

Friendly Fire: How Falun Gong Mistook Me For an Enemy

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ABSTRACT: This paper tells the story of my research on Falun Gong and its aftermath. I describe a series of events including online slurs, implied threats and warnings, phone and email harassment, and messages to my colleagues, seemingly designed to isolate, demoralize and silence me. Next, I narrate discovering references to an intelligence report stating that former United States Army Colonel Robert Helvey was believed to be acting as an adviser to Falun Gong. I discuss Helvey's book "On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict" as a check-list of Falun Gong tactics. I query the appropriateness of targeting academics with psychological violence designed to topple dictators and suggest the spiritual movement would be better suited to the principled nonviolence of Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

KEYWORDS: nonviolence, psychological warfare, academic freedom, Wikipedia

Even when we are silenced we must continue
to write—to assert freedom, to find meaning.

—Richard Flanagan

It was 2012—the year of the *Hunger Games*, London Summer Olympics, and Vladimir Putin's election victory—and I was sitting at my university desk in New Zealand when I opened an email from an unfamiliar source. The sender, who had a Chinese surname, told me that Falun Gong practitioners were increasing their efforts to vilify me. I got up from my desk and went outside, inviting the rush of cold air to disentangle my thoughts. Was the sender aware of other puzzling messages I had received? Might the email be related to the car that had

been following me at night? And how had a peaceful meditation exercise ended in a haze of paranoia, accusations and mistrust?

This is an account of my research on Falun Gong and the events that ensued when members of the spiritual movement mistook me for their enemy.

When I was invited to tell my story for this volume I knew there would be challenges. The first is the risk of writing at a time when practitioners and advocates are campaigning to get scholars dismissed from their jobs and to get articles that do not support them retracted from journals. The second is the bewildering nature of the events that occurred in the aftermath of my research. Many of them felt like a mixture of Plato's cave and Sartre's *No Exit*—Plato's cave in the sense that Falun Gong and the Chinese Communist party are shadowy, and *No Exit* in the sense that it was futile for any of us to hope others would see us through our own eyes. It was only when I came across a manual on how to overthrow dictators that the events began to make sense.

A Chance Encounter

I first came across Falun Gong in 2001 at a time when I was researching other spiritual groups. As biologist Lois Isenman observes, when people spend a great deal of time working in a specialist field, they often develop an intuitive sense in that area of knowledge (Isenman, 2013). On this day, I was walking along Bowen Street in Wellington when I sensed that a spiritual gathering was taking place. I looked around to see whether the sensation was coming from a nearby cathedral. To my surprise, the source was Parliament buildings, and as I approached I saw eight Chinese protesters wearing yellow t-shirts standing outside Parliament, their hands above their heads, and their faces emanating strength and tranquility. Later, I identified them as Falun Gong practitioners and read a story in the local newspaper about how they were persecuted in China.

I did not give the encounter much thought until 2003 when I learned that practitioners sent hundreds of letters to academic institutions inviting scholars to research them. At the same time, a Falun Gong group advertised in my local newspaper inviting the public to a demonstration of the exercises. I was keen to meet the group to see if I could do research that might help them. Although I am a European New Zealander, I felt I could relate to Chinese practitioners as I enjoy meditation and had practised Qi Gong, of which Falun Gong is an off-shoot.

The Meetings

When I arrived at the hall at the advertised time, a woman who I will call Jia welcomed me. The first thing I learned was that answering an invitation to watch a demonstration of Falun Gong exercises means that one is expected to do the exercises. Jia taught me the exercises that were soon to become my daily activity.

On the second week, we were sitting in a circle on the floor when I heard the sound of a car pulling up and footsteps. A police officer walked in. He just watched for an hour, said nothing, and left. What was going on in Falun Gong that was so worthy of police attention? I mentioned the officer's presence to Jia after he left, but she did not think it was unusual. Another practitioner had told me they were used to outsiders because spies often attended their sessions in China before Falun Gong was banned.

After a month of weekly meetings, Jia invited me to do the exercises outdoors with the group at 6am every morning. For almost all of the meetings, I did the exercises with my eyes closed, and we did not speak. We were communicating at a deeper level than words, united in the physical challenges as we held postures, inhaling the early-morning air, hearing the birds sing over the sound of the exercise audiotape, and smiling empathetically at each other when we left.

But it was not all harmony and light. As I delved into leader Li Hongzhi's books and speeches, something felt amiss. The tone was aggressive and demanding, compared with the beauty of other Chinese scriptures such as the *Tao Te Ching* and even of the meditative experience itself. Li's ideas, claims, and speech style reminded me of my experiences researching other spiritual paths when occasionally a person would lose touch with reality after excessive spiritual activities. The person would go into a temporary psychosis, jumbling spiritual truths with fragmented subconscious memories of supernatural material from film and print media. He or she would claim to be a supreme being saving the world from destruction and often attempt to dominate others. Transpersonal Psychologists recognise these experiences as spiritual emergencies (based on the pioneering research of Grof & Grof, 1989).

I wondered about exploring the controversial research on Qi Gong psychosis, but there was a more pressing issue. Practitioners had relatives in China who were at risk of imprisonment and they hoped Western media would help them by exposing the persecution. I asked Jia how she would feel if I researched media portrayals of Falun Gong, and to this day, I feel sad when I think about how happy she was. She brought me books, magazines, papers, and videos. She never asked for money and only accepted it if I requested to buy the products.

As summer ended, the physical demands increased and I found the practice less enjoyable. The city poured with rain and the consequent flooding brought mosquitos to the practice site. Temperatures dropped below zero. At the same time, my university workload seemed to double. Once during the standing exercises, I dropped my arms, faint from insufficient sleep, and I struggled to hold the seated lotus position for a full hour. "Strengthen your mind," Jia would tell me.

The Unnamed Refugee

One day as I was getting ready to leave a meeting, Jia told me about a practitioner who belonged to another Falun Gong group. The woman had been imprisoned and tortured in China several times but had escaped to New Zealand after her daughter bribed an airport official to get her mother on a plane out of China. She arrived in New Zealand unable to speak English and located other Falun Gong members who took her in.

Jia explained that recently the woman had applied for refugee status, but the Immigration Service declined her application, purportedly because the interpreter's translation understated the danger to her life. Jia said the woman had told her that although as a practitioner she should be able to face adversity, she did not want to be tortured again. Jia added that the woman was old and her body weak from previous torture, and she would be unlikely to survive.

During the week, I phoned the Immigration Service and asked how I could help. The advisor told me applicants could appeal within ten working days of the outcome. I phoned Jia and asked her to pass this message on to the woman urgently, and offered to help by getting a university interpreter. Jia was uncharacteristically evasive, but said she would contact another member.

When I next saw Jia, the woman would have had less than twenty-four hours to appeal, so I asked if she had passed on my message. She hesitated and said the woman needed to purify more (in Falun Gong beliefs one is purified by suffering) therefore they did not pass on my message. I urged her to reconsider, offering to do anything to help. But Jia was resolute, saying she herself had stood next to the woman and noticed she had not been meditating properly.

At this moment I realized there was a side of Falun Gong that I did not fully understand. Jia looked at me sympathetically and—appearing to be quoting from one of Li's speeches—said she felt sorry for me because I worked hard to do the exercises but had never experienced the persecution, and therefore would never be able to achieve the higher stages of Li's heaven. "But it's all predetermined," she sighed.

My fears for the woman's safety lingered for months, so I checked the Immigration and Protection Tribunal decisions (now publicly available at Ministry of Justice, 2017). To my relief, I learned that the woman successfully appealed the decision, with support from two witnesses who are likely to have been practitioners (Refugee Status, 2005). This experience highlighted for me how, on emotional issues, conflicting views about Falun Gong can arise from varying experiences of different groups.

The End of the Research and its Aftermath

After over a year of daily meetings, the group had a break, and I knew it would be the last time we would meet. I worked on the research, and, after it was finished,

I was quoted in a press release on new religious movements. In the release I said the FBI's definition of a potentially violent religion was so broad that several groups in New Zealand would fall into it, and cited Falun Gong as one of several examples. Here is my record of the events that followed:

Falun Gong members monitor the media daily, and discovered the press release even before I did. They were offended that they were classified with other religions that they perceived to be "totally evil", and I received a phone call warning me that I would be deluged by a hundred callers from a Falun Gong email list. Several emotionally-charged phone calls followed, in which the callers demanded the press release be removed from the Internet. A member contacted me at home and relayed accusations that I was being paid large amounts of money by the Chinese government, and repeatedly said that the situation was "extremely dangerous". Each time I asked exactly what the danger was, she did not explain. (Kavan, 2008, p. 16)

I have some empathy for practitioners in this situation because when the Chinese government banned Falun Gong, officials likened it to extreme religious groups. Therefore the media release could have stirred up memories of collective trauma and yearnings for healing and justice.

The situation blew over and I published two conference papers in Australian and New Zealand anthologies (Kavan, 2005 & 2008). In the latter, I included the account of how I had inadvertently upset practitioners. That, I thought, was the end of the conflict.

But it was only the end of the beginning. Practitioners read my articles and emailed me. One of the first messages was from the Falun Dafa Association. The author apologized for members harassing me and said he thought my paper was "well-researched." However, most emails from practitioners were not as kind-hearted, and the authors seemed unable to resist inserting slurs, for example: "Your saddest folly," "Darwin and Newton deceived you," "You have played right into the hands of the Communist Party." I replied amiably to the thoughtful emails and ignored the others.

Next came the emails to my colleagues across three campuses. They arrived in spates every couple of months. I thought they were from Falun Gong impersonators as they seemed to be caricatures of Li's inflated style ("the earth is a garbage dump," "human society suffers like a rotten apple") and two authors alluded to his teachings that most practitioners do not share with outsiders ("aliens are controlling the human mind," "dirty people, such as mix-blood"). I imagined Falun Gong detractors composing them between sniggers and told colleagues the emails were black propaganda in which senders deliberately misstate the source. None of us took them seriously. In the context of pressures to publish, funding cuts, teaching loads, and administrative demands, the authors'

exhortations to “stop your stupid work and become a disciple” [*sic*] were more risible than threatening.

Even so, there was something about the emails that was unnerving, and that was their timing. Sometimes I would receive positive messages from readers saying my article resonated with their challenging experiences of Falun Gong. Although I would have heard nothing from Falun Gong members for months, within forty-eight hours a practitioner would send me an email, usually criticizing me. I wondered if the article had been circulated on a shared list as this could explain the timing; however this explanation proved incorrect when I checked with the first senders. One expert suggested there could be a single person playing several roles using different email addresses, but that seemed unlikely as the positive emails were from identifiable people such as academics and therapists. A second expert suggested my emails were on a firewall and being intercepted—but by whom? It was the Chinese Government, not Falun Gong, that had a firewall, and they would be unlikely to disagree with readers who had experienced challenges with the spiritual movement.

Wikipedia Manipulation

The email timing was one of several disconcerting events. Between 2009 and 2012 potentially defamatory comments about me appeared on the Wikipedia Talk pages under the guise of content discussion. Pro-Falun Gong editors repeatedly misquoted my articles to make them sound uninformed, and made several inaccurate statements, for example, that I had no peer reviewed research on Falun Gong (Wikipedia, 2009a, 2009d, 2009e, 2012). Echoing Li’s (1999) sexism, they depicted me as “this woman” whose research—along with that of another female researcher—was inferior to the real experts like David Ownby and Benjamin Penny (Wikipedia, 2009a, para. 6, 2009c, 2009d). The comments were laced with innuendoes such as “people get away with very sloppy stuff in conference papers” and insinuations that my work was a tool for the Communist Party (Wikipedia, 2009a, para. 4, 2012).

As political scientist Patricia Thornton (2008) has observed, Falun Gong tactics sometimes backfire. The Wikipedia discussion sparked interest in my papers that, having been published in local conference proceedings, were not indexed on influential databases and might otherwise have been unread. Other editors defended me (for example, Wikipedia archives 29, [2009b] and 32 [2010]) and several pro-Falun Gong editors were banned from the site for using it for ideological purposes and harassing perceived opponents (Wikipedia, 2011). Readership increased and my Academia.edu page rose to the top two to five percent of pages, measured by number of article downloads. Subsequently, international media quoted the articles, giving them even more attention (Bagnoli, 2016; Griffiths 2014).

Strange Occurrences

In late 2011 the tension escalated. Several times I noticed I was being followed when driving home at night. One evening there was a Chinese woman in my garden flashing a torch light. Then my house was broken into, and the burglars left valuable electronic goods untouched, but took spiritual objects including crystals and my meditation blanket.

I knew I was experiencing a phenomenon that practitioners talk about: a series of events that, if mentioned to outsiders, could sound paranoid, which they believe are orchestrated by the Chinese Communist Party (Kavan, 2008). I now understand how practitioners feel. As it turned out, in my case the events had a rational explanation. The burglars had been high on drugs when choosing the items to steal and were drawn by visually-appealing objects. The woman in my garden turned out to be a neighbour looking for a lost cat. Another female driver had similar experiences and knew the man to be a traffic officer who drove an unmarked car.

While this was going on, my university was engaged in discussions with Chinese officials about export education, and the embassy was also inviting scholars to attend conferences on religious “cults.” I attended only two meetings, along with colleagues from my School. The day after I received the invitation to the second meeting, I received an email warning me of “sinister” plans in which practitioners intended to vilify me by linking me to the Chinese state. I went to the meeting regardless and (like the other meeting I attended) it was unrelated to Falun Gong.

In 2015 the New Zealand government passed the Harmful Digital Communications Act which made internet and email harassment illegal. The emails decreased, and, at the same time, other academics were attracting practitioners’ ire.

Two Australian scholars were targeted using similar tactics, along with James Lewis former editor of *Journal of Religion and Violence* who declined a practitioner’s request that he retract a scholar’s article on Falun Gong (Lewis, 2016). Additionally, supporters of Falun Gong’s organ harvesting claims contacted the editor of the *Journal of Medical Ethics* requesting a retraction of a paper that did not concur with Falun Gong assertions that China is harvesting organs from prisoners (Retraction Watch, 2016). More recently, following pressure from the same supporters, editors of *Liver Journal* retracted an article that contained data referring to the use of organs, which advocates claim could have been retrieved from prisoners (Mondelli, Younossi, & Negro, 2017). The authors face a life-long embargo from submitting their work to the journal. The calls for retraction have been accompanied by articles from practitioners denigrating the scholars (for example, Ong, 2017; Wu, 2016).

One of the disparaging articles gave me a clue to the mystery of the emails to my colleagues. An Australian practitioner mentioned that he and other members

sent emails to colleagues of a scholar who published an article that did not concur with Falun Gong claims (Wu, 2016). Given the similar modus operandi and proximity of Australia and New Zealand, it now seems likely that some of the emails sent to my colleagues were from genuine practitioners. An alternative explanation is that opponents imitated a Falun Gong tactic or vice versa.

The Hard Question

By this stage it was clear that I and other researchers would benefit from understanding practitioner and advocate tactics. We had explored their explicit actions like marches, rallies, demonstrations, public exercises, and media releases, but had relatively little knowledge of how they used covert, psychological techniques to achieve their goals. For me, this was the hard question of scholarship because these processes were often gradual, anonymous, indirect and ambiguous, and they co-existed with an ironic rhetoric of human rights and truth-telling.

Searching the internet, I came across references to a 2001 intelligence report published by India's foreign intelligence agency Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW or RAW). The report stated that former United States Army Colonel Robert Helvey was believed to be acting as an adviser to Falun Gong (Kampmark 2015; Mowat 2005).

Helvey's name sparked my interest because I had come across it before—in the work of the late Mark Palmer, founder and former director of Friends of Falun Gong, an organization that partially funds Falun Gong media (Kavan, 2017). In his book *Breaking the Real Axis of Evil: How to Oust the World's Last Dictators by 2025*, Palmer recommends Helvey's training in how to use nonviolent force to topple despots (Palmer, 2005). After this, he devotes a chapter to bringing down China and suggests Li Hongzhi might be the "best hope" for "breaking" the "geriatric repressive regime" (Palmer, 2005, pp. 245 & 249).

Although it is impossible to verify whether Helvey advised practitioners (as this would be confidential) two observations can be made. First, Helvey does not advise dissidents in the sense of directing them and choosing their targets; rather he shares nonviolent techniques they can use to oust tyrants and seize political power (Helvey, 2004). In this context, 'nonviolent' means 'non-physically violent to others.' Psychological aggression is part of the tactical repertoire and there is also scope for violence to oneself through martyrdom.

Second, Helvey's techniques are no secret and his manual *On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict* is available on the internet, both in English and Mandarin Chinese (Helvey, 2004). Predictably, the publication is not in China's bookshops, and in 2016 three activists caught studying the manual and related books received jail sentences of between two-and-a-half and five years (*The Guardian*, 2016). While it may seem strange that Chinese dissidents use a United States book on tactics

when their own country is renowned for military classics like *The Art of War*, *The Thirty-Six Stratagems*, and *The Six Secret Teachings*, Helvey offers specific suggestions for current political situations.

On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict reads like a checklist of Falun Gong tactics. Here are several suggestions from it, to which I have added examples of Falun Gong activities in parentheses: (1) black propaganda (publishing a purported announcement from official Meng Weizai that he was resigning from the Communist Party); (2) declaring a victory before one has fully got it (Tuidang announcements that over 200 million Chinese have quit the Communist Party); (3) airing exposure through congressional hearings (the 2012 United States Congressional Executive Commission on China); (4) circulating propaganda that attempts to appear authoritative (the reports of the World Organization to Investigate the Persecution of Falun Gong); (5) provoking opponents to negatively react for the purpose of igniting outrage at their reaction (inviting political leaders to the Shen Yun Performing Arts Show seemingly to goad China); (6) blaming the opponent for all the facts (attributing practitioner misbehavior to Party culture [Li, 2016]), and (7) attacking a multi-national corporation that supports the regime whose headquarters are based in another country (Falun Gong's lawsuit against Cisco). Curiously, given the disputed self-immolations, Helvey also discusses the tactic of self-immolation accompanied by invitations to "international news agencies to cover and to photograph the event" (2004, p. 35).

Additionally, Helvey explains the importance of rumour spreading, and his advice on how to create the stories may be helpful to researchers analyzing organ theft narratives:

It is important that the rumour be based upon at least a slim factual basis, or at least could be perceived as being upon known or suspected facts. The subject of rumour should be of importance to the target and it should be interesting so that others will repeat it. Rumours can be used to raise or lower the morale of the target audience, or engender emotions such as hate, disgust or admiration. (Helvey, 2004, p. 84)

A further, unmentioned step is to characterize those who question the rumours as agents of the regime.

How do scholars fit in to the plan? Although there is no explicit reference to academics, Helvey suggests dissidents use "teachers" and "others who are respected in their own communities" to spread their propaganda (Helvey, 2004, p. 8). Falun Gong invitations to academics to conduct research on them seem to dovetail with this strategy. However, as researchers tend to critique knowledge claims, rather than broadcast them, the stage is set for conflict.

Although Helvey signals that the methods are to be directed at tyrants, the manual contains several tactics Falun Gong activists have used on scholars. These

tactics are similar to ones used in psychological warfare by both China and the United States (described by Cheng, 2013 and Thomas, 2003). They include: attempting to pull away pillars of support to isolate opponents, looking for opportunities to place them in situations where the only outcomes are unfavourable, and generating distrust and confusion to lower their morale and divert attention from one's own vulnerabilities or intention (Helvey, 2004).

Challenges and Possible Responses

These tactics, with their impressive lineage in psychological warfare and international successes in ousting tyrants, seemed a little wasted on me. That is because I like practitioners and have goodwill towards them. Further, the tactics backfire, damaging the reputations of innocent members who genuinely embrace 'truth, compassion and forbearance.'

As well as being inappropriately aimed at academics, the tactics are not well suited to spiritual movements. Since Boudurant's (1958) research on Gandhi, nonviolent resistance is divided into two categories: principled and tactical (coercive). Principled non-violence prohibits both physical and psychological violence and seeks mutually beneficial solutions, while tactical non-violence prohibits only physical violence, and seeks to win by antagonizing, manipulating and coercing opponents. As a spiritual movement (especially one that has the law of karma as a key tenet), Falun Gong would benefit from switching to principled non-violence. While its current tactics do not cause direct physical damage, its psychological attacks have the same harmful intent as physical attacks and can be equally injurious. As philosopher Barry Gan says, "The heart of violence is in the mind of the perpetrator, not in the means by which the intention is carried out" (Gan, 2013, p. 22).

I believe it is vital that scholars publish their experiences so future researchers are aware of the risks. In this vein, I offer six suggestions for academics researching Falun Gong: (1) check every story, as situations may not be as they seem, (2) familiarize oneself with the tactics of psychological warfare and tactical nonviolent resistance, (3) connect with scholars who have transversed the minefield, (4) if practical, respond to media enquiries in writing so statements can be worded to avoid emotional triggers, (5) forewarn journal editors that activists have previously called for retractions of articles, and (6) ensure witnesses are present in any discussions with Chinese officials so there is evidence against accusations of collusion.

Final Thoughts

My experiences of Falun Gong and those of several other researchers show what happens when members of a spiritual movement use harmful tactics on misidentified enemies. The irony of the conflict is that scholars and practitioners

have much in common. Both engage in mental challenges that require intense focus—practitioners in meditation and scholars in academic discovery. Both seek knowledge—for practitioners, spiritual revelations, and for academics, nuggets of information. Most important, both aim to be loyal to their values regardless of political influences, with practitioners upholding their right to religious freedom and scholars upholding their right to academic freedom.

For Jia and me, there was another similarity, and I became aware of it when our paths crossed unexpectedly during the conflict. Without hesitation, we hugged each other and then moved on. We did not speak because that would have tainted our rapport, and beneath our different worldviews, neither of us wanted to be the other's enemy. Our freedom to choose harmony over conflict was a glimpse of light in the research equivalent of Plato's cave.

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