

[Forthcoming 2016 in *Alternative Religion and Spirituality Review* 7:1]

## Sucking the ‘*De*’ Out of Me:

### How an Esoteric Theory of Persecution and Martyrdom Fuels Falun Gong’s Assault on Intellectual Freedom<sup>[1]</sup>

James R. Lewis

*Professor of Religious Studies*

*UiT—The Arctic University of Norway*

#### **Abstract**

In March 2015, a Falun Gong practitioner began an extended email assault on an Australian academician, an academician who had written about the confrontation between this practitioner’s movement and the People’s Republic of China in ways that he deemed overly critical of Falun Gong. This (in many ways anonymous) person demanded that she retract her article, implicitly threatening to defame her, her university, and the journal in which her piece appeared, and, possibly, file a lawsuit if she did not accede to his demands. Though most non-specialists think of Falun Gong as a peaceful spiritual exercise group unjustly persecuted by Chinese authorities, it has a dark, little-known history of forcibly silencing critics. In turn, this pattern of repression is tied in with an esoteric theory of karma which prompts practitioners of Falun Gong to actively seek persecution and martyrdom.

#### **Keywords**

Falun Gong; People’s Republic of China; Li Hongzhi; *Journal of Religion and Violence*; New Religious Movements; Martyrdom

Virtue or Merit (*de*), according to Li Hongzhi, is a form of white matter which enters our body each time we do a good deed or are victimized by others. Bad karma, on the other hand, is a kind of black matter which penetrates us when we commit an evil deed. Thus, if someone insults you, the aggressor's white matter will pass from his body into yours, while your black matter will be absorbed by his body. Therefore, even though you may appear humiliated, the real loser is the aggressor, because he took your black matter and gave you his white matter (Palmer 2001, 8).

I recently became aware of both this esoteric theory of persecution-as-energy-exchange – which might alternately be referred to as Falun Gong's metaphysics of martyrdom – as well as the group's assault on intellectual freedom. Their recent attacks on academic publications is but one part of a larger effort to silence media publications and broadcasts which they judge to be false because such items are critical of their group, or because these media appear to give voice to the perspective of the People's Republic of China (PRC) on Falun Gong (a Chinese religious movement, also referred to as Falun Dafa).

An Australian colleague was recently impacted by this ill-considered crusade. As past editor of an academic journal in which her 'objectionable' article appeared, I was indirectly brought into the conflict. I subsequently discovered that, with the exception of PRC-related websites (which many Westerners dismiss without consideration), it was difficult to find information on this 'dark side' of Falun Gong. So after some deliberation, it seemed to me that I should place some information onto the Internet to which any other scholar or journalist attacked by Falun Gong in the future might be able to refer as a resource. Let me also note that my original purpose in writing this essay was editorial rather than academic. As a consequence, this piece is not consistently formal.[\[2\]](#)

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of May, 2015, I received a forwarded email from the Philosophy Documentation Center, which hosts the electronic version of the *Journal of Religion and Violence*, a journal I formerly edited. The first part of the email read,

*Re: Your author using false information in her academic journal. Please advise how to deal with it.* My name is Zhiman Liu [not his real name[\[3\]](#)] and I am a Falun Gong practitioner in Melbourne. I am writing to seek some advice regarding your

author Diana Berkshire [not her real name] who seems to deliberately use false information to demonize Falun Gong in her academic journal published on The Philosophy Documentation Center. This is not just a human rights issue, but also an issue of religious belief and freedom. We can expose this demonization in the media, take legal action, and approach many organisations such as Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission or Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch to fight against this defamation. But if we take that approach we think it would deeply damage Diana Berkshire's reputation as well as the reputation of publisher she published the journal. We would prefer to resolve the problem privately and peacefully in order that the reputation of Falun Gong is protected without damaging the reputation of anybody and any publisher.

Diana Berkshire, University of Australia [a pseudonym for her former university], published a piece on The Philosophy Documentation Center in 2013 titled "Falun Gong and Martyrdom" [not the real title]. In the article, she uses the lies created by Chinese authorities to discredit Falun Gong as evidence to argue for her points. Although she sometimes credits the resources from Chinese authorities or media, she ignores the evidence that has proven the information she has obtained are obviously lies.

This email goes on for another page or two, claiming that Berkshire's scholarship is based on information from the PRC and thus ipso facto false. It is, however, somewhat disjointed because Zhiman Liu also goes off topic at one point to extol the health benefits of Falun Gong practices. He concludes by saying,

As Falun Gong practitioners who cultivate Truthfulness, Compassion and Forbearance, we would not fight back at anyone who demonizes our beliefs. Instead, we'd like to start with friendly explanation and communication. To that end, on March 17, 2015, we sent Ms. Berkshire an email (please see below) asking to meet openly in order to discuss this further. Unfortunately, we have not heard from her.

As I said before, we wish the problem could be resolved in a peaceful way without aggressive action. In her avoidance of our request, we hope you can offer some suggestions on how we can move to the next step in our efforts to

stop this misguided information from spreading to and influencing the public. A good start would be for Ms. Berkshire to remove the piece from her journal immediately.

Liu also included a copy of the original email he sent to Berkshire, which was considerably briefer. His penultimate statement in the original communication contained an implied threat: “there are always consequences to such hurtful intentions.”

I should note in passing that this person is clearly oblivious to the self-contradiction involved in stating, on the one hand, that “we would not fight back at anyone who demonizes our beliefs,” while, on the other hand, threatening legal action and media exposure “to fight against this defamation.” By implication, Liu also threatens to ruin the reputations of both Dr. Berkshire and the *Journal of Religion and Violence*. And in his email to her institution, he implicitly threatens her university’s reputation as well.[\[4\]](#)

To pick up the narrative again, I responded to Mr. Liu on the 27<sup>th</sup> of May, informing him that he should not be contacting the hosting service, as they are not responsible for the journal’s content. I also let him know that, in the past, I had regarded myself as friendly to Falun Gong. I considered informing him that there are only a few valid objections one can make about an academic article, such as personal slander (I once contacted an editor about potential slander) or when a researcher fakes data (e.g., Carey and Belluckmay 2015), but quickly thought better of providing that information, realizing he would then immediately accuse Berkshire of both. I concluded my email by stating that,

The conventions of academia are that we do NOT threaten lawsuits when someone publishes something with which we disagree. No representative of the PRC ever threatened me despite the fact that I sponsored FG representatives in my classes for a solid ten years back when I lived in the United States. So let me request that you take a deep breath and start over from scratch in a civil tone.

I don’t know exactly what I expected after that communication. I probably hoped he would get the hint and back off. But I was being naïve. He soon re-contacted me, asking how he should proceed against Berkshire. So in my response to Liu’s next email on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May, I informed him rather more forcibly that,

... even if we judge that what something someone else publishes is completely incorrect, in academia one never demands the kind of retraction you are demanding. Instead, one writes a critical response that one then submits to a scholarly journal. I know that is unlikely to satisfy you, but that really is the proper way of doing things in the scholarly realm.

After a little research, it seems that I now have some questions to ask you, namely does the Falun Gong movement condone – even encourage – the kind of attack you have been mounting against Prof. Berkshire? I ask this because I happened to stumble across an article online in which the scholar in question was harassed by Falun Gong practitioners after she made a public statement (refer to the ‘Postscript’ in the following piece<sup>[5]</sup>):

[https://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/fms/Colleges/College%20of%20Business/Communication%20and%20Journalism/ANZCA%202008/Refereed%20Papers/Kavan\\_ANZCA08.pdf](https://www.massey.ac.nz/massey/fms/Colleges/College%20of%20Business/Communication%20and%20Journalism/ANZCA%202008/Refereed%20Papers/Kavan_ANZCA08.pdf)

If I looked into this further, I sense that I would find yet other, similar attacks. Such tactics will not only not win you any friends, but they will also make you look exactly like the kind of ‘cult’ the PRC accuses you of being.

Additionally, I had done more research into Falun Gong over the intervening days, and had come to a better understanding of both their ideology of spiritually beneficial martyrdom and their rather severe apocalypticism. So I asked him about those ideas as well. Liu did not, of course, respond, and I thought I had finally rid myself of this nuisance. To be on the safe side, I emailed a couple of Falun Gong people I had known from back when I used to teach in the Midwest, and asked if they would contact this guy and set him straight. However, no one ever got back to me, suggesting they saw nothing wrong with his tactics.

After some searching, I did finally find a Falun Gong website (<http://en.minghui.org/>) that included an email contact address (the primary website, <https://www.falundafa.org/>, includes the emails or phone numbers of local contacts but no general email or phone number). Their response was that Zhiman Liu was likely a PRC agent posing as a Falun Gong practitioner – highly unlikely, given (1) Liu’s detailed critique of the government of China’s repression of the movement, and (2)

Liu's extolling the benefits of Falun Gong practice. The following testimony was interjected into his attack on Dr. Berkshire:

Health Benefits of Falun Gong: In fact many people have experienced significant health benefits after practicing Falun Gong. Some had previously suffered serious sickness for many years, and some already didn't have long to live. Through practicing Falun Gong and following its foundation of Zhen, Shan, Ren (Truthfulness, Compassion, Forbearance), their illnesses were healed. There are many testimonies about these experiences. You may visit Minghui website to view it (<http://en.minghui.org/cc/15/>). This is also one of major reasons that over 100 million people were attracted to practicing Falun Gong in only seven years (1992 to 1999). Guan Guiming, a very famous Chinese singer in the early 1980s, was diagnosed with cirrhosis by doctors in 1983. He had visited many doctors but without success. When the cirrhosis became worse, he had to stop singing. However, after he started practicing Falun Gong in 1996 he got well—the cirrhosis disappeared—and he was able to return to his singing career.

I had also emailed Dr. Berkshire when I was first contacted by the hosting service. At this juncture I emailed her again, and asked if she could supply me with a few details about what had happened. Her response, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May, in her words:

I first received an email in March from Zhiman saying that I had deliberately made false statements against Falun Gong. I asked the advice of some of my peers, and they suggested that I just delete the email, which I did.

The next I heard was on Tuesday or Wednesday this week. The School Manager of the school where I used to work at the University of Australia called me to ask if I knew about the emails that were doing the rounds at UA. She forwarded one of these to me and circulated an email to the school staff. I'll send you that email separately. I thought, ok as bad as that is, at least it isn't happening at the place of my current employment. Wrong!

The Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic Services) at UX [another pseudonymous institution] (my current employer) forwarded an email from Zhiman that he had received, virtually identical to the one circulating at UA. The university lawyer

and Director (Integrity and Professional Conduct), phoned me to tell me that those emails had gone to various random staff members but also the Vice Chancellor, Chancellor, Council, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research and Innovation). Some poor non-academic staff member who I had never met before (and had only worked at UX for two weeks), turned up at my office door saying she had received the email and that she was deeply concerned about me and feared for my safety. But not everyone got the email. I'm not sure how the recipients are chosen.

The university lawyer and Director (Integrity and Professional Conduct) have been very supportive and are certain I haven't done anything wrong ....

I know Falun Gong members feel obligated to correct what they perceive to be misconceptions about Falun Gong. I haven't met anyone who has been through this before.

With a larger perspective on this incident, I began to relax a bit. Dr. Berkshire didn't seem to be under immediate threat. Liu hadn't emailed me for a couple of days after I had been blunt with him, so I expected this would be the end of it. Then on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June, he emailed everyone on the journal's editorial board and anyone else associated with the journal in any way, including the new editors, with the same recounting of his accusations. One of the current editors sent a very straightforward response back to him the same day:

Dear Zhiman Liu:

The *Journal of Religion and Violence* is an academic journal. All our articles are blind-reviewed by leading scholars in the field. Due to the sensitive nature of our subject matter, many organizations and groups are upset about our articles; however, this is the nature of the field.

You sent this email out to contributors to the journal, board members, review members, and other scholars affiliated with the journal. Most of these individuals had no role in the acceptance, vetting, and publication of the article in question.

I do not know if you intended to offend many people, but you did. This unfortunately undercuts what appears to be your intention – to establish a respectful dialogue about the Falun Gong.

If you intend to establish respectfully dialogue on an academic level, I encourage you to write an article and submit it to a journal.

This email, which warns him against being disrespectful, would have stopped any reflective person in their tracks. Liu, however, would not be dissuaded. After being rebuffed by both the former and current editors of the journal, he then took his complaint against Berkshire to the Australian Association for the Study of Religion. And as I write these words, he is now badgering scholars whose chapters just happened to be in the same anthology one of Berkshire's papers on Falun Gong.

I also sent out a couple of emails on some New Religious Movements (NRM) discussion lists, informing people they might be receiving a copy of Liu's email. Additionally, I asked for input/feedback. Someone suggested it might be from an agent of the PRC posing as a Falun Gong member, but, as I have already mentioned, the information in his emails was too detailed and too critical of the Chinese government for that to be plausible. Another list member suggested that he was just a 'troll,' who we should all ignore. And the director of Info-Secte/Info-Cult in Canada telephoned me to share some of his (illuminating) experiences with Falun Gong.

However, by this point I was more than casually irritated, and couldn't seem to just let the matter drop. Part of the problem was the knowledge that I had been bringing Falun Gong practitioners into my classes for ten years back in 1999-2009 when I taught in the University of Wisconsin system and at DePaul University in Chicago. In 1999, after Falun Gong exploded onto the headlines, I had read what little scholarship had been written on the group at the time, all of which was one-sidedly critical of the Chinese government's response.<sup>[6]</sup> Persuaded by this minimal scholarship, I had let practitioners present their point of view unhindered. I now felt that I had been deceived – or, at the very least, misinformed – and that I had done my students a disservice by allowing them to hear only one side.



In addition to allowing practitioners to speak to my students, I also used to show Part One of the group's early video, *Falun Gong: The Real Story*, in class. It turns out that there are several important inaccuracies in this production: In the first place, both the video as well as the people who formerly spoke in my classes denied that practitioners ever refused to consult regular medical doctors. This is untrue. Rather, "within the Falun Gong community there is considerable social pressure on practitioners to abandon conventional medicine" (Palmer 2003, 353). Thus, for example, in his field research, Gareth Fisher translated and transcribed one informant who recounted an illness she had around the time she first became acquainted with Falun Gong:

My eyes became red as though I was catching a cold. I had several bouts of diarrhea.... The elder sister who introduced me to Falun Gong asked me: "How about going to see a doctor?" I said: "I don't think so. The books say that I should experience the cleansing of my body..." (2003, 299).

Her sister took her to see a doctor anyway, who in turn told her to "go to the hospital to have an operation" (Ibid., 299). She refused, and eventually healed on her own. The informant's purpose in recounting this story was, of course, to demonstrate the amazing healing power of Falun Gong. However, it also provides a concrete example of a practitioner refusing medical treatment because of something said in the founder's books. One can easily imagine that there were many similar scenarios in which the outcome was tragic rather than miraculous.[\[7\]](#)

Three or Four minutes into *Falun Gong: The Real Story*, the video also denies that Falun Gong even has leaders – though by implication they clearly acknowledge the more general *spiritual* leadership of Li Hongzhi, the movement's founder. The assertion of having no leaders seems to be based on the fact that the group has a non-traditional organizational structure.[\[8\]](#) However, the Falun Gong organization nevertheless has people at all levels functioning as leaders.

[This structure combines a] global communication network characteristic of information-age "grass-rooted networks of communal resistance" (Castells 1997), with a disciplined and quasi-Leninist organizational structure of local groups linked through cadres of leaders in contact with their counterparts at different levels of the network – a

form of organization long used by Chinese peasant rebels and the Chinese Communist Party during its insurgency in the 1920s and 1930s (Zhao 2003, 216).

As for disingenuously denying that the founder was ever in day-to-day control of the movement, Master Li could mobilize thousands of practitioners, seemingly overnight, for massive demonstrations in China prior to the crackdown.

The network of practice site supervisors was activated to mobilise the practitioners to react against any criticism through public actions directed at media and government offices. The resistance, anchored in public displays of bodies in movement, was spectacular. Thousands of disciplined adepts appeared at strategic times and places, 'clarifying the facts' and demanding apologies, rectifications and the withdrawal of offending newspapers from circulation. Such had never been seen in Communist China: a network of millions of potential militants from all social strata and geographic areas, which did not hesitate to display its power on the public square and confront the media (Palmer 2007, 252).

And as an example of his unquestioned authority over the Falun Gong organization, Li Hongzhi was able to instantly dismiss "the chief assistant of the Beijing Falungong General Training Station [one of the group's local *leaders*] for having stayed at home rather than taking part in a demonstration" (Palmer 2007, 254).

At least one other theme misrepresented in the program is Master Li's apocalypticism. In the later part of *Falun Gong: The Real Story* (about 25 minutes in), there is a place where someone is translating Li Hongzhi as he speaks, denying that he had ever taught anything apocalyptic. The practitioners who had spoken in my classes echoed that assertion. However, given Master Li's "unabashedly apocalyptic" pronouncements (Palmer 2003, 349), this is also markedly inaccurate. Thus, for example, he proclaimed:

At present, the universe is undergoing momentous transformation. Each time this transformation occurs, all life in the universe finds itself in a state of extinction ... all characteristics and matter which existed in the universe explode, and most are exterminated ... (Li Honzhi, cited in Palmer 2007, 226).

In an early lecture in the United States (well before the group was banned in China), Master Li asserts (1) that the ultimate cause of these catastrophes was immorality, and then describes, at some length, (2) the current period of immorality, such as:

The change in human society has been quite frightening! People would stop at nothing in doing evil things such as drug abuse and drug dealing. A lot of people have done many bad deeds. Things such as organized crime, homosexuality, and promiscuous sex, etc. None are the standards of being human (Li Honzhi 1996).

This implies, of course, that we are so corrupt that we are on the verge of experiencing a new apocalypse. And this apocalypticism was a part of his teaching almost from the beginning, years before the crackdown. I should also point out that many people who were at one time Falun Gong's friends subsequently distanced themselves from the group after critics began to call attention to Master Li's pronouncements against homosexuality, feminism (Palmer 2001, 8), rock music and 'race mixing' (Li Honzhi 1997). Many former admirers also became adverse after learning about his exotic conspiracy theory regarding shape-shifting space aliens who capture human beings for use as pets back on their home planet (Palmer 2001), and who are planning to take over our planet via their false, immoral religion of 'science' (Dowell 1999). For example, San Francisco legislators withdrew their nominations for Li Honzhi to receive the Nobel Peace Prize after being informed about his pronouncements on homosexuality and race<sup>[9]</sup> (Lubman 2001).

I have often studied groups whose leaders held such anti-progressive social views, so I frankly did not find that aspect of the teaching shocking. What really bothered me after I studied the movement in greater depth was Master Li's teaching that encouraged his followers to seek persecution, if not outright martyrdom:

Falun Gong adepts are fearless of persecution and even seem, by their provocative acts, to deliberately seek it: persecution validates their doctrine and brings them closer to the salvation promised by Li Hongzhi (Palmer 2001, 17).

In her study of Falun Gong's conversion patterns, Susan Palmer (not to be confused with David Palmer) points out that involvement in the group eventually "requires participation in public demonstrations against the PRC government's persecution of

Falun Gong practitioners” (2003, 354). Resistance in the face of oppression builds up one’s *xinxing*, or spiritual energy. The theory of how this works rests on a quasi-physical interpretation of karma. Li Hongzhi teaches that what other spiritual systems might call ‘good karma’ is a white substance referred to as *de*; ‘bad karma,’ on the other hand, is a black substance Li refers to as *karma*. How this works out in a confrontation with police and other oppressors is a kind of spiritual vampirism:

Li says that ‘When one throws punches at someone else, he also throws out his white substance [that is *de* or virtue] to the other person, and the vacated area in his body will be filled with the black substance [that is *karma*]’. This is important as it goes some way to explaining why Falun Gong practitioners have been apparently so willing to go to public places in China and do things that will get themselves arrested and, as they claim, brutalised. If a policeman were to beat you up, he is actually passing on his *de* to you and that space in him is taken up by *karma*! You win – he loses (Penny 2001 [brackets in Penny]).

This esoteric view of the karmic process motivates practitioners to *actively seek* oppression: at the unseen spiritual level, what is actually happening is that practitioners are attacking policemen – not vice versa. Furthermore, it is the practitioners who are winning. This is the dark side of Falun Gong’s so-called ‘Forbearance.’ When all of this ‘clicked’ for me, I finally understood Zhiman Liu’s strategy: While I was refusing his demands to remove Berkshire’s article, he was sucking the *de* out of me. At that same time, I was inadvertently absorbing his black *karma*.

And as for followers who die while ‘forbearing,’ Li Honzhi assures those “who martyred themselves to the cause could be expected to receive instant ‘cultivation’ or enlightenment, the goal toward which every adherent struggles” (Farley 2014, 249-250). A first-person account on a (now defunct) Falun Gong website provides a concrete sense of this positive acceptance of martyrdom:

When I walked out of the door, the scene in front of me shocked me. The courtyard was full of prisoners on the ground being tied up by police. A white board with a name and the accusation was hung on their chests. I was treated the same way. At that moment, I had righteous thoughts: “do not be afraid; whatever happens will be helpful to improve my *xinxing*.” It also reminded me

of Jesus being nailed on a cross in those days. It would be my pleasure to be able to sacrifice myself for Dafa (cited in Fisher 2003, 302).

During her imprisonment, this practitioner was given the opportunity to sign a statement saying she would abandon Falun Gong. Had she done so, she would have immediately been set free. She refused, but was nevertheless unconditionally released one month later – a release that she, of course, attributed to the strength of her practice. This was not, however, to be the fate of many other practitioners, who were imprisoned or sent to forced labor camps.

When it became evident that the government was on the verge of banning the movement in 1998, Li Hongzhi and his family escaped China and relocated permanently in the United States. Then from the safety of his new home, Master Li encouraged his followers left behind in the PRC to continue to demonstrate against the Chinese government. At a gathering in Montreal some years later that was attended by Susan Palmer, Li Hongzhi,

...congratulated the martyrs of Tiananmen Square who have “consummated their own majestic positions” and presumably earned a posthumous enlightenment, or a crown of martyrdom: “Whether they are imprisoned or lose their human lives for persevering in Dafa cultivation, they achieve Consummation” (Palmer 2003, 356).[\[10\]](#)

Palmer discusses the philosophy of karma and martyrdom behind these protests, and rightly notes that, “While Western politicians, journalists and human rights groups respond to social justice arguments, for the practitioners themselves, it is spiritual and apocalyptic expectations that fuel their civil disobedience” (Ibid., 349).

At some point along the way, as I was catching up on the scholarship I had missed during the intervening years, the realization forcibly struck me that it was Master Li’s encouragements to practitioners to confront persecutors which had ultimately invoked government repression. Li Hongzhi not only encouraged followers to confront media whose portrayals of Falun Gong were judged inaccurate, but also government authorities – as in the case of the Zhongnanhai protest, which was likely undertaken with Li Hongzhi’s “personal approval” (Ownby 2003, 109).[\[11\]](#) Alternately, he could, of course, have instructed his followers to: “lay low and continue the practice secretly and,

if necessary, deny that you are a practitioner.” Instead, he held this kind of cautious approach up for ridicule; e.g., “There are also many new practitioners who practise in hiding at home, afraid of being discovered by others. Just think: what type of heart is that?” (Li Hongzhi, cited in Palmer 2007, 253).

Furthermore, the authorities were willing to immediately stop subduing individuals and let them go free if they would just sign a statement (as mentioned in a passage quoted earlier example); in other words, the abuse, imprisonment, and being sent off to work camps was totally avoidable. Finally, the real clincher was that the leader who was encouraging his followers to resist and to embrace martyrdom had retreated from the field of battle. In David Ownby’s words, “Li scorns those practitioners – even in China, where stakes of resistance are high – who lack the courage of their convictions, [and] seems to ask that his followers make sacrifices that he himself has not made” (2003, 118-119).

Reflecting back to my own situation fifteen years ago, I can see that I had been locked into my ‘Western human rights’ frame of reference, feeling righteous indignation, and providing a forum for practitioners. However, the practitioners had an entirely different frame of reference. Instead of standing up for religious freedom, they were primarily focused on building up their *xinxing* by spreading a one-sided message about their victimage at the hands of security officials – officials who, they had been taught, were “‘evil beings’ devoid of ‘human nature’” (Palmer 2003, 357). As in any apocalyptic struggle, Falun Gong’s vision of the struggle with evil was far from compassionate. As early as December of 2000,

Li posted a message to the FLG website: “When this test concludes, all bad people will be destroyed by gods. Those Dafa disciples who are able to come through the test will leave through Consummation. Those people who’ll be left behind will have to eradicate sins by paying with horrible suffering” (Rahn 2003, 56).

So there had been a dramatic cosmic struggle against demonic beings unfolding right before my eyes – to which I had been totally blind. To repeat my earlier statement: I realized I had been deceived, and my categorization of the conflict as a human rights

issue had caused me to completely miss the practitioners' thoroughly *religious* understanding of their struggle.

Additionally, I should also say that the early propagandists employed by the PRC had not done the best job either. Like me, they too had not fully understood Li Hongzhi's esoteric theory of persecution and his metaphysics of martyrdom, and instead had propagated a heavy-handed discourse about Falun Gong being 'evil' and 'heretic' – both of which have such strong religious overtones in English that they are out of place in secular analyses of groups labeled dangerous. Their critique was shrill and sometimes clumsy, and thus easy to dismiss.

To return to the issue at hand, the Falun Gong people have been so intent on broadcasting their message of 'truth' that they have been making enemies. For example, in a newspaper article about Auckland's Christmas parade some half-dozen years ago, Kerre Woodham described how practitioners were so intent on being allowed to participate that they began to harass her after they were turned down:

That didn't stop them calling constantly, threatening legal action, wanting my boss' number...and promising all kinds of retribution. My flabby liberal *laissez-faire* attitude towards these people has turned into active dislike. They are passive-aggressive bullies (2008).

She also pointed out that, "If they think they're going to win friends and influence people by taking the Santa parade trustees to court, then there's clearly a cultural disconnect that needs to be corrected." Woodham should be grateful they didn't actually file a lawsuit, which has happened more than once.

Thus, for instance, in 2001, the Canadian *La Presse Chinoise* (*Chinese Press*) published a critical piece based around the testimony of a former practitioner. In that case, the newspaper was sued for libel. Four years later, Quebec's Supreme Court decided against the plaintiff. The ruling included a statement that, "Falun Gong is a controversial movement which does not accept criticism." Similarly, in response to a condemnatory statement published in the *Chinese Daily* newspaper in Australia, Falun Gong filed a defamation lawsuit in 2004. Two years later, the New South Wales' Supreme Court ruled in favor of the *Chinese Daily*.

There have been a number of other lawsuits, but in most cases practitioners rely upon different tactics – though often using the implied *threat* of lawsuits as part of their overall strategy. Thus, for example, in response to an AP piece in 2005, “Chinese Show off Repentant Falun Gong,” practitioners staged a protest at AP headquarters and demanded that the report be withdrawn. And to refer to one more example, in 2008, the *New York Times* published an article, “A Glimpse of Chinese Culture That Some Find Hard to Watch,” critical of a program that had been promoted as a Chinese cultural event, but which was actually a heavily politicized attack on the PRC by the Falun Gong. Falun Gong websites responded with dozens of pieces attacking both the newspaper and the article’s author.

As a background to these attacks on Western media, one should realize that, prior to its being banned, Falun Gong had been highly successful at intimidating the news media in China:

Li preached that members must defend the *fa* (way or principle as outlined in his teachings) whenever it was attacked. Practitioners relentlessly protested any negative media reports, initiating over 300 protests between April 1998 and mid-1999, forcing dismissals of reporters and receiving public apologies (Kavan 2005).

For a concrete example, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of May, in 1998, Beijing Television Station aired a story on the movement which, in addition to mostly positive information,

...also contained an interview with physicist and Marxist ideologue He Zuoxiu, who called the group an ‘evil cult’ that propagated dangerous and unscientific practices and ideas. Falungong responded vigorously to the attacks: five days later more than a thousand practitioners demonstrated in front of the television studio, until its director apologized, aired another report favourable to Falungong, and fired Li Bo, the journalist who had interviewed He Zuoxiu (Palmer 2007, 252).[\[12\]](#)

Part of Falun Gong’s problem seems to be that they just can’t forget the Glory Days back in China when their intimidation tactics were so successful they could get hostile reporters fired – something they would probably like to be able to do with critical scholars. In any case, at this juncture it is easy enough to see that demanding an article in an academic journal be withdrawn,[\[13\]](#) along with a threat to ruin a scholar’s, a



university's or a journal's reputation, is completely congruent with the movement's well-documented *modus operandi*.

One of the ironies here is that the Church of Scientology, infamous for hitting back and filing lawsuits, has finally realized that these kinds of attacks on their critics – including attacks on academicians (Cowan 2009) – are counterproductive (Lewis 2016). They awakened to the fact that for years they had been turning “critics into enemies and enemies into dedicated warriors for a lifetime” (Melton quoted in Frantz 2007). Falun Gong would do well to learn from the Church of Scientology.

Let me now bring this discussion to a close by stating that although the information I have brought forward here obviously does not show the movement in a favorable light, my overriding purpose has not been to attack Falun Gong. Rather, as I stated at the beginning of this piece, my goal has been to provide anyone who might be attacked by Falun Gong in similar circumstances in the future with some potentially helpful information.

I know practitioners will try to dismiss this paper, saying that Zhiman Liu is a Chinese agent trying to defame Falun Gong. I do not believe this to be correct, for reasons I have already stated. However, even if this attribution *is* correct, it still does not change Li Hongzhi's ideology of martyrdom, apocalypticism, homophobia, sexism and racism. Nor does it change Falun Gong's attacks on critics or the lawsuits they have leveled against select media outlets.

More generally, practitioners will likely strenuously object that I left out 'their side' of the story. But it is precisely because they shout down and forcibly silence anyone critical of their position that makes this essay necessary as a partial corrective. Additionally, not only do practitioners never make efforts to include the other side of the story, but their perspective on this matter is spread generously across the Internet on numerous websites – there is thus no danger of their side of the issue not being heard outside of the People's Republic of China.

Finally, they might also accuse me of just repeating Chinese Communist propaganda or of being on the PRC payroll – typical Falun Gong strategies for de-legitimizing critical voices. However, the problems I point out here are either the consequences of practitioners' own hostile actions, or else problems created by Master Li's own ill-

considered statements. Thus no kind of counter-criticism or *ad hominem* attacks against me are going to make these problems go away. Furthermore, such attacks will only serve to attract yet more attention to this article's recounting of Falun Gong's moral failings.

## References

Associated Press. 2005. Chinese Show Off Repentant Falun Gong.  
[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A26902-2005Jan21\\_2.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A26902-2005Jan21_2.html). Accessed: 5 June 2015

Carey, Benedict, and Pam Belluckmay. 2015. Doubts About Study of Gay Canvassers Rattle the Field. *New York Times*, 25 May.  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/26/science/maligned-study-on-gay-marriage-is-shaking-trust.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/26/science/maligned-study-on-gay-marriage-is-shaking-trust.html?_r=1) Accessed: 27 May 2015.

Castells, Manuel. 1997. *The Power of Identity*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers.

Cowan, Douglas E. 2009. Researching Scientology: Perceptions, Premises, Promises, and Problematics. In *Scientology*, ed. James R. Lewis, 53-79. New York: Oxford University Press.

Dowell, William. 1999. Interview with Li Hongzhi. *TIME-Asia*, 10 May 1999.  
<http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2053761,00.html> Accessed: 27 May 2015.

Farley, Helen. 2014. Falun Gong: A Narrative of Pending Apocalypse, Shape-Shifting Aliens, and Relentless Persecution. In *Controversial New Religions*, eds. James R. Lewis and Jesper Aa. Petersen, 241-254. New York: Oxford University Press.

Fisher, Gareth. 2003. Resistance and Salvation in Falun Gong: The Promise and Peril of Forbearance. *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 6:2, 294-311.

Kavan, Heather. 2005. Print Media Coverage of Falun Gong in Australia and New Zealand. In: *Papers from the Trans-Tasman Research Symposium, 'Emerging Research in Media, Religion and Culture'*, ed. Peter Horsfield. Melbourne: RMIT Publishing, 74-85.

<http://falunfacts.blog.com/2010/03/30/print-media-coverage-of-falun-gong-in-australia-and-new-zealand/> Accessed: 27 May 2015.

Konigsberg, Eric. 2008. A Glimpse of Chinese Culture That Some Find Hard to Watch. *New York Times*, 26 February 2008.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/06/nyregion/06splendor.html?scp=1&sq=A+Glimpse+of+Chinese+Culture+That+Some+Find+Hard+to+Watch&st=nyt> Accessed: 5 June 2015

Langone, Michael D. 2007. The PRC and Falun Gong. *Cultic Studies Review* 6:3, 235-285.

Lewis, James R. 2012. *Cults: A Reference and Guide*. Sheffield, United Kingdom: Equinox Publishing.

Lewis, James R. 2016. Scientology vs. the Media. In James R. Lewis and Kjersti Hellesøy, eds. *Handbook of Scientology*. Leiden: Brill, Forthcoming.

Li Hongzhi. 1996. Lecture in Sydney.

<http://www.falundafa.org/book/eng/lectures/1996L.html> Accessed: 4 June 2016.

Li Hongzhi. 1997. Teaching the Fa in New York City, March 23.

<https://falundafa.org/eng/eng/lectures/1997L.html> Accessed: 4 June 2015.

Li Hongzhi. 1998. Lecture at the First Conference in North America, March 29-30. <https://falundafa.org/eng/eng/lectures/19980329L.html> Accessed: 7 June 2015

Li Hongzhi. 2003. *Zhuan Falun: Turning the Law*

*Wheel*. [http://www.falundafa.org/book/eng/pdf/zfl\\_new.pdf](http://www.falundafa.org/book/eng/pdf/zfl_new.pdf) Accessed: 30 May 2015.

Li Junpeng. 2014. The Religion of the Nonreligious and the Politics of the Apolitical: The Transformation of Falun Gong from Healing Practice to Political Movement. *Politics and Religion* 7, 177–208.

Lubman, Sarah. 2001. A Chinese Battle on U.S. Soil: Persecuted Group's Campaign Catches Politicians in the Middle. *San Jose Mercury News*, 23 December 2001.

<http://www.culteducation.com/group/1254-falun-gong/6819-a-chinese-battle-on-us-soil.html>

Accessed: 4 June 2015

Ownby, David. 2003. In Search of Charisma: The Falun Gong Diaspora. *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 6:2, 106-120.

Palmer, Susan J. 2003. Healing to Protest: Conversion Patterns Among the Practitioners of Falun Gong. *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 6:2, 348-364.

Palmer, David A. 2001. Falun Gong: Between Sectarianism and Universal Salvation. *China Perspectives* 35, 14-24.

<http://hub.hku.hk/bitstream/10722/194523/2/Content.pdf?accept=1> Accessed: 7 June 2015.

Palmer, David A. 2007. *Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Penny, Benjamin. 2001. The Past, Present and Future of Falun Gong. Lecture at the National Library of Australia, Canberra. <https://www.nla.gov.au/benjamin-perry/the-past-present-and-future-of-falun-gong> Accessed: 3 June 2015.

Rahn, Patsy. 2002. The Chemistry of a Conflict: The Chinese Government and the Falun Gong. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 14:4, 41-65.

Woodham, Kerre. 2008. Booze and Bullies. *The New Zealand Herald*, 23 November 2008. [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/opinion/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=466&objectid=10544538](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/opinion/news/article.cfm?c_id=466&objectid=10544538) Accessed: 3 June 2015.

Zhao, Yuezhi. 2003. Falun Gong, identity, and the struggle over meaning inside and outside China. In *Contesting media power: Alternative media in a networked world*, eds. Nick Couldry and James Curran, 209-226. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

---

[1] This article may be re-posted, as long as it is reproduced in full, without alteration. JRL

[2] For a more properly scholarly analysis, there are several good analyses of the conflict between the Falun Gong and the People's Republic of China in terms of deviance amplification (e.g., Langone 2007; Li 2014).

[3] I was originally going to use the name he provided, which is apparently almost as common in Chinese as John Smith is in English and thus not likely his real name – but then thought better of it.

[4] This reminds me of a young Chinese woman who used to drive over from Minnesota to speak in some of my classes back when I taught in central Wisconsin. Like other practitioners, she asserted that the Falun Gong was a ‘cultivation practice,’ and not a religion. However, when I asked her if someone who self-identified as a Christian could practice Falun Gong exercises, she answered ‘No,’ because Christianity was a different ‘cultivation practice.’ And when I followed up by pointing out that – if one followed her logic on this point – then Falun Gong must also be a religion (or Christianity also not a religion). However, she was never able to grasp my point. She, like Liu, was able to make contradictory assertions, almost in the same breath.

[5] In the original email, I referred Liu to that link. For present purposes, I will cite from a slightly different version of the same paper: “When the research was finished, I was quoted in a press release on new religious movements, in which I said that the FBI’s definition of a potentially violent religion was so broad that several groups in New Zealand would fall into it, and cited Falun Gong as one of several examples. Falun Gong members monitor the media daily, and discovered the press release even before I did. They were offended that they were classified with other religions that they perceived to be ‘totally evil,’ and I received several emotionally-charged phone calls requesting the press release be removed from the Internet. A member relayed accusations that I was being paid large amounts of money by the Chinese government, and repeatedly said that the situation was ‘extremely dangerous.’ Another warned me that I would be deluged by a hundred callers from a Falun Gong email list. The response was understandable, in the sense that during the time I shared with Falun Gong I never disagreed with them and seemed to be enjoying their practices, yet now I was speaking in an academic voice. This experience nevertheless highlighted for me the similarity between Falun Gong’s view of what constitutes fair media treatment and the Communist party’s model, which suppresses any dissenting voices. Public opinion is very important to members, and they are willing to protest and bring defamation suits against those who write less than favourable material” (Kavan 2005).

[6] Not a Sinologist, the only thing I have ever written about Falun Gong is a brief entry and a short overview of the conflict in the introductory chapter of the third edition of my small reference volume on *Cults* (Lewis 2012). If I ever get a chance to undertake a fourth edition, this will be changed.

[7] Falun Gong claimed that those “Followers who became ill or died after Falungong practice had only themselves to blame, since they were considered to have practiced Falungong incorrectly” (Palmer 2007, 264).

[8] Li had directed followers to assert that “Falungong has no organization, but follows the formless nature of the Great Tao” (Palmer 2007, 264).

[9] Li Hongzhu is not exactly racist in the way in which that term is usually used. Rather, on this topic, his aversion is not to other races but to race-mixing, which he sees as a symptom of degeneration as well as one of the causes of the imminent catastrophe; e.g., “as humankind’s morality decays, all matter is rotting. In other words, it has become tainted. At present, the cultures of humankind are in a muddle – they are messy combinations of all sorts, and human races are becoming more and more mixed. These have indeed driven humankind to slide to a very dangerous stage – this is certain. As I said, catastrophes happen because humankind is depraved” (Li Hongzhi 1998).

[10] Though she was at the meeting in Montreal on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May 2001 where Master Li made these statements, in her article Susan Palmer also refers to a now defunct webpage containing the text of his lecture: Li Hongzhi. “Towards Consummation.” 17 June 2000.

<http://www.clearwisdom.net/eng/2000/Jun/17/JingWen061700.html>

[11] Given the fact that Master Li had flown to Beijing in the days leading up to the demonstration, some sources assert that he was obviously involved in the planning of that protest (Palmer 2007, 267), despite later denials (Palmer 2007, 271). Later, after the crackdown started, “Li Hongzhi started issuing threatening statements [hinting that his millions] of followers might rise up” against the government (Palmer 2007, 272).

[12] As David Palmer makes clear in his section on ‘Falungong Militancy’ in *Qigong Fever* (2007, 251-256), Falun Gong vigorously pursued this strategy of repeated massive protests as a way of silencing criticism in China before the movement was banned. For anyone who wants to understand why Falun Gong was eventually banned in the PRC, Palmer’s book is essential reading.

[13] In China, Falun Gong’s suppression also involved an article published in an academic magazine. An important step leading up to the Zhongnanhai protest was “a critique of Falun Gong in an obscure academic magazine, describing Li’s teachings as superstitious and a health hazard. The article might have been forgotten, except that six thousand Falun Gong protestors occupied the University for three days, demanding a retraction. The editors refused, responding that academic publications do not print retractions. Police broke up the protest, arresting 45 people” (Kavan 2005). The pivotal protest event that eventually set the crackdown in motion was subsequently held in Beijing in response to this police action.