



Title	Falun Gong: Between Sectarianism and Universal Salvation
Author(s)	Palmer, DA
Citation	China Perspectives, 2001, n. 35, p. 14-24
Issued Date	2001
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10722/194523
Rights	This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

The Doctrine of Li Hongzhi

Falun Gong : Between Sectarianism and Universal Salvation

David A. Palmer

PRE-PUBLICATION VERSION.

Published in *China Perspectives*, No. 35, May-June 2001, pp. 14-24

(original French version published in *Perspectives chinoises*, No. 64, March-April 2001, pp. 14-24).

Since the Zhongnanhai demonstration of 25 April 1999 and the anti-Falun Gong campaign launched three months later, Li Hongzhi and his millions of followers have never ceased to puzzle observers of the Chinese scene. The first surprise was Falun Gong's ability to organize over 10,000 protesters around the Party's nerve centre, catching security forces completely off guard. This led to the astounding discovery that in only seven years of existence, Falun Gong had managed to recruit tens of millions of followers¹. And the movement's tenacious resistance, in spite of two years of systematic repression, continues to disconcert the Chinese authorities.

Falun Gong represents one of the greatest external threats the Chinese Communist Party has ever encountered since its accession to power in 1989; more serious, according to some, than the 1989 student movement. Indeed, Falun Gong adepts have a coherent ideological system, an unconditional loyalty to their Saviour Li Hongzhi, an inner discipline forged through rigorous practise, and a flexible yet centralised underground organization.

Is Falun Gong a religion? A cult? A political movement? What is its ideology? Chinese propaganda labels Falun Gong as an "anti-scientific, anti-social and anti-human evil cult". It is often described in Western media as a "mystical movement", a "Buddhist- and Taoist-inspired organization", etc. Such terms tell little about Li Hongzhi's true doctrine, and reveal the difficulty in pinpointing Falun Gong's distinctive ideology. What belief system inspires its adepts to such courage in the face of repression?

In order to help the reader to answer these questions, this article proposes a brief analysis of the doctrine of Li Hongzhi, founder of Falun Gong. Four main themes dominate the master's writings : (1) an *apocalyptic theme*, stressing the moral decadence of humanity and the omnipresence of the forces of evil. Extra-terrestrials are infiltrating themselves in the

body of humanity through modern science, the great enemy of virtue; the Buddhist prophecy of the imminent destruction of the world and inauguration of a new universal cycle, is close to being fulfilled. (2) An exhortation to *rigorous spiritual discipline*, calling on followers to purify their hearts of all attachment to the things of this world. The gods have abandoned the orthodox religions of the past, which have already completely lost the spirit of the true Dharma. (3) A *messianic theme*: Li Hongzhi is the omniscient and omnipotent saviour of the entire universe. He has revealed, for the first time in history, the fundamental Law of the universe, which is the only protection against the apocalypse. (4) A *sectarian practise*: Li Hongzhi's adepts must concentrate exclusively on Falun Gong; it is forbidden to read or even think about any other religion, philosophy, or school of thought or of Qigong. They must devote themselves heart and soul to Falun Gong's psycho-physiological discipline; the perceptions and visions triggered by this practise are attributed to Li Hongzhi's supernatural power.

This doctrine is elaborated in the writings of Li Hongzhi, which are considered by adepts as sacred writings (*jing*), and the reading of which constitute an essential component of daily practise. The writings are for the most part comprised of edited transcriptions of Li Hongzhi's preachings during "Dharma assemblies" (*fahu*) held during tours around China in 1994 and in Western countries beginning in 1996, and of the Master's answers to disciples' questions during these assemblies. The first of these works, *Zhuan Falun* ("Turning the Dharma-Wheel"), is considered by many adepts as the "Bible" of Falun Gong, containing the Law of the universe in its entirety, and in relation to which the other writings only bring clarifications and explanations.

Antecedents in the Qigong subculture

Falun Gong's scriptural canon sets it apart from other movements in the Qigong subculture, of which it is an outgrowth. At the same time, it crystallizes many ideas which had been circulating in popular Qigong networks since the 1980's. Indeed, in the first years following its foundation in 1992, Falun Gong appeared little different from the thousands of other Qigong methods being taught in China: a set of traditional gymnastic and meditation exercises. Qigong had appeared in 1949 as an attempt by the new Communist regime to extract traditional breathing arts from their "feudal" and "religious" settings. This new

“Qigong” was at the time little more than a series of hygienic and therapeutic techniques propagated by the new regime’s medical institutions as a cheap and efficient way to improve the health of the Chinese people².

After the end of the Cultural Revolution, traditional and sectarian masters emerged from obscurity and began to transmit their lineages under the guise of Qigong. A plethora of Qigong sects were founded, each teaching a set of techniques and concepts often derived from traditional Chinese religion. In the 1980’s, intellectuals in Qigong circles tried to reformulate these concepts in scientific language, with the aim of creating a new super-science of Qigong. Their project aimed to reconcile ancient techniques and concepts with Marxism and scientism, allowing to train and develop the “exceptional functions of the human body” (telepathy, photokinesis, clairvoyance, etc.) within a legitimate and respectable scientific setting, and putting China in the lead of a new worldwide scientific revolution. From a simple method of disease prevention and therapy, Qigong had come to be seen as a scientific means of acquiring and exploiting paranormal powers.

But “Qigong Science”, unable to produce replicable proofs of its claims, mired itself in quackery and ridicule. The first years of Falun Gong coincide with a period of disappointment and confusion in the Qigong world, which had become the target of a fierce polemic against Qigong “pseudo-science” in the Chinese media. In this context, Li Hongzhi distanced himself from the Qigong subculture and redefined the purpose of Qigong practice : in Falun Gong, the stated goal is neither physical health nor the acquisition of psychic powers, but the purification of the heart and spiritual salvation.

The Qigong subculture was already rife with religious concepts and behaviour, but these were rarely explicitly and systematically articulated. In Falun Gong, however, Qigong exercises are merely the physical adjunct to a religion of universal salvation with its own clearly elaborated doctrine. Although other Qigong masters had also enjoyed playing the role of saviour, preaching to assemblies of disciples, none had, like Li Hongzhi, gone beyond the stage of personal charisma, publishing “sacred writings” the study of which was to become more important than the original body exercises of Qigong³.

The Apocalyptic Theme

Much of Falun Gong's religious ideology can be traced back to the world of popular sects often designated as "White Lotus societies" during the Ming and Qing dynasties (1363 – 1911). These heterodox movements were inspired by the Buddhist eschatology of the *kalpas* or universal cycles. For over a thousand years, a constellation of sects have pointed to social chaos and corruption as foreboding the end of the present kalpa inaugurated by the Sakyamuni Buddha, and have preached paths to salvation and preparation for ushering in the new kalpa. The first mention of this doctrine in China appears to date from the Tang dynasty⁴. Some "White Lotus" sects were involved in rebellions against the imperial State, such as the revolts of Xu Hongru (1622), Wang Lun (end of 18th cent.) and of the Eight Trigrams (1813); consequently, popular sects have often been the targets of harsh repression campaigns.

Li Hongzhi bases his doctrine on this sectarian eschatology, proclaiming that we have now reached the "age of the end of the Dharma" prophecied by Sakyamuni Buddha – a period which would be marked by unprecedented moral degeneration. "At present, the universe is undergoing momentous transformation. Each time this transformation occurs, all life in the universe finds itself in a state of extinction.... all characteristics and matter which existed in the universe explode, and most are exterminated.... A new universe is then created by the Great Awakened Ones of an extremely high level..."⁵. These extinctions are a cyclical phenomenon which occurs each time civilization's scientific development outstrips its moral attainment. Hundreds of thousands and even millions of years ago, civilizations existed which had reached extremely high levels of material, technological and artistic progress. It is these civilizations that built the moon and the pyramids, which had nothing to do with Egypt. But they had abandoned their morals, and so the Awakened Ones exterminated them⁶. "In fact, these prehistoric civilizations sunk to the bottom of the sea. Later, many changes occurred on Earth, and (the pyramids) rose back to the surface."⁷. During the apocalypse, all science and technology disappears, and the handful of survivors has to start again at the Stone Age⁸. Earth has already undergone 81 such mass exterminations.

A small number of living beings, including humans and others, are nonetheless saved from the apocalypse and sent to other planets. These extra-terrestrials now want to return to Earth⁹. Their weapon : modern science, which they use as a tool to infiltrate themselves in the minds of humans. "I tell you, the development of present-day society is entirely produced and controlled by aliens"¹⁰. Science is actually a religion with its own clergy of Bachelors,

Masters, Doctors, Research Fellows and Professors. But contrary to the divinely-transmitted religions, science is spread by aliens in order to control humans¹¹. The aliens, in order to conduct experiments on humans, abduct them and use them as pets on their planet. They have discovered that humans have a perfect body, and want to take possession of it. By using science to infiltrate themselves in human bodies, they aim to substitute themselves to men. They inject their 'things' into human molecules and cells, turning them into slaves of computers and machines, until they can be replaced by the aliens. "Why are computers developing so rapidly? Why is the human brain suddenly so active? This is the result of the manipulation of the human mind by extra-terrestrials. They have assigned a serial number to each human capable of using a computer"¹².

Modern science is the greatest enemy of morality. "As soon as we speak of morals and of the distinction between good and evil, such non-scientific subjects are seen as superstitions. But isn't that using the bludgeon of science to beat away at the essential dimension of man – human virtues?"¹³ For science cannot confirm the existence of gods or of virtue; it is ignorant of the moral retribution of karmic causality¹⁴.

The tyranny of amoral science is symptomatic of the moral decline of contemporary society and of the end of the universal cycle. In ancient China, those who pursued a spiritual calling were admired by others. But today, such persons are objects of derision. "In mainland China, the 'Cultural Revolution' has eliminated peoples' so-called old ideas, forbidding them from believing in the sayings of Confucius. People no longer have self-mastery, they have no norms, and they no longer believe in religion. They no longer believe that they will be punished for their evil deeds"¹⁵. Since the opening-up and reform policy, the economy has livened up, but negative things are also penetrating the country¹⁶. Although the older generation continues to cherish its values, ensuring the preservation of the social order, Chinese youth does not have the slightest inkling of morality¹⁷. "Today, when people study (the story of) Lei Feng¹⁸, they say that he was crazy. But in the fifties and sixties, who would have said that he was crazy? The moral level of humanity is sliding deeper and deeper. Peoples' sole ambition is personal profit; they hurt others for their own interest, they struggle and scheme against each other without an afterthought."¹⁹

"Today, says Li Hongzhi, beauty is valued less than ugliness, goodness less than evil, and a well-groomed appearance less than shabby attire"²⁰. In the past, singers were trained in the art of music; today any ugly and uncouth good-for-nothing can climb onto the stage, cry

out at the top of his voice, and become an instant celebrity. Elegant halls are filled with the noise of 'Disco' and 'Rock'. In the past, art sought after beauty ; today, it erupts with demonic tendencies – a consequence of the sexual promiscuity of artists. Prostitution, fashion, and football riots are all signs of demonic power²¹. “As for the toys sold in stores, in the past, dolls were a pleasure to look at. Nowadays, the uglier they are, the better they sell. Skulls, monsters, there are even toys shaped like feces : more horrible means higher sales !”²² “People recognize only money and not people. There is no feeling, human relationships have become monetarized”. People don't hesitate to offend the cosmic order for money : products, magazines and films promoting sexual license are everywhere to be seen ; drugs are manufactured and sold ; drug addicts don't hesitate to cheat and rob others to pay for their fix ; things have reached the point where “people practise intergenerational incest” ; “the abomination of homosexuality reflects the hideous psychological perversion and loss of wisdom of our era”. Underground criminal organizations have infiltrated all sectors of society ; their leaders have become the idols of the youth, who scramble to be their followers²³. If society continues to change this way, in what state can we expect to end up ?²⁴

“Men wear long hair and women cut theirs short : *yin* is asserting itself while *yang* is weakened, the roles of yin and yang have been inversed”²⁵. For Li Hongzhi, womens' liberation destabilises the cosmic balance. In the natural order, woman should be *yin* and soft, while man should be *yang* and hard. In the past, men knew how to love and protect their wives, and women knew how to take care of their husbands. But since women's liberation, we see only divorce, conflicts, and abandoned children²⁶.

The world is saturated with the black karmic matter produced by the evil deeds of men. Even stones, bricks, plants, trees, and animals are full of impure karmic matter – so much so that medicines can no longer cure diseases, and ever stranger new illnesses keep appearing.²⁷. The “creditors” of our karmic debts are coming back to us with misfortune²⁸.

Li Hongzhi describes a world full of demons and possessed bodies. Animals, anxious to escape the apocalypse, have begun practising asceticism. But, lacking human qualities, they can only progress to the level of demon, from which they try to possess human bodies²⁹. These animal demons have already possessed the bodies of Taiwanese monks, of Indian gurus, of Japanses cult leaders, of Qigong masters and adepts³⁰. Even the tablets on altars for ancestor worship are low-level demons³¹. Buddhist icons in temples are possessed by the evil spirits of foxes, snakes and yellow weasels. If you have an impure desire, for

example to get rich, the statue will grant your wish, but only in exchange for possessing your body without your knowing it³². And so Li Hongzhi concludes : “The Earth is the trash can of the universe... the evil men of the universe fall downwards, until they reach its centre : Earth”³³.

Spiritual discipline

“He who wishes to heal his illnesses, cast off misfortune, and eliminate bad karma, must practise spiritual discipline (*xiulian*), and return to his authentic root”, to his benevolent human nature. “... Such is the true purpose of being human”, says Li Hongzhi. “What should we do ? We must purify the body (of the disciple), and make him capable of exercising himself until he reaches a higher level. He must purify his mind of all evil ideas, of the karmic field around his body, and of the factors harming bodily health”³⁴.

In this process of purification through spiritual discipline, the substance of the body, down to its tiniest particles, is gradually replaced by an energetic matter one hundred million times more dense than a molecule of water³⁵. But in order to achieve this, one must look inwards, purify one’s heart, abandon one’s desires, passions and sentiments, cultivate the virtues of patience, understanding and detachment, and conform to the fundamental qualities of the universe which are Truth, Benevolence, and Forbearance (*zhen shan ren*)³⁶.

Virtue or Merit (*de*) , according to Li Hongzhi, is a form of white matter which enters our body each time we do a good deed or are victimized by others. Bad karma, on the other hand, is a kind of black matter which penetrates us when we commit an evil deed. Thus, if someone insults you, the aggressor’s white matter will pass from his body into yours, while your black matter will be absorbed by his body. Therefore, even though you may appear humiliated, the real loser is the aggressor, because he took your black matter and gave you his white matter³⁷.

There is a reason for all the ills that afflict society : people must repay the karmic debts they have contracted through their evil deeds in past lives. But at the same time, it is our suffering which propels us to seek a way out and to rise to a higher level. If life were pleasant and painless, would there be any reason to strive for anything better ?³⁸. The misfortunes of life put our attachments to the test and give us an opportunity to increase our heart’s degree

of purity. The transformation of “black matter” into “white matter” is an extremely painful process³⁹.

If one’s spiritual discipline is successful, one may realize one’s Buddha-nature, attain to illumination, and enter paradise. If one fails, on the other hand, the merit accumulated by our efforts will only allow us rebirth as a rich or powerful person⁴⁰. The essence of successful spiritual discipline is to recognize that all the benefits of one’s discipline come from the master, not from oneself: “practise comes from the disciple, while Force comes from the Master»⁴¹. Indeed, spiritual discipline is a complex process by which the body is transformed in multiple spaces. “Can you achieve that alone ? No, you can’t. These things are arranged by the Master...»⁴².

The messianic theme

Li Hongzhi is different from the thousands of Qigong masters who were active in China in the 1980’s and 90’s. According to a biography published on a Falun Gong website⁴³, Li Hongzhi was initiated into the Great Buddhist Law at the age of four by the Master of Complete Enlightenment ; by the age of eight years old, he already possessed immense supernatural powers. During his adolescence, he learned Taoist martial arts from the True Man of the Eight Extremes, as well from as the Master of the True Way who planted esoteric teachings into his mind while he was sleeping. Later came a female Buddhist master, followed by a succession of over twenty Masters, who made him undergo unimaginable trials.

As his capacities increased, Li Hongzhi gained a deeper understanding of the state of humanity. “Mankind should live in superb conditions, but his spiritual confusion leads him into a state in which the soul and body are gnawed away and tortured... Conscious of his duty, (Li Hongzhi) was determined to do everything he could to bring health back to the people and to build a paradise for noble souls. To this end, he decided to create a method of the Great Dharma which could be practised by common people, based on his own Great Dharma which had been transmitted to him alone, and which he had been practising secretly for many years.” All of his masters aided him in this task, so that “Falun Gong assimilated not only the distinctive qualities of Li Hongzhi, or merely the best of one, two, or several

schools, but indeed, it integrates all types of prodigious powers of the universe, that is to say its essence, which is now cristallized in Li Hongzhi alone”.

“I only appear to be a man”, says the Master⁴⁴. “The difference between me and you is that my brain is completely open, but not yours”⁴⁵. Li Hongzhi has uncountable “Dharma-bodies” (*fashen*) which accompany his disciples, protect them and heal them⁴⁶, on the condition that they keep their hearts pure of any selfish desire to be cured⁴⁷. The true disciple is indeed he who practises spiritual discipline with an absolutely pure and devoted heart. If he has the slightest personal desire, he is not a true disciple and Li Hongzhi will do nothing for him, even if he practises all the external forms of Falun Gong. The “Dharma-bodies” of Li Hongzhi know all that goes through the minds of his followers⁴⁸.

He has already exorcised the demons and impurities from the bodies of his true disciples, as well as an enormous quantity of their bad karma. But he hasn’t eliminated all of it, in order that they may undergo the trials and suffering which must result from their karmic debts. These trials are indeed necessary for spiritual progress⁴⁹.

In a single training workshop, Li Hongzhi claims to eliminate the illnesses of 80 to 90 % of the participants and to give them paranormal powers that a whole lifetime of spiritual practise would be unable to achieve⁵⁰. Indeed, Falun Gong allows one to surpass in a short period of time the level of spiritual accomplishment of cave hermits who have been practising spiritual refinement for centuries⁵¹. For it is not the adept who cultivates himself through his practise, but the Dharma-Wheel (Buddhist swastika) planted by Li Hongzhi in the lower abdomen of each follower, which refines him and increases his psychic powers. The swastika never stops turning and releasing powers, even while the adept is not practising the Falun Gong exercises⁵².

Li Hongzhi has appeared not only to save humanity, but to “rectify” all forms of life and matter in the universe. “(I have already) essentially rectified the universe. All that remains is humanity, that most superficial layer of matter, but this is also on the verge of being accomplished. My Force (*gong*) is entirely capable of stopping this material layer from breaking up, exploding, or whatever, entirely capable of stopping it (applause). Thus these phenomena which were prophecied in history will simply not occur”⁵³. Before Li Hongzhi accomplished his mission, the universe had no future. Indeed, after speaking in 1994 of the imminent explosion of the universe, he declared in 1997 that he had already prevented its destruction⁵⁴.

Li Hongzhi's Force is transmitted through his "omnipotent"⁵⁵ book, *Zhuan Falun*, every single word of which contains a multitude of Buddhas, Taos, Gods, and Dharma-bodies which bring enlightenment to the reader. Each time the adept reads the book, his level of understanding rises to a superior level, and he discovers truths that he had missed the previous time⁵⁶ – insights which yet are only a small fraction of the Master's wisdom⁵⁷. The book explains mysteries never before revealed to humanity⁵⁸. "*Zhuan Falun* has strongly shaken the world scientific community!"⁵⁹. The highest gods say: "you have given men a ladder to heaven – *Zhuan Falun*"⁶⁰.

Zhuan Falun explains the Great Law of the universe, which Li Hongzhi reveals to humanity for the first time in the history of our civilization (it was, however, transmitted on a large scale in a previous universal cycle, hundreds of millions of years ago)⁶¹. This Dharma goes beyond anything that any religion or philosophy has ever taught to humanity. All religious teachings and forms of spiritual practise of the past are but low-level forms of this Great Dharma⁶². The teachings of Laozi and Sakyamuni, founders of Taoism and Buddhism, apply only to the Milky Way, while Falun Gong applies to the whole universe⁶³. "The doctrines of the Buddhist religion cover only the tiniest part of the Buddhist Dharma"⁶⁴. As for Christianity, to compare it with Falun Gong would be like comparing a ramshackle hut with a magnificent palace⁶⁵.

Orthodox religions, i.e. Taoism and Buddhism (for Li Hongzhi, Christianity is a form of Buddhism⁶⁶) have long been in decline, and today practise only external forms. They are now incapable of bringing salvation to humanity. Buddhas and gods no longer pay attention to these religions⁶⁷; rather, they are now studying Falun Gong by the myriads⁶⁸. For Buddhas and gods only recognize peoples' hearts and not external religious forms⁶⁹. This is why religious devotees' prayers are never answered nowadays⁷⁰. Li Hongzhi thus rejects most ritualized forms: to become his disciple, it is not necessary to kowtow before the master, one should merely have a pure heart.

"Presently, I am the only one in the whole world who is teaching the orthodox Dharma (*zhengfa*). What I am doing has never been done before. I have opened a great gate in this period of the end of the Dharma. In fact, this doesn't happen once in a thousand or even ten thousand years..."⁷¹. To become a Falun Gong disciple is an opportunity one shouldn't pass by: Li Hongzhi will stop his teaching in the near future "I say, time is running out ... I am not only saving humans. When you will have reached enlightenment, I will have

other things to do, I won't be able to teach you anymore. I will not be transmitting the Dharma among humans for long... There will be a day when spiritual practise will come to an end. Everything will stop in a flash, then it won't be easy to practise spiritual discipline...⁷². At that moment, all traces of Falun Gong will disappear. The ink will vanish from Li Hongzhi's books, which will turn into mere blank pages⁷³.

A sectarian practise

How does one become a Falun Gong disciple? One must keep a pure heart, and commit oneself to a path of mental and bodily discipline. This implies the regular study of *Zhuan Falun* which one should first read from cover to cover in a single shot⁷⁴, then reread regularly⁷⁵ as often as possible⁷⁶. Some adepts go so far as to commit the entire book to memory. One must also practise five daily series of slow-motion gymnastic and meditation exercises. Falun Gong gymnastic forms are more simple and easier to learn than many other Qigong methods⁷⁷, but they must be followed rigorously: even children must not be lax in practising the body postures exactly as prescribed by Li Hongzhi⁷⁸. One must practise as much as possible, even five hours a day if one has the time, but always remembering to give the highest priority to studying Li Hongzhi's writings⁷⁹. Falun Gong must be practised within society: although some disciples practise spiritual discipline to the exclusion of all other activity, Li Hongzhi does not encourage monasticism. One must undergo the trials of this degenerate world in order to progress along the path.

A cardinal rule of Falun Gong is that practise must be exclusive. Nobody is forced to practise Falun Gong, but whoever chooses to follow Li Hongzhi's Law must exclusively devote himself to it. Li Hongzhi does not stop anybody from choosing another path than Falun Gong – but “today, nobody else can, like me, truly raise (the practitioner) to a superior level”⁸⁰.

The notion of exclusive practise is common in meditational traditions, which emphasize concentration and the avoidance of mental dispersion. Following this logic, Falun Gong disciples must focus exclusively on Li Hongzhi's exercises and writings⁸¹. But this rule is carried to the extreme: even though he draws heavily on the concepts of various Buddhist, Taoist and Christian traditions, Li Hongzhi claims that the mixing of traditions is the worst problem in this age of the end of the Dharma⁸². “It is forbidden to mix even the

slightest thought of another Qigong method” to Falun Gong practise⁸³. To think of another method could lead to deforming the rotating swastika planted by Li Hongzhi in the adept’s lower abdomen, which could have dangerous consequences⁸⁴. One should not read, nor even glance at the books of other Qigong masters, for they are filled with the spirits of snakes, foxes and weasels. “A small thought appears in your brain : oh yes, this sentence makes sense. As soon as this thought lights up, the possessor demons (in the book) will come out”⁸⁵. Li Hongzhi even suggests to burn such books, which prevent his Dharma-bodies from protecting his disciples⁸⁶. Most Qigong masters are swindlers, who are hundreds of times more numerous than authentic masters⁸⁷, “and you are unable to distinguish them”⁸⁸. Likewise, it is “absolutely forbidden”⁸⁹ to read religious and medical classics such as the *Taoist Canon*, the *Inner Book of the Yellow Emperor*, the *Book of Mountains and Seas*, the *Book of Changes* or Buddhist sutras⁹⁰. «...What do you want to read these books for ? These books do not deal with practising the Great Dharma, what good is there in reading them ? What can you get from them ?”⁹¹.

The practise of *Taijiquan* is forbidden⁹², as are martial arts which include a practise of inner discipline⁹³. Also forbidden are massage⁹⁴, talismans sold in temples⁹⁵, the recitation of incantations⁹⁶, donating money for the construction of temples⁹⁷, ancestor worship⁹⁸, and even raising pets, for these could become demons after coming into contact with the spiritual energies of the adept⁹⁹. On the other had, Li Hongzhi discourages, but does not oppose, some disciples’ practise of burning incense or making offerings of fruit before his portrait¹⁰⁰.

Li Hongzhi’s obsession with purity applies to human races as well. “Mixing the races of the world is not allowed. Now that the races are mixed, this has created an extremely grave problem”. For each race has its own celestial world : the white race has its Heaven, which occupies a tiny part of the universe ; the yellow race has its Buddha-world and Tao-world, which fill up almost the whole universe. Children born of mixed marriages are not linked to any celestial world, “they have lost their root”¹⁰¹. Cosmic law forbids cultural and racial mixing – this is why, claims Li Hongzhi, Jesus did not allow his disciples to teach their faith in the Orient. It is also why East and West were originally separated by impassable deserts, a barrier which has been destroyed by modern technology. “As a result of racial mixing... the body and intelligence of the child are unhealthy... Modern science knows well that each generation is inferior to the preceding one...”¹⁰².

The true disciple of Li Hongzhi must not take medicines in case of illness. Therapeutic care only changes the outward form of illness¹⁰³, which actually grows out of a subtle body in a deep space which is untouched by treatment¹⁰⁴. Illness is a means of repaying one's karmic debt : one must thus let it follow its natural course, unless Li Hongzhi intervenes personally to eradicate it. If common people may take medicines, the spiritual practitioner must abstain if he wishes to eliminate his bad karma¹⁰⁵.

It is also forbidden to give therapy to others with Falun Gong. This rule sets Falun Gong apart from other Qigong schools, which teach their adepts how to heal the sick by emitting subtle energies (*Qi*). According to Li Hongzhi, the practitioner who treats others by Qigong merely absorbs the morbid energies of the patient into his own body¹⁰⁶. Thus the bodies of those who attempt to heal others are possessed¹⁰⁷.

Teaching Falun Gong is a “duty” of the adept. “You must speak of the Dharma and propagate it”, even though this obligation is not forced¹⁰⁸. But the dissemination of Falun Gong must follow certain rules which aim to preserve the purity of the Master's teachings : (1) teaching must be free ; one must not collect fees at training sessions the way Li Hongzhi did in the first years of Falun Gong ; (2) one must not insert personal ideas into teaching : one should only quote the Master's literal words and share one's personal experiences and feelings about practise ; (3) disciples must not give lectures, but must rather meet in small groups to read Li Hongzhi's writings or listen to his tapes ; (4) one must not recruit followers by healing the sick¹⁰⁹. Following the spread of Falun Gong, humanity will have a better future : “if everybody practises the inner spiritual discipline, if all turned to their own hearts, ... if they thought of others in their deeds, human society would then become good, morals would rise, spiritual civilization would change for the better, public safety would be ensured, there might not even be policemen. People wouldn't have to deal with it, each would care for himself, looking within his own heart – wouldn't that be wonderful”¹¹⁰.

Conclusion

Falun Gong doctrine contains the basic structural elements of a religion of universal salvation. It reminds humanity of its spiritual essence and points to a path of transcendence, leading to the abandonment of selfish desires and attachments in order to “return to one's original nature”. Stressing the moral corruption of the contemporary world, it advocates

detachment from common social norms based on money and competition, replacing them with a transcendent ideal of conformity to the universal principles of “Truth, Benevolence and Forbearance”. It gives meaning to suffering, which it explains as both the consequence of our own sins and as a trial which is necessary for our spiritual progress. It situates the present state of humanity within a cyclical context, explaining the origin, the development, and the decadence of humanity in each cosmic cycle. And it traces a clear and simple path for liberation from the sufferings of this world: a single master, a single book, a single practise.

That such a large number of Chinese adhered to such a doctrine in such a short span of time, that its propagation was so spontaneous, and that a core of disciples remains so steadfast in the face of repression, seems to indicate that Falun Gong resonates with a deep and unquenched thirst for meaning, community and faith in a country whose traditional religious structures have for the most part been destroyed in the past century¹¹¹. The substitute cults of the State, of Science, and of Money have left a spiritual vacuum which manifests itself in the corruption, the fraud, and the moral disarray into which China seems to be mired. Even the material and social advantages promised by those idols of the 20th century remain inaccessible to large sections of the population – seniors, laid-off workers, petty intellectuals – who have been pauperized and marginalized by the new market economy.

Many observers may yet wonder how the irrational and sectarian aspects of Falun Gong doctrine could have been so readily accepted by such a large number of people, including many with a scientific background. Though it is true that Falun Gong took root in a fertile social milieu, one should not neglect the dynamics of its propagation, which follow a Chinese religious model whereby the adoption of concrete practises which are perceived as useful, precedes adhesion to a doctrine or community. Falun Gong is not a Christian-style dogma that one must first accept before being admitted to participate in community life. Li Hongzhi’s *doctrine* cannot be separated from Falun Gong mind and body *techniques*. Its gymnastic and meditation exercises can be practised by anyone, regardless of one’s intention to become a follower of the movement, and produce immediate and perceptible effects. Daily practise of Falun Gong gymnastics improves the adept’s state of health and feeling of well-being. The visions and perceptions experienced during meditation produce altered states of consciousness which become an intimate and subjectively felt ‘proof’ of the

existence of spiritual dimensions outside of everyday reality. These experiences facilitate the adept's detachment from the ordinary world and increase his desire to further explore the inner worlds penetrated during meditation. At the same time, however, by projecting the practitioner outside of ordinary reality, meditation makes him vulnerable : he now needs new bearings, a new interpretive framework, which are provided by the Master and the doctrine. These link the immediate and intimate experience of the adept to the cosmology, the eschatology and social ideology of the Master, thus federating the individual subjectivities of each disciple around a common belief system. Adherence to Falun Gong doctrine is the result of a process which begins with a concrete, physical and individual experience, and ends in an abstract, spiritualist and universalist conceptualization.

All along this process, Li Hongzhi stresses the capital importance of virtue and purity of heart. He goes against the grain of post-Maoist cynicism which, forsaking communist ideals, considers the profit motive as the sole mover of men, and of the Hollywood-inspired hedonism of Chinese pop culture incarnated by TV and music stars. Falun Gong's attractiveness proves that morality still strikes a powerful chord in this country which, in past eras, made Virtue the pillar of its civilization. Falun Gong morality, however, is perceived by its followers as of an entirely different nature from the empty and hypocritical moralistic discourse of state propaganda. The free teaching of the method, the warm and supportive atmosphere of the practise and sharing sessions, the discipline of the volunteer trainers, are perceived as signs of an authentic virtue which is hard to find nowadays. Where the simple, honest and virtuous person is often ridiculed and abused by his co-workers in today's China, Falun Gong raises his suffering to the level of a heroic spiritual struggle in which he must resign himself and bear the blows, each insult and each wound being a gift of 'white matter' which will help him to move a step higher toward celestial perfection¹¹².

Falun Gong's ideology and moralism helped draw into its fold masses of disoriented Qigong practitioners in the years 1994-1999. With so many quacks and swindlers posing as "Qigong masters", practitioners didn't know who to believe in. Opponents of Qigong were waging a harsh polemic in the press, and it had become difficult to answer back in the name of "Qigong science". Qigong schools and lineages had multiplied, but the subculture still lacked a satisfactory conceptual system which could give meaning to the practise, the phenomena, and the abuses linked to Qigong. At such a juncture, Li Hongzhi's doctrine was not only able to give explanations, but also to lead Qigong practitioners to a new level which

transcended the old scientific and ethical problems of Qigong: that of a religion of salvation. And the repression of Falun Gong a few years later only confirmed the Master's claims : the isolation, the harassment and the cruelty suffered by followers in mainland China are seen as evidence of the demonic forces of society rising up against the Great Law, and as salutary trials along the disciple's quest for 'Merit'. In such a context, it becomes easier to understand why many Falun Gong adepts are fearless of persecution and even seem, by their provocative acts, to deliberately seek it : persecution validates their doctrine and brings them closer to the salvation promised by Li Hongzhi.

Falun Gong's sectarianism reinforces this antagonistic dynamic, confirming the vision of a world divided between the 'saved' disciples of Li Hongzhi and the rest of the world possessed by demons. Falun Gong fundamentalism, which calls for the mutual exclusion of beliefs, practices and races, and which forbids the absorption of ideas, techniques or substances (medicines) exogenous to the the Master's system, goes against a certain Chinese syncretic tradition which always seeks to harmoniously integrate the best elements of the cosmos. Animosity flared early on between Li Hongzhi and other figures in Qigong circles ; Falun Gong was expelled from the semi-official national Qigong association in 1996. This event sealed the rupture between Qigong circles and Falun Gong, and reinforced the latter's sectarian attitude. The death of adepts who had refused medical treatment for illness drew media criticism, adding to the sect's persecution complex. And the repeated protests by followers, both before and after the official crackdown, at newspaper offices, around Zhongnanhai, on Tiananmen Square – which could only lead to a hardening of the State's entirely predictable response within the logic of the Chinese political system – seem calculated to draw official power into a moral battle pitting the demonic oppressor against heroic martyrs.

If Falun Gong is certain to endure for long as an underground sect, its influence as a mass movement seems to have subsided. But the aspirations which Falun Gong had incarnated remain unappeased : China continues to search for its religion. Falun Gong is the latest in a series of millenarian movements which have gripped China in the past 150 years. The country was torn by the Taiping rebellion of the mid 19th century, with its promised advent of the "Heavenly Kingdom of the Supreme Peace". At the end of the Qing and during the republican period (1911-1949), it witnessed the rise of popular sectarianism inspired by 'White Lotus' eschatology. It was carried away by the communist utopianism and

Maoist messianism of 'New China'. It was mesmerized by 'Qigong fever' and its hope of transforming humanity with the psychic powers of mind over matter ; and it finally endured the Falun Gong tragedy. Each of these movements rejected traditional religious forms and promised the collective redemption of China or even of all humanity. Succeeding each other in waves, they attracted massive followings. The Falun Gong episode shows that Chinese millenarianism is not dead : what of its next incarnation ?

David Palmer is currently writing his doctoral dissertation on the history of Qigong networks in the Peoples' Republic of China, for the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Section des sciences religieuses, Paris.

¹ In 1997, Li Hongzhi claimed to have 100 million followers, most certainly an exaggerated figure, including 20 million regular practitioners. (Li Hongzhi: *Falun Fofa: zai meiguo jiangfa* [The Buddha-Law of the Dharma-Wheel: Dharma Talks in America], Hongkong, Falun Fofa chubanshe, 1997, p. 122). The Chinese official media speaks of 3 million practitioners, certainly an underestimation. It is impossible to estimate the number of disciples who persist as adepts since the movement's transformation into a secret organization.

² For a summary of the history of Qigong in post-1949 China, see David Palmer, "Falun Gong: la tentation du politique", *Critique internationale*, no. 11, 2001.

³ Note that Li Hongzhi categorically denies founding a religion "...I do not engage in religion, and our Falun Dafa is absolutely not a religion" (Li Hongzhi, *Falun Fofa – zai beimei shoujie fahui shang jiangfa* [The Great Law of the Dharma-Wheel– Dharma Talks at the First North American Dharma Assembly], Xining, Qinghai renmin chubanshe, 1999, p. 41).

⁴ Daniel Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religion. Dissenting Sects in Late Traditional China*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1976, p. 83. Note, however, that Li Hongzhi condemns many beliefs linked to popular sectarianism : asked about the Inborn Mother (*wusheng laomu*), principal divinity of many popular sects, he answers : "What Inborn Mother ? There is simply no such divinity" (Li Hongzhi, *Zhuan Falun fajie* [Explanations to 'Turning the Dharma-Wheel'], Hongkong : Falun fofa chubanshe, 1997, p. 189). Asked about Maitreya, the promised future Buddha awaited by several sects, he answers that "... Maitreya doesn't have a Dharma-Gate, these are but the inventions of heretical and demonic dharmas (*ibid.*, 192). As for Yiguandao, a sect which appeared in the early 20th century preaching the unity of the five great religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity and Islam), Li Hongzhi states that "it's an evil cult ; from the moment of its appearance the Qing Emperor killed them (*sic*). At the beginning of the republican period, the Nationalist Party killed them, executing them in groups. Since Liberation by the Communist Party, (the Party) has been repressing the "Yiguandao"... it's not ordinary people who are killing them, but it's the will of Heaven. Up there, they want (Yiguandao) to be killed, its existence is not allowed. To speak of the "common cult of the Five Religions" (*wujiao tongtang*) ' is a serious case of seditious teachings. It's a sign of demonic activity among ordinary people" (Li Hongzhi, *Zhuan Falun, Juan er* [Turning the Dharma-Wheel, Part Two], Beijing, Zhongguo shijieyu chubanshe, 1995, pp. 87-88).

⁵ Li Hongzhi, "Zhuan Falun" (Turning the Dharma-Wheel), in Li Hongzhi, *Falun Dafa* (The Great Law of the Dharma-Wheel), Hailaer, Neimenggu wenhua chubanshe, 1998, pp. 1-332, p. 165.

⁶ Li Hongzhi, *Falun Fofa (Dharma-Talks in Sydney)* (The Buddha-Law of the Dharma-Wheel [Dharma-Talks in Sydney]), publisher unknown, 1996, p. 23

⁷ Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1995, pp. 13-14

⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 38-40

⁹ Li Hongzhi, *Falun Fofa – zai Ouzhou fahui shang jiangfa* (The Buddha-Law of the Dharma-Wheel – Dharma talks at the European Dharma Assembly), Xining, Qinghai renmin chubanshe, 1999, pp. 70-71.

¹⁰ Li Hongzhi, *Dharma Talks in North America, op.cit.*, 1999, p. 4.

-
- ¹¹ Li Hongzhi, Dharma Talks in Europe, *op.cit.*, 1999, p. 28.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71
- ¹³ Li Hongzhi, *op.cit.*, 1996, p. 21.
- ¹⁴ Li Hongzhi, Dharma Talks in Europe, *op.cit.*, 1999, p. 29.
- ¹⁵ Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1995, pp. 123-4.
- ¹⁶ Li Hongzhi, *op.cit.*, 1998, p. 310.
- ¹⁷ Li Hongzhi, Explanations..., *op.cit.*, 1997, p. 3.
- ¹⁸ A Peoples' Liberation Army soldier in the 1960's, Lei Feng was elevated to the status of national hero and role-model by state propaganda for his self-sacrifice and devotion to serving the people.
- ¹⁹ Li Hongzhi, *op.cit.*, 1998, p. 13.
- ²⁰ Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1995, pp. 126-7.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 126 ; Li Hongzhi, Explanations..., *op.cit.*, 1997, pp. 89-90.
- ²² Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 129.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 141-142.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.139.
- ²⁶ Li Hongzhi, Explanations..., *op.cit.*, 1997, pp. 104-105.
- ²⁷ Li Hongzhi, *op.cit.*, 1998, p. 257 ; Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1995, pp. 45-46.
- ²⁸ Li Hongzhi, *op.cit.*, 1998, p. 195.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.102.
- ³⁰ Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1995, pp. 131-132, 138 ; Li Hongzhi, Explanations..., *op.cit.*, 1997, pp. 118, 218, 245 ; Li Hongzhi, *op.cit.*, 1998, pp. 183-196, 250.
- ³¹ Li Hongzhi, Explanations..., *op.cit.*, 1997, p. 238.
- ³² Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1995, pp. 121-122.
- ³³ *ibid.*, pp. 43-45.
- ³⁴ Li Hongzhi, *op.cit.*, 1998, pp. 4-5.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 66.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 62.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 129.
- ⁴⁰ Li Hongzhi, Explanations..., *op.cit.*, 1997, p. 72.
- ⁴¹ Li Hongzhi, *op.cit.*, 1998, p. 29.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- ⁴³ www.Falundafa.org
- ⁴⁴ Li Hongzhi, Dharma Talks in North America, *op.cit.*, 1999, p. 45.
- ⁴⁵ Li Hongzhi, *op.cit.*, 1996, p. 20.
- ⁴⁶ Li Hongzhi, Explanations..., *op.cit.*, 1997, p. 61 ; Li Hongzhi, *op.cit.*, 1998, p. 111.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 114-15.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 148-149.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 113, 131-132.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 221.
- ⁵¹ Li Hongzhi, Explanations..., *op.cit.*, 1997, p. 110.
- ⁵² Li Hongzhi, *op.cit.*, 1998, p. 270.
- ⁵³ Li Hongzhi, Dharma Talks in North America, *op.cit.*, 1999, p. 46.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- ⁵⁶ Li Hongzhi, *op.cit.*, 1996, p. 10.
- ⁵⁷ Li Hongzhi, Explanations..., *op.cit.*, 1997, p. 106.
- ⁵⁸ Li Hongzhi, *op.cit.*, 1996, p. 4.
- ⁵⁹ Li Hongzhi, Dharma Talks in Europe, *op.cit.*, 1999, pp. 18-19.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- ⁶¹ Li Hongzhi, *op.cit.*, 1998, p. 33.
- ⁶² Li Hongzhi, Dharma Talks in North America, *op.cit.*, 1999, p. 7.
- ⁶³ Li Hongzhi, *op.cit.*, 1998, p. 35.

-
- ⁶⁴ Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 146.
- ⁶⁵ Li Hongzhi, Dharma Talks in Europe, *op. cit.*, 1999, p. 57.
- ⁶⁶ Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 159.
- ⁶⁷ Li Hongzhi, Dharma Talks in Europe, *op. cit.*, 1999, p. 31.
- ⁶⁸ Li Hongzhi, Explanations..., *op. cit.*, 1997, p. 37.
- ⁶⁹ Li Hongzhi, Dharma Talks in North America, *op. cit.*, 1999, p. 59.
- ⁷⁰ Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1996, p. 17.
- ⁷¹ Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 90.
- ⁷² Li Hongzhi, Dharma Talks in North America, *op. cit.*, 1999, p. 92.
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 131.
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ⁷⁵ Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 155.
- ⁷⁶ Li Hongzhi, Dharma Talks in America, *op. cit.*, 1997, p. 154.
- ⁷⁷ Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1998, pp. 38-39.
- ⁷⁸ Li Hongzhi, Explanations..., *op. cit.*, 1997, p. 87.
- ⁷⁹ Li Hongzhi, *Falun Fofa (zai xinjiapo fahui shang jiangfa)* (The Buddha-Law of the Dharma-Wheel [Dharma Talks at the Singapore Dharma Assembly]), Hongkong, Falun dafa chubanshe, 1999, p. 72.
- ⁸⁰ Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 40.
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.
- ⁸² Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1995, p. 56.
- ⁸³ Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 90.
- ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- ⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 150 ; Li Hongzhi, Explanations..., *op. cit.*, 1997, p. 279.
- ⁸⁶ Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 215.
- ⁸⁷ Li Hongzhi, Explanations..., *op. cit.*, 1997, p. 204.
- ⁸⁸ Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 107.
- ⁸⁹ Li Hongzhi, Explanations..., *op. cit.*, 1997, p. 125.
- ⁹⁰ Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 217.
- ⁹¹ Li Hongzhi, Explanations..., *op. cit.*, 1997, pp 82, 139.
- ⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 161.
- ⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 324.
- ⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 198.
- ⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- ⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85.
- ⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 234.
- ⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 270.
- ⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 117-118.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 89 ; Li Hongzhi, Dharma Talks in North America, *op. cit.*, 1999, p. 115.
- ¹⁰¹ Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1996, pp. 110-111.
- ¹⁰² Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1996, pp. 112-113.
- ¹⁰³ Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 63.
- ¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 251.
- ¹⁰⁵ Li Hongzhi, Dharma Talks in America, *op. cit.*, 1997, p. 17.
- ¹⁰⁶ Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 74.
- ¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 250.
- ¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 294 ; Li Hongzhi, Dharma Talks in North America, *op. cit.*, 1999, pp. 72, 85.
- ¹⁰⁹ Li Hongzhi, *op. cit.*, 1998, pp. 120-123.
- ¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 329-330.
- 111: On the systematic destruction of temples as the centres of community life in traditional China, see Vincent Goossaert, *Dans les temples de la Chine. Histoire des cultes, Vie des communautés*, Paris: Albin Michel, 2000, pp. 98-103, 204-206.
- ¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 135-36, 317-18.