

The Fluid Nature of Academic Freedom for Falun Gong Practitioners

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ABSTRACT: In a Western democracy such as Australia, academic freedom is something that is taken for granted. It forms the cornerstone of the academic endeavour and university lecturers and researchers feel unimpeded as they sift through documents both public and private, collect data and construct knowledge from that information. The generation of that knowledge is always seen to be in the public interest. It forms the basis of the research that follows it by academics or students known or unknown. That construction of knowledge is guided by a set of inviolable rules of citation, ethics, style and method. As a studies in religion academic, I wrote about new religious movements, esotericism and the place of religion on the internet. In the course of writing about Falun Gong, I attracted the attentions of a Falun Gong practitioner who disagreed with what I wrote. This article forms my account of the attack on my academic freedom by that individual.

KEYWORDS: Falun Gong; Falun Dafa; new religious movements; academic freedom; religious persecution; PRC; Chinese religion

Introduction

For many years, I worked as a Studies in Religion academic at a prominent Australian university. I lectured to large classes about Eastern religions, wrote and taught an award-winning introductory course on world religions and another on the meditative aspects of world religions. As the academic responsible for teaching these courses, I was approached by a Falun Gong practitioner who wanted to talk to the students enrolled in my courses. I saw the approach as an opportunity for my students to get a firsthand account of a movement with which most were unfamiliar. Most people knew little else, but that the practice of Falun

Gong involved five physical meditations and that there were persistent claims of persecution of practitioners by the government of the People's Republic of China. Somewhere in the back of the collective consciousness was something about the harvesting of organs; maybe that seemed a bit far-fetched. Even so, my students were critical scholars of religion and asked the hard questions that were responded to with respect, albeit a little one-sidedly. The Falun Gong practitioner handed out flyers to a 'Chinese cultural event' which was a thinly-veiled propaganda event for Falun Gong. To my knowledge, none of my students ever attended.

This is a reflection of my experiences with one individual who has taken exception to what I have written about Falun Gong. I cannot confidently say that he represents anyone or anything other than himself. He claims he is a Falun Gong practitioner, correcting the misinformation that I have allegedly spread. Parts of this story have been told elsewhere by other actors in this tale (see, Lewis, 2016; Lewis & Ruskell, 2017). This article details the systematic attack on my academic freedom by a Falun Gong practitioner offended by my academic, peer-reviewed writings about Falun Gong, and his sustained campaign to discredit me among my peers and to have me removed from my employment.

Academic Freedom in Higher Education

Tierney and Lanford (2014) defined academic freedom as: 'the freedom to teach and conduct research without fear or concern of retribution.' The belief in its value lies in the understanding that an institution and society benefits from free enquiry and expression; many citing it as necessary for creativity and innovation (Tierney & Lanford, 2014). Academic freedom allows an academic to determine his or her own teaching and research agenda. Researchers are judged on the quality of their work by their peers (Tierney & Lanford, 2014). Hence, academics disseminate their research through peer-reviewed journals, books and book chapters. Their peers scrutinise their methodologies, the validity of their findings, and the analysis from which they derive their ideas. In the United States, the first amendment protects the notion of academic freedom. Judicial philosopher Learned Hand stated: 'there are no orthodoxies, religious, political, economic, or scientific—which are immune from debate or dispute' (Hand, as cited in Rubin, 2001).

I learned about a colleague in a nearby city who is now being subjected to a picket outside of his house by Falun Gong practitioners who have taken umbrage to his academic writings challenging the widespread belief that Falun Gong practitioners were specifically targeted for illegal organ removal (see Campbell, 2016).

Writing about Falun Gong

In 2009, I was asked by James Lewis to write a book chapter about Falun Gong. Another author had withdrawn from the book project, and a fill-in was required.

I did not have much knowledge about Falun Gong, and even less firsthand experience of either Falun Gong or of its practitioners, but I did have a solid scholarly understanding of both Eastern religions and New Religious Movements. I accepted the challenge and wrote a chapter based on a growing academic literature (for the chapter, see Farley, 2010).

I was intrigued by Falun Gong and sought to reconcile the gentle, friendly practitioners who I saw at farmers' markets and other public events with a bizarre doctrinal narrative that would rival Hollywood's latest science fiction blockbusters. My academic interest in Falun Gong continued to grow and I have authored two more chapters and a journal article about the movement which have since been published (see Farley, 2013; Farley, 2014a; Farley, 2014b).

Academic Freedom under Threat

When the first email arrived from an aggrieved Falun Gong practitioner, I was shocked. I had tried to be very even handed in my chapters and article about Falun Gong. I did not have anything against that religion but sought to tease out and understand the inconsistencies of their message. I was aware that most people did not know very much about Falun Gong and I wanted to shed some light on their practices and beliefs. Even so, if there was doubt or if information that was contentious, I flagged it as being so. I never once expressed doubt about the veracity of Falun Gong's claims of persecution by the government of the People's Republic of China. It is beyond doubt that Falun Gong practitioners are being unjustly targeted (for example, see Noakes & Ford, 2015).

I showed the original email to a colleague who told me just to delete it. I talked with that colleague as to whether I should respond to the email and gently put my case forward. The colleague indicated that he thought that it would do no good and would probably fan the discontent of the practitioner. I took his advice and deleted the email. Very soon, a number of colleagues within the institution where I worked, senior management at the university where I worked, colleagues from the university where I used to work, academics I had corresponded with, and a random assortment of other people, some of who had no contact with me at all, had also received a very similar email about me. Without exception, those people sided with me and contacted me to alert me to the fact that the email was out there, and they also offered their support. It consoled me that the emails from the practitioner did not have the impact that he had hoped. As a consequence, I decided to do nothing. I only answered the polite enquiries of those who had received the emails and who wished to know the background. Even though I had deleted the email, I still have the original text as he included the full text in his emails to my colleagues.

The Responses of My Colleagues

The university lawyer first contacted me when members of my university's council and several senior members of the university's executive received letters with content similar to that in the original email but this time, suggesting that I be dismissed from my position. The lawyer wanted to reassure me that the university 'had my back.' Even so, the matter had been referred to the university's audit and risk committee. The chair of that committee also got in touch with me. Both he and the lawyer were supportive and gave me their private cell phone numbers should I need to contact them in an emergency. I forwarded every email about the matter to the university lawyer. In the later stages of the ordeal, the lawyer suggested I engage a private lawyer to take up my case. I declined to do so as I thought it would end up a battle of the lawyers and whoever had the most resources would win. I could not be sure that it would be me.

Disturbingly, the practitioner tracked down my LinkedIn account and directly contacted many of my 'connections' through that means. I have no idea how many people he contacted. At least two people got in touch with me to say that he had made contact with them. The content of those messages was substantially the same as the emails he had written. I made a complaint to LinkedIn about him but I am unsure as to whether or not they took any action.

Though the Vice Chancellor of USQ did not contact me directly, I do have a copy of the letter that she wrote in response to the aggrieved adherent's email, as he had attached it to emails he sent to some of my colleagues. Dated 9 June 2015, the letter affirms that the university acts in accordance with the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* and that I did not have a case to answer. The Vice Chancellor suggested that the practitioner write an academic article and air his views in that way.

Writing For the Right

On 21 May 2016, an article written by Jianguo Wu, the practitioner who was targeting me and my associates, was published in the *News Weekly*. Titled "Honorary fellow means to dishonourable end," the article rolled out the same claims about me: that I was a tool of the Chinese government, that I had made unsubstantiated claims about Falun Gong, and that I misrepresented Falun Gong's teachings. What I find most interesting is that Jianguo claimed he fled from China in 1992, a year after the immolations at Tiananmen Square, in order to embrace academic freedom, among other things (Wu, 2016). Yet he felt comfortable compromising my own academic freedom in response to something I had written with which he did not agree. Though he was at complete liberty to refute what I had written in an academic way, i.e., through publishing an academic journal article, he chose not to.

In this article, it appeared that what Jianguo found most contentious in what I had written was about the alleged self-immolations by Falun Gong members at Tiananmen Square (see Farley, 2014). In the abstract of that book chapter, I wrote:

The teachings of Falun Gong explicitly forbid suicide, yet in 2001, five protesters set themselves ablaze in Tiananmen Square resulting in the death of two. Allegedly, their stated aim was to bring the world's focus onto the repression of the movement by the Chinese government. Falun Gong spokespeople were quick to speak out in defence of founder Li Hongzhi, saying that the movement strictly forbids suicide in line with the traditional Chinese belief that says that suicide is an affront to the ancestors. They further claimed that the Chinese government had staged the suicides in order to stir up public opinion against the movement and indeed the tide of public opinion did turn against Falun Gong and its founder.

In writing that abstract, I intended to convey an unbiased view of the story. I did not write this taking just one side. Further, I added a note which read: 'Some commentators deny that this massacre took place. See (Munro, 2002, p. 267)'. Again, the intention was to demonstrate that this information was contentious. In both the abstract and note reproduced above, I left in the original references to indicate that this information came from other reputable, academic sources. These were not my own ideas. I readily admit that I was not an eyewitness to the event and I had not spoken to an eyewitness.

The choice of publication in which Jianguo chose to publish was interesting, and I am a little surprised that they even published this article. *News Weekly* is published by an organisation called the National Civic Council (*News Weekly*, 2016). The National Civic Council is a conservative Christian lobby group who believe in the family as the basic unit of society (and oppose lifestyles that undermine that), the family farm, the integrity of life (from fertilisation onwards), patriotism, and Judeo-Christian values (National Civic Council, n.d.). Their website also documented their opposition to same sex marriage, the promotion of Australian law over Aboriginal law, and rejected that all cultures are equal. It is baffling that the *News Weekly* published this article in light of their very conservative views. As this article was published, I was contacted by the *News Weekly* to provide a response. I did not reply to this email as I thought that any response would only escalate matters.

China in Perspective

Jianguo Wu published another article about me on a web page called *China in Perspective*. This article was certainly a lot more inflammatory than anything that he had published in English, probably because an article like this would not be

published in the West due to the risk of litigation. Jianguo probably thought that this article would remain undiscovered as it was written in Chinese.

I have no knowledge about the intended audience or the purpose of the page. In this article, he claimed that the Chinese government was trying to corrupt Western academic freedom. There has been much controversy about the infiltration of Confucius Institutes into Western universities. Claims have been made that these are merely listening organs and propaganda tools of the Chinese government (see Pan, 2013). Even so, Jianguo claimed that these attempts are minor compared to the influence that the Chinese government directly exerts over Western academics. He considered me to be a prime example (Wu, 2015).

Not content to besmirch my own reputation, Wu also attacked the reputation of James Lewis, who had originally asked me to write about Falun Gong. He went on to imply that Professor Lewis and myself are actually in receipt of monies from the Chinese government in return for our articles. I can categorically confirm that we are not. Towards the end of the page, he contradicted himself by claiming that Lewis is the likely author of my articles. Again, I absolutely refute these claims.

Elsewhere in this article, Jianguo made erroneous reports about my career. He called me an Associate Professor of Philosophy, Religion and Classics. In fact, when I was employed at my former place of work, I was a lecturer in studies in religion. I currently hold an honorary role there as a Senior Research Fellow, though Jianguo cast doubt over my association with that institution. He used my LinkedIn profile as evidence, even though that profile details my work at the studies in religion academic and my current role as a Senior Research Fellow. He further claimed that I had not been an active researcher in religion despite my sustained publishing in the area over this period (for example, see Cusack & Farley, 2016; Farley, 2015a; Farley, 2015b; Farley, 2014a; Farley, 2014b; Farley, 2014c; Farley, 2014d; Farley, 2013; Farley, 2011; among many others). Jianguo also claimed that the honorary title with my former employer was due to a secret deal being done with the Chinese government. I would like to think it was because of my publishing and supervision record!

Jianguo also accused me of being fraudulent and of making things up, saying that I had fabricated some of the information that I claimed as being Falun Gong information. This is not a new technique. Heather Kavan (2005) claimed that this was a tactic used by Falun Gong practitioners. When journalists asked for a translation of Master Li's speech in Chinese, they were told that it was impossible to summarise his words (Stavinros, 1999).

Why Speak Out Now?

I received information that a colleague of mine at another Queensland university was similarly being harassed by members of Falun Gong. I chose not to speak

out previously because I believed that I was being targeted by a single individual. I believed that the individual believed he had a sacred duty to try and correct the ‘wrong’ information I had written about his beliefs. Though I did not agree with him, I thought I could understand his motives with which I, at least in part, sympathised. When it became evident that this was part of a wider strategy by Falun Gong adherents, I became more concerned. I could no longer write off the practitioner who had targeted me off as a single fanatic. I also learned of the difficulties faced by a colleague in New Zealand who had been targeted by Falun Gong members. I have decided to tell my story as a warning to other academics who will speak against Falun Gong. I cannot imagine that this will stop them writing. What I hope it does do is show them that this is part of a wider strategy employed by Falun Gong. Most of all, I want to stand in solidarity with my colleagues and let them know that they are not alone. I stand for academic freedom and I will stand with them to ensure that they can exercise it. These are just two examples, but there are many more.

What Makes Falun Gong Practitioners So Sensitive to Perceived Criticism?

Those who speak for Falun Gong have long claimed that the government of the People’s Republic of China are responsible for the torture, systematic detention, illegal execution and organ harvesting from Falun Gong practitioners (for example, see Falun Dafa, 2017; Phillips, 2017; Greenlee, 2006). This persecution is portrayed as a human rights abuse to a Western audience that is inclined to demonise the Chinese government and believe them capable of such brutalities (Aldrich, Lu, & Kang, 2015). For their part, the Chinese government makes counterclaims, stating that Falun Gong is an invidious and evil cult, and comparing it to other notorious cults such Aum Shinrikyo (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America, n.d.b). They also assert that the Falun Gong leadership coerces its members into instigating illegal activities (Ross, 2009). They call out Li Hongzhi as a pathological liar who actively deceives those who follow him as well as the general public (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America, n.d.a). Those in the West are already very wary of cults (Pfeifer, 2015), and it is this predilection which the Chinese government is seeking to leverage by demonising Falun Gong. This portrayal is reinforced by the unearthly theology that characterises Falun Gong (Farley, 2010).

The Western media have played into the hands of the highly developed Falun Gong publicity apparatus and have ensured that thoughtful citizens are appropriately outraged by the persecution of Falun Gong practitioners in China. The aim of this strategy is to focus international pressure on China and force them to ease the persecution of Falun Gong members (Greenlee, 2006). The government of

China has at least partly countered these attempts through the pressures applied via its Confucius Institute project active in prestigious universities in the West (Tin-yau Lo & Pan, 2016). Most recently, in Australia, investigative journalists have uncovered a systematic approach by the government of China to exert 'soft power' over the country's government in order to counter dissent and impact political opinion (McKenzie, Koloff, & Davies, 2017). Falun Gong practitioners are most likely correct in their suspicions that the government of the People's Republic of China are trying to exert soft power in order to soften opposition in the West to the continued persecution of Falun Gong practitioners, or at the very least to undermine support for the beleaguered movement outside of China. However, they are too ready to vilify specific academics writing in this area. All that Jianguo has achieved in trying to demonise me, is to discredit Falun Gong in the eyes of the Academy.

Conclusion

I reluctantly agreed to take part in this project. I was concerned that I would only stir things up again, just as they had settled down. At least I did not have Falun Gong practitioners picketing my residence as was happening to my colleague. I am ashamed to say that I did not even reach out to my close colleague in Brisbane who was undergoing his own persecution. It was too painful for me to confront.

Falun Gong adherents perceive that their very survival is at stake, and in many ways, it probably is. Their generalised alertness to transgressions against them by the Chinese government has made them hyper-vigilant, sometimes seeing conspiracies where none exist. Even though a single Falun Gong practitioner has tried to discredit me, I believe he was only doing what he believed he must. Falun Gong doctrine asserts that if there is misinformation disseminated about Falun Gong, then it must be corrected. I believe that is what he believed he was doing. This belief has stopped me from retaliating. I have declined to engage a lawyer to defend my reputation. I have not responded to any of his emails. Until now, I have not sought a public arena in which to defend myself against his claims.

There can be no denying that the government of the People's Republic of China has staged a relentless campaign against Falun Gong. Their motivation for doing so can only be speculated about, but Noakes and Ford (2015) conclude that the Chinese government would lose too much face if they were to reverse their campaign of persecution and suppression before claiming a decisive victory. What is not as clear is exactly how far they were and are prepared to go. The belief that the Chinese government is actively sponsoring Western academics to discredit Falun Gong cannot be substantiated. I am one of the more active researchers of Falun Gong, and while I am prepared to concede that those articles that can be viewed as being critical of Falun Gong may have been taken and reused (without

my permission) in various fora, no approach has been made to me either directly or indirectly.

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