

## THE *FALUN GONG* IN THE NEW WORLD

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*Abstract.* Despite the polarised debate which has raged in the media over whether the Chinese spiritual movement Falun Gong<sup>1</sup> should be seen as an ‘evil cult’ or as an innocent ‘cultivation system’, there is little doubt that most objective Western scholars would categorise Falun Gong as a new religious movement (many of which have also been accused rightly or wrongly of being ‘cults’ or ‘sects’). Indeed, the controversy surrounding Falun Gong has attracted considerable media and scholarly attention, so that the Falun Gong is now undoubtedly the best known of Chinese new religious movements and, as I argue elsewhere, a key to the reevaluation of a centuries-old tradition of popular religious practice in China which has long been condemned and suppressed by Chinese authorities.<sup>2</sup> The present article, based on fieldwork in North America, on research in Falun Gong written sources and on my previous work in the history of Chinese popular religion traces a portrait of Falun Gong practices both in China and in North America.

The emergence and growth of the Falun Gong in the 1990s is part of an explosion of religious activity that has marked Chinese society since the 1980s. The religious revival, a product of China’s post-Mao ‘spiritual vacuum’ and the scaling back of the Party’s ideological control of society, spans a range of Chinese and foreign, institutionalised and popular religions and includes the rapid rise of Christian (particularly Protestant) fortunes, the return of Chinese religions to rural life, and the resurgence of certain ‘heterodox’ traditions.<sup>3</sup> More immediately relevant to Falun Gong is the ‘*qigong* boom’, which began in

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<sup>1</sup> Or *Falun dafa*; the terms are used interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> See David Ownby, ‘A History for Falun Gong: Popular Religion and the Chinese State since the Ming Dynasty’, *Nova Religio*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (April 2003): 223–43.

<sup>3</sup> On the rise of Protestantism, see Alan Hunter and Chan Kim-Kwong, *Protestantism in Contemporary China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); on religion in rural China, see Helen Siu, ‘Recycling Ritual’, in Perry Link, Richard Madsen and Paul Pickowicz (eds.), *Unofficial China: Popular Culture and Thought in the People’s Republic of China* (Boulder, Colo: Westview, 1990); and Kenneth Dean, *Taoist Popular Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); on ‘heterodox’ groups, see Robin Munro, ‘Syncretic Sects and Secret Societies: Revival in the 1980s’, in *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*, No. 21 (summer 1989).

earnest in the early 1980s and continued until very recently.<sup>4</sup> *Qigong* is still little known in the West outside of alternative medicine/new age circles. *Qi* means ‘cosmic breath’ or ‘energy’ and refers to a force a practitioner can capture through specific gestures, exercises or meditative techniques. Most practitioners seek in *qigong* cultivation improved physical and spiritual health. Some, however, claim what might be called supernatural powers based on their mastery of *qi*: the ability to heal illness, to repel objects (including people) by emitting *qi* from their bodies and a host of other remarkable talents, many of which we would call ‘extrasensory perception’.

The Chinese government largely created *qigong* in the 1950s and supported its post-Mao resurgence, establishing the Chinese *Qigong* Scientific Research Association in April 1986.<sup>5</sup> Its support in the Deng era grew in part out of a hope that mass practice might reduce systemic health care costs (at a time when the government was cutting back on its support to this sector) and in part out of national pride in the achievements of ‘Chinese science’ as manifested by *qigong* masters, who claimed to be reviving ancient Chinese wisdom. Among other things, the Research Association planned to sponsor scientific research on *qigong*, to weed out ‘superstition’ and systematise *qigong* knowledge and practice.

The Chinese public enthusiastically embraced *qigong*. When the Research Association was founded, its leaders noted that there were already over 2,000 national level *qigong* organisations and, one assumes, countless local branches and unorganised groups. Official Chinese government sources put total membership at 60 million in 1990; other sources have put the numbers as high as 200 million, almost one-fifth of China’s immense population.<sup>6</sup> *Qigong* rapidly became a social phenomenon of considerable importance. *Qigong* newspapers and magazines appeared in profusion to cater to the public interest in the subject. *Qigong* masters organised mass rallies in which paying customers experienced trance, possession and a variety of other-worldly states; the original small group, master–disciple pattern was

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<sup>4</sup> The best single source on the *qigong* movement is David Palmer, “‘La fièvre du qigong’”: *Guérison, religion, et politique en Chine contemporaine*, doctoral dissertation, École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris, 2002. See also Zhu Xiaoyang and Benjamin Penny (eds.), ‘The *Qigong* Boom’, *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*, No. 27 (autumn 1994); and Nancy N. Chen, ‘Urban Spaces and Experiences of *Qigong*’, in Deborah S. Davis (ed.), *Urban Spaces in Contemporary China* (Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> See Palmer on the history of the *qigong* movement. Also Zhu and Penny, ‘The *Qigong* Boom’, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Chen, ‘Urban Spaces and Experiences of *Qigong*’.

transformed into a mass experience. Masters were also quick to capitalise on the phenomenon in the newly vibrant Chinese economy, selling books, audio and video cassettes, and organising national and international tours to promote *qigong*. Practitioners, who could be seen in public parks and on university campuses, included the old and suffering as well as the young and curious. To my knowledge, no one has attempted to establish the sociological profile of *qigong* practitioners; my impression, based on extensive, if anecdotal, evidence, is that the profile would resemble that of the population as a whole. In other words, practitioners included men and women, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, powerful and powerless, urban and rural, Party and non-Party.

Although the boom began at roughly the same time as the religious revival, and for similar reasons, few Chinese thought of *qigong* as a 'religious' practice because of the particular meaning of 'religion' (*zongjiao*) in China. Historically, there was no Chinese term which corresponded to the general category of 'religion' in Western discourse. The closest equivalent would probably have been the word *jiao*, often translated as 'teachings,' but *jiao* appeared rarely alone and more often as a suffix (*rujiao*, Confucianism; *daojiao*, Daoism; *fojiao*, Buddhism). Traditional Chinese discourse distinguished between 'orthodox teachings' (*zhengjiao*) and 'heterodox teachings' (*xiejiao*, the term currently used to designate 'cults' or 'sects'), but not between the religious and the secular realms. The word currently employed in China to designate 'religion' came to China from the West via Japan, and designates institutional religions having a long history, an imposing church organisation and a body of doctrine. Indeed, the constitution of the People's Republic acknowledges only 'five great religions': Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism. To most Chinese, the very word 'religion' has a vaguely foreign or bureaucratic sound, and the idea of a 'new religious movement' makes little sense. Thus *qigong* practitioners do not 'believe in a religion' (*xinjiao*) as would members of a church. Instead, they 'cultivate' (*xiuyang*), a word that, even in translation, faithfully renders the connotation of prolonged physical, meditative, and moral practice.

If we set aside the history of the idea of religion in China, however, it is obvious that many *qigong* masters and practitioners drew on traditional spiritual teachings, which Western observers would call 'religious' whether the Chinese choose to or not. Moreover, as the movement developed and masters competed for the attention of potential followers, some masters began to produce books that sought not only to provide technical guidelines to proper *qigong* exercises, but also to explain why *qigong* worked. Although some of the explanations

remained attached to Chinese or Western medical traditions, others took a far more obviously spiritual direction, becoming, in the case of Li Hongzhi's writings, the equivalent of scriptures.

At the most basic level, Falun Gong is a variety of *qigong*, although Li Hongzhi emerged in 1992 to 'rectify' the larger *qigong* movement, which in his view was rife with false teachings and greedy and fraudulent 'masters'. Li's writings are highly sectarian, by which I mean that he understands himself and the Falun Gong in terms of a centuries-old tradition of (largely Buddhist) cultivation. Much of his message attacks those who teach incorrect, deviant or heterodox ways.

It is important to note that neither Li Hongzhi nor Falun Gong was particularly controversial in the beginning. Indeed, Li became an instant star of the *qigong* movement, celebrated at the Beijing Oriental Health Expos of 1992 and 1993. Falun Gong was welcomed into the Scientific *Qigong* Research Association, which sponsored and helped to organise many of Li's activities between 1992 and 1994. Notable among those activities were 54 large scale lectures given throughout China to a total audience of some 20,000.<sup>7</sup> Li's appeal at the outset seems to have been, as in many other cases, his promise to help followers toward better health. Like other masters, he charged admission to his lectures, although Falun Gong sources insist that his fees were much lower than those of other schools of *qigong*. And at some point, the success of Falun Gong meant that Li could stop charging admission fees and offer his vision freely to anyone who wished to attend. He and his movement lived by sales of books, video cassettes and other paraphernalia. In addition to offering his teachings free of charge, Li Hongzhi also sought to distinguish himself from other *qigong* masters by the character of his message; instead of improved health or supernatural powers as the goal of cultivation, he sought a larger theory of the history and meaning of cultivation. He also built a nationwide organisation of 'practice centres', which helped to keep local enthusiasm alive throughout the country as he continued his lecture tours. Some combination of marketing, message and organisation clicked, and the movement enjoyed a rapid and huge success. Li claimed that there were some 60 million practitioners in China by the end of 1994; later Chinese government estimates put the number at two million. Since the Falun Gong did not compile

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<sup>7</sup> See Falun Gong practitioners (comps. and eds.), *A Report on Extensive and Severe Human Rights Violations in the Suppression of Falun Gong in the People's Republic of China, 1999–2000* (Golden Lotus Press, 2000) pp. 98 ff. This is obviously a Falun Gong source, but to my knowledge, the basic facts in question here are undisputed.

membership statistics, there is no way to evaluate these competing claims. By all accounts, however, the movement became very popular very quickly, and, as subsequent events indicate, its importance is not in doubt.

In capsule form, Li's vision includes the following elements. First it claims to be profoundly moral. The very structure of the universe, according to Li Hongzhi, is made up of the moral qualities cultivators are enjoined to practice in their own lives: truth, compassion and forbearance. The goal of cultivation, and hence of life itself, is spiritual elevation, achieved by eliminating karma—the built-up sins of past and present lives which often manifest themselves in individuals as illness—and accumulating virtue. China and indeed the world have gone astray; some of Li's descriptions of this moral decline have apocalyptic overtones. Through cultivation, nonetheless, practitioners are promised personal harmony with the very substance of the universe. One finds few lists of dos and don'ts in Li's writings; nor are there sophisticated ethical discussions. Instead, followers are advised to rid themselves of unnecessary 'attachments', to do what they know is right and hence to return to 'the origin', to their 'original self'.

Second, Li Hongzhi's vision is presented not only as a return to a neglected spiritual tradition, but also as a major contribution to modern science, although I should hasten to add that few Western readers will find Li's science convincing and that Li himself ultimately rejects science as misleading and dangerous. Still, Li claims to have mastered the latest breakthroughs in scientific research, even if his chief goal is to call into question certain dichotomies (between matter and spirit, for example) central to the modern scientific paradigm in order to make space for his own vision, which most non-believers would surely label as more 'religious' than 'scientific'. Be that as it may, the scientific (or 'pseudo-scientific') flavour of Li's writings is indisputable and resonates with the romance of 'scientism' in modern Chinese history, the idea that science—the scientific method, scientific agriculture, scientific socialism—would bring about China's national salvation from backwardness and ineffectuality.<sup>8</sup>

Third, Falun Dafa promises practitioners supernatural powers. Li himself professes to possess many such powers. He promises to install a rotating 'wheel' in the stomach of each practitioner (the *lun* of Falun Gong means 'wheel'), which will purify the practitioner. Li also promises that his 'dharma bodies' (*fashen*)—essentially, other incarnations of his presence—will watch over practitioners, ensuring their

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<sup>8</sup> On science in modern Chinese history, see Danny W.Y. Kwok, *Scientism in Chinese Thought, 1900–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965).

physical safety and the efficacy of their cultivation. A wide range of other powers practitioners may achieve includes: the opening of the heavenly eye, which may enable practitioners to see into other spatial dimensions and/or through walls and other obstructions; the capacity to remove karma from family members or friends; and omniscience.<sup>9</sup> Probably the most common claim is that cultivation will bring practitioners consistent health and rejuvenate them; in several passages, Li seems to promise a sort of immortality in this world, an idea which many practitioners seem to embrace eagerly. However, supernatural powers are developed only as a result of moral practice and only if the practitioner does not strive to develop them. In other words, once someone sets his sights, say, on clairvoyance, its attainment becomes impossible. Abuse of the powers, once attained, is equally impossible because they disappear with the intent of wrongful use. Thus we see embodied in Li Hongzhi's Falun Gong what must surely be one of the oldest, most common, and most widely shared wishes in the world: that the righteous have the power.

Fourth, even as it expands throughout the world, Falun Dafa remains unabashedly Chinese, which is significant because its membership, even outside of China, is overwhelmingly Chinese (about 90 per cent in North America, although the ratios are apparently quite different in Europe). Both Falun Dafa and the larger *qigong* movement from which it emerged may well be understood as cultural revitalisation movements, that is, attempts, largely grounded in traditional religious culture, to revalorise certain aspects of China's cultural heritage in the wake of the perceived failure of China's revolution and its broad scale opening to the West.

To this point, my depiction of Falun Gong is based largely on my reading of Li Hongzhi's writings and on secondary literature on *qigong* and on other aspects of the religious revival in China. A more complete understanding of a new religious movement, however, requires fieldwork among practitioners. Prior to the political problems which resulted in its becoming an international *cause célèbre*, Falun Gong was only one among many *qigong* groups in China, and few researchers, with the possible exception of the Public Security Bureau in some parts of China, paid any particular attention to its organisation and practices. After the events of the spring and summer of 1999, when the Chinese government outlawed Falun Gong, any scientific, objec-

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<sup>9</sup> See *Zhuanfalun*, internet edition, 'Lecture Two: The Supernormal Capability of Clairvoyance'. Li Hongzhi's writings are available free of charge over the internet. Follow the links from any of the following addresses: [www.falundafa.org](http://www.falundafa.org), [www.falundafa.ca](http://www.falundafa.ca), [www.minghui.ca](http://www.minghui.ca), or [www.clearwisdom.net](http://www.clearwisdom.net).

tive research on the Falun Gong in China became of course impossible. As a result, it is quite difficult to speak with authority about the nature of Falun Gong organisation and practices in China between 1992 and 1997. I have attempted to interview practitioners in North America on these subjects, but few find such details significant, and most prefer to talk about the miracles wrought by Li Hongzhi and Falun Dafa practices. Consequently, I have done my fieldwork among Falun Gong groups in North America, hoping to get a sense of what Falun Gong means to practitioners, even as I acknowledge that, for a host of reasons, Falun Gong outside of China cannot be completely the same as Falun Gong inside China. Thus in what follows I will paint a brief portrait of North American practitioners, who they are and how they practice their cultivation system, based on fieldwork and on surveys circulated at two Falun Gong experience-sharing conferences, one in Montreal in February 2000 and a second at Toronto in May 2000.<sup>10</sup>

Let us begin by asking basic questions about Falun Gong practitioners: who are they, where are they geographically, what is their sociological profile?

The first part of the answer is that the Falun Gong in North America is a product of recent Chinese immigration. Despite the prominent place enjoyed by images of Western practitioners in Falun Gong literature, roughly 90 per cent of the North American membership is ethnically Chinese. Many of the Westerners seem to fit the profile of what we might call 'spiritual seekers', a large and apparently growing category of people who are dissatisfied with the teachings and practices of mainstream churches and try out a variety of 'new age' spiritual practices in the search for answers and meaning. For example, of the seven Western respondents to the questionnaire circulated at the Montreal experience-sharing conference in February 2000, all but one described a previous involvement in alternative spirituality, healing, or psychotherapy. Further interviews have seemed to confirm that many Western practitioners are experienced veterans of a series of new religious movements, including several eastern meditation groups. At the beginning of my research, I found this mixture of Western 'hippies' and the Chinese—who are extremely 'straight', in general, as I will demonstrate below—to be somewhat incongruous, and I have heard tales of Chinese practitioners who were uncomfortable with the Western practice of mixing and matching, or selectively practicing those

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<sup>10</sup> Some of the results from the Montreal survey are published in Susan Palmer and David Ownby, 'Falun Dafa Practitioners: A Preliminary Research Report', *Nova Religio*. Vol. 4, No. 1 (October 2000).

aspects of Falun Gong cultivation which they found appealing while ignoring the rest; and thus I have also heard of Western practitioners irritated with Chinese insistence that they take all parts of cultivation seriously. On the other hand, I have not heard many such tales, and to be fair, there are a number of Western practitioners who have been in the movement for as long as I have been researching it.

These Western practitioners have not been a particular focus of my research to date, and I will have little to say about them. Ultimately, it may be very important to the future of Falun Gong (as it has been, say to the Sokka Gakkai) to be able to attract non-Chinese members in North America, as the numbers of North American Chinese are, after all, limited. To date, it seems to me that Falun Gong has welcomed interested Westerners with open arms and, as I already mentioned, has featured images of them prominently on their web sites and other literature. On the other hand, I have seen nothing to suggest changes in doctrine or cultivation practice designed specifically to attract Westerners, most of whom must surely find their first encounter with *Zhuanfalun* or with any of Li Hongzhi's writings quite daunting in their esoteric Chineseness. Li Hongzhi himself states repeatedly in his writings that Chinese have an advantage over Westerners as potential practitioners because of their cultural background, which places fewer obstacles in the way of cultivation. In fact, many Falun Gong activities are divided into Chinese and foreign groups because most Chinese practitioners prefer to use Chinese and very few Western practitioners are capable of speaking Chinese. In any case, I have spoken with dedicated Western practitioners who seem to have mastered the ins and outs of Falun Gong doctrine as well as Chinese practitioners, suggesting that Falun Gong expansion in that direction is not impossible.

To return to the Chinese practitioners, most of them, according to surveys I have carried out, came to North America in the 1990s—76 per cent in the case of the Montreal survey; 81 per cent, in the case of the Toronto survey (if we stretch the 1990s back to 1989 in both cases). The surveys did not address the question of the reasons for wanting to leave China; in interviews, individual practitioners mentioned a variety of factors, all of which are fairly predictable: frustration with the slow pace of political change in China; anger with ongoing corruption; frustration with the lack of opportunity coupled with a desire to get ahead; frustration with the lack of idealism in contemporary Chinese society; desire to live in a less 'complicated' society. Most of these recent immigrants would have supported the democracy activists of 1989 in a general way, I suspect, but none with whom I have spoken identifies himself/herself as such



now, and no one with whom I have spoken mentions the events of 1989 as important to their personal history or to the history of the movement.

I suspect that an important common experience shared by this group is that of having experienced the *qigong* boom in China in the 1980s and 1990s. Some confirmation of this is the fact that Falun Gong has a considerable following in Taiwan, which was frequently visited by *qigong* masters, including Li Hongzhi, during the heyday of the *qigong* boom, but which had no direct experience of 1989 and its aftermath. Still, only 45 per cent of those responding to my surveys reported having practiced other forms of *qigong* prior to taking up Falun Dafa. In any case, most practitioners responding to my surveys began cultivation in North America rather than in China.

To continue with our profile of the Chinese practitioners, they are found in all major (and many minor) North American cities where there is a Chinese population. Falun Gong web sites enable one to get a sense of this geographic distribution by providing contact information across the continent (indeed, throughout the world) for anyone interested in taking up cultivation. Local groups do not, so far as I have been able to tell, attempt to keep up with how many practitioners there are in their areas. Practitioners are not 'members' of an 'organisation' and do not fill out a form at any point in their cultivation process; no central church registry asks for local statistics. Thus it is very difficult to estimate how many practitioners there might be continent-wide. The May 2001 experience-sharing conference in Ottawa, which drew practitioners chiefly from Toronto, New York, and Montreal, was attended by roughly 1000 practitioners, an impressive number. The Toronto conference of May 2000 was attended by perhaps 700 and the Montreal conference of February 2000 by perhaps 300. These numbers do not of course represent the totality of Falun Gong practitioners in the regions/cities in question, not all of whom are willing or able to attend experience-sharing conferences. On the other hand, my impression is that even major centres do not have more than a few hundred practitioners, and that the total number of Falun Gong practitioners in North America, were we to add them all together, would still be rather small, particularly in the context of the millions of followers claimed by Li Hongzhi. The millions are—or were—in China, and Falun Gong, like other new religious movements in North America, seems to have made few inroads as a mass movement.

More women than men filled out my questionnaires, by a ratio of roughly three to two, confirming my impression that there are more women than men among Chinese Falun Gong practitioners

in North America—but not to the point that a feminine presence dominates. The average age of those responding to my survey was slightly over 40; if we were to select out those who had immigrated from 1989 on, the average age would probably be younger still. Most North American Chinese practitioners are extremely well educated: almost 40 per cent of those I surveyed have undergraduate university degrees; when we add in M.A.s and Ph.D.s, the percentage rises to almost 70 per cent who have *at least* an undergraduate degree. By contrast, only 17.4 per cent of the Canadian population twenty-five years and older has completed university, according to the 1996 census.<sup>11</sup> Income levels in general reflect Falun Gong practitioners' high level of education; almost 10 per cent of Chinese practitioners surveyed at the Toronto meeting reported that their household income from 1999 exceeded \$100,000 (Canadian dollars); more than one-fourth reported earning \$60,000 or more. By way of comparison, the average total income of persons reporting income in Canada, according to the 1996, census was \$25,196; thus a household where both husband and wife worked would earn slightly more than \$50,000.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, 30.7 per cent of Falun Gong practitioners reported earning \$20,000 or less (as befits a group of recent immigrants, many of whom are still in school) and 43.4 per cent report earning between \$20,000 and \$60,000. Asked to compare their standard of living in Canada with that in China, 43 per cent of Chinese respondents at the Toronto conference replied that their standard was higher in Canada, 21 per cent said that their standard of living had been higher in China, and 35 per cent replied that their standard of living had been little affected by immigration. According to the surveys, roughly four-fifths of the Chinese practitioners in Canada are married, and about half live together with their spouses and children (this number is surely low because of the high number of recent immigrants within the movement). In sum, Falun Gong as practiced by Chinese in Canada is a bourgeois movement; the stereotypical practitioner lives in the suburbs and drives a Ford Taurus to her job in computers or finance. Those still in school share similar orientations and aspirations to those already in the workplace.

Let us turn now to the nature of Falun Gong practice in North America. The average Chinese practitioner in Canada is quite dedicated, and claims to devote two hours per day to Falun Gong activities. More than half (56 per cent) of these activities take the form of

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<sup>11</sup> <http://ceps.statcan.ca/english/profil>

<sup>12</sup> <http://ceps.statcan.ca/english/profil>

individual practice, 33 per cent of the time is spent in group practice, and slightly less than 13 per cent in proselytising or publicising Falun Gong.

Individual practice means just what it seems to mean: practitioners who are too busy, or too isolated, to participate in group activities, or who simply prefer to cultivate on their own, read and reread Li Hongzhi's works (chiefly *Zhuanfalun*, but also his 'new scriptures' which appear via the web sites of the movement) on their own, or do the exercises, or watch videos by themselves or with family members at home. Indeed, even Falun Gong group activities involve large amounts of reading—collective or individual—of Li Hongzhi's scriptures, as a part of the ritual the group has established. Even at crowded group meetings, where there may be any number of discussion groups in a variety of locales, one can often find Falun Gong practitioners who have chosen simply to sit by themselves in a chair and (re)read *Zhuanfalun*. One can also run across practitioners who have chosen to meditate in these noisy group settings, but in my experience, those who read Li Hongzhi's works are more numerous. It seems to me, in fact, that the spiritual experience of Falun Gong is largely a binary one between practitioner and Master Li, mediated by Li's works in book (and less frequently, video) form. The Falun Gong organisation seems in general to be important for instrumental reasons, but not necessarily for spiritual ones; in any case, I have not had the sense that personal relations among Falun Gong members during group events are particularly intense, even if they are perfectly amicable. Survey data confirms this impression: when asked to identify what attracted them to Falun Gong, the option 'Falun Gong community' consistently placed last, among other options to be mentioned below. I have also noticed that while Western practitioners frequently evoke family metaphors and the warmth often associated with such metaphors in their discussion of Falun Gong, Chinese practitioners in general do not.

In any case, the individual dimension of Falun Gong practice, whatever its considerable importance, is the most difficult dimension for the researcher to investigate. Group activities consist of the following. Daily exercise practices: these are informal, involving groups of practitioners who live close to one another and/or know one another and who gather, often very early in the morning, even throughout the cold Canadian winters, to do the Falun Gong exercises,.

Weekly meetings: these are often held Friday evenings or Saturdays, in whatever space practitioners can find, be it the common area of apartment buildings or a classroom in a high school or university building. The main activities at such meetings are the performance

of exercises and group reading of Li Hongzhi's writings. The group readings seem to occupy a more important place than the exercises, in the meetings I have attended. There may also be discussions, on occasion, but discussions of spiritual matters often tend not to be very lively; members are more likely to turn to scripture or to keep their own counsel than to debate different understandings of scripture or practice. In part, this may result from the stricture against preaching, or indeed against any spiritual leadership other than that of Li Hongzhi himself; no one is allowed to speak in his name. By contrast, there may be considerable discussion of the organisation of whatever Falun Gong events are in the offing, as these weekly meetings are the closest thing to a regular 'congregational experience' that North American Falun Gong groups seem to have.

Beyond regular daily and weekly activities, experience-sharing conferences are an important expression of Falun Gong organisation and practice. These conferences are organised periodically by Falun Gong groups in major centres: Toronto, New York, Washington, Boston and Montreal, to speak only of the northeastern quadrant of North America, will each host an experience-sharing conference loosely in rotation. These conferences are announced via the Falun Gong web sites as well as by word of mouth. Falun Gong practitioners travel considerable distances to attend these conferences, which serve as important occasions for members to exchange experiences, renew friendships, meet new members and discuss issues important to the Falun Gong. I suspect that such conferences are particularly important given the relatively small size of Falun Gong communities: Montreal has only a few dozen consistently active members; Toronto, a major North American centre, at best a few hundred. The costs of such conferences are borne by the local community, so far as I can tell, by passing the hat among the most affluent members. Here it helps that the movement is fairly wealthy. Sometimes participants are asked to pay for meals, which are provided by the locals; other times not. Buses will be rented if, for example, large numbers of practitioners are coming from Toronto to Montreal. Members in host cities will help to arrange housing for those visiting from other cities. I should add that Falun Gong founder Li Hongzhi appears not infrequently at experience-sharing conferences, the only occasions where most practitioners will ever see him in person. These appearances stopped during the height of the suppression campaign against Falun Gong, but have resumed since the fall of 2000. Li's visits are unannounced, and he leaves immediately after addressing the practitioners.

The core of an experience-sharing conference, whether or not Li Hongzhi makes an appearance, is a series of narratives of personal

spiritual experience, delivered before the assembled group. There were 25 or so presented at the Montreal conference, and roughly the same number of presentations were made at Toronto and at Ottawa, of durations ranging between 10 and 30 minutes. It takes most of a full day. All of the witness statements are written down and submitted beforehand to conference organisers, primarily in order that they be translated from or to Chinese, English and sometimes French, depending on the venue—but also, one suspects, so that conference organisers can make sure that there will not be inappropriate statements. These translations are broadcast over FM frequencies (headphones are provided) at the same time that the speaker delivers (usually by reading a text) his or her narrative in the native language. The effect is fairly formal and intellectual; a graduate seminar is a closer parallel than a revival meeting, and if there can indeed be applause and/or tears on occasion, people also fall asleep, and are allowed to do so. This format is again perhaps a result of the fact that Falun Gong has no ‘preachers’ or ‘spiritual leaders’ other than Li Hongzhi himself; indeed, Li does not allow practitioners to ‘translate’ his writings for others, preferring that the prospective practitioner confront Li’s writings directly. On the other hand, I have noticed that Protestant ceremonies, at least in rural China, also include a lengthy portion devoted to personal witness statements. In the case both of Protestant ceremonies and Falun Gong events, the emphasis in the witness statement is most frequently on the direct, visible efficacy of practice.

Some speakers at Falun Gong experience-sharing conferences have rather remarkable personal experiences to relate. One spoke of feeling so compelled to return to China to speak out against the government’s campaign of suppression that he left Montreal in the dead of night, in the middle of winter, on the eve of his final exams, leaving only a note for his wife and child. A frequent theme is that of having to make difficult choices between the need to ‘stay in the world’, as Li Hongzhi counsels—to go to work, be a supportive parent or child—and the need to serve and protect the ‘way’, the *fā*. The above-mentioned testimony of the young man who returned to China on the eve of his exams falls into this category, as he had to balance his felt need to be in China against his multiple obligations in Canada. More typical perhaps was the testimonial of a mid-level software engineer at Nortel, a major Canadian computing firm, who was involved in a major code-rewriting project at the moment of the initial campaigns by the Chinese government against Falun Gong. This was a particularly acute conflict in his case, as he was one of the relatively few practitioners in Ottawa, spoke fluent English, and was expected to approach Members of Parliament and other government agencies.

Although cast in the language of the career-oriented workaholic, I found his testimony very moving as tears came to his eyes when he described having to explain his situation to his superior and to ask for time off to deal with the crisis in China. Moreover, toward the end of his testimony, he recounted his realisation that he had gotten through the conflict by, among other things, passing increasing amounts of household responsibility onto his aging mother—and he vowed to do better in the future. This again underscores the common motif of a spiritual journey, carried out through the travails and conflicts of daily life. The idea is that while the practitioner had believed that he or she was doing his best, he had learned that he could do more, that the *fa* had to be respected and served in all aspects of life. Indeed, I would estimate that the majority of witness statements delivered by Chinese practitioners are varieties on the theme of ‘coming to know the *fa* through personal practice in difficult circumstances’.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the testimonials, experience-sharing conferences also include group discussion sessions, although these seem quite readily to turn into either scripture-reading or testimonial sessions.

Other group cultivation activities include the nine day video introduction to Falun Gong. This is as much part of proselytising as group cultivation. It involves experienced practitioners’ showing the nine lectures that make up *Zhuanfalun* to new recruits, every day for nine days, two hours a day. I have not yet participated in such an event. The contents of the message is the same as that learned in reading the book (indeed, the book is an edited form of the transcription of Li’s lectures in China). There are also conferences called ‘country-wide assistants and contact persons group intensive study and experience-sharing’, presumably designed for those who feel called to active participation in the organisation of Falun Gong activities. I have not participated in these either.

Falun Gong groups in North America also engage in a wide range of activities which they refer to as *hongfa*, which can be translated as ‘making known the Law’, or perhaps ‘proselytising’, although I should hasten to add that practitioners are *in general* less interested in converting people than, say, the fervent Southern Baptists among whom I grew up in the Bible Belt of the American South. Part of this may be Chinese reticence, or language difficulty, but part of it comes also from the Falun Gong belief that those who come to know the Law are destined to do so (this is a very common Chinese belief and not unique to the Falun Gong). In any case, most of their *hongfa* activities

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<sup>13</sup> Large numbers of these testimonials are available on Falun Gong websites, especially [www.clearwisdom.net](http://www.clearwisdom.net).

seem to be designed to publicise Falun Gong, to get it in the public eye, to take control of the image of Falun Gong in the public arena. I assume that such activities have accelerated since the spring of 1999, as a major motivation is to combat the label ‘cult’, which the Chinese government has sought with some success to attach to Falun Gong.

*Hongfa* activities can range from individual efforts—handing out fliers in a shopping mall or at a subway station, doing demonstrations of the exercises in a public library—to much larger affairs requiring considerably more organisation, such as parades through downtown streets or demonstrations in public places: Parliament Hill in Ottawa, the mall in Washington DC, before Chinese embassies and consulates throughout the world. Practitioners are by now quite practiced at such things, and local police with whom I have spoken praise the Falun Gong for their respect of municipal regulations and their attention to detail. Among other things, Falun Gong groups are very careful to clean up after an activity, not to leave, for example, the detritus of a collective lunch in a public park on the grounds for the staff to handle. This happens spontaneously, voluntarily, and, indeed, contrasts radically with what one often observes in public places in China, which are often treated with scant respect. I should add that many *hongfa* activities also have a cultivation component: exercising in a public place, for instance, piques public interest, makes the Falun Gong known, etc. Thus it is hard to draw a clear line between the two spheres.

In sum, Falun Gong life as lived in North America is—or at least can be—extremely active with many events scheduled outside of work hours, on evenings and weekends. On the other hand, Falun Gong practitioners do not appear to be any more ‘frenzied’ than are fervent members of other churches. Reflecting back on my experience as a young Southern Baptist thirty-five years ago, I recall that there was church on Wednesday evenings and Sunday mornings, Vacation Bible School in the summer, retreats year-round for those who were interested. In short, this, too, could be quite consuming. Falun Gong events, at least in North America, have always struck me as well balanced. People appear glad to be there; I have never had the sense that anyone was constrained to attend. Indeed, I have attended last minute rehearsals, the night before the big event, when one would expect tempers to be short and the atmosphere to be tense. Such is not the case: the atmosphere was instead like that of a local community dramatic production, but where there were no clashing egos and everyone wanted to the play to come off well.

What do Falun Gong members draw from their experience? What has drawn these materially comfortable people to contribute their

time and money (I repeat that contributions appear to be voluntary) to such an all-absorbing cause? According to my surveys, when asked what attracted them to Falun Gong, respondents named—in order of popularity—‘the intellectual content of Li Hongzhi’s ideas’, followed by ‘the spiritual enlightenment offered by Falun Gong’, ‘health benefits’ and ‘Falun Gong exercises’. Neither ‘Master Li’ nor the ‘Falun Gong community’—two other choices available on the questionnaire—figured significantly. More than one third indicated that their ‘heavenly eye’ had opened, indicating considerable interest in supernormal powers. While my survey was not designed to measure motivation and commitment, general impressions, based on interviews and time spent with Falun Gong practitioners, are that many were initially led to Falun Gong for health reasons (this is particularly true for older practitioners), and that the positive effects practitioners experienced on their health served as an important test, for them, of the efficacy of the practice. They were equally impressed that they did not have to pay for these benefits. But if practice begins with the suffering body, it does not end there. Indeed, for many practitioners, *Zhuanfalun* genuinely contains the secret of life, whether life is understood as the physical functioning of the universe, or the meaning of human life as lived. There is no doubt that practitioners appreciate the global ambitions of Li Hongzhi’s theology, by which I mean his efforts to embed human moral practice in a schema which embraces the universe, both past and present. Practitioners also appreciate the positive sanction for moral behaviour; in the same way that many Chinese took socialism to mean ‘being nice to people’ in an earlier era, many practitioners take comfort in goodness, truth and forbearance. For some, the fact that cultivation leads to supernormal abilities is important, but this does not come up often in many of the conversations I have had (of course, media-savvy practitioners may filter what they say, knowing that they are dealing with a non-practicing, sceptical academic).

Of my original hypotheses concerning Falun Gong practice there is one at least that I have *not* found to be confirmed. I had thought that Falun Gong adhesion in North America might represent a response to the marginalisation which often accompanies the immigrant experience, that participation in Falun Gong might be a way to remain culturally Chinese in the face of cultural loss. This hypothesis might be supported by the datum that the majority of Falun Gong practitioners who responded to my surveys began cultivation in North America rather than in China. However, as I spent time with practitioners, I got no sense whatsoever that they had felt marginalised. The Toronto Chinese community numbers some 335,000, accord-



ing to the 1996 census, and these numbers, plus the sense of cultural confidence which many Chinese—even sojourning Chinese—possess seems to mean that even if Chinese are ‘marginal’ as a minority in some objective sense of the term, this does not seem to be an important feature of their mental landscape. Or if it is, I have yet to find its expression.

### *Concluding Remarks*

My overall impression, from having spent considerable time with Chinese-Canadian and Chinese-American practitioners, is one of innocence. These are people who have discovered what is to them the truth of the universe. They have arrived freely at this discovery, and if they change their mind, they are free to go on to something else. The Falun Gong community seems to be supportive, but not constraining, at least not beyond the peer pressure which exists in many group situations; there is no visible power structure which might chastise a misbehaving practitioner, nor do practitioners tell one another what to do, or what to believe. Falun Gong spirituality in North America seems to be an individual rather than a group affair, mediated by Li Hongzhi’s scriptures. Were Li present in the everyday lives of practitioners, this could well change, as they accord him a devotion which would make many Westerners uncomfortable. But Li has *not* been physically present in their lives with the exception of rare appearances at experience-sharing conferences, and as a result, most practitioners seem to have taken responsibility for themselves.

This essay has not examined the political aspects of the Falun Gong experience, in part because these aspects have perhaps been over-emphasised in much of the media attention to Falun Gong. Instead, my goal has been to illustrate the larger context—the *qigong* boom—in which Falun Gong emerged and developed in China, suggesting implicitly that whatever has been made of Falun Gong in the media, it was in fact in the beginning no more nor less than one among many organised movements which attracted large numbers of participants and earned the initially positive sanction of the state. Fieldwork among practitioners in North America suggests in general that the movement is largely what practitioners declare it to be. This does not of course mean that troubled people may not be drawn to the movement, nor even that certain groups in what is an extremely decentralised, *under-organised* phenomenon might not conceivably engage in certain abusive practices. Nor does this mean that Falun Gong has not become extremely politicised, even if this

appears to be largely *in response to* the campaign launched by the Chinese state. In any case, this essay suggests the value of taking a group's self-image as a starting point for serious research.

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