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Book review: The Religion of Falun Gong

BENJAMIN PENNY

Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012

xiii + 262 pp. \$45.00; £29.00

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Academic interest in *falun gong* has been primarily concerned with *falun gong* as a social movement, while broadly being understood as one school within the larger “*qigong* fever” of the reform era. Penny’s book is the first academic study to take

an interest in the teachings, which form the core of its doctrine. By choosing his title, Penny lays out his stall: his book makes the argument that based on its doctrines, practices and the activities of its practitioners, *falun gong* should be regarded a religion, even though this label is rejected by *falun gong* practitioners and its founder, Li Hongzhi.

The book starts with a hugely informative opening chapter reminding the reader of the social context from which *falun gong* emerged and the very short period of time (seven years) that lapsed between first making itself noticed among the myriads of *qigong* practices flourishing in China and its ban. In this chapter Penny also introduces China's religious policy, which is an important factor in his central argument. For Penny, Li's rejection of the religious label needs to be understood in the very specific context of Chinese religious policy; but outside observers must adopt a different set of categories from the religious regulators in the PRC.

In chapter two Penny provides a history of the movement, charting the doctrinal history as well as the astonishing development from an officially sanctioned movement to the ban in 1999, which in itself provided an important stimulus in its doctrinal development by redefining the meaning of "forbearance," one of the three key concepts in *falun gong*. As in contemporary Chinese Christianity, the government's act of repression is turned into a source of spiritual capital, which has become central to its teachings. Chapter three deals with the "lives" of Master Li, presenting in some detail the two different accounts of Li Hongzhi's life as presented by the man himself on the one hand and the Chinese government on the other. A third take on his life is presented through the perspective of his readings. This is perhaps the most fascinating aspect of this chapter, showing the eclectic influences on Li, which range from traditional religious writings, contemporary martial arts films and novels, to Western New Age material and science fiction. Chapter three also analyses Li Hongzhi's own writings, which form the heart of *falun gong* doctrine. It is at this point about half way through the book that the reader's patience with Li Hongzhi's doctrine begins to be tested, even though Penny does his utmost to present it in a clear, logical and comprehensible way.

Chapter four is devoted to the extremely complex understanding of spiritual anatomy, cosmos and history as presented in Li's doctrine; perhaps the most fascinating part of this chapter introduces an anonymous source available on the internet in 2001 called "What Shanshan Saw in Other Dimensions," which brings to life the otherwise difficult-to-digest concepts of the body and the cosmos. Chapter five makes *falun gong* more approachable again by focusing on the practitioners and what they are hoping to achieve through the process of cultivation. What becomes clear here is how central the figure of "Master Li" is for every practitioner's success and it is at this point that a more general frustration with the inconsistency in Li's written work (on the part of this reviewer at least) makes way to a more profound unease about the role Li Hongzhi designates to himself in the life of every practitioner.

Penny's methodology is that of an historian and firmly rooted in "new Sinology" as defined by Geremie Barmé (Penny is deputy director of ANU's China in the World Centre). He is nothing but meticulous and the wealth of his sources, which include all official writings on *falun gong* in their different versions as well as extensive web-based material, and the diligence with which he analyses them is hugely impressive. Penny consciously chose this approach over interviews and practitioner-based social science research – an approach this reviewer applauds. This unprecedented and original use of written sources on *falun gong*, however, also leads to one of the book's weaknesses. Reading all the meticulous analyses of at times really rather obscure and contradictory doctrinal points can be a dry experience. When we finally get to

hear Penny's own voice in the Epilogue, we realize what we have been missing all along: a critical authorial voice throughout the book, which accompanies the reader on this fantastical journey through Li Hongzhi's mind. Indeed nobody can accuse Penny of not taking his subject seriously. While this reviewer had to keep pushing aside mental images of the main villain in Jonathan Letham's *Motherless Brooklyn* (1999) – a New Age meditation guru investing big time in New York real estate – Penny only very occasionally allows himself a subtle quip.

This book undoubtedly fills a huge gap in our understanding of the doctrinal background to one of the most fascinating social phenomena of the late 20th century. A wonderful piece of Sinological research, this book is a must-read for all scholars of Chinese religion and contemporary intellectual history. Readers outside this field may struggle through some of the sections dwelling in such earnestness on what probably Li Hongzhi himself would concede are weaker points of his doctrine. And how much one takes away from this book will ultimately depend on how prepared one is to take *falun gong* seriously as a religious doctrine.

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