

Innocent Victims of Chinese Oppression, Or Media Bullies? Falun Gong's In-Your-Face Media Strategies

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Rather than a finished paper, I will be reading from a selection of my sources as the basis for my presentation. I will begin with a story that exemplifies my conclusion:

[A]s I write this..., I'm sitting with a stonking great glass of red wine beside me to try to calm my nerves. I blame the Falun Gong. Yet again, this militant, strident, obsessive group is trying to gatecrash Auckland's Santa parade and won't take no for an answer.

The quasi-political, faux-spiritual group has been trying to get in behind Santa for years and when they're told to shove off and take their poxy pastel posters with them, they get stroppy [belligerent] and threaten High Court action.... We were discussing this on *Talkback* [a call-in program] and, within minutes, the loyal practitioners of Falun Gong, aka Falun Dafa, were clogging the lines wanting to tell me how spiritual and peaceful and gentle they were and all they wanted to do was spread love and light.

I have no problem with a little light love spreading – just not in the Santa parade. ... If they think they're going to win friends and influence people by taking the Santa parade trustees to court, then there's clearly a cultural disconnect that needs to be corrected. It's the Santa parade, for goodness sake. Could there be a more benign organisation?

I quickly tired of the Falun Gong lobbyists after a couple of calls and banned them from the airwaves.

That didn't stop them calling constantly, threatening legal action, ... and promising all kinds of retribution. My flabby liberal laissez-faire attitude towards these people has turned into active dislike. They are passive-aggressive bullies – and they don't belong in the Santa parade.¹

¹ *The New Zealand Herald*, Kerre Woodham (McIvor), "Booze and Bullies," 23 Nov 2008.

Falun Gong (FLG) actually did file suit against the Auckland Children's Christmas Parade Trust (and lost). Michael Barnett, chairman of the Trust, was compelled to hire private security after FLG picketed his office and harassed him. More broadly, I should note that FLG regularly tries to participate in Chinese cultural parades and festivals all over the world. Their applications to join in these events are often rejected on the basis of the strong political message they insist on delivering.

I will now backtrack and provide some background for

- (1) How FLG managed to achieve media dominance outside of the China
- (2) How FLG became so belligerent, to the point of alienating people
- (3) Finally, I will draw on some notions from social movement theory to partially interpret FLG's media strategy

PART I – Factors in Falun Gong's Media Success

To begin with, more than ten years ago, Heather Kavan (Massey University, NZ) read all of the stories with more than a minimum mention of FLG published in Australian and New Zealand newspapers from the time Falun Gong was first mentioned in May 1999 until the end of June 2005 (excluding Chinese media and FLG's own newspaper, *The Epoch Times*). Her findings remain broadly representative of overall trends and can be extended to the present period and to the Anglophone media world more generally:

Although studies of the Australian media found that the press tend to discredit new religious movements and magnify their deviance (Richardson, 1996; Selway, 1992), reporters seem to be receptive to Falun Gong, minimising the religion's unusual beliefs and presenting the movement as compatible with mainstream activities. ... I found that journalists have been supportive of Falun Gong. 61% of reports were favourable, 33% were neutral, and only 6% were negative.

19.5% of the articles were extremely positive to Falun Gong. These articles were so impassioned that they often appeared to be verbatim from practitioners' sources, and many contained strong anti-Chinese sentiments. They included: (1) alchemy stories of practitioners (all female) being healed of serious illnesses, testimonies of psychological benefits and even a reversal of the aging process; (2) heart-rending atrocity stories of members (mostly female) being tortured or kidnapped by the Chinese government,

and (3) articles that had a propagandist tone.

31.1% of the stories were totally positive to Falun Gong, but not to the point of appearing to have been authored by participants, or being highly exaggerated. These included numerous stories of protests against human rights abuses, as well as success stories in which the interviewees (all male) linked their success to practising Falun Gong.

10.4% of the stories gave alternative perspectives, (for example the Chinese embassy's views, and reasons why Air New Zealand banned a Falun Gong airport advertisement), but gave a positive impression of Falun Gong. In this category I also included positive articles in which the author made qualifying remarks, such as "Leaving aside the rationality or otherwise of the Falun Gong religious movement . . ." (Fitzgerald, 2005).

13.2% of the articles gave alternative perspectives, but left no impression of which side the author favoured. Examples include reported debates about a Falun Gong float being banned from a Christmas parade, and comments about Falun Gong members being prohibited from using loud hailers [loud speakers] outside the Chinese embassy.

19.8% were neutral reports of facts, which no party would be likely to dispute, such as protests. Most of these articles were brief summaries of international news.

2.6% of articles gave alternative perspectives, but Falun Gong came out looking negative. Most of these were reports of negative activities, where the authors added that Falun Gong members denied responsibility. Examples include reports of practitioners allegedly self-immolating in Tiananmen Square, and hacking into Hong Kong newspaper websites to redirect people to a site containing Falun Gong messages.

3.4% of articles were negative towards Falun Gong. These either reported negative activities, such as alleged Falun Gong members slashing their wrists at Sydney's Villawood detention centre, or only quoted sources critical of Falun Gong, such as the Chinese embassy or Rupert Murdoch.

No articles were extremely negative, in the sense of appearing to have been authored by anti-Falun Gong or anti-cult sources.²

² Heather Kavan (2005), "Print Media Coverage of Falun Gong in Australia and New Zealand." In: Peter Horsfield, ed.: Papers from the Trans-Tasman Research Symposium, 'Emerging Research in Media, Religion and Culture'. Melbourne: RMIT Publishing, pp. 74-85. The articles to which Kavan refers are: James T. Richardson (1996). "Journalistic bias

Given these rather remarkable statistics and the sharp contrast between media treatments of FLG and other new religious movements, the question becomes, Why is FLG treated differently? I believe this arises from a combination of different factors.

In the first place, the movement's founder-leader, Li Hongzhi (LHZ), explicitly discourages followers from telling outsiders about the group's inner ['high-level'] teachings, some of which are quite strange, not to mention racist, sexist and homophobic.³ Instead, he instructs them to present FLG as an innocent spiritual movement being persecuted by the People's Republic of China (PRC); e.g.:

... you must not talk about high-level things. What you know are things that Gods should know. Those things are what I taught to you, not to worldly people. So you shouldn't tell those things to ordinary people. ...only talk about our being persecuted, about our real situation, 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 to you 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?⁴

A second important factor that plays into Falun Gong's media success is that by shifting conversations about FLG away from the group's inner teachings to a discourse about human rights, FLG is able to situate itself into a popular interpretive framework which views the PRC through the lens of political repression. In an article originally published in 1999, James Mann argues that stories about China in the American media (and, by extension, Western media more generally) "tend to be governed at any given time by a

towards new religious movements in Australia." *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. 11(3), pp. 289-302 and D. Selway (1992). "Religion in the mainstream press: The challenge for the future." *Australian Religious Studies Review*, 5(2), pp. 18-24.

³ I have briefly discussed this aspect of LHZ's teachings in, "Sucking the 'De' Out of Me: How an Esoteric Theory of Persecution and Martyrdom Fuels Falun Gong's Assault on Intellectual Freedom." *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 7:1 (2016), pp. 101-102. I also discuss the aspect of LHZ's teachings that prompts followers to seek martyrdom. The most detailed treatment of FLG's teachings in English is Benjamin Penny's excellent, *The Religion of Falun Gong* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012)

⁴ Li Hongzhi, "Explaining the Fa During the 2003 Lantern Festival at the U.S. West Fa Conference." (15 February 2003. Los Angeles). LHZ's rhetorical question practically begs the further question, Enough for what? If Li's purpose is convert more individuals to FLG and thus save them from the suffering during imminent apocalypse, then, according to his own teachings, this is nowhere near enough to save them. Rather, this minimal amount of information is just enough to evoke public sympathy for FLG's campaign to overturn the ban against the group in China. This goal – not saving souls – appears to be the overriding focus of LHZ's concern.

single story, image or concept”:⁵

In the 1950s and the 1960s, the “frame” was of China as little blue ants or automatons. In the 1970s, following the Nixon administration’s opening, the frame was of the virtuous (entertaining, cute) Chinese, displaying their timeless qualities even under communism. In the 1980s, the frame was that China was “going capitalist.” And for most of the 1990s, the frame was of a repressive China. ... since the American frame of the 1990s says that China is a repressive regime, then virtually every story about China seems obliged at some point to mention the theme of political repression. (Ibid)

In other words, the story line that LHZ encourages his followers to present to outsiders fits nicely into a narrative that Westerners are prepared to hear – it reinforces what they already think they know about China.

Over and above this narrative frame, it is objectively the case that China is and has been repressing FLG – a factor that should be analytically separated from the larger generic interpretive frame that observers bring to media reports about the PRC. This factor is not, however, as simple as it may first appear. As I and others have pointed out, “by their provocative acts,” it is clear that followers “deliberately seek” and provoke brutalization at the hands of authorities.⁶ In the early days following the banning of the movement, individual practitioners could avoid jail terms simply by signing a statement renouncing Falun Gong. LHZ, however, preached the spiritual benefits of being persecuted⁷ – even going so far as promising full ‘Consummation’ (FLG’s equivalent of Enlightenment) to those who made the ultimate sacrifice.⁸ I would not normally include the facts on the ground such as these as being part of a larger media *strategy*. In this case, however, LHZ’s conscious intention behind encouraging protest and resistance seems to be that he expects the media spectacle of practitioners being brutalized by police will evoke international outrage, thereby bringing pressure to bear on the PRC to lift the ban on FLG (as I will further discuss in the final section of this paper).

Yet another factor is FLG’s various media enterprises and sophisticated use of the Internet.

⁵ James Mann (1999) “Framing China.” *Media Studies Journal: Covering China* 13:1.

⁶ David A. Palmer (2001). «Falun Gong: Between Sectarianism and Universal Salvation.» *China Perspectives* 35, p. 17.

⁷ Lewis (2016) “Sucking the ‘De’ Out of Me.”

⁸ Susan J. Palmer (2003). “Healing to Protest: Conversion Patterns Among the Practitioners of Falun Gong.” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 6:2, 348-364.

The group was already effectively using email in China for the purpose of organizing demonstrations (e.g., the Zhongnanhai demonstration) before being banned.⁹ Four years later, practitioners were maintaining “hundreds of sites around the world.”¹⁰ This number has undoubtedly multiplied in the intervening dozen years, due, in part, to the fact that “most overseas members are Chinese students and scholars who have both easy access to the Internet and the requisite cultural capital and technical capabilities.”¹¹

At the global level, [this] has ensured that [FLG’s] interpretation of events prevails over that of the PRC government. Western press coverage has been overwhelmingly supportive of Falun Gong and critical of PRC authorities, and negative assessments of the movement outside of the PRC are few and far between. Undoubtedly, the extensive information which practitioners have posted on their websites provides a ready resource for sympathetic journalists with tight deadlines.¹²

Additionally, by May 2000 – shortly following the ban – members had set up their own newspaper outside of the PRC and were also publishing it on the web by August. They established New Tang Dynasty TV (initially in New York), a channel directed particularly to the Chinese diaspora, in 2001. Sound of Hope radio was initiated in 2003. Beginning in 1999, Western media outlets who lacked their own reporters on the ground in China have received “most of their international information about Falun Gong from press releases from the Rachlin media group. What we are not told is that this group is essentially a public relations firm for Falun Gong, managed by Gail Rachlin – one of Li’s most avid disciples who is also spokesperson of the Falun Dafa Information Centre.”¹³

FLG has thus been able to influence other media via its extensive presence on the web, through its direct press releases and through its own media. FLG has also been able to propagate its point of view indirectly, through other, non-FLG sources, which creates the impression of multiple sources for the same narrative. Thus, for example, “The press often quote Amnesty International, but Amnesty’s reports are not independently verified, and

⁹ Mark R. Bell and Taylor C. Boas (2003). “Falun Gong and the Internet: Evangelism, community, and struggle for survival.” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 6.2, p. 283.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

¹¹ Yuezhi Zhao (2003) “Falun Gong, Identity, and the Struggle over Meaning Inside and Outside China.” In Nick Couldry and James Curran, eds., *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a Networked World* (Rowman & Littlefield), p. 214.

¹² Bell and Boas (2003) “Falun Gong and the Internet,” p. 287.

¹³ Kavan (2005). Print Media Coverage.

mainly come from Falun Gong sources.”¹⁴ Additionally, Falun Gong followers and/or sympathizers de facto control the relevant webpages in Wikipedia.¹⁵ FLG’s domination of their Wikipedia pages is especially important,

Because Wikipedia's articles are the first- or second-ranked results for most Internet searches. ... This means that the content of these articles really matters. Wikipedia's standards of inclusion – what's in and what's not – affect the work of journalists, who routinely read Wikipedia articles and then repeat the wikiclaims as “background” without bothering to cite them.¹⁶

Journalists often work under tight deadlines.¹⁷ As a consequence, Wikipedia seems to offer an attractive option as a seemingly independent, neutral source of information. However, like Amnesty International reports, Wikipedia turns out to be little more than a mouthpiece for the FLG point of view.

Yet another factor for understanding FLG’s media dominance is that the PRC seems to have mostly abandoned the media field outside of China. The PRC’s point of view on FLG is sometimes represented to the outside world by such periodicals as the *People’s Daily* and on Chinese Embassy websites in other countries, but the only sustained counter-voice from China is the ‘Facts’ website (<http://www.facts.org.cn/>).

PART II – The Development of Falun Gong’s Attack Strategies

One final but highly significant factor in Falun Gong’s overall media strategy has been its attacks on critical media, which later expanded to include demands to be given fora for expressing their messages. This emerged as a core tactic some years before the group was banned. More specifically, after FLG had grown into a large enough of a movement in China to attract media attention, “Falun Gong’s consistent response to any negative media

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ E.g., in this regard refer to Sheng Jiang (2015) “Is Falun Gong’s Wikipedia page objective?” <https://www.quora.com/is-Falun-Gongs-Weikipedia-page-objective> (Accessed 19 June 2016) and User: Colipon/Falun Gong. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Colipon/Falun_Gong (Accessed 20 June 2016).

¹⁶ Simson L. Garfinkel (2008). “Wikipedia and the Meaning of Truth: Why the online encyclopedia’s epistemology should worry those who care about traditional notions of accuracy.” *MIT Technology Review*. <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/411041/wikipedia-and-the-meaning-of-truth/> (Accessed 9 July 2016). For some academicians, Wikipedia “seems to represent the worst of how the Internet has dumbed down the research process, with its easily accessible but unsubstantiated (if not downright false) information.” Darren Crovitz and W. Scott Smoot (2009). “Wikipedia: Friend, Not Foe.” *The English Journal* 98:3, p. 91.

¹⁷ Kavan (2005). Print Media Coverage.

story [was to relentlessly] counterattack against the responsible outlets [using] strategies ranging from exercising in front of news organizations to harassing individual editors and reporters.”¹⁸

Between 1996 and mid-1999, practitioners initiated over 300 protests against negative media reports, forcing dismissals of reporters and receiving public apologies. In China the media are free only as far as they facilitate social stability, so when Falun Gong threatened civil unrest, media managers were quick to capitulate to their demands. For example, when 2,000 protestors surrounded Beijing Television after the station broadcast a segment about a doctoral candidate who became psychotic while practising Falun Gong, the station fired the reporter, aired an immediate sympathetic portrayal, and – to show extra goodwill – handed out 2,000 boxed lunches to the protestors. [Then, h]aving learnt that such protests were fruitful, Falun Gong members [became] unstoppable. To prevent social unrest, Beijing authorities introduced a blackout against any negative media reports on the movement.¹⁹

One should understand that FLG demanded more than simply “the right to reply to media criticism: It demanded the censorship of opponents’ views in the first place. ... [In fact,] the movement actually urged the Chinese government to use its powers of censorship to muzzle the opponents of Falun Gong.”²⁰

FLG seems to have been unique among Qi Gong groups (all of which were experiencing criticism in the late nineties) in vigorously counter-attacking its critics. This almost certainly means that followers were ultimately receiving their marching orders from LHZ himself – though he disingenuously attributed such actions to the independent initiative of others in the movement. Thus, for example, in “Digging Out the Roots,” an essay published a year before FLG was banned, LHZ refers to defending the ‘Dafa,’ a complex term roughly comparable to the Buddhist ‘Dharma’ and the Taoist ‘Tao’:

Recently, a few scoundrels from literary, scientific, and qigong circles, who have been hoping to become famous through opposing qigong, have been constantly causing trouble, as though the last thing they want to see is a peaceful world. Some newspapers, radio stations and TV stations in various parts of the country

¹⁸ Zhao (2003) “Falun Gong, Identity, and the Struggle,” pp.214-215.

¹⁹ Kavan (2008) “Falun Gong in the Media,” p. 3.

²⁰ Zhao (2003) “Falun Gong, Identity, and the Struggle,” p. 215.

have directly resorted to these propaganda tools to harm our Dafa, having a very bad impact on the public. This was deliberately harming Dafa and cannot be ignored. Under these very special circumstances, Dafa disciples in Beijing adopted a special approach to ask those people to stop harming Dafa — this actually was not wrong. This was done when there was no other way ...when students voluntarily approach those uninformed and irresponsible media agencies and explain to them our true situation, this should not be considered wrong.²¹

At the time, LHZ was insisting that FLG was not a political movement, an identification that might have provoked government suppression. Thus in the same essay, he tries to describe these essentially political actions as non-political: “I have said that Dafa absolutely should not get involved in politics. The purpose of this event itself was to help the media understand our actual situation and learn about us positively so that they would not drag us into politics.”²²

After being banned in the PRC, Falun Gong continued to actively try to silence its critics. As an example of the movement’s efforts to suppress contrary voices, in 2001, the Canadian *La Presse Chinoise (Chinese Press)*²³ published a critical piece based around the testimony of a former practitioner. In that case, the newspaper was sued for libel. Four years later, Quebec’s Supreme Court decided against the plaintiff. The ruling included the statement that, “Falun Gong is a controversial movement which does not accept criticism.” Similarly, in response to a condemnatory statement published in the *Chinese Daily* newspaper in Australia, Falun Gong filed a defamation lawsuit in 2004. Two years later, the New South Wales’ Supreme Court ruled in favor of the *Chinese Daily*.²⁴

There have been a number of other lawsuits, but in most cases practitioners rely upon different tactics – though often using the implied *threat* of lawsuits as part of their overall strategy. Thus, for example, in response to an AP piece in 2005, “Chinese Show off Repentant Falun Gong,”²⁵ practitioners staged a protest at AP headquarters and demanded that the report be withdrawn. And to refer to one more example, in 2008, the *New York Times* published an article, “A Glimpse of Chinese Culture That Some Find Hard to

²¹ Li Hongzhi (1998) “Digging Out the Roots.” <http://en.falundafa.org/eng/jjyz72.htm>. Downloaded 20 June 2016

²² Ibid.

²³ <http://www.chineseexpress.com/>

²⁴ Lewis (2017) “Sucking the ‘De’ out of Me.”

²⁵ Associated Press, “Chinese Show Off Repentant Falun Gong” (2005). http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A26902-2005Jan21_2.html Accessed: 5 June 2015.

Watch,"²⁶ critical of a program that had been promoted as a Chinese cultural event, but which was actually a heavily politicized attack on the PRC by the FLG. Movement websites responded with dozens of pieces attacking both the newspaper and the article's author.

According to incomplete statistics, FLG practitioners have filed over 100 lawsuits since 2001 in countries as diverse as the United States, Canada, Sweden, Germany, Belgium, Spain, South Korea, Greece, Australia, Bolivia and the Netherlands, but have seldom won; perhaps like the Church of Scientology, FLG values lawsuits as more of an harassment tactic than as actions they actually hope to win. In more recent years, FLG news outlets have tried to re-ignite international media interest by featuring such stories as the supposed mass renunciation of the Communist Party by members within China (which most other media recognize as implausible) and the supposed mass harvesting of organs from imprisoned FLG members (a claim which has evoked a mixed response from the international media).

Conclusion – Theorizing Falun Gong's Media Strategies

There have been several attempts to theorize the conflict between Falun Gong and Chinese authorities, from Junpeng Li's application of a conflict amplification model²⁷ to my and Nicole Ruskell's partial application of a moral panic approach.²⁸ To focus more specifically on FLG's media strategies, Andrew Junker used the notion of tactical repertoires developed by social movement theorists (e.g., Tilly 1995; Taylor 2004) to contrast Falun Gong's approach to protest against PRC authorities with the Chinese democracy movement's approach. The aspect of his analysis that is particularly relevant to my analysis in the current paper is his discussion of how "[f]amiliar strategies of action shape what actors attempt to accomplish" (p333). Junker demonstrates that both movements rely upon strategies they had developed in China as the basis for their continued demonstrations in other countries. Thus, for example, both movements used the tactic of posting petitions or open letters in China, and continue to use this tactic overseas. FLG utilized public displays of Falun Gong exercises to attract attention in China and continues to deploy the same tactic outside of China (which has no parallel in the democracy movement). And the

²⁶ Eric Konigsberg, "A Glimpse of Chinese Culture That Some Find Hard to Watch." *New York Times* (26 February 2008).

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/06/nyregion/06splendor.html?scp=1&sq=A+Glimpse+of+Chinese+Culture+That+Some+Find+Hard+to+Watch&st=nyt> Accessed: 5 June 2015

²⁷ Junpeng Li (2013) "The Religion of the Nonreligious and the Politics of the Apolitical: The Transformation of Falun Gong from Healing Practice to Political Movement, Religion," *Politics and Religion* 7, pp. 177-208.

²⁸ James R. Lewis and Nicole S. Ruskell (forthcoming), "Understanding Falun Gong's Martyrdom Strategy as Spiritual Terrorism," In James R. Lewis, ed. *Cambridge Companion to Religion and Terrorism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Chinese democracy movement fundraised in China and continues to fundraise overseas (which has no direct parallel in FLG).

However, Junker's reliance on a "tool kit" approach causes him to focus on specific, ground-level tactics and to miss larger strategies such as Falun Gong's attacks on media outlets that broadcast critical stories. As I have already shown, for a few years in the late 1990s, FLG enjoyed marked success counter-attacking critics in the PRC, and seems stuck in this approach as a way of silencing critics outside of China – without considering the ill-will that this tactic potentially evokes (as we saw in the case of Kerre Woodham recounted at the beginning of the present paper).

Using the examples of Suma Ching Hai International, Zhong Gong and Falun Gong/Falun Dafa, the potential for expatriate protest to backfire on protesting groups (that she refers to as 'cybersects') is discussed in Patricia M. Thornton's chapter in Kevin J. O'Brien's edited volume, *Popular Protest in China* (2008). Thornton builds her analysis on what Keck and Sikkink have termed 'boomerangs' of transnational support, which are attempts to mobilize international networks and international opinion as part of an effort to force change back home.²⁹ However, She points out that cultivation of a boomerang effect "comes, not infrequently, at a cost: the bids of these banned sects for transnational support have resulted in increased domestic and international scrutiny of their internal affairs and public relations tactics, and have occasionally produced a backlash of negative media attention for both the networks and their supporters. In contrast to the transformative backfire generated by repressions, which can produce a 'take off' in popular mobilization, backlash undermines the credibility of movement organizers and their capacity to influence established media, politicians, and the public at large."

For her section on Falun Gong, she discusses how the group's media outlets – particularly *The Epoch Times* – 'manufactured dissent' by promoting an ongoing pseudo-story about supposed mass resignations from the Communist Party of China by high-ranking officials. Though dismissed as 'laughable' by other news outlets, *The Epoch Times* and its affiliated organizations continue to maintain a running count of 'resignations' on their websites. She also discusses the example of the Falun Gong's attack on the late Harry Wu, a prominent China critic who had challenged Falun Gong's story about the mass harvesting of organs from imprisoned practitioners and selling them on the international organ market. Falun Gong viciously attacked Wu, accusing him, among other things, of being on China's

²⁹ Margaret E. Keck and Karen Sikkink (1998), *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

payroll – extremely improbable, given Wu’s history with the PRC.

To conclude, Falun Gong’s heavy-handed efforts to silence critics are the least palatable of FLG’s various strategies aimed at directly influencing the media. This approach even threatens, to use Thorton’s term, to ‘backfire’ on FLG, which would thus undermine the movement’s PR strategy of painting itself as an innocent spiritual exercise group. FLG could be proactive and save itself from this negative scenario, but LHZ seems to have become progressively more antagonistic toward international media and thus not inclined to call a halt to his followers’ belligerent activities in this arena. It thus seems only a matter of time before global media outlets wake up and begin to re-perceive Falun Gong as a negative organization – as a kind of Chinese Church of Scientology – that will slowly decline in numbers and influence and gradually fade away, especially after LHZ finally passes from the scene.

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