

Introduction to Special Issue on Falun Gong and the Media

Why have Western media given Falun Gong relatively favorable coverage; how is the Canadian Government bank-rolling advocates' anti-China messages; what happens to scholars who publish findings that do not support the propaganda; and who is benefiting from the narrative (here is a hint—it is not everyday practitioners)? The collection of articles in this volume addresses these and other questions.

The papers were born out of dialogue between scholars from varied disciplines and locations who were questioning unusual activities related to Falun Gong. It seemed that pro-Falun Gong enthusiasts had increased their efforts to control the media and scholarly narratives, and academics felt a need to delve deeper. Considerable research has already been done to lay the foundations of this dialogue, such as Yu's (2009) analysis of the media campaign war between Falun Gong and China and Herman and Chomsky's (1988) work on bias and propaganda in the media.

Before introducing the articles, I would like to mention a relatively unusual aspect of scholarship about Falun Gong. Publications about the spiritual movement have long stirred up emotions amongst practitioners, especially when they trigger painful memories or do not support their public statements. I would like to acknowledge this and note that this volume is not intended to undermine members' genuine experiences and suffering. Rather, the aim of the special issue is to provide a forum for academic discussion to increase understanding of how Falun Gong messages are being communicated to the public.

As the *New York Times* has many articles about Falun Gong, two research teams focused on this publication. Wang and Liu's paper explores the narratives from the perspective of cross-cultural image-building, including the stories of Falun Gong's conflict with the anti-cult movement in Flushing. The authors found that, while articles are becoming increasingly detailed and objective, there are cross-cultural misinterpretations of Chinese words that lead to misunderstandings.

Zhang, Huang, and Li's research on the *New York Times* has a more comparative slant and shows the different ways journalists encouraged readers to interpret events related to the Branch Davidians and Falun Gong. The authors suggest that the *New York Times* treated Falun Gong practitioners as "valuable victims"

in Herman and Chomsky's sense of people who are abused by a hostile power, compared with "impoverished victims" who suffer at the hands of the state or subsidiary governments.

Lewis and Ruskell further apply Herman and Chomsky's research as they delve deeper into the contrast between sympathetic media treatments of Falun Gong and the sensationalist depictions of other new religious movements. They suggest the preferential reporting arises from Western predispositions towards framing China as oppressive, as well as the spiritual movement's effective use of propaganda and sophisticated use of the internet and media outlets. They also acknowledge the time and budget constraints of modern journalism. Equally important, the authors observe Falun Gong attacks on critical media, which they describe as the least palatable of its strategies.

While Lewis and Ruskell discuss attacks on media freedom, Farley focuses on a Falun Gong attack on academic freedom. She describes her experiences of attracting the ire of a practitioner who disagreed with what she wrote. Her story, like those of other academics who have been targeted, involves online attacks and a call to her university to dismiss her from her job. She shares her experiences to show they are part of a wider Falun Gong strategy and to stand in solidarity with her colleagues.

In keeping with Farley, my paper "Friendly Fire" is a narrative of Falun Gong attacks on my research. The account includes my discovery of intelligence information suggesting that practitioners and advocates are basing their tactics on former United States Army Colonel Robert Helvey's advice on how to oust dictators. The article contains suggestions for researchers caught in the cross-fire between Falun Gong and the Chinese government.

Next, Lewis and D'Amico address the extraordinary discovery that the Canadian Government is bankrolling Falun Gong's anti-China propaganda campaign. They narrate their story of learning that the Canada Media Fund subsidized Falun Gong-linked films, including giving \$18 million to New Tang Dynasty television. They suggest explanations, including the possible influence of David Kilgour who publicises propaganda about organ harvesting and was a member of the Canadian Parliament for twenty-seven years.

Finally, my paper on archetypes relates to Lewis and D'Amico's research by showing how the organ harvesting allegations changed the media narrative by casting practitioners into the role of helpless victims who have to be rescued by the superior West. The money trail to these stories runs through United States government-funded Freedom House. The research showed how Western advocates perpetuate Xinhua's master narrative that practitioners have got themselves into dire straits and need to be saved by authorities.

In bringing together this volume, the authors hope to stimulate interest among scholars about the importance of going—to use Patsy Rahn's phrase—beyond the

headlines (Rahn, 2000). To understand the media accounts, we must first delve into the way the script has been generated by people who have vested interests in it. This is likely to require input from diverse fields beyond the ones represented in this volume, most especially from researchers on organ trading.

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References

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