

The Life and Times of Li Hongzhi: *Falun Gong* and Religious Biography*

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ABSTRACT When the suppression of the *falun gong* started in July 1999, one of the targets of the government's propaganda was the biography of Li Hongzhi, its founder and leader. This article examines two versions of a biography of Li Hongzhi published by the *falun gong* in 1993 and 1994 that are no longer available. This biography presents Li as possessing superhuman abilities and god-like insight. In my analysis, I place this biography in the context of a centuries-old tradition of religious biography in China showing that, in textual terms, it represents a contemporary example of that venerable genre. As with its precursors, this biography seeks to establish a genealogy of the figure whose life is recorded and to buttress the orthodoxy of his doctrine.

Falun gong came to the world's attention on 25 April 1999 when between ten and 15 thousand adherents held a peaceful demonstration outside the Zhongnanhai compound in the heart of central Beijing. The demonstrators stayed all day but apparently caused no breach of the peace: they were not loud or disruptive and they did not attempt to distribute any publicity material to passers-by. It appears that the police behaved in a reciprocally calm and low-key manner. The suppression of the *falun gong* only began some three months later when, on 22 July, "the Research Society of Falun Dafa and the *falun gong* organization under its control" were banned by the Chinese authorities.¹ The titles of the official press releases issued on that day are indicative of the directions that anti-*falun gong* publicity would take in later, and continuing, attacks on *falun gong*. They were:

CPC Central Committee forbids Party members to practise *falun gong*²

China prohibits pro-*falun gong* activities³

* I am indebted to the National Library of Australia for a Harold White Research Fellowship that enabled me to do this research.

1. Zhonghua renmin gongheguo minzhengbu, "Guanyu qudi falun dafa yanjiuhui de juejing" ("On the resolution outlawing the Falun Dafa Research Society"), *Renmin ribao* (*People's Daily*), 23 July 1999, p. 1, reprinted in He Ping (ed.), *Jiepi "Falun dafa" xieshuo* (*Exposing and Criticizing the Heterodox Theories of "Falun Dafa"*) (Beijing: Xinhua chubanshe, 1999), p. 7. See also, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/special/fagong/1999072200A101.html>.

2. Zhonggong zhongyang, "Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu gongchangdangyuan buzhun xiulian 'falun dafa' de tongzhi" ("Circular of the CCP Central Committee forbidding members from cultivating 'Falun Dafa' ") *Renmin ribao*, 23 July 1999, p. 1, reprinted in He Ping, *Exposing and Criticizing*, pp. 3–6. The English title comes from <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/special/fagong/1999072200A102.html>.

3. Zhonghua renmin gongheguo gong'anbu, "Zhonghua renmin gongheguo gong'anbu tonggao" ("Public notice of the Public Security Ministry of the People's Republic of China"), *Renmin ribao*, 23 July 1999, p. 1, reprinted in He Ping, *Exposing and Criticizing*, p. 8. The

The *falun gong* practice causes health problems and death⁴

The life and times of Li Hongzhi.⁵

This last release which I have adopted as the title of this article was a sustained attack on claims about the life of Li Hongzhi to be found in *falun gong* publications. The Chinese authorities in charge of the suppression clearly regarded Li's biography as one of their most important targets, making it integral to the struggle between *falun gong* and the Chinese authorities. This article concerns the complexities underlying the way that the figure of Li Hongzhi has been represented within *falun gong* and the stakes involved in contestation over the true meaning of his "life."

Falun gong, or *falun dafa* as it is known amongst adherents, grew out of the *qigong* boom of the 1980s and early 1990s. Best known for teaching five sets of meditational exercises, it also proclaims a system of morality. Practitioners aim, through its brand of "cultivation," to attain "consummation," a state in which they transcend the limits of normal human existence. In this, *falun gong* can be seen to grow out of the centuries-old traditions of internal cultivation practised by religious believers in China. At the same time, however, it has features that proclaim its modernity, such as its obsession with "science" (if only to criticize it) and its recourse to ideas found in Western "new age" discourse.

Made public in 1992, *falun gong* grew through the 1990s into a movement of tens of thousands of adherents, although exact figures are impossible to obtain as practitioners never "joined" *falun gong* in the sense that someone would join a club or a party. Practitioners simply practised – and as in all such movements some practitioners were more strongly attached to *falun gong* than others. When the suppression began, it is likely that many of the less strongly attached adherents simply shifted their loyalties to other *qigong* groups or away from cultivation altogether. At the same time as *falun gong* was growing within China it began to spread overseas, first among overseas Chinese communities and more recently into non-Chinese populations. It now has websites based in more than 30 countries across the world and, indeed, the internet has been fundamental in creating and sustaining *falun gong* as an international movement with co-ordinated protests and actions.

footnote continued

English title comes from <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/special/fagong/1999072200A103.html>.

4. Gong'anbu yanjiushe, "Yin xiulian 'falun gong' zhibing, zhican, zhisi de bufen anli" ("Categorized cases of sickness, disability and death due to the cultivation of *falun gong*"), *Renmin ribao*, 23 July 1999, p. 4, reprinted in He Ping, *Exposing and Criticizing*, pp. 70–77. The English title comes from <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/special/fagong/1999072200A105.html>.

5. Gong'anbu yanjiushe, "Li Hongzhi qiren qishi" ("Li Hongzhi: the man and his deeds"), *Renmin ribao*, 23 July 1999, p.4, reprinted in He Ping, *Exposing and Criticizing*, pp. 63–77. For a full translation, see *Chinese Law and Government*, Vol. 32, No. 5 (September–October, 1999) pp. 56–64. The English title comes from <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/special/fagong/1999072200A106.html>.

On the other side, the government's crackdown on *falun gong* – and other *qigong*-related practices such as *Zhonggong* (China Health and Wisdom Practice), *jiugong bagua gong* (Practice of the Nine Palaces and Eight Trigrams) and *chanmi gong* (Practice of Zen and Tantrism) – also reflects a longstanding tendency among Chinese governments to suppress popular religious and spiritual movements, although the temptation to see *falun gong* in a direct line of succession from any of these movements should be resisted. Indeed, just as *falun gong* has used ideas deriving from the West in some of its doctrines, so the Chinese government has been keen to align it with some new religious movements notorious for their tragic and violent ends that are familiar to Western audiences in their propaganda, and have used terms such as “evil cult” to describe *falun gong*.⁶

Academic research on the *falun gong* movement is, as yet, in its early stages.⁷ The research that has been published has, understandably, concentrated on issues that arose as a result of the movement suddenly coming to the world's attention: its relationship with the state, the reasons for its evident popularity, what its growth says about Chinese society at the turn of the millennium. Apart from the question of its relationship with well-known religiously inspired uprisings of the last two centuries – the so-called White Lotus uprising, the Taiping rebellion and the Boxers – the issue of continuities between *falun gong* doctrine and rhetoric and those of traditional Chinese religious traditions has not been systematically addressed. This article analyses the biography of Li Hongzhi as an example of religious biography demonstrating its deep indebtedness to that long tradition in China. It argues that our understanding of the nature of *falun gong* as a social movement must be informed by analysis of its religious ideas and its copious writings: the contention is that in order to understand the movement, it is necessary to understand the biography of its founder. The way Li Hongzhi is represented to the adherents of *falun gong* is indexical of how they perceive the doctrine and the practice of

6. “Evil cult” is the standard translation found in Chinese government sources for “xiejiao,” literally “heterodox teaching.” The two terms are, of course, not equivalent.

7. Two monographs in English have appeared to date, neither of them academically serious: Danny Schechter, *Falun Gong's Challenge to China: Spiritual Practice or “Evil Cult”?* (New York: Akashic Books, 2000), and Ian Adams, Riley Adams and Rocco Galati, *Power of the Wheel: The Falun Gong Revolution* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2000). Two useful monographs in Chinese are Zhang Weiqing and Qiao Gong, *Falun gong chuanshiren Li Hongzhi pingzhuan (A Critical Biography of Li Hongzhi, the Founder of Falun Gong)* (Taipei: Shangye zhoutan chuban youxian gongsi, 1999) and Kang Xiaoguang, *Falun gong shijian quantoushi (A Complete View of the Falun Gong Incident)* (Hong Kong: Mingbao chubanshe, 2000). Amongst scholarly articles that have appeared recently are Heike Holbig, “Falungong: genese und alternative Deutungen eines politischen Konflikts,” *China Aktuell* (February 2000), pp. 135–147, David Ownby, “Falungong and Canada's China policy,” *International Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (Spring 2001), pp. 183–204, Susan Palmer and David Ownby, “Falun Dafa practitioners: a preliminary research report,” *Nova Religio*, Vol. 4 (October 2000), pp. 133–37, Elizabeth Perry, “Challenging the mandate of heaven: popular protest in modern China,” *Critical Asian Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (2001), pp. 163–180, Kelly A. Thomas, “Falun Gong: an analysis of China's national security concerns,” *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (March 2001), pp. 471–496. For a useful selection of articles translated into English, see the two issues of *Chinese Law and Government* edited by Shiping Hua and Ming Xia under the titles, “The battle between the Chinese government and the Falun Gong,” Vol. 32, No. 5 (September–October, 1999) and “The Falun Gong: qigong, code of ethics and religion,” Vol. 32, No. 6 (November–December, 1999).

falun gong. Thus, this analysis will also address the claim of some practitioners and spokespeople that Li Hongzhi's status is simply that of an ordinary teacher: "He's not a guru, I don't worship him; I respect him in every way, just like I respect you and the people around me."⁸

When "The life and times of Li Hongzhi" was released under the authorship of the research department of the Ministry of Public Security, the target of its attack was a biography of Li that had circulated both as an appendix to early editions of *Zhuan falun*, the major book of the movement, and as a stand-alone text on the internet. Its English version is entitled "A short biography of Mr Li Hongzhi, founder of Falun Xiulian Dafa, President of the Research Society of Falun Buddha Science."⁹ This biography consists of an introduction and five parts and describes the life of Li Hongzhi from his birth until late 1993. Its last sentence reads: "At present, Mr Li is heading his disciples to preach the Law and teach the cultivation exercise in big and medium-sized cities throughout the country."¹⁰ Thus, it was probably composed in late 1993 or 1994 and appears to have circulated freely for some five or six years afterwards. The biography is presented as a product of the Falun Gong Research Society (Falun gong yanjiuhui) appearing over their signature. Neither the current edition of *Zhuan falun* nor its translation into English include this biographical essay and it has also disappeared from the internet. The English version was last available in March 2001 on a practitioner's own site (rather than on an official site of the movement) but had disappeared by 1 May.

Importantly, in Li Hongzhi's Canadian lectures held on 23 May 1999 in Toronto, the status of the biography was explicitly addressed in a question and answer session:

Q. I want to recommend to a newspaper that they publish the Master's biography. Is this appropriate?

8. This statement comes from Caroline Lam, an Australian spokesperson of *falun gong*, "The Religion Report," ABC Radio National, 28 July 1999 (transcript available on <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/8.30/relrpt/stories/s39480.htm>).

9. <http://www.compapp.dcu.ie/~dongxue/biography.html>, downloaded on 9 March 2001. The "Translation Group of Falun Xiulian Dafa" is credited with the translation and no author is given. By 1 May 2001 it had disappeared from this site and I have been unable to locate another website on which it appears. All citations come from this text. Another translation is available in *Chinese Law and Government*, Vol. 32, No. 6, pp. 14–23. This translation is, in many ways, more readable than the *falun gong* version but as it does not have the imprimatur of the movement, the official version is preferred. The Chinese version of this biography can be found in Li Hongzhi, *Zhuan falun (Turning the Wheel of the Law)* (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbao dianshi chubanshe, 1994) pp. 333–345 under the title "Zhongguo falun gong chuangshiren, falun gong yanjiuhui huizhang Li Hongzhi xiansheng xiaozhuan" but has not been published in that book since 1996. An English language internet version of *Zhuan falun*, translated by the "Translation Group of Falun Xiulian Dafa" and dated 1997 has the biography listed in its table of contents but the relevant link leads to the message, "The page cannot be found" (http://www.nb.net/~boying/ZFL/en_zfl.htm and <http://www.nb.net/~boying/ZFL/Biograf.htm>).

10. The word "law" is a translation of the Chinese *fa* which, in religious writings, is itself a translation of "dharma." "Law" is the preferred translation of this term in the *falun gong*'s own writings, though perhaps "teachings" may be a less misleading translation for Western readers in this context.

A. No. I don't want to speak about my own situation. Nobody should. Because everybody wanted to find out about me there was a very, very simple biography in *Zhuan falun*. Now I would ask them to take it out. What I tell you about is the Law, everyone should study this Law. Have no interest in my circumstances! Just study the Law and that will lead you to consummation.¹¹

This *Zhuan falun* essay was not, however, the first work of this kind. In the first edition of *Zhongguo falun gong* a similar, and longer, essay is presented under the title “Falun xuanzhuan xin tian di – ji Li Hongzhi xiansheng he ta chuangli de falun gong (“The wheel of the law revolves the new cosmos – on Li Hongzhi and the *falun gong* he founded”).¹² This essay, unlike that in *Zhuan falun*, does have a named author, Zhu Huiguang, who is described as a journalist who works for the magazine of the Chinese Association for Scientific Research into *Qigong* (*Zhongguo qigong kexue yanjiuhui*). Indeed, in 1993, he wrote articles in both *Qigong yu kexue* (*Qigong and Science*), the magazine concerned, and *Zhonghua qigong* (*Chinese Qigong*), the magazine of the Chinese National Association for Students of Chinese Medicine, introducing *falun gong*.¹³

This biographical essay clearly serves as the major source for the later one in *Zhuan falun*, as shown below. However, its status is completely different. Whereas the *Zhuan falun* essay is presented as an authorized biography from within the movement and became an authorized text in the sense that its circulation was sponsored by the organs of publicity of *falun gong*, the earlier *Zhongguo falun gong* essay is introduced as “a report on a special topic (*zhuan ti baodao*)” written by someone “especially employed” for the job and is provided “to allow readers to understand in brief the situation of the author of this book and the background to its being written.”¹⁴

The first part of this article examines the authorized biography from *Zhuan falun*. The second part analyses it not for its veracity or otherwise, but as an example of religious biography. The third part compares *Zhuan falun*'s authorized biography and Zhu Huiguang's earlier essay from *Zhongguo falun gong*. A substantial part of this article is descriptive in nature as both the essays I discuss are now generally unavailable and are difficult to obtain.

11. Li Hongzhi, *Falun jofa – zai Jianada fahuishang jiangfa* (*Falun Buddha Law – A Lecture at an Experience Sharing Meeting in Canada*) (New York: Universe Publishing Company, 2000), pp. 107–108.

12. Li Hongzhi, *Zhongguo falun gong* (*China Falun Gong*) (Beijing: Junshi yiwen chubanshe, 1993), pp. 150–182.

13. Zhu Huiguang, “Falun changzhuan, shengming changqing” (“The wheel of the law constantly turns, life is endless youth”), *Zhonghua qigong* (*Chinese Qigong*) (March 1993), pp. 32–33, “‘Rexian’ xian shengong – Li Hongzhi Wuhan chuanguo pianduan” (“‘Hotline’ shows miraculous results – an episode of Li Hongzhi transmitting the *gong* in Wuhan”), *Qigong yu kexue* (*Qigong and Science*) (September 1993), p. 15, “Falun gong hongdong jingcheng” (“A *falun gong* sensation in the capital”), *Qigong yu kexue* (December 1993), p. 18.

14. Li Hongzhi, *Zhongguo falun gong*, p. 150.

The Zhuan Falun Biography

The tone of the *Zhuan falun* biography is clear from the outset. It begins: “The year of 1992 saw the spectacular appearance of a marvelous man with his miraculous cultivation way in the world of *qigong* in China.” Dating its appearance to May of that year – when it was accepted under the auspices of the Chinese Association for Scientific Research into *Qigong* – the introduction stresses the originality and novelty of *falun gong*’s principles, and the amazement and fascination of cultivators at Li’s “superb energy potency” and the “magical effectiveness” of his new system. It concludes: “Falun Buddha Law is like a bright shining pearl that dispels the dirt out of the practitioner’s mind with its radiance and lights the beacon on the great way towards cultivation.”

The first part of the biography deals with Li’s early life, from his birth to his teenage years. He was born on 13 May 1951, the authors noting helpfully that this was the eighth day of the fourth lunar month in that year. This is the first point of contention in the government’s attacks on this text, to be discussed below. Li’s birth took place in the town of Gongzhuling in Jilin “into an ordinary intellectual’s family”; in other words, his parents held white-collar jobs. The eighth day of the fourth month in the lunar calendar is the day on which the birth of the Sakyamuni Buddha is traditionally celebrated. Li was apparently a “gifted and compassionate” child helping his mother with her tasks and looking after his younger brothers and sisters.

Li’s spiritual training began at the age of four when he “received personal instructions from Law Master Quan Jue (Complete Enlightenment) the tenth heir to the Great Law of Buddha School” who first introduced him to the cultivation of the three-part morality of the *falun gong*, namely truth, compassion (or benevolence as it is translated in later writings) and forbearance (*zhen, shan, ren*). This master began not by teaching Li any of the practice but rather by inculcating his moral sense, looking disapprovingly at him, or causing his hand to be cut, or sending “some big boys who would give him a good beating” when he did wrong, or smiling at him when he did something good. On confessing his wrongdoing Master Quan Jue would also smile at him.

When he was eight, “Mr Li suddenly felt something more in the corner of his eyes.” This turned out to be the words *zhen, shan* and *ren* which Master Quan Jue had “planted” there. Invisible to other people, Li could see them at any time. He also attained “the superb great law with great supernatural powers (*shangsheng dafa, ju da shentong*),” enabling him to perform feats beyond the powers of normal people. He could render himself invisible in games of hide and seek, pull old nails out of wood with little effort, “rise high into the air,” and stop boys from fighting by preventing them from moving. However, perhaps the following anecdote is the most remarkable:

When he was in the fourth grade, once, he left his schoolbag in the classroom after school. When he returned to fetch it, he found the door of the classroom locked and the windows shut. Then, an idea came to his mind: “If only I could enter the

classroom!” With the thought flashing past, he suddenly found himself already in the classroom. With another thought, he was out again. Even he himself was amazed at what had happened. Once after this, an idea suddenly occurred to him, “How would I feel if I stopped myself in the middle of the glass?” With such a thought, he really found himself in the middle of the window glass feeling his whole body and mind all filled with fragments of glass. He felt so uncomfortable that he wanted to go out immediately. With this thought he was out of the glass again.

In addition to his spiritual prowess, Li also continued to show great compassion, clearing roads of stones in case someone should fall on them, rescuing an adult from drowning without a thought to his own safety and weeping at the sufferings of good characters in films or novels.

When he was 12, Master Quan Jue informed Li that another master would take his place. The second master was called “Eight-Pole-Immortal (*Baji zhenren*)”¹⁵ and he taught Li “Daoist gongfu.” This largely consisted of physical exercises and gymnastic forms including those with swords and spears. The first part of the biography concludes with the departure of this second master.

The second section of the biography begins with Li starting his life in employment in 1972. No details of his job history are given, rather it is the arrival of his third master that warrants attention. This man was “a master of the Great Way School (*yi wei dadao shifu*) with the Daoist alias of True Daoist (*Zhendaozi*)” who came from the Changbai mountains in Jilin province on the Korean border. *Zhendaozi* apparently wore normal clothes and taught inner cultivation (*nei xiugong*). In a rare reference to the historical circumstances of the time, the biography notes that “at that time, people did not dare to practise *qigong* openly,” so Li practised at night. “Sometimes,” it notes, “his master would take his *zhu yishi* (the main consciousness) out for practice. In sleep he could often feel his master putting something in his brain and Celestial Eye.” Again, this master stressed the importance of the cultivation of *xinxing* (glossed in *falun gong* publications as “mind or heart nature, moral character”), through the cultivation of moral behaviour. *Zhendaozi* left Li in 1974.

His fourth master was an unnamed woman, “a female master of the Buddha School (*yi wei fojia nüshifu*), who chiefly taught Buddha School’s cultivation principles and exercise to him.” No more is revealed about her save that when she arrived “his energy potency had reached a very high level.” In 1982, he moved to Changchun for civilian employment – presumably implying that his previous work had been for the army. This agrees with the official government version of his life to be discussed below.

At this point in the official *falun gong* narrative, the enumeration of each of Li’s masters gives way to the generalizing statement that: “Over about a dozen of years, he received instructions successively from more than twenty masters from both the Buddha School and the Tao School, with a different master teaching him at a different level of cultivation.” After this exhaustive process, his “energy potency had reached an ex-

15. *Baji zhenren* is better translated as “Realized Man of the Eight Extremes.”

tremely high level. Some of his supernatural powers are difficult for ordinary people to imagine or understand.” The anecdote that follows this statement is, however, strangely underwhelming. In July 1990, Li was practising with some disciples outside and the weather started to turn stormy. With thunder and lightening in the sky his disciples became restless. Li continued “as steadily as a mountain with no intention to waver or shrink back,” and the practice concluded with no rain coming. Li assured his disciples that, indeed, it would not rain for half an hour – and the storm held off for exactly that long.

This second section of the biography concludes the narrative of Li’s personal development and notes that, “he has been able to see the truth of the universe, many more beautiful things which have existed there for a long time, as well as the origin, development and future of mankind.”

The third part of the biography concerns Li’s development of the *falun gong* system. Through compassion for the plight of humanity whose “spirits have been corrupted and [whose] bodies have been suffering,” Li determined on devising a “great Law suitable for ordinary people to cultivate.” This would not be the same system of cultivation he was taught as his was a “grand-scale cultivation way and could not be popularised on a large scale.” The process of developing what became known as Falun Buddha Law (*falun fofa*) began, according to this biography, in 1984. Studying the methods of *qigong* available at that time, and with the assistance of his masters who all returned to help him in this work, he had finalized the method by 1989. Because of the input from all the masters, and thus all the different cultivation schools, “what Falun Dafa contains is more than what belongs to Mr Li or a few cultivation schools. It has assembled all the mystical powers, which are the essence of the whole cosmos.” The period between 1989 and 1992 was spent testing the new cultivation system on some disciples.

The fourth section of the biography begins with *falun gong* entering the public realm in May 1992. Beginning with its acceptance and support by the “China Institute of *Qigong* Science Research” (that is Zhongguo *qigong* kexue yanjiuhui), it notes that: “So far, Mr Li has been invited to scores of Law preaching and exercise teaching sessions in different parts of China. The number of students has reached more than 100,000.”

Notably, at this stage in the movement, the validity of the widespread claim that “all *falun gong* activities are free of charge and run by volunteers,”¹⁶ appears not to have been so clear-cut. The issue of the finances of *falun gong* has been a bone of contention since the crackdown began and continues to be so, most recently in claims emanating from He Zuoxiu that *falun gong* has been financed by the US Congress.¹⁷ Since such financial matters are so controversial, it is worth quoting this passage in its entirety:

Falun Dafa is unselfish, which can be seen from the fact that the charges for attending each session are very low. Wherever he holds the session, Mr Li insists upon the

16. Statements such as this are often made in *falun gong* material. This particular statement comes from <http://www.falundafa.org/eng/start.htm> (accessed 24 May 2001).

17. Paul Ekert, “Falun Gong leader calls China crackdown futile” (Reuters, 7 March 2001) accessible on http://www.cesnur.org/2001/falun_march03.htm (downloaded 21 June 2001).

lowest charge. Some qigong classes run by some cultivation schools were investigated and rectified by the authorities concerned because they overcharged their students. On the contrary, the impartment session of Falun Dafa has always charged such low fees that there had to be a repeated consultation with the authorities concerned. It won't do to charge no fee at all. Money is needed to rent the lecture hall and pay the service charge to the organisations. After meeting all kinds of expenditure, such as expenses for traffic, board and lodging, there is little money left. What is left of the money is all spent on the construction project of Falun Dafa. Mr Li often says, "Since we offer salvation to all sentient beings, we should not add to the burden of the learners." Falun Dafa is not short of ways to make money. Some people came to see Mr Li and promised to offer tremendous rewards in order to monopolize the popularisation of Falun Dafa. Some people even invited him to go abroad to make big money. Mr Li turned down all these offers. He reiterated his aim: serve the people.

The biography then describes what happens in a Law preaching session. Li first "purifies the students' bodies" and "unblock[s] their main and collateral channels" and in doing so "remove[s] the root of their disease," if they are ill. He then goes on to plant a *falun* or "law wheel" in the abdomen of each student and other *falun* and *qiji* or "energy mechanisms" in other parts of their bodies. It describes how "Mr Li's Law bodies" will protect each practitioner and how he "clear[s] up the students' house and places of practice and then put[s]'a covering of safety' over them so that the students will not be interfered with by bad messages."

This section concludes with a paean of praise for Li Hongzhi: he is enlightened with "a deep insight into the mysteries of the cosmos, which enables him to dispel the miasma in which the present-day world of qigong is shrouded"; he is "magnanimous, amiable and easy of approach"; he is solely dedicated to preaching the Law; and he "works excessively and knows no Sundays and holidays, often having no time to eat or rest." It concludes in a way that is redolent of the rhetoric of the 1960s and 1970s in China:

Falun Dafa founded by Mr Li Hongzhi is like a red sun rising from the east, whose radiance with unlimited vitality will illuminate every corner of the earth, nourish all the living things, warm the whole world and play an unparalleled role in the realisation of an ideal and perfect human society on this planet.¹⁸

The final section of the biography discusses Li's attendance at the 1992 and 1993 Oriental Health Expos (Dongfang jiankang bolanhui) in Beijing. At the first, held in December 1992, Li "created a great sensation throughout the capital city all at once." Two of the organisers of the Fair, Li Rusong and Professor Jiang Xuegui, are both quoted in praise of Li Hongzhi and of *falun gong* as a cultivation system. Li was appointed to the organizing committee of the 1993 Expo and, due to popular demand, gave three lectures rather than the usual one. The income from the second lecture was given to the Public Security Volunteers Foundation of China (Zhonghua jianyi yongwei jijinhui). He also received two awards: the

18. This passage appears in the English translation of the biography cited above but not in the 1994 edition of *Zhuan falun*. I have not been able to locate a Chinese source for it.

“Award for Achievement in Borderline Science (bianyuan kexue jinbu jiang)” and a “Special Gold Award (tebie jinjiang)” and the title “A Popular Qigong Master (shou huanying de qigong shi).”

The Zhuan Falun Biography as a Religious Biography

The attacks on Li's biography by the Chinese government focused on three specific points. First, it provided evidence from the relevant police station under the Changchun Public Security Bureau that on 24 September 1994 Li formally changed his birth date from 7 July 1952 to 13 May 1951. It also claimed that he acquired a new identity card on that date. It noted that in 1951, 13 May was the eighth day of the fourth lunar month, the traditional date for the birthday of Sakyamuni. “By changing his birthday to fall on the same day of the birth of the founder of Buddhism,” the press release says, “Li Hongzhi could claim that he is ‘a reincarnation of Sakyamuni’.”¹⁹

The second point of attack related to “investigations and interviews” with “former schoolmates, teachers and neighbours.” These witnesses of Li's past are said to have reported that far from being miraculous or possessed of supernormal powers Li was an ordinary child whose school results were not exceptional. They reported that his claimed cultivation history was “nonsense,” “impossible” or that “I have never seen or heard of that.” His PLA colleagues, with whom he worked as a trumpeter and then an attendant at a guesthouse between 1970 and 1982, said that “the full schedule of rehearsals and performances and the strict military discipline and work timetable could never have left him any time to practise any *qigong*.”²⁰ Finally, his employers at the Changchun Cereals and Oil company where he worked from 1982 until 1991, said that Li had no knowledge of any *qigong* before attending “the *qigong* training class in 1988.”²¹

The final specific attack related to the development of the *falun gong* exercises. The press release claims that Li made up *falun gong* on the basis of two other *qigong* systems he had learnt – *chanmi gong* and *jiugong bagua gong* – and added “some movements from Thai dance that he picked up during a visit to relatives in Thailand.” It claims that two early followers named Li Jingchao and Liu Yuqing helped to develop the system and that, far from being tested exhaustively beforehand, it was only complete one month before its official launch. Other early followers collaborated with writing teaching materials and touching up photographic images. Even Li's clothes were part of an act: “The yellow garments worn by Li Hongzhi were an opera costume purchased in a store.”

The direction of this attack is clear: the biography of Li Hongzhi is

19. “Li Hongzhi qiren qishi,” p. 64, “Li Hongzhi: the man and his deeds,” p. 57. This article also lists the other items of bureaucratic registration that have the changed birthdate and some documents issued in 1986 and 1991 on which the original birthdate stands.

20. “Li Hongzhi qiren qishi,” p. 64, “Li Hongzhi: the man and his deeds,” p. 58.

21. “Li Hongzhi qiren qishi,” p. 65, “Li Hongzhi: the man and his deeds,” p. 58.

simply untrue. Like the *falun gong* system itself, claim the authorities, it is a fabrication and to demonstrate its falsity is to open the eyes of the credulous to Li's deceptions. In the case of *falun gong*, of course, it is very difficult to find sources of information that are not associated with either the movement itself or with the Chinese authorities. The biography of Li Hongzhi is exemplary in this respect as the two versions of Li's life are simply not commensurable. Despite the fact that the attack from the government side claims the authority of witnesses, they are mostly unnamed²² – and must remain, for the purposes of analysis, textual fabrications.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that in the West as in China, in the last months of the 20th century the claim to veracity and proof and the appeal of debunking a spiritual fraud were, and remain, strong. If the biography of Li Hongzhi is examined as a piece of text *for its textual characteristics*, it is revealed not as a clumsy fraud but as a remarkable contemporary rewriting of an ancient tradition which the Chinese government is implicitly acknowledging and contesting.

Li Hongzhi's biography belongs to the tradition of Chinese biographies of religious figures. There are both Daoist and Buddhist subtraditions within the greater stream of religious biography but they share a great deal, especially from the structural point of view. The earliest surviving collection, the proto-Daoist *Liexian zhuan* probably dates from the second century CE. Within the Daoist tradition collections of biographies of immortals followed every few centuries and reached their apogee with the late Song or early Yuan *Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian*. Large collections continued to appear through the Late Imperial period and into the 20th century.²³ The earliest surviving Buddhist collection is *Gaoseng zhuan* from approximately 530, but it was based on earlier lost collections. As in the Daoist case, collections of Buddhist biography continued into modern times.²⁴ The goals of the lives that Daoist and Buddhist biographies narrate are, of course, as different as the theologies they are based on, but the overarching shape of the life and some specific types of detail or incident are common.

Religious biographies in general, not just Buddhist or Daoist ones, generally climax in the transcendence of the central figure. The variety of that transcendence changes – immortality, nirvana, resurrection – but the narrative force of the genre is found in the inexorable movement towards

22. A notable exception is Pan Yufang, who claims to have been the midwife present at Li's birth. See Xinhua she, "Li Hongzhi bian xiahua gai shengri" ("Li Hongzhi made up lies and changed his birthdate"), *Renmin ribao*, 29 July 1999.

23. On the Daoist biographical tradition see my "Immortality and transcendence," in Livia Kohn (ed.), *Daoism Handbook* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 109–133, Stephen Eskildsen, *Asceticism in Early Taoist Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), Stephan Peter Bumbacher, *The Fragments of the Daoxue zhuan* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2000), and my *Biography and Religion in China and Tibet* (London: Curzon Press, 2002).

24. On the Buddhist biographical tradition in China, see John Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997) and Arthur F. Wright's classic article, "Biography and hagiography: Hui-chiao's lives of eminent monks," in Kaizuka Shigeki (ed.), *Silver Jubilee Volume of the Zinbun-Kagaku-Kenkyusyo* (Kyoto: Kyoto University, 1954).

the passage from a mundane human existence to another form. Li Hongzhi's biography follows exactly this pattern. The string of masters that instructs him, the new heights of cultivation he achieves and the growing powers that he attains, ultimately and necessarily lead to his supreme power and enlightenment. After enlightenment is achieved, two more traditional elements appear in the biography. First, Li passes on his knowledge to disciples in the form of the development of *falun gong*: his major work *Zhuan falun*, literally "turning the wheel of the law" significantly borrows its title (unacknowledged) from the standard translation of the first sermon of the Buddha. Secondly, he demonstrates his spiritual attainments to the world at large and is honoured for them – in his case at the Oriental Health Expos of 1992 and 1993. The final chapter of a standard religious biography is, of course, missing. Typically the subject would ascend bodily into heaven, pass into nirvana or enter into holy bliss. One remarkable aspect of Li's holy life, as written, is that his own life, in this world, has not ended.

Again, the traditional forms of religious biography – and indeed in the Chinese tradition in orthodox dynastic biography – demand that their subject has demonstrated his or her powers or at least potential to attain powers while young. In this way the later august position that the subject reaches can in some sense be seen as having been prefigured if not preordained. In Li Hongzhi's case this happens in three ways. The first, as the biographer notes, is that his birthday coincided with that of Sakyamuni but whether, as the Chinese authorities claimed, this amounts to seeking recognition as Sakyamuni's reincarnation is dubious: identical birthdays are not typically signs that someone is a reincarnation. The second is that as a child Li showed signs of moral rectitude and compassion not usually expected of a child and consciously cultivated the three-part morality of *falun gong* from the age of four. Thirdly, of course, his supernatural abilities, so handy in the playground, are acquired from the age of eight. Part of the attack by the Chinese authorities was to deny this pre-history of *falun gong*, insisting instead that it was invented in 1992.

A common goal of much traditional Chinese religious biography is the establishment of genealogy. Thus, at the level of an individual biography the subject's masters are noted, and when that biography is read in conjunction with the master's biography, where his masters are noted in turn, a set of biographies becomes a de facto lineage map. Indeed some collections of biographies such as the *Han Tianshi shijia* are constructed on precisely this model where each of the Daoist Celestial Masters receives a biography in order. Li Hongzhi's biography is fascinating in this regard as it grants him a kind of genealogy in the bounds of his own life. The typical sequential model outlined above is compressed into his "more than 20 masters." In doing so, he can be constructed not just as the inheritor of the various traditions his masters represent but as their apogee and unifier.

Concurrent with the establishment of a genealogy, and implicit in such a project, is the definition and defence of orthodoxy. The line of masters

invoked by the biography implicitly embody an orthodoxy which Li Hongzhi affirms. At the same time, others who cannot claim the same heritage are rendered heterodox. While Li Hongzhi's biography makes the claim that his method derives from the accumulated wisdom and cultivation of his line of masters, it also seeks to establish his position within *qigong* circles. Thus, in the first sentence of the biography, the context in which Li is to be seen is defined as "the world of *qigong* in China." That same world is later characterized as being "shrouded" in a "miasma." *Falun gong*, as opposed to other *qigong* schools, has excluded "all the factors which may lead to deviation, such as the use of *yinian* (the intention) when practising and the spontaneous self-generating movements in the exercise." This stigmatization of the *qigong* world of the early 1990s is reinforced in Li's writings. The first words of the first lecture of *Zhuan falun*, first published in 1994, stress the differences between *falun gong* and other varieties of *qigong*:

Throughout the entire course of my lectures on the *fa* and cultivation practice, I have been responsible to society and practitioners. The results we have received have been good, and their impact upon the entire society has also been quite good. A few years ago there were many *qigong* masters who taught *qigong*. All of what they taught belonged to the level of healing and fitness. Of course, I am not saying that their ways of practice were not good. I am only pointing out that they did not teach anything at a higher level. I also know the *qigong* situation in the entire country. At present, I am the only person genuinely teaching *qigong* towards high levels at home and abroad.²⁵

A more powerful warning comes from the second lecture in *Zhuan falun*. It is ironic that the language of its accusations was to be echoed in the attacks of the Chinese authorities some five years later.

Do not be taken in by how reputable some sham *qigong* masters are. A well-known person does not necessarily know things well ... Nowadays some sham *qigong* masters have made things chaotic, and use *qigong* as a means of securing fame or fortune. They are cults expanding their evil influence, and they outnumber those genuine *qigong* masters many times. Every day people all say things and do things this way, and you just believe them? You may think *qigong* is just like that, but it is not. What I am saying is the genuine principle.²⁶

Thus, reading the *Zhuan falun* biography in terms of religious biography shows its importance as a tool in asserting the pre-eminent position of *falun gong* within the *qigong* movement as a whole during the mid-1990s. This, in turn, implies that the biography's intended audience came from the world of *qigong* where the kinds of claims made about Li may have been greeted with less scepticism than among the general public. The assertions of the authorities in their attacks on the biography, therefore,

25. Li Hongzhi, *Zhuan falun*, third translation edition (New York: The Universe Publishing Company, 2000), p. 1; *Zhuan falun* (Taipei: Yiqun shudian, 2000), p. 1; *Zhuan falun* (1994 edition), p. 1.

26. *Zhuan falun* (third translation edition), p. 87; *Zhuan falun* (2000 Taipei edition), pp. 97–98; *Zhuan falun* (1994 edition), p. 76.

can be seen as an attack on the view of reality current, at that time, amongst practitioners of many varieties of *qigong*.

Apart from the traditions of religious biography, there is clearly another stream of influence acting on Li Hongzhi's biography. Echoes of the high tide of PRC enthusiasm in the rhetoric of the biography have already been noted. Born in 1951 or 1952, Li grew up and reached adulthood before the reform period had begun. Throughout this period, and indeed into the 1980s, and 1990s, the composition and publication of exemplary biographies was sponsored in the interests of the state, much as it had been in pre-modern China. If anything, the role of this tradition of exemplary biography was enhanced with the practice of declaring and celebrating "models" for emulation.²⁷ While the great stature that Li is said to possess is far removed from the self-denying "spirit of the screw" of Lei Feng, the communist supermodel, there are elements in this biography that recall Lei Feng's commitment to service, such as Li helping his mother by "offer[ing] to undertake the tasks of cooking, chopping wood, looking after the house, taking care of his younger brothers and sisters" after seeing her "toiling day and night." Indeed, the definitions given for the three parts of the *falun gong* moral trinity in the *Zhuan falun* biography are reminiscent of popular communist moral instruction of the Lei Feng kind:

"Zhen" (Truth, *sic*) requires that one should behave honestly, tell the truth, not cheat anyone, tell no lies, conceal no faults when he commits them and return to the origin and go back to the truth in the future. "Shan" (Compassion) requires that one should have compassion, not bully, show sympathy for the weak, give help to the poor, be ready to help others and do more good deeds. "Ren" (Forbearance) means looking at the bright side of things in the face of difficulty and insults, enduring them without resentment or hatred, grudge or revenge, and being able to bear the greatest hardship and tolerate what an ordinary person cannot tolerate.

Finally, the way that Li's motivation for formulating *falun gong* is described in the biography stresses both duty to the people (his aim to "serve the people" has been noted above) and the social rather than individual natures of his goals: "People need strong physiques and noble spirits to build a perfect society and live a happy life. He realized his duty and made up his mind to devote himself to working for people's health and building a paradise of noble spirit."

Comparison with the Zhongguo Falun Gong Biography

The *Zhuan falun* biography was, as noted above, based largely on an earlier essay found as an appendix to the 1993 edition of *Zhongguo falun gong*. This earlier essay was about twice as long as the *Zhuan falun* biography and the first half of it accounts for almost all of the first four parts of the latter biography, in most places by simple transcription. The

27. See Beate Geist, "Lei Feng and the 'Lei Fengs of the eighties' – models and modelling in China," *Papers on Far Eastern History*, Vol. 42 (September 1990), pp. 97–124.

fifth part that concerns Li Hongzhi's appearance at the December 1992 and 1993 Oriental Health Expos does not come from the *Zhongguo falun gong* essay. References in the earlier essay to *falun gong* being made public in May 1992 suggest that it was completed in late 1992. In the parts of the two essays that correspond closely with each other, there are three major points of difference: discrepancies in accounts of Li's background, the textual presence of the author and the intrusion of history.

First, the two essays present different versions of the circumstances of Li Hongzhi's childhood.²⁸ About a page of detail in the earlier essay is left out of the later biography. In it Li's family is described as being "completely poverty-stricken (*shifen pinhan*)," his mother "relying on a wage of some 30 *yuan* to bring up the whole family." In these circumstances, he acquired a "stubborn personality and a spirit of bearing hardships and tolerating hard work." In the later essay he is described as coming from "an ordinary intellectual's family." The effect of this change in social status is to shift Li from the "ideal" of a boy who had to overcome great hardships to attain his great triumph, to the "unexceptional" where he is represented as being little different from his friends. From a religious point of view, this shift allows for the greater possibility of emulation – it is easier for prospective adherents to identify with someone with an "average" social background, as opposed to the exceptional figure who rose from the gutter. This is reminiscent of the debate in orthodox Daoism over the prerequisites for immortality.²⁹ On one side of that argument were those who maintained that one needed to be "fated" to achieve immortality – a position which denied most people the possibility of attaining the goal and therefore rendered emulation pointless – and on the other were those who claimed that anybody with sufficient will was able to attain it. In addition, Li's social status in the earlier essay may show a sensitivity to issues of class background, defending him from possible attack by representing him as coming from the bottom of the heap.

Secondly, in the *Zhongguo falun gong* essay, the author himself intrudes into the narrative at several points, all of which have been removed in the later version. A typical example occurs in the discussion of Li's great compassion and alludes to the narrator's presence in Li's domestic world: "Once, when I was chatting with [Li's] nine-year-old daughter, she told me a 'secret' on the quiet: 'What my Daddy is scared of most is seeing people cry'."

In the second half of the earlier essay, none of which appears in the *Zhuan falun* biography, the presence of the author is considerably more

28. In addition, the simple chronology of Li's life is different in the two accounts in two places. I note these differences for the sake of completeness, without claiming to understand why the changes were made. It may be that the revisions were actually simple corrections of errors in the earlier text. In the earlier version the anecdote about predicting the oncoming storm is said to have happened in July 1989 whereas in the later version it happened in July 1990. In the earlier essay, Li is said to have started to investigate all kinds of *qigong* practice in 1987, while in the later essay this has become 1984.

29. See my entry on "hagiography" in Fabrizio Pregadio (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Taoism* (London: Curzon Press, forthcoming).

apparent, taking the role of arbitrator on some key issues, as discussed below. Clearly the removal of the author's interventions into the biographical narrative was a vital move in rendering the "report on a special topic" into an authorized biography. Observations from the subject's daughter appear to have no place in such an essay; indeed all mention of Li's family is removed from the *Zhuan falun* essay save the passing observation that, "For the cause of *Falun dafa*, he gave up his job and left his family behind." The question of Li's family is fascinating: we know from this biography that he has, or had, brothers and sisters, at least one daughter and presumably a wife. Only one photograph of him on the *falun gong* photo archive on the internet shows him with his family – his wife and a single daughter – standing in front of a seaport.³⁰ While it is clear that the anecdote cited above humanizes Li (as do comments from Zhu Huiguang translated below) its removal focuses the attention of the reader more firmly on the central figure of Li Hongzhi and on *falun gong* as an individuated religious practice, focused primarily on the practitioner and his or her own cultivation. Within this system, families, and the kind of communal responsibilities that come with them, are secondary.³¹ It is also the case that the removal of a mediating voice reinforces the overall authority of the biography as the undeniably "true" story of Li Hongzhi.

In addition to removing the textual presence of the author, the *Zhuan falun* biography also detaches the biography from its historical context. In the introduction to the earlier essay, discussing the appearance of Li Hongzhi in 1992, Zhu writes:

1992 was a most important page in the history of China's development. After the speeches of Comrade Deng Xiaoping's "imperial tour of the south," reform was deepened and the economy grew more prosperous each day. When the great wave of reform surged, and when even more people rushed to "dive into the sea of business," in the world of *qigong* Li Hongzhi unexpectedly appeared.

Bearing in mind that this passage was written in the same year as the events it describes, and given the positive tone in which the reform process is described, the meaning of placing Li's appearance in this

30. See http://209.196.48.36/photo/images/master_li_pics/heying/images/Master_family_01_big.jpg (accessed on 4 July 2001).

31. See, for instance, the following passage from *Zhuan falun*, p. 95: "Cultivation practice must take place through tribulations so as to test whether you can part with and care less about different kinds of human sentimentality and desires. If you are attached to these things, you will not succeed in cultivation. Everything has its karmic relationship. Why can human beings be human? It is because human beings have sentimentality. They live just for this sentimentality. Affection among family members, love between a man and a woman, love for parents, feelings, friendship, doing things for friendship, and everything else all relate to this sentimentality. Whether a person likes to do something or not, is happy or unhappy, loves or hates something, and everything in the entire human society comes from this sentimentality. If this sentimentality is not relinquished, you will be unable to practise cultivation. If you are free from this sentimentality, nobody can affect you. An everyday person's mind will be unable to sway you. What takes over in its place is benevolence, which is something more noble. Of course, it is not easy to abandon this sentimentality right away. Cultivation practice is a long process and a process of gradually giving up one's attachments. Nonetheless, you must be strict with yourself" (*Zhuan falun* (third translation edition), p. 162; *Zhuan falun* (2000 Taipei edition), pp. 180–81; *Zhuan falun* (1994 edition), p. 140).

context may be that Li is somehow parallel to Deng. In that case, *falun gong* would stand as the equivalent to Deng's economic reforms in the world of *qigong*.

In another place in the earlier essay, Li's second master Baji zhenren, on the verge of leaving, warns Li that great calamities will come in society and that he should simply remember to practise diligently. The author notes that, "not long afterwards, the Cultural Revolution started" and that Li "did not take join any organization at all, nor did he receive the special honour of 'red guard.'" His fellow students at middle school all knew that he practised *gongfu* and they all wanted to induce him into entering their group, but he declined them all." Here, clearly, the fact of Li's unwillingness to participate in organizations stresses his lack of interest in politics in general, an attractive characteristic in 1992. In addition, his very traditional relationship with his teachers throughout the Cultural Revolution period is in great contrast to the ritual humiliation of teachers in those times. These references to events in history, to the contexts of Li's spiritual development and early career, have disappeared in the later *Zhuan falun* biography. Instead, the only dates that occur refer to particular events in Li's own life. It is as if he had existed in a society in which nothing of importance impinged on the lives of the individuals within it, rather than the China of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s when scarcely more could have taken place. Thus, the authorized biography is shorn of historical particularity; like the removal of a particular author, the removal of history generalizes the biography, lifting it into a kind of universalized realm where the focus of the story is simply on the spiritual development of a single figure.

The second half of the *Zhongguo falun gong* essay, none of which appears in the *Zhuan falun* biography, departs from purely biographical concerns to discuss *falun gong* as a cultivation system and the status of Li Hongzhi. The section on *falun gong* largely consists of testimonials from adherents arranged under four subheadings: strengthening the body, curing diseases, correcting errors and eliminating heterodoxies, and enhancing the *xinxing*. The last section of this essay addresses the questions, asked, the author says, by "some students": "Is the teacher a Buddha? What ordinary person could have these spiritual powers?" As is implied by the conjunction of these questions, the conclusion that Li Hongzhi is a "living Buddha" is reached, according to the author, by observers of Li's amazing powers – primarily healing – who disbelieve that any ordinary person could perform such actions. Since this issue goes to the heart of discussions over Li's status as a special kind of being, and, thus, the relationship he has with his followers, I present the following discussion in its entirety:

In transmission classes, when Li Hongzhi was lecturing, several of the students had strange experiences to different degrees. Ordinary people could feel something pressing down on their heads; some said it felt like they were wearing a cap. Lots of people could feel a tightness between their eyebrows, and in the hollow of their palms and in their lower abdomens they all had law wheels rotating. The more sensitive of them could feel law wheels in rotation in all the important joints and acupuncture

points in their bodies. Students whose third eyes had been opened could sense a white light twinkling in front of their eyes and some of them could see an orchid-purple light spinning in front of them. A lot of the students could see a column of light on top of the teacher's head, a white light on his body and balls of light surrounding him. The balls of light were as big as basketballs, continuously moving. Students whose third eye levels were comparatively high could see a gold Buddha image. Beijing student Wang Changsi said, "As I was listening to the lecture, I saw a gleaming gold Buddha with my own eyes, I saw four gold Buddhas revolving together one after the other. During the night of fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month of 1992, I saw a great Buddha in a nearby square filling the entire sky." There were also a great many students who saw this sight. After some people who did not believe in *qigong* heard this report they said that it was a hallucination, that it was unbelievable. In that case, a great many people all produced this kind of hallucination – is not this phenomenon itself also worthy of research? Analysing it from the point of view of psychology, the production of any hallucination is conditioned, yet there are no Buddha images in the transmission classes and Li Hongzhi has clearly stated that *falun gong* is not Buddhism and does not advocate chanting the Buddha's name or prostrating before the Buddha. Thus, I consider that if any of the people who do not believe in *qigong* could experience one *falun gong* class first hand, they would have a new outlook and also gain a great many benefits.

There are some people who ask, "Is Li Hongzhi actually human? Or is he a Buddha?"

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

Thus, apart from the fascinating insights this passage provides into the way that Li Hongzhi's followers viewed him, at least at an early stage in the movement,³² it shows the author judiciously weighing up the evidence and discussing possible causes for the phenomena described. Even in that part of the second section of the *Zhongguo falun gong* essay where testimonials are given he is always present mediating the material. By removing this latter part of the essay, the editors of the *Zhuan falun* biography have achieved two goals. First, they have removed the authorial voice as they did for the first part of the essay and secondly, they have managed to leave open the question of Li's status. Whereas Zhu Huiguang raises the question of Li's Buddhahood only to dismiss it, affirming instead a particular interpretation of him derived from the world of *qigong*, the editors of the later biography, by not addressing it directly, leave open the possibility that it cannot be dismissed.

Conclusion

With the removal of Li Hongzhi's biography from its internet and paper publications, *falun gong* lost one of the primary resources of

32. On how some followers viewed Li Hongzhi in 2000 and 2001, see my, "Falun Gong, prophecy and apocalypse," *East Asian History*, No. 23 (June 2002), pp. 149–168.

religious and spiritual movements – the biography of its founder. Such a biography offers the opportunity for the embodiment of the doctrine to be illustrated, for followers to see how the perfectly orthodox life should be lived. In the case of *falun gong* – and this was of particular importance in the early days of the movement when it was still one system amongst many in the *qigong* marketplace – the biography also offered a way of claiming superiority over other *qigong* movements whose founders could not demonstrate the same august lineage as Li Hongzhi.

In the context of an eleven-year history of *falun gong*, the disappearance of the biography can also be seen as part of a larger trend. In the early days of the movement, as evidenced by videos, photos and other evidence, Li Hongzhi was an ever present figure appearing at public events like the Oriental Health Expos or on radio talkback as well as delivering his lectures personally. He is seen correcting the movements of adherents in their exercises, milling about with them informally, signing autographs.³³ For practitioners in China, Li's gradual removal from the scene began in 1994 when he determined not to teach any more instruction classes in China. In 1995 and 1996, Li started to spread his message beyond China, giving lectures in Europe, the United States and Australia. He applied for asylum in the United States in early 1997 and took up residence there when it was granted. After the suppression of the movement, Li moved even further away from the public, not appearing at experience sharing meetings for some 16 months. The only evidence of Li's continuing existence was a new photograph that appeared on the websites on 19 January 2000 with the caption, "Master Li quietly watching the practitioners and people in the world amidst the mountains after leaving New York last July [1999]." Despite his occasional appearance now at selected meetings, Li Hongzhi has become, for most of his followers, an electronically mediated image that produces text, without either a physical presence or a biography.

Falun gong's growth and continued diasporic existence is strong evidence of the power of electronic communication technologies, and in this sense the movement could not have existed in the same form before their development. At the same time, however, as this article has demonstrated, *falun gong* has elements that place it firmly within traditional Chinese religious structures. While the biographies I have discussed relate to the contemporary context and are full of the quotidian detail of modern China, they belong securely in the line of religious biography developed centuries earlier. They are, at once, testimony to the continuing efficacy of the biographical tradition within Chinese religion, evidence of the continuities in religious thought in a period commonly assumed to have been highly inimical to it, and, in the various manifestations of the life of Li Hongzhi on the internet and printed sources, an example of the creative use to which these traditional forms and structures can be put in modern times.

33. See the images on http://209.196.48.36/photo/images/master_li_pics/heyings1.htm.