on raising the “quality” of the people, see Anagnost, *National Past-times*, Ch. 5.

This category of syncretic sect has been most thoroughly explored in ibid., and also in Kenneth Dean, *Lord of the Three in One: The Spread of a Cult in Southeast China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).


44 For one account of a local government’s attempt to turn a shrine into a profit-earning tourist attraction in south China, see Jonathan Unger and Anita Chan, “Inheritors of the boom: private enterprise and the role of local government in a rural south China township,” *China Journal* 42 (1999): 45–74.


47 For more on the content of Li’s teachings, see Shue, “Global imaginings.”

48 Li Hongzhi and other Falun Gong spokespersons have steadfastly maintained that their beliefs and practices are entirely apolitical. Most ordinary Falun Gong practitioners doubtless also share this view of their activities, even, one suspects, many of those who have made the decision to confront state prohibitions directly by continuing their demonstrations.

49 Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters*, p. 258.

50 Or, as Perry, *Challenging the Mandate of Heaven*, p. xx, explains: “Fear of the loss of the Mandate of Heaven was generally seen as the driving force behind the campaign [to suppress Falun Gong].” See here also (pp. xv–xvi) Perry’s analysis of the factors of “timing, scale, and composition” of the movement as contributors to the Chinese government’s determination to launch a “drastic initiative” to wipe it out – “an initiative so out of step with its [more permissive and conciliatory] attitude toward labor disputes, tax riots or even student … demonstrations.”


54 By some of these accounts, however, “not even nationalism could replace the yearning for spiritual fulfilment.” So popular religious beliefs and practices such as those of Falun Gong are seen as helping to fill the “vacuum” left by the destruction of “the myth and cult-like image of the late Chairman Mao.” John Wong and William Liu, *The Mystery of China’s Falun Gong: Its Rise and Its Sociological Implications* (Singapore: East Asian Institute, Singapore University Press, 1999), pp. 47–49.

55 Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 209. And as Petrone further points out (p. 9), “Although it was published much later, Bakhtin’s very influential definition of carnival was written in the Soviet Union in the late 1930s and can itself be read as resistance to the Stalinist order. Bakhtin rejected official Soviet celebrations as the ‘official truth’ and looked to popular culture for opportunities to overthrow the official discourse, at least temporarily.” For more on the recalcitrance of popular culture even during the high-Stalin era, see also Anne Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).
To this point, see the moving account of the highly intricate and deeply moral understanding of state, society, legitimacy, and responsibility held by the people of a remote community in south-west China in Erik Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).