

Herman Salton, *Arctic Host, Icy Visit: China and Falun Gong Face Off in Iceland* (Saarbrücken: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, 2010)

Review by Aníta Einarsdóttir

In June 2002 the President of the People's Republic of China went to Iceland for an official visit. Consequently, some practitioners of Falun Gong, among many others, booked flights to Iceland at the same time, with the airline *Icelandair*. Somehow, by means still unknown, since Falun Gong keeps no list of its members itself, the Icelandic government had a blacklist of all these actual and presumed Falun Gong members that they believed to be going to Iceland to protest against the Chinese president and the Chinese government's alleged human rights violations. The people that were on this blacklist were either denied visas, embarkment onto their booked flight, or arrested at the international airport in Iceland and asked all kinds of questions about the purpose of their visit and their personal beliefs. Many of those eventually admitted into Iceland were then arrested and held in a school near the airport, not knowing what was going on and, like everybody else on the blacklist, wondering how their names got on such a list, which no one ever got to look at, except authorities and flight-personnel. The people that were kept in custody at the school were released after being forced to sign an agreement with the authorities about restricted areas and a peaceful stay in the country.

The people of Iceland do not seem to know very much about these events that in so many ways breach the rights of the people travelling, and if there is anything they know it is the little that the newspapers of Iceland, themselves much influenced by the Icelandic authorities at the time, chose to publish. This year, 2012, will be the tenth anniversary of these events in Iceland and it is therefore about time for the Icelandic people to consider and discuss what has been hidden from them and how such a limited access to public information has been inconsistent with the values of 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Icelandic government managed so extraordinarily to lower the dignity of Iceland and its international reputation, by bending over for the Chinese government, and the people of the country need to be informed of events of this nature.

The book *Arctic Host, Icy Visit* is about Falun Gong and various events that happened all over the world after the ban of the movement in China in 1999, but the main idea of the book came from the events in Iceland in June 2002. The book gives precise and detailed information, from the founding of Falun Gong until China's massive campaigns to try to ban its exercise in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, both in China and elsewhere.

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It took the author, Herman Salton, eight years to write and publish this book, i.e. from 2002, when he began his inquiries after the events in Iceland, until 2010, when the book was released. This has given him a very long time to gather a lot of sources, some of which very good and reliable. He uses old and recent newspaper articles, books written by Falun Gong members and founders, and judgments made by the Icelandic authorities, for instance the Ombudsman. However, despite all the effort put into the bibliography of the book, it is difficult to verify all sources, since Salton refers to a lot of interviews that he personally conducted with Falun Gong members who, for instance, are talking about what they have been through, either with the Chinese government or other governments and authorities. These sources might be valuable, but it can be hard for the reader to evaluate them, since they are made personally by the author. They also take only the side of Falun Gong members, leaving out any other side of the stories, like that of the Chinese and Icelandic authorities.

Given that Salton indicates in the beginning of the book that he writes it for the people of Iceland - *"To The People of Iceland Whose Decency and Sense of Democracy Continue to Be a Source of Inspiration"* - for them to be able to be informed about events that nobody has talked about or that have been suppressed by the government, it is written in a way that catches the reader's attention right away from the first page. The author tells the reader a story, not like a novel but like a documentary. He also writes in an English that should be understandable for most people.

Still, even if the book gives good information written in a clear and understandable way, it is not written in a very critical way. The reader of the book should be aware of this and read it with an open mind and exercise caution regarding the author's interpretation of the events. As mentioned before, he interviews many Falun Gong practitioners and therefore gets their side of all stories, that is, telling all the good things about the practicing of Falun Gong and insisting upon the "innocence" of their activities. He tries, even though he is struggling with it because of his opinion of the matters, to write somewhat from the governments' side as well, but it is mostly in an ironic way, letting the reader know that despite excuses from the authorities, their actions are wrong. It might be because it is hard to get in touch with governments on these matters, because they know of their wrongs and are therefore not willing to discuss them. There might also be no excuses from the governments' side and therefore the only information to give is that coming from the Falun Gong practitioners.

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There is one chapter of the book that stands out from all the other good chapters, which is the legal chapter. The book might give a good idea of all the things that are wrong in the governments' behavior, both the Icelandic government as well as any other government that has done similar things. But for a person that knows the law, especially European and International law, it is rather a confusing chapter. The author erroneously conflates European law and the European Convention on Human Rights throughout and the analysis is superficial, when not simply inaccurate.

This book gives good information but there is always, especially because the author almost only takes Falun Gong's side in these matters, more than meets the eye. It is obvious though that the Chinese government has an enormous impact on the whole world, and tries to ban Falun Gong everywhere. At the same time, other governments are aware of the influence that the Chinese government has, and may be aware that their own actions are unjustifiable and therefore try to avoid discussions about these matters. They hide the truth and give no comments on their behavior. Salton's book takes the reader on a journey all around the world, informing them about the things that not many people seem to know of and digs up sources and information that seem to have been somewhat hidden.

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Review by Tiantian Zhang

It was after an eight-year-long delay following the controversial event that the book *Arctic Host, Icy Visit: China and Falun Gong Face Off in Iceland* by Herman Salton was published. Salton was then an officer at the Icelandic Human Rights Center, among other roles. In this book, the author focuses on a 2002 event where a certain group of people, namely Falun Gong practitioners, were ordered by the Chinese government to be banned to enter Iceland before and during the visit of the Chinese President. In-depth research was made and opinions given by the author, along with a detailed review of the event.

The series of events that was thought to tarnish Iceland's long and well-respected reputation in human rights history is briefly summarized in the foreword and introduction, and then further described in Chapters 3 and 4. It happened in early June 2002, when the President of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Jiang Zemin, planned to make his visit to Iceland. In the author's description, what happened before and during the President's visit was "unforeseen," and "bizarre, even burlesque.". Practitioners of a Chinese "spiritual movement," namely Falun Gong, were barred from Iceland with various methods. Those methods, including denial or withdrawal of their visas to Iceland, interrogation and refusal of entry at airports before boarding Iceland-bound planes, cancellation of their hotel room reservations and secret monitoring of their activities, are listed and submitted in evidence by the author as major breaches of human rights by the Chinese government and interference with Iceland's sovereignty. What makes these actions stand out, however, is the fact that they were ordered by the Chinese government, but assisted and partly conducted by Icelandic government.

Being a Chinese citizen who has lived in Iceland for 3 years and majored in law for more than 5 years, I find it quite difficult to offer a conclusive evaluation of the events. In order to be able to give an objective opinion, I realize that a better understanding and in-depth investigation are required before I start judging the events, given my limited knowledge, which is probably colored by my experiences in both countries. After a comprehensive search for information from different media and publications, I would like to say that I have to hold a quite unique view on the Falun Gong movement, the 2002 event and its meaning, and the book as a whole.

By simply looking at the cover and reading the title of the book I sensed immediately a

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subtle hint of criticism in the main theme. The cover displays a picture of police cars under a gloomy semi-dark sky, giving an impression of heavy and solemn atmosphere along with the title "Arctic Host, Icy Visit." I indiscreetly came to a conclusion that the book I was going to read could be categorized into a certain stereotype of books and publications, namely those typically critical publications dealing with human rights issues whenever the Chinese government is involved. Mere criticisms of the government's well-known bad manners ignoring or infringing human rights are not the most outstanding characteristic of such publications. Instead, the criticisms and analysis always lead to the same conclusion, which is a routine of blaming the Chinese government for interference with other states' sovereignty and abuse of its rising political and economic influence. However, the author manages to give some inspiring information and thoughtful conclusions after a careful examination of the 2002 event.

From what I know about the government by living more than 20 years under its regime, I have not much doubt in the truthfulness about their radical actions in Iceland as told in the book. Nor does it surprise me that the actions and orders were actually operated and carried out by the Icelandic government, whom I suppose to have quite some experience in barring foreigners from the country from my own experience. Information from various sources including newspaper reports, individual interviews of practitioners, witnesses and officials, reports from international human rights organizations, and letters by the Minister of Justice all support the story as reported by Salton. The author provides a considerable amount of information in chapters 3 and 4, covering important particulars and details.

However, one of the major flaws in this book lies in the characterization of Falun Gong. The author has made an attempt to give a concise and in some level accurate portrayal of Falun Gong in Chapter 2, but his view is apparently limited, if not totally biased, by the sources that he could access and lack of direct contact with of the innocently self-profiled organization. Appearing to be a "meditation exercise" in origin, Falun Gong is no longer merely a spiritual or religious group. The author makes a relatively objective introduction but fails in accuracy. It is not to be blamed because Falun Gong's image is profiled drastically differently in international media compared with the Chinese domestic media as well as with what people have observed, not to mention inconsistency within the Falun Gong group itself.

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I agree with the author about the anti-scientific and confrontational character of Falun Gong, which are pointed out in the book, but about their nature and non-violent history I have to hold a different opinion. On 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2001, some Falun Gong devotees committed self-immolation at the Tian'an Men Square. A similar incident took place once again in Beijing on 16<sup>th</sup> February of the same year. The incidents were reported by Chinese domestic media and were witnessed by Beijing's citizens. Even though huge controversy emanated from these incidents and Falun Gong claimed that the tragedy was completely planned and manipulated by the Communist Party (CCP), the truth remains undiscovered. These two events came as a huge shock and had a widespread influence at that time, but were not mentioned at all in the book. It is valuable and important information to consider because it was just a year before the event in Iceland. If the incidents as reported in China were true, then the Chinese government's concerns and bans would be viewed as more reasonable and understandable, even if of questionable legality.

Besides, as the author also noticed, the anti-government character of Falun Gong is obvious to the public. Radical criticisms and literal attacks towards the Chinese government, especially the CCP, are expressed explicitly in their books, official website, newspapers and flyers. As far as I know, almost every Chinese relative and friend of mine has received propaganda from Falun Gong anti-government movements, most commonly emails, mobile phone messages and home phone calls with recorded tape speeches. It is difficult to conclude that this organization is "peaceful in essence." However, no matter how the nature of Falun Gong is and what the purpose of their movement is, there is inadequate justification for the Chinese government's actions according to law. Human rights were breached and no excuses or attempts should be made to excuse their unlawfulness. Still, a crucial error is made when the author tries to analyze the legal challenges and legal assessment concerning this event: he refers to the European Convention on Human Rights as European Union law even though the former is under the auspices of the Council of Europe and is quite distinct from the European Union's institutions. Further, Iceland has long been a party to the former treaty, but is not (yet) a member of the European Union at all.

When reaching its conclusion, the book approaches a routine of emphasizing freedom of association, speech, assembly and expression, and claims that the Chinese government used its political and economic influence to interfere with Iceland's sovereignty. Meanwhile it

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also makes an interesting point that Western States are used to look at China's human rights issues through colonial eyes, with a paternalistic attitude and teacher-pupil template, and try to use human rights as negotiation tools. But what I would like to add is that it is also important to realize that the fear of the West from the supposed threat from a rising power is usually attributable to lack of communication. China's blockage of media is worsening the case.

With relatively satisfying accuracy and objectivity, this book gives the 2002 event and its background a thorough introduction and provides a reasonable conclusion. But throughout the whole book, it shows the typical Western superiority complex of a "peaceful, scarcely populated, proudly independent and highly civilized" state (juxtaposed against China) and the pity of its tainted reputation in human rights by the government and its "obedience" to another political power. But I would take a bold guess that the possibility cannot be ruled out that the Icelandic government was aware of the consequences of potential protests, and was not completely unwilling or even forced, as the book has implied, to carry out and assist the actions reported. Welcoming hundreds of radical protestors to its soil to carry out their activities with unforeseen consequences, the Icelandic government, or any other government that cares about its peace and security, was not very likely to favor this idea. But being forced and having to obey another irresistible power to breach human rights unwillingly seems more forgivable. If that was the case, Iceland should really be concerned to protect its sovereignty and remain "one of the most liberal states" and "proudly independent," but it must stand firmly on its position and take responsibility for its own decisions and actions.

**P.S.** The author of this book has provided a reply to the reviewers in issue 8(1) of *Nordicum-Mediterraneum*:

<http://nome.unak.is/nm-marzo-2012/vol-8-n-1-2013/51-book-review/351-review-response>

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