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Disciples of the Buddha Law: the incorporation of practitioners in Falun Gong self-cultivation and movement-formations in New York and Hong Kong

Building a bridge between the history of Chinese religion and the anthropology of religion, this dissertation provides ethnographic insight into the Falun Gong movement in New York and Hong Kong. Falun Gong is approached as a highly politicized transnational Chinese religion that is being translated into the particular urban contexts of New York and Hong Kong, and maintaining intimate connections to mainland China. This dissertation follows the experiences and stories of Chinese and non-Chinese practitioners, unpacking why and how they became engaged in Falun Gong cultivation and were incorporated into the movement.

Through exploring relations between authority and media, asceticism and ethics, of interest are the embodied processes through which practitioners sought to cultivate the Buddha Law moral principles of truthfulness, compassion, and forbearance, in their daily lives. This arduous process is shown to have been made possible through the organization of various mediums – objects, spaces, bodies, books, music, Mp3 players, etc. – into a broader practice of mediating the Buddha Law. It is argued that this practice of mediation hinged on Master Li – the movement’s authority and divine medium – but also images of mainland Chinese martyrs overcoming Chinese state violence and sovereign power. Identified in this dissertation, is a particular Falun Gong ethics of pain and truth – an aesthetic style of sensing (*aisthesis*) – that transformed practitioners into humbled disciples of Master Li and organized their sensations of immediacy with the power of the Buddha Law. This ‘asceticism of commitment’ incorporated practitioners into the Falun Gong movement and sustained transnational campaigns of contestation with the Chinese state over the authenticity of Chinese religion and heritage.