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CHINA'S FALON GONG The World is Watching...and Joining

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It's a tightrope the Chinese government would rather not walk, with the sensitive 10th anniversary of Tiananmen Square just gone by. Falun Gong, however, is pressing its own issues with communist leaders. The sect, a popular quasi-religious movement gaining followers worldwide, desires official recognition and respect. This has precipitated a power struggle that has tensions rising.

After being caught off guard by the emerging movement's 25 April 1999 ten-thousand-plus-member sit-in — a silent but illegal and audacious protest at the government compound in Beijing — the Chinese Communist Party leaders took immediate measures to monitor the sect more closely and to keep its activities under control. On July 22 the government announced a ban on the practice of Falun Gong, asserting that it is a threat to political order. The Chinese media broadcast the official report to the public, charging Falun Gong with promoting "superstitious, evil thinking."¹ The *People's Daily* in China declared, "We should be highly vigilant against superstition for it may confuse our thinking, undermine our fighting will, shake our beliefs and destroy our cohesiveness."²

The movement's response? Widespread silent sit-in protests by the Falun Gong faithful in several major cities in China. The government's retaliation? Arrests and indictments of leaders, detainment of protesters, and, after a fresh wave of protests broke out in October, the official labeling of Falun Gong as an illegal cult.

Followers of Falun Gong include not only the poor, who believe communism has left them with no hope in Chinese society, but also the educated and even members of the Communist Party. Followers are frustrated and feel misunderstood, claiming that they are not interested in political power, just in being recognized as a legitimate religious entity permitted to practice their beliefs. These beliefs, they say, include morality, marital fidelity, and physical exercise, as well as the overriding principles of truth,

compassion, and forbearance. Such things can only be good for a society, contend Falun Gong adherents.

FALUN GONG: FITNESS CRAZE OR NEW FAITH?

Even before stepping into China's political limelight, Falun Gong (or Falun Dafa) attracted a good deal of public attention, since its inception in 1992. Its popularity has steadily grown at a grassroots level, not only in China, but also in countries such as Australia, Canada, Switzerland, and the United States. With the movement surrounded by so much political controversy in China and so much popular interest worldwide, onlookers wonder what Falun Gong is about. It is a simple query that defies a simple answer.

For many who adhere to its exercise regimen and moral standards, Falun Gong is merely a means of fitness and self-improvement. "We don't worship anyone. We don't have any rituals. Everyone's free to come and go, and we don't have an organization as such," Australian practitioner Caroline Lam told a reporter.³ For Lam and others who meet to go through the set of five prescribed exercises (which include slow, controlled movements as well as breathing techniques), their adherence to Falun Gong is sustained by the stress relief and health benefits they've realized.

The movement's founder said, "We are ordinary members of society....It's only that we get up early to do our exercises. We are a popular mass exercise movement."⁴ Yet it would be a mistake to define Falun Gong as simply a health-and-fitness craze. The philosophy behind the exercises and moral code reveals a deeper significance. Purportedly rooted in Buddhist and Taoist teachings, Falun Gong (*fa* meaning "law" or "principle"; *lun* meaning "wheel"; and *gong* denoting "cultivation energy") has been rendered "Buddhist Law" in English. It is not really Buddhism, however. It is more closely tied to the ancient Chinese practice of *qigong* (pronounced CHEE-goong), which is a form of Taoism combining personal discipline (morality, meditation, and breathing exercises) with attainment of spiritual energy or life force. (*Qi* is generally translated as "life force.")

Serious practitioners of Falun Gong seek to tap into the life force *qi* and thereby move toward enlightenment. They do this by cultivating the *falun* or "law wheel" within them. This "law wheel" is believed to be a minireplica of the universe itself, spinning in sync with the universe and absorbing universal energy while purging the body of its bad elements. Access to the inner *falun* (said to be located in one's lower abdomen, the psychic center of the body) is sought through cultivating one's mind and body. Falun Gong emphasizes cultivation of *XinXing* or "the mind nature," with the goal of bringing it in line with *Zhen-Shan-Ren* (Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance), believed to be "the supreme nature of the universe."⁵ ("Cultivation" is a frequently used term for the practice of Falun Gong.)

According to the movement's founder and revered leader, Li Hongzhi, benefits of Falun Gong range from reversing the aging process and being healed of chronic illness to supernatural abilities such as seeing through matter with a "third eye."⁶ It's an appealing list of perks and powers, obtainable by simple means, and available to anyone — for free, if one wishes to download the Falun Gong texts from the Internet or attend one of its public seminars.

While it is clear that Falun Gong is more than an exercise regimen, there is disagreement as to whether it can truly be classified as a religious movement. A closer look at Li Hongzhi, his teachings, and the practices of Falun Gong may help clarify the issue.

QIGONG MASTER LI HONGZHI: THE MAN BEHIND THE MOVEMENT

Li Hongzhi, who claims to have been sent to earth by a supreme being,⁷ did not want to discuss the issue with Time magazine in a recent interview, saying, "I don't wish to talk about myself at a higher level. People wouldn't understand it."⁸ Yet to understand the nature of Falun Gong, one must start with its leader.

He was born in 1951 in Changchun, Jilin, a northeastern Chinese province. "As a teenager during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76)," one writer points out, "Li would have had little or no formal education as schools and universities were closed down and the youths sent to the countryside to experience peasant life."⁹ Li said his first job was that of a musician, playing trumpet for a traveling group of performers, after which he worked in a state-run grain bureau. His résumé also includes ex-soldier, accomplished sword fighter, and martial arts master, the latter two of which he learned in the most influential arena of his life, qigong.

Li claims to have begun study of qigong at age four in China's mountains, sitting under masters of the ancient Chinese tradition and absorbing their teachings. He continued his education with the masters until he developed his own brand of qigong. "Li said he was chosen by his mentors to receive the principles of what has since become the Falun Dafa ideology. Why him? 'Maybe the masters thought I was good enough,' [Li said]."¹⁰ Apparently, his teachings and ways carry unparalleled significance, as he claims to have a spiritual authority superior to that of Muhammad, Buddha, and Jesus (who Li says was also a Buddha). Li says a "supreme being" commissioned him to come to earth and save humanity from its corrupted morals and from the technological evils of science.¹¹

Li founded his sect and began teaching its principles in 1992. Capitalizing on a renewed interest in Qigong during the past quarter century, especially among university students and the unemployed, Li launched Falun Gong, which quickly grew into a

major movement. The Chinese government soon pressured the popular Li to curb his activities. Li decided then — sometime between 1994 and 1996 (reports vary) — to move to the United States, where American devotees warmly received him. Li conducted his first Falun Gong seminar in Houston on 12 October 1996. He resides in Manhattan and lives on the royalties from his books.¹²

Followers consider his writings sacred, particularly his main text, *Zhuan Falun* (Spinning the Wheel of Law), which was published in 1994. It is a compilation of Li's teachings for guiding the cultivation of individuals in "truth of the cosmos."¹³ An advertisement for the practice of Falun Dafa claims, "A genuine practitioner will have natural gain without craving for it. All of the cultivation energy and all Law are in the Book, and one will naturally obtain them by reading the Great Law through....No matter how many books of scriptures are published, all are materials of assistance to *Zhuan Falun*. It is only *Zhuan Falun* that is genuinely guiding cultivation."¹⁴

This authoritative and exclusive tone permeates Li's teaching. "In regards to your cultivation, you need a master who protects you and cares about you," he says of himself.¹⁵ He warns about other spiritual leaders, asserting that many humans are merely demons reincarnated, even masquerading as monks. "Especially in Taiwan many famous monks or lay Buddhists are actually demons," Li writes.¹⁶ He accuses other qigong masters of being "possessed with foxes or yellow weasels, and some with snakes."¹⁷ Elsewhere he says, "Sham qigong and fake qigong masters and those possessed by spirits...outnumber the genuine so many times it is hard to tell the genuine from the fake."¹⁸

Since Li's teachings supposedly lead to better health and rejuvenation, as well as supernormal powers, medicine is only for those who do not properly believe. He forbids followers to seek medical attention, claiming that they can be restored to health by reading his books. Practicing Falun Gong allegedly has the power to smooth away wrinkles, return gray hair to its original color, restore menstrual cycles to postmenopausal women, and cure tuberculosis. "Your diseases will be eliminated directly by me," Li writes.¹⁹ Followers may even gain the ability to levitate and see into the future: "There is a mirror in the position of one's forehead....When one is about to develop the power of remote sight, the mirror will keep turning over."²⁰

Li claims that he has the power to implant in his followers the *falun* or law wheel. As they follow his exercises, immerse themselves in his teachings, and meditate, they are able to tap into the power of the life force, purging their spirits of the evil karma so prevalent in the world and unleashing their potential for a new kind of energy.

This world, according to Li, is a dumping site for the garbage of the cosmos. "Anything that is bad falls down here," he told followers at a gathering in Australia.²¹ Li talks about the "tremendous decline of the human morality....Take a specific instance, to

become a musician or a singer in the past, one had to go through training to acquire singing techniques in addition to understanding music theories. But now a person with a bad-looking appearance and messy long hair will stand on the stage, screaming with much effort...[T]he loud noises have entered the hall of great elegance. The blind or the lame as well as people of ugly appearance have all become singing stars with hoarse voices with the help of the radio and TV promotions.”²² Given this statement, it should come as no surprise that modern art and rock and roll are pet peeves on Li’s list of societal evils. Other corruptions he identifies are more traditional moral issues such as drug abuse, homosexuality, and marital infidelity.

Mixed in with this naming of evils in the earthly realm is Li’s identification of threats from worlds beyond. In his interview with *Time*, he talked about the effect of extraterrestrials on society: “One type of alien looks like a human but has a nose made of bone,” he said, while noting that others are ghostlike in appearance. Li disclosed that they showed up on earth sometime around 1900. “Everyone thinks that scientists invent on their own,” he continued, “when in fact their inspiration is manipulated by the aliens....In terms of culture and spirit, they already control men.” The intent of these aliens, according to Li, is to displace humanity with clones.²³

This view explains in part why Li is critical of science and technology. He decries television and other modern technological developments, and yet, ironically, it is through the Internet that his books and seminars have been widely publicized. Moreover, it has been via the Internet and cellular phones that his followers in China have been surprisingly adept at organizing and staging protests.

Li sees the modern world with its moral decay — along with the evils of science — as headed for disaster, except for those who look to Falun Gong for salvation. Hinting at the coming destruction, he writes, “The universe in which we now live is a reconstructed entity after nine catastrophic explosions. The planet we inhabit has already experienced destruction many times.”²⁴ Li claims to have been sent to save humanity from its plight. He alone knows the “truth of the cosmos” and what lies ahead. Only by the enlightenment he has received can one escape disaster. “The future looks bleak except for those who purify themselves with Falun Gong and who work to achieve a higher plane.”²⁵

In Li’s view, the races are not to be intermingled. Mixed-race children, he notes, are a symptom of societal decline. A race has its own particular “biosphere,” and whenever children are born of a mixed-race relationship, they are “defective persons.” Li contends that heaven itself is segregated. “Anybody who does not belong to his race will not be cared for. I do not just say that. It is really true. I am revealing the secret of heaven to you.”²⁶

SPECTRUM OF PRACTICE

From those who practice the exercises of Falun Gong merely for stress relief and fitness to those who pore over Li's *Zhuan Falun* looking for spiritual guidance and enlightenment, there is a common thread: a desire for self-improvement. One practitioner in New Jersey summed up her attraction to the movement: "It's a way of upgrading one's physical condition and moral character. Basically, I would say, it's a way of life."²⁷

In China years of atheistic communism have left a spiritual vacuum and the desire for a traditional form of spiritual practice. Perhaps these factors will keep Falun Gong more popular there than in Western culture. Nevertheless, its fundamental appeal seems universal. The positive public face of Falun Gong and the promise of self-improvement are huge selling points in North American culture (e.g., the tremendous market for self-improvement books and videos) that attract the casual, surface practitioner. Li's philosophy and teaching, however, are intrinsic to the regimen. The exercise instruction recorded and set to background music contains "repeated references to obscure Buddhist deities and one long segment in which students move an imaginary 'law wheel' around their bodies. The goal...is to get this wheel, with its purported healing powers, to take up residence in the abdomen."²⁸

One Chinese woman echoed the sentiments of many when she said, "I don't know if there's a wheel in the stomach. All I know is that I feel better."²⁹ Many experience such benefits as improved mobility and relief from allergies and chronic headaches.

Once one begins to take in the teachings and ideology of Falun Gong, deeper, more esoteric appeals to self-improvement are introduced. Those who are further along in the program testify that Falun Gong allows a person to

- "Open up all the energy channels in the body."
- "Attain wisdom and enhance one's energy level."
- "Mix and exchange the energy from both the cosmos and human body to rapidly purify the body."
- "Circulate energy smoothly throughout the body."
- "Attain clear and pure mind, to strengthen supernormal powers and to increase energy potency."³⁰

Convinced of the effectiveness of Falun Gong on one level, one goes readily to the next level of searching out the teachings behind the exercises. One must then take what looks like a great leap of faith. Since true devotees are forbidden to seek out medical treatment, even when seriously ill, their only thread of hope for survival is their faith in Li. Unfortunately, for some, that has not been enough. "Followers are prohibited from consulting doctors when sick," reports *Inside China*, quoting a researcher at the Chinese

Academy of Sciences. "As a result, some have died, while others have become insane from practicing qigong."³¹

Most followers dismiss such stories as false or far-fetched. There are tens of millions, in fact, who would agree with one of the movement's leaders when he said, "This is the most real practice I've found. It's what I've been looking for my entire life."³²

One need go no further than the Internet to find not only Li Hongzhi's writings (translated into several languages), but also information about getting his video and audio tapes. Radio stations in North America air the reading of *Zhuan Falun*, and seminar and exercise group announcements are also on the Net. There is no doubt — Falun Gong has arrived.

JUST WHAT THE DOCTOR ORDERED?

Many Westerners have questioned why the Chinese government has been relentlessly hostile toward Li Hongzhi and Falun Gong. On 28 July 1999, Ted Koppel began his telecast of *Nightline* by commenting:

Here's the problem: The Chinese government does not have a very good reputation for openness, nor, to be blunt, do they deserve one. They are secretive — sometimes to the point of paranoia, and they tend to be repressive in the face of even the slightest dissent. So when we in this country hear stories of the Chinese government cracking down on what is consistently being described as a perfectly harmless movement that has its roots in Buddhism, believes in meditation, deep breathing, stylized exercise, we tend to take that at face value; that is, after all, just the sort of reaction we would expect from the Chinese government. Only as Henry Kissinger once famously observed, "Even paranoids have enemies." And this time the Chinese government may, in fact, have something legitimate to be worried about.

In the view of the Chinese government, several factors make Falun Gong a genuine threat: (1) the number of Chinese who practice the teachings of Li Hongzhi is quite possibly greater than that of the total membership of the Chinese Communist Party; (2) some adherents of Falun Gong are card-carrying Communists, even generals within the Chinese military; (3) Falun Gong's enrollment includes thousands of people in the West as well, and Li and his family reside in Manhattan (the Chinese government views such contacts outside of China with utmost suspicion); (4) the spiritual teachings of Li are certainly incompatible with the atheistic doctrine of Chinese communism; (5) the increasingly numerous mass demonstrations staged by Falun Gong leaders have disrupted social order and have forced confrontations with the government; (6) the fact that Falun Gong thrives on the hope for self-improvement and happiness among the growing number of losers in the Chinese communist experiment provides further evidence that this experiment has failed; and (7) the rise of Falun Gong is reminiscent of

seemingly innocuous spiritual movements of the past that quickly grew into powerful political forces that eventually toppled existing dynasties.

People outside China should also be wary of this global movement. Despite the marketing of Falun Gong as a way to good health, moral living, and inner happiness, the central tenets of Li's teachings should alarm most North Americans. Great strides toward racial harmony have occurred in the latter half of the twentieth century. Li's doctrine of racial purity and the segregation of the races (even in heaven) is a backward teaching that should offend all Americans who have worked toward understanding and better relations among the many diverse ethnicities in North America. What about those children who are products of mixed marriages? Either they must be excluded from the physical, social, and spiritual benefits of Falun Gong or Li must severely amend his original teachings. Either way, something is terribly amiss about Li's doctrine on the races.

Countless North Americans have flirted with a wide variety of spiritual disciplines from different religious traditions, predictably tiring of one and then moving on to something new, yet still embracing the belief that all religions basically teach the same truths. For increasing numbers, Falun Gong is the current spiritual fad. Do they realize that Li insists that only faithful obedience to his teachings will bring true enlightenment and salvation to a seeker of ultimate truth? Li emphasizes the distinctiveness of his doctrine when he states, "Falun Dafa is completely different from traditional cultivation [religion] ways in theory, and from internal alchemy theory in various systems and schools."³³ Practitioners of Falun Dafa are required to obey the first rule of Li Hongzhi: "No one is allowed to propagate other religions in the name of practising Falun Dafa."³⁴

For eclectics who indulge in selective elements of various religious traditions, Li's dogmatic teachings must be disconcerting. Nevertheless, the marketing of Falun Gong is really no different from the public banners that are waved in the long parade of religious movements that have appeared in our society in recent years, who promise good health and mental enrichment, but whose promises actually veil their esoteric assertion that they are the only way to ultimate truth. It is most apparent in the teachings of Li Hongzhi. Although adherents of Falun Gong readily tell people that Li's teachings are just what the doctor ordered, in fact, what Li prescribes are bitter pills to swallow for most Americans.

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

The last of the 13 "Basic Requirements and Points of Attention for Practicing Falun Gong" contain some eerie words from Li: "If you are interfered with by some terrifying scenes or feel threatened, just say to yourself: I am protected by my Master. I am not afraid of anything. You may chant the name of Master Li, and continue with your practice."³⁵ Although the statement is intended to reassure Falun Gong practitioners of

Master Li's protection while they practice his prescribed exercises, they reveal two realities about Li and his spiritual disciplines. First, contact with spirit beings (i.e., demons) is a real possibility when one engages in Li's exercises. Second, from the Christian perspective it is clear that Li himself has some connection with the domain of darkness. If North Americans in general should be distressed with Li's teachings, Christians should be even more disturbed with the occult nature of his exercises.

As we've seen, many critics of Falun Gong point to Li's aversion to modern medicine, which they claim has caused the death and insanity of many adherents of Falun Gong. Christians should be concerned not only with this alarming belief but also with Li's teaching on the supernormal power that supposedly dispels all physical disorders. One receives this power when Li opens a practitioner's "Celestial Eye" that is "the main channel...located between the middle of the eyebrows and the pineal body." "We usually see with our physical eyes. It is these very two eyes that serve as a screen and block our passage to other spaces. We can only see what exists in our physical world. Opening the Celestial Eye enables us to see without using the two eyes. After reaching very high level cultivation, one will acquire a True Eye....I will open your Celestial Eyes straight to the plane of the Wisdom Eye Sight." Indeed, "I am here to open the Celestial Eye on a large scale."³⁶ Those familiar with New Age occultism will note the similarity between the "Celestial Eye" and the "Third Eye." Both promise to provide the true believer with esoteric knowledge and occult powers.

"I especially impart the Great Way of Buddha Cultivation," Li says, "which I had got awakened to through innumerable ages in the past."³⁷ If we are to believe Li, then, he is an extraordinary human being — perhaps more divine than human. The apostle Paul would view Li Hongzhi quite differently, affirming only Christ as the One who provides true wisdom and salvation. Paul said of false teachers in his day: "Evil men and imposters will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Tim. 3:13).

While Li Hongzhi disdains our world as the "trash can of the universe" where all corruption is deposited, the compassion of Jesus Christ compelled Him to embrace the suffering of this fallen world and die miserably on a cross in order to reconcile us with our Creator. "For Christ died for sins once for all," exclaimed the apostle Peter, "the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God" (1 Pet. 3:18). Jesus loved and died for the people who dwell in the "trash can of the universe" — even "the blind or the lame as well as people of ugly appearance." It is the kind of love that is incontrovertibly absent in the teachings of Li Hongzhi.

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NOTES

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