

**Falun Gong in the United States:  
An Ethnographic Study**

by  
**Noah Porter**

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FALUN GONG IN THE UNITED STATES: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

by

NOAH PORTER

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
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College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .....	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	iv
ABSTRACT .....	vi
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 2: METHODS .....	6
Establishing Rapport .....	6
Methods Used and Research Setting .....	6
Justification for Methodology.....	10
IRB and Ethics.....	12
Reflexivity .....	13
CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	17
Advocacy Anthropology and Falun Gong.....	17
Culture, Power, and Narratives.....	19
Falun Gong Basic Beliefs .....	27
Classification of Falun Gong.....	35
Is Falun Gong a Religion? .....	35
Is Falun Gong a Cult? .....	40
Is Falun Gong a Political Movement?.....	45
Is Falun Gong a Millenarian or Revitalization Movement?.....	58
Falun Gong History .....	67
The Chinese Media versus Falun Gong: A Battle of Representation.....	67
The Rise of Falun Gong.....	72
Why The Crackdown? .....	86
After the Crackdown.....	99
Falun Gong’s Growth in the United States .....	107
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS .....	113
Who Are the Practitioners?.....	113
Basic Demographics of Practitioners Worldwide.....	116
Difficulties in Identifying Practitioners .....	126
The Tampa Practitioners.....	128
The Washington D.C. Practitioners .....	129
The Internet Practitioners.....	142
How Practitioners Get Started: Similarities and Differences in Background Circumstances.....	144
Religious Background.....	144
Qigong Background.....	146
Initial Exposure to Falun Gong .....	146
Turning to Falun Gong for Healing .....	147

Common Elements of Falun Gong “Conversion” Narratives .....	148
Health Care and Falun Gong .....	153
The Medical Care Controversy .....	155
Public Practitioner Narratives about Illness .....	160
Interview Findings .....	166
Concluding Remarks on the Health Care Controversy .....	172
Social Structure .....	177
Six Periods of Loose Organizational Structure .....	177
Falun Gong and Finances .....	197
Falun Gong’s Hong Kong Splinter Group – Peng Shan Shan .....	199
Falun Dafa Professional Practitioners .....	205
Falun Gong and the Internet .....	207
Overview of Falun Gong in Cyberspace .....	207
A Brief History of Falun Gong Websites .....	209
The Content of Falun Gong Websites .....	212
The Significance of the Internet for Falun Gong .....	219
How Practitioners are Raising Awareness .....	222
Chinese Opinions of Falun Gong .....	222
Methods of Getting the Message Out .....	227
Selected Practitioner Biographies .....	230
The Life of Jianping Chu: An Example of How a Person Becomes a Practitioner .....	230
The Life of Nappi: From Car Accident to Cultivator .....	236
Preface .....	236
Nappi’s Story: “~ Sharing a Point, to View ~” .....	238
Comments on Nappi’s biography .....	245
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION .....	246
Summary .....	247
Significance of an Anthropological Approach .....	253
Recommendations .....	256
Recommendations for Anthropology .....	256
Recommendations for Falun Gong .....	257
REFERENCES CITED .....	260
APPENDICES .....	283
Appendix A: Tampa Semi-Structured Interview Protocol .....	284
Appendix B: D.C. Semi-Structured Interview Protocol .....	285
Appendix C: Internet Semi-Structured Interview Protocol .....	287

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Falun Gong Demographics Worldwide.....	113
Table 2: Falun Gong Practitioner's Educations and Careers .....	115
Table 3: Anecdotal Demographic Information - North American Practitioners .....	121
Table 4: Falun Gong Demographics for Tampa, FL .....	128
Table 5: Falun Gong Demographics for Washington, D.C. ....	129
Table 6: Falun Gong Demographics for American Practitioners on the Internet .....	142
Table 7: The Six Periods of Falun Gong .....	177
Table 8: Most Frequently Checked Falun Gong Websites in the United States.....	212

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Practitioners in D.C. "Sending Forth Righteous Thoughts.".....	27
Figure 2: Part of the first exercise .....	34
Figure 3: Political Cartoon by Tony Auth.....	45
Figure 4: "Our country is in its best human rights period in history." .....	67
Figure 5: Part of an anti-Falun Gong comic. ....	67
Figure 6: Practitioners in Sheng Yang.....	72
Figure 7: A Practitioner's Home After Being Ransacked by Chinese Police .....	99
Figure 8: A 5,000 Yuan Fine For Having a Wife Who Appealed for Falun Gong.....	100
Figure 9: "Photo Taken by an American Tourist: Police Arrest Falun Gong Practitioners in Tiananmen Square" .....	100
Figure 10: Liu Yufeng, a Practitioner Who Was Beaten to Death .....	101
Figure 11: Practitioners in D.C.....	107
Figure 12: Suspicious-looking Chinese Man with a Camera Hangs Around the D.C. Practice Site .....	112
Figure 13: Li Hongzhi interviewed. ....	112
Figure 14: Chinese tourists walking away after taking pictures of practitioners up close.....	130
Figure 15: Joggers glance at dancers on Falun Dafa day. ....	131
Figure 16: Passersby read Falun Gong posters.....	133
Figure 17: A passerby imitates by watching. ....	133
Figure 18: Teaching a new person the fifth exercise.....	134
Figure 19: Teaching a new person the fourth exercise.....	134
Figure 20: Practitioners setting up for Falun Dafa day.....	135

Figure 21: A picture of Li Hongzhi on Richard's wall .....	138
Figure 22: Richard's wall.....	139
Figure 23: Nappi's fireplace mantle.....	139
Figure 24: Nappi's wall and VCR.....	140
Figure 25: Medical care allegation in Chinese comic. ....	154
Figure 26: Clearwisdom.net refutes medical care allegation.....	155
Figure 27: Conference at USF.....	196
Figure 28: Children presenting at an Orlando experience sharing conference. ....	197
Figure 29: Professional Practitioners by the Washington Monument .....	205
Figure 30: A New Website is Advertised at the D.C. Conference .....	209
Figure 31: A Practitioner's Van In D.C. With A Message For China.....	222
Figure 32: The poster used for the Practice Site in Tampa.....	229
Figure 33: A Poster Used on the Mall in D.C. ....	230
Figure 34: Practitioners in Front of the Chinese Embassy .....	246

## FALUN GONG IN THE UNITED STATES: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY

Noah Porter

### ABSTRACT

Falun Gong, also known as Falun Dafa, has been described in many ways. It has been called *qigong*, one of many schools of physical exercises that aim at improving health and developing “supernatural abilities.” Scholars and mainstream media have referred to it as a “spiritual movement” or religion, although practitioners claim it is not a religion. It has been called a cult, in the pejorative sense rather than in a sociological context, by the Chinese government and by some Western critics. In the writings of Li Hongzhi, the founder of Falun Gong, it is referred to in different ways, though primarily as a “cultivation practice.”

The question of how to define Falun Gong is not just an academic issue; the use of the cult label has been used to justify the persecution of practitioners in China. To a limited degree, the Chinese Government is able to extend the persecution overseas. How society defines Falun Gong has implications for action on the level of policy, as well as the shaping of social, cultural, and personal attitudes.

This research project addresses what Falun Gong is through ethnography. Research methods included participant-observation, semi-structured ethnographic interviews (both in-person and on-line), and content analysis of text and visual data from Falun Gong books, pamphlets, and websites. Research sites included Tampa, Washington D.C., and “cyberspace.” In order to keep my research relevant to the issues and concerns of the Falun Gong community, I was in regular contact with the Tampa practitioners, keeping them abreast of my progress and asking for their input.

My findings are contrary to the allegations made by the Chinese Government and Western anti-cultists in many ways. Practitioners are not encouraged to rely on Western medicine, but are not prohibited from using it. Child practitioners are not put at risk. Their organizational structure is very loose. Finally, the Internet has played a vital role in Falun Gong’s growth and continuation after the crackdown.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Amy Lee gives many of the interviews in Chinese, which are translated for American audiences, but she struggles to speak in English. She only began speaking English last March when she arrived in the United States, smuggled out of China with the help of a Western journalist. She practices by reading her press statement aloud, mouthing the words slowly and repeating them. Occasionally, she asks how to pronounce certain words. They are words like "surveillance," "unconscious" and "comatose."

– Rose Farley, “Unlocking the Gong” [2001: 5]

The history drenched parks of the capital now played stage to a new scene as Public Safety thugs, plain clothed and uniformed swarmed in en-masse, rounding up the usual suspects - defenseless Chinese people - checking ID cards and asking "Are you Falun Gong?" An affirmative answer won the speaker a free trip in the "people's safety school bus." Official Chinese media fell in line, demonizing the sect and praising the government's swift bud-nipping. Thanks to the party's resolution, the people of China were safe from the threat of stationary mobs of peaceful chi-gong practitioners.

– Joshua Samuel Brown, “Falun Gong: Ancient Wisdom or Mere Scientology?” [2000]

Falun Gong, also known as Falun Dafa, has been described in many different ways. It has been called qigong, which is a type of slow-moving exercises that typically also regulate breathing that originated in China. It has been called a religion, or sometimes more specifically a “quasi-Buddhist sect” (Lam 2001a). It has also been called a cult, in the pejorative sense rather than in a sociological context, by the Chinese government and by some Western anti-cultists like psychologist Margaret Singer. In the writings of Li Hongzhi, their “leader,” it is referred to in different ways, though primarily as a “cultivation” practice.

Falun Gong practitioners have been making their voice heard in the media in the United States and other countries, but in my experience, they are not being given adequate regard by many social scientists. Danny Schechter (2001) wrote a book entitled *Falun Gong's Challenge to China: Spiritual Practice or 'Evil Cult'?* that makes a genuine attempt to sort through the conflicting accounts of events:

I published several essays and articles specifically on the media coverage because I felt the media was not doing a very good job of covering this story. Western media tended to use the same frames of reference that China was using, cult, sect, etc. As a consequence, it was pejorative. It was presenting Falun Gong as something that no right-minded person would be interested in. They compared it to what happened in Waco, Texas. This made

me suspicious. This isn't fair and it is a very superficial labeling of these people. [Yoon and Schechter 2001]

However, he is a journalist, and journalists are “already suspect in academic circles” (Shankman 2001: 49), which may make academics reluctant to consider him a reliable source. Indeed, if we look at Patsy Rahn’s (2001a: 241-242) review of Schechter’s book, we can see that she is critical of Schechter’s claims to objectivity and his omission of the aspects of Falun Gong that Rahn herself finds troubling.

With a few exceptions, (e.g., Chen 2000; Frank 2002), anthropologists have generally had little to say about Falun Gong. John Young (2002) tends to support official Chinese definitions: “The Chinese government for several years afforded the notorious Falun Gong movement a large measure of freedom, even though it fits the classic definition of a militant cult that gives little freedom of thought to its members, similar to the Branch Davidians, or Jim Jones’ People’s Temple...” (Young 2002: 31) Young cites a book called *Li Hongzhi and His 'Falun Gong:' Deceiving the Public and Ruining Lives* by Ji Shi, which has been described by some as a “relentless barrage of propaganda from China's entirely state-run media” (Associated Press 1999; also see Cheng 2002). Young (2002) calls a protest frequently described as peaceful “an anti-government demonstration” (p. 31) and says that China’s current materialist obsession leaves them open to “exploitation by a charismatic cult leader” (p. 31).

Patsy Rahn, a critic of Falun Gong from UCLA, listed four areas she feels are problematic about Falun Gong:

1. Li's absolute authority
2. A strong us/them division with a highly negative view of "ordinary" people
3. An environment conducive to abandoning medical care
4. The use of misinformation to influence practitioners [Rahn 2000]

Her report concludes by saying, “I feel it would be beneficial for the press to continue to broaden its coverage of the Falun Gong beyond the human rights issues in China, and for research to be done on the group here in the United States” (Rahn 2000). After publication, Rahn’s paper “has immediately been taken hold off and distorted by the Xinhua Newsagency, which maintains a special section on (or rather against) the Falun Gong” (ter Haar 2001: sec. 3). Her report, both its content and what was done with it afterwards, clearly shows that more research on Falun Gong practitioners is needed. I hope my research helps to rectify this situation.

Hinton (2002) writes, “our most fundamental enterprise—examining and characterizing human similarity and difference—may serve as the basis for horrendous deeds” (p. 18). In the past, anthropologists have not always taken a stand against harsh persecution. For example, Eugen Fischer, an anthropologist in Nazi Germany, was initially impressed with people of mixed “race.” However, “[his] opinion was not looked upon with favor from those in the Hitler regime, and over a relatively short time his statements changed, until he had brought himself in line with government policy” (Schafft 2002: 124). I have been told, both by practitioners and non-practitioners, that scholars who write on Falun Gong are placed in a similar position by the Chinese government; “[the] alternative for those who could not or would not stand with official policy was to be removed from any serious endeavor and to be regarded with suspicion by the police state” (2002: 125). For writing this thesis, I have been told I will almost certainly end up on China’s blacklist, and therefore be barred from entering the country for life. Madsen (2000: 247) noted that scholars writing on Falun Gong are given the basic criticisms they are required to write, and then they flesh out the criticisms with their own knowledge. Scholars and journalists who go along with the Chinese Communist Party’s [CCP] party line on controversial issues like Falun Gong are rewarded (Brady 2000: 952-954). To do otherwise would likely put them in a precarious position with the Chinese government. However, I contend throughout this thesis that Falun Gong practitioners, while they have spiritual beliefs that may seem odd to outsiders, are peaceful people who have not done anything to justify this sort of persecution.

However, one issue I should note that I am still a bit uncertain about is how my thesis will be received. One Chinese person, a non-practitioner, expressed concern that by being critical of the crackdown on Falun Gong, I could be perceived as being anti-China. Danny Schechter reported receiving such criticisms for his book (2001: 9). Some have suggested that the human rights criticisms between the United States and China are “not a big deal” and have simply become a public relations game of mutual fingerwagging (Chen 2003 ). Others, however, do see such criticisms a big deal, and believe that criticisms by the United States do not help human rights in China. Wyse (2000) wrote: “many Chinese believe that their wish to cooperate with the U.S.A. is doomed to failure...The ongoing pressure to explain to CNN reporters why [China] does this or that, is wearing tolerance towards outsiders thing, especially about issues considered ‘none of an outsider’s business.’ One of these issues is religious freedom” (p. 278-279).

Young (2002) wrote that the most effective way to deal with Chinese leaders in the area of human rights is “to give them face in public coupled with discreet private requests” (p. 29). However, who exactly is going to make discreet private requests to help Falun Gong if allegations against it gain a foothold in public opinion? Scholars and politicians with ties to China must be aware of Falun Gong’s situation if they are to be able to critically evaluate Falun Gong and be motivated to take action on behalf of it.

At the same time, I understand the concerns of the Chinese reader who was very worried about what sort of impression of China my thesis would leave in the reader’s mind. I admit that since the focus of my paper is on Falun Gong, and the information necessary to contextualize Falun Gong is sometimes unfavorable to the Chinese government (or at least certain elements of it), it may not make for pleasant reading for Chinese with strong, nationalistic feelings. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to cover the positive accomplishments made by the CCP, although I would encourage readers who are unfamiliar with recent Chinese history to seek out such materials. In addition, I would like to point out that this thesis is written more towards an academic audience, not a popular audience. This is partly because I do not believe that the current books written on Falun Gong have been extensive and nuanced enough to address the concerns of social scientists. I believe that the primary audience for my thesis would not judge China solely based on one source.

To quote Deng and Fang (2000), “Should other researchers happen to share our interpretations, they do not have to repeat this painstaking process so that they can directly address their particular concerns; should they disagree, this lengthy process would also lay out the basis to identify any differences” (p. 2). While I strongly disagree with many of their criticisms, I agree with the sentiments they express in this sentence. My intention in writing this is not to make China look bad, but simply to prevent Falun Gong from being made to look bad based on accusations that do not fit with my research findings. Once a better understanding of Falun Gong is achieved, it is in the hands of others to decide what should be done.

One interesting question I have been asked is what I think the prospects are for reconciliation between Falun Gong and the Chinese government. Unfortunately, Jiang Zemin seems to have invested a lot in the persecution, and therefore he may be unwilling to admit he made a mistake. Since even Chinese leaders who have stepped down still have considerable influence, it may not be possible for other CCP

members to look into a compromise until the next generation of Chinese leadership is fully in power. However, if the CCP members would be willing to open a dialogue with Li Hongzhi, I believe a compromise could be reached. The CCP's concerns and Falun Gong's concerns do not seem to be entirely incompatible; both are concerned with the fate of China (Palmer 2003: 359), and their efforts would seem to be better spent trying to help the country than fighting each other.

## **CHAPTER 2: METHODS**

### **Establishing Rapport**

I have made previous contact with practitioners before beginning this study. In the fall of 2001, I made a 21-minute video about Falun Gong, featuring four practitioners and one Chinese person who had a negative opinion of Falun Gong from the Chinese media. The practitioners generally liked my video, and I think the video helped to establish rapport for me going into the more detailed thesis research. Since the central goal of my research is to help non-practitioners understand practitioners in the United States from the perspective of practitioners, establishing rapport was a vital first step, which all my methods built upon. Collier and Collier (1986) also recognized the usefulness of the visual image in establishing rapport: “Early stages of fieldwork usually involve meeting strangers in a strange land. This initial experience is one of diplomacy and orientation, introducing ourselves to people and gaining local knowledge and clearance to begin our research...Photography can accelerate this entry process” (p. 15).

### **Methods Used and Research Setting**

The first phase of my project took place in Tampa, Florida. I used participant-observation at two practice sites in Tampa. The first was on the University of South Florida campus, where every weekday there was an hour-long scheduled practice session near the engineering building. The second was at a nearby park in Tampa, where the sessions typically last 3 hours. Between January 16 and March 26, 2002, I estimate that I have spent over 54 hours doing participant-observation at the practice sessions, involving the exercises, readings, informal conversations with practitioners, and so forth. In addition, I went to a special event put on by the Falun Gong practitioners in cooperation with Amnesty International that consisted of a

question and answer session about Falun Gong, a video made by Falun Gong practitioners about the crackdown, and a play about human rights violations called “One For the Road.”

I also used unstructured life history interviews with Jianping Chu and Qiaoyun Zheng, two of the practitioners who attend both practice sites. These interviews helped to provide me with a better idea of the cultural context of the background that the overseas Chinese came from.

I have also tried to reconstruct the history of Falun Gong. Although it has only been in existence (or, as practitioners believe, revealed to the public) since 1992, and only in the last few years has it received much international attention, it would be impossible given the research time frame for me to examine all that has been written on Falun Gong. I tended to focus on Falun Gong websites more to understand their history as they see it; in picking and choosing what events to represent Falun Gong in this paper, I chose ones that I thought were historically influential to the outcome of events, and that may shape the behavior of practitioners here in the United States.

I used a semi-structured interview with 27 questions at the Tampa practice site to explore particular issues about the Falun Gong community, such as how and to what degree practitioners organize themselves, what role the Internet plays in the culture of Falun Gong, how active and in what ways have they been promoting their beliefs and plight, and how their beliefs have affected their health care practices. In total, 15 semi-structured interviews were collected during this phase of my research, 12 of which were from the Tampa site, one of which was from a traveler who visited the site once and the other was incomplete. Of the three not collected at the Tampa site during this phase of my research, one was an e-mail interview with a practitioner in China, and two were interviews with Orlando practitioners. Of the 10 Tampa practitioner interviews, only one was conducted by e-mail. Of the other nine, four were conducted in one-on-one tape recorded sessions, and the other four practitioners were interviewed as a group. I believe this was appropriate because these four Falun Gong practitioners were friends with each other, and in fact, two were married to each other. Interviewing couples together was helpful because in at least one instance, one added something that the other forgot to mention.

A 42-question protocol was used in conducting semi-structured interviews with 17 Falun Dafa practitioners in the Washington D.C. area. This interview protocol was an expanded version of the interview protocol used in my research on the Tampa practitioners from January 2002 to April 2002.

Deciding what questions were relevant to use on this interview protocol came from two sources: first and foremost, questions were tailored to address allegations made by the critics of Falun Gong. Second, drawing inspiration from an article written by Pitchford, et al. (2001), I wished to know the sort of information that a sociologist of religion might be interested in to understand Falun Gong. This expanded interview protocol had several question groupings: background information, Falun Gong awareness promotion, health care, Internet usage, social structure, and miscellaneous questions mostly related to beliefs. Because Falun Dafa is rather amorphous in terms of its social structure, it is difficult if not impossible to use any sort of sampling other than a convenience sample. There is no hierarchy keeping lists of who is officially a practitioner and who is not; who is a practitioner is a matter of self-selection and group consensus based on the teachings of Li Hongzhi. As a result, it is difficult to say how representative these 17 practitioners are of practitioners nationwide, except for me to say that I captured a fair amount of variation in age, nationality, duration of practice, and other characteristics.

Participant-observation was also used in Washington, D.C. during this second phase of my research. I frequently attended the Saturday and Sunday practice sessions during the months of May, June, and July, which took place on the national Mall, between the Capitol Building and the Washington Monument. From my fieldwork in Tampa, I had a rough idea of how to do the exercises. This knowledge was refined by a tutorial session during the first practice session I went to, and then later by another tutorial session at the home of Richard, one of the contact people for the D.C. area, in early May. Aside from Richard's house, I also went to two special events put on by the D.C. practitioners: one was the Falun Dafa day that took place on May 13, celebrating the 10th anniversary of the introduction of Falun Dafa to the public, and the other was on July 20th, marking the anniversary of the crackdown on Falun Dafa in 1999. In addition, I also went to the Chinese embassy, where practitioners were protesting the way practitioners had been prevented from appearing in public when Jiang Zemin came to visit Iceland, although this was not a planned event for them. Field notes were taken during these session, though I tried not to be obtrusive.

Pictures were also taken with a digital camera. Because it would be impractical to obtain permission from all practitioners, especially those who do not speak English, and the exercises were performed in a public area, seemingly chosen because of the high volume of tourists and other passersby, informed consent for pictures did not seem necessary. Had anyone requested that their picture not be used,

I would have honored their request. That situation did not arise, however. Also, before taking any pictures inside of a practitioner's home, I obtained their verbal permission. Recognizing that "single images do not provide us with the character of people's relationships with each other, the quality of their interactions, the behavioral give and take of culture in motion" (Collier and Collier 1986: 84), the use of images was used primarily as a supplement to field notes in the data collection process, and as a supplement to textual descriptions in this thesis.

The third and final phase of my research took place both on-line and with the Tampa practitioners with whom I had established rapport. I believe the ethnographic picture of Falun Gong would have been incomplete if I did not take into account the virtual dimension of their social interactions more fully. In the first two phases of my research, I found that out of the 31 practitioners I interviewed, 26 of them reported checking Falun Gong websites often (defined as once a month or more, though most reported checking much more often than that), three reported checking rarely (defined as less than once a month), and only two reported never checking Falun Gong websites. This shows the importance of Falun Gong websites in the lives of practitioners. The websites themselves are a place where practitioners can submit articles for others to read, creating a virtual community that transcends locality. I have heard anecdotes from practitioners about reading someone's articles, and then meeting them at an experience-sharing conference, already knowing a bit about them. The first part of my Internet research consisted of daily readings of Falun Gong websites. In doing so, I developed a better understanding of how Falun Gong practitioners choose to represent themselves to other practitioners, how practitioners interpret the writings of Li Hongzhi, and how Falun Gong as a virtual community responds to world events.

The other part of my Internet research consisted of more semi-structured interviews, which used a revised version of the semi-structured interview protocol I used in my D.C. research. Through my research in Tampa and D.C., I had been refining my understanding of Falun Gong, and I was then able to develop an interview protocol that is more custom-tailored to the reality of Falun Gong beliefs and practices. For example, one question I asked on previous versions of the interview protocol was, "What kinds of illnesses or injuries do you think you would get medical treatment for if you had them?" Through the responses to this question, I discovered that there were several important distinctions related to medical care that I was not making. Non-practitioners see getting an illness as a possibility, while some practitioners did not. In

terms of self-diagnosis, most non-practitioners see the symptoms of illness as a sign of illness, while practitioners might see minor symptoms as merely the product of karma being cleansed from their bodies. Some practitioners also had different feelings in regards to the likelihood and treatment of physical injuries like broken bones versus contracting an illness. Since I had become aware of these distinctions, I was able to use a semi-structured interview protocol that was better able to capture these variations.

As for how this semi-structured interview protocol was distributed to the Falun Gong virtual community, it was not a difficult problem to solve. The main Falun Gong website ([www.falundafa.org](http://www.falundafa.org)) gives the e-mail addresses of practitioners all over the country (and even the world, although non-U.S. e-mail addresses were not utilized in this study) who agreed to be the contact person for their area. Oftentimes, a web page URL for local area will be given as well, and on this page, the e-mail addresses of even more practitioners will be given. Also, e-mail addresses were collected from places like AOL and Yahoo where public profile web pages are provided to their users, and the profile meets three conditions: 1. The e-mail address is listed, 2. Their location is specified, and is within the U.S., and 3. Their age or date of birth is listed, and they are at least 18 years old. Originally, I also planned on asking the practitioners I have already established rapport with to help me find practitioners using the “snowball method”, but I decided against this because I would be losing direct control over who received the interview, which could potentially result in responses from practitioners who would be put at greater-than-average risk. Because Falun Gong practitioners generally believe in “clarifying the Truth”, I believed this e-mail survey would be very effective in getting responses, and would also allow them to express their thoughts directly through their texts. Furthermore, because the responses are in an electronic format, I was able to cut-and-paste the responses, which allowed me to avoid the time-consuming process of interview transcription.

Finally, I believe I was able to maintain an open dialogue with the Tampa practitioners concerning my research activities, so that my actions were sensitive to the Falun Gong community, allowing me to incorporate their input into my conclusions.

### **Justification for Methodology**

Some of the methods I used were not that different from those of others. David Ownby (2002) is a historian, and I am sure he is far more familiar with the historical parallels between Falun Gong and different groups throughout China's history. Rahn (2002) seems to have done a fair amount of reading of Falun Dafa books and websites. Many other scholars have written about Falun Gong, either writing an article specifically about it, or simply bringing up Falun Gong as an example to illustrate whatever sort of issue they happen to be writing about (for example, Androff 2001; Aalderink 2001; Adams, et al. 2000; Bruseker 2000; Chen 2000; Ching 2001; Deng and Fang 2000; Kipnis 2001; Frank 2002; Lestz 1999; Lowe 2001; Lum 2001; Madsen 2000; Munekage 2001; Ownby 2000; Palmer and Ownby 2000; Perry 2002; Rahn 2000, 2002; Shue 2001; Sinclair 2001 ter Haar 2001; Vermander 2001; Wong and Liu 1999; Xiao 2001; Xu 1999; Yan 2001; Young 2002). However, apparently only a few have actually interacted with practitioners for their writings (Frank 2002; Palmer and Ownby 2000; Tong 2002a; Ditzler 2001; Palmer 2003; Burgdoff 2003; Fisher 2003; Lowe 2003). Most who have written about Falun Gong have simply relied upon the writings of Li Hongzhi, the websites, and newspaper articles for their information about Falun Gong, and then applied the theoretical perspective of their discipline and their personal perspective in analyzing it. Journalists often talk to practitioners, but they generally lack the time and theoretical background to give Falun Gong anything other than a superficial treatment. (This is not always the case, however; a few journalists have done an excellent job.) Also, it seems as if practitioners have thus far not taken a very active role in academic debates.

The methodology I have chosen here is intended to bridge these communications gaps. Textual sources are of course important, but if used alone they do not constitute a complete picture of Falun Gong (see Frohock 2003). Anthropology has long been known for using participant-observation as a way of understanding a culture. Participant-observation "is an important technique for anyone hoping to develop relationships with, and not merely gather information from, those under study" (Tierney 2002: 11). As a result of developing these relationships, the participant observer gains access to information that may otherwise be inaccessible. Falun Gong practitioners generally are very concerned about the way they are portrayed; without having spent the time that I did with practitioners, I could perhaps see myself being more persuaded by the criticisms of Falun Gong made by Rahn (2002) and Deng and Fang (2000). I believe the combination of participant-observation, life history interviews, semi-structured interviews, and

doing a literature of both scholarly and journalistic accounts will give the sort of holistic description that has long been the hallmark of ethnography. By establishing rapport with practitioners and becoming aware of the concerns about Falun Gong, I had, in effect, become the middleman between the different discourses on Falun Gong, both insider and outsider. I hope that through my research efforts, practitioners, journalists, and especially scholars – particularly the critics – will come to understand each other’s perspectives in a more nuanced fashion.

Practitioners can benefit from this as well. Frank (2002) has noted that “[interviews] also reveal members’ lack of self-awareness regarding how outsiders see their unflagging support of Li Hongzhi.” Jianping Chu, after seeing some of my refutations to the allegations of critics, wrote: “I am so disappointed by those writing you cited by those scholars.” Rahn (2002) has criticized Falun Gong’s belief system for discouraging practitioners from looking at materials critical of Falun Gong; while I disagree with her that this is grounds for claiming their individual autonomy has been compromised, I would agree that practitioners might benefit from a greater awareness of other discourses about Falun Gong.

### **IRB and Ethics**

Originally, my research started out as a series of class projects. During this time period, IRB was not required to conduct research. However, even within this context, I had practitioners sign and re-sign informed consent forms for each class project that I did, and therefore my research conformed to the ethical guidelines of the discipline of anthropology.

During the third phase of my research, I had officially enrolled in my thesis writing and “internship,” and IRB consent was then required. Until this approval was granted, I restricted myself to literature review; it was during this period that I read Falun Gong sites most heavily. Meeting IRB concerns involved several precautions that are also standard concerns in most ethnographic research. First, I needed to ensure that my research would not put anyone at risk. This was achieved in several ways. First, all responses were confidential, and the only way respondents could receive the survey was because that they posted their names and addresses on public websites, thus clearly implying that they do not consider their affiliation with Falun Gong to constitute a risk to them. And, naturally, anyone contacted could choose

not to reply. Second, I contacted neither practitioners living outside the United States, nor non-English-speaking practitioners within the United States. Interview questions were provided only in English to ensure this. Finally, I provided contact information for both myself and my advisor should a practitioner wish to contact either of us or submit their responses anonymously, and included a statement that my research data would be kept confidential. The Office of Research, Division of Research Compliance, approved my protocol.

Furthermore, while it may not have been necessary to give anonymity to individuals under the first two phases of my research, pseudonyms were used in all cases except for one: Robert Nappi. This exception was made for a number of reasons. First, Nappi is an American. Second, Nappi has already been to China to promote Falun Gong, been arrested, and deported; therefore, the Chinese Government undoubtedly already knows about him and has blacklisted him. Third, Nappi's situation is unique and well publicized; he has appeared in both *Falun Gong Stories* books, newspaper articles, and even appears on many of the Falun Gong flyers and posters that are used at different practice sites. Were I to even try using a pseudonym on him, I could not mention his car accident, which is the defining event in his life (along with the introduction of Falun Dafa), or else his unique circumstances would make the attempt at anonymity futile. For example, I knew right away that when Frank (2002) was talking about "Freddy," he was really talking about Nappi. Fourth, Nappi approached me first with the idea of getting his article published in some capacity – and using his article in my thesis will allow him to achieve that goal.

### **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity is defined best as "the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the 'human as instrument'.... It is a conscious experiencing of the self both as inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the processes of research itself." (Lincoln and Guba, 2000: 183). How a researcher is socially positioned affects the product of his or her research. In other words, it is useful for the reader to be aware of the ways in which power, in the five senses defined by Yelvington (1995), explains why the researcher has chosen a particular topic, why he or she has chosen certain approaches and certain issues within that topic, and then decides to present the results in a certain

way. Put more simply, it is helpful to know who the author is, and why and how he or she wrote a particular text, so I will briefly describe my relationship to Falun Gong.

As a child, I had an agnostic father and a Jewish mother. I got kicked out of Hebrew school when I was only in third grade; as a result, I carried resentment towards the concept of religion while I was growing up. This resentment had subsided by the time I was in college at Appalachian State University. Here, I came across some people whose belief systems might be characterized as “New Age,” one of whom became a good friend of mine and introduced me to a store called Ancient Wisdom where there were weekly sessions of Reiki healing. Reiki was originally developed in Japan, but had become popular in the United States within a New Age context. I wrote my senior honors thesis, entitled “Reiki healing at Ancient Wisdom: the people and beliefs behind a spiritual center's event” (Porter 2001) from the fieldwork I did there.

I first heard of Falun Gong while I was an undergraduate at ASU. I was taking a course called “The Human Future,” an honors course that was based on the premise that the problems that China faces from modernization will be problems that the rest of the world will have to face as well, and a student mentioned Falun Gong while doing a presentation to the class. This student was arguing that Falun Gong’s teachings were ridiculous, and therefore we should not criticize China for the crackdown on the grounds of human rights. He had brought along a Falun Gong book, which he read an excerpt from; I do not remember which passage he chose specifically, but I do remember that he had obviously purposely selected a passage that would sound ridiculous to a non-practitioner. I remember seeing many people smiling derisively and chuckling. They sounded odd to me as well, but I thought it was unfair for a “religion” (not realizing the complexities involved with the term that I do now) to be outlawed simply on the basis of it sounding ridiculous to outsiders. Wouldn’t Christianity sound laughable to those who were unfamiliar with it, as was the case with the Mbuti pygmy who called it the biggest falsehood he knew (Turnbull 1987)? Similarly, how did the belief systems of Native Americans sound to the European colonizers? Judging from history, it does not appear that the Europeans had much respect for them. The proposition that simply having odd-sounding beliefs to outsiders is grounds for human rights violations seemed like a disturbing philosophical and moral position to advocate. I wanted to speak up and say something to the class along

these lines, but I knew nothing of Falun Gong except for the strange-sounding paragraph I had just heard. I figured that maybe they knew something I did not about the situation and stayed silent.

When I began graduate school at the University of South Florida, I noticed some practitioners doing exercises on campus close to where I lived. I was taking a Visual Anthropology class at the time, and we had to do some sort of a final project using a visual medium. I thought that Falun Gong would make a great subject for a video in that class. I was unsure at first of how they would react to my request to do a video; when I did my previous research with Reiki healers, they were friendly, but cautious about my research making their customers feel unwelcome. In other words, they were doing me a favor by allowing me to do an ethnographic study of them; they did not have much to gain from my research, except possibly the enjoyment of reading the final product. These Falun Gong practitioners I had met turned out to be different. I was quite nervous about asking them to help me make a video, assuming their attitude would be similar to the people at Ancient Wisdom. I was quite surprised when they readily agreed; what I did not realize then is that they feel there is a real need to get the word out about Falun Gong, and therefore they were just as appreciative, if not more so, towards me for doing the project as I was of them for letting me do it.

When I finished the video, one of the practitioners said that she thought it could use some commentary at the end, giving my opinion on the controversy. I had just begun doing some research on Falun Gong at this point, and I was just beginning to realize how complicated the subject was. I felt sympathy for the practitioners since I could not imagine any sort of justification for the brutal treatment in the pictures I had seen, especially since my impression from interacting with them is that they did indeed live up to their principles of Zhen-Shan-Ren [Truthfulness, Compassion, Forbearance]. Nevertheless, I felt that I did not understand the situation well enough to take a stand one way or the other, or even to make any definitive statements in analyzing the situation. I felt more research was needed before I could do either.

It was in early 2002 that I had this opportunity to do more research on Falun Gong. As I continued to research Falun Gong, some of the more eccentric teachings of Li Hongzhi began to bother me a little. I felt a little disappointed when I heard that Li Hongzhi teaches that the moon is hollow, evolution never happened, and that rock music is bad. After a bit of introspection, I figured out the reason that these particular things bothered me, while other teachings (such as aliens, or that homosexuality is wrong) that