

A Glimpse Into the Daily Life and Work of Falun Gong's Founder

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Mr. Li Hongzhi, the founder of the spiritual discipline Falun Gong, also known as Falun Dafa, speaks at a conference in Los Angeles in this file photo. The Epoch Times

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Connie Wu is a videographer and documentarian who has worked at Shen Yun's headquarters since 2006.

For many years, Mr. Hongzhi Li, the founder of Falun Gong, has remained very low-key in the public eye. However, recently, The New York Times published biased and misleading reports about a series of companies founded by Falun Gong practitioners, such as Shen Yun Performing Arts and The Epoch Times, once again placing Mr. Li in the spotlight.

Yet, the picture they paint of Mr. Li is very fragmented and what specific glimpses they do offer bear no resemblance to the spiritual leader I know and have worked with for almost 20 years. And I'm not alone, so I embarked on an effort to talk to others who, like me, have spent years working alongside Mr. Li so that we may offer some of our observations.

A Grand Vision Takes Shape in New York

In 1999, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) launched a nationwide campaign of mass detention, violence, and vilification of Falun Gong—a persecution that has now lasted more than a quarter of a century. Countless Falun Gong practitioners in China have lost their jobs, property, freedom, or even their lives, with some subjected to forced organ harvesting. Many children, whose parents practiced Falun Gong, have been left orphaned. In 2001, to provide a safe place for Falun Gong practitioners who fled China, especially orphans, Falun Gong practitioners in North America built Dragon Springs in a remote mountain area over 80 miles northwest of Manhattan. The grounds were developed largely by volunteers.

Since its establishment, Dragon Springs has been registered as a religious temple. In the subsequent years, Fei Tian Academy of the Arts, Fei Tian College, and Shen Yun Performing Arts were established at Dragon Springs to revive China's authentic culture that was almost destroyed by the CCP, to teach this culture to the next generation, and share its treasures with the world. These institutions are all religious in nature and provide Falun Gong practitioners with a means to live by and express their faith. Furthermore, Shen Yun plays a key role in exposing the persecution of Falun Gong in China and pays tribute to

the resilience of people there who peacefully stand up to tyranny. As a result, Dragon Springs became a place where Falun Gong practitioners lived, worked, studied, and practiced their faith.

A Simple Life of Spiritual Guidance

As the founder of Falun Gong and the artistic director of Shen Yun Performing Arts, Mr. Li guides the spiritual practice of Falun Gong practitioners worldwide (mostly through written teachings, published online) and provides the artistic vision for Shen Yun. However, Mr. Li holds no administrative position in any of the organizations or projects established by Falun Gong practitioners, nor does he run their daily operations. And here is what's most notable: Mr. Li has never received any compensation from these organizations. Even with Shen Yun, to which he has provided significant artistic guidance, Mr. Li has contributed entirely on a voluntary basis.

When I first read the allegations in the New York Times about Mr. Li's alleged life-style, I sought out George Xu, the president of Dragon Springs, who has worked alongside Mr. Li for many years. Mr. Xu says that one needs only look at how Mr. Li lives to know the truth. "Mr. Li lives in ... basically a dormitory. He has no property or car, and his daily life is very simple," explains Mr. Xu. "Aside from a bookshelf, his living space is completely bare. It's pretty basic."

When I asked Mr. Xu about Mr. Li's source of income, he smiled and shook his head: "He has never received a single penny from any Falun Gong project or organization. In fact, his only source of income is royalties from Falun Gong books or related intellectual property," explains Mr. Xu. "And keep in mind, all these books, videos, and things are also available for free on the internet, so ... Mr. Li is clearly not concerned with maximizing his income."

When I asked Mr. Xu about some of his daily habits, he started talking about the dining area on campus. "He has very simple food preferences, and originally, he would eat in the dining hall with

everyone else,” explains Mr. Xu. “However, as more and more people arrived, he began to just eat in his room to avoid disturbing others.”

“And honestly,” Mr. Xu added, “it’s not uncommon for him to skip some meals altogether because he’s just so busy.”

Always Working

Mr. Kaijin Liang, who has been working at Dragon Springs for almost 20 years and serves as one of its engineers, says it’s common to see Mr. Li doing manual labor around campus.

“The construction of Dragon Springs has been extremely difficult. On many days, Mr. Li worked alongside us from morning till night,” says Mr. Liang. “For over 20 years, even when Shen Yun was just getting started and needed Mr. Li’s guidance in artistic areas, whenever he had a little time, he would come to the construction site to help. Even now, at over 70 years old, he still helps with manual labor whenever he has time. Sometimes when I walk through the construction area at night, I see him picking up screws, cleaning work areas, etc.”

Mr. Liang smiled and added, “Frequently, Falun Gong practitioners will come to the construction area to ask him questions seeking spiritual guidance, and he’s like all covered in sawdust, his shirt sleeves rolled up, and sweating from the work. Yet, he patiently stops and takes these questions.”

Reflecting on some of the assertions from the Times report about luxury items, Mr. Xu laughed, “I’ve never once seen him care about brand names. As long as the clothes fit, that’s all that seems to matter to him. At first, he wore khaki pants. Later, he designed his own pants, and some practitioners helped make them, so they would fit better. In fact, he often wears the same uniforms and jackets given to all Shen Yun performers, so ... it’s kind of hard to spot him in a crowd on campus.”

Ms. Ying Li (no relation to Mr. Li), who manages logistics at Dragon Springs and has been volunteering at the site for many years, felt there was a lot of misunderstanding surrounding the respect offered Mr. Li on campus. “Falun Gong has brought many benefits to practitioners, and everyone is grateful to Mr. Li for introducing this practice and making it free to learn, worldwide,” says Ms. Li. “We deeply respect him and make that clear in our interactions, but it seems some of these media reports try to distort that into zealous blind reverence.”

“This is ridiculous,” adds Ms. Li. “We are not blind, and if I may say so myself, we are quite grounded. The fact is we have experienced first-hand the wonders Falun Gong has done for our health, our energy levels, our relationships with others, and of course, our spiritual well-being, so of course, we have great respect for the one who made all this possible, and that’s Mr. Li.”

However, Ms. Li does acknowledge that some people get a little too excited. “I mean, when something has changed your life to the extent that Falun Gong has done for so many, you invariably get a few folks who want to give Mr. Li gifts to express their gratitude, but here’s the thing: he has never accepted anything expensive. Sometimes, when practitioners offer non-valuable items like tea or food, he will accept them to honor their intentions, but he usually gives them away to other practitioners or students soon afterward.”

A Balanced Environment

One thing that has struck me over the years is that, while Mr. Li maintains a rather austere lifestyle, the environment for the students, staff, and volunteers at Dragon Springs is well-balanced, and intentionally so.

Mr. Xu offers a few examples of this: “As more Western people were coming to study or work at Dragon Springs, the management team hired a baker to provide Western-style food for them.”

“In addition,” adds Mr. Xu, “the school has set up a gym, ping-pong tables, billiards, chess, and other facilities, encouraging students to exercise and engage in traditional forms of entertainment, rather than wasting endless hours on the internet.”

“It’s all quite refreshing,” says Mr. Xu.

Setting the Record Straight

Mr. William Shi who has led the campus security team for more than a decade is frustrated by the allegations in the media.

“Mr. Li focuses on the spiritual development of Falun Gong practitioners ... I mean, that’s his whole life,” says Mr. Shi. “All the management of daily operations are left for the Falun Gong practitioners to handle, and honestly ... what most people miss is that their success or failure in doing these things is part of their spiritual path. It’s their decision to make, their path to walk. Therefore, Mr. Li does not involve himself in the daily operations of projects like The Epoch Times, Ganjing World, or others. People who think otherwise either don’t understand the role of spiritual leaders in Eastern traditions or they are just misinformed.”

“Take the Epoch Times, for example,” adds Mr. Shi. “Even though The Epoch Times has been around for over 20 years, Mr. Li has only visited a few times, and when he speaks, it is always to guide practitioners in their spiritual journey or in resisting the persecution.”

My final stop was at the office of Shen Yun’s management team to speak with Mr. Yu Zhou to get his thoughts.

Mr. Zhou thought for a while, staring out the window.

“When the CCP first began persecuting Falun Gong, they spread rumors that Mr. Li lived in luxury with mansions and cars. Now, some Western media repeat the same false narratives,” Mr. Zhou offered. “As Falun Gong practitioners working alongside Mr. Li all these years,

we have personally witnessed and felt the hardships he has endured and the selfless sacrifices he has made for all and for everyone who practices Falun Gong over the decades. Naturally, we wish for Mr. Li to live a better life. But in reality, he doesn't care much about these things. In our eyes, he is indifferent to material desires and has remained so. He is nothing like the figure some media have made him out to be. What a shame they do this.”



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