

BENJAMIN PENNY:

*The Religion of Falun Gong.*

xiii, 262 pp. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012. £29. ISBN 978 0 226 65501 7.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X13000347

This book presents us for the first time with a substantial treatment of the Falun Gong as a religious culture, rather than as a persecuted religious group. Benjamin Penny does so in eminently readable prose. Although the movement was founded in 1992 and prohibited in the summer of 1999, followed by a terrible suppression, it has produced, and continues to produce, a rich religious literature. Since the persecution has made it impossible to carry out any fieldwork in China, and the movement's leadership is not particularly open to discussing the origins and growth of their beliefs, researchers depend largely on written texts. These are widely available on the Internet and allow us to make sense of the movement's evolving religious culture and identity (or identities). Penny (p. 33) excludes fieldwork among present-day followers abroad as a source of information about the Falun Gong religious culture prior to the persecution. He argues that these people often joined only later and that their interpretation will have been influenced by the events following the persecution from 1999 onwards.

Here I would submit one of my very few qualms about this book. On the movement's websites of the early 2000s one could still find digital versions of booklets that had been published informally prior to the persecution by followers themselves in Beijing (several copies are in the library of the Sinological Institute of Leiden University and no doubt have been collected by others as well). These booklets contain fascinating religious autobiographies in which the authors have detailed the relevance of the Falun Gong to their recent personal lives. They include the case of a simple labourer and his broken leg, for which he refuses to seek medical treatment since he interprets it as a moral punishment which he has to endure to lessen his bad karma.

Moreover, it is a general problem of all fieldwork that informants will provide information which has been coloured by subsequent events, normative thinking and so on. If anthropologists were to begin excluding all biased informants from their fieldwork, very little would be left for them to study. Therefore, as a matter of principle I cannot agree with the decision to exclude informants. However, in terms of the amount of work that is already involved in the present richly textured analysis of Li Hongzhi's writings, I have no problem with the particular choices made by Penny for the writing of this book from a practical point of view.

In the first chapter the author covers the question of defining the movement in its own terms and those of its principal persecutors, the Chinese communist state. I should add here that there have also been other detractors, who disagreed with the movement but did not necessarily support the nature of the persecution that started in the summer of 1999. In this respect the state persecution has blotted out other forms of disagreement. In this chapter Penny discusses for instance how the Falun Gong initially fitted quite comfortably in a landscape of religious or semi-religious activities that were condoned by the Chinese state or even, as in the case of Qigong (including the Falun Gong), actively supported by it. He sees the Falun Gong very much as a religious movement, despite the rejection of this qualification by Li Hongzhi himself. After all, the teachings include a detailed cosmology, moral tenets and much else that we would normally qualify as religious. The rituals not only include the Falun Gong exercises, but also the regular meetings to study the writings of the master.

This is followed by a chapter on the history of the movement, which also includes an interpretation of changes and reinterpretations in the teachings subsequent to the start of the persecution. Here I would propose adding an important change in the rituals of the movement as well. Already on the mainland an important feature of the evolving movement was its active protesting against perceived misinterpretations or misrepresentations of their teachings. I would submit that the ongoing protests after the start of the persecution, initially also in China itself (and still today, for instance in the form of small texts printed on paper money) and especially elsewhere can be seen as ritual acts earning the adherents crucial karmic merit.

The chapter on Li Hongzhi's biography does not stop at the mere events of his life, but also pays much attention to the sources of his reading. Especially interesting is the discussion (89–93) of Li's use of Western literature on UFOs. In fact, he is an interesting example of a wave of interest in these matters, spurred on by the first Western television series after the Cultural Revolution, the highly popular "Man from Atlantis".

The core chapters of the book that now follow deal with the religious teachings of the movement. I find these chapters the most impressive since I have myself struggled much with the writings of Li Hongzhi, and the difficulty of doing them justice without becoming condescending proved insoluble for me. I think that Penny has succeeded admirably in this task. Intriguing is his discussion (146–9) of Shanshan's writings after the start of persecution which tell us of a cosmic battle against apocalyptic threats such as the Communist Party itself. There is a striking parallel with the changed identification of the devils from Hong Xiuquan's original vision from the deities and ancestral of local religious culture into the Manchus after they become increasingly embattled in their Guangxi holdout in the late 1840s. In other words, persecution actively produces the kind of apocalyptic thinking that it is so much afraid of, rather than being caused by it. Li Hongzhi's teachings, and the interpretations of his followers, are still developing today. The present study by Penny will provide an excellent vantage point from which to observe these changes.

**Barend J. ter Haar**  
Oxford University

ANNE DE COURSEY CLAPP:

*Commemorative Landscape Painting in China.*

(Tang Center Lecture Series.) 176 pp. Princeton: P.Y. and Kinmay W.

Tang Center for East Asian Art, Princeton University, 2012. £19.95.

ISBN 978 0 691 15476 3.

doi:10.1017/S0041977X13000359

*Commemorative Landscape Painting in China* is a detailed and insightful essay on a type of occasional painting popular in later China. Anne de Coursey Clapp, a well-known and highly regarded scholar of Ming painting, makes a careful study of this genre, drawing upon the knowledge she has accumulated over a lifetime study of Ming painting. Originally presented as a lecture, the book follows the format of viewing a selection of works of art from a number of perspectives. Larger considerations include the artist, patron, style of art, social and political context and the function of the paintings in the literati society of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Chapter 1 begins with an introduction to early commemorative painting in the Song, when a familiar literary form acquired visual expression. Prior to this time commemorative paintings took the form of portraits, but during the Song, landscapes more obliquely portrayed the subject, while colophons described the