

China syndrome: The persecution of Falun Gong

by [Dean Peerman](#) in the [August 10, 2004](#) issue

Walking toward Chicago's Federal Plaza a few months ago, I saw what appeared to be a rather large aggregate of people engaging in aerobic exercises. On closer inspection, however, the group—many of them of Chinese background—proved to be performing the slow-motion rituals of the spiritual movement known as Falun Gong, which claims a worldwide following of around 100 million. A few of the group were approaching passersby and handing out flyers protesting the ongoing crackdown on Falun Gong in China, the country of its origin.

In May an even larger body of Falun Gong practitioners gathered to exercise and meditate on the plaza, this time sharing the space with an exhibition titled "Persecution Meets Principle." Telling the story of the five-years-long suppression of Falun Gong, the display included examples of torture techniques—some with live simulation—used daily by Chinese authorities against the movement's adherents. According to the Falun Dafa Information Center, as of mid-July the number of confirmed deaths among the thousands of practitioners in Chinese custody was 1,006 (all of them named on a Web site), though movement leaders believe the actual number is much higher. Many of the Falun Gong faithful are held in forced-labor camps, often without charge or trial.

Witnesses have confirmed that the Beijing regime removes bodily organs from the corpses of executed prisoners or torture victims—including Falun Gong practitioners—and sells them to third parties. One such witness, expatriate physician Wang Guoqi, said in testimony to a subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives that under orders he had removed body parts from more than 100 prisoners.

One of the detainees is a naturalized U.S. citizen: Charles Lee of Menlo Park, California. Because of his Falun Gong affiliation, he was arrested immediately upon deplaning at the Guangzhou Airport in southern China in January of last year. He had

hoped to broadcast evidence of China's human rights violations by overriding the state-controlled TV signals; instead, he himself became a victim of the persecution. Reportedly he has been beaten, interrogated repeatedly, deprived of sleep, put through a show trial, dragged and kicked to "reeducation classes," and tied to an iron bed with his limbs stretched in an agonizing way. Worst of all, he has been subjected to extremely painful and potentially lethal forced feedings through his nose. Lee, a member of Amnesty International, knew the risks he was taking in venturing to his homeland to defend the lives of others. Whether one views his undertaking as courageous or merely foolhardy, surely his imprisonment is both unjust and unlawful—as is that of his fellow practitioners.

A reading of three books about Falun Gong—Danny Schechter, *Falun Gong's Challenge to China: Spiritual Practice or "Evil Cult"?* (Akashic Books); Ian Adams, Riley Adams and Rocco Galati, *Power of the Wheel: The Falun Gong Revolution* (Stoddart); and Maria Hsia Chang, *Falun Gong: The End of Days* (Yale University Press)—and a perusal of the writings of Li Hongzhi, the founder, has firmly reinforced my opposition to China's mistreatment of the movement and its followers. But my view of Master Li and his teachings has become considerably more equivocal.

Political scientist Chang—whose book is the best and the latest (2004) of the three—notes that though the Falun Gong leadership maintains that the movement is not a religion but merely promotes spiritual and moral "cultivation" (self-transformation), "an examination of its belief system . . . indicates otherwise." In fact, while not an organized religion with professional clergy and houses of worship, it draws heavily on Taoism, Confucianism and especially Buddhism. Falun Gong also utilizes a variant of an age-old folk religion focusing on the practice of *qigong* (breathing routines believed to replenish energy). Denial of the religious identification may have seemed a prudent stance, says Chang, "given China's long history of religious persecution." In this case, however, prudence has been of no avail. (Chang, by the way, concludes with an incisive chapter about the persecution of other faiths in China, including Christianity.)

A minor government functionary when he burst on the scene in 1992, the charismatic Li, relying on both word of mouth and the Internet, quickly amassed an immense following for Falun Gong (Law Wheel Cultivation; also known as Falun Dafa, or Great Law of the Wheel). All of a sudden China's parks were filling up with people doing Master Li's exercises. Prominent in his philosophy were three guiding moral principles: *zhen*, *shan* and *ren* (truth, compassion and forbearance). Who could

quarrel with those? And as an added incentive, there were no membership fees (contrary to a government accusation, Li has not been a greedy guru, though he has profited nicely from his publications). Initially Falun Gong's ranks included many members of the Communist Party, some of them from its upper echelons. For a time a few officials even looked favorably on Falun Gong as helping the government save money; with its emphasis on fitness, the movement served to reduce health-care costs.

For Li, it was a case of being in the right place at the right time. He filled a vacuum, providing a spiritual outlet for millions of disillusioned Chinese. "There was a time," writes Chang, "when the people held the party and its Marxist creed in religious reverence. But they have paid dearly for their devotion. More than that, to many the party has abandoned its convictions: it now worships a new idol, Mammon." ("To get rich is glorious," said China's late leader Deng Xiaoping.) The new panacea, state-managed capitalism, has little appeal among the Chinese masses. Indeed, it is leaving them in the dust—the country's economic ascent notwithstanding—and has resulted in massive unemployment and rampant crime and corruption. The authors of *Power of the Wheel* offer this ominous assessment of Chinese society: "All the traditional cracks and fissures are reappearing, but on a larger scale, and with even more frightening speed."

Despite denying that Falun Gong is a religion, Master Li promises not only good health but salvation. And there he loses me. No doubt his exercise program can be beneficial, and some of his teachings, such as his stress on compassion, tolerance and nonviolence, seem—well, downright Christian. Except that these are described as steps on the way to achieving godhead. Using Li's exercises to gain physical fitness is one thing; buying into his belief system is something else entirely. But for him the two are inseparable. The final goal of cultivation practice, Li says, is to "become God or Buddha."

Getting there requires more than performing exercises, of course; to learn the truth of the universe, one must study Falun Dafa. And here we come upon an arcane worldview that is truly mind-boggling—a worldview that features both space aliens and numerous deities, that affirms not just karma and reincarnation but parallel lives (we all live in "multiple dimensions"), that holds that Earth has had many more civilizations than history records and that humanity has suffered "complete annihilation" 81 times.

Master Li claims to have implanted a “law wheel” (*falun*) into the abdomen of each practitioner. It is not a physical wheel, Li hastens to say; it does not interfere with the stomach’s guts. But it is more than metaphorical. Very sensitive people, he says, can sometimes feel it rotating. (Much that might otherwise seem utterly implausible gets explained as being “in another dimension.”) Furthermore, according to Li, when a practitioner reaches a high level of cultivation his or her third or “celestial” eye, connected to the pineal gland, opens and bestows such powers as “supersonic” vision and clairvoyance. (Chang points out that Li says there are “over 10,000 genuine supernatural capabilities,” yet he forbids his followers to use such powers in public because they might have “serious consequences and dangers.”)

Convinced that as a consequence of moral decay the world is in its last days (hence the subtitle of Chang’s book), Li envisions an apocalypse not unlike the rapture phenomenon of the Left Behind book series. Sanctuary will be available for those who adhere to Falun Dafa, the “right law,” but “evil people” will be destroyed (*xiaohui*) “in a horrific manner.” The good will survive the conflagration and rebuild the world.

And if Master Li’s “good people” can, as he says, become godlike, what does that make him? It is no mere surmise that Li sees himself as not only a holy man but a divine savior. For example, he has said: “If I cannot save you, nobody else can. . . . I am the only one in this entire world who . . . is teaching . . . the Great Law.” He claims that he has “paid back all the sins committed by all sentient beings.” And he actually considers himself superior to both Jesus and the Buddha, because they operated only “within a small arena,” in contrast to his being “not of the universe.”

Do Li’s millions of followers really believe all this stuff? I would like to think that many of them have not delved very deeply into his abstruse, gaseous-cosmic prose. The few I have met seem fairly rational and sensible people. (Some practitioners *have* defected from the ranks after becoming fully cognizant of Li’s pretensions to divinity.)

In any case, bizarre beliefs and megalomania are not crimes—or shouldn’t be. What is happening in China is a calamity of increasingly appalling proportions, a calamity that has received too little attention in the West. As Danny Schechter notes (in *Falun Gong’s Challenge to China*), the initial response from official Washington, the UN and even some human rights organizations was slow and tepid. And because the crackdown came in 1999—at a time when lucrative trade deals were in the works

and China was negotiating to enter the World Trade Organization—Schechter was prompted to comment: “It appears that money, not morality, remains the central concern of governments on both sides of the globe.”

In May 2000 the guiding heads of the European Economic Community elected to remove the issue of human rights in China from the bargaining table. The trade-off: “China agreed to open up the incalculable potential of its financial and telecommunications markets to multinational corporations” (*Power of the Wheel*). Shortly thereafter the U.S. Congress voted to grant China permanent favored-nation status.

The evidence indicates that the decision to eliminate Falun Gong was largely that of one man—then President Jiang Zemin. What sparked the suppression was a remarkable demonstration on April 25, 1999, in which more than 10,000 Falun Gong followers stood quietly in front of the Communist Party compound adjacent to Beijing’s Tiananmen Square—the largest demonstration in the People’s Republic since the pro-democracy movement of ten years before. They were protesting the arrest of a few of their number who six days earlier had gone to a magazine’s editorial office to complain about the publication of an article that had termed Falun Gong a superstitious cult and a health hazard. The regime was unnerved by the sight of thousands, peaceable or not, gathered outside party headquarters—and by the fact that the staging of such a huge event had eluded its security apparatus. In the eyes of the demonstrators, however, they were not engaging in an act of defiance but were simply pleading with the government to accept their spiritual movement.

Why did President Jiang react so savagely, outlawing Falun Gong, labeling it an “evil cult” and initiating the arrests, detentions and tortures that continue to this day? There has been much speculation about his motivation. Some say that he perceived the movement as a genuine threat, despite its commitment to nonviolence. Others say that it was merely a matter of his being jealous of Li Hongzhi’s popularity. Still others say—and I am inclined to agree—that Jiang felt the need for a foil to help him solidify his less-than-assured hold on power, and so he manufactured a crisis. But the regime has been surprised by Falun Gong’s resilience, and by the fact that so many practitioners have refused to recant; in a sense, Beijing has created its own nemesis. Though nonpolitical at the outset, Falun Gong is quite political now. The Chinese government has pronounced it evil, and Li, evidently no longer seeking to negotiate with the government, calls it evil in return.

But he does so from afar. Li left China for the United States three years before the crackdown—for reasons that have never been made fully clear. Some observers have commented that it is unbecoming for Li to be giving pep talks via Internet and other means to his followers in China, virtually urging them on to martyrdom, while he is safely ensconced Stateside. Li might retort that there is no guarantee of his safety in the U.S.; he has received death threats, he says, and for some time he was in hiding. Practitioners have been subjected to intimidation, threats and even physical assaults in several U.S. cities, as well as cities in other countries, by Beijing hirelings. Rarely does Li leave his New York refuge, but he did travel to Chicago the week of the torture exhibition and gave a 45-minute lecture—much of it critical of backsliders—to a large assemblage of followers at the convention center in suburban Rosemont.

Also that week, in a packed courtroom attorney Terri Marsh presented oral arguments in a class-action lawsuit against Jiang Zemin before Chicago's Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals. She maintained that since Jiang's crimes were not official acts of office but individual, according to U.S. case law they do not enjoy immunity in U.S. courts. It remains to be seen whether anything will come of this case—a ruling is expected within the next several months—but similar lawsuits have been brought in other U.S. courts and at least five other countries. Though no longer head of state, Jiang is in charge of the Chinese army and remains a powerful figure (perhaps more powerful, some observers say, than the new president, Hu Jintao).

Rather strong condemnations of the persecution of Falun Gong eventually did start coming from the West. The Chinese government has generally responded by complaining about foreigners interfering with China's internal affairs and impugning its national sovereignty. In the case of the U.S. at least, it adds the charge of hypocrisy. And who can deny that the revelations about the abuses at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison—not to mention the Bush administration's lawyers seeming to condone the use of torture in an August 2002 Justice Department memo—serve to undermine any U.S. moral authority or leverage in addressing persecution in China or anywhere else.