



Falun Gong in the United States: An Ethnographic Study

Noah Porter

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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 it to 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. 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.

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