

MAGA-land's Favorite Newspaper

How *The Epoch Times* became a pro-Trump propaganda machine in an age of plague and insurrection

Story by Simon van Zuylen-Wood

The rural hamlet of Cuddebackville, New York, is home to a guru named Li Hongzhi, who calls his 427-acre compound Dragon Springs. At the center of the compound—a kind of timber frame Shangri-la—stands a massive replica of a Tang Dynasty temple. On March 19, 2020, Li wrote a message to his disciples titled “Rationality.” The message was about COVID-19, which was by then crippling New York City, 80 miles to the southeast. “Plagues and pestilence, by their very nature, are arranged by the Gods,” Li began. “When humans become corrupt in their hearts, they will generate karma, fall sick, and suffer calamities.”

Li gradually worked up to his point, referring to the Chinese Communist Party by its initials: The pandemic “has come with a purpose and with a target. It has come to eliminate the followers of the evil Party and those who go along with the evil CCP.” As a remedy, Li suggested a kind of social distancing: “At present, the hardest-hit countries are those that associate closely with the evil CCP, and the same goes for individuals. So, what can be done? Stay away from the evil CCP and don’t align with the evil Party.”

A few months later, in July, I was clicking around on YouTube when something predictable happened: An ad popped up for the weirdly ubiquitous *Epoch Times*. Equally predictably, the ad starred a thin man with a hint of an Eastern European accent. He was enthusiastically leafing through the print edition of the newspaper, pointing at articles. When people stumble upon *The Epoch Times*, they usually find it through ads like this one, which in 2019 blanketed Facebook and have now migrated largely to YouTube. The pitchman—his name is Roman Balmakov, he’s 30, he went to high school in Ohio—is more recognizable than any of the publication’s writers.

The ad began with a smiling Balmakov peering out from behind the newspaper. “Hey,” he said, “I just read an unbelievable article in *The Epoch Times*.” He splayed the paper on a table, showcasing a news story headlined “The Mysterious Origins of the CCP Virus.” It suggested that the pathogen could have emerged, maybe purposefully, from a lab in Wuhan. (Nobody knows for sure, but most scientists believe that the virus jumped naturally from animals to humans.) “It’s not just that,” Balmakov said, turning the page. “Look: an investigation into how the countries that have been most affected are the *same* ones that have been the most deeply infiltrated by the Chinese Communist Party.” According to the investigation, Washington State’s early COVID-19 outbreak can be partly explained by the fact that Seattle was the first U.S. port to welcome Communist Chinese cargo ships, in the 1970s.

On the one hand, the paper was underscoring the possibility that China had covered up the true source of the virus, and perhaps even engineered it. This has become a common right-wing claim. On the other hand, it was suggesting that the virus was a divine instrument designed to punish the CCP and its supposed allies. A less common claim. If the assertions are contradictory, Roman Balmakov doesn’t seem to mind. They are, after all, coming from a higher power.

The Epoch Times is unreservedly pro–Donald Trump, and coverage of the newspaper tends to portray it as either a recent entrant into the Trumpist media stable or a case study of Facebook-enabled misinformation. To an extent, it is both. Following Joe Biden’s election as president, the newspaper reconstituted itself into a vehicle for esoteric voter-fraud allegations. In Georgia, heading into the two January special elections for the U.S. Senate, people affiliated with the newspaper materialized to stick copies under car windshields. Balmakov himself now has his own YouTube channel, Facts Matter, devoted to the notion that the election is not over; in less than two months, the channel has amassed more than 400,000 subscribers.

The newspaper, whose revenues have quadrupled in the Trump years, has used every opportunity to call Biden’s victory into doubt. It has interviewed promoters of election-related falsehoods ad nauseam and eagerly [publicized](#) the January 6 Trump rally that turned into an insurrection at the Capitol. Even after the violence of January 6, *The Epoch Times* has continued to publicize doubts about the outcome of the presidential election. One of its columnists postulated that the riot was a “false flag” operation.

But conventional descriptions of *The Epoch Times* don’t adequately capture the singular mix of straight news, religious belief, conspiracy-peddling, Sinophobia, science denialism, legitimate grievance, and political expediency at the heart of the institution—a mix that, despite the paper’s mysteries, makes it a strangely fitting poster child for this unsettled moment.

The epoch times was founded in 2000 by John Tang, an Atlanta-based follower of the Chinese spiritual movement Falun Gong, whose members you might have seen doing meditative exercises in parks, and whose living messiah is Li Hongzhi, a cherubic-faced man generally shown wearing dark suits. The movement, which claims to have millions of adherents, encourages believers to abandon lust, greed, alcohol, and other worldly “attachments.” Some of the more unusual characteristics of its outlook include a distrust of medical doctors and a belief in malevolent, Earth-roaming aliens who created impious technology (such as video games). In 1999, the Chinese government concluded that Falun Gong was growing too popular. Beijing labeled the movement a cult and suppressed it. But Falun Gong flourished abroad among the Chinese diaspora, and its teachings took on a fervent anti-Communist bent.

The Epoch Times has sought to maintain a certain distance from Falun Gong, and its right-wing politics come across, at first glance, as no more cultish than those of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon’s old *Washington Times*. For a decade and a half, the paper’s affiliation, like its politics, hardly mattered. Even as it established outposts around the world—now in 36 countries—*The Epoch Times* occupied a position of near irrelevance. Its name, absurdly redundant, managed to sound dull and bogus at once. I’ve walked by *Epoch Times* newspaper vending machines on countless occasions, never pausing to grab a copy. Each display was an anti–Pandora’s box, stifling any curiosity to open it.

Recently, though, Balmakov started showing up in everybody’s social-media feeds. The paper had begun supporting Donald Trump, and in 2019 *The Epoch Times* had launched itself into the higher echelons of conservative media: By the end of that year, according to Facebook, the newspaper, together with a network “linked” to the Epoch Media Group (which publishes *The Epoch Times*), had spent some \$11 million in advertising on the platform. Republican A-listers appeared on its YouTube shows, right-wing pundits in its print pages. Its web traffic spiked. *The Epoch Times* can currently claim the most popular Apple newspaper app in the country (*The New York Times* is No. 2).

The newspaper was distinguishable from more inflammatory outlets by its staid prose and original reporting, and by offering features such as recipes (“Meet Your New Favorite Pizza Topping: Salad”) and a Goop-ish lifestyle section. The affiliated television network, New Tang Dynasty (NTD), with 30 million Facebook followers, has the sterile look of a satellite-news channel you might find on TV in a European hotel. Watching, I’d sometimes zone out to a human-interest story about synthetic hamburgers, or to the weather report.

But there was no predicting when the content would get weird. Hyper-suspicious of centralized government, it takes the notion of the “deep state” for granted. It has extensively promoted the false claim that the Obama administration spied on Trump’s 2016 campaign, which segues neatly into its refusal to accept the legitimacy of Biden’s victory. Doppelgänger sites such as Vision Times and America Daily—reportedly launched by or populated with former *Epoch Times* figures—have leavened far-right content with gentler offerings (about, say, classical Chinese paintings). A series on the occult, *Edge of Wonder*, became a firehose of content about QAnon, amplifying its foundational proposition that Washington is run by a pedophile cabal. The show—which was produced by NTD but later claimed to be independent—was recently scrubbed from YouTube. (*The Epoch Times* has denied any involvement with these sites.) Last summer, I became a print subscriber to *The Epoch Times*—for \$16.90 a month, the paper is delivered to my home every Wednesday. I noticed at the back of each issue a deadly new installment in an 18-part series on the far-reaching tentacles of communism. From installment [No. 7](#): “As expounded previously, sexual chaos is an innate feature of communist ideology. Marx is believed to have raped his maid.”

Beginning in 2020, *The Epoch Times* gained new resonance. For years, its anti-communism had seemed oddly beside the point. Then a deadly pandemic emerged in China, where the government muzzled whistleblowers and covered up the virus’s early spread. “They’ve been waiting for so long to find some large-scale evidence of the abject villainy of China,” one former NTD employee told me. “Now COVID comes along and checks off all the boxes.” Suddenly, *The Epoch Times*’ wall-to-wall coverage of the “CCP virus” was being amplified across the American right. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who recently sat for an interview with the paper, pushed the hatched-in-a-lab theory. Trump called the virus “a real bad present” from China.

More broadly, ambitious Republicans like Senators Marco Rubio, Josh Hawley, and Tom Cotton are now among the most prominent China hawks in Washington. And while *The Epoch Times*’ editorial product can be absurd, the paper is not exactly wrong to home in on President Xi Jinping’s incarceration of ethnic minorities or his crackdown on Hong Kong.

While John Tang remains chief executive of *The Epoch Times* and NTD, little else is known about the management of these organizations, and outside journalists are not granted access to the newsroom. (I reached out to numerous *Epoch Times* staff members, none of whom replied; the publisher declined to be interviewed, but the newspaper provided answers to some questions via email.) The syndicated columnist Salena Zito, whose writing appears regularly in *The Epoch Times*, told me she hadn’t known that the paper ran her columns at all. “How do you pronounce that place anyways?” she asked. (Balmakov says “epic” but others say “e-pock.”)

Reporters, poking around, have unearthed intriguing connections: a documentary co-produced with Steve Bannon; a donor who worked at the secretive hedge fund run by the *Breitbart* benefactor Robert Mercer. It’s probably best, though, to understand the publication

through a spiritual lens. Along with Falun Gong's anti-CCP dance troupe Shen Yun, whose gauzy, beguiling subway advertisements have become an inescapable part of urban life, *The Epoch Times* is a key component of a soft-power portfolio, one whose product, if you buy in, promises to save your soul.

Two years ago, Balmakov addressed a crowd of thousands at Capital One Arena, in Washington, D.C. Falun Gong was holding its annual conference, headlined by Li. Balmakov had been invited to the podium for an "experience sharing." Every day, he told the crowd, he woke up at 3:30 a.m. to deliver a 60-pound haul of *The Epoch Times* around Manhattan. One day, he had an out-of-body experience, seeming to float 40 miles above the pavement. "I saw good meet with good," he said, "and evil meet evil. I also saw that our newspaper was a shining golden light."

Li hongzhi was born 68 years ago in Jilin, a province in northeastern China. His early years were undistinguished, if intriguingly varied. He is said to have worked as a grain clerk, a hotel attendant, and a trumpet player for a kind of forestry-police band. (Li's biographical details tend to come from his followers or the Chinese government, so it's hard to know what to believe.) In the 1980s, he became deeply invested in the then-booming Chinese exercise practice known as *qigong*, and he later quit his job at a cereal company to devote himself to it.

In 1992, he founded Falun Gong, a mash-up of *qigong* and his personal philosophy: L. Ron Hubbard by way of Daoism. The movement's motto is "Truthfulness, compassion, forbearance"—innocent enough, although Li's forbearance does not extend to homosexuality, premarital sex, or, as noted, modern medicine. The path to salvation involves Li planting karmic "wheels" into the abdomens of his followers; the extra-devout can accrue powers such as telepathy.

The Chinese government tolerated Falun Gong for a while, even as state media occasionally published critiques of its anti-medicine dogma. In response to official criticism, Li's disciples staged peaceful protests—culminating in a fateful 1999 sit-in in Beijing, attended by 10,000 disciples.

Within months, the party banned Falun Gong outright. It also published anti-Falun Gong comic books, ran bulldozers over the group's instructional videos, and called for the arrest of Li, who was by then living in New York. Reports began to emerge from China about the imprisonment and torture of Falun Gong members, and about the widespread harvesting of their organs for transplantation. In the West, many observers found the persecution baffling, and Falun Gong became a bipartisan cause célèbre. So what if Li Hongzhi believed that David Copperfield could truly levitate? His peaceful followers surely didn't deserve to suffer.

When *The Epoch Times* appeared on the scene, in 2000, the newspaper carried more anti-Communist and organ-harvesting content than your typical right-of-center publication. (Human-rights advocates have found some organ-harvesting claims credible, though it's also true that Li has instructed his followers to emphasize their persecution to elicit sympathy.) But in general, Falun Gong's efforts at broader influence were mostly welcomed. Among other things, the group won acclaim for developing two technologies, Ultrasurf and Freegate, designed to help mainland Chinese bust through the Great Firewall.

Meanwhile, Li sought to make a mark in the realm of high culture, turning his Dragon Springs compound into a dance academy for the children of Falun Gong followers. (An accredited prep school and college came later.) The dancers would go on to perform with Shen Yun, whose

shows offer a pastiche of “traditional” dancing, puritanical tut-tutting, and anti-Communist admonition, along with torture pantomimes—performances strikingly reminiscent of the CCP’s own propaganda ballets. A few years ago, Li advised special attention to the rich in its marketing of Shen Yun. As he told one group, “You put up ads in poor communities, and that’s like throwing money out the window.” When Shen Yun made its Lincoln Center debut, in 2011, the *New York Observer* was there for the boldfaced names: Salman Rushdie, Donna Karan, Ric Ocasek.

In 2016 came a promising new opportunity for Falun Gong, in the form of Donald Trump. For the first time in decades, a major party’s presidential nominee was running an overtly protectionist campaign, with China in his crosshairs. Falun Gong came to see Trump as a kind of killer angel, summoned from heaven to smite the Chinese government. *The Epoch Times* ramped up its spending on Facebook ads and hitched its wagon to the 45th president. In 2018, it hired a Texas-based GOP consultant, Brendan Steinhauser, who helped arrange for appearances at high-profile right-wing conferences and booked otherwise ungettable interviews.

In short order, the newspaper lost the liberal goodwill it had accumulated in the post-crackdown period. But it gained a new cohort of conservative readers with a reflexive suspicion of China. The timing couldn’t have been better.

A significant share of Falun Gong practitioners in the U.S. are Chinese Americans. But the most prominent faces on *Epoch*-affiliated outlets are young or middle-aged white men. I once wrote an article on the Russian-backed media outlet *RT* and found it to be populated with naive reporters who didn’t realize what they’d signed up for, or who couldn’t find jobs elsewhere. Was that the case here?

In early July, I called the main phone number listed on *The Epoch Times*’ website. The newspaper had not responded to emails. I got an automated message saying that, because of an increase in subscriptions, the paper was experiencing unusually high call volume, and nobody was available to answer the phone. I biked to West 28th Street in Manhattan, where *The Epoch Times* and NTD share part of a building. The pandemic-stricken city was ghostly, but I figured workaholic editor types might be coming into the office anyway. *The Epoch Times* often includes pictures of its editor in chief, Jasper Fakkert, and its publisher, Stephen Gregory, so I knew what they looked like. I parked myself across the street and sat on a curb, watching the door.

I didn’t see Fakkert or Gregory, but I did see a steady stream of 20- and 30-somethings coming in and out of the building, as if COVID-19 had never happened. I didn’t know for sure whether they were *Epoch Times* employees, so I climbed the stairs to find the office. I arrived at a foyer to see two women gaping at me. Behind them, through a glass partition, was a humming newsroom, like nothing I’d seen since shutdowns began, several months earlier. The two women told me I wasn’t allowed to be there. I didn’t want to be there myself: Neither woman was wearing a mask. I went back down the stairs.

I managed to get in touch with a lapsed Falun Gong member in her mid-20s who had worked for *The Epoch Times* in pre-Trump days. She requested anonymity because she still has family in Falun Gong. The most important thing to know about the paper, this source told me, was that virtually all of its staffers were Falun Gong adherents. Her mother, who is of Chinese descent, joined Falun Gong more than a decade ago, after seeing Shen Yun, and soon started selling ads for *The Epoch Times*. My source began interning for the paper in high school. A few years later,

she dropped out of an elite liberal-arts college and returned to work there full-time. Commuting from her home in an outer borough, she would arrive at the office around 7:30 a.m. As they would outside the office, staffers were encouraged to close their eyes for 15 minutes every six hours and “send forth righteous thoughts.” *The Epoch Times*’ coverage was ecumenical; my source mostly covered apolitical stories. But ultimately the paper’s mission was to grow. Promoting Falun Gong was central. I was recently forwarded an email sent in 2016 by an editor named Cindy Drukier, urging her colleagues to promote the paper’s exclusive tell-all by a drummer and Falun Gong practitioner named Sterling Campbell, who had played with David Bowie. “This is one of our highest-potential articles ever,” Drukier wrote. (Bowie had recently died.) “Perhaps Bowie’s entire career and superstardom was all for this moment.”

I had read that the paper, in its fledgling days, was staffed by volunteers. My source, who worked unpaid for several years, eventually received a salary of about \$20,000 a year. (*The Epoch Times* says all staff are paid.) To save on rent, some staffers worked other jobs, lived with their parents, or shared cramped apartments. Ben Hurley, an ex-believer and a former *Epoch Times* staffer in Australia, wrote in a Medium post several years ago that he and his colleagues were paid in “virtue,” a “white substance in another dimension that you gain when you do good things.”

For a brief period in 2016, a half-dozen nonpractitioners—a category also referred to as “sentient beings”—were [hired as reporters](#). But for the most part, the newspaper appears to bring in Falun Gong practitioners to do the work. (*The Epoch Times* disputed this, without elaborating.) “A lot of these guys are kind of hippies,” my source said. “They just picked up a pamphlet like anyone else.” Once inside either *The Epoch Times* or NTD, they have tended to shuffle from one to the other and from job to job. Ben Chasteen, a co-host of *Edge of Wonder*, had studied massage therapy at the American Institute of Alternative Medicine. Before hosting his own show, he was a staff photographer. Jan Jekielek hosts the marquee interview program *American Thought Leaders*, but I have also seen him identified as the newspaper’s PR contact.

Because Falun Gong adherents spend countless hours of personal time delivering newspapers or handing out flyers for Shen Yun, working for *The Epoch Times* or NTD is as much spiritual practice as it is a career choice. I spoke with another lapsed Falun Gong member, in her 20s, whose immigrant East Asian parents joined when she was a toddler (and remain practitioners). This second source, who also requested anonymity because of her family, told me that she spent virtually every weekend of her childhood demonstrating against the CCP or handing out Falun Gong literature. One winter, she was stationed outside a “Bodies” museum exhibit in Philadelphia, which believers suspected was filled with Falun Gong remains. Another time, she helped stage torture scenes in Manhattan’s Columbus Circle, using cages and fake blood.

In her late teens, she went to work for NTD. She told me she had been taught that nonbelievers’ souls were shrouded by an evil aura, which could be lifted when a practitioner “clarified the truth” about the righteousness of Falun Gong or the sins of the Communist Party. (Communists go to hell.) “It’s explained like an actual battle,” she told me. “Arrows are coming out of your mouth,” shooting at the evil inside nonbelievers. The best way to do this, she went on, is at scale—by producing a YouTube segment or bringing friends to see Shen Yun.

The paper’s roster of op-ed writers appears to be made up of non-Falun Gong and features prominent conservatives, such as the *New Criterion* editor Roger Kimball. One opinion writer, Mark Hendrickson, a retired economics professor at Grove City College, in Pennsylvania, told

me he was under no illusions about the paper's objectives. "They've probably done some research into, well, what do Americans want to read?" he said. "Instead of just being anti-Communist, they're a paper that tries to be well rounded." It seems noteworthy that few of its Asian journalists are given a prominent showcase. For years, the publisher, Stephen Gregory, [has insisted that](#) *The Epoch Times* "doesn't speak for" or "represent" Falun Gong, but merely covers Falun Gong persecution. That seems hard to believe. This summer, I came across a trove of Li's speeches, translated and transcribed on one of Falun Gong's English-language websites. Li speaks at length about the newspaper's role in exposing the "wicked CCP," then fields questions about various Falun Gong—or "Falun Dafa"—activities, including the management of "our media."

Which project would be best suited for saving the sentient beings of Africa? Shen Yun? New Tang Dynasty TV? Or Epoch Times?

Master: (Laughing) Use whichever one has matured.

In some areas, the person in charge of the Dafa Association is in charge of many things at the same time, such as The Epoch Times, NTDTV, the Dafa Association, and truth-clarification project groups.

Master: Indeed, that's the way some areas are. If it really is due to lack of manpower, then there is nothing to criticize. With some areas, it is really problematic, though. Even I'm thinking: if someone could take my place, I wouldn't work on Shen Yun.

I found another kind of testimonial on Falun Gong websites, too: cathartic accounts in which adherents testified to the brutally long hours they put in at *The Epoch Times*. Presented in the third person, they convey the Job-like doubt and sacrifice of their subjects. One of these accounts reported on the experience of a believer named Ivan Pentchoukov, whose byline I recognized from the print edition of *The Epoch Times*. Pentchoukov had been working off and on at the paper for eight years, but frequently grew discouraged. "One time he successfully sold many Shen Yun tickets," the article said, which motivated him to return to *The Epoch Times*. "He decided to give up working on his PhD degree, and, despite his parents' strong opposition, went back to work for" the paper. Later, needing money, he found work as a taxi driver. "Again he realized he couldn't save people effectively that way. 'Many times I couldn't lift my hand and give the passenger a flier.'" He returned to the paper. After that, "miraculously, all his troubles were resolved."

On January 25, 2020, seven months before his indictment for defrauding investors in a private border-wall scheme—to which he has pleaded not guilty—the former Trump adviser Steve Bannon started broadcasting a podcast from his rowhouse on Capitol Hill. Bannon called it *War Room: Pandemic*. The U.S. had only a couple recorded cases of COVID-19 at that moment, and Europe had hardly any. Nobody in authority was paying much attention, and Bannon recognized that this was a mistake. "You may not have an interest in the pandemic," he warned, "but the pandemic has an interest in you."

The first outside reporter Bannon summoned for the podcast was Simone Gao, a writer for *The Epoch Times* and the host of *Zooming In*, an NTD show. Gao said she had been watching clip after clip on Chinese social media of doctors and ordinary citizens testifying to the gravity of the situation. Meanwhile, Gao said, state media were running saccharine coverage of Chinese New Year festivities. Two weeks later, Li Wenliang, the Wuhan doctor who issued some of the

world's earliest warnings about the pandemic—and whom Chinese authorities forced to confess to “making false comments”—died of the coronavirus.

Bannon had an existing relationship with *The Epoch Times*. In 2019, NTD co-produced and aired his docudrama, *Claws of the Red Dragon*, loosely based on the Chinese telecom company Huawei, which has been accused of stealing intellectual property (charges that it has denied). While Trump himself, amid trade negotiations, was still praising Xi's COVID-19 response and minimizing the virus, Bannon saw the pandemic through the lens of the Trumpian nationalism he had helped to mold. From his perspective, the same country that was siphoning U.S. jobs and threatening U.S. economic dominance had produced a deadly virus that globalization was inevitably bringing to American shores. *The Epoch Times*, for reasons of its own, shared Bannon's alarm.

Joshua Philipp, a melancholic 30-something with a thatch of thick black hair, is an *Epoch Times* star. The range of the stodgy print newspaper can be limited; YouTube is another story. Philipp hosts a YouTube show mostly about China called *Crossroads*. In early April, Philipp hosted a 54-minute documentary, *Tracking Down the Origin of the Wuhan Coronavirus*, that cast doubt on the narrative that COVID-19 first jumped from animals to humans in a Wuhan wet market. Well-produced, the documentary features moody B-roll video of Philipp researching late into the night and riding the subway around Manhattan.

The film is typical of *The Epoch Times*, which sometimes asks valid questions—are we 100 percent sure about the provenance of the virus?—before derailing. Most of the film's commentators are China hawks, not medical experts. The first half of the documentary explores whether the virus's genome sequence suggests that it leaked out of a lab. By minute 40, it's running footage of gas masks on assembly lines and citing a 2015 study about Beijing's bio-weapons capability. By minute 50, one of its talking heads says, “The real disease here is communism.” At the end of the film, Philipp is at the Lincoln Memorial, channeling Falun Gong sentiments: “I believe that viruses can't survive where hearts have compassion.” The movie, which has racked up some 9 million views, was the first major entrant in the coronavirus-truther genre that took off last spring.

China coverage has been *The Epoch Times*' most prominent calling card, but under-the-radar measures may have spurred the paper's growth. A few months ago, one of the lapsed Falun Gong women I spoke with sent me a link to a YouTube skin-care channel with more than 2 million subscribers—Beauty Within, hosted by a pair of influencers named Rowena Tsai and Felicia Lee.

The channel had nothing to do with politics or China, and bore no outward connection to *The Epoch Times*. Eventually, though, I discovered an NTD page promoting it, and after wading through a lot of beauty tips, found my way to an episode in which Tsai detailed her commitment to Falun Gong. (Lee, Tsai, and NTD did not respond to requests for comment.)

Diversification has become a hallmark of *The Epoch Times*' promotional strategy. In 2019, after its heavy Facebook spending was revealed, *The Epoch Times* shifted tactics, spending roughly half a million dollars in a single month on ads from “sock puppet” pages like “Honest Paper” and “Patriots of America.” By the end of the summer, numerous accounts associated with the paper had been banned from advertising on Facebook. Meanwhile, the website Snopes had started reporting on an outlet called TheBL.com (*BL* stands for “Beauty of Life”), which had created hundreds of accounts, groups, and pages to promote pro-Trump, anti-CCP content.

TheBL.com was created in 2016 by Trung Vu, then the CEO of the Vietnamese edition of *The Epoch Times*; its editor is the former editor of the English-language edition of *The Epoch Times*. In late 2019, Facebook banned the BL for using fake accounts. By then, Facebook said, the group had spent close to \$9.5 million promoting itself, accruing 55 million followers worldwide. (*The Epoch Times* maintains that it only began advertising under different pages after Facebook, without explanation, prevented it from advertising under its own name. It denies any affiliation with the BL.)

Although his firm was hired to build the brand and boost print subscriptions, the consultant Brendan Steinhauser says he was not involved in the social-media carpet-bombing that has come to define *The Epoch Times*, and never got a solid picture of the paper's finances. In 2019, the Epoch Times Association, the nonprofit under which the newspaper is lodged, brought in more than \$15 million in revenue (compared with about \$4 million in 2016), about half of which came from subscriptions. Whatever *The Epoch Times*' financial situation, the publication's bottom line pales in comparison to that of the more glamorous Shen Yun. In 2018, the most recent year for which tax forms are available, Shen Yun reported a profit of \$26 million and net assets of \$122 million.

In May 2020, the *Daily Beast* discovered a benefactor named Huayi Zhang on the IRS form of Universal Communications Network, the nonprofit that operates NTD. Zhang, who for several years in the 2000s served as chair of the network's board, was a principal at Renaissance Technologies, the hedge fund run by Robert Mercer. The link was suggestive, given that Bannon, a onetime Mercer ally, has a connection to NTD. ("I'd give them a number," Bannon told *The New York Times* in late 2020, about his film budget. "And they'd come back and say, 'We're good for that number.'") But the existence of a secret pot of Mercer money seems unlikely. According to the IRS document, Zhang and his wife donated \$909,500 from 2012 to 2016—almost all of it in the years before Trump ran for president. Zhang also served on the board of another Falun Gong-linked organization, which perhaps points to a spiritual, rather than political, interest.

The zealotry of the labor force is also a key component of the business model. Falun Gong followers often donate not only their time but their cash; unsold Shen Yun tickets are bought by followers, who see the performances over and over. Ming Xia, a political scientist at CUNY Graduate Center and the College of Staten Island who studies Falun Gong, compares the group to a multilevel-marketing scheme, in which members recruit other members ad infinitum.

Eager for more insight, I tried again to infiltrate *The Epoch Times*. Falun Gong exercise sessions take place every day all over New York City. Most are outside, so the coronavirus was no real impediment. One day I checked out the 7 p.m. session closest to the newspaper's offices, in Madison Square Park, figuring I might run into some familiar faces. No dice: There were three men and one woman, none of whom I recognized. I sat on a bench and watched the four of them for a while as they stood in place and moved their limbs around slowly. Tranquil music played from a speaker on the ground. Eventually I got up and walked over to grab a pamphlet. The woman, Asian, wearing ripped black jeans and gladiator sandals, was evidently the recruiter of the bunch. She broke off to intercept me. She told me her name and made it her mission to get me to join her. I demurred, asking if I could just watch from the bench. She responded that that would be very boring. I gave in.

The woman had me stand opposite her and mirror her motions. At first it was hard to concentrate, because a Black Lives Matter demonstration started marching through the park as soon as we began. I was being told to make a little bubble with my hands as protesters chanted “No justice, no peace, fuck these racist-ass police” behind us. Eventually the protesters passed through, and I spent 10 minutes learning *qigong*. “Dive into the water,” my instructor told me. “Your body should be like a mountain.” Placebo effect or real, I don’t know, but I did feel some tension lifting. My instructor told me I’d feel even more relaxed if I stopped chewing gum.

I was wearing a face mask. Nobody else was. I asked why. “We understand the virus very well,” my instructor explained. I wouldn’t quite comprehend this, she said, but she was protected by an energy field that activated once she began practicing.

I asked if the protective energy field extended to other people, such as me standing nearby. I didn’t get an answer. Instead my instructor asked, “Did you know the virus started in China?” I thanked her and returned to my bench.

According to Li’s central text, *Zhuan Falun*, ill health is a sign of insufficient “cultivation.” For a period of weeks this summer, I had seen news splashed across Falun Gong media about a jeweler in the Hamptons who developed COVID-19 symptoms in March and became very ill. A friend of the jeweler’s in Falun Gong urged her to repeat the phrase *truthfulness, compassion, forbearance* over and over. Miraculously, all her troubles were resolved. This case aside, the internet is full of alarming accounts of Falun Gong refusing medical care and succumbing to illness, and even dying. The ex-NTD source I spoke with told me that she decided to leave Falun Gong two years ago when, after she shunned medical attention, a ruptured ovarian cyst led to internal bleeding.

In late July, at the Trump International Hotel, in Washington, D.C., a rare COVID-19-era indoor political conference took place. It was called the Freedom Summit, and it featured a number of prominent Republicans, including Senators Ted Cruz and Tom Cotton. Steve Bannon broadcast *War Room: Pandemic* live from the event.

One of the few journalists there was *The Epoch Times*’ Jan Jekielek, wearing a navy suit and an orange polka-dotted pocket square. He must have been delighted by what he heard. Despite the bland name, it was really a forum for the China hawkery that has emerged as a staple of the Trump years. For *American Thought Leaders*, Jekielek sat down with former Representative Dave Brat, now the dean of the business school at Liberty University. Rather than merely repeating “Wuhan virus” talking points, Brat spoke at length about a litany of Chinese transgressions, including the militarization of the South China Sea, TikTok’s surveillance capabilities, and, yes, organ harvesting. Brat said that his outrage at China had compelled him to rethink his commitment to free trade.

Maybe belonging to one faith-based community makes you predisposed to the magical thinking of another. Listening to the interview, it struck me that while Trump has been of use to *The Epoch Times* in recent years, it may not need him going forward. The Republican Party has in many ways moved in *The Epoch Times*’ direction. To the fixation on China, add the distrust of medical expertise, the belligerent nationalism, the taste for conspiracy theories, and the hysterical outcry at the specter of socialism. The difference is that the same issues that many in the GOP exploit opportunistically, *The Epoch Times* embraces earnestly. The newspaper tends to regard its penalization by tech platforms, or critiques of its journalism, as predictable extensions of the actual censorship it faces in China. (“You seem to have decided to assist the CCP,” a

representative from the paper emailed me.) Flirtations with QAnon by pro-Falun Gong media make a kind of sense, too: The group is already receptive to the idea that powerful people in government might target the innocent in order to make use of their bodies.

Not long ago, I remembered that I was still paying for *The Epoch Times*. When I tried to cancel my subscription, the website put me through a gauntlet, before presenting me with a last hurdle, like a final boss in a video game, in the person of Roman Balmakov himself. Before I could bail on the paper, there he was, wearing a brown vest and a red tie, in a short video I was urged to watch.

“Hey, you’re here to cancel, and that’s A-okay,” Balmakov announced. But he had a message for me first. “You’ve probably looked at the state of our nation, and you might not be feeling that optimistic,” he said. “I know the feeling as well.” Footage of what looked to be an antifa demonstration flashed on the screen. Balmakov ticked off a lengthening roster of ills—“worst of all, possibly the culprit behind everything else, the increasing dominance of socialist and communist factors within our society. We are a nation that is quickly becoming free in name only ... That’s what pushes me to work harder, every single day.”

The day after Biden’s victory over Trump was announced, a Falun Gong website posted a brief poem by Li Hongzhi, titled “On the General Election.” His first public statement in months, it was reprinted on the front page of the next edition of *The Epoch Times*. “In this majestic universe, the communist devil is making trouble,” the poem began. “Fraud and corruption are harming a great nation.” Via email, practitioners were urged to help sway the results of the election by sending forth an extra 30 minutes’ worth of righteous thoughts a day.

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