

WHOSE MESSAGE WILL WIN THE SOULS?  
THE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF RELIGIOUS  
LIFE IN CYBERSPACE AND ITS  
“CHINESE CHARACTERISTIC”

by

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*The Internet has culminated in the development of tools for human communication that began with the appearance of languages and continued with the inventions of writing, typography, radio, and television, leading to the contemporary computer-mediated communication. At each stage throughout history, applying these new tools in human society changed its basic functions deeply. The sphere of religion was obviously not left outside these transformational processes. With the rise of contemporary information technologies, radical changes on the religious scene can be predicted, parallel to those of communication revolutions in the past. It can be supposed that the religious traditions that will most effectively adapt to new technologies will be the most successful ones on the globalized market of world religions. Based on this observation, this article is trying to find features that should enable religious movements to succeed in this process. The main source for the prognosis originates in the research of the religious activities in the Chinese environment, especially those of the Falun Gong movement. As China will soon become the key actor in reshaping (not only) the cyberspace of the future, the observations made in this environment can be an important inspiration for predicting the further development of religious life on the entire Internet.*

**KEYWORDS**

*Chinese cyberspace, Falun Gong, qigong, protest, organisational network structure, online activism, authority, community, identity*

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## 1. POST MAOIST CHINA AND FALUN GONG

At the end of the 1990's, two seemingly independent processes flourished in China. Firstly, the Internet was spreading rapidly in a society where the information circuit had previously been very limited and highly controlled. Secondly, religions were being revived after the period of strong repression in the time of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). Both processes are rooted in economic and social reforms started by the pragmatics who took over political power after Mao's concept of permanent socialistic revolution had failed. This paper tries to find an answer to the question: Whose Message Will Win the Souls? by examining the case of one concrete representative of Chinese post-reform religious revival and its co-development with the ICT communication. This analysis should suggest which forms of religious movements or communities have a chance to succeed on the current religious scene that is being globalized by the Internet.

The model religious movement that has been globally successful on the Internet and that can be used for some generalisations and predictions of future development is Falun Gong.<sup>1</sup> This movement developed from qigong communities popular during the 1980's and 1990's in the People's Republic of China. Qigong was a wide, health-focused phenomenon based on Chinese traditional medicine; and within it there appeared a stream gaining a strong religious appeal that corresponded with a general revival of earlier suppressed religiosity. This trend experienced its biggest popularity in the 90's under the name Falun Gong.<sup>2</sup> Falun Gong was centred on the figure of its founder and the highest authority, Li Hongzhi, and according to some sources there were more than 100 million Falun Gong followers<sup>3</sup>. As a result of its popularity, a conflict between Falun Gong and the governing Communist Party that was consolidating its economic and political power started.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the Falun Gong movement, its history and thoughts, see Chan, C. S. 2004, 'The Falun Gong in China: A Sociological Perspective', *China Quarterly* vol. 179, pp. 665-683; Šindelář, P. 2005, *Čína, síť a postmoderna. Cesta Falun Gongu do 21. století*, (China, Network and Postmodernity. Falun Gong's Path into the 21st Century), Masaryk University, Brno (diploma thesis); Ownby, D. 2008, *Falun Gong and the Future of China*, Oxford University Press, Oxford; Chen, N. N. 2003, 'Healing Sects and Anti-Cult Campaigns' in *Religion in China Today* (The China Quarterly Special Issues, New Series, No. 3), ed D. Overmyer, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 199-214; Tong, J. 2002, 'An Organizational Analysis of the Falun Gong: Structure, Communications, Financing', *China Quarterly*, vol. 171, no. 4, pp. 636-660; Leung, B. 2002, 'China and Falun Gong: Party and Society Relations in the Modern Era', *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 33, no. 11, pp. 761-784.

<sup>2</sup> For qigong movement history and Falun Gong's position inside this broader phenomenon, see Ownby, D. 2008, *Falun Gong and the Future of China*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 45-124.

<sup>3</sup> Tong, J. 2002, 'An Organizational Analysis of the Falun Gong: Structure, Communications, Financing', *China Quarterly*, vol. 171, no. 4, pp. 642.

### 1.1. CONFLICT EVOLUTION

The relation between the Chinese government and the more and more self-confident Falun Gong grew continuously tenser and resulted in a protest of the movement's followers in front of the communist government's residential area in the centre of Beijing in 1999.<sup>4</sup> Chinese political representatives decided to treat Falun Gong as a threatening example; a massive propaganda campaign against the movement was launched, accompanied by police repression and the introduction of legislative precautions to suppress not only Falun Gong but the whole stream of religious groups that would be labelled as New Religious Movements in the Western context. In this respect, the new Chinese legislative and repressive policy can be considered very anti-cult.<sup>5</sup> The aggressive policy succeeded fast and effectively in its aim to sweep Falun Gong (and other religious groups)<sup>6</sup> out of Chinese society. This became proof of the non-reformative character of religious politics inside a country experiencing dynamic changes of its social context. Surprisingly, Falun Gong did not only survive this tremendous attempt of its brutal liquidation, but it also reformed itself and used the situation to its advantage. And the Internet is the main factor that plays a key role in the following story of stand up and resistance.

In spite of its limitations in communist China, the Internet was experiencing a boom in Chinese urban middle-class society at the same time as Falun Gong did. It is exactly this level of society from which the local leaders of Falun Gong were recruited. They consisted mainly of urban clerks, university students and staff, and interestingly also of lower Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cadres. This organisational base quickly started to use the Internet as a

<sup>4</sup> It happened to be the biggest act of civil protests after the well-known Tiananmen Square events in 1989. The timing of the Falun Gong protest was problematic, as it fell exactly on the 10th anniversary of this highly sensitive historical event.

<sup>5</sup> *Anti-cult movements* is a term used for individuals, groups or institutions which actively criticize particular representatives of New Religious Movements (NRM) from different positions. Although their argumentation is claimed to be part of academic discourse, their motivation and the goals that they follow originate in the sphere of politics, ideology or religion. The Chinese state uses this kind of agenda developed in the Western world to threaten uncomfortable and problematic religious groups in their own environment. Anti-cult movements act very effectively on the Internet, as their counterpart NRM do. For more details on Anti-cult movement in Cyberspace, see Introvigne, M. 2000. "'So Many Evil Things': Anti-cult Terrorism via the Internet", in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, ed. J. K. Hadden & D. E. Cowan, Elsevier Science, New York, pp. 277-306 or Cowan, D. E. 2004, 'Contested Spaces: Movement, Countermovement, and E-Space Propaganda', in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, eds. L. L. Dawson, & D. E. Cowan, Routledge, New York, pp. 255-271. On general NRM and Internet interference see Cowan, D. E. & Hadden, J. F. 2004, 'Virtually Religious. New Religious Movements and the World Wide Web', in *The Oxford Handbook of the New Religious Movements*, ed. J. R. Lewis, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 119-140.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the qigong movement of Zhong Gong (Thornton, P. M. 2003, 'The New Cybersects: resistance and repression in the reform era', in *Chinese Society. Change, Conflicts and Resistance*, ed. M. Selden, RoutledgeCurzon, London/New York, pp. 247-270), which is not well-known in the West, but very popular in the China of those days.

highly utilized tool for communication (together with cell phones, faxes and other new communication technologies of those days) and for spreading their leader's thoughts. One of the issues that helped the leader, Li Hongzhi, to dominate the competitive Chinese qigong scene was his emphasis on charge-free spiritual revolution – something highly atypical of a society in transition from a communal Maoist society to a primitive form of wild capitalism. The Internet and a digitalised format of Li Hongzhi's teaching (books, audio, video files with his lectures and with samples of basic physical exercises) was a very powerful instrument for spreading his popularity, especially in urban areas.

Therefore, Falun Gong was already familiar with this new space for communication and proselytizing at the crucial point of its crackdown. Even according to Chinese governmental security agencies, the organisation of the Falun Gong resistance act in front of the Communist headquarters in Beijing was so smooth, yet invisible, simply due to its effective use of ICT (mainly e-mails and cell phones). At this time, part of the movement's "top management" was already operating abroad (Li Hongzhi himself, for example), which was a result of growing pressure from state apparatus and partly of Falun Gong's popularity among the migrant population of overseas Chinese, mainly in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the United States. This base abroad was to become a source of revival activities after the violent crackdown of the movement in its domestic environment. The followers, who were pushed into emigration or driven to private illegality in China by a systematic repression campaign, naturally and spontaneously gathered around the Internet as their new organisational structure. This Internet axis grew into a network of horizontally structured local cells connected through a sophisticated system of central web pages. The system has been serving as a global organisational structure since the movement's defeat in China. Its open and flexible form imitates the structure of the World Wide Web itself; on the other side there is quite a strict hierarchy governed by the authority of the leader who has established their new centre in New York's Chinatown.<sup>7</sup>

## 1.2. FALUN GONG'S NEW ORGANIZATIONAL CYBER-STRUCTURE

It was the Internet which enabled a transformation of a numerous, but culturally, ethnically and geographically specific Chinese movement into a massive global and multicultural movement within a very short time.<sup>8</sup> Cyberspace became Falun Gong's organisational instrument that spread the re-

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<sup>7</sup> See Leung, B. 2002, 'China and Falun Gong: Party and Society Relations in the Modern Era', *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 33, no. 11, pp. 761-784; Lowe, S. 2003, 'Chinese and International Contexts for Rise of Falun Gong' *Nova Religio* vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 263-276.

ligious movement all over the world; in addition, it became the main space for its activist and proselyte manoeuvres. In China, the war between the authoritative state and the self-confident religious movement continues; both sides present their interpretations of 1999's events to the world's public and accuse the other side of all the guilt. These propaganda fights sometimes lead to various hacker or sabotage actions attacking the media of the other side. In contrast to the information situation inside China, where CCP has strong instruments to control information channels, the persecuted and oppressed Falun Gong followers have won sympathies on the global scene.<sup>9</sup>

However, the core of Falun Gong's spiritual message, unlike their activist ideological message, is firmly founded outside the huge galaxy of the Falun Gong web pages. Cyberspace serves mainly as a natural gathering place for its sympathizers, as an arena for opinion and personal experience exchanges and as an organisational and communicative headquarters. Furthermore, the Internet works as a sphere for the citizen activism of Falun Gong followers, a source of compassion for the persecuted community members, a place reviving resistance towards Chinese governmental policies - that is, a space where Falun Gong's identity is formed and where relations to its spiritual authorities (Li, his teaching, martyrs, etc.) are re-established. The Internet distributes thoughts and ideas inside the community as well as outside Falun Gong, in the surrounding, close and distant world.<sup>10</sup> In spite of all its contributions, when considering the religious practice of Falun Gong, Cyberspace cannot be seen as being more than a communication space connecting the local cells of a global religious net. Falun Gong's religious practice, its ritual and its religious micro communities are located in the real world. They are to be found in urban parks, where they

<sup>8</sup> Actually, the multi-cultural character of Falun Gong as a global movement is quite disputable. According to a number of research projects in the United States, Canada, Europe and elsewhere, it seems that the core of Falun Gong adherents and especially of its leadership is still made up of ethnic Chinese based in the huge overseas communities. The non-Chinese follower segment creates a outer circuit of sympathizers that is more fluid and non-stable in its character (Zhao, Y. 2003, 'Falun Gong, Identity, and the Struggle over Meaning inside and Outside China', in *Contesting Media Power. Alternative Media in a Networked World*, eds. N. Couldry & J. Curran, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, pp. 209-223; Ownby, D. 2002, 'The Falun Gong in the New World', *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, Brill, Leiden, pp. 303-320).

<sup>9</sup> To present its perspectives, Falun Gong handles with powerful and effective instruments, such as the Epoch Times publishing corporation, running its printed newspaper and news server (<http://en.epochtimes.com/>) that is frequently quoted in media world, lobbying in western governmental institutions and with individual politicians ([http://www.clearwisdom.net/emh/special\\_column/recognition.html](http://www.clearwisdom.net/emh/special_column/recognition.html)), etc. As an evidence of its successful activities, distribution of documents on physical suffering, experienced by FLG practitioners in China can be noted (see 'Chalupecky Award' winning project of Czech visual artist Ondřej Brody: [http://brodypaetau.com/?page\\_id=79](http://brodypaetau.com/?page_id=79)).

<sup>10</sup> Parallel conclusions to my field research (cyberspace research included) have been attained by Ownby, D. 2008, *Falun Gong and the Future of China*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp.200-211 or Bell, M. R. & Boas, T. C. 2003, 'Falun Gong and the Internet: Evangelism, Community and Struggle for Survival', *Nova Religio*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 280-283.

do group qigong exercises; they attend study circles in private or public locations from Japan to Argentina. They are to be seen protesting in front of Chinese embassies in the world's capitals or on the smaller town streets; all these actions attempt to draw attention to the suffering of their co-members and at the same time affirm their martyr global identity.

Those small or larger autonomous local communities could be in many respects mistaken for just another spiritual stream inspired by oriental religious traditions.<sup>11</sup> However, there are features that differentiate this movement from the unfocused and multiform scene, features that define Falun Gong as a united, strongly self-identified and socially functioning community and that enable Falun Gong to resist the most rapidly developing world power, China. The space and at the same time the tool creating an organism out of Falun Gong's individual cells is the Internet. The movement has been using the Internet as a means of organisation, communication and ideological war. Nevertheless, the essence of its religious message or the religious agenda itself is not directed at that space. Moving a certain type of Falun Gong's activities to the Internet has not transformed the movement into a religious community whose entire activity takes place exclusively in cyberspace (Helland's on-line religion).<sup>12</sup> Undeniably, the centre of Falun Gong's religious life is outside of virtual space; for the practising followers, the most important elements of Falun Gong are individual or group qigong exercises, the study of master Li's texts and a personal cultivation according to the zhan - shan - ren (truth - compassion - tolerance) principles.<sup>13</sup> The movement does not exist in cyberspace as a whole, but it works as an organisation due to cyberspace, and its specific religious community is defined via cyberspace.

### 1.3. BUILDING THE WEB-CHURCH

Today, the global web of Falun Gong has a firmly established structure that has evolved over the years and where a certain hierarchy has been formed.

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<sup>11</sup> As an example, books on the topic of qigong or Chinese medicine/spirituality from more general perspective, including Falun Gong qigong exercises into its survey. E.g. Růžička, R. & Sosík, R. 2008, *Čchi-kung. Cesta ke zdraví a dlouhověkosti*, (Qigong. The Journey to the Health and Longevity), Poznáni, Olomouc, pp.139-162.

<sup>12</sup> Later in the text, see a criticism of this Helland's classification and its popularity among researchers of religiosity in Cyberspace. The original classification was introduced in Helland, C. 2000, 'Online religion/Religion Online and Virtual Communitas', in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, eds. J. K. Hadden & D. E. Cowan, Elsevier Science, New York, pp. 205-223. For a frequently quoted and similar classification, see Karaflogka, A. 2002, 'Religious Discourse and Cyberspace', *Religion* vol. 32, pp. 284-286.

<sup>13</sup> The roots of FLG's spiritual message come from traditional Chinese religious traditions (Taoism, Buddhism, popular religion, etc.) For further information on FLG's sources of inspiration, see Šindelář, P. 2005, *Čína, síť a postmoderna. Cesta Falun Gongu do 21. století*, (China, Network and Postmodernity. Falun Gong's Path into the 21st Century), Masaryk University, Brno (diploma thesis), pp. 15-18, 40-48.

This development was probably most influenced by events happening after the separation of a heretical Hong Kong group led by Belinda Peng Shan-Shan, who used to be a contact person for the local branch of Falun Gong. This group separated from the Hong Kong branch after the leader Li Hongzhi disappeared from public because of the development in 1999. The group declared themselves the new leaders of the entire movement and established their own web pages to confirm this position, to present their ideas and to proclaim it to other members. The control centre of Falun Gong represented by the New York group with the direct connection to Li reacted promptly. They stated that Belinda Peng and her group were misguided, governed by demonic powers and instructed from Beijing; these arguments were supported by the announcement by master Li himself, published on the New York group web pages.<sup>14</sup> During the summer of 2000, Falun Gong's centre rebuilt the previously ephemeral structure of the movement's assembled individual web pages and placed the web page Minghui Net in its centre (in Chinese at [www.minghui.org](http://www.minghui.org), in English at [www.clearwisdom.org](http://www.clearwisdom.org)). This web published Li Hongzhi's appeal to his followers "On Important Matters, Practitioners Must Watch the Position of Minghui Net", in which the "Teacher" also approved this new hierarchical form of the Falun Gong web pages.<sup>15</sup> In Li's physical absence, the web page works as the main authority of the movement; all of the important texts, new regulations and appeals to the followers are there. Through this page, Li communicates with his followers in the so called jingwen form ("authoritative" or "classic texts"). The texts are presented to public exclusively on this web and some of them even have a crucial importance for the movement and its teachings. As a result, the factual power over the movement today is concentrated in the hands of the server administrators of Minghui.org, who are members of the previously mentioned New York group connected to master Li. In spite of his indisputable spiritual authority for the whole movement, Li's actual influence in this group and the intensity of his activities in the everyday running of Falun Gong remain quite unclear for the public and for the researchers. It is the authority of the noted web pages that name the movement's priorities, shape its campaigns, publish daily reports and if necessary clarify or correct the misapprehensions of Falun Gong's line.

Besides the Minghui Net, the movement runs a number of other, no less important web pages. The web [www.falundafa.org](http://www.falundafa.org) serves as a gate to the

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<sup>14</sup> More on this heresy case, see Fisher, G. 2003, 'Resistance and Salvation in Falun Gong: The Promise and Peril of Forbearance', *Nova Religio*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 294-311).

<sup>15</sup> Bell, M. R. & Boas, T. C. 2003, 'Falun Gong and the Internet: Evangelism, Community and Struggle for Survival', *Nova Religio*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 282.

interwoven Falun Gong net; it enables access to the basic texts by Li Hongzhi and informs about the movement's history, activities and motivations for activism. The information given here is only brief, and the links to other web pages play a more important role. The links lead to pages that are either global ones specialising in specific topics or focusing on specific target groups or represent branches of Falun Gong in specific countries. The branches' web pages provide further information on activities in respective national languages, translate the content of the global pages and inform about events in a specific location.

Due to this complex and entwined net of interlinking webs, it is often difficult to decide whether a web page is run directly by Falun Gong or by an independent organisation fighting for human rights in China in general. According to Dawson and Hennebry, in this case the Internet works as a special kind of loop where a person interested in certain related topics is always being linked, returned and readdressed to Falun Gong's web pages.<sup>16</sup> A parallel to a real net exists in which, according to the rules and logic of the Internet surfing/fishing, the best possible catch appears every day. The multiplicity of independent Falun Gong web pages scattered on servers around the whole world provides an effective prevention against outside interventions (hacking attacks, server blockage) as well as readiness to action.<sup>17</sup> Still, in the seemingly free and individually working net structure, there is the hierarchy and ideological centre in Minghui Net that ensures the unity of the structure and confirms the identities of particular elements by the highest Falun Gong authority – Master Li Hongzhi.

## **2. RULES OF CHINESE CYBERSPACE**

The Falun Gong case gives not only an opportunity to notice the changes the religious movement has undergone when faced with cyberspace, but also to observe an otherwise quite rare situation when a religious movement changes the form of cyberspace itself. The phenomenon of Falun Gong and its activities on the Internet, which overlapped with the rapid development of this media in China, influenced the development and establishment of today's local information net, which is strongly controlled and geared by the Chinese state. With regard to the earlier prognosis, the Internet should have brought free access to information and freedom of speech to China, which would have further led to introducing human rights and freedoms usual in

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<sup>16</sup> Dawson, L. L. & Hennebry J. 2004, 'New Religions and the Internet: Recruiting in a New Public Space', in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, eds. L. L. Dawson, & D. E. Cowan, Routledge, New York, pp. 160.

<sup>17</sup> Bell, M. R. & Boas, T. C. 2003, 'Falun Gong and the Internet: Evangelism, Community and Struggle for Survival', *Nova Religio*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 280



the western world to Chinese society.<sup>18</sup> The fact that this development has at least been delayed can be easily based on the observation that multinational companies like Microsoft, Yahoo or Google have free willingly agreed to censor the Internet, to prevent searching for "inappropriate" web links in their search engines and to inform about the contents of their users' blogs, as their priority is to establish their position on the expanding Chinese market.

In today's form of the Internet in China, the state benefits from all its advantages (especially in business and entrepreneurship, but in education, science and administration as well); simultaneously, the state can eliminate its dangers and threads to the laboriously built political status quo. It was the "Internet war" between Falun Gong and the governmental apparatus, especially its most brutal phase in the first years after the movement's ban in China, which inspired the elaboration of the controlled system of the present day.<sup>19</sup> The main tools used in this system are, firstly, closing the net from the outside world (the so-called Great Chinese Wall) and secondly, monitoring and censoring within the country's borders.<sup>20</sup> A number of sceptical observers anticipate the moment when, instead of the free western form of the Internet effecting Chinese political culture, Chinese Internet inventions would rather be used in the environment of the practically unregulated Internet in the west. Nevertheless, the Internet is neither an all-solving instrument for spreading freedom and equality nor an instrument of absolute control leading to the establishment of an authoritative society. C. R. Hughes stated that the Internet, just like any other technology, is not a free-standing entity, but rather only a tool reflecting a current state of society and its culture.<sup>21</sup> There is no need to be afraid of possibilities to control and steer events in cyberspace which had been until recently considered to

<sup>18</sup> These expectations are illustrated by two statements of former US presidents - Bill Clinton: "...cracking down on the internet in PRC is like trying to nail Jello to the wall." (Bell, M. R. & Boas, T. C. 2003, 'Falun Gong and the Internet: Evangelism, Community and Struggle for Survival', *Nova Religio*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 288) and George W. Bush: "Imagine if the Internet took hold in China. Imagine how freedom would spread." (Kalathil, S. & Boas, T. C. 2003, *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, pp. 13)

<sup>19</sup> For more detailed information on cyberspace fights between FLG and the Chinese state, see Šindelář, P. 2005, *Čína, síť a postmoderna. Cesta Falun Gongu do 21. století*, (China, Network and Postmodernity. Falun Gong's Path into the 21st Century), Masaryk University, Brno (diploma thesis), pp. 81-82).

<sup>20</sup> On the specific situation of the Internet in China, Internet censorship and future perspectives, see e.g. Kalathil, S. & Boas, T. C. 2003, *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington; Hughes, C. R. 2004, 'Controlling the Internet Architecture within Greater China', in *Cyber China. Reshaping National Identities in the Age of Informational*, ed. F. Mengin, Palgrave MacMillan, New York, pp. 71-90; Hartford, K. 2000, 'Cyberspace with Chinese Characteristic', *Current History* vol. 99, no. 638, pp. 255-262; Giese, K. 2004, 'Speaker's Corner or Virtual Panopticon: Discursive Construction of Chinese Identities Online' in *Cyber China. Reshaping National Identities in the Age of Informational*, ed. F. Mengin, Palgrave MacMillan, New York, pp. 19-36.

be an embodiment of freedom and liberalism. It is more important to take into consideration the directions and tendencies of the changes happening in present Chinese society. In spite of all the restrictions, the Internet is still one of the freest locations for expressing ideas and looking for information in China. That is one of the reasons that attract even many representatives of the Chinese grey zone to participate and communicate in cyberspace.<sup>22</sup>

### 3. DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

When describing the growing process of a specific religious group in cyberspace, some important findings appear. These are regularities that play a crucial role in the transformations a society undergoes, including its religions, of course, as a result of a new communication model using the Internet. A deeper analysis of those regularities is needed for any further research on the functioning of religions in cyberspace. The key issues would be analysing transformations of religious institutions, religious authorities, religious communities and personal identities of religious groups' members, following their inhabitation of cyberspace.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, questions of individualisation or personalisation of religious life arising from its re-creation on the Internet or the ways in which various religious groups influence or change the new medium could be discussed.

Falun Gong in its current form is a movement that has succeeded because of the Internet and despite the huge effort invested to stop the movement. Falun Gong recovered its strength quickly and effectively; it evolved from a huge religious community existing in one country, focusing on its typical citizens and operating with not easily adaptable Chinese cultural, philosophical and religious patterns into a multinational, effectively organized net of cells practicing religious activities in small local communities.

<sup>21</sup> Hughes, C. R. 2004, 'Controlling the Internet Architecture within Greater China', in *Cyber China. Reshaping National Identities in the Age of Informational*, ed. F. Mengin, Palgrave MacMillan, New York, pp. 71-90.

<sup>22</sup> Compare to Chen, N. N. 2003, 'Healing Sects and Anti-Cult Campaigns' in *Religion in China Today (The China Quarterly Special Issues, New Series, No. 3)*, ed D. Overmyer, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 199-214; Clarke, J. 2007, 'Communing on the Internet: Chinese Catholics and their Various Uses of the Web', *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 31, pp.459-470; Dunn, C. E. 2007, 'Netizens of Heaven: Contesting Orthodoxies on the Chinese Protestant Web', *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 31, pp. 447-458; Palmer, D. A. 2004, 'Cyberspace and the Emerging Chinese Religious Landscape-Preliminary Observations' in *Cyber China. Reshaping National Identities in the Age of Informational*, ed. F. Mengin, Palgrave MacMillan, New York, pp. 37-50; Thornton, P. M. 2003, 'The New Cybersects: resistance and repression in the reform era', in *Chinese Society. Change, Conflicts and Resistance*, ed. M. Selden, RoutledgeCurzon, London/New York, pp. 247-270.

<sup>23</sup> See Dawson, L. L. 2004, 'Religion and the Quest for Virtual Community', in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, eds. L. L. Dawson, & D. E. Cowan, Routledge, New York, pp. 75-89; O'Leary D. 2004, 'Cyberspace as Sacred Space. Communicating Religion on Computer Networks', in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, eds. L. L. Dawson, & D. E. Cowan, Routledge, New York, pp. 37-58; Castells, M. 2001. *The Internet Galaxy. Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Additionally, these cells can be operated as a worldwide organisation, can influence global public opinion and are able to resist the biggest economic-political power state of the present world.

Falun Gong and its history in cyberspace show a direction for future research of the relation between religion and the Internet. In its beginnings, this research unfortunately split into two practically separate study subjects. The reason behind the separation was a search for classification instruments that would handle the new subject, cyberspace, appropriately. There appeared the by now classical division of religious activities into religion online and online religion; analogical or specifying classifications later followed.<sup>24</sup> Although the division faced critical reactions, rejection and various alterations,<sup>25</sup> it resulted in the establishment of two disciplines in the study of religions, neither of which are able to offer crucial solutions. None of the approaches suggests what influence the use of new information technologies will have on religion as a general phenomenon nor describes its impacts on particular religious systems, on communities, on the religious life of individuals, on religious identity in society or on the future religious map of the world. The first approach, based on the concept of religion online, understands the Internet as a new, effective, systematic and at the same time comfortable instrument for fieldwork which will replace old, more elaborate and time-consuming methods in the research of religions. The second approach started to trace the mysterious and never seen ideal type of online religion. With excitement, it focuses on spare attempts to transport religious life from the offline world into cyberspace. This research mainly consists of descriptions and analyses of exotic online rituals, religious events in parallel online worlds and activities of charismatic leaders stuck in virtual reality. Undeniably, this research is innovative, but due to a small proportion of those cases among the overall religious activities in Cyberspace, it can be seen as rather a waste of academic staff, their time and their resources. On the other hand, the conducted analysis of the Falun Gong activities on the Internet with their specific features shows other possible directions for scientific examination of religious presence in cyberspace.

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<sup>24</sup> Helland, C. 2000, 'Online religion/Religion Online and Virtual Communitas', in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, eds. J. K. Hadden & D. E. Cowan, Elsevier Science, New York, pp. 205-223; Karaflogka, A. 2002, 'Religious Discourse and Cyberspace', *Religion* vol. 32, pp. 284-286. Leung, B. 2002, 'China and Falun Gong: Party and Society Relations in the Modern Era', *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 33, no. 11, pp. 761-784.

<sup>25</sup> For representative criticism of Helland's earlier classification, see Cowan, D. E. 2005, *Cyberhenge: Modern Pagans on the Internet*, Routledge, New York or Young, G. 2004, 'Reading and Praying Online: The Continuity of Religion Online and Online Religion in Internet Christianity', in *Religion Online: Finding Faith on the Internet*, eds. L. L. Dawson, & D. E. Cowan, Routledge, New York, pp. 93-106.

### 3.1. TECHNOLOGY CHANGING SOCIAL REALITY

The Internet is nothing more than a new communication tool. Human kind is getting used to handling this tool in a massive way, as it became used to other communication inventions in the past. The Internet of today is just a culmination of previous developments in human communication. This evolutionary line started with the appearance of language, continued with the inventions of writing, typography, radio, and television, and leads to the contemporary computer-mediated communication. At each stage throughout human history, the application of new tools in human society changed its basic functions and influenced its development. The sphere of religion was obviously not left outside this transformation process. In correspondence to the rise of contemporary information technologies, radical changes on the religious scene, parallel to those connected with communication revolutions of the past, can be predicted. Based on this presumption, it can be suggested that religious traditions that will most effectively adapt to the new communication technologies will be the most successful ones on the future globalized market of world religions. There is a popular parallel to the success Protestantism achieved thanks to Gutenberg's printing machine 400 years ago in Christian Europe.

Regarding the changes caused by accepting the Internet as a key instrument for communication on the religious scene, there are two basic sets of questions that need to be discussed:

What changes inside religious traditions/communities/practices/functions result from the use of the new communication instrument, the Internet?

What form of religious communities/streams/traditions has the biggest chance to profit from using the new communication tool, and why is this so?

### 3.2. INSPIRATION IN FALUN GONG'S DEVELOPMENT

The example of the Falun Gong movement that, thanks to the Internet, succeeded, survived its almost certain death, spread all over the world and continues in its activities on the Internet effectively; but the fact that it at the same time had to change its features, functions and form in a quite fundamental way can offer some answers, or rather predictions.

Traditions which oppose the opinions of a majority or which face a powerful opposing subject show a higher level of success (in relevance to their size, influence and popularity in society). This is not only valid in totalitarian regimes such as China, but applies globally – for instance the radical Islamic fundamentalists operating in cyberspace or some new religious movements appearing in strongly anti-cult societies. These groups succeed on the Internet

because they almost destroy their ineffective offline hierarchy structures and replace them with a net structure imitating the structure of the Internet itself. Comparably successful movements that have been successful because they accepted the network logic can be found outside the religious sphere, among various activist groups, neo-Nazis, musicians gaining popularity through MySpace or even in Barack Obama campaigning. The main strategy of these movements is to combine their strong local activity with effective communication and promotion at a global level – through the Internet.

Another important prerequisite that helps individual religious movements to succeed is their ideological or functional closeness to cyberspace. As an example, the success of new religions such as New Age can be cited. This broad stream of religiosity implies an individual approach to religion and a syncretic attitude to spirituality. New Age religious streams are often based on a free choice of dogmas, identities or authorities contrasting with the determination by the environment or society an individual was born into – there is a kind of deterritorialisation of religion.<sup>26</sup> The choice, freedom, transformation of traditional authorities, identity switch and deterritorialisation are all concepts typical of the Internet as well. The correspondence between the concepts of the Internet and New Age is not surprising, as they are both products of the same generation – American counterculture of the 1960's.

Falun Gong's case also offers provisional answers to the question, "What will change in a religion once its communication is moved into cyberspace?" Again, this issue can be perceived from a more general perspective because the problems of religion in cyberspace are an integral part of the changes the whole society undergoes. At the same time, the following predictions are highly hypothetical and should act rather as a set of directions for further research of future forms on the global religion scene. Most probably, changes will appear in the understanding of (religious) identity, (religious) community and its functions, (religious) authorities and their influence, (religious) institutions and their organisation, and the spreading of (religious) messages and information. The religious identity will be more easily adaptable, more flexible and shared across continents without problems. The religious communities will be deterritorialised, and their structures and functioning principles will change. There will be a crisis of traditional religious authorities and new ones will appear; authorities' validity and confirmation will be based on principles different from the traditionally approved ones. Religious institutions will transform into global nets and the

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<sup>26</sup> Mayer, J-F. 2003, 'Religion and the Internet. The global marketplace', in *Challenging Religion. Essays in Honour of Eileen Barker*, eds. J. A. Beckford & J. T. Richardson, Routledge, New York, pp. 39-41.

spreading of their message and their mutual communication will be happening in a net form as well. Such development can lead to the dominance of new forms of religiosity and to the appearance of brand new religious traditions, but it can also cause the reshaping and resurrection of traditional religious groups and societies.<sup>27</sup>

Not all these predictions will definitely come true; furthermore, there is a possibility that as a negative reaction to widespread Internet communication, a movement rejecting its logic and rules and standing in opposition to the Internet will succeed globally. The (hypothetical) success of such a movement would actually also be influenced by the introduction of the new communication tool. So far, using the Internet for spreading ideas and communicating has been successfully employed even by a number of fundamentalist, tradition-reviving and modern society-criticising religious streams<sup>28</sup>.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The case of a specific movement that developed from particular Chinese conditions into a global organisation might seem to be too exact to be used for general observations and analysis of a global change of religions caused by the Internet. It has been explained that China and its cyberspace is a very specific environment, strongly regulated and yet rapidly growing. The same situation is there on the Chinese religious scene. It is difficult to compare the situation to Euro-American society, where the Internet density is quite high, its regulation quite low and where the religious scene has been quite static for centuries. However, cyberspace needs to be considered as a global net and cannot be mistaken for an English speaking cyberspace. There are a number of cyberspaces next to each other, being rather separate<sup>29</sup> and communicating with other cyberspaces according to Chinese rather than Western rules. Even the global religious scene – strongly regulated and dynamically developing – more closely resembles the situation in China than the situation in Euro-American conditions. That is why it can be beneficial to search for an answer to the question, “Who will succeed in the global religious arena?” in the environment of Chinese cyberspace.

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<sup>27</sup> See Mayer, J-F. 2003, ‘Religion and the Internet. The global marketplace’, in *Challenging Religion. Essays in Honour of Eileen Barker*, eds. J. A. Beckford & J. T. Richardson, Routledge, New York, pp. 36-46.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. an autonomous Czech NRM “Vesmírní lidé” - [www.vesmirnilide.cz](http://www.vesmirnilide.cz) (English version available at [www.universe-people.cz](http://www.universe-people.cz)).

<sup>29</sup> They are mostly defined by a used language. The transition of information between cyberspaces is not as obvious as many theoreticians of the global informational network expected. Next to the English speaking network there is not just the Chinese one, but also a Russian one, a Japanese one, a Spanish one and many others. Interestingly enough, FLG managed to penetrate most of them. See [www.falungdafa.org](http://www.falungdafa.org) and the language possibilities it offers.