

A Frame Analysis of Newspaper Reports about Cults in English: A Case Study of the *New York Times*

ZengYi Zhang

University of Chinese Academy of Sciences

BiaoWen Huang

Beijing Jiaotong University

XiaoDan Li

University of Chinese Academy of Sciences

ABSTRACT: “Cults” (aka “sects”; new religious movements) constitute a regular topic for contemporary journalists to write about. After briefly surveying relevant publications in academic periodicals, the present article examines the content of a variety of different newspapers, both in terms of the length and the frequency of their articles on cults. We then turn our focus on the *New York Times*, and its contrasting treatments of the Branch Davidians and Falun Gong. *NYT* articles on the Branch Davidians suggest that the group’s teachings are mere personal declarations or examples of religious fanaticism, and that the Davidian leadership is manipulative and abusive to its members. Despite the obvious similarities between the two groups, Falun Gong, in sharp contrast, is portrayed as being a mixture of traditional Buddhism, Taoism, and Chinese qigong practices, which is currently being persecuted in the People’s Republic of China.

KEYWORDS: China, Falun Gong, Branch Davidians, *New York Times*, framework analysis, cults

Introduction

Since the 1970s, traditional values, morality, and social order have been severely challenged. Intensified social anomie and a variety of marginal or non-mainstream cultural trends have provided an environment in which new religions (“cults”), have flourished. Differing from Christian religious groups and often including elements of mysticism, astrology, divination, and witchcraft, as well as extreme political and social ideas, it is claimed that cultic groups can address the lack of traditional beliefs in modern society (particularly where those born after the second world war are concerned). Since the mid-twentieth century, cults (an umbrella term which is used here for a variety of marginal sects, new religious groups, and alternative religions) have developed in unprecedented ways. In the West, where there is a widespread belief in the right to freedom of religion, the number of cults that exists is large, and the makeup of these groups is varied. Many of these organizations are not seen as posing a direct threat to mainstream values and are not harmful to wider society. However, a small proportion of cults are founded upon the worship of influential teachers, who exercise a sort of spiritual control that stands in complete opposition to the fundamentals of modern society, particularly freedom and human rights. As such, these groups can be understood as endangering the norms of modern society. They can cause harm to communities and individuals alike. The “cult threat” has gradually become a serious social problem, arousing the concern of scholars across the globe.

According to Zhao Wanli and Zhao Chao,¹ in total, there are 896 academic papers on cults listed in the three ISI citation databases (SCI, SSCI, and A & HCI) for the years 1969 to 2008. Figure 1 gives the distribution of these papers by date.

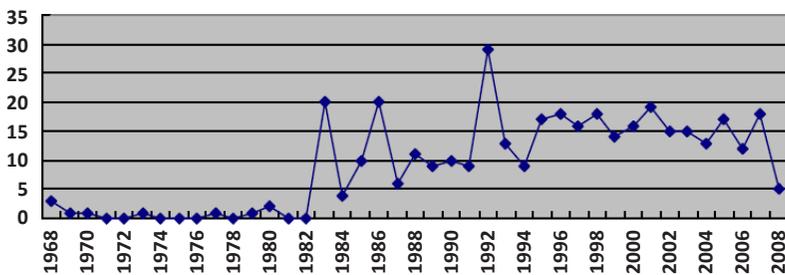


Figure 1: Distribution of academic papers on cults in the SCI, SSCI, and A & HCI databases, 1968–2008

¹Zhao Wanli and Zhao Chao, “An Analysis of High-end International Academic Journals on the Study of Cults,” 2009.

It is clear that the number of relevant academic papers grew rapidly in the early 1980s, reaching a peak of 30 in 1993—the year when the world was shocked by the Waco tragedy. From 1993 to 2007, the average number of research papers per year remained at around 15. Most of the 18 journals in which the majority of the papers were published (see Figure 2) belong to the fields of religion and sociology. Notably, not much research on cults has taken place in journalism and communication studies, although there has been a great deal of news coverage on the subject.

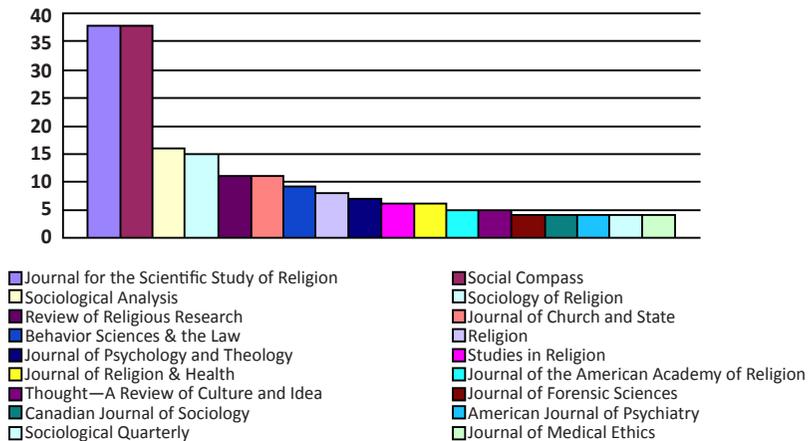


Figure 2: Eighteen journals in which the majority of papers about cults were published between 1968 and 2008

1. Coverage of Cults in Major Newspapers in English

1.1. Data Sources and Research Methods

A few years ago, we conducted a preliminary survey of the news coverage about cults in major newspapers in English, collecting data from ProQuest for the years 1980 to 2007. ProQuest includes more than 500 English newspapers from around the world, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *The Times*, *China Daily*, and *Beijing Weekly*.

Our approach was to enter search terms like “cult,” “sect,” and “new religion,” alongside the names of various specific groups. We filtered out duplicated and irrelevant articles, and were left with a total of 1496 articles.

1.2. Overall Distribution of the Reports on Cults

The following figure shows the report distribution by year.

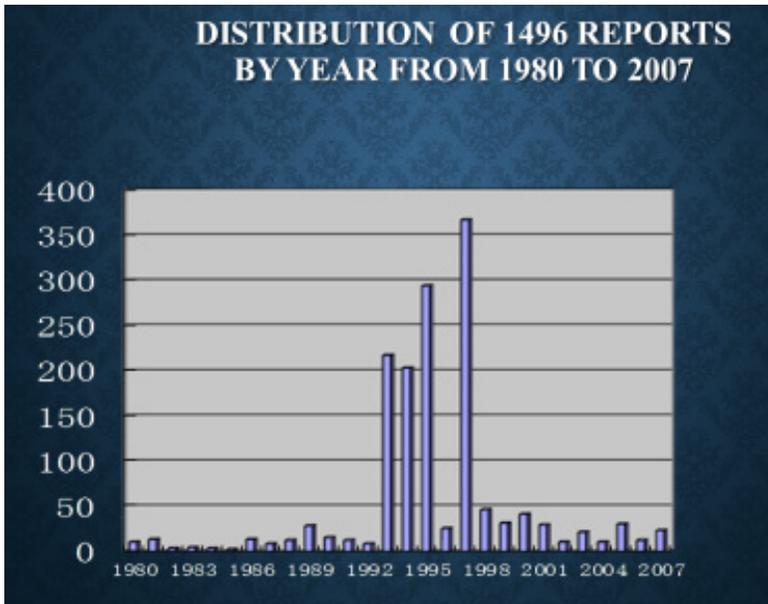


Figure 3: Distribution of 1496 reports by year from 1980 to 2007

The top 10 years, ranked by the number of news reports, are shown below. The top five are: 1997, 1995, 1993, 1994, and 1998.

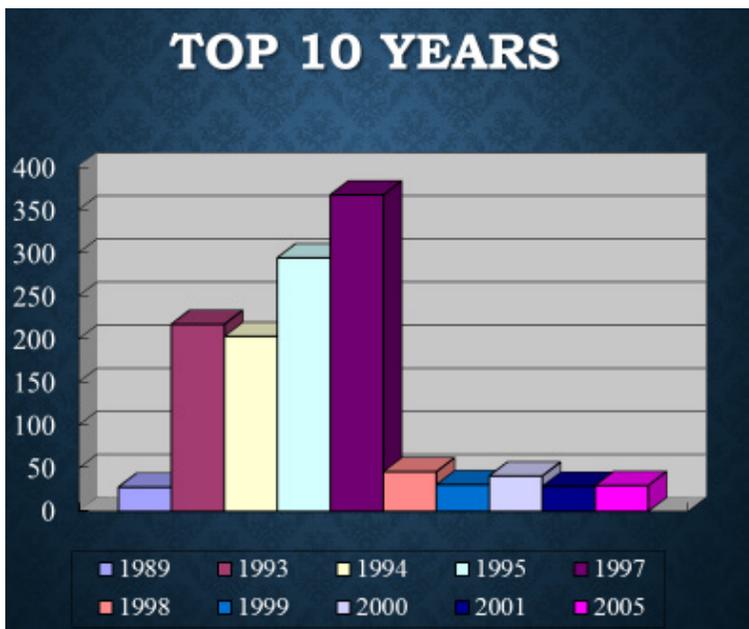


Figure 4: The top 10 years ranked by number of news reports

Ten newspapers with the largest number of reports on cults included the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *The Atlanta Constitution* (see Figure 5).

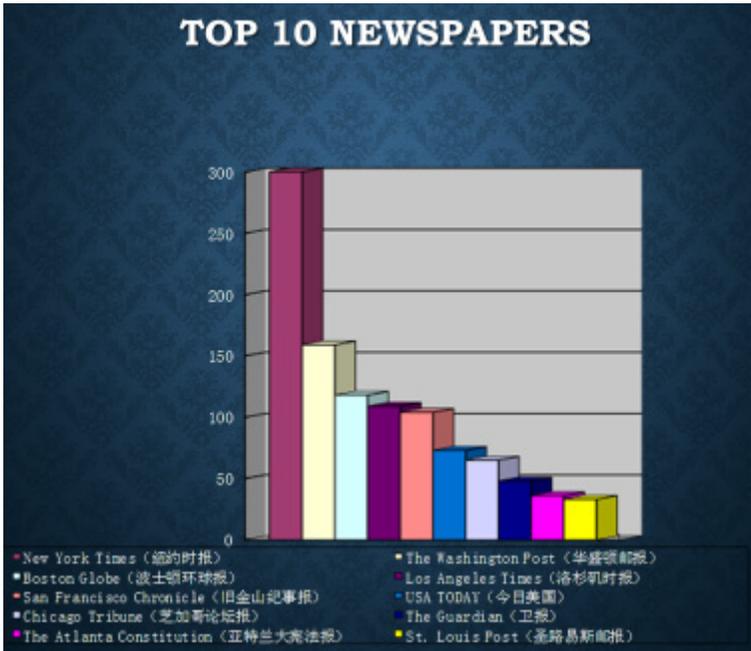


Figure 5: Ten newspapers with the largest numbers of reports on cults

1.3. Reports on major cults in major newspapers

When examining the reports on major cults in the data set, we found that there were 29 about The People's Temple (with the number of reports per year peaking at seven in 2005). The newspaper carrying the largest number of these reports was the *New York Times* (again with a statistic of seven reports—see Figure 6).

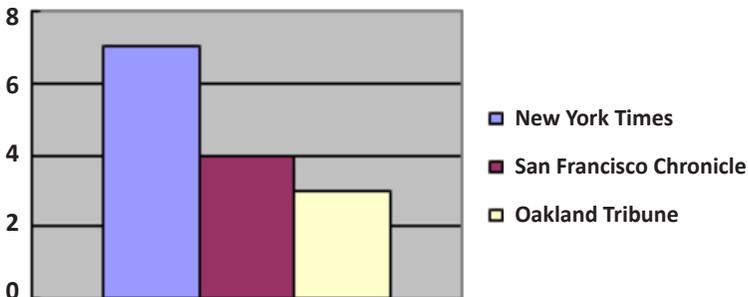


Figure 6: Three newspapers containing the most reports about The People's Temple

In addition, there was a total of 262 articles about Heaven’s Gate. The overwhelming majority—251 articles—were published in 1997 (there were a further five articles in 1998, five in 1999, and one in 2002). The sample of reports, therefore, was much larger for Heaven’s Gate than for The People’s Temple, and the time span was more concentrated. The newspapers that included the most articles about Heaven’s Gate were the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times* and *San Francisco Chronicle* (see Figure 7).

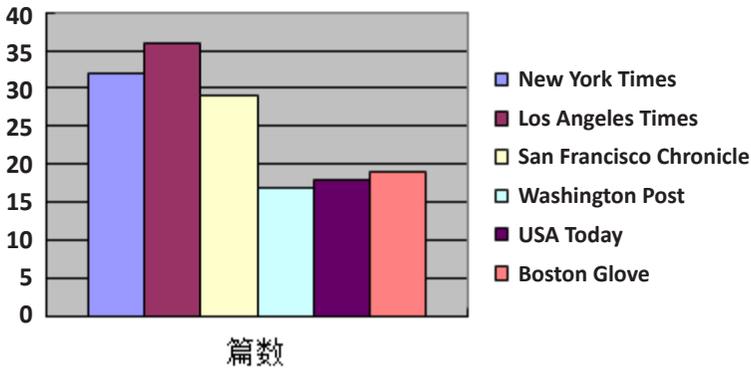


Figure 7: The six newspapers that published the most articles about Heaven’s Gate

Where the Branch Davidians were concerned, 268 articles were found. The years in which the most reports were published were 1993 and 1995, with 172 and 77 articles, respectively. The *Washington Post* published the most articles on the group, followed by the *Houston Chronicle* and *New York Times* (see Figure 8).

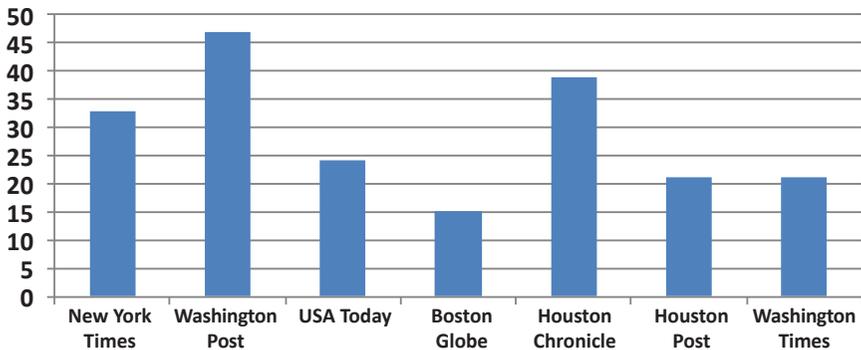


Figure 8: The newspapers that published the most articles about the Branch Davidians

For the Order of the Solar Temple, 86 reports were found, with the majority being published in 1994 (61 reports). By number of reports, the *Boston Globe*, *New York Times*, and *The Guardian* gave this group the most attention (see Figure 9).

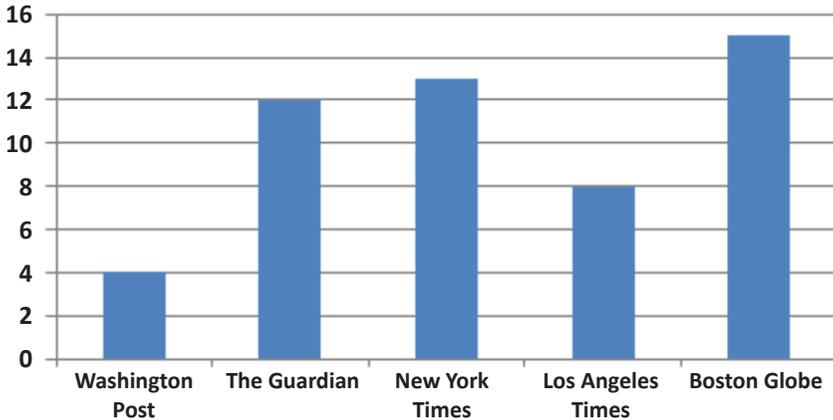


Figure 9: The newspapers that published the most articles about the Order of the Solar Temple

Major western newspapers also gave considerable attention to Japan's Aum Shinrikyo movement, with a total of 69 reports, 57 of which were published in 1995. The *Washington Post* published the most articles on this group, with the *New York Times* publishing only a small number (see Figure 10).



Figure 10: Newspapers that published the most articles about Aum Shinrikyo

The banning of Falun Gong by the Chinese Government in July 1999 sparked a wave of interest in that organization from both domestic and Western media outlets. Our investigations showed that the *Wall Street Journal* (including its ‘Oriental Edition’) published 29 reports on Falun Gong, with a further 24 appearing in the *New York Times* and another 16 in the Chinese-English newspaper *Beijing Weekly* (see Figure 11).

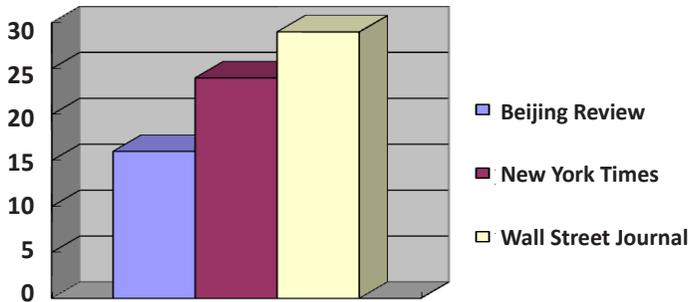


Figure 11 Three newspapers that published the most articles about Falun Gong

The data given above indicates that among important Western newspapers, the *New York Times* has given the most attention by far to new religious movements, if the total number of reports and the number of reports on major cults are taken into consideration.

2. Framework Analysis of Reports Related to Cult Manipulation and Abuse in the *New York Times*

2.1. Data Sources and Samples

We searched the full-text database for the *New York Times* (1980–2010) available via ProQuest Newspapers for the terms “cults” and “sects,” and for the specific names of groups (e.g., The Peoples Temple, Heaven’s Gate, the Branch Davidians, the Order of the Solar Temple, Aum Shinrikyo and Falun Gong). We retrieved a total of 626 reports (after removing duplicate articles). We then searched this body of articles for keywords such as “manipulation,” “abuse,” “suicide,” and “mental control.” We obtained 229 reports altogether for the keywords “manipulation” and “abuse” combined. The numbers of reports about each major group and the percentages of reports containing the two keywords are detailed in the table below.

Table 1: Statistics for reports obtained about major cults, and the numbers/percentages related to manipulation and abuse

Cult	Relevant reports	Percentage	Manipulation or abuse	Percentage
Falun Gong	160	25.6%	87	38.0%
People's Temple	68	10.9%	29	12.7%
Heaven's Gate	60	9.6%	15	6.6%
Branch Davidians	260	41.5%	60	26.2%
Order of the Solar Temple	14	2.2%	12	5.2%
Aum Shinrikyo	64	10.2%	26	11.4%
Total	626	100%	229	100%

According to this data, the majority of relevant reports in the *New York Times* relate to the Branch Davidian group, with a total of 260 articles. Interestingly, the total number of reports on Falun Gong was 160—more than the numbers of all reports for other Chinese groups, The People's Temple and Heaven's Gate put together. Thus where Chinese groups are concerned, the *New York Times* has been the most interested in Falun Gong.

The table also indicates that 38.0% of Falun Gong-related reports contained the keywords “manipulation” or “abuse,” this being the highest proportion in the data set. The remaining percentages were, in descending order, 26.2% (Branch Davidians), 12.7% (The People's Temple), 11.4% (Aum Shinrikyo), 6.6% (Heaven's Gate), and 5.2% (Order of the Solar Temple). The results therefore indicate that the *New York Times* is most concerned about issues of manipulation and abuse when reporting on Falun Gong.

It is also important to note that the emphasis on manipulation and abuse in reports on Falun Gong is different from the emphasis in reports on the Branch Davidians. The Falun Gong articles focus mainly on the control and abuse of its followers by the Chinese Government, whereas articles on the Branch Davidians tend to concentrate on the manipulation or abuse of its members by the leader.

We also examined the years of publication for the 229 reports on cult-related manipulation and abuse in the *New York Times*, and found that the most reports appeared in 1999 (followed by 2001, 2000, 1997, 1995, 1994, and 1981—see Table 2). The years in which more articles were published correspond with the occurrence of key events, such as the banning of Falun Gong by the Chinese Government in July 1999, the Falun Gong self-immolation incident in 2001, and the collective suicide of Heaven's Gate members in 1997.

Table 2: Distribution by date of reports on major cults related to manipulation and abuse

Year	Number of Reports	Ranking	Year	Number of reports	Ranking
1980	4		1996	5	
1981	13	7	1997	17	4
1982	1		1998	5	
1983	2		1999	38	1
1984	1		2000	22	3
1985	0		2001	35	2
1986	5		2002	8	
1987	2		2003	3	
1988	1		2004	3	
1989	0		2005	4	
1990	1		2006	6	
1991	1		2007	3	
1992	0		2008	5	
1993	9		2009	2	
1994	14	6	2010	3	
1995	16	5			

2.2. Report Framework Analysis

2.2.1. Length of the Reports

An analysis of the 229 articles about cult manipulation and abuse indicated that 45.4% of the articles were in-depth reports of between 601 and 1200 words. In addition, 23.6% of the articles contained more than 1,200 words and can be thus be viewed as feature stories. This proportion is relatively high, demonstrating that the *New York Times* is highly concerned about cultic manipulation and abuse.

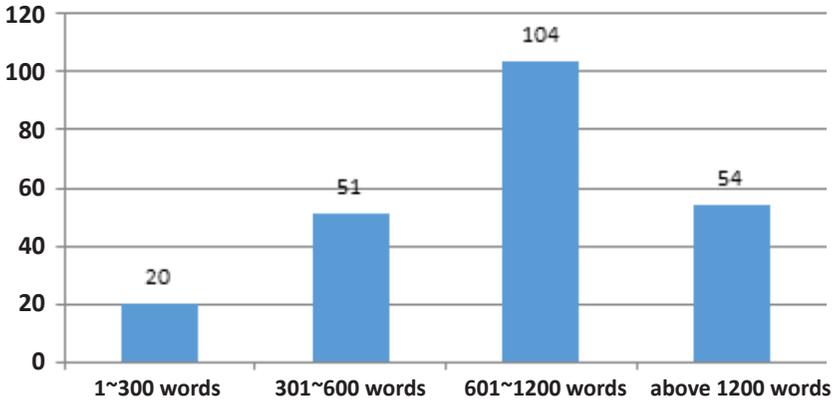


Figure 12: Length of the reports on cult manipulation and abuse in the *New York Times*

2.2.2. Report Column Distribution

A significant proportion of the reports on cultic manipulation and abuse could be categorized as international news (96 reports, or 41.9%). The next largest category was domestic news (62 reports, or 11.4%), followed by opinion articles (22, or 9.6%), as shown in Figure 13. In general, the opinion articles were found to express the attitude of the journalist and the newspaper regarding certain important events. The 22 commentary reports on the issue of cultic manipulation and abuse in *The New York Times* demonstrate that the newspaper is concerned about the topic.

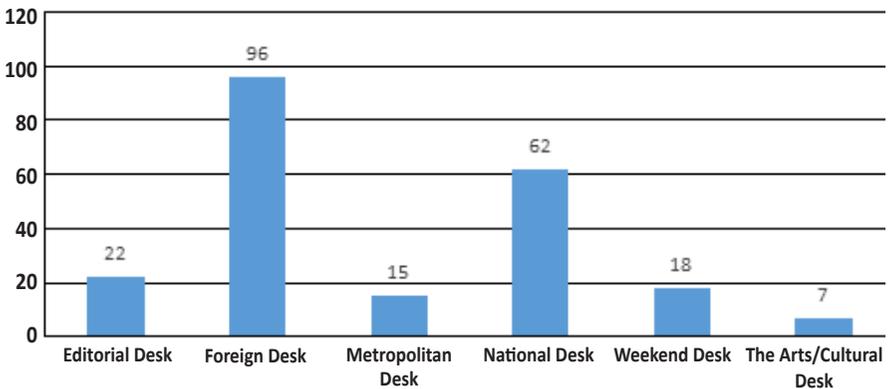


Figure 13: Column distribution for reports on cult manipulation and abuse in the *New York Times*

2.2.3. Subject of the Reports

We divided the reports into several groups, based on the main subject: (1) internal organization, (2) doctrine, (3) killing (including suicide and homicide), (4) physical injury, (5) political requirements, (6) cultural traditions, (7) social influences, and (8) others. All 229 reports were encoded and analyzed, and the most prevalent subjects were found to be killing (36.3%), doctrine (30.8%), and internal organization (20.4%).

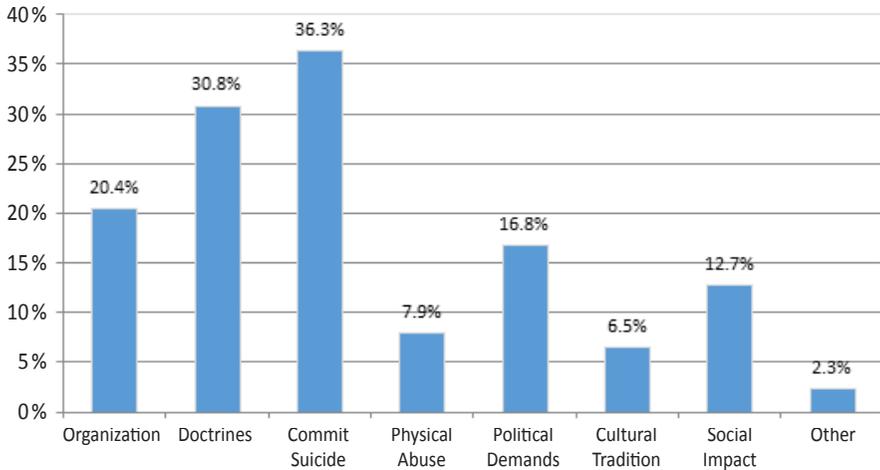


Figure 14: Subject distribution for reports on cultic manipulation and abuse in the *New York Times*

2.2.4. Attitudes

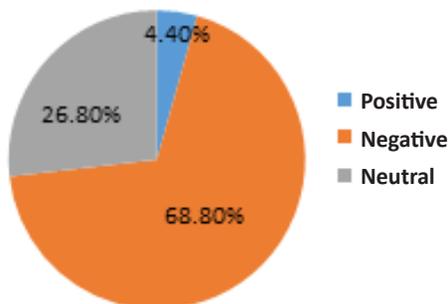


Figure 15: Attitudes toward cults in the *New York Times*

Our analysis revealed that 68.8% of the articles displayed negative attitudes towards cults. A further 26.8% could be described as neutral, with just 4.4% being

positive or sympathetic (see Figure 15). Thus, we can conclude that, in general, the *New York Times* has a negative attitude toward such groups.

2.3 Additional Findings

Our data indicated that Branch Davidians and Falun Gong were the two cult groups reported on most frequently by the *New York Times* between 1980 and 2010. Further analysis has shown that the newspaper's attitudes toward these two groups—one based in the US, the other based in China—is very different. Of all the reports related to the Branch Davidians, 51.7% were negative, 42.8% were neutral, and only 5.5% were positive or sympathetic (see Figure 16).

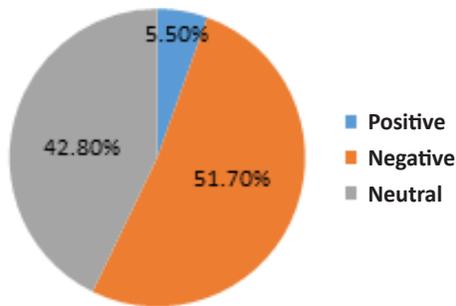


Figure 16: Attitudes toward Branch Davidians in the *New York Times*

Where reports about Falun Gong were concerned, however, 56.6% were found to be positive or sympathetic, with 32.7% being neutral and just 10.7% being negative (see Figure 17).

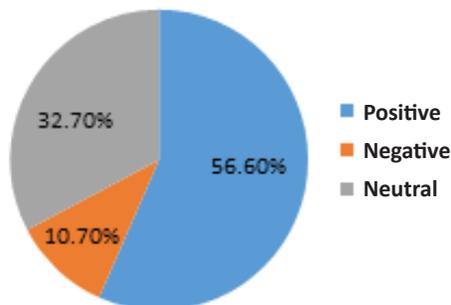


Figure 17: Attitudes toward Falun Gong in the *New York Times*

2.4 Differences between reporting frameworks

In the *New York Times* news reports studied here, Falun Gong is defined as being a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, and traditional culture, with a strong relation to qigong. We can use the following quotation as an example: “Falun Gong advocates a mixture of traditional qigong, Buddhism, and Taoism. It promotes breathing exercises and meditation as methods for enhancing mental and physical health.”² In contrast, the articles on the Branch Davidians suggest that the group’s teachings are mere personal declarations or examples of religious fanaticism, rather than consisting of elements of traditional religion.

Moreover, the ways in which the two groups were categorized differ. Falun Gong tends to be described as a type of fitness practice or a religious “sect” (the term “cult” is hardly used in the reports—indeed, it appears only in reference to the Chinese Government’s stance on the group). The Branch Davidians organization, however, is always referred to as a “cult” (e.g., “destructive cult”; “Waco cult”).

In terms of the image construction of the leaders of the two groups, we found that Falun Gong’s Li Hongzhi was described as a “religious leader,” an advocate of religious doctrine, and a victim of the Chinese Government’s intervention policy. In one report about Falun Gong, for example, it states that Li “left China, he says, partly because he was afraid of government persecution, but also, more importantly, because he wanted his daughter to go to an American high school.”³ The leadership of the Branch Davidians is represented quite differently, however, with the focus being placed on exposing the deception, control, and abusive tactics used by the leader against members.

Additionally, the issues discussed in reports about the two groups stand in sharp contrast. Many of the Falun Gong-related articles describe the Chinese Government’s banning of Falun Gong as a violation of human beings’ right to freedom of religious belief. In this context, the arrest of Falun Gong practitioners in China is seen as a breach of human rights. On the other hand, reports about the Branch Davidians often focus on the Waco massacre, describing it as a crime committed by the cult’s leader. As such, the Branch Davidians organization is painted as an extreme religious faction that, in itself, limits freedom and contravenes human rights.

The sources of the news reports should also be noted. For Falun Gong, the information appears to have been taken mainly from members of the group who are exiled abroad, as well as opponents of the organization, and scholars with particular agendas. The articles criticize Chinese official statements and practices, without offering insight into Chinese views about Falun Gong. Furthermore,

²Seth Faison, *New York Times*, July 31, 1999 (待定, 可用原文).

³Erik Eckholm, “Banned Movement’s Head Urges Talks With China,” *New York Times*, July 24, 1999 (待定, 可用原文).

generally speaking, the attitude conveyed regarding the Chinese media is one of skepticism. By way of contrast, in reports about the Branch Davidians, sources include FBI spokespeople, judges, sectarian leaders, religious leaders, and academics, thus providing a much more diverse picture of the group.

3. Discussion and Conclusions

Examining the data presented here, it is not difficult to conclude that the *New York Times* has employed different news frameworks for reports about Falun Gong and the Branch Davidians. It can be said that reports about Falun Gong do not offer balance and neutrality, a conclusion which has also been drawn in another independent study. In “Analysis of Falun Gong Reports in the United States and Chinese Mainstream Newspapers,” Yuan Li uses framework analysis to examine news reports about Falun Gong in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Time* magazine, *Newsweek* and *American News*, drawing the conclusion that the mainstream media in the US uses three sub-frameworks to construct a narrative about Falun Gong and human rights. First, the US media defines Falun Gong as a religious organization and as a type of health practice, and prefers to use the less-loaded word “sect,” rather than “cult,” when referring to the group. Second, the US media describes Falun Gong practitioners as victims, who are being persecuted by the Chinese Government. Various details are provided about the nature of this persecution.⁴ Finally, the Chinese Government is portrayed as a sort of a demon that deprives citizens of religious freedom and human rights.⁵

In *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky contend that people who are abused in a hostile country can be termed “valuable victims,” while people who suffer at the hands of the state or subsidiary governments are “impoverished victims.” Additionally, the mass media pays more attention to valuable victims than impoverished ones.⁶ Following this model, it can be argued that the US media—and, more specifically, the *New York Times*—focuses on the legitimacy of religious groups like Falun Gong and positions its practitioners as “valuable victims” who have been persecuted by the Chinese Government, while ignoring the internal injustices within the group. As such, rather than questioning the legitimacy of Falun Gong itself, the group’s members are encouraged to view the Chinese Government’s right to ban Falun Gong as a violation of human rights and freedom of religious belief. To some

⁴Yuan Li, “Frame Analysis of US and China Print Media Coverage of Falun Gong: A Comparative Approach,” Master’s Thesis, University of Wyoming, August 2003, pp. 20–21 (待定, 可用原文标题).

⁵*Ibid.*, 26–27 (同上, 待定, 可用原文标题).

⁶Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, [1988] 2002), 37.

extent, we suggest that the US media is still under the influence of a Cold War mentality, in which the dichotomies of freedom and dictatorship, friendliness and hostility remain central.

Thus, despite the fact that the *New York Times* is considered to be one of the most reputable newspapers in the world, we can see that it fails to maintain a completely objective, neutral perspective; double standards remain at play. As we have demonstrated, the newspaper's reports on cultic manipulation and abuse are influenced by existing ideological frameworks, cultural and social agendas, and geographical settings.