Falun Gong is a peculiarly visible new religious movement; I have seen exhibitions of exercises and protests by yellow-shirted members in cities in Europe, Asia, North America and Australia, and the ubiquity of both *The Epoch Times* and Shen Yun Performing Arts advertising means that Falun Gong is vaguely familiar to a large number of people, who are nevertheless incurious about what the group believes and why the Chinese government banned it in 1999. Benjamin Penny’s *The Religion of Falun Gong* (2012) is a landmark study that locates the movement in the media, in discourses about human rights (claims regarding organ harvesting in PRC prisons), and analyses the role of founder Li Hongzhi (b. 1952) who inaugurated Falun Gong in 1992, during the qigong boom of the 1980s and 1990s. Falun Gong means “the Practice of the Wheel of the Law” and the alternative name Falun Dafa means “the Great Method of the Wheel of the Law” (p. 5). The wheel is a familiar motif in Buddhism but in Falun Gong is believed to be a device placed by Li Hongzhi in the lower abdomen of the adherent. It is unsurprising that the Chinese government classify Falun Gong as a *xiejiao* (evil cult).

Penny describes the emergence of Falun Gong in the context of a time of “renovation and rebuilding of temples, churches, and mosques, the rediscovery of religious culture and the reinvigoration of religious networks” (p. 18). After the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) reinforced the narrative of five heavily regulated “official” religions (Buddhism, Islam, Daoism, Protestant and Catholic Christianity). Penny shows acute awareness of the incubation period of religions, and records the Chinese and international reception of Li in the beginning, for example, at the Oriental Health Expo in Beijing in December 1992, where he appeared as a miraculous healer; this honeymoon soon ended as controversies about the organizational structures and financial status of Falun Gong, and the reception of *Zhuan Falun*, the key scripture, released in December 1994, erupted. Li was
accused of spreading pseudo-science, and initially had success deflecting these accusations, though after the 18 April 1999 protest at Tianjin Normal University and the subsequent Zhongnanhai protest in Beijing Falun Gong was banned.

The third chapter focuses on Master Li, the founder and central focus of Falun Gong. He has reinvented himself along the way, but conforms to the template of an enlightened being, apparently taught from the age of four by “a master whose name translates as ‘Complete Enlightenment’” (p. 82). He trained with three further masters (the last of whom was female) and manifested miraculous powers throughout his life. Penny notes that the CCP released details regarding Li’s life, including his parents’ both being medical practitioners, that he had a wife and daughter, and that his name was originally Li Lai (Hongzhi, meaning “vast will” was chosen as more appropriate). The movement’s scripture Zhuan Falun makes it clear that Li Hongzhi is a powerful healer, and may be identified with Maitreya Buddha (the eschatological Buddha to come). His status links to the anthropology of the movement, in which members possess yuanshen (original spirit, a Daoist term) which survives death. In the next chapter Penny analyses Li’s links to Daoism and Buddhism, and the anthropology that sees humans as originally “Buddhas, Daos, or gods” (p. 133) which has been corrupted such that we now occupy the filthy material world.

Chapter Five, “Cultivation,” concerns the mental and physical exercises that Falun Gong members undertake to “transform themselves ultimately into a superior form of being” (p. 152). Daoism is the parent tradition of these forms of cultivation; in a work called The Great Consummation Way Li introduces the five core exercises, four standing and one seated, which involve mantra-like utterances as well as physical movement. Li Hongzhi also teaches a fairly traditional Chinese position on morality, which in part might be influenced by the Christian New Testament (see Penny’s discussion of Li’s “image of being repeatedly slapped in the face”, p. 174). This chapter concludes with Penny’s reiteration that in Falun Gong self cultivation is an abandonment of emotions and attachments; since the banning of Falun Gong and Li’s exile in the United States the aims of “truth, compassion, and forbearance” (p. 175) are interpreted in different ways, though the ultimate aim of the cultivator becoming entirely passionless is retained.

The sixth chapter, “Steps to Consummation,” explains Li’s advocacy of the “milk-white body” (p. 187) which has no qi in it, and how that see-
rates Falun Gong from qigong groups in which qi is cultivated. Practitioners experience the complete transformation of their bodies, and certain extraordinary powers like telepathy, walking through walls, the “Third Eye” (p. 202), and the development of a “Buddha body” (p. 207). Penny’s “Epilogue: Transformations” is a brief summation of his argument, conscientiously emphasizing the provisional and pioneering nature of his study. Other books on Falun Gong have been written since The Religion of Falun Gong, but Benjamin Penny’s study remains invaluable, not least because he is a Sinologist steeped in the primary documents, but also because of the clarity and conviction of his argument. More than a decade on, this is the go-to book about Falun Gong, and it is recommended to all scholars in the field of new religions, and to students of the interactions between the East and the West in the contemporary era.