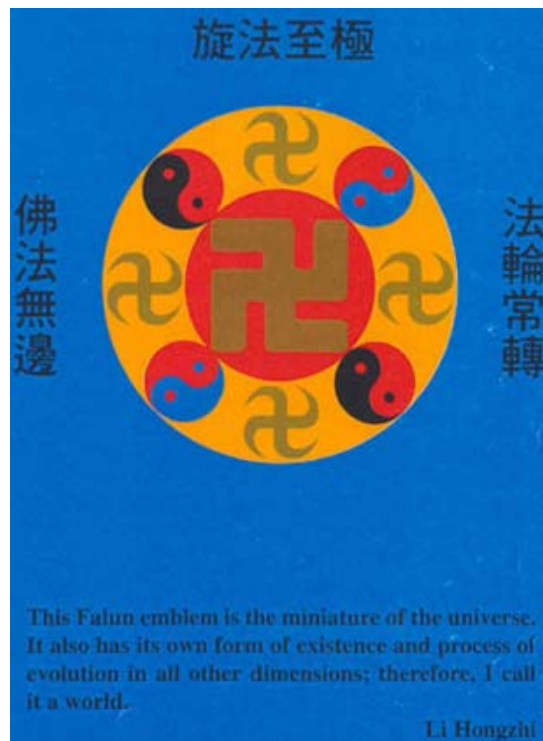


Situating Falun Dafa: The Movement, The Master, China and Montreal

By Andrew Smart



Virtually every week, while brushing through the international section of the *New York Times* or the *Globe and Mail*, a story regarding what has seem to have become 'the Falun Gong situation' in China appears in print. The stories often describe a conflict between practitioners of Falun Gong, a *qigong* meditation practice, and the ruling Communist Party of the Peoples Republic of China. Often, such an article also mentions efforts of Falun Gong practitioners in North America urging other Canadians and Americans, and their governments, to support the Falun Gong cause in the face of a ban and persecution by the Chinese ruling structure. While this conflict seems to be taking place on the other side of the planet, it is in fact taking place to a large degree on North American soil, specifically in large urban centers with large Chinese populations, such as Vancouver, San Francisco, New York, Toronto, and even Montreal. Many people in North America may be conscious of the Chinese government's ban on Falun Gong, the self-immolations of Falun Gong practitioners in Tiananmen Square that took place in 2001, and the, sometimes gruesome, reports of brutality by the Chinese government against Falun Gong practitioners in China. However, most people likely neither understand what Falun Gong practice actually is, nor do they understand why the PRC government has such a stake in destroying a peaceful movement that appears to be based solely on meditation and exercise. What many people in Montreal seem to notice is that a Falun Gong practitioner 'lives in my building' or that there are Falun Gong practitioners exercising in the park or that there was a swastika in the Saint Patrick's Day Parade. Falun Gong, practiced by millions all over the world, has a definite presence in Montreal. The practitioners lead ordinary lives that they feel are marked positively by the practice of exercises, meditation, and self-cultivation outlined in Li Hongzhi's *Zhuan Falun*, essentially the guidebook of Falun Gong. The practitioners in Montreal are deeply connected to the difficulties faced by practitioners in China and are active on both the North American and Chinese fronts of the conflict. The following pages will attempt to situate Falun Gong, its presence in both Montreal and China, and define its practices, leadership, beliefs, and activism both on the 'free-soil' of North America and in the face of government persecution.

Simply defined, Falun Gong, or Falun Dafa, is 'a powerful practice to improve body, mind, and spirit.' Introduced to the public in 1992 by the founder Li Hongzhi, Falun Dafa emerges from a spiritual boom of qigong sects that existed in China throughout the 1980s. *Qigong* is a compound of the word *qi*, defined as breath or life force, and *gong*, meaning practice or cultivation. *Qigong* practice can be defined as a martial art directed to enhance "the strength, endurance, and spirit of the warrior. The medical qigong can be used to heal diseases. Most spiritual qigong is focused on self-cultivation, ethical development, and refinement of personal temperament" (Schecter 21). Qigong practice, in some form, has existed in China for centuries. The language and practice of Falun Dafa is deeply rooted in the philosophical traditions of Taoism and Buddhism. Terms such as *qi*, karma, and *wu wei* appear throughout the *Zhuan Falun*, the text compiled by Master Li Hongzhi, the spiritual leader who presented Falun Gong to the rest of the world. A self-proclaimed 'Buddha school', Falun Gong, through a series of physical exercises, meditation practices, and self-cultivation based on the principles *Zhen, Shan, Ren*, or Truthfulness, Forbearance, Compassion, leads its practitioners on the path to spiritual enlightenment. The *Zhuan Falun* reads, "Our Falun Dafa is based upon the highest standard of the universe, *Zhen, Shan, Ren*, all of which we cultivate simultaneously" (Li 7). The physical exercises "are graceful, and impact, practitioners say, on the circulation of energy in the body" (Schecter 22). The exercises are divided into five sets, both standing and seated, and involve a series of motions, intense stretching and release. The exercises are completed with a long period of seated meditation. (see next page) While the exercises share the concept of 'no mind' or 'non-thought' common to East Asian meditation practices and Yoga, there is no specific breath pattern of which to be adhered. The exercises are intended to open up the body's energy channels and improve physical well-being. At the surface level, Falun Dafa appears to be a simple workout routine for the body and mind, and for some it likely succeeds at this level. However, the claims of and politics surrounding the founder Li Hongzhi, in the context of a Chinese definition of religion, have created a great debate as to the true definition of Falun Gong and its practice.

Li Hongzhi, or Master Li to Falun Dafa practitioners, is said to have been born in July of 1952, by some accounts sharing the same birth date with Sakyamuni Buddha. Li seems to have been a child of ordinary circumstances. However, he claims to have been taken under the tutelage of a Buddhist master who helped him "to practice the 'Buddhist Law,' attaining 'cultivation of the Law at the age of eight'" (Adams 4). His account of his spiritual development is marked by meetings and training with Taoist sages, and

Buddhist masters that seem to hark back to the tales of Chinese antiquity. By other accounts, supported by the Chinese government, Li Hongzhi is an ordinary man who saw an opportunity for success and fame in the *qigong* boom of the 1980s. The Chinese government would likely add a desire to incite a rebellion to overthrow the ruling order to such a characterization. This kind of interpretation can be linked to earlier 'popular' religious masters of the fifteenth century. David Ownby writes:

the mix of charismatic leadership and the sometimes marginal social position of those who felt drawn to such groups and practices probably made them a magnet for the kind of ambitious character whose goal was to build a personal following. Scholars have examined in depth cases of rebellion where personal desires for adulation and wealth meshed with prophecies of the coming turning of the kalpa to provide the mobilization necessary to set a rebellion in motion. (Ownby 8)



Falun Dafa practitioners and the Chinese government vehemently dispute the rebellious nature of Li Hongzhi and his practice. However, it is certain that Li Hongzhi's writings are both apocalyptic in nature and that the disenfranchised in Chinese society have found the teachings of Li attractive. Li asserts that his school is the most developed and is superior to all other Buddha and qigong schools. However, much of the teachings outlined in the *Zhuan Falun* are not inventive. Their foundation lies in hundreds of years of Taoist and Buddhist tradition in China. Li Hongzhi is compared to other religious leaders who "worked to clarify and redirect the aims and practices of their traditions without rending the fabric" (Adams xv). This clarification and redirection presented in Li's teaching has had a sweeping effect on China and the rest of the world. (see next page) Despite Li's self-exile in the United States, in the ten years since its appearance, Falun Dafa has accumulated millions of practitioners. Regardless, as Adams writes, "Not since the days of Mohandas Gandhi has one man had such an enormous spiritual and political impact on his native country—an impact so forceful that the resonance of his message could not be contained within his country's borders" (Adams xiv). The commotion that surrounds Falun Dafa and its persecution in China are deeply linked to the seemingly outrageous and apocalyptic claims and 'cult'-like mass reverence and following of Master Li.

The seemingly outrageous claims of Master Li can be arranged in three sections: those regarding energy and the Falun emblem, those regarding human prehistory and the existence of extraterrestrials and U.F.O.'s, and those regarding the coming apocalypse, the third of which lies at the foundation of the vehement attacks on Falun Dafa by the PRC. The Falun emblem (see next page) is a swastika symbol surrounded by four smaller swastikas and four yin yang symbols. Li states, "The Falun emblem is the miniature of the universe. It also has its own form of existence and process of evolution in all other

dimensions; therefore, I call it a world." The claim that an artistic representation can be viewed as a microcosm of the universe is not new to Chinese philosophy. Much of Taoist belief is founded on the universal nature of the yin yang microcosm of the universe. However, "the Falun, or Dharma Wheel is described by Mr. Li as a miniature of the cosmos that he says he installs telekinetically in the abdomens of all his followers, where it rotates in alternating directions, throwing off bad karma and gathering qi" (Smith). This contention is supported by practitioners of Falun Gong, many of whom claim "they can feel the wheel turning in their bellies" (Smith). This is something difficult for non-practitioners to understand or believe. Li claims Falun Dafa practice can give practitioners superhuman energy capabilities, among them, the power to levitate. Li goes on to write that humans have existed on the planet earth for millions of years, citing a 270 million year old trilobite fossil marked with a human foot print and a uranium deposit found in the Gabon Republic, that he claims to have been a sophisticated nuclear reactor that that operated for 500,000 years two billion years ago, as evidence. He goes on to claim that Darwin's theory of evolution is a "mockery" of history (Li 7). There is also a great deal of emphasis on the supernatural in Li's teachings. Smith writes that Li Hongzhi "wrapped his exercises in a complex cosmology that mixed traditional religious tenets with popular notions of extraterrestrials and U.F.O.'s to create a vivid belief system that struck a chord with many Chinese" (Smith). He goes on to state that Falun Dafa "is a group that believes that it is engaged in a battle with evil beings for control of the universe" (Smith). Among these evil beings Master Li includes President Jiang Zemin of the PRC. The supernatural means to defending against and defeating such evil beings are rooted in the practice of Falun Gong. Such claims of supernatural powers and the coming apocalypse in Li's writings are at the basis of China's attack on both Li and his practice. Li's prophecy can be attributed to the self-immolations of Falun Gong practitioners that took place in 2001 and led to the Chinese government's deeming Falun Gong 'an evil cult.' Li urges his practitioners to let go of worldly attachments and be ready for the coming conflict against evil. In a poem issued in January 2002 entitled "The Catastrophe," Li writes:

*The dark, somber clouds have but a few days left
With the bitter cold fully over, spring now appears
Awakening, the sentient beings stand aghast at the things they see
Half of China Proper covered by sand and dust*
(www.clearwisdom.net)

Another poem, also from January 2002, entitled "Cleaning Out" reads,

The dark clouds have passed
yet the winds remain fierce
And though the Red Dragon is slain
humans are still in delusion

For where there is Evil
there is dark, dense haze
Dafa disciples
hold the palm erect
eliminate the remaining Evil
summon righteous thoughts
clarify the truth
rescue the sentient beings
thoroughly annihilate the Evil
and sweep the entire cosmos clean

(www.clearwisdom.net)

The allusions to the apocalypse and the PRC seem barely masked in metaphor. Phrases such as "China proper covered by sand and dust," "thoroughly annihilate the Evil," and "the Red Dragon is slain" are likely the kind of statements that lead the Chinese government to persecute Falun Dafa. While such

statements are only a small element of the practice, they seem to have taken the greatest importance in the conflict between Falun Dafa and the PRC.

The heated debate between the practitioners of Falun Dafa and the PRC and its leadership is further founded in the Chinese notion of religion, and the ruling party's insistence that Falun Dafa is an 'evil cult'. Some difficulty arises when attempting to define an inherently Chinese religion based on the Western model. The Chinese concept of religion arises from a long history of different, intermingling philosophies, often in separation or opposition to the ruling state. Specifically, the religions, or philosophies, of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism are melded into a Chinese popular religion. Unlike the Western traditions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the Chinese history of religion is not marked by an unwavering devotion to one god and one god alone or orthodoxy. Instead, "many Chinese believers seemingly exhibit little loyalty to any particular denomination, going from god to god and temple to temple according to their perception of a particular god's efficacy" (Ownby 2). The typical practitioner of Falun Dafa, in approach to both the exercises and teachings of Li Hongzhi, seems to both support and refute such an idea. While the practitioner adheres to the syncretistic elements of Buddhism and Taoism imbued in Falun Dafa, loyalty is firmly affixed on the practice of Falun Dafa above all other practices and the teaching of Li Hongzhi above all others. Such loyalty is fully expressed in the reverent response of Falun Dafa practitioners when graced with a public appearance by Master Li himself. Loyalty to both the Master and his method seem at the foundation of Falun Dafa practice. Such reverence to a single individual and his teachings is likely at the basis of China's ban of Falun Dafa. However, this is not the first time the Chinese ruling structure has reacted forcefully against popular religion. As Ownby writes, "In the eighth and ninth centuries...a Confucian reaction against the Buddhist establishment targeted both the fabulous wealth of the monasteries and the supposedly foreign character of the faith" (Ownby 3). While the PRC cites economic reasons for its attack on Falun Gong, the government would have great difficulty in attacking the practice for its foreign character. Instead, the foreign character is the Communist ruling government of China itself. Simply, the practice of Falun Dafa is more Chinese than the ruling structure of China. The claim that Falun Dafa has more followers than the membership of the Communist Party in China poses a major problem to the PRC government. To have a subculture that is more connected to 'popular' culture with a mass following that claims reverence to a charismatic leader who speaks out against the PRC and its ruling body can be viewed as a political threat. As a senior Communist Party official remarks, ""Falun Gong is an evil cult that, unchallenged, could threaten China's tenuous stability, should it galvanize the millions of people disenfranchised by the transition from a centrally planned to a market-driven economy" (Smith). The assumed threat to the stability of China has resulted in a large-scale ban and persecution of Falun Dafa in the PRC. While in some respects China's campaign seems to be successful, the government had engaged itself in "a confrontation that has drawn considerable attention in the West, in part because it represents the most sustained challenge to Communist Party authority in more than a decade" (Smith). Whether China will have the capacity to sustain a long-term attack on Falun Dafa cannot be foretold. However, the practice and knowledge of Falun Dafa, accompanied by an aggressive media campaign against the PRC by Western-based practitioner will certainly keep Falun Dafa alive in cities in North America, such as Montreal.



As Falun Dafa is deemed the 'great formless way' it is difficult to gauge exactly to what extent the practice is alive in Montreal. However, it is difficult to live in the city without one's attention being drawn to Falun Dafa. Whether traveling on the subway, opening the newspaper, spending time in the park, or walking down Rue de la Gaucheterie on a sunny Saturday afternoon, one may find it difficult to miss the presence of Falun Dafa in Montreal. The advertising campaign in the Metro is perhaps the most obvious. Virtually every stop seems posted with a woman in seated meditation, the letters www.falundafa.org set beneath her. Such advertisements are often situated between advertisements for such mega-corporations as the Gap or Ford Motor Company. It is impossible to gather from Montreal practitioners who likely paid for such expensive advertising placements. Falun Dafa appears to have been introduced to Montreal in 1996. Beyond the information made available on the Internet site, there is no specific central location of Falun Dafa in Montreal. There are no temples and no offices. Falun Dafa operates solely in private homes, University campuses, such as Concordia and McGill, and in public parks, such as Parc Lafontaine or the open space at the corner of Clark and Rue de la Gaucheterie in Chinatown. Falun Dafa has no specific leadership structure within Montreal. There are no ordained priests or masters. Only Li Hongzhi is given any kind of hierarchical reverence. Falun Dafa charges no fees for its teachings; there is no collection bowl. Upon Li Hongzhi's insistence, no practitioner is allowed to seek personal fame or profit through the teaching of Falun Dafa. Falun Dafa does not keep any records or name-lists of practitioners. One contact estimated there are fifty to sixty regular practitioners in Montreal who are involved in periodic Falun Dafa activities and events. Perhaps, there are one hundred 'sometimes-practitioners' or those who chose to practice privately at home. It seems many Chinese-Canadians are drawn to the practice as means to stay in touch with their 'Chinese-ness' while living in North America. However, especially among Concordia students, Falun Dafa has gained a sizable following of Caucasians. Practitioners are insistent that there is no recruitment and all practitioners have come to Falun Dafa by their own desire to improve their well-being. While some practitioners seem to have established strong friendships with others, there is no specific meeting place for practitioners. Only periodic study sessions held by Falun Dafa Concordia and specific practices scheduled at parks, campuses, community centers and homes around the city are regular events. There is group practice every Sunday on the Concordia campus and weekend practices are held at Parc Kent and Parc Angrignon throughout the summer. Furthermore, there are periodic nine day courses in Falun Dafa also held on the Concordia campus.

The only place that somewhat resembles a religious site is an apartment at 1099 Clarke Ave. in Chinatown. (see next page) This apartment, owned by two Falun Dafa practitioners, one of whom resides there, has been made available for practitioners to exercise. The 'open door' policy reflects the non-restrictive nature of Falun Dafa practice. The apartment is sparsely decorated, with practice mats stacked near the door, and a few posters of Master Li and the Falun emblem adorning the walls. Essentially, the apartment acts as a warm place for practitioners to gather or exercise when the harsh, Montreal winter bars them from outdoor parks. The apartment is also a place for meetings and a depository of the masses of flyers produced voluntarily by practitioners around the city. There seem to be hundreds of books, videos, cd's, and homemade flyers amassed at the site. Practitioners insist that all activities and monetary donations are one hundred percent voluntary. Practitioners volunteer their time and money based solely on how much they have and want to give. The majority of such volunteer work is aimed at educating the Canadian public to and attempting to alleviate the suffering of Falun Dafa practitioners persecuted in China. This is best exemplified by two computers equipped with Internet access made available to practitioners at the Clarke Ave. site. Both activism against persecution and the Internet, obvious aspects of the Clarke apartment, have become important non-doctrinal elements of Falun Dafa practice.



The accounts of persecution in China are varied and disputed between reports of Falun Dafa practitioners and the PRC. In his article written in the summer of 2001, Smith writes, "Since China set out to crush Falun Gong...as many as 200 people have died, possibly thousands have been beaten or tortured, and millions have been cowed into renouncing their faith in Mr. Li's apocalyptic cosmology" (Smith). It is certain that the situation in China has become increasingly violent. Literature produced by Falun Dafa shows gruesome photographs of supposed torture of Falun Dafa practitioners in China. Claims are made that women have been stripped naked and thrown into an all-male prison facility. Further claims cite Chinese police, both uniformed and in plain clothes, for raping, beating and murdering Falun Gong practitioners. Recently, Falun Gong's Web site has posted urgent claims about a brutal roundup in Changchun, saying that some believers had been tortured and others thrown from high-rise buildings. These reports could not be confirmed" (Rosenthal). The Chinese government and media insist that such contentions are false. Furthermore, Falun Dafa claims there are hundreds of thousands of practitioners detained in labor camps. Rosenthal writes, "an official in [Changchun's] Re-education Through Labor Bureau said Falun Gong's estimates of practitioners being held in labor camps were 'hugely exaggerated'" (Rosenthal). While difficult to determine with great degree of accuracy, there is certainly a violent campaign being launched against Falun Dafa practitioners. Western leaders have spoken out, urging the PRC leadership to yield in its approach to Falun Dafa. Western practitioners, including some in Montreal, have gone to great lengths to speak out and spare from suffering fellow practitioners in China.

Curiously, the persecution of Falun Dafa is not restricted to the territorial boundaries of China. Anti-Falun Gong rhetoric and actions seem to be regular emissions from Chinese embassies and consulates around North America. Recently, "in Washington...Falun Gong filed a civil lawsuit against Chinese officials it accuses of harassing followers in the United States" (Rosenthal). Members of Falun Dafa in Montreal have filed a similar lawsuit against the French language newspaper *Le Presse Chinoise*. The practitioners are suing the paper for printing slanderous, inciting material against Falun Dafa and its practitioners. The filers of the suit view the *Presse Chinoise* in league with officials in the PRC or its embassies in North America. Furthermore, members of the Chinese consulate have been both vocal and made their physical presence known at Falun Dafa events in Canada. Adams recounts a practice that was taking place in Toronto. Just as the practitioners were taking:

the requisite 'serene and peaceful countenance,' three men in dark suits emerge from the shadows of a clump of maple trees. They identify themselves as members of the local Chinese consulate, and begin to denounce the practitioners as cultists and anti-Chinese fanatics. They also issue very specific warnings: 'We know who you are; we know where you and your families come from in China. They will pay for what you are doing here.'
(Adams xviii)

Such scare tactics on Canadian soil seem to reinforce Falun Dafa's contention that the situation in China is as terrible as they report. With violence and an aggressive campaign against Falun Dafa practitioners in China, practitioners around the world have taken to their computers and the Internet in order to fight the persecution and keep the message of Li Hongzhi alive.

The role of computers and the Internet have had a profound effect on the operation of the modern world, and in the case of Falun Dafa, modern religion. Smith writes, "Under attack, Falun Gong has evolved from a well-regulated movement with a structure not unlike that of the Communist Party into a non-hierarchical mass movement whose structure mirrors that of the Internet, on which it depends" (Smith). While in Canada, Falun Dafa practitioners are free to practice publicly with little negative stigma, the internet has made it possible for Falun Dafa practitioners in China to stay in contact with both Master Li and the Falun Dafa movement while remaining anonymous. Ownby writes that "the suppression of Falun Gong in China has mobilized practitioners among the Chinese diaspora, particularly in North America, to push these technological possibilities to the limit, creating a virtual community through websites and email" (Ownby 16). The majority of information of Falun Dafa can be accessed, free of charge, on web sites such as www.falundafa.org and www.clearvision.net. While it is illegal to access Internet sites regarding Falun Dafa in China, practitioners in China are finding ways to access information while alluding PRC Internet security officers. One such hacker, in China, reports, "When Master Li issues a new message, 99 percent of the followers in Beijing will have it within three days" (Smith). With this kind of technological development, in a country with the huge population of China, it seems impossible for the PRC to monitor

the electronic activities and spread of Falun Dafa. Furthermore, as Ownby writes, "Falun Gong emerged at a historical moment when technology...has made it possible for members of such groups to become aware of their size and geographic spread, or in more general terms, to achieve self-consciousness" (Ownby 16). The Internet may prove to be Falun Dafa's greatest weapon in its battle with the PRC. Without it, the lines of contact, information, and support between Chinese practitioners and those at computers at places such as the 1099 Clarke Ave. site would be broken.

Despite the controversy surrounding Falun Dafa and its leader, the reports of brutality and the ban of Falun Gong in China, and the implications of participating in a new religious movement in the modern world, it seems that a group or sect should to a large degree be defined by the actions of its adherents and participants. The practitioners of Falun Dafa in Montreal, both Chinese-Canadian and Caucasian students, are people who act peacefully and with respect while following their chosen spiritual path. At a party held on the Concordia campus on 7 April 2002, the occasion being the return to Canada of a Falun Dafa practitioner detained in a Chinese prison for two years, the people of Falun Dafa in Montreal expressed a great deal of gratitude to the people and organizations, most notably Amnesty International, who facilitated the man's return. The mood of the party was entirely positive. There was no anger or hatred expressed towards the PRC. Instead, the practitioners took the time to celebrate life and freedom and their practice of Falun Dafa. The event was marked by a family atmosphere, outgoing friendliness, and generosity. Face to face, the practitioners of Falun Dafa in Montreal do not seem to be caught up in one of the new century's most controversial stories. It seems that Falun Dafa has an extremely positive effect on its practitioners in Montreal, who, when asked, simply praise the practice for its contribution to their everyday lives.

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