

THE FALUNGONG PHENOMENON

BY HU PING

The Chinese government has been particularly virulent in its suppression of Falungong, a peaceful quasi-religious movement that proliferated rapidly in the 1990s. Hu Ping examines the popular appeal of Falungong, and the reasons why the Chinese government has chosen to treat it as a threat.¹

1) The significance and the origins of Falungong

The Falungong phenomenon has undeniably been one of China's most important developments in the transition to the new century. Falungong currently represents a serious challenge to the Chinese Communist government - even though Falungong did not set out with any such intention. Some people have gone so far as to declare that Falungong will be the Chinese government's Waterloo, or if not, its Moscow.

Jiang Zemin once said, "I don't believe Falungong cannot be controlled." It appears that before Jiang ordered the suppression of the Falungong in 1999, more clear-sighted people around him had advised against it. There was a tacit acknowledgement that mowing the grass would not destroy the roots, and many officials were content to turn a blind eye to activities that didn't take place right under their noses. But some Falungong practitioners insisted on continuing their public activities, spurring the authorities to take action. Jiang Zemin himself may have sensed that he had blundered into a trap, and that having climbed onto the tiger's back he would find it difficult to dismount. Many people who had initially disregarded Falungong were amazed at how events transpired. Regardless of the value judgment applied to Falungong, I believe it is important for us to gain a full understanding of the group, not only from the political angle, and perhaps not even primarily from the political angle.

Why was Falungong able to grow so rapidly?

In the few years following 1989, Falungong grew from nothing into a massive movement involving tens of millions of people. We should look for the explanation in Chinese society after 1989.

In post-1989 China, the Communist Party found itself ideologically bankrupt. Others have pointed out that Communist ideology is itself a kind of religion, which originally served to suppress other ideologies and religions while at the same time serving as a substitute for other forms of religion. For that reason it is not surprising that when Communism became morally bankrupt, other forms of religion sprang up to fill the vacuum. The 1989 democracy movement had lifted high the flag of rationalism, and its failure was the failure of rationalism. For that reason it was followed by a wave of irrationalism, and the sudden invasion of all manner of strange events and miraculous beings.

The atheistic authorities instinctively detested these supernatural elements, but in the years of chaos immediately following Tiananmen it is possible that at some level they were willing to tolerate religion as a relatively harmless outlet for popular frustrations: "If the people believe in gods or demons or *qigong* or mysterious powers, it's still better than if they believe in the democracy movement." Added to this were the increasingly superannuated proletarian revolutionaries, who like many an elderly monarch in his twilight years became enraptured with mysticism, and admitted various practitioners of special powers into their halls, bestowing official recognition and even a certain amount of publicity through official channels. In this social environment it is by no means surprising that Falungong was able to develop so rapidly.

Falungong incorporates elements of both *qigong* and religion. It incorporates more health-related elements than traditional religion, and more religious and moral elements than typical *qigong* schools. Many people in China had developed a subconscious yearning for religion, and Falungong presented them with an opportunity to enter this door through the pretext of physical healing. Available information suggests that many followers were introduced to Falungong as a result of their desire to improve their health, and once they had learned more about Falungong, they became immersed in its moral teachings; on learning more about the moral teachings, they were introduced to its mystical and religious roots, which excited or awakened their latent religious yearnings; and thus they converted from mere exercise to devout faith.

Falungong has been able to develop so rapidly because it satisfies so many human needs. One of the most important of these is the need for interaction and belonging. During the

Mao Zedong era, traditional social and popular groupings were destroyed, and people were forced into official groupings in which individuals were treated as undifferentiated elements; subsequent reforms disbanded these groups and dispersed the people like sand. Since the authorities prohibited free association, people who were not members of formal authorized groups were easily pulled into less organized group activities. Falungong provided regular collective activities, as well as a belief system. One follower describes Falungong as providing structure to daily life, as well as an opportunity to make friends and develop conduits for mutual assistance, spiritual support and encouragement. Falungong provided a sense of meaning and belonging to people who felt frustrated, lost, lonely and impotent in a society roiling with change, suffused with materialism and devoid of morality. Whether or not this follower accurately describes Falungong, it is fair to say that religious activity in general gains much of its following from precisely these qualities.

The political nature of Falungong

Strictly speaking, Falungong is not political, and up to now has not involved itself in politics.

Falungong deals only with purifying the individual through exercise, and does not touch on social or national concerns. It has not suggested or even intimated a model for social change. Many religions or quasi-religious organizations to some extent pursue social reform, and for that reason may become part of a political movement, but there is no such tendency evident in Falungong.

If the content of a philosophy or a doctrine is relatively amorphous, a researcher may feel obliged to draw conclusions over the nature of the philosophy from the kind of person it attracts. From what we have been able to observe up to now, a significant portion of Falungong practitioners is made up of relatively unassertive middle-aged or elderly people, and a large proportion are women. The peaceful nature of Falungong's petitioning activities is attributable, I think, not to strict law enforcement, but to the humble honesty of its members. It is hard to imagine such people instigating a Taiping Rebellion.

In October 1999, Liu Ji (former head of the Chinese Institute of Social Sciences, and said to be at one time part of Jiang Zemin's brain trust) mentioned Falungong in the context of democratic elections during an interview with Taiwan's *China Times*. Liu Ji observed, "China has a big population with a relatively low educational standard, so any cultish belief can easily take off, and Li Hongzhi's Falungong is a typical example." Liu Ji refrained from adding one more comment that has circulated among some friends: "If China wants to implement democratic elections, won't that result in someone like Li Hongzhi being elected? We oppose the Communist Party, but we don't want a Khomeini, either."

Although Li Hongzhi has attracted a huge number of followers, that doesn't mean he could win an election. Years ago boxing champion Mohammed Ali expressed an interest in running for President of the United States, but in the end he didn't, presumably because he realized his chances of winning were slim. The reason is simple: the public can worship a

person, even consider him a superman or a saint, but only within a certain arena. Anyone who comes into contact with followers of Falungong will realize that apart from discussions touching directly on their teachings, nothing in their speech or actions sets them apart from other people. Some religions, such as Islam, make a point of involvement in politics and become political powers, and that is how a Khomeini arises. Given that Falungong is not political in nature, we can rest assured that in a modern democracy with freedom of religion and division of church and state, Falungong will not become a political power.

The suggestion that Falungong is political in nature is just another example of the Chinese Communist Party's habit of making everything political. In the past the authorities banned wearing high heel shoes and lipstick and singing Teresa Teng songs on the grounds that they were "bourgeois politics." Now none of these things is banned, and it's clear that none of them was ever political.

Does the persistent petitioning of Falungong members against the government's suppression constitute political participation? No, it does not. Everything Falungong members have been doing is aimed at resisting the intrusion of politics onto Falungong turf. It is only by the CCP's perverse logic that you can be accused of opposing the Party merely by denying the accusation that you oppose it.

Not only has Falungong not involved itself in politics, it has not even involved itself in broader human rights campaigns. After Falungong became the victim of official persecution, a number of human rights groups published statements in its defense, but Falungong has not reciprocated with statements on behalf of human rights and democracy activists. Of course I hope that more Falungong practitioners will extend their concern for protecting Falungong to a desire to protect human rights generally (and I believe more and more practitioners will do so), but up to the present, Falungong as a group has not participated in human rights movements.

The organization of Falungong

Early on, in the course of a confidential discussion, Jiang Zemin is reported to have compared the danger of Falungong with Poland's Solidarity movement. This remark makes it clear that the CCP objects to Falungong not as a "heretical cult," but as an organizational force that could rival the Party itself. This raises the question of whether Falungong is actually organized. Available information suggests that it is not.

If Falungong is organized, then where is its constitution? Where is its membership list? What procedures have to be carried out to become a member? What are the rights and duties of members? What does the organization require of its members? What is the organizational structure? How are leaders chosen, and how are their responsibilities divided? The authorities have arrested many Falungong practitioners since the suppression began in 1999, and certainly by this point at least one of them would have been persuaded to "come clean" with information on how Falungong is organized so the authorities could infiltrate it. Since this has not happened, it is safe to conclude that it simply isn't necessary.

According to *A Critical Biography of Li Hongzhi* (Li Hongzhi Ping Zhuan), at the outset Falungong intended to register with the Civil Affairs Bureau as a "civil society group," but according to official requirements the group would have had to produce a constitution, a membership list, sources of funding and so on, and lacking those items it was never able to register. Right up until the end of 1998, in a letter to Beijing followers, Li Hongzhi emphasized once again, "It would be best if we could register as an independent organization, so we could unify under that registration instead of each branch having to register individually. If we can't register, we'll just have to continue as before, with each group carrying out its own instruction and exercise without organizing, and maintaining its own special qualities and purity." Under these conditions, Falungong has remained an unorganized and unregulated group.

zational effort must be involved. But if we examine that particular incident, we can see how it could have easily occurred without any formal organizational efforts. According to what is known, the mass petitioning on April 25 was the result of an incident that developed in Tianjin from April 19 to April 24, when the number of Falungong petitioners snowballed from 50-odd people to estimates of more than 10,000. The Tianjin authorities responded in a way that could not satisfy the petitioners, but which also did not instill terror in them, and as a result the petitioners felt encouraged to hope for a better outcome from a stronger petitioning drive. Under these conditions it is not surprising that Falungong followers were able to use their existing networks and communications channels, including word-of-mouth, telephone and the Internet, to rally so many followers to Zhongnanhai.



A Falungong practitioner arrested at Tiananmen Square, October 1, 2000. Photo: AP Wide World Photos.

None of its local offices accepts donations of goods or money; there are no membership lists or even regular meeting places. All participants are free to come and go as they please; there is no induction ceremony and no constitution or other documentation (Li Hongzhi Ping Zhuan, pp. 141-142). From all of the above it is clear that Falungong is not organized.

There are still quite a few people who believe that Falungong has a secret organizational structure because of its ability to arrange large mass activities. But there have been many instances of mass demonstrations in Communist countries, and most of them have been spontaneous and unorganized.

Falungong has raised considerable attention with its mass petitioning movements, such as the one in Beijing on April 25, 1999. Normally it is assumed that when more than 10,000 people participate in a mass movement, some kind of organi-

What made people most suspicious about the huge petitioning drive at Zhongnanhai on April 25 was that the Chinese authorities seem to have known nothing about it in advance, suggesting the existence of a secret organization. But available information indicates this was not the case. A friend who was visiting Beijing at the time heard in advance that Falungong members would petition the State Security Council, even though he had no connections with Falungong or China's security apparatus. This suggests that there was no great secrecy attached to the plans for the mass petition.

Various explanations have been offered for the authorities' lack of preparation, assuming that they did know in advance that the petitioning would take place. One is that the authorities hoped to learn more about the organization by letting its members and leaders come out in the open; another is that the

security forces underestimated the extent to which the situation would develop. Petitioning of the authorities has become increasingly common in recent years, and as it appeared that this petition bore no political flavor and would be limited in scope, the authorities saw no reason to take preventative measures.

In fact, just from the point of view of common sense there is little likelihood of Falungong being a secret organization. Generally speaking, only organizations involved in activities likely to be banned by the government would set up a secret organization, for example underground political parties or triad societies. Falungong was tolerated for many years, even after it abandoned plans to register as an organization. Falungong

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followers engaged in public exercise sessions, and practitioners never considered their activities something that had to be concealed from the authorities or society at large. Under those conditions, why would Falungong set up a secret organization?

After the government imposed its ban on Falungong, some of its activities had to go underground, and some members established methods of communication that could be concealed from the authorities, as well as overseas spokespersons to deal with the international community's concern over official suppression of the group. Even now, however, it cannot be said that Falungong has a genuine systematic structure.

What, then, is the source of Falungong's ability to rally larger group gatherings than many organized groups? We know that the purpose of establishing an organization is first of all to bring together people who share a common philosophy, interests or needs. Falungong declares that only public group exercise can bring about the desired health benefits, so those who wish to take part in these group activities naturally satisfy the requirement of an organization in spite of the lack of a formal structure.

Being organized requires regular group meetings and activities; otherwise an organization will gradually disintegrate and exist in name only. Falungong has developed naturally along these lines through its practice of daily exercise sessions. During these regular exercise sessions, Falungong members have an opportunity to discuss family matters and world affairs and sometimes offer each other mutual support; this not only reinforces their beliefs, but also promotes mutual trust, empathy and shared views, and facilitates fast and efficient communication.

Other comparable organizations, for example groups involved in the overseas democracy movement, can be said to have a high caliber of membership, a genuine organizational structure and a system of constitutions and rules, but they

suffer from a lack of regular organized activities. In the course of a year how many representative meetings, branch meetings, discussion panels and protests can you conduct? The fact is, democracy activists do not necessarily have much in common beyond their interest in the movement, and impediments are compounded by the hardships of life in exile. For that reason it has been difficult to maintain a cohesive group of activists from those who initially joined out of enthusiasm for the movement.

Mancur Olson, Jr., in his seminal work, *The Logic of Collective Action*, pointed out that the greatest difficulty in collective action is the existence of "free-riders." Many people believe in the principle of democracy, but few are willing to share the risk of active participation when they will benefit as much as the activists if the movement is successful. The problem of free-riders exists even in the free world, where human rights guarantees ensure that participating in collective action seldom involves any genuine personal risk.

The problem boils down to the separation of ends and means. Workers go on strike in order to gain pay increases, and derive no benefit from the activity of striking itself. In order to deal with the problem of free-riders, Olson suggests devising a way to make participation in collective action a reward in itself. Falungong has managed to solve this problem by making the means an end in themselves. If a person does not maintain regular exercise, he will not derive the full health benefits; consequently, official prohibition of these exercises is detrimental to an individual's health. Similarly, if he exercises only in private he will receive the health benefits much more gradually. Of course he can choose to be a free-rider and await the outcome of others' protests against government suppression, but in the meantime he loses health benefits.

It is true that if you defy the government ban and continue to take part in public group exercise, you may have to suffer consequences, but this will require you to exercise your *ren*, variously translated as forbearance, endurance or tolerance. *Ren* is not only a moral imperative, it is also one of the rules of Falungong exercise. The more you exercise your *ren* by enduring suffering for the sake of Falungong, the more you gain, the stronger you become, and the more hope you have of accomplishing your goal.

2) Falungong and the concept of *ren*

Chen Kuide has pointed out that the reason Falungong has become so influential in China is, "They are distinguished from other religious groups by *ren*." Of course, the concept of *ren* has long been part of Chinese culture, "But Falungong makes it a central tenet, and in China's present social environment this effectively satisfies the spiritual needs of a large proportion of the Chinese people."

Practitioners of Falungong do in fact display a stronger spirit of *ren* than most other people, and they attribute this *ren* to the teachings of Falungong and Li Hongzhi. I see a number of reasons for this:

First of all, most people who practice Falungong are the kind of honest, simple people who are most capable of *ren*. Conversely, this is also the type of person most easily attracted

to Falungong, and participation reinforces their innate temperament and disposition.

Secondly, there is the temperament-molding effect of Falungong exercise. *Ren* can be put into practice through cultivating a serene mentality, and as Western anger management methods have demonstrated, a serene mentality can be achieved through certain physical exercises. Chinese *qigong* (including Falungong) uses gentle, flowing movements and requires the practitioner to clear his mind of random thoughts, leading to a feeling of serenity through which *ren* is more easily achieved.

Thirdly, apart from engaging in physical exercise, Falungong practitioners engage in spiritual cleansing by channeling the Dafa and practicing meditation. This bears many similarities to the Christian practice of regular prayer and worship, the Confucian practice of physical and mental cultivation, and maybe even to the practice in the Cultural Revolution of daily readings and struggle sessions. In the stress and business of daily life it cannot be denied that those who invest some effort in improving their spiritual environment are better able to deal with life's vicissitudes than those who fill every spare minute with frantic activity such as mahjongg or karaoke.

Finally, moralism is a practice and not a theory; it relies on will power and resolve, not reason. Most people feel that their resolve is inadequate, and for that reason, the content of moral imperatives is less important than who issues them. If the Ten Commandments had not been issued through the hands of Moses and ascribed to Jehovah, they would not have been anywhere near as influential among the Hebrews. Many readers of Li Hongzhi's books object to the writer's promotion of himself as a kind of god. On the other hand, for those who hunger for strong guidance, encouragement and discipline, isn't it possible that it is precisely the authoritative tone of the *Zhuan Falun* that is able to influence their willpower and their moral behavior?

The comfort of *ren*

In a society with no justice and an era with no moral compass, the source of greatest frustration to honest, dutiful people is not the fact that they lose out and suffer abuse more than others. Rather, it is the discovery that their honest and dutiful nature is not considered praiseworthy, but rather a sign of stupidity and foolishness, and that it subjects them to ridicule and isolation. For this reason they need, more than the average person, the recognition and support of like-minded people. Because they cannot receive encouragement in practical matters, they need, more than other people, the solace of illusion; that is to say, they need myths and they need religion. Falungong joins such people under a common myth so that they no longer feel alone and insignificant, and enjoy access to reliable spiritual resources. For that reason they are able to even more resolutely and heroically persevere with their moral philosophy.

Many interpretations of the concept of *ren* recognize that people practice *ren* in pursuit of other greater goals. Common sense tells us that the sacrifice of short-term pleasures is necessary to achieve a greater and more lasting happiness. Traditional religion's encouragement of people to practice virtue

uses a similar rationale, but bases its motivation on the reward for sacrifice to be found in the next life, not in the present one.

In a normal society, a person's ability to endure and accept loss usually wins him the admiration and goodwill of other people, so that ultimately there is no real loss, and it is not that difficult to remain honest and dutiful or to achieve spiritual satisfaction. But an unjust society and a morally degenerate era are very hard on honest and dutiful people, who discover that dishonest and disloyal people not only enjoy a better life, but also gain the admiration of society at large, while honest people are deprived of even the little they should be entitled to, and are subjected to widespread ridicule and scorn. If they can gain neither practical nor spiritual reward, they may fall into despair and may even end up following the path of least resistance into the world of immorality.

Under these circumstances the value of religion is most apparent. A person with religious faith can inure himself to the losses of this world in favor of the greater reward to be gained

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in the next. Falungong is no exception. Li Hongzhi says, "The rewards of the Buddha are gained through suffering," and "He who suffers in this life will become a Buddha when he leaves it." Followers of Falungong believe that endurance of suffering is a small price to pay for the eternal rewards to come.

Ren is one of the three basic virtues promoted by Falungong, the others being truthfulness and benevolence, defined as follows:

Truthfulness - one must act honestly, speak the truth and refrain from fraud and deceit. If one does wrong one should not conceal it, but should return to the path of truth.

Benevolence - one should have a charitable heart, should not blame others, should have sympathy for the weak and help the poor, and generally perform good works.

Ren - in times of trouble and humiliation, one should maintain an open attitude and bear up under difficulty. One should not succumb to resentment or vengeance, but should be willing to accept the bitterest suffering and tolerate what most people consider intolerable.

Among those three words, truthfulness and benevolence are relatively easy to understand and accept, but *ren* is more complicated. In her detailed exploration of *ren*, Gong Xiaoxia observes, "In the teachings of the Falungong, only through 'ren' can you attain 'truthfulness' and 'benevolence.'" She adds, "For the ordinary person, *ren* brings a new sense of purpose to life." And elsewhere, "*Ren* is not just a matter of holding back, but

rather becomes a means of overcoming. The passive *ren* becomes an active *ren*, and gives spiritual strength to the weak."

It is worth taking time to explore *ren* in the context of Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity. In his book *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche analyses the roots of Christian morality, which he describes as a slave morality that instills resentment. Nietzsche says that those who are persecuted, having no means of rebelling, develop a strong resentment, and through reactive means create from resentment a new system of values and meaning in which cowardice is transformed into virtue and forgiveness.

Max Scheler, in his phenomenology of resentment, disagreed with Nietzsche's criticism of Christian morality, but delved more deeply into Nietzsche's analysis of resentment. Scheler observed that when a relatively small and weak person is offended, the instinctive tendency to fight back immediately is suppressed into a passive impulse for revenge sometime in the future. Revenge, as a product of forcible suppression of a wave of feeling, can engender resentment, a painful source of self-torment. Likewise, it has been noted that the Chinese character for *ren* depicts a heart topped by a knife; unless you eventually remove the knife from where it is concealed in your heart and use it against your opponent, that knife will remain embedded in your heart and subject it to constant bleeding.

In relieving the heart of this dagger, Falungong forfeits the option of resentment and vengeance by employing *ren* to accomplish a reversal or creation of value in which an insult is no longer insulting, or an injury is no longer an injury, or being cheated is no longer being cheated, as in the story of "sour grapes."

In this respect, the reversal or creation of value employed by Christianity and Falungong has been compared with the "Ah Q mentality" of "spiritual victory" depicted in Lu Xun's story. However, there are significant differences. When Ah Q is beaten and doesn't dare fight back, he dismisses the incident by muttering, "Pick on someone your own size." But his "spiritual victory" is pure self-deception. When he says, "pick on someone your own size," he is only talking to himself; if his opponents had overheard him, they would probably have beaten him again and forced him to retract what he said. By keeping his views to himself Ah Q does not overturn a value, nor does he create a new one.

Secondly, while Ah Q declines to fight back when bullied by someone stronger, he is quick to bully others weaker than himself, like a nun or a little boy. His actions have no principle behind them, but are purely opportunistic. Ah Q's form of spiritual victory is not sufficient to transform resentment into a value system, and becomes laughable because Ah Q is incapable of genuinely insisting on it. In contrast, I have observed that many people who initially looked down on Falungong have been deeply impressed after observing the courage of practitioners in the face of pressure from the authorities.

The heroism of the weak

There are two questions I would like to discuss here. The first is, does *ren*, in the sense of patience and resignation to one's fate, constitute a virtue?

Resignation to one's fate is usually used in a pejorative sense, but this is not necessarily justified. Resignation is not merely an unwillingness to fight, but also means accepting hardship and adversity with peace of mind and without losing dignity. Is this not a virtue worthy of respect?

Likewise patience may appear meaningless and impotent. But when a person is in a position of weakness and actually has no means of fighting back, what is he supposed to do? Viktor E. Frankl, a survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp, once said that when one is trapped and there is no way out, the only option is to tolerate one's suffering as honestly and honorably as possible.

Frankl says that the ability to face suffering with peace of mind should be considered a kind of achievement, perhaps the greatest human achievement. That is because the oppressor wants to exert his dominance both physically and mentally. Physical strength can be forced upon another, but mental strength has to be recognized. The CCP, when oppressing people, has never been satisfied with physical persecution, but has always insisted that the oppressed "confess their errors," recognizing that if he refuses to concede moral superiority in spite of overwhelming physical torment, the Party will not have genuinely prevailed.

One commonly hears this criticism of the Falungong: "You advocate *ren*, tolerance, so why can't you tolerate the authorities' criticism and prohibitions, but insist on going to Tiananmen Square and 'surrounding' Zhongnanhai?" But in



Photo: Reuters.

fact, this criticism is illogical. *Ren* does not involve capitulation or retreat, but rather perseverance. "Don't strike back and don't scold back" - that is *ren*. "Don't scold back" doesn't mean you cannot explain or appeal. Using public exercises and peaceful petitioning as an expression of perseverance is not in any way contradictory to *ren*.

It is in this sense that *ren* transcends passivity to become a kind of achievement. Marx criticized religion for using imaginary comforts as a substitute for practical struggle. What Marx did not consider was that when religion encourages one to persevere in holding to one's personal values against the coercive logic of the oppressor, this can also be considered a form of struggle.

The interpretation of *ren* as "forbearance" also gives it an active quality, in contrast to the passivity of resignation. If you scold me and I don't scold back, it's not because I'm not able to scold, or afraid of the consequences, but that I feel it is wrong to scold and I refuse to acknowledge the superiority of your values by answering a wrong with a wrong. On the surface it appears that I am impotent or weak, but what others regard as impotence may arise from honesty and goodness, from the magnanimity of someone with true inner strength.

The teachings of Falungong state, "In this universe there is a principle, 'in losing you win, and in winning you lose. If you fight your loss, you lose even more.'" Under this value system a good person doesn't have to fear insult or injury. As long as he is a good person and does good works, in the end he will

be repaid with goodness. And this compensation is not in the future, but in the present; it takes place at the same time as the loss. That's why some Falungong practitioners, when beaten and kicked by the police, do not plead for mercy or admit their wrong, but actually cry out, "Thank you! Thank you!"

Even CCP authorities have admitted that their attack on Falungong has failed to stop protests by Falungong practitioners. Falungong followers take joy from suffering, regard persecution as a test and treat sacrifice as the ultimate goal, and for that reason the usual tactics are not only ineffective against them, but actually spur them on with greater resolve.

3) Falungong and the search for the meaning of life

It is worth noting here that many Falungong practitioners, when explaining the motivation behind their unyielding struggle, do not refer to a particular spiritual reward, but say they are defending the truth, or preserving morality or seeking the meaning of life. Many people might understand this motivation, but find it hard to perform to the same degree of heroism. This exemplifies the strength that Falungong's spiritual aspects can lead to ordinary people in their pursuit of life's meaning.

To seek the meaning of life is to seek a way to transcend the impermanence of physical existence. Meaning exists in relationships. As a Jewish theologian said, a person is like a letter of the alphabet; only when combined with others does he have meaning. For that reason, seeking meaning requires establishing a mystical relationship with something that is unlimited or eternal such as God, the spirit of the universe or the universal Dafa, or a secular relationship with other human beings through which one is transformed from a small self into a larger self.

Traditional Confucianism and Communism belong to the second type. Confucianism prescribes the "Three Imperishables" - one's virtue, achievements and teachings. Hannah Arendt's book, *The Conditions of Mankind*, depicts a philosophy of life very similar to Confucianism, in which the only way to achieve immortality is to enter the arena of public discourse, through which the testimony of others replicates one's behavior eternally through the memory and history of humanity.

A little deep reflection makes clear the limitations of the nonreligious, secular form of immortality: 1) This kind of immortality can only be enjoyed by a small minority of great people, and is not a realistic aspiration of the ordinary majority, whose lack of status prevents their acts of heroism from entering the history books; 2) This kind of immortality is only possible if someone else is present to witness it and record it or tell it to others. When an authoritarian government is in complete control and eliminates all undesirable behavior and voices, it also to a great extent eliminates other people's opportunity for immortality; 3) Preserving one's immortality through history requires stability and continuity in history itself, and in prevailing social values.

One of the reasons that modern Chinese live so much in the present is the radical change in society and in values that they have experienced. Many things we previously held sacred are now considered ridiculous, many things we used to think were everlasting are already gone, and many things we toiled



and suffered and sacrificed to accomplish have lost their meaning. As history has proven unreliable, immortality has come to be seen as unattainable, and many people have given up the notion in favor of living for the moment. For this reason, if you want to use secular means to attain immortality, you will first have to convince others - and given the great change in values, you are likely to meet with discouragement.

In comparison, a person choosing religious means of seeking immortality avoids these limitations. Before God, or before the law of the Buddha, there is no difference between the great and the humble, only a difference between those who are devout and those who are not. God, or the universal Dafa, does not have to be as selective as history, so religious immortality can include even ordinary people. In addition, the believer gains a feeling of meaning in life through establishing a relationship with God or the spirit of the universe, and therefore doesn't require someone else to witness or record his actions. A jailed dissident's greatest fear is to be forgotten by the outside world, because that would eliminate the meaning of his existence and his suffering; but a believer has less fear of being alone because he believes God is always with him. Finally, the believer sees the values he pursues as originating with God or the spirit of the universe, which transcend the boundaries of history and are not subject to the vagaries of social values.

Many friends in the democracy movement feel ashamed when comparing themselves to Falungong followers. This desire to emulate a good example is laudable, but I think we need to recognize the difference between the two groups. The democracy movement is a secular movement that does not enjoy the inspiration of myth or the rewards of illusion. For that reason anything we attempt to accomplish relies on the strength of our inner resources.

It is not easy to be a genuine democracy activist. The activist not only has to fight for his own rights, but must also recognize the equal rights of others, including those of his enemy; even more important, he must oppose the oppression placed on all others by any power (whereas most religious believers, including Falungong practitioners, only concern themselves with their own oppression); he must fight for the rights of all people, without giving preference to his own rights.

The spiritual inadequacy of Marxism

At a conference back in 1999, a Falungong practitioner was explaining Falungong's universal principle to me. A friend who was with us remarked, "From what you say, it seems Falungong practitioners are very selfish. You are willing to suffer loss because the more you lose the more you benefit."

Of course there is some basis for this criticism, which can in fact be applied to many religions that similarly encourage good and moral behavior by holding that one gains through loss. As the Dalai Lama has said, "If you try abandoning selfish motivations and develop a more charitable attitude toward others, you will end up receiving more benefit than you would have originally. So I sometimes say that the clever selfish person should act in this way."

Not many Chinese people are religious, but the Chinese attitude toward history has strong religious overtones. We

maintain that history is progressive and meaningful and that historical developments have objective laws through which mankind may ultimately reach a happy conclusion. Those who follow the flow of history will prosper and those who defy it will perish. As long as we choose to stand on the side of historical correctness, we need not fear whatever sufferings or hardships we encounter, because we hold that "history is just," "history will prove me right," "history will show that I was innocent." We can accept failure without despair because we hold that "history is on our side," and therefore we will ultimately emerge victorious; and if we have to sacrifice our lives, we hold that "the annals will devote a page to our loyalty," and our name and our spirit will continue to live on after us. Is this not similar to the way that religion leads people to suffer hardship in the present for the sake of a reward in the next life?

There are two points we need to clarify here: 1) The average person believes that to at least some extent virtue is its own reward. If I find someone's wallet on the street and return it to its owner, I get satisfaction from that act rather than from the expectation of reward. If all I cared about was the money I would have simply kept the wallet in the first place. 2) The average person hopes that goodness will be rewarded, not because of a desire for personal benefit, but out of an innate longing for justice. We hope the world is just, and that each of us will reap what he sows.

That doesn't mean that all people carry out good and moral works for the sake of pure idealism. Tocqueville expressed it well: "I do not believe that self-interest is the sole motive of religious men, but I believe that self-interest is the principal means that religions themselves employ to govern men, and I

Religion tells us that, however imperceptibly, what we do counts and that good and evil will be rewarded appropriately. This gives immeasurable spiritual support to the disadvantaged in an unjust and pragmatic society.

do not question that in this way they strike the multitude and become popular." Religion becomes meaningful by putting the world and the universe into a moral and rational order. Religion tells us that, however imperceptibly, what we do counts and that good and evil will be rewarded appropriately. This gives immeasurable spiritual support to the disadvantaged in an unjust and pragmatic society.

At a press conference during his trip to the United States in 1997, Jiang Zemin took the initiative to address the question of religion through the Tibet issue. Jiang asked, "America and the West have such high intellectual and scientific standards, why are there still people who believe in Tibetan Buddhism? I don't know - why?"

Of course, Jiang was not really asking for an answer or for anyone's opinion. It was clear from his expression and vocal inflection that he was in fact being critical, even satirical.

In speaking of religion, CCP authorities probably only remember Marx's famous statement, "Religion is the opium of the people," and their understanding of that statement is biased and incorrect. If we look back at the statement in its original context, what Marx said was, "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of the heartless world, just as it is the spirit of the spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people." It is not hard to see that this sentence is meant to be explanatory rather than critical. What Marx meant was that in a world without feeling or justice, people need comfort and hope, and that is how religion is engendered. It explains the social roots of religion, and its social utility. Marx refers to religion as an opiate for its ability to numb pain rather than as a harmful drug. Even if we allow that religion is an opium of the people, that doesn't mean we reject it. If pain becomes unbearable, isn't a narcotic allowed? Would anyone suggest that a person should endure the amputation of a limb without anesthetic?

It is true that Marx opposed religion, because he believed that religion trapped people in illusion and made them resigned to their fate so that they were unwilling to struggle for social progress. Anesthesia can effectively dull pain, but it can also make a person forget his illness and prevent him from looking for a cure. Marx did not wish to condemn humanity to a world without comfort, but rather wanted to spur on people to revolution.

Marx believed that by eradicating the undesirable aspects of society that engendered religion, human society could attain a rational condition and no longer need the illusion of religion. But this notion was in itself an illusion, because human society cannot possibly reach a perfect situation. Put another way, religion is rooted not only in society, but in humanity itself. It is an illusion to believe that human beings can live without illusion.

We know that that there are three main reasons that people need religion. Firstly, people can never be satisfied with the limitations of their own lives, and cannot overcome their fear of death; secondly, there is the fathomless mystery of the universe; thirdly, there is the strong hope of opposing and redressing the injustice of society. Out of this comes a faith in the afterlife, a faith in an eternal soul, a faith in an omnipotent creator of all things, a faith in karma or heaven or a last judgment and a spiritual power protecting moral precepts (such as God, Dao or the universal Dafa).

The concept of an eternal soul through which a person can continue to exist in some form after death cannot be proved or disproved by rational or scientific means. No matter to what stage science and rationality develops, this human yearning for an immortal soul will not change, and for that reason human beings will probably always have religious faith.

There is not necessarily a direct link between religious belief and the emotions and yearnings a person feels. It is often said that the stronger the emotions and yearnings one feels, the more likely religious faith is to be present, but sometimes just the opposite occurs - through too great a desire for faith, faith may be lost. It can be imagined that no one would long for faith more than Jews imprisoned in the Nazi concentration camps, but many of these people in fact lost their faith.

Believers usually have difficulty understanding why nonbelievers do not believe, and nonbelievers have similar difficulty understanding the faith of believers. A person who converts from being a nonbeliever to a believer, or from a believer to a nonbeliever, finds it difficult to explain this transformation to others. This limit of mutual understanding demonstrates why religion cannot be bound by reason, and how religious faith is a kind of leap, not a continuous process; it is a choice. Religious faith cannot be said to go against logic, because it doesn't involve logic in the first place.

In fact, even Jiang Zemin is not necessarily entirely without faith. Of course I don't believe that Jiang remains a steadfast believer in Marxist-Leninist thought. But there are some principles that he almost certainly still embraces. Jiang Zemin says he believes in science, and he regards the statement "Every movement of matter has objective laws" as a scientific principle and a principle of experience. But as Hume long ago noted of the inductive method, we can only know that some movement of matter follows objective laws, but we can never know if all movement does.

In addition, this theory is not essential to science, nor is it the only one. You can propose another theory, such as "God's plan." You can also take a position of ignorance: I don't know if every mystery in the universe has an answer, but that doesn't mean that I can't tirelessly seek those answers.

The wish for immortality and the hope for an afterlife does not necessarily lead to religion. Warrior kings also hoped for immortality, as we can see from the massive mausoleum the Qin Emperor built for himself while still alive. Many folk beliefs relating to the netherworld and immortal beings are simply a displacement from the real world rather than a genuine belief system. The attitude of many ordinary people toward gods and spirits is the same as their attitude toward rulers of the real world; it is based on flattery and bribery, with the aim of worldly advantage rather than the pursuit of morality. This is not the same as religious faith.

Among the factors that inspire the inclination toward religious faith, probably most important is the search for moral order - the hope that good and evil will be rewarded appropriately and that morality and happiness will be united. When it appears that a good or evil person has not been rewarded appropriately, our tendency is to say, "The time has not yet come; it will all come out right in the end," if not in this world, then in the next one. Who guarantees this? Perhaps it is God, or perhaps it is Providence or the universal Dafa, or even the "objective laws of historical development that move beyond the will of man." To have such a belief is to have religion.

Marx's materialistic concept of history and its deterministic nature have a religious quality. As traditional religion declined in influence, Marxism captured the interest of Western intellectuals and became a substitute for religion. But Marxism's relocation of the glorious and just kingdom of God to earth among mankind guaranteed its demise.

The heaven on earth promised by Marx could only appear in the last stage of human history, in an era of great proletarian revolution and victory, at a stage when moral and historical determinism were reunited under the proletarian class. But

assuming there is no eternal soul, what reward does this earthly paradise provide to the multitudes who sacrifice their lives for its realization? As a substitute for religion, Marxism's narcotic effect is vastly inferior.

4) The official attack on Falungong

Religion resigns people to their fate and helps them take comfort in illusion instead of fighting for reality. Marx was a revolutionary, and the Communist Party started out as a revolutionary party, so it's not surprising that Communists had little tolerance for religion. But now that the Communist Party has become the ruling power in China, it favors religion as a means of helping them maintain order. Edward Gibbon wrote, "The various modes of worship, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all considered by the people, as equally true; by the philosopher, as equally false; and by the magistrate, as equally useful." Party official and Falungong practitioner Wang Youqun in May 1999 wrote a letter to Zhu Rongji and Jiang Zemin explaining that Falungong was not involved in politics and respected public order and even benefited stability and unity, and all he said was true. But while Wang wrote this letter with the intention of easing tensions, but he ended up provoking the authorities. Why did this happen?

In fact, this is not surprising. What gave Wang the right to give credit to Li Hongzhi rather than the Communist Party? Christians assert that they submit to the government because Christ told them to submit to the higher authorities. This means they serve two powers, Christ and the government, but Christ takes precedence. This second-class submission cannot satisfy a dictatorial government. If Jiang Zemin were clever, he would have swallowed his pride and declared that whether it's a black cat or a white cat, as long as it doesn't cause trouble it's a good cat. But Jiang Zemin is not clever.

History shows us that intelligent rulers have manipulated religion rather than suppressed it. But there are exceptions. Religious persecution in Europe in the Middle Ages arose from a system under which rulers were endorsed by a single religious group, and any reformers or alternative religions were perceived as a challenge to the legitimacy of the rulers. Communist Party rule similarly unifies government and religion (in the form of Communism), and makes no allowance for reform or heresy.

But just as a dead pig no longer fears boiling water, the ideological bankruptcy following June 4th gave the government a measure of immunity against non-political ideologies. That's why not long after June 4th all kinds of spiritual beliefs began to flourish, and Falungong enjoyed official tolerance for a time. But this situation could not last for long. Out of an inability to recognize the trends of the times, and a wish to reestablish and rejuvenate ideological control, Jiang Zemin mobilized the entire Party machinery to suppress Falungong, and at the same time to wipe out Zhong Gong, Xiang Gong and other religious groups. By doing so he turned against himself a power that originally posed no threat to him. And by taking action on the basis of protecting the CCP's rule, Jiang Zemin committed an error that will be difficult for the government to resolve.

At first Jiang Zemin grossly underestimated the Falungong and believed that harsh tactics would quickly lead to the group's dissolution. Unexpectedly the Falungong proved to be extremely tenacious, no doubt due to the religious aspect of Falungong, and the sincerity of the faith of its followers. As a result, what was initially a matter of no concern became, through suppression, a major threat.

Historians have noted that religious movements tend to thrive in the face of persecution. This is only half true; many more religions have been wiped out through persecution. But it is true that religions that have thrived have done so after experiencing a period of persecution. Persecution that doesn't destroy a religion serves to establish it. Every religion claims to instill in its followers an unusual degree of spiritual strength, and it is in unusual circumstances that this unusual strength is confirmed.

A religion's "truth" and power is not signified by divine manifestations or miracles. When the Romans butchered Christians, Jesus did not come down from heaven to protect them or smite their tormentors. Rather, the power of religion is in the steadfast determination of its followers, who refuse to yield under oppression and bear witness under physical trial. Many an ordinary person has demonstrated extraordinary spiritual strength because of his beliefs, and has served as an inspiration to those with religious inclinations, who become convinced that these teachings must be "true." Even for nonbelievers, the heroic moral integrity and spiritual strength of believers can come as an enormous shock, and can inspire respect even if the teachings themselves are not accepted.

Some people criticize Falungong practitioners for their insistence on public exercise and petitioning. They say, "If you want to practice, do it privately. Why do you have to do it at Tiananmen Square or other public places?"

This brings to mind the biblical story of Nicodemus, who was unwilling to publicly acknowledge his faith in Jesus Christ because he thought it would cause him trouble. The existentialist philosopher Kierkegaard referred to people like Nicodemus as admirers rather than followers of Christ. Many members of traditional religions are satisfied to turn their faith into a private matter, and thereby lose the original power of faith. A religion that presents itself as truth must be made public. You cannot say to the light, "Shine only on me." In a similar manner, genuine political dissidents make their views public as a matter of course; otherwise, how many people in China today would not be considered dissidents?

Falungong and science

The Falungong has been criticized as antiscientific and as superstition. The modern understanding of "scientific" is a systematic knowledge or research of the various manifestations of the natural world or human society. Broadly put, science must be observable, measurable, replicable, testable and non-specific.

Two things must be said here. Firstly, science is not necessarily accurate. Given that one of the qualities of science is testability or refutability, this suggests that science can also be

in error. Secondly, science is not necessarily truth. Many truths and values lie outside of science, and just as we cannot say everything that is scientific is true, we also cannot say that everything that is not scientific is in error or without value.

Using the above qualities as standards, it is clear to see that Falungong is nonscientific. For example, when the Falungong states that there is a distinct physical difference between white matter and black matter, or when it states that a person's abdomen contains a wheel, these things cannot be observed or measured.

The typical Falungong disciple claims that Falungong is in fact scientific, because it has the tangible effect of strengthening the body and curing illness. It is true that science relies on tangible effect, but that does not mean that all tangible effect is scientific. Regular exercise has been shown time and again to cure or relieve chronic illness without any attribution to miraculous powers. Similarly, if a person who practices Falungong enjoys the same benefits and claims they are due solely to the scientific efficacy of Falungong, that is overreaching.

Falungong is a religion, not a science. We cannot use religion to judge science, nor can we use science to judge religion. However, Falungong, like many religions, touches on matters of the tangible world as well as on those of the non-tangible world, and therefore enters the realm of scientific rationality. For that reason scientific rationality has the right to question Falungong when it makes claims such as the presence

of virtue and karma in our bodies in the form of white and black matter.

We should pause here to consider the viewpoint of Joseph Campbell, a scholar of myths. Campbell said that religions all contain unreal elements, but if a religion is understood as metaphor and the meaning of its words is read in this context, in the manner of verse rather than prose, then it is true. What is not true in the superficial sense can still be true on a deeper level. We need religion, we need myths. You can argue with them, but why destroy them?

What should also be mentioned in passing is that the CCP's attack on the Falungong, carried out in the name of and on the basis of science, is actually suppressing freedom of expression and freedom of religion. Just as religion and ideology have been used in the past to kill, the CCP is using science to kill, and thus defiles the name of science.

Falungong and superstition

Superstition has never been properly defined. To a nonreligious person, all religion is superstition. For the believer, all religions that worship a god different from his own are a form of superstition. Superstition usually refers to content, for example belief in supernormal powers, or in a mysterious connection between the natural world and the affairs of men (e.g. astrology). Sometimes it refers to an attitude, such as the unquestioning faith Red Guards placed in Mao Zedong, or that children place in their parents.



Public enemy No. 1: Falungong practitioners arrested at Tiananmen Square, May 8, 2000. Photo: AP Wide World Photos.

As an attitude superstition does not always refer to unquestioning belief, but can refer to the lack of certainty, or faith containing an element of suspicion or doubt. If you buy a new house and the *feng shui* master says its *feng shui* is bad, the easiest thing to do is hang a mirror in the appropriate place or make whatever other correction is advised. Your thinking is, the solution is so easy, there's no harm in doing it.

Confucius said, "Worship the gods as if they exist," which is similar to saying, "Better safe than sorry." Blaise Pascal posed the existence of God as an argument of wager: "If you believe in God and there is no God, you have lost nothing. If you don't believe in God and God does exist, you have lost everything." There are a lot of people who share this attitude. In Chinese the word for superstition can be either a noun or a verb; it can be a content or an attitude. One thing can be said for certain about superstition: it is an irrational belief that arises out of awe or fear toward something unknown.

Falungong requires its followers to improve themselves physically and spiritually through a course of exercises and by being a good person. Both are good and right. Any reasonable person would think that regardless of whether or not one accepts all of the teachings of Falungong, there is nothing wrong with taking regular exercise and doing good. Like many successful religions, one of the strengths of Falungong is that what it requires of its followers is something that has value in itself in terms of normal human desires and aspirations. In addition, Falungong doesn't require its members to pay dues or offer sacrifices, nor does it offer up images for worship. For that reason, even if a person starts out not having any strong belief in Falungong, it is very easy for him to become increasingly involved and eventually find that what he believes far outweighs what he doubts.

Is there any element of superstition in Falungong teachings? Yes. For instance, in its attributing the suffering and happiness in life to the transformation between virtue and karma. But while some have criticized Falungong for advising those who are ill not to see a doctor, this is not the truth. The Falungong scriptures state, "Can a hospital cure illness? Of course it can. . . It is only that their cures are carried out through normal methods." Falungong believes that human illness is the result of karma, and while a doctor can cure the superficial manifestation, only exercise can cure the root cause. While some people may take this to an extreme and forgo medical treatment in favor of exercise only, most people do both.

In any case, superstition cannot be regarded as harmful from the standpoint of morality and social ramifications. I once watched a CCTV program that described how conservation of banyan trees was greatly facilitated by the belief among local people that cutting down the trees would summon evil spirits from the mountains. The anthropologist James G. Frazer once observed that superstition benefited human society by providing a motivation for correct behavior, and that it was much better for society if people behaved correctly with the wrong motivation than if they did what was wrong for all of the best reasons.

Friedrich Hayek believed that most of the superstitions that

have been able to survive generations of experience and competition are relatively beneficial and harmless. He believes that setting up a social moral order based on pure rationality overestimated the usefulness of reason in human nature, and warned that wholesale eradication of traditional religious or superstitious beliefs could result in a breakdown of moral order in society.

In any event, protecting superstition is first and foremost a matter of freedom of speech and freedom of religion. Of course, harmful superstitious practices such as offering children as human sacrifices or requiring widows to burn themselves to death must be banned because they violate basic human rights. The crux of the matter is to oppose coercion - coercive imposition of superstition and coercive elimination of superstition. That obliges us to separate church and state, guarantee human rights, and protect freedom of speech and religion and rule of law.

5) The power of Falungong's resistance

Several years ago some friends and I got together and discussed whether China would produce a new religion. All of us were deeply depressed over the moral chaos in present-day China. None of us accepted for a moment that Maoist China was a moral and rational nation, because morality requires genuine free choice, which Mao eliminated, and is based on confirming basic human rights and interests, which Mao denied. Reestablishing morality would require first of all reestablishing freedom and guarantees of human rights, and then on this basis promoting a more equitable moral viewpoint.

At the same time, we also knew that any attempt to establish enforceable rules of behavior based on worldly moral reason or viewpoints was unlikely to serve as an effective substitute for religion. During the decades that the CCP has been in power, it has managed to eradicate the sparse religious tradition that formally existed while at the same time provoking a strong desire for religion among the populace; many people thirst for faith but lack interest or confidence in traditional religion, leaving open a historical opportunity for a new religion to develop. But we also suspected that under modern conditions a new religion was unlikely to become established. I know some overseas Chinese students who developed an interest in the Bahai branch of Islam, but they were unable to reach the point of becoming believers. Does this suggest that only a homegrown religion can satisfy the need for a new religion in China?

The strength of Falungong is in its mixture of new and old. By incorporating elements of Buddhism and some Taoism, Falungong benefits from at least part of the strength of traditional religion. For an extended period traditional religion was suppressed to the point of near extinction, and most people had never seen any transcendent displays, causing serious damage to the credibility and appeal of these religions. In spite of this, under more relaxed conditions they experienced a marked resurgence, though the previous period of suppression left them damaged. Falungong arose from tradition but also created new elements. Li Hongzhi says, "Do something that

has never been openly expressed." "What was spread throughout humanity in prehistoric times I am revealing again in the final stages. That is why it is precious."

This made people think, "No wonder those things of the past were not effective, it turns out that Buddhism's most valuable things were never revealed, and now they are being revealed for the first time!"

Something that is created out of thin air, with no prior history or tradition, will not be easily accepted nowadays. On the other hand, if it is only part of old tradition, regardless of its previous glory (not to mention those that have been crippled), it is also unlikely to impress people. The Falungong puts old slogans on a new signboard, so that it benefits from the strength of both history and lack of precedent.

The Falungong follower and Party official Wang Youqun wrote in his letter to Zhu Rongji and Jiang Zemin in May 1999, "Teacher Li Hongzhi has unselfishly offered the Zhuan Dafa of the great universal Dafa to modern man. This scripture tells us things that have never before been revealed in human culture. The clarity and depth of its contents are hard to express in words. Its preciousness exceeds that of any other classical text from the present or the past, in China or elsewhere, and its value is impossible to measure. Most valuable is the fact that the universal Dafa is expressed in modern Chinese. For the 1.2 billion people of China, this is an incomparable good fortune!" Don't forget, this letter was written after the authorities had given notice that they would bring the Falungong under control, and was purposely addressed to the highest officials. If one wished to avoid trouble, the way to do it would be to maintain a low profile, not take such a high profile action as this, so the earnestness and sincerity of Wang's faith is evident.

Dai Qing knows quite a few Falungong followers. She says they worship Li Hongzhi as people once worshiped Mao Zedong, and are willing to die for him. Given that Li Hongzhi does not aspire to any worldly power, this worship appears to be entirely voluntary and self-provoked. The willingness of Falungong followers to give up all worldly welfare reveals much about the character of their religion and testifies to their spiritual strength.

From press reports, especially from photographs, we can see that Falungong practitioners who practice openly in public and do not conceal their faces are predominantly middle-aged, female and average working-class people. This contrasts strikingly with the typical image of the oppositionist as a gentleman warrior, an elite intellectual or a long-haired, bare-knuckled rowdy. No wonder some people have observed that in the Falungong "the old revolutionaries have encountered a new problem."

Of course, this is a problem of the CCP's own making. In a sense we can say that Falungong's ability to mount such a strong resistance is directly related to the fact that followers never expected to encounter suppression. Falungong's lack of involvement in politics should have given practitioners some safety and insurance, so Jiang Zemin's order to suppress the group took members completely by surprise.

Falungong followers are quite different from democracy

activists, who are well aware of the danger they face. Even the "Second Kind of Loyalty" is like this. For example, Hai Rui² scolded the emperor out of love, but his practice of carrying a coffin with him to the palace shows that he was psychologically prepared for the fact that if the emperor chose to take offense it could mean a death sentence. Falungong followers had no such psychological preparation. It would be reasonable to expect that people who are psychologically prepared would be stronger in the face of oppression. This may be true of individuals, but not necessarily of groups, especially disorganized groups. That's because psychological preparation often borders on apprehension, and if not managed effectively can result in a group of people scattering like hares. In a group there will unavoidably be many people who initially participate out of a "safety in numbers" mentality, and once the group is dispersed and the danger falls on them as individuals, they will withdraw. Falungong followers had no psychological preparation for being attacked, because they had no intention of challenging the authorities, and once they were attacked, they were simply incredulous. They believed that they were entirely innocent and undeserving of this treatment, and therefore had to object and petition, and this was interpreted by the foolish and unreasonable authorities as protest and challenge. In this way people who never intended to challenge the authorities became the authorities' biggest challenge.

In its suppression of the masses, the CCP's typical tactic has been to disperse the gang by destroying the leader, or killing one to frighten a hundred, with the aim of disbanding a movement. But Falungong is not a typical group. Its public practice sessions and its petitioning drives are initiated by its ordinary members. There is no effective way for the iron fist of the proletarian dictatorship to deal with these harmless, ordinary and predominantly superannuated people. If the tactic is too mild, it won't have any effect. If it's too harsh, it seems unjustified. It has been said that quite a few of the ground-level officials and police officers obliged to carry out the suppression see very little sense in the order, and in private confide the opinion that the typical Falungong practitioner is not engaged in causing chaos among the populace and should not be considered a "public enemy." It is rare to see such a meek and mild group of people as Falungong petitioners taking on one of the world's most vicious political powers.

Martyrdom and suicide

Reports of self-immolation in Tiananmen Square by Falungong practitioners raised considerable alarm in 2001. The CCP used these incidents as further justification for its suppression of the Falungong, saying that Falungong teachings harmed followers by driving them to suicide. This claim requires a detailed exploration.

First of all, there was from the outset considerable controversy over whether the people who committed suicide were indeed followers of Falungong. It is known that in recent years there have been many suicides in China, especially among women, and in particular among rural women. A report in the Western media stated that in fact Chinese women have the highest suicide rate in the world. These suicides have included

many instances of self-immolation in public places³.

The official Falungong Web site had for more than a year been dealing with rumors of impending Falungong suicides, even mass suicides, and there were worries that Chinese officials would use any suicide to implicate Falungong. For that reason, immediately after the self-immolations in Tiananmen Square, the first response by Falungong's overseas spokesman was to deny that the suicides were Falungong followers. (Later the spokesman no longer denied the possibility, but never did agree that the dead were definitely Falungong practitioners.)

In fact, there is no way to ascertain this point, as Falungong is not a tightly structured organization with confirmed membership lists; nor are official reports reliable in a situation that serves the purposes of official propaganda in suppressing the Falungong as a harmful cult.

Assuming that the people who committed suicide were in fact Falungong practitioners, the next question is, does Falungong encourage its followers to commit suicide? Many religions teach that after death the souls of good people or believers are transported to an afterlife far superior to the present one. At the same time, these religions do not encourage suicide but rather expressly forbid it. Contrary to the secular view that a person's life is his own to do with what he wishes, according to religious teachings a person's life is not his own but is a gift from God, and by taking the initiative to terminate this life a person goes against the will of God. Likewise Li Hongzhi designates suicide a sin because, "As human life has a plan, you are breaking the comprehensive order. . . . God will not let you off for this, and that is why suicide is a sin."

(It is interesting to note that the Communist Party forbids suicide on similar grounds, claiming that a Communist's life belongs to the Party, and therefore committing suicide is an act of opposition to the Party.)

The belief in a superior afterlife and in God's plan for one's life tends to equip religious believers with an ability to face hardship and misery in the present life with greater fortitude. Whether we're talking about people in Nazi concentration camps, in the Soviet gulag or in China's forced labor camps, the suicide rate among religious believers is consistently much lower than that of nonbelievers. Indeed, many people become believers as a means of staving off despair and strengthening their determination and bravery. Quite a number of religious friends have told me that without their faith they would have been unable to survive to the present.

On a purely objective basis, if we examine reported suicide rates among followers of Falungong compared with suicide rates among the Chinese population in general and in other countries, we see that the incidence of suicide is actually very low. The CCP through extensive efforts identified 136 incidents of Falungong followers who committed suicide during the period from 1993 to July 1999, when the official ban was imposed. Based on the official figure of 2.3 million followers during that period (and some have estimated a vastly larger following), that makes a rate of 0.84 suicides per 100,000 persons per year. Officially reported statistics for China as a whole in the years 1990-1994 show an average suicide rate of 16.7 per 100,000 persons per year. The suicide rate in Taiwan

for the year 2000 reached 10.64 per 100,000. Even if we allow for the figure of 2.3 million Falungong members as a maximum over the seven-year period, and halve it to an average of 1.65 million, that still makes a suicide rate of only 1.7 per 100,000, much lower than among the Chinese population as a whole. If we allow for the possibility that all 136 suicides occurred in one year, we come up with a rate of only 5.9 per

If anything, it should be said that practicing Falungong prevents suicide rather than promoting it.

100,000, still far below that of the population as a whole.

The conclusion to be drawn is clear: no matter how the calculation is carried out, suicide rates among Falungong followers are low, which is especially notable when taking into account the large percentage of members who are advanced in age and in relatively poor physical health, groups where suicide rates in China are traditionally very high. If anything, it should be said that practicing Falungong prevents suicide rather than promoting it.

The CCP has attempted to equate the Tiananmen self-immolations to the mass suicide by followers of Jim Jones' People's Temple cult in November 1978. However, this comparison is unjustified for the following reasons: 1) The People's Temple aspired to creating a utopian community, while Falungong only aims for individual healing and doesn't touch on the conditions of society or the nation; 2) The People's Temple used violent physical coercion to keep followers from leaving the fold, while Falungong practitioners are entirely free to participate in Falungong exercises and other group activities or not, as they choose; 3) The People's Temple isolated its followers in closed communities cut off from the rest of society, whereas Falungong practitioners retain their normal roles and activities in the wider community; 4) The People's Temple was an apocalyptic cult predicting the imminent end of the world, but neither Falungong scripture or the writings of Li Hongzhi contain any such claims; 5) Genuine mass suicide requires a fast and irreversible mode of death, such as the poison and firearms employed by the People's Temple. Public self-immolation is a painful and drawn-out form of suicide, which at any time may be thwarted by the life-saving efforts of onlookers; 6) The People's Temple had prepared itself for violence through the stockpiling of weapons, but no weapon of any kind has ever been discovered among followers of Falungong.

The CCP's accusations that Falungong exercises "mind control" over its followers are similarly unfounded. Effective mind control requires a controlled environment, insulating followers from any other viewpoints, and physical coercion and punishment, all of which were employed by the People's Temple. It is clear that the conditions do not exist for Li Hongzhi to exercise mind control over Falungong followers, even if he wished to do so.

While the self-immolations in Tiananmen Square do not in

any way resemble the mass-suicides induced by apocalyptic cults such as the People's Temple, they strongly resemble protest-type suicides. Indeed, public self-immolation is the most common form of protest suicide, as exemplified by the suicide of Buddhist nun Pham Thi Mai in calling for the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Vietnam in 1967, and the 1969 suicide of university student Jan Palach protesting the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Not only were the self-immolations at Tiananmen Square the purest form of protest suicide, but if they were indeed carried out by Falungong followers, they could even qualify as martyrdom. The English word martyr comes from the Greek word *martys*, which means "witness." Nearly all of the world's great religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam, have a tradition of martyrdom in which dying for one's faith is the greatest honor and will be rewarded appropriately in the next life.

When it comes to martyrdom through suicide, however, the noted sociologist and anthropologist Milton Yinger emphasizes that this is a purely autonomous act rather than something advocated in a religious teaching or command. Suicide martyrs, he says, carry out the act for the sake of arousing the public above and beyond the normal requirement of a church to demonstrate their faith, and religious teachings clearly oppose suicide even as a form of martyrdom. (It is interesting to note that in contrast Chinese tradition, for example the philosophy of Mencius and Confucius, sometimes encourages suicide as a means of preserving honor. There are many instances in Chinese history in which a regime change provoked suicide among the conquered elite.)

Religious teachings, while forbidding suicide, can nevertheless help a person more bravely face death when it is inevitable and make him willing to sacrifice his life for the sake of standing up for his values. In this context the Tiananmen suicides, if they were indeed followers of Falungong, should be seen as protecting and fighting for their religious freedom, and protesting the persecution of Falungong.

We may have our personal reservations about acts of martyrdom, and in particular we cannot agree to the murder of children in acts of mass martyrdom. At the same time, can it be right to criticize the "insanity" of those who choose death over oppression or injustice, but say nothing about those whose cruel treatment drives people to such acts of desperation?

Edward Gibbon devotes a considerable portion of his classic *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* to the Roman persecution of Christians. Gibbon notes that the Romans were mystified by the willingness of Christians to sacrifice their lives. Some of the oppressors saw their actions as a means of turning Christians from their erroneous beliefs, which they sincerely regarded as a dangerous threat to their own religion. There was no concept of freedom of religious beliefs in ancient times, unlike our present age, where freedom of religion is enshrined in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. On that basis the persecution perpetrated by the Romans is more excusable than that of Jiang Zemin, who cannot claim similar ignorance. The CCP's suppression of Falungong (and

other "cults" such as Xiang Gong and Zhong Gong) is not based on any genuine threat that the group poses to the people as a harmful cult, and is not even because of the threat posed by followers surrounding Zhongnanhai, but rather because the huge public followings of these groups constituted a civic power outside of the Party; in the eyes of a cowardly and cruel dictator such as Jiang Zemin, they appeared a threat to his absolute power that had to be eliminated immediately. However, this fear could not be publicly voiced, hence the need for inventing some supposed "crime" committed by these groups.

One strange thing is that some people are very tolerant and respectful of traditional religions, but feel a strong antipathy toward Falungong, even though all of their criticisms of Falungong could be just as easily applied to traditional religions. Perhaps because traditional religions have been around for such a long time, at this stage their tenets and behavior have established limits and there are very few extremist incidents. In the case of a new religion or pseudoreligion, the situation is less stable, and there is always the worry of believers engaging in personal worship of a revered teacher.

I can understand this concern. In a new religion it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the true from the false, but we

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shouldn't discard the good with the bad. In terms of what it demands from its followers, Falungong is actually a very mild religion. Falungong doesn't call for fasting or vegetarianism, doesn't require periods of seclusion or living in a monastery or nunnery, doesn't require tithing or other set monetary contributions and doesn't prohibit medical treatment. Why should Falungong be considered a heretical sect more than any other religious group? One critic of Falungong was asked why he didn't apply the same standards to criticize Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism or Taoism. He replied, "The government requires us to criticize Falungong, not these other religions."

We should see that in the present, with separation of church and state, the destructive potential of religion is effectively limited. At the same time, with the development of an increasingly worldly society, religion's positive relevance is more evident. So I feel that we should demonstrate a more open and enthusiastic attitude toward all religion, whether traditional or new. Taking it a step further, while many people expressed great dissatisfaction with the flood of "strange and miraculous beings" in China, they would do well to remember what Francis Bacon said: "Some cures are worse than the disease." Some situations are not good, but forcibly suppressing them is even worse. Protecting all human rights, including

freedom of religion, takes precedence over all else. We should respect those who in earlier eras severely criticized religion in order to protect rationality and science, but they are different from the current authoritarian opportunists who kill in the name of science.

Historically, martyrdom has typically led to a political power softening its oppression of a religious group. There seem to be no previous examples in history similar to the Chinese government's stance in using religious protest suicide as an excuse to impose even greater suppression on a religious group, and in hopes of reducing support for Falungong within the government. It is yet another historical precedent that brings shame upon the Chinese race.

6) Falungong as the seed of political crisis

In July 1999 the 12th session of the 9th National People's Congress passed its resolution on heretical sects. It is clear that this was Jiang Zemin's method of suppressing the Falungong, and the NPC simply served as a rubber stamp. But not everyone performed his desired role in the machinery; Tian Jiyun cast an abstaining vote and Ding Shisun declined to vote as a means of showing opposition.

Ding Shisun stated, "In the beliefs of any religion there are elements that are antiscientific and separated from the reality of society, bordering on superstition and illusion. The people have the right to believe or not to believe in religion. A religion cannot be judged as a heretical sect on the basis of being antiscientific. Millions of people believe in Falungong and it has been around for quite a long time, with a relatively organized form, indicating that they are meeting a spiritual need in society. Apart from taking legal action against perpetrators of illegal acts, we should use nothing but education and propaganda to deal with religion, superstition or antiscientific teachings. We should not use oppression. We should advise and discourage but not forcibly eliminate or attack." Tian Jiyun likewise warned that eliminating Falungong was too extreme and risky, and not conducive to social stability and unity, and might well have undesirable repercussions.

It could be that Jiang Zemin himself early on recognized his mistake in taking things so far right from the outset. But Jiang is not the kind of person to admit and correct his mistakes. Originally Falungong was different from the democracy movement; retracting the decision to suppress the group would not necessarily have caused a crisis for the CCP's one-party rule. But Jiang Zemin would not retract the decision, because it could have caused a crisis for his position in the core leadership.

The Communist system is the most unsystematic form of oligarchy. The power of the top leadership of the Communist Party is enormous but also fragile. A king can admit a sin or an error without losing his throne, because his position is established through bloodline or the mandate of heaven. The president of a democracy can admit error because his position is established through election, through the public mandate. During a set period of time, a president can continue to make mistakes - as long as he's not impeached - and still remain president and exercise his power as president (Bill Clinton

being a prime example). But a Communist Party leader cannot survive a mistake; he cannot admit error because he is presented as the embodiment of truth and the representative of what is right. In the history of the Communist Party, as soon as a top leader admits error he falls from power, and his close confederates with him. In China we've seen this in examples ranging from Chen Duxiu and Ju Qiubai to Wang Ming and Hua Guofeng.

Jiang Zemin knew that if he openly admitted error he would no longer be able to retain his position in the inner circle. The more aware he became of his error, the more he needed to protect the myth of his infallibility, and the more he needed to perpetuate the error by suppressing those within the party who disagreed. In fact, one of the reasons Jiang issued the order to suppress the Falungong in the first place was to attack sympathizers within the Party and consolidate his own strength. Within the Communist Party, a leader cannot tolerate those in opposition to him because there is a possibility of them uniting against him. It has been reported that the former chairman of the State Administration for Sports, Wu Shaozu, was dismissed from his position because of his sympathy for Falungong, and that he was secretly arrested at one point, indicating the serious nature of the top-level power struggle. When Jiang Zemin said that he was "losing sleep" over the transition of power, was it related in any way to the Falungong problem?

The CCP has maintained unrelenting repression of Falungong since the official ban was imposed in 1999. First accused of being "unscientific," Falungong was then designated a "heretical cult" and ultimately a "hostile organization," more recently adding the charge of "collaborating with foreign powers." The sentences have become harsher with the crimes. Some people have observed that the nature of the Falungong has changed. But is it so unreasonable that followers should protest official oppression? If a person or group becomes "politicized" or "anti-government" through protests, does that mean that the government's oppression is justified? This is the Communist Party's logic. Officials can commit arson, but ordinary citizens cannot light a candle.

According to reports compiled by the Falungong and human rights organizations, up to the present 800 Falungong practitioners have been killed as a result of abusive treatment by the authorities, hundreds of thousands have been arbitrarily detained, more than 100,000 have been sent to Reeducation Through Labor camps, more than 500 have been sentenced to prison terms of up to 18 years, and more than 1,000 have been forcibly committed to psychiatric institutions. While some of these figures are difficult to verify, enough Falungong practitioners have been arrested and beaten by police officers at Tiananmen Square in broad daylight and in the presence of tourists and other witnesses, that it is easy to imagine even more numerous atrocities being committed behind the scenes.

When answering inquiries from parties outside of China, senior CCP officials never categorically deny that Falungong practitioners have been brutally beaten, but attribute these instances to "low professional standards" among some law enforcement officers. This is completely false. A number of

analysts have pointed out that as with the firing on unarmed protestors on June 4, 1989, the torture of Falungong practitioners could only result from orders given from the highest levels of the leadership (granted, the command could be merely implied). Because there are too many Falungong practitioners to arrest all, and because their backgrounds are too ordinary, the authorities cannot even trouble themselves to mount formal prosecutions in most cases, but instead resort to brutality (as with June 4th) in the hope that physical oppression will lead to elimination of Falungong.

As to the likelihood of success for the authorities' brutal methods, many observers believe the Falungong will outlast the CCP. As Gandhi once said, "Martyrdom is not the end of the matter, but only the beginning." A religion only really begins its existence when its followers have experienced martyrdom. Given that many traditional religions underwent suppression to the point of virtual extinction, only to revive and flourish decades later, how long will the CCP be able to maintain its suppression of the Falungong? Even with unrelenting suppression since 1999, Falungong practitioners have refused to give up their public protests. Falungong originally had at least 10 million followers, and was already deeply entrenched among the people. Now it has spread to other parts of the world, and has its own martyrs who have left behind their own witnesses and stories. The viability and future prospects of Falungong cannot be underestimated.

The Fourth Generation and Falungong

Now that the Fourth Generation has taken over the reins of power, how will they deal with Falungong? Will they correct Jiang Zemin's foolish policy, or will they accept the baton passed by Jiang and continue suppressing Falungong?

From a rational point of view, it would not be difficult for the Fourth Generation to reassess Falungong because in terms of protecting the CCP's rule, it is clear that suppression of Falungong was a mistake. Reassessing Falungong does not necessarily pose a challenge to CCP rule. The current antipathy between the Communist government and Falungong originates from Jiang Zemin; he made Falungong the government's enemy by declaring them so, and conversely if they are no longer considered the enemy, they will no longer be so. This is not without historical precedent; examples include the Christian church's relationship with Rome and Buddhism's relationship with various ancient Chinese dynasties.

Having said that, it is not easy for the Fourth Generation to declare that Jiang Zemin was in error. Given the preposterousness, the level of violence and the depravity of the suppression of Falungong up to now, if the error is admitted, will the CCP be able to preserve its power base? Small errors are easier to correct, but the larger the error, the harder to correct because of fears over the ramifications. At the Luoshan conference in 1959, wasn't it obvious to everyone present that Peng Dehuai's statement was correct and that Mao Zedong's policies were a disaster? Nonetheless, all those at the meeting stood behind Mao and violently attacked Peng. In the end even Peng himself signed his own condemnation and admitted that he had committed the error of opposing the Party. This is what is called

"acting in the interests of the group," and "defending the integrity of the Party and the leadership."

Yet, if the Fourth Generation does not dare to correct the error of suppressing Falungong, this will signify that they have taken Jiang Zemin's command upon their own shoulders and will have to keep traveling down Jiang's dead-end road of wickedness rather than taking the high road of benevolence.

In fact, the CCP doesn't believe it can actually eliminate Falungong; rather, the CCP's suppression of Falungong is a symptom of its loss of confidence in its own future. The Falungong issue, like June 4th, tells the outside world yet again that an authoritarian government must by its very nature extend and abuse its power and must depend on the suppression of the people to protect its existence. It also tells the outside world that the victimization of some is the victimization of all, and that when we protect the human rights of others we also protect our own human rights (I hope Falungong practitioners will keep this in mind). I have emphasized many times that indifference is not a crime, but is the necessary condition of crime; the existence of authoritarian power lowers our moral standards. We must brace ourselves against it, for the sake of others, and for ourselves.

Translated by Stacy Mosher

1. This is an edited and updated version of six articles originally published in *Beijing Spring*.
2. Hai Rui was a Ming Dynasty minister known for his upright character.
3. More recently there have been many cases of self-immolation by people subjected to forced relocation in urban redevelopment schemes.