

Sacred Suicide

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Chapter 11

Death by Whose Hand? Falun Gong and Suicide¹

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Introduction

The teachings of Falun Gong explicitly forbid suicide; yet in 2001, five protesters set themselves ablaze in Tiananmen Square resulting in two deaths. The suicides' stated aim was to bring the world's focus onto the repression of the movement by the Chinese government. Falun Gong spokespeople were quick to defend founder Li Hongzhi, saying that the movement strictly forbids suicide in accordance with the traditional Chinese belief that suicide is an affront to the ancestors. They claimed that the Chinese government had staged the suicides in order to stir up public opinion against the movement. Indeed, the tide of public opinion did turn against Falun Gong and its founder (Bell and Boas 2003: 285).²

Yet despite Falun Gong's stated opposition to suicide, the movement does encourage its adherents to refuse medicine or medical treatment, and some regard this refusal of treatment to be suicidal. Chinese state media seized upon Li's writing in which he expressed that illnesses are caused by *karma*, and claimed that in excess of one thousand deaths were the direct result of adherents following Li's teachings. Authorities also claimed several hundred practitioners had cut their stomachs open seeking the Dharma Wheel that turns in response to the practice of the five meditative exercises characteristic of the movement. Indeed, many of their fellow followers had been arrested in Tianjin, following condemnation of their movement by physicist He Zouxu of the Chinese Academy of the Sciences. He had claimed that Falun Gong had been responsible for several deaths (Bejsky 2004: 190). This chapter examines the complex relationship between Falun Gong and the

¹ An earlier version of this chapter was published as Helen Farley, "Self-Harm and Falun Gong," *Journal of Religion and Violence*, 1(3) (2013): 259–75.

² Some commentators deny that these self-immolations even took place. See Munro (2002: 267).

Chinese government, exploring the reality behind the claims and counterclaims regarding the former's stated opposition to suicide. This is contrasted with Falun Gong writings that encourage adherents to refuse medical treatments in order to rid themselves of *karma*.

On Sunday, April 25, 1999, Falun Gong first came to the attention of western media when some 15,000 adherents calmly surrounded the seat of the Chinese government at the Zhongnanhai compound adjacent to the Forbidden City in Beijing (Penny 2003: 643; Lee 2011: 209). The movement was outlawed in 1999, which signaled the beginning of a bipartisan propaganda war between Falun Gong adherents and the Chinese government, each claiming the other was responsible for deceptions, atrocities, and conspiratorial plots (Biggs 2005: 205). Falun Gong or Falun Dafa is a religious movement that arose from the *qigong* boom of the 1980s (Ownby 2003: 233). "*Qigong* fever" was the name given to the phenomenon that gained over one hundred million practitioners, some 20 percent of the urban population in China, practicing *qigong*'s characteristic breathing and meditation techniques (Palmer 2007: 6; Palmer 2008: 79). Falun Gong emerged in 1992 as part of this pre-existing *qigong* movement. Falun Gong means literally "Great Way of the Wheel" or the "Dharma Wheel Discipline" (Fisher 2003: 296).

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the history of attitudes to suicide in China. There are conflicting accounts of how the act is viewed; sometimes it is condoned as the act of a martyr or as a protest, and at other times it is clearly an affront to the ancestors and thus is roundly condemned. An examination of the emergence of Falun Gong from the larger *qigong* movement in the early 1990s follows. Most people in the West think of Falun Gong adherents as peaceful meditators, cruelly suppressed by the Chinese government. The veracity of this claim is scrutinized, along with the central tenets of Falun Gong belief and practice. Falun Gong adherents have a strong belief in fate, destiny and *karma* that is congruent with their attitude to death, but particularly to suicide. Though Falun Gong founder Li Hongzhi speaks against suicide, his teachings may inadvertently condone suicide in two particular circumstances: in self-immolation as a form of protest and in the refusal of adherents to accept medical treatment when ill, sometimes resulting in death.

Suicide in China

The suicide rate in China is one of the highest in the world and suicide has often played a prominent role in Chinese culture (Fei 2011: 213). Indeed, suicide has featured in accounts of defeated military leaders and monarchs during the

shifting of dynasties, wars, the uncovering of corruption, and unfavorable family circumstances (Lo 1999: 624). Depending on the viewpoint of the narrator, suicide was variously depicted as an act of fervent loyalty, as an extreme form of moral protest, or as a strategy for escaping abusive or unjust social or familial situations (Lee and Kleinman 2005: 296, Fei 2011: 214). By way of example, in pre-Communist China, Mao Zedong wrote about women who took their own lives in order to escape forced marriages. These suicides he considered to be symptomatic of larger societal problems, such as the double standards around chastity and promiscuity in men and women, the inability to pursue love, and other facets of patriarchy that disempowered women. He viewed suicide as a symptom of a society that had caused people to lose hope (Lee and Kleinman 2005: 295). It is true that in contrast to most other countries, the suicide rate for women in China is significantly higher than for males (Zhang and Xu 2007: 185).

Suicide rates soared during the Cultural Revolution. During the mass arrests and detentions between 1966 and 1969 by the Red Guards, official reports claim that around 35,000 people died from all causes, though the actual figure is probably closer to 400,000 (Lester 2005: 100). Teachers jumped from windows and those detained in labor camps and prisons found ingenious ways of ending their lives (*ibid.*: 100–101). These suicides were acts of protest against a brutal regime, often precipitated by violence and torture. Even so, suicide is generally eschewed in the Chinese tradition as polluting. It is viewed as an unnatural death and, consequently, to be shunned. In some cases, the unfortunate victim is not to be mourned. The consequences of suicide also include economic hardship for the family through the loss of that person's productivity and reproductive power (Lee and Kleinman 2005: 296). Suicide notes are often characterized by a deep sense of remorse and a sense of unfulfilled filial responsibility towards parents and the family (*ibid.*: 297). In other contexts, Chinese cultural attitudes to suicide are to some extent ambiguous: it can be supported as pro-social or frowned upon as anti-social. In the context of Confucian thought, it is morally wrong to preserve one's life at the expense of benevolence and justice ("*ren*" and "*yi*"). Life is good, but is not the supreme good; death is evil, but it is not the supreme evil (Lo 1999: 626).

Suicide can also be viewed as a practical solution to a problem and in this context it is supported. For those who believe in reincarnation, the temptation to begin life anew is sometimes too great. Many women, especially in rural areas, wish to reincarnate as a man (Zhang and Xu 2007: 189). This tension between opposing viewpoints while allowing for creative ambiguity also encompasses the challenges of normlessness and hypocrisy. For this reason, the community and family members might view the suicide differently (Lee and Kleinman 2005:

295). Suicide can be viewed as a means of defying social power and as a strategy to respond to the inter-subjective struggles of commonplace social experience. Social forces may prevail in defiance of individual purposes and aspirations, and in turn, suicide may convey a resistance to the imposition of that authority (ibid.: 300–301). For example, Lucien Bianco wrote that one of the most common ways to exact revenge upon a callous creditor was to commit suicide in front of his door. In doing so, it caused the landlord to lose face (Bianco 1978: 280).

The reportage of suicide in an authoritarian state is rarely straightforward. In some instances, administrations have suppressed the real number of deaths ascribed to suicide in order to limit criticism of the state. Until the late 1980s, there was very little reliable data on suicide in China (Lee and Kleinman 2005: 295; Xin Ma et al. 2009: 159). In some cases, World Health Organization estimates of Chinese suicide rates are up to 40 percent higher than Chinese government estimates (Phillips et al. 2002: 835). Conversely, these same regimes may attribute suicides to a particular group or groups in order to discredit them or to garner public support against them. This is what Falun Gong practitioners have accused the Chinese government of doing in regards to several cases of self-immolation reported in the media both in China and the West. Certainly, Falun Gong attracted much criticism following the alleged self-immolation of practitioners (Bell and Boas 2003: 285).

The Birth and Substance of Falun Gong

Falun Gong emerged onto the Chinese religious landscape in 1992, founded by Li Hongzhi (Palmer 2007: 6; Penny 2012a: 35). It emerged from the *qigong* movement that had transfixed China since the 1980s. *Qigong* can be described as a system for improving and maintaining health based on ideas found in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) and other aspects of Chinese culture. The practice of *qigong* involves practitioners observing a wide range of physical, mental, and breathing exercises. “*Qi*” can be translated as vital energy, and “*gong*” as skill, so *qigong* is literally the skill of developing vital energy so as to obtain good health (Xu 1999: 967; Rahn 2002: 41).

By 1991, there was considerable criticism and cynicism about *qigong*. The Chinese government began to vigorously monitor *qigong* masters, associated literature and *qigong* organizations with the goal of uncovering “false” or “unscientific” *qigong* (Ownby 2008: 166; Chen 2003: 509). It was amid this widespread disenchantment with *qigong* that Falun Gong emerged and was able to gain traction, attracting millions of adherents across China (Ownby 2000).

Li Hongzhi deliberately distanced Falun Gong from *qigong* by arguing that the aim of Falun Gong was not about the accumulation of extraordinary powers such as clairvoyance or supernatural healing, as had been the focus of much *qigong* practice. He also emphasized that it was not specifically about health, though good health was sure to follow rigorous practice. In contrast to *qigong*, the goal of Falun Gong was to purify one's heart and attain spiritual salvation (Lu 2005: 175; Palmer 2007: 219). The earliest writings about *qigong* described body postures and illustrated appropriate techniques, but did not contain any moral content. By way of contrast, the writings of Li Hongzhi contain moral content to accompany the somatic technologies (Ownby 2000). Supporters of both Falun Gong and *qigong* were equally strident in their protests that the two sets of practices were independent. Though it emerged from the ideas and practices of *qigong*, Falun Gong has characteristic exercises and ideologies that differentiate it from *qigong* (Irons 2003: 254; Palmer 2007: 27–8).

Given Falun Gong's interesting status within the People's Republic of China, it is useful to examine the background of its charismatic founder. Seen as an enlightened master by Falun Gong adherents, he is portrayed by authorities as evil incarnate, an unscrupulous liar and charlatan. Li Hongzhi completed his primary school education in Changchun in 1969, graduating from junior high school at eighteen and applying to join the Communist Youth League. Former schoolmates and teachers recall him as an ordinary child who was unexceptional academically in school (Thornton 2005: 260). The Chinese government is adamant that Li Hongzhi learned how to perform *qigong* exercises in 1988. Falun Gong sources dispute this, instead saying that he was drilled from age eight in those disciplines by various Taoist and Buddhist masters (Lu 2005: 178; Penny 2003: 648–9). Whatever the situation, it is certain that Li did travel to Beijing in 1992 to participate in research with a group at the China Qigong Scientific Research Society (Tong 2009: 8). Not long afterwards, Li founded the Falun Gong Research Society with his associates Li Chang, Wang Zhiwen, and Yu Changxi. Accreditation followed and the new organization was recognized as a branch of the larger organization, which in turn publicized Falun Gong training sessions (Tong 2002: 640). After 1994 when Li left China, these sessions were no longer conducted. According to Falun Gong sources, the reason for their discontinuation was to enable Li to devote all of his time to the study of Buddhism. But it is likely his departure had more to do with the mounting opposition Falun Gong was attracting within Communist Party and government circles (Ownby 2008: 167). By this time, Falun Gong had tens of millions of adherents enticed by its negligible admission criteria, lack of membership fees, simple exercises, and assurances of health and salvation (Chang 2004: 4; Irons 2003: 250; Penny 2012b: 7). Li Hongzhi finally left China for

the United States in 1996, just ahead of government persecution. He established himself in New York, where he resides and actively directs Falun Gong's operations (Burgdoff 2003: 335).

Falun Gong adherents believe that Li possesses supernatural powers such as the capacity for levitation and that he is able to manifest miracles. In order to promote this image, he associates himself with characters in popular martial arts media and fantasy literature (Xiao 2001: 125, 6). Further, Li claims to use telekinesis to insert the *falun*, or the "wheel of the law," into the abdomens of those who follow him (Hongzhi 1999a: 130). Li claims that negative energy is expelled as this wheel turns, and positive energy is generated, ensuring sound health and an absence of disease (Fisher 2003: 295; Palmer 2003: 353). In order to keep the wheel turning, adherents must regularly perform the five characteristic meditative exercises of Falun Gong, thereby removing any accumulation of bad karma (Thornton 2005: 260–61). To further support this process of cultivation, Li directs "law bodies," or *fashen*, which are complete, independent, and realistic individuals which are flexible and invisible. He directs the *fashen* to protect followers suffering from illness, healing them in the process. Those practitioners serious about adhering to Falun Gong must uphold the purity of their devotion, ceasing any other sort of spiritual practice. Serious adherents must also avoid even reading about or thinking about other forms of spirituality in order to avoid deformation of the rotating *dharmā* wheel (Lu 2005: 177–8, 180).

Falun Gong, also known as Falun Dafa, is an uneasy fusion of several pre-existing traditions—namely Taoism, Buddhism, and Chinese folk religion—which have been remixed into something never before seen in China (Thornton 2005: 260; Lu 2005: 174). The breathing and meditative aspects of Falun Gong closely resemble the breathing exercises used to increase potency and longevity in Taoism (Chang 2004: 39). Even so, there are numerous references to UFOs and science, giving the movement a more contemporary appearance (Ackerman 2005: 500). This is reinforced by Falun Gong's extensive use of modern communication technologies including email and the Internet (Leung 2002: 782). In the West, Falun Gong is known primarily as a harmless set of meditational exercises that are readily accessible to novice practitioners. In reality, it is first and foremost a rigorous system of morality (Penny 2003: 644; Chan 2004: 676; Ackerman 2005: 501; Burgdoff 2003: 336). Physical rejuvenation and good health are only the result of strict moral practice (Ownby 2000; Madsen 2000: 243). Followers strive to foster the time-honored spiritual values of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance through the practice of particular exercises and meditation (Hongzhi 1999b: 59–61; Madsen 2000: 243). The practitioner directly experiences the supreme nature of the cosmos energized from within by the energy of the turning

falun when he or she becomes suitably developed (Leung 2002: 764). The purging of negative *karma* accrued from this life and previous incarnations, together with the accrual of virtue as accepted in Falun Gong, allows the cultivation of spiritual advancement (Ownby 2008: 93). In spite of the extensive moral teachings in Falun Gong, followers and leaders alike claim that Falun Gong is not a religion, but a movement that encourages spiritual and moral cultivation (Keith and Lin 2003: 629–30; Madsen 2000: 243).

In Falun Gong, everything is either good or evil, and individuals are either true practitioners or ordinary people. Those who remain faithful to Li's teachings are true practitioners with a fated relationship to Falun Gong and access to the highest spiritual truth. If they are able to remain faithful to Li's teachings and resist seductions along the way, this elite group will attain enlightenment. Any deviance from this path and they will resume their pathetic lives as ordinary people, destined for annihilation at some time in the not-too-distant future (Lowe 2003: 268). To most observers, these apocalyptic and millenarian characteristics make Falun Gong resemble a religion (Chang 2004: 59, 60; Burgdoff 2003: 334).

Suicide and Falun Gong

Li Hongzhi has repeatedly criticized suicide as a sin, as part of a larger prohibition against taking life. According to the tenets of Falun Gong, God has a plan laid out for every individual. Not every detail of a life is planned out but the major milestones such as birth and death are planned to take place at certain immutable times. Obviously, Falun Gong practitioners are able to influence their own lives, but it is very difficult to extend a lifespan beyond an allotted time. By killing oneself before time, an individual is effectively sidestepping the divine plan. The act of suicide, while temporarily removing a person from suffering, is an act that accrues even more negative *karma* for an individual, which increases the amount of *karma* to be eliminated in a future incarnation. An individual would be better advised to endure the suffering, thereby helping to eliminate negative *karma* and not attracting more *karma* through suicide (Hongzhi 1999a: 27). Before a person dies, preparations are occurring for that individual's next incarnation. A mother is pregnant, awaiting the birth of her child and the fetus is awaiting the consciousness of the individual. If someone dies by their own hand before their designated time, then that individual must wait between lives in a nether world until they have spent the allotted time of their own predestined lifespan. Once that time has passed, the individual will move into the next incarnation but with an additional accumulation of *karma* (Penny 2012b: 116).

Though theoretically adherents of Falun Gong are opposed to suicide, there are two instances that confuse the situation. The first involves the self-immolations that took place in 2001 as a protest against the persecution of Falun Gong by the Chinese government. The crackdown that occurred after these events also sparked a number of mass suicides in detention centers. The second is in Falun Gong adherents' refusal to seek medical help when they are ill. This has resulted in a number of deaths from a variety of medical disorders that remained untreated. Though suicide is not condoned in Falun Gong, there are certain philosophies and circumstances that predispose followers towards suicide in particular contexts.

Self-immolation

Suicide by burning is an intensely dramatic method of terminating one's life (Romm et al. 2008: 988). Self-immolation, while involving an individual intentionally killing him or herself as with other forms of suicide, is usually done for or on behalf of a larger cause. An act of self-immolation is not about injuring anyone else or inflicting material damage. Rather, it is an extreme form of protest. Thus, it is usually done either in a public place or with an accompanying letter directed to the public or to specific political leaders (Biggs 2005: 173–4). These individuals are attempting to appeal to others and to incite potential sympathizers (ibid.: 201). This kind of protest is not unknown in China; there is a long history of suicide as protest in China, for example, women committing suicide to protest unfair or cruel familial situations (Lee and Kleinman 2005: 296; Fei 2011: 214).

On January 23, 2001, the eve of Chinese New Year, seven Falun Gong followers traveled over 550 kilometers from Kaifeng to Tiananmen Square, to set themselves alight in front of cameras and journalists from the Cable News Network (CNN) (Biggs 2005: 176; Thornton 2005: 266; Ching 2001). One of the protesters, a man sitting on the ground, was enveloped by fire; another four consisting of two mother and daughter pairs, lurched about with their arms raised as flames consumed their bodies. Police hurried to extinguish the flames and assembled a barrier to block the view of onlookers, but police were not fast enough; a 36-year-old woman died from her burns. Initially, the Chinese government attempted to quash news of the event, even though western journalists had been present and had recorded it; the tape was immediately confiscated by authorities (Chang 2004: 16–17). But soon the government realized they could use this as an opportunity to muster opposition to Falun Gong. A week after the incident had occurred, state television broadcast some

footage showing the 12-year old daughter of one of the practitioners, rolling around in agony. The government framed the deaths as “cultic suicide,” and discredited them as a form of protest (Biggs 2005: 205).

The leadership of Falun Gong were quick to deny any connection to the incident. From the United States, it released its own video, charging the Chinese government with fabricating the incident (*ibid.*: 206). Adherents abroad claimed that the self-immolators were not true practitioners (Thornton 2005: 266), because both Li and the movement had consistently opposed any form of killing, including suicide, as a means of reaching salvation (Chang 2004: 17–18). This attempt to disassociate itself from the act was probably counter-productive. In all probability, the leadership of Falun Gong did not encourage or sanction these actions; but it also seems unlikely that it was part of a Chinese government conspiracy to discredit the organization. Interestingly, some of the adults had participated in previous protests. Even in light of the government manipulation of the event’s coverage to the detriment of Falun Gong, two more people set themselves alight in the months following (Biggs 2005: 205). On February 16, another adherent immolated himself on a residential street in Beijing. By the time the police arrived just a few minutes later, Tan Yihui, just 25 years old, a shoe-shiner from Hunan province, had died (Chang 2004: 17–18). The self-immolations continued when on July 1, Luo Guili set himself alight in a city square in Nanning in southern China. Barely 19 years old, he died the following day of severe burns and heart and lung failure (*ibid.*: 21).

Prior to the propaganda campaign resulting from the self-immolations, people marveled at the Chinese government’s repression of such an insignificant and benign organization. Subsequent to it, people thought that the government’s actions were justified. Authorities had shown the 12-year-old girl’s face on television for more than a month, and public opinion shifted to oppose Falun Gong. It seems unlikely that the state could have attained such success if children had not been involved in the immolation. Such a move allowed the government to step up their repression of the organization, which included the systematic torture of its followers. The Chinese government claimed that around 1,700 Falun Gong followers had committed suicide; evidence, they reasoned, of Falun Gong’s cultish evil (Bejesky 2004: 155; Biggs 2005: 206). The Chinese media carried many anti-Falun Gong diatribes. Children were compelled to attend anti-Falun Gong lessons, and 12 million school students contributed to a signature campaign, signing a declaration asserting their disbelief in cults and opposition to them. Thousands of workers attended mass meetings and signed petitions condemning the movement (Chang 2004: 18). Within just six months of the shocking incident, Falun Gong was effectively disempowered

within China (Richardson and Edelman 2011: 380). During the course of 2002, the maimed survivors were paraded around and were part of a press conference. "Falun Gong is indeed an evil cult and it led me to this," uttered Chen Guo, the daughter of the woman who died (Thornton 2005: 266). Footage showing the young girl, her face badly burned and bandaged, calling out for her mother, was shown repeatedly on television (Chang 2004: 18).

In response to the crackdowns, on June 20, 2001, some sixteen Falun Gong followers held in a Harbin labor camp attempted suicide by hanging themselves with ropes created from bed sheets. Of these, ten women died. These followers were among thirty who had previously gone on a hunger strike, for which they had their sentences extended by six months. In addition, authorities conceded that eleven Falun Gong members in a re-education center had attempted mass suicide, with three dying from the effort. For its part, the Falun Gong leadership claimed that fifteen followers in that same camp died as a result of torture (*ibid.*: 28).

In light of the Chinese government's persecution of Falun Gong, Li Hongzhi fashioned an apocalyptic ideology to motivate his disciples to instigate and participate in civil disobedience. It was estimated that by February 2002, 365 practitioners had died while in custody, and more than 50,000 were either in prison, labor camps, or mental hospitals (Palmer 2003: 355). Would-be activists were not formally invited to become a member of an activist team. There were no formal instructions on how to dissent. Civil disobedience actions were planned at local meetings. The heroic roles of the protester and the martyr were exhibited via testimonials and stories at "Experience-Sharing Conferences" (Palmer 2003: 353–4). Li increasingly talked extensively about "*Fa*-rectification," the process by which the cosmos would be rid of evil. This process would ensure the annihilation of evil doers—in this context, those responsible for suppressing Falun Gong. The process had already begun on other levels and would soon come to humanity. This was the struggle before that final battle (Penny 2012b: 156–60). Hundreds of practitioners chose to place themselves in situations where they died painfully (Palmer 2003: 362).

After the political heat intensified in response to the immolations, Falun Gong adherents displayed posters on power poles in Shenyang City and dropped fliers in letter boxes in Beijing back streets, disputing the government's reports of the self-immolations and condemning them for turning a blind eye to poverty and unemployment. Residents were inundated with video footage and automated phone calls that played recordings criticizing the government. Angry followers also hacked into television broadcasts (Chang 2004: 21; Thornton 2005: 266; Rahn 2002). The apocalyptic teachings of Li Hongzhi could well have precipitated the self-immolations through a veiled call to civil disobedience

and the promise of salvation for martyrs. Li teaches that the “Ending Period of Catastrophe” is almost here, that contemporary society is degenerate and will be purged. The only ones who will be saved are those who are genuine Falun Gong practitioners. Li called Jiang Zemin, then president of the People’s Republic of China, “the highest representative of the evil force in the human world,” who is being manipulated by higher beings to persecute Falun Gong. According to Li, only when evil is eliminated can practitioners return home through consummation to the Falun Dafa paradise (Rahn 2002).

Refusing Medical Treatment

Though not as dramatic as the self-immolations, many Falun Gong members have effectively committed suicide through a refusal to seek medical treatment when they were ill. There is considerable social pressure on Falun Gong followers to abandon conventional medicine, though not all inevitably do so. Li does not explicitly tell adherents not to consult doctors, saying each person must make their own decision (Hongzhi 1999a: 41–2). He asserts that disease is caused by negative *karma* (Palmer 2003: 363). In Falun Gong, *karma* is recognized as a discrete substance, and is black in color. The first goal of the process of cultivation is to transform this *karma* into another substance, called *de*, which literally means “virtue.” In contrast to *karma*, *de* is white in color. Li himself then transforms *de* into a form of energy called *gong* that gradually infuses all the body’s physical structures, converting it into what is known as a “pure white body” in Falun Gong texts (Penny 2012b: 42). This accounts for most of the *karma* in the body.

The process of the removal of the remainder of the *karma* is called “*xiaoye*” and is achieved through the practice of Falun Gong (Wessinger 2003: 221). According to the tenets of Falun Gong, physical disorders are actually precipitated by the ejection of negative *karma* from the body. To employ conventional medical treatment to treat the condition serves only to mask the pain associated with this elimination. In this way, *karma* can re-enter the body where it will lie dormant until it re-appears, possibly causing a more severe illness. Illness represents an opportunity to purge *karma* from the body. Hence the pain and suffering of sickness becomes a spiritual issue rather than a medical one (Burgdoff 2003: 341; Porter 2003: 157). A true practitioner does not suffer real illness, only *xiaoye*. Afflictions should not be approached with fear and dread but following the principles of forbearance, calm, and joy at the potential of being provided with an opportunity to progress spiritually (Fisher 2003: 300). Li considers that illness, along with birth, old age, and death, all have *karmic*

reasons and demand *karmic* retribution. If a person is ill, then the *karmic* debt needs to be paid before wellness can be regained (Hongzhi 2003: 296).

In Li's opinion, dubious moral values have caused a variety of diseases that neither hospitals nor medicine can cure. The corruption of society has led to this situation (ibid.: 298). He further claims that medicines can poison a person and that they cannot remove the *karma* that is causing the illness (ibid.: 298–9). Instead, hospitals and medicine simply mask the spiritual illness, while healing the physical illness. The retained *karma* will cause the illness to reappear in the latter part of life (Porter 2003: 157). According to Li, when an individual dies, the *karma* is pressed into the reincarnated person and is not obvious to start with. The sickness will appear to be caused by some trigger in the physical world but this is really not the case. If the person dies again without having purged that *karma* through enduring the illness, then the illness will manifest in the individual in a subsequent lifetime (Hongzhi 2002: 38–40). He likens the human body to a tree in which the growth rings contain the sickness *karma*. He further asserts that no person is able to deal with all of the sickness *karma* at the same time and so it must be dealt with incrementally (ibid.: 40). Interestingly, Li does not confine his criticism to Western medicine. He also claims that conventional *qigong* also delays dealing with *karma*. Further, he warns that if a person has accumulated much negative *karma* over several lifetimes and continues to accrue more by doing bad things, then sooner or later heaven will not permit the debts to remain unpaid and the person faces the complete destruction of the body and soul, that is, complete annihilation (ibid.: 41).

In this context, Li also refers to his *fashen* who, as mentioned earlier, he can direct to take on the role of removing negative *karma* from practitioners. If the practitioners are ordinary people, he will not direct the *fashen* to help them; to do so would be a waste. A practitioner condemns him or herself to ordinariness by taking medicine instead of taking the opportunity to clear *karma*. Illness is a test and *fashen* are only to help those who pass that test (Lu 2005: 177–8; Hongzhi 1999a: 41–2). When adherents die of their illness even when they have refused medical care, Li covers himself by asserting that the person must have been an ordinary person and it would have been their time to die. It is not worth extending the life of an ordinary person. Li himself must acknowledge his disciples; conducting the meditation exercises and otherwise following the teachings of Falun Gong does not guarantee that Li will acknowledge that person as a disciple. The fundamental nature of that person has not been transformed because the practice was not approached with sufficient diligence (Hongzhi 1998: 33–5). Li has also expressly prohibited Falun Gong practitioners from healing others, which they would be capable of if they were advanced enough

in their own cultivation. Healing others transfers the *karma* from the ill person onto the healer and, therefore, retards his or her own cultivation. It also robs the sick individual of the opportunity to begin cultivation themselves, the only sure way to health (Penny 2012b: 42). The Chinese government claims that more than 1,400 adherents have died because they rejected medical care due to their Falun Gong beliefs (Cheung 2004: 24).

Conclusion

The allure of Falun Gong lies in its claims to wed traditional Chinese culture to modern science and beyond, to the science of Master Li Hongzhi that would supplant the scientific knowledge crudely accrued thus far (Ownby 2008: 93). Falun Gong emerged from the larger movement of *qigong* through the 1990s, but is different in important ways. Both have a millenarian structure and the idea of a universal bliss in salvation. *Qigong*'s vision is of a blissful future for humanity, but Li Hongzhi tells of an apocalyptic end of the universe with salvation taking place in another dimension (Palmer 2007: 239). Body technologies are common to both and yet with *qigong* the path of accomplishment is based on paranormal powers, while in Falun Gong the way to salvation is via moral and spiritual discipline (Hongzhi 1999b: 7; Palmer 2007: 239).

Though Li Hongzhi and Falun Gong condemn suicide as an attempt to disrupt God's plan and because of the excessive negative *karma* accrued, certain philosophies and teachings predispose adherents to effectively commit suicide in certain contexts (Hongzhi 1999a: 27). The self-immolations of a number of Falun Gong practitioners in 2001, undoubtedly an act of protest against the Chinese government's crackdowns on the organization also became an appealing option for adherents because of Li's apocalyptic messages. He advocated "*fā*-rectification," increasingly focused on retribution against those who suppressed Falun Gong and the struggle that preceded it (Penny 2012a: 156–60). Though not explicitly encouraged, adherents heard stirring tales of martyrs, protesters, and the paradise that awaited them after death (ibid.: 353–4). Though the leadership of Falun Gong tried to distance themselves from the self-immolations of 2001, the mass suicides and immolations continued.

Falun Gong's teachings about illness have also encouraged large numbers of adherents to effectively suicide through their refusal of medical treatment. Though illness is seen as an opportunity to work through and expel *karma*, seriously ill adherents have died without medical treatment (Palmer 2003: 363). Li has covered himself by saying that those who died were not practicing the

tenets of Falun Gong with the correct attitude and that their practice had not effected a real change in their psyches (Hongzhi 1998: 33–5). Though the aim of this practice is not to die but is to gain health, the reality is that a number of people are dying as a result, from diseases including cancer, heart disease, and diabetes. The open condemnation of suicide by Falun Gong's leadership is disingenuous given the number of followers who have died as a direct result of their adherence to Falun Gong's teachings.

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