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## “I am the only one propagating true Dharma”:

## Li Hongzhi’s Self-Presentation as Buddha and Greater

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### Abstract

*Li Hongzhi, founder-leader of Falun Gong, was a controversial figure even before his movement was banned in China in 1999. We find conflicting images of Master Li (as Falun Gong members refer to him) as a revered spiritual teacher among his followers and as just another a cult leader to his detractors. From early on, Li Hongzhi presented himself as a high-level spiritual teacher who had studied under a series of exalted spiritual masters in what should be referred to as his hagiography. Perhaps surprisingly, we also often find instances of practitioners and other friends of the movement blatantly ignoring, downplaying, or whitewashing the more controversial of Li Hongzhi’s teachings. As his following grew, Li Hongzhi’s claims to spiritual greatness grew as well, until he began viewing himself as a bodhisattva who had come to earth to save humanity from an impending apocalypse. However, as his self-conception continued to expand, even the status of bodhisattva seemed insufficient to capture his increasing sense of his own specialness. Eventually, he not only claimed to be a transcendent god, situated well beyond all earthly and spiritual realms, but also claimed that all other spiritual teachers, including Jesus and the historical Buddha, were his disciples. This paper provides a brief backdrop to Li Hongzhi and the Falun Gong movement, then traces the development of Master Li’s evolving self-perception.*

*Keywords: Li Hongzhi, Falun Gong, new religion*

### Introduction

At present, I am the only one propagating true dharma all over the world. This is something my predecessors<sup>1</sup> were never able to accomplish. I have furthermore been able open this door widely during this period of the latter Dharma. This opportunity does not come along except once in ten thousand years (Li, 1999). In an early lecture in Australia, Li Hongzhi, founder and leader of the Falun Gong movement, asserted that the planet had experienced many near-apocalyptic catastrophes in the distant past due to human immorality. He then proceeded to describe, at some length, the current period of immorality:

The change in human society has been quite frightening! People stop at nothing in doing evil things, such as drug abuse and drug dealing. A lot of people have done many bad deeds. Things, such as organized crime, homosexuality, and promiscuous sex, etc. None meet the standard of being human. (Li, 1996)

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<sup>1</sup> As is clear from other assertions in Li Hongzhi’s corpus of writings and lectures, the “predecessors” to which he refers are earlier religious teachers like Jesus Christ and the Buddha.

This implies, of course, that we are so corrupt that we are on the verge of experiencing a new apocalypse. Many Falun Gong supporters subsequently distanced themselves from the group after critics began to call attention to Li Hongzhi’s pronouncements against homosexuality and feminism (Palmer, 2001, p. 8), as well as rock music, and “race mixing” (Li, 1997). Many former admirers also turned away after learning about his exotic conspiracy theory regarding shape-shifting space aliens, who capture human beings for use as pets (Palmer, 2001) and plan to take over the planet via their false, immoral religion of science (Dowell, 1999). For example, San Francisco legislators withdrew their nomination of Li Hongzhi for the Nobel Peace Prize on learning of his pronouncements on homosexuality and race (Lubman, 2001). Li Hongzhu perceives “race-mixing” as a symptom of degeneration, as well as one of the causes of the imminent catastrophe:

As humankind’s morality decays, all matter is rotting. In other words, it has become tainted. At present, the cultures of humankind are in a muddle – they are messy combinations of all sorts, and human races are becoming more and more mixed. These have indeed driven humankind to a very dangerous stage – this is certain. As I said, catastrophes happen because humankind is depraved. (Li, 1998)

Thus, while FLG tends to blame its public relations problems on the intervention of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the core issue undermining the group’s self-presentation is that it is “Janus-faced” (Lubman, 2001), proclaiming itself to be an innocuous spiritual exercise movement, while denying or downplaying Li Hongzhi’s invectives against people and lifestyle choices he dislikes. For instance, in *Zhuan Falun, Volume II*, he asserts that “the irrationality of our times is reflected in the filthy psychological abnormality that is repulsive homosexuality” (cited in Penny, 2012, p. 102). Elsewhere, such as in a 1998 lecture in Europe, he stated that the gods will eventually “eliminate” gay people (cited in Lubman, 2001). To make Li Hongzhi more palatable to Western audiences, some of his more extreme talks have not be translated into English (Lubman, 2001). Plus, it appears that existing translations have been edited in recent years by followers to remove offensive remarks.

We should question why many Western commentators appear to intentionally overlook Li Hongzhi’s unpleasant side. This seems to be the result of the journalistic tendency to view China in terms of negative stereotypes (Mann, 1999), as well as a general hostility towards the PRC one finds in the West:

According to one veteran China-watcher, Orville Schell, the West's blind embrace of Falun Gong fits into a well-established pattern of viewing communist China in black-and-white terms, missing the complexities and nuances. "This has been the tradition," said Schell, Dean of the Journalism School at the University of California, Berkeley. "Anyone the Chinese government opposes gets lionized as righteous." (Lubman, 2001)

In addition to Li Hongzhi's fulminations about the lifestyle choices he dislikes, followers have also attempted to downplay or deny other controversial aspects of his teachings and, especially, some of his more extreme self-aggrandizing remarks. The Falun Gong organization engages in this censorship of their leader's talks and writings as part of a larger strategy meant to bring critical pressure from foreign countries to bear on the Chinese government.

Some critics say Falun Gong has deliberately obscured its teachings in the West so it can manipulate domestic and foreign policy. "They know how to play politics with American elected officials," said Ming Xia, a political science professor at the City University of New York on Staten Island. (Lubman, 2001)

In this article, I intend to examine this largely hidden side of Falun Gong, especially Li Hongzhi's implicit and explicit claims to be a new Buddha, as well as his claims to be greater than the historical Buddha. This will lead into a close examination of what has come to be referred to as the "Birthday Controversy." However, before turning to the analysis proper, it will be helpful to provide a a thumbnail sketch of Falun Gong and its conflict with the PRC.

### **Falun Gong and China**

Qi Gong is the generic name for a complex of techniques for physical and spiritual well-being, with a tradition in China predating the Christian era. It has sometimes been referred to as Chinese yoga. Although spiritual and religious activities in general are and have been viewed with suspicion in the PRC, in the latter part of the twentieth century the government began to actively promote Qi Gong and other traditional practices, such as acupuncture, as part of "traditional Chinese science." This eventually led to the so-called "Qi Gong Boom" of the eighties and nineties, involving hundreds of Qi Gong organizations, with perhaps as many as a hundred million practitioners. Although the initial impetus from the government was based on an understanding of such practices as scientific and medically-beneficial, the growth of the movement was accompanied by an increasing emphasis on Qi Gong's

traditional folklore and spiritual philosophy, as well as by the emergence of charismatic, self-designated “grandmasters” as cultural and even political leaders.

The largest, but by no means the only, such Qi Gong group was Falun Gong. Li Hongzhi established his particular brand of Qi Gong in 1992, after leaving the semi-official Qi Gong Federation. The core of Falun Gong practices are five key exercises involving slow movements of the arms and the legs, in some ways reminiscent of Tai Chi practices. The number of participants in Falun Gong grew rapidly, in part because, after his initial successes, Li taught the practices without charge.

Li came from a humble social background. Li’s early hagiographies, however, paint him as a child prodigy who trained under a series of exalted spiritual masters and acquired supernatural powers (Penny, 2003). As he saw the political atmosphere in China turn against Qi Gong, Li moved permanently to the US in 1998 and, despite later claims to the contrary, continued to direct the Falun Gong movement’s eventual resistance against the Chinese government from outside the country.

There were people in China’s scientific and political leadership who had never been comfortable with opening the door to these traditional practices. Over time, Chinese researchers failed to find hard scientific support for the supposed health benefits of Qi Gong. In consequence, critical voices denouncing Qi Gong (specifically, the emergent Qi Gong of the boom, not traditional Qi Gong) as pseudoscience grew steadily more persuasive. Additionally, many of the leaders of Qi Gong groups set themselves up as independent authorities who could, it was thought, potentially challenge the authority of the government. This led to what was at first a gradual withdrawal of official support for the newer Qi Gong groups. Eventually, Qi Gong organizations, such as Zhong Gong and Falun Gong, were targeted as superstitious and reactionary by a press campaign. Unlike other targets of this campaign, Falun Gong responded by staging demonstrations, including an April 1999 demonstration involving 10,000 members outside Beijing’s Zhongnanhai, the residence of China’s top leaders. This was viewed as a direct threat, an echo of the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations. The leadership was especially taken aback by the failure of its intelligence service to provide information about the demonstration beforehand (Tong, 2009, p. 6). It has also been said that the nation’s top leaders were surprised by both the large size of the movement and by the fact that, upon investigation, it was found that more than a few mid-level political and military officials were practitioners.

The group was officially outlawed on 22 July 1999. The government accused it of “spreading fallacies, hoodwinking people, inciting and creating disturbances, and jeopardizing social stability” (cited in Wong, 2004). On 29 July, Chinese authorities issued an arrest warrant for Li Hongzhi. The government initially arrested hundreds, later thousands, of Falun Gong followers. Petitioned by practitioners residing in the United States, in November of the same year the US House and Senate unanimously passed resolutions criticizing the Chinese crackdown. Additionally, the rapid proliferation of Falun Gong websites and other online information supporting Falun Gong helped shape international opinion about the conflict. However, it should be realized that, with Li Hongzhi’s encouragement, practitioners intentionally left out certain essential information about the movement that paint a very different picture of Falun Gong and its conflict with the People’s Republic of China.

**Wikipedia.** Anyone can add to or modify information contained in this online dictionary. This works out for most non-controversial topics, but there have been numerous problems with dueling editors trying to embed their points of view in contested encyclopedia entries. As I have discussed elsewhere (Lewis, 2016), Falun Gong followers and/or sympathizers control Wikipedia’s webpages on the movement (Colipon, 2014; Jiang, 2015). In consequence, they present their point of view largely unhindered by Wikipedia’s gatekeepers, downplaying or ignoring negative information about the group and whitewashing Li Hongzhi’s teachings by cherry-picking his moderate remarks rather than discuss his more radical views. Thus, for example in the Wikipedia entry on The Teachings of Falun Gong, the anonymous author addresses the controversy regarding Li Hongzhi’s injunction against medical treatment:

Li himself states that he is not forbidding practitioners from taking medicine, maintaining that “What I’m doing is telling people the relationship between practicing cultivation and medicine-taking.” Li also states that, “An everyday person needs to take medicine when he gets sick.” (The Teachings of Falun Gong)

The author then quickly shifts ground to quote a practitioner (rather than Li Hongzhi himself) who asserts, “It is always an individual choice whether one should take medicine or not” (The Teachings of Falun Gong). This passage, however, represents a disingenuous strategy to make Li Hongzhi’s teachings about medical treatment seem much more reasonable than they actually are.

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The quoted statements from Li Hongzhi in this passage are extracted from his “Fa Teachings in the United States” (1997).<sup>2</sup>

What most readers will be unaware of is that Li draws a sharp distinction between practitioners and “ordinary people.” So what he is actually saying here is that it is fine for ordinary people to seek medical treatment. However, for Falun Gong practitioners, he sets a different standard. For example, later in the same lecture, he asserts:

If you regard yourself as an everyday person ... go ahead and take medicine. [But then] you haven’t passed this test, and at least on this matter you’re an everyday person. When you pass this test, you become extraordinary in this regard. But if you want to cultivate into (sic) a Buddha, your understanding has to be extraordinary in every regard. If you don’t let go of that attachment, you won’t be able to pass this test, and it will be impossible for you to reach Consummation.<sup>3</sup> So if you miss this opportunity you will have failed to pass this test. (Li, 1997)

The final touch to this highly manipulated Wikipedia presentation of Li Hongzhi’s teaching on seeking medical treatment is when the author quotes a single practitioner who states that seeking medical attention is always a matter of individual choice, indirectly implying that this is Li Hongzhi’s position as well (The Teachings of Falun Gong). Of course, none of the quotes in the author’s entry are direct lies, but, without the full context, they are misleading, to put it mildly.

To focus on another example from the same Wikipedia entry, the author tries to water down Li Hongzhi’s exaggerated claims for himself by quoting from the lecture, “Teaching the Fa at the International Fa Conference in New York” (2004), where Li Hongzhi says that it “doesn't matter if [people] believe in me or not. I haven't said that I am a god or a Buddha. Ordinary people can take me to be just an average, common man” (The Teachings of Falun Gong).

Once again, readers unaware of the distinction Falun Gong’s founder draws between a practitioner and an average person will miss the insider connotations of the label “ordinary people.” Furthermore, if one examines the larger passage from which these two sentences are extracted, it quickly becomes clear that Li sees himself as playing the role of a Buddha:

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<sup>2</sup> I am quoting from the Third Translation Edition of 2014, entitled “Fa Teachings in the United States.” The earlier translation from which the Wikipedia author is quoting was entitled “Lectures in the United States.”

<sup>3</sup> “Consummation” is the rough equivalent of Nirvana in Falun Gong.

When Shakyamuni imparted his Fa<sup>4</sup> ages ago, his disciples asked him, “Master, is it possible for us to cultivate into a Tathagata without breaking our ties to the secular world?” Or, in other words, could they cultivate into gods or Buddhas without leaving behind ordinary people’s surroundings and the social environment of this world? ... More than two thousand years have passed, and all the disciples of true religions have been waiting. Waiting for what? For gods above to make a grand display? For gods to come here, so that you don’t need to cultivate or care about cultivating well, and it won’t matter if anyone is good or bad, and everybody will just go up to Heaven together? Of course, regardless of who I am, people know that I am transmitting the Fa and saving people. But the Master who is with you here today teaching the Fa has an ordinary person’s physical body. As for how people think of me, a lot of ordinary people have their opinions. That’s fine — it doesn’t matter if they believe in me or not. I haven’t said that I am a god or a Buddha. Ordinary people can take me to be just an average, common man, that’s fine. All of what I do takes the form of human activity; I’m using the means of common, plain human beings as I save Fa-rectification period Dafa disciples. (The Teachings of Falun Gong)

In this passage Li Hongzhi refers to himself as a master, but does not explicitly claim to be a Buddha. However, he clearly implies as much by claiming that he has the power to save his disciples. Note that Li also distances himself from his own status as an ordinary human being with the assertion that he “has an ordinary person’s physical body,” as if he was merely wearing the appearance of humanity as a way of disguising his true, magnificent holiness (The Teachings of Falun Gong).

This same coyness was evident in an interview in the Asian edition of *Time* (Spaeth, 1999) in the immediate wake of the movement’s suppression in China:

TIME: Are you a human being?

Li: You can think of me as a human being. (Spaeth, 1999)

To draw one more piece of evidence from the conclusion of Li Hongzhi’s earlier lecture, he also asserts, using terminology transparently drawn from Mahayana Buddhism’s *Bodhisattva* Vow, that in the future his disciples will have the same power to save others:

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<sup>4</sup> “Fa” is the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit term *Dharma*.



Your cultivation’s goal goes beyond self-Consummation, as you are to save sentient beings, and you are helping the lives of the future to establish that future. (The Teachings of Falun Gong)

In other words, Li is saying that in the future, after his followers have achieved enlightenment, they will themselves become *Bodhisattvas*. Once again, Li Hongzhi is implicitly claiming to be a Buddha or, at the very least, a master from a much higher spiritual level. This implicit claim is clearly evident in more than a few of Li’s other statements. To once again refer to his *Time* interview:

TIME: Are you from earth?

Li: I don't wish to talk about myself at a higher level. People wouldn't understand it. (Spaeth, 1999)

This part of the interview immediately follows a discussion of Li Hongzhi’s teachings about aliens, meaning that the interviewer is asking him whether or not he is an extraterrestrial. However, in his response, Li Hongzhi shifts the thrust of the answer to imply that he is an interdimensional being whose true status is so exalted that ordinary, unenlightened people would be unable to comprehend it.

### **The Birthday Controversy**

Li Hongzhi’s self-perception as a being from a higher level and his implicit claim to Buddhahood are part of a controversy about his date of birth. In the early days of the group, Falun Gong was presented as simply another Qi Gong organization. However, as the official attitude toward Qi Gong changed from support to criticism, Falun Gong became what James Tong calls a “chameleon” organization (2009, p. 29), adopting new self-definitions in an effort to sidestep the increasingly anti-Qi Gong policy of Chinese officials.

As a result of these changing conditions, in 1994 Li Hongzhi decided to recast Falun Gong as a Buddhist organization.

From then on, Li fashioned himself as leader of a religious movement rather than the head of a Qi Gong organization. He changed his birthday to that of Sakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism. His writings have become sacred scriptures (*jingwen*). Meditation and reading of Li’s scriptures were added to the daily routine of Falungong practitioners. Falungong congregations were not only practice sessions on breathing exercises but also “Dharma Assemblies” (*fahut*) to study Li’s sermons on spiritual cultivation. (Tong, 9).

James Tong is not the only researcher outside of the PRC to accept the Chinese authorities' conclusion that Li Hongzhi intentionally changed his birth date to 13 May, the date traditionally celebrated in China as Buddha's birthday. Even David Ownby, who has described himself as a friend of Falun Gong, says that, "from a non-practitioner's point of view, such a coincidence strains credulity" (2008, p. 81).

Li Hongzhi has tried to deflect criticism on this point by subsequently downplaying the significance of his change of birth date, asserting that:

During the Cultural Revolution, the government misprinted my birth date. I just corrected it. During the Cultural Revolution, there were lots of misprints on identity (sic). A man could become a woman, and a woman could become a man. It's natural that when people want to smear you, they will dig out whatever they can to destroy you. What's the big deal about having the same birthday as Sakyamuni? Many criminals were also born on that date. I have never said that I am Sakyamuni. I am just a very ordinary man. (Spaeth, 1999).

This sounds reasonable enough. However, Li Hongzhi was over forty years old when, as he claims, he "corrected" his birth date. So one can legitimately ask why he chose to wait until 1994, when he "declared that he would devote his time to the study of Buddhism" (Tong, 2009, p. 9), to make this change. Though Western scholars might question mainland sources, it is worth noting that Kaiwind, a Chinese non-profit organization devoted to exposing "cults" (with a special focus on Falun Gong), claims to have tracked down the specifics of how bureaucrats sympathetic to Falun Gong were able to change the official record of Li Hongzhi's birth date at his request. The details of the resulting report are worth quoting at length:

[O]n September 23, 1994, Li Hongzhi drove to visit Xu Yinquan (who was then the vice director of the Dispatch Division under Changchun Municipal Public Security Bureau, and had been the vice secretary-general of Falun Gong Committees of both Jilin Province and Changchun Municipality), requesting Xu to help make the change since his residence was registered in Luyuan public office, in which Xu's brother-in-law Wang Changxue was the political instructor. Xu complied with the request at once. On the following day, Xu went to the public office and asked Wang Changxue to help make a new identity card for Li Hongzhi, on the excuse that the original one was lost. Wang Changxue agreed and asked a police woman, Sun Lixuan, to handle the necessary procedure.

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According to Sun Lixuan’s recounting, on September 24, 1994 (a Saturday), Wang Changxue led Xu Yinquan to her office, in which Xu filled up the residence booklet and the application form for the issuance of a new identity card. Since the clerk, Jia Mingshan, was not present, Sun Lixuan affixed the signature on behalf of Jia. As Xu Yinquan told her that Li Hongzhi’s date of birth was mistaken when he was demobilized, Sun Lixuan then changed the date of birth to May 13, 1951 from July 7, 1952, and changed the ID number from 220104520707361 to 220104510513361. Then Wang Changxue approved the application form. On September 26 (Monday), Sun Lixuan reported to Jia Mingshan the handling of Li Hongzhi’s identity card and told him that what she did was under the direction of Wang Changxue. Jia Mingshan made an additional note on the registry of identity card issuance.

With the approved application form, Xu Yinquan went to the ID card office under the Third Division of Changchun Public Security Bureau to make a new identity card for Li Hongzhi. The card, with a serial number of 220104510513361 and issuance date of October 20, 1994, said that Li Hongzhi was born on May 13, 1951. (Wang, 2015)

The Kaiwind investigator, Wang Ermu, filed this report relatively recently (2015), which may explain why Falun Gong has not yet disputed it. Alternately, perhaps the Falun Gong organization regards Li Hongzhi’s birth date a dead issue, not worth challenging. What struck me about the report were the numerous details and images of original documents, which, if the piece was faked, provides numerous points of attack for critics, any one of which could be contested. However, it is unnecessary to appeal to this evidence in order to demonstrate that Li Hongzhi perceives himself as Buddha returned, or as a spiritual master superior to the historical Buddha.

Thus, for example, in the initial version of his biography, first published in 1993 as an appendix to Li Hongzhi’s book, *China Falun Gong*, the author of the biography (a Qi Gong journalist) states that “There are some people who ask, ‘Is Li Hongzhi actually a man? Or is he Buddha?’” (cited in Penny, 2012, p. 78). Like many of Li Hongzhi’s own statements, this assertion implies, but stops just short of claiming, that Li Hongzhi is Buddha rather than an ordinary human being. This hagiography emphasizes the numerous extraordinary spiritual masters he supposedly studied under, starting from the time he was a child. I will not rehearse the story of Li Hongzhi’s association with these masters here, as there are several good treatments of this aspect of Li Hongzhi’s teaching that can be found elsewhere (Penny, 2003; 2012). However, while this tutelage under a series of exalted masters seems

to have been intended to provide a prestigious lineage for Li Hongzhi, it appears that, later in his career, Li Hongzhi's expanding self-image required him to diminish the status of even these teachers so that they were merely following his original instructions:

Actually, everything that I have done was arranged countless years ago, and this includes who would obtain the Fa — nothing is accidental. But the way these things manifest is in keeping with ordinary humans. As a matter of fact, the things imparted to me by my (sic) several masters in this life are also what I intentionally arranged a few lifetimes ago for them to obtain. When the predestined occasion arrived, they were arranged to impart those things back to me so that I could recall my Fa in its entirety. (Li, 2001, p. 24).

Falun Gong distances Li Hongzhi from the extraordinary claims of his hagiography by pointing out that the relevant document was not written by Li Hongzhi himself, but,

His own writings imply that he is a kind of celestial *bodhisattva*, or *mahasattava* (great *bodhisattva*), in the tradition of the *Mahayana* pantheon. ... Li has implied his own Buddhahood on other occasions as well. In a 1998 message to his followers, he stated that “at present I have *once again* come to this world to teach the Fa [“law” or, in the Buddhist context, “Dharma”] ... and directly teach the fundamental law of the universe.” (Frank, 2004, p. 236-237; Li, 2001, p. 53).

Li Hongzhi is not, however, content to present himself as being on par with the historical Buddha. Instead, one can find numerous places where he places his teachings and, by implication, himself, higher than Sakyamuni:

Throughout history, people have been studying whether what The Enlightened One taught is the Buddha Fa. The Tathagata's teaching is the manifestation of Buddha-nature, and it can also be called a manifestation of the Fa. But it is not the universe's true Fa, because in the past people were absolutely prohibited from knowing the Buddha Fa's true manifestation. The Buddha Fa could only be enlightened to by someone who had reached a high level through cultivation practice, so it was even more the case that people were not allowed to know the true essence of cultivation practice. Falun Dafa<sup>5</sup> has for the first time throughout the ages provided the nature of the universe — the Buddha Fa — to human beings; this amounts to providing them a ladder to ascend to heaven. So how could you measure the Dafa of the universe with what was once taught in Buddhism? (Li, 2001, p. 11)

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<sup>5</sup> Another name for Falun Gong.

But to go even further,

In other places, [Li Hongzhi] suggested that he is superior to any Buddha or gods, since those deities just revealed parts of the Buddha Law (sic) and only Li Hongzhi himself, for the first time in history, brings the whole Buddha Law to human beings. In July 1998, Li finally implied that he was the creator of the cosmos rather than merely the messenger bringing new revelations to mankind. He said: “No matter how great the Law is, I am not within it. Except for me, all beings are in the Law. That is to say, not only are all beings created by the Law, but also the circumstance all of you live in is created by the Law.... The Law covers the Buddhas, the Dao and all other kinds of gods whom you do not know. No matter whether you are Buddha, Dao or gods, only through the cultivation of Falun Dafa can you return to where you came from.”<sup>6</sup> In Mr. Li's view, the Law creates the cosmos and contains all beings, whereas he not only owns the sole right to deliver and explain the Law, but also is beyond and superior to the Law. This claim indicates that Li Hongzhi is superior to all beings; and, if there is an omnipotent god, it is Mr. Li himself (Lu, 2005, p. 178).

One can find many places in Li Hongzhi’s books and lectures where he implicitly or explicitly makes elevated assertions about himself that it would take a thesis-length treatment to recount them all.

Before leaving this topic, let me note that, among other claims, “in 2002 he took credit for averting the otherwise predicted destruction of the earth by a comet and World War III ” (Østergaard, 2004, p. 223). Finally, this quick survey of Li Hongzhi’s references to his own exalted spiritual status would not be complete without noting that the Falun Gong organization sells paintings of Li wearing a Buddhist robe and standing on or sitting in a lotus flower, paintings that followers venerate (Tong, 2009, p. 77). These images clearly assimilate Li Hongzhi into the traditional iconography usually reserved for representations of Buddhist Bodhisattvas.

## **Conclusion**

After a preliminary discussion and presentation of background information, the initial part of my analysis focused on how Falun Gong supporters tone down the more radical aspects of Li Hongzhi’s teachings by selectively quoting from his public statements. This is a

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<sup>6</sup> The lecture from which Lu quotes here, “The Buddha Law of Falun: The speech at the Falun Dafa assistants meeting in Changchun 1998,” appears to have been removed from the web.

common strategy for religious apologists. After indicating that pro-Falun Gong editors had basically taken over the relevant parts of Wikipedia (a supposedly neutral source), I chose to analyze two parts of a Wikipedia entry on The Teachings of Falun Gong, namely Li Hongzhi's admonitions against cultivators taking modern medicines and his claims to exalted spiritual status. By examining the full texts of the talks from which the anonymous author took certain key quotes, I was able to demonstrate that, in their original context, Li was asserting something completely different from what the author of the entry portrayed.

The article then moved on to an initial analysis of Li Hongzhi's self-concept as a great, enlightened soul, followed by a discussion of the controversy over Li Hongzhi's birth date. I referred to a series of scholarly studies of Li Hongzhi, all of which called attention to his self-perception as a *bodhisattva* or a Buddha, or even a spiritual master whose attainments place him into a unique category, far above "lesser" teachers, such as the historical Buddha.

As I have argued elsewhere, "too many objectively harmless groups have come into being with the leader asserting divine authority" (Lewis, 1998) for such acclaim, in and of itself, to indicate that a particular group constitutes an unhealthy religion. In this case, however, one has to question, on the one hand, what it says about Li Hongzhi when he secretly "changed his birthday to that of Sakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism" (Tong, 2009, p. 9). As I indicated earlier in this paper, even for scholarly outsiders who regard themselves as friends of Falun Gong, such "a coincidence strains credulity" (Ownby, 2008, p. 81). On the other hand, given that Li Hongzhi is so emphatic about his exalted status when speaking to followers, why do he and Falun Gong adherents/sympathizers feel they have to deny that Li Hongzhi makes such claims? It certainly seems to fly in the face of the "Truth" that Li Hongzhi teaches as one of the cornerstones of Falun Gong.

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