

## Review: Junker, Andrew: Becoming activists in global China - social movements in the Chinese diaspora

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Book Review:

## Becoming Activists in Global China: Social Movements in the Chinese Diaspora

Chengpang Lee\*

*Becoming Activists in Global China: Social Movements in the Chinese Diaspora* by Andrew Junker, 2019, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

It may sound ironic at first pass, but the ongoing development of modern higher education and research institutions has made contemporary social science academia more like a normal product market than ever before. One of the primary characteristics of the normal product market is that new and innovative products are much rarer than products that come from a mass production line. The mass production style of social science research is marked by the number of scholars involved and the level of the division of labour. New and innovative research takes a long time to produce. Sometimes, these works appear as refined and as polished as those that we typically see in mass produced research. They are more like a handmade craft that requires readers that appreciate its value.

Without question, Andrew Junker's book, *Becoming Activists in Global China: Social Movements in the Chinese Diaspora*, belongs to the second category of research. It is a relatively short book (at around 200 pages). However, it is a delicate work that deserves to be read carefully and thought upon intensely. Drawing on interviews and observations in multiple sites (US, Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan), materials from different archives, and organisational publications, the book continues in the tradition of scholarly interest about the controversial religious organisation Falun Gong. It follows the organisation from the late 1990s and represents the latest academic effort to use the group as a test case to reflect on social movement theories, sociological studies of religion, contentious politics in China, and more broadly, cultural theory. Although the book shares Falun Gong as its subject, it differs from past studies in that Junker's book aims to answer key questions from the literature on social movements and organisational studies: Why do social movements adopt different tactics? Why do some organisations develop more effective strategies while others struggle? In contrast to our image of religion, Junker argues it is religion (or religionisation) that makes Falun Gong more successful as a social movement than Minyun.

As the title of the book suggests, Junker deals with the empirical phenomenon of overseas social movements organised by the Chinese diaspora. Two of the primary social movements discussed here are Falun Gong and Minyun (abbreviated as the democratic movement). The majority of the work deals with Falun Gong, with only a chapter dedicated to a discussion of Minyun. Therefore, the book can be seen as the latest academic research on Falun Gong. Falun Gong, probably the most well-known religious organisation, recently designated as an 'evil cult' by the Chinese Communist Party-run government, was originally a qigong group that later grew into a religious organisation in the middle of the 1990s. It gained fame and international renown by the end of the 1990s largely because of its open condemnation and harsh repression by the Chinese government. According to Junker, the continuous interaction between Falun Gong and the CCP government was the de facto cause of Falun Gong's strength and resilience in waging protest events overseas. In contrast, Minyun exhausted its mobilisation potential due to inadequate organisational structure and activist ethic. In Junker's words, the puzzle at the heart of the issue is "why did Falun Gong, especially in contrast to Minyun, succeed in adopting and implementing the social movement form of activism?"

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In the book, Junker makes many insightful comments on this question. His arguments can best be summarized into the following points: First and the foremost, it is the decentralised organisational structure of Falun Gong's mobilisation that is key to its success. This point may sound quite counterintuitive to the typical image of Falun Gong as a charismatic movement led by Hongzhi Li. Junker argues that this character of mobilisation is formed or shaped by the group's experience during a period in the late 1990s, when Li disappeared for quite a long time. During this period, members of Falun Gong in and outside of China had to come together and centralise their mission of 'truth telling' to the general public. Individual creativity was encouraged alongside this unity. Interestingly, Junker argues that the need for individual creativity follows from Falun Gong's transformation from a qigong group to a religious organisation. In this regard, the process of 'religionisation' brings about the necessary form of social movement to Falun Gong. Second, religionisation requires proselytising to ensure group growth. Junker argues that this need encourages member engagement with the general public. This is in sharp contrast to Minyun organisations in which the general public is viewed passively and not actively engaged. Minyun organisations did not actively solicit public support in foreign countries. Third, Minyun organisations suffered as the organisation became increasingly oligarchical in nature and came into conflict with member ideals of democracy within the organisational structure, whereas Falun Gong avoided this problem. The direct consequence is that different Minyun organisations did not collaborate and factionist politics haunted the movement. Junker argues that Minyun was highly influenced by traditional Chinese culture while Falun Gong escaped this because of its religionisation.

Junker advances our understanding of Falun Gong and Minyun by comparing these two movements from a social movement perspective. However, there are several points that were not fully addressed. First, the context of diaspora is not fully elaborated. To what extent does mobilisation in a foreign context by a diasporic community differ from that of a typical social movement? Second, Junker argues that after 2000, there was a reduction in the politicisation of Falun Gong. He seems to omit the fact that Falun Gong published its famous *jiupinggongchandang* (Nine Comments on the CCP) in 2004, and initiated its campaign to encourage withdrawal of CCP membership in the same year, two highly politicised actions. Third, the role of Falun Gong leadership is not fully explored. Junker's attitude towards Falun Gong's leader Li Hongzhi is rather ambivalent. On some points, Junker seems to imply that Li did not play a significant role. Rather, in Junker's view, it was the followers or senior members who made decisions. However, in other places, Li is the person responsible for the overall direction of the movement and for mobilising thousands of followers to risk their lives in protests. The issue of leadership is also important to understanding Minyun. Unlike Falun Gong, in which the real leader of the organisation can only be recognised as Li Hongzhi, it is more difficult to identify a single leader in Minyun. By not taking the issue of leadership fully into account, Junker's interpretation of the different forms of mobilisation may just be a reflection of different leadership structures. Fourth, Junker seems to omit the "Chinese-ness" of Falun Gong but overemphasizes its new religious characteristics. Falun Gong uses Tang (widely considered to be the greatest dynasty in Chinese history) as its public symbol. Its television station is named *xintangren* (new Tang people). The relationship between Falun Gong and Chinese culture is more complicated than Junker leads his readers to believe.

To conclude, this book sheds new light on the study of Falun Gong and Minyun. It reflects the author's personal interests and his academic backgrounds in multiple fields. This book is also a good example of the academic discussion of the epistemological base of social science knowledge. Why is religion consistently excluded from the discussion of politics? Why is religion largely not considered as a type of social movement? Junker's book brings these issues to the fore. In addition to his contribution to the study of Falun Gong, the study of overseas Chinese Minyun, the discussion of the secular bias towards religion among social scientists is a welcome engagement.

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