

Book Reviews

James R. Lewis: *Falun Gong: Spiritual Warfare and Martyrdom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018; paperback; pp. iv, 118.

You must not talk with ordinary people about the high-level things I have taught you. Instead, only talk about our being persecuted, about our being good people and being wrongly persecuted, about our freedom of belief being violated, about our human rights being violated. They can accept all those things, and they will immediately support you and express their sympathy. ... Knowing those facts, the people of the world will say that Falun Gong is being persecuted and that the persecutors are so evil. They'll say those things, and isn't that enough?

– Li Hongzhi 2003 (Quoted in the Introduction to Lewis 2018, p. 1)

As this passage indicates, Li Hongzhi (LHZ) – Falun Gong's (FLG's) founder-leader – cautions practitioners to refrain from sharing his more esoteric teachings with outsiders. Instead, LHZ's followers are told to present 'ordinary people' (meaning all non-practitioners) with a black-and-white narrative regarding how their 'peaceful' spiritual group is being repressed by the sinister People's Republic of China (PRC). This strategy has been remarkably successful in shaping the opinions of non-Chinese observers.

James R. Lewis's *Falun Gong: Spiritual Warfare and Martyrdom*, the subject of the current review, provides an overview of this movement. However, unlike other treatments, Lewis focuses much of his attention on Li Hongzhi's more controversial (and less publicised) teachings. These esoteric teachings reveal a less savoury side of FLG – an aspect that prompts followers to actively seek out brutalisation at the hands of law enforcement authorities, and even martyrdom in the name of their founder. More generally, the earth is a battleground on which practitioners are subjected to ongoing assault by demons (who can disguise themselves as human beings) which, according to LHZ, 'should be killed' (quoted in Lewis, p. 5).

Following a brief introductory chapter which sets the stage for the balance of the monograph, the second chapter presents a short sketch of Falun Gong, which incorporates an overview of the conflict between FLG and the PRC. Much of the relevant literature produced by both sides adheres to a pattern Lewis refers to as 'duelling atrocity tales'.

The third chapter covers Falun Gong's founder-leader, Li Hongzhi. In addition to providing the basics of his biography Lewis draws attention to LHZ's gradually expanding sense of his self-importance. At the outset Li Hongzhi presented himself as an exalted master of qigong. However, as FLG grew into an increasingly successful mass movement, the

master began to portray himself as a Buddha, eventually revealing to followers that he was a god.

The fourth chapter covers Li Hongzhi's doctrine, with a special focus on his teachings about the upcoming end of the world, on the war with demons, on Falun Gong's idiosyncratic understanding of karma, and on what Lewis describes as 'spiritual warfare'. Li Hongzhi overtly instructs practitioners on how to kill demonic entities as well as how to spiritually assault perceived enemies of the movement.

One of the most dramatic events in the ongoing conflict between Falun Gong and the People's Republic of China was the self-immolation of five practitioners on 23 January 2001 (subsequently referred to as the '1.23 Incident'). While FLG responded by asserting that the PRC had staged the self-immolations (Falun Gong even created a video, *False Fire*, that claimed to prove this accusation), it is clear that these were devoted followers who interpreted some of LHZ's teachings as encouraging martyrdom in his name.

Falun Gong has been a notable exception where the negative treatment most new religions receive in the media is concerned. In Chapter 6 Lewis analyses the factors that combine to make Falun Gong this exception. He also calls attention to FLG's pattern of attacking critics, a response attributable to LHZ's direction to followers to 'clarify the truth'.

Referring back to his analysis of Falun Gong in the preceding chapters, Lewis discusses his approach

to Falun Gong in an afterword. A significant part of this discussion utilises David Ownby's study of FLG – as presented in the latter's monograph, *Falun Gong and the Future of China* (2008) – as a foil for his own perspective. Finally, in his exhaustive bibliography Lewis states that he 'tried to bring together as many English-language academic sources on Falun Gong' (p. 99) as possible.

Lewis's monograph is a welcome addition to the scholarly literature on Falun Gong. Excluding pro-FLG apologetic works and explicitly anti-FLG volumes, the principal books on this topic are: David A. Palmer's *Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China* (Columbia University Press, 2007); James W. Tong's *Revenge of the Forbidden City: The Suppression of the Falungong in China, 1999–2005* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Maria Hsia Chang's *Falun Gong: The End of Days* (Yale University Press, 2012); Benjamin Penny's *The Religion of Falun Gong* (University of Chicago Press, 2012); Juha A. Vuori's *Critical Security and Chinese Politics: The Anti-Falun Gong Campaign* (Routledge, 2014); and David Ownby's *Falun Gong and the Future of China* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

Ownby's volume has been the most influential of these half-dozen titles. His strength is his positive approach to ground-level practitioners. But this is also part of his weakness, as he tends to downplay or to skip over the less pleasant aspects of FLG. Lewis's study thus makes an important contribution as a corrective to Ownby by highlighting these

aspects without degenerating into an anti-cult diatribe.

I did, however, question the appropriateness of the extended treatment of Li Hongzhi's self-aggrandising assertions in the latter part of Chapter 2. While a certain amount of this kind of material is essential, I did not feel that such a detailed examination of LHZ's god complex contributed meaningfully to an analysis of Falun Gong's violent side (the volume's stated focus).

I also found myself wishing Lewis had included more theory. The one place in the text where he engages in theoretical analysis is in the latter part of his media chapter (Chapter 6). However, perhaps I am asking too much of such a concise book, which is, after all, intended to be a short introduction to the topic.

My complaints are, however, relatively minor. In general, this is a fine monograph that illuminates a mostly hidden side of this controversial movement. It may even be that *Falun Gong: Spiritual Warfare and Martyrdom* will eventually influence the debate about Falun Gong; hopefully, it will change at least some observers' perceptions of the group as a 'peaceful' group being unfairly persecuted in the People's Republic of China.

Falun Gong: Spiritual Warfare and Martyrdom will be of interest to scholars of religion, particularly sinologists and new religious movements specialists. It will also be attractive to a general readership curious about this group and why it was banned in China.

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