

Falun Gong and the Internet: Evangelism, Community, and Struggle for Survival¹

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ABSTRACT: In this paper we argue that studying Falun Gong's use of the Internet is essential to understanding the movement as a whole. Falun Gong has made skillful use of the Internet for three of its most important functions. In the area of information distribution, the Internet has become an important vehicle for disseminating Li Hongzhi's teachings. To strengthen the integrity of a globally-dispersed community, it has proven useful for organizing face-to-face gatherings and for online experience sharing. In Falun Gong's struggle for survival as a movement, the Internet has helped practitioners bring pressure against the People's Republic of China (PRC) government, especially at the international level. But Falun Gong's Internet use has not guaranteed success in these tasks. Reliance on the Internet has paved the way for the emergence of a splinter sect and challenges to Li's authority, and the PRC government has effectively countered much of Falun Gong's Internet use within the country.

Throughout history, technology has often facilitated the spread of religion. Indeed, it is frequently stated that the most important difference between Jan Hus and Martin Luther was the availability of the printing press.² More recently, radio and television have assisted the spread of evangelical Christianity in the United States. It is not unreasonable to posit, therefore, that the Internet may play an important role in the growth of religious movements that embrace it.

Although the exact size of Falun Gong is impossible to determine, and the Internet's precise birth date is difficult to specify, it is safe to say that Falun Gong is the largest religious movement born alongside the rapid global proliferation of the Internet.³ Certainly, its growth has coincided with an Internet boom, in China and around the world. The People's Republic of China (PRC) established its first Internet connection in 1993, and its user community has grown rapidly since 1997,

reaching 45.8 million by the end of June 2002.⁴ Globally, the number of Internet users rose from 26 million in 1995 to over 600 million in 2002, by which time virtually every country had established a connection.⁵ In comparison, Falun Gong emerged in 1992 and grew rapidly in the latter half of the decade, both within China and around the world. Chronologically and geographically, it has been well positioned to take advantage of the Internet.

There is a widespread perception from around the world that the Internet has been central to the growth of Falun Gong. Western press accounts often emphasize the movement's embrace of technology; the *New York Times* has described it as a "vast, silent, virtually invisible movement...that came together not on the streets but on the Internet."⁶ The Chinese government and official state media have likewise acknowledged the importance of the Internet for the movement's dissemination of information.⁷ Critical Chinese academics have called it "a radical movement [pioneered] through 'traditional' spiritual methods with innovative communication networks."⁸ Western academics, both critical and sympathetic, have pointed to the significance of Falun Gong's Internet use.⁹

Even the movement's leader Li Hongzhi has noted the importance of the Internet for Falun Gong's organizational efforts. When asked how 10,000 people came together to protest in front of Zhongnanhai (the Chinese leadership compound in Beijing) on 25 April 1999, he replied, "they learned it from the Internet."¹⁰

Admittedly, many such assertions of the importance of Falun Gong's Internet use are anecdotal or overstate the case. Undoubtedly, the vast majority of Falun Gong adherents in the PRC are not Internet users, especially the many practitioners who are elderly or come from rural provinces. While it is used more extensively at present, the Internet could not have been a major factor in Falun Gong's initial rise in the PRC, where the numbers of Chinese with Internet access were still relatively small. Even now, there are many other variables that explain the tenacity and growth of Falun Gong practice, both within the PRC and around the world.

Nonetheless, a look around the Internet reveals that Falun Gong has established a significant online presence. Discussions of Falun Gong are commonplace on China-themed chat rooms and bulletin boards. Email news lists deliver daily updates to interested subscribers around the world.¹¹ Falun Gong's shortwave radio station, launched in the summer of 2000, also broadcasts on the Internet in streaming audio.¹²

Most important is Falun Gong's presence on the World Wide Web. Practitioners maintain hundreds of sites around the world; most contain content in both Chinese and English, while others feature such languages as German, French, Russian, and Portuguese.¹³ Together,

the Falun Gong websites offer a number of different features: online teachings of Master Li, news of crackdowns in the PRC, warnings of police movements, announcements of gatherings around the world, experience sharing (practitioners' testimonials), and statements to counter PRC propaganda. In June 2000, Li designated one of Falun Gong's websites, minghui.org, as an official site, giving it (and the Internet in general) tremendous authority among practitioners.¹⁴ The English language version of mingui.org is clearwisdom.net.

This discussion aims to highlight Falun Gong's use of the Internet and its implications for the movement in three areas: 1) instruction and dissemination of literature; 2) strengthening of community and identity; and 3) struggle for survival against the PRC. Two considerations should be noted at the outset. First, much about Falun Gong, including its Internet use, is markedly different within the PRC than without. In consequence, we will distinguish between the two throughout the following analysis. Second, we consider that the Internet is neutral in and of itself and has effects only in the sense that people use it as a tool. Just as Falun Gong uses the Internet to its own advantage, the PRC government and others have shown that they can use the Internet against Falun Gong.

Our central argument is that studying Falun Gong's use of the Internet is essential to understanding the movement as a whole, both within the PRC and around the world. Falun Gong has skillfully used the Internet as a powerful new tool of instruction, strengthening of community, and struggle against the PRC government. But the Internet is not a panacea, and its use does not guarantee unqualified success in any of these arenas, as our analysis will demonstrate.

INSTRUCTION AND DISSEMINATION OF LITERATURE

One of the principal aims of Falun Gong's Internet use is the distribution of religious or instructional material to current and potential practitioners. The movement's websites have grown increasingly sophisticated in this respect, and one can often find audio and video content in addition to images and text. One purpose of the websites is to guide practitioners in performing Falun Gong's five central exercises. Diagrams on the sites explain the movements, and some have added instructional videos and music clips that can be downloaded and played during practice.¹⁵

In addition to providing instructional information and practical aids for exercise, the Internet also serves as a key vehicle for the dissemination of Li's teachings.¹⁶ Almost all Falun Gong web pages link to sites where one can download Li's books for free, in a variety of languages. Many of them also provide text or audio files of his public lec-

tures. Rather than relying on a central website to distribute this material, many local sites store their own copies, facilitating access to the teachings from around the world and making it nearly impossible to eliminate or block them.

Most importantly, the Internet has allowed for the distribution of Li's recent teachings, known as *jingwen*.¹⁷ These articles have not been collected in book form, so they are only available on the Internet or as printouts and photocopies. The online publication of *jingwen* has allowed Li to provide encouragement and guidance to practitioners during the difficult times over the past years. Several of these articles, including "Towards Consummation" and "Eliminating Your Last Attachments," are considered particularly providential and have gained centrality within the movement.¹⁸ Li's online articles cannot easily be accessed by most Internet users within the People's Republic of China, but followers outside of the country regularly send them into PRC by email, and a few tech-savvy Falun Gong members in the PRC circumvent government controls to download *jingwen* from overseas websites. These can be further distributed as printouts or on computer disks. As one practitioner in the PRC brags (albeit a likely exaggeration), "when Master Li issues a new message [online], 99 percent of the followers in Beijing will have it within three days."¹⁹

While the dissemination of religious information via the Internet has some effect inside the PRC, its greatest impact is at the international level, where Falun Gong uses the Internet as an effective tool of evangelism. Curious individuals outside of the PRC can log onto the Internet and download Falun Gong literature for free, exploring the practice in the risk-free environment of their own homes. Informal surveys of practitioners in the United Kingdom have revealed that many first explored Li's teachings via the Internet. Indeed, the truest testament to the Internet's importance for distributing religious information may be the fact that Li himself has adopted it as the principle means of communicating with his followers.²⁰

In summation, we can say that Falun Gong has aggressively taken advantage of the Internet's capacity for low-cost dissemination of information. The Internet has become an integral instrument for distributing literature and an effective tool of evangelism.

COMMUNITY

As a globally-distributed movement that emphasizes group cultivation and is centered on a leader *in absentia*, Falun Gong faces inherent challenges to the integrity of its community. The Internet has offered ways to overcome these obstacles, but it has also created its own set of problems. Falun Gong has used the Internet to strengthen its com-

munity in two ways: facilitating the organization of face-to-face local gatherings, and creating a sense of global community. But the Internet has also paved the way for splits within the movement and challenges to Li's authority, and Falun Gong has been forced to impose an element of hierarchy on its websites in response.²¹

Despite its extensive use of the Internet, Falun Gong is not a "virtual" movement, existing solely online. Li's teachings imbue the movement with a strong impetus toward group practice.²² The Internet cannot replace this personal contact between practitioners, but outside of the PRC it serves to facilitate face-to-face gatherings. Falun Gong uses the Internet extensively to organize and announce workshops and conferences around the world, as well as regular practice times for group exercise. It is easy to find a local contact almost everywhere in the world, from Ireland to Israel, and some sites list instructors who will travel to teach interested groups where there is no established Falun Gong community.²³

While the Internet cannot eliminate the need for face-to-face gatherings, some aspects of Falun Gong are more amenable to a virtual environment. The Internet has proven particularly useful for experience sharing, in which members discuss the benefits they have obtained from the practice and the struggles they have overcome in pursuing it.²⁴ A few years ago, experience sharing was mostly limited to small group meetings, as it still is in the PRC. At the international level, however, this activity is increasingly carried out on the Internet. Chat rooms facilitate experience-sharing, as do daily emails on the Minghui distribution list, which always carry at least one experience sharing story. Many Falun Gong websites feature sections on experience sharing, and the Minghui website was originally established for this purpose.²⁵ Aside from the distribution of *jingwen*, experience sharing is the most important of Falun Gong's religious activities facilitated by the Internet. Indeed, Li himself has endorsed the Internet as a vehicle for experience sharing—in October 2000, he posted a positive comment in response to an experience sharing piece that had been published online.²⁶

Experiences and other information shared by practitioners around the world have contributed to a global sense of community and solidarity within Falun Gong, with the Internet as one of the central ties that binds it together.²⁷ After reading of the trials and tribulations of those within the PRC, overseas practitioners often claim to be inspired by their courage and to take lessons from their cultivation experience.²⁸ Likewise, practitioners inside the PRC look to evidence of external support such as commendations given out by elected officials and resolutions passed by the United States Congress.²⁹ They also take encouragement from events like World Falun Dafa Day, which was celebrated in numerous cities around the world. The Internet is the main

vehicle for the distribution of this type of news, and it would be difficult for members to stay so informed without websites and email lists.

Challenges to Li's Authority

Use of the Internet has allowed Falun Gong to overcome certain challenges it faces in maintaining a sense of community within a global movement. In addition to facilitating face-to-face gatherings and online experience sharing, the Internet has allowed for a movement centered on a single leader to spread and flourish despite his physical absence. But reliance on the Internet has created problems for the movement as well — in particular, opening the way for challenges to Li Hongzhi's leadership and authority.

Soon after the PRC government began its crackdown on Falun Gong in July 1999, Li (in exile at the time) largely disappeared from public view. The only major "sighting" of him consisted of a photo posted on Falun Gong websites in January 2000, showing Li meditating in the mountains and supposedly watching over his followers from afar. In May 2000, a "splinter group" of practitioners in Hong Kong gathered around Belinda Peng Shan-Shan (a former contact person for the movement), claiming that she had obtained supreme enlightenment and was now the rightful leader of Falun Gong. They pointed to the online photo as proof that Li was now removed from the world and that Peng could legitimately take his place.³⁰ In response, a statement attributed to Li was posted online, reaffirming Li's role as master and harshly repudiating Peng's claims.³¹ In the following months, a propaganda battle broke out between the two sides, with frequent denunciations posted on rival websites.³²

Peng's splinter sect has subsequently done little to weaken Li's centrality to the Falun Gong movement as a whole, but it appears to have convinced him that a distributed system of websites poses certain dangers to Falun Gong. In the wake of Peng's leadership challenge, a few of Li's close associates began a major consolidation of Falun Gong websites, establishing a hierarchical structure with Minghui as the central site. In the summer of 2000, leaders distributed a notice that Falun Gong sites should mirror the articles and postings on Minghui. Li concurred, stating that "on important matters, practitioners must watch the position of Minghui Net."³³ Since then, Minghui (along with its English version Clearwisdom.net) has become the dominant presence among Falun Gong websites.³⁴ When the North American site buhuo.org questioned the authority of Minghui, it was placed under the direct control of Minghui's webmasters and eventually eliminated.³⁵ Subsequently, editors of the movement's central site have shown little tolerance for deviations from the official line.³⁶

The above analysis should demonstrate that Falun Gong makes extensive use of the Internet to disseminate religious teachings and facilitate the strengthening of community. At the same time, the movement's leaders have discovered that the Internet has its limitations and can be dangerous as well as beneficial. This is a lesson which the PRC government is also learning, as it responds to Falun Gong's use of the Internet in its struggle for survival.

STRUGGLE WITH THE PRC GOVERNMENT

Undoubtedly, the aspect of Falun Gong's Internet use that has most captivated public attention has been its struggle with the PRC government. Within the PRC, Falun Gong practitioners have staged both mass demonstrations and individual protests, and they continue their now-banned practice despite widespread arrests and intimidation. Internationally, Falun Gong has developed an effective and influential public relations operation, seeking to influence foreign governments and global public opinion. In these and other elements of its struggle for survival, Falun Gong has used the Internet to aid in its efforts. But the PRC government has also sought to counter the movement's Internet use, both within the PRC and globally, and the Internet provides no guarantee of success for Falun Gong.

Within the PRC, Falun Gong's use of the Internet for struggle against the government has taken two major forms: organization of activities and passing information in and out of the country. The movement's organizational Internet use first came to international attention in April 1999, when 10,000 people gathered in front of Zhongnanhai to protest the publication of an article that had harshly criticized Falun Gong. Subsequently, both Li and PRC officials pointed to the use of email as a factor in the group's ability to mobilize such large numbers. While most of these practitioners probably heard about the event through word of mouth, cell leaders apparently used email more widely in the planning stages.³⁷ It is possible that email served a similar purpose in the planning of more recent demonstrations, such as the extensive National Day protests on 1 October 2000, though hard evidence of this possibility is lacking. With increased government surveillance of Internet use by suspected Falun Gong members, however, organizing via Internet has become more dangerous. Beepers and pay phones are less likely to be monitored and may be emerging as the logistical tools of choice for the movement's underground activists.³⁸

The most important use of the Internet for Falun Gong practitioners within the PRC is probably to pass information into and out of the country. As mentioned above, practitioners abroad can send material from Falun Gong websites (such as Li's new articles) to members in

the PRC with email access, and tech-savvy practitioners within China can circumvent government controls to download Falun Gong material directly from the Internet. All of this information can subsequently be distributed in print form or on computer disk. Likewise, practitioners within the PRC can send news of government crackdowns out of the country via email, to be posted on Falun Gong websites. These sites sometimes report on the latest tactics used by authorities and warn of locations where persecution is becoming particularly intense — information which can subsequently be sent back into the PRC.³⁹

In response to Falun Gong's use of the Internet within the PRC and to the political dangers of the medium in general, the government has sought to control the Internet in a variety of ways.⁴⁰ The first of these involves technological measures. With direct control or at least strong influence over much of the Internet infrastructure in the PRC, authorities have been able to prevent most people from accessing Falun Gong information on the Web. Falun Gong websites in the PRC have long since been shut down, and those overseas are blocked by a national firewall; surveillance software seeks to identify those who try to circumvent these controls. Email is less amenable to censorship, but the government has been willing to take extreme measures when necessary. During the July 1999 crackdown on Falun Gong, for instance, authorities apparently shut down one of the country's major Internet service providers for two days.⁴¹

Second, the government has used well-publicized crackdowns to discourage use of the Internet for forbidden purposes. In addition to targeting human rights and democracy activists, Chinese authorities have arrested several Falun Gong practitioners for their Internet use. Zhang Ji, a student from northeastern China, was charged with "using the Internet to spread subversive information" after emailing news of police crackdowns to members abroad. Wang Zhenyong, a former professor, was arrested for downloading Falun Gong material from foreign websites and distributing it via email. Li Yixiang, an engineering student and Falun Gong practitioner at Tsinghua University, was arrested after posting notice on the Internet of plans to withdraw his Communist Party membership. During part of his "re-education," he wrote a long article for the *People's Daily* criticizing Falun Gong and specifically mentioning his Internet use as part of what led him astray.⁴²

The third way that the PRC seeks to restrict the spread of Falun Gong's information on the Internet is the promotion of self-censorship. To remain in the good graces of government regulators, Internet chat rooms regularly employ monitors to wipe forbidden messages from the screen and suspend the privileges of frequent offenders. New rules released in November 2000 require chat rooms and bulletin board operators to limit discussions to government-approved topics.

Likewise, Internet content providers have long shied away from posting any controversial political material, and new regulations make law out of what were always the unwritten rules of the game. The operators of Internet portals are now allowed to post news only from state media sources, and they are held legally responsible for any subversive content under their purview, including anything to do with “cults.”⁴³

Finally, the PRC seeks to counter Falun Gong’s presence on the Internet (and in society in general) with an aggressive propaganda campaign. In addition to denouncing the movement in print and broadcast media, the government has gone head-to-head with Falun Gong on the Internet, posting numerous critical articles in the online version of the *People’s Daily* and maintaining several anti-Falun Gong websites.⁴⁴ After several purported Falun Gong members attempted suicide by self-immolation (and one succeeded) in Tiananmen Square on 23 January 2001, the Chinese government posted gruesome photos of the burn victims in an attempt to discredit the movement.⁴⁵

While most popular observers have focused on Falun Gong’s Internet use within the PRC, there is far more international use of the Internet in the movement’s struggle with the PRC government. As in the PRC, some of this Internet use is for logistical purposes. Websites and email lists around the world facilitate the organization of demonstrations, such as the vigils held in front of the PRC embassy during the 2000 experience-sharing conference in Washington, D.C.

Most important at the international level, however, is the use of the Internet for publicity and public relations to influence foreign governments and global public opinion. Overseas sites offer content in Chinese, but also in fluent English and other Western languages. Clearly, they are designed to exert influence beyond the overseas Chinese community. Interestingly, many of Falun Gong’s foreign-based sites portray a different image of the movement than would be most familiar to practitioners in the PRC. Young Westerners are featured prominently in photos on many sites, and the movement frames its message in terms of freedom of religion and human rights, concepts with greater resonance in the West than Falun Gong’s philosophical tenets. Many sites offer extensive news of PRC government crackdowns on practitioners, including those who have died or been tortured in captivity.⁴⁶ Furthermore, foreign websites allow Falun Gong to respond to PRC propaganda. For instance, to counter the claim that Li has used the movement for personal enrichment, many foreign-based websites state clearly and prominently that there is no charge for instruction or practice and that materials can be downloaded free of charge.

Just as the PRC has sought to block Falun Gong’s Internet use within the country, so it also seeks to counter the effectiveness of the movement’s overseas Internet presence. Over the past several years,

Falun Gong sites from Ireland to Canada have been subject to hacker attacks that have been traced back to the PRC. Some attacks have sought to disable the sites, others to replace their normal content with anti-Falun Gong messages.⁴⁷ But PRC efforts to shutter the movement's foreign-based websites should be considered an occasional and temporary annoyance at worst. Falun Gong webmasters have responded defensively, setting up mirror servers around the world for their most important sites and duplicating and distributing information whenever possible.⁴⁸ With no direct control over the Internet outside of the country, PRC authorities have few real tools to limit the international flow of Falun Gong's information.

Beyond the question of which side is winning the cyberwar lies the more important question of what effect Falun Gong's Internet use is having on the relevant players in the game: the PRC government, the PRC public, foreign governments, and the global public. What difference does the Internet make in this struggle? Much attention has been heaped upon the supposed threat that an Internet-empowered Falun Gong poses to the PRC government, but the seriousness of this challenge has undoubtedly been exaggerated. Initially, the Internet may have significantly helped Falun Gong's efforts to organize public demonstrations such as the gathering of 10,000 people at Zhongnanhai. Now, isolated protests continue, but effective surveillance and crackdowns on Internet use have rendered the medium substantially less useful as an organizational tool. Furthermore, Falun Gong's Internet use may have led the PRC government to repress the movement more harshly than it otherwise would have done, putting it in the category of something that must definitely be stamped out rather than merely contained.⁴⁹

Similarly, there has been some speculation about how the Internet may have helped Falun Gong influence opinions of the PRC public, especially the growing middle class where almost all of the PRC's Internet users can be found. But while Falun Gong has many middle-class members, the resonance of its message among middle-class Internet users as a whole may be limited. The movement's anti-technology, anti-materialist message (which practitioners somehow seem to have reconciled with Internet use) directly contradicts the materialism that is such a defining characteristic of the PRC's up-and-coming technophiles. While admittedly inconclusive, both survey and anecdotal evidence suggests that there is minimal support for Falun Gong among PRC Internet users who are not already practitioners.⁵⁰

It appears, therefore, that Falun Gong's use of the Internet has not significantly impacted the PRC government or public in ways that are beneficial to the movement. What about the effect of the movement's Internet use in the international sphere? One definite focus of Falun Gong's public relations efforts has been the United States and other

foreign governments. The United States Senate and House of Representatives have passed resolutions condemning PRC crackdowns on the movement, and Falun Gong practitioners have testified before Congress in hearings on human rights and trade with the PRC.⁵¹ The group's global Internet presence likely helped its story find a sympathetic ear in these legislative bodies. But Falun Gong's plight (and the issue of human rights in general) has certainly taken a backseat to such concerns as trade and security when real decisions are made on PRC policy in Washington.

The most successful use of the Internet in Falun Gong's struggle with the PRC government, therefore, appears to be in its impact on Western public opinion. The movement has successfully portrayed its efforts for survival in the PRC as an issue of human rights and freedom of religion. At the global level, it has ensured that its 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.⁵² Undoubtedly, the extensive information which practitioners have posted on their websites provides a ready resource for sympathetic journalists with tight deadlines.⁵³

CONCLUSION

The overview presented in this article should demonstrate that studying Falun Gong's use of the Internet is essential to understanding the movement as a whole. Falun Gong has embraced the Internet in three of its most important functions, and it has skillfully and effectively made use of the medium in a variety of ways. In the area of information distribution, the Internet has become an important vehicle for disseminating Li's teachings. To strengthen the integrity of a globally-dispersed community, it has proven useful for organizing face-to-face gatherings and for online experience sharing. In Falun Gong's struggle for survival as a movement, the Internet has helped practitioners bring pressure against the PRC government, especially at the international level.

But Falun Gong's Internet use has not guaranteed success in any of these tasks. In particular, reliance on the Internet has paved the way for the emergence of a splinter sect and challenges to Li's authority, and the PRC government has effectively countered much of Falun Gong's Internet use within the country. Certainly, Falun Gong can use the Internet as a tool to promote its own interests, but others can also use the Internet against Falun Gong. In the end, success will be determined not by the technology itself but by the efforts of those that employ it.

This point is an important one to keep in mind when evaluating

Western attitudes toward Falun Gong. In general, governments and media in the West have shown sympathy toward Falun Gong and have been critical of the PRC's efforts to repress it. But many of these same journalists and government officials have accepted without reservation the conventional wisdom that the Internet guarantees freedom in the PRC if only given enough time.⁵⁴ Newspaper articles on the movement with headlines such as "The Web Is Mightier Than The State" presume a certain inevitability to Falun Gong's eventual triumph in the PRC.⁵⁵ Statements by prominent politicians, such as Bill Clinton's claim that cracking down on the Internet in the PRC "is like trying to nail Jello to the wall," serve to reinforce the same ideas.⁵⁶ Our analysis suggests that these assumptions are mistaken, misleading, and even dangerous for the movement's future survival. For those who really want to support Falun Gong, as their public statements might suggest, it is not only wrong but irresponsible to assume that the Internet alone will solve the movement's problems. Proactive steps are necessary for anyone who hopes that Falun Gong may one day practice as freely in the People's Republic of China as it does around the world and on the Internet.

ENDNOTES

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² On the historical importance of the printing press, see Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

³ Exactly *what* Falun Gong is, as a movement and as a practice, has been a source of some considerable debate. This article does not address whether Falun Gong is a "practice," a "religion" or a "cult." For an effort at a concise definition, see Massimo Introvigne, "Falun Gong 101," <<http://www.cesnur.org/testi/falung101.htm>>, accessed 14 August 2001.

⁴ See China Internet Network Information Center, "Survey Report On Internet Development In China," <<http://www.cnnic.net.cn/develst/e-index.shtml>>, accessed 31 December 2002. Estimates by private firms tend to place the figure about 25 percent lower.

⁵ Nua Internet Surveys, <http://www.nua.com/surveys/how_many_online/index.html>, accessed 31 December 2002.

⁶ Barbara Crossette, "The Internet Changes Dictatorship's Rules," *New York Times*, 1 August 1999.

⁷ See, for example, "Police: Falun Gong Followers Leak State Secrets," Xinhua News Agency, 25 October 1999.

⁸ Zixian Deng and Shi-min Fang, "The Two Tales of Falungong: Radicalism in a Traditional Form," <<http://www.xys.org/xys/netters/Fang-Zhouzi/religion/2tales.doc# Ref481930847>>, accessed 14 August 2001.

⁹ Patsy Rahn, "The Falun Gong: Beyond the Headlines," paper presented at the American Family Foundation conference on "Cults and the Millennium," Seattle, 28 April 2000, <<http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/bth/FalunRAHN.htm>>, accessed 14 August 2001; Richard Madsen, "Understanding Falun Gong," *Current History* 99, no. 638 (September 2000): 243-47.

¹⁰ This quote from Li has been repeated in a number of different places and is perhaps the most significant statement concerning Falun Gong's use of the Internet for organizational purposes. See <<http://falundafa.org/fldfbb/news990502.htm>>, accessed 14 August 2001.

¹¹ One popular mailing list is Minghui (English), available at <<http://faluncanada.net/eng/mh-list.html>>, accessed 16 August 2001.

¹² See <<http://www.falundafaradio.org>>; Rupert Wingfield-Hayes, "Falun Gong Goes on Air," BBC Worldnews, 29 June 2000, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/asia-pacific/newsid_811000/811719.stm>, accessed 14 August 2001.

¹³ See <<http://www.falundafa.org/eng/local.htm>> and <http://media.minghui.org/index_others.html>, both accessed 14 August 2001.

¹⁴ See "On Important Matters, Practitioners Must Watch the Position of Minghui Net," <http://www.clearwisdom.ca/eng/2000/July/16/AW071600_1.html>, accessed 14 August 2001. For the response of several Falun Gong members, see Emily Myers Kutolowski, "The Role of Clear Wisdom Net in My Cultivation," <http://www.clearwisdom.ca/eng/2001/Feb/03/ESA020301_1.html>, accessed 14 August 2001; and "Why Do We Shine the Light Directly on Jiang Zemin?" <http://www.clearwisdom.ca/eng/2000/Sept/24/PO092400_1.html>, accessed 14 August 2001.

¹⁵ See <<http://www.falundafa.com/eng/media.htm>>, accessed 16 August 2001.

¹⁶ It was evidently a major problem initially to get the "scripture" distributed in the PRC because of the lack (and expense) of printed copies. See "Disposal of Handwritten Copies of Scriptures," in *Falun Dafa Essentials for Further Advancement*, 2d English ed. (New York: Universe Publishing Company, 2000), 59.

¹⁷ *Jingwen* translates as "scripture" or "sacred texts," though on Falun Gong's English-language sites these are frequently referred to as "new articles." For a list, see <http://www.faluncanada.net/library/english/jingwen_e.html> or <<http://www.clearwisdom.net/>>, both accessed 16 August 2001.

¹⁸ See <<http://www.clearwisdom.net/emh/articles/2000/6/17/9122.html>> and <<http://www.clearwisdom.net/emh/articles/2000/8/14/9117.html>>, both accessed 15 August 2001. For a testimonial on the importance of the Internet for distributing *jingwen*, see Kutolowski, "The Role of Clear Wisdom Net in My Cultivation."

¹⁹ Craig S. Smith, "Sect Clings to the Web in the Face of Beijing's Ban," *New York Times*, 5 July 2001; Interview with Gail Rachlin and other Falun Gong representatives, Washington, D.C., 7 February 2001.

²⁰ Based on a survey of 85 overseas Falun Gong practitioners, Scott Lowe in this issue concludes that the Internet is not particularly important for establishing initial interest in Falun Gong. Our findings, however, suggest that whatever may have sparked initial interest in the movement (family, friends, observation of public exercises, media coverage, etc.) the Internet can play an important role in the individual's exploration and practice of Falun Gong, both in the beginning and more advanced stages.

²¹ The Web also exacerbates the deterritorialized nature of Falun Gong, contributing to the debate over the true number of practitioners (see <<http://cti.itc.virginia.edu/~jkh8x/soc257/nrms/falungong.html>>, accessed 14 August 2001). Since individuals can download the teachings and learn the movements in their own home and practice in private without anyone ever knowing, it is difficult to determine just how many practitioners there are. Several sites (such as the United Kingdom site <<http://societies.su.umist.ac.uk/falungong/beginner.htm>>) emphasize class attendance, group practice, and community over individual study.

²² Li said that “it is very necessary for the disciples to share with one another what they have experienced and learned in their cultivation practice.” From “The Fa Conference,” *Falun Dafa Essentials for Further Advancement*, 59-60.

²³ For example, see <<http://www.umich.edu/%7Efalun/contact.html>>, accessed 16 August 2001.

²⁴ Experience-sharing pieces have rapidly developed as a recognizable literary genre within the movement. Typically, they begin with an introduction thanking Master Li (and acknowledging his omnipresence) and then move on to a discussion of how the practitioner came to learn Falun Gong and the benefits that ensued. This is followed by an account of tribulations endured by the practitioner; a breakthrough which allows for these tribulations to be overcome; and finally a rededication of the practitioner’s efforts towards cultivating the *fa*. See, for example, part II of the daily newsletter from 20 September 2000, <http://www.clearwisdom.ca/eng/daily_archive/latest_Sept00.html>, accessed 14 August 2001.

²⁵ See <<http://www.clearwisdom.ca/eng/2000/July/19/editor0719001.html>>, accessed 14 August 2001.

²⁶ See <<http://www.clearwisdom.ca/eng/2000/Sept/30/POI0930005.html>>, accessed 14 August 2001. This statement is apparently the only time that Li has responded directly to an experience-sharing story, and the fact that he did so on the Internet has convinced some practitioners of the authority of the Minghui/Clearwisdom website. For an example of such a sentiment, see Kutolowski, “The Role of Clear Wisdom Net in My Cultivation.”

²⁷ As one practitioner puts it, “Master [Li] said, ‘students both inside and outside of China are one body.’ For me, reading ClearWisdom articles everyday has allowed me to connect to the other parts of the body, particularly the ones in China.” See Kutolowski, “The Role of Clear Wisdom Net in My Cultivation.”

²⁸ See Kutolowski, “The Role of Clear Wisdom Net in My Cultivation.” as well as other testimonials posted on clearwisdom.net. This claim was also voiced frequently in interviews with practitioners living in the United Kingdom and in the testimonials of practitioners at the August 2000 annual conference in London. The Internet is also used as something of an evangelical and “follow-up” tool whereby practitioners can email encouragement to new or wavering practitioners. For example, see Chenxi Lou, “My Experience Sharing,” <<http://www.clearwisdom.ca/eng/2001/Mar/01/EXP0301011.html>>, accessed 14 August 2001.

²⁹ Barend ter Haar, in a commentary posted at <<http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/bth/falun.htm>>, accessed 14 August 2001, has argued that official endorsements are particularly important in the Chinese cultural context and are likely to lend significant moral support to Falun Gong practitioners. Rahn in “The Falun Gong: Beyond the Headlines” suggests that the commendations and proclamations given out routinely by the staff of mayors’ and governors’ offices (as opposed to congressional resolutions, which must be passed by members) have been used misleadingly by the Falun Gong leadership which seeks to imply official endorsement of Master Li and his teachings.

³⁰ On the ambiguities concerning Peng's position within the Falun Gong splinter group, particularly in the wake of Li's California appearance, see Gareth Fisher's article in this issue. Previously Peng transliterated her Chinese name as Pang San-San.

³¹ Li called Peng that "vile person in Hong Kong who lost her senses [and] has severely interfered with Dafa by saying absurd things." See <http://www.clearwisdom.ca/eng/2000/July/07/JingWen_070700.html>, accessed 14 August 2001.

³² Peng's site, <<http://www.falundafa.com.hk>>, is the best site to examine the propaganda battle. It seems that Peng's postings, rather than her claim to authority, were what most disturbed Li. See, for example, <http://www.clearwisdom.ca/eng/2000/July/07/JingWen_070700.html>, where Li says that "she even caused damage by using [i.e., posting online] a telephone call I made to her." For the text of the phone call, see <http://www.falundafa.com.hk/eng/FakeMaster_yehao1.htm> (all of the above accessed 14 August 2001). It is interesting to note that when Li did emerge in public again, in late October 2000 at the San Francisco experience-sharing conference, he expressed regret over "problems with certain individuals." <<http://www.clearwisdom.ca/eng/2000/Nov/05/JingWen110500.html>>, accessed 14 August 2001. Peng retorted that the postings attributed to Li were illegitimate and written by an impostor, an accusation which was difficult to disprove.

³³ See "Break Through Blockades and Enhance the Effectiveness of Falun Dafa Websites Around the World," <http://www.clearwisdom.ca/eng/2000/July/16/AW071600_2.html>, accessed 14 August 2001; and "On Important Matters, Practitioners Must Watch the Position of Minghui Net," <http://www.clearwisdom.ca/eng/2000/July/16/AW071600_1.html>, accessed 14 August 2001.

³⁴ [M]inghui.org and clearwisdom.net are currently the Chinese and English-language versions of the same site. Originally, English-language content was available at minghui.org; later this content was moved to the site clearwisdom.net. In 2001, clearwisdom.net was significantly revised so that old URLs for documents on the site are no longer valid. The old site has been archived at clearwisdom.ca (a former mirror for clearwisdom.net).

³⁵ See Deng and Fang, "The Two Tales of Falungong."

³⁶ For example, after Li reappeared in public at the San Francisco experience-sharing conference, the editors of Clearwisdom posted the following notice on the site: "As usual, please destroy all audio and video recordings of the Fa conference yourselves after Master's work is formally published. This is to ensure the correct dissemination of Dafa." See <<http://www.clearwisdom.ca/eng/2000/Nov/05/JingWen110500.html>>, accessed 14 August 2001.

³⁷ Melinda Liu, "The Great Firewall of China," *Newsweek*, int. ed., 11 October 1999, <http://discuss.washingtonpost.com/nw-srv/issue/15_99b/printed/int/wb/ov1315_1.htm>, accessed 14 August 2001.

³⁸ Ian Johnson, "The Survival of Falun Dafa Rests on Beepers and Faith," *Wall Street Journal*, 25 August 2000; Calum Macleod, "Inside the Falun Gong," *The Independent* (United Kingdom), 23 February 2001.

³⁹ See, for example, <http://www.clearwisdom.ca/eng/2000/Sept/22/MNC092200_1.html>, accessed 14 August 2001.

⁴⁰ While the following discussion of PRC Internet policy focuses on elements that affect Falun Gong specifically, China's response to the Internet is driven by a number of other factors. For an overview, see Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas, *Open Networks, Closed*

Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).

⁴¹ Hong Kong Voice of Democracy, "Chinese Government Blocked E-Mails During Falun Gong Crackdown," <http://www.democracy.org.hk/EN/jul1999/mainland_18.htm>, accessed 14 August 2001.

⁴² Lynne O'Donnell, "China Seizes Cultist Who Used Net," *Times* (United Kingdom), 9 November 1999; "A Doctoral Student Breaking Away from 'Falun Gong,'" *People's Daily*, 19 April 2000, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200004/19/eng20000419_39239.html>, accessed 14 August 2001.

⁴³ See Shanthy Kalathil, "A Thousand Websites Almost Bloom," *Asian Wall Street Journal*, 29 August 2000; "China Bolsters Censorship Tactics on the Internet," *San Jose Mercury News*, 19 September 2000; "China Tightens Internet Restrictions," Associated Press, 7 November 2000.

⁴⁴ Two of the principle English-language anti-Falun Gong sites are <<http://www.china.org.cn/english/7458.htm>> and <<http://www.mingjing.org.cn/ppflg/e-falun/>>. The Chinese-language version of the latter is at <<http://www.mingjing.org.cn/ppflg/indexc.html>>, (all of the above accessed 14 August 2001).

⁴⁵ Falun Gong's leadership claims that the victims were not actually Falun Gong members, since the principles of Falun Gong prohibit suicide. See <<http://www.clearwisdom.ca/eng/weekly/category/immolation.html>>, accessed 14 August 2001.

⁴⁶ For example, see <<http://faluninfo.net>>, which had documented 261 deaths in police custody as of 14 August 2001.

⁴⁷ See the long list of alleged hacking attacks in "A Report on Extensive and Severe Human Rights Violations in the Suppression of Falun Gong in the People's Republic of China," <<http://hrreports.faluninfo.net/>>, accessed 14 August 2001; as well as "Falun Dafa and the Internet: A Marriage Made in Web Heaven," *Virtual China*, 30 July 1999, <<http://virtualchina.org/archive/infotech/perspectives/perspective-073099.html>>; and Jonathan Dube, "China Ate My Website," ABCNews.com, 6 August 1999, <<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/tech/DailyNews/falunweb990806.html>>.

⁴⁸ See, for example, "Notice to Overseas Practitioners from the Minghui Editors," <<http://www.clearwisdom.ca/eng/2000/July/27/EDITOR072700.html>>, accessed 14 August 2001.

⁴⁹ For a similar argument, see John Wong and William T. Liu, *The Mystery of China's Falun Gong: Its Rise and Its Sociological Implications* (Singapore: World Scientific/Singapore University Press, 1999).

⁵⁰ According to Jack Qiu, a student of the Chinese Internet and former host of online chat rooms in the PRC, "although I know [Falun Gong] practitioners are using the Net for their purposes, I don't see a lively support for them in the most popular Chinese online forums.... The rising urban middle-class share the modernist mindset of the decision-makers, while the suppressed group is not part of the deliberating public due to the nature of its spirituality" (personal communication, 25 August 2000). Additionally, a recent survey of over 1,000 mostly overseas Chinese Internet users found that the overall opinion of Falun Gong and Master Li was slightly negative. Support for Falun Gong was much lower among the 79 percent of the sample group that did not identify themselves as practitioners. See "The Controversy about Falun Gong: What Do Chinese People Think?" <<http://www.voicesofchinese.org/falun/surveyrpt.shtml>>, accessed 14 August 2001.

⁵¹ See House Resolution 218 (18 November 1999) and Senate Resolution 217 (19 November 1999), as well as statements by four Falun Gong members at a Congressional Human Rights Caucus Briefing on 6 April 2000,

<<http://www.house.gov/lantos/caucus/index/archive/briefings/statements/4-06-00.htm>>, accessed 14 August 2001, and by Tracy Zhao at a hearing of the House Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights, 2 March 2000, <http://www.house.gov/international_relations/hr/ctzhao.htm>, accessed 14 August 2001.

⁵² See Rahn, "The Falun Gong: Beyond the Headlines," for an analysis of the slant in Western press coverage of Falun Gong.

⁵³ Falun Gong practitioners are clear in their belief that their online resources help influence journalists' opinions; see <http://www.clearwisdom.ca/eng/2001/Mar/01/LNC030101_3.html>, accessed 14 August 2001.

⁵⁴ See Kalathil and Boas, *Open Networks, Closed Regimes*.

⁵⁵ Craig S. Smith, "In a Chinese Battle, the Web Is Mightier Than the State," *Wall Street Journal*, 9 September 1999.

⁵⁶ William Jefferson Clinton, speech at the Paul H. Nitze School for Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Washington, D.C., 8 March 2000.

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