THE GEOPOLITICS OF RELIGIOUS SPATIALITY
AND FALUN GONG’S CAMPAIGN IN NEW YORK

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Introduction

Falun Gong burst into public view on April 25, 1999, as 10,000 to 15,000 practitioners gathered quietly and unannounced outside the central government offices in Beijing, China, to present a mass appeal requesting government acceptance of their practice. Falun Gong was introduced to China in 1992 by Mr Li Hongzhi.1 It boasts 100 million followers, 39 general instruction offices, 1,900 ordinary instruction offices and 28,000 practice sites, all formed within seven years of being introduced to China before 1999.2 (Schechter 2000:41) Before FLG was banned by China’s government, it was approved and highly recognized by the China Qigong Scientific Research Society (CQSRS), a semi-governmental organization. The affiliation with CQSRS indicates that Falun Gong was recognized and accepted by the government in this earlier period.3 The Chinese government tended to sponsor qigong as evidence of “Chinese science”, as a point of national pride to promote nationalism and as a tool with which to challenge Western science. Indeed, prior to the crackdown on the practice, qigong promotion was a national project in China before 1999, and the widespread adoption of Falun Gong accompanied the fashion of qigong fever (Palmer, 2009; Ownby 2008).

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1 Li is the founder of Falun Dafa (Falun Gong). His background has two opposing story lines, one provided by the Falun Dafa Research Society, the other by the government of the People’s Republic of China. According to the Falun Dafa Research Society, Master Li was born into an intellectual family on May 13, 1951, in the city of Gongshuling, Jilin Province, China. He received instruction at the age of four from a Buddhist master. According to the information provided by government-sponsored media in China, Mr Li’s birthday is July 27, 1952, and he was a former factory employee.

2 This is also a controversial description. Why did millions of people join FLG? The gong practice itself produces a mythical and religious experience. Many practitioners report healing miracles, and some practitioners experience feelings which they cannot explain. Both miracles and “holy” emotions serve to bring practitioners into an altered state of consciousness they consider sacred.

3 Through it Li established the Falun Dafa Research Society to provide a formal link between his teachings and the qi gong network in China. The society allowed him to create training centres and contact locations to propagate his teachings.
In this chapter, I am interested in the practice of Falun Gong’s spiritual spatiality in the urban setting of New York’s public space, mainly its qigong exercises undertaken in city-wide public parks, its parades in immigrant communities and its on-the-street human rights campaigns in Manhattan, New York. Although the routine practices at private households or work-sites are also important, they will not be the focus in this chapter.

“Religious” or “spiritual spatiality” refers to Danièle Hervieu-Léger’s geopolitics of religious spatiality in the search of the relationship between religion and space. She identifies three registers within this question, which are the territorial modalities of the communalization of religion, the geopolitics of the religious and the religious symbolizations of space. In Hervieu-Léger’s words,

The geopolitics of the religious, which embraces the history of religious conquests in all their forms, the study of how concrete forms of ‘pastorizing’ are implemented in territories gained, the analysis of the intercommunity conflicts and relationships generated by these movements, the identification of forms of resistance, compromise and cohabitation that are aroused in a given space by the distribution and restructuring of the balance of power between religious groups and transitions, and the phenomena of exile, emigration, refuge and dispersal into diasporas connected to religious conquests. (Hervieu-Léger 2002: 99)

Falun Gong (FLG) is not a church-based religion but a new religious movement originally emerging from China in 1992 and exiled overseas after 1999. The first part of this chapter will give a brief description of FLG’s history and practice. The second part will give an ethnographic account of FLG’s spatial practice in New York, particularly in public parks in both old and new immigrant communities, as well as in popular tourist sites in Manhattan. In the end, by examining a set of campaigns relating to places, this chapter seeks to understand the relationship between the wider city and the strategically spatial practices of Falun Gong and how the transnationalization of its practice confronts and is incorporated into its diverse host society.

Qigong Body and Cultivation

Falun Dafa or Falun Gong, which can be translated as “Practice of the Dharma Wheel”, is a type of qigong, a central element of traditional Chinese medicine. According to the book Zhuan Falun, Falun Gong is an advanced cultivation system of the Buddhist School but is not limited to Buddhist teachings. It serves as an intensive physical and spiritual practice that requires practitioners to cultivate their Xinxing. Falun Gong’s teaching