

Although there was no expectation of scholarly analysis, as I gathered my sources and conducted my interviews I realized that the Icelandic events were part of a more complex, controversial and intriguing story than I had thought. That is when the report became a book, and why both took such a long time to complete. I explain this in my introduction but I reiterate it here because the fact-finding origin of *Arctic Host, Icy Visit* may explain some of its problems—and perhaps some of its virtues, too.

Both **reviewers** have my gratitude for reading long-winded and at times excessively detailed explanations of facts. Both reviewers would have made for helpful editorial advisers and the book would have benefited from their insights ahead of publication. But both reviewers also repeatedly misquote me and make some comments that I find baffling and that must be addressed. I have identified six of them, all of which relate to my supposedly pro-Falun Gong (FG) bias. For a book that originated as a fact-finding report this is a sombre charge that has the potential to undermine the entire project. An author who does not consider all sides of a story and all sources available is, as far as I am concerned, an author who has no credibility and who does not deserve to be read. So I take this matter extremely seriously and I will consider each of the six points raised by the reviewers in turn.

## 1) Sources

The first criticism is that my book relies on biased sources, so let me recall exactly what was available to me. As I explain at length in the introduction (p.11) and footnotes (36 and 37 at p.203), I contacted all four parties involved in the 2002 events: the Icelandic government (including the police and border agency); the Chinese government (including its Reykjavík Embassy); *Icelandair*; and Falun Gong practitioners. The Icelandic authorities refused point blank to be interviewed and so did *Icelandair*. Still, I managed to talk to a Justice Ministry official whom I knew personally and from whom I quote extensively throughout the book. I also studied all official documents and reports from Icelandic TV stations and newspapers, so Icelandic sources were hardly neglected despite the not-exactly-forthcoming attitude of the Reykjavík authorities. The same is true of Chinese sources: I interviewed an Embassy official who gave me extensive anti-FG materials but who then refused to confirm the transcript in writing and vanished (again, I explain this in fn. 37, p.203). I nevertheless read, commented

and quoted extensively from the Chinese government materials I was given. As for FG sources, the first reviewer criticizes me for using anonymous interviews and the second for “a lack of direct contact” with FG. Both are wrong: as my footnotes show, I conducted over thirty interviews—in four languages—with FG practitioners in twelve countries, not a single one of which was anonymous and all of which were transcribed, confirmed in writing and made available to third parties for verification (for each interview I also gave the interviewee’s initials and the date of our talk). As I explain at p.13, Chinese authorities are known to use covert surveillance to locate dissidents, so I had good reasons to use initials rather than full names. In any event, FG practitioners are eager to talk about their plight so even the most unscrupulous researcher would not need to ‘fake’ interviews with them. In addition to Icelandic, Chinese and Falun Gong sources, I also quoted extensively from the international press—in five languages—and from reports of respected organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. This book involved some painstaking research conducted in my spare time, with a zero budget and over eight years. *Arctic Host, Icy Visit* is not sloppily researched.

## 2) Use of Sources

Not only did I review a wealth of non-FG sources, I also used them often—indeed, more often than FG sources. The first reviewer criticizes me for only relying on the movement and says (somewhat cryptically) that “there is always more than meets the eye”, while the second complains that this makes my view “apparently limited if not totally biased”. Are we talking about the same book? There are almost 1,000 footnotes taking up fifty pages in my 250-page-long book—a fifth of the entire volume. Although my reviewers clearly ignored them, they are the lifeblood of any fact-finding piece of research and a quick statistical analysis shows them to give ample space to Chinese, Icelandic and third-party sources. 36 out of the 41 footnotes of Chapter 1 (87%), for instance, rely on materials other than FG’s. In Chapter 2 that proportion is 177 out of 268 (66%) and this in a section of the book that looks specifically at FG and that must therefore quote extensively from its literature. Chapters 3 and 4 are no different—in fact, they are even less reliant on FG: in the former, 113 out of 166 footnotes (68%) mention and quote from sources other than FG, while in Chapter 4 that ratio is even higher (141 out of 167, or 84%). As for the second half of the book, it relies even more heavily on non-FG sources: 112 out of 121 footnotes (92%) in Chapter 5 and 164 out of 188 (87%) in Chapter 6, while in the Conclusion not a single footnote out of 42 is based on FG

materials. My reviewers say that I did not do my homework and that I relied on biased sources. I say that they did not do theirs and that 83% of *Arctic Host, Icy Visit* is based on non-FG materials.

### 3) Tone

Still, when two intelligent people separately come to the conclusion that a book is biased, its author should worry. I have reviewed it and I have come to the conclusion that *Arctic Host, Icy Visit* may have a problem of tone. What I did in 2002 was this: I collected as much evidence as I was able to, from as many sources as I could, and read it all; I found it to be overwhelmingly in favour of FG (which does not mean that the latter is 'innocent'—more on this below); and I wrote so. Because of this and because the bulk of the book was written in 2002 when I was a young and idealistic human rights lawyer, its tone leaves no doubt about my position and I agree that in certain parts it may come across as opinionated, something that was rightly picked up by the reviewers. Also, much has happened in the world since 2002 (Iraq, Guantánamo, etc.) and what seemed to me shocking in 2002 is less so today. But this is a matter of tone rather than bias, of form rather than substance: I still believe that the 2002 events are important (not at all "burlesque", as the second reviewer misquotes me as writing), that they had to be told and that the evidence was and remains firmly against the Icelandic and Chinese governments. So while *Arctic Host, Icy Visit* may be opinionated, it is not biased. Bias occurs when a conclusion is reached before seeing the available evidence. I did exactly the opposite.

### 4) Falun Gong Characterization

The same is true of my much-criticized depiction of FG. The first reviewer argues that my book tells "all the good things about the practicing of FG and insist[s] upon the "innocence" of their activities". I do no such thing and I find it frankly disconcerting that she would quote me as using the word "innocence" in relation to FG, for not once does this word appear in my book, neither in relation to FG nor anybody else. And this for a simple reason: I would never characterize anybody—not even myself—as 'innocent', let alone an organization like FG that has a sophisticated media presence and a clear agenda. My book neither endorses nor praises FG—indeed, at one point I describe some of its views as "homophobic and racist". But my job was not to assess whether the FG tenets are palatable or not: because international

law regards public order as a limit to religious freedom and because the CCP uses the violence charge to ban FG in China and to marginalize it overseas, I had to assess the available evidence on this specific ground of violence. This led me to the following conclusions: 1) FG is a spiritual movement and not a cult; 2) it has become political in China (and nowhere else) because for the CCP all dissidents and religious groups are political; 3) its approach is anti-scientific and some of its beliefs eccentric (in this it is similar to other spiritual movements and even some mainstream religions); 4) some of its members can be annoyingly pushy and exaggerate their claims; 5) it is peaceful in both doctrine and observance. The second reviewer disagrees and says that this non-violent characterization of mine is “a major flaw in the book”. Perhaps, but I am hardly in the minority here: all of the scholarly assessments of FG reach the same conclusion (I list them in my bibliography). She also writes that the so-called Tiananmen Square ‘self-immolation’ episode of January 2001 is “not mentioned at all in the book”. She is wrong: I dedicate to it 23 lines (p.207) where I also explain in detail the doubts surrounding this incident. I have never heard of the February 2001 episode she mentions but it hardly matters, for even assuming that both are genuine, two self-immolation cases in the 20-year-long history of FG simply do not turn it into a dangerous cult.

The second reviewer also writes that the “anti-government character” of FG is shown by the fact that “radical criticism and literal attacks towards the Chinese government...are expressed explicitly in their books, official website, newspapers and flyers”; that FG spreads its anti-government “propaganda” in China through “emails, mobile phone messages and home phone calls with recorded tape speeches”; and that for these reasons “it is difficult to conclude that this organization is “peaceful in essence” (at last a correct quote from me, and one by which I stand). I find this train of thought frankly disturbing. Apart from the fact that the CCP knows a thing or two about propaganda, the international press, the academic community and all independent human rights organizations agree that hundreds of FG practitioners were in 2002 and are still being imprisoned, tortured and even killed by the Chinese authorities, together with many thousands of other dissidents. I am sorry but I trust these sources more than I trust the Chinese government—or any other government for that matter. Academic even-handedness is important but not at the cost of moral relativism: although one would never say so from reading the second review, it is—may I recall—FG practitioners who have been killed by the Chinese authorities and not the reverse, so there cannot be moral equivalence between the two. May I also suggest that in light of FG’s not-

exactly-Ghandian treatment by the CCP, its “anti-government character” is not entirely surprising? One would have also thought that twenty-to-thirty million deaths in one go during the Great Leap Forward, a brutal Cultural Revolution, a bloody repression in Tiananmen Square and thousands of political prisoners render the CCP rather more vulnerable to accusations of violence than FG’s two (unconfirmed) cases of self-immolation in twenty years, both of which happened in China but nowhere else in the world.

### **5) Cultural Imperialism**

The last charge against *Arctic Host, Icy Visit* is one of cultural imperialism. Since I am regularly criticized for the exact opposite—i.e. xenophilia, Western liberal guilt and excessive focus on post-colonial issues—for me this is an exciting first. “Throughout the whole book”, the second reviewer writes, “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”. Apart from the fact that she once again misquotes me (I never use the word “obedience”), the reviewer clearly objects to my flattering characterization of Iceland vis-à-vis China. The trouble is, when I wrote that sentence about Iceland I was not even remotely thinking of China—and so much so that in my foreword (from which the quote comes) China is mentioned only twice, en passant, and not in relation to Iceland. So this ‘juxtaposition’ between the two countries—let alone between a ‘good’ Iceland and a ‘bad’ China—is something that not only I never made but that I did not even think of. Besides, two of the four traits I attach to Iceland are hardly controversial (the country has no army so it can only be ‘peaceful’; it has a large landmass but merely 300,000 inhabitants so it can only be ‘scarcely populated’). As for ‘proudly independent’ and ‘highly civilized’, these are clearly my own opinions but I never pretend otherwise and I never—not even for a minute—thought that China compares poorly to Iceland either in its attachment to independence or in civilizational grandeur. Indeed, suggesting otherwise seems absurd to me and while I am not in the business of comparing civilizations, I would have thought that as one of the world’s oldest, China has few if any peers (something that Western schools routinely neglect). Yet why would any of this relate to my book? China and its government are clearly not the same thing and it should be possible to criticize the latter while admiring the former (I do so all the time with Western countries). So this comparison between Iceland and China is entirely of the reviewer’s making and rather than exposing my superiority

complex, it seems to me to show her internalized sense of inferiority, itself probably caused by centuries of Western domination. I do agree that Westerners often suffer from a disquieting sense of cultural superiority and I have often written about it (see e.g. <http://www.opendemocracy.net/herman-salton/fear-factor-europe-bans-burqa>). But I simply do not and neither does my book.

## 6) Human Rights and the CCP

Let me end this response on the issue of human rights. According to the second reviewer *Arctic Host, Icy Visit* falls into “a routine of blaming the Chinese government” and into “a certain stereotype...of those typically critical publications dealing with human rights issues whenever the Chinese government is involved”. I am not too convinced by this image of a hapless CCP under attack by those nasty Westerners. It is certainly true—and I repeatedly say so in my book—that Western governments exploit human rights to score power-political points against the CCP. It is also true that they themselves violate human rights. I would even go further and argue that some of them have in the past decade launched legally questionable wars that caused unnecessary deaths. But once again my book is not about this: it is about some human rights violations that took place in Iceland in 2002. Besides, the fact that Western governments can be hypocritical hardly makes the CCP’s own human rights record stellar: it is not stellar at all, and while it is somewhat improving, it remains much worse than that of most Western governments and we should not be afraid of saying so. The question of the universality of human rights is a complex but irrelevant one here to the extent that the CCP has by its own admission accepted to be bound by them and claims to be committed to them—which means, I would hope, that like anybody else it can be censored if it violates them.

The idea that I would be kinder to a Western government than to a non-Western one flies in the face of my personal history and publications and would, I think, surprise anybody who knows me, including my students (I teach on a postcolonial politics module) and my two former Chinese partners (both of whom dislike FG). If *Arctic Host, Icy Visit* is anything, it is a scathing indictment of the Icelandic government of 2002, as my much-criticized legal chapter suggests (since my book makes a more general point about the treatment of FG internationally, I thought—and still think—that a broader overview of the international legal framework was necessary there). I never believed for a moment that the Icelandic

Government was 'forced' by the CCP to act the way it did. But it was clearly under some kind of pressure and, to its credit, in 2010 it apologized to FG for the events of 2002. Does this excuse its actions? Absolutely not. Does this mean that Iceland has a spotless human rights record were it not for those naughty Chinese? Not at all, as the reviewer correctly notes. Would this be the first time that a powerful government puts pressure on a less powerful one? Hardly: a summary of US pressures on Western and non-Western governments alike would run into several tomes. Ultimately, the beauty of human rights—and their claim to universality—lies precisely with the fact that they must be defended against *any* government that violates them (even, indeed especially, if powerful) and in favour of *any* idea (even, indeed especially, if we disagree with it) so long as it is peacefully expressed. This was exactly the case with FG in 2002. *Arctic Host, Icy Visit* is a modest endeavour and has its faults, but it was born out of an honest attempt to expose an injustice. This and only this—not some kind of phantasmal anti-Chinese or pro-FG bias—led me to write it.

**N.B.** The text of the book review addressed by this reply can be found here: <http://nome.unak.is/nm-marzo-2012/vol-7-n-1-2012/37-book-review/118-herman-salton-arctic-host-icy-visit-china-and-falun-gong-face-off-in-iceland-saarbruecken-lap-lambert-academic-publishing-2010>