



Zhen Shan Ren

Truthfulness Compassion Forbearance

Falun Dafa Association of Australia Inc

URGENT

17 July 2020

David Anderson
Managing Director, ABC

Dear Mr Anderson,

Expression of Grave Concern by the Falun Gong Community about the ABC's Forthcoming Reports

We are writing to express grave concerns about the forthcoming 'DARK KARMA' documentary and related programming by the ABC. Based on current promotional materials, we believe it severely misrepresents the beliefs and practices of Falun Gong, breaches the ABC's own Code of Practice and editorial guidelines, and is likely to have an extremely harmful impact on the Falun Gong community in Australia, many members of which are traumatised refugees fleeing religious persecution.

Though we have not yet had the opportunity to see the documentary – or even speak to its reporters and producers until very recently, as explained below – the media release announcing the documentary suggests that it is highly misrepresentative and unfair in its descriptions of our faith system. As currently promoted, the program may breach ABC policies on hate speech and trauma by inciting undeserved hatred, stigmatisation, and hostility toward members of an already marginalised, vulnerable religious minority. This exacerbates harm and distress to survivors, their friends, and families. The report also appears to violate the ABC's own Code of Practice regarding accuracy, balance, impartiality, fair treatment, open-mindedness, the avoidance of misleading information, sensitivity to foreign cultural practices, and harm mitigation. We are further concerned that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) will use it in their ongoing propaganda efforts against Falun Gong in both China and Australia.

We request a meeting with ABC producers and executives as soon as possible, before the documentary is aired, in which we will have an opportunity to articulate our concerns and have them taken into consideration by the ABC. We look forward to hearing from you by the end of today, Friday July 17.

Our specific concerns are addressed below. We discuss the ways in which the apparent content of the program appears to run counter to ABC's Code of Practice, as well as how deeply unfair and misrepresentative the depiction of our faith appears to be.

Misrepresentation of Falun Gong's beliefs and practices

Falun Gong is a spiritual practice of the Buddhist tradition, indigenous to China. It consists of a set of five meditative qigong exercises and a body of religious teachings which have been described as "profoundly moral," and which include discussion of a large range of metaphysical phenomena and ideas. The primary text of the practice is the book *Zhuan Falun*, which Falun Gong practitioners try to read regularly and take as a guide to ethical practice. The auxiliary teachings, all of which are publicly available, run to over a million words.



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At the heart of Falun Gong's belief system are the values of *Zhen, Shan, Ren*, which translate as honesty/truthfulness, kindness/compassion, and tolerance/forbearance. These qualities are taken by Falun Gong to represent the Dharma, or the essential law and quality of the universe. Practitioners of Falun Gong strive to embody these principles while letting go of worldly attachments and concern for fame, reputation, or gain. We also try to overcome tendencies toward jealousy, anger, and other negative emotions. This is the essence of Falun Gong moral cultivation.

Falun Gong does not have a centralised administration, hierarchy, system of membership, or tithing. Practice is entirely voluntary and without compulsion, and Falun Gong activities around the world are carried out by volunteers. Falun Dafa Associations around the world are, like ours, grassroots, voluntary, and loosely organised.

This background is necessary in order to explain how misleading and misrepresentative the depiction of Falun Gong's beliefs is in the ABC media release. Practitioners of Falun Gong would scarcely recognise their practice based on the depictions in that document.

The ABC documentary's investigation of Falun Gong's beliefs appears to focus on four ideas: our attitudes toward homosexuality and "mixed races", Falun Gong teachings on aliens, our relationship to modern medicine, and views of the Donald Trump presidency.

The topics listed above are not core elements of Falun Gong beliefs: collectively they comprise an extremely small portion of corpus of Falun Gong teachings (Donald Trump is not mentioned at all in Falun Gong literature). An excessive emphasis on marginal or non-existent teachings would appear to directly contradict ABC's standards, which state that "no significant strand of thought or belief within the community is knowingly excluded *or disproportionately represented*" (emphasis added). Setting aside questions of fairness and proportionality, the ABC's depiction of our beliefs on these topics appears to be misleading, betraying a deep religious and cultural illiteracy and, in some cases, a reckless disregard for accuracy. Moreover, they are likely to have the effect of promoting prejudice and hostility toward Falun Gong. A brief discussion of each topic follows:

Views on homosexuality and persons of "mixed race"

The ABC media release claims that Falun Gong holds intolerant racist and homophobic views. These statements are misleading, reckless, and divisive: rather than promoting understanding, they expose gays and lesbians, persons of mixed race, and Falun Gong adherents themselves to needless anguish.

Falun Gong does not forbid individuals of any sexual orientation or gender identity from practicing the discipline, nor does it promote or condone hatred or discrimination based on race, sexual orientation, or identity. To the contrary, Falun Gong teachings stress that all people have an immortal soul, have inherent dignity, and should be treated equally, with tolerance and compassion.

Like most world religions, Falun Gong espouses conservative sexual ethics. As a practice of the Buddhist tradition, it encourages practitioners to relinquish attachments to lust and sexual desire, and only sanctions sexual activity within the confines of monogamous, heterosexual marriage. Any sexual relations that fall outside marriage are understood to create negative karma. However, this does not translate into a



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discriminatory attitude toward the gay community. Same-sex attracted individuals are counted among the community of Falun Gong believers, and they are treated no differently from anyone else. Moreover, Falun Gong does not seek to impose its ethical precepts on anyone.

With respect to persons of mixed race, Falun Gong's cosmology includes a belief that human ethnicities are created in the image and likeness of gods, and that different ethnicities have their own caretaker deities. Falun Gong also teaches about reincarnation and the transmigration of souls, and holds that a person's soul is not bound to any particular ethnicity (e.g. a person may reincarnate into a Chinese family in one lifetime, and into a Latino family in another). Far from encouraging racism or discrimination, these teachings actually discourage it: Falun Gong teachings emphasise the inherent divinity of all people, and are fundamentally incompatible with racial prejudice. It is also worth noting that a significant proportion of Falun Gong adherents in the West belong to mixed-race families. This reality about the Falun Gong community cannot be reconciled with the claim of discrimination or intolerance towards people of mixed race.

On medicine

The ABC media release claims that Falun Gong has “cult-like abhorrence of modern medicine that's claimed lives.” This is an inflammatory, misleading, and reckless claim. It is also one of the primary ways that the Chinese Communist Party has sought to justify the imprisonment, torture, killing, and forcible re-education of Falun Gong adherents, and so deserves to be interrogated more closely.

Falun Gong views illness and misfortune as manifestations of negative karma, which is incurred from doing wrong, including in past lives (e.g. negative karma is produced when a person behaves in ways that are contrary to the precepts of truthfulness, compassion, and forbearance). Pain, illness, and other hardships are considered an inescapable feature of the human condition, and some suffering is deemed necessary to pay off one's karma. Falun Gong's teachings in this respect are hardly unique among religious and faith traditions, and mirror similar cultural practices in China over millennia.

Crucially, how a person interprets these teachings and applies them in their lives is entirely up to them: Falun Gong has no prohibitions on seeking medical treatment, and the Falun Gong community does not apply social pressure to discourage individuals from seeking medical treatment. To the contrary, its teachings state that hospitals and Western medicine can be effective at treating illness, and that people experiencing severe illness should seek medical care. In fact, near the site of the Dragon Springs temple complex which ABC reporters visited, a group of medical doctors who practice Falun Gong operate a family clinic. Western scholars and researchers who have conducted extensive field work with the Falun Gong community confirm that the group does not prohibit practitioners from taking medicine or apply social pressure to that end. They also rebut claims that Falun Gong exercises “cult-like” control over individual practitioners.

It is further worth noting that Falun Gong's popularity, particularly in the 1990s in China, was largely attributable to its efficacy in *improving* health and promoting healthy lifestyles (e.g. through daily practice of meditation, self-reflection and moral rectitude, and by eschewing drugs and alcohol). Evidence of this phenomenon – both statistical and anecdotal – abounds, and features prominently in ethnographic studies of Falun Gong. Any even-handed treatment of this subject would include a discussion on the health benefits of Falun Gong.



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As evidence that Falun Gong's alleged abhorrence of medicine has "claimed lives," the ABC documentary relays the story of Colleen May. According to the release, May died at the age of 75 after she began practicing Falun Gong and stopped taking blood pressure medication (it neglects to mention that May died 17 years after she began practicing Falun Gong). The media release includes an assertion from Shani May, Colleen's daughter, as if it were a bald fact: "if it wasn't for Falun Gong, [Colleen] would still be with us."

We express our condolences to the family of Colleen May. It is entirely understandable that family members of loved ones who make choices that they do not understand or agree with will feel aggrieved upon their passing. Yet the claim that Falun Gong is responsible for Colleen's death is reckless and inflammatory, denies her own agency and choices, and is simply not supported by the evidence. It also conflicts with ABC's own code of practice, which states that reporters should "be sensitive to significant cultural practices when depicting or reporting on recently deceased persons," and should avoid presenting opinions as facts.

Views on extraterrestrial beings

Falun Gong texts do occasionally make reference to the existence of beings living on other worlds and in other physical dimensions (e.g. one sentence in *Zhuan Falun* alludes to extraterrestrials). But in discussing this possibility, Falun Gong is little different from various other religious traditions, which also posit an inhabited universe. Tibetan Buddhism, for instance, holds that this planet is only one among an inhabited "three thousand worlds." Modern Christian theologians discuss the issue of extraterrestrial life as well, including in official settings such as Vatican-sponsored publications. Influential philosophers and scientists, from Immanuel Kant to Stephen Hawking, have also expressed belief in the existence of alien life, and this view is shared by a majority of the general public. At the time that Falun Gong was being taught in China, the study of UFO phenomena and extraterrestrials was not considered a fringe or pseudoscientific field, but was treated as a mainstream and legitimate topic of inquiry.

Judging from the promotional materials released by ABC, it appears that the forthcoming documentary falsely suggests a) that the issue of alien life features prominently in Falun Gong's teachings and cosmology (it does not); and b) that this is evidence that Falun Gong is strange and perhaps undeserving of respect. If ABC's goal was sensationalism, it may have succeeded. If the goal was to present Falun Gong beliefs accurately and in the appropriate cultural context, it appears to have failed.

Relationship to Donald Trump

The ABC media release claims that Falun Gong teaches Donald Trump is an "angel" sent from heaven, and that "the group" has engaged in unethical practices to advertise for and promote Trump's presidency. These statements demonstrate a reckless disregard for truth or accuracy.

Falun Gong takes no official position on Donald Trump. There are no Falun Gong teachings that Donald Trump is "an angel that was sent from heaven," as claimed in the ABC media release. Views of the Trump presidency vary widely within the Falun Gong community, and as a faith system that aims at transcendence of worldly concerns, Falun Gong's teachings discourage an excessive interest in politics.



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Moreover, the ABC documentary appears to erroneously conflate the actions or beliefs of individual Falun Gong practitioners, or media companies founded by practitioners, with the faith community as a whole. The effect is to incite hostility toward the group, and to present it as a large, tightly organised, and well financed organisation, which it is not.

Falun Gong is a faith community formed by the individuals who freely adopt the Falun Gong teachings. We do not take membership. We do not collect funds. We do not have a single administrative apparatus that runs the practice globally. It is a highly diverse community that includes people with views across the political spectrum. All coordination between Falun Gong communities around the world is done by volunteers, and people are free to come and go from Falun Gong practice, meetings, and activities. Cultivation of Falun Gong is a personal matter, and interpretation and application of the teachings is up to each individual.

All of this would be unclear to ABC viewers, given that your media release states: “the group [Falun Gong] has harnessed social media, spending millions through made-up groups and fake identities to promote Donald Trump and his anti-Beijing policies.”

This statement appears to be a reference to the activities of a small number of individuals who practice or practiced Falun Gong, and who operated a digital media business. Neither they, nor their business, represent Falun Gong. They never claimed to represent Falun Gong, and misleading or deceptive business practices are contrary to the ethical teachings of Falun Gong. The organisations and companies established by practitioners of Falun Gong cannot represent the faith community as a whole, and indeed the vast majority of people who practice Falun Gong are not involved with any of these organisations or companies. Why, then, would ABC attribute this behaviour to “the group” Falun Gong?

The ABC is here engaging in fallacious reasoning – attributing to an entire religious group the behaviour of a small number of the individuals who practice that faith. Typically, when this form of reasoning is applied to groups of people (in particular vulnerable populations) it is condemned for what it is: bigotry and discrimination. When it is applied to people who share the same race, it is called racism. When it is applied to those of the Islamic faith, it is called Islamophobia. When applied to gays and lesbians, it is called homophobia. Why does the ABC think it is appropriate to apply this bigoted form of reasoning to Falun Gong?

The ABC’s depiction of the relationship between the faith of Falun Gong and the activities of a small number of organisations founded by practitioners of Falun Gong is simply inaccurate. It thus violates the ABC’s own Code of Practice, which demands factual accuracy.

Dragon Springs complex

The trailer for the documentary also focuses on the Dragon Springs temple complex in New York, which it identifies as a Falun Gong “headquarters.” Dragon Springs is the site of a Tang Dynasty-style temple complex, two classical Chinese dance schools, and Shen Yun Performing Arts.¹ We agree that these endeavours are an important part of Falun Gong’s advocacy efforts, but Dragon Springs does not speak

¹ This information is available on the Dragon Springs website: www.dragonsprings.org



for the global Falun Gong community, nor does it manage the global Falun Gong community. The documentary appears to fixate on the fact that the Dragon Springs complex is guarded and not open to the public, and implies that this is evidence of something nefarious. Yet Falun Gong practitioners and artists who live at Dragon Springs have received credible threats on their lives from agents of the Communist Party. Why would the site's proprietors invite curious onlookers and agents of the CCP to invade the privacy of the people who work and study there? Common sense precautions in the face of a totalitarian police state willing to project power abroad is not evidence of anything sinister.

In sum, from the media release it appears that ABC has used a dishonest and selective framing to depict Falun Gong beliefs as divisive, alien, threatening and "cult-like," and to thereby cause viewers to regard Falun Gong with contempt, hostility, and hatred. This is an extremely unfair, uncharitable approach to news coverage: it will cause misunderstanding about a culturally foreign faith practice, and potentially exacerbate the trauma of Falun Gong practitioners in Australia who have fled political persecution as refugees.

The ABC report echoes Chinese Communist Party propaganda used to persecute Falun Gong

The content of the ABC documentary, as indicated by the media release, closely tracks with the propaganda narrative that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has sought to advance for the last two decades. The CCP's purpose has been to undermine sympathy toward Falun Gong in the West, so that it can continue to imprison, torture, forcibly re-educate, and kill Falun Gong adherents on a mass scale with impunity (including via organ harvesting).

The CCP's allegations include, *inter alia*, claims that Falun Gong is an evil cult, that it is a danger to public health, that it has a hidden political agenda, and that it operates based on a highly centralised, hierarchical structure. These claims have been rejected by researchers, academics, and human rights groups, and yet all of these claims are uncritically reflected in the ABC media release.

We are aware that the CCP has become more aggressive and sophisticated in its overseas propaganda efforts in recent years, including by offering financial incentives to Western journalists and media producers to create anti-Falun Gong content. While we are not accusing ABC of accepting payment from the Chinese Communist Party, the fact that the ABC documentary so closely echoes the discredited narratives of a violent, totalitarian regime should give producers pause.

The opening sentences of the ABC media release imply that Falun Gong may not actually deserve the sympathy that their plight has garnered in the west. Did the producers and journalists reach this conclusion after conducting an open-minded and culturally sensitive exploration of Falun Gong's teachings and the dynamics of the diaspora community? Or did they reach this conclusion in advance, and then selectively seek out evidence and perspectives that would confirm their beliefs? What prompted your producers to pursue the lines of inquiry that they did? How did they decide on the framing of their story, and which views and perspectives are worthy of inclusion? Did they consider whether their program would expose members of a religious minority to hatred and contempt, or that it would re-traumatise refugees who faced similar, dehumanising propaganda in China?



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More to the point: is it ABC's objective to incite hostility and prejudice toward Falun Gong by presenting it in a sensational and dishonest way? Or is the goal to help Australian viewers develop a nuanced, accurate, and culturally sensitive understanding of a marginalized faith system? If the latter, one would expect ABC to actually present the Falun Gong community, describe Falun Gong's teachings and practices in a fair and even-handed way, giving appropriate weight to different views, and putting them into appropriate cultural and geo-political context. They did not do this.

Bad faith in attempting to get the perspective of the local Falun Gong community

ABC's content guidelines state that the ABC "requires that reasonable efforts must be made to ensure accuracy in all fact-based content," and further requires that, when allegations are made about an organisation, they are provided a fair opportunity to respond. We do not believe this standard was met. Moreover, we believe ABC failed to set out different sides of the issue fairly and proportionally, and neglected to seek comment or rebuttals from the Falun Gong community itself.

The Australian Falun Dafa Association first became aware of the ABC's investigation after a practitioner meditating in Hyde Park, Sydney, on July 10 informed John Deller, a member of the Association, that an ABC crew was filming them. Mr Deller telephoned the reporter, Lisa McGregor, who called him back the following Monday (July 13). Mr Deller offered to speak to Ms McGregor, and was informed that she had no need to interview him for the documentary. The following day, July 14, Hagar Cohen from ABC Background Briefing called and interviewed Mr Deller. Neither Mr Deller, nor any other representatives of the Falun Gong community, were invited for a sit-down interview.

The Falun Dafa Association of Australia subsequently contacted the Falun Dafa Information Centre, a volunteer-run organisation in New York that handles media requests related to Falun Gong. The Falun Dafa Information Centre informed us that they were never contacted by ABC.

The belated interaction with the community here, primarily aimed to gather footage and conduct last-minute adversarial questioning, suggests that the ABC may have had an almost single-minded interest in speaking with critics of Falun Gong and with people who no longer practice it, rather than speaking with current practitioners or volunteer representatives in the local community. Again, this appears to contravene ABC's Code of Practice.

The harms likely to be caused to the Falun Gong community by these mischaracterisations

ABC's Code of Practice states that the broadcaster must never "gratuitously harm or offend," and should "avoid the unjustified use of stereotypes or discriminatory content that could reasonably be interpreted as condoning or encouraging prejudice." If the media release disseminated about the forthcoming documentary is at all representative, the documentary clearly fails to adhere to these standards.

We do not oppose, and in fact are open to journalists and researchers reporting on Falun Gong. We believe, as individuals and as a group, that we can learn from criticism. Yet we also believe that a public broadcaster has a moral duty to treat their subjects in an open-minded, fair, balanced, and accurate manner. This duty is even more important when reporting on an already vulnerable and persecuted minority group, so as to avoid causing undue harm or exacerbating the group's marginalisation.



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International legal experts have concluded that crimes against humanity have taken place against Falun Gong in China, along with the acts enumerated in the genocide convention. Many of the Falun Gong practitioners in Australia fled persecution, imprisonment, and torture at the hands of the Chinese Communist Party. They have spent the last two decades as targets of a massive propaganda campaign, orchestrated by the Communist Party that aims to vilify and dehumanise them, and present them as undeserving of sympathy. To be targeted by the same types of propaganda in Australia would be to re-traumatise them. It also risks undermining public support and pressure for ending the persecution in China.

The ABC program, as described in the media release, is extremely offensive to the followers of the Falun Gong faith system, and gratuitously so. The release states, in the broadcaster's own voice, that Falun Gong is "cult-like," "intolerant," that it causes deaths, and that its teachings are "dangerous and divisive." These are reckless, misleading, and unsubstantiated allegations, and any reasonable person would conclude that these labels would encourage prejudice, hatred, and contempt towards Falun Gong. They expose Falun Gong political refugees to discrimination, hostility, and potential trauma and re-victimisation.

The date of the intended broadcast is noteworthy: July 20 marks the start of the CCP's nationwide persecution of Falun Gong in China. The only two groups who attach significance to this anniversary are the Chinese Communist Party and Falun Gong. That the ABC would broadcast this documentary to coincide with the 21st anniversary of the persecution of the practice shows how unworthy of dignity and respect the reporters and editors involved in this program seem to think we are. We fully expect that if the documentary proceeds as planned, the wider Falun Gong community in Australia will be subject to the same hostility and contempt.

According to its own standards, ABC has an obligation to mitigate such risks by taking care with how content is expressed and presented. A first step would be to discuss these concerns with representatives from the faith community that will be most harmed by your reporting. Again, we request an urgent meeting with ABC producers and executives before the documentary is aired, in which we will have an opportunity to articulate our concerns and have them taken into consideration by the ABC.

Yours sincerely

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CC:

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Hon Paul Fletcher, Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts