Cyberspace and the Emerging Chinese Religious Landscape –

Preliminary Observations

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It is still too early to assess the full impact of the Internet on China's rapidly evolving religious landscape. The effectiveness of Falun Gong's cyber-militancy has, however, underscored the role new information technologies are playing in the shifting relations of power between a classic repressive state apparatus and deterritorialized religious or sectarian movements. While the impact of the development of the Internet and other information technologies on the economy and politics of the Chinese world has been amply commented upon, to my knowledge no in-depth research has yet been conducted on how the Internet is changing the form of religion in China. And yet, religious changes represent an important dimension of the cultural recomposition and transformation of the Chinese-speaking world. This chapter proposes some initial hypotheses and observations on these issues, a preliminary report on what will, I hope, become a full-fledged study on the expansion of religion in Chinese cyberspace and its impact on religious practices, communities, and state-religion relations in contemporary China. I will begin with some general considerations on the relationship between information technology and religion; briefly present the types of religious information available on the Chinese Internet; and consider the cases of Daoism and of Falun Gong. In these case studies, we will see how, as a "virtual panopticon" closely monitored by the state while at the same time a space allowing unprecedented freedom of expression and

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access to information, the Internet is becoming a new zone of tension in the age-old agonistic relationship between religion and state in China.

I began this study with three hypotheses. It was assumed that new information technologies would have three effects on the Chinese religious landscape: (1) the emergence of a new space for religious expression, characterized by an autonomous quest for meaning rather than collective rituals; (2) a further undermining of orthodoxies accompanied by the emergence of new centers of religious influence; (3) greater integration of Chinese communities on the mainland and overseas, as well as between Chinese and non-Chinese communities. So far, while the data seems to support the first two hypotheses, the third needs to be reformulated: a clear difference appears between online religion in mainland China and Hong Kong-Taiwan, with, surprisingly, the potentialities of the Web being more fully exploited on the mainland than in Hong Kong and Taiwan. This discrepancy will be described and explained in our case study of Daoism.

General considerations

Religion can be considered as the transmission of a specific type of memory or information. On this basis, the invention of new information technologies has had a profound impact on the transformations of religion throughout history, and can shed light on current trends of religious modernity, notably the globalization of religion on the one hand, and the increasing autonomy of the religious subject on the other. One way to see religion is as a system for creating, maintaining, developing and controlling the individual or collective consciousness of belonging to a specific line of belief[2], by linking individuals to a body of memory. As such, one of the overriding concerns of religion is the perpetuation and diffusion of this body of memory. The social forms of religion will to a large extent reflect the technical means by which religious teachings and practices are transmitted. For instance, the role of religious specialists, whose duty is to hold, protect and transmit sacred traditions, will be different in entirely oral cultures, in societies in

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[2] Cf. Daniele Hervieu-Leger , *La religion pour memoire* (Paris : Editions du Cerf): 119.

which there exists a small class or scribes, and in literate civilizations in which all people have access to religious scriptures. The impact of the printing press on the emergence of Protestantism is well known: the mass production of the Bible and its distribution outside of clerical circles to lay believers, helped to popularize the notion of the individual's direct and unmediated relation to God. The gradual trend, throughout history, of the "modernization" of religiosity expressed by the increasing autonomy of the individual in religious experience and belief, can be linked to the evolution of information technologies from orality to writing, printing, electronic media, and now the Internet. Each of these advances have permitted the dissemination of religious information on an increasingly global scale, at an increasingly rapid pace, to an ever larger number of people, with an ever increasing diversity of content. Seen from a broad perspective, the evolution of religion in modern times has seen a tendency toward globalization on the one hand, and individualization on the other. In this context, spiritually "free" individuals, whose religious identity is no longer merely inherited, can create new communities of choice out of a limitless, worldwide range of religious possibilities. More specifically, the Internet challenges the traditional grounding of religion in bodies, territories, and institutions. For oral cultures, the primary means for the reproduction and transmission of religious memory has been through the disposition of bodies and objects in ritual performance. Scriptures reduced but did not eliminate the importance of ritual in literate cultures, often becoming central to the ritual manipulation of sacred books. Digital culture, however, dematerializes religious texts. The gestures of manipulation are the same, making no distinctions between the Word of God, gossip, or smut, all transmitted through the same wires and flashed onto the same screen. Polarities in space and time between the sacred and the profane are corroded; the ritual coordination and movement of bodies gives way to the solitary clicking of electronic mice. The physical congregation of worshipers in a single spot – the temple, church or sacred ground, often with its own territory marking the limits of a community – can be replaced by online networks of individuals with common affinities, seeking the same information and communicating directly with each other. The foundations of religious (and, in the Chinese case, political) institutions – bureaucratized channels for the

generation, processing, and control of religious information – are eroded in a virtual marketplace where nothing is easier than mixing and matching the itinerary of one's own spiritual journey. Disembodiment, deterritorialization and disinstitutionalization are processes which could be triggered or accelerated by the Internet in relation to religion[3].

Such are some of the ways in which we can assume that the form of cyberspace will modify the flows of spiritual information. But the "on-line world" does not eliminate and replace off-line reality; rather, the interpenetration of the two is what is creating new religious formations[4]. A rapid overview of the pre-digital configuration of Chinese religion will allow us to better understand the results of this interpenetration in the Chinese case.

The Chinese case

New information technologies can be said to be accelerating the "institutional deregulation of belief"[5] which is a global characteristic of modernity, a phenomenon which has affected the Chinese religious landscape as much as in the West, albeit as a result of a different historical process. Since the Song dynasty (960-1279), by attempting to control and limit the expansion of the institutionalized religions (Buddhism and Taoism), the state has contributed to the gradual weakening of « orthodox » religions, creating the conditions for the flourishing of popular religion and sectarianism[6]. The only centralized institution comparable to the "Church" as we know it in the West was the Imperial state itself, with its Son of Heaven embodied by the Emperor, its ritual system of governance, and its "clergy" of Confucian administrators trained in the art of virtues. Locally, religious life centred around the temple, which was the focus of all community life. Temples and their festivals structured the space and time of families, lineages, villages, guilds, and the state. Temples were usually autonomous organizations governed

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[3] For a bibliography of general works on religion and the internet, see Stephen O'Leary, "Suggested Readings in Online Religion", Online Journalism Review, http://www.ojr.org/ojr/business/1017965578.php
[4] Cf. Daniel Miller and Don Slater, *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*. Oxford: berg, 2000, Chap. 1.
[5] Daniele Hervieu-Léger, *La religion en miettes ou la question des sectes* (Paris : Calmann-Levy, 2001): 126.
[6] David Ownby, "A History for Falun Gong: Popular Religion and the Chinese State since the Ming Dynasty", *Nova Religio*, in press, 2002.

by local associations which hired clergy to conduct rituals[7]. However, the role of temples in Chinese community life has steadily declined since the beginning of the 20th century, particularly in the cities. During this period, waves of war and modernizing revolutions have largely eliminated the concrete and visible forms of religious life centred around neighbourhood temples and festivals in the cities. The destruction of family and local cults, through which Chinese peoples' religious identity was expressed[8], has created atomized bodies, « modern » individuals cut off from their ancestral filiations. The weakening and destruction of traditional religious institutions has accelerated the emergence of a modern religiosity characterized by individual, voluntary engagement. In the 1980s and 1990s, body cultivation practices known as *qigong*, owing to the simplicity of their transmission and their indeterminate status between health practice and religion, were one of the few forms of religious transmission and practice to survive in urban areas. After the Cultural Revolution, while the spread of other forms of religious practice and community was still difficult, *qigong* could rapidly propagate and integrate itself into the urban fabric of society. Parks, sidewals and public spaces had become, through *qigong*, alternative spaces for the expression of a modern religiosity. But since the late 1990s, the militancy of Falungong, with its roots in the *qigong* movement, and the repression it has provoked, have led to most *qigong* groups dissolving or going underground[9].

It is in this context that cyberspace has emerged as a new frontier for the dissemination of religious ideas and for the expression of the spiritual search.

Our historical overview shows that prior to the advent of the Internet, the traditional religious ordering of bodies through ritual had already largely disappeared in the cities. The meditation and gymnastic traditions of *qigong*, however, could adapt to an industrial organization of homogenized individuals gathering daily for mass exercise sessions. As we will discuss further, Falun Gong was able to connect this movement to digital

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[7] On the role of temples in Chinese religious life, see Vincent Goossaert, *Dans les temples de la Chine. Histoire des cultes, vie des communautes* (Paris : Albin Michel, 2000).

[8] See Kristofer Schipper, "Rediscovering Religion in China", communication at the symposium "Modern Society and the Science of Religion", 1997; Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation. Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995): 85-110. Many of these cults have been reconstituted in the countryside after the end of the Cultural Revolution (see Kenneth Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), but this phenomenon has not occurred in the cities.

[9] On the *qigong* movement in China, see David A. Palmer, "La fievre du *qigong*. Guerison, religion et politique en Chine contemporaine", Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris, forthcoming (2002). English edition forthcoming at Hurst.

communication technologies, facilitating the spontaneous organization of large public demonstrations. Many religious and spiritual groups and seekers, however, at a time when temple-centred religiosity has become a pale shadow of what it used to be, and when *qigong*-style group practice in parks has been banned or discouraged, now lack a formal, fixed location in physical space. It is in this context that the Internet has opened a new virtual space for the development of religion.

Portals to religion

A foray into the world of online religion can begin with one of the main Chinese language web portals, such as Chinese Yahoo.com and sohu.com. These provide links to religious sites summarized in Tables 1 and 2. The first thing we notice from these tables is how a "denominational" classification of religion has imposed itself on the internet portals – even though the Chinese-designed portal, *sohu*, mixes denominational categories with others: organizations, institutes, religious problems, news, etc. Superficially, the portals may be reinforcing the "denominationalization" of Chinese religion, a process which has been going on since the 20th century and especially since the founding of the Peoples' Republic, which, importing Western theories of religion, undertook to identify Chinese religious "believers" and classify them according to institutional affiliations. Indeed, prior to the 20th century, although the "Three Doctrines" of Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, each which its own clergy and scripture, had an independent existence, most local temples and religious communities were not explicitly associated with one or the other of the main traditions. Whether internet users remain loyal to one "religion" or freely surf from one tradition to the other is a question that merits further investigation. A second, evident observation is the overwhelming predominance of Christianity and Buddhism. Compared to the indigenous tradition of Daoism, which has always been closely tied to the liturgical structures of local communities, Christianity and Buddhism were already, prior to the Internet, globalized religions, less embedded in local territories and ritual, with a greater focus on textual doctrine, and a strong commitment to the universal propagation of sacred text: orientations that could more easily translate

into the colonization of cyberspace. Within Christianity, the weak presence of Catholicism is also striking compared with Protestantism: the horizontal, fragmented configuration of Protestant communities seems to have penetrated the Internet faster than the monolithic, hierarchical institutions of the Catholic Church.

Category	Total number of sites	Number of sites listed as related to mainland China
Protestantism	607	140
Buddhism	352	109
Catholicism	38	8
Divination	34	7
Islam	33	12
Daoism	23	13
New Age	10	1
Yiguandao	8	--
Popular Religion[10]	4	--

Table 1. Religious sites listed in cn.yahoo.com[11]

Category	Total number of sites
Buddhism	1186
Christianity	1049
Islam	75
Daoism	69
Judaism	25
News & Media	24
Other Religions	18
Religious Organizations	12
Religious Institutes & Schools	10
Resources for Research	8
Religion and the Times	8
Religious Problems	8
Chan	6
Baha'i	3
Hinduism	3

Table 2. Religious sites listed in sohu.com[12]

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[10] Includes two sites devoted to the god Guangong and the sites of two other temples (lingjianmiao and xingtiangong)

[11] Data accessed on 10 October 2003.

[12] Data accessed on 10 october 2003. The *sohu* index includes some English-language sites: most of the sites listed under Judaism are in English. For most categories, however, almost all of the listings are for Chinese-language sites.

It should be noted that sites classified under "religion" represent only part of the online world devoted to the spiritual and religious search. Sohu, for instance, lists a further 1263 sites under "mysterious culture" – mostly devoted to various forms of divination and ghost stories; 492 sites under "myth and folklore", which include sites on popular cults such as Mazu, BBS forums on the *Book of Changes*, etc. Under "sports and recreation", one finds 77 sites devoted to *qigong* and 714 to martial arts.

Online Daoism

A deeper exploration of the ocean of online data can begin with a look into the sites listed under "Daoism". Choosing the most "Chinese" of the religions allows us to see what is happening online in the tradition that we would assume to be the least influenced by international networks. Getting a comprehensive picture is also facilitated by the small number of sites in this category.

A survey of 29 Chinese-language websites listed under "Daoism" in the portals in March 2003 found 14 sites based in mainland China, eight in Taiwan, six in Hong Kong and one in Germany. A significant difference can be seen between the mainland and Hong Kong/ Taiwan sites: the latter are all run by temples or by established organizations, while most of the mainland sites are maintained by individuals or businesses. Almost all of the Hong Kong and Taiwan sites publicize temple or organization activities, while only two of the mainland sites (also maintained by temples) do so. The mainland sites are more likely to contain general information on Daoism, offer scriptures for download, provide online forums or chat services, and post opinions and editorials. The Taiwanese sites are more likely to offer specific information, notably on temple divinities. Few of the Hong Kong sites contain opinion pieces or content pertaining to temple divinities. Overall, the Hong Kong and Taiwanese sites can be said to be an extension into cyberspace of the traditional temple-based configuration of Chinese religion. The mainland sites, however, reflect a more eclectic mix, where one finds sites created by individuals impassioned by Daoism (see http://a863.xiloo.com) and others who claim to be masters (see www.jingxiantianshi.com), and by various types

of groups promoting Chinese culture. Overall, the mainland sites reflect a more individual, idiosyncratic and interactive exploration of China's spiritual traditions, and a greater degree of commercialization (providing fortune-telling or feng-shui services).

The Internet thus reveals a more "modern" religiosity in Communist China, detached from organized institutions, more centred on the individual, and in which the separation between online and offline realities is greater than for the more traditional configuration of religion in Taiwan and Hong Kong. It would appear that in the mainland, Communist control has not prevented a greater degree of individual initiative and entrepreneurship from emerging than in the temple-dominated religious landscape of Taiwan and Hong Kong. On the mainland, the Internet is reinforcing what was previously a minority trend in Chinese religion, in which individual study of religious writings and content becomes more important than participation in temple rituals. While there has always been a current of "lettered", more mystical and individualistic religion pursued by Chinese literati and scholars, traditionally, ritual practice has been more important than doctrine in Chinese religion. Religious surfing on the internet, however, changes the emphasis from practice to content.

The Political and Geographic Dynamics of a Daoist Website

An interesting case in point is the Taoist Culture & Information Centre (www.taoism.org.hk), one of the largest web-sites on Daoism, produced by a Hong Kong Taoist temple, the Feng Ying Seen Koon[13]. This project began in 1998, after some members of the Hong Kong Daoist community noticed the lack of information on Daoism on the internet in comparison with Buddhism and Christianity. The temple then decided to sponsor a major Chinese-English online database as a contribution to the propagation of the religion. Several challenges were encountered in the course of this project. The first was how to produce large quantities of text on Daoism that would be accessible to lay readers. In the absence of practicing Daoists able to write at length on the history, major figures, and major concepts of the religion, the temple had to hire

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[13] The author of these lines is the copy editor of the site's English version.

academic scholars from mainland universities, including Qing Xitai, Li Gang and Jiang Sheng, whose contributions were often based on Marxist and materialist theory. At the end of the first phase of the project in 2002, over 400 articles had been posted in three versions: traditional Chinese, simplified Chinese and English. By all accounts, the project was very successful: by June 2002, the traditional Chinese version of the site was registering approx. 1.1 million hits per month, the simplified had over 400,000 hits with a monthly increase of approx. 25000 visits since the beginning of the year; and the English version was visited by over 320,000 surfers[14].

In its discussions on the kind of additional content that should be added to the website, the database commission, composed of prominent members of the Hong Kong Daoist community and academic scholars of Daoism from the mainland and Hong Kong, was then confronted with a new problem: it was noted that while Christian and Buddhist web-sites contain simple and precise explanations of their respective religions' doctrines and positions on current social problems, this aspect was weak in the case of the Daoist web-site. After much discussion, it was decided to write up the "Daoist position" on current events and social issues such as terrorism and the environment. But this decision was not made without debate, some commission members raising the issue of the absence of any commonly recognized authority to come up with these positions. Gradually, however, the website has come to acquire an authority of its own, to such degree that the London Museum once addressed a request to the database commission to resolve an enigmatic interpretation of a Chinese Daoist painting in the museum.

The success of the Feng Ying Seen Koon's Taoist Culture & Information Centre was not without creating some jealousies among other Daoist temples in Hong Kong, some of which are reported to be considering developing their own large-scale websites. Through its website, the Feng Ying Seen Koon, which was previously a relatively minor local temple in Hong Kong, has suddenly risen to global prominence in Daoist circles and now exercises a global influence in the dissemination and interpretation of information on Taoism.

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[14] The average time for each visit was 15 minutes for the traditional Chinese version, 13 minutes for the simplified Chinese version, and 21 minutes for the English version. Source: internal statistical report, Taoist Culture & Information Centre.

The case of the Taoist Culture & Information Centre thus illustrates two trends which are accelerated by the introduction of the Internet into religious life: the first is a shift in emphasis from a local community, ritual-based practise of religion to an individualistic approach characterized by the search for more information content. The second is a shift in the relative influence of different religious organizations: those with a strong presence in cyberspace can acquire new influence extending much farther than their original local sphere of activities.

Such a redistribution of influence among religious organizations can further undermine institutionalized religion, which has always been relatively weak in China. Informal and non-orthodox organizations can be as easily accessible online as state-supported institutions. However, though state control on religion is indeed weakened by the Internet, it can continue to assert itself in manners both direct and subtle. If blocking access to websites is an instance of direct intervention, state influence continues to be exercised in a more subtle fashion toward those sites that are accessible. The Taoist Culture & Information Centre, for instance, is very careful to present content that is acceptable in the context of current Chinese ideology and political tendencies.

The TCIC is based outside of mainland China, but directed at mainlanders, a strategy that seems to be tolerated by the Chinese authorities. Such a site acts as a hub for the building of religious networks and common discourse throughout the Chinese world and beyond. While the majority of visits are to the traditional Chinese version (likely coming from Hong Kong and Taiwan), sizeable minorities are from mainland China (readers of the simplified Chinese version) and from other countries (English version). The content of all three versions is identical. Since the authors of the articles are for the most part academic scholars from the mainland, and since the database commission makes a conscious effort to avoid content which would be politically sensitive on the mainland, we can see how, indirectly, Chinese state policy and ideology on religion exercises itself not only on sites based in the mainland, but also on a site based in Hong Kong which has become an important provider of online information on Taoism for the whole Chinese world. Interpenetration and mutual influence characterize this strategy, where an outside organization can penetrate into Chinese cyberspace, but,

at the same time and indirectly, Chinese state influence on religious discourse spreads beyond Chinese borders.

The Online Militancy of Falun Gong

An alternative strategy is one of direct confrontation, the best-known example of which is Falun Gong. New information technologies had become central to the organization's functioning by 1997-98, when its founder, Li Hongzhi, settled in the United States and created an international communication system allowing him to lead, from a distance, his millions of followers in China. Beginning in the 1980's, the *qigong* movement – of which Falun Gong was one school -- had developed an organizational model based on the systematic tramsmission of exercise routines from a central association down to thousands of local parcs and practice sites around China and the world. This setup, based on loose networks of volunteer trainers and requiring almost no property or resources, allowed for the rapid creation of mass organizations by hundreds of *qigong* masters. Li Hongzhi was the first of these to make full use of the Internet, allowing him and his key disciples to send directives from anywhere in the world, spreading through electronic means and then word of mouth (not only email but also telephone and fax – the internet had not yet become a mass phenomenon in 1999) to millions of disciples. *Qigong* transmission networks, which until then had been devoted to the propagation of simple, repetitive exercise routines, could now instantly activate millions of people to trigger spectacular events, without needing a rigidly structured organization. Through the informal circulation of news and directives between practitioners, "spontaneous" but perfectly-organized mass demonstrations were held in dozens of localities around China between 1997 and 1999, usually to protest government or media organs critical of Falun Gong, sometimes attracting over 10,000 practitioners. It was such a protest, surrounding the Party leadership's compound at Zhongnanhai on April 24, 1999, with the heavy symbolism which it evoked, that triggered the Chinese state's ruthless anti-Falun Gong campaign.

Against Falun Gong, the state deployed the classic repressive apparatus: mobilizing

the Party and government-controlled mass organizations; lauching a propaganda campaign through all media; punishing leaders and hard-core practitioners with torture and internment in prisons, psychiatric hospitals and work camps. But the enemy was not a typical dissident organization. Its leader lives abroad; Falun Gong's virtual organization can easily set up new nodes at points anywhere on Earth. No longer a strictly Chinese organization, it has rapidly adopted the best techniques of the American art of public relations and online militancy. An all-out propaganda war is being waged between Falun Gong and the Chinese state, and cyberspace has become one of the key battlefields.

The Chinese government's position has largely been defensive: all Falun Gong websites have been blocked in China, and practitioners have been arrested for disseminating Falun Gong emails[15]. A dozen Anti-Falun Gong websites have been created by various government agencies. Some of them are available in English and can be accessed from Chinese embassy web-sites [16]. Interestingly, one mainland Chinese-language anti-Falun Gong website contains a point-by-point refutation of Falun Gong claims that the supposed self-immolation by practitioners on Tiananmen Square on Jan. 23, 2001, was a government-staged hoax – implicitly acknowledging that the Falun Gong version is widely known on the mainland[17]. Indeed, in spite of state attempts to block mass emailings, Falun Gong "spam" tracts do reach the electronic mailboxes of ordinary Chinese email users.

Outside China, Falun Gong and its practitioners have established dozens of websites, most of which are based in the US and Canada, but also in Europe, Iran, Turkey, India, Israel, Brazil, etc. Most local sites carry information diffused by eight official Falun Gong sites[18]. One of these, www.falundafa.org, contains downloadable Falun Gong scriptures, instructions for practice, and contact information for practice sites; another, www.pureinsight.org, contains articles on scientific and cultural subjects related to Falun Gong. The other six sites are almost exclusively devoted to the campaign

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[15]   Stephen   O'Leary,   "Falun   Gong   and   the   Internet",   *Online   Journalism   Review*, http://www.ojr.org/ojr/ethics/1017964337. Accessed on 10 oct. 2003.
[16]   For   example,   see   http://www.chinaembassycanada.org/eng/c3161.html, http://211.99.196.218/fanduixiejiao/eng/index.htm.
[17] http://ppflg.my163.com/. Accessed on 10 oct. 2003.
[18]   See   www.falundafa.org,   www.faluninfo.net,   www.clearwisdom.net,   www.clearharmony.net, www.pureawakening.net, www.pureinsight.org, www.fofg.org, www.flgjustice.org.

to defend Falun Gong against Jiang Zemin and the Chinese government. An online TV station (fgmtv.net) provides videos of practice methods, testimonies, and news programmes in several languages. A twice-weekly e-newsletter and daily press releases disseminate the latest news on the repression in China, lawsuits launched against Jiang Zemin and other officials before courts in dozens of countries, expressions of support from legislators, etc. Falun Gong is continually publishing staggering amounts of information online. Dozens of human-rights reports can be downloaded. One example is a 91-page report which contains the names, photographs, and biographies of victims of psychiatric internment; the exact addresses and telephone numbers of the departments involved; the names, titles, and ages of the perpetrators; and detailed accounts of incidents of torture[19]. Elsewhere online, the names and contact details of scores of persons involved in the persecution in China, including minor officials, were posted, as targets of letter-writing, fax and telephone campaigns. Misfortunes which had occurred to these individuals, such as illnesses, accidents or death, were described as signs of karmic justice. How Falun Gong was able to obtain such detailed information in dozens of small Chinese localities was not clear. Even natural disasters and bad weather hitting various parts of China were reported as signs of dharmic retribution[20]. All manner of bad social and economic news on China were also given as proof of the moral depravity of the regime and the calamities it is bringing on the country. Overall, Falun Gong has been thoroughly systematic in its use of the Internet to propagate its message and to organize its campaigns. This has allowed for the growth of a loosely organized worldwide movement able to respond instantly to information, campaigns and spiritual guidance disseminated through both a centralized hierarchy of websites and through the horizontal spread of electronic communications between practitioners. Online access to the Master's pronouncements makes it possible to eliminate intermediate formal structures of authority within the movement, even though Li Hongzhi's public appearances – the only times his disciples can enter his physical presence – are rare and brief. Cyberspace becomes a medium through which the master's charismatic power can be exercised by

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[19] Falun Gong Human Rights Working Group, "Falun Gong Practitioners Tortured in Mental Hospitals Throughout China", downloaded in March 2003 from www.clearwisdom.net.
[20] www.minghui.cc/mh, accessed in November 2001.

establishing a direct virtual connection between himself and each individual practitioner[21].

Concluding remarks

These pages have only touched on the surface of what is becoming an essential dimension of the Chinese religious landscape. In spite of the "panopticon effect" of a cyberspace through which the Chinese state can easily monitor its subjects, the Internet has allowed the emergence of new networks of seekers and providers, and for the exploration of forms of religiosity which are difficult to express in other public spaces in China. Ironically, then, state restrictions on offline religious activity may have given the Internet a greater role in the evolution of religious culture than in other countries. And if the militancy of Falun Gong has led the state to impose an almost complete blackout of non-governmental information on Falun Gong in China, a different dynamic is prevailing in the rest of the online religious world in mainland China: creation, exploration and ambiguity are daringly pursued under Big Brother's nose.

Further inquiry on Chinese religion in cyberspace should include a systematic analysis of the content of religion on the Chinese internet, the differences between online and print content, and the relative dissemination of information originating from the mainland, from overseas chinese sources, and from non-Chinese sources, with particular attention to discussions in online forums. Is there a specific online religious discourse which is different from other forms of religious discourse? Key websites representative of various religious and spiritual traditions should be analysed in depth, detailed statistics on their users obtained, and their sponsors and authors interviewed. Links between websites should be mapped, in order to trace the existence of affinity networks which may (or may not) reveal the emergence of new currents. Online religious seekers should be contacted and interviewed, and typical profiles drawn up, so as to understand the sociological makeup of religious surfers. The relationship between using online information and other

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[21] For further analysis on Falun Gong and the Internet, see Mark R. Bell & Taylor Boas, "Falun Gong and the Internet: Evangelism, Community, and Struggle for Survival", *Nova Religio* 6-2 (2003): 277-293.

forms of religious practice and community should also be elucidated: is the internet a complement to other forms of religious practice and community? Does it direct seekers away from other forms or, on the contrary, is it a conduit that leads them to join religious communities? Does the internet have an impact on other forms of religious practice? Another area deserving of investigation is the link between religion and civil society as expressed in the internet. Are virtual religious networks on the internet self-contained in a closed circuit, or are they linked to other groups and other social concerns? Will the proliferation of religious content on the Internet lead to a relaxing of state policy towards religious and other popular groups, or will it, on the contrary, provoke even harsher measures of control?