

## The Body of Master Li

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Falun gong began in China in 1992, and spread overseas from the middle of that decade. Since July 1999 it has been subject to a massive suppression by the Chinese Government and has become an increasingly expatriate movement. Currently, over the road from the Chinese embassy in Canberra, and outside each of the Chinese consulates in our state capitals, and most Chinese diplomatic missions across the world in countries where protests are allowed, groups of Falun gong practitioners have been a constant presence for more than a year. These protest actions of adherents have been prompted by the Chinese government's actions, with hundreds killed and thousands held in labour camps since July 1999.<sup>1</sup> Speculation about the reasons for this suppression has been widespread but for the Chinese government the reasons are simple: Falun gong is an "evil cult" that threatens social stability, prevents people from seeking medical assistance for illness, sends people insane and encourages suicide.<sup>2</sup> Li Hongzhi, the leader and founder of Falun gong, on the other hand, believes that in teaching Falun gong he is offering nothing less than, "salvation for humankind."<sup>3</sup>

I am not going to endorse either of these views here; rather I am going to try to offer an account of an aspect of Falun gong doctrine that I consider central but which has not so far been addressed: Falun gong's ideas about the body, especially the body of Li Hongzhi, usually known in the movement as Master Li.



**Li Hongzhi as he appears in the frontispiece to *Zhuan Falun*, and other works.**

Source: [http://hqphoto.minghui.org/photo\\_high/master\\_li\\_pics/master02.jpg](http://hqphoto.minghui.org/photo_high/master_li_pics/master02.jpg)

I will begin by examining some of the images of Li Hongzhi presented on various Falun gong websites and in their publications that show a strong relationship with Buddhist imagery, and then move on to discuss what special powers his body possesses. I will then examine how and in what ways, according to Falun Gong doctrine, the bodies of practitioners change when they are properly cultivated before concluding with the possible relationship between these ideas of self-transformation and another set of ideas on a similar theme from

twentieth century China.

It is a journalistic commonplace about Falun gong that it is "a spiritual movement with influences from Buddhism and Daoism." As in most newspaper clichés, there is some truth to this statement but the question of Falun gong's relationships to Chinese and other religious and spiritual movements is complex. It is clear from much of the terminology in Li's writings, and indeed the name of the movement itself (Falun gong translates as

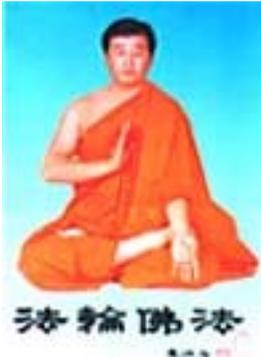
The Practice of the Wheel of the Law, or Dharma), that how Falun gong defines itself in relation to Buddhism is fundamental to it, and I will discuss this in more detail below. Equally Falun gong can be seen as the latest inheritor of a fundamental concern with the nature of the body and of a doctrine of bodily transformation that found its most developed manifestation in Daoist religion. Falun gong is, in fact, the latest version of a doctrine of internal cultivation, which is an umbrella term used to describe different practices that aim to transform the human body into something that transcends the bounds of our normal existence, usually through physical or mental exercises. Such exercises have roots deep in Chinese spiritual practice – I would argue that they precede the formation of any of the institutionally recognised religious systems in China - and they have found a place, in various forms, in most Chinese religions for the past 1,800 years at least. However, since the 1950s, and in particular the early 1980s, internal cultivation has not found its home exclusively, or even largely, in religious circles. It has reappeared as qigong, a mass movement based on physical meditations that exploded in popularity in the 1980s. Falun Gong is a relative latecomer in the qigong boom and its doctrines also show the influence of earlier qigong systems as well as, importantly, that of western new age ideas. We can infer from Li Hongzhi's writings that his reading over the past decade or so has included the works of Erich von Daniken (*Chariots of the Gods* and later works), Tompkins and Bird (*The Secret Life of Plants*) and the prophecies of Nostradamus. While Falun Gong has roots deep in Chinese religious and spiritual thought and practice, it is, equally, a necessarily contemporary movement. In its syncretism, or perhaps better, spiritual bricolage, it shares features with many so-called “New Religious Movements,” and in my analyses of its ideas and practices, I regard it as fitting comfortably in that designation.

### **Master Li as Buddha**

To return to Buddhism: in their attacks of Falun Gong that started in July 1999, one of the specific targets of the Chinese government has been claims made about Li Hongzhi himself; and specifically on his attempts, in their view, to imply equivalence with the Buddha. These attacks charge him with fraudulently changing his birth date from July 7, 1952 to May 13, 1951 in September 1994. May 13, 1951 was the eighth day of the fourth lunar month in that year. This is the date in the lunar cycle traditionally celebrated as the Buddha's birthday. “By changing his birthday to fall on the same day of the birth of the founder of Buddhism, “ the government's press release said, “Li Hongzhi could claim that he is ‘a reincarnation of Sakyamuni.’”<sup>4</sup> The question of Master Li's possible Buddhahood is hardly discouraged in Falun gong materials. A widely distributed instructional video demonstrating the five sets of Falun Gong exercises shows a golden Buddha figure in lotus position transforming into Master Li, dressed in a saffron suit.<sup>5</sup>

The alignment with the Buddha comes not just in the texts and videos but also on the internet. Li Hongzhi, now resident near New York, currently makes very few public appearances. His presence for adherents to the movement is now almost exclusively electronic – his latest writings appear on Falun gong websites, as do messages to practitioners concerning the current direction their practice should be taking, archives of practitioners' “experience stories,” reports on the current situation in China, and all other Falun Gong related news and resources – including images of the Master on the extensive

Falun gong photo archive. Amongst the many images of Li on this site, there is a number of him in practice mode.



### **Master Li in practice mode.**

Source: [http://photo.minghui.org/photo/images/master\\_li\\_pics/single/fx/fx02\\_small.jpg](http://photo.minghui.org/photo/images/master_li_pics/single/fx/fx02_small.jpg)

Here Li Hongzhi sits in lotus position having donned a robe with one shoulder bare and with his hands in what appear to be characteristically Buddhist positions. One fascinating aspect of this image is that while it appears to use explicitly Buddhist iconography, it is, in fact, not quite right. The rules of Buddhist iconography are strict, and the various hand positions (or mudras) have specific meanings and connotations. In this image Li's right hand is at his chest in a kind of half praying gesture and his left is lowered, palm out, with the middle finger apparently pushed forward. The position of Li's right hand is not common in Buddhist imagery but is known in the representation of the Buddha's temptation by the three daughters of the evil Mara who transform themselves into beauties of all shapes, sizes and colours attempting to make him swerve from his righteous path. However, the position of the left hand in those images bears no relation to Li's left hand. On the other hand, the position of Li's left hand is reminiscent of the Buddhist varada mudra that signifies charity. The varada mudra has the hand pendant with the palm turned outward, however, it is exclusively reserved for the right hand and none of the fingers are pushed out.

Interestingly, this hand gesture has made another, more recent, appearance in Falun Gong. For over a year now, Li has directed his followers to "send forth righteous thoughts" towards the representatives of the government that is suppressing the movement. He directs that this should be done by meditating in full lotus position, with one of two hand gestures. This single right hand erect posture is one of them.



### **“Holding One Palm Erect“ from “The Two Hand Positions for Sending Forth Righteous Thoughts.”**

Source: <http://www.clearwisdom.net/emh/articles/2001/6/12/11429.html>

The next image of Li Hongzhi is more ornate.



### **Master Li in practice mode.**

Source: [http://photo.minghui.org/photo/images/master\\_li\\_pics/single/fx/fx01\\_small.jpg](http://photo.minghui.org/photo/images/master_li_pics/single/fx/fx01_small.jpg)

It has him dressed in a red robe with a bare shoulder seated on a lotus with a halo and two concentric auras, yellow outside red. His left hand is in the same position as in the first image but the right is raised, his middle finger and thumb touching, with his other fingers erect. The right hand in this case is almost in the vitarka mudra that signifies instruction, however in that gesture the thumb meets the index finger rather than the middle finger. No

explanations or glosses are provided on the internet nor in the books where these and other similar images appear as frontispieces as to what meanings this not-quite-Buddhist iconography has.

What are we to make of these images that clearly refer to Buddhist iconography but do not quite conform to it? One possible explanation is that neither Li nor his audience understand Buddhism very well; he has simply made mistakes and nobody noticed. While it is clear from his writings on Buddhism that he is not a sophisticated interpreter of that religion, and also that knowledge of Buddhism in contemporary China in general is shallow at best, I suspect that this explanation is a little too simple. Rather, I suggest that he does not conform to Buddhist iconographic rules because he would maintain while Falun Gong belongs to what he calls “the Buddha school” it is not Buddhism, indeed that it has superseded and surpassed Buddhism. Thus, Li claims that, “Our Falun Dafa is one of the eighty-four thousand cultivation ways in the Buddha School,” of which Buddhism as we know it is also one, and moreover one that no longer offers salvation.<sup>6</sup> While this set of images of the Master appear superficially Buddhist it is plausible that they actually employ a different but, as Li would maintain, correct iconography – that they are part of the new dispensation of Falun gong.

A discussion of the nature of Li Hongzhi’s being appears in an early biography of Li published in 1993 and revised in 1994. It is now suppressed by the movement. This discussion is prompted by the declarations of some followers who claim Li is a living Buddha. The biographer relates that during some lectures:

a lot of the students could see a column of light on top of the teacher’s head, a white light on his body and balls of light surrounding him. The balls of light were as big as basketballs, continuously moving. Students whose third eye levels were comparatively high could see a gold Buddha image. Beijing student Wang Changsi said, “As I was listening to the lecture, I saw a gleaming gold Buddha with my own eyes, I saw four gold Buddhas revolving together one after the other... There are some people who ask, “Is Li Hongzhi actually human? Or is he a Buddha?”

The biographer judiciously concludes:

I consider that since he lives amongst us, he is a common man. When you see him wearing a knitted jumper with holes in it or patched underwear, when you see the simple way that he lives, when you hear his unaffected language, he really is a genuinely common man. Indeed, although he has spiritual powers that surpass those of ordinary people, his unsophisticated personality causes you not to sense his specialness.<sup>7</sup>

In the same way that superficially Buddhist iconography appears in the images I have shown, so in the terminology Li employs in his writings, orthodox Buddhist terms appear with different meanings from the ones those terms have in orthodox Buddhism.

### **Master Li's Body**

One of the most notable features of Master Li's body, in Falun Gong doctrine, is his fashen or Law Bodies. "Fashen" is a clear case of Li's redefinition of orthodox Buddhist terminology – it is the Chinese reading of the standard East Asian translation of dharmakaya, literally the body of the dharma or Buddhist doctrine. This term is rich with meanings in orthodox Buddhist schools but given Li's background in China perhaps the primary meaning in his context would have been the Mahayanist doctrine of the Buddha's three bodies: the dharmakaya, the samboghakaya and the nirmanakaya. Donald Lopez describes it in this way:

[In Mahayanist literature] we find references to the dharmakaya as almost a cosmic principle, an ultimate reality in which all buddhas partake through their omniscient minds. After the dharmakaya comes the enjoyment body (samboghakaya), a fantastic form of a buddha that resides only in the highest pure lands, adorned with thirty-two major and eighty minor physical marks, eternally teaching the Mahayana to highly advanced bodhisattvas; the enjoyment body does not appear to ordinary beings. The third body is the emanation body (nirmanakaya). It is the body that appears in the world to teach the dharma.<sup>8</sup>

Li's understanding of law bodies is very different. For him, a law body is a being created in the process of high-level cultivation after a practitioner has transformed his own human body into what Li calls a pure white body. It is defined as, "a body made of gong and fa," that is cultivation energy and the doctrine itself. They are developed in the lower cinnabar field, a place in the lower abdomen numinous in Chinese religious thought for millennia. Li says that fashen possess the power of the person that generated them and are controlled by the mind of that person, "yet [a] fashen itself," Li explains, "is also a complete, independent, and realistic individual life."<sup>9</sup> They also possess a body, though it is different from our own as these fashen can manifest in other dimensions and can change in size: "Sometimes, it becomes very large, so large that one cannot see its entire head. Sometimes, it becomes very tiny, even tinier than a cell."<sup>10</sup>

Li's own fashen – they "are so numerous that they are uncountable"<sup>11</sup> - have a vital role in adherent's cultivation practice. It is the fashen who readjust the practitioner's bodies, insert the falun that I will discuss below, and protect them as they practice, standing next to the practitioner – they can be seen when the practitioner's celestial, or third, eye is opened. The protection offered by them is even stronger when practice is done in a group. "My fashen sit in a circle," Li says, "and above the exercise site is a shield on which there is a big Falun. A large fashen guards the site above the shield."<sup>12</sup> With the celestial eye opened practitioners will also notice that every character in *Zhuan Falun*, the primary text of the movement, bears the image of Master Li's fashen. They also perform the vital function of converting the white substance known as de that you accumulate in your body through good deeds and cultivation, into gong, cultivation energy.

Needless to say Li's fashen are very powerful. They, "possess my mighty divine powers"<sup>13</sup> and they know everything and can do anything. If you are deviating from the

proper path, the fashen will attempt to help you by “giving you hints,”<sup>14</sup> but in the end they will not stop you doing what you want to do. But they also act as Master Li’s enforcers: if, in passing on the practice to anyone, you demand a fee, “my fashen will take back everything given to you, and you will no longer be a practitioner of our Falun Dafa.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, if you attempt to treat illnesses for other people, “all things in your body from Falun Dafa will be taken back by my fashen.”<sup>16</sup> They also have high standards. Li relates that:

we have a practitioner who one day saw my fashen come to his home. He was very excited: “Teacher’s fashen is here. Teacher, please come in.” My fashen said: “Your room is too messy, and there are too many things.” Then, it left. Usually, when there are many evil spirits in other dimensions, my fashen will clean them out for you. His room, however, was full of different bad qigong books. He came to understand it and cleaned it up by burning the books or selling them. My fashen then returned. This is what this practitioner told me.<sup>17</sup>

These discussions of Master Li’s fashen come from *Zhuan Falun*, but the biography mentioned above is another source of information regarding Master Li’s extraordinary powers. The biography presents Li as extraordinary from his early childhood, being the recipient of teachings from a series of masters from the age of four. In the end he had more than twenty masters who taught him different styles of cultivation. The biography reports that, “after dozens of years’ diligent cultivation, Mr Li’s energy potency reached an extremely high level. Above all, he has been able to see the truth of the universe, many more beautiful things which have existed there for a long time as well as the origin, development and future of mankind.”<sup>18</sup>

The biography also gives details of his supernormal abilities: by eight he could levitate, he had the power of invisibility and the ability to bend frozen metal. He could keep fighting boys apart merely by wishing it and the ability to move himself by thought.

However, the powers he possesses that are most commonly reported in early writings are related to healing people of otherwise incurable illnesses and chronic medical conditions. These cures took place most publicly at the 1992 and 1993 Oriental Health Expos in Beijing – when one of the organisers, a Professor Jiang Xueguei [sic] said, “I saw with my own eyes that Master Li Hongzhi has worked many miracles for this session of the Health Fair.”<sup>19</sup> In addition in March 1993 the qigong magazine, *Qigong and Science* reports that in Wuhan, he conducted “hotline consultations” and “remote healing” on talkback radio.<sup>20</sup>

### **What Master Li can do to your Body**

I noted earlier that currently, Li exists for his followers primarily in electronic form but this was not always the case. To become a practitioner of Falun gong – at least in the early 1990s – the easiest thing to do was to attend a set of the nine lectures delivered over consecutive evenings by Li himself. However, this may not have been a matter of free choice – he notes on several occasions that attendance was predestined.<sup>21</sup> During the process of these lectures it is not simply information that was being imparted. Three other events took place without the knowledge – or active collaboration – of those attending.

First, Master Li purified the bodies of those present. Secondly, he inserted into them a falun, or wheel of the law, again an orthodox Buddhist term – dharmacakra – with an entirely new meaning. Finally, he implanted “energy mechanisms” all over their bodies.

Li needed to purify the bodies of new practitioners since, he says, it was impossible to cultivate while your body is full of “bad things,” or “the fundamental causes of your illnesses and your poor health,” have not been removed.<sup>22</sup> In the second lecture, he notes that following the first, delivered the day before, many of those who attended, “felt that your whole body was light and very comfortable,” but that:

from today on, some people will feel chilly all over their bodies as though they suffer a heavy cold, and their bones may ache as well. Most of you will feel uncomfortable somewhere. Your legs may ache and your head may feel dizzy.<sup>23</sup>

Even though this purification process had no outward manifestation as it was being performed, it is not something that takes place only on an elevated spiritual plane – it is acutely felt in this physical body.

Strangely, what is not felt to the same degree is the insertion of the falun, or wheel of the law. During the lecture, Master Li, “personally installs it,” for practitioners. While, “the majority of people can feel [the falun],” not everyone can.<sup>24</sup> The falun is defined as “an intelligent being consisting of high-energy substances. It automatically transforms gong [defined as cultivation energy] and does not exist in our dimension.”<sup>25</sup> It is further explained as “a miniature of the universe that possesses all of the universe’s capabilities, and it can operate and rotate automatically.”<sup>26</sup> The idea is that the falun is in continuous rotation in your lower abdomen and will never stop. When it rotates clockwise it absorbs energy from the universe and when it rotates anti-clockwise it emits energy transferring it to different parts of the body, transforming them. At this point I should note that the Chinese government has, since the suppression started, published a number of photographs allegedly showing Falun gong practitioners who have mutilated themselves. A significant number of these pictures feature people who have supposedly cut open their guts to find the falun Li planted inside them. However – even by Falun gong logic - they are clearly deluded as the falun exists in a different dimension. More falun can, apparently, be developed as your practice increases.

The third action that Master Li performed on the bodies of the lecture-goers was the implantation of “energy systems and mechanisms that will, together with Falun, rotate and transform you automatically.”<sup>27</sup> There are apparently more than 10,000 of them. They assist in the transformation of the body. These three processes are required to begin cultivation according to the Falun gong system.

The goal of cultivation is to rise up from the current low state of humanity and “return to your origin.”<sup>28</sup> In the process your skin will become “delicate and reddish-white,” with your wrinkles gradually disappearing. In addition, Li says, “elderly women will regain their menstrual period since a cultivation practice of mind and body requires menses to cultivate the body.”<sup>29</sup> These kinds of signs and changes are reminiscent of reports of cultivators in various systems over two millennia, though most usually associated with

Daoism. In those reports, characteristically, your hair is meant to turn from grey back to black, your teeth are meant to regrow and your complexion becomes like that of a sixteen or seventeen year old girl.

Such cosmetic improvements are, however, merely the outward signs of a greater change to your whole body. The energy from the cosmos that the falun collects is, as I have explained, transferred throughout the body. On first beginning cultivation the energy that is generated “has very coarse grains...with gaps and low density. Thus, it has little power. When one’s level becomes higher, it is completely possible that the density of one’s energy will be one hundred times, one thousand times, or 100 million times higher than that of ordinary water molecules. The higher one’s level, the denser, finer-grained, and more powerful one’s energy.”<sup>30</sup> This energy is stored in the body, not only in this dimension “but it also fills up the molecules, atoms, protons, and electrons of all bodies in other dimensions, until it reaches the extremely microscopic cells.” Eventually your whole body is filled with what Li refers to as “high-energy matter.” He also claims that this substance – whatever it is – “has intelligence and is very capable.” As practice continues, the density of the high-energy matter in your cells increases and represses human cells; they are what he calls, “the most incompetent cells.” These then no longer take part in metabolism and are eventually completely replaced. This kind of body is known as the “pure white body,” mentioned above. The attainment of this state is the culmination of the first stage of cultivation, the cultivation that occurs in this world. What happens afterwards is further cultivation of the pure white body but where that leads is, I fear, knowledge beyond our comprehension.

In the course of cultivation the body also produces other beings within it. The most notable is the immortal infant. The immortal infant, like the fashen, is generated in the lower cinnabar field and in this, as well as other ways, bears comparison with orthodox Daoist rituals concerning the birth of a foetus within the body of the priest. Li outlines its early stages in this way:

When it grows to be the size of a ping-pong ball, the shape of its whole body will be very visible with the nose and eyes formed. At the same time when the Immortal Infant is as big as a ping-pong ball, a small round bubble will be born beside it. After birth, the bubble will grow along with the Immortal Infant. When the Immortal Infant reaches four inches tall, a lotus flower petal will appear. When the Immortal Infant grows to be five or six inches, the petals of the lotus flower will basically be formed, and a layer of lotus flower will appear. A shining, golden Immortal Infant will sit on a golden lotus flower plate, looking very beautiful.<sup>31</sup>

Eventually the immortal infant grows to be the same size as the normal body. This is claimed to be the cultivator’s “true body.” How this relates to the transformed body of high-energy matter is not explained. Li also maintains that in cultivation the body produces two other kinds of being - cultivated infants which “are tiny and playful, and run around joyfully [while] the Immortal Infant does not move,”<sup>32</sup> and, of course, fashen.

During cultivation, the practitioner will notice that the potential of their bodies changes. They acquire what are called “supernormal abilities.” Of those mentioned the most frequently cited are the Celestial Eye, mentioned above, Clairvoyance and Clairaudience, Precognition and Retrocognition and Remote Viewing. The Celestial Eye, or Third Eye,

is claimed to exist in potential form in everyone and is located between the eyebrows above the bridge of the nose. To activate it requires unblocking the passage between the Celestial Eye and the pineal gland in the centre of the head - this is done either during the lectures or through self-cultivation. When the Celestial Eye is opened – depending on what level you have reached – you will be able to see beyond this dimension. In other words you will be able to see parts of the cosmos no-one else can. Only at extremely high levels of cultivation will the whole cosmos in all dimensions be open to you, nonetheless amazing sights and insights are available to those whose Celestial Eyes have been opened. Here is an anecdote Li tells in *Zhuan Falun*:

I taught the Celestial Eye opening on the second day of a class. Right away, one person with good inborn quality had his Celestial Eye opened at a very high level. He saw numerous scenes that many other people could not see. He told others: “Wow, I saw Falun falling like snow flakes on the audience’s bodies throughout the whole auditorium. I saw what Teacher Li’s real body looks like, Teacher Li’s halo, what Falun looks like, and how many fashen there are.” He saw that Teacher was giving lectures at different levels and how Falun were adjusting practitioners’ bodies.<sup>33</sup>

The logic behind the other supernormal powers is parallel to that of the Celestial Eye. In the same way as the Celestial Eye sees other dimensions by the removal of blockages, it can be understood as allowing “true” vision. Similarly, it would appear that precognition and retrocognition and the rest are perhaps better conceptualised as the “true” ways of knowing made possible by removing the impediments of these bodies we have.

Now, as with the other supernormal powers, practitioners should neither seek them nor use them in “normal human society.” Cultivation with any intention of seeking supernormal abilities will render the cultivation useless as the intention is an attachment. Cultivators must rid themselves of all attachments for their practice to be efficacious. Using them in society would result in the following: “state secrets would be jeopardized; it would be the same whether people wore clothes or not, and you could see people in a house from outside; while strolling on the street, you could pick up all the top prizes of the lottery if you saw them.”<sup>34</sup> Disruption of normal society is not permitted. It is worth pointing out that *Zhuan Falun* was written during the period when Falun Gong was formally sponsored by state organizations and throughout that work, it promotes a thoroughly conformist, even docile, attitude to law and social behaviour. Anti-government protest comes at a later stage in Falun Gong’s history and occurs only in reaction to attacks from media outlets, and to direct targeting from the state.

### **Master Li as Mao**

While the Buddhist parallels in the representations of Li Hongzhi I have discussed are undeniable, the next set of parallels I want to point to are much more speculative. Falun Gong is, as I have explained, a doctrine of transformation of the body. In this transformation, as in classical Daoist practice, people are able to transcend the normal state of humanity and attain powers not normally possessed by humanity. These ideas have deep pre-Daoist Chinese roots and over the years became understood in, perhaps, less literal ways in some non-religious contexts. One of these contexts is the realm of Chinese political thought in general where the transformation of society has sometimes been seen as dependent on the transformation of every individual in that society into another, superior

sort of person. One example of where this influence has been felt, I suggest, is in Maoist thought where the creation of socialist man is seen as requiring a transformation of the individual at the level of the self rather than simply being generated as a product of the transformation of the means of production and exchange. Mao's tendencies in this direction can be seen in his earliest writings, particularly in his 1917 pre-Marxist essay "A Study of Physical Education."<sup>35</sup> Of course, the ideal of creating a new person reached its almost mystical height during the Cultural Revolution. Li was, as I have noted, born in either 1951 or 1952 and could not have but been influenced by Mao's ideas at a most formative time in his life. He was about fifteen when the Cultural Revolution began but as the biography notes, during those times Li "did not join any organisation at all, nor did he receive the special honour of 'red guard.' His fellow students at middle school all knew that he practised gongfu and they all wanted to induce him into entering their group, but he declined them all."<sup>36</sup>

I am not here claiming that Li's writings are in any simple sense Maoist but the influence of the vocabulary from the height of Maoism is undeniable. In this passage from the biography, Falun Gong is described in terms deeply redolent of the literature of that period:

Falun Dafa founded by Mr. Li Hongzhi is like a red sun rising from the east, whose radiance with unlimited vitality will illuminate every corner of the earth, nourish all the living things, warm the whole world and play an unparalleled role in the realisation of an ideal and perfect human society on this planet.<sup>37</sup>

Equally suggestive are a second set of images of Li found in Falun Gong's photo archive.



#### **Master Li surveys a lake**

Source: [http://photo.minghui.org/photo/images/master\\_li\\_pics/single/china/master14\\_small.jpg](http://photo.minghui.org/photo/images/master_li_pics/single/china/master14_small.jpg)

This first shows a plain clothes Master Li, a Master Li in mufti. Here he stands next to a lake dressed in a trench coat, one arm behind his back, looking out across the water. The next



#### **Master Li with clouds**

Source: [http://photo.minghui.org/photo/images/master\\_li\\_pics/single/china/master12\\_big.jpg](http://photo.minghui.org/photo/images/master_li_pics/single/china/master12_big.jpg)

This shows him standing at the end of a path, the sky and clouds behind him looking to the camera while gesturing into the distance, again with his left arm behind his back. These are heroic images, a man alone in the landscape, confident yet pensive. The great leader in a moment of reflection.

These images are suggestive of paintings that other great leader, Mao. The following images come from a volume published in 1979 whose title translates as “Chairman Mao Lives in the People’s Hearts Forever.”<sup>38</sup> None show a one-to-one correspondence with the images of Li Hongzhi but all, to my eye, show an eerie resemblance.



The first painting is called “Who will make us float or sink as we head towards the boundless land?” and it is by Chen Yanning. It is of a young Mao, left arm behind his back in traditional long robe against a background of water and clouds.



The next is called, “The East is Red” and was painted by Zhang Songhe, and shows an older Mao staring out to sea, trenchcoated, and arms behind his back.



The third image, “Climbing Jinfeng Mountain” also has the characteristic arm position and the precipitate landscape behind with a dramatic sky and clouds. It was painted by Ma Zhensheng and Li Licun.

## Conclusion

I hope that I have indicated both how deeply traditional many aspects of Falun gong are, and at the same time, how completely modern it is. There are aspects of Falun gong doctrine that could have been understood by a cultivator in China a thousand years ago, and there are parts of their doctrine that could not have appeared in China before the late 1980s. This synthesis of age-old traditions and contemporary modes of being is not confined to Falun gong but can be seen in many aspects of contemporary Chinese life. Nonetheless, it would appear reasonably obvious that to understand the nature of the

Falun Gong movement and the motivations of its adherents, we must first come to some sort of understanding of its doctrine, and how that doctrine relates to other systems of thought and practice in pre-modern as well as modern and contemporary China.

Yet, in analyses of Falun Gong to date, there appears to have been an almost wilful desire to ignore what practitioners believe and do. For instance, in the first book-length study to be published, *Falun Gong's Challenge to China: Spiritual Practice or "Evil Cult"?* the author Danny Schechter devotes a bare eleven pages from 254 to answering the question, "What does Falun Gong believe?" and includes only another twenty-one of excerpts from Li's teachings.<sup>39</sup> This "veteran journalist and Emmy-award-winning broadcaster,"<sup>40</sup> conforms to what has become the standard journalistic trope of Falun Gong as a threat to party and state and, since its suppression, as a dissident movement whose suppression speaks to the Chinese government's continuing record of Human Rights abuse. Discussions on various China-related email lists and the small number of journal articles so far published have expanded little on this theme, and have focussed on the foreign policy implications of the suppression and Falun gong's relationship to the history of Chinese popular protest movements.

This lack of interest in doctrine can hardly be put down to the difficulties of accessing information (except possibly for those journalists based in China). Li Hongzhi's writings are widely disseminated and are free, literally at the flick of a switch as the Chinese originals and many translations into English and other languages are easily downloaded from Falun Gong websites. In addition, Falun gong practitioners are not difficult to find and, in my experience, are only too happy to talk, to explain their ideas, to answer any and all questions, and to provide materials.

I can only conclude that phenomena like Falun Gong – even if they attract tens or even hundreds of millions of adherents – are too often seen as anomalous, difficult and not amenable to analysis with the methodologies of the "hard" social sciences. When they escape the journalistic tropes I have described above, they tend to appear in the media as suitable fodder for the "postcard" slot on "Foreign Correspondent" and like television programmes, along with Sumo wrestling and Mongolian horse racing. A proper understanding of contemporary China relies on really getting to grips with these widespread and popular movements at least as much as with understanding politics, economics and trade even if that means our colleagues in those fields have to start to take an interest in religion. The fact that they are often difficult for westerners to understand should not be any reason to relegate them to the anomalous or quirky or kooky. Rather, it should stand as an indication of the shortcomings in our understandings of contemporary China.

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<sup>1</sup> See the relevant reports from Amnesty International ([www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)) and Human Rights Watch (<http://www.hrw.org/asia/index.php>). In particular, HRW's *Dangerous Meditation: China's Campaign Against Falungong* from 2002 is an authoritative source on the suppression. The relevant Falun Gong website concerned with human rights issues is the Falun Dafa Information Center ([www.faluninfo.net](http://www.faluninfo.net)).

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A disturbing recent publication with relevance to the treatment of some Falun Gong practitioners is *Dangerous Minds: Political Psychiatry in China Today and its Origins in the Mao Era* (Human Rights Watch and the Geneva Initiative on Psychiatry, 2002; downloadable from the HRW website ([www.hrw.org/reports/2002/china02/](http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/china02/))).

<sup>2</sup> Chinese government publications on Falun Gong are many but often rely on the same sources. The Chinese embassy in Canberra has a website with a good range of material on what it calls the “Falun Gong Cult” (<http://www.chinaembassy.org.au/eng/c4343.html>).

<sup>3</sup> Li Hongzhi, *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p. 1, downloadable from the Falun Dafa website ([www.falundafa.org/book/chigb.htm](http://www.falundafa.org/book/chigb.htm)); English version (Third Translation Edition, updated in March, 2000, USA), p. 1, downloadable from English version of the same website ([www.falundafa.org/book/eng/pdf/zflus.pdf](http://www.falundafa.org/book/eng/pdf/zflus.pdf)). All citations from *Zhuan Falun* are from this edition unless otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup> Gonganbu yanjiushe, “Li Hongzhi qiren qishi” *Renmin ribao*, July 23, 1999, p.4, reprinted in He Ping, *Jiepi “Falun dafa” xieshuo*, pp. 63-70, quotation at p. 64. For a full translation, see *Chinese Law and Government*, Vol. 32, No. 5 (September-October, 1999) pp. 56-64, quotation at p. 57. The English title comes from <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/special/fagong/1999072200A106.html>. This article also lists the other items of bureaucratic registration that have the changed birthdate and some documents issued in 1986 and 1991 on which the original birthdate stands.

<sup>5</sup> See, “Great Perfection Way of Falun Buddha Law,” part one, “Introduction to Falun Gong,” at approximately 2:30 minutes. The most convenient source for this video is <http://www.falundafa.org/media/>

<sup>6</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.4; English version, p.6. This relates to the Buddhist canonical statement that, “In cultivation there are 84,000 Dharma-doors,” which is normally taken to mean that there are innumerable paths to enlightenment.

<sup>7</sup> Li Hongzhi, *Zhongguo Falun Gong* (Beijing: Junshi yiwen chubanshe, 1993), pp. 150-182. The quotation is at p. 181-2. The biography itself is credited to Zhu Huiguang.

<sup>8</sup> Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Buddhism in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p.22.

<sup>9</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.62; English version, p.92.

<sup>10</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.62; English version, p.92.

<sup>11</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.29; English version, p.43.

<sup>12</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.43; English version, p.64.

<sup>13</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.41; English version, p.61.

<sup>14</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.76; English version, p.113.

<sup>15</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.27; English version, p.40.

<sup>16</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.89; English version, p.131.

<sup>17</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.76; English version, p.114.

<sup>18</sup> Li Hongzhi, *Zhuan Falun* (first edition, Beijing: Zhongguo huangbao dianshi chubanshe, 1994), p.339.

The English version is from <http://www.compapp.dcu.ie/~dongxue/biography.html>, downloaded on March

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9, 2001. The “Translation Group of Falun Xiulian Dafa” is credited with the translation and no author is given. By May 1, 2001 it had disappeared from this site and I have been unable to locate another website on which it appears.

<sup>19</sup> Li Hongzhi, *Zhuan Falun* (first edition), p. 344.

<sup>20</sup> Zhu Huiguang, “‘Rexian’ xian shengong,” *Qigong yu kexue*, September, 1993, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> See for instance *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.1; English version, p.1.

<sup>22</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.27; English version, p.41.

<sup>23</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.27; English version, p.41.

<sup>24</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.13; English version, p.18.

<sup>25</sup> Li Hongzhi, *Falun Gong* (revised edition, Chinese and English internet versions downloaded on 29.1.01), Chinese version, p. 61; English version, p. 68.

<sup>26</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.13; English version, p.18.

<sup>27</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.13; English version, p.18.

<sup>28</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.50; English version, p.75.

<sup>29</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.13; English version, p.17-18.

<sup>30</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.23; English version, p.35. The following discussion is based on passages following this reference.

<sup>31</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.54; English version, p.81.

<sup>32</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.54; English version, p.80.

<sup>33</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.112; English version, p.166.

<sup>34</sup> *Zhuan Falun*, Chinese version, p.16; English version, p.24-25.

<sup>35</sup> This essay has been anthologised several times. See, for instance, Stuart R, Schram (ed.), *Mao’s Road to Power: Revolutionary Writings 1912-1949, vol. 1, The Pre-Marxist Period, 1912-1920* (Amonk, N.Y.: M.E.Sharpe, 1992), pp. 113-127.

<sup>36</sup> *Zhongguo Falun Gong*, p. 159.

<sup>37</sup> This passage appears in the English translation of the biography cited above but not in the 1994 edition of *Zhuan Falun*. I have not been able to locate a Chinese source for it.

<sup>38</sup> No author given, *Mao zhuxi yongyuan huozai renmin zhongxin* (Tianjian: Tianjin renmin chubanshe, 1979). The paintings reproduced are figures 2, 44 and 47.

<sup>39</sup> Danny Schechter, *Falun Gong’s Challenge to China: Spiritual Practice or Evil Cult?* (New York: Akashic Books, 2000).

<sup>40</sup> As cited in the dust jacket notes on the author.