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# Falun Gong in the United States: An Ethnographic Study

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FALUN GONG IN THE UNITED STATES: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

by

NOAH PORTER

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Anthropology  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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## FALUN GONG IN THE UNITED STATES: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

Noah Porter

### ABSTRACT

Falun Gong, also known as Falun Dafa, has been described in many ways. It has been called *qigong*, one of many schools of physical exercises that aim at improving health and developing “supernatural abilities.” Scholars and mainstream media have referred to it as a “spiritual movement” or religion, although practitioners claim it is not a religion. It has been called a cult, in the pejorative sense rather than in a sociological context, by the Chinese government and by some Western critics. In the writings of Li Hongzhi, the founder of Falun Gong, it is referred to in different ways, though primarily as a “cultivation practice.”

The question of how to define Falun Gong is not just an academic issue; the use of the cult label has been used to justify the persecution of practitioners in China. To a limited degree, the Chinese Government is able to extend the persecution overseas. How society defines Falun Gong has implications for action on the level of policy, as well as the shaping of social, cultural, and personal attitudes.

This research project addresses what Falun Gong is through ethnography. Research methods included participant-observation, semi-structured ethnographic interviews (both in-person and on-line), and content analysis of text and visual data from Falun Gong books, pamphlets, and websites. Research sites included Tampa, Washington D.C., and “cyberspace.” In order to keep my research relevant to the issues and concerns of the Falun Gong community, I was in regular contact with the Tampa practitioners, keeping them abreast of my progress and asking for their input.

My findings are contrary to the allegations made by the Chinese Government and Western anti-cultists in many ways. Practitioners are not encouraged to rely on Western medicine, but are not prohibited from using it. Child practitioners are not put at risk. Their organizational structure is very loose. Finally, the Internet has played a vital role in Falun Gong’s growth and continuation after the crackdown.



## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Amy Lee gives many of the interviews in Chinese, which are translated for American audiences, but she struggles to speak in English. She only began speaking English last March when she arrived in the United States, smuggled out of China with the help of a Western journalist. She practices by reading her press statement aloud, mouthing the words slowly and repeating them. Occasionally, she asks how to pronounce certain words. They are words like "surveillance," "unconscious" and "comatose."

– Rose Farley, “Unlocking the Gong” [2001: 5]

The history drenched parks of the capital now played stage to a new scene as Public Safety thugs, plain clothed and uniformed swarmed in en-masse, rounding up the usual suspects - defenseless Chinese people - checking ID cards and asking "Are you Falun Gong?" An affirmative answer won the speaker a free trip in the "people's safety school bus." Official Chinese media fell in line, demonizing the sect and praising the government's swift bud-nipping. Thanks to the party's resolution, the people of China were safe from the threat of stationary mobs of peaceful chi-gong practitioners.

– Joshua Samuel Brown, “Falun Gong: Ancient Wisdom or Mere Scientology?” [2000]

Falun Gong, also known as Falun Dafa, has been described in many different ways. It has been called qigong, which is a type of slow-moving exercises that typically also regulate breathing that originated in China. It has been called a religion, or sometimes more specifically a “quasi-Buddhist sect” (Lam 2001a). It has also been called a cult, in the pejorative sense rather than in a sociological context, by the Chinese government and by some Western anti-cultists like psychologist Margaret Singer. In the writings of Li Hongzhi, their “leader,” it is referred to in different ways, though primarily as a “cultivation” practice.

Falun Gong practitioners have been making their voice heard in the media in the United States and other countries, but in my experience, they are not being given adequate regard by many social scientists.

Danny Schechter (2001) wrote a book entitled *Falun Gong's Challenge to China: Spiritual Practice or 'Evil Cult'?* that makes a genuine attempt to sort through the conflicting accounts of events:

I published several essays and articles specifically on the media coverage because I felt the media was not doing a very good job of covering this story. Western media tended to use the same frames of reference that China was using, cult, sect, etc. As a consequence, it was pejorative. It was presenting Falun Gong as something that no right-minded person would be interested in. They compared it to what happened in Waco, Texas. This made

me suspicious. This isn't fair and it is a very superficial labeling of these people. [Yoon and Schechter 2001]

However, he is a journalist, and journalists are “already suspect in academic circles” (Shankman 2001: 49), which may make academics reluctant to consider him a reliable source. Indeed, if we look at Patsy Rahn’s (2001a: 241-242) review of Schechter’s book, we can see that she is critical of Schechter’s claims to objectivity and his omission of the aspects of Falun Gong that Rahn herself finds troubling.

With a few exceptions, (e.g., Chen 2000; Frank 2002), anthropologists have generally had little to say about Falun Gong. John Young (2002) tends to support official Chinese definitions: “The Chinese government for several years afforded the notorious Falun Gong movement a large measure of freedom, even though it fits the classic definition of a militant cult that gives little freedom of thought to its members, similar to the Branch Davidians, or Jim Jones’ People’s Temple...” (Young 2002: 31) Young cites a book called *Li Hongzhi and His 'Falun Gong:' Deceiving the Public and Ruining Lives* by Ji Shi, which has been described by some as a “relentless barrage of propaganda from China's entirely state-run media” (Associated Press 1999; also see Cheng 2002). Young (2002) calls a protest frequently described as peaceful “an anti-government demonstration” (p. 31) and says that China’s current materialist obsession leaves them open to “exploitation by a charismatic cult leader” (p. 31).

Patsy Rahn, a critic of Falun Gong from UCLA, listed four areas she feels are problematic about Falun Gong:

1. Li's absolute authority
2. A strong us/them division with a highly negative view of "ordinary" people
3. An environment conducive to abandoning medical care
4. The use of misinformation to influence practitioners [Rahn 2000]

Her report concludes by saying, “I feel it would be beneficial for the press to continue to broaden its coverage of the Falun Gong beyond the human rights issues in China, and for research to be done on the group here in the United States” (Rahn 2000). After publication, Rahn’s paper “has immediately been taken hold off and distorted by the Xinhua Newsagency, which maintains a special section on (or rather against) the Falun Gong” (ter Haar 2001: sec. 3). Her report, both its content and what was done with it afterwards, clearly shows that more research on Falun Gong practitioners is needed. I hope my research helps to rectify this situation.

Hinton (2002) writes, “our most fundamental enterprise—examining and characterizing human similarity and difference—may serve as the basis for horrendous deeds” (p. 18). In the past, anthropologists have not always taken a stand against harsh persecution. For example, Eugen Fischer, an anthropologist in Nazi Germany, was initially impressed with people of mixed “race.” However, “[his] opinion was not looked upon with favor from those in the Hitler regime, and over a relatively short time his statements changed, until he had brought himself in line with government policy” (Schafft 2002: 124). I have been told, both by practitioners and non-practitioners, that scholars who write on Falun Gong are placed in a similar position by the Chinese government; “[the] alternative for those who could not or would not stand with official policy was to be removed from any serious endeavor and to be regarded with suspicion by the police state” (2002: 125). For writing this thesis, I have been told I will almost certainly end up on China’s blacklist, and therefore be barred from entering the country for life. Madsen (2000: 247) noted that scholars writing on Falun Gong are given the basic criticisms they are required to write, and then they flesh out the criticisms with their own knowledge. Scholars and journalists who go along with the Chinese Communist Party’s [CCP] party line on controversial issues like Falun Gong are rewarded (Brady 2000: 952-954). To do otherwise would likely put them in a precarious position with the Chinese government. However, I contend throughout this thesis that Falun Gong practitioners, while they have spiritual beliefs that may seem odd to outsiders, are peaceful people who have not done anything to justify this sort of persecution.

However, one issue I should note that I am still a bit uncertain about is how my thesis will be received. One Chinese person, a non-practitioner, expressed concern that by being critical of the crackdown on Falun Gong, I could be perceived as being anti-China. Danny Schechter reported receiving such criticisms for his book (2001: 9). Some have suggested that the human rights criticisms between the United States and China are “not a big deal” and have simply become a public relations game of mutual fingerwagging (Chen 2003 ). Others, however, do see such criticisms a big deal, and believe that criticisms by the United States do not help human rights in China. Wyse (2000) wrote: “many Chinese believe that their wish to cooperate with the U.S.A. is doomed to failure...The ongoing pressure to explain to CNN reporters why [China] does this or that, is wearing tolerance towards outsiders thing, especially about issues considered ‘none of an outsider’s business.’ One of these issues is religious freedom” (p. 278-279).

Young (2002) wrote that the most effective way to deal with Chinese leaders in the area of human rights is “to give them face in public coupled with discreet private requests” (p. 29). However, who exactly is going to make discreet private requests to help Falun Gong if allegations against it gain a foothold in public opinion? Scholars and politicians with ties to China must be aware of Falun Gong’s situation if they are to be able to critically evaluate Falun Gong and be motivated to take action on behalf of it.

At the same time, I understand the concerns of the Chinese reader who was very worried about what sort of impression of China my thesis would leave in the reader’s mind. I admit that since the focus of my paper is on Falun Gong, and the information necessary to contextualize Falun Gong is sometimes unfavorable to the Chinese government (or at least certain elements of it), it may not make for pleasant reading for Chinese with strong, nationalistic feelings. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to cover the positive accomplishments made by the CCP, although I would encourage readers who are unfamiliar with recent Chinese history to seek out such materials. In addition, I would like to point out that this thesis is written more towards an academic audience, not a popular audience. This is partly because I do not believe that the current books written on Falun Gong have been extensive and nuanced enough to address the concerns of social scientists. I believe that the primary audience for my thesis would not judge China solely based on one source.

To quote Deng and Fang (2000), “Should other researchers happen to share our interpretations, they do not have to repeat this painstaking process so that they can directly address their particular concerns; should they disagree, this lengthy process would also lay out the basis to identify any differences” (p. 2). While I strongly disagree with many of their criticisms, I agree with the sentiments they express in this sentence. My intention in writing this is not to make China look bad, but simply to prevent Falun Gong from being made to look bad based on accusations that do not fit with my research findings. Once a better understanding of Falun Gong is achieved, it is in the hands of others to decide what should be done.

One interesting question I have been asked is what I think the prospects are for reconciliation between Falun Gong and the Chinese government. Unfortunately, Jiang Zemin seems to have invested a lot in the persecution, and therefore he may be unwilling to admit he made a mistake. Since even Chinese leaders who have stepped down still have considerable influence, it may not be possible for other CCP

members to look into a compromise until the next generation of Chinese leadership is fully in power. However, if the CCP members would be willing to open a dialogue with Li Hongzhi, I believe a compromise could be reached. The CCP's concerns and Falun Gong's concerns do not seem to be entirely incompatible; both are concerned with the fate of China (Palmer 2003: 359), and their efforts would seem to be better spent trying to help the country than fighting each other.

## CHAPTER 2: METHODS

### Establishing Rapport

I have made previous contact with practitioners before beginning this study. In the fall of 2001, I made a 21-minute video about Falun Gong, featuring four practitioners and one Chinese person who had a negative opinion of Falun Gong from the Chinese media. The practitioners generally liked my video, and I think the video helped to establish rapport for me going into the more detailed thesis research. Since the central goal of my research is to help non-practitioners understand practitioners in the United States from the perspective of practitioners, establishing rapport was a vital first step, which all my methods built upon. Collier and Collier (1986) also recognized the usefulness of the visual image in establishing rapport: “Early stages of fieldwork usually involve meeting strangers in a strange land. This initial experience is one of diplomacy and orientation, introducing ourselves to people and gaining local knowledge and clearance to begin our research...Photography can accelerate this entry process” (p. 15).

### Methods Used and Research Setting

The first phase of my project took place in Tampa, Florida. I used participant-observation at two practice sites in Tampa. The first was on the University of South Florida campus, where every weekday there was an hour-long scheduled practice session near the engineering building. The second was at a nearby park in Tampa, where the sessions typically last 3 hours. Between January 16 and March 26, 2002, I estimate that I have spent over 54 hours doing participant-observation at the practice sessions, involving the exercises, readings, informal conversations with practitioners, and so forth. In addition, I went to a special event put on by the Falun Gong practitioners in cooperation with Amnesty International that consisted of a

question and answer session about Falun Gong, a video made by Falun Gong practitioners about the crackdown, and a play about human rights violations called “One For the Road.”

I also used unstructured life history interviews with Jianping Chu and Qiaoyun Zheng, two of the practitioners who attend both practice sites. These interviews helped to provide me with a better idea of the cultural context of the background that the overseas Chinese came from.

I have also tried to reconstruct the history of Falun Gong. Although it has only been in existence (or, as practitioners believe, revealed to the public) since 1992, and only in the last few years has it received much international attention, it would be impossible given the research time frame for me to examine all that has been written on Falun Gong. I tended to focus on Falun Gong websites more to understand their history as they see it; in picking and choosing what events to represent Falun Gong in this paper, I chose ones that I thought were historically influential to the outcome of events, and that may shape the behavior of practitioners here in the United States.

I used a semi-structured interview with 27 questions at the Tampa practice site to explore particular issues about the Falun Gong community, such as how and to what degree practitioners organize themselves, what role the Internet plays in the culture of Falun Gong, how active and in what ways have they been promoting their beliefs and plight, and how their beliefs have affected their health care practices. In total, 15 semi-structured interviews were collected during this phase of my research, 12 of which were from the Tampa site, one of which was from a traveler who visited the site once and the other was incomplete. Of the three not collected at the Tampa site during this phase of my research, one was an e-mail interview with a practitioner in China, and two were interviews with Orlando practitioners. Of the 10 Tampa practitioner interviews, only one was conducted by e-mail. Of the other nine, four were conducted in one-on-one tape recorded sessions, and the other four practitioners were interviewed as a group. I believe this was appropriate because these four Falun Gong practitioners were friends with each other, and in fact, two were married to each other. Interviewing couples together was helpful because in at least one instance, one added something that the other forgot to mention.

A 42-question protocol was used in conducting semi-structured interviews with 17 Falun Dafa practitioners in the Washington D.C. area. This interview protocol was an expanded version of the interview protocol used in my research on the Tampa practitioners from January 2002 to April 2002.

Deciding what questions were relevant to use on this interview protocol came from two sources: first and foremost, questions were tailored to address allegations made by the critics of Falun Gong. Second, drawing inspiration from an article written by Pitchford, et al. (2001), I wished to know the sort of information that a sociologist of religion might be interested in to understand Falun Gong. This expanded interview protocol had several question groupings: background information, Falun Gong awareness promotion, health care, Internet usage, social structure, and miscellaneous questions mostly related to beliefs. Because Falun Dafa is rather amorphous in terms of its social structure, it is difficult if not impossible to use any sort of sampling other than a convenience sample. There is no hierarchy keeping lists of who is officially a practitioner and who is not; who is a practitioner is a matter of self-selection and group consensus based on the teachings of Li Hongzhi. As a result, it is difficult to say how representative these 17 practitioners are of practitioners nationwide, except for me to say that I captured a fair amount of variation in age, nationality, duration of practice, and other characteristics.

Participant-observation was also used in Washington, D.C. during this second phase of my research. I frequently attended the Saturday and Sunday practice sessions during the months of May, June, and July, which took place on the national Mall, between the Capitol Building and the Washington Monument. From my fieldwork in Tampa, I had a rough idea of how to do the exercises. This knowledge was refined by a tutorial session during the first practice session I went to, and then later by another tutorial session at the home of Richard, one of the contact people for the D.C. area, in early May. Aside from Richard's house, I also went to two special events put on by the D.C. practitioners: one was the Falun Dafa day that took place on May 13, celebrating the 10th anniversary of the introduction of Falun Dafa to the public, and the other was on July 20th, marking the anniversary of the crackdown on Falun Dafa in 1999. In addition, I also went to the Chinese embassy, where practitioners were protesting the way practitioners had been prevented from appearing in public when Jiang Zemin came to visit Iceland, although this was not a planned event for them. Field notes were taken during these session, though I tried not to be obtrusive.

Pictures were also taken with a digital camera. Because it would be impractical to obtain permission from all practitioners, especially those who do not speak English, and the exercises were performed in a public area, seemingly chosen because of the high volume of tourists and other passersby, informed consent for pictures did not seem necessary. Had anyone requested that their picture not be used,



I would have honored their request. That situation did not arise, however. Also, before taking any pictures inside of a practitioner's home, I obtained their verbal permission. Recognizing that "single images do not provide us with the character of people's relationships with each other, the quality of their interactions, the behavioral give and take of culture in motion" (Collier and Collier 1986: 84), the use of images was used primarily as a supplement to field notes in the data collection process, and as a supplement to textual descriptions in this thesis.

The third and final phase of my research took place both on-line and with the Tampa practitioners with whom I had established rapport. I believe the ethnographic picture of Falun Gong would have been incomplete if I did not take into account the virtual dimension of their social interactions more fully. In the first two phases of my research, I found that out of the 31 practitioners I interviewed, 26 of them reported checking Falun Gong websites often (defined as once a month or more, though most reported checking much more often than that), three reported checking rarely (defined as less than once a month), and only two reported never checking Falun Gong websites. This shows the importance of Falun Gong websites in the lives of practitioners. The websites themselves are a place where practitioners can submit articles for others to read, creating a virtual community that transcends locality. I have heard anecdotes from practitioners about reading someone's articles, and then meeting them at an experience-sharing conference, already knowing a bit about them. The first part of my Internet research consisted of daily readings of Falun Gong websites. In doing so, I developed a better understanding of how Falun Gong practitioners choose to represent themselves to other practitioners, how practitioners interpret the writings of Li Hongzhi, and how Falun Gong as a virtual community responds to world events.

The other part of my Internet research consisted of more semi-structured interviews, which used a revised version of the semi-structured interview protocol I used in my D.C. research. Through my research in Tampa and D.C., I had been refining my understanding of Falun Gong, and I was then able to develop an interview protocol that is more custom-tailored to the reality of Falun Gong beliefs and practices. For example, one question I asked on previous versions of the interview protocol was, "What kinds of illnesses or injuries do you think you would get medical treatment for if you had them?" Through the responses to this question, I discovered that there were several important distinctions related to medical care that I was not making. Non-practitioners see getting an illness as a possibility, while some practitioners did not. In

terms of self-diagnosis, most non-practitioners see the symptoms of illness as a sign of illness, while practitioners might see minor symptoms as merely the product of karma being cleansed from their bodies. Some practitioners also had different feelings in regards to the likelihood and treatment of physical injuries like broken bones versus contracting an illness. Since I had become aware of these distinctions, I was able to use a semi-structured interview protocol that was better able to capture these variations.

As for how this semi-structured interview protocol was distributed to the Falun Gong virtual community, it was not a difficult problem to solve. The main Falun Gong website ([www.falundafa.org](http://www.falundafa.org)) gives the e-mail addresses of practitioners all over the country (and even the world, although non-U.S. e-mail addresses were not utilized in this study) who agreed to be the contact person for their area. Oftentimes, a web page URL for local area will be given as well, and on this page, the e-mail addresses of even more practitioners will be given. Also, e-mail addresses were collected from places like AOL and Yahoo where public profile web pages are provided to their users, and the profile meets three conditions: 1. The e-mail address is listed, 2. Their location is specified, and is within the U.S., and 3. Their age or date of birth is listed, and they are at least 18 years old. Originally, I also planned on asking the practitioners I have already established rapport with to help me find practitioners using the “snowball method”, but I decided against this because I would be losing direct control over who received the interview, which could potentially result in responses from practitioners who would be put at greater-than-average risk. Because Falun Gong practitioners generally believe in “clarifying the Truth”, I believed this e-mail survey would be very effective in getting responses, and would also allow them to express their thoughts directly through their texts. Furthermore, because the responses are in an electronic format, I was able to cut-and-paste the responses, which allowed me to avoid the time-consuming process of interview transcription.

Finally, I believe I was able to maintain an open dialogue with the Tampa practitioners concerning my research activities, so that my actions were sensitive to the Falun Gong community, allowing me to incorporate their input into my conclusions.

### **Justification for Methodology**

Some of the methods I used were not that different from those of others. David Ownby (2002) is a historian, and I am sure he is far more familiar with the historical parallels between Falun Gong and different groups throughout China's history. Rahn (2002) seems to have done a fair amount of reading of Falun Dafa books and websites. Many other scholars have written about Falun Gong, either writing an article specifically about it, or simply bringing up Falun Gong as an example to illustrate whatever sort of issue they happen to be writing about (for example, Androff 2001; Aalderink 2001; Adams, et al. 2000; Bruseker 2000; Chen 2000; Ching 2001; Deng and Fang 2000; Kipnis 2001; Frank 2002; Lestz 1999; Lowe 2001; Lum 2001; Madsen 2000; Munekage 2001; Ownby 2000; Palmer and Ownby 2000; Perry 2002; Rahn 2000, 2002; Shue 2001; Sinclair 2001 ter Haar 2001; Vermander 2001; Wong and Liu 1999; Xiao 2001; Xu 1999; Yan 2001; Young 2002). However, apparently only a few have actually interacted with practitioners for their writings (Frank 2002; Palmer and Ownby 2000; Tong 2002a; Ditzler 2001; Palmer 2003; Burgdoff 2003; Fisher 2003; Lowe 2003). Most who have written about Falun Gong have simply relied upon the writings of Li Hongzhi, the websites, and newspaper articles for their information about Falun Gong, and then applied the theoretical perspective of their discipline and their personal perspective in analyzing it. Journalists often talk to practitioners, but they generally lack the time and theoretical background to give Falun Gong anything other than a superficial treatment. (This is not always the case, however; a few journalists have done an excellent job.) Also, it seems as if practitioners have thus far not taken a very active role in academic debates.

The methodology I have chosen here is intended to bridge these communications gaps. Textual sources are of course important, but if used alone they do not constitute a complete picture of Falun Gong (see Frohock 2003). Anthropology has long been known for using participant-observation as a way of understanding a culture. Participant-observation "is an important technique for anyone hoping to develop relationships with, and not merely gather information from, those under study" (Tierney 2002: 11). As a result of developing these relationships, the participant observer gains access to information that may otherwise be inaccessible. Falun Gong practitioners generally are very concerned about the way they are portrayed; without having spent the time that I did with practitioners, I could perhaps see myself being more persuaded by the criticisms of Falun Gong made by Rahn (2002) and Deng and Fang (2000). I believe the combination of participant-observation, life history interviews, semi-structured interviews, and

doing a literature of both scholarly and journalistic accounts will give the sort of holistic description that has long been the hallmark of ethnography. By establishing rapport with practitioners and becoming aware of the concerns about Falun Gong, I had, in effect, become the middleman between the different discourses on Falun Gong, both insider and outsider. I hope that through my research efforts, practitioners, journalists, and especially scholars – particularly the critics – will come to understand each other’s perspectives in a more nuanced fashion.

Practitioners can benefit from this as well. Frank (2002) has noted that “[interviews] also reveal members’ lack of self-awareness regarding how outsiders see their unflagging support of Li Hongzhi.” Jianping Chu, after seeing some of my refutations to the allegations of critics, wrote: “I am so disappointed by those writing you cited by those scholars.” Rahn (2002) has criticized Falun Gong’s belief system for discouraging practitioners from looking at materials critical of Falun Gong; while I disagree with her that this is grounds for claiming their individual autonomy has been compromised, I would agree that practitioners might benefit from a greater awareness of other discourses about Falun Gong.

### **IRB and Ethics**

Originally, my research started out as a series of class projects. During this time period, IRB was not required to conduct research. However, even within this context, I had practitioners sign and re-sign informed consent forms for each class project that I did, and therefore my research conformed to the ethical guidelines of the discipline of anthropology.

During the third phase of my research, I had officially enrolled in my thesis writing and “internship,” and IRB consent was then required. Until this approval was granted, I restricted myself to literature review; it was during this period that I read Falun Gong sites most heavily. Meeting IRB concerns involved several precautions that are also standard concerns in most ethnographic research. First, I needed to ensure that my research would not put anyone at risk. This was achieved in several ways. First, all responses were confidential, and the only way respondents could receive the survey was because that they posted their names and addresses on public websites, thus clearly implying that they do not consider their affiliation with Falun Gong to constitute a risk to them. And, naturally, anyone contacted could choose

not to reply. Second, I contacted neither practitioners living outside the United States, nor non-English-speaking practitioners within the United States. Interview questions were provided only in English to ensure this. Finally, I provided contact information for both myself and my advisor should a practitioner wish to contact either of us or submit their responses anonymously, and included a statement that my research data would be kept confidential. The Office of Research, Division of Research Compliance, approved my protocol.

Furthermore, while it may not have been necessary to give anonymity to individuals under the first two phases of my research, pseudonyms were used in all cases except for one: Robert Nappi. This exception was made for a number of reasons. First, Nappi is an American. Second, Nappi has already been to China to promote Falun Gong, been arrested, and deported; therefore, the Chinese Government undoubtedly already knows about him and has blacklisted him. Third, Nappi's situation is unique and well publicized; he has appeared in both *Falun Gong Stories* books, newspaper articles, and even appears on many of the Falun Gong flyers and posters that are used at different practice sites. Were I to even try using a pseudonym on him, I could not mention his car accident, which is the defining event in his life (along with the introduction of Falun Dafa), or else his unique circumstances would make the attempt at anonymity futile. For example, I knew right away that when Frank (2002) was talking about "Freddy," he was really talking about Nappi. Fourth, Nappi approached me first with the idea of getting his article published in some capacity – and using his article in my thesis will allow him to achieve that goal.

### **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is defined best as "the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the 'human as instrument'.... It is a conscious experiencing of the self both as inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the processes of research itself." (Lincoln and Guba, 2000: 183). How a researcher is socially positioned affects the product of his or her research. In other words, it is useful for the reader to be aware of the ways in which power, in the five senses defined by Yelvington (1995), explains why the researcher has chosen a particular topic, why he or she has chosen certain approaches and certain issues within that topic, and then decides to present the results in a certain

way. Put more simply, it is helpful to know who the author is, and why and how he or she wrote a particular text, so I will briefly describe my relationship to Falun Gong.

As a child, I had an agnostic father and a Jewish mother. I got kicked out of Hebrew school when I was only in third grade; as a result, I carried resentment towards the concept of religion while I was growing up. This resentment had subsided by the time I was in college at Appalachian State University. Here, I came across some people whose belief systems might be characterized as “New Age,” one of whom became a good friend of mine and introduced me to a store called Ancient Wisdom where there were weekly sessions of Reiki healing. Reiki was originally developed in Japan, but had become popular in the United States within a New Age context. I wrote my senior honors thesis, entitled “Reiki healing at Ancient Wisdom: the people and beliefs behind a spiritual center's event” (Porter 2001) from the fieldwork I did there.

I first heard of Falun Gong while I was an undergraduate at ASU. I was taking a course called “The Human Future,” an honors course that was based on the premise that the problems that China faces from modernization will be problems that the rest of the world will have to face as well, and a student mentioned Falun Gong while doing a presentation to the class. This student was arguing that Falun Gong’s teachings were ridiculous, and therefore we should not criticize China for the crackdown on the grounds of human rights. He had brought along a Falun Gong book, which he read an excerpt from; I do not remember which passage he chose specifically, but I do remember that he had obviously purposely selected a passage that would sound ridiculous to a non-practitioner. I remember seeing many people smiling derisively and chuckling. They sounded odd to me as well, but I thought it was unfair for a “religion” (not realizing the complexities involved with the term that I do now) to be outlawed simply on the basis of it sounding ridiculous to outsiders. Wouldn’t Christianity sound laughable to those who were unfamiliar with it, as was the case with the Mbuti pygmy who called it the biggest falsehood he knew (Turnbull 1987)? Similarly, how did the belief systems of Native Americans sound to the European colonizers? Judging from history, it does not appear that the Europeans had much respect for them. The proposition that simply having odd-sounding beliefs to outsiders is grounds for human rights violations seemed like a disturbing philosophical and moral position to advocate. I wanted to speak up and say something to the class along

these lines, but I knew nothing of Falun Gong except for the strange-sounding paragraph I had just heard. I figured that maybe they knew something I did not about the situation and stayed silent.

When I began graduate school at the University of South Florida, I noticed some practitioners doing exercises on campus close to where I lived. I was taking a Visual Anthropology class at the time, and we had to do some sort of a final project using a visual medium. I thought that Falun Gong would make a great subject for a video in that class. I was unsure at first of how they would react to my request to do a video; when I did my previous research with Reiki healers, they were friendly, but cautious about my research making their customers feel unwelcome. In other words, they were doing me a favor by allowing me to do an ethnographic study of them; they did not have much to gain from my research, except possibly the enjoyment of reading the final product. These Falun Gong practitioners I had met turned out to be different. I was quite nervous about asking them to help me make a video, assuming their attitude would be similar to the people at Ancient Wisdom. I was quite surprised when they readily agreed; what I did not realize then is that they feel there is a real need to get the word out about Falun Gong, and therefore they were just as appreciative, if not more so, towards me for doing the project as I was of them for letting me do it.

When I finished the video, one of the practitioners said that she thought it could use some commentary at the end, giving my opinion on the controversy. I had just begun doing some research on Falun Gong at this point, and I was just beginning to realize how complicated the subject was. I felt sympathy for the practitioners since I could not imagine any sort of justification for the brutal treatment in the pictures I had seen, especially since my impression from interacting with them is that they did indeed live up to their principles of Zhen-Shan-Ren [Truthfulness, Compassion, Forbearance]. Nevertheless, I felt that I did not understand the situation well enough to take a stand one way or the other, or even to make any definitive statements in analyzing the situation. I felt more research was needed before I could do either.

It was in early 2002 that I had this opportunity to do more research on Falun Gong. As I continued to research Falun Gong, some of the more eccentric teachings of Li Hongzhi began to bother me a little. I felt a little disappointed when I heard that Li Hongzhi teaches that the moon is hollow, evolution never happened, and that rock music is bad. After a bit of introspection, I figured out the reason that these particular things bothered me, while other teachings (such as aliens, or that homosexuality is wrong) that

clearly bothered other people did not give me much concern. The reason was that science and rock music (or at least the types of music that I like that I could see someone classifying that way) were both things that I really liked, and it felt somewhat like a conflict of interest for me to be defending a belief system that “attacks” other things that are important to me. After doing some more reading and thinking, I came to a few conclusions: I realized that Falun Gong might teach these things are not good, but they would not try to impose their beliefs on others in a way that I would find objectionable. For example, they would not prevent a biology or astronomy professor from teaching evolution or a more mundane origin and composition for the moon, nor would they take any action against rock musicians.

Many have wondered if I am a practitioner or not, and I do not feel I can give a simple answer to this question. I find the exercises generally enjoyable (though sometimes painful), and I find that Falun Gong practitioners as a whole are a very pleasant group of people to interact with. If a friend of mine were to tell me that he or she had decided to become a practitioner, I would not have a problem with it. I think that Li Hongzhi’s teachings are generally morally sound (although I am not convinced that some of the things he says are immoral actually are, such as homosexuality, rock music, abortion, and so forth). However, Li Hongzhi’s ontological and epistemological teachings have not been sufficiently convincing for me to abandon my views on these issues, which are grounded in agnosticism and empiricism. You might say that I have developed a strong respect for the “natives” I have worked with, as many anthropologists do, but I have not completely “gone native.” One practitioner referred to me as a “half-practitioner;” in the absence of a better short answer to the question of whether I am a practitioner, I think this is a good answer to use.



## CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Advocacy Anthropology and Falun Gong

I consider this research project to be advocacy anthropology, though it is not an exact match to advocacy anthropology as it is described in some of the literature. Despite this, I feel comfortable describing my research this way because I feel the underlying principles behind what I am doing matches up. In advocacy anthropology, “the anthropologist serves not as a direct change agent but as an auxiliary to community leaders... The community advocacy anthropologist does not work through an intervening agency. His or her relationship with the community is direct and intimate” (van Willigen 1993: 109). Indeed, I am not going through an agency to conduct my research, but working with Falun Gong practitioners directly. Also, I find this statement to be very applicable to what I am trying to accomplish: “The primary function of the research effort in collaborative terms is the furtherance of the developmental and political goals of the community” (p. 112).

I think that van Willigen (1993) may have a problem with calling my research advocacy anthropology because he feels that a key concept of advocacy anthropology is that the “research effort is focused on short-term research needs” (p. 110). While perhaps it could be argued that practitioners (at least in China) do have a short-term need to end the persecution, I get the impression that van Willigen was talking about something more short-term and more likely to result in some sort of immediate, tangible victory. His vision of advocacy anthropology seems geared towards goals like gaining effective social services for disadvantaged communities rather than the sort of work I am doing.

Ervin (2000) has a view of advocacy anthropology that does not seem as confining as the one van Willigen (1993) uses. There are four types of needs that Ervin recognizes: normative, felt, expressed, and comparative (2000: 64-65). Normative needs are those determined by an outside authority. Felt needs are not expressed upfront, but are uncovered by the researcher during the research process. Expressed needs

are those which the community has self-identified and openly strives for. Comparative needs are those which have been identified for a group of people, but equivalent services are not given to all within that group, such as Alzheimer support groups which do not meet the culturally-specific needs of certain ethnic groups (p. 65). Out of these four types of needs, “Expressed needs” best describes the needs of Falun Gong practitioners, as they see clarifying misconceptions about Falun Gong and ending the persecution as being of the utmost importance. Lowe (2003) seems to be in agreement with me on this; he wrote, “Many respondents thanked me for asking them their opinions... It is clear that respondents want academics to study Falun Gong and correct the misinformation being propagated by the PRC” (p. 274).

Ervin distinguishes between “lowercase letter ‘a’ advocacy,” which includes creating a sympathetic description of a group, and “uppercase or capital ‘A’ advocacy,” which involves a more explicit involvement. He points out that one form of uppercase ‘A’ advocacy “involves participation in sustained activities that attempt to influence public opinion and changes in policy” (Ervin 2000: 123). Ervin recognizes that “much of what sometimes passes for academic anthropology often actually consists of advocacy” (p. 129) in the sense that it presents sympathetic, one-sided descriptions of the poor and marginalized, and the oppression they face. Whether this should be considered advocacy with a lowercase “a” or an uppercase “A” is debatable. My research is intended to influence public opinion which may help change China’s policy on Falun Gong, although not in direct fashion. It is also intended to challenge the ideas that lead to negative opinions about Falun Gong and may lead to a less hospitable sociopolitical environment for practitioners in the United States if such allegations are left unchallenged. These are the “Expressed needs” of the community, and they make my research applied anthropology.

Simply writing a text that is sympathetic to the group I studied does not necessarily make this applied anthropology; if this were the case, almost all cultural anthropologists could say they are doing applied anthropology (with the possible exception of Colin Turnbull, who recommended that Ik people he studied would benefit from having their society destroyed), and calling one’s work “applied anthropology” would not be a meaningful distinction. If applied anthropology is “a general label for the entire array of situations and approaches for putting anthropology to use” (van Willigen 1993: vii), then in order for a text to be applied anthropology, it must be put to use somehow. So, the question becomes how I will plan to put this thesis to use.

Were I to simply print up a single copy of my thesis, have it bound, and then let it collect dust on a library shelf, then I would say that my research could not be considered applied anthropology because it is doing far too little to fulfill the expressed needs of the practitioners. This is my problem with Chuck Ditzler's thesis on Falun Gong; he writes that he hopes his thesis "should serve as a measure of what are some conclusions that can be safely drawn now and as a map or foundation for future and more focused research" (Ditzler 2001: 3). However, he never specifies who exactly will be able to use it as a foundation for future research. (Personally, I was only able to obtain a complete copy of his thesis through luck and persistence.) I do not plan on making my thesis so hard to obtain. The University of South Florida has given me the option to "Release the entire work immediately for access worldwide," and I plan on using this option so that anyone can download it as a PDF file. While there are some disadvantages to releasing an academic work in this way, such as that "things on-line are not taken as seriously as things in print" (Stanlaw and Peterson 2003: 51), I think having a substantive work such as this being immediately available worldwide outweighs the disadvantages. Davis (2003) found that in a survey of members of the American Anthropological Association that "87% of respondents...reported that in conducting their research, they search for and access information electronically" (p. 55), but that "electronic access to anthropological materials has been fragmented and incomplete" (p. 55). Therefore, I hope to do all I can do to speed along the word-of-mouth process. There are a number of places I could turn to on-line to help this process along. While I do have a tentative list of places I plan on contacting, it would be premature of me to give this list here since these decisions will be made after the thesis is completed and available. Generally, if scholars whom I think may be interested in my research read a particular site, it is a candidate for being notified of my research. I may also look into getting an article on a Falun Gong site.

### **Culture, Power, and Narratives**

Most would now agree that we live in a globalized world, but what that actually means, both in terms of definition and significance, has varied. Because of the great degree of interconnection among peoples of the world nowadays, individuals, money, cultures, information, and products are circulating. "Circulation is used to discuss the breaking down of oppressive barriers among cultures, races, languages,

and nations, including immigration restrictions and segregation policies” (Tsing 2000: 337). On the other hand, Immanuel Wallerstein wrote that we are now living in an “era of groupism,” which is politically dominated by “defensive groups, each of which *asserts* an identity around which it builds solidarity and struggles to survive alongside other such groups” (Wallerstein 1995: 6). The difficulty is defining analytical concepts such as power and culture in a way that is versatile enough to address these complexities. To point out that cultures can no longer be treated as isolated wholes in anthropology has reached the point where it is now flogging a dead horse.

Yelvington (1995: 15-22) gives a useful typology of power that allows us to address some of the complexities of the relationships between Li Hongzhi, practitioners, and the Chinese government. He sees power “not as a state to be reached, but as something wielded, something exercised” (p. 12). There are five interrelated dimensions of power, according to Yelvington’s model, and I will give an example of how each might be applicable to Falun Gong, or the Chinese sociopolitical situation in general.

First, there is a *relational* aspect to power, where an increase in the power of one entity decreases the power of another entity. In other words, resources like time, money, and commodities are controlled by “social entities”—that is, individuals, groups, and classes—and the relationship between these social entities and their resources affects the power of other social entities. For example, if a practitioner (social entity) started to spend most of his or her time (resource) doing Falun Gong activities, and to fit Falun Gong into his or her busy schedule he or she had to quit the debate club (social entity), the debate club’s power over the person’s time was decreased. Or, to use an actual example written by a practitioner:

After a while, things started to change. All my friends and my parents started to give me pressure because they felt that I did not get a job that I deserve. This pressure disturbed my mind. At this time, one of my colleagues came to me, saying that there was a well-paid job opening. He said that the manager of that company was his good friend and they really needed people like me. I struggled hard in my mind. One side of me said, "As we cultivate in an ordinary human society, we should conform to the state of the society. Therefore, I should take a job with better pay so that they won't consider me abnormal." The other side told me that, "right now I am very busy with promoting Dafa. There are not too many people like me who is single and so flexible. I should not leave the practice site just for a better-paid job." After struggling for a few days, I finally decided not to take that job. [Clearwisdom.net 1999o: 3]

Another good example from a practitioner may be helpful:

Not until the next day did I realize that the whole matter was giving me hints. I am a painter and I work for a company as a designer. I teach children to paint whole day every Sunday. Therefore, I didn't have time to do my own painting at all. I could not let go of this desire. From time to time, this desire would come out, so I would try to find time to

paint. That day, I suddenly realized that I was actually the same as my son: he missed the last bus because he was busy playing around and I was "busy playing" as well — I was pursuing my own painting. Don't I still cling to the worldly things? It is as if I am taking a walk but I always stop to pick up the good-looking stones along the way. My son could still return home on foot even he missed the bus. My home is up in heaven. How can I return home if I delay myself? [Clearwisdom.net 1999o: 5]

The relational aspect of power is also applicable to the Chinese government:

A confidential circular in 1990 reported, "religious activities and party activities compete for participants, compete for time, and compete for space." It said this phenomenon "damages the party's image, corrupts the will of party members, and seriously disrupts the building of grassroots party organizations in the countryside .... The result is extremely serious." The circular called for a "thorough reorganization" of party cells that had already come under the control of "religious forces." The document did not refer to any specific religious beliefs. [Waldron 2000: 29-30]

Here, we can see that the Chinese government was well aware of the relational aspects between its power and that of religions.

Second, there is a *structural* aspect of power, where historically there has existed a certain hierarchical social relationship. Positions of power, having been predefined, are more easily perpetuated. Also, hierarchical social relationships that have historically existed shape how new hierarchical social relationships will be created. An example of structural power might be how Li Hongzhi joined the Chinese Qigong Research Society in order to have state support for the existence and spread of Falun Dafa, but the Chinese Qigong Research Society required a certain degree of hierarchy in the organizations that join.

Third, there is a *definitional* aspect of power. Power is definitional in that those who are in positions of power are able to create and implement rules, and define consequences for violating them. This is the definitional power in the formal sense. One result of the successful implementation of the use of definitional power in the formal sense is that the definition becomes taken for granted and largely unquestioned. There is also definitional power in an informal sense, which consists of using existing rules to resist the imposition of new rules. An example of definitional power in the formal sense would be the Chinese government's labeling Falun Gong a cult to justify their crackdown while suppressing all viewpoints that challenge this. An example of definitional power in the informal sense would be Falun Gong's challenging this by raising questions about the legality of such a crackdown in Chinese law, and claiming it violates basic human rights.

Fourth, there is a *historical* aspect of power. Power is the result of historical processes, which results in a unique combination of past circumstances that create the power relationships in the present.

The creation of group identities and hierarchical social relationships do not happen in a vacuum. A whole host of historical factors may be helpful in explaining the Chinese government's view of Falun Gong as threatening, including the Taiping Rebellion and the 1989 student protests, and the fact that social stability historically has been highly prized in Chinese society.

Fifth, there is a *cultural* aspect of power. Individuals view the exercise of power upon them through the lens of culture. "That is, if culture is defined by routinized practices and a system of symbols and meanings, then the exercise of power is 'felt' by and through its effects on practices, symbols, and meanings" (Yelvington 1995: 19). For example, Falun Gong practitioners do not see the crackdown as just a violation of human rights, but as being arranged by corrupt beings referred to as the "old forces." Fisher (2003) writes that "The Chinese state, like many totalitarian regimes, maintains its authority less by brute force than through successfully manipulating the psychological and social world of its citizens" (p. 304).

Culture and its relationship to power need to be clarified. Yelvington (1995: 20) points out that the routine practices and shared meanings of culture are constructed and modified according to the other aspects of power he describes. "In the process of establishing and then elaborating or limiting a given symbolic universe, symbols of identity become the contested terrain of intergroup struggle, and more powerful groups find it easier to establish their own representations of themselves and of competing others" (p. 20). If the symbols of identity for Falun Gong are the exercises, teachings, and physical objects and verbalizations that symbolically point towards those teachings, then the contested terrain is whether these symbols of identity are symbolic of peace and beneficial to society (and the universe) or whether it is a cult that jeopardizes social stability. In China, the government firmly holds power politically and economically; they are able to ensure that every news report on Falun Gong is negative, that Internet filters are in place to block access to Falun-Gong-related information (Zittrain and Edelman 2002), and they can arrest and torture practitioners. However, Falun Gong practitioners have contested their domination of China's symbolic universe in various ways, including finding ways around the Internet filters, finding ways to clandestinely broadcast Falun Gong programs on Chinese television, and even having people from other countries unfurl Falun Gong banners on Tiananmen Square and shout, "Falun Dafa Hao" [meaning, "Falun Gong is good"].

Yelvington writes that social identities are dependant upon social context; that is, “through interaction and communication with others, by the use of symbols, an individual acquires an identity or conception of the self” (1995: 24). He is primarily dealing with “involuntary” social identities, such as ethnicity and gender, meaning that they are culturally viewed as being “fixed and immutable...even though emphasis or deemphasis...is seen as possible” (p. 24). However, what happens when a person confronts (or is confronted with) a voluntary identity? In other words, there are no biological markers that identify someone as a Falun Gong practitioner whether they wish to be seen as one or not; instead, a person typically encounters a cultural system like Falun Gong as an outsider, and then becomes an insider. (At this point in Falun Gong’s history, the belief system has not been around long enough for anyone to be raised from infancy to adulthood within it.) So what exactly does this process of becoming a practitioner entail?

To address this question, I use the concept of *narrative induction* proposed by Charlotte Linde (2001):

I define narrative induction as the process by which people come to take on an existing set of stories as *their own* story...It is by now a commonplace that memory is not only a neurological process of recording, but also a social process of construction and reconstruction. Even so, we must still problematize the question of what it means for a person to remember something that she did not experience, or indeed, to be encouraged or exhorted to remember it as a national or religious duty...Memory in this sense is a key to identity, and to the acquisition of identity. [p. 608]

“The important issue here,” Linde writes, “is not just the existence of the story, but the social work that an institution performs to make one person’s story everyone’s story—relevant to everyone and available to everyone as a real model” (2001: 613). The book *Zhuan Falun* is encouraged to be read by practitioners daily, and practitioners quote from the book rather than summarize Li Hongzhi’s teachings in their own words. *Zhuan Falun* is filled with stories to illustrate its points, and I can remember more than one occasion where I asked a practitioner for his or her opinion on something and they answered me in the form of one of the stories from the book. Newcomers are encouraged to read the book from start to finish quickly. “Part of coming to tell someone else’s narrative as one’s own,” Linde writes, “is learning *how* to tell one’s own story. Thus, in religious contexts, one must know not only which stories to take as models, but *how* the model is to be used” (2001: 618). In the case of conversion stories, the initiate must learn to structure his or her narratives in particular ways in order to be accepted into the community he or she is

trying to enter. Part of this process is learning which aspects of shared stories should not be emulated (p. 619) – for example, claiming to be the new spiritual authority of Falun Gong as one practitioner in Hong Kong did. Also, which aspects of the story are meant to be relevant in guiding one’s actions must also be learned. For example, Li Hongzhi tells the following story in *Zhuan Falun*:

There was a Taoist in the Ming Dynasty who was possessed by a snake at the time of his Taoist cultivation. Later, this Taoist died without completing his cultivation. The snake took over the Taoist’s body and cultivated a human form. That man’s grand master was that snake in human form. Because his nature had not changed, he transformed himself into a big snake to make trouble for me. I thought that he went too far, so I caught him in my hand. I used a very powerful gong called “the dissolving gong” to dissolve his lower body and turn it into water. His upper body ran back home. (Li Hongzhi 1999b: 210-211)

This story is used to bolster the lesson that Li Hongzhi was teaching; however, practitioners are not encouraged to believe that they can identify people possessed by animals and use “the dissolving gong” on them (also see Bergdoff 2003: 342; Palmer 2003: 358). Also, just like the insurance agents that Linde (2001) describes, practitioners tend to “tell their stories as the story of success, a trajectory that moves ever upward” (p. 619). Finally, just like those insurance agents, not all practitioners (if they can be called that without internalizing the beliefs) internalize the narratives set forth in *Zhuan Falun*.

In this globalized world in which circulation is commonplace, more than one viable identity may be presented to an individual to choose from. Schiff (2002) uses the term “identity-talk,” defined as “the articulation of a sense of collective selfhood in words” (p. 279), to describe this phenomenon: “Identity-talk is not merely inscribed by culture; rather, cultural and social groups provide the metaphorical *currents* or *streams* of thought that individuals can take up and live inside” (p. 279). In other words, people are not the passive recipients of the process of narrative induction, but they are “active participants in the process of resisting, selecting, and collecting stories” (p. 279). Recognizing this is where Deng and Fang’s (2000) criticism of the narrative induction process in Falun Gong falls flat:

The pedagogy Li uses to spread Falun Dafa includes intensive and exclusive methods. The first one is the requirement for the disciples to read, or to memorize his “scriptures”, and refuse to read any other book concerning Buddhism, Daoism or Christianity. The reason given for such a treatment is very special. Every word in those books contains “impure” messages that all the deviances hide behind, whereas every word in Zhuan Falun contains Li’s Fashen (ZFL E, 369). Typically, an initiate should read Zhuan Falun from cover to cover without interruption—once, twice, ... without thinking or evaluating it, until it is completely accepted as truth. A failure to convert after repeated readings must be “sought within” the initiate, or sought without for demonic interferences that may include family members. The remedy is similar to “thought reform”: read until one drops. Li even suggests that a ten-thousand reading would still reveal new discoveries



(Sydney E, 4) and each word in the “scripture” had a Falun behind it (ZFL E, 369). After the initiation, the Fashen would supervise the disciples (ibid. 226), keeps them from going deviant. Thereafter, a disciple should not, again, read any other books of spiritual nature. Li calls this “the none other method,” and threatens that “the Falun will become deformed” otherwise (FLG E, 67). [Deng and Fang 2000: 7]

The main problem with this description is that before the narrative induction process is complete, there is nothing to stop the practitioner from “thinking or evaluation” except for his or her own choice, and even then, the person will continue to exist in a social climate where different “streams of thought” exist – after all, practitioners do not isolate themselves from non-practitioners. (This is the case for both Western and Chinese practitioners, with the exception of “professional practitioners,” which is the term for monks who accept the teachings of Falun Dafa and continue to live as monks. However, even in their case, they still regularly encounter non-practitioner Buddhists, and they still leave their temples on occasion.) What influences our decision of which stories and identities will be resisted, selected, and collected? Depending on the particulars involved in the situation, different aspects of power in Yelvington’s model may be used to explain the decision to go with a narrative or resist it. For example, the definitional aspect of power exercised by the Chinese government and other critics of Falun Gong may cause a person to resist the narrative induction process. Or, perhaps the power that culture exerts upon the individual makes him or her resistant to Falun Gong if he or she finds some of Li Hongzhi’s teachings to be disagreeable. The decision to completely accept or reject the narrative induction process need not take place right away; in his study of Arab students at Hebrew University, Schiff (2002) found: “...this complex mix of streams does not disappear in the identity-talk of Arab students but remains as part of a lived-with tension that is tolerated rather than resolved” (p. 280). I have similarly found that some practitioners are resistant to the narrative induction process, as I show in chapter 4.

The process of narrative induction need not be entirely verbal, but may also be embodied. Mattingly and Lawlor (2001) discuss how Kianu, a three year old boy with a left arm that was damaged by a brachial plexus injury, comes to be seen and see himself as child with potential rather than a child with problems. They call this “creating therapy moments” (p. 45), and these “reveal the possibilities of and potentials of a [person]” (p. 45). Mattingly and Lawlor ask how these alternative identity possibilities take on “weight and plausibility” and answer that it is not only through talk, but through embodiment and performance (2001: 46). Each of the Falun Gong exercises has a metaphysical or spiritual connotation of

improving oneself in some way; thus, they not only talk about their healing and spiritual transformation, but they typically enact it on a daily basis by doing the exercises. Munekage (2001) agrees with Nancy Chen's explanation of qigong as "making the practitioner's body a tool of the imagination" (p. 83).

Finally, it should be noted that paradigmatic narratives, defined as "a representation of the ideal life course within an institution" (Linde 2001: 621), can be broken, even after sincerely going through the process of narrative induction. Sometimes, the social conditions change so that old paradigmatic narratives do not work well anymore, and new paradigmatic narratives must be developed to function in the new social climate (p. 627-629). Also, unless the individual is a part of a culture in a total social institution, "multiple options are available as possibilities to be 'lived in'" (Schiff 2002: 299). In addition, in the absence of social support for a paradigmatic narrative, the new identity might be suppressed or abandoned, especially when subjected to the disapproval of those with definitional power (Mattingly and Lawlor 2001: 53). I have found at least one instance of a person embracing the belief system of Falun Gong (though debatable to what degree), and then abandoning the paradigmatic narrative:

For some years prior to today, 8 March 2003, I have thought that the work of Li Hongzhi was on the whole good, and I have had web pages about his cultivation way, known as Falun Gong or Falun Dafa, since 1995. I have particularly admired his refusal to charge fees of his followers and his efforts to bring Taoist - Buddha School concepts, as well as the standards of Zhen (Truth) - Shan (Kindness) - Ren (Forbearance), to the general population of the world, thus repairing some of the damage done by Mao's Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.

Although I still support Taoist - Buddha School concepts and Zhen (Truth) - Shan (Kindness) - Ren (Forbearance), in light of some statements reported in a 28 February 2003 revised draft translation on a clearwisdom.net web page to have been said by Li Hongzhi,

I do not, as of today 8 March 2003, any longer recognize Li Hongzhi as an authentic Teacher/Master. [Smith 2003]

He goes on to quote from Li Hongzhi's article, and then says: "Those statements are not only offensive to me, but they contradict earlier statements of Li Hongzhi himself" (2003). Using Yelvington's typology of power, we might say that this shows the cultural and definitional aspects of power. It is cultural power in the sense that his values came into conflict with Li Hongzhi's statements, and his personal values won. It is also definitional power in the informal sense in that Li Hongzhi made some statements that defined reality for those who subscribed to the belief system, but which he challenged by using earlier statements of Li Hongzhi that, in his opinion, contradicted these new statements.



**Figure 1: Practitioners in D.C. "Sending Forth Righteous Thoughts."**

*This ritual is believed to eliminate evil in other dimensions. One of my key informants compared it to prayer for Christians. It consists of hand gestures and reciting: "The Fa rectifies the Cosmos, the Evil is completely eliminated. The Fa rectifies Heaven and Earth, immediate retribution in this lifetime." Photo by Noah Porter.*

### **Falun Gong Basic Beliefs**

Falun Gong, also known as Falun Dafa, has been described by some as an "amalgamation of Buddhist meditation, Taoist cultivation, and qigong exercises" (Chen 2000); however, we should note that "although the teachings of Falun Gong contain some phrases and many concepts similar to those used in Buddhism and Taoism, it is not a branch of the Buddhist religion, just as Tai ch'i is not a branch of the Taoist religion" (Androff 2001). Falun Gong has been translated by at least one scholar to mean "Dharma wheel practice," and Falun Dafa as "Dharma Wheel Great Dharma" (Madsen 2000: 244). However, practitioners have translated these terms slightly differently; for them, Falun means "Law Wheel," Gong means "High-level energy" and "A practice," and Dafa means "Great Way, the Great Law" (Culp n.d.: viii). The two names, Falun Dafa and Falun Gong, are generally considered interchangeable, though Falun Dafa refers more to the doctrinal aspects while Falun Gong refers more towards the practices. (Madsen 2000: 243-244) Androff (2001) notes: "Falun Dafa originally referred to the movement that practices Falun Gong. Now the movement itself is being called by the name of its practice, Falun Gong."

It should be noted that Falun Gong practitioners are very careful when it comes to explaining the beliefs of Falun Gong. They believe it is better to quote Li Hongzhi than to paraphrase him, but if paraphrasing is necessary, then the practitioner must identify it as such so that they do not inadvertently change the teachings of Falun Gong. With this in mind, I would like to point out that this section is not a comprehensive account of everything Li Hongzhi talks about in his writings. These are merely some of the beliefs that I chose to highlight because, in my opinion, they should serve to give the reader a general idea of how practitioners view certain key issues, such as morality, history, ultimate reality, and the purpose of life. This is by no means a substitute for reading the works of Li Hongzhi. I encourage anyone with any interest in the beliefs of Falun Gong to learn the teachings straight from the source at [www.FalunDafa.org](http://www.FalunDafa.org). As practitioners would say, these are merely some of my understandings of his teachings, and should be taken as authoritative; even when I directly quote Li Hongzhi, I think practitioners would say it is better to read his words in context.

Another possible confounding factor to my attempt at summarizing the basic beliefs of Falun Gong is my inability to read the Chinese versions. I asked one practitioner if he thought there were any significant differences in the English and Chinese versions of Falun Gong books, and he replied:

No. It is almost word by word translation, which is why most people think it is a bad translation because the translators feared to deviate from the original wording and meaning. To me it sounds repetitive, because in Chinese it is fine to repeat yourself, but in English it is a bad English if you use the same word over and over in one sentence. Therefore, it is a true translation, though it is not of the best of English.

Deng and Fang (2000), two critics of Falun Gong, have posited less legitimate motivations for translation differences. They contend that the English version omitted aspects because “Li is practicing a selective Falungong ‘method’ according to the different backgrounds of the group” (Deng and Fang 2000: 11). Perhaps further empirical study is needed to further evaluate their claims, but I did not find much significance to these differences between practitioners who could speak Chinese and those who could not. Western practitioners were able to obtain access to draft translations not available on the Falun Gong websites, and all practitioners read *Zhuan Falun* most often and view other materials as supplementary. In addition, there are articles available on [Clearwisdom.net](http://Clearwisdom.net) and [Pureinsight.org](http://Pureinsight.org), two important English language Falun Gong sites, that draw upon the materials that Deng and Fang suggest are being kept from Western practitioners. Also, at the practice sites, Western practitioners are free to ask Chinese practitioners

questions. I believe these factors keep down the variation in what Western and Chinese practitioners perceive to be the belief system of Falun Gong.

Why do cultivators cultivate? Li Hongzhi explains:

Some people even have this thought: “What do I cultivate into a Buddha for?” It shows that their understanding of Buddha is really poor—“What’s the use of cultivating into a Buddha?” Don’t laugh—they really don’t know. Why does one cultivate Buddhahood? First, doing so can allow one to keep the human body forever; second, one will be eternally free of suffering and forever be in a wonderful state. A human life is short, so keeping the human body is one reason; another is that Buddhas don’t suffer. The place where your being came into existence is a dimension very high in the cosmos. [You] come from a dimension of the cosmos, and [your] original nature is kind. It is exactly because a person became bad and dropped here step by step that he is waiting to be destroyed. That’s the process. So why does one return? The place where you truly came into being is in a high-level dimension—that is the most beautiful place and where you should stay.

In the words of Great Enlightened Beings, it’s as if humans have dropped into a mud pit and are playing with mud here. But all humans came this way and think that this is pretty good. Humans think it’s pretty good—they’re wallowing in the mud, yet they think they’re pretty comfortable and that things are pretty good. We’ll give an example—but this isn’t to put people down. Take pigs, for instance. They sleep in the pigpen and live in mud with excrement and urine, but in their realm of thought it seems pretty good. Once humans ascend from this realm and look back they’ll find it just awful. That’s the reason. They say that humans among everyday people are just wallowing in mud and that it’s filthy everywhere. That’s the meaning. In this dirty environment, he thinks that if he’s a little cleaner than others he’s better off. The truth is, he can only wash his mudcovered body with muddy water. So I’d say he’s not much cleaner. [Li Hongzhi n.d.: 26, brackets in original]

Clearly, Falun Gong views everyday human existence as something to be overcome; the end result is that a person will become a Buddha, Dao, or God (Hongzhi 2002: 1, 20, 21).

According to the Falun Gong belief system, there are three virtues that are also principles of the universe: Zhen, Shan, and Ren (真, 善, 忍). Zhen is truthfulness and sincerity. Shan is compassion, benevolence, and kindness. Ren is forbearance, tolerance, and endurance. These three virtues are the only criteria that truly distinguish good people and bad people (Li Hongzhi 1999b: 13). Human society has deviated from these moral standards (Li Hongzhi 1999b: 16). All matter in the universe contains Zhen-Shan-Ren (Li Hongzhi 1999b: 15). All three are equally important.

Cultivation practice can be done at three levels. Qi is the first level, and it is the lower level that other qigong practices teach at. Falun Gong teaches at two higher levels, known as In-Triple-World-Fa (*Shi-Jian-Fa*) and Beyond-Triple-World-Fa (*Chu-Shi-Jian-Fa*). In-Triple-World-Fa is a process of purifying the body and replacing it with high-energy matter. Beyond-Triple-World-Fa is cultivation of the

Buddha-body. A practitioner usually only knows his or her own cultivation level after going beyond In-Triple-World-Fa (Li 1996).

Each person has karma (业障, 业力), which is a black substance that surrounds the body in another dimension as a result of doing bad deeds. Bad deeds include, but are not limited to: murder, homosexuality, and drug abuse (Li Hongzhi 1999b: 33). By doing good deeds and enduring suffering, one can transform that karma into de (德), which is a white substance. De also forms a field that surrounds a person's body (Li Hongzhi 1999b: 32). People can use De to gain money and power, while karma "can be transformed into illness and misfortune" (Li Hongzhi 1999a: 9). If someone runs out of De, his or her primordial spirit will die (Li Hongzhi 1999b: 34). Li Hongzhi can transform de into gong (功), or cultivation energy. Gong accumulates in a gong column, or *gongzhu*, above a person's head (Li Hongzhi 1999b: 35) after it first grows upward in a spiral from the lower half of the body. (Li Hongzhi 1999a: 6). Li Hongzhi writes that "the Gong we have developed has very strong radioactivity which can be totally controlled by the cultivator" (Li 1996).

In order to facilitate a person's cultivation, Li Hongzhi helps practitioners in a few main ways: he gives them a *Falun* (law wheel), a *Qiji* (energy mechanism), and protects them with his *Fashen* (law bodies) (Li Hongzhi 1999a: 1). The Falun is continuously spinning, taking in energy from the universe, and converting it to gong (1999a: 33-34). Li Hongzhi says that the fashen are "the embodiment of my mind's wisdom and my energy, and their thinking is absolutely no different from mine" (Hongzhi 2002: 16). However, he cautions that, "only fake Law Bodies directly tell students what to do. Furthermore, fake Law Bodies only appear when a student is strongly attached to something" (Hongzhi 2002: 19). Jianping Chu, one of the Tampa practitioners I talked to, said that fashen are similar to the Holy Ghost in Christianity.

To be a Falun Gong practitioner, you must upgrade your *xinxing* (心性), which means mind-nature or moral character (Li Hongzhi 1999b: 2). Xinxing includes de, tolerance, sacrifice, enduring hardships, and giving up desires (Li Hongzhi 1999b: 28). Your body also must be purified of illness before you can practice, which Li Hongzhi will do for you if you are genuinely pursuing the fa (法). The fa is the laws and principles of the Buddha school.

Each person is believed to have a main consciousness, one or more paraconsciousnesses, and a *Benti* (true being) (Li Hongzhi 1999a: 39). “Because at birth you were also born simultaneously in many dimensions of the universe, these other selves of yours make up a complete, integrated entity with you and interrelate to one another, being mentally connected” (Li Hongzhi 1999b: 351).

Falun Gong practitioners believe they can receive supernormal capabilities. The development of supernormal capabilities depends on *xinxing*. Not all people receive supernormal capabilities at the same level; some people may cultivate in a “locked” mode where they do not have many supernormal capabilities (Li Hongzhi 1999a: 6). There are some supernormal capabilities that non-practitioners may obtain, such as telepathy and precognition, while some are available only to cultivators (1999a: 6-7). These powers cannot be used to disrupt human social life, and high-level beings will ensure this (1999a: 7).

Human civilizations have existed before our own and been destroyed, leaving only a small numbers of survivors who lived primitive lives. According to Li Hongzhi, humankind had been destroyed a total of 81 times already (Li Hongzhi 1999b: 21). Prehistoric beings created the moon, which is hollow, and they also created the pyramids, which sank to the bottom of the ocean before being discovered by the Egyptians and used to preserve their corpses (Li 1996).

Science is seen as being very limited. Li Hongzhi writes:

The guiding ideology for today’s human science is confined only to this physical world in its research and development, as a subject will not be studied until it is recognized—it follows such a path. As for phenomenon that are intangible and invisible in our dimension, but objectively exist and are reflected into our physical dimension as concrete manifestations, people dare not approach them, dismissing them as unknown phenomena. [Li 2000: 2-3]

Li Hongzhi is also critical of scientists who allow themselves to be used for political purposes and call Falun Dafa superstition; these people “can merely act as a club that’s held in the hand of politicians and used to strike at people” (Hongzhi 2002: 8). Li Hongzhi feels that Falun Dafa cannot be refuted by science because “the Fa-principles of the cosmos... transcend all theories in the human society” (2002: 8).

Religion is also seen as being very limited; “What was taught by religions and what people experienced in the past were only superficialities and shallow phenomenon. Its broad and profound inner meaning can only manifest itself to, and be experienced and understood by, practitioners of genuine cultivation” (Li 2000: 5). In regards to religion, Li Hongzhi writes: “In fact, a religion has two aims: one

is to really make those who are good and can go up through cultivation obtain the proper way; the other is to maintain the morality of human society on a quite high level” (Li 1996).

There are five exercises in Falun Gong. First, there is Buddha Showing a Thousand Hands: “Using gentle stretching movements, this exercise opens all energy channels in the body” (O’Neill 2001: 2). The second exercise is Falun Standing Stance: “Comprised of four static postures that can be held for several minutes each, the second exercise enhances one’s energy level and awakens wisdom” (p. 2). The third exercises is Penetrating the Cosmic Extremes: “With its gentle hand-gliding movements, this exercise purifies the body using energy from the cosmos” (p. 2). “The fourth exercise is called The Great Heavenly Circuit, or Falun Heavenly Circuit: “By Gently tracing the hands over the entire body, front and back, the fourth exercise rectifies all abnormal conditions in the body and circulates energy widely” (p. 2). The fifth exercise is called Way of Strengthening Divine Powers, or simply Strengthening of Divine Powers: “A meditation that refines both body and mind through deep tranquility; strengthens divine powers and energy potency” (p. 2).

In addition to the five exercises, there is another type of ritualized movement, for lack of a better term, called Sending Forth Righteous Thoughts, which was introduced at a conference on May 19, 2001, and made available on the Internet on June 12, 2001 (Li 2002c: 39; Palmer 2001: B5; Palmer 2003: 348-349, 356-358). Sending Forth Righteous Thoughts is said to eliminate evil in other dimensions.

Also, following the crackdown, Li Hongzhi has taught that practitioners have entered a new phase of cultivation called Fa Rectification. During this time period, practitioners are expected to be more involved in promoting Falun Gong and clarifying misconceptions:

For Dafa disciples, Consummation is the conclusion of cultivation, and Fa-rectification is the great responsibility history has bestowed upon you during the Fa-rectification period. So during the current process of clarifying the truth and exposing the evil, everything we do is embodying Dafa. Whether we’re clarifying the truth, exposing the evil, or participating in other Dafa activities, including our Fa conferences, we should demonstrate Dafa disciples’ mercy as well as the goodness that Fa-rectification cultivation brings out. I’d like to wish the Fa conference complete success.

Meanwhile, I hope that the students in Europe can be more like the students in North America—every student should, in addition to participating in group activities, in his daily life fully take the initiative of a Dafa disciple, establish his own mighty virtue in the process of clarifying the truth, and do well on his own Dafa disciple’s path. So in clarifying the truth, don’t wait, don’t rely on others, and don’t just hope for changes in external factors. Every one of us is creating history for the future, that’s why everyone is not only participating in group activities, but also taking the initiative to look for things to do. As long as something is good for Dafa, you should take the initiative to do it, take the initiative to work on it. Every person you come into contact with in society is someone to



clarify the truth to, and what's manifest in clarifying the truth is Dafa disciples' mercy and their salvation of the world's people. I hope that every Dafa disciple will fully take initiative and fully play his role as a Dafa disciple. Once again, I'd like to wish the Fa conference complete success. [Li 2001c]



**Figure 2: Part of the first exercise**

*This is the beginning of "Buddha Showing a Thousand Hands" performed by Li Hongzhi. From [http://www.falundafa.org/book/eng/flg\\_4.htm#d1](http://www.falundafa.org/book/eng/flg_4.htm#d1).*

## Classification of Falun Gong

### Is Falun Gong a Religion?

Irons (2003) has no problem with classifying Falun Gong as a religion “since it meets essential traits of a religious group: an organized social group adhering to common teachings and, often, leadership, with shared ritual, ideology, myth, and an orientation toward an ultimate reality beyond the everyday” (p. 245). On the other hand, Liu, a sociologist, finds it unclear whether Falun Gong is a religion or not:

To qualify as a religion, sociologists generally regard three criteria deemed important. These are: religious belief system, or dogma; symbolic and ceremonial ritual that is sacred; and a religious organization of clearly structured status roles of the religious body. On the bases of these criteria, FLG’s status is less than totally clear. There is a system of belief that neither invokes deity, nor sacred theology. However, it is a system of belief that invokes religious-like devotion to the cultivation...of truthfulness, benevolence, and forbearance. The exercise and sitting meditation resemble a set of rituals to be followed daily. Finally, there is an organization that is allegedly linked hierarchically in regions and local exercise points through websites and electronic mail. It is an unusual kind of organization in which face-to-face meeting of actors is not necessary. [Liu 1999: 32]

As he notes, by using these criteria to define a religion, it is problematic whether or not to classify Falun Gong as a religion. First, what differentiates a religious belief system from a non-religious belief system? Liu writes that “not all beliefs and practices, no matter how they make invoke supra-human influences, can be called religious” (1999: 36), but he adds that “An obvious assumption that distinguishes religion from non-religious belief is the faith in god or deity...Some people have argued, however, that the presence of a deity may not be necessary in religion” (p. 36-37 n. 2). Second, how do we define what a ritual is? Some have argued that Falun Gong’s exercises are rituals (see Burgdoff 2003: 339), but this is a problematic classification. Grimes notes that “the word *ritual* functions too much like a badge of membership in the Current Discourse Club. It flags an author’s intention of taking a broadly ‘cultural’ approach, but it adds little or nothing to the analysis” (Grimes 2002: 227). For a more nuanced, sophisticated definition of ritual, researchers should ask themselves:

*in what respect* is it ritual. Do we treat something as ritualistic because it is formulaic? Because it is repetitive? Because it is religious? In short, what definition of ritual do we apply to our claims? Further, we need to ask not just *whether* something is ritual or ritual-like, but *what kind* of ritual it is like. Is it like a pilgrimage? Like celebration? Like a rite of passage? ...there are different kinds of ritual, and the differences among them are important. [Grimes 2002: 227]

The third aspect of Liu's definition, an organization, is more problematic than Liu seemed to have realized; the term "hierarchy" is suggestive of many characteristics that do not seem to fit with Falun Gong's loose style of organization. (Falun Gong's loose style of organization will be discussed further in the next chapter.)

While Liu problematized the three aspects of his definition of religion in relation to Falun Gong, he failed to problematize the term itself. In other words, the category of religion itself is a problematic one (El Guindi 1977: 5-24; Shaikh and Asad 2002; Asad 1993; Pandian 2002; Faubion 2003:72-76). Talal Asad noted, "religion as a category is constantly being defined within social and historical contexts, and that people have specific reasons for defining it one way or another" (Shaikh and Asad 2002). The term "religion" grew out of Western traditions, and has since been globalized. Roman scholars originally invented the classification of religion for the purpose of contrasting Christianity with what they saw as false belief systems (Pandian 2002: 11). However, China's history differed:

In imperial China, unlike medieval and early modern Europe and unlike much of the Islamic world, there was never an independent church hierarchy standing apart from the state. There was no autonomous system of church schools taking care of the basic education and the moral training of the social and political elite...the imperial state maintained its own approved pantheon of recognized deities, and it attempted to "standardize the gods" throughout the realm by encouraging the worship only of those spirits admitted to the official pantheon. [Shue 2001: 16]

In China, the local gods and rituals were usually tolerated "as long as these were the expressions of traditional regional cultures and posed no overt threat to the political order" (Lowe 2001: 215). In fact, "the Chinese state established a network of state-supported cults, and co-opted or otherwise supported local cults whose deities seemed to reflect desired values" (Ownby 2003: 226). However, when religions were introduced that gave the Chinese people another choice of identity, beliefs, and way of life, the government would sometimes interpret this as a threat and respond with oppression and regulation; "Governments [in China] have reserved the right to limited ordination and determine the qualifications of Buddhist and Taoist clergy, periodically 'cleaning house' and expelling monks and nuns who fail to measure up to the moral and academic standards set by the state" (Lowe 2001: 215; also see Ownby 2003: 225). This trend continued into the twentieth century, though a practitioner has told me that the CCP is tolerant of such groups than past dynasties. In China, religious freedom "is part of the legal framework set up by the Communists in 1949, meant to allow all in the country *equal opportunity to serve the state*" (Wyse 2000:

278, emphasis added). Also, “because no Chinese word seemed to encapsulate phenomena [associated with religion] in the same way as does the European word, a new word, *zong*, was adopted in the 1800s” (Ditzler 2001: 53). In addition to all these other differences between religion in China and the West, “many Chinese believers seemingly exhibit little loyalty to any particular denomination, going from god to god and temple to temple according to their perceptions of a particular god’s efficacy” (Ownby 2003: 224).

Pandian (2002) suggests using the term “supernaturalism” rather than religion, except as an “emic category to identify certain forms of supernaturalism in the West” (p. 11). Asad (1993) wrote that a universal definition of religion is impossible, “not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes” (p. 29). Whether we choose to use the term “religion” or “supernaturalism,” however, it is clear that some categorization is necessary because “the continued power of what is today commonly called religion is too important a phenomenon to be ignored because of definitional difficulties” (Kipnis 2001: 32). While it is not without its’ share of problems (see Asad 1993: 29-39; Faubion 2003: 73), I prefer Geertz’s definition of religion for etic purposes, which fits Falun Gong: “(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating concepts of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Geertz 1973: 90). Kipnis (2001) agrees that Falun Gong fits this etic definition of religion. Looking from emic perspectives, there are reasons why China and the West define religion differently: “Western liberals call them religion to distinguish them from the models of institutionalized science and the ideological expressions of governments, whereas the CCP designates them as permissible or illegal religions in order to keep them from impinging on the institutionalized spaces of science or the government itself” (Kipnis 2001: 43-44). Throughout this paper, I will often use comparisons of Falun Gong with religions; this is not intended to dispute the grounds on which Falun Gong claims it is not a religion, but because I think Falun Gong and religions (both in Western and Chinese definitions) both fit the Geertzian definition of religion, and therefore comparison is possible and potentially useful. This is not intended to claim that the power relations involved with what are termed religions are homogenous and universal. I am merely suggesting that the interaction between individuals and belief systems of this sort, whether termed “religion” or “cultivation,” seem to be similar enough that it

is a useful starting point for inquiry, so long as we are careful not to reify these categories and overlook differences that might later emerge in the course of examination.

In China, there are official religions and what has been termed “Chinese popular religion” by some Western scholars (see Ownby 2003: 227), or “superstition” in official Chinese discourse. China’s Ministry of Culture is concerned with “traditional customs,” which involve especially ‘healthy’ traditional annual festivals such as the Spring Festival...the ‘healthy traditional customs are promoted as mass sociabilities’ (Feuchtwang and Wang 1991: 260). Excluded from the Ministry of Culture’s list of traditional customs is “‘superstition,’ which mainly consists in various forms of divination, popular magical practices, local ritual observances, and local forms of festivity” (p. 260). Both superstition and religion are believed to be phenomena that should eventually be eliminated from Chinese society, but religion is protected by article 36 of the PRC Constitutional Law while superstition is not (p. 261). Religion is tolerated in China for reasons of internal unity and for facilitating relations with other countries, but in general, “‘superstition’ is seen as an evil power that makes people attribute their fate to ‘supernatural and mysterious forces’ instead of to the Party’s leadership” (p. 262). Chinese law states that any government official who denies citizens their religious freedom may face up to two years in prison, but no one has yet been found guilty of violating this law (Adams, et al. 2000: 7).

Falun Gong was first introduced to the Chinese public as a qigong practice, not as a religion or superstition (although even in China, these boundaries been contested). Qigong is primarily seen as a way to keep healthy rather than a religion; the Chinese government has generally tried to encourage it as a science and discourage religious or supernatural elements. However, the category of science in China tends to include things that are generally not considered scientific in the West, including qigong and traditional Chinese medicine (Kipnis 2001: 36). “Chinese traditions assume a profound interpenetration of matter and spirit, body and soul...Like most qigong practitioners, Falun Gong [practitioners] do not make a clear distinction between physical and spiritual healing” (Madsen 2000: 244). Even within qigong, there have been struggles between science and supernaturalism:

Situated both in scientific researches on *qigong* and in the prevailing nationalistic revival of traditional beliefs and values, this discursive struggle has articulated itself as an intellectual debate and enlisted on both sides a host of well-known writers and scientists—so much so that a veritable corpus of literature on *qigong* resulted. In it, two conflicting discourses became identifiable. Taking “discourse” in its contemporary sense as referring to forms of representation that generate specific cultural and historical fields

of meaning, we can describe one such discourse as rational and scientific and the other as psychosomatic and metaphysical. Each strives to establish its own order of power and knowledge, its own “truth” about the “reality” of *qigong*, although they differ drastically in their explanation of many of its phenomena. The controversy centers on the question of whether and how *qigong* can induce “supernormal abilities” (*...teyi gongneng*). The psychosomatic discourse emphasizes the inexplicable power of *qigong* and relishes its occult workings, whereas the rational discourse strives to demystify many of its phenomena and to situate it strictly in the knowledge of modern science. [Xu 1999: 963; also see Ownby 2003: 234-235]

Thus, to the Western layperson, *qigong* of all sorts may seem to be religious because it deals with spiritual matters. Because Li Hongzhi makes use of many concepts from Buddhism and Taoism in his writings, this may make Falun Gong seem even more like a religion to the outsider; Falun Gong “grew initially into a space termed scientific [in China], but was insulated from the spaces formally acknowledged as institutionalized science in Western countries” (Kipnis 2001: 42).

Falun Gong practitioners do not see Falun Gong as a religion, however. There was an article on Clearwisdom.net in which a practitioner is quoted as saying:

People may think that we are trying to avoid this issue and are afraid of being identified as a religious group. In fact, it is not true. We do not have any religious forms such as temples or worship. We do have our own belief, which is Zhen-Shan-Ren... People probably have a very vague idea about what is religion. Actually religion is only a very small portion of Buddha cultivation. But I think this does not matter. [Clearwisdom.net 2000g]

Jianping Chu, one of the Chinese practitioners I interviewed, said: “Actually, Falun Gong is just a very flexible practice method. I’d say it’s like a way of life. We get to practice any time we have, maybe we get together Saturday at a park. We don’t have any—We don’t worship anything, and there are no rituals to follow. It’s not a religion.” Jiaxin Luo, another practitioner said, “Falun Gong is a not a religion, but we do have our principles, which is, again, Truthfulness, Compassion, and Forbearance.”

One of the main reasons that practitioners do not like to use the term religion to describe Falun Gong may be that religions have the stigma of being superstitious in China, while practitioners feel “that the Falun Gong teachings and practices are grounded in reality, more specifically that they are a historical and scientific truth, as well as a higher Truth” (ter Haar 2001: sec. 2). Bruseker thinks the denial that Falun Gong is a religion serves also a psychological purpose:

There is much stress put on the Qi gong orientation of Falun gong in its official literature. Nowhere does Li outright say that Falun gong is Buddhist; in fact, he denies it. These denials are made right beside overtly Buddhist doctrine and dogma and thus seem nonsensical, but they actually do serve an important purpose. They allowed people who would never have considered themselves religious, like the many old-age pensioners who

lived through the Liberation and Cultural Revolution, to join what was essentially a religion. Psychologically many practitioners do not seem ready to admit that Falun gong is a religion... To many people, religion has no meaning. They are so far removed from the links to the past, which were of course severed quite seriously in China in "modernization" and the Cultural Revolution, that religion is a joke. If one is a member of a religion then they are stigmatized for it, in the Party more so, but also within the population at large. [2000: 46]

In talking to practitioners, I find that this denial is a bit exaggerated. It is true that Falun Gong practitioners do not call Falun Gong a religion, but their own terminology classifies Falun Gong and religions like Christianity and Buddhism together as righteous cultivation practices; they are not as separated in the minds of practitioners as Bruseker seems to indicate. Li Hongzhi writes,

As a matter of fact, what I transmit is not a religion. But the real transmission of the Law and the salvation of people will bring about the same effect: give you a way so that you can really obtain the proper way through cultivation and make so many people who have heard the Law or read my books understand such a principle that they will not do bad things or evil deeds intentionally though they may have no intention of cultivating themselves. [Li 1996]

We can see here that practitioners see both Falun Gong and religions are seen as having the same aims.

Some have called Falun Gong a sect. This term is not really appropriate; "according to a sociologist, sects regard themselves as an elite with a well-defined boundary, apply rigorous standards to volunteers seeking admission, demand an overriding allegiance to a higher truth, and expel the wayward" (Stoll 1982: 12). Falun Gong doctrine does distinguish strongly between practitioners and ordinary people, but this division does not always play out so neatly in the real world; it does not fit the criteria of having a well-defined boundary. Also, there are not rigorous standards applied for admission; almost anyone can show up and have a Falun Gong practitioner show them the exercises. In addition, sects tend to have branched off from a mainstream church (Bruce 1996: 72), and no clearcut case can be made for Falun Gong directly branching off from another belief system (Ownby 2003: 228; Irons 257-258).

### **Is Falun Gong a Cult?**

Terms like "cult" and "sect" have a long history within the sociology of religion (Jenkins 2000: 16-18; Berger 1967: 164; Bruce 1996: 69-91; Warner 1993: 1065), which are distinct from the more popular usage to refer to religious groups that are seen as strange, undesirable, or dangerous. As one historian said, "The specific terminology might change over time—the language of 'cult' only dates from the 1890s—but there is no period, including colonial times, in which we cannot find numerous groups more



or less indistinguishable from the most controversial modern movements” (Jenkins 2000: 4). Along with fringe religious groups almost always came movements to denounce or even eradicate them; the definition of a cult was not created in a vacuum, but rather is “a prefabricated script some centuries in the making, incorporating charges that might originally have been developed long ago against a wide variety of movements” (p. 10). Over time, the term cult has developed into quite a laundry list of accusations:

The major issues form a litany of allegations about brainwashing; deception and fraud in the recruitment processes; systematic undermining of personal autonomy and freedom of will; exploitation, bordering on extortion, in the remuneration of paid workers; profiteering and dishonesty in setting the level of fees for services; excessively harsh living conditions; physical and mental impairment resulting from inadequate diet and health care; deliberate alienation of members from their families; manipulative arranging of marriages; psychological terrorism and blackmail against would-be defectors; separation of members from their young children; authoritarian styles of leadership; collusion with undemocratic political forces and regimes; and unjustifiably harsh treatment of perceived ‘enemies’. [Beckford 1985: 94]

Christianity faced similar accusations when it first emerged in the Roman world, and groups like the Methodists, Freemasons, Roman Catholics, and Latter-Day Saints all faced slander and persecution during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Jenkins 2000: 10-11). In other words, groups that are labeled cults initially often become legitimate religions if they survive long enough.

Size and power are a powerful influence on whether a group is treated as a cult or as a religion. When misconduct is discovered among a group commonly labeled as a cult, the behavior is seen as being intrinsic to the group. For example, sexual misconduct (meaning the socially unacceptable or criminal sexual behavior of one individual that is not institutionalized or condoned by the religious belief system) could be found both in mainstream groups and groups labeled as cults in the 1970s, but the media was loathe to report on the sexual misconduct of mainstream denominations. Jenkins writes, “while nothing was to be lost by offending the members of a quirky local commune, it took a brave editor to run a story attacking a mainstream denomination, which could respond with an advertising boycott or a venomous letter-writing campaign” (2000: 15). Such allegations against mainstream denominations were not commonly reported “until the explosion of public concern in the mid-1980s” (p. 15). Because the Chinese Government had labeled Falun Gong a cult, the media may have more readily accepted reports of self-immolation and other socially unacceptable behavior, despite the denials and explanations by practitioners.

In sum, whether a group is considered a cult is largely a measure of public opinion regarding the group, with factors such as the group’s behavior and the group’s ability to influence media coverage

playing a significant role. This is not to say that all groups that are labeled cults are innocent of all the misdeeds they are accused of. While the criteria for what constitutes a cult varies depending on time, culture, group, individual, and situation, groups such as Aum Shinrikyo, the Japanese religious group made infamous by their poison gas attacks, are surely deserving of the negative attention they have received. However, I still do not feel that using a word like “cult” is appropriate because there are so many negative characteristics that may be used to justify the label, and once the label is in place, the nebulous nature of the word “cult” makes people more readily accept other so-called characteristics of cults, regardless of the veracity of these claims. Because Falun Gong has a single spiritual authority and makes a strong distinction between practitioners and “ordinary people,” some people see this as evidence of Falun Gong being a “cult,” and, as a result, may readily accept other claims about Falun Gong that they believe are characteristic of cults, regardless of whether or not the claim is applicable to Falun Gong.

It would be pointless to try addressing every single definition of a cult that has ever been proposed, but I would like to address at least one that was specifically used against Falun Gong:

One typical characteristic is that the cults tend to assign drastically different meanings to the terms that it borrows... The purpose, we suggest, is two folds: commitment through confusion. The confusion is intended by the miscommunication, by projecting an object in the reader’s mind that share some characteristics of preconceived notions only to be replaced with a completely different object intended. Such miscommunication separates the “meaning intending” from its “environment.” That is, it uses the shells of a particular and attractive term to express different contents while such a term was not intended to represent this new idea in a prescribed usage environment. By missing the intended object, it leads to a hidden object. When it is done on purpose, it is simply dishonesty. However, an analyst must be able to distinguish errors from frauds, the latter places the burden of proof on us. This is a difficult process, but unfortunately, as many emerging cult would establish its own identity through this identity migration process... [Deng and Fang 2000: 2]

Deng and Fang (2000: 3) feel that this particular definition of cult is applicable to Falun Gong because Li Hongzhi introduced it to the public as qigong. They feel that by calling Falun Gong a qigong, Li Hongzhi was able to use “socially acceptable terms to create an impression of conformity but retains the ability to claim supernormality” (p. 3). However it should be noted that qigong has a tradition of qigong masters claiming extraordinary powers (Carlyle 2002: 9; *China ABC* 1985: 159; Rahn 2002: 47), and that “interconnection of jing (body), qi (mind), and shen (spirit) is the basis of all schools of qigong” (Cohen 2000: 3). Also, qigong was seen as a form of “moral guidance” since about 1986; a qigong master named Yan Xin was referred to as “the spiritual hope for the Chinese masses who feel they have lost their way”

(Rahn 2002: 47-48). This certainly weakens Deng and Fang's implication that Li Hongzhi was trying to hide "supernormality" by calling Falun Gong a type of qigong; supernormality is already a part of qigong, as was moral guidance. However, Bruseker (2000) agrees that the belief system that Falun Gong possesses is "is atypical of most Qi gong practices which focus on practice and not theory" (p. 23). It is quite conceivable that someone could have tried Falun Gong with the expectation of it being like other qigong practices without realizing what sort of belief system went along with it, and therefore conclude that calling it a qigong was inaccurate. This argument, however, would be a lot more compelling if Falun Gong utilized drastic means to keep people "in" Falun Gong. Falun Gong does not force practitioners to sign contracts, threaten physical or economic harm for apostasy, or any other such coercive methods that are often attributed to cults. If someone tried Falun Gong and disliked it for any reason, they would have nothing to fear from practitioners. Also, it is interesting to note that practitioners are cognizant that Falun Gong does not fit neatly into categories like qigong or religion, and some are looking for more accurate ways of describing it to non-practitioners (see Culp n.d.: 21).

In Chinese, the word for cult is *xiejiao* (邪教), which has its' own distinct meaning and history. The term *xiejiao* "consists of two characters: *xie* that can be translated as 'heterodox' and *jiao* that can be translated as 'teachings.' Traditionally, *xiejiao*, or heterodox teachings, was a name for teachings that were opposed to the 'correct' (*zheng*) teachings of Confucianism" (Aalderink 2001: sec. 1.2). This term originally was more of a condemnation by the ruling class on specific teachings, but in recent years the focus seems to have shifted more towards the groups themselves rather than on the teachings. A *xiejiao* is no longer a group that does not adhere to Confucianism, but is "a social dissident group that secretly forms an association, upholds non-traditionalist, non-logical beliefs and adopts extreme, evil, destructive means to reach their anti-science, anti-human, anti-social and anti-governmental goals" (Aalderink 2001: sec. 1.2; also see Wessinger 2003: 215). Non-Chinese religious groups have been described as *xiejiao*, including Heaven's Gate, Aum Shinrikyo, and the People's Temple (Aalderink 2001: sec. 1.2), giving the term *xiejiao* a lot of overlap with the term cult, at least with the kind of religious groups that make shocking headlines worldwide. (However, China would likely consider many "mundane" groups to be *xiejiao* that the U.S. would not consider cults; see Lowe 2001: 223 n. 2). And, just like the term "cult," the label of *xiejiao* carries with it a laundry list of accusations that makes it imprecise and pejorative. It is significant to

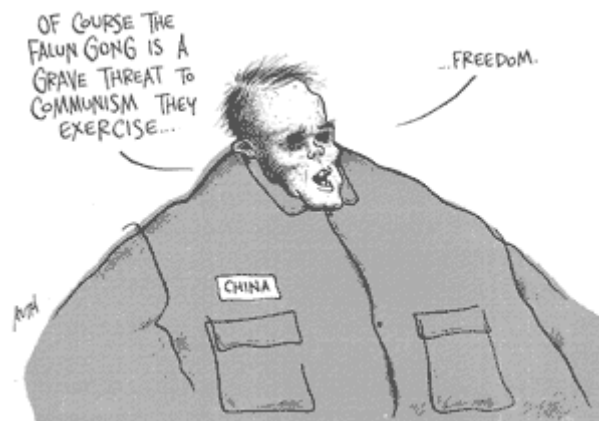
note that “anti-science” is one of the so-called characteristics of a xiejiao, while this is generally absent from Western conceptions of cults. Rahn (2002) says that the Chinese government may have chosen to translate xiejiao as “cult” as “a means of gaining sympathy and understanding from the West, whereas it appears to have achieved the opposite effect” (p. 49). This does appear to be the case:

My last visit to Australia ...was preceded by an official representative of the Chinese government, a man who rather chilled the entire event with his repetitious reference to "the evil cult of Falun Gong." It was not at all welcome to that audience to hear such formulated recitations as, "The government of the People's Republic of China look upon the evil cult of Falun Gong as an evil force that denies the validity of science as embraced by the government of the People's Republic of China and the evil cult of Falun Gong has been teaching citizens of the People's Republic of China that the philosophy of the evil cult of Falun Gong is the means by which...." well, you get the idea. [Randi 2001]

The preceding was written by James Randi, a well-known Western critic of “pseudo-science,” and someone that Frank (2002) has described as an “unwitting pawn the [CCP] uses in its anti-Falun Gong war of rhetoric.” Randi does not like Falun Gong and would seem to ordinarily welcome criticisms on the basis of science, but even he found their repetitive use of the term “evil cult” to be ridiculous.

Whether you wish to label Falun Gong negatively depends upon your values. Falun Gong has its own distinct value system and view of the universe, and not everyone will agree with it. Some of Falun Gong’s teachings go against prevailing scientific explanations of how the world works. Some people are uneasy about how practitioners are placing so much faith in a living leader (not unlike Catholics placing their faith in the Pope). However, I feel it is unfair to make statements such as that Falun Gong “fits the classic definition of a militant cult that gives little freedom of thought to its members, similar to the Branch Davidians, or Jim Jones’ People’s Temple” (Young 2002: 31). Such statements irresponsibly leave the impression that Falun Gong has similarities to these violent groups, when in fact Falun Gong practitioners have consistently refused to use violence against those who persecute them.

## Is Falun Gong a Political Movement?



**Figure 3: Political Cartoon by Tony Auth**

*Courtesy of Tony Auth.*

When I asked practitioners what they thought the most serious misunderstandings about Falun Gong are, a common answer was that it involves politics. Li Hongzhi explicitly says in his writings not to get involved in politics; however, some people are incredulous in spite of this:

Falun Gong's practitioners have also been defined politically by Western nations and economic interests, who have raised the human rights issue largely to suit themselves. It does no good for Li and his followers to keep on repeating they have no political object... Falun Gong attempted to enlist the help of the U.S. Congress and Senate, the European Parliament, and the United Nations Committee on Human Rights... It also made it abundantly clear that both internal and international pressures would continue until China capitulated to its demands. These, by anyone's definition, are political actions. [Adams, et al. 2000: 144-145]

Adams et al. are mistaken about these being political actions by anyone's definition; they are not political activities in the eyes of practitioners. As one CCP member sympathetic to Falun Gong (Clearwisdom.net 2003p) said, "They simply want the right to practice Falun Gong openly and with dignity. Hardly a political agenda" (M.H. 2002: 12). Whether they fit any other definition is debatable.

In a certain sense, Falun Gong is involved in politics; due to the Chinese Government's brutal persecution, their very existence has become politicized, so not to be politically involved would amount to abandoning one's spiritual beliefs or passive acceptance of whatever punishment the Chinese Government unleashes upon them. It seems naïve to me, however, to confuse enlisting political entities to help ensure the survival of one's group with using political entities to change policies of a nation not directly connected to group survival to closer fit one's ideology. I feel this is an important distinction to make; after all, some

of the teachings of Falun Gong do take sides on politicized issues. For example, Li Hongzhi has said that abortion is wrong in his teachings. However, I have never known practitioners to get involved in the abortion debate. Practitioners believe that someone must choose for themselves between right and wrong, so they would prefer to allow people to discover “the truth” for themselves rather than force others to do what they believe is the right thing. To do otherwise would go against their principle of Forbearance.

Bruseker (2000: 16-20) makes an interesting case for why the Chinese Government may have interpreted the teachings of Falun Gong as having political implications. Falun Gong does not have beliefs that deviated radically from what is politically acceptable in China; its coexistence with the Chinese Government for seven years is testament to that (Bruseker 2000: 72). Munekage (2001) remarked that it is “ironic that some the social criticisms expressed by Falun Gong are shared with the party-state” (p. 22). However, Li Hongzhi’s teachings seemed more in line with the conservative elements within the CCP than the reformers. The conservative members were concerned about official corruption and the effects of market reform, which would seem to sit well with Li Hongzhi’s teachings about the declining morality of human society and the folly of caring only about getting rich. “Indeed, much of Li’s criticism of ‘human moral standards,’ is an angry attack on capitalist greed and consumerism,” writes Bruseker (2000: 17). One person claiming to be a high-ranking member of the CCP wrote: “with the large numbers of Practitioners Li Hongzhi had attracted, Falun Gong unavoidably competed with the Party for the hearts of the nation, giving China a choice between goodness and corruption. This competition the Party certainly couldn’t allow! Falun Gong had to go” (M.H. 2002: 9). This is undoubtedly a pejorative simplification, but since Falun Gong does emphasize morality and corruption was (and still is) a widespread problem in China, this may be suggestive of how others in China could have seen viewed the contrast between Falun Gong and the CCP. A critic of Falun Gong saw Li Hongzhi’s teachings as much further out of line with CCP ideology:

The factor that ultimately caused the party’s break with the sect was the political opposition and challenge posed by the Falun Gong, and the unorthodox message it conveyed to the people of the supremacy of divine power over human agency. Li made a bold declaration that no government, including that of the CCP, could deal with the social problems existing in China, but that supernatural power, possessed by the Falun Gong alone, was the answer. [Xiao 2001: 128]

I am skeptical of Xiao’s claims; my impression of Li Hongzhi’s teachings before the crackdown is that they did not focus much on the Chinese government, but rather emphasized the need for individuals to upgrade their xinxing. Even a critic of Falun Gong like Xiao admits that the basic teachings of Falun Gong are in

line with CCP ideology “because individual development with social responsibility is the very spirit advocated by the CCP itself in the reforms” (2001: 133), but, “when it comes to challenging its authority, the CCP has zero tolerance” (p. 133). However, Bruseker (2000) points out that the so-called challenge that Falun Gong posed was not as much about ideology as it was about attracting traditionalist CCP members of high social status (p. 18). Coupled with the fact that Falun Gong attracted enough people to “run the country,” according a former Public Security Bureau executive, (Adams, et al. 2000: 24), statements like “Zhen-Shan-Ren is the Sole Criterion to Discern Good and Bad People” (Li Hongzhi 1999b: 13) may have been seen as threatening not because they were against the government, but because they did not teach absolute obedience to the government. Li Hongzhi commented of this connection: “Or should something be considered evil if it is outside the category of communist theories?” (Li 2000: 146). Market development has weakened the CCP’s ideological hold on the people of China; “[as] the economy continues to slip out of the government’s grip, its attempts to regain an ideological hold becomes both more frantic and less persuasive to the Chinese masses” (Xiao 2001: 135). Waldron seems to agree that this is a concern for the CCP:

*But who is the target of this [leadership] struggle? Who is Jiang Zemin's opponent? There seems to be no one.*

A longtime foreign resident of Beijing had the answer. "These guys are sick of calling people up and issuing orders and having no one obey them." In other words, this is a struggle for leadership. It is not against anyone--except, collectively, the entire Chinese foot-dragging independently minded mass of the Chinese people and even the Communist apparat, for whom the "leadership" at the "center" is no longer a source of fear, let alone an object of respect. These people need to be shaken up, and a good old-fashioned struggle campaign is seen as the way to do so. [Waldron 1999]

In such a political climate, it does not take much to seem threatening to the Chinese Government, even for a regime that is as well-known for being intolerant of criticism (see M.H. 2002: 11).

Aside from Li Hongzhi’s critique of declining morality in society, some scholars have interpreted his other teachings as having political dimensions to them. For example, concerning Li Hongzhi’s teachings that racial differences are innate and due to coming from different heavens/paradises, Munekage writes: “Li’s discourse of cultural difference between China and the West in individual competition implies that Chinese people cannot just adopt the Western model of modernization” (2001: 45). Munekage also notes that the Chinese government “has been critical of the Buddhist belief in an afterlife, an alternative realm of the world as negative ideas of ‘escapism’ and ‘superstition’” (2001: 80); Falun Gong, of course,

believes that the goal of cultivation is to return to the paradise where people came from, which might leave them open to these criticisms also. Thornton (2002b) writes that even the healing claims of Falun Gong may have political implications. She describes somatization, defined as “the expression of personal and social distress in an idiom of bodily complaints and medical help seeking” (p. 673), as being prevalent in Chinese society. “At stake for both practitioners and officials” (2002: 674), Thornton writes, “is the public recognition that widespread social ills and dissatisfaction do exist, that they are often expressed as physical symptoms and that the current health care system is unable to address the problem adequately” (p. 674). In addition, since Li Hongzhi writes that abortion is a bad deed, this could conceivably be construed as talking a political stance on China’s one-child policy. Also, following the crackdown, David Ownby said, “It is also significant to take note...that the leader of Falungong, Li Hongzhi, starts to hold...more [political and reactionary] remarks...in its frequent speeches” (Entrevues 2001); however, Li Hongzhi has recently said: “Master isn’t leading you to take away somebody’s political power” (Li 2003). Therefore, a key question that should be asked is what should be defined as political, and who has the power to define what is political, especially since I have yet to run across a practitioner who expressed wanting to cultivate for political purposes.

Similar to Bruseker’s view of the of the teachings of Falun Gong, Thornton (2002b) also feels that the content of Li Hongzhi’s teachings could be interpreted as having political implications. She claims that both *menlian* (doorway couplets), a type of wordplay displayed on doorways that is sometimes critical of the government, and Falun Gong both “deploy strategies of ‘framing’ – the deliberate interjection of critical and dissenting views into the public sphere – that rely upon a measure of indirection for their success” (p. 662). In other words, she sees Falun Gong as an “adaptive [strategy] for the expression of dissent in contemporary China” (p. 662). In her view, because the Chinese government is rather intolerant of criticism, this restrictive political climate will give rise to political criticism that cannot look like political criticism on the surface. Therefore, a successful political criticism “masquerades as the politically irrelevant beneath a mask of compliance” (p. 666), and because the criticism is never made explicit, “both the speaker and listener are protected in a sort of collusive communicative act” (p. 668), where the “strategic use of irony and ambiguity...serves as a kind of protective cloak shielding both the speaker/author and the listener/reader from the penetrating gaze of the state while simultaneously



delivering a political critique” (p. 671). Chang (1991) provides us with a good example of what Thornton (2002) is talking about:

At the beginning of the 1960s, in spite of all the disasters Mao had caused, he was still China’s supreme leader, idolized by the population. But because the pragmatists were actually running the country, there was relative literary and artistic freedom. A host of plays, operas, films, and novels emerged after long hibernation. None attacked the Party openly, and contemporary themes were rare. At the time Mao was on the defensive, and he turned more and more to his wife, Jiang Qing, who had been an actress in the 1930s. They decided that historical themes were being used to convey insinuations against the regime and against Mao himself.

In China, there was a strong tradition of using historical allusion to voice opposition, and even apparently esoteric allusions were widely understood as coded references to the present day. In April 1963 Mao banned all “Ghost Dramas,” a genre rich in ancient tales of revenge by dead victims’ spirits on those who had persecuted them. To him, these ghost avengers were uncomfortably close to the class enemies who had perished under his rule. [Chang 1991: 273]

Also, Catholics in China have used similar methods to show their dissatisfaction with governmental control of their religious affairs:

While the ordinations were instituted by the Patriotic Association, many clergy, seminarians and lay people utilized the event to exercise the margin of independence they now have in China. Some of the candidates hesitated for a time before consenting to be ordained. Others begged off pleading excuses that could be understood in Chinese Catholic culture. The acolytes from the national seminary who practiced in preparation for the event did not appear the morning of the ordinations, and seminarians from another institution had to be hurriedly brought in to substitute. At the conclusion of the ordination, the choir, rather than singing a joyful hymn, as is customary, sang a lamentation. Most important, the ordination rite included an expression of loyalty to the Holy Father, and, as in all Masses, the congregation prayed for his welfare. So, you see, there has been until recently some narrow space to take one's own position, show displeasure for government orchestrated religious activity, and to demonstrate where one's true loyalties lie. [Christiansen 2000]

In another example, Chang describes several ways in which Chinese people were engaged in “collusive communicative acts” to support Deng Xiaoping and protest the Gang of Four in 1976:

In the university, we were ordered to denounce Deng in endless mass meetings. But most people showed passive resistance, and wandered around the auditorium, or chatted, knitted, read, or even slept during the ritual theatrics. The speakers read their prepared scripts in flat, expressionless, almost inaudible voices.

Because Deng came from Sichuan, there were numerous rumors about him having been sent back to Chengdu for exile. I often saw crowds lining the streets because they had heard he was about to pass by. On some occasions the crowd numbered tens of thousands.

At the same time, there was more and more public animosity towards the Gang of Four, also known as the Gang from Shanghai. Suddenly bicycles and other goods made in Shanghai stopped selling. When the Shanghai football team came to Chengdu they were booed all the way through the game. Crowds gathered outside the stadium and shouted abuse at them as they went in and came out.

Acts of protest broke out all over China, and reached their peak during the Tomb-Sweeping Festival in spring 1976, when the Chinese traditionally pay their

respects to the dead. In Peking, hundreds of thousands of citizens gathered for days on end in Tiananmen Square to mourn Zhou with specially crafted wreaths, passionate poetry readings, and speeches. In symbolism and language, which, though coded, everyone understood, they poured out their hatred of the Gang of Four, and even of Mao... [Chang 1991: 492]

Chang gives yet another useful example, which relies more on non-participation in political affairs than the “strategic use of irony and ambiguity” (Thornton 2002: 671): “Throughout history Chinese scholars and mandarins had traditionally taken up fishing when they were disillusioned with what the emperor was doing. Fishing suggested a retreat to nature, an escape from the politics of the day. It was a kind of symbol for disenchantment and noncooperation” (Chang 1991: 237). Davis notes that even going to McDonald’s and “[eating] a Big Mac... can send a million daily messages that the old ways have changes” (Davis 2000: 254). Of course, we would be negligent if we fail to problematize the intention behind these acts. Were the authors of the “ghost dramas” simply trying to tell a good story, or were they subtly trying to criticize? Did those who retreated to nature do so to be near the fish, or to be away from the emperor? Were those who ate Big Macs trying to assert their identity as being modernized and Westernized in opposition to a traditional Chinese identity, or did they just intend to satisfy their hunger? And, similarly, are Falun Gong practitioners attracted to Falun Gong because they wish to covertly engage in criticism, or because they are simply seeking health, spirituality, and happiness?

The latter appears to be the case with Falun Gong. Munekage (2001) made a distinction between cultural resistance and political resistance, where political resistance is defined as “dramatic confrontations seen in the public sphere, such as riots, rebellion, or mass protest” (p. 13), while cultural resistance is defined as “non-confrontational resistance” (p. 13). The example provided by Chang (1991: 237) of people going fishing to avoid politics would likely be an example of cultural resistance. Munekage believes that the way Falun Gong

expresses their critical consciousness toward mainland China’s social change... did not conceive of state power as the target to resist... While Falun Gong [practitioners] did not directly declare their intention or consciousness to resist the state’s hegemony before spring 1999, their movement itself is a negation of state hegemony by conducting their new values-creating movement. [Munekage 2001: 58]

Before the crackdown, “there were different perspectives of their autonomy for promoting [Falun Gong]” (Munekage 2001: 119) among the practitioners; “Some practitioners came to view their autonomy as threatened early on and attempted to enter the state realm of *qigong*. Others continued to withdraw from

the state and conducted 'avoidance protest,' which turned to political confrontation when the authorities realized that their practice was a negation of state hegemony" (p. 119). In other words,

The overarching issue is religious and spiritual freedom associated with human rights. In a dictatorship where so much of life is regulated by the state, the people need spiritual solace and individual freedom to practice meditation and qigong. They are now being told that the most popular form of qigong is illegal and evil. Besides, qigong should be practiced in open air, and in the case of Falun Gong followers, home practice itself is difficult and dangerous. They are forbidden to read Li's books. They could keep what they have, and circulate these in secret, but risk official punishments. The government, indeed, is looking into their inner souls, and rendering judgments of good and evil, as well as of legality or illegality. [Ching 2001]

Ching (2001) goes on to say, "In China, there is no real vehicle of expression for the people to communicate with their leaders, since ballot boxes do not count. The only means of mass protest is petition of the government. And yet, mass petitions become the basis for mass suppression." Falun Gong is expressly apolitical, but by attracting large numbers of people who are simply seeking health, spirituality, and happiness, the Chinese Government may have seen this as political because it gave the appearance that they were failing to provide the Chinese people with these things. A historical parallel may be drawn to a Chinese emperor who reportedly said, "Happiness may not be sought after; happiness proceeds from complying with orthodoxy, and misfortune from following heresy" (Blackburn 2000: 33; also see Stover and Stover 1976: 134; Dai 2000). While China has gone through considerable changes since then, the CCP still values conformity; in fact, one practitioner told me that the CCP is less tolerant of differing beliefs than previous dynasties.

To use Thornton's (2002) and Munekage's (2001) terminology, Falun Gong has been seen by some as using "frames" to offer a subtle cultural resistance to what they see as a nation-wide (and universe-wide) decline in morality. Munekage claims that Falun Gong's cultural resistance had eventually crossed the line into political resistance, especially following the crackdown (though I think she does a disservice to Falun Gong by placing their non-violent protests into the same category as riots and rebellions). Blackburn (2000), however, finds problems inherent in this view; he recognizes that "[efforts] through the history of political thought to impose essentialist and teleological explanations of situations, and to isolate and clearly identify 'the political' have consistently limited the range of discourse..." (Blackburn 2000: 17). To understand Falun Gong as simply one more group using religion to offer political protest "[supports] realist assumptions about the nature of politics and security which may hinder our understanding of what is

actually happening with these people” (p. 21). In other words, the so-called protest expressed by Falun Gong “might imply understandings of political action and of security which transcend an exclusively State-Individual dialectic” (p. 22).

One of the practitioners I talked gave a description of why Falun Gong is not a political group, which agrees with the points I have made here:

They fail to see that we cannot avoid political life in nowadays society, such as voting in your local district for public affairs etc. In democratic countries, those issues may not be counted as politics. But in a communism country like China, all such issues are directly related to power and the central government. For instance, a plant is being built not because of the need, but because some officials could get a decent income from it. If the plant causes serious pollutions or other problems, the only effective way to resolve it in China is to find a high ranking official speaking for you rather than presenting scientific evidences to related departments. Similarly, the crackdown of FLG is not because it poses a threat to the government, but because Jiang Zemin, ex-President of China, does not like it. In China, a majority of issues are about manipulation and allocation of power among the very few. So Chinese people tend to think that FLG is playing political games with the government. Low esteem of political movements makes them assume that FLG is a group with certain political purposes.

They also think that since FLG is a spiritual belief, the followers should do their practice quietly and pay no attention to public affairs.

Well, it takes time and our effort to let them truly understand what we are doing. On speaking of FLG, a lot of issues are raised, such as the relation between science and superstition, politics and public interest, minority and majority, history of religions as well as what kind of a government the China’s one is, how it treats its dissents, etc. Therefore we build up our own media to discuss those issues in depth. And we go out to talk to people about them. All such activities resemble a political group’s actions. But our purpose is dramatically different: we only ask the public to have a correct understanding of FLG and the persecution. We are NOT interested in politics. Let us see.

In her description, we see how appealing to political entities is the standard way of resolving disputes in China (also see Schechter 2001: 68 n.). However, the attempt to appeal on behalf of Falun Gong would surely result in arrest and imprisonment nowadays, and it seems unlikely that any politician in China would openly support Falun Gong in the current political atmosphere. Therefore, being political involved, or at least participating in “activities [that] resemble a political groups’ actions” is the only alternative to being vilified and persecuted. However, this practitioner also seems to agree with my distinction between striving for the right to exist without harsh oppression and using politics to make changes in society which closer match their ideology. Calling Falun Gong a political group or political movement fails to recognize this distinction, and therefore I do not feel it is appropriate to use. As one anthropologist said, “They are, to some degree, agents of change, but without the plans, goals, organizational structure, and intent to effect widespread change. Indeed... Falun Gong concentrates instead on securing benefits for its [practitioners]

exclusively, not for society at large” (Frank 2002). (I think practitioners would argue that protecting Falun Gong is beneficial to society at large, however.)

By asking for the right to choose their own spiritual faith, however, there are some political implications in a Chinese context that are not generally found in the West. A Falun Gong practitioner once handed me a flyer that said (paraphrased from memory): “In most nations, choosing your spiritual faith is a right. In China, it’s a crime.” (The situation is more complicated than this flyer slogan, of course. People are allowed to choose a spiritual faith, but only as long as it is an officially recognized spiritual faith, and the person is not a CCP member. Also, the CCP uses a variety means to prevent the officially recognized religions from growing very large or powerful.) In *Poisonous Deceit*, M.H. (2002) writes:

Chinese tradition does not place a high value on “personal liberty.” But that doesn’t mean that Chinese people don’t have human rights, even though they’re not very aware of them. They still have human rights, even if they don’t claim or believe they have them. And even if they can’t justify to themselves why they deserve or should expect to exercise these rights, they still have these rights.

Using the Chinese language to explain the reality of personal liberty is not as easy as one would imagine. It’s like always living in darkness and trying to conceive of what it means to live in the light of day. If you have no concept of light, then you have no language to express the concept.

So too, if the Chinese don’t have a heartfelt understanding of personal liberty, they won’t find it easy to talk about it or defend what little “liberty” they have. So it’s easy to deny someone something they have little idea they’re entitled to in the first place. [M.H. 2002: 10]

Similarly, Lili Feng wrote: “What is happening in China is beyond the violation of human rights, it is a violation against the most basic human existence” (Feng 2000). Underlying these assertions by practitioners and the party line on human rights in China lies a very different answer to a basic philosophical question, namely: What is the source of human rights? Falun Gong’s conception of the individual having the right to choose their spiritual faith is more in line with Western conceptions of human rights:

In traditional liberal thinking, rights were thought to derive from natural law, a higher moral order designed by God that acted as a guideline to the implementation of state law and as a restraint on state power. According to John Locke, it was from natural law that people acquired the natural rights to ‘life, liberty, and property’. Although one or two scholars have remained loyal to the original tenets of natural rights, most modern liberal thinkers have jettisoned the Judaeo-Christian basis of the doctrine, suggesting in a more secular tone that human rights are grounded in our very humanity. As L.J. MacFarlane explains, in their most basic form, human rights are ‘owed to each man or woman by every man and woman solely by reason of being human’. [Weatherley 2000: 22]

Put more simply, it might be said human rights in liberal Western traditions and among Falun Dafa practitioners both “derive from our innate moral worth as human beings” (Weatherley2000: 22; also see Curtler 2002: 38). The Chinese government takes a dim view of this position:

The official Chinese position on rights treats these liberal ideas with disdain. The Lockean conception of natural rights is rejected as nothing more than theoretical and theological nonsense, at odds with and divorced from the reality of human society. Similarly, the assertion that we possess human rights simply because we are human beings is dismissed as a form of esoteric, liberal humanism. Instead, it is argued that rights are grounded in the laws enacted by the state. As the orthodox scholar Gu Chunde explains, ‘individual rights are the rights and interests of people bestowed on them by law’. [Weatherley 2000: 23; also see Young 2002: 30]

Wei (2002) provides us with an example of how Chinese scholars have dismissed criticisms of China’s human rights:

Throughout the 1990s and into the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, any discussion of China in the Western media would almost invariably be linked to human rights. Yet few, if any, journalists have attempted to define or to question where they came from. “Human rights” or even “fundamental human rights” are no self-evident truths. There is no logical or epistemological procedure one can use as a way of defining something as a human right. The concept of human rights referring to those entitlements we are all supposed to have because we are human has evolved with and within human history. The crux of the matter is whose history? Human rights are inextricably linked to one particular human way of life in *one place, at one point in time*. [Wei 2002: 370-371]

As a result of this very different conception of human rights, the CCP is given “absolute power...to define and in particular to change the content of rights” (Weatherley 2000: 23), ostensibly because “as the vanguard of the proletariat” (p. 23), the CCP has the “necessary insight to interpret its interests” (p. 23). While it is not unusual that a country may reserve the capacity to change laws regarding the rights of the individual, “what is unusual about China is that the rights are altered not to benefit or protect the individual, but to accommodate the economic and political goals of the CCP” (p. 24). (A non-practitioner has told me that he believes that all countries do this, not just China; this is certainly a debatable issue.) In addition, the Chinese government has “complete autonomy to decide exactly who can enjoy rights” because human rights are seen as “the ‘property’ of the party-state in China...they are commonly perceived as a type of ‘gift’ or ‘grant’ which can be bestowed upon citizens by the party-state or taken away from them by the party-state” (p. 24). In other words,

Since the state exists for the sole purpose of protecting its citizens from the ruthless nature of unfettered existence, any ends which the State or its representatives requires to accomplish that end is automatically justified. The State is thus ‘above’ the application of moral considerations, and the main political conflicts are seen either in terms of

individuals against individuals, states among states, or between states and individuals.  
[Blackburn 2000: 35]

Falun Gong, however, postulates that Zhen-Shan-Ren applies to the entire universe; simply being a high-ranking politician does not exempt you from this.

The justification of these suppressions on the grounds of it simply being Chinese culture, in the sense of the exercise of power being accepted by both the power-holder and the powerless, falls flat. The naïve view of cultural relativism as “the view that what cultures do is their business and no one outside a given culture is in a position to judge whether activities within that culture are right or wrong” (Curtler 2002: 35) is an untenable position which anthropologists have been misrepresented as adhering to (Merry 2003; di Leonardo: 1998: 342-346). Chinese culture, and cultures in general, should not be theorized as “homogenous, integrated, and consensual” (Merry 2003: 4), as Chang (1991) demonstrates in her criticism of some Western media portrayals of China during the Cultural Revolution:

Still, I could not help being irritated by some observations. Once I read an article by a Westerner who came to China to see some old friends, university professors, who told him cheerfully how they had enjoyed being denounced and sent to the back end of beyond, and how much they had relished being reformed. The author concluded that Mao had indeed made the Chinese into “new people” who would regard what was misery to a Westerner as pleasure. I was aghast. Did he not know that repression was at its worst when there was no complaint? A hundred times more so when the victim actually presented a smiling face? Could he not see to what a pathetic condition these professors had been reduced, and what horror must have been involved to degrade them so? I did not realize that the acting that the Chinese were putting on was something to which Westerners were unaccustomed, and which they could not always decode. [Chang 1991: 472]

While the people in China are now freer to engage in criticism privately than during the Mao era (Li Cheng 1997: 26), the crackdown on Falun Gong seems like a step backwards towards the more repressive policies of the Cultural Revolution (Ching 2001; Ditzler 2001: 1; Waldron 1999; Feng 2000; Landsberger n.d.; Lam 2001b). One practitioner gives a scathing account of this sort of forced conformity, similar Jung Chang’s (1991: 472) account of the article that upset her:

Under what circumstances would a person betray his belief in the truth? Under normal circumstances it is not possible. It can only happen when his willpower is destroyed. When a person who formerly believed in the truth suddenly "reforms," his/her mind is already destroyed...Jiang group uses all kinds of means and even brutal torture and murder to "reform" practitioners. Once a person's willpower is destroyed, he can only play the role of a slave... By destroying practitioners' spirit, the Jiang group is murdering practitioners' minds instead of their physical bodies, which can be called "killing without a knife" and it is covert and extremely vicious.

It is not at all inappropriate to call such reform tactics "mental rape." For people who believe in truth, their faith is incomparably sacred to them and cannot be violated.

Now, most Chinese people don't have faith so they can't feel for the practitioners, as they cannot empathize with the pain when a person is forced to attack his own faith with outside lies.

What is most despicable is that Jiang forces these brainwashed or "reformed" people to praise him, which is no different than a villain who rapes a girl and then forces her to praise him in public, saying how caring he is! Jiang shows off his crimes as good deeds; that is truly disgusting. [Clearwisdom.net 2003n]

Frank (2002), for example, described how there was a Chinese television program to denounce Falun Gong that featured a "former" practitioner who, "apparently under some duress, makes a kind of 'War is Peace' statement." Frank goes on to say that "a viewer in the United States noted that the prisoner's tone and body language seemed to indicate that she in fact still believed in and supported Falun Gong" (2002). Merry (2003) recognizes the connection between how one views culture and one's views of human rights; when culture is seen as "homogenous, integrated, and consensual" (p. 4), this results in culture being "increasingly understood as a barrier to the realization of human rights by activists and a tool for legitimating noncompliance with human rights by conservatives" (p. 4). However, if we recognize a more dynamic view of culture, "focusing on its historical production, its porosity to outside influences and pressures, and its incorporation of competing repertoires of meaning and action" (p. 4), then the task of scholars defending human rights abuses must be done in terms of the processes of exercising power, not in terms of integrated, consensual cultures.

Weatherley (2000) points out that not all Chinese scholars agree with China's prevailing view of human rights. He names two, Han Depei, a political theorist from Wuhan university, and Li Buyun, editor of the Chinese journal 'Studies of Law, who believe that there is some innate moral worth to human beings that should not be violated at the whim of the CCP (see Edelman and Richardson 2003: 321). Weatherley (2000) comments that it is "striking" that the views of Han and Li are in "proximity to those espoused by liberal theorists...[although that] neither Han nor Li expressly acknowledges the liberal roots of this concept probably reflects their awareness of the current limits to academic expression in China" (p. 25). Other Chinese scholars are mentioned as well who disagree with the remnants of "class struggle" within the Chinese constitution (p. 28-29). Pan Yue, a high-ranking Chinese State Council official, published an article in December 2001 that was critical of the CCP's stance on religion (Kindopp 2002: 266). Still others have argued for greater freedom of speech (Weatherley 2000: 31-32). However, Weatherley cautions "the significance of those scholars who espouse such views should not be overstated...because



they are few in number, while the vast majority of China's rights theorists retain support of the position propagated by the government" (2000: 36). This does show, however, that some prominent Chinese scholars do not see the innate worth of the individual as being incompatible with Chinese society.

Mainstream Chinese scholarship takes the position that human rights are universal in principle, but they are dependent upon economic development. In other words, the right to vote or to choose a spiritual faith is irrelevant to a person who does not have adequate food or shelter, and a society capable of providing these things. While they are correct in a sense, "the prioritization of subsistence rights in this way gives autocratic regimes (such as the CCP) an ideal opportunity to justify the continued restriction of civil and political rights by simply insisting that their country is not yet 'developed' enough for its citizens to genuinely enjoy these rights" (Weatherley 2000: 30). In a debate with Bill Clinton in which Clinton criticized China's human rights record, Jiang Zemin replied: "Had the Chinese government not taken the resolute measures, then we could not have enjoyed the stability that we are enjoying today" (CNN 1999g). Some Chinese scholars have countered that because of China's incredible economic progress over the last couple decades, the claim that greater economic development is needed before greater rights can be granted is untenable (Weatherley2000: 31).

In summary, China recognizes the principle that humans should have rights, but argues that individual rights can be curtailed for the collective good, and "what the Chinese government defines as the collective good is simply what is good for the Chinese government" (Weatherley 2000: 33; also see Edelman and Richardson 2003: 314). (Of course, it is difficult to separate cases in which the CCP is acting in their own interest at the expense of the public good, and when their actions were made with good intentions. A non-practitioner I talked to told me he sincerely believes the Chinese government is acting only in the best interest of China, though this is certainly debatable.) When Falun Gong practitioners push for their right to practice their spiritual faith without persecution, they are asserting that they as individuals have moral worth that derives from being a human being, and that the Chinese government does not have the right to imprison, torture, or kill them in the name of the collective good (as defined by the Chinese government). Falun Gong practitioners do not see themselves as being involved with politics, but the Chinese Government retains definitional power in Chinese society, and can therefore define what is political and what is not. According to Andrew Nathan, when 10,000 practitioners gathered peacefully at

the government compound in Beijing, the CCP leadership may have had “no way of being sure that the group would not have ambitions that, to them at least, would seem political” (Schechter 2001: 78). While practitioners may have believed that “in a socialist country, it is both the citizens’ privilege and obligation to report truth to the government” (Schechter 2001: 74), the Chinese Government seems to have “focused on the size of the vigil, not its content” (p. 74). However, as a result of the crackdown, the “damage to the party’s legitimacy was...costly, both at home and abroad” (Kindopp 2002: 261), which may explain why there is now “evidence that the party is exploring ways of accommodating large segments of unofficial religious life” (p. 259).

### **Is Falun Gong a Millenarian or Revitalization Movement?**

“To dream a dream and make it come true,” writes Burrige (1969); “to realize the shape of what can be seen only in the mind’s eye; to feel compelled to bring about the seemingly impossible” (p.3). In many societies throughout the world, not just in China, there have been many movements inspired a single person who is “impelled to tell his good news of a new way of life” (p. 3). Anthony Wallace is credited with coining the term “revitalization movement” to describe these sorts of groups:

...a revitalization movement is defined as a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture...the persons involved in the process of revitalization must perceive their culture, or some major areas of it, as a system (whether accurately or not; they must feel that this cultural system is unsatisfactory; and they must innovate not mere discrete items, but a new cultural system, specifying new relationships as well, in some cases... [Wallace 1956: 265]

David Ownby noted: “The qigong boom had the air of a cultural revitalization movement, although one should hasten to add that traditions are always transformed as they are revitalized” (Ownby 2001: A31). Under the rubric of revitalization movement, “a very large class of phenomena” is encompassed, including what Burrige calls a “millenarian movement.” Some in academia have commented about the similarity between Li Hongzhi’s teachings and these movements, and this is generally not a positive comparison to make – put simply, the implication is that in times of social instability, a leader will present a new way of life which taps into social discontent, and, sometimes, these movements may eventually turn violent. One German scholar wrote, “international comparison shows that such movements usually [are political] themselves: ‘all [prophetic] protest movements...sooner or later [turn] from religious to economic and

political objectives, only the time and the intensity of this 'turning over' vary” (Heberer 2001: 28). As Wallace describes,

The movement is a revolutionary organization and almost inevitably will encounter some resistance. Resistance may in some cases be slight and fleeting but more commonly is determined and resourceful, and is held either by a powerful faction within the society or by agents of a dominant foreign society. The movement may therefore have to use various strategies of adaptation: doctrinal modification; political and diplomatic maneuver; and force. These strategies are not mutually exclusive nor, once chosen, are they necessarily maintained through the life of the movement. [Wallace 1956: 274]

In this section, I will first show how Falun Gong seems to fit the description of a millenarian movement (as defined by Burrige) in some ways, and then note differences that make it unlikely that Falun Gong would adopt force as a strategy.

As Burrige (1969) describes them, there are many similarities between Falun Gong and his definition of a millenarian movement. In his thinking, millenarian movements are “a frequent characteristic of periods of social unrest” (p. 3). Indeed, the 1980s were a period that produced a crisis of meaning for Chinese society (Xu 2002; Schell 1980). Xu (2002) writes, “Looking for a new belief, new value system, and, ultimately, new meaning of life became an important theme of cultural and intellectual life at the time” (p. 10). During these periods, “communities that feel themselves oppressed anticipate the emergence of a hero who will restore their prosperity and prestige” (Burrige 1969: 3). Indeed, it appears as if many qigong masters and religious groups began emerging during this time period. Burrige claims, “the human condition appears as one of general indebtedness” (p. 6). In his view, a human being feels indebted to the society that has given him or her the capacity to fill his or her “potential” after “a long process of feeding, nurturing, teaching, and training by parents and others” (p. 6). The society in which the individual lives also defines how this debt should be paid, and the debt is only released after death. Millenarian movements, however, seek to change this relationship between individual and society; “by examining the kinds of redemption or releases from obligation that are offered by particular kinds of millenarian activity, we might be able to see more accurately what assumptions and rules are currently not revealing the truth of things, what kinds of redemptive process would be more in tune with an actual or desired distribution of power” (p.8). Indeed, in *Zhuan Falun*, we find Li Hongzhi say that the truth of things is not being revealed:

The Buddha Fa” is most profound; among all theories in the world, it is the most intricate and extraordinary science. In order to explore this domain, humankind must

fundamentally change its conventional thinking. Otherwise, the truth of the universe will forever remain a mystery to humankind, and everyday people will forever crawl within the boundary delimited by their own ignorance. [Li Hongzhi 1999b: vii]

And, Li Hongzhi also presents an alternative vision of redemption from Deng Xiaoping's declaration that "to get rich is glorious" in *Zhuan Falun*:

Human beings often believe that everything they pursue is good. In fact, from a high-level perspective, these are to satisfy those bits of vested interests among everyday people. It is said in religion that regardless of how much money you have or how high your position ranks, it is good for only a few decades. One cannot bring it along at birth or carry it after death. Why is gong so precious? It is precisely because it grows right on the body of your Primordial Spirit and can be carried at birth and taken forth after death. In addition, it directly determines your Fruit Status in cultivation, and it is therefore difficult to cultivate. In other words, what you lose is something bad. Thus, you can return to your original, true self. So what do you gain? The improvement of your level; eventually you achieve Right Fruit and complete cultivation, solving the fundamental issue. Certainly, it will not be easy for you to immediately lose all sorts of everyday people's desires and reach the standard of a true practitioner, as it takes time to make it. When you hear me say that it takes time, you might say that Teacher has told us to take time, and so you will take time in doing so. That will not be permitted! You should be strict with yourself, though we allow you to improve gradually. If you could do it all at once today, you would be a Buddha today. Thus, it is not realistic. You will be able to achieve this gradually. [Li Hongzhi 1999b: 146-147]

"Since existing authorities are quick to scent a challenge," Burrige (1969) writes, "it is only prudent to gain the support of respected leaders of the community without appearing as a rival to them; and this emerging hero can only do if what he has to say expresses and articulates just those questions which the community feels disturbed and anxious about" (p. 10). In Li Hongzhi's case, he was accepted into the Chinese Qigong Research Society, and befriended many CCP members. We can also see "new assumptions which predicate the creation of a new man, a new culture, society or condition of being are being wrought" (p. 10-11) in Falun Gong, as one practitioner wrote in an article entitled "Foreseeing the Future Society":

With Master's coming to offer salvation in person, the cultivation course of Dafa disciples will become a period of great and sublime history. "When this page of history is turned, the people who remain will see your greatness" ("Rationality"). Naturally, upon witnessing this magnificent scene, all of society will enter a time of cultivation. Till then, the earth will be new and all things will flare with a new century's sheen. For the people who remain, there will be no evil higher beings that can take control of them. People will come out from the maze and understand what happened. Their hearts will be struck strongly by Dafa.

It will be a society based on cultivation. People will uphold cultivation as the norm and pursue a positive attitude. Cultivation will become the standard when deciding what should exist or what should not. Cultivation will also guide human society onto the right track. Human beings will understand that returning to the original true self is the purpose of life. [Pureinsight.org 2001]

So, we have seen that Li Hongzhi offers a different conception of morality and reality, which differed in what Burrige referred to as the “redemptive process.” He also presented his teachings at a time of social unrest in Chinese society, and spoke of a new and better future society. So why is it that in spite of these similarities, Li Hongzhi has not written an article that advocates violence in self-defense, much less in taking the offensive to violently overthrow the CCP?

Even if we were to assume that Li Hongzhi would like to overthrow the CCP, something the practitioners would find highly ridiculous, there are several practical reasons why it would not be in his best interest to use force as a “[strategy] of adaptation” (Wallace 1956: 274). Rahn (2002), even though she interprets Li Hongzhi’s writings as allowing for this possibility, notes four sociopolitical factors preventing this. First, it would damage Falun Gong’s reputation, and lessen the impact of their criticisms on the grounds of human rights. Second, practitioners believe the Fa will provide retribution, and that doing it themselves is a wrong deed. Third, it would damage their options as a “protest movement,” in that Falun Gong depends on a friendly political environment in the West. Fourth, Li Hongzhi and Clearwisdom.net have consistently spoken against using violent means or doing anything else that would damage the reputation of Falun Gong. (Rahn 2002: 58-59) Sutter notes that in order for Falun Gong to start posing any real threat to the regime, several changes would be necessary; “Notably, they need to establish communications across broad areas, establish alliances with other disaffected groups, and put forth leaders prepared to challenge the regime and gain popular support with credible moral claims” (Sutter 1999). While they arguably have accomplished the first in the form of the Internet (although China’s sophistication in censorship technology is advancing, making it more difficult for practitioners to communicate this way), they have not accomplished the second or third (at least, not in China), nor is there any strong indication they intend to do so. Chinese opinion of Falun Gong has been rather mixed, with people showing more sympathy towards practitioners than towards Li Hongzhi (see chapter 4), which rules out the “popular support with credible moral claims” (Sutter 1999) criterion.

Since these movements seem to rely on an individual, it may be useful to ask what sort of a person Li Hongzhi is. There is only anecdotal evidence to go on, but it may help to determine what sort of personality he has. Adams, et al. (2000) have uncovered some interesting information about his the early parts of Li Hongzhi’s life:

Chinese government's investigators have determined that his classmates, teachers and neighbors all described him as an ordinary child. His grades were average, and his only marked talent was for playing the trumpet. Even his brother Li Donghui, ten years his junior, had no early intimation of future greatness. He recalls Hongzhi as "deeply introverted" and shy, but courageous at need. At one point, Li seems to have rescued another child from the town's river, then left the scene to escape the congratulations that were showered upon him by people who'd witnessed his heroism.

According to Donghui, Li's one abiding concern, fitting in an eldest son, was the care of his family (which also included two sisters, Jun Li and Ping Li), as his parents had separated after his siblings were born. Otherwise, Donghui described his brother, at this stage at least, as a quiet, humble person, "always studying on his own." The only sign that Hongzhi was given to meditative practices occurred when the two boys went bicycling together in the mountains, where Hongzhi would sit cross-legged and compose his thoughts, a regimen that was at the time officially forbidden by the state. [p. 5]

After Li Hongzhi worked as a bandsman for the Jilin Provincial Forest Police unit, Xinhua news agency "later quizzed his immediate associates and superiors, [who] described Li as an ordinary soldier, although somewhat 'conceited'" (Adams, et al. 2000: 6). Of course, following the crackdown, it was very likely expected that his former coworkers should offer some sort of criticism of him, lest they appear to be Falun Gong sympathizers. Similar to what his brother said about him, Schechter (2001) also finds that Li Hongzhi was shy:

I met with Li in lower Manhattan just after the Falun Gong's banning in July 1999. He struck me as rather shy, and uncomfortable playing the role of an internationally recognized leader. He seems to have encouraged followers to stop calling him Master because the term is misunderstood in America as suggesting genuflection to his every word. It is significant that even as the crisis in China escalated and news outlets sought comments from him, he chose to remain out of public view. This may be for security reasons—but it certainly indicates that he is not an obsessed publicity-seeker. [p. 61]

This hardly seems like the type of person to lead a revolution.

On the other end of the spectrum, the practitioners do not seem like the type of people to use force. Demographically, Frank (1999) found that "While there are some similarities to many millenarian movements ... the make up of Falun Gong's membership is much different than these previous movements. [Practitioners] seem to come from all walks of life and all classes, including a substantial number of party members." In addition, Nancy Chen wrote:

Most of the pre- and early-20th century rebellions have been rural-based, with peasants as the primary participants. The Boxers and White Lotus rebels, among others, were overwhelmingly young and male, with few female participants. In contrast, the majority of qigong practitioners, including Falun Gong, tend to be urban-based with more or less equal distribution among male and female practitioners at the entry level. Most qigong and Falungong devotees in China are notably older, consisting of retired workers, intellectuals, and cadres- far from being outsiders, these are people fully entrenched in the socialist system. [Chen 2000]

Falun Gong surveys found that in 1998, 72.9% of practitioners were female and 62.1% were above 50 (Pureinight.org 2002c) – while I am not a historian, I cannot imagine that many of the violent uprisings in China’s history have consisted primarily of middle-aged and older women. Kindopp (2002) agrees that Falun Gong “could never launch an effective uprising against the state’s apparatus of coercion” and that Falun Gong is merely a “threat” to the regime’s “symbolic order, which presents an image of a society united under its rule” (p. 259).

In addition, the culture of practitioners seems opposed to this sort of a response. Schechter (2001) interviews a practitioner who was also a Chinese Communist Party member, and when Schechter asked him if he was trying to overthrow the government, the man responded, “How can I overthrow myself? Overthrow myself? I don’t understand” (p. 78). Also, in my conversations with practitioners, their peaceful response to the crackdown has been a source of group pride. For example, Jianping Chu said to me in 2001:

Actually, it’s not Falun Gong that is against the government. It’s someone in the government. Because in China, there were so many practitioners, more than 100 million, and that’s why the president in China regarded Falun Gong as a potential threat to his power, which is why he started the persecution. And Falun Gong is not against the government. Today, so far like more than two years, there is no violence from the practitioners to the government. A lot of people die, but still no violence. We won’t fight like they persecute us. We just try to appeal to governments, and hope they will stop. And also we tell people around the world who will help us stop [it].

In addition, I found this telling anecdote where a mother talks about children, violence on television, and Fa Rectification:

One thing I have noticed with alarm is the amount of evil portrayed in children's programmes. The evil is usually blatant (while it is far more subtle in adult programmes) and quite scary for small children. Why should fear be part of entertainment? I have noticed that the common theme in many children's movies is the battle of good against evil - whether it's humans, dinosaurs, mermaids or toys! The good usually wins, but only after a battle of some kind. Before I became a practitioner I thought that this was quite a good lesson for my children to learn, that good will overcome evil. However, now I realise just how warped those ideas of good and evil are, when compared with the sole criterion for judging good and bad: Zhen, Shan, Ren. The good is not really good, just less bad than the evil. The good wins over the evil through human cunning, logic and outsmarting, not through truthfulness, compassion or forbearance. These stories of good against evil also teach children that it is okay to hurt a person or even destroy them if they are "evil". This is very warped! If it is wrong to hurt or kill someone, it is wrong regardless of how bad a person or character is. (This is different from eliminating evil in other dimensions that practitioners are doing as part of Fa Rectification. This is something done out of compassion for all sentient beings, and to safeguard the Fa). [Children's Garden 2001]

In the entire course of my fieldwork, I have yet to run across a practitioner who sees violence as an acceptable course of action against the Chinese government. In addition, Burgdoff (2003) notes, “the dispersed organizational structure [of Falun Gong] works against the possibility of the type of group isolation or withdrawal that has been associated with violence precipitated by new religious movement” (p. 338).

Rahn (2002: 49-50) has suggested that the harsh way that Li Hongzhi speaks of Jiang Zemin’s regime might be used to legitimate violence. Since Li Hongzhi has referred to Jiang Zemin as “evil’s chief wretch” (Li 2001b: 6), it may be useful to look at practitioner’s attitudes towards Jiang Zemin to test this possibility. I did not ask specifically about attitudes towards Jiang Zemin in my semi-structured interviews, although I had a few informal conversations that seem telling. First, Jianping Chu told me that Jiang Zemin is too evil to be redeemed because not only had he killed practitioners, but he has outlawed the principles of Truthfulness, Compassion, and Forbearance. It is not possible for Jiang Zemin to be a practitioner, according to Jianping Chu, because Jiang has done too many evil things. I then asked Jianping Chu what he thought would happen to Jiang Zemin when he died; he replied that Jiang would have a heavy price to pay. He then brought up the story of Sodom and Gomorrah from the bible and how Lot’s wife turned into a pillar of salt upon looking back, apparently to draw a comparison to the level of immorality. Second, when I asked Qiaoyun Zheng about Jiang Zemin, she had a very different opinion of him than Jianping Chu. She seemed to feel that the crackdown was more attributable to ignorance than malice; Falun Gong was simply presented badly to Jiang Zemin, according her, so he reacted badly. Qiaoyun Zheng also said that because there were 70 million practitioners in China, but Jiang Zemin still had never heard of them until the April 25 incident, this shows that Jiang Zemin is really out of touch with the Chinese people. Third, Chengping Zheng, one of the people I refer to as a casual practitioner or doubter, said that Jiang Zemin is not a smart man, and he cannot handle running a big country like China. Fourth, one of the Orlando practitioners said that Jiang Zemin is similar to Nero, the Roman Emperor. Fifth, I once asked Jianping Chu about the meaning of an article by Li Hongzhi entitled “Beyond Forbearance” which some non-practitioners have interpreted as a “call to arms.” He gave the example of seeing someone being murdered or raped; in this case, he told me, you can stop the murderer or rapist instead of showing him or her forbearance. I asked if this means practitioners can kill people under such circumstances, and he says he does not. Not even Jiang



Zemin, I ask? He said not even Jiang Zemin. Sixth, in contrast to what Jiangping Chu told me about Jiang Zemin being beyond redemption, one time Jing Yang told me that anyone could become a practitioner if they chose to, including Jiang Zemin. Seventh, while looking at the cover of a book that had Jiang Zemin on it, Nappi told me, with a hint of scorn in his voice, that Jiang Zemin looks like an animal (a toad, if I remember correctly). All of this suggests that the practitioners certainly do not see Jiang Zemin as a person worthy of their respect, but nothing suggests that they would condone using any sort of violent means against him.

Some people may wonder if the ideals of non-violence will still hold, even after practitioners in China are the victims of persecution. While there is only anecdotal evidence available with which to address this question, it is suggestive of how Falun Gong practitioners might react to being the subject of the Chinese government's persecution. Levine (2001), a social worker, wrote that the "Holocaust survivors... who coped most successfully appear to make conscious efforts to interpret their survival as a special obligation to give meaning to their lives—neither denying the trauma of their ordeal or succumbing to it" (p. 354). In her study on genocide in Guatemala, Manz (2002) wrote: "For some, the deep religious faith was able to carry them through. For others, even for of the most religious, the blow was so devastating that it shattered their faith in God" (p. 300). Of course, cultural factors may play an influence on the interpretation and coping of traumatic experience, so Chinese examples would be helpful. Kindopp describes the evangelical Christian movement's view of government persecution:

...official persecution has not only created individual martyrs, but has cultivated a theology of martyrdom that shapes the entire movement. In contrast to most unofficial religious groups in China's history, which promise supernatural strength and wealth, China's house church Christians identify with a savior who suffered unto death. Seasoned activists no longer fear their inevitable arrests and beatings, but view them as a form of spiritual discipline. As one 20-year old veteran evangelist put it, "The first time the police arrested me for spreading the Gospel, I was terrified. The first time they beat me, I thought they would kill me. But this has happened so many times that I am no longer afraid of being arrested. Nothing they can do frightens me anymore." The young woman then added, "In fact, I never feel as alive spiritually as when I am in jail." House church networks have incorporated the spirit of martyrdom into their organizational culture, making individual persecution into a valuable form of personal capital—to the extent that leadership candidates are often ranked by the number of times they have been arrested. [2002: 264-265]

In his description, we see the redefinition of the pain of persecution into spirituality, and even social capital. Schell (1980) finds a similar attitude in a 61-year old Chinese Christian he talked to:

“Is it still dangerous to admit that you are a Christian?” I ask, breaking the lull in our conversation.

“I suppose it’s all right,” he replies distantly. “Of course, it’s not nearly as bad as it once was. But for me,” he adds, coming to life, “*I will admit it to anyone. If they want to arrest me, I will go gladly, just like Jesus. He was a peaceable man.*”

“Are you angry at the way your country has treated you?”

“What good would that do?” he replies with a cryptic smile. “It is strange how foreigners get angry at their own countries. But we Chinese cannot change our country.” [p. 134-135, emphasis added]

All of this suggests that spiritual belief systems can be powerful ways of redefining the traumatic experience of state persecution. This is the case with Falun Dafa as well; practitioners who renounce Falun Dafa under duress will often send in a “Solemn Declaration” to Clearwisdom.net, in which they explain that their “failure” will only provide motivation for them to try harder to be a better practitioner in the future. To give an example, one practitioner wrote:

Early in 2002, I was illegally sentenced to forced labor for one year. Right before the "Sixteenth Congress" the policemen at the labor camp started a new round of more severe persecution towards steadfast Dafa disciples. The policemen equipped themselves with 4,500 V electric batons, and they instigated other convicts to torment and devastate Dafa disciples, physically and mentally. Under such great pressure I wrote the "three letters" against my will... After I came home, through further studying the Fa and with the help of fellow practitioners, I realized that what I did was against my will, although as a Dafa disciple I should never have done it--because it is such a shame. Not wanting to let down Master's boundless compassion and his efforts to save us, I hereby declare: The "three letters" I have written and the test I have answered while in the labor camp were forced upon me against my will by the wicked; they are all null and void. In the future, I will give my best on the path of Fa-rectification. I will do what a Dafa disciple should do and become a qualified Dafa disciple during this Fa-rectification time. I will redouble my effort to make up for my mistakes and retrieve the loss to Dafa. [Clearwisdom.net 2003]

In addition, practitioners who do not give up Falun Gong while being tortured can take comfort in this fact:

The retelling of the day [her daughter] was taken is the only part of the story that causes Amy Lee to cry.

"That hurt," she says, "*in my heart*. You know?"

Later, Amy was served with a divorce petition that her husband brought against his will. She had no choice but to sign. When she was released, she realized she had one option left if she wanted to live: She snuck out of the country, leaving her husband and daughter behind. Back home, her husband is routinely required to write "self criticisms" and reprimanded for Amy Lee's activities.

Invariably, the reporters ask Amy Lee what it felt like to be tortured. Even if English were Amy Lee's native tongue, it's uncertain whether she--or anyone who has gone through what she did--could find the words to relay her feelings.

Amy Lee's participation in this tour jeopardizes her husband and daughter, but she says she will not be silenced. She also refuses to let the government break her spirit.

"I still feel very happy," she says, "because I did not go against my heart."

[Farley 2001: 5]

All this suggests that whether a practitioner cracks under the pressure of the persecution or not, they do not seem to carry resentment with them (or, at least they do not channel what resentment they do carry into

violence) because their spiritual beliefs help to reinterpret their suffering as reaffirming of their identity as a practitioner.

## Falun Gong History

### The Chinese Media versus Falun Gong: A Battle of Representation



Figure 4: "Our country is in its best human rights period in history."

Available: <http://www.clearwisdom.net/emh/articles/2001/9/5/13558.html>. Used with permission.



Figure 5: Part of an anti-Falun Gong comic.

A frame from a Chinese comic book entitled "Li Hongzhi: The Man and His Evil Deeds" by the China Art Museum Press. He is saying, "The entire world must heed me, otherwise it's nothing." Available: <http://www2.kenyon.edu/depts/religion/fac/Adler/reln270/falungong/22.htm>.

Frank (2002) presents a typology of different discourses on Falun Gong:

I have categorized these discourses as follows: foreign media, Chinese media, scholarly, human rights, and practice-oriented. The war of representation that comprises these five categories reveals a certain degree of complicity between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), foreign corporations, Chinese entrepreneurs, and consumers in taking advantage of the free market reforms and participation in neoliberal regimes that have characterized post-Cultural Revolution China...

Although there are limits to typologies of this sort, which Frank notes, I believe his typology will be a useful reminder of the different motivations that exist for different groups to present Falun Gong in different ways. By contrasting the Chinese media with these other discourses, I hope to show why I was skeptical of the accounts presented by China in my history of Falun Gong.

Although sometimes the Chinese media is able to criticize government policies to some degree, the Chinese government still tightly controls the mass media and does not allow “freedom of the press” (Li Cheng 1997: 26; also see Dolven 2002: 27; Jiang 2002: 47-48; Murphy 2002b). Rahn (2002) notes that the Chinese governments’ campaign of oppression is seen as harsh and unnecessary in the west, and therefore:

Information on the Falun Gong from the Chinese government is...seen as propaganda and generally dismissed in the west. It is rarely reported on in the Western media. Verification by outside sources of the Chinese research on the Falun Gong is difficult if not impossible. In addition, the role of the media in China is closely linked to the propagation of government policy and although there's been some broadening of independent reporting by the Chinese press, in areas as politically sensitive as this, the press must not contradict the party-line. [Rahn 2000]

The official Chinese anti-Falun Gong site, which now seems to be offline, did not link outside resources that present other points of view (O'Leary 2001: 211). (Rahn made a similar accusation about Falun Gong sites, which will be discussed in chapter 4.) However, what O'Leary said about the official site seems to hold true for anti-Falun Gong sites that are still up (for example, Embassy of the PRC in the Kingdom of Denmark 2002).

Rahn (2000) points out some of the problems in relying on Falun Gong websites for information. Gail Rachlin, Falun Gong practitioner and spokeswoman, speaks to the press through Rachlin Management and Media Group in New York;

Information is provided via press releases, interviews with Li Hong Zhi (interviews with Li have been discontinued since the summer of 1999), and information provided on the Falun Gong Website. The information from this source is understandably biased and serving self-interests. This raises the larger question of the use of the Internet for information and the absence of any standard of accuracy, verification, or accountability for information provided on personal and interest-group websites, as well as the websites' impact on individual Internet users, the news media, and political policy. [Rahn 2000]

However, the information presented by Falun Gong practitioners has been sufficiently persuasive for some third parties like Amnesty International to get involved:

Official sources have confirmed many of these deaths, rejecting outright all allegations of torture and ill-treatment. Amnesty International is not able independently to verify these reports of torture resulting in death. It is however extremely concerned at the inadequate, contradictory response of the authorities to mounting credible evidence. In the face of numerous corroborating testimonies, blanket denial of official wrongdoing will not be convincing, especially when accompanied by evidence of official cover up, including reports of hasty cremation before autopsies can be performed, and the continuing detention of those who seek to publicize their experience of ill-treatment...The organization calls on the Chinese government to ensure all allegations are thoroughly and independently investigated and the results publicized. [Amnesty International 2001a: 31-32; also see Edelman and Richardson 2003: 324-325]

In a heated debate such as this one, it is important to try to find corroborating evidence to go with the reports of either side. In addition to the points raised by Amnesty International, there have also been some secret documents uncovered which corroborate the brutality of the persecution claimed by the practitioners (Center for Religious Freedom 2002).

There is also the issue of credibility between the two sources. Not only is the Chinese media controlled by the government, not allowing outside verification and is requiring stricter censoring of the Internet (CNN 2002), but it has also been criticized for fabricating news stories for its own ends. Here is one example where they were caught lying:

In China, after a tragic explosion at a rural elementary school, the official government story blamed a deranged assailant. But news sites and participants in on-line chat rooms spread the word that the blast occurred because pupils had been forced to make fireworks. The on-line reports forced Prime Minister Zhu Rongji to apologize two weeks ago for the government's "unshirkable responsibility" for the accident. [Lee-Young 2001]

Also, a Falun Gong website, quoting from Voice of America, claims that China has been caught lying specifically about Falun Gong:

Hai Tao, of Voice of America, reports "Since the Chinese government started to crack down on Falun Gong in July 1999, all state-run media agencies started to attack Falun Gong, its founder and its key members. On November 28, it was 'reported' that 'Zhi-wen Zhang,' living in Wei-nan of Shan-xi Province, burned her half-a-year-old daughter and then committed suicide by setting fire to herself, in protest of the government's crackdown on Falun Gong. This report made a stir in the country and was reprinted by many newspapers in Shen-zhen, Harbin, Shanghai and other places. Recently, the Hong Kong Information Center for Human Rights and Democratic Movements conducted an investigation and found out that the report was a sheer fabrication. An official at the Wei-nan Communist Political and Law Committee of Shanxi province named Wu testified that there was no such event and that there was no such person named Zhi-wen Zhang. [Clearwisdom.net 2000a]

Frank (2002), as previously noted, describes how China produced a flashy, *60-Minutes*-style show that featured a “Falun Gong prisoner, apparently under some duress, makes a kind of ‘War is Peace’ statement,” adding that “viewer in the United States noted that the prisoner’s tone and body language seemed to indicate that she in fact still believed in and supported Falun Gong.” In addition, Falun Gong spokesman Zhang Erping notes:

Not long ago, a spokesman of the Chinese Foreign Affairs Department claimed that no one had ever been sent to a labor camp because of practicing Falun Gong. Yet a few days later the “Chinese Legal System Review” (a newspaper) revealed that a single labor camp in Masanjia district in Liaoning Province had "transformed" more than 400 Falun Gong practitioners. [Clearwisdom.net 2001a]

Of course, being caught lying in these instances does necessarily mean that all the negative reporting done by the Chinese government on Falun Gong is false in all instances, but it does indicate a willingness to deceive that calls for skepticism beyond that of other news sources.

Ding Guangen, China’s propaganda chief, said that the media’s role in China is to “adhere to the Party’s basic line, serve the people, socialism, and serve the work of the nation and Party” (Schechter 2001: 10). It is noteworthy that truth and objectivity are not stated ideals as they are generally considered to be in the United States (though living up to these ideals is certainly debatable). Unfortunately, even Chinese scholarship on this issue is as suspect as the media:

Researchers at universities and academies of social sciences were called together for day-long meetings and told organize exposés of Falun Gong. (I saw a document presented by the public security bureau at one such institution outlining Falun Gong’s flaws and instructing the researchers to use their knowledge to fill in the details. So much for objective scholarship.) [Madsen 2000: 247]

Weatherley (2000) provides a compelling explanation for why the Chinese government does this:

by carefully ensuring that academic opinion reinforces the official line on human rights, the government has aimed to enhance the credibility of its perspective on human rights in the eyes of its Western opponents. In other words, by controlling what is published so that it conforms to and expands upon the official position, the government has been able to show foreign observers that there is widespread academic backing for its ‘unique’ understanding of human rights. [p. 20]

Brady (2000) also noted “in addition to the propaganda work of its own writers...the CCP has encouraged foreign authors to write about China. This is the policy known as ‘foreign strength to propagandize for China’ (*liyong waili wei wo xuanchuan*)” (p. 951).

However, lest I give the impression that the Chinese media is completely different from the media in other countries, I would like to point out a quote by Chomsky and Herman:

The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfill this role requires systematic propaganda. [1988]

In sum, all reports occur in a context that is a worthy of examination.

Western media, on the other hand, had initially played a hand in encouraging negative historical parallels to Falun Gong. Frank compares an article written in 1858 on the Taiping rebellion with an article written on April 28, 1999, just three days after the infamous April 25 incident, and finds some troubling parallels:

Specific carnivalesque images link these news reports across time: “mesmerized,” “trance,” “mesmeric,” “faith healing,” “violent upheaval,” “cosmic forces,” “slaughter the imps,” etc. If the facts presented about Falun Gong omit specific links to the Taiping Rebellion or the Boxer Uprising, then certainly the focus on the exotic makes such link implicit. Thus, through a tacit symbolic structure, Falun Gong becomes as a social movement in the mind of the reader. [Frank 2002]

Falun Gong has since become more involved with how they are represented in the media since those initial reports. However, people on both sides of the issue have expressed disappointment with how Falun Gong has been treated in the Western media. Lu (1999) found that Chinese people generally thought that neither Western media nor Chinese media gave accurate coverage of Falun Gong. On the other hand, Schechter (2001) feels that the Western media has often played a sycophantic role to Chinese leaders. For example, during a CBS interview of Jiang Zemin by Mike Wallace:

Wallace never attempted to explain what Falun Gong is. That obviously pleased Jiang Zemin, because a few weeks later, while colding local reporters in Hong Kong for being too critical, he allegedly called on them to be “more like Mike Wallace of *60 Minutes*.” According the *New York Times*, Jing lectured the Hong Kong media, calling them “too simple” and “naïve” to question his political motives. [Schechter 2001: 19]

## The Rise of Falun Gong



**Figure 6: Practitioners in Sheng Yang**

*Available: <http://falunorlando.org/gallery/china.html>. Used with permission.*

Li Hongzhi was born on one of two dates: either July 7, 1952, or May 13, 1951. Concerning the latter date, Bruseker notes, “This date coincides with the birthday of the original Buddha Sakyamuni, symbolically imparting a spiritual authority to Li which regular birthdays just cannot give” (2000: 9). The Chinese government claims this is an attempt by Li Hongzhi to misrepresent himself, but Li Hongzhi dismisses this as an insignificant coincidence. An anti-Falun Gong website gives a quote from Li Hongzhi of highly questionable authenticity as to why this is: “When Li’s acquaintances asked him why he made up his life story, Li answered, ‘No one would believe me if I do not exaggerate a little bit’” (Embassy of the PRC in the Kingdom of Denmark 2002: 2). An interview with Li Hongzhi by Time magazine, however, gives a much different reason for the change:

TIME: The government has accused you of changing your date of birth to when Sakyamuni [Siddhartha Gautama] was born.

Li: During the Cultural Revolution, the government misprinted my birthdate. I just corrected it. During the Cultural Revolution, there were lots of misprints on identity. A man could become a woman, and a woman could become a man. It’s natural that when people want to smear you, they will dig out whatever they can to destroy you. What’s the big deal about having the same birthday as Sakyamuni? Many criminals were also born on that date. I have never said that I am Sakyamuni. I am just a very ordinary man. [Spaeth 1999]

One Falun Gong website also pointed: “It is usually a long and troublesome process to change any information in one’s residence records because the police need to search through personal records and sometimes they interview the applicant’s family members. In other words, Mr. Li could not correct his date



of birth without proof and the approval of the government record office” (Clear Harmony 2001). So far, there has been no irrefutable proof of either account that I know of; it is simply Li Hongzhi’s word against that of the Chinese government and their records. However, one of the practitioners I talked to brought up a couple points that makes it seem more likely that Li Hongzhi is telling the truth. First, Li Hongzhi did not advertise this supposedly significant birth date, and the practitioner did not recall anyone being persuaded by or even bringing up Li Hongzhi’s birthday before it was used to attack him. Second, the practitioner I talked to also said his birth date was wrong on the records, and he named several Chinese people he knew just off the top of his head who also had incorrect birth dates on record. For him, the wrong date came about through an incorrect conversion from the Chinese calendar to the Gregorian calendar on a form he was filling out. He also pointed out that sometimes birth dates are purposely filled out wrong so that the person can start working at a younger age.

Li Hongzhi was born in Gongzhuling in Jilin province in Northeast China, close to the Manchurian border. He completed primary and junior high school at Zhujiang Road Elementary School, the Fourth Middle School, and the 48<sup>th</sup> Middle School in Chanchun (Adams, et al. 2000: 3). He later worked on a stud farm, as a trumpeter for a police unit, and as a hotel attendant. Chinese media accounts tend to emphasize the aspects of his life that are mundane and the accounts of people who knew him who said that his job performance was mediocre (Bruseker 2000: 8). Li Hongzhi, on the other hand, tends to emphasize how he started learning from two great spiritual masters from the mountains at age four rather than the more banal aspects of his life (2000: 9).

Leisure time has increased dramatically since the end of the Mao era, where one was expected only to work, study, eat, and sleep. Previously, “[even] leisure time and revenues for socializing were rationed through bureaucratic channels under the supervision of the Chinese Communist Party” (Davis 2000: 240); however, in the 1990s, “one could...forge varied social connections when enjoying low-cost leisure activities” (p. 251). This has allowed many people to pursue many hobbies that would have previously been considered “unhealthy bourgeois conduct,” including qigong (Li Cheng 1997: 28). Munekage (2001) agrees that China allowed more autonomy in people's private lives under Deng Xiaoping; in the early 1990s, when Falun Gong was introduced, the Chinese Government’s attitude had changed from "having everything all my way" (p. 17) to "keeping bad things in check" (p. 17). “When within less than a

decade millions of people gain access to advanced moves of communication, new vocabularies of social discourse and novel forms of leisure through newly commercialized outlets,” Davis writes, “it does not seem an exaggeration to claim that a revolution in consumption had occurred” (Davis 2000: 248).

Some have traced the beginnings of Qigong back to the third or fourth century AD, although “the specific origins of the practice remain unclear” (Frank 2002). Frank suspects that while what is called “qigong” does “share some similarities to past practices, it is an ‘invented tradition’...rooted in the Chinese past, but re-created for the present” (2002). (Falun Gong practitioners, however, believe that it is ancient wisdom passed on for countless generations.) Chinese physician Guizhen Liu first popularized Qigong in the 1950s (Yan 2001). During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, those who spoke about qi could expect harsh treatment from Red Guards (Frank 2000). In the late 1970s, “the first qigong masters who came out...to teach qigong, were all medical doctors” (ter Haar 2001: sec. 4.4), although a few people in China began claiming to receive supernormal abilities from qigong at this time, including a boy who claimed he could read with his ear (Rahn 2002: 47; Ditzler 2001: 45; Goodspeed 1991: A23; Ownby 2003: 234). In 1982, when the ban on religious activities in China was lifted, “The most that anyone expected...was that a few old people might return to the handful of reopened temples and churches (all of which were under strict government control)” (Waldron 2000: 19). During the 1980s, there was a large increase of interest in qigong, and qigong masters often made extraordinary claims about the effectiveness of their practices (Madsen 2000: 44; *China ABC* 1985: 159; Rahn 2002: 47). By 1986, there were over 2,000 qigong groups (Rahn 2002: 47). It was around this time that qigong no longer just taught people a method for achieving health, but it also “offered a form of spiritual practice, a form of moral guidance, a form of social organization which sometimes included civic-type activities, and it offered a sense of goodness and pride to people living in a time of great insecurity and change” (Rahn 2002: 48). Part of the reason qigong went in this direction may have been due to the people who were previously imprisoned on grounds of “superstition” during the Cultural Revolution, and were now being set free in the post-Mao era (Sinclair 2001: 10-11). By 1991, qigong was claimed to have 60 million adherents in China (Goodspeed 1991: A23), though it may have been as high as 200 million (Ownby 2003: 234).

The sudden growth of religion was a concern to the Chinese government in the mid-1980s (Waldron 2000: 29), and qigong had developed into quite a spectacle in the 1990s:

In addition to the popular, tent show-style mass healings that qigong healers engaged in... regular qigong programs appeared on Chinese television; large crowds gathered in sports stadiums where qigong "masters" miraculously healed the ill and lame with a kind of laying on of hands; and provincial and nationwide qigong associations formed to promote physical fitness [Frank 2000]

Some also publicly displayed their "supernormal abilities": "...others have held mass rallies where they enchant thousands with magical tricks in which they seem to start fires with their thoughts, set light bulbs glowing with a touch of their fingers or send the hands of a clock spinning through mental telepathy" (Goodspeed 1991: A23). However, these sorts of "charismatic cults," in the words of one author, "[found] it prudent to keep a low profile in officially atheistic China" (Kaye 1992: 24). Evidence of suspicion of qigong masters can be found as early as 1989, around the time of the student protests, when government hotlines were set up in major cities for citizens to report suspicious behavior by qigong masters (Perry 2002: xv). By early 1990s, qigong had "swept China with such force, worried government officials [were] taking steps to regulate it...Anyone who attempt[ed] to treat patients with Qigong must now register with the State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine" (Goodspeed 1991: A23). In addition, "Qigong rallies that attract more than 200 people have been banned. Some of China's most popular Qigong masters have been detained, jailed or warned to lower their public profiles. And police regularly stage raids on public parks to check the registration of Qigong instructors" (Goodspeed 1991: A23). (Since I have read of accounts of larger qigong gatherings subsequent to this, I assume this law that prohibits gatherings of more than 200 was not nationwide, not permanent, or not enforced.) Despite these concerns, the Chinese government had several reasons for supporting qigong in the 1980s and 1990s:

there was during this period a whole host of experiments done on Qigong masters and Qigong practitioners. These experiments were supported by the Chinese state for a variety of reasons. First, I think they were very proud. This was a variety of Chinese science. They were trying to make it into a scientific practice. So there were research grants given to institutes in China to work on proving on how Qigong works this and Qigong works that. Or people would bring seeds and have a Qigong Master do his Qigong over them and take the seeds back and plant them and check and see whether they grew better. And there was sort of a national pride, I think, both on the part of the government and on the part of practitioners and Qigong masters. And why not? It is ancient Chinese wisdom. It has now come back. We can display it to the world. And also I think the Chinese government believed that if large numbers would practice Qigong, and this may well be true, that it would reduce systemic health care costs. Everyone would get healthier. The hospitals would be emptier. People would be happier. There is nothing wrong with that. So let us support Qigong. [Ownby 2000]

However, Ownby seems to be talking about the more liberal reformers, such as Deng Xiaoping, rather than the conservatives:

The emergence of a qigong charismatic movement and its appeal to party octogenarians unnerved by the bleakness of human mortality has become a symbol of the divisions among the revolutionaries, who have rarely agreed since they took control of the country two years ago... Party elders are united in disgust at the collapse of Soviet communism, but they are still settling vendettas from 30 or more years ago, and have widely differing ideas on many issues, including the pace of economic reform, the selection of younger leaders, and the counter-revolutionary qualities of qigong [Thomson 1991: 6]

This is not to say that conservatives like Jiang Zemin were completely opposed to qigong in any way, shape, or form. In fact, Jiang Zemin had turned to Zhong Gong, a qigong group banned shortly after Falun Gong, to help with his arthritis and back pain (Schechter 2001: 34-35). However, it seems clear that the conservatives like Jiang Zemin were more concerned about whether qigong was winning over people's hearts and drawing away from the CCP's authority than the reformers were. Falun Gong turned out to have several key differences from many other Qigong practices, which have led to its' incredible growth and eventual crackdown once the pendulum of power had swung back towards the conservatives.

In 1992, the same year that Falun Gong was introduced to the public, Deng Xiaoping reappeared after a yearlong absence from public view, and he "launched a campaign for more and faster capitalist-style reform" (CNN 1997). Following the disintegration of the USSR in December of 1991, "Deng concluded that the best hope of keeping the Chinese Communist Party in power -- and avoiding another Tiananmen -- was to deliver the economic goods to the people" (CNN 1997). Although Deng was not squeamish about the use of force, as evidenced by the government response to the 1989 student protests, he was a pragmatist at heart, well-known for saying: "It doesn't matter if the cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice." Indeed, qigong seemed to be doing well at "catching mice": in addition to its' estimated 60 million adherents in 1991, "some of the best-selling books in China today deal with the exploits of a handful of famous Qigong masters" (Goodspeed 1991: A23). Qigong was also profitable for China's tourism industry (Xinhua New Agency 1994). Deng himself, along with "a handful of other aging Communist party officials, [were] said to be treated regularly by their own Qigong masters" (Goodspeed 1991: A23). All in all, it was a golden age for qigong.

In addition, morality in general was an interest to the Chinese public around the time of Falun Gong's introduction (though certainly not exclusive to that period). An article written around the same time as Falun Gong's introduction surveying the publishing industry in China noted that books which "foster a lofty ideal, improve moral cultivation, work steadily and bring benefit to all mankind" (Zhu 1993:

11) have sold well; “a rough statistic indicates that several hundred kinds of such books have been published with a distribution of up to several hundred million copies” (p. 11). These numbers seem to lend more plausibility to the later estimates of 100 million Falun Gong practitioners, rather than the downgraded figure of 2 million that the Chinese government later endorsed after the crackdown.

One of the significant differences between Falun Gong and many other qigong practices was not only Falun Gong’s strong emphasis on spirituality and morality, but also a complete belief system to go with it (Ownby 2003: 235; Palmer 2003: 351; Lowe 2003: 274); in other words, Li Hongzhi “tries in his books to give some coherence to his theory” (Yan 2001). Munekage notes that in other practices, “qigong’s cosmology is relatively ambiguous or is not an issue for group practices” (2001: 27), while “Li Hongzhi conveys a system of ideas that is more developed and far-reaching” (Ditzler 2001: 17).

Li Hongzhi revealed Falun Gong to the public in May 1992 in Changchun, a city in northeast China with 1.5 million people, and a decline in their major industry, mining and machinery production (Deng and Fang 2000: 5). There were approximately 500 people in attendance of his first lecture. At the time, about 50 million Chinese were involved in qigong to some degree, and it was difficult to capture the attention of the public with hundreds of qigong masters presenting their own variation on the same basic themes (Adams, et al. 2000: 9). However, the people in attendance were “electrified by his lecture. By all accounts, Li was a natural. He spoke fluently and easily, demonstrating his five simple sets of exercises, and referring only occasionally to a few notes written on scraps of paper” (p. 10).

After two successful lectures in Changchun, Li Hongzhi went to Beijing and held training sessions under the auspices of the Chinese Qigong Research Society (*Zhongguo qigong keyanhui*). I was not able to find much about the specific decision on whether or not to admit Falun Gong. All I could find was this short description from a newsgroup posting:

May of 1992, Master Li was entrusted to make his inauguration. Upon a deliberate study by leaders of the Chinese Qigong Scientific Research Committee, Falun Gong was given a definite confirmation of its methods, theories and effects and was awarded official recognition by the Committee. Ample assistance was provided by the Committee in the public popularization of the method. [Winston 1996]

One may wonder why Falun Gong was admitted into the Chinese Qigong Research Society in the first place if Li Hongzhi’s teachings were “superstitious.” In general, it appears that the deciding factors in whether an applicant’s qigong method is seen as science or superstition was not so much careful

investigation of the scientific claims of the qigong master as it was a function of “the amount of support your group had from those in high places accompanying official sponsorship” (Rahn 2002: 47) and “how well the advocates are able to bribe (establish ‘relationships’ with) officials” (Mainfort 2000; also see Cheng 2002). Rahn (2002) claims that Falun Gong cultivated friends within the CCP for this reason (p. 47), but I know of no evidence that Falun Gong bribed any officials. In addition, despite Deng and Fang’s (2000: 2-3) claim that Falun Gong deceptively passed itself off as qigong to hide its supernatural aspects, Li Hongzhi was just one in a line of qigong masters who “claimed to have an access to the traditional resources and possess supernatural healing powers, and yet tried to disassociate from Taoist or Buddhist religion” (Yan 2001). The life cycle of these qigong masters generally went from “winning some popularity for a time” to being “discredited for moral decadence and [falling] into disgrace” because their practice “turned into selfish ends” (Yan 2001). We can see a good example of this happening the same year as Falun Gong’s introduction to the public:

China's most well-known practitioner of the mysterious 'qigong' healing technique has been sentenced to six years in prison for swindling her patients...Zhang Xiangyu, 49, was sentenced ...for 'swindling money through superstition' and all her illegally earned income was expropriated...In May 1988, Zhang received money from a female leukemia patient to perform a cure entitled 'nine dragon, yin yang, eight diagram exercise,' ....The patient died the following year... Between 1987 and April 1990, Zhang swindled large sums of money from patients eager to receive her miracle touch... Superstition is one of six evils targeted by state public security forces as pernicious criminal activities. The others are prostitution, gambling, smuggling, drug abuse, and the sale of women and children. [Kyodo News Service 1992]

Yan (2001) claims “Li Hongzhi was originally one of these masters and was treated by the government not much different from other masters.” These sorts of masters “[found] it prudent to keep a low profile” (Kaye 1992: 24). Through qigong, “a lot of money was made ... in a similar way to televangelism in the United States” (Sinclair 2001: 11). The Chinese Qigong Research Society seems to have known that Falun Gong contained “superstitious” teachings from the very beginning and did not care; they just wanted him to earn money that they could take a large cut of, and then have him fade away like the rest. Much to their eventual chagrin, his popularity just kept growing and he broke away from them. This explanation is supported by Li Hongzhi, who said to a reporter: “After three years of teaching I withdrew from the China Qigong Research Society...I thought at the time that all the qigong society did is try to make money off the qigong masters, and they didn’t do any research on qigong” (Schechter 2001: 66). The concern about the growth of the popularity of qigong masters explains why it was that “coverage of qigong in the national

media is generally limited to cautionary horror tales” (Agence France Presse 1996), such as one which claimed a man “was practising qigong exercises with his wife, when he suddenly attempted to gouge her eyes out, saying he had received instructions from a ‘greater being’ to change her facial feature” (1996).

Unlike many other qigong practices around at the time, Li Hongzhi was not secretive in sharing Falun Gong; he held mass lectures with low fees. He founded the Falun Xiulian Dafa Research Society (*Falun gong yanjiuhui*) in 1993, along with Li Chang, Wang Zhiwen, and Yu Changxin (Tong 2002a: 640), “which would coordinate the organizational infrastructure of Falun gong and translate his works into different languages” (Bruseker 2000: 60). The Falun Xiulian Dafa Research Society was accredited and established as direct branch affiliate (*zhishu gongpai*) of the Chinese Qigong Research Society that same year with the title of Falun Gong Research Branch Society (*Falun gong yanjiu fenhui*) (Bruseker 2000: 61; Tong 2002a: 640).

In September 1994, Li Hongzhi terminated his teaching of Falun Gong training seminar in China (Tong 2002a: 640). That same year, he released his teachings in a book called the *Zhuan Falun*, which became the backbone of Falun Dafa teachings. Some scholars have compared the role of *Zhuan Falun* for Falun Gong to being like the role of the bible for Christianity (Bruseker 2000: 63; Rahn 2001a: 241).

In October 1994, the Chinese Ministry of Civil Affairs broke up the “The International Qigong Science Federation” for “failing to register with the ministry, carrying out unauthorized activities throughout China and ‘exerting a bad influence on society,’ the [People’s Daily] said, without elaborating” (Agence France Presse 1994). This may have been what Li Hongzhi was referring to when he wrote: “I felt disgusted when reading a magazine a student was holding. It mentioned that an international Qigong conference was being held. People with supernormal capabilities could participate in a contest, and whoever had the strongest supernormal capabilities could go to that conference. After I finished reading, I felt upset for days” (Li Hongzhi 1999a: 8).

By 1995, Li’s work was widely available on the Internet (Bruseker 2000: 60). At this point, Li Hongzhi no longer needed to teach seminars in China since his books, websites, and practitioners were spreading his teachings, although he did in Europe and other parts of Asia (Bruseker 2000: 65). Although the Internet was not widely accessible in China at this time, information on the websites would trickle down through word of mouth, and the bootleg-counterfeit industry would publish unauthorized copies of

Li's books (Bruseker 2000: 65-66). On December 21, 1995, Li Hongzhi wrote an article entitled "For Whom do You Practice Cultivation?" which opened by saying, "When some people resort to the media to criticize qigong, some practitioners waver in determination and give up their practice..." (Li 2000: 26), foreshadowing a growing attacking on qigong practice. Meanwhile, "the Chinese crackdown of Uighurs on the basis of religion jumped to a higher level since 1995. The Uighur youth in Ghulja City started the traditional Uighur gathering called Mashrap in order to promote Uighur culture. The Chinese government was so scared and nervous about this gathering and began to crack down extremely hard" (Uighur witness 2000). This further shows that "superstition" was a growing concern for the Chinese government.

On January 22, 1996, Li Hongzhi wrote an article entitled "What is Mi Xin [superstition or blind faith]?" which criticized materialists who labeled everything that does not agree with science as superstition (Li 2000: 35-37). In February 1996, State Councilor Song Jiang attacked "pseudo-science" in an address to the National Conference on Popularization of Science (Tong 2002a: 640 n. 29). In March 1996, Li Hongzhi told Ye Hao and Wang Zhiwen, two of the Falun Gong "leaders" in Beijing, to file for withdrawal from the Chinese Qigong Research Society. Li Hongzhi's motivation for making this call is open to debate. The Chinese government may have been involved in having Falun Gong removed from the Chinese Qigong Research Society as attempts to slow the growth of Falun Gong (Bruseker 2000: 66). According to a report by Falun Gong practitioners, the Chinese Qigong Research Society had set fees for Li Hongzhi's lectures and demonstrations and took 60% of the profits for themselves. As a result, Li Hongzhi claims to have pulled out of his own accord in protest of what he saw as profiteering by the Chinese Qigong Research Society (Schechter 2001: 66). A different interpretation of what happened is that Falun Gong "was bullied out by a belligerent Public Security Bureau" (Bruseker 2000: 67). If this were the case, it would indicate that an attack on the legitimacy of Falun Gong and attempt to push it into the position that it could be considered an illegal, unregistered organization (2000: 68), since "all social groups and organizations must register with the government before being allowed to operate" (Schechter 2001: 66). Munekage (2001), however, believes that the problem was that "Li Hongzhi attempted to maintain his organization as not totally subordinate to the state-sanctioned *qigong* movement... while he accepted the official awards and participated in some voluntary activities promoted by the party-state, he also declined



some of official offerings” (p. 101). Li Hongzhi’s attitude towards the Chinese Qigong Research Society can be seen in some of his early writings, which seem to support Munekage:

This is very important. I just said that in principle people in the local Qigong Science and Research Society, Human-Body Science Research Society, or the Qigong Society can’t do our leadership work and can’t be heads or assistants of our Falun Gong assistance centers. But we should handle our relationship with them well, because the China Qigong Science and Research Society clearly stipulates that all directly regulated qigong practices are managed by the practice’s teacher when it comes to cultivation; whereas they’re in charge of local administrative management. But we don’t have any administrative management. The management of our practice is entirely loose. We can tell them who the heads of our assistance centers are, and when there are formal meetings they can ask the heads of our centers to attend. That’s no problem. But if they drag our students to do other things that go against our regulations, we won’t do that. You can explain these things to them clearly. If they organize some activities that are good, that don’t involve other issues and that are like doing calisthenics with hundreds of people—they are activities of the masses—where they organize various qigong practices and have them do several sets of exercises, have a competition to see who’s better, and then give some awards, I think that’s no more than advancing the development of the sports cause. It’s alright to take part in sports activities, that’s no problem. But if they use our practice to do other things, that’s just unacceptable. You can make this clear to them. [Li Hongzhi n.d.: 63-64]

She goes on to say that “in 1994, Li declined the government’s offer to strengthen relations with governmental administration that wanted to fix his movement firmly in the realm of the state-led qigong movement” (Munekage 2001: 102), and that Li Hongzhi “found an alternative autonomous place [for promoting Falun Gong] in the publication network driven by market forces...the market structure provided him with an autonomous realm outside of state’s domination” (p. 103). In April 1996, Falun Gong applied to the National Minority Affairs Commission as a non-religious, academic organization. Tong (2002) explains this seemingly odd request for reclassification: “There was no special organization link between the *falun gong* and the National Minority Commission. A *falun gong* source suggested that the choice to affiliate with the Commission could be due to personal connections in the top leadership of both organizations” (Tong 2002a: 641 n. 35). Their application was rejected, as were several subsequent requests for reclassification (p. 641). In May 1996, the government in Suzhou fined the “Shen Chang Centre for Human Body Applied Science and Technology,” another qigong practice, 8 million yuan (Tong 2002a: 640). Falun Gong first ran into problems around this time:

On July 24, 1996...the Chinese News Publications Office allegedly issued a circular banning all Falun Gong publications. Six months later, police agencies reportedly launched a nationwide investigation that was closed after reporting “no evidence found so far.” It seems clear that some leaders wanted a crackdown, but Falun Gong had too much support among the people, apparent protection by higher-ups. [Schechter 2001: 28]

After the ban of *Zhuan Falun* in July, Falun Gong ran into problems with the Chinese Qigong Research Society. On September 12, 1996, they “issued an internal investigatory report on Falun Gong, noting their concerns over Falun Gong’s ‘serious problems’” (Munekage 2001: 107). They are reported to have written: “Li Hongzhi no longer promotes *qigong*. He repeatedly said that he would concentrate on studies of Buddhism. Our association no longer has any relation with his. This indicates that the *qigong* corporate body [Falun Gong] no longer performs its duty. The Falun Gong Central Organization itself canceled its affiliation with our association as our direct school” (Mo Bangfu, *quoted and translated in* Munekage 2001: 107). The Chinese Qigong Research Society gave Li Hongzhi the option to once again become part of their organization if Falun Gong “changed the content of its activities and passed an official review” (Munekage 2001: 107). They also “suggested that they would mobilize some personnel to criticize Li’s books” (p. 107).

Li Hongzhi went to the United States in October 1996 on a tourist visa to give a lecture in Houston (Tong 2002a: 640-641), and then he gave lectures in Europe. “Responding to the issues of power and authority within the organization raised by his departure, Li at least symbolically abrogated his personal authority over the movement when he left giving official control of the tutoring stations to the ‘Beijing Research Society’” (Bruseker 2000: 70). As a result of being apart from the China Qigong Research Society, Li Hongzhi was able to set his own prices, which were much lower than those being offered in the Chinese Qigong Research Society, and he even gave free lectures. Other Qigong masters complained about how “Falun Gong was undercutting their prices and competing unfairly” (Schechter 2001: 67). The enemies Li Hongzhi made in the Chinese Qigong Research Society lobbied for the government to slow the growth of Falun Gong, and began slandering Li Hongzhi by questioning his legitimacy as a teacher and calling him a “spy for America” (Schechter 2001: 67). On November 28, 1996, the Chinese Qigong Research Society officially terminated the registration of the Falun Gong Research Society, claiming:

Since gaining approval from our direct school in August 1993, Li Hongzhi’s Falun Gong increased its practitioners and worked for health preservations and healing obstinate diseases with some results. However, on the process of prevailing *qigong*, Li propagated theology and superstition and received criticism from many fields on his violation of the proper purpose of *qigong* practice. When our association combed out organizations, Li Hongzhi, the delegate of Falun Gong did not attend the meeting. Li Hongzhi violated our regulation in his promotion of *qigong* practice. He also refused to attend the educational reform program. Therefore, we decided to withdraw Falun Gong’s registration. [Mo Bangfu, *quoted and translated in* Munekage 2001: 107-108]

Whether Li Hongzhi withdrew Falun Gong of his own accord in protest of the policies of the Chinese Qigong Research Society or whether it was forced out because of the political maneuvering of enemies of Falun Gong, the fact remains that it had lost the formal recognition of the Chinese Qigong Research Society, leaving it in a potentially precarious position. Bruseker (2000), apparently siding with the Chinese Government's portrayal's of Falun Gong as still being an organization, writes: "From any point after 1996, Falun Gong could have been banned as an illegal unregistered organization because, quite simply, it was" (p. 68); this assertion is debatable, however, depending on how we define an organization.

After their application for being reclassified as a social organization under the National Minority Affairs Commission in April 1996 failed, Falun Gong applied as a social organization devoted to the study of Buddhism to the Chinese Buddhist Federation, and then as a non-religious, academic organization under the United Front Department. All three applications for reclassification resulted in failure, and they were discouraged from any further attempts at reclassification. (Tong 2002a: 641)

On February 17, 1997, Deng Xiaoping died. During his lifetime, Deng Xiaoping had "successfully presided over a broad coalition of forces within the Chinese politburo, harmonising politburo tensions either through direct intervention or simply through his presence" (Rudd 1996). While Jiang Zemin gave lip service to Deng Xiaoping after his death, it seems that Jiang Zemin did not care much for Deng's reforms, which "gave China the highest economic growth rate in the world and left the Communist Party in power but increasingly irrelevant to the daily lives of the people" (CNN 1997). Before Deng's death, "American analysts [believed] internal party documents [were] already circulating, containing a formal repudiation by Jiang Zemin of an earlier speech by Deng Xiaoping on the need to go even faster down the economic reformist road" (Rudd 1996). With Deng's "harmonizing" presence out of the picture, conflict between the liberal reformers and conservatives like Jiang Zemin seemed likely to grow in intensity. Sure enough, once in power, Jiang Zemin advocated a political theory he called "the Three Represents," which was "part of a drive to extend the Communist Party's influence" (Murphy 2002b: 31).

In early 1997, Falun Gong "leaders" had "decided to switch to a loose organizational structure" (Tong 2002a: 641). (In fact, I believe it was always rather loose, which practitioners have said as well, even under the CQRS, but certain functions like translations had to cease.) That same year, it was becoming apparent that the efforts by the government to curb the growth of Falun Gong were not working

because the material was still available on the Internet and people could still easily learn from practitioners in public parks (Bruseker 2000: 69-70). As a result, Li Hongzhi was pressured into applying to leave China for good. Sometime this year, the Ministry of Security conducted an investigation of Falun Gong for “possible illegal religious activities but did not draw any conclusions” (Lin 2001: 220). In November 1997, Falun Gong’s “leaders” wrote to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, which, in addition to stating their compliance with instructions not to reapply for reclassification, also officially declared the end of their existence as an organization. In December 1997, they also wrote a similar letter to the Ministry of Public Security (Tong 2002a: 641).

In February 1998, Li Hongzhi, after several attempts, finally got his application for an immigrant visa in the United States approved (Bruseker 2000: 12, 78; Tong 2002a: 21). As for why he chose the United States, Li Hongzhi gave a couple reasons. First, he said: “My daughter wanted to go to school in the United States. I also wanted to let her learn more English. I heard that American education is better” (Faladafa.org 1999a). Second, “when asked... by the Australian press why he left China, he modestly cited the need to take the ‘stress’ off the practitioners there” (Hanson 1999: 25). It was during this year that Falun Gong practitioners began protesting bad media coverage, in one case forcing a journalist at the Beijing Television Station to resign (Bruseker 2000: 70). It was clear that the Chinese government had decided that Falun Gong was a problem by now. By July 1998, the Ministry of Security “designated Falun Gong as a devious religious sect and conducted investigations” (Lin 2001: 220). One person claimed “I have seen a central propaganda circular from 1998 identifying falungong as a target for a propaganda campaign aimed at reducing its influence by ‘whatever means necessary.’ The propaganda campaign against falungong began in 1998, as did the group’s attempt at organized resistance” (Savitt 1999). Buddhists apparently were also displeased with the growth of Falun Gong at this time as well; “Mo Bangfu notes that at local levels, conflicts between the Falun Gong group and Buddhist leaders began in 1998, because more Buddhist members were converted to Falun Gong which restricts followers to have the only one faith” (Munekage 2001: 109).

Also in 1998, there were changes in the qigong system that encouraged Falun Gong practitioners to do health surveys. As one practitioner describes,

Before the fall of 1998, the state sent a notice that it would manage the practice of Qigong and all Qigong organizations needed to re-register and re-apply. Some

practitioners suggested that Falun Gong should also apply in order to gain a legal cultivation environment. Chengtao, together with another practitioner and I, went to the National Physical Education Commission and inquired about the registration process. We were told that the application should include a health survey of no fewer than 30 people. Therefore, we decided to a survey the effects of Falun Gong on healing and fitness. [ClearHarmony 2002]

There was a health-oriented survey done in Beijing previously in 1996, one year before Deng's death, which concluded: "the medical costs of the cultivators reduced greatly. Annual reduction of medical costs per person is 2,300 yuan. Therefore, both social effect and economic benefits have been achieved" (Zhang and Xiao 1996: 9). This 1996 survey had a sample size of only 355, while a total of 34,351 practitioners were surveyed between five different 1998 surveys.

It was in 1999 that Falun Gong was truly noticed by the international community. On April 11, an article critical of Falun Gong appeared in a magazine for teenagers in Tianjin, written by a man named He Zuoxiu, who was skeptical of the supernormal claims of qigong and disagreed with Falun Gong being taught to children (Deng and Fang 2000; Xu 2000: 2). On April 20-23, thousands of practitioners went to the editorial offices of the periodical in Tianjin to protest the article. The protesters were beaten, and 45 were arrested. On April 25, between 10,000 and 15,000 practitioners gathered around Zhongnanhai, the leadership compound in Beijing, to appeal for better treatment (Schechter 2000: 120). It has been claimed by some that practitioners at the time were directed to go there:

The overseas Chinese-language press has suggested that the Zhongnanhai demonstrations were actually organized in part by the government, to help trump up charges against the Falun Gong, which it had observed and monitored for years through its infiltrators. It even gives the name of a high official, [Luo] Gan, as being the chief Communist organizer of the Zhongnanhai gathering. As secretary general of the State Council, [Luo] had been investigating Falun Gong and had wanted it banned since 1996 but could not find any legal basis for transgression. In that case, it is not certain where the Falun followers intended first to make their petition, but [Luo] had the police direct them to Zhongnanhai, in order to create an incident with which they afterwards could be charged. [Ching 2001]

The practitioners who went to Beijing had three requests:

- Release the innocent fellow practitioners arrested in Tianjin;
- Lift the ban on publishing and distributing Zhuan Falun, the main book of Falun Dafa;
- Allow a legal and non-hostile environment for practicing Falun Dafa in China. (Li Dayong n.d.: sec. III, a1)

While some have portrayed this event as an "anti-government demonstration" (Young 2002: 31), Danny Schechter said in an interview "In fact, many of the practitioners were members of the [Communist] party

and supportive of the government” (Lindsey 2001: 2, Brackets in original). In addition, one account described the protest thusly: “Throughout the day, as protesters squatted in orderly rows, ate Popsicles and nibbled on fruit, others collected wrappers and apple cores to prevent littering” (Pomret and Larid 1999).

Jian Xu gives a much more informative account of the nature of this event:

The Falun Gong practitioners’ peaceful protest at the Zhongnanhai government complex, as well as the government’s reaction to it, tell much about how the “public sphere” is differently conceived by the practitioners on the one hand and the state on the other. What the practitioners want is the right to practice a form of *qigong* they believe in without state intervention. *Qigong* has claimed the body as a space of private experience and its practice a public space independent of state’s control. On the other side, however, the government still views the embodied space of *qigong* to be subject to its regulation precisely due to its public nature. The practice of assigning different cultural values to various kinds of *qigong* practice is the government’s strategy to gain control over the new public space. The Falun Gong practitioners’ sit-in protest itself was an attempt to use the public space as a legitimate sphere in which to voice their discontent with governmental interference, whereas the government construed the public space as a sphere in which only state power is to be exercised. [Xu 1999: 962]

This event took place “just before the anniversaries of major events in 20th-century China (the May 4th Movement of 1919, the Tiananmen Protests of 1989, and especially the founding of People's Republic of China of 1949),” which was at a time when foreign press were “primed for stories” (Chen 2000).

Kindopp (2002) interviewed a “prominent scholar involved in discussions on how to respond to Falun Gong” (2002: 261 n. 3) and found: “Within the regime there was never a question of whether to respond to the Falun Gong’s challenge, but how. But less severe options were also considered. A more moderate approach called for public criticism of the Falun Gong’s ‘superstitious’ beliefs while confining active measures to undermine its influence to within party-state organs” (p. 261). This approach was rejected.

### **Why The Crackdown?**

Bruseker wrote: “The problem in determining why the government cracked down on Falun gong does not seem to be the lack of an explanation but that there are too many possible explanations” (2000: 71). I believe it is a mistake to assume there must be a single explanation for the crackdown; it was a convergence of historical, economic, cultural, and psychological factors. Indeed, a 1985 report by China’s Ministry of Public Security entitled “Main Activities of Sects and Societies in Recent Years” shows that China was looking at multiple factors in deciding whether a group should be seen as an enemy, including:

“recruiting from within the ranks of the CCP, organizing across provinces and counties, membership that proselytizes, making criticism of the CCP, heterodoxy and receiving support from ‘forces overseas’” (*in* Rahn 2002: 46). Therefore, I do not think that having “too many possible explanations” is a problem because the existing explanations tend to complement each other.

To begin to understand why the Chinese Government has initiated a crackdown on Falun Gong, it is important to put the event into context, including understanding the concept of the Mandate of Heaven, which is a widespread concept in Chinese culture. When the Mandate of Heaven is broken, “such things occur as popular up-risings and natural disasters, along with decadence and corruption in a weakened government. A loss of the Mandate of Heaven means that the current ruler is no longer fit to rule” (Rahn 2000; also see Shue 2001: 9; Adams, et al. 2000: 34-35; Frank 2002). Rahn suggests that is that if China has too many tribulations, it may cause people to doubt whether the Mandate of Heaven is still with the Chinese government. (A non-practitioner I talked to disputed the importance of the Mandate of Heaven in contemporary China, however.)

If the Mandate of Heaven is still as strong in the minds of the Chinese as Rahn states, then some may claim there are reasons to doubt it is still with the Communist party. Corruption is widespread in China. As one middle-aged writer said, “We have a sense of unfairness and injustice as we see *dahu* [millionaires], especially those corrupt government officials, having their money snowball, and spending money like water” (Li Cheng 1997: 31). There is a saying in Shanghai: “A big embezzler lectures about governmental anticorruption campaigns, a medium-sized embezzler listens to the lecture, only a small embezzler goes to jail” (p. 309). China has also had to deal with natural disasters recently. In 1998, there was an earthquake near Beijing that killed 47 people and left tens of thousands of people homeless (McKinnon 1998); in mid 1976, shortly before the death of Mao and the arrest of the Gang of Four, there were many earthquakes as well (Chang 1991: 493). China has also dealt with uprisings; a rather infamous incident occurred in 1989 in Tiananmen Square, which resulted in a rather negative image of China within the United State (Li Cheng 1997: 3). Bruseker (2000) suggests that the student protest in 1989 was a significant part of the Chinese government’s decision to crackdown: “If the Chinese government learned anything from Tiananmen, it was that letting protest movements go unchecked is a sure-fire way of

endangering the entire political apparatus of the Communist Party of China. They acted accordingly” (p. 74; also see Tong 2002b: 798). In addition, China has been going through economic difficulties:

According to official government statistics, the official gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate during the year was just over seven percent, but the actual rate was widely considered to be lower by experts. The economy faces growing problems, including state enterprise reform, unemployment, underemployment, and regional economic disparities. Rural unemployment and underemployment combined are estimated to be over thirty percent. Tens of millions of peasants have left their homes in search of better jobs and living conditions. Demographers estimate that between 80 and 130 million persons make up this “floating population,” with many major cities counting 1 million or more such persons. [US State Department 2000: 220-221; also see PBS 2003]

This lack of economic opportunities for migrants has led to an increase in crimes by migrants (Li Cheng 1997: 137). A Cantonese woman said to a Western reporter, “Everyone in Guangzhou is sick of the drifters. They are rascals. They come with hardly any money, are dirty, and don’t have any skills. If they don’t find work, they start begging or stealing. They are the reason crime is bad” (Li Cheng 1997: 137). In addition, in one incident concerning the Mandate of Heaven and specifically related to Falun Gong, when Li Hongzhi said that a comet was predestined to hit the earth but it was prevented from doing so (Li 2002a), “Meteorologists for the evening news... took care to reassure viewers that the partial eclipse on July 28 was no cause for alarm—despite popular beliefs that unusual astrological occurrences are a sign of the loss of the Mandate of Heaven” (Perry 2002: xviii).

Lestz (1999) also suggests the April 25 incident went against the cultural values of the Chinese power structure:

Much has changed in 20 years of reform, but China’s political culture still values predictability, obedience, order, and outward harmony; and its leaders detest surprises. Li Hongzhi’s followers are, so far as can be told, simply asking to be left alone. But by appearing en masse before Zhongnanhai -- and later showing up repeatedly in small organized bodies in Tiananmen Square—they have rattled the cage of a command structure that has not forgotten its origins, and have produced a reaction perfectly in harmony with party practice since the founding of the Chinese Communist state. [Lestz 1999]

Shue (2001) claims that the Chinese government does not just value social stability, but they stake their legitimacy upon it (p. 8; also see Waldron 2000: 20; Whyte 1999). Whyte notes that in China, “there is a very strong tendency for the state to be either credited or blamed for what happens in people’s lives” (1999). The nineteenth and twentieth century has been filled with much war and instability for China. In fact, Adams et al. (2000) calculate that from 1845 to 1949, 50 to 55 million people died in China directly or indirectly from violent conflicts; “China therefore averaged approximately 550,000 deaths per year; 45,800



deaths per month; 10,576 deaths per week; 1,510 deaths per day; 62 deaths per hour; 10,576 deaths per week; 1,510 deaths per day; 62 deaths per hour; and slightly more than one death per minute” (p. 120). It is perhaps understandable that those who lived through the horrors of the Cultural Revolution would value social stability. This sort of knee-jerk reaction seems to be counter-productive to social stability, however; rather quickly eliminating Falun Gong as they might have hoped, their decision has fuelled a brand new era of oppression – and the goal of social stability that the Chinese government was aiming for has not been achieved. According to Kindopp (2000), “broader social discontent continues to grow, fuelled primarily by endemic official corruption, and cases of large-scale protests are on the rise, raising the prospect that a high-profile standoff between the state and any social group could ignite widespread popular uprisings” (p. 265; also see Thornton 2002: 661).

One often-theorized explanation for the crackdown is that the CCP drew historical parallels to Chinese religious or quasi-religious groups of past eras, and acted accordingly. Ownby (2003) argues that “both *qigong* in general and Falun Gong in particular should be seen as modern reincarnations – although considerably transformed in important ways – of a particular strand of traditional Chinese popular religion generally referred to...as the ‘White Lotus Tradition’ or as ‘folk sectarianism’” (p. 224). In the past, China has had problems with religious groups, such as White Lotus and the Boxer Rebellion (Rahn 2002; Lowe 2001; Charman, et al. 2001; Stover and Stover 1976: 139; Ownby 2003). Fisher (2003) writes, “the Boxers resisted colonial rule through sheer numbers and the belief that their faith made them impervious to foreign bullets. The Chinese government is no doubt mindful of these historical examples, and, as a result, continues to treat Falun Gong as a serious threat” (p. 304). Examples can be traced back as early as 184 AD, when the Yellow Turbans, a Taoist group, revolted against the Han dynasty. In 189 AD, another Taoist group called the Five Pecks of Rice rebelled and established a theocracy in southwestern China. (Lowe 2001: 214) Another notable example is the Taiping Rebellion, which killed twenty million people around the time of the American Civil War (O’Leary 2001: 208). Led by Hong Xiuquan, a man who believed he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ and destined to overthrow the Manchu Dynasty, the Tai Pings waged war for over 10 years before being defeated. Rahn (2002) believes that a strong historical parallel exists between Falun Gong and Yi Guan Dao, a group that was suppressed by the Qing, Kuomintang, and Communist governments, and was forced to flee to Taiwan and exist underground until

1987 (p. 45-46; also see Irons 2003). I have heard both practitioners and non-practitioners dispute this explanation. A non-practitioner told me that in Chinese schools, the religious elements of the major uprisings in China's history are not emphasized; rather, they are portrayed as incidents in which noble peasants rose up against a corrupt dynasty. However, this emphasis may simply be given to bolster the legitimacy of how the CCP came to power, rather than suggesting that high-ranking CCP members are unaware or unconcerned about the power of religious groups. The comparison was probably also objectionable to the non-practitioner because viewing Falun Gong as being like these groups would imply the CCP was corrupt enough to warrant a similar reaction. A practitioner I talked to said that this explanation was not plausible to him because the CCP had launched an investigation of Falun Gong already, and found no evidence of Falun Gong being a threat to the Chinese government (for a brief discussion of practitioner's views on this, see Ownby 2003: 237). However, Hertzke wrote: "One scholar told me (without irony or apology) that fear stemmed from how religious critics... provided opposition to the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Or, as a party organ put it most graphically a few years ago, the regime must 'strangle the baby while it is still in the manger' to avoid the fate of Warsaw Pact countries" (2000). This certainly suggests that even if Western scholars have made a mistake in suggesting the crackdown may have been partially motivated by Chinese leaders drawing comparisons to these particular groups, the CCP was certainly concerned about the potential of religion in general to lead to rebellion.

The Chinese government is also generally wary of groups that devoted to a single leader: "It is realized that in many ways people looked on Mao as a god. The Party currently rejects this conception of Mao and associates it with the greatest errors of the Cultural Revolution" (Bruseker 2000: 11). In many ways, Maoism can be seen as being a religion (Kipnis 2001: 35; Lowe 2001: 219). However, there are significant differences between Falun Gong and these earlier movements, as one anthropologist noted:

While there are some similarities to many millenarian movements (e.g. the presence of a single, charismatic leader, Li Hongzhi, now living in the United States), the make up of Falun Gong's membership is much different than these previous movements. Members seem to come from all walks of life and all classes, including a substantial number of party members. The majority of practitioners I've met in the US (both Chinese and non-Chinese) are well-educated, including several Ph.D. physicists and engineers. Many of them had practiced other types of qigong but found this one to their liking. [Frank 1999]

Bruseker writes, "The respect Li has in Falun gong circles is extremely high; it is thus not an enormous conceptual leap to guess that if Falun gong practitioners are willing to take spiritual orders from Li, then

they might also be willing to take secular orders as well” (2000: 11). Practitioners would probably find it ridiculous to suggest that Li Hongzhi would dispense orders in this way and become the next Mao or Hong Xiuquan.

Another reason the Chinese government may have objected to Falun Gong is that Li Hongzhi was living in the United States by the time the infamous April 25 incident occurred (Sinclair 2001: 4-7). “There is, in fact, ample reason to believe that Falun Gong is linked to a large body of believers abroad -- a big taboo for any Chinese religious group” (Lestz 1999). Catholics in China are prohibited from owing any allegiance to the pope (Center for Religious Freedom 2002: 2; Lowe 2001: 218-219; Chang 1991: 247), so the fact that Li Hongzhi was living in the United States could not have helped matters. We can find evidence of these suspicions in smuggled secret documents of the Chinese government after the crackdown:

“The hostile Western powers headed by the USA have hastened to carry on their strategies of “westernizing” (xi hua), “segregating” (fen hua), and “impairing” (ruo hua) our country. They have gathered anti-China and ant-Communist forces and have striven to build up a power domain all around our country in an attempt to form an “Asian and Pacific group security system” (ya tai ji ti an quan ti xi) led by the USA so as to tie us up. The hostile organizations both in our country and abroad have shifted their focus to the inside of our country and have hastened their infiltration through various methods, such as via foundations or academic delegations, and all kinds of media.”

Such western support is tied to democracy movements (“Democratic Party of China”) and also to religious ones, especially Falun Gong:

“With the intervention and support from the USA and Taiwan, the cult organization ‘Falungong’ has speeded up its collusion with the antagonistic powers and openly defies our government. It has become a political tool used by the antagonistic powers.” [Center for Religious Freedom 2002: 5-6]

While the Chinese government was still debating what to do about Falun Gong, Jiang Zemin reportedly said:

Falun Gong is no longer in the germinating stage. It is rearing its head and putting forth leaves. Some Western countries want to see another 1989 political disturbance in China, they are looking for opportunities. Hostile forces are also colluding with Falun Gong organizations. If the situation is allowed to develop, we will, when the time comes, have to pay a big price in political and economic losses. [Luo 1999]

Suspicion of foreign connections may be traced back to the introduction of Christianity (*China ABC* 1985: 109-110) and Buddhism (Lowe 2001: 214) in China, and the origins of the Taiping Rebellion as well.

Robert Morrison (1782-1834) was one of the few protestant missionaries allowed into China despite the opposition by the Chinese government and Catholics, who already had a missionary presence in China.

One of Morrison’s first converts was Liang A-fa (1789-1855), who made religious tracts in Canton, despite

concerns about his safety. One of these religious tracts first introduced Hong Xiuquan, the leader of the Taiping Rebellion, to Christianity (Gosling 1998). In an indirect way, Robert Morrison's attempts to proselytize lead to the deaths of millions.

Perry (2002) suggests another explanation for why the crackdown occurred, despite the April 25 appeal being "arguably the least violent of all the demonstrations that occurred in China that year" (p. xiii). She claims that China, both past and present-day, "has demonstrated a certain degree of tolerance an even sympathy towards economically driven protests, provided they remain clearly bounded in both scale and aspirations" (p. xiv). Taxi drivers and farmers from particular regions who are protesting specific policies are tolerated; groups and movements that unite different classes and social groups, however, are seen as threats (p. xvi). Falun Gong certainly fits into the latter category, as evidenced by a quote from Li Hongzhi: "I didn't know this...But there are people practicing Falun Gong in practically every department and province, from the highest state government to an average citizen..." (Hanson 1999: 25).

The death of Deng Xiaoping may have been a contributing factor in the crackdown. According to a practitioner I talked to, Deng Xiaoping was a qigong enthusiast in life. Indeed, some have even said that qigong bought him a few extra years of life:

Beijing cab drivers (as reliable a source of political intelligence as cab drivers around the world) say he is being kept alive by the ancient Chinese art of "Qigong", a form of controlled breathing long respected by the practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine. Others say that as in imperial times, the geomancers have now been called in to advise on how best to keep this once great man alive as long as possible. [Rudd 1996]

Another report said: "after returning to Beijing from a visit to Qingdao in June [1994], Deng Xiaoping, supreme leader of the CCP, was once on the brink of death because his heart stopped beating. He was later saved through the efforts of four qigong masters" (Shih-Chang 1994: 10). In addition, it has been claimed "that over 200 qigong masters were active within Zhongnanhai at one point while Deng was alive. Some high-level cadres in the Chinese government were said to be Falun Gong practitioners, but the extent of their power or their connections to potentially sympathetic higher officials is unknown" (Ditzler 2001: 14). While Deng Xiaoping was "increasingly in the shadows" (CNN 1997) during the later years of his life, and his political influence was somewhat diminished due to his poor health and the dismissal of Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, his two hand-picked successors (Thomson 1991: 6), the transfer of authority to a new head of state would not be complete until his death:

In the Confucian tradition, Chinese emperors were seen as the "Pole Star" whose living presence was capable of holding Heaven and Earth in balance. In this sense, the Chinese political psyche has long required an ultimate source of political authority to harmonize not just the natural elements but, more importantly, the affairs of men. It was Mao Zedong who performed this role in the first 25 years of the history of the People's Republic. And this has been Deng Xiaoping's role in the period since then. Similarly, despite the fact that Mao had lost his faculties in the last two years of his life, his political importance remained, although his power was dispensed on his behalf by those closest to him. Just as those at Deng's bedside now are capable of exercising enormous political authority – albeit temporarily. In this sense, the transition to a new leadership structure will not occur in reality until after Deng's physical death. [Rudd 1996]

A Chinese practitioner I talked to said that Jiang Zemin would not take drastic action against qigong while Deng was still alive; indeed, if qigong was widely seen as the only thing keeping Deng Xiaoping alive and Jiang Zemin pushed for drastic action against qigong, it is easy to imagine how this could be seen as symbolically trying to pull the plug on Deng's life support. In addition, Amnesty International wrote that "fear for stability in the transition from Deng has seen heightened repression against organized dissent" (Amnesty International 1997). This trend has continued; "the current group of Chinese leaders, human rights experts say, is less tolerant than the previous generation headed by Deng Xiaoping" (Schenker 2002).

Another explanation is that Jiang Zemin used the crackdown as an attempt to demonstrate his legitimacy as a ruler (Wang, et al. n.d.: 6). During his time as mayor of Shanghai, Jiang was nicknamed "The Flowerpot – an ineffectual adornment to the party who spent his time cutting ribbons and giving boring speeches" (Adams, et al. 2000: 14; also see CNN 1999g). Also, the infamous *Tiananmen Papers* show that the decision to advance Jiang Zemin's career was not a carefully planned decision, but simply a last minute replacement:

In the matter of lawlessness, it is clear from the Tiananmen Papers that Jiang Zemin, the current President of China and General Secretary of the Communist Party, owes his positions not to any constitutional procedure, but to a voice vote taken on May 27 1989 by the "eight elders", a cabal of senior party leaders led by Deng Xiaoping. You will search China's constitution in vain for any reference to this body, yet they made all the key decisions leading up to the June 4th massacre. [Derbyshire 2001]

While officially banned and denied in China, Hachigan noted "excerpts from The Tiananmen Papers ...were posted on on-line bulletin boards and discussed in chat rooms in China within days...of their release in the United States" (Sinclair 2002: 10). In addition, Deng Xiaoping showed signs of resistance to giving legitimacy to Jiang Zemin during the last years of his life. According to an article written in November 1994,

At present, Jiang Zemin – who is said to have party, government and military strength - cannot even get the chance to see Deng Xiaoping. Therefore, it is really very difficult to predict correctly who will be the successor in mainland China after Deng's death.... Legally speaking, [Deng] is only a Communist party member. However, if viewed from the real situation, Jiang Zemin - the highest leader of the party, government and armed forces - has no control over any power at all...It is said that even Jiang Zemin finds it difficult to have a chance to meet Deng Xiaoping. For example, when members of the Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee wanted to pay a New Year call on Deng Xiaoping during the spring festival this year, they succeeded in getting in touch with Deng Xiaoping, who was in Shanghai, only through Ding Guangen, a member of the Political Bureau. We all know that Ding Guangen is Deng's trusted follower. [Shih-Chang 1994: 10]

When Deng Xiaoping finally died, a CNN article wrote: “Jiang's future is anything but secure, because unlike Deng and Mao, Jiang has no revolutionary credentials and did not serve in the military, also known as the PLA” (Koppel 1997). Jiang Zemin has not been taken seriously by many Chinese people (Whyte 1999), including many high-ranking CCP members (Chen 2003), and has been called heartless by some (Li Cheng 1997: 26). In China, the “[loss] of face neutralizes a person’s ability to act effectively not only in carrying out normal roles and duties, but also in responding to requests and granting favors” (Young 2002: 29). On more than one occasion, when I merely mentioned “Jiang Zemin” and “jokes” in the same sentence to a person of Chinese nationality, they could not contain their laughter. Jiang Zemin was also “known for favoritism in appointing many members of the ‘Shanghai Gang’ to the central leadership” (Li Cheng 1999). After succeeding Deng Xiaoping, Jiang needed to improve public opinion of him; “to assure a more broadly-based personality cult, there had to be a major crises, a suitable adversary against which he could move decisively, thus establishing his perceived legitimacy to govern” (Adams, et al. 2000: 36-37). When 10,000 Falun Gong practitioners appeared outside the leadership compound in Beijing, he certainly took notice:

The official paranoia apparently reaches as high as President Jiang Zemin himself. The 73-year-old leader, not known for late-night Web surfing, has become obsessed with the sect and its ability to organize its activities in cyberspace. Diplomatic sources say Jiang frequently brings up Falun Gong in conversation, and he has reportedly been driven around Beijing in a car with tinted windows to observe for himself the group's silent protests. [McCathy 1999]

There is some anecdotal evidence from someone who claims to be a high-ranking CCP member which says that Jiang Zemin has an “insatiable need for recognition and applause” (M.H. 2002: 2), supporting the hypothesis that the crackdown may have been politically and personally useful to him. There is also some historical precedent for this hypothesis. In 1866, Chinese forces under the authority of Governor Yan

Jingming of Shandong Province attacked a mountaintop commune known as Yellow Cliff because of their alleged rebellious nature, resulting in the deaths of over 10,000 people:

In the fall of 1866, the Shandong officialdom was hard-pressed for success stories to report to their superiors in Beijing. Tax resistance and rebellion had plummeted in step. Governor Yan himself had been demoted in rank during the spring of 1866 and was on the verge of losing his official career because of rampant unrest in his province. Do we pay the man an unwarranted insult in suggesting that Yellow Cliff might have seemed a profitable and relatively low-risk means of regaining lost prestige? [Perry 2002: 98]

While care must be used in drawing historical parallels like this since the dynasties of the past differed in many ways politically from the CCP (Stover and Stover: 131-147) and the CCP itself has changed considerably under Deng Xiaoping (for example, see Xu 2002; Li Cheng 1997) I believe that the analogy holds when viewed in terms of individual motivation, specifically attempting to crush a seemingly-vulnerable group to bolster one's career. Ownby (2003) wrote, "officials anxious to finish up a case, or to justify an intervention in local society, could easily assign the attributes of the supposed 'White Lotus' to any group they chose" (p. 227-228). However, while Yan successfully slaughtered the "rebels" at Yellow Cliff and advanced his career, Jiang's regime seems to have encountered much more trouble in trying to wipe out Falun Gong.

Another possibility, suggested by a person who claims to be a high-ranking CCP member who has worked with Jiang Zemin, is that the practitioner's code of morality led the practitioners in the CCP to be critical of behavior that they believed were contrary to Truthfulness, Compassion, and Forbearance:

Do you honestly think you would want those good people around you talking such nonsense? Wouldn't you rather follow your "political agenda" with like-minded people around you, instead of fellow Party members who: lecture you on Truthfulness, Forbearance and Kindness; refuse to carry out your orders because they are not in accordance with the teachings of Mr. Li; kindly point out your dishonourable ways; get in the way of your running the country as you want to, etc., etc.? Of course you would! [M.H. 2002: 13]

From this account, it is easy to imagine what the account of the person on the receiving end of this advice might look like. The unsolicited advice could have not only been a source of irritation to other CCP members, but the refusal to carry out orders may have seemed threatening. Sinclair writes:

Falun Gong has offered a return to a different kind of Chineseness from the one that the government is promoting. It rejects modern science in direct contrast to the government's definition of nationalism and modernity and supports traditional Chinese values in contrast to modern Chinese materialism. Falun Gong provides an alternative meaning of Chinese tradition that threatens the state's monopoly of defining what it is to be Chinese. [Sinclair 2001: 16]

Differing belief systems have been suppressed in China for 2,000 years on the grounds of being xiejiao (“crooked teachings”) because ideological homogeneity is seen as being closely linked with social stability (Lowe 2001: 213-214). The communist party, since the time of its inception, has been no exception to this, as Chang (1991) shows in a discussion between her father, a communist, and Dr. Xia, her grandfather:

The two men would talk for hours. They shared many ethical values, but whereas my father’s were dressed in the garb of an ideology, Dr. Xia’s rested on a humanitarian foundation. Once Dr. Xia said to my father: “I think the Communists have done many good things. But you have killed too many people. People who should not have been killed.” “Like who?” my father asked. “Those masters in the Society of Reason,” which was the quasi-religious sect to which Dr. Xia had belonged. Its leaders had been executed as part of the campaign to “suppress counterrevolutionaries.” The new regime suppressed all secret societies, because they commanded loyalties, and the Communists did not want divided loyalties. “They were not bad people, you should have let the Society be,” Dr. Xia said. There was a long pause. My father tried to defend the Communists, saying that the struggle with the Kuomintang was a matter of life and death. Dr. Xia could tell that my father was not fully convinced himself, but he felt he had to defend the party. [Chang 1991: 178-179]

It seems likely that a century later, the CCP saw Falun Gong as just another group dividing the loyalty of the Chinese people.

Waldron (2000) claims that the crackdown on Falun Gong was partly due to China’s history of repression of all things labeled superstitious under an atheistic, communist ideology, and the resulting loss of control over such groups. Before the CCP began suppressing all forms of spirituality in earnest,

...it was relatively easy to create institutional structures to co-opt and control belief, first because many religious figures took communism seriously and imagined they could work with it and also because ordinary believers had not yet undergone the suffering to come. Today, believers have built firm barriers between the heart of their faith and practice and official efforts to manipulate. Religion has become genuinely personal and social, divorced from organization and immune to the old United Front tricks —this despite the reconstruction of organizations within which many believers operate. For the government, this is very bad news indeed, for it means that the structures of belief and understanding of meaning, effective manipulation of which has been a hallmark of totalitarianism, have survived in China —and freed themselves. [Waldron 2000: 32]

And, as a result of this, even though Falun Gong “poses no discernible threat to the regime” (Waldron 2000: 33), the Chinese government “had been looking for a way to show how tough it was in order to frighten China’s increasingly uncontrollable society back into line —to ‘kill the chicken for the monkey to see’—and the Falun Gong looked like an ideal target” (p. 33). Similarly, Fisher (2003) believes that allowing Falun Gong to continue existing could be an inspiration to Uighurs, Tibetans, and Democracy movements, something the Chinese government clearly wants to avoid (p. 305). The fact that the



“chicken” has not been killed may explain why “China’s leaders...are treading much more carefully in their struggle against other ‘evil cults’ than they did against the Falun Gong” (Kindopp 2002: 259).

In addition, the April 25 incident seems to have happened on a particularly sensitive year. As previously noted, this event took place “just before the anniversaries of major events in 20th-century China (the May 4th Movement of 1919, the Tiananmen Protests of 1989, and especially the founding of People's Republic of China of 1949)” (Chen 2000) which was at a time when foreign press were “primed for stories” (2000). To have a large protest on such a year would “undermine public confidence in its ability to maintain stability...and would hence make the government ‘lose face’ internationally and domestically” (Wong: 1999: 13). One Chinese scholar is quoted as saying, “By moving 12,000 people into the center of Beijing, this group was making a very strong statement. By picking this time to move these people, so near to June 4th, the statement had that much more power” (Pomret and Larid 1999).

In addition to the timing being sensitive, the location may have seen especially threatening as well. Lowe (2003) notes that “though dissident groups have long gathered at the more public Tiananmen Square, this seems to be the first large-scale protest targeting the living quarters of the elite. As such, it must have seemed unusually threatening” (p. 275 n. 1; also see Fisher 2003: 304-305).

A practitioner told me that Li Peng, a high-ranking CCP member who bears much of the responsibility for the decision to use force against the protesters in Tiananmen Square in 1989, might have held a grudge against Falun Gong for a decision Li Hongzhi made when Falun Gong still enjoyed official support. According to this practitioner, Li Peng had contacted Li Hongzhi to get qigong healing for some sort of ailment. Li Hongzhi had already agreed to do a lecture, and so he delayed meeting with Li Peng. After he finished the lecture, he contacted Li Peng and said that now he had time to use his qigong to heal him. However, Li Peng told Li Hongzhi that he had already contacted another qigong master and got healing. The practitioner I talked to thought that by placing a higher priority on his prior commitment, Li Hongzhi may have inadvertently offended Li Peng. However, another practitioner I talked to thought that Li Peng was not really against Falun Gong, but was only forced into taking a position against it because of Jiang Zemin.

Finally, a man named Luo Gan, along with a relative of his, may bear some responsibility for the crackdown (persecution truth 2001). Luo Gan was a high-ranking official of the Red Guard Revolutionary

organization during the Cultural Revolution (FalunInfo.net n.d.a). Later on, as previously noted, Luo Gan was secretary general of the State Council, and he “had been investigating Falun Gong and had wanted it banned since 1996 but could not find any legal basis for transgression” (Ching 2001). However, “[Luo] had the police direct them to Zhongnanhai, in order to create an incident with which they afterwards could be charged” (Ching 2001). It has been claimed that the April 25 incident “sent a shockwave through the CCP leadership, for it was probably the first time since the Party gained control of the country in 1949 that the Party and the government failed to receive any information beforehand that an unauthorized gathering of any reasonable size would take place” (Lin 2001: 221). He Zuoxiu, a scientist and one of Luo Gan’s relatives (FalunInfo.net n.d.a; Clearwisdom.net 2000g), perhaps partially motivated by how Li Hongzhi calls modern science limited (Sinclair 2001: 15), seems to have intentionally provoked Falun Gong:

Early in 1999, as part of a general crackdown on unapproved spiritual and religious groups, physicist He Zuoxiu wrote an article attacking the Falun Gong. He Zuoxiu is a science delegate to Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference that advises the Chinese legislature. He is also a crusader against supernatural and "unscientific" thinking. His article caused concern among Falun Gong practitioners.... [Colvin 2001]

He Zuoxiu claimed that two of his graduate students had relapses of mental disorders due to Falun Gong, both in his article and on Beijing Television. The practitioners protested the magazine’s office in Tianjin because they would not carry a response, and were beaten and arrest by riot police (Schechter 2001: 69) under orders from Luo Gan (FalunInfo.net n.d.a). Afterwards, practitioners who complained to local authorities about this harsh treatment were told to go to Beijing (Schechter 2001: 69); Luo Gan had “secretly order[ed] the police to lead Falun Gong practitioners into gathering around the Zhongnanhai government compound” (FalunInfo.net n.d.a). While critics of Falun Gong may be skeptical to accept a Falun Gong source for this claim, I talked to a practitioner and he told me that if police were to direct massive numbers of people to Beijing like that without consulting their superiors, it is very likely they would lose their jobs, if not face criminal charges. Afterwards, Luo Gan was appointed as part of the team created by the Central Committee of the CCP to investigate the April 25 incident:

Within the Special Case Team, Luo Gan and Hu Guangbao proposed going on the offensive after the Falun Gong situation had deteriorated, as doing so at such a time would be justifiable and advantageous, and would enable the authorities to make a clean sweep of the handful of key figures who used Gong-practice as an excuse to sabotage the socialist system. [Luo 1999]

It was Luo Gan who finally issued the order that Falun Gong be banned (Luo 1999). Luo Gan was then put in charge of the “the Head Office for Handling the Falun Gong Issue,” also known as the “610 Office.” In the letter Jiang Zemin wrote which established the 610 Office, he instructed that the “Central Committee and government units in all ministries and commissions, and all provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities directly under the Central Government, need to act in close coordination” with the 610 Office, and as a result, it has become a “well-organized and independent system spanning from the Central Government to the local governments, and has absolute power over each level of administration in the Party, as well as over the political and judiciary branches”, according to Falun Gong (FalunInfo.net n.d.b). As for He Zuoxiu, he “became a national hero for opposing Falun Gong” (Yan 2001). Things could not have worked out better for the two if they planned it – which, it appears, they just might have.

#### **After the Crackdown**



**Figure 7: A Practitioner's Home After Being Ransacked by Chinese Police**

*From: <http://www.clearwisdom.net/emh/articles/2000/8/7/7374.html>. Used with permission.*





**Figure 10: Liu Yufeng, a Practitioner Who Was Beaten to Death**

*From: <http://www.clearwisdom.net/emh/articles/2000/10/31/6347.html>. Used with permission.*

Tong (2002b) states that there were several reasons why the crackdown did not happen immediately: “First, to avoid negative international media coverage, the target dates could not coincide with a high-profile international summitry or with state visits at home and abroad, or be temporally close to major anniversaries in Beijing, all of which would attract a large contingent of foreign press on the lookout for stories on continued state repression in China” (p. 800). “Second,” he wrote, “while the Politburo could avoid major anniversaries and state visits, it could not have prevented major foreign policy crises, two of which intruded into its time-table” (p. 800). These crises were the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by the United States, and the president of Taiwan making moves towards independence. The third reason why the crackdown did not happen immediately was the need to gather more information on Falun Gong.

As indicated in a letter written by practitioners in May 1999, China was preparing to take action against Falun Gong before declaring it illegal:

Recently, you all have been working very hard, tapping telephone conversations, using modern equipment to monitor Falun Gong practitioners, or using police vehicles to block or to follow practitioners, or tracing practitioners individually, or questioning practitioners constantly, or investigating practitioners in their workplaces and

neighborhoods both openly and secretly. You even had group training at our Falun Gong practice sites at our regular practice time, and so on and so forth. Some of you even spread such rumor saying that practitioners would have a gathering at Xiang Shan or have gathering on May 22nd. Therefore, you sacrificed your spare time running here and there nonstop. We can't do anything and really feel helpless for you. But we do have great sympathy for all of you. Please allow us to say some words from the bottom of our hearts: You've worked very hard. Please take it easy and take some rest!  
[Clearwisdom.net 1999a]

Some Falun Gong practitioners reported that on May 23, they were forced out of the park where they practice; park security professionals were threatened with losing their jobs if they did not drive away practitioners (Clearwisdom.net 1999b). In some areas, it was suggested that Communist Party members, Young League members, cadres in office or retirement should not practice, "or they are responsible for any consequences. They also said that the policy right now is 'loose externally and tight internally'" (Clearwisdom.net 1999c).

In June 1999, thousands of legitimate copies of Falun Gong books were seized and destroyed under false pretenses (Clearwisdom.net 1999d). Later that month, a station in Wuhan began research for a television program that would condemn Falun Gong (Clearwisdom.net 1999e).

On July 20, 1999, the crackdown was officially announced; police broke into the homes of hundreds of Falun Gong practitioners and took them to prison during the middle of the night (Ahang and Hu 2001). It was at this point that Falun Gong became international news. Falun Gong held a press conference in front of the Chinese Embassy in Washington D.C. on July 24 in response (Clearwisdom.net 1999f). Meanwhile, Falun Gong practitioners raised the issue over whether Beijing would attempt to extradite Li Hongzhi; a U.S. official replied, "We don't have an extradition treaty with China. Nobody has made that kind of request concerning his repatriation either. We don't anticipate this is going to be an issue" (CNN 1999a). On July 25, practitioners put on a similar press conference in Canada in front of the Chinese embassy in Ottawa (Clearwisdom.net 1999g). Li Hongzhi was declared "an evil person" by the Chinese government around this time. News reports in China began accusing Falun Gong practitioners of refusing life-saving medicines, going insane, and murdering people. The group Human Rights Watch, based in New York, called for an international protest on behalf of Falun Gong and appealed for U.N. intervention (CNN 1999b). China destroyed more 1.55 million Falun Gong publications, and requested Interpol to arrest Li Hongzhi in the week following the crackdown (CNN 1999d), probably because they figured that Falun Gong was simply one of the "more sectarian groups [which] tend to form around charismatic leaders and

often dissolve on their arrest” (Kindopp 2002: 264). In addition, China started flooding the e-mail addresses of known practitioners and hacking Falun Gong websites in other countries an effort to disrupt their communication worldwide (Clearwisdom.net 1999k; Dube 1999).

It was significant to the development of media coverage of Falun Gong that practitioners were so quick to make their side of the story known since “the way a controversy initially appears in the media often governs its course” (Shankman 2001: 48). It is interesting to note that CNN.com and Clearwisdom.net, a popular English-language Falun Gong site, both lack media coverage of Falun Gong previous to 1999.

In August 1999, Falun Gong practitioners got their first endorsement by the mayor of a city since the crackdown. Anthony A. Williams, mayor of Washington D.C., proclaimed August 9-13, 1999, as “Falun Dafa Week” (Clearwisdom.net 1999h). On August 17, England turned down China’s request that Li Hongzhi be denied entry to their country, partially based on Interpol’s refusal to arrest Li Hongzhi, also adding, “The Chinese authorities are aware of our and the EU countries’ disappointment at the banning of this organisation and the restrictions which are being placed on the practice of individual spiritual belief” (Clearwisdom.net 1999j). Also, during this time, it was reported that Jiang Zemin became obsessed with Falun Gong; he would constantly bring them up in conversations, and would drive around Beijing in a car with tinted windows to observe Falun Gong practitioners secretly (McCathy 1999).

On September 12, 1999, Jiang Zemin gave Bill Clinton a copy of an anti-Falun Gong book entitled, “Li Hongzhi and His 'Falun Gong:' Deceiving the Public and Ruining Lives”. This book is filled with blatant propaganda (Associated Press 1999; Cheng 2002), including “gruesome photographs of Chinese allegedly made so crazy by practicing Falun Gong that they committed suicide, were killed or mutilated their family members. It claims 1,404 people have died, mostly for refusing medical treatment as instructed by Falun Gong teachings. Documentation and attribution are sketchy” (Associated Press 1999). These sorts of accusations were used previous to the crackdown on Falun Gong to attack other qigong practices (Agence France Presse 1996).

On September 30, 1999, four or five suspected Falun Gong practitioners were sitting cross-legged in Tiananmen Square and refused to move. They were arrested (CNN 1999c). This happened two days before the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the PRC.

By October, many practitioners had been imprisoned, and many had lost their jobs. They had to borrow money from other practitioners to survive (Clearwisdom.net 1999m).

On October 1-3, 1999, about 200 practitioners attended a conference in Washington D.C. Like many conferences to come, practitioners came from all over the country and stayed at the homes of their fellow practitioners.

On October 26 and 27, 1999, in what were described as a “low-key protests,” 36 Falun Gong practitioners were arrested in Tiananmen Square. On October 30, 1999, a new “anti-cult” law was enacted that targeted Falun Gong. Falun Gong practitioners are not allowed legal representation; lawyers were ordered not to respond to application inquiries, and report all information immediately to the government (Ahang and Hu 2001; Clearwisdom.net 1999i). Those who were imprisoned were treated quite poorly:

Tens of Thousands of Falun Gong practitioners in police custody suffer abuses. Many are deprived of food, sleep, not allowed to relieve themselves, and exposed to extreme hot or cold weather. They are also subjected to forced labor and force-feeding when on hunger strike. The police torture practitioners with electric batons, cigarette lighters, and use handcuffs to hold practitioners in painful positions. Women practitioners suffer the most, as they are also raped and undressed in front of other prisoners. Electric prods were used to beat female practitioners' breasts or inserted into their bodies. Some pregnant women lost their children during forced heavy labor in labor camps. In Masanjia labor camp, 18 female practitioners were stripped, thrown into cells with male inmates, and suffered gang rape. [Ahang and Hu 2001]

There are so many stories of practitioners being arrested and abused that it would be tedious to list them all.

Also in October 1999, the apartment of Janet Xiong, an American citizen, was broken into and ransacked. Nothing was taken, but someone had clearly gone through her documents. A year later, Chinese police detained some of her Americans friends, and mentioned her name during their questioning. (Ho 2002: 30)

On November 1, an article was published in The Wall Street Journal entitled “American Dream Finds Chinese Spiritual Leader” about a practitioner buying a house for Li Hongzhi and him not accepting it (Schechter 2000: 58). Practitioners objected to the negative way in which Li Hongzhi was depicted in the article (Clearwisdom.net 1999n). Zhang Erping, Li Hongzhi’s spokesman, told the reporter: “How does it feel to know that millions of Falun Gong practitioners in China know your name?” Lili Feng, a researcher at Scripps Research Institute and one of the dozens who sent angry e-mails to him, wrote: “You will get paid back for what you said and did by gods” (Smith 2000).



In December 1999, the Chinese Government used the newly enacted anti-cult law to attack Zhong Gong, another qigong group that acquired millions of members. Their leader, Zhang Hongbao, was in Guam at the time, and requested asylum from the United States. It was granted in June 2001 (Human Rights Watch 2002).

On January 1, 2000, twelve practitioners were denied entrance into China. The Chinese Government had begun maintaining a blacklist of overseas practitioners. (Clearwisdom.net 2000b)

In late February 2000, the U.S. State Department issued a report, strongly criticizing China for their human rights abuses. (Clearwisdom.net 2000c)

On April 6, 2000, four Falun Gong practitioners testified before Congress on the issue of human rights in China. (Clearwisdom.net 2000d)

On April 26, 2000, State Department spokesman James Rubin spoke out, opposing the crackdown on Falun Gong: "We call on the Chinese government to cease its crackdown on the Falun Gong, release all those in custody for the peaceful expression of their beliefs and guarantee the rights of citizens to freedom of speech, conscience and association and peaceful assembly" (Clearwisdom.net 2000e).

On April 29, 2000, the American Family Foundation in Seattle sponsored a conference entitled "Cults and the Millennium". At the conference, three scholars spoke, criticizing Falun Gong: Margaret Singer, Zixian Deng, and Patsy Rahn (Lattin 2000). Margaret Singer, the famous anti-cult psychologist, said that 44 parents had contacted her with concerns about their children being involved in Falun Gong (Schechter 2000: 56).

January 23, 2001, was when the infamous self-immolation incident happened. Five people showed up Tiananmen Square and set themselves on fire. Falun Gong practitioners have pointed out many suspicious aspects of the event, suggesting the Chinese government was behind it. The Chinese Government was reported by practitioners to have fabricated such a report earlier (Clearwisdom.net 2000a). Since suicide is a traditional gesture of protest in China (Chang 1991: 89, 134; Rahn 2001b; Lindsey 2001: 2; ter Haar 2001: sec. 1; Li Cheng 1997: 168-169), it may seem reasonable to think Falun Gong members might protest in this way. However, Falun Gong beliefs prohibit killing, which includes suicide (see Li Hongzhi 1999c: 27); therefore, I think that even if there were people who lit themselves on fire and considered themselves Falun Gong practitioners, they would not be representative of Falun Gong

practitioners any more than Christianity as a whole is represented by people who shoot and bomb abortion clinics. While some have said that “the event was a public relations disaster for both Beijing and Falun Gong” (Lindsey 2001) and that “the [Chinese] state was quite angry at the Western media for publishing it as evidence of Falun Gong martyrdom” (ter Haar 2001: sec. 1), it should also be pointed out that there is some evidence that the Chinese government is divided on the issue of Falun Gong (Edelman and Richardson 2003: 320), and that “Public sentiment within China was decidedly opposed to the government campaign, at least until several [supposed] Falun Gong adherents—including a mother and daughter—immolated themselves in a January 2001 protest in Tiananmen Square” (Kindopp 2002: 261). Therefore, those the anger directed at Western media portrayal of the self-immolation may reflect divisions within the Chinese government; and, in any case, it is clear that Falun Gong took a much more damaging PR blow from the incident than the Chinese government did. In addition, convincing evidence has been provided that the events described by the Chinese media are at least deceptive, if not a complete hoax (Schechter 2000; Schechter 2001: 20-23; FalunInfo.net n.d.c).

In addition, since the crackdown, some non-practitioners in China have claimed “local officials have accused them of being Falun Gong [practitioners] in an effort to intimidate them into silence” (Murphy 2002b: 32).



**Figure 11: Practitioners in D.C..**

*From <http://www.clearwisdom.net/emh/articles/1999/10/6/10897.html>. Practitioners came from many different states for a conference in Washington D.C. on 10/1/99 to 10/3/99. Used with permission.*

### **Falun Gong's Growth in the United States**

There is no definitive history of Falun Gong in the United States; much of what we know comes from scattered newspaper accounts and the words of practitioners. However, one (former) practitioner has provided this very brief timeline of Falun Dafa events in the United States before the crackdown:

- The first Falun Dafa seminar in the USA of Teacher Li Hongzhi was in Houston on 1996 October 12, the date of a partial Solar Eclipse visible from Eastern Canada to Africa.
- On 1996 October 19, Teacher Li also gave a Falun Dafa seminar in New York City.
- On 1997 March 23, the day after Comet Hale-Bopp was nearest Earth, there was a partial Lunar Eclipse, and Teacher Li Hongzhi gave a Falun Dafa seminar in Manhattan, New York City.
- On 1997 April 6, Teacher Li Hongzhi also gave a Falun Dafa seminar in San Francisco.
- On 1998 March 28-29, in New York City, Teacher Li Hongzhi attended The U.S. Falun Dafa Conference.
- A Western US Falun Dafa Cultivation Experience Sharing Conference was in Los Angeles on 1999 February 20-21.
- An Eastern US Falun Dafa Cultivation Experience Sharing Convention was in New York on 1999 March 27-28. [Smith 2003]

As noted previously, Falun Gong was first introduced to the United States when Li Hongzhi left China in October 1996 on a tourist visa to give a lecture in Houston (Tong 2002a: 640-641). On the day he gave his first lecture in the United States on October 12, 1996, there was a partial solar eclipse (Pomret and Larid 1999); while I have not heard any practitioners comment on the significance of that particular eclipse, there have been articles on Falun Gong websites that associate celestial events with prophecies (for example, PureInsight.org 2002d). At the time of his lecture, Westerners likely saw qigong in a new age framework. “The New Age industry that grew up in the 1980s and 1990s out of this spirit of peace, love, and Daoism”, Frank (2000) writes, “spawned a transformed conception of...qi...through the New Age discourse, *qi* has become an industry in both East and West.” The claim that the Westerners who may have been attracted to Falun Gong were part of a New Age discourse seems to be supported by Palmer and Ownby (2000), who found that of the Westerners at the experience-sharing conference in Montreal in February 2000, “all but one described a previous involvement in alternative spirituality, healing, or psychotherapy...Interviews confirmed that the Westerners...tended to fit the profile of what one might call a ‘spiritual seeker’” (p. 136).

At one of Li Hongzhi’s lectures in New York in March 1998, there were about 200 people in attendance (Wang 2000). Before the crackdown, Falun Gong did not get much media coverage within the United States. However, there are a few newspaper articles written that year. For example, on July 23, 1998, the *Seattle Times* ran a photo with the caption: “Kim Eng, Left, Karen Eng and Pearl Chen practice Falun Dafa, meditations and energy training, at Marina Park in Kirkland. Falun Dafa is practiced there Monday through Saturday at 7 a.m. and 7 p.m.” (*Seattle Times* 1998: B4) In October 1998, there was an article in a North Carolina newspaper that gives some interesting information on the pre-crackdown period of Falun Gong in the United States. The author first describes how his legs hurt from doing the fifth exercise, and a practitioner tells him that the pain is normal at first. He describes the group as consisting of 21 people, not counting himself and “Zhang, a 26-year-old chemistry grad student [who] teaches newcomers to the group, which meets from 8:30 to 11:30 a.m. every Sunday at Duke Gardens, as well as Saturday mornings in Pullen Park in Raleigh” (Schultz 1998: G1). He gives an interesting anecdote of a Westerner’s first impressions of Falun Dafa:

Dan Hodgdon used to practice martial arts, including kung fu, and started attending the Falun Dafa sessions in Raleigh three months ago. He was wary of some of the spiritual language at first.

"That's one of the things I was a little concerned about, but it's nothing like [religion]," the 55-year-old says. "I enjoy it. It relaxes you. It stretches you out."

Cultivation, to Hodgdon, "is a way of lifting your spirit, understanding yourself as a spiritual being," he says. "But not in a religious way, more philosophical." [Schultz 1998: G1]

Other than these three paragraphs and a few statements about "supernormal abilities," the article generally presents Falun Gong as being equivalent to Tai chi. This view of Falun Gong can be found in another article a month earlier that year in the same paper, which said: "Duke University's International House welcomed students on Friday to an open-air 'stress festival' to learn ways to prevent, manage and vent stress, from the tai chi-like Chinese practice of Falun Dafa to massage and aromatherapy" (Fisher 1998: A1). Also, in November 1998, the Boston Globe printed a picture of practitioners with the caption: "Mengyang Jian (left) and Dan Tang (center) spent their Saturday afternoon with friends on Boston Common practicing a type of meditation known as 'Falun Gong'" (Boston Globe 1998: B9).

Also, there is a list of 21 articles on-line from a U.S. conference in March 1999, just a month before Falun Gong became headline news (Clearwisdom.net 1999o), one of which is no longer linked (although the file is still on-line and can be found with a search engine). The only one that is (seemingly) not available is from Gail Rachlin, the Falun Gong spokesperson with whom Schechter (2001) worked. Of the 21, only 11 appear to be Chinese; however, this ratio may be due to a desire to portray Falun Gong as accessible to Westerners rather than accurately representing their demographics. These experiences also show that most of the people who were attracted to Falun Gong were "spiritual-seekers," especially those who were Westerners. One Western practitioner described how he taught Tai chi for many years, until a student of his brought him a Falun Gong book, and he decided he liked Falun Gong better (Clearwisdom.net 1999o: 1). Another Westerner wrote: "After searching for the past 25 years, and participating in 75 workshops and seminars that dealt with different degrees of spirituality and transformation, I didn't find that miracle that I was searching for"; then, "in February of 1998, I attended a New Life Expo in New York City where I discovered Falun Dafa" (Clearwisdom.net 1999o: 4). Another Western practitioner wrote: "In order to achieve the higher level of cultivation, I had been practicing some other cultivation ways for about 24 years. I had always been trying to improve the health of my body, mind and spirituality. For many years, no matter what I tried to improve the quality of my life, I always had a lot

of tribulations, problems, misfortunes and miseries" (Clearwisdom.net 1999o: 6). This practitioner goes on to explain how Falun Gong helped him mentally cope with his divorce. Another Western practitioner, a college student, wrote how he saw a flyer, and even though he "didn't even know what Qigong was" and he "was a little doubtful of a 9-day seminar offering a way to attain Buddha," he nonetheless "became very interested when I read about returning to the True Self and 'the path of cultivation that begins with being a good person and leads to Enlightenment.' I also felt very good that there was no money charged. I decided to go to the Falun Gong seminar because it was my greatest wish to return to my True Self"

(Clearwisdom.net 1999o: 6). One more example of this may be helpful:

At the time just prior to my cultivation, things were not going very well in my life, and I was both spiritually and mentally confused. Trying to fit into the ordinary way of life just didn't seem fulfilling and purposeful to me. I didn't know what to make of life and couldn't understand what I was to do with my life. Why was I here? What was the purpose of my existence? I had been brought up in a religion, but it never seemed to answer the questions I had, and I never seemed to fully connect with its teachings. I was very much lost, and I wished I had some practice to follow so I could find my way. It was then, like clockwork, when my brother sent me a copy of *Zhuan Falun* in the mail. At first, I didn't know what to make of it. Being brought up in a small town in Maine, I didn't know anything about cultivation practice, and some of the words in the strange blue book, let alone the title, which I couldn't even pronounce, were very foreign to me. Nevertheless, I was deeply intrigued by it and could hardly put it down. The more I read, the more questions Master Li answered, and the more my mind seemed to open up to the Fa. I could sense that there was something very special, very powerful, and very profound about this book, and I felt I had found my way. [Clearwisdom.net 1999o: 9]

From these different anecdotal sources, we can see that the writings of Li Hongzhi seemed strange and exotic to many Westerners at first. However, previous to the crackdown, it seemed to provide meaning, relaxation, and spirituality, much in the same way as those who participate in the New Age movement.

Frank (2002) gives a fascinating account of his ethnographic research in the spring of 1999 in Texas around the time of the crackdown. Practitioners met at the house of two practitioners, Mrs. Zhou and her elderly mother. Frank reports these sessions started out with an informal 30-minute chat period, and then moving on to the exercises. The practitioners' main concerns at these sessions seem to be doing the exercises correctly. After the crackdown, the practitioners he talked to "developed set responses to certain lines of questioning" (Frank 2002). Before, practitioners would emphasize that Falun Gong is free to try, completely voluntary, and has healed their illnesses. After the crackdown, however, changes emerged:

Community practice took on even greater importance during the period immediately following the Chinese government's initial crackdown, and practitioners in Washington enthusiastically participated in public outreach activities. At the same time, since it was difficult to tell who was a practitioner and who was working for the Chinese Embassy,

distrust ran high. During the week of July 26, 1999, for example, I spoke to several protestors from a group of some five hundred who had gathered on the grounds of the Capitol. This group included practitioners from all over the United States and abroad, some of whom had initially traveled to the west coast that week to attend a Falun Gong event but diverted to Washington when the protests began. I spoke for an hour with an elderly Chinese-American man, an immigrant to the Bay Area, who gave me permission to record our interview. As he freely criticized Jiang Zemin and Chinese communism in general, two women, also practitioners, hovered close by and eventually interrupted to ask him the purpose of our interview. He explained that I was an anthropologist doing research on Falun Gong, at which point they pulled him aside out of earshot. He returned a few moments later and somewhat sheepishly requested that I surrender the tape, repeatedly asking “We’re still friends, aren’t we?” I handed him the tape, but could not help wondering if his request had been made under duress.

Another suspicious incident occurred during the August 14, 1999, opening ceremony of Falun Gong Week on the Washington Mall. Two older Chinese men in threadbare clothing carefully videotaped the event from several vantage points (including three feet from my face). They told me that they were practitioners from Houston, but never joined in the practice. Several protestors commented that these two were probably from the Chinese Embassy or one of the consulates. “To me, I have nothing to hide,” Judy told me after watching the two men for a while. “There was white guy videotaping earlier, but he kept trying to hide it. I just don’t get it. This event is open to the public. He doesn’t have to hide it.” [Frank 2002]

He concludes that before the crackdown, Falun Gong “could best be described as a loose quasi-cult whose members focused on individual spiritual cultivation in a group setting. Galvanized by a common threat, practitioners forged bonds, developed a sense of community, cobbled together an international, national, and local communications system, and created a loose organizational structure” (Frank 2002). It should be noted that he seems to mean “cult” in the sociological sense, rather than the pejorative sense.



**Figure 12: Suspicious-looking Chinese Man with a Camera Hangs Around the D.C. Practice Site**

*Photo by Noah Porter.*



**Figure 13: Li Hongzhi interviewed.**

*"CBS interviews Falun Dafa's founder, Mr. Li Hongzhi, the day after Chinese leader Jiang Zemin launches the persecution of Falun Dafa in China." Used with permission, Courtesy of Falun Dafa Information Center. Available: <http://www.faluninfo.net/gallery/photo.asp?ID=401>*



## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### Who Are the Practitioners?

**Table 1: Falun Gong Demographics Worldwide**

Data Source	Time	Location	Size	Gender	Nationality or Ethnicity	Age Distribution
Zhang and Xiao 1996	1996 Sept.- Nov.	China: Beijing	355	Male: 100 (28%) Female: 255 (72%)		10-19: 2 (0.6%) 20-29: 21 (5.9%) 30-39: 29 (8.2%) 40-49: 66 (18.6%) 50-59: 138 (38.9%) 60-69: 85 (23.9%) 70-79: 14 (3.9%)
PureInsight.org 2002c	1998	China: Guan- dong	12,553	Male: 3,502 (28%) Female: 9,051 (72%)		Below 50: 6,076 (49%) Above 50: 6,433 (51%)
PureInsight.org 2002c	1998	China: Wuhan	2,005	Male: 563 (28%) Female: 1,442 (72%)		Below 50: 768 (38%) Above 50: 1,237 (62%)
PureInsight.org 2002c	1998 February	China: Dalian	6478	Male: 1501 (23%) Female: 4977 (77%)		Below 50: 1,864 (29%) Above 50: 4,614 (71%)
Wang, et al. 1998	1998 October	China: Beijing, Zizhu Park	584	Male: 174 (30%) Female: 410 (70%)		7-20: 13 (2.2%) 21-50: 167 (28.6%) 51-98: 404 (69.2%)
Dan, et al. 1998	1998 October	China: Beijing	12,731	Male: 3,354 (27.9%) Female: 9,177 (72.1%)		<10: 44 (0.3%); 11-20: 176 (1.4%); 21-30: 608 (4.8%); 31-40: 1,071 (8.4%); 41-50: 2,241 (17.6%); 51-60: 3,498 (27.5%); >60: 5,093 (40.0%)

Clearwisdom.net 2003m	July 1999 to April 2003	China: Heilong- jiang, Jilin, Shan- dong, Lianon- ing, Hebei, etc.	663 deaths	Male: 321 (48.4%) Female: 342 (51.6%)		10-19: 4 (0.6%) 20-29: 65 (9.8%) 30-39: 183 (27.6%) 40-49: 129 (19.5%) 50-59: 110 (16.6%) 60-69: 70 (10.6%) 70-79: 7 (1.1%) Unknown: 95 (14.3%)
PureInsight.org 2003	1999- 2000	USA and Canada: Internet	235	Male: 98 (41.7%) Female: 137 (58.3%)	"Asian": 226 (97%) "Caucasian": 7 (3%)	mean: 38.9, sd: 13.6, range 4-78 1-4: 1 (0.4%) 5-14: 3 (1.3%) 15-24: 9 (3.9%) 25-34: 83 (36.1%) 35-44: 64 (27.8%) 45-54: 30 (13.0%) 55-64: 27 (11.7%) 65-74: 10 (4.3%) 75-84: 3 (1.3%)
Palmer and Ownby 2000	2000 February	Canada: Montreal	78	Male: 34 (44%) Female: 44 (56%)	"Chinese-speaking": 71 (91%) "Westerners": 7 (9%)	mean: 41.88, median: 37
Lowe 2003	2000 June	Internet	85		PRC: 45 (53%) US: 1 (1%) Malaysia: 8 (10%) Romania: 1 (1%) Singapore: 30 (35%)	
Burgdoff 2003	2001 March	USA: Colum- bus, OH	25-30		Chinese: (between 85% and 90%) Westerners: 3 or 4	
My research	2001- 2003	USA: Tampa D.C. Internet	53	Male: 31 (58%) Female: 22 (42%)	Born in US: 18 (34.0%) Born in China: 24 (45.3%) Born in Taiwan: 5 (9.4%) Born elsewhere: 6 (11.3%)	mean: 37.38, median: 36, sd: 10.52 20-29: 14 (26%) 30-39: 19 (36%) 40-49: 11 (21%) 50-60: 9 (17%)

**Table 2: Falun Gong Practitioner's Educations and Careers**

Data Source	Time	Location	Size	Education Distribution	Career Distribution
Zhang and Xiao 1996	1996 Sept.- Nov.	China: Beijing	355	Illiterate: 6 (1.7%) Primary School: 38 (10.7%) Junior High: 64 (18%) Senior and Vocational High School: 106 (29.9%) College and University: 141 (39.7%)	Worker: 39 (11%) Peasant: 1 (0.3%) Office Cadre: 67 (18.9%) Scientific Medical Worker and Teacher: 72 (20.3%) Joint-venture Employee and Self-employed: 22 (6.2%) Housewife: 5 (1.4%) Retired: 145 (41.1%) Student: 4 (1.1%)
PureInsight.org 2002c	1998	China: Wuhan	2,005	Illiterate: 115 (5.7%) Elementary: 371 (18.5%) Junior High: 513 (25.6%) High School: 549 (27.4%) College: 435 (21.7%) Grad School: 22 (1.1%)	
Wang, et al. 1998	1998 October	China: Beijing, Zizhu Park	584	Illiterate: 37 (6.3%) Elementary: 77 (13.2%) Junior High: 116 (19.9%) High School: 124 (21.2%) College: 217 (37.2%) Grad School: 13 (2.2%)	Peasant: 7 (1.20%) Worker: 154 (26.4%) Housewife or Unemployed: 47 (8.1%) Officials: 180 (30.8%) Scientific, technological, medical people: 162 (27.7%) student: 27 (4.6%) military service people: 7 (1.2%)
PureInsight.org 2003	1999- 2000	USA and Canada: Internet	235	Elementary: 4 (1.8%) Middle: 13 (5.8%) High School: 30 (13.4%) Bachelor's: 72 (32.1%) Master's: 69 (30.8%) Doctoral: 36 (16.1%)	Business Supplies/Service: 7 (5.1%) Computer-Related: 52 (38%) Consumer Retailer/Wholesale: 10 (7.3%) Education/Research: 20 (14.6%) Engineering/Construction: 6 (4.4%) Government: 6 (4.4%) Manufacturing/Distribution: 18 (13.1%) Non-profit Organizations: 8 (5.8%) Others: 10 (7.3%)

Frank 2002	1999 Spring and Summer	USA: Texas and D.C.	~50	"the majority of practitioners...were... well-educated."	"background in the physical sciences or engineering": ~90%
Palmer and Ownby 2000	2000 February	Canada: Montreal	78	Ph.D.s: (9%) Masters: (34%) B.A. or B.Sc.(24%) Other: (33%)	\$60,000 CAN +: (almost 15%) \$40k-\$60k CAN: (13.5%) \$20k-\$39k CAN: (21.6%) \$10k-\$19k CAN: (23%) unspecified income: (26.9%)
Lowe 2003	2000 June	Internet: PRC (45) US (1) Malaysia (8) Romania (1) Singapore (30)	85	"Every survey respondent from Canada and the United States had at least one advanced degree; several had multiple Master's degrees or even two Ph.D.s" (p. 269). "The Chinese respondents living in Western nations were uniformly well educated, clearly representing the expatriate elite. All had masters or Ph. D. degrees. The respondents from Singapore and Malaysia were a mixed bag, with a smattering of university graduates among the majority who had only a primary or secondary school education. This is closer, I suspect, to what we would find in the PRC" (p. 270)	
Burgdoff 2003	2001 March	USA: Columbus, OH	25-30	"Between 85 and 90 percent of the group consists of Chinese graduate students and their family members."	

### Basic Demographics of Practitioners Worldwide

It is important to ask whom the Falun Gong practitioners are worldwide as well as locally. Palmer and Ownby have been studying practitioners in Montreal and Toronto. Among their survey respondents, they found a ratio of 90 percent Chinese practitioners and 10 percent Western practitioners, an average age of 41.88, 44 women and 34 men, 80 percent of who were married. They also found a high level of education; 9 percent had Ph.D.s, 34 percent had Masters degrees, and 24 percent had a B.A. or B.Sc. Most of the surveyed practitioners had heard about Falun Gong from friends or relatives. The most commonly reported reasons for being attracted to the practice were intellectual content, cultivation exercises, and health benefits. They surmised that the results from China would not be the same because

immigration policy favors those who are educated and are likely to contribute to the economy (Palmer and Ownby 2000: 136). Of course, their results may not be representative of all practitioners since, as Deng and Fang (2001) point out (rather venomously, I might add), those who attend the conferences and would volunteer to speak to researchers are probably the most devout practitioners, and therefore casual practitioners may be underrepresented. In addition, Chuck Ditzler pointed out that the “less than 40% response rate of [the] survey distributed by Palmer and Ownby...at an experience sharing conference indicates that...groundwork is probably necessary” (Ditzler 2001: 20-21).

Combining the results of the five surveys done in China in 1998 by practitioners, we find that out of the 34,351 practitioners surveyed, 9,294 (27.1%) are male, 25,057 (72.9%) are female, 13,026 (37.9%) are 50 or younger, and 21,325 (62.1%) are above 50 (Pureinight.org 2002c). An article written in July 1992, only a month after Falun Gong was introduced (or reintroduced) to the world in Changchun, gives an interesting anecdotal account of a more diverse audience for Li Hongzhi’s teachings:

Yet, as though drawn by Li’s personal “magnetism,” hundreds of Pekingites turned up recently for an afternoon of holy rolling, trance dancing, faith healing and speaking in tongues.

They presented a fair cross-section of the city: crew-cut teenagers in cryptically emblazoned T-shirts, older matrons in floral print pants suits, bespectacled bureaucrats, bandy-legged farmers from the kerbside vegetable markets, daisy-fresh coeds in cotton frocks. [Kaye 1992: 24]

The anecdote goes on to mention several audience members: “a grizzled dotard” who was “supported by two grandchildren,” “a long-haired fellow [who] sported on a chain around his neck a hologram medallion of the Sakyamuni Buddha,” “a pair of svelte expatriate wives,” and “a haggard, middle-aged matron and her retarded daughter” (1992: 24). However, the author may have chosen to highlight these people because he found them interesting, or thought his readers would, rather than because they were representative of the audience as a whole. In terms of the practitioner’s careers, “statistics indicate that the movement was not made up of the poor, disenfranchised, and unemployed malcontents of the new capitalist system of China. Rather, it was made up of literate, respectable, and clearly somewhat successful technocrats and retired officials, that is to say, the hypothetical bourgeoisie of Chinese society” (Bruseker 2000: 57; also see Lowe 2003: 267). Zhang Erping, a Falun Gong spokesman, in commenting on the pirate broadcasting of a Falun Gong program on Chinese television after the crackdown, said: “With so many science and hi-tech graduates among our followers, it’s not surprising that the skills to do this exist in China” (Murphy 2002a:

17). Bruseker also notes that certain statements in the *Zhuan Falun* support the assertion that Li Hongzhi was speaking to a mostly older audience (2000: 58).

There is another source of statistical information available to us: the persecution deaths recorded by Clearwisdom.net. From July 1999 to April 2003, a period of 45 months, they have recorded 663 total deaths. Of these deaths, there are: 321 males (48.4%) and 342 females (51.6%). The average overall age was 43; for males, the average was 42 and for females, the average age was 44. The top five provinces in reported practitioner deaths were: Heilongjiang (105), Jilin (83), Shandong (82), Liaoning (73), and Hebei (72) (Clearwisdom.net 2003m). Regarding an earlier report on practitioner deaths, it was noted that:

A profile of a typical Falun Gong activist who has died in custody can be drawn from the Falun Dafa information. Females (66 cases), are either in teens or early twenties or over 40 to 65, from the North Eastern provinces of either Jilin, Heilongjiang, Liaoning, Hebei or (particularly) Shandong (28 cases) or from Sichuan province (6 cases). Male cases tend to be over 35 years' old (47 cases) and more diffuse in province and manner of death, tending to more violent ends, with less details known... The list of deaths mirrors previous reports that point to typical Falun Gong activists being older males and females (typically 40 plus) from the Chinese heartland provinces, mainly the North East, or young female activists, typically of higher education age. [Work Permits UK 2002]

While these statistics must be taken with a grain of salt since this information is hardly collected in conditions conducive to statistical research, they do seem to agree with the other numerical data collected in China.

In Zhang Yongjie and Cheng Yuanzhong's groundbreaking work *The Fourth Generation*, Chinese society is divided into divided into four generations (Xu 2002: 174); since their model "seemed to be have been accepted unanimously" (p. 175) it may be useful for interpreting the data on the ages of practitioners found in Table 1, even though this sort of model "can be imprecise at the boundaries...[because] defining 'where one generation begins and another ends' is arbitrary" (Li Cheng 1999). The generations are roughly divided according to the political climate they were educated and socialized within. The first generation, born in the 1930s and earlier, grew up before the communists took power in 1949. The second generation, born in the 1930s and early 1940s, were socialized between 1949 and 1966. The third generation, born in the late 1940s and 1950s, "were perhaps the only generation who had received an exclusive education of communist ideals and morality in their childhood" (p. 176). This was the period of the Cultural Revolution, after which many of the members of the third generation became profoundly disillusioned. The fourth generation, born in the 1960s and early 1970s, were socialized under the economic and political

reforms of Deng Xiaoping, and valued self before society in contrast to the ideology of previous generations. Xu described how many Chinese saw the generational differences thusly: “the first generation had conquered the country (*da tianxia*), the second generation governed the country (*zuo tianxia*), the third generation had a rough and bumpy life, and the fourth generation was seeking self” (p. 178). Since the introduction of this theory, a fifth generation has been added to refer to those born in the 1970s and who grew up in the 1990s (p. 292), and who have been described as being “interested only in pleasure” (p. 178; also see p. 292 n. 30). It should be noted that this generational framework is more applicable to urban Chinese than rural Chinese (p. 205), but this should not be a significant problem for the purposes of this generalized analysis since Falun Gong is “largely an urban phenomenon” (Wong 1999: 10). Munekage (2001) agrees, saying that Falun Gong was “designed for Chinese city-dwellers exposed to rapid social change in the PRC” (p. 35).

Looking at Table 1 from this generational framework, it appears that Falun Gong is the most popular with the first and second generations in China before the crackdown in 1999. Among the third generation, it enjoyed some popularity, but to a lesser degree than that of the first and second generations. From these statistics, it appears that the fourth and fifth generations combined comprised only roughly 15% of the practitioners in China. However, in Canada and the United States, it appears that Falun Gong enjoys the greatest support among the third and fourth generations. While all three surveys in North America include Westerners, the one conducted by practitioners (Pureinight.org 2003) and the one conducted by Palmer and Ownby (2000) are predominantly made up of Chinese practitioners. And, in the case of my data, I can separate the Mainland Chinese practitioners: out of 24 Chinese practitioners, 1 is second generation, 2 are third generation, 18 are fourth generation, and 3 are fifth generation. Also, Jiangping Chu, one of my key informants, told me that he has not noticed any difference in terms of the enthusiasm and devotion of Chinese and American practitioners, but he said that Chinese practitioners did tend to be older in his experience. This would also seem to fit with the fact that “China did not send any significant numbers of students abroad until 1978” (Li Cheng 1999), and my observation that many Chinese practitioners mentioned education as a reason for coming to the United States.

There have been disputes over the number of practitioners in China, which have ranged from the very conservative figure of 2 million to the unbelievable figure of 70 million practitioners. In regards to

these figures, Wong notes that Falun Gong is an urban phenomenon, and goes on to say, “With China’s total urban population in 1998 at 370 million, including children and infants, the claim of 70 million membership would give an impossible ratio of one FLG follower to every 5 urban Chinese” (Wong 1999: 10). On the other hand, the 2 million figure seems far too low. Bruseker notes that on July 28 and 29, 1999, alone, the Chinese government claimed to have seized and destroyed over 3.55 million Falun Gong books and cassettes. He goes on to say:

[The estimate of 2 million] would mean that every Falun gong practitioner bought at least one and a half Falun gong books, cassettes, or videos. Although this is possible the number seems a little too perfect. Since families and couples may have practiced and there were undoubtedly those who practiced without buying a book the number of Falun gong practitioners was likely higher than two million. It is even possible that the figures of amounts of Falun gong material found were downplayed to fit the official account of the movement’s size. [Bruseker 2000: 50]

The possibility of downplaying the size of Falun Gong is quite plausible when we consider that “if the Party oppresses a large portion of the working class, it is clearly no longer the ‘party of the people’” (Edelman and Richardson 2003: 327). After reviewing as much as evidence as is available, Bruseker (2000) concludes a range of 2 million to 10 million practitioners is a more likely figure, “especially if one is counting only true Falun gong followers who believe the Falun gong doctrines as well as engaging in the practices” (p. 51). However he admits that the higher estimate of 70 million may reflect the amount of people who tried Falun Gong at one time or another. One thing that Bruseker seems to have overlooked, however, is the possibility that many practitioners may have hidden their Falun Dafa materials, which there is some anecdotal evidence of: “[Fu-Cheng, a practitioner] was forced to flee [China] when police officers came again and confiscated not only his wife's Falun Gong materials (most of which he had alertly hidden after her first arrest) but also his own (which he had failed to hide)” (Hasan 2003). Also, it is possible that a significant portion of the materials destroyed were gifts rather than voluntary purchases; as one practitioner wrote: “I was very excited and bought dozens of Master Li’s books, audio tapes, and videotapes. I bused to my brothers’ and sisters’ homes hundreds of miles away and gave them the books as gifts” (Clearwisdom.net 1999o: 7). In addition, it has been reported that many people in China bought Falun Gong materials “as much for their entertainment as for their health value” (Wyse 2000: 280). In other words, because of varying degrees of commitments, population estimates are inevitably imprecise (see Jenkins 2000: 9-10; Burgdoff 2003: 338).



Adherents.com, a well-known website for tracking membership and geographic data of religious groups, cites articles claiming there are 10,000 practitioners in the United States (also see Ho 2002: 30) and 4,000 in Canada. How these estimates were determined is not stated; however, given what I have seen of Falun Gong and the fact that 943 asylum applications were granted by the INS in 1999 on the basis of being a Falun Gong practitioner, and that number has risen since (Arnett 2000), these estimates seem reasonable. Also, Adam Frank, an anthropologist who has studied Falun Gong in Texas, states that “based on practitioner estimates of membership in large metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles, New York, Houston, and San Francisco”, he estimates that “membership probably numbered fewer than 10,000 people for both [Falun Gong and Yan Xin Gong, another qigong] combined” (Frank 2002). He also gives additional information on the demographics of Falun Gong practitioners in the U.S. in contrast to China:

Media accounts suggest that retired people constitute the single largest group of practitioners in China, but the membership also includes rural peasants, urban factory workers, military personnel, and Communist Party members. In other words, Falun Gong attracted people from diverse backgrounds throughout China. The demographics in the United States are quite different. Based on interviews conducted in Texas and Washington, DC, in the spring and summer of 1999, the majority of practitioners in the United States were of Chinese descent and well-educated. Most came to the United States to study, many to pursue graduate degrees. Of the approximately 50 people interviewed, both Chinese and non-Chinese, roughly ninety percent have a background in the physical sciences or engineering. Not surprisingly, Falun Gong websites were (and still are) often linked to university servers (as are the websites of many other qigong re groups, e.g. Yan Xin Gong, Xiang Gong, etc.). [Frank 2002]

My experiences agree with Frank’s findings; practitioners were generally well-educated, and there did seem to be many in the physical sciences and engineering.

**Table 3: Anecdotal Demographic Information - North American Practitioners**

<b>Source:</b>	<b>Relevant Population Information</b>
Arnett 2000	[in 1999] “5,218 applications from Chinese people seeking asylum were filed or reopened. Only 943 were granted for claims including Falun Gong.”
Arnett 2000	“an estimated several hundred live in the [San Francisco / San Jose] Bay Area”
D.C. area contact person (my research)	In May 2002, a practitioner said there are between 300 and 400 practitioners in the whole D.C. area, about 150-200 of which are core practitioners.
Tampa participant-observation (my research)	approximately 12

Birhanemaskel 2003	"Zhang started the group two years ago in Fort Collins, where about a dozen people meet weekly..."
Wagstaff 2003	[California:] "There are 15 Falun Gong practice sites throughout Los Angeles, including those at USC and UCLA as well as Venice Beach, Ye said."
Tung 2003	[New York:] "In May 1999, she and her husband started a group in Prospect Park along with a schoolmate with hopes of getting more people interested in Falun Gong...The responses from the passers-by have been encouraging. Before long, the group expanded to 10 to 12 people, mostly African Americans."
Farley 2001	"The rally, expected to draw 3,000 attendees from across the country, will commemorate the second anniversary of the day the Chinese government declared Falun Gong an evil cult" and outlawed its practice." "As promised, some 3,000 practitioners began gathering beneath the Washington Monument at 8 a.m."
Farley 2001	"In Texas there are only a few dozen loosely knit practitioners, most of whom are Chinese born, but they are making their presence more visible with hopes of attracting Westerners."
Farley 2001	"At 9 a.m. the news conference outside the Chinese Consulate in Houston gets under way. About 30 practitioners, most wearing yellow Zhen-Shan-Ren T-shirts, hastily assemble their props for the benefit of two local television crews."
Seper 2000	"Zhang and other practitioners estimate there are about 40 Falun Gong members in Columbus, about a dozen in Cleveland and a handful more in Cincinnati, Dayton and Akron."
Kyodo News Service 2000	"About 2,000 members of the Chinese spiritual practice group Falun Gong demonstrated in front of the United Nations"
Abdeljabbar 2000	"In a grassy area off Pavonia Avenue in Jersey City, a group of about 10 people sit, taking soft breaths and peacefully moving their arms in harmony with one another."
Briscoe 2000	"WASHINGTON (AP) - More than 100 Falun Gong protesters exercised quietly and stood vigil in front of the Chinese Embassy Thursday, as the embassy spokesman held a news conference to condemn the movement as a dangerous, mind-controlling cult."
Canadian Press 2000	"About 50 practitioners meditated outside the Ontario legislature during the lunch hour, one of several gatherings across the country to mark the first anniversary of Beijing's crackdown"
Le 2000	"Eng and 19 Seattle area followers plan to join thousands at a candlelight vigil tonight outside the Chinese Embassy in Washington, D.C."
Innes 2000	"Yan Liu, 31, a research scientist at the University of Arizona, estimates he has taught Falun Gong to about 100 Tucsonans since moving here in 1998."
Shields 2000	[Missouri:] "About 20 are in Columbia."
Osnos 2000	[Chicago, IL:] "By 9 a.m. Saturday, their devotion was spread all over the sidewalk near the hotel on South Michigan Avenue--some 600 followers from Arkansas and Minnesota, Canada and Sweden, most performing their tai-chi-like exercises beside honking traffic."
Wang 2000	"Columbia has about 20 Falun Gong practitioners who practice in four groups on the MU campus and downtown. Half of them are Americans."

Beckman 2000	[Missouri:] "He is now in the middle of a seminar he is conducting on the MU campus. But attendance hasn't exactly been up to par, Lin said. 'Sometimes about 10 people come, sometimes five,' he said Monday night. 'This time, three.' But Lin said the low numbers don't discourage him anymore, thanks to Falun Dafa."
Wang 2000	"Ren saw his master in a meeting of about 200 people in New York in March 1998."
Zacharias 2000	[Vancouver, BC] "...the 20 or so practitioners went through a series of exercises..." "If Lee had to take a guess, she would say there are between 200 and 300 followers in the Vancouver area."
Stamey and Burke 2000	"A Chinese-American woman from Queens is back home today, a week after she was swept up in the mass arrest in Beijing of protesters from the banned Falun Gong meditation group. Beijing-born Tracy Zhao, 30, a Northwest Airlines flight attendant and practitioner of Falun Gong, was greeted by her mom, Yan Zuo, 55, and about 50 American practitioners"
Lewis 2000	[Michigan:] "David Xie, 39, a Troy engineer who was among the 11 people practicing Falun Gong in Troy recently inside the community center."
Osnos 1999	"...estimated 150 Falun Gong followers in the Chicago area..."
Osnos 1999	"At one Chicago-area meeting spot, a dozen practitioners gather every Wednesday evening in a quiet parking lot at a Westmont office park."
Osnos 1999	"At a June meeting in Chicago, 1,300 practitioners crowded into the Chicago Marriott Downtown to see Li and discuss his teachings."
Lo 1999	"Canada has about 2,000 followers, according to Vancouver co-ordinator Lee Ying, with most being ethnic Chinese."
Sager 1999	[PA:] "Jian Zhang, 43, his wife, Weihua, 44, and about 20 other people meet Saturday and Sunday mornings on Flagstaff Hill in Oakland..."
Geller 1999	[NJ:] "Falun Dafa groups meet at a number of parks, including the one in Leonia, where four to 10 practitioners gather weekday mornings." "Practice sessions and readings of Falun Dafa texts are held in about 30 locations around the state each week"
Tucker 1999	"'There may be a couple of hundred here, but it's growing,' said Andy Cook of Riverside."
Mims 1999	"...10 adherents in Utah..."
Bradley 1999	[Colorado:] "a Falun Gong practitioner who estimated 300 or more people follow the new movement in Denver, Boulder, Lafayette, Englewood and Colorado Springs. "
RickRoss.com 1999	"In silence, the 50 men and women form themselves into orderly rows on Boston Common. Tsang estimates that there are about 200 serious Falun Gong practitioners in the Boston area - those who, like himself, devote two or three hours a day to exercises - but says several thousand people have attended classes or demonstrations."
Chao 1999	[CA:] "Falun practitioners, who number about 500 in the Bay Area..."
Arden-Smith 2001	"In Cambridge, a four-hour Friday night meeting in a fluorescent-lit classroom at Massachusetts Institute of Technology draws up to 80 people a week - a number up sharply from a year ago."
Lubman 2001	[CA:] "Local practitioners say the Bay Area has 200 to 300 followers who try to raise awareness about Falun Gong's persecution."
Kodas 2000	[Hartford, CT] "About a half-dozen practitioners met at the park Sunday..."
Da Costa-Fernandes 2001	[CT:] "five Falun Gong practitioners stood ... outside High Plains Community Center." "Practitioners gathered here are from Bethany, Orange, New Haven, Milford and Hamden."

Thanawala 2001	“Truong and three other Falun Gong practitioners walked along Route 1 Monday to raise awareness of the Chinese government's two-year crackdown on the practice. ‘Although the number of walkers has swelled to more than 30, Hao said Monday's group has been with the march since Boston.’”
Cuda 2001	“Wang, of Boston, was one of a half-dozen supporters of the movement who marched from Orange to Fairfield as part of a 24-day protest walk from Boston to Washington, D.C.”
Taylor 2002	“... Lin, who has shown Falun Gong to more than 200 people in Bushnell Park and other locations in the past two years.”
<a href="http://falunorlando.org/fahui/orlando.html">http://falunorlando.org/fahui/orlando.html</a>	“January 27-28, 2001 – Approximately 250 practitioners gathered in Orlando, Florida for the first large-scale English-speaking experience sharing conference.”
Clearwisdom.net 2001d	“The 2001 Florida Falun Dafa Experience Sharing Conference was inaugurated at the Special Event Center of the University of South Florida, Tampa, on December 29. Over 600 Chinese and Western practitioners from the US, Canada, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Sweden, UK and Germany attended.”
<a href="http://www.falunchicago.org/english/conferences/2000/">http://www.falunchicago.org/english/conferences/2000/</a>	“2000 Chicago Falun Dafa Experience Sharing Conference was held in Congress Plaza and Hotel in downtown Chicago on June 17. About 500 practitioners attended the conference and about 20 shared their cultivation experience in Falun Dafa. There were more western speakers than Chinese ones.”
<a href="http://www.falunchicago.org/english/conferences/2001/">http://www.falunchicago.org/english/conferences/2001/</a>	“On June 24, the 2001 Chicago Experience Sharing Conference started with an outdoor practice in the park across from the hotel. Approximately 1,000 people attended the conference.”
Haga 1999	“Yeng estimated the number of Twin City practitioners at 100, based on turnout at weekly group practice in St. Paul's Como Park”
Suzukamo 1999	“A handful of the Twin Cities' estimate 100 or so practitioners... demonstrated their exercise... in an effort to educate Westerners about the little-known practice”
Skemp 1999	“...as demonstrated by 20 local Falun Gong at the St. Paul Student Center.” "According to practitioner Jingduan Yang, there are about 100 participants in the Twin Cities area. "
Cowhig 1999	“The 400 or so meditator-demonstrators on the mall...”
Osnos 1999	“‘Many of the non-Chinese are drawn to it because they are looking for an alternative outside of bio-medicine,’ said Nancy Chen, an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of California at Santa Cruz, who has studied Falun Gong.”
Osnos 1999	“Once practiced almost exclusively by middle-age Chinese immigrants, Falun Gong's newest adherents include many people of a very different profile--young, middle class and non-Chinese. Included are growing groups of white, black and Latino practitioners...”
Osnos 1999	“Practitioners vary widely in age and occupation, from computer programming college students to retired nurses. “
Osnos 1999	“It is impossible to estimate how many people in this country practice Falun Gong because many follow it privately, and the group claims no centralized organization. The largest concentrations are in California, Massachusetts, New York, Maryland and Illinois, according to the group and experts who study it.”
Sager 1999	“Two years ago, the family barely found time to sit down and eat a meal together. Now they spend at least 10 hours a week together practicing Falun Dafa. “

Geller 1999	“Whatever Falun Dafa is -- and it defies easy classification -- it is starting to catch on in New Jersey. Practice sessions and readings of Falun Dafa texts are held in about 30 locations around the state each week, drawing largely from a growing Chinese community”
RickRoss.com 1999	“Although Li is its acknowledged leader, Falun Gong supposedly has no formal structure. 'There is a certain amount of organizational activity,' concedes Tsang, 'but individuals volunteer to do whatever has to be done.' “
Arden-Smith 2001	“Merle Goldman, a faculty researcher at Harvard's Fairbank Center for East Asian Research, says that in the United States, the movement appeals 'mainly to highly educated Chinese people who want to feel better about themselves, to satisfy some kind of a spiritual need.' ”
Palmer and Ownby 2000: 134	[Feb 12-13, 2000] "The Montreal conference was attended by some 200 people, many of whom traveled by car or chartered bus from Toronto, Ottawa, Boston, New York, and New England"
Malmgren 2001	[St. Pete, FL] "About a dozen people stand silently in a circle." "Several groups meet in the Tampa Bay area, including two in St. Petersburg and two in Tampa."
Hilton 1999	[1999]: "It was one Friday evening in late spring in New York and I was walking across the Upper East side toward one of the world's most elite and privileged academic institutions, Rockefeller University...The people here are seriously clever, and many of them are also young and Chinese. I was headed here because I had been told that a group of brilliant scholars devoted each Friday evening to the practice of a strange new set of beliefs called Falun Gong" "When my companion and I arrived at Rockefeller University, we found rows of chairs et out and more than 100 devotees already seated, waiting for the session to begin...Eighty Chinese men and women of all ages were gathered there."
Jones 2002	[Salt Lake City, UT:] "Other groups took advantage of the Olympics as a chance to educate the public about world affairs. Nearly 500 Falon Gong members attended a candlelight vigil, and others hit the streets handing out packets in six languages explaining the practice of Falon Gong and their persecution in China... The Falon Gong held numerous press conferences at the beginning of the Olympics, and handed out pictures of people who have been persecuted and beaten in China."
<a href="http://www.falundafa-pa.net/media/longest_march.html">http://www.falundafa-pa.net/media/longest_march.html</a>	"Other local Falun Gong practitioners - there are an estimated 200 in southeast Pennsylvania - opened their homes and larders to the marchers."
Burgdoff 2003	“The practice session was held at the Buckeye Village community center, which, like most Falun Gong practice sites, was a public space, in this case part of a residential community owne and managed by Ohio State University. Most of the practitioners in this local group were graduate students at Ohio State University or their family members. I was one of the few non-Chinese present” (p. 332)
Palmer 2003	“On 19 May 2001 I beheld Master Li. He appeared at noon, unannounced, at the Ottawa Congress Centre, where a thousand-odd Falun Gong practitioners – overwhelmingly Chinese – sat in silk suits for the day of testimonials that is the essence of all their Experience-sharing Conferences” (p. 348).

## Difficulties in Identifying Practitioners

Making statements about practitioners is difficult, as differentiating between practitioners and non-practitioners is not always clear-cut. Practitioners must continue to cultivate or the “Falun will cease to exist in them” (Li Hongzhi 1999a: 35). This means that practitioners must read the *Zhuan Falun* and do the exercises on a regular basis; every day is preferable. Therefore, a good indicator of who is a practitioner and who is not would seem to be who shows up at the practice sites regularly. However, there are problems with only using this criterion.

First, a practitioner does not have to go to a practice site to do the exercises; it is possible for people to do the exercises alone (Zhang and Xiao 1996: 9; Culp n.d.: 78). It is conceivable that there is a large population of practitioners in the United States who never interact with other practitioners, and therefore are invisible to studies such as this. Not only are the books available on-line, but also videos showing how to do the movements and exercise music. In a less extreme case, a practitioner may show up only infrequently at a practice site for various reasons, giving the mistaken impression that they might only be a dabbler rather than a serious practitioner.

Second, it is a mistake to assume that just because someone participates regularly at a practice site that they believe and behave exactly as prescribed in the writings of Li Hongzhi. More than one practitioner has told me about how at the beginning, they had strong doubts about aspects of Li Hongzhi’s writings, such as the part about supernormal abilities. Typically, when someone sees himself or herself as a practitioner, these doubts are seen as something to be overcome; they consciously strive towards a stronger faith. However, an American woman who regularly participates in the sessions and even occasionally wears a Falun Gong shirt has told me: “I don’t know that I can actually consider myself a Falun Dafa [practitioner].” She has many strong doubts about various aspects of Li Hongzhi’s writings, but you would probably not guess it from the frequency of her attendance.

Third, the practitioners have all told me that there are spies working for the Chinese government who infiltrate gatherings of Falun Gong practitioners in this country. This is not paranoia on the part of practitioners; secret documents smuggled out of China have confirmed the use of this strategy, such as this one from the Department of Public Security of Anhui Province dated March 6, 2001:

Secret forces are the heart and soul in covert struggles and the crucial magic weapon in our battle against and victory over the enemy. The level of secret forces construction

decides the quality of the intelligence information and intensity and strength of reconnaissance. All public security authorities should solidly establish the thought of “focusing on present struggles while persevering in long-term struggles” and make sure that the construction of secret forces goes on as well. They should make overall plans and appropriately distribute forces and work, and eventually build up a system of secret forces with various forms at different levels, in which the secret agents are its main part, and friends, spies, informants and liaison personnel are the supporting part. We should actively build up secret forces, fill in the blanks to make the structure of secret forces more plausible and their qualities and function dramatically improved in regard to the following prominent individuals and organizations: important individuals, key objects, complicated areas and the front that needs controlling, etc. – especially the key and professional members of “Falungong,” the illegal organizations, the underground Catholics, cults; key members and important individuals from harmful *qigong* organizations, “joint ventures of three-part investments” (san zi), with complicated political backgrounds, private enterprises and business companies, as well as the more prestigious and influential colleges and universities. The public security authorities of the province, cities and counties should find and train a group of “extraordinary” (jian zi) special spies who have wide range of detecting activities and can keep cool in any unexpected situation and who can also penetrate into the inner circle of the suspects or near them to reconnoiter, grasp and control the crucial front. [Center for Religious Freedom 2002: 4-5]

Practitioners have given me mixed messages about their effectiveness; one said that he never would have guessed a particular person was a spy had his fellow practitioners in the area he was visiting not told him. On the other hand, Jianping Chu said there was a woman from Canada he knew who pretended to be a practitioner for a year, and while she fooled many other practitioners, he said he had suspicions about her all along. She eventually dropped her façade and began writing negative articles about Falun Gong. It is important to keep in mind then that some of those who appear to be Falun Gong practitioners may actually be fakes.

Falun Gong practitioners do not have to go through any sort of initiation or obtain any sort of official membership to become a practitioner. Jianping Chu tells me that a practitioner is a practitioner when they know they are one in their heart. Distinguishing a true practitioner from a false practitioner is not a high priority for the Tampa practitioners. There have been times when new people have shown up at the practice site, and I wondered whether they were spies or not. The practitioners tended not to concern themselves with this possibility; that is, when meeting new people who seem to be interested in learning or who claim to be practitioners, the practitioners tend to give them the benefit of the doubt until they do something that arouses their suspicion. Therefore, to be considered a practitioner, all one has to do is learn the exercises and the teachings, and behave accordingly. Not behaving according to the principles of Falun Dafa can cause someone to be considered a spy; typically, practitioners will simply tell each other in

private about their suspicions that someone may be a spy so they will know not to share their information with them. They will not turn spies away from their practice sites or conferences, but instead see it as an opportunity to for the person to be exposed to Falun Dafa. There are exceptions to this, however. Jianping Chu told me about one person who was wearing a Falun Gong scarf or bandana around their neck, and the person was drunk in public. Drinking alcohol goes against Falun Gong beliefs, and by appearing in public like this, he felt the false practitioner was doing damage to the reputation of Falun Gong. In this case, Jianping Chu said it was perfectly acceptable to tell other people that the person is not a practitioner. (However, he did not try to take the scarf since that would be stealing.)

It became clear that my population would simply be people who regularly show up at practice sites rather than trying to identify “genuine” practitioners. While most of the people at practice sites consider themselves and are considered by others to be practitioners, it was clear that who is a practitioner and who is not is a more complex issue than that. Even if it is questionable to consider someone a Falun Gong practitioner, I think it is still justifiable to include these people in this study because it reveals the social landscape that practitioners exist in. True practitioners still have to deal with doubters and spies, and vice-versa. Of course, they also had to deal an anthropologist.

### The Tampa Practitioners

**Table 4: Falun Gong Demographics for Tampa, FL**

Time	Location	Size	Gender	Nationality/Ethnicity	Age Distribution
2002 Jan.-May.	USA: Tampa, St. Pete., Orlando	15	Female: 9 (60%) Male: 6 (40%)	Chinese: 9 (60%) Westerners: 6 (40%)	mean: 38.33 26-35: 7 (54%) 36-45: 4 (23%) 46-55: 4 (23%)

So, with these issues in mind, the question becomes who are the people at the practice site, and how do these people compare with the statistical information that exists on Falun Gong practitioners. I was not able to interview every person who has ever shown up at the site, so some people were left out of my sample. During the course of my study, I noticed a few people who would show up one time and then I would never see them again. One person, who went by the nickname Chase, was a jewelry salesman on college campuses, and he would try to go to Falun Gong practice sites in the areas he visited. I interviewed



him because I wanted to get the perspective of a practitioner who was not integrated into the social network of practitioners in Tampa. In addition, there were some practitioners from St. Petersburg who I knew were well integrated into the social network of the Tampa practitioners, although they did not go to the Tampa practice site quite as frequently because of the distance. In the Tampa Bay area, there are two practice sites in Tampa and two in St. Petersburg (Malmgren 2001). Looking at both their social network and their frequency of attendance led me to conclude that there about 13 people who make it a point to regularly attend the Saturday practice sessions. Of these 13, I was able to do semi-structured interviews with 10 of them. Of the 13, 10 (77%) were Chinese, and 3 (23%) were Westerners; 8 (61.5%) were female, and 5 (38.5%) were male. All the 10 Chinese practitioners I interviewed had at least one family member still living in China, 3 of whom mentioned having family in Beijing, while none of the Western practitioners had any family living in China. This may indicate the Chinese practitioners have a more personal stake in ending the crackdown since known practitioners in the United States have to worry about their family in China being persecuted. Among the 10, the youngest was born in 1974 and the oldest was born in 1950, with 1967 being the median birth year. The four who were not included at first were older, two of which have gray hair and one of which mentioned being in junior high during the Cultural Revolution, so this data is skewed towards suggesting the practitioners are younger on average than they actually are.

In addition to the 10 out of 13 Tampa and vicinity practitioners I interviewed, I also interviewed Chase, a Western practitioner who I mentioned above, two Orlando practitioners, and a woman living in China through e-mail. Although these people are not regular practitioners at the Tampa site, I am including them in the statistics in table 4; their inclusion in this study is to get some idea of the similarities and differences that might exist between practitioners in other areas during this same time period.

### The Washington D.C. Practitioners

**Table 5: Falun Gong Demographics for Washington, D.C.**

Time	Location	Size	Gender	Nationality/Ethnicity	Age Distribution
2002	USA:	17	Male: 10 (59%)	Taiwan: 3 (18%)	mean: 35.18
May-Aug.	Washington D.C.		Female: 7 (41%)	USA: 6 (35%)	16-25: 4 (24%)
				China: 7 (41%)	26-35: 5 (29%)
				Other: 1 (6%)	36-45: 5 (29%)
					46+: 3 (18%)

As can be seen from the Table 5, the mean age of the D.C. practitioners was 35.18. Three practitioners were born in Taiwan, six were born in the United States, seven were born in China, and one was born in another Asian country. When asked why they moved to the D.C. area, all Taiwan and China-born practitioners mentioned moving to D.C. for reasons involving education or work, either their own or that of a spouse. The practitioner from the other Asian country moved to the United States with his family when he was only 3 years old because of the Vietnam War.



**Figure 14: Chinese tourists walking away after taking pictures of practitioners up close.**

*Photo by Noah Porter.*



**Figure 15: Joggers glance at dancers on Falun Dafa day.**

*Photo by Noah Porter.*

Much more so than the Tampa practitioners, the D.C. practitioners made themselves visible to passersby. Their selection of location for a practice site indicates that this was their intention; their location was a popular spot for tourists; as one website writes about the Mall,

Today, [the Mall's] 2 miles encompass the Smithsonian's museum buildings; the memorials to Washington, Lincoln, and Jefferson; and the Constitution Gardens with the Vietnam Memorial. In spring, the Tidal Basin's cherry blossoms dazzle; in summer, people fly kites, play Frisbee, picnic, and attend festivals; in West Potomac Park (the Mall's west end) they even play polo. [Halstead 1997]

This agrees with an issue I heard the Tampa practitioners mention; one practitioner wanted to keep the campus practice site in the same location by the engineering building despite the construction because he wanted to be consistent with what the website and the flyers said, while another practitioner said it would be better to move the campus site to the mall on the center of campus where more people can see them. On the D.C. Mall, I could not even begin to venture a guess how many people are exposed to Falun Gong. As figure 14 and figure 15 demonstrate, both Chinese tourists and people who are presumably D.C. area natives get exposed to Falun Gong through their choice of location.

In figure 16 and figure 17, we can see a somewhat deeper level of participation than simply glancing at practitioners or taking pictures. Figure 16 shows passersby who look at the posters put up by practitioners. Figure 17 shows a curious jogger who decides to stop and imitate the movements. Notice that she is standing rather than sitting in the lotus position, and that she is not raising the proper arm for a female. Figure 18 and figure 19 both show practitioners teaching the exercises to new people. Practitioners seem to view teaching new people as one of their obligations, and do not seem to mind it. During my first day at the practice site on the Mall, a Chinese woman was giving instruction to me and almost a dozen newcomers, and she would use clever analogies that seemed designed to make her lessons more memorable. For example, when describing the shape of a basic hand position, she said, "We don't want a Hershey's kiss or a hot dog, we want an oval!" I brought one of my friends along one day, and he wrote this about his experience on an on-line journal site:

So yesterday I had an interesting experience. I trekked into DC with Noah to participate in and to observe a group of Falun Gong practitioners...we found the group, and I had the pleasure of receiving instruction from two of their members. The movements themselves reminded me of Tai Chi.... [The exercises] flow with an ease of movement that facilitates their being practiced. To sum it up, I rather enjoyed learning them, and I wouldn't mind learning them better and practicing them on my own. I doubt I would start venturing to DC on a regular basis to practice with a group, simply because that is a bit too much commitment for me at this time. Maybe once a month or something would be nice.

Now, as you may or may not have heard, Falun Gong is a group which the Chinese government calls, "an evil cult," but then again, this is coming from the Chinese government. I saw nothing about the group that was at all cult-like. They did not ask for donations. They did not ask me to come with them to a "temple" or to renounce any of my beliefs or anything of the sort. The only thing I was asked was, "would you like to learn the movements?"

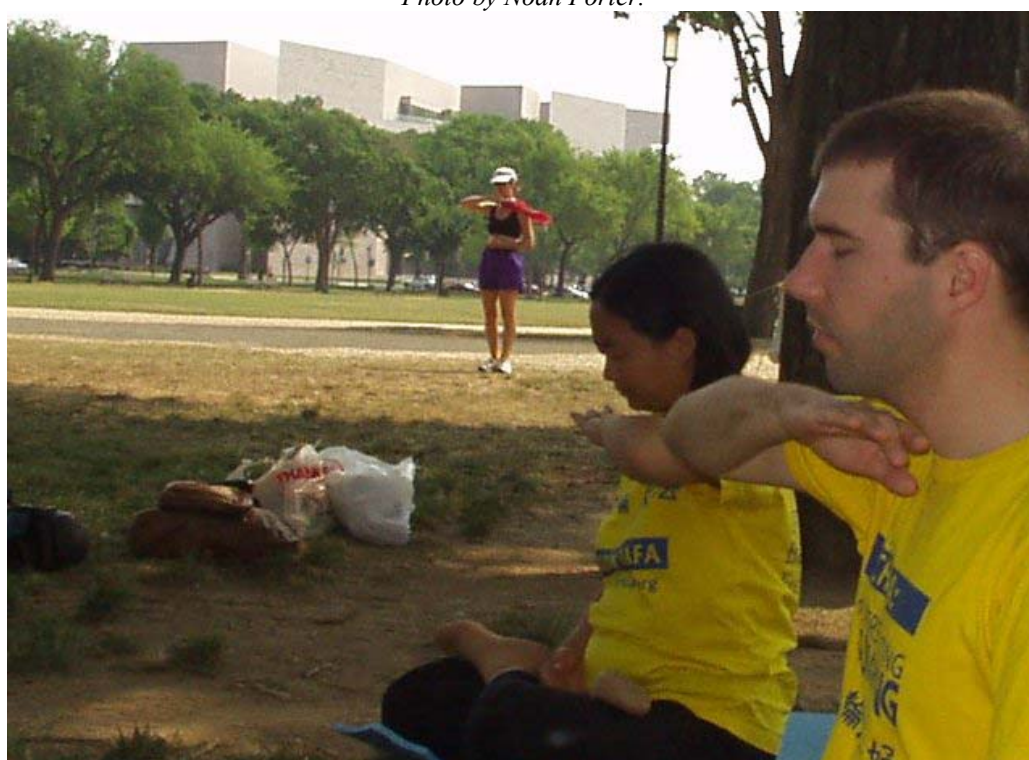
Although this is merely one anecdote, it suggests that the methods they use are effective in leaving a positive impression of Falun Gong among newcomers.

Most practitioners seem willing to volunteer their time and effort in other ways as well; in figure 20, we can see practitioners helping each other set up a pavilion for Falun Dafa day.



**Figure 16: Passersby read Falun Gong posters**

*Photo by Noah Porter.*



**Figure 17: A passerby imitates by watching.**

*Photo by Noah Porter.*



**Figure 18: Teaching a new person the fifth exercise.**

*Photo by Noah Porter.*



**Figure 19: Teaching a new person the fourth exercise.**

*Photo by Noah Porter. Used with the permission of the practitioner pictured.*



**Figure 20: Practitioners setting up for Falun Dafa day.**

*Photo by Noah Porter.*

One of the most notable personalities among the D.C. practitioners is Richard. On the first day I arrived at the practice site on the Mall, I found myself a bit confused because Falun Gong writings and the Tampa practitioners had told me that Falun Gong had no real leadership structure, except perhaps for Li Hongzhi, who was a spiritual authority. Other than him, no practitioner was supposed to assume leadership roles; yet, here was Richard, using a suitcase-sized portable speaker with a microphone to give people commands, such as that the new people should separate into a group in order to be taught the exercises, and that everyone should wear one of the yellow Falun Gong shirts because they were being videotaped that day. While these commands do not seem unreasonable or demanding, it struck me as very odd that there would be someone giving commands like this at all. Richard had his name as a contact person on the brochures that were handed out there, but the contact persons in Tampa/St. Petersburg never told people where to go or what to wear. Part of the reason might have been that the D.C. practice site had considerably more practitioners, more newcomers, and more passersby who might be getting their first impression of Falun Gong from what they saw; under these conditions, it seems reasonable that a greater effort would be put forth in giving newcomers attention and managing their appearance. However, when

Richard was not there, I did not see others behave in the same way, and I concluded that this behavior was largely a personality quirk of Richard's.

There was one incident that I found particularly telling in terms of showing that it was simply Richard's personality that gave him the appearance of a leader, and not that the group had accepted him in such a role, even informally. This contrasts with what Ditzler (2001: 59) said about practice sites having informal leaders, and with Fisher (2003) when he wrote that "contact member" is just a "euphemistic term [Falun Gong] uses to describe its leadership group" (p. 309 n. 13). One day at the practice site, I was doing the exercises as usual, and after giving some warnings to other practitioners one-on-one, Richard stopped the music in the middle of the exercises and started lecturing everyone. He took issue with people performing the movements before Li Hongzhi gave the verbal command on the tape; he said that if we were going to anticipate the movements, we "might as well not listen to master at all." At first, when I saw this, I thought this incident reaffirmed that he had the role of a leader, even if only informally, because I never saw another practitioner stop the tape to do that, nor could I imagine any of the practitioners I had met there doing that. However, I later talked to one of my key informants, and instead of him agreeing with the point Richard made about people anticipating the movements as would be expected if Richard had the authority of an informal leadership role, this practitioner told me that he thought that what Richard did was very wrong. He said that the way Richard spoke lacked compassion, and if any newcomers had come across the practice site at that moment, they would certainly have walked away with a negative impression of Falun Gong. Indeed, although I usually found the exercises to be enjoyable (with the exception of the occasional sore arm or leg from stretching too long), I found myself to be quite uncomfortable in his presence at that moment, and became very self-conscious of whether I was doing the exercises correctly or not.

During that incident, no one challenged Richard's right to stop the music and scold people; I think this may have been because even if they agreed with my key informant and thought that Richard should not have done that, they should have Compassion and Tolerance for his character flaws. I did witness another situation where Richard was overruled, however, despite his initial attempt to make a decision for the group. In that situation, some people had shown up, but the practice session had not yet started. It was a very sunny day, and two other practitioners recommended that the practice site be moved into the shade.



Richard objected, saying they were more visible in the middle of the Mall with the sun shining down on them. The two other practitioners persisted in saying the practice site should be moved into the shade, and Richard was reluctant to concede. He said, “I just don’t think we should be treating us like non-practitioners.” (Sitting in the hot sun for three hours apparently would fall under the Tolerance part of Truthfulness-Compassion-Tolerance for him.) Even though no one agreed with him, it seemed to me that he was rather reluctant to go along with what the others suggested; still, he was overruled in the end, further showing that my initial impression of him having an informal leadership role was wrong.

Through participant-observation, I was able to learn more about what role Li Hongzhi plays in the life of Washington D.C. practitioners. Like the Tampa practitioners, the D.C. practitioners do not generally have Li Hongzhi directly participating in their affairs; they eagerly read and follow the principles set forth in his books, articles, and poems, but he is not micromanaging their lives. The practitioners in D.C. also have experience-sharing conferences and other events, and like the practitioners in Tampa, they do not know if or when Li Hongzhi will show up. (In fact, I had the misfortune of having to leave an event early where Li Hongzhi showed up afterwards, missing a great opportunity for my research.)

However, I did hear practitioners talk about an incident that indicates that Li Hongzhi is more involved with the D.C. site than the Tampa site because of the proximity to New York, where he is said to live. Practitioners told me about an incident where they were at their practice site, and one of them received a phone call, telling that person to get all the practitioners from that site and go to the location of another practice site. At the other practice site, there was a bus waiting for them to take them to New Jersey. After taking some precautions to ensure they were not being followed by anyone in the service of the Chinese Government, they met in a secret location where Li Hongzhi gave the practitioners a special lecture. (I think this lecture may have been published as *the North American Lecture Tour*, although I am not certain about that.) It would be interesting for someone to do an ethnographic study of New York practitioners and see if Li Hongzhi calls meetings more frequently there since it would not be such a hassle to do so, or if he chooses to get involved as infrequently even when time and money are less of an issue.

In addition to the books, websites, and the other ways Li Hongzhi directly and indirectly interacts with practitioners described above, I observed that Li Hongzhi’s picture was up in both of the practitioner

homes I visited. The depictions of Li Hongzhi are reminiscent of David Morgan's discussion of the use of Jesus portraits by Christians:

How viewers were meant to encounter this person was paramount... This autonomy from a narrative or textual reference is what made the image new for American Protestants. Christ is seen here as a visual description of himself—that and that alone. His features are encoded with his character as a benevolent, solemn, tranquil savior... By focusing on what Jesus looked like rather than what he did, the image meant to visualize his character... [Morgan 2002: 57]

Indeed, there are images in both practitioners' homes that do not seem tied to specific events, but rather seem to just be a portrayal of Li Hongzhi's character. In his pictures, he also seems to embody tranquility, and, of course, Truthfulness, Compassion, and Forbearance. "In this new age of photography," Morgan writes, "when families, friends and lovers collected photographs of one another, it seemed only natural to treasure a portrait of one's best, most intimate Friend" (2002: 54).



**Figure 21: A picture of Li Hongzhi on Richard's wall**

*Photo by Noah Porter.*



**Figure 22: Richard's wall**

*Photo by Noah Porter.*



**Figure 23: Nappi's fireplace mantle**

*Photo by Noah Porter.*



**Figure 24: Nappi's wall and VCR**

*Photo by Noah Porter.*

During my participant-observation, I ended up being the subject of a disagreement that illustrated something about the availability of Falun Gong books and articles that I had not previously realized. It was already known to me that several Falun Gong books, including the introductory book, *China Falun Gong*, and their most important book, *Zhuan Falun*, have English translations available on-line, but certain materials like *Zhuan Falun II* are only available on the Chinese version of the website. From just this knowledge, it seemed to me that those who spoke English would only be able to learn about the contents of the Chinese-language books by learning Chinese, or hearing about it second-hand from those who knew Chinese and had read the books, and perhaps from discussions about the non-translated content on the websites. However, I found that this is not always the case. There are draft-versions of many, if not all, of the Chinese-language books that English-speaking practitioners may obtain.

I personally was able to obtain one of these draft translations from one of my key informants, but it was not easy. I first heard about the draft translation of *The North America Lecture Tour* from Nappi, who was telling me over the phone how profound the teachings were and how it was what practitioners have been waiting for. After he whet my appetite to get my hands on it, he told me his wife disagreed with his decision to give it to me because she thought that I would be unable to accept what was said in it, and as

a result it would interfere with my cultivation. At first, Nappi seemed reluctantly to go along with his wife's decision, but later changed his mind and decided to loan me a copy. Indeed, I could see why his wife thought it might seem strange to new practitioners:

This play's stage is China... One dynasty after another, every dynasty's people are one dynasty of people from the heavens. They are representatives from faraway cosmic bodies, representing countless sentient beings from there and coming here... After forming predestined relationships, the next life they reincarnated in other areas to await the day when Dafa would be taught. Every dynasty is like this, and every ethnic group in the world has reincarnated in China. Every country's people – except for the great number of lives from the higher realms that came after the Fa started to be taught in recent times – every country's people in history reincarnated in China. No matter which country you are from, you were Chinese on this Earth first... For example, the current Americans are people from the Ming dynasty... The United Kingdom was the Great Tang dynasty, France was the Great Qing, Italy was the Yuan, this Australia was the Xia, this Russia was Zhou, Sweden was Northern Song, Taiwan was Southern Song, Japan was Sui. [Li 2002b: 16-17]

While it is readily apparent how a new practitioner or a non-practitioner could see these teachings as strange or even absurd, it seems to me that a double standard tends to be used in evaluating old religions and spiritual practices and new religious or spiritual practices. “Even if we do not focus on the most aberrant groups,” writes Jenkins, “the existence of so many unorthodox fringe religions can be seen as a symptom of social malaise or fragmentation. In response, many commentators have inquired what has gone so badly wrong with the religious consciousness of their nation as to permit the emergence of such suspect movements.” (Jenkins 2000: 5) In sum, this incident demonstrated to me how practitioners exert their own agency in regards to Falun Gong beliefs; Li Hongzhi may structure their thinking in terms of making a distinction between new practitioners and long-time practitioners, and what sorts of things are appropriate to discuss with each, but it is up to the practitioner to decide which category a particular person falls into. (On a side note, it now appears that *The North American Lecture Tour* is available in English on the Canadian Falun Gong website and Clearwisdom.net, but not on the American Falun Dafa site.)

My experiences revealed eight notable differences between the Tampa and Washington D.C. practice sites, some of which I have mentioned already. First, the D.C. area had hundreds of practitioners, while the Tampa Bay area seemed to only have a couple dozen. Second, the D.C. practitioners were on the Mall, a highly visible location where a lot of tourists go, while the practice site in Tampa is done in a park that does not seem to be very popular. Third, since Falun Gong can be highly influential but it does not completely determine one's personality, there were different personalities that created different issues –

such as Richard’s bossy personality – that the Tampa practitioners never had to deal with. Fourth, because Li Hongzhi was closer to the D.C. practice site, he could more easily initiate a lecture with the D.C. practitioners than he could with the Tampa practitioners (although I had only heard of this occurring once). Fifth, having the Chinese Embassy in D.C. meant that the D.C. practitioners could easily find a place to voice their discontent with the policies of the Chinese Government, while I heard at least one practitioner had to ask during the meeting of the Tampa and Orlando practitioners if there was a Chinese consulate anywhere in the state they could go to. (Another practitioner said there was not.) Sixth, being in the Nation’s capital, the practitioners had many federal-level politicians they could interact with, while the practitioners in Florida mostly only had state and local level politicians to cultivate relationships with. Seventh, because D.C. had so many more practitioners and so many more newcomers being exposed to Falun Gong, there was a regularly scheduled event to introduce newcomers. In Tampa, on the other hand, newcomers were not frequent enough to warrant this; instead, they are taught on an ad hoc basis at the regular exercise and reading sessions. Eighth, the order of the exercises was sometimes intentionally mixed up at the D.C. site. There did not seem to be any significance to this that I could tell, but one of the D.C. practitioners did remark that this was the only practice site he knew of that did this. This alternate order was not done all the time, either; it seemed to be prerogative of whoever brought the exercise music.

### The Internet Practitioners

**Table 6: Falun Gong Demographics for American Practitioners on the Internet**

Time	Location	Size	Gender	Nationality/Ethnicity	Age Distribution
2003 Jan. - April	USA	21	Male: 15 (71%) Female: 6 (29%)	China: 8 (38.1%) USA: 6 (28.6%) Taiwan: 2 (9.5%) Born elsewhere: 5 (23.8%)	mean: 37.76 20-29: 5 (24%) 30-39: 8 (38%) 40-49: 5 (24%) 50+: 3 (14%)

I received 21 responses to my e-mail interview questions. The respondents’ average age was approximately 38, with the oldest being 60 and the youngest being 22. Eight were born in China, six were born in the United States, two were born in Taiwan, and five were born elsewhere.

To be perfectly honest, I was expecting a higher response rate because practitioners see it as their duty to “clarify the truth” and “spread the Fa,” so I figured they would welcome the opportunity to talk

about Falun Gong. However, when I discussed this somewhat low response rate with one of my key informants, he explained that many practitioners are bound to be suspicious, since the Chinese government uses spies. Thus, it is harder for them to judge people's intentions without seeing and talking to them. A couple respondents chose not to answer a few of my questions on account of their uncertainty of how the information would be used. Another person saw that I sent e-mails to both of his e-mail accounts, which aroused his suspicion and caused him to ask me if I was doing legitimate research. One practitioner (possibly the same person) even called my advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Bird, to ask if my research was genuine; she found this rather surprising and told me that this is the first time this has ever happened to her. Lowe (2003: 264, 270) reported receiving 85 complete responses in only 10 days in June 2000. I think there are a number of factors to explain the discrepancy in response rates between my survey and his. First, Lowe asked fewer questions than I did, so the survey was less of an imposition on their time. Second, Lowe gave them a very short window in which the practitioners could respond, forcing them to either act immediately or not have their answers accepted, while I gave much more time for them to respond. I think many practitioners I interviewed may have decided to put off answering my questions, and then never got around to answering them. Third, the questions Lowe asked were more-or-less innocuous, while I asked questions that directly related to many of the allegations used against Falun Gong; therefore, practitioners may have been more suspicious.

There is not as much to discuss here since the practitioners I contacted did not get together. The practitioners who use the Internet do not do so in lieu of any other Falun Dafa activities (getting together at practice sites, reading the books, etc.), and there generally is not much informal interaction between practitioners on the Internet. I have found a few Yahoo groups and message boards devoted to Falun Gong that are an exception to this, but the membership numbers for these groups are rather low. As of the time I am writing this, there are only 19 members in the Falun Dafa group on Yahoo for the D.C. area (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Dafa-DC-English>), despite there being hundreds of practitioners in the area. (There may be another group for Chinese practitioners that I am unaware of, however.)

The responses I got to the e-mail interviews were informative in that most of what they said came as no surprise to me. What this tells me is that my findings among practitioners in Tampa and Washington D.C. probably hold for the rest of the country as well.

## How Practitioners Get Started: Similarities and Differences in Background Circumstances

### Religious Background

What attracts people to Falun Gong initially varies. The Chinese practitioners did not come from any sort of a formal religious background; many of them had parents in the Communist party, which is officially atheist. However, Jianping Chu told me that this state-sponsored atheism was not absolute in determining their beliefs (also see Hertzke 2000):

Jianping Chu: Uh, you know, we were, for me, and people like, my age, were born—were *educated* in anywhere saying communist is the only truth, and the communist party is the seal of China. And we're educated to listen, *accept* whatever government say. So that's a big thing. And we're also...uh, educated to be atheist. We don't [believe in] anything beyond material things. We believe people can defeat nature if we work hard... something like that.

Noah Porter: So your parents were both atheists?

JC: Um... *not really*. I, I believe not really. On the surface, yes. But they still believe some things from *culture*, passed down from generation to generation, that cannot be eliminated completely. For us, it's worse. Most the younger people don't believe anything.

NP: So what did they believe in?

JC: They believe in at least that people should be good, and also there's some—In Chinese, we say gods controlling human life, we should respect them and should be kind of humble like that. But, after China opened the market window to the world, things, you know, people think for money, and things change... and that belief become weaker... and they also... kind of... thinking for money, and take care that... more than before. It's really [an] unfortunate thing.

Qiaoyun Zheng had similar things to say about atheism not being absolute for her parents:

Noah Porter: What was your parents' religion? Did they have a religion?

Qiaoyun Zheng: Uh... actually, my mother, when she was a child... she, uh... get a... How do you say that? The ceremony to get into... to become a Christian. What's that ceremony?

NP: Um... baptism?

QZ: Oh yeah, baptism. Yeah. Actually... she, uh... she... get a baptism... when she was a child... and... but, later on... Both my mother and my father is, um... communist... a member of the communist party.

NP: So they were both atheists, right?

QZ: Huh?

NP: Atheists? You know, don't believe in God—

QZ: Oh, yeah. No, no, no-no-no. That's—you know, actually it's—Chinese—I *think* most of the Chinese people... although... although... although they are communist party... or not... no-no-no... no matter they are communist party or not, but, uh... they believe the Buddha, more or less, I think. That's what I think. Okay, for example, for my parents, although they don't believe one hundred percent... I think they [*unintelligible*] seventy or... eighty percent don't believe the Buddha, but sometimes, it seems, they believe there is a... [chuckle] God, you know... [still chuckling]



The three Western practitioners at the Tampa site, on the other hand, all reported some religion in their background; one went to a United Methodist church, one was “Raised Presbyterian with a hard-shell Baptist background,” and another said: “I was not a spiritual person at all. I grew up in the Protestant Religion, but I haven't been religious at all.” Chase, the one-time visitor to the Tampa site, said “I was raised Jewish... but not very religious Jewish.” For the Chinese practitioners, it appears there has been a spiritual longing despite the presence of communist ideology:

Noah Porter: What did you believe? Were you religious at all as a kid?

Qiaoyun Zheng: Actually... I have no strong belief with the communist party. Oh no, actually I'm not *hate it*, you know.... But... I'm not very... believe it... as my parents does, you know? Hmm... I don't have my belief... but I... believe a little bit Buddhism. My best friend, I told you—

NP: Yeah.

QZ: She... We... we always, uh, go to some... temple?... yeah... But by that time... hmm, I don't know... hmm... the purpose why we go to the temple, you know? We just know that we find some *solution*, but what we don't know what kind of solution we want to get. And, uh, we just go to the temple. We like the *feeling*... that *peace, quiet*, environment in the temple, you know? And we also like the—when you standing in front of the statue of the Buddha... yeah, that's very... if you are—you [*unintelligible*]... and sometime, it can shock—*shake* you. I don't know how—h-h-how to say that feeling. Yeah. That's, uh... but, uh... but, uh, by that time we don't know... and we don't know... whether the Buddha does exist... that's a real things or not. We don't know. We just want to go there, and, uh, enjoy the *quiet* environment in the temple, and try to get some answer. Yeah.

At least three of the Chinese practitioners in Tampa mentioned dabbling in Christianity before becoming Falun Gong practitioners.

The religious backgrounds of the D.C. practitioners seemed vary primarily by nationality.

Because religion tends to be discouraged in Chinese society, particularly among members of the Chinese Communist Party, when I would ask about religious backgrounds, the Chinese practitioners would tend to give answers like “I don't have any religion” or “Basically, I'm not a religious person.” One Chinese practitioner admitted to reading Buddhist and Taoist texts and being curious about the meaning of life, but did not take on a specific religious identity. The Taiwanese practitioners also did not profess to belong to a specific religion, but unlike in China, they had a lot more positive exposure to religion. As one Taiwanese practitioner explained it, “In Taiwan, we don't have a specific religion. We believe the God. We believe Buddha. We believe Tao. We believe everything, you know... So I don't have a specific—but I believe... those kind of things.” For the American practitioners I interviewed, I tended not to get a single, straightforward answer; that is, most people did not simply name religion and leave it at that. One person

called their religious background “confused” because they were exposed to Judaism and multiple branches of Christianity by their parents, but was raised to be atheist or agnostic. Another person said he had “very little” religious background; this person had a parent who was Episcopalian and became a Buddhist, while he was personally interested in Confucius, Lao Tzu, and “the thing with Carlos Castaneda.” The one notable exception to this was Jerry, the oldest person I interviewed at the D.C. practice site, who said he was born and raised a Presbyterian, and still is. He is the only person I encountered there who still maintained a religious identity simultaneous to being a Falun Gong practitioner (for another example, see Culp n.d.: 63-66).

### **Qigong Background**

There were not any significant patterns in terms in qigong background among the D.C. practitioners, except that generally more Chinese practitioners have tried qigong, and those who have tried it are more likely to have tried more kinds. This is to be expected since qigong originated and flourished in China. American practitioners have mentioned karate, tai chi, and transcendental meditation. However, there were Chinese practitioners who did not try qigong previously, indicating that previous qigong exposure is not a necessary condition for becoming a practitioner. Among the Tampa practitioners, four said they had practiced other qigong before practicing Falun Gong. A few practitioners also mentioned doing Tai Chi and Yoga, and one mentioned doing karate.

### **Initial Exposure to Falun Gong**

Palmer and Ownby (2000) found that out of 78 respondents to their survey, 58 had learned from friends, family members, or coworkers (p. 135). Lowe (2003) found that out of 85 surveys, 63 reported that they had first heard of Falun Gong from friends, family members, or acquaintances (p. 271). My results were very similar.

The practitioners I interviewed mainly reported their initial encounter with Falun Gong to be through word of mouth. Jiayu Kou got her husband Jing Yang to practice, and Jing Yang gave a free workshop in 1998 that got Jianping Chu to practice. Jianping Chu then got Qiaoyun Zheng and his wife Zhenzhen Guo to start practicing. Some practitioners discovered Falun Gong through serendipity. One

Western practitioner saw an article in a health magazine, and then got in contact with Jing Yang through the Internet. Another Western practitioner decided to go to the park one morning to practice her Tai Chi again after a long period of neglect, and happened to run across some practitioners there. Similarly, Chase describes a chance meeting with practitioners in Tallahassee:

So it dawned upon me, uh—there was a bunch of Chinese people doing the exercises, that I said to myself, “I bet this the Falun...Dafa, Falun Gong exercises from China that I’ve been reading in the newspapers.” And I started watching these people exercise, and it was *such* beautiful movements. And, coming from a background in qigong, I could really *sense* the intense *energy* ... that um—an—an energy field around these people that were incredible to me, and I just, um, sat there in awe for about two hours, watching these folks do these exercises. Then, when they were over, I spoke to the exercisers, and they invited me to their next session.

It appears that practitioners come to learn about Falun Gong largely through the encouragement of friends and family, and to a lesser extent on media reports and chance encounters with practitioners in public areas. My interviews with the D.C. practitioners overwhelmingly support this assertion. Out of the 17 practitioners interviewed in D.C., 15 of them mentioned hearing of Falun Gong through word of mouth; strangers, coworkers, friends, and family all had a hand in their becoming practitioners. Of the two who did not learn of Falun Gong through word of mouth, one first heard of it from the news coverage of the April 25 appeal in 1999 and then learned about it on the Internet, and the other discovered it through the Internet because he was curious about Zhuan Falun in China, but could not look at the Falun Gong website until he was in America.

### **Turning to Falun Gong for Healing**

Health benefits are a commonly expressed reason for being attracted to Falun Gong; Palmer and Ownby (2001) found 30 out of 78 said they were attracted to Falun Gong for this reason (p. 135), and 20 out of 85 practitioners said the same thing in Lowe’s (2001: 271) survey. If Falun Gong’s efficacy is due solely to the placebo effect, then the experiences of Falun Gong practitioners are magnificent examples of the placebo effect because the majority of practitioners I interviewed reported some sort of improvement in their physical health, mental health, or both. I do not feel qualified to make an evaluation of whether qigong works or not; I can merely note what different people believe about whether it works or not. In one experiment, “Using digital electromagnetic wave detection equipment on two qigong practitioners in the laboratory, researchers at the Showa University Medical School in Japan found a dramatic increase in the

strength of the body's energy field during the practice of qigong” (Collinge 1999). Also, “in a tightly controlled experiment at New York's Mount Sinai Medical School, two qigong masters using emitted qi were able to alter the chemistry of an enzyme solution in a test tube from five feet away” (Collinge 1999). Survey research done on Falun Gong specifically showed a high level of reported effectiveness in curing physical and mental illnesses (Clearwisdom.net 1998). However, many qigong experiments have been criticized, largely for relying on self-reporting of efficacy, and the debate is still ongoing (Xiang 1999; Carroll 2002; Cohen 2000: 6; Barrett 2001; Mainfort 2000; Xu 1999). The health conditions that Falun Gong was purported to help with by the Tampa practitioners include: hepatitis-B, insomnia, allergies, health complications due to a ruptured spleen, skin problems, colds, chronic fatigue, nose polyps, migraine headaches, a “serious cough,” and back pain due to car accidents. The only person who did not report any change in health was Melissa, who reported that her health was “good” both before and after practicing Falun Gong. It is interesting to note that she is the one who has the strongest doubts about the teachings of Falun Gong, and says she is not sure whether to consider herself a practitioner or not. Chase’s experience of having his nose polyps heal after practicing Falun Gong may be useful to compare:

’Til to this day, they’re still opened... I don’t know if it’s because... I’m eating better, which—foods, I know, affect my congestion, and will form a—a—will help the polyps grow, I know, but—It seemed to happen right after doing Falun Dafa, that my, uh... polyps just... disintegrated, and I’m able to *breathe* now through my nose.

It seemed to me that Chase’s doubts about Falun Gong were not as strong as Melissa’s doubts. I think that the healing of illnesses attributed to Falun Gong by practitioners can be a powerful catalyst towards the person truly considering themselves a practitioner and accepting Li Hongzhi’s writings as the truth of the universe. Since Chase could not be completely sure that Falun Gong was responsible for the disintegration of his polyps and not his change in diet, however, seeds of doubt still remained in his mind. Also, since Melissa had good health before practicing, she did not experience any of the miraculous healing that the others reported, and thus had nothing to serve as the catalyst for the elimination of her doubts.

### **Common Elements of Falun Gong “Conversion” Narratives**

It is commonplace for practitioners to share biographical accounts through a variety of mediums, including interviews with journalists (where they generally do not have control over the final product), articles on Falun Dafa related websites such as Clearwisdom.net, in books such as *Falun Gong Stories: A*

*Journey To Enlightenment*, experience-sharing articles at conferences, socializing at Falun Dafa events, and, in the case of this project, interviews with a social scientist (see the biographies section in this chapter for two examples).

Instead of using models that emphasize the social pressure placed upon practitioners (Deng and Fang 2000: 10), I think that it would be much more accurate to use a narrative induction model (Linde 2000; also see Mattingly and Lawlor 2001) to describe how people come to be practitioners. I found that the practitioners decided for themselves to internalize the identity of practitioners. Certainly, the presence of the other practitioners provided the social conditions to make this sort of narrative induction possible by providing a practice site, a structured reading, and a social network supportive of the emergence of the identity. However, this always seemed to be the process of an individual's choice rather than a product of coercion. In terms of Yelvington's theory of power, the cultural power of the society is inscribed in the mind of the individual, and this is the primary factor in whether or not the person will accept the definitional and cultural power of Li Hongzhi. In addition, the practitioners appeared free to leave and quit if they desired. It is only the new identity they acquired through narrative induction that keeps them together as a group.

Linde writes, "In conversion stories, we see that conversion to a particular religion or ideology often requires not only a change of one's stories, but a change to a narrative of a particular structure" (2000: 618). She gives the example of young woman who used to be a "self-described 'Jesus Freak'" who decided to convert to Orthodox Judaism. Although her conversion was genuine, the congregation doubted her sincerity because she "told a narrative whose structure would have been appropriate for a Christian conversion but was inappropriate for Judaism" (p. 618). Falun Gong practitioners, when describing their lives or just anecdotes of it, also have their narratives structured in certain ways. Of course, not all elements will be present in all practitioner life stories, but my experiences have shown that this narrative structure is so common that it would be accurate to describe it as cultural.

The first element is gratitude. In the words of one practitioner, "I am forever thankful for the awareness and wisdom and peace Falun Dafa has helped me build in my life" (Culp n.d.: 34). Another practitioner wrote: "A billion years of thanks wouldn't be enough for me to express my gratitude!"

(Clearwisdom.net 1999o: 9). Gratitude may be expressed either at the beginning or the end of the narrative.

The second element is a description of the problems that the person had before becoming a Falun Dafa practitioner. Problems may include: a bad temper, smoking, drinking, drug use, medical problems, and confusion about the purpose of life. Confusion about the purpose of life and other philosophical questions is commonly expressed, and those practitioners who mention it often describe how they were dissatisfied with explanations found in science, medicine, philosophies, and religions. Medical problems are also very common (see Palmer and Ownby 2000: 135; Lowe 2003: 271). Typically, when medical problems are described, the practitioner will often list all the types of medication and treatments they tried, and how they turned out to be ineffective:

In 1997, I developed an incurable disease, acute leukemia. I had little ability to produce blood. During emergency treatment, I was infected with hepatitis B and C, and pulmonary tuberculosis. Five major hospitals in Shanghai and Jiangxi Province gave me emergency treatment, and doctors held group consultations many times. On two occasions, a doctor from the Chinese Academy of Medical Science held group consultations for me. Finally, all the experts concluded that there was no medicine that could cure my leukemia. They thought that I had only one-to-three months to live. In February 1998, when the predicted deadline was approaching, the doctors suggested to my family to make funeral arrangements. [McCoy and Zhang n.d.: 23]

One interesting thing to note is that the practitioners are careful not to make negative generalizations about religions or medicine from their experience; a practitioner will describe how such things did not work for him or her, but generally leave it at that. Palmer (2003)'s model of Falun Gong conversion claims there are four "phases": healing, moral reform, spiritual salvation, and apocalyptic activism (p. 350 – 355). (I hope to address the issues she raises in a future article.)

The third element is the introduction of Falun Gong. The exact way in which people were introduced varied, but there is typically a sign of some sort that the person has found the right path upon introduction or soon thereafter. "As I walked past a booth...I felt a strong energy drawing me in," (Culp n.d.: 36) said one practitioner. "Three quarters of the way through the book I felt the power of *Zhuan Falun*," (Culp n.d.: 30) wrote another practitioner.

The fourth element is a struggle to overcome one's old ways and become a true practitioner. Even when the conflict involves other people, it is described in terms of the individual's shortcomings in

handling the situation. When the life narrative focuses more on health improvements than accepting the belief system, the struggle often takes the form of enduring short-term physical suffering:

Since the first day I learned Dafa, my body has been in the process of purification. I had a bout of diarrhea during the Nine-Day Workshop when I first watched Master's lectures on video. Then all my previous illnesses returned. I had a bursting headache, and my body was sore all over. It was really hard to bear. Amazingly, I was fine during the evening workshop and during the daytime. However, after going home I would start to become uncomfortable. These kinds of bodily purification came one after another during the first year of my practice. I knew that I had lots of karma and faced these ordeals without paying too much attention to them. [McCoy and Zhang n.d.: 45]

As we can see from this narrative, the health-focused narratives focus on how suffering from illnesses will disappear if given sufficient time.

The fifth element is contentment as a Falun Dafa practitioner. They often describe how their life has purpose, and they feel healthier than ever before. One practitioner wrote, "Although I do not quite perceive the profoundness of Dafa and the complexity of the universe, I will assimilate myself to the nature of the universe, 'Zhen-Shan-Ren,' (Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance) and behave as a good person" (McCoy and Zhang n.d.: 79-80). Wei Zhao, one of the D.C. practitioners, told me that Falun Dafa was something she was looking for "all [her] life, maybe many lives." She compared doing the exercises and reading the the books to a missing child finding his or her way home. Jing Lin, another practitioner I interviewed, said:

Falun Gong is really the way, you know, to save people... So through the cultivation, you can really return to your... true self. You can go back to your home. Your real home. Not the one on earth. And it's really precious. You know, it's the first time, you know, have this huge Fa spread on earth, and uh, it's... If you miss this chance, you will feel sorry forever, you know, for yourself... um... because it's the first time, and it will be the last time. So, just take the opportunity and don't miss it.

Tom, a Western practitioner, told me: "It's changed my life. That's what I can say. It really has. It's a big turn-around. I couldn't have not—I could not have turned around unless I came across it." He later added, "It was as if it pounded the core of my heart."

In addition to these five elements, there are some elements of Falun Gong narratives that are fairly common, but are not employed in every story. One example of this is crying as a response to a Falun Dafa-related epiphany. I first encountered this when some practitioners were showing a Falun Gong video to newcomers to teach them the exercises. Before the exercises began, the video showed Li Hongzhi doing some movements that were not part of the five exercises, and the newcomers were told them not to emulate

them. I asked one of the practitioners why Li Hongzhi is only allowed to do those certain movements, and he replies, "Because he's Master Li." He then added that people who really understand what these movements mean have tears running down their cheeks from watching them. I later found out that reporting tears is not uncommon among practitioners:

Although I love reading books, I never found a book like *Zhuan Falun*. It is so inspiring. The words are of great compassion and awe-inspiring righteousness. When I read what the teacher says, "Does everyone know what I am doing? I regard all practitioners including those who are able to genuinely practice cultivation through self-study as my disciples." I just couldn't restrain my tears. My heart was crying out, "Is this real? Is this real? Can I call you my master? How can I be so lucky to be your disciple?" [McCoy and Zhang n.d.: 13]

Crying is not limited to just *Zhuan Falun*: "In March 1995 I was fortunate enough to receive a copy of *China Falun Gong*. I could not help crying upon reading the book. I knew then that Falun Dafa was the cultivation way that would lead me back to my original home" (McCoy and Zhang n.d.: 31). Palmer (2003) described a practitioner who cried when he felt the purification of karma from his head to his feet (p. 354). Another practitioner said, "Every time I saw Master Li's photo I wanted to cry!" (McCoy and Zhang n.d.: 40). In another instance, some practitioners told some stories about Falun Gong to a man who was skeptical about it, and they reported: "The young man cried after listening to those descriptions. The sincere words and benevolence of practitioners touched the hearts of kind people. He held the truth booklet and promised to pass it to his relatives and friends. Let them all know the truth. The practitioner cried as well" (ClearHarmony 2002b). Another practitioner describes how she began reciting one of Li Hongzhi's articles while in a prison camp and cried:

I had cried all the way through the process of reciting "Lunyu" [the introductory article in *Zhuan Falun*]. The sacredness, magnificence and gratitude I felt in the depth of my true being were beyond any description in words. I experienced the magnificence, solemnity and glory of melting my whole being into the Fa without holding anything back. For the first time, I truly understood what it meant to "move the heaven and earth alike, move the gods and the ghosts to tears." It is this great determination and magnificent feat that could break through stones and that astonishes heaven and earth. I could not hold back my tears. [Clearwisdom.net 2002d]

In her study of the Taiwanese Buddhist charismatic movement Ciji, Huang (2003) found:

1) Compared to the characterization of crying as pragmatic and ritualistic, crying in this religious group is uncontrolled, sometimes uncontrollable, and formless, and lacks intention. 2) In contrast to the negative connotations the larger society assigns to crying in public, crying here is conceived of as a common, acceptable, and shared experience, as well as a domain for contextual interpretation and a locus of embodied identity. 3) In contrast with Taiwanese cultural ideology (Confucian and patrilineal), crying in Ciji conveys multiple interpretations that are organized around a discourse that stresses



femininity and contains a transformative capacity in the followers' identity... [Huang 2003: 85]

We can see many parallels to the use of crying in Falun Gong in her description. First, Falun Gong practitioners do not utilize crying in an intentional way; that is, they do not cry with the intention of achieving a specific, planned result. Second, crying can be a shared experience for practitioner, as seen in the incident above where the practitioners who “converted” a newcomer were moved to tears by his tears. However, crying is often done in solitude with practitioners, as is the case with the people who are moved to tears by reading Li Hongzhi’s books. Third, crying can also be a “locus of embodied identity” (Huang 2003: 85). As I mentioned previously, embodiment can contribute to the narrative induction process; in other words, it “contains a transformative capacity in the followers’ identity” (Huang 2003: 85). One difference between the crying in Falun Gong and Ciji is that the crying in Ciji seems almost exclusively the behavior of women (p. 76), while in Falun Gong, either gender may cry and “hence assume a tacit position of inferiority that fits well with a hierarchical culture” (p. 76), in the sense that they feel through Falun Gong, they can become something greater than what they are currently.

### **Health Care and Falun Gong**

Most Falun Gong practitioners report significant improvements in their health. It may seem paradoxical at first that someone could then think that an exercise designed to promote health could be accused of impairing it, although this is in fact the case among many critics of Falun Gong. This is a difficult issue to reconcile, as the critics of Falun Gong have plenty of ammunition for these arguments. In this section, I will show how the writings of Li Hongzhi and the publicly-shared stories of practitioners seem to support these types of arguments at first, but how my research findings suggest that practitioners are not the ticking time bombs of preventable death that critics have portrayed them as. However, my findings are not entirely uncontroversial, so I will finally attempt to put these findings into context.



**Figure 25: Medical care allegation in Chinese comic.**

*Another frame from "Li Hongzhi: The Man and His Evil Deeds" by the China Art Museum Press. This frame depicts a practitioner blocking medics, saying Li Hongzhi will cure him. Available: <http://www2.kenyon.edu/depts/religion/fac/Adler/reln270/falungong/22.htm>.*



**Figure 26: Clearwisdom.net refutes medical care allegation.**

"Photographer: We will waive your medical bill if you say the words written on the paper." From <http://www.clearwisdom.net/emh/articles/2001/12/18/16916.html>. Used with permission.

### **The Medical Care Controversy**

The critics of Falun Gong see it as dangerous to the health of practitioners. Patsy Rahn writes: "As Falun Gong practitioners will point out, Li does not specifically say anywhere in his writings that you must not take medicine or receive medical care. However, the teachings create an environment that is conducive to abandoning medical care. Illness becomes a test, and the refusal of medicine or medical care becomes the sign of a true practitioner" (Rahn 2000). The writings of Li Hongzhi at a glance certainly seem to suggest this. In the introductory book *China Falun Gong*, Li Hongzhi wrote:

Q. Can I practice when I have a cold or fever?

A. I will say that after you are finished with this class, you will never get sick. You may not believe it. Why do my students sometimes have symptoms similar to having a cold or fever? That is the passing of a tribulation and hardship, and implies that an improvement onto another level is due. They all understand that they do not need to pay attention to it, and it will pass. [Li Hongzhi 1999a: 146]

At the same time, practitioners vehemently deny the allegations that Falun Gong prevents practitioners from seeking medical care:

The Chinese government has repeatedly claimed that the founder of Falun Gong, Mr. Li Hongzhi, has forbidden practitioners from taking medicine or that the teachings of Falun Gong forbid taking medicine. This is absolutely not true.

Mr. Li has clearly stated that the goal of Falun Gong is not to heal one's ailments. In the most widely read Falun Gong book, *Zhuan Falun*, Mr. Li states, "I do not talk about healing illness here, and neither will we heal illnesses here." He has also emphasized that seriously ill people should go to the hospital without delay. [Clear Harmony 2001]

After examining the word choice they used, it looks as though Patsy Rahn may be right. The practitioners write that Li Hongzhi has not forbidden taking medicine, but his teachings do say that practitioners will not get sick. Also, the response from the Clear Harmony website notes that Li Hongzhi says that seriously ill people should go to the hospital immediately, but in light of his earlier comments, it sounds like he teaches that a practitioner could not possibly be one of those seriously ill people. Is it possible that after becoming a practitioner, a person will interpret all sickness as a tribulation and lose their life because of their beliefs?

Since *Zhuan Falun* is considered to be the most important (and therefore most commonly read) book in Falun Dafa, it is best to start with what Li Hongzhi said about illness in that book before considering other sources. He makes several statements in the book that are relevant to this discussion.

First, he wrote:

A Buddha is mighty capable, and he could wipe out all of humankind's illnesses with a wave of his hand. Why doesn't he do it? Besides, there are so many Buddhas. Why don't they show their mercy by curing your illness? It is because ordinary human society is supposed to be this way. Birth, old age, illness and death are just such conditions. They all have karmic reasons and are of karmic retribution. You must repay the debt if you have it. [Li Hongzhi 1999b: 296]

In this passage, we can see that Li Hongzhi views illnesses as necessary for people to atone for their wrongdoings in their past and current lives. Second, Li Hongzhi wrote:

There are also some qigong masters who claim that hospitals cannot cure illnesses, and that the efficacy of hospital treatments is just like such and such. How should we speak of this? Of course, it involves reasons from many areas. In my view, the principal one is that human moral values have hit a low point, leading to a variety of odd diseases that hospitals cannot cure. Taking medicine is not effective, either. There are a lot of phony drugs as well. It is all because of the extent to which human society has become corrupt. [Li Hongzhi 1999b: 298]

From this passage, we can see that since Li Hongzhi believes the morals of society are declining, the illnesses are getting worse, and that conventional medicines are often ineffective against them. He continues on in the next paragraph to say:

Some illnesses cannot be detected at a hospital, even though people are actually ill. Some people are diagnosed with illnesses that do not have names, since they have never been seen before. Hospitals call all of them "modern diseases." Can hospitals heal

illnesses? Of course they can. If hospitals could not heal illnesses, why would people believe in them and go there for treatments? Hospitals are still able to heal illnesses, but their means of treatment belong to the level of everyday people while illnesses are supernatural. Some illnesses are quite serious, and so hospitals require early treatment if one has such an illness. If it becomes too serious, hospitals will be helpless, as overdoses of medicine can poison a person. Present medical treatments are at the same level as our science and technology—they are all at the level of everyday people. Thus, they only have such healing efficacy. One issue that should be clarified is that average qigong treatments and hospital treatments only defer to the remaining half of life or later those tribulations that are the fundamental cause of illnesses. The karma is not removed at all. [Li Hongzhi 1999b: 298-299]

This paragraph makes it clear what problems Li Hongzhi sees with conventional medical treatments. He does not dismiss the fact that the fact that hospitals can cure diseases, but he does seem to feel that having your diseases cured at a hospital does not eliminate the karma, and thus the karma will still exist in your body to cause you more illnesses later in life.

Looking at the other writings of Li Hongzhi only seems to further this view that practitioners should not seek medical care. Since this matter is already mired in linguistic confusion, I feel it best to continue quoting verbatim from the relevant writings of Li Hongzhi, rather than summarizing what he has said in my own words, and then comment upon it afterwards. In *Essentials For Further Advancement*, he wrote:

As a matter of fact, a person does not know how many lifetimes—in each of which he has accrued a great deal of karma—he has gone through. When a person is reincarnated after death, some of his sickness-karma is pressed into his body at the microscopic level. When he is reincarnated, the new body's matter has no sickness-karma on the surface (but there are exceptions for those with too much karma). What was pressed into the body in the previous life then comes out, and when it returns to the surface of this physical body, the person will become ill. Yet the sickness will usually appear to be triggered by an external condition in the physical world. This way it will conform on the surface to the objective laws of our physical world. That is, it will comply with this human world's principles. As a result, everyday people have no way of knowing the actual truth about the cause of the sickness, and they are thus lost in delusion without being enlightened. Upon becoming ill, the person will take medicine or seek various kinds of treatments that in effect press the sickness back into the body again. Consequently, instead of paying back for the sickness-karma from his wrongdoing in the previous life, he will do some additional bad things in this life to hurt others; this will bring about new sickness-karma and lead to different kinds of sickness. Nevertheless, one will again take medicine or use various treatments to press the sickness back into the body. Surgery can only remove flesh in the superficial physical dimension, while the sickness-karma in another dimension has not been touched at all—it is simply beyond the reach of modern technology. When a person is reincarnated after death, any sickness-karma that has accrued will again be pressed back into his body. This cycle goes on one lifetime after another; it is unknown how much sickness-karma accumulates in a person's body... [Li 2000: 38-30]

In the same article, he continues on to say:

As a cultivator, in addition to the karma eliminated by Master, you have to pay for a portion yourself. You will thus feel physically uncomfortable, as though you were suffering from a sickness. Cultivation practice is to clean you up from the origin of your life. The human body is like the annual rings of a tree, whereby each ring contains sickness-karma. So your body must be cleaned up from the very center. Were karma to be pushed out all at once, however, you would not be able to take it, for it would endanger your life. Only a piece or two can be pushed out every once in a while, allowing you to overcome it, and through the suffering pay off your karma. But this is only that little bit left for you, yourself to endure after I have eliminated karma for you. This will continue until your cultivation reaches the highest form of Shi-Jian-Fa (i.e., the pure-white body), when all of your karma will have been pushed out.... [Li 2000: 40]

On the next page of the same article, Li Hongzhi goes further with his explanation of the danger of continually pushing back karma:

Eliminating sickness-karma is a matter that cannot be casually done for an everyday person, and this is absolutely impossible for a non-practitioner that must only rely on medical treatment. Doing this at will for an everyday person is actually undermining the principles of heaven, for it means that a person can do bad things without having to pay for the karma. It absolutely will not do if a person does not repay his debts—the principles of heaven won't permit it! Even the treatments of ordinary qigong also are to push the karma inside a person's body. When a person has too much karma and is still doing bad things, he will face destruction—the complete destruction of both body and soul—at his death, which is total extinction. [Li 2000: 41]

In *Falun Dafa Lecture in Sydney*, Li Hongzhi wrote:

...One's karma will still have to be repaid, and it is just such a principle. What we have done here is to push out all your dirty things from the original source of your life. However, nobody does such a thing. Only if you practice cultivation, will we do such a thing for you. But, everyone must conduct your Xinxing well and shouldn't think, "Oh, I am sick again," when you feel unwell. If you think this way, then take medicine when your illness comes. We would not intervene, because cultivation practice depends on enlightenment quality, not on forceful regulations. We have not said that you should not take medicine when you are not feeling well. We have not.

Some people cannot treat themselves as practitioners. They only practice the exercise without studying the Fa and will do anything. Although you find them practicing the exercise, my Fashen will not take care of them. If they are not looked after, they are just ordinary people and will become ill. If we make a rule to forbid you to take medicine and you cannot conduct yourself according to the standard of a practitioner and remain an ordinary person, you will claim that Li Hongzhi does not allow you to take medicine when you become ill. Therefore, I do not say whether one should take medicine or not, and you should decide it yourself. It is in fact a test for you. If you cannot treat yourself as a practitioner, you will still have illnesses. It is just such a principle, and we have only mentioned its principle. Therefore, I have told everyone that if you want to practice cultivation in the future, the physical discomfort you experience is very likely your karma being pushed out from your previous lives. I have found that some people had been born tens, or a hundred of times over. There were many illnesses in each lifetime, which will all need to be pushed out. Anyway, they will all have to be removed. More of them will be taken away from another dimension, and a portion must be removed for you. But, they cannot all be removed from another dimension because you have to be made to suffer a little. If one does not suffer, it means that a person does not pay for the bad things he has done. One day when you succeed in your cultivation and are put in the Buddha's position, you would feel rather uneasy to be there. Others would also wonder, "How does he move up here?" Is it right? Thus, you must endure a portion of the pain. Then, while enduring

it, you will improve your enlightenment quality. Will you treat it as an illness? Or will you consider it eliminating karma for a practitioner? [Li Hongzhi 1999c: 41-42]

Finally, there is a relevant passage from a question and answer session with Li Hongzhi found in *Lecture at the First Conference in North America*:

Question: I heard that in China there was a student who died not long after he learned the Fa. He insisted on not taking any medicine before he passed away. Why would a person die when he didn't even fear death like that?

Teacher: When a sick person doesn't take medicine, you can tell from the surface whether it's because deep down inside he wants me to cure his illness or because he determinedly deems himself a practitioner. If an everyday person caught a deadly disease and insisted on not taking medicine no matter what, would he die? He died, didn't he? It was time for him to die, so he died, as he was an everyday person. How could an everyday person's life be casually extended? He claimed that he did the exercises. Think about it, everyone: Does it make you a Dafa disciple if you do the exercises of Falun Gong and read the books? If you don't advance diligently and don't truly act according to the standards I've taught you, how could you be my disciple? Whether you're my disciple depends on whether I acknowledge you as one. In other words, are you up to the standard for a disciple? If you perform the exercises every day just like doing other physical exercises, if you read the books without assimilating the content, if you don't advance diligently and don't act according to the requirements from the books, can you be my disciple? Aren't you still an ordinary person? Let's say that an ordinary person becomes ill and, like a drowning person hoping to clutch a piece of straw, he realizes that I can eliminate a person's disease karma. Since with this practice system the understanding is that no medicine is to be taken when dissolving karma, he has done the exercises with the misunderstanding that if he just performs the exercises and doesn't take medicine he'll get well and not die. Not only is he an ordinary person, but he also still holds such a strong attachment. How could he not die?

Dafa is solemn, and cultivation practice is a serious matter. How can a person's life that's supposed to end be casually extended, or an ordinary human be easily allowed to reach Consummation and become a Buddha?! You must cultivate your mind. It doesn't count if your mind is not fundamentally transformed. You aren't considered to have passed the test if you seemingly do well but still have a little bit of attachment inside that you yourself fail to notice. That's because this is the most serious matter. Fundamental changes need to truly take place. You know that many people practice Falun Gong, and that a considerable number of them have been cured of cancer or other fatal illnesses. I don't need to tell you about this because all of our students know it.

There were also some critically ill people suffering from cancer or other deadly diseases who came to practice Falun Gong but died just the same. Why? While that person was paying lip service to practicing Falun Gong, his mind didn't let go of his illness whatsoever. Some people may think this way: "He was quite keen on practicing. He told us about not taking medicine, and he also advised us to give up the attachment to illness. He even helped others learn the Fa." But he didn't necessarily give it up himself—you don't know what was on his mind. This shows how complicated the matter is. He asked others to give up the attachment, knowing that Teacher could hear it. He wanted it to be heard by Teacher. To put it plainly, he was trying to deceive Teacher. His real intention was: "Teacher will certainly take care of me for all these things I've done. I'm reading the books, performing the exercises, and telling others to cultivate, so Teacher will definitely eliminate my illness." You see that on the surface he stopped taking medicine, said those words, and acted in accordance with my requirements for practice. In essence, however, he didn't truly meet the standard for a cultivator. He was still thinking, "As long as I do this, Master will surely get rid of my illness." He was still thinking like that. Did he root out his desire for Master to get rid of his illness? Wasn't that desire still embedded and concealed in his mind? In that case, wasn't he trying to

deceive others as well as me? In fact, he was deceiving himself. In that case, how could he be cured of his illness?

Nonetheless, we oftentimes give chances to people who are seriously ill, and we keep deferring things. The date of the hospital's death sentence has long passed. A long time has passed, whether it has been half a year, a year, or several years. We're still giving this person chances and waiting for him to discard that attachment. He simply doesn't give it up. Although he doesn't say anything, his mind is often unsettled by the following thoughts: "Since I'm practicing Falun Gong, my illness is probably gone. Since I'm practicing Falun Gong, maybe it will be cured." He can't truly regard himself as a cultivating disciple who doesn't think about illness whatsoever. I've already said that I have hardly any requirements for you. Everything is unrestricted—only your mind matters. If I didn't even look at your mind, could I still save you? Actually, no matter which cultivation way a person practices, his mind has to be transformed. The difference is that our cultivation system aims directly at one's mind. [Li 1998:33-35]

Just looking at the teachings of Li Hongzhi alone seems to suggest that Patsy Rahn is correct in saying that Falun Gong creates an atmosphere conducive to the abandonment of medical care; this last question seems to indicate a connection between a practitioner having faith in Falun Gong to cure his illness and refusing medicine. However, the question asked to Li Hongzhi did not get into the specifics of the situation in which this death occurred; perhaps the person's illness was incurable, or perhaps the person could not afford medical treatment anyway. It seems rather clear that the teachings of Falun Gong do encourage practitioners to view illness as a test; however, it is not clear that all, most, or even a significant portion of practitioners will thus contract an illness, view it as tribulation intended to cleanse karma, and then ignore it to the point where it becomes fatal. We should examine how practitioners are interpreting these teachings and behaving as a result before jumping to the conclusion that Falun Gong is preventing practitioners from treating any medical conditions they might have.

### **Public Practitioner Narratives about Illness**

Through the publication of books like *Falun Gong Stories: A Journey to Ultimate Health*, articles on Falun Gong websites like Clearwisdom.net, and experience-sharing articles presented at conferences in which many people from all over the country and the world attend, a practitioner's narrative goes from private experience to public domain. In all these cases, there are built-in filters in place; the decision to publish an experience-sharing article in one of the *Falun Gong Stories* books or on Falun Gong websites rests on the decision of an editor. In the case of articles for conferences, there is usually a selection process. One of my key informants told me that the reasons he has picked one article over another include whether he thinks he has the ability and time to translate it properly and whether the issue it deals with is



important, but never because he thought the practitioner's article was heterodox. Still, it is easy to imagine how an article that strays beyond the acceptable spectrum of opinion and writing style commonly accepted by practitioners would be rejected from being presented to the public by other practitioners.

Put more simply, the opinions presented in the ways listed above will be more homogenous than the range of opinions of the people you will find doing the exercises at a Falun Gong practice site. Therefore, the opinions on health care that are found in this section may not agree with the opinions of all practitioners. The opinions and experiences that would not be selected for public presentation to the Falun Dafa community will be described in the next section. For now, I will deal with the practitioner narratives that are selected/allowed to be presented in public ways. I will show how practitioners deal with issues relating to illness (karma-cleansing tribulation). Since these incidents are presented in a public way through Falun Gong books, websites and events, the way they handle illness seems implicitly intended to be exemplary.

The first issue I will deal with is how the practitioners in these public narratives deal with the interpretation of physical suffering. In other words, when a practitioner feels physical discomfort that he or she knows most non-practitioners would consider an illness, but which Li Hongzhi's teachings suggest are just tribulations intended to clear karma, how does the practitioner deal with this situation? As noted earlier in this chapter, Falun Gong narratives that deal with how one became a practitioner and how Falun Gong has changed one's life tend to be structured in a certain way, where the person starts out with problems, discovers Falun Gong, and after some sort of tribulation, they emerge as a practitioner with wisdom, good health, and good morals. When health is the focus of the conversion narrative, we see practitioners struggle both to endure the suffering and to interpret their suffering as a karma-cleansing tribulation rather than as an actual illness. For example, a 53-year old Chinese practitioner named Xiufen Xie describes her tribulation with a spinal cord injury that paralyzed her:

I was afraid that I wouldn't be allowed to practice Falun Gong since I had severe illnesses. So I tried to stand up by leaning on the wall, reading *Zhuan Falun* as I started by standing for a few minutes to 10 minutes. I sometimes fell to the floor while I was reading. Then I would read on my knees. I kept exercising my legs for three months, and their strength improved. My standing time gradually increased. I felt very happy. On July 1, I asked my husband to take me in the wheelchair to the Falun Gong practice site at the 6<sup>th</sup> Construction Area. Mr. An, who was assistant of this practice site, asked me, "Do you have any illnesses?" I kept replying, "No, I am fine. I don't have any illnesses. I don't have any illnesses." He smiled and said nothing. I felt relieved... I will

remember this day forever. “I have become a Falun Dafa practitioner now! Now I can practice as a normal person!” [McCoy and Zhang n.d.: 38-39]

It is interesting to note how the assistant at the practice site decided to ask her if she had any illnesses, and then smiled afterwards. While slightly ambiguous, this sounds to me as though Mr. An asked Xiufen Xie if she had any illnesses as a test to see whether he should consider her a true practitioner yet. Another example is in order; Wenyi Ni is a 21-year old student who suffered from migraines:

It was indeed hard during the process of eliminating my karma. I tumbled around in my bed with the headaches. It felt as if my head were going to explode. However, I always controlled myself and would not touch any medicine. I told myself to persist under all circumstances. I said to myself that if I could not even withstand such a small suffering, how could I proceed with my cultivation where I am bound to encounter even bigger tribulations? Thus, I built up more self-confidence every time I was in the process of getting rid of karma, and firmly believed that I could bear all the suffering. The most important thing I understood was the power of Dafa, which enabled me to have great strength to fight against disease. With the help of Dafa, I was able to become healthy again. [McCoy and Zhang n.d.: 79]

Here we see Wenyi Ni detailing the intensity of the pain, yet still refusing to touch medicines because she feels it would be a setback to her cultivation. Jenny Fan, a practitioner diagnosed with a cerebral hemorrhage, describes how she stops taking medicine as more of a gradual process than taking a dramatic stand like Wenyi Ni:

From reading [*Zhuan Falun*], I realized the fundamental cause of illness and made up my mind to meet the standards of a genuine practitioner. I decided to forget about my illness and to concentrate on practicing Falun Dafa. Soon, I stopped taking all medicines. I considered it a non-issue as my focus was on cultivation and practice. My headaches subsided noticeably every day. I clearly felt layers of pain being pushed out from the inner brain, to the skull, and to the scalp, and then disappearing [McCoy and Zhang n.d.: 104]

It is interesting to hear Jenny Fan describe the decision to stop taking medicines a “non-issue;” since she said she “realized the fundamental cause of illness,” it sounds like it was a non-issue because of a combination of her newfound faith in Falun Gong and a noticeable improvement in the amount of pain she felt. One final example of how practitioners handle the interpretation of their suffering in public narratives is in order; Tao-Wen Yeh, a 73-year old teacher from Taiwan with osteoporosis, wrote:

...after I learned the fourth set of exercises, it seemed that all my illnesses returned. It was so painful that I could hardly bear it. I couldn't sleep, turn over, or get out of bed. Every time I wanted to get out of bed, it took me half an hour to stand up. This situation continued for more than 10 days. At that time, Master's book *Zhuan Falun* was out of stock, and I had not yet read it. I lacked confidence and conviction, and so began to think of my physical discomfort as “being sick;” I got scared, and medications were not effective. [McCoy and Zhang n.d.: 92]

She then read more Falun Dafa books, and concluded: “From that moment on, I began to understand how precious is the Fa...Not only did it purify my body, but it also eliminated some of my bad karma. How could I add things to my body? So I never went back to taking shots and medicine again” (McCoy and Zhang n.d.: 92). These passages seem to show that practitioners should interpret their suffering as a karma-cleansing tribulation rather than an illness, and that to do otherwise is to lack confidence and conviction. While this seems to support the allegation that Falun Gong will cause practitioners to refuse medical care, potentially putting their lives in danger, it should be noted that in these narratives there is almost always an improvement in health condition that goes along with refusing medical care to “meet the standards of a genuine practitioner.” Given this, what would happen if a practitioner who refused medical treatment found that despite diligently practicing the exercises and genuinely believing in Li Hongzhi’s teachings, their suffering continued to grow worse? One practitioner said, “I have already learned such an excellent Qigong. If I cannot cultivate successfully, I would rather die” (McCoy and Zhang n.d.: 96); however, would such convictions hold in the face of intense, prolonged suffering, that showed no signs of abating, and where conventional medical treatments seemed a viable option to lessen or stop the suffering (if only momentarily by pushing the karma back)? Put more simply, what happens to a practitioner when the narrative does not seem to be working? This situation will not be found in these public narratives, but it will be addressed in the next section when I discuss my interviews.

The second issue I wish to address is checkups with a doctor. How are these practitioners in these public narratives shown to deal with getting medical examinations to confirm they are indeed in good health? Will they simply assume their health is good because they practice Falun Gong, and therefore avoid checkups? I have found three practitioner public narratives that deal with the issue of checkups.

First, there is Guo-Rong Lin, a 56-year old Taiwanese practitioner diagnosed with prostate cancer:

...During the three-year cultivation practice I never thought about my illness, went to a doctor, or took medicine. In April 1998, during a regular health check-up required by my company, my prostate examination was normal. It has truly strengthened my confidence and resolve in my cultivation practice of Dafa. I know it was the power of Dafa and Teacher’s great virtue that made such a strong impact on me. [McCoy and Zhang n.d.: 21]

Second, there is Qingyun Hu, a former official in the Chinese government who was diagnosed with leukemia:

...The medicine and the treatment were ineffective. The cancer cells continuously increased throughout the treatment...After I practiced in the hospital for more than two months, my body gradually recovered. At my insistence, the hospital reluctantly agreed to release me. They strongly suggested that I return to the hospital for a treatment one month later. I firmly cultivated and practiced Falun Dafa after leaving the hospital. I never went back to the hospital for chemotherapy, blood transfusions, or other treatments. [McCoy and Zhang n.d.: 21]

Third, there is Jenny Fan, the previously mentioned practitioner who was diagnosed with a cerebral hemorrhage: “When I left the hospital, my doctor warned me that the illness could endanger my life at any time. This terrified my family. However, routine check-ups showed an improvement in my health. My doctor asked me how I recovered so fast. I told him it was Falun Dafa that saved me and gave me a second life” (McCoy and Zhang n.d.: 105). In the first case, we have a practitioner who did not get medical checkups until required to do by his company. In the second case, we have a practitioner who was “strongly suggested” to come back into the hospital a month later, but never went back. In the third case, we have a family who was “terrified” by the prospect that her illness could return and endanger her life, and went in for routine check-ups. These incidents leave the impression that company policy and family concern are both legitimate reasons for a practitioner to get a check-up. However, a doctor’s warning that an illness could reoccur is not taken as seriously as the assurances in Li Hongzhi’s teachings that this will not occur if one’s xinxing is good.

The third issue I will address is how practitioners in public narratives deal with social pressure to get medical procedures. In other words, if a person considers himself or herself a genuine practitioner and eschews medical treatment, are they willing to get medical treatment because friends, family members, doctors, or employers ask (or demand) them to? We have already seen practitioner’s public narratives in which checkups were done because of company policy and out of deference to his family, but not when a doctor strongly suggested it. Would practitioners also defer to their family and companies’ wishes when they desire the practitioner to take medicine, get an operation, and so forth? Like with the other two issues, there are a few excerpts from public practitioner narratives that I think might be helpful in answering these questions. First, there is Kathy Gillis, a 63-year-old Canadian woman with half her thyroid removed:

Recently, I have been trying to balance my need to clear away my last medical issue without causing my very caring doctor to feel personally rejected or a failure. My story is as follows.

Half of my thyroid gland was removed 35 years ago... When I discovered that many Falun Dafa practitioners do not need to take medicine, I thought that it was expecting too much of Falun Dafa to restore the function of a gland that had been

surgically removed. However, I also thought, "At my next routine test I will check my level and request that my doctor test my levels more often, so that I will be able to gradually cut back on my medication." After the blood test, I received a rather panicky message from my doctor asking me to come in to see her right away. She told me that my level was extremely high, and it was dangerous for my heart. Instead of being concerned, I was pleased because I understood that I no longer needed the medication.

I could have simply stopped going to see my doctor and stopped having tests at that point, but I thought of how my doctor would feel if I did that. Instead, I decided to involve her in what I was doing and in making decisions. I have been fortunate enough to have an open-minded doctor ... Perhaps because she has been reading about Falun Dafa, she was not surprised when I told her that I had decided not to take any more thyroid medication. She simply gave me a requisition for a blood test "in case I should have problems," thereby fulfilling her responsibility as a doctor. [McCoy and Zhang n.d.: 48-49]

Second, we have Guo-Rong Lin, the previously mentioned 56-year old Taiwanese practitioner diagnosed with prostate cancer:

One day in January 1997, I was helping my mother to the bathroom for a shower. Just as I was bending down, I lost my balance and fractured my backbone with a frightening snap. I was not able to stand up. My wife and mother were stupefied. I immediately realized that I was a practitioner and I shouldn't be afraid of anything. I tried to get up from the ground and told them, "I am fine. Don't worry." Then an amazing thing happened. For a few days, I didn't feel any pain during the daytime, and I could go to work as usual. But during the night my back pain was unbearable. I had to endure the excruciating pain throughout the night. It was hard for me to turn over in bed. It was even harder for me to get out of bed. *I had to keep this to myself in order not to disturb my family.* That was a terribly painful experience. I knew it was my own tribulation caused by my karma. So I had to overcome it all by myself. And I knew that if I wanted to overcome it, I would make it. I was fully conscious of what was going on and how I should conduct myself. I continued to practice and study Dafa and extended my practice time whenever possible during that period. I became even more diligent in practicing cultivation. Two weeks later my pain diminished substantially. Three weeks later my pain was totally gone. My back was straightened. My chronic back pain has also disappeared. [McCoy and Zhang n.d.: 21-22, emphasis added]

One thing both of these stories have in common is a concern by the practitioner that the non-practitioner friends and family members may worry about them if they do not seek medical attention like a non-practitioner would. The difference between the two is that in one case, the person worrying about the practitioner is expected to be accepting of the decision to not use medical treatment, while in the other case, the practitioner thought the family would be "disturbed" by his decision, so he kept it a secret from them.

From these incidents, it appears that the Falun Gong personal experiences that are shared in a public way are intended to provide examples of how Li Hongzhi's teachings have changed their lives for the better, which include his teachings about illness and karma. These practitioners are shown to interpret their pain as karma cleansing rather than illness, and as a result, miraculous recoveries occur. So far, it seems that both the writings of Li Hongzhi and the publicly available practitioner narratives support Patsy

Rahn's assertion that Falun Gong creates an environment conducive to the abandonment of medical care. However, before concluding that the Falun Gong critics are correct, we should first examine how well the teachings and examples quoted above match up with my research findings.

### **Interview Findings**

After talking to dozens of practitioners about the health care issue, I found a much greater variation of responses than one might expect from just reading the teachings of Li Hongzhi or the publicly available practitioner narratives. Before I get into discussing this range of responses, reflexivity requires I point out a confounding factor to my analysis. Practitioners took different views of me; at least one of the practitioners I met considered me a fellow practitioner, one person called me a "half-practitioner," and at least one person undoubtedly saw me as an "ordinary person" and took a dim view of my research (though this person did not make time for me to interview him anyway). Recall the incident mentioned above where the practitioner fractured his backbone and merely said, "I am fine. Don't worry" to his family to avoid worrying them; this seems to suggest that practitioners might tailor their responses similarly if they thought I would not understand the concept of karma-cleansing tribulations. In addition, since practitioners are expected to safeguard the reputation of Falun Dafa, those who felt uncertain about my ability to comprehend or whether I would present Falun Gong in a favorable light may have decided to err on the side of caution. Falun Gong practitioners believe in truthfulness, so I am certain that they would not lie to me. However, there is a theme in Falun Dafa that there are different levels of understanding (Li Hongzhi 1999b: 8-13; PureInsight.org 2002e), and new students should not be told "things that are too high-level" (Li 2002b: 23). I generally got four types of responses that indicated to me that the person might have some reluctance to use medical treatment.

First, there was unwillingness among some to admit that getting an illness was a possibility; as Yu Wang said when I asked if she thought she would not get ill, "No. I don't think—because I just feel great." She then added that if she got minor problems, she would just tolerate them. This suggests, however, that she is only expecting minor problems; the narrative she is operating under might seem inadequate were she to encounter a problem that was too painful or long-lasting for her to consider it minor. Some people didn't comment on the likelihood of getting an illness because they simply did not wish to think about it; for

example, one Western practitioner said she would “cross that bridge when I come to it, if I come to it.” Some practitioners did not think that they would get ill, but seemed willing to entertain it as a hypothetical situation; Jiaxin Luo said: “I don’t think I will have a disease, but if I do—If I think it’s a disease, I’m going to go [get medical treatment].” Xuezhen Xie had a similar viewpoint: “If there’s a really serious problem, maybe [I’ll] go to...have it checked out... but I don’t have that experience.” Zhenzhen Guo seemed the least open to the possibility of seeking medical treatment, replying, ““if [that] did happen, I could solve problem by myself, maybe.” It should be noted that even she ended her reply with “maybe,” however, indicating her uncertainty about this.

Second, there was unwillingness to self-diagnose symptoms as being an actual illness. Yuanming Li was the one who best exemplified this reluctance to use medical treatment:

Yeah, if you have injury—that means—If you have problem, you should go to doctor. Yeah. If you feel—if you—if you—But, you cannot *think* you should go to doctor. That’s a difference, you know. I think, you know, if you have problem, okay—if it’s a really serious problem, okay, you know it. If a doctor say it needs surgery, it’s okay for the doctor to do it, okay? But, actually, we know...sometimes, if you are really healthy, you *know* yourself, you know? People—because your body is yours, you know? It’s not ours. You *know* it is a problem or not, okay? Sometimes we have some little phenomena. We call it *Shao wei*, okay? That is “just a little bit fever.” But just once things recovered, okay? Just for a little—I—you—We know. We—we—we’re not so nervous. “Oh, I’m a feeling”—That’s okay. So, if you—we know ourselves very well, okay? We check ourselves. If we see our healthy condition all the time, we know it. Because if everything from inside give you information, okay, to let you know if it is a real problem just a surface phenomenon. It’s gone, okay, that’s all.

Yuanming Li told me that he had stomach problems that had disappeared because of Falun Gong, so I asked him what he would do if the stomach problems came back worse than ever. He said:

Sometimes, it’s cold, maybe *Shao wei* or something, because—sometimes, um—just only one times I know, okay. It feel very cold, okay? I feel very cold, and I shall say, “Okay, I drink some water, and I have good sleep,” okay? Because I practice everyday, okay? Tomorrow morning, it’s all done. It’s all—it’s—everything just disappeared. So, that means this is not—You can say it’s illness, but actually illness has different level. Some is real illness. Some is just to...[Jerry jumps in and says “Psychosomatic. Up here,” pointing at his head.] Yeah, yeah. Up here.

Again, we see that the narrative is structured in such a way that forbearance of the pain is said to bring about, and seems to coincide with, a relatively quick end to it.

Third, there was making a strong distinction between the seriousness of injuries and of illnesses. “The only [way] that I imagine I could get into that situation is a car accident. I may have broken legs, and then I’d go to hospital,” Jing Yang said. Adam said, “If I have my arm broken or something like that, I

would obviously go and get a cast and things like that.” Joel summarized this distinction best when he said: “Injury is not such an issue as illness.”

Fourth, there was a preference for Falun Gong over medical treatment. That is, the person does not explicitly rule out the possibility of seeing a doctor, but states that Falun Gong would definitely be their first choice in addressing the problem. Debra from Orlando, for example, said, “I’d talk to some practitioners before a doctor.” Lianer Cao gave a similar answer:

I do not think I will be free from any illness or injury after my practicing FLG, but I believe it is very effective in developing a strong immunity system in one's body. If I ever had any serious symptoms, I will choose the best way to handle these: western medicine, Chinese medicine, or FLG. Probably I will choose FLG because I believe it can eradicate the disease.

Once again, we see some reluctance to use medical treatment for symptoms of illness, but not a complete refusal. Should Falun Gong fail to end her suffering in a reasonable amount of time, I believe it is very likely that a person like this would seek medical attention.

In addition to practitioners who showed reluctance towards the idea of using medical treatment, there were some practitioners who had no qualms about relying on medical treatment, much like the practitioner that Palmer (2003) says “rattled a bottle of her kidney stones in [her] face, that had been removed by a surgeon” (p. 353). Most of these people are either new practitioners, or they people who have been practicing casually and have not strongly internalized the identity of a practitioner. A Chinese practitioner, one of the doubters, said he was in a car accident and had to go to the hospital. While there in the hospital, the doctor offered him some medicine; “I accepted it,” he said. I asked him if he had any problem with accepting it, and he replied, “No. Not any problem.” Joel, one of the Internet practitioners I contacted, seemed to have a unique perspective on this issue; he seemed to believe in Li Hongzhi’s teachings, but was critical of how his fellow practitioners interpreted them. When I asked if he had gotten medical treatment for anything since practicing Falun Gong, he wrote:

Of course! The world will not be turned upside down as some people think! The difference is you know when, and why. Cultivation is of heart and mind. When the two are joined as one, wisdom is the by product. YOU are a great practitioner, for what ever reason you get a broken arm, you say my xinxing is good and don't go to the doctor. YOU have a heart attack for what ever reason, you don't go to the doctor because you say your xinxing is good. You are dead, now how do you cultivate? Too many people with false understandings. Of course not every instance is like this but you can get a little of my train of thought on this issue.



It would seem that he has many of the same concerns as the critics of Falun Gong about practitioners not getting medical care.

In terms of actual behavior, I have less information to go on because most practitioners have told me they have not had any sort of serious illness that would require hospitalization or medication. However, there are a few incidents I have encountered related to this issue. First, I would like to review two anecdotes from sources not affiliated with Falun Gong or the Chinese government. The first comes from a newspaper article that is critical of Falun Gong:

The Zen-riddle-like suggestion is what [Chi Hua, a female practitioner in her fifties] offered one new [practitioner] when she consulted her about a lump in her body and asked whether she should go to the hospital and have it checked. According to Chi, everything is in the mind, and Falun Gong will work only when no doubt is left in there—to the degree that even a momentary wavering is dangerous.

"An old lady suddenly said one day during an exercise session, 'Oh, maybe I should just go to a hospital and make sure.' We immediately understood that her faith was broken, and we asked her children to please take her to a hospital right away," said Chi. [Xiang 1999]

In the first incident, one practitioner has a doubt about whether she should really be avoiding medical treatment; as a result, the practitioners encouraged her to go immediately, and informed the woman's children to take her. This suggests that not only will practitioners not apply social pressure to keep practitioners from getting medical treatment, but may actually use social pressure (in this case, getting one's children involved) to get people to go to the hospital. While this article was intended to portray Falun Gong as dangerous by making the reader wonder what would happen if she did not mention going to hospital to the other practitioners, it shows that practitioners can and do seek medical treatment. The second comes from a group that calls itself "Cult Counseling America" and describes itself as a counseling agency that charges a fee for its services. An article on their site said:

What worries me the most is that ever since my parents became Falun Gong practitioners they have abandoned seeking medical treatment when needed. In *Zhuan Falun*, Li claims that his practitioners' illnesses will be cured directly by him... Due to this teaching my stepfather suffered unnecessarily during previous attacks of gout and flu.

Worrying about my parent's health and trying to protect them from this cult, I started to question Li's teachings long before my stepfather's stroke. In so doing, I sadly discovered how greatly their worldview had changed. In stating their belief that Li has supernatural power, that the world is coming to an end, that sickness is caused by bad deeds, and that demons are everywhere, I realized that they had been brain washed. Our discussion soon turned into debate and then argument. To my shock my mother called me evil.

After our second argument I moved out. Living at home with my parents had become painful and uneasy. It hurts me to see them hurting themselves and I can't do a thing about it. I have even started to feel anxiety, anger, and sadness.

When my stepfather had the stroke in January, we were traveling in China. He went without medical treatment for approximately five days. While he was alone in the house two friends came to visit him and offered to take him to the hospital. Although the right side of his body was paralyzed he was able to open the door for his friends. He could have gone to the hospital at that time, but he refused due to his belief in Li's teachings. Days later my sister returned home and found him sick. She had to beg and cry for him to go to the hospital. When he finally got to the hospital, the doctor pointed out that he could have died if he hadn't been treated for another two days. He was in the hospital for a month. [MyOwnMind.com 2002]

Because this group makes its' money by offering counseling services for those dealing with so-called cults, it stands to reason that they have motivation to portray different groups they deal with in the harshest tone possible, and not go to as great of lengths to verify the accuracy of such stories. However, assuming this story is more or less accurate, then, in this case, we again see a practitioner who was reluctant to use medical care at first, but finally gave in. Still, in both of these cases, critics of Falun Gong would probably argue that their reluctance put their life in danger unnecessarily, and that they could have died if they had held off longer (by just two days, as claimed in the second case). However, is the reluctance to get medical care in the face of continually worsening symptoms as reported in this anecdote typical of the majority (or even a significant portion) of practitioners?

My participant-observation and interviews indicate that it is not typical. Several incidents have been illustrative of this. First, Zhenzhen Guo was pregnant, and she had gone to the hospital for issues relating to her unborn child. Second, Xuezhen Xie needed medicine for seasickness to go on cruise for research once; he had forgotten about this when I first asked if he had relied on medicine or medical care since becoming a practitioner, but his wife reminded him. Third, Chase reported that he once got flu-like symptoms that caused him to seek medical help:

I actually, um... tried to hold out without taking any medication, and let—and allow this, um... impurity to leave my body... and, um... I was able to do that, and then a couple of months later, it actually came back again... and this time, I have to admit that I... broke down, and went to a doctor and took some medication for it, and it did go away, and since then...um... I had some... mixed feelings on that, but... since then, I've been feeling great, and that was about three months ago.

He later added, "Even though I did take the medication, I'm hoping that the karma was allowed to...leave, and not come back at a future date." Fourth, Nappi had a bad toothache, and was about to go to dentist when he changed his mind at the last minute; he claims the pain was gone the next day. Were it not, I imagine the fact that he was initially willing go to the dentist the first time is a good indicator he would have gone back if the pain did not subside.

One last issue that needs to be addressed is whether children practitioners receive medical care or not. This issue has long been a source of problems for the Christian Science Church, which has been accused of relying on prayer instead of medicine and allowed children to die because of this (Fraser 1995). Patsy Rahn quotes from a testimonial on a Falun Gong website to imply that Falun Gong may do this as well:

In another testimonial on the Falun Gong website, one eight year old girl tells of her four year old brother who refused medicine at school saying "I fell over today. Teacher wanted to give me medicine, and I refused it. I endured." His mother replied that he was a "true practitioner". The eight year old girl then tells us that she has a sister who died of a high fever and how "Once I had a high fever. Because my father did not cultivate, he forced me to go to hospital and take medicine. " But her mother, a practitioner, asked her "Do you think you are ill?" And she said "No, it is my karma elimination process. I won't go to hospital." [Rahn 2000]

This particular testimonial leaves me with some doubts, however. The girl's sister was said to die of a high fever, and then her testimonial says that she had a high fever; the natural assumption here is that she had the same condition that her sister died from. However, "fever is a symptom of almost every disease known to man." (Demick 2001) Therefore, it is quite possible that this practitioner had a far milder condition than what her sister died of, and was in little or no danger. Also, contrary to what at least one experience-sharing article suggests (Clearwisdom.net 1999o: 7), I found that Zhenzhen Guo was willing to go to the hospital for her unborn child. After her child was born, she got the baby immunizations and was going to give it medicine when it got sick. This suggests that practitioners are perfectly willing to seek medical treatment for their children. Finally, Andrew, one of the Internet practitioners, gave the best refutation to this claim:

No I do not [have children]. But I can tell you instances I have seen; for example, a few months ago I was at a FG reading session at Stanford and the child of one of the practitioners had a seizure. Everyone quickly said he should be taken to the hospital we quickly rushed him to Stanford ER where he was admitted for a work up, and discharged the following day. In answering this question I would like to clarify the misconceptions that surround the issue of medications and refusal of medical care that the PRC spews out in its propaganda. I am a medical doctor and think I can give an objective view of what I have seen in the practitioners and families I have met. The practitioners I have been in contact with are very responsible to their own health, especially those of family members who are not practitioners, such as their children. Falun Gong is not like some groups I have seen such as Christian scientist, Jehovah witness, or others who do refuse medical treatment for themselves and their children which at times brings up ethical dilemmas in the field of medicine. The children of practitioners are brought up like any other child, with a pediatrician, full immunizations, and medical care is sought when necessary such as the case I witnessed above.

Given all this, I do not think the children of practitioners are at risk of dying from medical neglect.

## Concluding Remarks on the Health Care Controversy

To review, the accusation that Li Hongzhi forbids the use of medicine is untrue, but there does seem to be credible evidence that critics like Patsy Rahn are correct in stating that Falun Gong creates an environment that encourages practitioners not to use medical care. Li Hongzhi teaches that sickness results from karma accumulated over several lifetimes, and that medical care merely pushes the karma back to resurface at a later time, while Falun Gong enables the practitioner to eliminate the karma for good by enduring the suffering it causes. The publicly available practitioner narratives, intended to guide and inspire other practitioners, show practitioners enduring their symptoms and then feeling better after a short period of time. My research findings suggest that casual practitioners do not share this attitude towards medical care, but many of the faithful practitioners do. However, it seems that many of the faithful practitioners who have this attitude have had good health since becoming a Falun Gong practitioner, and therefore the narrative has worked for them. When we examine cases in which the narrative did not work – in other words, where suffering was intense and did not subside after a short period of time – it appears that practitioners are willing to be pragmatic and get treatment. However, the fact remains that some practitioners get illnesses and hold out on getting medical treatment for as long as they can mentally endure, and (from the viewpoint of a non-practitioner) this means that there are greater health risks associated with being a practitioner than not being one. While this shows the portraits painted by critics may be exaggerated, it may still be viewed as problematic by some, depending on their philosophical viewpoint. There are some parallels between this and Christian Science; while children do seem to be put at risk like in Christian Science, drawing upon the arguments made in that debate about assessing risk may be useful for this analysis.

Margaret P. Battin, a critic of Christian Science, condemns the religion on the grounds of informed consent. Battin makes use of the concepts of "risk budget" and "risk style," where risk budget is "the degree and severity of risk he or she is willing to accept in order to avoid certain losses or achieve certain gains," and risk style is "the degree of deliberation or abandon he or she exercises in making prudential calculation under risk or uncertainty" (Battin 1999a: 9). She goes on to say:

...the kinds of risk characteristically taken by members of these groups often fall well outside the risk budgets and, in addition, violate the risk styles of most other members of

the culture ordinarily display in their decisions. Put another way, the members of certain religious groups like Christian Science take risks other people do not and decide to do so in ways that other people would not, but they nevertheless do so in remarkably uniform ways. Nor are these trivial risks; some are potentially fatal ones. [Battin 1999a: 10]

She believes that Christian Science is morally wrong because “the choice between Christian Science healing and conventional medical treatment does not constitute a subjectively recognized *risk* for the devout Scientist” (Battin 1999a: 12). Christian Scientists are aware of the availability of medical treatment, but she claims they systematically miscalculate the likelihood that each will bring a cure:

Take, for instance, the case of the Christian Scientist with acute appendicitis who seeks relief. Like other members of contemporary society, he or she will have some background understanding of the likelihood of untreated appendicitis’s resulting in death. Although this is by no means a scientifically rigorous conception, the person can say, for instance, that the likelihood of death is greater in untreated appendicitis than in, for example, untreated influenza. However, the teachings of the individual’s church persuade him or her that although this background information accepted by nonbelievers and correctly describes the probabilities confronting them, the probabilities are quite different for persons who understand the nonphysical nature of illness and disease, the power of Christian Science healing, and the true nature of prayer. The believer holds that achieving a correct understanding of “illness” and “disease” as resulting from defective mental attitudes will free him or her from them, even when the risks would otherwise be very high... [Battin 1999a: 14]

The similarities to Falun Dafa should be apparent by this point; Li Hongzhi’s teachings claim that for a genuine practitioner, all illnesses will be cleared from the body, and what seems to be an illness is just karma being cleansed. DesAutels (1999a) counters Battin’s criticism by arguing that “the choice of both Christian Scientists and non-Christian Scientists is not one of simply deciding between alternative approaches to curing disease but is one of deciding between alternative worldviews” (p. 40), and then goes on to say that the choice between the two “(each with its own internal consistency, empirical verification, and demonstrated beneficial results) becomes a matter of individual responsibility or conscience” (p. 50).

Another similarity to Christian Science is the use of the public narratives to reaffirm efficacy: “These testimonials are typically quite detailed and fervently sincere in tone; they are direct, firsthand account of what is often an extremely powerful, faith-confirming experience” (Battin 1999a: 14). However, Battin feels these testimonials do not adequately inform Christian Scientists of the risks they are taking because “the record is wholly anecdotal in form, appealing simply to isolated cases without reference either to general patterns or trends or comparisons based on control groups” (Battin 1999a: 15). Falun Dafa might be better this regard than Christian Science because it has made at least two studies of this sort available to practitioners in some detail, although they suffer from methodological problems, thus

perhaps not alleviating the concerns of critics. First, there was the "Falun Gong Health Effect Survey of Ten-thousand Cases in Beijing," which had a very impressive sample size, but suffered because of its reliance on self-reported rather than medically-verified improvement. In addition, the questionnaire used an inadequate range of answers, as can be seen from this question in their appendix:

2. Health condition after practice: [ ]
- A. Completely recovered.
  - B. Significantly improved.
  - C. Improved.
  - D. No change. [Clearwisdom.net 1998]

If a person's health condition got worse, there is nothing there is no way they could indicate this; the closest option is to say there is no change. This particular problem was fixed in the second survey, "Summary of Results from the 1999 Health Survey of Falun Gong Practitioners in North America," but the results still remained self-reported. They did try to get this study published in an academic journal, but it was not accepted:

Based on the positive survey results, around February of 2001 we wrote a paper and submitted it to an academic public health journal. The review sent back it to us around July of 2001 with somewhat negative comments. One of the critiques was that the response rate was not given, i.e. out of how many survey questionnaires did we receive 235 responses. This was considered a major drawback of the paper and the results. Due to various reasons, we did not attempt to revise the paper and submit it again. [Pureinsight.org 2003]

Had the author not been so vague here, he or she perhaps could have had an article that would better alleviate the inevitable concerns of Falun Gong critics. We are left to wonder what are the other critiques this reviewer made. We are also left to wonder what are these "various reasons" that the author did not attempt to revise and resubmit the article – was it because it would be impractical or too time-consuming to address the concerns of the reviewer, or was it because a scientifically rigorous study would not have supported their conclusions? Critics of Falun Gong will most likely assume the latter.

It is debatable whether scientific acceptance is necessary for either Christian Science or Falun Gong, however. Battin writes, "My challenge to Christian Science was, in essence, a 'put-up-or-shut-up' one – either prove that Christian Science healing is effective or stop making the claim that it *is* effective..." (Battin 1999b: 54). She contends that by making any sort of claims that their beliefs and practices have an effect on illness, that creates an obligation for them to demonstrate this through rigorous, quantitative studies, and gives some suggestions of how this could be done (p. 55-56). DesAutels replies, "Battin

remains in the grip of the medical paradigm. The type of information she maintains should be ‘put up’ by the Christian Science Church...is the type of information appropriate only to the medical model of health” (DesAutels 1999b: 63). She contends that because the choice between Christian Science and the medical model of health is a choice between two worldviews, and, in the Christian Science worldview, such information is not necessary to make a rational decision. Disease cure rates are intrinsically rooted in the medical model of health:

For medical science, health is nothing more than disease management and measurements of health care effective are nothing more than measurements of how effectively a health care system controls physiological pathologies. But healing, health, and well-being are not reducible to objective (scientific) measurements of altered pathologies. The point I am making here is no different from the position espoused by the World Health Organization (WHO)—that health should be broadly construed as consisting of physical, mental, and social well-being. [DesAutels 1999b: 67]

The health care criticisms of Falun Gong similarly seem to rest upon a view of wellbeing only in terms of scientific measurements:

It's interesting to observe that, although Li explicitly prohibited any terminally ill and mentally ill people from practicing Falungong, he and his disciples always claimed that Falungong had cured thousands of terminally ill patients who became a believer after failed medical treatments. However, it is general agreed in medical science that testimonials and self-validating statements in lieu of controlled scientific tests had no scientific value. [Deng and Fang 2000: 20]

Falun Gong has described itself as a science, but it does not claim to rely upon the same epistemic and ontological assumptions of conventional science (see PureInsight.org 2002e). This has been clearly shown in a statement that was on FalunDafa.org in 1999 following the crackdown:

Modern scientists have invented various precision instruments to probe the laws of the universe. However, they agree that the human body itself is a most complex instrument, equipped with capabilities for information gathering, dissemination, analysis, storage, and retrieval, and that there is still much to be discovered about the workings of the human brain. We feel that the human body itself is the most effective instrument to probe the universe and life. In the course of cultivation we experience a gradual "enlightenment" to many universal truths and phenomena not yet explained, though widely acknowledged by scientists and the general public. Because of this, we consider Falun Dafa a higher, although not conventional, science.

In addition, Pureinsight.org has featured articles about the limits of empiricism (Pureinsight.org 2002f) and critical of modern science for its basic assumption of atheism (Pureinsight.org 2002b). Falun Dafa clearly has a different worldview than the standard scientific medical model uses, and therefore DesAutels’ reply to Battin also seems applicable to Deng and Fang:

Battin appears to be defending the view that we shouldn't tell each other instructive or inspirational stories of any sort unless we provide related "scientific" evidence for the effectiveness of the approaches taken in the stories. She also appears to be defending the view that even in religious settings, only medically defined health and healing should be discussed. But deciding the kind of health and healing most worth having and determining what counts as proof of healing effectiveness is not nor ever can be the sole purview of those who, like Battin, worship at the altar of medical materialism. Need I remind Battin that in spite of medical advancements, all human beings face death? And that prior to death, all humans must decide what most contributes to a life worth living? Health does matter to Christian Scientists, and they do expect to experience it; but what most matters to Christian Scientists are the deeply *spiritual* aspects of health and healing experienced during (and after) life here on earth. [DesAutels 1999b: 68-69]

Indeed, we find that practitioners of Falun Dafa take a view of health that does not rely upon rational choices from a scientific paradigm, but which is perfectly rational within its' own worldview. If we accept that people should be able to choose their own worldview, then Falun Dafa is arguably the better of the two; Falun Dafa significantly diverges from Christian Science when it comes to how practitioners react to other practitioners who decide to use medical treatment for their (symptoms of) illness. While a Christian Scientist who goes to a hospital may find himself or herself denied the services of Christian Science practitioners (Battin 1999a: 19), Falun Dafa practitioners, as I have shown, will not pressure a practitioner who wants to get medical treatment not to do so. For example, recall the anecdote where a woman just wondered aloud if she should go to the hospital, and then the practitioners told her to go and told her children to take her (Xiang 1999).

As long as Falun Gong practitioners do not interfere with the lives of non-practitioners, I believe they should be afforded the same courtesy. Why should modern science establish hegemony over the risk-assessment of other belief systems? It seems almost perverse to me that someone could argue that Falun Gong beliefs might cause practitioners to neglect their health in order to support a brutal crackdown that is a far greater threat to their lives. In addition, some social scientists have called for the "broadening of the bio-psychosocial model to include the spiritual" (Mansfield, et al. 2002: 46), which would entail taking the satisfaction practitioners get from the practice into account.

Finally, we should not prematurely dismiss the possibility of linkages between the practice of Falun Gong and health benefits (not including the spiritual). While there may have been methodological flaws with the health research done so far done by practitioners (Deng and Fang 2000: 20), this does not mean that health benefits are necessarily non-existent. There is some evidence for the positive health effects as a result of religiosity (Powell, et al. 2003; Seeman, et al. 2003). In addition, there are some



historical precedents for spiritual belief systems having a positive effect on health that has not yet been recognized outside the faith; for example, “Adventists avoided alcohol, tobacco, and meat, and they have upheld these restrictions through decades in which they were marked as blatant cranks” (Jenkins 2000: 235). However, later on, “this deviant population provided an ideal control group for researchers exploring the effects of eating red meat and smoking, and the resulting studies produced ample evidence that Adventists tended to live far longer than their non-Adventist neighbors” (p. 235). This is not to say that Falun Gong will necessarily produce similar results, but merely to point out the possibility, however probable or improbable one believes it to be, that it could.

### Social Structure

In a book review of *Power of the Wheel: The Falun Gong Revolution* (Adams, et al. 2000), Chao (2002: 591) criticized the book for neglecting the following important organizational questions: “...how are the stations established and maintained? What kind of social and political units besides kinship provide the basis of the network? How are profits from sales of the books and cassettes distributed?” In this section, I will address these questions as best I can, given the available evidence.

### Six Periods of Loose Organizational Structure

**Table 7: The Six Periods of Falun Gong**

Period	Dates	Diffuseness?	Li Hongzhi public lectures?	Part of CQRS?	Communication Hierarchy?	Internet?	Legal in China?	Fa Rectification?
1	May 1992 (one month)	localized	Yes; local: Changchun	No	No	No	Yes	No
2	June 1992 to September 1994	national	Yes; national	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
3	September 1994 to March 1996	national	No (assistants only)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
4	March 1996 to early 1997	international	Yes; international	In flux	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
5	early 1997 to mid-1999	international	Yes; international	No	No (Internet only)	Yes	Yes	No
6	mid-1999 to present	international	Yes; international	No	No (Internet only)	Yes	No	Yes

As mentioned in chapter 2, Falun Gong's type and degree of organization has changed throughout its' existence. There are roughly six identifiable periods in Falun Gong's organizational history: (1) the very beginning in May 1992 when Li Hongzhi gave a couple lectures in Changchun, (2) the establishment of the Falun Gong Research Society (*Falun gong yanjiuhui*) and the Falun Gong Branch Research Society (*Falun gong yanjiu fenhui*) under the Chinese Qigong Research Society from June 1992 to September 1994, (3) the period from September 1994 to March 1996 when Li Hongzhi stopped giving lectures in China and the Falun Gong Branch Research Society often operated remotely from him, still as part of the Chinese Qigong Research Society, (4) the period from March 1996 to early 1997 when the Falun Gong Research Society filed for withdrawal from the Chinese Qigong Research Society and attempted to be reclassified, (5) the period from early 1997 to 1999 where the Falun Gong Research Society had officially disbanded and Falun Gong practitioners had adopted a mostly non-hierarchical, non-bureaucratic form of organization, and finally (6) the period from the crackdown in mid-1999 to present, where practitioners have been forced underground in China.

When I told a practitioner about this typology of mine, he said that he did not see much difference between the six periods. Falun Gong has tended to adopt as loose an organizational structure as is legally possible. Another practitioner wrote: "Falun Gong has no formal organization. (Note: some names like 'Falun Dafa Association of New York' was only founded because by the law of a country we need something like that to function properly or legally. If without such legal stipulation, there will even no such names existing." Jianping Chu said something similar about why there was a Falun Dafa Club at the University of South Florida. Without registration as a student organization, the university would not have allowed Jianping Chu benefits like reserving a room to meet in on campus and the opportunity to have a booth at campus events.

The first period was a very short one. Li Hongzhi took unpaid leave from the grain and oil company he was working at to give a lecture in Changchun. There was no organization to speak of it this point, just Li Hongzhi and his teachings. "If Li hadn't succeeded that day," wrote Adams, et al. (2000: 10), "he might have disappeared, never to be heard from again, like a special guest or warm-up act who didn't click with the crowd." After his wildly successful first speech in May 1992, the crowd swarmed around him and many offered to help Li Hongzhi spread his message. This included his brother Honghui, who quit

his job as a Communist Party official who specialized in international trade commissions. Li Hongzhi was invited back a few weeks later, with thousands in attendance (Adams, et al. 2000: 11).

During the second period, from June 1992 to September 1994, Falun Gong's organizational structure was partially determined by the Chinese Qigong Research Society. Following the crackdown, articles critical of Falun Gong usually give a hierarchical chart of the organization Falun Gong which goes from Li Hongzhi at the top, Headquarters at city/provincial level, branches, 39 teaching centers or main stations, 1,9000 instruction centers or guidance stations, and 28,263 practice sites (Wong 1999: 25; Tong 2002a: 642-643). However, one of my key informants pointed out "this [is] required by [the] Chinese Qigong Association. All qigong have this structure." Therefore, it should only be assumed to be applicable while Falun Gong was under the auspices of the Chinese Qigong Research Society.

Since critics of Falun Gong have asserted that "evidence exists that Falungong is a well-structured group, with four to five layers" (Deng and Fang 2000: 16), it must be addressed what went on at each level of the organizational structure. The headquarters in Beijing had a translation committee, a committee to manage the distribution of documents, and liaisons that practitioners could correspond with about the exercises of Falun Gong (Tong 2002a: 644). Li Hongzhi wrote four regulations for the guidance centers (Li 2001a: 44-48), while the Beijing headquarters did not write any. "In the absence of national regulations from Beijing, the Shanghai main station had to write its own regulations and job descriptions of the head officials of guidance stations and tracts, and those of instructors" (Tong 2002a: 644-645). Tong goes on to say that the evidence did not suggest that the headquarters in Beijing was "an elaborate national corporate headquarters, with complex organizational structure, bureaucratic staff, and specialized agencies" (p. 645). As for the 39 teaching centers or main stations, more information is known. Tong (2002a) gives the following descriptions of five different main stations:

- "...the Beijing main station had three functional committees (*zu*) – doctrine and method, logistics and operations, and propaganda" (p. 645)
- "...the Shanghai main station also had three committees – doctrine and method, operations, and propaganda" (p. 645)
- "...the Fuzhou main station had management, propaganda, material, liaison and instruction committees" (p. 645)
- "It is the Changchun main station, the earliest, founded by Li Hongzhi himself, for which there is the most detailed description. Its three divisions and one office in June 1993 were reorganized in late 1993 into two divisions and one office. The doctrine and method division was given the task of organizing scientific research on the human body; identifying followers with special physical powers and reporting them to higher levels; instructing and inspecting the work of guidance counselors. The information and material division was empowered to build the information

network of guidance stations; collect information at fixed or variable time periods; and establish case files and monitor the progress of adherent practicing *falun gong*. The general office was given the task of formulating long-term education programme on *falun gong* doctrine and method; organizing and coordinating main station activities and managing its finances; liaising with outside organizations; disseminating the communiqués of the main station committee; selecting meeting sites; and receiving, managing and distributing *falun gong* publications and paraphernalia. Both divisions and the general office were given the additional task of fulfilling chores assigned to them by the main committee.” (p. 645)

- “Like Changchun, the Changde main station in Hunan also served two-way communications functions, exercise instruction and rectification. It also convened biweekly meetings for urban *falun gong* leaders to study doctrine; and organized annual conferences...to promote the *falun gong* method. Apart from the three functional committees (material, publicity, and external liaison), the Wuhan main station was subdivided into three geographical stations... underneath which were guidance stations and practice sites. It was led by a five-person committee that was empowered to make all decisions on local important activities, and personnel appointments and dismissals. In addition, the Wuhan main station had two special functions. First, it was the national distribution center for *falun gong* books and materials, and distributed 510 containers of publications as container cargo, through vehicles or the postal system to 23 provinces and cities from 1997 to 1999. Secondly, as the southern regional hub of the movement, all instructions and scriptures of the *Falun Dafa* Research Institute in Beijing were communicated through the Wuhan main station to *falun gong* organizations in the eight provinces and municipalities.” (p. 645-646)

All in all, this appears to be a rather loose hierarchy, but one, which, as a practitioner told me, followed the structure that is expected of qigong organizations under the Chinese Qigong Research Society. It is noteworthy that such local variations in organization existed; a stricter level of organization would have most likely designated what committees to form and what to call these committees (p. 649).

During the third period, from September 1994 to March 1996, Li Hongzhi’s popularity had reached the point that he “could not appear in public without attracting huge crowds that would halt traffic for blocks” (Adams, et al. 2000: 21). In *Explaining the Content of Falun Dafa*, Li Hongzhi made some comments that are suggestive of what the organization was like at this time. First, on September 18, 1994, he said:

Why do I ask you to practice together? When you come across questions, you can discuss with each other and exchange views. Those questions can be answered that way. When a person practices by himself and has a question, he might get confused and be puzzled. But at a practice site you can discuss with each other, and a lot of questions can be answered. Actually, to handle a question, just look at your xinxing for the answer, and any question can be answered. But there are still some specific questions that are hard for assistants to handle, for sure. This meeting I’m holding with you is to tackle those questions. This is a special treat for the assistants in Changchun, as other areas don’t have opportunities like this. I have to take care of a lot of things this time while I’m back in town. The students all know this, so they do their best not to disturb me. One ring of the phone might really disrupt what I’m doing, and so a lot of students don’t even call me—I know that. I’m gathering you together to answer some questions for you. The General Center sent me some articles written by students about what they’ve experienced and learned, along with some summaries of issues. But I haven’t had a chance to read them because I’m revising a third book, *Zhuan Falun*, and I have a lot of other things to handle. [Li Hongzhi n.d.: 6]

From this paragraph, we can see that Li Hongzhi is making a speech to just the assistants, but not to the regular practitioners. The fact that he has initiated a dialogue with the assistants and not the rest of his practitioners seems to suggest organizational strata, in the sense that one group of people receives his teachings first and distributes them to those below. Also, we see the practitioners could have contacted him with a phone call; however, it is not clear if all students have his phone number or just a select few. In either case, students were discouraged from contacting him. Second, on December 27, 1994, Li Hongzhi said:

As far as the administration of assistance centers, we've already documented our regulations explicitly, and you have followed them. There are requirements for setting up an assistance center. And we've told you to have new assistance centers report to the one in Beijing or to one of the several main assistance centers. The assistance centers of the provinces and major cities, in particular, should [take responsibility for the assistance centers] within their administrative areas. For example, the Guiyang assistance center should take responsibility for Guizhou province, and the assistance centers of all the counties should contact them in a timely manner. It might not be convenient for each assistance center to contact Beijing. The counties around a big city should also be overseen [by the assistance center of that city]. This helps them to carry out and expand their work. Everyone should be responsible to Falun Gong. If you don't get involved and they do things however they want to and they don't understand what we intend to do, they'll actually go awry and it'll be a loss for Falun Gong. [Li Hongzhi n.d.: 56]

In this paragraph, we see regulations for the initiation and administration of a practice site, which include reporting to main assistance centers. This shows that Falun Gong was obeying the structure required by the Chinese Qigong Research Society. However, the question still remains as to what degree this organization structure remained intact or dissolved following Falun Gong's exit from the Chinese Qigong Research Society. One practitioner who mentioned moving to the U.S. in August 1995 wrote: "Being far away from the Master and the veteran students, the only thing that I feared of the most was being behind in cultivation practice. However, who should I ask if I have questions? It was impossible for me to make international calls all the time and look for someone to answer my questions" (Clearwisdom.net 1999o: 10). From this, it appears the main purpose of the "hierarchy" was for practitioners to have their questions about Falun Gong answered.

It was also during this time period that Falun Gong's presence on the Internet first appeared. After Li Hongzhi left China in 1995, Falun Gong sites were set up (Lin 2001: 222). However, as can be seen from the experience-sharing article quoted above in which a Chinese practitioner who moved to the U.S. spoke as though his telephone were his only option to keep in contact with a practice site assistant

(Clearwisdom.net 1999o: 10), the Internet may not have been a significant way for practitioners to communicate yet. However, its importance would increase quickly, since the “number of [Chinese Internet] users has been doubling every six months” (Hartford 2000: 225).

The fourth period began when Li Hongzhi told Ye Hao and Wang Zhiwen, two “leaders” at the Falun Dafa Research Society in Beijing, to file for official withdrawal from the Chinese Qigong Research Society in March 1996, and they started searching for a new home to keep their status as a legitimate organization. The termination of the registration of the Falun Gong Research Society with the Chinese Qigong Research Society was made official in November 1996. At this time, practitioners claim, “Li had neither taught training seminars nor met *falun gong* practitioners, save for some rare occasions when he met overseas practitioners visiting China” (Tong 2002a: 641). Munekage claims that Li Hongzhi had “found an alternative autonomous place [for promoting Falun Gong] in the publication network driven by market forces...the market structure provided him with an autonomous realm outside of state’s domination” (2001: 103).

The fifth period is the most controversial one; the Chinese government has claimed Falun Gong was still an organization at this time, so their continued existence meant they were an illegal organization, and therefore action against them was justified under Chinese law. Falun Gong claims that it had no organizational structure by this point, and they had written letters to the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Ministry of Public Security to inform them of the measures they had taken to eliminate any semblance of an organization:

They made a formal declaration that the *Falun Dafa* Research Society would cease to exist, reiterated that it would no longer accept donations, abolished its functional offices of translation, publication purchase and distribution, discontinued the concomitant services of purchasing *falun gong* publications and paraphernalia for practitioners, and terminated its practice of responding to practitioners’ enquires over *falun gong* techniques. To demonstrate that there was no longer a centralized, formal command structure, they abolished the nomenclature of main station and main station chiefs, calling these guidance stations as in other stations. To show that the guidance stations were not administrative bodies, they disconnected their telephones, abrogated the position of the liaison officer, and instructed them not to maintain financial accounts or hold inventories. Practitioners thereafter would practice *falun gong* among themselves, or learn from books and videos. [Tong 2002a: 641-642]

However, as a result of this attempt to disband the Falun Dafa Research Society, the Beijing headquarters lost national control of the main stations and guidance stations that formerly were below it in the hierarchy, which lead to “increasing local variations in organizational forms and functions” (Tong 2002a: 644). For

example, the Harbin main station continued to operate under the title of main station rather than rename itself as a guidance station until instructed to do so once again by Beijing in June 1999, only a month before the crackdown (Tong 2002a: 644). A parallel could perhaps be drawn to the result of the oppression of Catholics within China:

The chains of command that bound priests and faithful in obedience to bishops and similar structures were destroyed. Father Hsia operated on his own, underground, as did his nominal bishop. Faith had become an individual and personal matter. When practiced collectively, it was in small groups where the bonds of trust replaced any formal institutional structures. The result was that when, in the early 1980s, the Party sought once again to grasp the levers of control over organized religion created in the 1950s, it turned out that the levers were no longer connected to anything real. [Waldron 2000: 26]

Also, in late-imperial-era China, “innumerable small groups of believers...[were] bound together at the cellular level by personal ties between master” (Ownby 2003: 230). Similarly, once the hierarchical communication structure of Falun Gong had to be abolished, the only “lever” left was Li Hongzhi’s definitional power (and the cultural power that resulted from it), and the remaining vehicles by which it was delivered, such as word of mouth and the Internet. While it may seem disingenuous to maintain Falun Gong websites after writing letters to the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Ministry of Public Security claiming no organization, there are two interrelated reasons to doubt any intent to deceive on the part of practitioners. First, “absent a comprehensive telecommunications law... regulatory policies for the Internet have emerged piecemeal” (Hartford 2000: 256). In other words, it was not always clear what was and was not legally acceptable to do on the Internet in China at the time because precedent was still being established. Second, since the Internet was such a recent phenomenon, its growth was only just beginning, so on-line activities may not have seemed like much of an important issue at the time. As Ownby (2003) noted, “the leadership of the PRC government must bear much of the blame for changing the rules of the game” (p. 236).

The first Internet connection was established in China by 1993 (Bell and Boas 2003: 277), but even by October 1997, China only had 620,000 Internet users. Therefore, even if we were to hypothetically assume that every single one of these was a practitioner, this would still not constitute a majority of the practitioners (CNNIC 1997). Also, the majority of practitioners were over 40 years old, while 78.5% of Internet users in China at the time were between 21-35 years old, and only 11.2% were over 40 (CNNIC 1997). Bell and Boas (2003) agree that “many...assertions of the importance of Falun Gong’s Internet use

are anecdotal or overstate the case” (p. 278). Even so, the number of Internet users in China has tended to double every six months (Hartford 2000: 255), and by 1997, enough sites were set up that there was a concern among some practitioners about other practitioners setting up their own websites and misrepresenting Falun Gong. So, on June 15, 1997, the “The Foreign Liaison Group of Falun Dafa Research Society” posted a notice on the Falun Dafa Bulletin Board that practitioners should not include other qigong, religions, product marketing, and statements by Li Hongzhi not intended for publication (Falun Dafa Bulletin Board 1997; Lin 2001: 222). Practitioners were instructed to report pages that violate these guidelines to Ye Hao or Li Peng; however, this seems not to have been effective because they had to post another note the following year, repeating essentially the same message (Falun Dafa Bulletin Board 1998).

The sixth period is the post-crackdown period. Organizationally, this period is very similar to the fifth, with a couple exceptions. First, within China, practicing in public areas is a surefire way to get arrested, so Falun Gong has been forced underground. Second, since Li Hongzhi described this post-crackdown period as the time of “Fa-Rectification,” in which practitioners are encouraged to take a greater involvement in society to “safeguard the Fa.” A magazine article described gave a telling description of how communications work during this period:

Today, Falun Gong exists in China almost entirely by virtue of the Internet. A savvy coterie of Chinese activists, many of whom live on the lam in safe houses, maintain ties through encrypted e-mails with Falun Gong’s exiled leadership in New York, where Li Hongzhi now lives. It is these underground members who try to keep the movement public by protests or secretly pasting flyers reading “Falun Gong Is Good!” on the walls of apartment blocks. But the network is fraying. “It’s a more autonomous movement now,” says New York-based Falun Gong spokeswoman Gail Rachlin. “It’s harder to stay in touch, and everybody seems to be watched.”

A visit to a Falun Gong safe house requires the kind of spycraft found in espionage novels. A journalist downloads an e-mail encryption program from the Internet and uses it to send his temporary mobile-phone number, the type that doesn’t require registration, to a Falun Gong contact. He follows instructions to enter a crowded restaurant as someone outside secretly keeps watch. The coast is clear. He drives by taxi to a nearby market, walks through it, exits and finds another cab waiting to take him to the safe house. “We’ve figured out a system,” says the organizer, “but we’re amateurs and the government is professional.” (Indeed, that person has since been arrested for other Falun Gong activities.) [Time 2001: 19]

Li Hongzhi explains how he sees the “organization” of Falun Gong and its relationship to the Internet in an interview:



REPORTER: Mr. Li, I want to ask you this: There are so many practitioners in the world -- over one hundred million of them. Which types of channels do you use to communicate with them?

Master Li: There is no channel of communication -- no direct ones. You know, since you all learned about this conference here, so did I. As far as among themselves, why do they all know about what has happened and where? You know that the Internet is very convenient (to use from) all over the world. When a conference is to be held at a certain location, the information is posted on the Internet, and people in many regions of the world will know about it, and I will know about it as well. In fact, ordinarily, I have no contact with them, not even a phone call. [Falundafa.org 1999a]

Madsen describes the Falun Gong organizational structure as being more a little more organized than this:

“A decentralized network of local groups linked through cadres of leaders in contact with their counterparts at different levels of the network. This form of organization was long used by peasant rebels throughout Chinese history—and by the Chinese Communist Party during its insurgency in the 1920s and 1930s”

(2000: 246). Bruseker (2000: 13) also tends to side with the Chinese government’s portrayal of Falun Gong as being highly organized. However, he relies on articles that rely on the Chinese media to do so, which makes this assumption questionable. If Falun Gong was organized to a sufficient degree that it would still need to be registered with the government after leaving the Chinese Qigong Research Society in 1996, this raises the question of why it would be permitted to exist for three years as an illegal organization (Cheng 2002 asks a similar question). Smart (2001), in a discussion about why Hong Kong’s government permitted squatter settlements for many years, mentions five reasons for the persistence of illegality:

Market persistence occurs because continued demand for illegal goods and services create profit opportunities. Ambiguous persistence results from the existence of informal social legitimacy. Managed persistence refers to cases where the government allows and illegal activity to continue in order to reap certain benefits. Rebellious persistence is supported by internal political actors who engage in or protect illegality to support their rebellion. When political actors external to the nation-state support illegal activities in order to undermine state control, subversive persistence pertains. [Smart 2001: 32]

We can see a good example of ambiguous persistence in the way in which laws are enforced on religious groups in China:

Although the law clearly defines the limit, which a religious group can operate in China, the actual implementation of this policy depends greatly on the local cadres' attitude towards religion, as well as the complex socio-political dynamics between local religious believers and the local authority. Thus there exists a vast gray area where religious groups can experience a wide range of treatments-- from dominating the decision of local government to total denial of their constitutional rights. For example: about 80% of the 85,000 population at Fugong County (in Yunnan Province) are Christians and one of their former Governors is an Elder of the Church. Whenever the Fugong Government implements any major policy, the Church is automatically consulted. The neighboring county within the same Prefecture--Lanpin--has a couple thousand Christians but they were refused by the County Government to register despite repeated applications and

intervention by Prefecture Government. Therefore they exist in an illegal status and often harassed by the local authority including arrest, beating, fines and even torn down of the believer's houses. [Chan 2000]

Assuming that Falun Gong was as organized as the Chinese Government claims, ambiguous persistence and managed persistence seem like the most likely candidates for the persistence of it; Falun Gong has supporters throughout Chinese society, including many people within the Chinese Communist Party, government, police and military (Madsen 2000: 246) which would seem to seem to lend the organization some social legitimacy. Managed persistence also seems appropriate; “the Chinese government believed that if large numbers would practice Qigong, and this may well be true, that it would reduce systemic health care costs” (Ownby 2000). Falun Gong seemed to be especially popular among those people in late middle age, who have lived through the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. “Many members of this generation are beginning to face health problems but are losing many of their entitlements to medical benefits because of government retrenchment” (Madsen 2000: 246).

However, those who criticize Falun Gong by claiming it must have been highly organized to mobilize large numbers of practitioners to participate in protests may not be giving enough credit to Falun Gong when they say, “The Overall Noble Conduct of Falun Dafa Practitioners Does Not Result from a Rigid Organization, but from an Integration of Individual Behaviour” (Falundafa.org 1999c). In terms of how Falun Gong is organized now, Li Hongzhi said something that I can personally vouch for: “You are free to come and go. [Falun Gong] has neither a list of names nor any records of anybody” (Faladafa.org 1999a). Susan Palmer, a sociologist who has also been researching Falun Gong in North America, also agrees with their claims of lacking organization:

When I first decided to embark on studying Falun Gong, I hoped to crack the surface within a month and expected to find an efficient core group behind the scenes, masterminding the missionary programs. I had researched other new religions whose leaders were in seclusion...

But Falun Gong does not behave like other new religions. For one thing, its organization - if one can even call it that - is quite nebulous. There are no church buildings, rented spaces, no priests or administrators. At first I assumed this was defensive, that they had established guerrilla-style cells to fend off an intolerant Communist Party.

By now, I'm beginning to think that what you see is exactly what you get - Master Li's letters on the Net on the one hand and a global network of practitioners on the other. Traveling through North America, all I dug up was a handful of volunteer contact persons. The local membership (they vehemently reject that word) is whoever happens to show up at the park on a particular Saturday morning to do qigong. [Palmer 2001: B5]

In this chapter, I have also described how practitioners in D.C. did not accept it when Richard tried to make decisions for the group that others disagreed with. Hine (1977) noted: “Most futurists assume the bureaucratic mode to be the only mechanism by which large numbers of people can be organized” (p. 19). However, she found that “wherever people organize themselves to change some aspect of society, a non-bureaucratic but very effective form of organization structure seems to emerge” (p. 19). (The change in the case of Falun Gong is the right to exist and spread Li Hongzhi’s teachings.) She calls this form of organization a SP(I)N, or “segmented polycephalous [ideological] network.” A SP(I)N is composed of autonomous segments, “any of which could survive the elimination of all the others” (p. 19). It is this feature that has made Falun Gong so hard for the Chinese Government to suppress. Falun Gong does differ from their description of a SP(I)N in one aspect, though: “Movements do not have a single paramount leader who can control or even speak for the entire movement” (1977: 20). Li Hongzhi does not issue orders to Falun Gong practitioners (with the possible exception of the incident with Peng Shan Shan), although he is the authority on what the principles of Falun Gong are. However, it does fit the general characteristic of decentralization even if the authority on the principles is centralized in one leader; aside from Li Hongzhi’s ideological guidance, each group of practitioners is autonomous. “The real key to understanding the power of a SP(I)N is recognizing the nature of the unifying forces to keep the structure from disintegration. One of the forces that integrates a SP(I)N is a range of horizontal organizational linkages; the other is ideological” (1977: 20). There are contact people for different locations for Falun Gong, and I have found that the contact persons for Tampa, St. Petersburg, and Orlando all know and support each other. Another type of horizontal linkage is the “ritual activity,” which in Falun Gong takes several forms, such as conferences, protests, and demonstrations at public events. The ideological bond, the (I) in SP(I)N, is what makes a SP(I)N like Falun Gong so successful. “The power lies in a deep commitment to a very few basic tenets shared by all” (1977: 20). Something similar can be found in many of the grass-root churches in China, where they are “sustained primarily by generating high levels of individual member commitment to the group” (Kindopp 2002: 262). Li Hongzhi encourages practitioners to read *Zhaun Falun* as often as possible, and discourages them from reading the works of other religions or qigong practices; this encourages (though by no means forces) ideological homogeneity. However, despite how Falun Gong appears more ideologically unified than the typical SP(I)N that Hine describes, there are

still “passionate arguments...about conflicting concepts of how to implement movement goals” (1977: 20). For example, I have discovered disagreement among the USF practitioners whether to move their practice site or not. Jianping Chu feels it should stay at the Engineering Building because that is where Internet sites and pamphlets say to contact him, while another practitioner feels that moving their practice site to the center of campus would make them more visible. Jing Yang, a practitioner from St. Petersburg, has told me that before the April 25 incident that got Falun Gong outlawed in China, many practitioners debated among themselves whether their appeal would be seen as a political action and bring dire repercussions.

The main difference between Falun Gong and the SP(I)N style of organization described by Hine (1977), as previously mentioned, is that Li Hongzhi is the spiritual authority; besides this, Falun Gong was more or less a very large network of peers. The “organization” of Falun Gong was overwhelmingly comprised of horizontal linkages, not vertical ones. Even before the Internet, it was the case that word of mouth “travels more quickly than Westerners can imagine; it’s a sort of super-domino effect that moves through 1.3 billion people” (Adams et al. 2000: 22; also see Lowe 2003: 273). When practitioners in China decided to use a health survey to help their reapplication for recognition as an official group in 1998, we can see a very telling example of how Falun Gong functioned as a SP(I)N rather than a traditional hierarchy:

One of the requirements in medical statistics is a high degree of randomness in the population sampled. The larger the sample size, the higher the degree of randomness. Therefore we decided that our survey population would be above a thousand people. We distributed the forms to all the practice sites we knew and asked the assistants at the sites to make copies and distribute to practitioners. Unexpectedly, the forms started to come back in only three days later and we quickly collected more than 1000 forms.

There were many Falun Gong practitioners in China and the news spread fast. Many assistants in other practice sites also asked to have the forms. Therefore we decided to increase our survey population and distribute the forms widely. Usually, it took several months to conduct a large-scale medical survey with more than 1000 participants. At first we felt it would be impossible to do a survey in such a short period of time. However, Chengtao thought that Falun Dafa is extraordinary and we could certainly accomplish it within the time limit. Chengtao volunteered to take responsibility for coordinating and overseeing the project. The practitioners actively participated and put Dafa as a priority.

Everyone did his best. Some practitioners rented the computer facilities; many practitioners who were good at typing came to enter the data into the computers. Some assistants had to run back and forth several times a day to find surveyed practitioners to correct mistakes in the forms, etc. We finally collected more than 15,000 forms.

[ClearHarmony 2002]

The author of this article goes on to say, “The whole process took less than two weeks. Only Dafa could create such miracles with such great changes in so many practitioners' bodies and minds” (ClearHarmony

2002). Whether or not Falun Dafa is as unique as this practitioner claims in being able to mobilize people without a hierarchy, this does indeed show what a powerful force the ideological component of a SP(I)N can be.

Deng and Fang use a definition of organization that seems to even include a SP(I)N:

We define organization as a collection of people [functioning] in various aspects toward a goal or a set of goals . This organization theory may extend to the Weberian hypothesis of hierarchy and ordered activities toward a goal. Falungong qualifies to be an organization by either definition though it is not a bureaucratic organization—a definition Li and his defenders use to equate with “organization”. Because Falungong is formed on an attachment to the Master, it qualifies as an emotive organization. However, Li and other disciples insist that they do not organize, citing there was no “formal” appointment or monetary compensation to the local leaders. Their collective activities are coincidence of spontaneity. Or the closest they would concede is that they communicate “heart-to-heart,” a mystic ability developed after cultivation. [Deng and Fang 2000: 16]

The definition presented in the first sentence seems problematic in that it is too broad. Going by this vague definition, all those who exercise - jogging, lifting weights, etc. - could be construed as belonging to an organization since they are “[functioning] in various aspects towards a goal”: in this case, physical fitness. Semantic quibbles aside, Deng and Fang’s contention seems to be that because Li Hongzhi’s writings establish himself as the sole spiritual authority within the Falun Gong belief system, therefore “one-way communication is sufficient for the operation of this organization of millions.” (p. 16). It is true Li Hongzhi’s ideas always take precedence over the ideas of practitioners, according to his writings; however, I would argue that in the absence of any sort of strong external pressure, the person is a part of the “organization” only as long as he or she finds the belief system to be persuasive. This stretches the boundaries of what can plausibly be called an organization. I would say that by using this definition, many types of musicians could be considered the leaders of an “emotive organization.” While musicians typically do not make create comprehensive belief systems that include a code of morality and statements about ultimate reality as Falun Dafa does, there are plenty of bands that contain political messages in their lyrics (i.e., Moby, Rage Against The Machine, etc.), and this could influence their fans’ behavior if they like the music and the message. So does this mean releasing albums and playing concerts are forms of “one-way communication” that are “sufficient for the operation of [the] organization of millions”?

If the SP(I)N model of organization Hine described is to be applicable, then Li Hongzhi should be important to guiding their ideology but tangential to the operation of their day-to-day lives. That is, the ideology he has created (or revealed as being the truth of the universe if you are a practitioner) should be

useful for practitioners' decision-making processes, but he should generally stay out of their day-to-day affairs. How active he is in directing practitioners is debatable. For example, Li Hongzhi may have called Peng Peng and told her to take down her website, although she claims this was someone else pretending to be Li Hongzhi (Peng 2000a). Peng Shan Shan was a rather unusual case, however, since she had directly challenged his spiritual authority by claiming to be the new master/teacher of Falun Dafa. Jianping Chu tells me that Li Hongzhi does not tell people what to do, but rather tells them, usually when asked a question at a conference, what general principles might be helpful in their situation. In any case, Li Hongzhi does not have regular contact with the Tampa practitioners; they generally only receive the one-way communications he gives to all practitioners by coming out with new books and articles. Practitioners ideally see Li Hongzhi as a powerful, enlightened person who has decided to reveal the truth of the universe, and will often clarify how to interpret his scripture in specific situations. While he is alone in this position of revealing truth, practitioners generally act based upon their understanding of the principles in his writings rather than Li Hongzhi giving specific orders. One observer described this situation thusly:

Note: The seeming Protestant attitude in the Falun Gong approach to learning the scriptures ("every man his own Pope") is intriguing. The 400 or so meditator-demonstrators on the mall were sitting in very well-aligned rows which seemed in itself almost a sign of underlying organization. When I asked one demonstrator how they came, he said that it was spontaneous and everyone shared the expenses. There was no one leader to their group. [Cowhig 1999]

What lead this group that Cowhig observed was a belief in the writings of Li Hongzhi; that is the (I) part of SP(I)N.

If Falun Gong is a SP(I)N, and the organizing principle of a SP(I)N is ideology, then it is important to ask what the process is by which practitioners are exposed to and internalize the ideology of Falun Gong. In most of my readings, both in favor of and opposed to Falun Gong, the issue of whether someone has read everything Li Hongzhi has written, understood it, and internalized is not addressed, but simply assumed. Perhaps this is more the case in China where the crackdown might discourage people from practicing Falun Gong who do not have strong faith in it, but this is not the case here in the United States. For example, I asked Melissa about how she felt about Li Hongzhi denying evolution and saying the moon is hollow, which are two aspects of Falun Gong beliefs that I found hard to swallow, and she responded:

I guess I missed those two points. I don't think the moon is hollow. Don't see what difference that makes anyway. Why would Falun Dafa concern itself with that? Don't really know how to respond to the whole evolution issue. What does he present as an alternative?... Yeah, there are all kinds of things in his writings that, when they are brought to my attention, just make me go "Huh?"

I asked another Western practitioner the same question:

Interesting question, Noah. In reply, I can only think of something else that Master Li has said. This is a loose paraphrase, but he has reminded us that his teachings are not the things of everyday people. (I wish I could give that paraphrase to you as an exact quote, and if I come across it later, I will) So if something ever has not exactly agreed with my previous notions I just note that to myself and read on...these things take time; I trust Master Li and I believe he teaches higher principles. If my 'initial understand may not be absolutely correct' (another paraphrase)...then I leave the rift as a point for future development and I read on peacefully.

Part of the reason for this may be that some of Li Hongzhi's writings are still available only in Chinese, which means English-speaking practitioners may not know of them. Also, the *Zhuan Falun* is regarded as the most important book, so Li Hongzhi's other writings may not be read as diligently by some practitioners, or possibly not even at all. Jianping Chu told me he had read all of Li Hongzhi's books, but it appears that Melissa is mostly content to just read from the *Zhuan Falun* as part of the group readings at the practice sessions. Interestingly, when I asked Jianping Chu and Zhenzhen Guo about I read that how rock and roll music was seen as a bad influence by Li Hongzhi in various publications (for example, Kim 2001), neither of them could recall ever hearing Li Hongzhi specifically denounce rock music. Zhenzhen Guo said that practitioners may find rock music to be "too noisy," and Jianping Chu said that he thought rock music was "violent," but neither knew of Li Hongzhi dealing specifically with that issue. I later found out that Li Hongzhi actually did denounce rock music (Li Hongzhi 1997: 32), which surprised me, since I figured practitioners like Jianping Chu and Zhenzhen Guo would certainly know if and where Li Hongzhi had dealt with this issue. This indicates that we cannot rely entirely on media accounts or Li Hongzhi's writings to see what all practitioners believe.

Since practitioners have gaps and questions in their knowledge of Li Hongzhi's writings, it is pertinent to ask where they turn for clarification; if they were to all consistently turn to the same person when they had questions, it could be argued that this would be evidence of a social structure. However, this does not seem to be the case; when practitioners have questions, they said they often just read the *Zhuan Falun* to find the answers. They can also raise questions at the book readings at the practice sites; in Tampa, Jing Yang is often the one to answer these questions, probably because he both considered to

understand the books well and, in the case of the Western practitioners asking questions, he speaks English the most fluently of the Chinese practitioners. However, everyone is free to chime in with his or her own understanding of the issue raised.

Similarly, there is not just one person in charge of teaching people Falun Gong. There are some people who are listed as contact people for particular areas on brochures and Internet sites, like Jianping Chu and Jing Yang for Tampa and St. Petersburg respectively. If someone shows up at a practice site when they are not there, someone else is almost sure to take over in instructing them. When I was doing the exercises during the first phase of my research, Jianping Chu would often notice me struggling to do them correctly, and position his body to be facing me so I could better understand what he was doing. One time, Jiayu Kou commented after the session that someone should instruct me in how to do the exercises correctly. The next week, I told Melissa what she said and how it made me a little embarrassed to do them again; she told me I should not be embarrassed, and demonstrated the exercises for me that session. Outside of the practice sites, many practitioners have reported teaching Falun Gong to their friends and family members. In other words, the contact people for the sites may demonstrate the exercises most often, but others can and do take over when they are not present, and most practitioners are willing to teach the exercises to people outside of the practice sites.

Let us take a look at the distribution of power within Falun Gong using Yelvington's typology to further address this. Li Hongzhi's power is definitional and cultural. That is, he has the power to define morality, history, epistemology, and ontology within the belief system of Falun Gong. Once these things have been defined and accepted to some degree, these definitions stick with the individual as cultural power, which are reinforced by their interactions with fellow practitioners. However, should the individual become dissatisfied with Falun Gong and no longer believe in it, Li Hongzhi's definitional and cultural power over them has ended. His definitional power only works within the cultural system of Falun Gong – step outside it, and they are just articles and books that are irrelevant to your life.

The way the exercise sessions at the practice sites are structured reflect this belief system (see Burgdoff 2003: 334-336 for a practice site description similar to mine). At the USF campus site, I observed during the first phase of my research that a practitioner would usually come out around noon on their hour-long lunch break, carrying a stereo, a bag to place the stereo on, an extension cord for the stereo,



and a sign about Falun Gong. They could do any exercise they feel like doing that day; it is not required that they start with the first and go straight through to the fifth. It is usually one or more of the first four that is done rather than the fifth at these sessions. Some days, the practitioners were simply too busy to come out and practice, much as they would like to. This shows how Falun Gong fits the lives of practitioners, rather than practitioners having to restructure their lives to fit Falun Gong. At the sessions at the park on Saturday, there is time for all the exercises. First, exercises one through four are done in a row. Next, an hour is spent reading from *Zhuan Falun*; each person reads a paragraph, the next person. At the beginning of my participant-observation, I noticed that the practitioners who only spoke Chinese would break off into a smaller reading circle because of the language difference. However, lately they have been sitting in the same circle, so that some paragraphs are read in English and some are read in Chinese. Everyone has a book version of the *Zhuan Falun*, except for one older Chinese man who has printed a copy off the Internet. After the reading sessions, sometimes someone (usually Jing Yang or Jianping Chu) will ask if there are any questions. When they do not ask, people can still speak up and ask a question before the next exercise starts. When answering questions, I have seen people both jump in to answer a question and defer the question to someone they think is more knowledgeable. Finally, the fifth exercise is done, and practitioners are free to leave. Practitioners sometimes have to leave early and do not stick around for all three segments. Between these three segments of activity and before and after the sessions, the practitioners often converse with one another; it is a friendly atmosphere.

The Tampa Falun Gong practitioners almost all reported doing the exercises at home in addition to at the practice sites. Many also reported doing the exercises at work. The practitioners also reported that they practiced at other sites when they happened to be in a different area for a Falun Gong experience-sharing conference or for personal reasons. Because Tampa and St. Petersburg in the same vicinity, most practitioners who live in one area also come to visit the other with a fair degree of frequency. In fact, several of the practitioners from St. Petersburg attended the practice sessions in Tampa regularly enough for me to establish rapport with them and consider them regulars at the Tampa site. In addition, many of the practitioners at the Tampa site know practitioners in Orlando.

When it comes to experience-sharing conferences, there is a great deal of solidarity between Jianping Chu, Zhenzhen Guo, Qiaoyun Zheng, Jing Yang, Jiayu Kou, Jiaxin Luo, and Xuezheng Xie, that is,

the younger (20s, 30s, and early 40s) Chinese practitioners. It is usually easy to tell when there is a conference somewhere in the United States because the attendance at the Tampa site will drop low enough to be counted on one hand. Xuezheng Xie estimated that he has attended over 20 conferences, and Jing Yang estimated there are about five major conferences per year, and the aforementioned practitioners only miss about one of the five. Jianping Chu informed me that he is still paying off his travel expenses from attending all these conferences. The Western practitioners, however, have only attended between one and three conferences in Tampa, Orlando, and Atlanta. It seems that they are generally only willing to go to a conference if it is not too far out of their way.

There was an experience sharing conference in Tampa on December 29, 2001, at which Li Hongzhi showed up. I regret being out of town at the time and missing such a golden opportunity for data collection. At least I was able to talk to practitioners about the conference afterwards to see what role they had in organizing the event. I am not sure which practitioner's idea it was originally to have it, but they tell me that once someone had got the ball rolling, all the practitioners helped out as best they could.

Conferences require a lot of volunteer work for them to happen; for example, since many practitioners speak only English or Chinese, volunteers are required to translate. Also, there are mundane tasks like serving food, which Zhenzhen Guo did at the Tampa conference. Before the conference happens, arrangements need to be made, like contacting the local hotels to get a group discount. It took a group effort to make the Tampa conference a reality. The experience sharing conference in Washington D.C. during the summer of 2002 (described previously in this chapter) was similar in how many practitioners pitched in to help make the conference a reality, but there only seemed to be people who volunteered for certain tasks, not leaders who organized it.

One last issue I would like to address here is the "membership" of Falun Gong, which is an issue I touched on a bit previously. I use this word in quotes because Falun Gong, as a SP(I)N, does not have a bureaucratic style of organization anymore (and even when it did under the Chinese Qigong Research Society, it was generally loose). Because of this, being a practitioner of Falun Gong is never official, but is self-determined and, to some degree, judged by others. Erving Goffman (1993) provides a useful framework for describing this process. Goffman wrote, "When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already

possessed” (p. 72). The sources of information come in the form of those he *gives* and those he *gives off*, meaning that the person can verbally express information, and there is also a wide range of actions that unintentionally give observers information about the individual. We can see an example of the first type in this anecdote:

I had become a cultivator who didn't know how to cultivate. New practitioners always want to know, “how long have you practiced?” The implication is that if you have been doing this for sometime, you must be really good. I have always dreaded this question, because I have always known how far from the standard of a real practitioner I have been. In my heart, I believe I am now beginning to act more like a cultivator, but time is the true test of that.... I hope that in the future when I am asked when I began, the correct answer to this question will be, “I began to practice in November of 1998, but I began to cultivate in April of 2000.” [Culp n.d.: 76]

In the course of my research, I have also been asked several times if I am a practitioner, or how long I have been practicing. A good example of the second type is how some practitioners have been watching me during the second and fifth exercises while I was in D.C. to see if I could do them taking down my arms or uncrossing my legs because of the pain. Also, when I first started doing the exercises in Tampa with Jianping Chu and he saw that I could sit in the lotus position right away, he commented that maybe I was a practitioner in a past life. As Frank (2002) said, “anyone who can complete the full exercise acquires social capital.” Goffman goes on to say:

Knowing that the individual is likely to present himself in a light that is favorable to him, the others may divide what they witness into two parts: a part that is relatively easy for the individual to manipulate at will, being chiefly his verbal assertions, and a part in regard to which he seems to have little concern or control, being chiefly derived from the expressions he gives off. The others may then use what are considered to be the ungovernable aspects of his expressive behavior as a check upon the validity of what is conveyed by the governable aspects. [1993: 76]

I have seen a good example of this when I went with the Tampa practitioners to a meeting in Orlando. Guiping Cui, one of the practitioners from that area, said that she chose a woman to host a Falun Dafa event in another area, and the practitioners in that area told Guiping Cui that her choice was incorrect. They said the practitioner Guiping Cui had chosen hardly ever came to the practice site. Guiping Cui then discovered the reasons the woman she chose did not come to the practice site much was because she was on the computer all the time, promoting Falun Gong, and therefore Guiping Cui was correct in choosing her and the practitioners in the woman's area were incorrect in assuming she was not a diligent practitioner. This incident shows that in the absence of any real bureaucratic organization to designate who is a practitioner and who is not, it is up to each individual to decide who is a genuine practitioner, and how

good of a practitioner the person is. Opinions can and do vary about each person, making the boundaries between practitioners and non-practitioners nebulous and fluid.



**Figure 27: Conference at USF.**

*From <http://www.clearwisdom.net/emh/articles/2001/12/31/17326.html>. Used with permission.*



**Figure 28: Children presenting at an Orlando experience sharing conference.**

*From <http://falunorlando.org/gallery/children/orlando-con-7.jpg>. Used with permission.*

### **Falun Gong and Finances**

At least from April 1994 onwards, and even from the very beginning according to a practitioner I talked to, cash contributions to the guidance stations were forbidden (Li 2001a: 44, 46; Tong 2002a: 637). The Chinese Government has accused Li Hongzhi of getting rich off of Falun Gong. While “rich” is a relative term, it seems clear that the figures they report are exaggerated.

When Li Hongzhi taught seminars, the admission fee was usually 40 yuan per training session for a new practitioner, and 20 yuan for repeat practitioners. The repeat practitioners made up between 50 – 75% of the admissions, but the Chinese government figures for the profits of the seminars counted all attendees as paying the 40-yuan fee charged to newcomers. Also, the Chinese Qigong Research Society received 40% of admission receipts from July 1993 to September 1994. Falun Gong’s first four training seminars took in a total of 20,000 yuan, which is only 10% of the 200,000 figure cited by the Chinese government. Finally, from that 20,000 yuan, they had several operating expenses, including “material,

personnel, travel and accommodation costs, as well as entertainment expenses for local cadres and special guests” (Tong 2002a: 651).

The Chinese government has also claimed that Falun Gong made large profit off the sale of audio tapes, VCDs, video sets, badges, laminated photos of Li Hongzhi, calendars, exercise suits, and cushions (Tong 2002a: 652-653). They have also claimed that the Falun Dafa Research Society “directly edited, distributed, and sold 11.08 million copies of *falun gong* books, 5.31 million copies of video products, 1.29 million posters, and 230,000 badges, totaling 135 million *yuan* of sales and 4.2.49 million *yuan* of profits” (p. 653). However, practitioners have pointed out that these figures include the sale of bootleg Falun Gong materials, and that the bootleggers “received the lion’s share of profits” (p. 653). Also, the companies and organizations that agreed to produce and distribute materials for Falun Gong deprived the Falun Dafa Research Society of the revenue from the sales in various ways (p. 653). Li Hongzhi claimed that he made only 20,000 *yuan* from the sale of his books inside China.

Currently, the Falun Gong books are available at [www.universepublishing.com](http://www.universepublishing.com); the price of English books ranges from \$6.00 to \$12.95, with free delivery in the U.S. and Canada. The books in other languages can be slightly more expensive; the French and Japanese versions of *Zhuan Falun* are \$21.95, for example. All books listed can be downloaded for free at [www.falundafa.org](http://www.falundafa.org).

Devoted practitioners may choose to spend a good portion of money on Falun Gong. This happens in a few ways. First, some practitioners – typically the contact people for various areas – tend to buy extra materials so that they can give books to newcomers. One local Falun Gong website (<http://falundafa-newengland.org/teachatyourplace.html>) even offers to send materials to people who do not have a practice site in their area, but wish to start one up. Second, devoted practitioners often spend a lot of money traveling around to different conferences, although this cost is mitigated by the fact that practitioners native to an area will often let visiting practitioners stay at their house. Also, it appears that practitioners who decide to drive instead of fly to a conference often carpool.

On the other side of the coin, the campaign to suppress Falun Gong has been very costly for China. “The regime expended millions of hours of cadre work time and billions of dollars in propaganda production to crush the Falun Gong” (Kindopp 2002: 261). Murphy notes, “enormous resources have been

thrown into a campaign to smash the Falun Gong movement” (Murphy 2002b). A Falun Gong site describes the financial expenses of the persecution thusly:

[Jiang Zemin] used all the manpower, materials, and financial capabilities of the country. He took a huge amount of money out of the State Treasury many times, which caused huge pressure on the State finances, and thus weakening the economy. According to an overseas report on February 27th, 2001, Jiang used 4 billion Yuan for wiretapping and monitoring Falun Gong practitioner's phones. In December 2001, the Public Security Bureau claimed that Jiang used 4.2 billion Yuan for the creation of brainwashing camps... Unfortunately, the general public does not know the exact amount of the nation's financial resources that Jiang extracted for his campaign in persecuting Falun Gong... Besides the special funds, the daily expense on persecuting Falun Gong is even bigger. In the beginning of January 2001, the Public Security Bureau reported that the daily cost of persecuting Falun Gong practitioners at Tiananmen Square is between 1.7-2.5 million Yuan, i.e., 6.25-9.125 billion every year.

Besides the heavy security at Tiananmen Square, the police are stationed everywhere to monitor Falun Gong practitioners. The nation is surrounded by Xinhua News Agency, CCTV, People's Daily, and local newspapers that constantly fabricate lies about Falun Gong. The "610 Office" ... is established all over China. There were different kinds of petitions and exhibits that slandered Falun Gong. Every work unit and neighbourhood administration monitored Falun Gong practitioners. There were at least several million people involved in these vicious activities. These people's pay, which includes salaries, bonuses, overtime pay, and "rewards", should be around 100 billion Yuan (it is hard to estimate, but this number should not be too far). Part of this amount comes from the State Treasury, from the local government, from the financial robbery of Falun Gong practitioners (such as huge fines), and a small amount is from the fines to Falun Gong practitioners' employers. [ClearHarmony 2002c]

Another practitioner gives an example of how the Chinese government rewards those who catch practitioners: “Several evil perpetrators... checked my photo on the Internet and found out that I am a Falun Dafa practitioner... Then those policemen ate and drank to their hearts' content and boasted that they would receive a 2000 Yuan reward for each Falun Dafa practitioner they captured, and all the expenses would be covered by Dafa practitioners themselves” (Clearwisdom.net 2003o). Yet another practitioner gives an example how the Chinese government is spending money to undermine Falun Gong in the United States: “One of these thugs tried to hand me a slanderous newspaper.....and I tried to hand him a Falun Gong paper. He screamed at me and said ‘ I have been paid \$25 to be here....what are you going to give me!’” (Michele 2002).

### **Falun Gong’s Hong Kong Splinter Group – Peng Shan Shan**

Some people have expressed a concern over how Falun Gong will change in the future, possibly becoming violent (Rahn 2002: 57; Kaung Tai-wai *in* Yeung 2000; Kindopp 2002: 263). There are two issues involved with this concern: First, what is the likelihood that Li Hongzhi would radically change his

teachings from what they are now, and how would practitioners react? Second, what if a group splintered off from Falun Gong with different teachings? I have addressed the former situation in the previous chapter. In this section, I will describe an instance of the latter, and address the former again a bit towards the end.

Ye Hao, a former ranking officer in China's Ministry of Public Security, now runs Minghui.org, the Chinese version of Clearwisdom, most important Falun Gong website (Deng and Fang 2000: 2). Zhang Erping is a volunteer spokesman for Falun Gong, and part-time U.N. employee (CNN 1999e). Belinda Peng Shan Shan, a woman in her late 30s who ran her own trading company, was a practitioner in Hong Kong who was trying to organize a world conference during the period following the crackdown when Li Hongzhi was not making any public statements or appearances. On May 1, 2000, she reported the following conversation taking place:

At 3am of Hong Kong time on April 29th, I received a phone call from Ye Hao of Canada, who is now in America. The contents of the phone call are:

Ye Hao: Peng Shan Shan, I am Ye Hao. Your most respectful Master Li wants to talk to you.

Peng Shan Shan: OK. (I am very surprised. Master Li has never talked to me personally.)

So-called Master: Peng Shan Shan, you must cancel the Hong Kong experience sharing conference right away. You must remove the web site of Hong Kong and take Minghui web site as the guidance.

Peng Shan Shan: Take Minghui web site as guidance? (I have questions in my mind. Why not telling me to "Take Fa as Teacher"?)

So-called Master: How come you don't even listen to your Master's words?

Peng Shan Shan: What words? Do you mean the Jingwen "Fahui"?

So-called Master: You must listen to me. Cancel the Hong Kong Fahui and remove the Hong Kong web site. Take Minghui website as the standard. (I am very doubtful at this time. So I don't respond at all.)

Peng Shan Shan: I can't listen clearly. Can you give me your phone number? Let me call you back using my home phone number (the phone was passed on to Ye Hao now)

Ye Hao: Peng Shan Shan, that's your most respectful Master Li. You don't even listen to Master?

Peng Shan Shan: I can't hear clearly. Can you give me the phone number? I'll call you using my home phone.

Ye Hao: "212", (Ye Hao is discussing with the person behind him, then changes the phone number to) "917-xxx-xxxx" [Peng 2000c]

Peng Shan Shan then "revealed" the identity of the "fake master" a week later: "Ye Hao doesn't need to find a fake Master, as Zhang Erping is the fake master. They are working on the same project. It is natural that they cooperate well with each other and it is also natural that they defend each other. Who else can imitate Master Li better than he can," she wrote. (Peng 2000a)



By July, Peng Shan Shan had declared herself the new master-teacher of Falun Gong, or at least has been accepted as such by her followers (Fisher 2003: 298, 309 n. 15). She claimed that Li Hongzhi's time as master would end when he turned 50 on May 11, 2000. She bases her claims as the new spiritual authority on portents seen at a Buddhist temple. For her and her followers, all articles written by Li Hongzhi after May 11 are fakes.

On July 5, 2000, Li Hongzhi made clear his opinion on Peng Shan Shan:

Recently, a wretch in Hong Kong who lost her senses has been severely interfering with Dafa by saying absurd things, having bred demons in her mind, about how a Law Body of mine was telling her what to do. She even caused damage by using a telephone call I made to her, and has been constantly doing bad things. No matter what absurd things she says in the name of the alleged Law Body, I have no such students. If there are people who are willing to follow her to bring disorder to the Fa, they can go with her—what I want are disciples who practice cultivation in an upright and noble manner, magnificent Gods who are unshakable and solid, like diamond.

...all of you should ignore what that saboteur in Hong Kong has instigated and not give her an audience. [Li 2002c: 16]

A few days later, some Hong Kong practitioners who did not choose to follow Peng Shan Shan confronted her and her practitioners:

In the morning of July 8th, when Master Peng Shan Shan and several practitioners just finished the breakfast, Kan Hung Cheung from Hong Kong Falun Dafa Association along with a group of practitioners came to make trouble. They were angry and violent. Their eyes emitted demonic light. They were here to go against the Lord of Buddhas and Dafa. At this moment, it was also a test for all disciples to see if disciples can step out at this crucial moment to defend Fa and Master. Many of our disciples faced it with a righteous mind, was not interfered by them and stood in front of Master. Those people held the fake Jingwen's and tried to force our practitioners to read. They grabbed the arms of our practitioners and would not let go of them. A group of them even attacked one practitioner. As we held our righteous mind and formed a field of righteousness, they could not move us at all. Kan Hung Cheung took a group of people with him to check our activities, track down our whereabouts and tried to find bones in an egg. They asked the hotel staff member about our behavior and found nothing. Finally, they left without any results. We understand that this occurrence is a test and it has tested every disciple's xinxing. Everyone smiles and knows that we have passed another examination. [Peng 2000d]

I have not been able to find another account of this event, and cannot verify whether these practitioners were “angry and violent” as she claims, or whether she was exaggerating. I find it very unlikely that they would resort to violence, although Kim Hung Cheung was quoted as being concerned about the splinter group: “Many people know little about Falun Gong, and the radical moves taken by the faction members and their claim about the manifestation of the Buddha could cause people to think we are a cult” (Yeung

2000). Needless to say, Peng Shan Shan's group and the rest of the Hong Kong practitioners did not participate in events together (Yeung 2000).

Peng Shan Shan attracted about 20 followers, mostly women, only a fraction of the 200 (Yeung 2000) to 500 (Fisher 2003: 297) practitioners in Hong Kong. Peng and her followers attended the Hong Kong Book Fair on July 18 – 23, 2001, which proved to be a disaster for her splinter group. According to an article on Clearwisdom.net, Peng Shan Shan “needed to be dealt with in such a way that she would not even try to interfere again,” so “practitioners did their best to stop her” (Clearwisdom.net 2001b). The Hong Association of Falun Dafa used the following means to accomplish this: they made a public statement that she was not associated with them, they wrote letters to the organizers of the book show to “clarify the truth,” they looking into their legal options to stop her, they put a statement about her in the flyers they handed out, and they used “Sending Forth Righteous Thoughts.” The article concludes by saying: “In about one month practitioners halted Peng... with their firm righteous thoughts. On the day before the opening of the book show, Peng's booth was empty while others were setting up their booths. That same afternoon the sponsor openly disqualified her from the show” (Clearwisdom.net 2001b). Peng's website ceased being updated, and by 2002 was no longer accessible. I have found no information on what has happened with her and her small group of followers since then.

A practitioner I spoke with claimed that Peng Shan Shan was very likely a tool of the Chinese government. He said that she was seen entering and leaving office buildings of the Mainland Chinese government in Hong Kong, places where no ordinary practitioner would be free to come and go. Although Falun Gong has produced no definitive proof of this yet that I know of, there are historical precedents; Lowe writes, “Manipulation and interference in the internecine dispute of Tibetan high lamas and their monasteries...forms the main basis of the Chinese claim to sovereignty over the vast Tibetan plateau” (2001:15). In addition, an article written about Peng Shan Shan on July 27, 2000, states: “But her current whereabouts are hidden from all but a few of her followers. And where she lives or how she supports herself is also a mystery as those followers refused to divulge any information, citing concern over her privacy” (Yeung 2000). If the Chinese government is indeed supporting or controlling Peng Shan Shan, I believe there are three possible motivations for this. First, the Chinese government could use it to damage the reputation of Falun Gong. For example, one of Peng Shan Shan's followers, a pregnant woman, went

on a hunger strike; this generated negative publicity (Yeung 2000; Lee 2000). Second, if Beijing was in control of Shan Shan and she managed to convince a significant number of practitioners to follow her, China would then hold definitional and cultural power over many Falun Gong practitioners worldwide, which they could use as they saw fit. Third, if Peng Shan Shan was in league with Jiang's regime previous to declaring herself the new master-teacher, having a Falun Gong world conference in Hong Kong might make it easier for China for to identify devoted practitioners worldwide by having them all in one place.

There are a few noteworthy things about Falun Dafa's first and only splinter group thus far. First, it is worth noting that this incident happened less than a year after the crackdown began during a period in which Li Hongzhi was seemingly nowhere to be found. During this tumultuous period, it seems likely that some practitioners may have wanted more active guidance than simply being instructed to "take the Fa as teacher." Second, it worth noting that despite Falun Gong being effectively without a master-teacher for about a year and Shan Shan's claims to be the new master-teacher being available worldwide in English and Chinese on her website and advertised through media coverage, she only persuaded 20 to 30 practitioners to follow her. Even if we accept the Chinese Government's very conservative estimate of the number of practitioners in the low millions, this is not a very significant portion at all. Third, and most importantly, it was important to note how practitioners responded to it. The practitioners dealt with Shan Shan through a variety of methods, and the order of these methods is suggestive of how practitioners might deal with splinter groups in the future: First, they tried contacting her privately, and even arranged for Li Hongzhi to talk to her. Second, they had practitioners show up to talk to her disciples in the hopes they could convince them to give up following her and go back to being regular Falun Dafa practitioners. Third, they tried to inform the public about her in order to disassociate themselves from her and discredit her while they looked into legal means to use against her, and also used "Sending Forth Righteous Thoughts" to combat her influence in other dimensions.

In the future, should another practitioner decide to declare himself or herself the new spiritual authority of Falun Gong, practitioners may look back on this event as a template. Li Hongzhi set a positive precedent for them; he did not encourage any sort of drastic actions against her. He recommended that practitioners ignore her, but they were free to follow her if they did not want to be "disciples who practice cultivation in an upright and noble manner" (Li 2002c: 16). Put simply, this event should further reinforce

Li Hongzhi's previous teachings about practitioners assuming they have equal authority as him (Li 2001a: 46; Li Hongzhi 1999b: 241), making it unlikely that another Shan Shan might emerge that could have radically different teachings from Li Hongzhi. However, should it happen again, Li Hongzhi's teachings would have historical power (to use Yelvington's typology), so that that any would-be new master-teacher would be constrained to some extent by the belief system that Li Hongzhi has already established.

Patsy Rahn (2002) claims that simply the "intense derogatory language" (p. 49) used by Li Hongzhi in the case of Peng Shan Shan may be "operating on an unconscious level to set up the 'other' against which one can legitimate violence" (p. 49). My impression of Li Hongzhi's harsh language is that he is using it to preserve his definitional power over practitioners and avoid attrition (see Fisher 2003: 306). I have talked with practitioners who said that non-practitioners asked them what they would do if Li Hongzhi asked them to commit acts of violence, and they said that the question is based on a wrong premise, and therefore it would be pointless to answer. In other words, they seemed completely certain that Li Hongzhi would never order such a thing. Therefore, if Li Hongzhi were to advocate such a thing, I believe it would lead to massive levels of attrition. And, as noted previously, even Rahn (2002) notes four factors that make Li Hongzhi advocating violence in the future an unlikelihood. First, it would damage Falun Gong's reputation, and lessen the impact of their criticisms on the grounds of human rights. Second, practitioners believe the Fa will provide retribution, and that doing themselves is a wrong deed. Third, it would damage their options as a "protest movement," in Falun Gong depends on a friendly political environment in the West. Fourth, the Li Hongzhi and Clearwisdom.net have consistently said not to use violent means or do anything else that would damage the reputation of Falun Gong (p. 58-59).

## Falun Dafa Professional Practitioners



**Figure 29: Professional Practitioners by the Washington Monument**

*Photo by Noah Porter.*

Practitioners do not generally isolate themselves from the rest of society, but the professional practitioners are an exception to this rule to a certain degree. In *Zhuan Falun*, Li Hongzhi (1999b) wrote: “The majority of our Falun Dafa practitioners (that is, except for those professional practitioners) practice cultivation among everyday people” (p. 341). A professional practitioner is a monk or nun who discovers Falun Gong, but continues to live in a temple or monastery despite becoming a practitioner. During the D.C. experience-sharing conference in 2002, I had the privilege of interviewing three Taiwanese professional practitioners. (Four are pictured in figure 29, but one was not around at the time of the interview, as I recall.) They did not speak English, but one of my key informants volunteered to translate for me.

The professional practitioners I met were all females in their 40s, who had lived in Taiwan all their lives. One of the professional practitioners first heard of Falun Gong in July 1999 from television. She

then got the other two to start practicing in December 2000. After they became practitioners, they started taking every available opportunity to talk to others about Falun Gong. For example, one mentioned that when she had to take a bus, she would talk to the bus driver about Falun Gong. They estimated that they had passed out 40,000 to 50,000 Falun Gong flyers within their community, and they have gotten almost all of their friends and family members to start practicing. Because religion is generally more respected in Taiwan than in Mainland China, these professional practitioners reported that they have an easier time talking to people about Falun Gong because they are assumed to be knowledgeable in spiritual matters by many Taiwanese.

None of them had computers, so the Internet was not an important part of their cultivation. They reported that they would call each other on the phone occasionally, however, and they attend conferences whenever they can. When I asked how many, they told me they had attended too many conference for them to count.

While I was interviewing these professional practitioners, I noticed that we were drawing a lot of attention from other practitioners; they appeared to be listening intently to every word we said. After I was done asking my questions, the professional practitioners had two questions for me. First, they asked what is the most important thing I learned from studying Falun Gong. (I told them that I thought the basic moral values of Zhen-Shan-Ren have been inspirational to me.) Second, they asked me what sort of disagreements I found among practitioners. (I told them some of my preliminary findings, such as that some practitioners thought Zhen-Shan-Ren was the most important teaching of Li Hongzhi while others thought that all his teachings were equally important, and that some disagreed about the importance of the Internet for Falun Gong.) I then asked them if they had any reluctance to try Falun Gong since they are Taiwanese and it came from Mainland China, which is something another Taiwanese practitioner reported; they said they had no such issues. Afterwards, one of the practitioners who had been listening intently to our conversation jumped in to ask the professional practitioners about the situation with Buddhists who are against Falun Gong. At this point, it seemed like the conversation might drag on for a very long time, so I stopped asking my key informant to translate for me.

## Falun Gong and the Internet

### Overview of Falun Gong in Cyberspace

The Internet is a vital component of the Falun Gong community. Only one Tampa practitioner did not look regularly at Falun Gong websites, which, not surprisingly, was Melissa. In D.C., three people reported not looking at Falun Gong sites frequently: one was a newcomer to Falun Gong, one was a casual practitioner, and one was a devout practitioner but did not have a computer of his own. For everyone almost everyone else, looking at Falun Gong sites on a daily basis is ideal (see Culp n.d.: 21); some practitioners have said they will get busy sometimes and not be able to read them everyday, but even during busy periods in their lives, it appears that these practitioners will look at Falun Gong sites at least once a week. Interestingly, the practitioner from China told me that even though looking at Falun Gong sites directly was not possible, she simply subscribed their e-mail list and received all the articles this way.

Falun Gong sites may be classified in a few ways. First, a site may be classified by whether it is a general interest site to practitioners or a local site for a particular area. Second, a website can be classified by language; some of the general interest sites mirror each other in another language. For example, Clearwisdom.net is the English version of Minghui.org and Pureinsight.org is the English version of Zhengjian.org. Some other sites will have options for different languages on the same site.

The site of choice for the Tampa practitioners seems to be Minghui.org, or the English version, Clearwisdom.net. Jianping Chu said he looks at some others, “but [he has] priority for that one.” Xuezheng Xie, Jiixin Luo, and Jing Yang all reported looking at Clearwisdom.net in addition to Minghui.org, which suggests that being able to read the Chinese version of a website does not mean that a practitioner will ignore the English version. In addition, one of the Western practitioners reported that she liked to look at Minghui.org, even though she could not read it. The results for the D.C. practitioners were much the same.

This same Western practitioner said FalunDafa.org is a site she goes to regularly, which Chase mentioned as well. The information on this site is very basic, which is perhaps why the Chinese practitioners did not mention going there.

Lawrence (2002) surveyed the cultural landscape of Islam in cyberspace, and described how a certain Islamic website “wants to *Islamize knowledge*—a technical phrase that means to integrate all contemporary sciences, from biology to economics, within the framework of revealed knowledge...”

(2002: 243). The Falun Dafa website Pureinsight.Org seeks to do something similar by publishing articles written by practitioners which attempts to integrate a wide range of scientific knowledge and religious beliefs within the framework of Li Hongzhi's teachings. This website addresses many of the discrepancies between the teachings of Falun Gong and current scientific thought, such as criticisms of Darwinian evolution (Pureinsight.org 2002a). It also gives examples of how, in their opinion, various prophecies and scientific findings support Falun Dafa teachings.

The Tampa practitioners do not regularly meet new practitioners through the Internet. Qiaoyun Zheng mentioned that she hangs out in chat rooms, but those are chat rooms where non-practitioners are so she can tell them about Falun Gong. Whatever Falun Gong chat rooms and message boards might be on the Internet, the Tampa practitioners do not regularly go to them. If they meet a practitioner at a conference, they may choose to keep in touch with that person through e-mail. Also, if they have a question that they think a practitioner in another area would be knowledgeable about, they may get in contact with that person. However, there does not seem to be many Falun Gong practitioners who socialize on-line simply for the sake of socializing.

Practitioners may contribute their experiences to Falun Gong websites for others to see. Jiaxin Luo, Xuezhen Xie, and Jing Yang told me they had all shared their experiences with Falun Gong sites; a few others said they had not, but they hope to do so in the future. The reason that these people have not shared their story is they feel like they are not as diligent in their cultivation as they should be; "I think I'm not that strict," Jianping Chu said. He feels he wastes too much time doing frivolous things like reading novels.

There is a Falun Gong website for Tampa (<http://www.ctr.usf.edu/falundafa/>) which one of the practitioners made. It is very basic; three of the links go to the main Falun Dafa website, while the other two give their practice schedule and contact information. It includes contact information for both Tampa and St. Petersburg. Virginia, Maryland, and D.C. all have local websites as well.





**Figure 30: A New Website is Advertised at the D.C. Conference**

*Photo by Noah Porter.*

### **A Brief History of Falun Gong Websites**

Falun Gong websites were first established in 1995 after Li Hongzhi left China. As mentioned previously, while the number of Chinese Internet users was still relatively small at the time, it was growing quickly, and Falun Gong had enough of an Internet presence that both Falun Gong by 1997-1998 that the content of websites put up by practitioners became a concern (Falun Dafa Bulletin Board 1997; Falun Dafa Bulletin Board 1998).

Before the crackdown, FalunDafa.org was a rather plain-looking website. Other notable differences include listings for the practice sites in Chinese cities like Beijing, Gansu, Guangxi, and Hebei, and an English version of *Zhuan Falun II* available for download. The reason for no Chinese cities being listed any longer is obviously the crackdown. As for *Zhuan Falun II*, a practitioner I talked to gave me two reasons that it may have been why it was taken down. First, many of the original translations of Li Hongzhi's books were not very good, and bad translations could lead to misunderstandings about what he is

trying to say. Second, he said that some of the comments that Li Hongzhi has made about Buddhism in *Zhuan Falun II* were offensive to some Buddhists, so taking it down was intended to avoid conflict.

The basic information presented about Falun Gong has changed around the time of the crackdown. In April 1999, the description the website used of Falun Gong was very basic. By October of that year, several sections had been added on, obviously in response to the allegations used to justify the crackdown. Explanations were added for why Falun Gong was not a religion, cult, or a political movement. However, their explanation still contained many statements that may have sounded odd to the casual non-practitioner; for example, they say that *Zhuan Falun* gives explanations for “many mysterious and inscrutable things” which includes “museum artifacts, which give hints of great prehistoric civilizations, as well as human supernormal capabilities and scientific studies regarding the thought capability of plants.” The explanation about what Falun Gong is on FalunDafa.org in early 2000 contained no denials or odd-sounding statements, probably because the media attention attracted more Western practitioners, who pointed out how bad the combination of the two might look.

Immediately after the crackdown, several Falun Gong websites were hacked. At least one of these has been tracked to the Public Security Ministry in Beijing (Lin 2001: 225).

Since the crackdown, Falun Gong websites became inaccessible in China (Zittrain and Edelman 2002). At first, the firewalls set up by the Chinese Government were relatively easy to get around (Sinclair 2002: 6); proxy servers and e-mails were very effective means of getting information the Chinese government did not want you to have (p. 6-8). Finding a way to stop Falun Gong’s communications on the Internet has been a priority for the Chinese government:

New software continues to become available to the Chinese government to control the spread of certain Internet content. It comes as no surprise that as well as developing its own solutions the Chinese government has been talking to foreign companies to help it control the ‘worldwide web’. Gutmann mentions that China Telecom has been having discussions with an Israeli company called iCognito, which invented a program called “artificial content recognition”. The software learns which sites to filter out as the user surfs the Internet. It was designed “to filter out ‘gambling, shopping, job search, pornography, stock quotes, or other non-business material’ but the first question from the Chinese buyers is invariably: Can it stop Falun Gong?” [Sinclair 2002: 16]

However, now the Chinese Government has “set up its Internet infrastructure so that all data to enter the country from abroad must pass through eight central servers which filter out content with certain keywords” (Woodworth 2003), which include human rights and Falun Gong (2003). This keyword

filtering system has only been in place since late 2002 (Haselton 2002). It appears that the Chinese Government has yet been able to completely eliminate Falun Gong information from being transferred in and out of China; however, whether Falun Gong practitioners will be able to stay one step ahead of China's Internet censorship remains to be seen. As of October 2002, China is requiring the use of ID cards to sign into the Internet in licensed cafes, and as a result, trying to access blocked information can be traced. However, unlicensed Internet cafes are still unaffected. Haselton (2002) discusses a variety of techniques that have been or could be used to circumvent "censorware," and finds that all of them have their potential weaknesses. Another strategy that China has used was to encourage the rapid growth of homegrown Chinese content so that Chinese citizens would have less of a reason to look to foreign sites for information (Hartford 2000: 257).

In September 1999, shortly after the crackdown had officially started, the Chinese government decided to cut off all foreign Internet investment in China. This changed in 2001 when China let in Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation after his son publicly stated his contempt for Falun Gong (Sinclair 2002: 18). Other companies have been similarly willing to bend to China's demands to for the opportunity to do business (p. 18-19). Sinclair writes, "The involvement of foreign companies in China's Internet does not stop at those willing to abide by government regulations in order to take a slice of the market. China has not been able to build its national firewall on its own; it has relied on Western companies to supply the technology and expertise to make this 'Big Brother' project viable" (2002: 20).

Clearwisdom.net has grown in importance since the crackdown, as one practitioner explains:

I used to not read ClearWisdom that much until I saw a statement by Master that was published there. It said, quote, "It's not that ClearWisdom Net doesn't make mistakes. However, on important matters practitioners must watch the position of ClearWisdom Net. The purpose of posting my photo and article, "The Knowing Heart" on ClearWisdom Net was to build a trustworthy website for practitioners." (end quote) It seems crystal clear from this statement that practitioners need to read ClearWisdom, so I realized that to not do so is to not meet this requirement of Teacher. Later on Master published a short comment about an experience-sharing article submitted to ClearWisdom by a Western practitioner from the United Kingdom. Master wrote good things about this practitioner's article, saying that the practitioner's understanding was very good. In fact, he had never commented on any practitioner's article before that one. Reflecting on that, I've felt that now Master is not only encouraging everyone to read ClearWisdom, but is encouraging more Westerners to submit articles. For the past several months I have visited the ClearWisdom site every day, and reading the articles there has not only helped me improve personally, but has helped me allow the world to know the truth about Dafa and the persecution in China. [Emily 2001]

As we can see, Li Hongzhi wanted Clearwisdom.net (and Minghui.org, its Chinese equivalent) to become a central place for practitioners to exchange information. In Yelvington’s typology, we can see Li Hongzhi using power in the definitional sense to redefine the importance of Clearwisdom.net.

### **The Content of Falun Gong Websites**

There are many Falun Gong websites out there, but I would like to focus my attention on those which my interviews have shown are checked most often by Falun Gong practitioners. Table 8 reports the number of times a particular website was mentioned when I asked which Falun Gong sites the person checks most often. These numbers are out of 48 practitioners who said they looked at Falun Gong websites, and they allow a person to name more than one site if they check multiple websites frequently. In addition to what these numbers show, many practitioners added qualifiers that played up the significance of some sites and downplayed the significance of others. For example, one person said: “I also view [www.falundafa.org](http://www.falundafa.org) or [www.faluninfo.net](http://www.faluninfo.net) if I want some information about certain events.” The data indicates Clearwisdom.net and Minghui.org are the most important, followed by PureInight and Zhangjian, then Falun Dafa.org, and then other sites. Some sites [millionsails.org](http://millionsails.org) were not mentioned at all. Two practitioners mentioned [Epochtimes.com](http://Epochtimes.com), although it is not a Falun Gong site; it is merely a Chinese news site that has given sympathetic coverage to Falun Gong.

**Table 8: Most Frequently Checked Falun Gong Websites in the United States**

<b>Website</b>	<b>Number of Mentions</b>
FalunInfo.net	7
FalunDafa.org	13
Minghui.ca / Minghui.org	31
Clearwisdom.net	23
Pureinsight.org.org	10
Zhengjian.org	12
ClearHarmony.net	1
Xinsheng.net	3
Epochtimes.com	2
fgmtv.org	2
FOFG.org	1
Local Site	2

One practitioner explained the significance of Clearwisdom.net thusly:

For those of you who don't know, ClearWisdom Net is a website run by practitioners and for practitioners, primarily. It publishes stories about practitioners and experiences from practitioners around the world, news reports on Falun Dafa, and news of awards given to Master Li. Most importantly, though, it publishes new teachings--articles and remarks--by Master. I have benefited tremendously from reading ClearWisdom Net... [Emily 2001]

As noted already, Li Hongzhi has redefined the importance of Clearwisdom.net after the crackdown to a higher level of importance, and the responses of practitioners reflect this. After reading countless articles on Clearwisdom.net and Pureinsight.org informally, and 65 articles expressly for the purpose of finding themes, I have a few findings to report. I will report these together because there is a good deal of overlap in content, although Clearwisdom.net tends to have more general interest articles, while Pureinsight.org tends to have more scientific (from the perspective of a practitioner, at least) articles. Despite their different emphasis, Clearwisdom.net still has some "scientific" articles and Pureinsight.org still has general interest articles about the experiences of practitioners. While Pureinsight.org might not have as many practitioners' experiences, the ones they do have read a lot like the ones on Clearwisdom. This is why the two are being considered together.

First, there are "conversion" stories of practitioners. These follow the narrative structure previously reported: problematic life involving bad health, poor morality, or confusion about philosophical issues, then an introduction to Falun Dafa, typically with some sort of immediate sign that the person is on the right path, a struggle to overcome one's old ways of behavior and thought, and then finally emerging as a practitioner with improved health, morality, and a sense of purpose.

Second, there are stories of "karmic retribution." The editors of Clearwisdom.net explain the purpose of these stories thusly:

Editors' Note: In both Western and Chinese culture, the principle of karmic retribution, that is, being held ultimately accountable for one's own actions, is widely accepted. The fundamental teaching of Falun Gong is the characteristic of the universe, "Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance." The universe will reward actions that are in harmony with this principle, while actions such as beating, torturing and murdering people will incur karmic retribution. Stated another way, good deeds will be rewarded with good, while evildoings will meet due retribution. Articles such as this one are meant as a compassionate reminder of this principle to those who would commit wrongdoing. While many of those who persecute Falun Gong are merely "following orders," the universal law requires that they, too, be held responsible for their actions, and that only by reversing their course of wrongdoing may they escape retribution. [Clearwisdom.net 2003a]

We [Dafa practitioners] are truly worried about those who are deceived by the propaganda, and who continue to commit crimes against Dafa practitioners in spite of

warnings from heaven; they are heading towards a path from which they must turn or else they can never return. In order to dissolve their hatred and misunderstanding, we are willing to suffer more. We only hope that people will have a brilliant future and that all sentient beings will have peace and happiness. [Clearwisdom.net 2003a]

These stories report incidents where people in China take some sort of action against Falun Gong, including: “persecut[ing] Falun Dafa and Dafa practitioners,” “ransack[ing] [practitioner’s] homes,” “destroy[ing] Dafa books,” “curs[ing] Dafa,” and “arrest[ing] and tortur[ing] Dafa practitioners” (Clearwisdom.net 2003a). The “karmic retribution” can take many forms, including being convicted of other crimes, receiving accidental injuries, and coming down with a serious illness. These stories in no way encourage practitioners to speed up the process and cause misfortune or injury to those who have taken actions against Falun Gong; to do so would be committing a wrong deed and damaging the reputation of Falun Gong. The underlying message behind these stories seems to be that taking actions against Falun Gong will result in negative consequences naturally, and that practitioners should hope they figure it that out before it is too late for them.

Third, there are article that claim to explain the truth behind deceptive media coverage in China. For example, there article talks about how the China Central Television station reported that a woman named Cao Yuzhen committed suicide by drowning herself in a lake, and then CCTV blamed Falun Gong for it. The article claims that what actually happened was she was mentally ill, so her husband took her to a Falun Gong practitioner, hoping that Falun Gong would cure her of the mental illness. The practitioners turned her away because Falun Gong cannot be used to treat others (or, at least, they are discouraged from doing so), and it should not be taught to the mentally ill. The article concludes by saying, “Many people in the area knew that Cao committed suicide because she suffered from a mental illness. Even the local police who investigated the incident felt that it was far-fetched to blame it on Falun Dafa and found it hard to understand that CCTV lied about it” (Clearwisdom.net 2003b), implying that CCTV’s coverage was not just a lie, but a ridiculous lie.

Fourth, there are articles that describe the abuse suffered by practitioners living in China. Oftentimes, the abuse takes the form physical violence:

On June 5, 2002, during a work session in the Gaoyang Forced Labor Camp, Dafa practitioner Liu Jianjun felt pain in his heart and sat down on the ground for a rest. Tang Guangjun, the team leader told Liu to get up and continue working. During a break, Liu Jianjun still felt sick and rested on the ground for a while. Upon seeing this, Tang Guangjun ordered that Liu be dragged out and started to curse him. Liu Jianjun pointed

out that what Tang did was wrong. Tang became furious and ordered several guards to shock Liu with an electric baton and brutally beat him up. Blood came out of Liu's nose and mouth. Tang Guangjun still denied Liu a rest and tried to force him to start working. Liu refused and protested that what they did was illegal. Just then, two chiefs Duan and Li from the No. 5 division saw this and they allowed Liu to clean the blood on his face. After they left, Tang Guangjun began to beat Liu again. [Clearwisdom.net 2003c]

The abuse can also be sexual or humiliation. Sometimes, all three are present:

When Dafa practitioners lost consciousness from being beaten, guards instigated the inmates to pour water mixed with instant noodle seasoning and hot pepper into their noses. They continued to hit practitioners even after they regained consciousness. The thugs also jabbed toothbrushes into practitioners' vaginas to cause pain and to degrade and humiliate them. An even more vicious form of sexual torture is when a few prisoners, again with instigation from the authorities, force female practitioners down onto the floor, then other prisoners will line up and one by one and take turns in painfully squeezing female practitioner's nipples. They call this torture "milking" which causes so much pain to female practitioners that the screaming from the pain is nonstop. If any prisoner with any shred of a conscience does not want to participate, the prisoner head will intimidate other prisoners to attack her, using fear of their own torture as a means to compel them to torture others. A 50-year-old Dafa practitioner's nipples were squeezed to the point of bleeding. It is so tragic that it is unbearable to watch. [Clearwisdom.net 2003d]

In another article, a letter is quoted that cheerfully starts out with the salutation: "Dear Dad, Mom and Everybody in the Family, How are you!" and then gets quite bleak:

When I was in the "Concentration Unit," six guards and six inmates watched me. Four of the inmates and one guard escorted me to do labor. In the evening, they would not let me sleep and physically tortured me. Another day, I was even beaten unconscious. Following that day, two inmates painfully bent my fingers from both sides of my body and a third inmate slapped my face. They also used a heavy object to hold down my head. They ordered me to copy the "Letter Criticizing Falun Gong" and I refused, so the guards ordered three inmates to rape me. Later, the warden called over an inmate and yelled at him because he did not beat me hard enough. [Clearwisdom.net 2002a]

As we can see, these articles are quite rich with detail, painting vivid pictures in the reader's mind of how brutal the treatment of practitioners must be. The phrasings chosen in these articles often convey illegality: for example, one article says that a practitioner was "kidnapped by the police" (Clearwisdom.net 2003h) instead of using a word that confers legitimacy like "arrested," "detained," or "apprehended." These articles often include the names, and sometimes addresses and phone numbers, of those people who are involved in these activities. One practitioner explained the purpose of listing the phone numbers thusly:

The numbers are listed for overseas practitioners to call them to persuade them to stop getting involved in persecution, and also to tell them the retribution theory that if someone has done something as bad as beating a practitioner to death, this person commits a tremendous karma, and he has to pay for this karma. I believe it has been working. I called a couple of times and first they were so surprised that I would have their #s, and then, they were very tough and cussing a lot, but from their anger, I heard fear as well. A few of them promised that they would never do it themselves anymore. The deterrence is working, but we have no idea to what degree.

Also, these articles often conclude with statements like, “Here we are calling upon all the kind-hearted people to help the Falun Dafa practitioners” (Clearwisdom.net 2003e). How often practitioners come across such articles and feel motivated to act, I cannot say.

Fifth, there are articles that are reprints of newspaper articles, but usually editing out the Chinese government’s accusations, and changing some phrasings to fit their beliefs. For example, in one article, the phrase “conceived of by Li Hongzh [sic]” (Pappacoda 2002) was changed to “[founded] by Li Hongzhi” (Clearwisdom.net 2002b, Brackets in original). Note that they have bracketed out all the changed they have made, and even provided a link to the original article, should a practitioner wonder about what was altered. Some articles do not do this, however, and Rahn (2002) is critical of Minghui.org (Clearwisdom.net) for this:

When a news article is posted to the website it is edited to exclude opinions contrary to the FLG view, statements by or reference to the Chinese government’s position and any use of the word ‘cult’ or ‘sect’. Followers are thereby limited in their information to a single source with a constantly reinforced viewpoint. Practitioners are warned not to read the ‘bad things’ that the ‘evil people’ say about the FLG (therefore they are edited out of anything placed on the FLG website), and they are not supposed to repeat anything they hear from other sources, for to do so would only strengthen the evil. This limited information and strong dualistic thinking may make it difficult for practitioners to either accept that others may not agree with them, or to give validity to the alternative view of others. [Rahn 2002: 53; also see Lowe 2003: 274, 276 n. 13]

While Rahn makes this sound like some sort of manipulative information filter peculiar to Falun Gong, a similar thing has been taking place in the United States, starting with the Reagan and Bush (senior) administrations (if not earlier). Di Leonardo (1998) refers to this process as the “fissioning of the American public sphere”:

We can track this phenomenon on a number of levels. There is, first of all, the sheer multiplication of what were formerly more unified and limited sets of media units: the competition of cable channels—including non-English programming—with network television, of “lifestyle niche” special-interest magazines with earlier mass-market weeklies and monthlies, of new “niche” radio music programming, of the new computer networks. Books are increasingly marketed to “true believer” rightist or liberal, feminist or antifeminist audiences. Whites and blacks increasingly watch different television programs; magazines increasingly appeal to, and are read only by, Americans in very specific occupational, generational, and interest niches. Right-wing talk radio has proliferated and has its own specific listening market. [di Leonardo 1998: 271]

Wouldn’t a feminist book give “limited information” that would make it difficult for its audience to “give validity to the alternative view of others”? Wouldn’t right-wing talk radio do the same thing with a left-wing perspective? Critics like Rahn might argue that Falun Gong is different because while feminists and



right-wing talk show hosts may make the other viewpoint look ridiculous, wrong, and not worth the time and effort to investigate, they would not make statements about ultimate reality and say that looking at or repeating the opposing view “would only strengthen the evil.” While practitioners perhaps have more incentive not to look at the opposing view than a feminist or far right-wing conservative might, I feel that Rahn paints a distorted picture of Falun Gong’s supposed restriction of looking at outside information. First, as I noted in chapter 2, practitioners do not live in social isolation, and therefore there are always multiple streams of identity they can live within. Second, as noted already, some articles do in fact have the link to the original article (for example, see Clearwisdom.net 2002b), although critics like Rahn might still object because the link is not highlighted, so it must be cut-and-pasted manually. Third, the Clearwisdom.net article that Rahn cites (2002: 64) to make her claim that looking at or repeating other viewpoints is “strengthening the evil” is not authoritative. Articles on Clearwisdom.net are just practitioners’ viewpoints (with the obvious exception of Li Hongzhi’s articles), and do not carry the definitional power that Li Hongzhi’s articles do. In fact, the practitioner’s last words in the article are: “The above is my personal experience. Please compassionately point out anything improper” (Clearwisdom.net 2001c). Fourth, when I asked practitioners what they thought the most common and serious misunderstandings were, they were usually willing to answer the question, which meant repeating the allegations against Falun Gong. (However, they may have just been making an exception in my case because of my research.)

The sixth type of articles on Clearwisdom.net is “practitioners’ insights,” where practitioners discuss some sort of point related to the teachings of Li Hongzhi. For example, one article recommends: “Whenever we encounter persecution, it is most imperative that we maintain and steadfastly face the issues with powerful righteous thoughts...” (Clearwisdom.net 2003f). Another article recommends that when talking to people about Falun Gong, practitioners should “allow them to talk too, [so] they feel respected and that we are interested in what they have to say as well, not only in what we have to say” (Clearwisdom.net 2003g).

Seventh, there are sometimes “photo reports.” The photos vary, but one recurring theme I have noticed is practitioners doing the exercises in the cold (Clearwisdom.net 2003i; Clearwisdom.net 2003j). In one photo, practitioners in Germany are doing the fifth exercise in front of the Chinese Embassy to protest

the treatment of practitioners in China. A woman is shown with her shoes off, sitting in the snow, but still maintaining a tranquil face (Clearwisdom.net 2003i). In one picture, no snow is present, but a textual indicator of how cold it was is offered in place of a visual reminder: “Although Chicago is well known for its harsh, cold winds, Falun Gong practitioners strengthened their resolve to remain steadfast in the cold wind to show the world that Falun Dafa practitioners will never surrender to evil forces” (Clearwisdom.net 2003k)

Eighth, there are articles from the editors. These often take the form of reminders about Li Hongzhi’s teachings on different issues. Also, the articles from the editors give instructions about when to do “Sending Forth Righteous Thoughts” and when to stop:

This global activity of intensively sending forth righteous thoughts can now conclude, so in regards to sending forth righteous thoughts on a daily basis please revert back to the way it was done before October. Dafa disciples in and out of China will continue to make good use of this time to do well in the three matters of studying the Fa well, clarifying the truth, and sending forth righteous thoughts. The overseas practitioners' daily activities of sending forth righteous thoughts around the various Chinese Consulates and clarifying the truth will still continue in an orderly manner until the persecution is ended. [Clearwisdom.net 2002c]

The editors seem to be in contact with Li Hongzhi (see Clearwisdom.net 2000e), and therefore their articles may seem more authoritative than regular practitioner’s articles. We can also see some direction given here. However, the articles they post directly suggest (*not* order) practitioners towards performing certain actions are usually confined to “Sending Forth Righteous Thoughts.” If Falun Gong was to become an organization in the future, I predict the easiest way this could occur is if Li Hongzhi were to specifically give more authority to the editors of Clearwisdom.net so that they could do more than just remind practitioners of Li Hongzhi’s teachings and offer suggestions as to when and how often one should perform “Sending Forth Righteous Thoughts.” If that were to happen, perhaps a better case could be made for Falun Gong being an organization. I doubt that Falun Gong would turn into an organization this way, however.

Ninth, there are articles that attempt to find similarities and differences between Falun Gong and sciences, religions, history, and so fourth. This is the main sort of article that Pureinsight.org publishes. As noted previously, this is similar to how Lawrence (2002) found that some Islamic websites try to “Islamize knowledge”—that is, to make them compatible with their belief system. These articles, in addition to

adding to the practitioners' knowledge, are also likely to be useful in preparing practitioners to deal with challenges to Li Hongzhi's teachings based on science.

### **The Significance of the Internet for Falun Gong**

Scholars have described the significance of the Internet for Falun Gong in different ways.

Karaflogka (2002) described Falun Gong as a 'NCRM':

Because of its structure the Internet has been beyond the control of any political or commercial authority. In the anarchical environment of the Internet, cyber-communities and movements have evolved, having their own rules, agendas and codes of practice. All these have been regulated by the members themselves rather than by any outside power. It is within these parameters that my second type of cyberreligions, which I call 'New Cyberreligious Movements' is placed. New because they address issues using a new medium and introducing new possibilities; Cyberreligious because they mainly exist and function on-line; Movements because they can, potentially, mobilise and activate the entire human population. NCRMs may take the form of a response to, or a reaction towards, or a call for action, or even a rebellion against a religious establishment of the on-line world. Two distinctive examples of NCRMs are Falun Gong and Partenia. While Partenia exists entirely in cyberspace, Falun Gong exists somewhere between on and in, as do also the cyberchurches, cybersynagogues and so on, in the sense that they function in both off and on-line worlds. [Karaflogka 2002: 286]

Lin (2001) saw the significance of Falun Gong's Internet usage in terms of her theory of social capital:

...I will offer a case study, concerning the recent Falun Gong movement in China, as an example of how cybernetworks provide social capital in a social movement and sustain collective action even within an extremely constrained institutional field. This example shows how cybernetworks facilitate the use of social capital over space and time, and demonstrates effectiveness in generating and sustaining a social movement in a global context. (Lin 2001: 217)

She argues that social capital "contains three components: structure (embeddedness), opportunity (accessibility through social networks), and action (use)" (p. 41). While I do not plan on specifically addressing their conceptual frameworks, I would like to talk about the significance of the Internet for Falun Gong practitioners in a general sense.

The Internet's primary purpose for practitioners seems to be keeping up with Falun-Gong-related news and articles, keeping in touch with other practitioners, and reaching out to non-practitioners.

Numerous examples of these different functions were expressed in the responses to my semi-structured interviews, in particular the question: "How important do you think the Internet has been to the growth and success of Falun Gong?" Lianer Cao pointed out the Internet makes Falun Gong financially feasible:

Yes, I think Internet plays an very important role in the development of FLG. It is fast, cheap and enables people to communicate over oceans. Especially for people in China,

the information blockage severely hinders their vision of the whole movement. Our activities outside China greatly encourage those under pressure, misunderstanding and torture. Also since FLG is very strict in financial management of all related activities. We are supposed not to accept any donations or other forms of financial support from non-practitioners, we are very tight in money in organizing large-scale projects, etc. Internet saves us a lot money and effort in this regard.

Andrew, a practitioner, told me he was able to find out about Falun Gong from the Internet:

I think that it has been very helpful. For example, when I first heard about FG it was from a newspaper. I was able to learn some of the exercises and read some of the books just by getting on the Internet. So, people anywhere in the world can learn the practice through the Internet, although it is very helpful to have a volunteer teach the exercises in person. The Internet has been a way that practitioners have been able to communicate and work together to increase public awareness about the persecution in a more effective way.

Yuming Cui, another practitioner, wrote: “Internet is an important media for communication either with practitioners or telling the truth of Falun Gong and the persecution of Falun Gong practitioners in China to the Chinese people or the other people.” Yiping Wu responded with a nice typology of four functions of the Internet for Falun Gong practitioners:

Yes, the Internet plays an important role to the growth of Falun Gong. The following are examples of using the Internet. 1) WWW: a lot of information can be posted in WWW such as teachings, materials of video, audio. 2) email: it is convenient to communicate via email 3) forum: a place for practitioners to share and discuss 4) chat room: practitioners log in chat room in China to clarify truth for Chinese chatters because China government spread wrong and false information to defame Falun Gong among Chinese.

Akal, a young practitioner of Indian heritage, wrote: “I think the Internet has helped Falun Gong practitioners keep in touch with each other. It has also helped them get the latest information from the Internet as and when it happens. I think the Internet is indispensable for the practitioners in China, and it may be the best and safest way for them to read the latest happenings.” Yuanming Li told me that one of the first things practitioners did when the persecution started was put up websites, and that the article that claims the self-immolation incident was a hoax has been the most popular article for over a year. Musheng Liu wrote:

I think the Internet play a very important role [*unintelligible*] because... as I just mentioned earlier, information, news, are blocked by Chinese government. It's very difficult to get news, you know, over newspaper, radio, television—that's all controlled by the state media. Basically, that's controlled by the leadership—the top leadership. In this case, the Chinese president, Jiang Zemin, because he personally initiates the persecution against Falun Gong. He did not want all the true information to be heard to the outside world. So in this kind of situations, the Internet plays a very important role because they try very hard to block the Internet, but they cannot totally block it...

Ziwei Liu told me of a clever way she got around China's firewalls in her response:

Oh, it's very, very important, especially now. Um, um... In the beginning, I thought, um, Chinese Government block a lot of website, if type, like, Master Li's name, or Falun Gong, Zhen-Shan-Ren—Truthfulness, Compassion, Tolerance... Chinese people will not read it. I thought, um, that's the truth... but after I post the, uh, Flash movie—And people can discuss this.

Guizhen Yao, when asked the Internet's role in the growth and success of Falun Gong, simply responded:

“Very. A good way for communication and experience sharing.”

However, some people were quick to point out the limitations of the Internet's importance; these practitioners seem to concede that the Internet has its' usefulness, but feel it important to emphasize that it is the teachings themselves that have made Falun Gong successful, not the means by which they are spread.

Martin wrote:

I believe that Falun Gong would experience growth and success with or without the Internet. I think the improvements in quality of life and health speak for themselves. The Internet is just a convenient vehicle for spreading information. Many organizations and businesses utilize the Internet but it can't be said that they wouldn't be successful without the Internet. And conversely there are many organizations and businesses on the Internet that are not successful. Therefore, I feel that the Internet may help spread information quicker but the success of Falun Gong would still occur without the Internet.

Curtis, one of the Internet practitioners, said that the Internet “is pretty important so everyone can keep in touch. I think practitioners make good use of the Internet to communicate but it is not an essential part of the practice.” Peggy, one of the newcomers who might be described as a casual practitioner, responded:

I think it's going to be passed from person to person. I don't think anybody's gonna... get introduced to it over the Internet. I mean, maybe if they personally get introduced to it, then they might look things up on the Internet, and I—There are a lot of people that practice in D.C. that, um, log onto the Internet and read things that other practitioners have written, but, um, I haven't personally done that. But...I don't think it's-- For me, it's not influential in having me practice Falun Gong.

She later mentioned how she got her acupuncturist to check out Falun Gong by giving her the address of a Falun Gong website. Jiaxin Hu wrote, “It is not important if it was not for Chinese government's crackdown. Without Internet, it can grow just as fast. Falun Gong began in 1992 and it had tens of millions of followers by 1999. Internet became popular only very recently. Even today, majority of these millions of followers in China may not have Internet access. It might help its future growth in western society, but by no means essential.”

As we can see, practitioners have generally use the Internet to keep to maintain their horizontal linkages over vast distances, and provide a way to disseminate Li Hongzhi's articles, thus allowing him to exert his definitional power (to use Yelvington's typology once again).

## How Practitioners are Raising Awareness



**Figure 31: A Practitioner's Van In D.C. With A Message For China**

*Photo by Noah Porter.*

### Chinese Opinions of Falun Gong

The Chinese, both mainland and overseas (*Huayi*), have had mixed responses to the crackdown. In a New York Times article on April 26, 1999, a generally negative opinion is implied from the person they interviewed: “‘They’re crazy,’ said Li Xiaoming, 27, who works for a transport company. ‘But there are a lot of them, so the government has to listen’” (Faison 1999). Hertzke (2000), in his description of his discussions with scholars in China about religion, wrote:

...almost everyone I talked with in China viewed the government ban as appropriate. One of my interpreters, for example, told how a teacher she knew became involved in Falun Gong and would scare the students by holding a meditation pose in the classroom for half an hour. Others echoed the government’s charge that some Falun Gong members died because they refused medical treatment or jumped off buildings in moments of euphoria. [Hertzke 2000]

Also, Chuck Ditzler found that many people took a dim view of his research on Falun Gong:

In my interactions with non-practitioners I have experienced some of the “deviant” label that has become more pronounced during the crackdown. Some non-practitioners ask me, with a tone that is clearly critical, why I spend so much time with “those people.” When I told a Chinese student in the United States that I had started participant observation of Falun Gong, the student asked me: “Do you ever think about cutting your stomach open?” The question seemed to be asked half-jokingly, for the student disagrees with the ban of Falun Gong. The student felt a tinge of discomfort with Falun Gong, that it is something strange and critics might have a point that it makes practitioners go crazy. [Ditzler 2001: 21]

Wei (2002) finds that many in the Chinese diaspora hold a positive view of their cultural and ethnic heritage, but take a dim view of the PRC itself. Also, Bell and Boas (2003) found that “the most successful use of the Internet in Falun Gong’s struggle with the PRC government... appears to be in its impact on Western public opinion” (p. 287), while a student of the Chinese Internet they corresponded with told them: “although I know [Falun Gong] practitioners are using the Net for their purposes, I don’t see a lively support for them in the most popular Chinese online forums” (p. 292 n. 50, brackets in original). This might suggest that Mainland Chinese generally are for the crackdown and overseas Chinese are against it; however, the situation does not appear to be so simple. On the other end of the spectrum, Ching (2001) wrote:

The author visited China precisely in late July, and watched with boredom the daily television news that orchestrated the criticism of Falun Gong and its founder, Li Hongzhi. The leaders of China's officially approved religions appeared on television to denounce Falun Gong. Followers who recanted were also there to register their contrition and add to the criticisms. Falun Gong was accused of all kinds of crimes, including leading the sick astray and forbidding them to see physicians, thereby causing deaths. Following such media outcries, local Chinese friends were likewise bored and dismayed. For them, it was as though the Cultural Revolution were coming back. The problem is, two years later, these media criticisms continue. [Ching 2001]

In addition, Edelman and Richardson (2003) pointed out that many in the Chinese government were bothered by the Standing Committee of the CCP Politburo disregarded to consult them before initiating the crackdown (p. 320-321). In that same vein, Waldron said: “... we have the crude atavistic rhetoric of the anti-Falungong campaign with strident Cultural Revolution-style TV denunciations, and the equally primitive media campaigns against Lee Teng-hui and the United States--in the People's Daily and elsewhere. This is the sort of thing that embarrasses many Chinese, and rightly so” (Waldron 1999). In Canada, it appears this way as well:

It has become increasingly difficult for Beijing to mobilize popular support for its tirade against the Falun Gong, precisely because “the enemy” becomes the majority of the Chinese people. Among many of the non-activist Mainland Chinese who I have discussed this project with, there is a shared ambivalence towards the government’s

campaign against the group. It seems that this is largely fueled by a shared uncertainty about whose interests are served by the obliteration of a peaceful group to which their friends and neighbors belong. [Blackburn 2000: 68]

With all these different opinions, how can the opinions of the Chinese, both mainland and overseas, best be characterized?

Kindopp (2002) suggests that the self-immolation incident may have had a negative effect on the public perception of Falun Gong; “Public sentiment within China was decidedly opposed to the government campaign, at least until several [supposed] Falun Gong adherents—including a mother and daughter—immolated themselves in a January 2001 protest in Tiananmen Square” (p. 261). Indeed, one of the few voluntary apostasies that the practitioners I interviewed told me about was due to the infamous self-immolation incident.

On the other hand, one Chinese American man I met in D.C., a non-practitioner, told me the following story about the time he went to China in 2002: “I was actually quite surprised to hear people joking about [Falun Gong]. In everyday jokes they would add Falun Gong in it. When I went to Tiananmen Square, most of the important statues and stuff were blocked off because of protests. They had rope surrounding it so you couldn’t get close.” When I asked him about what sort of jokes they told, he replied: “Stupid ones. For instance, my friend ate so much he got a stomachache. They would say stuff like: ‘He probably went into the other house to practice some Falun Gong so he could eat more.’ Also the taxi drivers would say negative things that the Communist Party had caused in the economy today.” I then asked him if he thought the joking meant they saw the crackdown as unnecessary, and he replied: “Well, by the way they were joking about it, the situation was unnecessary. I mean, you should have seen the security at Tiananmen Square! Guards on every corner, cameras everywhere... It was fear.”

Voices of Chinese conducted a web survey in October 1999 that attempted to find out what the Chinese thought of the crackdown. Their respondents were “Chinese people with high levels of education. 85% of the respondents have a Masters degree or higher, and 96.2% of them live overseas” (Lu 1999). In addition, “of those who currently are students, 75.1% are pursuing a Ph.D. degree. 21% of the respondents are Falun Gong practitioners, 68% are not, and 11% did not indicate if they are practitioners or not” (Lu 1999). Lu concluded:

From the result of the survey, Chinese people's opinions regarding Falun Gong, its leader Li Hongzhi, Chinese government's actions against Falun Gong, and Chinese media and



western media's coverage about the issue are all bi-polarized with the majority of people hold negative opinions against Falun Gong. People's opinions about Falun Gong's founder and leader Li Hongzhi are more negative than people's opinion about the practice of Falun Gong.

The majority of the respondents also hold negative opinions about the Chinese government's actions against Falun Gong. The respondents are not satisfied with either Chinese media or western media's coverage. Vast majority of the respondents expressed negative feelings about the media coverage, and people are especially concerned with the biases of media coverage. [Lu 1999]

A practitioner said to me, "There are Chinese spies among the Chinese students and scholars... There are thousands of them taking student visas or diplomatic visas in the US... Sometimes, when a person is too unreasonable on an issue to even have a talk with him, there may be some other explanation on his behaviors." It is difficult to say how many of the people in the VOC survey fit the description of a spy, but it would seem reasonable to surmise that there were some; Lu (1999), in discussing the methodology of the survey, wrote: "1064 valid responses were collected after repeated responses from the same host machines were deleted." (It may be countered that these could have been Falun Gong practitioners since they would also have a vested interest in the outcome; however, cheating a survey would seem to go against Truthfulness, which makes this an unlikely possibility.) The survey also found that 39% of the respondents' thought Falun Gong should be banned in China, 41% disagreed, 17% were neutral, and 3% did not know. In addition, 50% said that China's actions were inappropriate. Also, it should be noted "the sample used in the study may not be representative since the sample was formed based on people's voluntary participation" (Lu 1999).

Another survey was posted on TIMEasia.com, although it cautions that it is "an unscientific, informal survey for the interest and enjoyment of TIME.com users, and may not be indicative of popular opinion" (TIMEasia.com 2001). The survey had a sample size of 24,723; 86.4% said that Falun Gong is "a spiritual group" and 31.9% found that Falun Gong is "an evil cult." I could find no explanation for why the results totaled more than 100%.

Two surveys were done in Hong Kong to find out public opinion on Falun Gong and the laws enacted against it, with two different outcomes (South China Morning Post 2001). A Democrat survey found that "more than 56 per cent of 620 respondents believed anti-cult legislation was unnecessary. Only 24 per cent said it was." However, a similar poll done by the Hong Kong Progressive Alliance, a pro-Beijing party, found that "almost 40 per cent of 7,000 people interviewed believed the Beijing-banned

Falun Gong was a cult. More than 55 per cent feared it would stir up ‘social unrest’.” The Progressive Alliance criticized the Democrats’ sample size, which was only 600; however, “veteran pollster Li Pang-kwong, of Lingnan University, said the discrepancy between the two polls was due to question formulation and sample-collection methods” (South China Morning Post 2001), saying that the Progressive Alliance may not have used a “well-controlled sampling method” (2001).

In a certain sense, it does not matter what Chinese people really think because “the regime’s success does not depend on its subject believing its mystifications—they must merely act as if they do, by following the ‘prescribed ritual’” (Kindopp 2002: 260). Cheng Li's description of how people in China responded to memorial services to honor Mao, despite his responsibility for 20 million deaths and 100 million people’s suffering, may shed some light on why so many are also going along with this “prescribed ritual”:

A small number of people in Mainland China did voice their concerns and resentment about the memorial activities. Well-known writers such as Ba Jin, Bing Xin, and Zhou Gucheng wrote a joint letter to the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party...

Most people in Shanghai, however, seemed indifferent to the government’s attempt to celebrate Mao’s 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. They were more interested in things that could help them make money. Mao occurred to them only if he had market value. A Shanghai watch factory produced 10,000 commemorative gold watches of Mao.

”Who cares about *Mao* or *Marx*? We’re only concerned about *market* and *money*,” a manager of the watch factory said to me in English. “The year of 1996 will be the Year of the *Mouse* in the Chinese lunar calendar. We’re going to produce a lot of goods with the image of a mouse.” He asked, “does this mean we like mice?” [Li Cheng 1997: 45]

If the CCP merely depends on people acting as if they believe in their ideology, then conversely, “challenging the regime does not require an assault on its institutions of coercion, but merely acting in a way that violates the prescribed ritual” (p. 260). However, if people’s primary concerns are legal and economic, and to speak out against the CCP’s treatment of Falun Gong could lead to legal and economic consequences, then these people are not likely to speak out even if they do disagree with how the Chinese Government has handled the situation. On the other hand, as shown in the previous chapter, people who have political views that they cannot express openly can still express their dissent in subtle ways.

As for the response of others to the crackdown, Frank (2002) wrote: “Surprisingly, many non-Chinese I interviewed in the United States expressed the sentiment that Falun Gong practitioners had gotten what they deserved. Americans, it seemed, were as tired of ‘crackpot cults’ as the Chinese were.” I do not know how many non-Chinese Americans or how systematically he interviewed them, but I find these

results surprising since the majority of non-Chinese people I talked to (informally and unsystematically) did not know what Falun Gong was, or only had the vaguest conception about it (e.g., they remembered reading something about the crackdown in the paper, they saw the exercises and concluded it was like Tai-Chi, etc.).

### **Methods of Getting the Message Out**

Practitioners are using many methods to raise awareness of Falun Gong and the crackdown in China. It seems like the Chinese practitioners may be more involved, though the Western practitioners are involved in spreading awareness of Falun Gong as well.

Some of the methods used by the practitioners include: putting up signs on campus, holding workshops about what is going on in China, setting up booths at the events of other organizations on campus like Amnesty International, passing out flyers, participating in parades, going to press conferences in other cities, arranging for the mayors of different cities (including Tampa and D.C.) to issue a Falun Dafa proclamation, bringing Falun Gong to health clubs and health expos, collecting signatures for appeal letters to present to human rights groups and congress, and talking to friends and family about Falun Gong when there is an opportunity to do so. Most practitioners will discuss Falun Gong when the opportunity presents itself. Despite all their efforts, many practitioners feel they are not doing enough and wish they could do more.

There has been some controversy over how meaningful the proclamations that the practitioners get from various cities actually are. Rahn (2000) wrote, “They are ‘rubber-stamp’ documents meant for public relations purposes only. Yet the Falun Gong states that the meaning of these awards is ‘profound’ and ‘represents the understanding and recognition of the Falun Dafa by human beings and society.’” She is correct that Falun Gong has cited these proclamations as a sign of support; for example, one practitioner defended Falun Gong to a critic on a newsgroup by saying: “If it was really as bad as you say why would there be so much support from the governments around the world? The governments would never support a person like you stated” (tc 2002). However, I do not think Rahn is correct in suggesting proclamations are always as easy to get as they are in her home state, where you just “call and leave a message as to whether you want a ‘proclamation’ or a ‘commendation’ and what day you need it by. You can also FAX in your

request, sending them a sample proclamation which they will then use” (Rahn 2000). Practitioners in Tampa have told me that the difficulty varies; sometimes the mayor’s office can be skeptical as to their motives for wanting a proclamation. In the minutes of a city council meeting at one particular city, we can see that “rubber-stamping” certainly did not take place:

Mr. Ginsburg said he was part of a group called Falun Dafa. Falun Dafa, which originated in China, was an exercise practice of body and mind. He said the program had great effects on mental well being and physical health. The basis of the practice was to try to be a better person and to try to relinquish one’s pursuit of self interest. Mr. Ginsburg said he could not represent the practice entirely because it was very profound. He said people were practicing Falun Dafa in over fifty countries, around one hundred million people worldwide and it was estimated Falun Dafa had been tried by about a thousand people here in the metro area. Mr. Ginsburg said he thought Littleton, by way of a proclamation, might be interested in showing the rest of the world they thought this might be a good practice. Council Member Kast said she had read about the group and asked for the proper pronunciation?

Mr. Ginsburg said there were two names: Falun Gong and Falun Dafa. [Littleton City Council 2002: 4]

The minutes then go on to show that another practitioner appeared in person to talk about Falun Gong:

Bani said the practice was based on truthfulness, benevolence, and tolerance. He said these were the highest characteristics of the universe and followers tried to assimilate these characteristics every day.

Bani said he was there to talk about the persecution of Falun Gong practitioners in China. He said in 1996 the book *Zhuan Falun* was the best selling book in China, a country where the population was over 1.6 billion people. In 1998, a Chinese government survey found that between 70-100 million people in China, including some of their government officials, were practicing Falun Gong. The Chinese government found this extremely threatening. In 1999, a crackdown began. 343 practitioners had been killed, others were sent to prison camps, mental hospitals, or labor camps.

Because of the brutalities, Bani asked for a resolution condemning inhumane acts against those who practice Falun Gong in China. He said some might ask why should Littleton care about something that was happening in China? September 11 showed that what happened on the other side of the world did affect us. If we could bring world peace and harmony to other places in the world it would affect us.

Bani said if we could do something for someone else with out gaining something for ourselves, we should do it. He said Broomfield had issued both a proclamation and a resolution. He asked for Littleton to do the same.

*Mayor Thornton asked for a copy of the proclamation and resolution for review.* [Littleton City Council 2002: 4-5, emphases added]

*From these city council meeting minutes, we can see that the practitioners did not just fax in a pro forma proclamation and have it rubber-stamped. Instead, they had to show up in person, describe what Falun Gong is, answer questions, and finally give a copy of the proclamation to the mayor for review. Also, it is worth mentioning that the Chinese government has gotten involved in trying to block the issuing of some Falun Dafa proclamations, politicizing the issue and making it less likely that rubber stamping occurs.*

One Western practitioner told me of how she went to a Chinese restaurant and told the owner that she was part of a local qigong group and wondered if she could leave some flyers on his counter. The man seemed interested until he saw she was talking about Falun Gong, and then said, “Oh no, we don’t do this.”

After talking with him about it, she said he “opened up a little more,” but he still would not accept the flyers.

Just doing their exercises is in itself a form of awareness promotion because they are demonstrating what Falun Gong is publicly. Also, they always put up posters that give basic information on Falun Gong, along with some flyers next to it. As noted previously, this is especially true for the Washington D.C. practitioners since a very high number of people walk through the Mall. This poster contains information on what the benefits of practicing Falun Gong are including a health survey of practitioners, testimonials, and pictures of Li Hongzhi doing the exercises. Sometimes posters about the prosecution will be put up as well:

By 10 a.m. Sunday, the group has re-created their photo opportunity in the heart of New Orleans' bustling river walk tourist district. Under a pavilion located a block off the French Quarter, the group erects its banners and torture photos. After connecting the microphone, Dakun Sun reads a statement about the persecution in China for the benefit of a newspaper reporter. After him, Amy Lee and Danielle read brief summaries of their lives.

The rest of the group fans out on the sidewalk, distributing leaflets. "SOS! Urgent," Joy says, offering fliers to anyone who passes. Some people refuse to make eye contact with her, but others are drawn to the images of torture.

"Oh, how hideous!" says one lady. Two teen-agers step up to the posters so they can read the accompanying text. "They exercise and they get beat up for it?" one asks. Another man says, "They're having the Olympics there?" [Farley 2001: 3]

As this newspaper article demonstrates, this strategy can be very effective in swaying opinions.



**Figure 32: The poster used for the Practice Site in Tampa**

*Photo by Noah Porter.*

Some practitioners will also wear Falun Gong shirts and put Falun Gong bumper stickers on the back of their cars. Jianping Chu tells me that practitioners in other areas often produce materials like shirts,

stickers, and pamphlets, especially where the practice sites have many more practitioners so printing costs can be split with many more people. At the conferences, they often share these materials with practitioners in other areas who can take them back with them.



Figure 33: A Poster Used on the Mall in D.C.

Photo by Noah Porter.

### Selected Practitioner Biographies

#### The Life of Jianping Chu: An Example of How a Person Becomes a Practitioner

Jianping Chu was born in the countryside in northern China, close to Beijing, in 1973. His father worked at the Bank of Agriculture, and his mother worked as a farmer. He has two siblings, an older brother and an older sister. His grandparents lived in the same house as the family, as was common in China during that time.

He describes his childhood in fond terms, despite being poor:

Noah Porter: So what was your childhood like? What do you remember about your childhood?

Jianping Chu: Oh yeah, it was quite simple I think. We went to school everyday, and when we got off we just play, you know, on the street with a lot of friends, you know,

kids...play something... You won't see here [chuckle]. In United States, it's different. We don't have much toys because most of us are very poor, so we play something... very simple and cheap.

Although they did not have costly toys, his family was still able to keep him fed and happy. He never had major conflicts with his family or at school at this point in his life.

As a teenager, he would study hard, and then play cards and sports like basketball in his free time.

He spoke well of this period in his life also:

JC: Uh... Life at that time was quite simple. Just study, and have... you know, eat... and then play... We don't worry about much things... quite simple. It was also... a little bit difficult... because... at that time, the living condition was lower than... worse than now, so... we eat... some kind, you know, all the food quite cheaper, and, uh... It's a little bit difficult for students...uh... had poor life over there, but it was happy because we're very—our minds were very simple.

In high school, he practiced something that he described as “sort of qigong, but not really.” He did qigong out of curiosity. “In China, already quite popular to know that qigong can develop supernormal abilities... I thought it would be great if I have some, so that's why, I think, I want to try,” he said. At the time, schools avoided taking a stand on the issue of qigong; they neither encouraged nor discouraged students from practicing.

In high school, he did well in chemistry, so he applied to college to become an applied chemistry major. His parents were not happy about his selection of school because they wanted him to go to school closer to home; it was approximately a 24-hour train ride from where they lived, and even longer when transfers were required. “You know, [kids], I think we always want to leave home farther to get more freedom I guess,” he said with a chuckle. His parents respected his decision, however.

He describes college as the first of three major changes that happened in his life; he said, “I didn't know anything about future, and after that, I think I learned a *little bit* how to deal with life, from college life.” It was in college that he feels he realized his academic potential, and had his first girlfriend. They later ended up having problems because he felt he was “mentally too young” during that time in his life.

During his senior year, he decided to join the communist party:

NP: So... why did you want to join the communist party?

JC: Well, you know, first thing is because everybody in China almost... almost, uh... like my age, uh, educated to believe in communism. I was strongly believe in that... and, uh... I'm sure—I was very sure, and, uh... I thought, you know...the party... is good... so I want to join up. And I also want to think... if I can join, I can serve people better, and also maybe... myself, have a better future... so that's why I want to join. And when I got to graduate school, things change.

He later completely reversed his opinion; subsequent to this interview, I asked him if he was still considered a member of the Communist party. He said that party members have to pay biannual dues, which apparently most people who go overseas do not pay. However, they are given the option to pay their dues and become a member again upon returning to China. Jianping Chu told me that even if he had that option, he would not renew his membership.

After college, Jianping Chu went to the Chinese Academy of Science for graduate school in 1994 where he specialized in corrosion. His department was assigned to the physics department, so he had to learn a lot about physics even though his background was in chemistry. Taking physics courses inspired his curiosity about larger issues in life:

And... you know, physics actually close... so close to philosophy... so, you know... Something change, and I start to think about—to read philosophy, to understand better... you know, the origin of life, maybe. Maybe that time, it wasn't that clear, but I was searching something—I started to search something. I started to prepare the knowledge for... later... then I make decision.

This was a difficult time in his life, however. The environment was very competitive, which placed a lot of pressure on him to academically perform well.

In 1995, Jianping Chu met his second girlfriend, which led to the second change in his life. He started to think about what he was going to do with his degree after he graduated, and his girlfriend asked him to go abroad. After his first year of study at graduate school, they went back northeast to another city called Shenyang. Jianping Chu was disappointed with the environment there. In 1996, their relationship fell apart, but he still decided to apply to go to the United States. He was accepted to a school in New Mexico, but his plans went awry:

JC: And I got everything done with, uh... passport... and even ticket. And then I went to... uh... hospital to take a regular examination before you go abroad. It's kind of required. And... I was found to have hepatitis-B... and I was very depressed... but I thought it's okay... because I—I felt quite strong...still. But...just before I defend... I got a...a flu... and I eat too many drugs and medicine—I mean, medicines to try—I was trying to get it... healed, because I—I was going to defend... you know... but I took too many. Over dosage. Then I got a medical—how do you call it? Reaction?

NP: Yeah, reaction.

JC: Reaction... and my body was almost collapse. I felt really bad, and sometime—because all my classmates were busy defending, so—they really didn't have time to take care of me, so sometimes I feel really lonely, and also...painful, and close to death. You know, so... I was so—that time change me, again... so I decided not to go... not to go to New Mexico, so I stayed in China for a year. I was trying to heal my problem... physical problem, also, my mental problem... and, uh, it's not like a mental—like a spiritual...



confusion... I was trying to find the answers, so I... I took a lot of... uh... chemical drugs, injections?

Jianping Chu tried both Western medicine and traditional Chinese medicine, but found both to be ineffective. He then got a book full of different qigong exercises, and even made up his own qigong routine from the ones he practiced in the book; it made him feel better. “After one year,” he said, “I know what I was looking [for] clearly. Before, I didn’t know. I only had a lot of doubts, but... by ninety-eight, I know I was looking for freedom... both body, spiritually and... and physical.” The school in New Mexico had given up on him, so he applied to the University of South Florida this time. He was accepted.

When he first moved to Tampa, he had a Christian roommate who saw Jianping Chu as a potential convert and took him to church. Jianping Chu said,

So I start to read Bible. I like it, actually. I enjoyed the time... something close to what I was looking, and, uh... I had a lot of friends that we discussed about life. They want to help me...you know... to accept... uh...Jesus, of course. And we had a good time, and, uh... I was quite active in Church and also, you know, that community, because I was looking for truth, and... uh... But things change... by November, because... Jing Yang, one of my fellow practitioners, came to USF... gave a workshop about Falun Gong. I know—that time, even when I went to church, I was doing qigong, because I want to try to keep my body fit... and when he came, you know... Chinese Student Association publicized—advertised that news about qigong so I went there. I attended a... workshop. They teach it free, and, uh... Even loan me a book, so I took it home... After the final exam, I... I started to practice... and gradually I changed. I thought that’s something I—I was really looking for. It take a few months... before I even realize it... but after that, I’m quite confident with this, because... many, many things I had doubt before, in practice, and also my personal... questions. It’s so clear answer in—in...his book. And also, my physical problem disappeared.

His roommate was quite disappointed that Jianping Chu had chosen not to become a Christian. In an amusing twist of fate, Jianping Chu started to encourage his roommate to read the *Zhuan Falun* (although his roommate would not).

From what Jianping Chu tells me, his purpose in coming to the United States was quite different from most other Chinese, who are only looking for fame and fortune:

JC: Actually, like I told you—my—my purpose to United States... was not to make fortune. It was to find my truth... freedom. So... first thing, I enjoyed staying here, because I was looking for it, and I did. Also, I don’t care about, uh... you know, how much money I make, and how... um... famous I will be, and what kind of job in the future I will get. I care that I’m doing the right thing, and I can find the truth, and, uh... I’m very happy that I did that, and, uh, found it. I... kind of like, achieved my [purpose]—my goal.

Jianping Chu was actually considering transferring out of his department into the philosophy department before discovering Falun Gong; however, since he is satisfied with the answers that the *Zhuan Falun* gave him, he is still in the same department.

After the crackdown happened, Jianping Chu's life has changed quite a bit. Before, he would just read the *Zhuan Falun* and go to two conferences a year. After the crackdown, Falun Gong conferences and events became much more frequent occurrences in the United States. In addition, the Chinese government now knows he is a practitioner and has confronted his family about it:

JC: My family... they were really scared... when the crackdown happened... Because... all the news they saw saying Falun Gong is so bad... so they asked me, again and again, to give up... do—do not practice this. And, my sister, collected a lot of... uh, information from newspaper, sending me a package, telling me, “look, Falun Gong is so bad. You shouldn't do it.” I told them it's not the truth, and...they knew...my physical condition... they knew I'm better... so... they...kind of... *accept* I'm doing the exercise...for health purpose... But they cannot—they are afraid I go out—if I go out, that, uh...I have to because other people's lives is being endangered. And almost everyday, someone is dying. I think one day they will realize that, because under that pressure, and under such an environment, people... gradually become really selfish in China. They only care themselves... and that's not right... But, I cannot tell them, “You are too selfish.” You know [chuckle]? But that's true. Actually that's true.

In addition, Jianping Chu had been having trouble getting his passport renewed. It expired in May 2002; and since it was not renewed by then, he had to apply for asylum. If that fallen through, he may be sent back to China, where he would most likely have been arrested and tortured – but luckily, the United States thus far seems to be pretty good about granting asylum on the basis of Falun Gong, and he was allowed to stay in this country. However, has told me many illegal immigrants from China try using Falun Gong for asylum purposes even though they are not practitioners; as a result, he is familiar with both cases in which non-practitioners have lied about being practitioners and have been allowed to stay in the country, and cases where actual practitioners have been denied asylum.

Jianping Chu's life history reaffirms what some have said about Falun Gong emerging in response to dissatisfaction with the materialistic, atheistic ideals of the Chinese Communist Party (Young 2002: 31; Wong 1999: 4). In their survey of practitioners in Canada, Palmer and Ownby (2000) found that most Western practitioners had participated in some form of alternative spiritual practice before finding Falun Gong, but said “it is unclear whether one might label Chinese Falungong practitioners ‘spiritual seekers’ as well” (p. 136). Jianping Chu's experimentation with multiple forms of qigong and Christianity, and his curiosity in philosophy arising from his study of physics certainly suggests that he could be classified as a

spiritual seeker. It is important to keep this in mind because it seems like the aforementioned authors who attribute the rise of Falun Gong simply as a critique of the current political and economic climate in China relegate Falun Gong to being akin to a mere symptom of a disease, rather than a spiritual path that people find to enrich their lives.

It seems noteworthy how Jianping Chu talks about opening China's market up to the world like the beginning of a new era in the country. From the interview, it seems he finds many flaws in this new era, where people are more concerned with money and fame instead of each other. It appears the new era is associated with atheism and selfishness rather than spirituality and connection with other people for him, and quite possibly for many others as well. Here is an illuminating example from a Falun Gong website of this association:

There is no real scientific basis for Darwin's theory of evolution. After I started cultivation, I thought that I had eliminated my notions in this regard since I had already come to know that the theory that human beings descended from monkeys is wrong. In addition, I recently discovered through my own experience how Darwin's theory of evolution is destroying the fundamental nature of the humankind... The essence of Darwin's theory of evolution is survival of the fittest and elimination of the weakest. This "survival of the fittest" means that "hapless" lives should be eliminated through competition. This concept had been deeply imprinted on my mind. Starting from the time that I first became an adolescent, it seemed that I had always belonged to the group of "outstanding people." I never needed much help from others. I always somehow looked down upon those people who were not "outstanding" enough. I thought that they got what they deserved, since they had nobody but themselves to blame for being so stupid. More importantly, I had the notion that made me think that I didn't have any obligation to help them because it should just be this way—survival of the fittest. [Pureinsight.org 2002a]

When reading a statement like this, one may point out that this practitioner seems unable to distinguish between Darwin's theory of evolution and social darwinism. However, it may be more insightful to ponder why the two are synonymous to this person. If atheism, materialism, and modern science are associated with the new era of Chinese society following the reforms made by Deng Xiaoping, then it is perhaps understandable how the blame might be equally distributed among these three candidates for the negative aspects of reform.

One last thing to think about in terms of Jianping Chu's story is what implications it carries for Chinese society. That is, Jianping Chu's story is not unique in that he was a bright student who went to America to further his education. He said that the science education in the United States is better than in China. The loss of one bright student will probably not make or break Chinese society, but what happens

when large numbers of Chinese scholars in the United States fear for their safety and avoid going back to China at all costs? It has been said that Americans “are able to harvest the best and brightest of China’s students” (Xiao 2001), and the crackdown only seems to be furthering this process.

## **The Life of Nappi: From Car Accident to Cultivator**

### *Preface*

Nappi is a practitioner I met in the Washington, D.C. area with a very interesting life story. Before going up to D.C., I asked one of the Tampa practitioners to put me in touch with a D.C. practitioner; my thinking was that if I was introduced to another practitioner, I would have an easier time establishing rapport and finding a key informant. This turned out to be the case, but not exactly the way I expected. I was introduced to Nappi's wife, who seemed to be a very busy woman, and not immediately impressed with my research or me. However, one time when I was calling for his wife, Nappi answered the phone and told me she was not there. Next thing I know, I am speaking with him at length about his life and his experiences in Falun Dafa. Unlike his wife, he seemed to take an immediate liking to me, and saw my research as being incredibly important.

When I finally was in the D.C. area, I got to meet Nappi, and did a semi-structured interview with him, using the same semi-structured interview protocol I used with all the other practitioners. After it was completed, he told me that he was planning on attending an event in which he would like to talk about Falun Dafa’s impact on his life; he wanted me to help write it. Because of the brain damage he sustained in a car accident, it was difficult for him to organize his thoughts for such a task. In addition, he was a very slow typist. I agreed to do it because it was a good chance to help him out, and it would further my research.

Using the audiotapes from the semi-structured interview along with a short article about his life (McCoy and Zhang n.d.: 41-44), I put together a short biography of Nappi’s life and read it to him. For a month or two afterwards, I would go over Nappi’s house about once a week to revise the biography to his liking. While I originally was writing in a tone that was simply sticking to the facts of Nappi’s life as best as I could ascertain them, devoid of flowery language and overtly moral messages, Nappi was quick to

insert these very things I thought it best to avoid. Frank (2002) wrote an example of the sort of description I was originally thinking I would write about Nappi's life:

Freddy, an American practitioner in his early fifties, relayed the following story. A serious head injury several years earlier had left him with reduced motor skills, crippled his ability to read or write, and made it difficult for him to concentrate. His injuries drove him into a deep depression, which he dealt with through heavy drinking and pot smoking. His wife, Judy, a government-employed computer scientist originally from China, had introduced him to Falun Gong several months earlier, and he reported a slow but significant reduction in his alcohol consumption. However, Freddy did not entirely embrace Falun Gong until he injured a finger in a gardening accident. At the time, he believed that the finger was broken or severely sprained. Judy urged Freddy to practice the Falun Gong exercises for a few minutes, after which, Freddy claims, the finger completely healed. Similar stories abound: from a graduate student in the physical sciences, for example, who publicly described his recovery from heart trouble after he began practicing Falun Gong; and from a man who described his recovery from stress-related headaches that had persisted even after surgery on his sinuses.

Frank, as I noted earlier, chose to use the pseudonym "Freddy" for Nappi; while it is remotely possible he was talking about someone else, I believe the odds are astronomical that someone else would fit these unique circumstances.

In order to help evaluate how representative Nappi's biography is of practitioners in general, it may be useful to look at what Frank (2002) heard other practitioners say about "Freddy":

These attempts to separate the "authentic" (Falun Gong) from the "fake" (Yan Xin Gong, Xiang Gong, etc.) reflect a certain reluctance among practitioners to reveal the extent of their sensual experience of Falun Gong. They want to share the richness of their experience, yet they worry non-practitioners will view them as dwelling too far out on the fringe. Their shyness is also evident in the many stories of paranormal sightings that circulate among practitioners -- spinning Dharma wheels, disembodied images of Master Li, colors, light -- all play an important role in the daily practice of Falun Gong. Practitioners often use such stories to illustrate both the ideology and cosmology of Falun Gong. Mr. Zhang recounted Li Hongzhi's description of Falun Gong as "a miniature of the universe." As Zhang described it, "Everything is rotating and smaller energy particles have higher energy levels, a phenomenon that human beings could not adequately explain." Others claim even more explicit visual perceptions of Falun Gong. One morning Freddy, Judy, Jeremy and I watched two women silently sitting back-to-back while reading one of Li's books. Freddy remarked that he could "see a Falun hovering above their heads." "A lot of people don't believe what Freddy says," Judy told me. "I was like that too at first, but now I trust a lot of his insights." Jeremy, ribbing Freddy, commented, "He's a burned-out hippie." Judy looked over at him and smiled. "I've never seen the spinning Falun," she said. "The only thing I ever saw was Master Li's aura." [Frank 2002]

From this description, it appears that Nappi ("Freddy") is more prone to seeing the miraculous than his fellow practitioners, and his narrative should be read accordingly.

What follows is the end result of our collaboration. It is presented unaltered. This preface should be kept in mind to contextualize his narrative. Additional commentary will be provided in the section following it.

*Nappi's Story: " ~ Sharing a Point, to View ~ "*

Nappi was born on December 15, 1953 in Washington, D.C.. He had a Catholic upbringing, although he'd later explore many forms of understandings. "I was involved with many different denominations, all built on the foundation of Christianity," Nappi said. At one time, inspired by his grandmother, a Jehovah's Witness, he studied from a Jehovah's Witnesses point of view for a while, though never finding an ultimate understanding. He feels he was always spiritual and creative, even as a kid. When he was 12, he drew a picture that he keeps on his wall to this day; the picture shows a young boy looking up at heaven, asking "Who? Me?" The drawing was of him talking to his Living Creator.

After his teenage years, he moved to California in the early 1970s; he was in Hollywood for a year, and then he lived in San Pedro for three years. During this time in his life, he spent a week in the desert learning Transcendental Meditation. He felt this allowed him to grow in awareness, and he felt the experience was very enlightening.

Moving on ahead, when he was in his late 30s, Nappi had a job at the Quantico wastewater facility. He had his job for only four months before life as he knew it would be forever changed.

At which time, he had what he refers to as his second birthday on May 24, 1991, which he considers more significant than his original birthday; on that day, he was in a severe accident on his way to work. "The only reason I'm alive," Nappi told me, "is that the accident took place in the yard of a doctor, who had apparently witnessed the accident taking place in which I had the life knocked out of me." The doctor helped him to breathe again. He was taken to the hospital in a helicopter at which time he had to be revived again. At the hospital, he died once again while having a brain operation; he died a total of three times within two hours, he was told.

He was in a coma for a month, and then in the hospital for a year. He does not remember the accident itself, what happened right before the accident, or the previous 20 years of his life, for that matter.

However, Nappi does remember seeing a light in a tunnel, like many other people have claimed to see who have had near death experiences.

After the accident damaged the left hemisphere of his brain, he not only lost feeling in his right arm from the stroke brought on by the operation, but he also lost his ability to read and write and to do simple arithmetic. He began to drink heavily, smoke pot and cigarettes, and take other drugs, submerging himself in a camouflaged form of awareness. He was very lonely; his only friends at that time were drug addicts. After he began to run low on money, they stopped being his friends. Nappi began spending most of his time at bars. He refers to this part of his life as self-destructive, bordering on suicidal. Looking back on this period of his life, Nappi sees his drug use as merely maneuvering and manipulating his awareness externally rather than trying to work on growth from an internal aspect of understandings.

Nappi bought a house in Triangle, Virginia with the money he got from the accident, and Lisa, his future wife, worked as a waitress at a restaurant nearby. At this point, the brain damage from his accident was still overwhelming; he would fall down walking some days, and even twisted his ankle badly at one point from just walking down the road, which laid him up for a little while. He would go to the bar in the restaurant where Lisa Fan worked to get his Long Island Ice Teas and forget his troubles. Lisa Fan could see right away that Nappi was a nice and spiritual person and did not like him drinking all the time; Nappi would drink a pint of 151 a day in addition to smoking an ounce of marijuana every week. Other than being a nice guy, Nappi felt like he did not have a lot going for him. Despite this, Lisa still got to know him better. Over time, and due to a persistent patronage of the restaurant, they grew to know each other. As time passed, they fell in love, and eventually married.

At the start of their marriage, Nappi and Lisa Fan would fight often because she did not like his excessive pot smoking and drinking, but Nappi would still do as he pleased.

In 1997, he was introduced to a way to grow with understandings, and to comprehend where awareness emanates from. Lisa was riding the metro train one day, and ran into a woman who was reading *Zhuan Falun*, a book written by a teacher by the name of Li Hongzhi. She glanced at a couple of pages and was struck by its profound spiritual teachings of the universal principle of “Truthfulness Compassion Tolerance”. Very intrigued, she expressed interest, and borrowed the book. She then proceeded to practice Falun Gong on the back porch of their house for a month or two before Nappi tried it. Everyday she would

do the exercises and invite Nappi to join, but he would refuse, choosing instead to hypnotize himself with television and marijuana to acquire a tolerance for discomforts in his life. At that point, Nappi still could not read or write, but Lisa would read the book to him. He did not take it all that seriously, but nevertheless she would still read *Zhuan Falun* to him daily. Eventually, his curiosity grew, and he tried to read the book on his own. For five years now, he had been attempting to learn to read again without much success. According to Nappi, all of a sudden, as hard as it is for even him to understand and explain, slowly but surely, as if waking from a bad dream, he could read again at an elementary school level.

A short time later when Nappi was working in his garden, clumsy as usual, he accidentally dropped a big log on his finger. The finger was badly cut and swollen, and seemed to be broken. At that time, his wife just happened to be starting her daily Falun Dafa exercises, so she suggested that he join along with her, that it might help. She had been involved in this already for a few months, and knew the significance of the moment and took advantage of it. Although Nappi at this time still hadn't taken this procedure that seriously, he was told that the movements can change (adjust) ones body from and on a subatomic level. This process brings about a cleaning out of the karma that one has earned over time from ones' body. This karma, he had heard, accumulates throughout a life and if dealt with in an appropriate fashion, can be eliminated. Not that he necessarily had a lot of blind faith or expectations in the event about to take place, he was just looking to try to calm down. Nappi was told to just do the movements and remain tranquil with no mind intent. Approximately ten minutes after he started, he had to admit his finger seemingly felt a little better, and after ten more minutes, it definitely felt better. Surprisingly, after another ten minutes went by there was no sign of any damage to his finger. It was no longer black and blue, and no longer felt broken. Also, the inch-long cut had miraculously vanished. He found it almost impossible to believe at first. In fact, he still finds it hard to accept as reality when explaining this to others, but he has a witness in case he ever forgets.

It was at this time he found himself doing the movements with more diligence. And in this fashion, he found himself getting up at 4:00 every morning for over a year, practicing them. Almost immediately, as if by magic, Nappi no longer had the urge to drink or smoke pot. Also, a worsening arthritic problem that seems to run in his family, now no longer bothered him after practicing.



Nappi's family was proud of the way he improved his life. They knew about his former drug addiction and alcoholism, and knew that he was, in Nappi's own words, "a big time waste of time." His family now knows he is a cultivator, earnestly working to cultivate his awareness, and is increasingly growing with understandings. He has learned to respect his body, or as Nappi likes to call it, his "temple of existence."

Subsequently, Nappi's son happened to be in jail due to previous violent activities, and Nappi sent him a copy of *Zhuan Falun* and some of the poems Nappi himself has been writing since he had learned to read and write again. His son was really interested for a time, but then he got out of jail and became preoccupied with his life. He does not take it too seriously, "but," Nappi said, "it did make him a better person. He is definitely a better person than when he never heard of cultivation. He was a little bully before. That's why he went to jail."

As time passed by, there then came a day when another event unfolded with a health-enhancing aspect to it. One Saturday, Nappi was at the Mall in Washington, D.C., and while practicing one of the exercises, exercise number two to be specific, a feeling came over him and his back began hurting really badly. Then, all of a sudden, a loud pop came from the middle of his back. Seconds later, another loud pop came from his wrist. Suddenly, he had feeling in his arm once again for the first time in six years. Nappi was told that an energy pathway must have been unblocked; he saw the effect as being similar to an acupuncture treatment. Shortly after this in a conversation with his mother, he was reminded of his back being broken in the accident years ago, which many have been responsible for this condition.

Also, Nappi has told me about an extremely painful toothache he had. It hurt so much that he was kicking things around the room in frustration, tears were coming out of his eyes, and he could not even see straight. He told Lisa that he had to go to the dentist. However, on the way there, he felt like he was accepting defeat and not practicing forbearance like he should, and told his wife to turn the car around. While struggling with the pain, he told his wife to read to him from *Zhuan Falun* while he tried to attain some tranquility; before he knew it, he was asleep. When he woke up, the pain was gone.

After the crackdown in 1999, Nappi wrote a letter to China's *acting* president, Jiang Zemin, urging him to reconsider the persecution of Falun Dafa. He tried to explain that Falun Dafa should be

looked at as an educational process rather than a political threat. Falun Dafa, as Nappi saw it, was concerned with issues more important than politics, such as the foundation of life and its true existence.

Eventually, Nappi decided that he had to do more to help practitioners in China, and he went to Tiananmen Square practitioners from approximately 11 different nations. It was at this time Nappi experienced a taste of what he expressed as being pure evil. As he was beat up by Chinese policemen and held prisoner for no reason other than attempting to display the innocence of a meditation that allows one to see within their soul and discover their foundation of existence, which is apparently against the law in China. They refused to let him call the American embassy, referring to the detainees as “guests,” and not prisoners, which allowed them to bend their own rules concerning treatment of detainees. For 24 hours, he was made to sit on a concrete floor while his captors sat in comfortable chairs, watching him and the others. About 15 to 20 protestors were in each room, altogether over 60 people from all over the world. To add insult to injury, in addition to the discomfort of sitting on a concrete floor and not eating, they were not allowed to go the bathroom in privacy. After a prolonged period of time of not being able to relieve himself, Nappi had an intense urge to go to the bathroom, and asked his captors (“hosts”) for permission. They said yes, and led him to the bathroom, but would not give him privacy; instead, three of them stood, watching and giggling, and refusing to let him close the door. When the so-called guests of the Chinese were finally driven to the airport in Beijing for extradition, they were publicly identified to the pilot and other plane passengers as “terrorists.” The plane was filled with tourists, who were scared at first, but quickly warmed up to the Dafa practitioners once they learned that they were not terrorists, merely people who were there to display the principles of truthfulness, compassion, and forbearance.

Thanks to Falun Dafa, both for its healing and inspiration, he has learned the importance of reading and writing as a sharing form of communication. Nappi writes poetry and articles about his understandings of the Truth of this living existence we all share in, called life. Of all the poems he has written, only one was not about Falun Dafa; even so, that particular poem was a declaration of love for his wife Lisa that he wrote on Valentine's Day of 2000. All the rest are about his understandings of cultivating awareness. Currently, he is taking a short break from his writings to concentrate on reading *Zhuan Falun* repeatedly and other Falun Dafa articles written by master-teacher Li Hongzhi to help further stabilize his

foundation of understandings. He plans on submitting revised versions of his poetry after he feels his perspective has become more well-rounded through further cultivation.

As I come to the end of this interview with Nappi about his life, there are a few things he would like to discuss regarding his expanding understandings. These understandings Nappi wishes to reemphasize are just a reflection of his level of awareness, and may not be absolute truths. Nappi has also come up with a short list of six different aspects of his understandings that he feels may be good things to pay attention to facilitate the blossoming of an individual's awareness. Although he is certain he could come up with more than six, these were the most important to given the short space and time we have to write this article in. He feels they could help guide others to understand the purpose and value of being alive, awake, and aware.

1. Wasting time – Consider for a moment all the ways that people waste their time and fail to grow in awareness. People become alcoholics and drug addicts, and others become television junkies. To waste our time in these ways is to waste the gift of life that has been given to us. From a very early age, people go to school and learn; by necessity, that learning begins at a shallow level and becomes deeper. However, some people reach a certain point in their education and simply settle for notions and waste their time from that point forward. Nappi considers meditation not just a form of relaxation, but also an important form of education. It is sad when someone simply does not care, and is content to waste their time because they are not aware that there is anything out there (in here) worth caring for or striving for.

2. Misjudgments – We should not be judging one another, Nappi thinks. Everyone thinks they are a judge, but to judge others is a mistake because judging easily leads to misjudging. If you misjudge someone, it causes a separation between you and them, as we are all siblings of creation, and should learn to share in such an event. Judging others can tend to build separatist notions.

3. Separatist notions – When we misjudge others and consider them as being separate from ourselves, it leads to a falling apart of the brotherhood of mankind. Throughout history, mankind has been plagued by separatist notions along lines of race, religion, gender, and so forth. This leads to conflict instead of harmony. Since we all have free will, we are able to harm to others; by simply not liking someone, you may use your free will to cause harm. A genuine rapport with others requires first searching within

ourselves and eliminating separatist notions, and then moving with a true understanding to make the appropriate connections.

4. Recognizing – To recognize the truth about the world around us, we must step back from our preconceptions of how the world is and become an observer. Perhaps others may tend to be so unobservant of the world around them that they will intentionally or unintentionally disturb others. After putting aside misjudgments and separatists notions, we should be able to become observers of the world around us without judging. After recognizing the limitation of your perspective, one may tend to be open to the possibility of being wrong and allow yourself to recognize more of what the world around you is truly like. Recognizing takes observing in a *whole-istic* fashion.

5. Substance – We are more than we think we are. As siblings of creation, we are also creators. We have inherited a creative aspect with our existence. Through our acknowledgement built on our recognition, we may give a space to allow substances to grow. As creators, we have a choice of what sort of substance we want to create. The world has created a lot of disharmonic substance, causing a great deal of suffering. These substances tend to have been built on the bad thoughts and deeds of mankind, and it has acquired an awareness of sorts; it seeks to perpetuate itself. However, since that is not possible, as it decays, it seeks to take everyone down with it. We should not contribute to this; instead, we should be creating beings. We should be painters, poets, dancers, and actors, acting in a truthful, compassionate, and forbearing manner, not people who waste time or promote a creation of separatism.

6. Significance of Zhen-Shan-Ren – As Truthfulness, Compassion, and seem to be eternal aspects of existence, then it seems only appropriate that if we assimilate to these characteristics, we can earn a position in this eternal condition called life; if not, we will fall apart in disintegration. Do we want to be eternal beings or go back to the darkness of nothing? The choice is ours to make when we understand the significance of Zhen-Shan-Ren (Truthfulness Compassion and Forbearance); this **character(istic)** we can recognize as The path to follow to allow our awareness to blossom. This should be our purpose or reason for being a particle of life, and enhancing the significance of **BEING**.

### *Comments on Nappi's biography*

The changes Nappi made from my original draft during the time we worked together are telling in many ways. Some of the changes Nappi asked for were a product of his personality more than a product of the culture of Falun Gong. For example, he used some unusual punctuation and grammar, such as “**character**(istic)” and “*whole-istic*,” which I believe may be related to the fact he writes poetry that also employs these unconventional word segmentation and emphases. However, his request that *Zhuan Falun* be both bold-faced and italicized is equally a product of his artistic license with grammatical rules and his faith in the importance and benevolence of the message contained within Li Hongzhi's magnum opus.

Nappi changed the biography to fit the typical structure of a Falun Gong practitioner's narrative. First, his gratitude can be seen in the statement, “Thanks to Falun Dafa, both for its healing and inspiration...” Second, problems are in abundance in his narrative, such as the car accident and drug use. Third, he describes his introduction, and includes his wife's introduction as a preface to his own. The sign that it is the correct path for her is shown when he says, “She glanced at a couple of pages and was struck by its profound spiritual teachings...” Fourth, there is the struggle to overcome old ways, which is shown by his last-minute refusal to rely on the dentist to take care of his toothache. There was also an incident that was cut for space in the final version in which Nappi described how he went back to his favorite bar after being introduced to Falun Gong, originally intending to get drunk, but instead he looks upward and says, “Just kidding,” and walks right back out the door he came in. Fifth, there is contentment expressed in his narrative, as can be seen in this statement: “His family now knows he is a cultivator, earnestly working to cultivate his awareness, and is increasingly growing with understandings.”

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

As Amy Lee waits, I recall something she said after an evening spent in a civil rights memorial park in Birmingham, Alabama. Inside the van, the group happily munches on Drumstix ice cream cones and discusses American movies. Their favorite is *Forrest Gump*.

"Americans don't like tragedy," Amy Lee announced. It takes a while for me to translate this, but eventually I understood.

She means, Americans like happy endings

Rose Farley, "Unlocking the Gong" [2001: 5]



**Figure 34: Practitioners in Front of the Chinese Embassy**

*Photo by Noah Porter.*

## Summary

The story of Falun Gong is one of incredible growth. One man takes unpaid leave from his job to present a form of qigong to the public, and within years, this form of qigong has spread to millions of people. Estimates have ranged from 2 million to 100 million. Falun Gong grew very rapidly in the decade since it was introduced for a variety of reasons. The climate of dissatisfaction with atheism and materialism leading to selfishness made people desirous of something that was spiritual and compassionate. Also, a primarily older population found appeal in a practice that claimed to be more effective and less costly than the health care system. In addition, because it was cheaper than other qigongs and then free after Falun Gong was no longer part of the Chinese Qigong Research Society, this must have looked very attractive to a country that, while far more economically prosperous than during the Mao era, still had quite a bit of poverty. And, since practitioners felt so passionately about Falun Gong, they made it widely available by practicing in parks where many others who practice qigong congregate, and also sharing the teachings with their friends and family members. In addition, the Internet was relatively new and not yet as tightly monitored and systematically controlled by the authorities in China, which accelerated the spread of Falun Gong as well.

The crackdown on Falun Gong had been building up ever since some Chinese officials decided it was time to be more aggressive in eliminating “superstition” and Li Hongzhi starting making enemies at the Chinese Qigong Research Society by undercutting their prices, claiming his method was far superior to theirs, and making his method so widely available. Thanks to the Internet, Falun Gong was able to grow at a rapid pace, which the Chinese government took note of around the time Falun Gong left the Chinese Qigong Research Society. In an effort to curb their growth, the Chinese Government banned the *Zhuan Falun*, although this was not effective in stopping Falun Gong from spreading. In 1996, Li Hongzhi moved to the United States, and his application to remain in the country was granted in 1998.

It was partly because of this rapid growth that the Chinese government tried to outlaw it. In 1999, an article critical of Falun Gong was allowed to be printed in a government publication, despite the Chinese government’s position that qigong should be neither promoted nor criticized. Falun Gong practitioners protested this at Tianjin, which led to the arrest of 45 practitioners. In response to these arrests, at least

10,000 practitioners showed up at the government compound in Beijing; some evidence suggests that they were directed to come here because some in the government wanted a crackdown. It was then that the Chinese Government realized just how large Falun Gong had grown, and that it was capable of mobilizing large numbers of people. They may have also been influenced by historical events where religious organizations and cults of personality have challenged the government, and seen Falun Gong as another such organization. Jiang Zemin had become obsessed with Falun Gong after this event, and his authority certainly played a large part in the crackdown happening, despite the support Falun Gong enjoyed by many Chinese Communist Party members. Jiang Zemin, realizing that many saw him as an ineffectual leader, may have also wanted to create an enemy so that he could defeat it and win the respect of the Chinese people, and make an example of Falun Gong to scare other groups that the government saw as problematic.

Before the crackdown happened, many practitioners were already in the United States practicing. After the crackdown, their participation in Falun-Gong-related events and promoting awareness of Falun Gong became a higher priority in their lives. The crackdown in China has affected their lives in other ways as well, such as creating disagreements within some families about it. Some practitioners had to deal with the scrutiny or even pleading of parents and siblings who think that practitioners are going to become seriously ill and refuse medical, or commit suicide. Some families are more concerned about what the government might do to them because of what the practitioner in America is doing.

Practitioners use a wide variety of techniques to make Falun Gong visible to the public, including writing letters to politicians, doing Falun Gong exercises at public events, wearing Falun Gong shirts, and talking to the press. Recently, some practitioners even filed a lawsuit against Jiang Zemin here in the United States. Most practitioners will promote Falun Gong any chance they get. Falun Gong has strong grass-root activism among its faithful practitioners.

The Internet functions as powerful tool in dispensing Falun-Gong-related news and creating a national and worldwide community of practitioners. Practitioners use the Internet to keep in touch with practitioners from other areas, and contact practitioners regarding specific Falun-Gong-related issues. Li Hongzhi has designated Clearwisdom.net and Minghui.org, English and Chinese language versions of each other, as being of greater importance since the crackdown. Through these websites, culture is created and updated; new narratives become collectively shared and known by practitioners.



Falun Gong is not structured hierarchically, as one might assume by looking at the neat rows and columns practitioners sometimes form while together in large numbers. Falun Gong is very similar to a SP(I)N style organization (Hine 1977), meaning practitioners rely on ideology rather than leaders to direct their behavior for the most part. The only aspect of Falun Gong that resembles a hierarchy at all is how Li Hongzhi has power over practitioners in the definitional and cultural sense – however, if practitioners decide to stop believing his teachings and abandon the identity of a practitioner, Li Hongzhi has no power over them. Other practitioners may offer to talk to the person and see if they have any “misunderstandings” of Falun Gong that they can help the person to understand, but if the person does not want to talk, he or she will be left alone. This is because the decision to cultivate is viewed as a personal one, and it is wrong to force someone else into it.

Practitioners are initially attracted to practice sites for a variety of reasons, and usually have a lot of doubts when they first start; this is true for both Chinese and Western practitioners. They go through a process of narrative induction to become genuine practitioners, although practitioners are never isolated from society, and therefore other streams of identity are always present, and are always an option should their paradigmatic narrative break down. Many report improvements in their health, which they attribute to Falun Gong, which might be a strong contributing factor to facilitating the narrative induction process. That is, many practitioners report healing miracles, and after experiencing something like that, Li Hongzhi’s credibility is increased for these individuals. When these beliefs are internalized and they become integrated into the social network of a practice site, they are more likely to get involved with Falun-Gong-related events. It is the ideology that is guiding their group behaviors, not a hierarchy.

Some like Patsy Rahn has viewed Falun Gong as problematic in terms of health behaviors. Practitioners believe that sick people should go to the hospital; however, if their Xinxing (mind-nature) is good and they “treat themselves like practitioners,” they believe they will not get ill. Practitioners have shown reluctance to get medical treatment at the first sign of symptoms, considering these to be “karma tribulations,” but this does mean they would not get treatment under any circumstances. I have talked to practitioners who seemed to genuinely believe in Li Hongzhi’s teachings, but were still willing to get medical treatment when their belief system seemed untenable in the face of unrelenting suffering. Many practitioners also expressed a willingness to seek medical attention for injuries, which were not as much of

an issue for them. Critics of Falun Gong have spoke as though practitioners would contract an illness and keep considering it a “karma tribulation” until the illness caused them to drop dead. I do not believe this to be the case. In the instances I have come across where a practitioner told me that he or she chose Forbearance over medical treatment, the “karma tribulation” was generally not long-lasting. However, we should keep in mind that Li Hongzhi’s writings say: “Were karma to be pushed out all at once, however, you would not be able to take it, for it would endanger your life. Only a piece or two can be pushed out every once in a while, allowing you to overcome it, and through the suffering pay off your karma” (Li 2000: 40). Therefore, the paradigmatic narrative that practitioners internalize tells them that the tribulation should be manageable and not overwhelming; should the symptoms of illness worsen instead of quickly showing improvement, the practitioner may decide that it is time to switch between different available “metaphorical currents or streams of thought that individuals can take up and live inside” (Schiff 2002: 279).

Out of all the allegations against Falun Gong, the health care aspect is the one that I think is most difficult to deal with. The critics of Falun Gong might see the very fact that there is reluctance to get medical care at all as problematic. That is, if we accept the premise that the biomedical model of health is correct and the teachings of Li Hongzhi about health are not correct as the critics of Falun Gong do, then even if I am correct in my assertion that practitioner’s paradigmatic narratives may not hold up if the “karma tribulation” does not go away soon, then the delay could adversely affect their health. In other words, if practitioners gets appendicitis, and the practitioner believes it is just “karma tribulation” and not a real illness, he or she may decide to try Forbearance – and, perhaps after a week, if the pain just keeps getting more unbearable, he or she may decide to get medical treatment for it. Critics might say that in this situation the practitioner was remiss in not seeking immediate attention when he or she first experienced symptoms. I cannot argue that most practitioners I have talked to have not shown some reluctance to rely on medical care. However, I would argue that an individual should be free to choose the worldview that best fits him or her. Practitioners are aware their assessment of risk is different from that of non-practitioners, and because of this, I do not think it is tenable to argue that practitioners are not making informed decisions about their health. Practitioners know how the biomedical model of health would interpret their symptoms, and they know how the Falun Gong belief system would interpret their symptoms

– and they can choose between them. Their choice is not between two different medical procedures, but between two different worldviews. And, should they choose, they can switch between them; the claims of critics that there are “tremendous difficulties in leaving” (Deng and Fang 2000: 23) are not supported by my findings.

Allegations such as that Li Hongzhi changed his birth date, while widespread, seem easily refuted when we consider how common record keeping mistakes of this sort are, and that sharing the same birth did not seem to be influential in one’s decision of whether to allow narrative induction to take place. In fact, when I talked to my key informant about it, who had presumably read all of Li Hongzhi’s books and articles, he was not even sure when Li Hongzhi’s birthday was! If Li Hongzhi had changed his birthday to be the same as that of the Buddha to establish credibility and get more practitioners to join, why wouldn’t a devout practitioner even know when his birthday was?

After using my original interview protocol to question one practitioner, I asked him if there was anything else he wanted to say about Falun Gong or his life. He said that while I had asked some good questions, I had not really gotten at what made Falun Gong so important for him. He went on to say that Falun Gong is something that must be experienced to be understood. Deng and Fang (2000) devalue the insider’s point of view by saying that “there are observable behaviors that are open to objective evaluations” (p. 12) and that “there are publications in many different languages that can be read... If it is the same text we are reading, our interpretation deserves consideration” (p. 12). While I must admit that they were rather thorough in reviewing the literature, I got the impression they have never spent any time with practitioners for them to make a statement like this: “Concerning the personal integrity of the disciples, we are interested in how the Falungong collectivity affects their mental well being...cults create anxiety and fear causing traumatic experience among their members” (p. 23). After having spent time with practitioners, I could tell that this was something that made their lives meaningful and they felt very strongly about. The practitioners did not seem anxious or fearful, and the most traumatic experiences they go through seem to be caused by the Chinese government.

Much greater than this supposed risk to their health from their beliefs is the risk of oppression from the Chinese government. The United States government up to this point has supported Falun Gong in many ways, including not turning Li Hongzhi over to China, and allowing practitioners to be granted

asylum. However, the United States government has also made concessions on allowing China to crackdown on Uighurs, apparently for purely political reasons (Kurlantzick 2002; Amnesty International 2001b). As China grows more economically powerful, they may be able to exert greater influence over the United States. Also, practitioners in the United States have been subject to intimidation and harassment, in some cases even burglaries and having their car firebombed, reportedly (flgjustice.org 2003). The United States has so far been a safe haven for an estimated 10,000 practitioners, and their master-teacher, Li Hongzhi. Will it remain so in the future? Public opinion will certainly play a role in this; should enough of the critics of Falun Gong succeed in negatively influencing public opinion, perhaps the United States will not continue to play the supportive role it has thus far. This is not to say that a crackdown might happen here; merely that if the negative allegations against Falun Gong gain widespread credibility, politicians might not want to be seen as supporting Falun Gong. Also, academics within the United States have sometimes bought into the Chinese propaganda too readily, perhaps partially due to fear of offending the Chinese government and endangering future research and business opportunities.

I hope that those who read this thesis, if they remember nothing else, will walk away with this one lesson: Falun Gong practitioners are not tricked, threatened, or otherwise forced into becoming practitioners or maintaining their identity as practitioners. Most people who become practitioners describe how they have found health, meaning, and spirituality in their lives after having tried other practices and belief systems that occupy similar institutional spaces – martial arts, qigong, religions, philosophies, Chinese and Western medicine, and so forth. Practitioners generally become practitioners through some a combination of searching and serendipity. Once they discover Falun Gong, they are presented with the choice of going through the narrative induction process to become a Falun Gong practitioner, remain within their own current stream(s) of identity as a non-practitioner, or to partially accept the identity of a practitioner as a lived-with tension. This sounds much more akin to something within the New Age tradition than a cult (in the pejorative, often-ambiguous, evolving-laundry-list-of-accusations sense, rather than the sociological sense).

While what I am doing here is not a typical applied anthropology project, it is applied anthropology in the sense that it is anthropology put to use. I hope that by making this thesis available, I can play a part in helping to raise awareness about what Falun Gong is, and especially what it is not. Falun

Gong provides a sense of purpose and morality for practitioners. It is nonviolent, and people can come and go as they please. It is almost perverse that critics like Deng and Fang (2000) raise quite a fuss about how practitioners are encouraged to frequently read *Zhuan Falun* and how Li Hongzhi has definitional power within the culture of Falun Gong, and thus claim this is a violation of “personal integrity” (p. 2, 23), yet they can remain quiet about a regime who beats, kills, rapes, and humiliates people. Not allowing people to choose their own worldview under penalty of inhumane torture, possibly even death, seems the much greater violation of personal integrity in my opinion.

### **Significance of an Anthropological Approach**

Political science, sociology, psychology, economics, history, and anthropology all study the same phenomenon: human beings. To some degree, what makes anthropology distinctive among the social sciences is simply a result of history, or more specifically, the sociopolitical situation of anthropology departments. For example, American anthropologists have historically been in close proximity to sociologists. Combination departments of sociology and anthropology usually saw anthropology as being the minority, “and under the chairmanship of sociologists who tolerated them as one would a troublesome, but exotically interesting, pet” (Murphy 1987: 19). Certain prominent anthropologists, such as Ralph Linton and Robert Redfield, were notably influenced by sociological theory. However,

What is more notable, however, is the relative lack of influence of sociological method and theory upon anthropology during the decades in which they roomed together, for our rejection of most sociological theory was notable. One may conjecture that physical closeness bred intellectual distance, for the isolated little pockets of anthropologists had to struggle to maintain their identities and separateness. To have embraced Durkheim, Weber, Cooley, George Herbert Mead, Pareto, and Simmel would have constituted the erosion of a boundary and the concession of an important bargaining chip in intra-departmental politics. We did read the great social theorists, to be sure, for their relevance to anthropology was manifest, but we read them defensively. [Murphy 1987: 19]

Perhaps anthropologists would ideally like to think that what compelled anthropology to go in the theoretical directions it did was because we thought it was the best way to understand and represent our subjects and subject matter. However, if Murphy is correct, the socio-historical reality of anthropology departments may have compelled anthropologists to reject sociological theories to maintain a separate identity rather than because of the soundness of their theories. Chun (2001) points out that academia is

embedded in the politics of the public sphere, and the development of anthropological thought is influenced by the setting in which anthropologists are taught (p. 570-571).

Anthropological self-identity comes from identification with other anthropologists, as is the case with other social sciences. In a discussion about historians, Feldman (2000) writes, “Sociologically speaking, the citation of other historians not only builds a community of scholars in the present but also extends solidarity into the past and future” (p. 557). Similarly, anthropologists tend to quote anthropologists in their references cited sections, join organizations with other anthropologists, and in the case of professors, exist in office spaces with other anthropology professors. All of these factors serve to construct an anthropological community of scholars (though this is not to say that anthropologists never cite non-anthropologists or that anthropology professors have not shared spaces with other social sciences).

The social science that is perhaps closest to anthropology is sociology. According to an introductory sociology textbook, “Anthropology examines the culture of different groups; so does sociology. But the methods of study and primary focus differ. Anthropologists often study preliterate groups, whereas sociologists focus primarily on modern groups” (Cargan 1994: 2). Although this may have been anthropology’s focus initially, this is no longer the case, as Julia Crane and Michael Angrosino point out: “We have mentioned that anthropologists are no longer merely the ‘sociologists for people with no clothes,’ and that modern ethnographers work in societies that range in complexity from little-contacted and technologically primitive groups to subsections of our own society.” (Crane and Angrosino 1992: 5). This means the primary focus no longer differs from sociology; anthropologists now study ethnic minorities in the United States (Baer, et al. 1999), sex workers (Romero-Daza, et al. 1998-99, Palestinians (Jean-Klein 2001), museum makers (Yelvington, et al. 2001), media audiences (Bird 2003; Askew and Wilk 2002) and many others who are far from the stereotypical subject matter of primitive tribes.

Anthropology traditionally studies culture; however, the word “culture” has been defined in a number of different ways, and has come to be used frequently by disciplines other than anthropology. Wagner writes, “By and large, though, the concept of culture has come to be so completely associated with anthropological thinking that if we should ever want to, we could define an anthropologist as someone who uses the word ‘culture’ habitually” (Wagner 1995: 54). Thomas (1999) writes: “Culture is at once anthropology’s most vital and most discredited concept” (p. 262). Angrosino notes, “We do not, in fact,

observe culture; we observe phenomena that we choose to group together and label culture” (1999: 68).

Anthropology makes its subject matter in this way:

...the way we experience and understand reality is in good part shaped by the language categories through which we sort out what we take to be real, and by the cultural symbolism through which we find significance and meaning in the mess of sense impressions continually bombarding us. Reality, then, isn't a hard-and-fast thing, the same for everybody, but a consensual matter, a social construct, that must be reaffirmed and re-created in all our interactions with other people. It would follow from this relativistic view of the human grasp of the world that people of different cultures inhabit somewhat different realities, as do people of the same culture but of radically different circumstances... [Murphy 1990: 98-99]

However, “the object of anthropological knowledge – society culture, belief, gender, law and so on – have never been exclusively anthropology’s own” (Thomas 1999: 262).

Although "disciplines are increasingly heterogeneous, hence their reification [of each other] tends to be increasingly invidious, increasingly a matter of evoking caricatures to be dismissed or defended" (Thomas 1999: 262), there are some notable theoretical, methodological, and heuristic differences in anthropology. This is not to say that the values, concepts, and methodologies associated with anthropology cannot be found in other disciplines or that there is even consensus and consistency on these issues in anthropology. I am merely suggesting that the socially-constructed community of scholarship that calls itself 'Anthropology' may have some qualities useful for the study of social groups that may not be as commonly emphasized within other socially-constructed communities of scholarship. I think Trevor Purcell put it best when he wrote: “anthropology is not simply cultural study but also, and equally important, cultural critique and transformation” (Purcell 1998: 268). Anthropological theory does not just suggest a way of describing a phenomenon, but it seeks to empower some and critique the power of others. For example, in describing different approaches to nationalism studies, Jean-Klein writes, “...now and then, namely, in the context of anticolonial studies, the anthropologist comes under the moral obligation not to take apart but to take a part in the construction of properly nationalist representations, in a self-conscious and disciplined fashion—aware that this is what she or he is doing.” (Jean-Klein 2001: 86). It is critical to note the choice to apply different types of study to the same phenomenon, one intended to bolster the social phenomenon and the other intended to weaken it. This theoretical and moral orientation directly influences anthropological methods. Even when the anthropologist seems to be borrowing heavily from other disciplines, they use them in ways that reflect the theoretical and moral orientations of anthropology. For

example, Whiteford 's (1998) study of children's health seems to rely pretty heavily on economic data, but focuses on the health effects on the poverty-stricken, particularly children, which most economists probably would not look at, or at least not look at in the same sympathetic way.

I feel that being a part of this socially constructed community of scholarship has been beneficial to my research on Falun Gong in a number of ways. Some other disciplines may have chosen to just focus on the textual records available instead of interacting with practitioners. For example, this has been the case with Patsy Rahn and George Bruseker, a political scientist and a historian respectively. Bruseker (2000) acknowledged "an overall determination of the reasons for people joining Falun gong demands a sociological study more than a historical review" (p. 52), and Rahn acknowledged that "it would be beneficial...for research to be done on the group here in the United States" (Rahn 2000). I feel that the combination of different textual sources (Falun Gong, academic, journalistic, etc.) along with my participant-observation and semi-structured interviews have given a more holistic picture of Falun Gong as one of many "defensive groups, each of which *asserts* an identity around which it builds solidarity and struggles to survive alongside other such groups" (Wallerstein 1995: 6). The anthropological value of defending oppressed people has helped to establish rapport with practitioners, and allowed me into their social world in a way that I think someone who used similar methodology but strived for mere "value-neutrality" (or sided against them) might find it difficult to achieve. Practitioners know all too well how negatively they have been portrayed by the Chinese government, anti-cultists, and those sympathetic too them. In such a situation, wouldn't anyone be cautious about whom they talked to and what they said if they thought there was a chance the person might twist their words to support the brutal oppression of their people?

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendations for Anthropology**

"Why would anthropology routinely ignore on particular field site?" asks Forte (2002: 20). "There are anthropology courses on every country, region and tribe in the world, but virtually none on Cyberia, the planet's third-most-populous 'nation,' and one that has the highest population growth rates of



all the countries on the planet” (Forte 2002: 20). In her discussion of Falun Gong, Lin (2001) writes, “It is clear that for the first time in history, a movement and countermovement occurred in cyberspace, apparently with dramatic effect” (p. 225). Is anthropology sufficiently prepared, theoretically and methodologically, to deal with groups like this? Anthropologists have certainly begun discussing this as an important issue; for instance Marcus (1998) asserts that we must develop ways to do ethnography in more dispersed, “multi-sited” ways that take into account the local experience, while also understanding the way that experience is constrained by larger forces. Such new ethnographies

literally move over discontinuous realms of social space in order to describe and interpret cultural formations that can only be understood this way. Now they must understand the operations of institutions (e.g. information systems, corporate cultures, media technologies) as much as the modalities of everyday life lived in communities and domestic spaces, which have been the most usual sites of anthropological study. [1998: 240]

In an article about Afghanistan, Edwards (1994) found that writing about a single site was inadequate, so to establish validity he combined disparate scenes, some on-line and some not, in a way that “struck [him] as somehow telling” (p. 356). Much of the social science literature on the Internet tends to focus on the areas of cyberspace associated with pop culture, and anthropologists have certainly contributed to this (Bird 2003). It is also important that anthropology be in the forefront of discussion about how virtual communities are contributing to the development of identity among many other social and cultural groups, including those like Falun Gong (see Bird and Barber 2002 for a brief review of such anthropological literature).

### **Recommendations for Falun Gong**

Frank (2002) wrote about Falun Gong’s image problems immediately after the crackdown:

The accounts of Falun Gong practitioners in the United States...provide alternative perspectives to much of what has appeared in popular media since the crackdown in 1999. These interviews underscore the wide gap between the way practitioners perceive themselves and the way they are portrayed by others. They also reveal members’ lack of self-awareness regarding how outsiders see their unflagging support of Li Hongzhi. Overwhelmed by a sense of responsibility to speak out publicly on behalf of their beleaguered fellow practitioners in PRC, overseas Falun Gong members engaged in an ostensibly “professional” public relations campaign designed to counteract negative images that emerged in the press and on the Internet. They actively cultivated relationships with journalists, anthropologists, politicians, and religious leaders to report “the Falun Gong viewpoint” or to advocate for Falun Gong members. Yet, every time one Falun Gong member publicly defused the cult-like image of the group on Nightline or privately assured the above-mentioned professionals that all was “normal,” another made

statements revealing an entirely uncritical veneration of Li Hongzhi and his ideology. This constant return to Li Hongzhi as supernatural being undercut Falun Gong's public battle against China's state-sponsored media, which consistently emphasized the superstitious nature of Falun Gong. Practitioners' devotion to Li Hongzhi complicated their relationship with journalists and researchers. ...it was easy to empathize with individuals, many of whose stories of physical and mental suffering were genuinely disturbing, but impossible to energetically advocate for a group whose activities often made it seem like a medicine show. [Frank 2002]

Practitioners seemed to have figured this out, and adjusted their speech and websites accordingly. On the other hand, when Falun Gong's critics wish to attack Falun Gong, downplaying these aspects has provided them with ammunition:

Go to [www.falundafa.org](http://www.falundafa.org) and see what's offered. You'll find "How to Get Started," "Exercises," and "Common Questions," but not a word about the basic claims of the religion. You come away with the idea that this is a series of stately exercises performed in the park, not a science-bashing, fanatic, irrational, cult. The pages of L. Ron Hubbard's Scientology sites give the same kind of an impression, with no mention of the blue octopi in the volcanoes that eventually show up in their creed if you can pay long and bountifully enough. [Randi 2001]

It appears that Falun Gong practitioners are in a double-bind situation here: either they downplay these "superstitious" elements and thus make it easier to understand and sympathize for the person who casually hears about Falun Gong but leaves themselves open to critics like James Randi who see this as misrepresentation, or they are open about these elements and come across negatively to those who casually learn of Falun Gong. For practitioners to continue to maintain a positive image in the United States, I have the following recommendations:

- On Falun Gong FAQ pages (such as <http://www.faluninfo.net/faq.asp>), provide more links to special reports so that the curious reader can instantly find a more in-depth explanation. Only the question about why the persecution is happening is currently linked to such a report. Answering someone's questions more thoroughly may help prevent accusations like Randi's (2001), and may prevent the individual from feeling like he or she was not provided with sufficient information.
- Do not ignore what is being published about Falun Gong in academic journals. In my experience, many of the scholars who have written about Falun Gong have never spoken with a practitioner. Lili Feng, a practitioner and biologist, was reported to have "You will get paid back for what you said and did by gods" (Smith 2000) to the author of a Wall Street Journal article that was critical of Li Hongzhi. Perhaps she was misquoted, or perhaps it simply looks worse in print than how it sounded, but reactions like this are counterproductive. Since non-practitioners may not share your

beliefs about how karma must be paid back, from their frame of reference, these sorts of statements may be mistaken for threats. Many authors provide contact information in their articles. In such a situation, sending an e-mail and respectfully telling them you disagree with what they have written and asking if they would like to hear your point of view would be a very constructive approach to take.

- In your discussions with non-practitioners, be careful that you do not just emphasize how great Falun Gong or Li Hongzhi is and fail to mention the role of your choice in the matter. Make sure that people know you did not just “read Zhuan Falun from cover to cover without interruption... without thinking or evaluating it, until it is completely accepted as truth” (Deng and Fang 2000: 2). Let them know that you always have a choice between being a practitioner and not being a practitioner, but it is because Falun Gong has had a positive impact on your life that you continue to stick with it.
- Familiarize yourself with some of the issues I have talked about in my thesis. Recognize that there are different ways of defining terms like: organization, religion, qigong, and so forth. If a person makes a statement such as "Falun Gong is not a religion," and the listener has a different definition of religion that would include Falun Gong, he or she may jump to the conclusion that the statement is deliberately deceptive. In that situation, it may be better to first explain what you understand a religion to be, and then explain why you do not think Falun Gong fits that definition. The person may disagree with your definition of religion, but at least he or she cannot fault you for being unclear.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Tampa Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

### Background Information

1. Where and when were you born?
2. Where is your family now?
3. How long have you lived in Tampa? Why did you move here?
4. What is your religious background?
5. Have you practiced any other forms of qigong?
6. How did you become a Falun Gong practitioner?

### Falun Gong Awareness Promotion

7. How active are you in letting people know about Falun Gong?
8. In what ways have you made people aware of the crackdown on Falun Gong?
9. Have you performed FLG exercises at public events?
10. Have you handed out pamphlets about the crackdown on Falun Gong?
11. Have you written letters to politicians about the crackdown on Falun Gong?
12. Have you talked to your friends and family about the crackdown on Falun Gong?
13. Do you plan on going to China to protest the crackdown on Falun Gong?

### Health Care

14. How was your health before practicing Falun Gong?
15. How is your health after practicing Falun Gong?
16. Have you gotten medical treatment for anything since practicing Falun Gong?
17. What kinds of illnesses or injuries do you think you would get medical treatment for if you had them?

### Internet Usage

18. How often do you look at Falun Gong sites on the Internet?
19. Which FLG sites do you check most often?
20. Have you met other practitioners through the Internet?
21. Have you shared your experiences with a Falun Gong website?
22. Have you created a Falun Gong website?

### Social Structure

23. Where do you practice Falun Gong besides here?
24. Which Falun Gong conferences, if any, have you gone to? Have you arranged any yourself?
25. When you have questions about the teachings of Falun Gong, whom do you talk to about it?
26. Have you ever taught Falun Gong to anyone?
27. Do you have contact with Falun Gong practitioners besides at the practice sites?

## Appendix B: D.C. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

### Background Information

1. Where and when were you born?
2. Where is your family now?
3. How long have you lived in DC? Why did you move here?
4. What is your religious background?
5. Have you practiced any other forms of qigong?
6. When and how did you become a Falun Gong practitioner?

### Falun Gong Awareness Promotion

7. How active are you in letting people know about Falun Gong?
8. In what ways have you made people aware of the crackdown on Falun Gong?
9. Have you performed FLG exercises at public events?
10. Have you handed out pamphlets about the crackdown on Falun Gong?
11. Have you written letters to politicians about the crackdown on Falun Gong?
12. Have you talked to your friends and family about the crackdown on Falun Gong?
13. Do you plan on going to China to protest the crackdown on Falun Gong?

### Health Care

14. How was your health before practicing Falun Gong?
15. How is your health after practicing Falun Gong? Describe how you felt better if you did.
16. Have you gotten medical treatment for anything since practicing Falun Gong?
17. What kinds of illnesses or injuries do you think you would get medical treatment for if you had them?
18. Do you have children? Have they ever had symptoms of illness? If so, did you get medical treatment for them?

### Internet Usage

19. How often do you look at Falun Gong sites on the Internet?
20. Which FLG sites do you check most often?
21. Have you met other practitioners through the Internet?
22. Have you shared your experiences with a Falun Gong website?
23. Have you created a Falun Gong website?
24. How important do you think the Internet is to the growth and success of Falun Gong?

### Social Structure

25. Where do you practice Falun Gong besides here?
26. Which Falun Gong conferences, if any, have you gone to? Have you arranged any yourself?
27. When you have questions about the teachings of Falun Gong, whom do you talk to about it?
28. Have you ever taught Falun Gong to anyone?
29. Do you have contact with Falun Gong practitioners besides at the practice sites?
30. How would you react if a friend of yours decided to stop being a practitioner?
31. Do you spend more, less, or the same amount of time with your non-practitioner friends and family members now that you are a practitioner?
32. Have you noticed any changes in Falun Gong, either in beliefs or its membership, since you start practicing?
33. Which Falun Gong books have you read?
34. How often do you read Falun Gong books?

## Appendix B (Continued)

### Miscellaneous

35. What do you think will happen to you when you die?
36. What goes through your mind during the exercises?
37. How much faith do you have in Li Hongzhi's teachings?
38. How does Falun Gong compare with other healing and cultivation practices you have tried or known about?
39. How important is Falun Gong? Why does it have that level of importance to you? Would you be willing to go to jail or die for your belief in Falun Gong?
40. Can you tell me what you think are the most important teachings of Li Hongzhi?
41. How important is Li Hongzhi to Falun Gong practitioners? Do you think Falun Gong could survive without him?
42. Just generally, can you describe what Falun Gong has meant to you?

## Appendix C: Internet Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Name: (Optional)

Age:

Sex:

Location:

### Background Information

1. Where and when were you born? Please provide a country and year at minimum.
2. Where is your family now? Do you have any family members in other countries (such as China)?
3. Have you ever lived in another city or country? If so, how long have you lived where you are now and why did you move there?
4. What is your religious background? What religion, if any, did your family members belong to? What religion, if any, do you belong to now?
5. Have you practiced any other forms of qigong? If so, which ones did you try?
6. When and how did you become a Falun Gong practitioner? Please give the year and the circumstances under which you became a practitioner.

### Falun Gong Awareness Promotion

7. How active are you in letting people know about Falun Gong?
8. In what ways have you made people aware of the Chinese government's attitude to Falun Gong?
9. Have you performed FLG exercises at public events, such as parades and festivals?
10. Have you handed out flyers or pamphlets about Falun Gong and the relationship with the Chinese government?
11. Have you talked to your friends and family about the crackdown on Falun Gong?

### Health Care

12. How was your health before practicing Falun Gong? Did you have any physical or psychological problems?
13. How is your health after practicing Falun Gong? If your health has changed, please describe exactly how you felt better or worse.
14. Have you gotten medical treatment for anything since practicing Falun Gong? Do you still get regular checkups at a doctor's office?
15. Do you think it is possible for you to get an illness or an injury now that you are a practitioner? If so, what kinds of illnesses or injuries do you think you would get medical treatment for if you had them?
16. Do you have children? Have they ever had symptoms of illness? If so, did you get medical treatment for them?

### Internet Usage

17. How often do you look at Falun Gong sites on the Internet on average?
18. Which Falun Gong web sites do you check most often?
19. Have you met other practitioners through the Internet? In other words, have you talked to a practitioner through e-mail or instant messenger before you have met them in person?
20. Have you ever shared your experiences with a Falun Gong website?
21. Have you ever created a Falun Gong website?
22. How important do you think the Internet is to the growth and success of Falun Gong? If you think the Internet has helped Falun Gong, please describe how.

## Appendix C (Continued)

### Social Structure

23. Where do you practice Falun Gong? Do you go to a practice site and practice at home? Do you practice anywhere else?
24. Which Falun Gong conferences, if any, have you gone to? Have you helped with the arrangements of any conferences? If so, how did you help?
25. When you have questions about the teachings of Falun Gong, whom do you talk to about it?
26. Have you ever taught Falun Gong to anyone? If so, did you teach the principles, the movements, or both?
27. Do you have contact with Falun Gong practitioners besides at the practice sites? In other words, do you only see other practitioners at the practice sites, or do you talk to and spend time together at other times in other places?
28. How would you react if a friend of yours decided to stop being a practitioner?
29. Do you spend more, less, or the same amount of time with your non-practitioner friends and family members now that you are a practitioner?
30. Have you noticed any changes in Falun Gong, either in beliefs or its membership, since you start practicing?
31. Which Falun Gong books have you read?
32. How often do you read Falun Gong books?

### Attitudes and Beliefs

33. What do you think will happen to you when you die?
34. What goes through your mind during the exercises?
35. How much faith do you have in Li Hongzhi's teachings? In other words, are you certain that everything he has said and written is correct, or do you think it is possible he might be wrong about some things?
36. How does Falun Gong compare with other healing and cultivation practices you have tried or known about?
37. How important is Falun Gong? Why does it have that level of importance to you?
38. Can you tell me what you think are the most important teachings of Li Hongzhi?
39. How important is Li Hongzhi to Falun Gong practitioners? Do you think Falun Gong could survive without him? In other words, if Li Hongzhi died, do you think Falun Gong would continue?
40. Just generally, can you describe what Falun Gong has meant to you?
41. What do you think are the most common and most serious misunderstandings about Falun Gong?