

Falun Gong in the media: What can we believe?

Heather Kavan

Massey University

Dr. Heather Kavan researches 'cults', extreme religion and altered states. She is a lecturer in the Department of Communication, Journalism and Marketing at Massey University, New Zealand, where her specialist area is speech writing. Contact: H.Kavan@massey.ac.nz

Abstract

This paper explores the accuracy of Western and Chinese media reports about Falun Gong, a religious movement that has been locked in a propaganda war with the Chinese government since 1999. The study is based on a year's ethnographic research with Falun Gong, analysis of Falun Gong leader Li Hongzhi's speeches and writings, and a discussion of external sources.

I discuss the competing versions of the facts about who Li Hongzhi is, why Falun Gong was banned, and human rights violations. I conclude that, although the Western media is more accurate than the Chinese media on the critical issue of human rights violations, much of the material about Falun Gong in the Western news misleads the public.

Introduction

Falun Gong, literally law wheel practice, is a new religious movement that is now illegal in China. Of all religious adherents, Falun Gong members are perhaps the most media savvy. They have despatched thousands of press releases, staged headline-generating events, maintained a strong Internet presence, and brought defamation suits against anyone who publishes unfavourable material. Consequently, Falun Gong adherents have been treated relatively kindly by the Western press, who have sometimes supported their religious and political agendas (Kavan, 2005).

While several studies have examined how Falun Gong, the Chinese media, and the Western media have framed and presented their material (for example Chen, 2005; Powers & Lee, 2001), from a practical perspective the issue of the material's accuracy is more important. Western governments' policies regarding human rights issues in China are often largely based on media reports (or on the reports of agencies, such as Amnesty International, who use the media as a source), so the information's credibility is vital.

Accuracy is also a critical issue in the numerous law suits Falun Gong have brought. In this light, specialist in Chinese studies Patsy Rahn's (2000) suggestion to go beyond the headlines and investigate what is really happening in Falun Gong is apposite.

My study is based on a year's ethnographic research with Falun Gong. In this paper I will interweave findings from my fieldwork with the different media accounts. I cover the news items from 1999 – when Falun Gong first burst into the international news – to the present. However, most of my discussion focuses on the early period because this is when the key issues about Falun Gong were raised.

I will begin by outlining the background to Falun Gong and its relationship with the media. Next I describe my fieldwork, followed by a discussion of sources. Then I will discuss the main issues in the media. I conclude by observing that while the Western media is more accurate than the Chinese media on the critical issue of human rights violations, much of the material about Falun Gong in the Western news misleads the public.

Background

Falun Gong origins

Falun Gong, also known as Falun Dafa, emerged in China in 1992 as a spiritual movement that was an offshoot of Qi Gong (sometimes called Chinese yoga). The movement's leader is Li Hongzhi. Qi Gong is mainly comprised of breathing exercises, but Li added teachings of a world full of demons, aliens and apocalyptic adventures. His books *Zhuan Falun* and *Falun Gong* read like an Asian version of the *X Files* and were instant best sellers. In 1998 Li reached celebrity status, and he shifted to the United States.

Falun Gong and the media

Conflict with the media has been central to Falun Gong almost since its inception, for it was not the Chinese government, but journalists, writers, scientists and ex-members who first criticised Falun Gong. Li's unscientific claims and professions of divine status invited scepticism, and by mid 1996 Chinese journalists began to publish critical articles about Falun Gong's supernatural beliefs and Li's egoism. In response, Li directed

members to defend the *fa* (his spiritual law) whenever it was attacked (Deng & Fang, 2000; Li, 1998a, 1998b). The protests were large and relentless.

Between 1996 and mid-1999, practitioners initiated over 300 protests against negative media reports, forcing dismissals of reporters and receiving public apologies (Zhao, 2003). In China the media are free only as far as they facilitate social stability (Chan, 2002), so when Falun Gong threatened civil unrest, media managers were quick to capitulate to their demands. For example, when 2,000 protestors surrounded Beijing Television after the station broadcast a segment about a doctoral candidate who became psychotic while practising Falun Gong, the station fired the reporter, aired an immediate sympathetic portrayal, and – to show extra goodwill – handed out 2,000 boxed lunches to the protestors.

Having learnt that such protests were fruitful, Falun Gong members were unstoppable. To prevent social unrest, Beijing authorities introduced a blackout against any negative media reports on the movement (Zhao, 2003). However, not everyone was aware of the blackout, and an obscure academic magazine in Tianjin published a critique of Falun Gong by renowned physicist He Zuoxin. The article might have gone unnoticed, except that six thousand Falun Gong protestors occupied the University over three days, demanding a retraction. The editors refused, responding that scientific publications do not print retractions. The protest developed into a riot – although this appears to have happened after the riot police arrived – and up to 45 people were arrested (the numbers vary in different accounts).

To appeal their alleged vilification and the arrests, Falun Gong made the tactical mistake for which they are most remembered. On 25 April 1999 over 10,000 members silently converged on the sidewalks of Zhongnanhai and surrounded Communist party headquarters for twelve hours. It is at this point that the story is taken up by Xinhua (China's news agency) and the Western media. Before discussing these reports I will describe my fieldwork and sources.

Fieldwork

Several years ago, Falun Gong practitioners sent hundreds of letters to academic institutions requesting that unbiased research be done on them, so, when a group

advertised in New Zealand, I approached them. Practitioners expect researchers to experience their spiritual path before they make judgement on it; therefore I used a methodology drawn from Robert Bellah's (1970) ideas about symbolic realism, of shifting into the person's religious reality for fieldwork purposes.

For over a year I met with Falun Gong members in New Zealand, outdoors between 6 and 7.30 am every morning to do Falun Gong exercises. I also attended weekly demonstration meetings to which the public were invited. The participants – all Chinese – welcomed and encouraged me: they told me that they were used to outsiders because before the Government crackdown in China, undercover spies sometimes attended meetings – often for several years.

Initially I did not intend to focus my research on the media, but I soon discovered that this was highly important to members, as they expressed disappointment that the Western media had not been uniformly supportive of them. From their conversations and literature I got the impression that Falun Gong had high expectations of the Western media, anticipating that the press would take a stance and assume a moral role in restoring members' religious rights in China. This view is highlighted by one of Li's speeches in which he rails against the media for "keeping silent while crimes and sins are committed" (Li, 2005a, p. 2).

At the morning meetings nobody spoke, we took a place in a circle, closed our eyes, did the exercises, and usually left without saying goodbye to each other. There was slightly more interaction at other meetings, and I was careful not to direct the conversation as I wanted to see what issues were important to the participants. I did not ask set questions as I was aware that practitioners had standard answers to particular lines of enquiry (Frank, 2004), and I focused on ensuring that I understood their perspectives correctly.

However, as I do not speak Chinese and could not claim any experience of being persecuted or tortured, I was never fully part of the group. Also, many of the members were biologically related to each other (most came to the movement through a family member). With the exception of two spokespeople, I do not know the names of the participants. Once, when I asked the name of a woman with whom I had met every day for over a year, I was told to call her "the woman".

The cultural barrier also meant that I sometimes did not fully understand how participants interpreted events. For example, on one occasion a practitioner had been practising alone in her front yard when – according to her account – she saw me standing next to her doing the exercises, although I was, in fact, over two kilometres away at the time. Over the next week members looked in my direction, whispered in Chinese and giggled. I am not sure how they interpreted the event, although the incident did not impede our relationship.

Over the year, I immersed myself in Falun Gong material – Li’s speeches, videos, books, and Falun Gong publications. Li’s coercive and inflated style (which Dean Peerman describes as “gaseous-cosmic” [2004, p. 30]) contrasted with the polite and humble nature of the participants. More significantly, Li’s speeches repeatedly contradicted both what Falun Gong members were telling me and what they were telling the media. I had hoped that my research would help Falun Gong, but I became increasingly aware that this would be unlikely.

While my fieldwork was in New Zealand, this paper focuses more broadly on the international media. Although my location is a limitation (especially as there are only approximately 100 Falun Gong members in New Zealand), Falun Gong practices are the same throughout the world. There are no variations of the teachings because Li threatens that if anyone inadvertently alters the teachings when speaking to outsiders, they will be attacked by demons and die (Li, 1998b). Therefore my general experiences tally with overseas accounts of Falun Gong practice (for example, Burgdoff, 2003; Frank, 2004; Porter, 2003). However, my conclusions are less favourable to Falun Gong than previous researchers, who were writing at a time when some of Falun Gong’s more extreme political writings had not been published.

Sources

For both the Chinese and Western media, I retrieved articles from Factiva database by typing Falun Gong and its alternative name Falun Dafa into the search engine. For the Chinese press reports I read all accounts disseminated by Xinhua. Xinhua is China’s principal news agency, controlled by the state-run Department of Propaganda. Their material is difficult to verify as original sources are usually inaccessible to Westerners.

The Western media get most of their information about Falun Gong from press releases disseminated by the Rachlin media group. This group is essentially a Public Relations firm for Falun Gong, managed by Gail Rachlin, who is one of Li's inner circle.

Journalists also get their stories from interviewing participants. However, Li forbids practitioners from talking about what he calls "high level things" to ordinary people, and instructs them to lie to those uninterested in spiritual matters ("tell them that we're just doing exercises" [Li, 2002, p. 21]). Therefore spokespeople tend to be evasive about their beliefs, and resort to formulaic principles and repetitions of their slogan 'truthfulness, compassion, forbearance'. Moreover, Li sets the terms of the debate by directing members to get sympathy by telling listeners about the persecution, with the hidden intention of later turning them into converts (Li cited in Rahn, 2005; see also Li, 2002, 2003a). Members do not see this strategy as deceptive: a Falun Gong spokesperson told me that by focusing on the persecution and not pushing their religion or leader, members were being inoffensive.

Generally, practitioners do not know if the information in the media is accurate. They themselves get most of their information from reading press releases, and usually if I asked them if something was true they replied, "Yes – I read it in the newspaper". Falun Gong also have their own media (Li, 2005b), and are heavily involved in the *Epoch Times*, a free newspaper that is most well known for its polemic *Nine commentaries on the Chinese Communist Party*, which Li promotes (Li, 2005c).

As practitioners do not teach Falun Gong beliefs, I found more information from Li's books and speeches. Copies are available on the Internet, but they are not necessarily the same as the originals. For example, disciples removed a chapter of Li's improbable autobiographical claims of supernatural exploits from *Zhuan Falun*, as well as from the Internet (see Penny, 2003 for a discussion on the content). They also removed English translations of *Zhuan Falun 11*, a book in which Li makes several scientific slip-ups (such as mistaking a light year for a measurement of time) and offends potential supporters by condemning homosexuality and Buddhism. Curiously, when I asked a research assistant to translate parts of *Zhuan Falun 11* for me, his car was broken into after he left my office, and my instructions on what to translate were stolen. Although I

am sure this event was a coincidence, it helped me to appreciate the wariness Falun Gong and the Chinese government have of each other.

Further, as Deng and Fang (2000) observe, English translations of Li's speeches have a less strident tone, they sometimes differ from the original Chinese in critical parts, and the most anti-gay, racist and anti-human scriptures have never been translated into English. Also, Li has instructed followers to destroy any unauthorised versions of his speeches (1998b).

While these sources shed some light on Falun Gong beliefs, an equally critical issue in relation to Falun Gong is the torture and persecution of members. The press often quote Amnesty International, but Amnesty's reports are not independently verified, and mainly come from Falun Gong sources (for example, Amnesty, 2000). The Hong Kong Centre for Human Rights is the only independent source of information, although the Centre is actually not an organisation, but one man – Lu Si Qing. However, statistics of arrests from both Amnesty and the Hong Kong Centre are often much higher than those reported by Western journalists who were present in China when the arrests were made (Rahn, 2000), which suggests that other information may be similarly exaggerated.

The media stories

The news items generally begin at the time of the Zhongnanhai protest. To resume the story, China's Premier Zhu Rongji told the protestors that their grievances would be addressed within three days. One participant told me that he "was very nice" and the crowd went home delighted. However, on July 22 1999 the government did an about-turn: Falun Gong was declared an 'evil cult', the religion was outlawed, and members were arrested. The Western and Chinese media give contradictory accounts.

Li Hongzhi

The first issue was Li's role in the protest. The Western press quoted Li and his spokespeople who said that the protest was spontaneous, that Li was on his way to a conference in Australia at the time, and had no knowledge of it. This seems unlikely because all Falun Gong decisions have to be pre-approved by Li, no matter where he is (Li, 1995). In contrast, Xinhua claimed that Li was on Northwest Airline Flight 087 to

China on April 22 and stayed for two days. Xinhua (1999c) also presented evidence that Li ordered disciples to protest. Over a month after his initial denials, Li changed his story, and admitted to journalist Paul Flatin (1999b) what Xinhua had been reporting from the outset: that he was in China on the eve of the protest. Xinhua's reports therefore seem more plausible than the initial Western ones, although we may question how the Chinese government gained their information (apparently Li's co-conspirators 'confessed').

The descriptions of Li also vary between China and the West. The Western media, taking their initial stories from interviews with Li, describe him as a bright, baby-faced man who looks more like a businessman than a guru, and who "may be wacky, but he's no counterrevolutionary" (Liu, 1999, para. 2). Flatin writes that "with his round, soft, Buddha-like features and smiling brown eyes, the cheerful Li hardly seemed like the illustrious spiritual leader of millions of Chinese" (1999a, para. 19). Numerous media quote Li's story that he was spiritually cultivating at the age of four, and at twelve years of age was discovered by a Taoist immortal from the mountains. Reportedly, having founded Falun Gong, he now leads a simple life from his New York apartment, and is a "family-values nostalgist" (Rosin, 1999, para. 11). With some exceptions (especially Hitchens, 2000), Li is portrayed as a hero, a man who, like Gandhi, mobilised millions of disciples to non-violently resist an oppressive regime. In 1999 he was nominated by six countries for the Nobel peace prize, and in 2001 *Asia Week* named Li the most powerful communicator in Asia (Number 1, 2001).

Not surprisingly, the Chinese media have a different view of Li. According to Xinhua, far from being a child spiritual protégé, he only began practising Qi Gong a year before he started Falun Gong, and when he began Falun Gong he copied the physical exercises from Qi Gong and hand movements from Thai dances. Once in power, Li enticed, brainwashed and intimidated followers. He forbade members to take medicines and go to hospitals (while doing so himself), leaving practitioners to die in agony while he did nothing to help them, aside from boasting that he could heal by simply waving his hand. While "hooting" that only he could save the world (Xinhua, 2001a, para.1), he amassed a fortune for himself, living in his luxury home off the profits from his propaganda, and visiting brothels (Xinhua, 1999a, 1999d). He is now in the USA enjoying the good life.

In some respects, Western and Chinese accounts are not as polarised as one would expect. Like Xinhua, the Western press also publicised some of Li's unusual beliefs. For example, in an interview with Van Biema (1999) of *Time* magazine, Li talked of his apocalyptic visions, and warned that ghostly-looking aliens are infiltrating human minds to corrupt and ultimately replace humans. However, later, when Hanna Rosin (1999) of the *Washington Post* questioned Li about these beliefs, he responded that he merely meant them as Buddhist metaphors. As Li no longer gives interviews, and more recent accounts come largely from the Rachlin media group, his unusual ideas are less reported today.

Regarding his spiritual status, Li was ambiguous when speaking to the Western media. While he said modestly to ABC news, "Don't make me into a God" (implanting the idea that one could easily make this mistake when encountering him), to *Time* magazine, "You can think of me as a human being", and to *The Times* "I'm not saying I'm higher than Jesus Christ," he is more forthright with disciples (Dowell, 1999, answer 30; Greenberg, 1999, p. 2; Kirsta, 1999, para. 34). At conventions he claims not just to be a God, but the best God, superior to Buddha and Jesus whom he dismisses as merely teaching 16 carat gold paths compared with his 24 carat gold path (Li, 1998c, 2003a). He also encourages veneration, telling disciples that his spiritual body is so large that, if he appeared in it, disciples would be looking upward from under his big toe (Li, 1999).

Why Falun Gong was banned

When the story of Falun Gong broke in the West, commentators ridiculed Communist leaders for launching the equivalent of a counter-terrorist attack on a group of "exercising grannies" (Mosher, 1999, para. 1). Referring to the fact that Falun Gong mainly comprises breathing exercises, *Time Asia* opened its story by announcing that it had now become illegal to breathe in China (Spaeth, 1999). To explain Falun Gong's illegal status, the Western media repeatedly quote members' claim that the Chinese government outlawed Falun Gong because Li had more followers than the Communist party (100 million compared with 60-70 million). This assertion seems unlikely for two reasons. First, scholars agree that the number of Falun Gong adherents was between two to ten million, not 100 million (see Bruseker, 2000, p. 52; Major religions, n.d, p. 24). Second, there were equally popular Qi Gong groups in China which were not banned.

Countering the Western reports, Xinhua (1999b) claims that the Western media portray Falun Gong as a harmless meditation group to make China look ridiculous. The agency produced a stream of articles explaining that the Chinese government banned Falun Gong because Li had broken numerous laws, threatened public safety, was responsible for over 1,000 deaths (mainly from members committing suicide or not seeking medical treatment), and because members had infiltrated the Communist party to overthrow the government.

On the issue of Falun Gong's responsibility for numerous deaths, practitioners told me that they did not know whether the incidents occurred, but they were sure that the deaths did not stem from Falun Gong beliefs. Members also said that Li does not discourage people from getting medical assistance. However, this claim does not tally with Li's writings. He teaches that illnesses are caused by karma, and that by taking medicines or getting medical help one presses the karma back into the body. The sign of a true practitioner is to refuse medicine or medical care (Li, 1998b; 1998c; 1999; 2001a; 2003b).

The second issue – that Falun Gong infiltrated the Communist party – is not disputed. Falun Gong had permeated the state's military, security, media and educational establishments. Also, in *Falun Gong* Li writes about his focus on gaining support from state government leaders, and these statements have suspiciously been omitted from the English and French translations (Deng & Fang, 2000). Even so, there is no evidence that in the early stages Li planned to topple the Communist party. To be sure, members today are political. They yearn for the demise of the party - parading down streets singing “no more Communist party, no more torture”, surrounding Chinese embassies silently chanting “all evil be destroyed”, and triumphantly share any news suggesting that the Communist party is collapsing. However, their opposition to the Party seems to be the result of being persecuted, rather than the cause of the ban.

Human rights abuses

Nowhere do Chinese and American accounts differ more than on the issue of human rights. After the ban, tens of thousands of practitioners were arrested and sent to labour camps without trial, and many claim to have been tortured. While the numbers may be exaggerated, the evidence is compelling. There are photographs of police brutality and

mutilated torture victims, and – although it is unclear whether these photos were taken independently – they are not usually disputed. There are also eye witness testimonies, and first hand accounts (for example, Zeng, 2005). Additionally, Ian Johnson of the *Wall Street Journal* documented his investigative research on the repression in a poignant series of articles, for which he received a Pulitzer prize (Johnson, 2004).

The Chinese media do more than issue blanket denials of human rights abuses; Xinhua paints an enchanted picture of Falun Gong members in air conditioned re-education centres, regaining their energy and vigour by eating ravishing meals and being showered by kindness from the guards. Members are depicted playing basketball, dancing, and attending to rabbits, deer, and birds (Xinhua, 2001c; 2001d). Even police stations are portrayed as veritable counselling services where police patiently educate Falun Gong members and try their best to save their lives (Xinhua, 2001b). Such stories would strain credibility even if they were referring to Western law enforcement.

Practitioners talk about the persecution a lot. They describe members being hung from shackles on the wrists for prolonged periods, shot with electric stun guns, pierced with sharp bamboo sticks, beaten, raped, confined to tiny spaces where they are unable to move their body, and prohibited from using a toilet for several days. They display banners with photographs of police brutality, and often re-enact torture scenes in public demonstrations. An undercurrent of sadness pervaded the meetings, as members were cut off from loved ones in China.

At the same time, practitioners did not perceive themselves as victims, and were adamant that they did not want to be portrayed this way. I understood this more fully when one day a practitioner looked at me with pity and exclaimed that she felt sorry for me because I worked so hard at doing the exercises but had never experienced the persecution. She then began quoting from one of Li's speeches on 'stepping forward'. Stepping forward means activism and refers to a series of tests members have to pass to gain entry into Li's heaven. These tests have arisen because Li has only planned enlightenment for a limited number of Falun Gong members, but with increasing numbers and the imminent end of the world, he has to quickly weed people out (Li, 2000a; 2001c). By defending the *fa* and being imprisoned and tortured, practitioners' karma is burnt off, thus assuring them a place in Li's paradise. It follows that when enduring severe torture, practitioners must

not recant their faith, even if their retraction is insincere. This is a serious disgrace (Li, 2001c), and those who recant are “malignant tumours” whom Li purposely orchestrated the torture to expose (Li, 2000b, sec. 18, para. 1).

Therefore, while practitioners abhor human rights abuses, they also find meaning in them. Persecution reinforces and reinvigorates their world view, as well as providing their religion with a selling point to the West.

Is Falun Gong a cult?

Another issue – and one that is most important to Falun Gong members that I met - is the use of the word ‘cult’. Xinhua consistently describe Falun Gong as a cult (*xijiao*). In China any word related to religion has implications of feudal superstition, but *xijiao* is especially pejorative because it has pathological connotations that suggest evil agents of disease (Chen, 2003b).

The Western media do not usually describe Falun Gong as a cult, because of pressure from Falun Gong, and members tell the media they are just an exercise group. However, as Wong and Liu (1999) observe, Falun Gong seems unusually proselytising for an exercise group. Also, on newcomers’ second or third visits they are given scriptures showing Li’s rejection of those who just do the exercises every day (usually *Zhuan Falun*, but see also Li, 1997; 1998b). I noticed that newcomers never returned after they were given the reading material, except for one man who reappeared only to put the books on the table and rush out the door. When – six months into the fieldwork – a member told me that Falun Gong was not about doing the exercises at all, I was not surprised. She had already given me this information via Li’s writings.

If the ambiguous – some might say deceptive – recruitment tactics make Falun Gong sound like a cult, we should look further at what exactly a cult is. Characteristics associated with cults include: an idolised charismatic leader who exploits people by letting them believe he – and it usually is a ‘he’ – is God’s mouthpiece; mind control techniques; an apocalyptic world view used to manipulate members; exclusivity (‘only our religion can save people’); alienation from society; and a view of members as superior to the rest of humanity.

If we employ these criteria, Falun Gong could be described as a cult. By his own account Li is the exclusive saviour of the world. He teaches that members are superior to ordinary people, and they must relinquish “affection for kinsfolk, love between a man and a woman, an affection for parents, feelings, [and] friendship” (Li, 2003b, lecture 4, para. 3). Also, Falun Gong activities take up large amounts of practitioners’ time each day. To be sure, practitioners are free to exit Falun Gong whenever they want, but this freedom is a physical reality, not a psychological one. As the Chinese members I met had no exposure to other spiritual paths, they believed the peace they experienced in meditation is only available through Falun Gong. Moreover, if they are left behind in the apocalypse they will suffer horribly (Li, 2000a). (The date of this event is uncertain because Li can use his mystical powers to delay it, but participants were expecting it within the next 25 years.)

Even so, as Chang remarks, ‘It takes a cult to know a cult,’ and the word cult can also be applied to Maoist China (Chang, 2004, p. 130). The parallel has not been lost on Falun Gong members who, after I had finished the research, put articles in my letterbox denouncing the Communist party as an ‘evil cult’ (these articles were from the *Nine commentaries on the Communist Party* [2005]). The comparison invites the question of whether Chinese abhorrence of Falun Gong may be because Li uses the same vocabulary and symbols that Mao Ze Dong did. Like Mao, Li has activated millions of people with his rhetoric. His ideology is similarly characterised by moral superiority, defining others as absolute evil, dehumanising enemies by labelling them snake spirits and possessed by ghosts, extolling the virtues of selflessness and sacrifice, emphasising the necessity of enduring physical hardship, harassing critics, and denigrating science in favour of his purportedly infallible truths.

Addicts and Atrocities

Having classified Falun Gong as a ‘cult’, it was only a small step for Xinhua to label practitioners ‘addicts’. This characterisation could perhaps be applied to some members before the crackdown. When Falun Gong was under the auspices of Qi Gong, there was an outbreak of Qi Gong psychosis in China, as members’ excessive spiritual activities brought on psychotic states (Chen, 2003a; Engardio, 2000).

However, I doubt that many Falun Gong members today have experienced this phenomenon. The practitioners I encountered did not report vivid spiritual experiences, and spoke of Falun Gong activities more as a chore to be endured (“I don’t do the exercises because I enjoy them; I do them because they are good for me,” one participant commented). In fact, in my quest for understanding, I may have been keener than the practitioners, and I sometimes suspected that they were only at the practice site because I – the outsider – was enthusiastically there each morning. This suspicion was confirmed when I discovered that daily 6am meetings ceased after I finished my fieldwork.

Even so, experiences and beliefs that are considered normal in a religious subculture can well seem psychotic and delusional to outsiders. The previously mentioned example of a practitioner hallucinating that I was standing next to her is a good example. Similarly, one practitioner appeared paranoid when, after the group had blocked public access, she claimed that pedestrians who expressed irritation had been secretly “got at” by the Chinese embassy.

Additionally, in my experience it was difficult to keep up with the harsh physical demands of Falun Gong without dissociating (especially at 6am). We stood with our hands in the air for interminable periods of time, and regularly sat in the lotus position for over an hour – throughout the Manawatu floods and sometimes in temperatures below zero. Following Li’s orders to disciples, (Li, 2001a, p. 72; Li, 2003b, pp. 139-40), we stayed in position no matter how severe the pain. When on one occasion I was in the early stages of hypothermia, I was told that if I had been meditating properly I would not have felt the cold. None of us were particularly functional afterwards, we often struggled to walk, and our dazed appearance could well have appeared mentally unhealthy.

To further support the label ‘addicts’, the Chinese government flooded the media with atrocity stories about Falun Gong members. Newspapers, magazines and broadcasting stations published lurid accounts of members dying from suicide, and cutting open their stomach to find their inner *falun*. There is no way of verifying these stories. Mysteriously the alleged atrocities have only occurred in China and not in the West, which suggests that the information may have been fabricated.

The most controversial of these incidents is the self-immolations of alleged Falun Gong members. In January 2001, three weeks after Li issued a statement to disciples saying that evil could “no longer be tolerated” and they could set aside the principle of forbearance and “use various measures at different levels” to “eradicate it” (Li, 2001b, para. 1), a man and two mother-daughter pairs burnt themselves alive in Tiananmen Square. The police rushed to the scene with fire extinguishers, but one of the women died at the scene.

For the Chinese media this was the atrocity story par excellence. Television stations broadcast footage of the women and girls staggering with their hands above their head (the Falun Gong pose) as flames leapt over their bodies. Xinhua produced a torrent of stories, focusing especially on one of the victims - the pretty 12 year old daughter, who died later.

Falun Gong spokespeople deny that the immolators were Falun Gong members, and claim that the Chinese government staged the whole event to smear the group – a view shared by journalist Danny Schetcher (2001) in his sympathetic investigation of Falun Gong. Members gave me a VCD that demonstrates discrepancies in the footage: the man is not sitting in the Lotus position correctly, and fire extinguishers are mysteriously available within minutes (*The world*, n.d). Even so, the survivors and organisers have subsequently told American and Chinese journalists that they were Falun Gong members and were inspired by Li (for example, Page, 2002, Xinhua, 2005). Also, there have been other Falun Gong self immolations, and several thwarted attempts.

Final thoughts

As Xinhua has a reputation for being untrustworthy, the agency is often not believed even when it is telling the truth (Chang, 2004). However, my research suggests that on the issues of Li and his role in the Zhongnanhai protest, why Falun Gong was banned, and its cult-like nature, Xinhua’s accounts are (if we ignore the florid tone) generally more accurate than Western ones. Nevertheless, there is more diversity in the Western reports, and on the critical issue of human rights abuses, the Western reports are more reliable.

The Falun Gong members I met appeared to be humble and courageous people. Their focus is on spiritual issues and their fellow practitioners in China. They dismiss wholesale all Xinhua’s reports, and have relentlessly campaigned for the West to do the same,

influencing the media and obtaining USA censures against China. In doing this they have sometimes exceeded the facts, but for them there is so much at stake – their reputation, their ability to see loved ones in China, and, more importantly, their eternal future with Li.

Writing about Chinese history, Dun Li (1978) comments that a commitment to a single ideology is a type of imprisonment, and that the stronger the commitment an individual, a group, or a nation has, the more imprisoned and dogmatic they become. At the heart of the battle between the Chinese government and Falun Gong are two warring ideologies with highly committed protagonists. Both use the media as pawns. Both use the same rhetorical strategies: issuing blanket denials when accused, devising conspiracy stories, and redirecting allegations by accusing the other of the same thing. What is being played out is a conflict of intransigent beliefs. The Western media's uncritical acceptance of Falun Gong's version suggests that Li, by appealing to ideals of amelioration of suffering and freedom of religion, has produced a story that the West wants to believe.

Postscript

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 a phone call warning me that I would be deluged by a hundred callers from a Falun Gong email list. Several emotionally-charged phone calls followed, in which the callers demanded the press release be removed from the Internet. A member contacted me at home and relayed accusations that I was being paid large amounts of money by the Chinese government, and repeatedly said that the situation was "extremely dangerous". Each time I asked exactly what the danger was, she did not explain.

The response was understandable, in the sense that during the time I shared with Falun Gong I never disagreed with them, 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 dissenting voices.

References

Amnesty International. (2000, March 23). People's Republic of China: The crackdown on Falun Gong and other so-called "heretical organizations". Retrieved June 30, 2004, from <http://web.amnesty.org/libraryIndex/engASA170112000>

Bellah, R. (1970). Christianity and symbolic realism. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 9(2): 89-96.

Bruseker, G. (2000). Falun Gong: A modern Chinese folk Buddhist movement in crisis, M.A. thesis, Leiden University. Retrieved Nov. 2, 2004, from <http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/bth/bruseker.rtf>.

Burgdoff, C. A. (2003). How Falun Gong practice undermines Li Hongzhi's totalistic rhetoric. *Nova Religio*, 6(2): 332-347.

Chan, A. (2002). From propaganda to hegemony: Jiaodian Fangtan and China's media policy. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 11(30): 35-51.

Chang, M. H. (2004). *The end of days: Falun Gong*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Chen, C. H. (2005). Framing Falun Gong: Xinhua news agency's coverage of the new religious movement in China. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 15(1): 16-36.

Chen, N. (2003a). *Breathing spaces: Qigong, psychiatry and healing in China*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Chen, N. (2003b). Healing sects and anti-cult campaigns. *The China Quarterly*, 174, June: 505-520.

Deng, Z. & Fang, S. (2000). The two tales of Falun Gong: Radicalism in a traditional form. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Family

Foundation. Seattle, WA, 28-29 April 2000. Retrieved April 2, 2005, from <http://www.xys.org/netters/Fang-Zhouzi/religion/2tales.doc>

Dowell, W. (1999, May 10). Interview with Li Hongzhi. *Time Magazine Asia*.

Engardio, J. P. (2000, March 23-29). Spiritual CULTivation. *New Times*. Los Angeles. Retrieved from Factiva Database.

Flatin, P. (1999a, June 21). Chinese spiritual leader cautions Beijing on crackdown. *Asian Political News*. Retrieved from Factiva database.

Flatin, P. (1999b, July 23). Falun Gong leader shocked, outraged by Beijing's ban. *Japan Economic Newswire*. Retrieved from Factiva database.

Frank, A. (2004). Falun Gong and the threat of history. In M. A. Tétreault and R. A. Denmark (Eds.), *Gods, Guns & Globalization: Religious Radicalism and International Political Economy*, vol. 13, *International Political Economy Yearbook* (pp. 233-265). Boulder: Lynn Rienner.

Greenberg, J. S. (1999, Aug. 20). A passive recipient: Falun Gong leader seems modest - and in control. Special to ABCNEWS.com. Retrieved from Factiva database.

Hitchens, C. (2000, Nov. 20). For whom the Gong tolls, *Nation*, 271(16). Retrieved from Factiva database.

Johnson, I. (2004). *Wild Grass: Three Stories of Change in Modern China*. New York: Pantheon.

Kavan, H. (2005). Print media coverage of Falun Gong in Australia and New Zealand. In P. Horsfield (Ed.) *Papers from the Trans-Tasman Research Symposium, 'Emerging Research in Media, Religion and Culture'* (pp. 74-85). Melbourne: RMIT Publishing.

- Kirsta, A. (1999, Aug. 14). This man claims to be teaching an ancient method of spiritual healing – Investigation. *The Times*. Retrieved from Factiva database.
- Li, D. J. (1978). *The Ageless Chinese*. (3rd ed.). New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Li, H. (1995). Comments regarding the fa-rectification made at the Falun Dafa assistants meeting in Beijing, January 2. Retrieved Jan. 10, 2006, from http://www.falundafa.org/book/eng/yj_4.htm
- Li, H. (1997). Falun Dafa: Lectures in the United States, pre-publishing version. Retrieved March 26, 2001, from <http://falundafa.org/book/eng/mgjf.htm>
- Li, H. (1998a). Assistants' fa conference in Changchun July 26, Changchun. Retrieved March 13, 2006, from <http://www.falundafa.org/book/eng/changchun1998a.htm>
- Li, H. (1998b). Essentials for further advancement: A Falun Gong practitioner's guide. Retrieved Feb. 1, 2006, from <http://www.falundafa.org/book/eng/jjyz.htm>
- Li, H. (1998c). Falun Buddha Fa: Lecture at the first conference in North America, March 29-30, New York. Retrieved March 26, 2001, from <http://falundafa.org/book/eng/north-america.htm>
- Li, H. (1999). Falun Dafa lecture in Sydney. Retrieved April 7, 2005, from <http://www.falundafa.org/book/eng/xnjf1.htm>
- Li, H. (2000a). Eliminate evil, November 30. Retrieved 12 June, 2005, from <https://dongtaiwang.com/dm/UGgC/Jjj.pyRNejvFqBz.ARg/rzu/negvpyrf/2000/12/2/4306.html>
- Li, H. (2000b). Essentials for further advancement II. Retrieved March 12, 2005, from http://www.falundafa.org/book/eng/jjvz2_15.htm
- Li, H. (2001a). *Falun Gong: Principles and exercises for perfect health and enlightenment*. MA: Fair Winds Press.

- Li, H. (2001b). Beyond the limits of forbearance. Retrieved April 2, 2004, from <http://clearwisdom.net/eng/2001/jan/02/jingwen010201.html>
- Li, H. (2001c). Teaching the fa at the Washington D.C. International Fa conference, July 21. Retrieved March 27, 2004, from http://www.faluncanada.net/libray/english/daohang_4.htm
- Li, H. (2002). Touring North America to teach the Fa, March. Retrieved Feb. 12, 2005, from http://falundafa.org/book/eng/na_lecture_tour.htm
- Li, H. (2003a). Teaching the Fa during the 2003 Lantern festival, Feb. 15. Retrieved June 3, 2005, from http://www.faluncanada.net/library/english/la2003/la2003_e.doc
- Li, H. (2003b). *Zhuan Falun: Turning the law wheel*. Taiwan: Yih Chyun Corp.
- Li, H. (2005a). Teaching the Fa at the 2005 Canada Fa Conference, May 22 Toronto. Retrieved June 5, 2005, from http://www.faluncanada.net/library/english/jw/jw050531_e.html
- Li, H. (2005b). Teaching the Fa in the city of Chicago, June 25. Retrieved Feb. 17, 2006, from <http://www.pureawakening.net/pa/article/2005/7/17/46283.html>
- Li, H. (2005c). We are not getting political, January 26. Retrieved Feb. 15, 2006, from http://www.falundafa.org/book/eng/jw_120.htm
- Liu, M. (1999, Aug 9). Mao vs. the Mystic. Why is Beijing so scared of a dumpy spiritual guru? The crackdown against Falun Gong goes beyond superstition. *Newsweek International*. Retrieved from Factiva database.
- Major religions of the world ranked by number of adherents (n.d.). Retrieved July 1, 2005, from http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html
- Mosher, S. W. (1999, Aug. 13). Letters to the editor: Failed China policy. *The Asian Wall Street Journal*: 8. Retrieved from Factiva database.

Nine commentaries on the communist party. Epoch Times Special Publication. Retrieved April 23, 2008, from <http://ninecommentaries.com/>

Number 1: Li Hongzhi, (2001, June 1-8). *Time Asia*. Retrieved 14 June, 2004, from <http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/features/power50.2001/p01.html>

Page, J. (2002, April 4). Survivors say China Falun Gong immolations real, *Reuters*. Retrieved from Factiva database.

Peerman, D. (2004, Aug. 10). China Syndrome: The persecution of Falun Gong, *Christian Century*: 28-31.

Penny, B. (2003). The life and times of Li Hongzhi: Falun Gong and religious biography, *The China Quarterly*, 175: 643-661.

Porter, N. (2003). *Falun Gong in the United States: An ethnographic study*. Masters thesis, University of South Florida.

Powers, J. & Lee, M. Y. M. (2001). Duelling media: Symbolic conflict in China's Falun Gong suppression campaign. In G. Chen and R. Ma (Eds.). *Chinese Conflict Management and Resolution* (pp. 259-273). Westport, CT: Ablex Pub.

Rahn, P. (2000). The Falun Gong: Beyond the headlines. *Cultic Studies Journal*, 17: 168-186.

Rahn, P. (2005). Media as a means for the Falun Gong movement. *Asia Media*, UCLA Institute. Retrieved June 6, 2005, from <http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=20142>

Rosin, H. (1999, July 24). Falun Gong leader, called 'evil' by China, says he's misunderstood. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from Factiva database.

Schechter, D. (2001). *Falun Gong's Challenge to China: Spiritual Practice or Evil Cult?* New York: Akashic Books.

Spaeth, A. (1999, Aug 2). No sects, please, we're Chinese. *Time* 154(2). Retrieved from Factiva database.

Van Biema, D. (1999, May 10). The man with the Qi. His spiritual movement has galvanized millions in China. But Li Hongzhi has more on his mind. *Time* 153(18). Retrieved from Factiva database.

Xinhua. (1999a, Sept. 12). China publishes new book exposing Falun Gong. Retrieved from Factiva database.

Xinhua. (1999b, Aug. 18). Harvard [sic.] scholar – Falun Gong cult should be combated in any country. Retrieved from Factiva database.

Xinhua. (1999c, Aug. 12). Li Hongzhi's role in illegal gathering at Zhongnanhai, Parts 1-8. Retrieved from Factiva database.

Xinhua. (1999d, Sept. 12). Li Hongzhi uses Falun Gong to amass dirty money. Retrieved from Factiva database.

Xinhua. (2001a, Feb. 4). Commentary – Li Hongzhi haunted by his own guilt (2). Retrieved from Factiva database.

Xinhua. (2001b, Nov. 20). Feature: Justice to defeat evil. Retrieved from Factiva database.

Xinhua. (2001c, May 27). Former practitioner disillusioned in Falun Gong. Retrieved from Factiva database.

Xinhua. (2001d, June 12). Re-education camp – Cult addicts transformed heart and soul. Retrieved from Factiva database.

Xinhua. (2005, Jan. 18). Falun Gong followers repent of Tiananmen suicide attempt.

Retrieved from Factiva database.

Wong, J & Liu W. T. (1999). *The mystery of China's Falun Gong: Its rise and sociological implications*. East Asian Institute (EAI) Contemporary China series, no. 22, Singapore: World Scientific. Singapore University Press.

The World needs Truth – Compassion – Forbearance. (n.d.). VCD, available from Falun Gong practitioners.

Zeng, J. (2005). *Witnessing history: One woman's fight for freedom and Falun Gong*. NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin.

Zhao, Y. (2003). Falun Gong: Identity and struggle over meaning in China. In N. Couldry & J. Curran (Eds.), *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a Networked World* (pp. 209-224). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Copyright Statement: Articles submitted for ANZCA08 remain the copyright of the author, but authors by virtue of submission agree to grant the Department of Communication, Journalism & Marketing at Massey University a copyright license to permanently display the article online for public viewing as part of this conference proceedings, and to grant the National Library of Australia a copyright licence to include the ANZCA08 Proceedings in the PANDORA Archive for permanent public access and online viewing. Articles first published in this ANZCA08 proceedings may subsequently be published elsewhere by authors, provided the next version acknowledges this original publication in the ANZCA08 refereed proceedings.