Falun Gong

1 Introduction

> Just talk about the persecution we've suffered . . . don't talk to [ordinary people] about [our] spiritual beliefs; tell them that we're just doing exercises (Li Hongzhi 2002).
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> You must not talk [with ordinary people] about the high-level things . . . I have taught you. [Instead,] only talk about our being persecuted, about our being good people and being wrongly persecuted, about our freedom of belief being violated, about our human rights being violated. They can accept all those things, and they will immediately support you and express their sympathy. . . . Knowing those facts, the people of the world will say that Falun Gong is being persecuted and that the persecutors are so evil. They'll say those things, and isn't that enough?[1] (Li Hongzhi 2003a)

While searching for a topic on which to write her master's thesis, Ying-Ying Tiffany Liu came across Falun Gong (FLG), eventually contacting practitioners in the United States. At the time, she was excited, feeling that "I might have found the perfect topic for my research paper!" (Liu 2005, 1). So she traveled to Flushing, New York, and eventually found the FLG office.

[1] Li Hongzhi's (LHZ's) rhetorical question practically begs this further question: Enough for what? If Li's purpose is to convert more individuals to FLG and thus save them from suffering during the imminent apocalypse, then, according to his own teachings, this is nowhere near enough to save them. Rather, this minimal amount of information is just enough to evoke public sympathy for FLG's campaign to overturn the ban against the group in China. This goal – not saving souls – appears to be the overriding focus of LHZ's concern.

> I walked in and introduced myself as a student from Canada who is interested in Falun Gong issues. One of the women from the desk got up to leave; she had to go somewhere else to pick up some newspapers (*The Epoch Times*). Wendy, the second woman, was a young lady who liked to giggle. As I stood talking with her, we had a few good laughs. Quickly we identified with one another by the similar Mandarin accent. Both of us were from Taiwan. When I told her that I planned to write a thesis about Falun Gong, Wendy was excited. "You've chosen the best topic! There are so many things you can write about Falun Gong. The Chinese Communist Party [CCP] claimed that they could wipe us out within three months. It has been ten years and we are only growing stronger. Falun Gong is the Chinese government's worst nightmare" (2005, 3) . . . Wendy said, "You should write about CCP's crimes and how Falun Gong is being harmed. Tell people the truth!" [Later,] I walked out of the office with many documents and information brochures and a feeling of great excitement. Wendy's kindness and enthusiasm had influenced my emotions. Not only was I excited about finding the field site for my thesis, I also felt a sense of mission – a sense that I am about to conduct a very meaningful project – still unaware of how complicated things could get (2005, 5).

As she dug deeper, Liu says that

> I discovered that the "reality" I experienced was quite complicated and contradictory. The feelings of ambiguity and insecurity were at times difficult to cope with. As a result, I stopped fieldwork for four months . . . During the four month break

> when I was examining my own role in this fieldwork, I realized that I started with this project from documents and media reports provided by Falun Gong, which often show the representation of a passive and victimized group that needs to be "saved." When I discovered they have their own strategies to take control over their own destinies, my egoist's desire of "helping the oppressed" seemed ridiculous (2005, 14–15).

Although my own initial encounters with Falun Gong were different from Liu's, I was similarly charmed by practitioners at first, and similarly motivated to want to "save" the "oppressed." In 1999, after Falun Gong had exploded into international news headlines, I read what little scholarship had been (hastily) written about the group that year (entirely online, as I recall), all of which was one-sidedly critical of the Chinese government's response. Persuaded by this minimal scholarship, I invited practitioners to visit my classes (at the time, during the years 1999–2009, I was teaching in the University of Wisconsin system, with an occasional evening class at DePaul University in Chicago) and allowed them to present their point of view unhindered. Additionally, I should note that, until very recently, the only thing I had ever written about Falun Gong was a brief entry and a short overview of the conflict in the introductory chapter of the second and third editions of my small reference volume, *Cults* (Lewis 2014). In part because I was not a Sinologist and in part because I was hard pressed to stay on top of my many other interests in the broader field of New Religious Movements, I also failed to keep up with the developing scholarship on Falun Gong. Thus, unlike Liu – who was disabused of her naïve first impressions in a matter of months – I continued to adhere to the FLG position on the conflict between their organization and the People's Republic of China (PRC) for the next fifteen years. (I describe the events that led me to reevaluate Falun Gong in Lewis 2016.)

I incorporate Liu's story here, in the Introduction, and note that, similar to Liu, I have in recent years backed away from "defending" Falun Gong. I state my changing position on this movement so that readers will be forewarned. As indicated by his remarks quoted in the Introduction epigraph, Li Hongzhi (LHZ) – FLG's founder-leader – discourages his followers from discussing Falun Gong's inner teachings. Instead, practitioners are instructed to tell "ordinary people" a simple, moralistic story about how an "innocent" spiritual group that is "just doing exercises" is being persecuted by the "evil" Chinese government. However, as Liu remarks, in reality, the situation is far more complicated – and often contradictory.

Over and above urging followers to tell outsiders this simplistic story, Li Hongzhi also urged practitioners outside of China to act as moral entrepreneurs, creating Falun Gong–friendly news outlets such as the *Epoch Times* newspaper and New Tang Dynasty TV, and encouraging news agencies all over the world to cover the suppression of their movement in China. Additionally, followers and sympathizers have created numerous websites focused on protesting the attack on the "human rights" of Falun Gong practitioners. As a consequence, anyone who wishes to focus exclusively on this movement's own interpretation of the issue can easily find ample resources on the Internet.

There are more things to say about my approach to FLG that I will not develop in this Introduction, primarily because I need to preface that discussion with extended explanations of certain aspects of FLG and LHZ. This would make the Introduction excessively lengthy. What I have done instead is to develop these matters in the Afterword, where I can refer back to issues that were analyzed in the intervening sections.

This volume focuses on Falun Gong and violence. I will note accusations of how Chinese authorities have abused, tortured, and "harvested" organs from

practitioners, but I focus on the almost completely unknown story of how Li Hongzhi's teachings have motivated practitioners to "deliberately seek" (Palmer 2001, 17) being brutalized and martyred. Furthermore, I will clarify other important points. For example, sympathetic observers have ignored or downplayed LHZ's teachings about how demons – which can take human form – "should be killed" (Li Hongzhi 1994a). Additionally, after a practitioner has become enlightened, everyone he or she has harmed will ultimately become happy beings in Paradise. Thus, "if the to-be-harmed life knew, it would stretch its neck out to let you kill it. It would happily, cheerfully let you kill it" (Li Hongzhi 1998a). These teachings and others I will be examining in these pages have, as one might anticipate, sometimes been interpreted tragically, in overly literalistic ways, by practitioners.

The section immediately following this Introduction, Section 2, provides an overview of Falun Gong, including a short history of the conflict between FLG and the PRC, as well as a pattern I refer to as "dueling atrocity tales." A selection of this movement's teachings, especially aspects of LHZ's teachings that are not usually discussed outside of China, is also covered.

Section 3 focuses on Li Hongzhi, including his self-presentation and what should be referred to as his *hagiography*. Once again, we find dueling images of Falun Gong's founder-leader, viewed as an elevated spiritual master by his followers and as just another a cult leader by his critics. Perhaps surprisingly, we often find instances of practitioners and other friends of the movement blatantly ignoring, downplaying, or whitewashing the most controversial of LHZ's teachings.

In Section 4, we examine Falun Gong's teachings on the imminent apocalypse, karma, the role of demons, and on what I term "spiritual warfare." While outside observers perceive FLG as a pacifist group because individual members appear to engage in passive resistance tactics rather than taking up

arms against the PRC, Li Hongzhi ascribes the movement's persecution to demonic influences, and explicitly instructs his followers to engage in forms of spiritual warfare designed to slay demons and inflict harsh retribution on perceived enemies.

Section 5 is built around a close examination of what came to be termed the "1.23 Incident" (referring to January 23, the date the incident took place), when a small group of Falun Gong members set themselves on fire in Tiananmen Square. Although the FLG organization quickly rejected all responsibility for this tragedy – asserting, instead, that it was staged by the Chinese state as a way of defaming Falun Gong – it is clear in retrospect that the self-immolators were sincere practitioners who interpreted certain of Li Hongzhi's contemporaneous messages as encouraging them to martyr themselves.

As a way of explaining why the non-PRC world has usually taken the side of Falun Gong against the Chinese state, Section 6 examines the various factors that have contributed to the perception of FLG as an innocent spiritual exercise group. In addition to creating its own media forums, followers and sympathizers regularly attack journalistic and academic sources critical of the movement as part of Li Hongzhi's direction to disciples to "clarify the truth."

Finally, I have included an afterword that extends the discussion of my perspective on Falun Gong. I believe this delayed approach is necessary because, as noted earlier, readers first need to understand a number of issues analyzed in the body of this text before they can really understand my current point of view on Li Hongzhi and his movement.

In the bibliography, I have tried to bring together as many English-language academic sources on Falun Gong as I could find. I also provide references to the nonacademic sources to which I refer throughout this volume, including Li Hongzhi's lectures and publications.

2 Falun Gong versus the People's Republic of China

For centuries, religious societies – especially secretive religious sects – have been behind numerous rebellions against the Chinese state. This goes back at least as far as

> . . . the Yellow Turbans (Taoists) who rebelled against the Han dynasty in the second century. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Taiping rebels, of Christian inspiration, nearly brought down the Manchu government. Fifty years later came the Boxers who sought to help the Manchu dynasty with their allegedly invincible techniques but who instead brought foreign invasions and havoc to the country (Ching 2001, 7–8).[2]

This history explains, in part, why contemporary Chinese authorities insist on controlling religious bodies within the country's borders. It also helps explain why the government has been so quick to respond to perceived threats from religious bodies. Falun Gong, however, managed to sidestep official skepticism about emergent religions by initially presenting itself as a (nonreligious) Qi Gong group.

Founded in the People's Republic of China in the early nineties by Li Hongzhi, Falun Gong grew out of what has been termed the "Qigong Boom" (Palmer 2007). *Qi Gong* is the generic name for a complex of techniques for physical and spiritual well-being, with a tradition in China predating the Christian era. It has sometimes been referred to as Chinese yoga. Although spiritual and religious activities in general are and have been viewed with

[2] Also refer to discussions about the White Lotus Society in, e.g., ter Haar 1992, Ownby 2003b, Ownby 2008.

suspicion in the People's Republic of China, in the latter part of the twentieth century the government began to actively promote Qi Gong and other traditional practices such as acupuncture as part of what was understood at the time as "traditional Chinese science." Falun Gong, established in 1992, was originally perceived as a part of this officially approved Qi Gong "fad" rather than as a potentially threatening religious sect.

The Qi Gong boom had its origins in the interest in supernatural abilities that emerged when a youngster named Tang Yu in Sichuan Province was reported to be able to "read with his ears" (Palmer 2007, 60–61). Subsequently, many self-styled "Qi Gong masters" appeared who claimed that they had supernatural abilities as well: Zhang Hongbao, Zhang Xiangyu, and Li Hongzhi among them. Numerous conferences on supernatural abilities were held and attended by many political leaders and scientists. For example, on 30 April 1986, the China Association of Scientific Study on Qi Gong was founded in Beijing. Peng Chong, the vice chairman of the standing committee of the National People's Congress, sent his congratulations. The list of examples of interest in FLG at the time could go on and on.

Much of what passed as "Qi Gong" during the Qi Gong boom was not traditional Qi Gong at all. Many of these supernatural abilities were later proven to have been faked. However, for a time, the whole nation, including people in China's scientific, media, and political leadership believed in the paranormal abilities of these Qi Gong "masters."

On 10 August 1990, the China Research Institute for Science Popularization held a conference in Beijing. The theme of the conference was "Promote traditional Qi Gong; say No to superstition." A number of experts from scientific, educational, journalistic, and political circles attended this conference. Si Manan and some magicians demonstrated the tricks played by the self-proclaimed "Qi Gong masters" – such as moving objects with thoughts, stopping an electric fan with one finger, taking pills out of concealed

bottles. Following this conference, the general public began realizing the contrast between traditional Qi Gong and pseudo–Qi Gong. The slogan at the time was "Stay away from pseudo–Qi Gong." As it came increasingly under attack, the China Association of Scientific Study on Qi Gong disaffiliated Falun Gong in December 1996. Falun Gong had become religious, which violated the association's understanding of Qi Gong as a physical and mental exercise.

The gradual change in FLG's self-understanding began in 1994 when Li Hongzhi started claiming that Falun Gong was a form of Buddhism – which is officially accepted as a traditional (and thus as a "good") religion by PRC authorities (Freedom House 2017). LHZ made several superficial changes, such as referring to gatherings of practitioners as "dharma assemblies," including the reading of his writings (now termed "scriptures") in FLG practice sessions, and changing his birthday to correspond with the day on which Buddha's birthday was celebrated in China in 1951.[3] However, in response to increasing criticism from the media and from certain Buddhist associations, Li Hongzhi and his family fled China in 1998 and relocated permanently in the United States. Then, from the safety of his new home, LHZ urged his followers left behind in the PRC to demonstrate against the Chinese government.

Falun Gong was mostly unknown to Western observers until the group made international headlines in 1999. In the early morning of 25 April 1999, approximately 10,000 FLG protesters showed up in Beijing outside of the Zhongnanhai compound, which houses both the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council. Although the demonstration was peaceful and practitioners left feeling that their grievances had been heard, this

[3] For traditional holidays, China uses a "lunisolar" calendar. Among other things, this means that the celebration of Buddha's birthday falls on different dates from year to year.

show of force was a major tactical blunder on the part of Li Hongzhi. The kindest thing one can say about LHZ's decision is that he was naïve (Penny 2017).[4] This group protest was viewed as representing a direct threat to the government, as well as an echo of the 1989 Tiananmen Square democracy demonstrations. The leadership was especially taken aback by the failure of its intelligence service to provide information about the pending demonstration beforehand. It has also been said that the nation's top leaders were surprised both by the large size of the movement and by the fact that, upon investigation, it was found that more than a few mid-level political and military leaders were practitioners.

Falun Gong was subsequently banned. A nationwide crackdown on the group began in July 1999, accompanied by an extensive media campaign against the movement, the closure of FLG practice sites, the detention of thousands of practitioners, and accusations of brutality and torture. On 29 July, Chinese authorities issued an arrest warrant for Li Hongzhi. The government initially arrested hundreds – later thousands – of Falun Gong practitioners. Petitioned by practitioners residing in the United States, the U.S. House and Senate unanimously passed resolutions on 18 and 19 November 1999 that criticized the Chinese government for this crackdown. Additionally, the rapid proliferation of Falun Gong websites and other information on the Internet supporting Falun Gong quickly helped shape international opinion about the conflict.

[4] "When over 10,000 followers placed themselves in front of Zhongnanhai with additional provocation from an Internet campaign, the Chinese leadership was impelled to save face through strict countermeasures." (Chen 2003a, 179). "Li Hongzhi put his practitioners in danger through his unwise decision to challenge Chinese authorities in late April 1999, and should be held responsible" (Ownby 2008, 164).