

Innocent Victims of Chinese Oppression, or Media Bullies? Analyzing Falun Gong's Media Strategies

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ABSTRACT: It is a well-established fact that most new, non-traditional religious groups are treated negatively in the mass media. However, Falun Gong, the qi gong group that was banned in China in 1999, is a marked exception to this general tendency. Why should this be the case? In the present paper, we examine the various factors that combine to make Falun Gong the exception to the rule. We also call attention to this organization's pattern of attacking critics, as well as their pattern of attacking anyone who offers an interpretation of events that is at odds with Falun Gong's interpretation. However, this heavy-handed tactic has the potential to backfire, and to prompt the media to re-perceive them as a bully rather than as an innocent victim.

KEYWORDS: Falun Gong, China, news media, new religious movements, propaganda model, tactical repertoires, boomerang effect

Factors in Falun Gong's Media Success

It is a well-established fact that, as a general tendency, the media are overwhelmingly negative when reporting on New Religious Movements (NRMs) and 'cults.' In van Driel and Richardson's (1988) longitudinal study on US print media's coverage of NRMs from 1973 to 1984, they found that out of 444 articles,

nearly 300 were negative in nature (p. 50)¹. Since that time, the media has become increasingly more negative and critical of NRMs. In our “Cult Journalism” (2016) piece, we discussed at length the sensationalistic media reports on NRMs during the ‘cult controversy’ of the 1990s, and the rise of sensationalistic reportage. Unfortunately, there is a significant lack of empirical data on media coverage of NRMs from the 1990s to the present.

In sharp contrast to this trend, media coverage of Falun Gong (FLG) has been consistently positive outside of mainland China. Over 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 percent of reports were favourable, 33 percent were neutral, and only 6 percent 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

¹Articles represent 207 ‘somewhat negative’ articles and 85 ‘extremely negative’ articles.

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. (Kavan 2005; emphases added)

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? We believe this arises from a combination of different reasons, and in the following pages will present six major factors that make the construction of FLG’s image in the media so positive. Additionally, we will discuss Herman and Chomsky’s (2002 [1988]) propaganda model. They use five filters: 1) concentration of ownership; 2) advertising as the main source of income; 3) reliance of the media on information provided from ‘approved’ sources; 4) “flak”; 5) anti-communism as religion (2). These filters provide insight into how the media approaches Falun Gong and how FLG’s media strategies have been so effective in the West. In introducing the Propaganda Model, Herman and Chomsky say:

The propaganda model . . . explains the broad sweep of the mainstream media’s behavior and performance by their corporate character and integration into the political economy of the dominant economic system. (2002, xii)

We believe that what journalists do, what they see as newsworthy, and what they take for granted as premises of their work are frequently well explained by the incentives, pressures, and constraints incorporated into such a structural analysis. (2002, xi)

Factor 1: Effective Use of Propaganda

Edward Bernays, a leader in propaganda theory and considered the father of public relations, gave a highly relevant definition of propaganda:

Modern propaganda is a consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea or group. (Bernays and Miller 1928: 25)

The movement's founder-leader, Li Hongzhi (LHZ), has done just that, crafting a public image of Falun Gong as an innocent spiritual movement being persecuted by the People's Republic of China (PRC). With a brilliant understanding of Western values and human behavior, he 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 (Lewis 2016: 101–102).² During a 2003 Lantern Festival in the US, Li Hongzhi told his followers:

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. . . . [O]nly 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? (Hongzhi, 2003)³

Taking advantage of free publicity at popular, televised events has been an important tool for FLG.

They seek every opportunity to gain moral support and recognition from international organisations, local governments, businesses and the general public by making themselves visible in public places and on public occasions. They put up signs at university campuses, set up booths and do their slow movement exercises in public places, circulate flyers, participate in parades, organise and attend press conferences, obtain Falun Dafa proclamations and

²Lewis has briefly discussed this aspect of LHZ's teachings in Lewis 2016. He also discusses 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*.)

³LHZ'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 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.

talk to anyone who is willing to listen about Falun Gong and their persecution by the Chinese government. (Yu 2009: 130)

One example is FLG's float in the American Rose Bowl Parade in 2007. The theme of their float was their usual protest against China, as they do in many parades across the country. But this parade was different from the others, as it was just before the start of the Beijing Olympics. At the time, there was a spotlight on China's human rights record being reported in the daily news. This made the timing of the parade the perfect opportunity to capitalize on the subject.

A reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* interviewed a FLG member about their Rose Bowl float:

"All human rights activists know the first and most difficult step in stopping persecution is to get exposure," said Shizhong Chen, a Falun Gong practitioner heavily involved in the opposition campaign. "What happens in Pasadena adds to the exposure. Leading up to the Olympics, such opportunities will [arise] more and more . . . This serves as a kickoff event for human rights causes." (Pierson 2007)

This clearly shows a concerted effort to use public events as "opportunities" to spread their message. This is a tactic that they employ around the world in parades and other public events where they can showcase (with the help of graphic posters and shocking claims) the atrocities they suffer at the hands of the Chinese government.

Factor 2: Western Public Predisposed to 'Oppressive China'

The second factor plays into Falun Gong's media success 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 that views the PRC through the lens of political repression. This fits perfectly with the West's predisposition to perceive China as an oppressive state.

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 single story, image or concept":

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. . . . [S]ince 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. (Mann 1999: 103)

Following the 1989 Tiananmen ‘crackdown,’ Mann notes that a “Chinese-American cameraman living in Beijing for decades complained . . . that when visiting TV correspondents arrive[d] in China from abroad in the 1990s, they all manage[d] to ask, in one form or another, ‘Take me to the oppression’” (ibid.: 102). 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.

Additionally, this pattern plays into the tendency of many Western commentators to intentionally overlook Li Hongzhi’s unpleasant side. This seems to be, at least in part, the result of a general hostility towards the PRC one finds in the West:

According to one veteran China-watcher, Orville Schell, the West’s blind embrace of Falun Gong fits into a well-established pattern of viewing communist China in black-and-white terms, missing the complexities and nuances. “This has been the tradition,” said Schell, dean of the journalism school at the University of California-Berkeley. “Anyone the Chinese government opposes gets lionized as righteous.” (Lubman 2001)

However, this predisposition isn’t entirely based on the 1990’s ‘oppression’ framework. It is also influenced by an underlying current of anticommunism. Herman and Chomsky’s fifth filter, ‘anticommunism as religion,’ offers an explanation for why FLG’s claims of abuse receive unusually positive media coverage.

The anti-communism control mechanism reaches through the system to exercise a profound influence on the mass media. In normal times, as well as periods of Red Scares, issues tend to be framed in terms of a dichotomized world of Communist and anti-Communist poker, with gains and losses allocated to contesting sides, and rooting for “our side” considered an entirely legitimate news practice. . . . The ideology and religion of anticommunism is a potent filter. (Herman and Chomsky 2014: 30)

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 we and others have pointed out, “by their provocative acts,” it is clear that followers “deliberately seek” and provoke brutalization at the hands of authorities (Palmer 2001: 17). This is because:

By defending the *fa* [i.e., defending Falun Gong] and being imprisoned and tortured, practitioners’ karma is burnt off, thus assuring them a place in Li’s paradise. It follows that when enduring severe torture, practitioners must not recant their faith, even if their retraction is insincere. This is a serious disgrace, and those who recant are “malignant tumours.” (Kavan 2008: 11–12)

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 persecuted (Lewis 2016)—even going so far as promising full ‘Consummation’ (FLG’s equivalent of Enlightenment) to those who made the ‘ultimate sacrifice’ (Palmer 2003).

We 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 we will further discuss in the final section of this paper).

Factor 3: Systematic Media Domination

Today, FLG members make sophisticated use of the Internet and run multiple media outlets across the world, ensuring that most information available to journalists come from FLG sources.

Describing the lengths to which FLG members have gone for media domination outside of China, Haiqing Yu states:

They have utilised Western media in defence against persecution in China, and have set up their own global media networks consisting of websites, newspapers, magazines, media production studios, radio and television broadcasts, newsletters, leaflets, booklets and VCD/DVDs. In 2000, they began to use radio broadcasts to propagate their ideas from America to China. Since 2002, two more media outlets with global operations have been added to this effort: one is a New York-based, Chinese-language television station broadcasting 24 hours a day via satellite to global audiences—the NTDTV; the other is a New Jersey-registered, globally distributed, bilingual and free newspaper—*The Epoch Times*. Both have a global mission and a virtual presence on the Internet. (2009: 130)

The group was already effectively using email in China for the purpose of organizing demonstrations (e.g., the Zhongnanhai demonstration) before being banned (Bell and Boas 2003: 283). Four years later, practitioners were maintaining “hundreds of sites around the world” (ibid.: 278). 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” (Zhao 2003: 214).

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. (Bell and Boas 2003: 287)

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” (Kavan 2005). “The information from this source is understandably biased and serving self-interests” (Rahn 2000).

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 mainly come from Falun Gong sources” (Rahn 2000). Additionally, Falun Gong followers and/or sympathizers have de facto control over the relevant webpages in Wikipedia (e.g., in this regard refer to Jiang 2015 and Colipon 2014). 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. (Garfinkel 2008).

Journalists often work under tight deadlines (Kavan 2005). 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.

The third filter from the propaganda model is on sourcing mass-media news: “the reliance of the media on information provided by government, business, and ‘experts’ funded and approved by these primary sources and agents of power.” Herman and Chomsky argue that many constraints on modern journalists make them reliant on information from seemingly credible sources.

The mass media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest. The media

need a steady, reliable flow of the raw material of news. They have daily news demands and imperative news schedules that they must meet. They cannot afford to have reporters and cameras at all places where important news stories may break. (Herman and Chomsky 2014: 18)

Yet another reason for 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. This creates a vacuum, leaving journalists without resources to make counter arguments. The only sustained, English-language counter-voice from China has been the 'Facts' website (<http://www.facts.org.cn/>).

Factor 4: Modern Journalism Constraints

Journalism is not what it once was. Deep cuts in newsroom budgets have led to less staff and less time to research stories. Reporters of the past had time to investigate, check facts, have assistants make phone calls, a photographer to take pictures and an editor to proof the copy. Today's reporters are expected to do all those tasks within a short time, including uploading the story online, writing an SEO headline, and a 140-character tweet with a link back to their site. This puts journalists in a position where they lack the time to double check their sources.

A reporter from a national daily said that the lack of time available to check facts on complex stories meant that important but complicated issues are simply not covered: "I think the time available to be thorough has decreased . . . the main consequence of that is that if things require lots of work, they are less likely to be embarked upon." (Lewis, Williams, Franklin, Thomas, and Mosdell 2008: 47)

The new time constraints put on journalists can lead to 'inaccuracies' in reporting and a lack of in-depth coverage. In *Journalism: Principles and Practice* (2009), Tony Harcup begs the question: "How many more inaccuracies might creep into coverage if newsrooms are understaffed?" (Harcup 2009: 87). He believes that more inaccuracies will happen if journalists continue to have too little time to investigate and verify facts. These time constraints are due to a massive reduction in personnel. Budget cuts have been happening across the field and around the world. Many believe the field of journalism itself is dying. But the biggest contributor to this dilemma is explained by Herman and Chomsky's second filter, advertising as the primary income source. They argue that moving news reporting to a free-market model, pitting newspapers against one another for how well they sell to markets served "as a powerful mechanism weakening the working-class press" (2002: 14). They believe that this gives advertisers a "de facto licensing authority since, without their financial support, newspapers ceased to be

economically viable” (quoted in Herman and Chomsky 2014: 14). This ‘licensing authority’ plays out in avoiding stories that would upset advertisers for fear of them pulling out of sponsorship. “[C]ompanies will usually not want to sponsor close examination of sensitive and divisive issues” (ibid.: 18).

Tighter time constraints are not the only effect of financial cutbacks that have hurt mainstream media. The first area to get cut in a news budget is the foreign bureau.

The economic pressures of maintaining overseas news gathering have seen the numbers of bureaux and correspondents persistently reduced by major Western news organisations over the last 20 years or more. This has led to a downward spiral in the quantity of international news being reported—particularly in the USA. (Sambrook 2010: 1)

Correspondents who do survive often provide information for several news outlets. “A foreign correspondent, for example, might be under such time pressure to file for multiple outlets and platforms that they cannot go and see things for themselves, relying instead on regurgitating copy fed to them from thousands of miles away in London” (Harcup 2009: 87). In fact, by 1999, Western media outlets who lacked their own reporters on the ground in China received “most of their international information about Falun Gong from press releases from the Rachlin media group” (Kavan 2005).

Factor 5: Falun Gong’s Media Attack Strategies

One final but highly significant factor in Falun Gong’s overall media strategy has been its attacks on critical media. Libel and defamation lawsuits are very expensive and many news agencies do not have the budgets to cover stories on litigious groups. Unless a story proves to be overwhelmingly in the public interest, the sheer threat of a lawsuit is enough for a journalist (or editor) to drop the story (Harcup 2015). On the flip side, if they do cover a story that opens them to the possibility of being sued, journalists will be incredibly careful with their wording, sometimes self-censoring to avoid contention. “If certain kinds of fact, position, or program are thought likely to elicit flak, this prospect can be a deterrent” (Herman and Chomsky 2014: 26).

“Flak” is the fourth filter on the Propaganda Model. Herman and Chomsky define it as “negative responses to a media statement or program. It may take the form of letters, telegrams, phone calls, petitions, lawsuits, speeches and bills before Congress, and other modes of complaint, threat, and punitive action. It may be organized centrally or locally, or it may consist of the entirely independent actions of individuals” (2014: 26).

Flak has proven to be an incredibly effective tool for FLG and emerged as a core tactic 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 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” (Zhao 2003: 214–215).

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. (Kavan 2008: 3)

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” (Zhao 2003: 215).

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 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. (LHZ 1998)

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” (ibid.).

After being banned in the PRC, Falun Gong continued to actively work 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)*⁴ 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 evaluative 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* (Lewis 2016: 105).

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,” 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 Watch” (Konigsberg 2008), critical of the Shen Yun 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 (China Association for Cultic Studies 2009). Perhaps like the Church of Scientology, FLG values lawsuits as more of an harassment tactic rather 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).

⁴<http://www.chineseexpress.com/>.

Not all threats of legal action are effective in intimidating journalists. In 2008, Kerre Woodham, a journalist for the *New Zealand Herald* and host of ‘Talkback,’ a local call-in radio show, wrote about her experience with FLG and the Auckland Santa Parade:

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 stropy [belligerent] and threaten High Court action. . . . We were discussing this on *Talkback* 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. (Woodham 2008)

FLG did file suit against the Auckland Children’s Christmas Parade Trust, and lost. But the victim in this story was not the journalist, or the *New Zealand Herald*—it was Michael Barnett, chairman of the Auckland Santa Parade Trust. FLG members personally attacked him and picketed his office. The harassment he received compelled him to hire private security.

In May 2015, an academic article by Dr. Helen Farley became a target for a member of FLG. In her own account, she details the lengths the member went to in his attack on her credibility:

I first received an email in March from Zhiman [not his real name] saying that I had deliberately made false statements against Falun Gong. I asked the advice of some of my peers, and they suggested that I just delete the email, which I did.

The next I heard was on Tuesday or Wednesday this week. The School Manager of the school where I used to work at the University of Queensland called me to ask if I knew about the emails that were doing the rounds at UQ. She forwarded one of these to me and circulated an email to the school staff. . . . I thought, ok as bad as that is, at least it isn’t happening at the place of my current employment. Wrong!

The Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic Services) at University of South Queensland (my current employer) forwarded an email from Zhiman that he

had received, virtually identical to the one circulating at UQ. The university lawyer and Director (Integrity and Professional Conduct), phoned me to tell me that those emails had gone to various random staff members but also the Vice Chancellor, Chancellor, Council, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research and Innovation). Some poor non-academic staff member who I had never met before (and had only worked at USQ for two weeks), turned up at my office door saying she had received the email and that she was deeply concerned about me and feared for my safety. But not everyone got the email. I'm not sure how the recipients are chosen. (cited in Lewis 2016: 98)

This is an example of the personal character attacks that are not only unnerving, but that also threaten a person's employment.

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 model (Li 2013) to our partial application of a moral panic approach (Lewis and Ruskell 2017). 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 and Van Dyke 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 our analysis in the current paper is his discussion of how “[f]amiliar strategies of action shape what actors attempt to accomplish” (Junker 2014: 333) 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 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 we have already shown, for a few years in the late 1990s, FLG enjoyed marked success counter-attacking critics in the PRC, and seems to have become 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 earlier).

Using the examples of Suma Ching Hai International, Zhong Gong, and Falun Gong, the potential for expatriate protest to backfire on protesting groups

(which 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 (1998) 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. However, she also 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. (Thornton 1998: 187–188)

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 payroll—extremely improbable, given Wu’s history with the PRC (Thornton 1998: 199–200).

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 Thornton’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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