

# An Occurrence on Fuyou Street

The Communist myth of Falun Gong's original sin

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Ten years ago, on April 25, 1999, while attending a Beijing wedding, I heard a rumor that a large crowd of people had gathered at Zhongnanhai, the Chinese government's compound. I phoned an acquaintance at the *South China Morning Post*. "Who are they?" I asked. "We think they are called 'Falun Gong,'" he said. "Apparently it's a huge Chinese religious movement, but we don't really know anything about them." Nobody knew much about them, but the scale of the event was shocking: 10,000 Chinese standing silently in the first mass demonstration since Tiananmen. Equally shocking was the party's ferocious crackdown, which came on July 20.

Falun Gong, at its peak a movement of 70 million people, is mostly invisible to China journalists and little more than a footnote in the West. One reason for this is that, of all the dissident groups, Falun Gong is stylistically the most impenetrable and the most Chinese: the torture displays with their strict Daoist delineations of good and evil, the traditional yellow silk costumes that suggest waving fields in an old five-year-plan newsreel, the banners that read like half-translated Chinese semaphores ("SOS URGENT RESCUE," "Bring to Justice Atrocious Police," "Falundafa open out a new era in mankind!"). Their slogans have a distinctly metallic sound to Western ears □ a Communist timbre.

Many in Washington would prefer to exclude Falun Gong from the dissident pantheon. The Tiananmen commemorations of June 4 mobilized official Washington: conferences, hearings, Nancy Pelosi's endless references to her human-rights advocacy in Shanghai, and "Where is the Tank Man?" pieces in the major newspapers. Yet when it came time to rally at the Chinese embassy on Connecticut Avenue, only 300 people showed up. Expect three miles of Falun Gong practitioners on July 20, perhaps as many as 5,000. They will dry-clean their yellow silk, purchase plane tickets, and sleep on floors so that Washingtonians can complain that they are blocking traffic. A few congressmen might briefly speak at the rally, but most will keep a safe distance. And there will be no political price for nonattendance, because there will be little press. Covering a Falun Gong parade is the bake-sale beat.

This is curious, considering Falun Gong's achievements: They are the only dissident group that has broken through the Chinese Internet firewall on a mass scale (Iranian dissenters use Falun Gong-designed systems to communicate and surf the Web freely). Until quite recently, they operated the only independent television station on air in China, broadcast into the country 24 hours daily. They print the only dissident daily newspaper, maintain the only significant shortwave radio presence, and on and on.

Or consider Falun Gong from a bleeds-leads perspective. Each of the 300 who came to the Chinese Embassy on June 4 was metaphorically carrying perhaps three or four victims of Tiananmen Square on his shoulders; on the Falun Gong side, we have only begun to assess the damage. They have suffered more than 3,000 confirmed deaths by state torture, abuse, and neglect. According to my current research, a minimum of 10,000 Falun Gong have been killed for their organs. I suspect the final tally will go far beyond that, because the practice is ongoing. So let's speculate that every one of those 5,000 Falun Gong practitioners is carrying ten, perhaps even twenty, corpses on his back □ murdered in labor camps, detention centers, psychiatric hospitals, or on operating tables, usually at the hands of a military surgeon. Quantitative analysis by my colleague Leeshai Lemish demonstrates that American media attention to Falun Gong fell in almost exact proportion to rising fatalities. So as we think about the anniversary of Falun Gong's suppression, we must acknowledge that the Western response has given the Chinese Communists a free hand. And the failure starts with the Western media's acceptance of the party's interpretation of April 25, 1999.

It is hard even to refer to the episode without endorsing Beijing's interpretation of events: Out of the clear blue sky, on April 25, 10,000 majestically disciplined Falun Gong practitioners "surrounded" (that's AP and Reuters) or "besieged" (that's AFP) Zhongnanhai, blindsiding the Chinese leadership. The idea that Falun Gong besieged Zhongnanhai in a threatening way is a direct transmission of the Communist-party line. It is

repeated in scholarly works on Falun Gong history, and is regarded almost as the movement's original sin. Even practitioners writing in Falun Gong publications □ perhaps feeling the history is too hard to explain □ often refer to April 25 as a mass "gathering at Zhongnanhai." They treat the word "demonstration" as if it were dirty, which to the Chinese Communist party it is. Whatever you call the demonstration, it was not specifically targeted at Zhongnanhai, much less was it a siege of the compound. Regardless, for the Chinese audience that Falun Gong is trying to reach, the party still owns the language and the history.

But surely not in the West? Recall that Henry Kissinger's statement on Tiananmen □ "No government in the world would have tolerated having the main square of its capital occupied for eight weeks by tens of thousands of demonstrators" □ was echoed by Charles Freeman, the Obama administration's recent nominee to chair the U.S. intelligence council. If the foreign-policy elite talk this way about the students of Tiananmen Square, imagine how they view an obscure Eastern revival movement: *Well, that's China, and those Falun Gong were asking for it.* Scholars might phrase it a little differently. In their telling, the suppression of Falun Gong began as an action-reaction phenomenon and ended as a tragedy: *Falun Gong are very good at making mistakes, aren't they?*

But it is difficult to believe that they asked to be martyred or that they were given a signal from their spiritual leader to run like lemmings into the labor camps and operating rooms of China. If you do believe that, you should review the history and interview the people who participated on April 25 and the events leading up to it.

Chinese society is often compared to a pyramid, an image that suggests permanence and imperial grandeur. But under Communism it has been more like a rocket in the early days of space exploration: ambitious, jerry-rigged, and potentially explosive. At the bottom is a vast booster filled with masses of peasants and impoverished workers. Moving upward through the second and third stages, one finds the intellectuals, the military, the entrepreneurs and nouveaux riches, and, at the top, a tiny capsule containing the party. From the party's perspective, Falun Gong, with its emphasis on traditional Chinese morality, seemed to spread through the rocket like an electrical fire. By 1996, only four years after the movement began, it had made it to the capsule, and the smoke was attracting serious attention. The response: Founder Li Hongzhi's book, *Zhuan Falun*, was banned, and Li left for America.

The party continued to watch Falun Gong, but no immediate repression followed. In early 1998 Amy Lee, a well-connected practitioner from boomtown Guangzhou, returned to her parents' home in Shandong for a visit. Opening the door, she saw something that spooked her: Her parents, both active practitioners, had removed every Falun Gong poster and portrait of Li Hongzhi from their walls. All the books were gone. Employing a sixth sense developed over decades of Communist rule, her parents, like animals before a storm, had gone underground.

In 1999, the Public Security Bureau estimated that Falun Gong had attracted 70 million practitioners, 5 million more people than belonged to the Communist party itself. It was at that point that a physicist published an article in a Tianjin Normal University journal portraying Falun Gong as a dangerous cult. China isn't the West, and these things aren't random: The physicist, He Zuoxiu, is the brother-in-law of Luo Gan, at that time the head of public security, and the Tianjin Normal University journal answers to the state. The article was a flare in the night sky, a signal and trial of the party's designs.

In China, when you see such a signal and know you are targeted, there are two options. You can keep quiet □ and probably get crushed. Or you can stand up □ and still probably get crushed. But Falun Gong takes refuting lies to be a central part of its morality. And it had a method for doing this: show up en masse (it's easy to chop the head of a single religious leader, harder with thousands of believers), stay silent, and simply stand around until someone talks to you. It had employed this method already against earlier negative reports □ newspaper articles in 1997, a Beijing television segment in 1998.

Prefiguring the events of April 25, about 5,000 practitioners staged a silent demonstration on April 22 at Tianjin Normal University, asking for a dialogue or a retraction of the physicist's article. The police were called in, and Officer Hao Fengjun was one of them. He says his "entire police force was suddenly maneuvered to the college, told to enforce martial law and close off the area." When he arrived at the

scene, he says, "we all realized that it was nothing like what had been described to us □ Falun Gong looking for a fight, disturbing public order, and so on. But we had no choice." Indeed, the video surveillance shows nothing more than people sitting around, but the police nonetheless beat and arrested 45 practitioners. Those who tried to reason with the officials and the police were told that the matter had been taken up by the Public Security Ministry, under the central government, and were instructed that they should go Beijing to appeal.

In the two days following the Tianjin arrests, the term "appeal" spread widely among Falun Gong practitioners □ not by central command, but simply by word of mouth. It had an explicit meaning: the National Appeals Office, a safety valve against corruption, the only location in China where a citizen can legally complain about the government. Everyone knew that the arrests in Tianjin had set a frightening precedent, and some believed it was better to stay home □ Master Li had said more than once that practitioners should avoid politics. Others argued that truth had to be defended, and that what they were considering wasn't a demonstration but a legal protocol. On April 24, thousands of practitioners set off for Beijing. Some made out their wills the night before.

They were followed. A group from Jilin Province was intercepted at a bus station by a special police division and told: Go home, the Tianjin problem is resolved. Others were intercepted in Shenyang by a policeman who had carefully memorized phrases from *Zhuan Falun*, the better to facilitate communication. One group of 20 took an overnight train from the northeastern city of Harbin. As they stepped onto a Beijing platform that swarmed with practitioners, a phalanx of policemen firmly directed them back on the train.

Not surprisingly, the location of the National Appeals Office wasn't well publicized. Not a single practitioner that I have interviewed could place it precisely on a map. The mysteriousness of its location, near the bull's-eye in the sensitive political center of Beijing, is central to the story. The western border of Zhongnanhai, which lies adjacent to the Forbidden City, is defined by a long, tree-lined avenue, Fuyou Street, which bulges slightly, as if accommodating the power of the walled leadership compound. To the north, Fuyou ends at Wenjin Street, the northern border of Zhongnanhai. To the south, Fuyou intersects Chang'an Avenue, Beijing's central east-west thoroughfare. Some practitioners thought the National Appeals Office office was near the Wenjin Street intersection. Others thought it was closer to Chang'an. But most believed that it was in the *hutongs*, the labyrinth of narrow alleys right off of Fuyou Street to the west. The entrance to those *hutongs* is located across from the guarded western entrance to Zhongnanhai.

As April 25 dawned, Zeng Zheng, a young consultant and Falun Gong practitioner, pulled her bike into Fuyou Street and noticed that something was a little off. Zeng had worked at Zhongnanhai briefly and knew the security intimately. Normally there were so many guards that it was difficult to enter the street without being questioned. Now, just before 7 a.m., practitioners were strolling down Fuyou Street, chatting and looking around for the appeals office as if they were in a shopping mall. But a line of police stood on the southern end. The police ordered the Falun Gong to go back up the block and stand at the entrance to the *hutong*, across from Zhongnanhai's western gate. The Appeals Office would open at 8, Zeng understood. "They were very well prepared," she says. "They were expecting us."

At 7:30, a young couple on their way to the Appeals Office passed by the moat on the eastern side of the Forbidden City. They saw a large detachment of Red Army soldiers sitting in jeeps, bayonets fixed, facing towards Fuyou. By 8, Luo Hongwei, a young newlywed, had just taken her place close to Zhongnanhai's western gate. Perhaps everything would be okay, she thought, exulting in the practitioner's discipline. "There were a lot of people, a lot of people," she says. "It's hard to avoid things' becoming chaotic. But the cars driving past were going *swish-swish*." By 8:30, an elderly practitioner who asked that I not use her name □ let's call her Auntie Dee □ made her way into the intersection of Chang'an and Fuyou. The street was now packed with practitioners, mainly country folk, plainly dressed and wearing cheap cloth shoes. As she watched them mill about, carrying their rations of dried food or crouching and eating, the anxiety she had been controlling suddenly swelled in a vivid moment of *déjà vu*. Ten years ago, she had felt the tanks thunder toward students as they squatted and ate and protested □ peacefully, but they were shot anyway.



*A peaceful start at Zhongnanhai, April 25, 1999*

AFP

People were still pressed together in front of the western gate of Zhongnanhai. Yet it was becoming obvious from the enormous police presence moving in from the *hutongs* that the Appeals Office, wherever it was, wouldn't be opening □ not today. Auntie Dee pushed through the crowd as quickly as she could, not daring to stand in front of Zhongnanhai, straining to keep her eyes from even glancing at it. Eventually she reached Fuyou's northern intersection with Wenjin Street. People were flooding in from the northeast now, and she could see policemen carefully herding practitioners along Wenjin directly opposite the northern exposure of Zhongnanhai. A friend of Auntie Dee's □ let's call her Aunt Sha □ remembers it well: "They just told us, go this way, go this way, and we followed."

While buses and police cars cruised around the intersection, Auntie Dee suddenly realized that video cameras had been set up at regular intervals and were filming them. Sick with fear now, she tried to move back from the front row: "I thought if they caught me on film, they would come for me later." (She was right: Auntie Dee and Aunt Sha would ultimately be sentenced to labor camp for three years. Zeng Zheng would get two, and Luo Hongwei's husband was released from prison last year.)

It was now nearly 9 a.m. The stage was set for the kabuki performance that followed: Premier Zhu Rongji's conciliatory public appearance and Jiang Zemin's smoldering circle around Zhongnanhai in his smoked-glass limousine. No record, film, or plausible account suggests that the Falun Gong practitioners did anything even faintly provocative during the entire episode, which continued for 16 hours. No littering, smoking, chanting, or speaking to reporters. When one practitioner suggested that they take turns to go eat or drink, others said no, definitely not □ if we drink, we'll have to go to the bathroom, and that could disturb those living or working in the area. Even by the Communist party's hair-trigger standards, there was no pretext to the use of the troops waiting by the Forbidden City. The evening announcement that the Tianjin practitioners would be released was greeted with quiet relief. The demonstrators left feeling optimistic. The next day Aunt Sha read the official media reports. "They said: 'Falun Gong gathered at Zhongnanhai.' They didn't say we *surrounded* Zhongnanhai. They also said that there is freedom to practice or not practice as one wishes," she says. The myth of a disorderly demonstration or riot would not be manufactured until later, in official media reports and in an hour-long film portraying the demonstration as a terrorist act. Because the Western media know so little of Falun Gong, this fiction survives in accounts of April 25.

The rest, I think you know, or can guess: constant reassurances from the party that everything was normal, that the existing policy toward Falun Gong □ essentially, don't ask, don't tell □ was still operational. Meanwhile, practitioners' phones were tapped, spies appeared at practice sites, warnings were selectively issued at workplaces, and the party created the 6-10 Office (named for its formation on June 10), one of the most terrifying secret police agencies ever created. The machine of the crackdown was ready to be switched on, and the "ringleaders" of April 25 were arrested on July 20.

In response to the July 20 crackdown, practitioners came back to Fuyou Street on July 21. Luo Hongwei was among them: "July 21 was like April 25. We lined up on the street waiting for an official to come so we could talk to them. But no officials came. Instead these huge trucks, one after another, came with police officers and took us away." The crackdown was justified with the myth of a day of infamy □ April 25 □ a fiction concocted as a pretext to stage an unprecedented persecution, one that continues to this day.

One final point. Officer Hao Fengjun went to work at the 6-10 Office in 2000. "Our monitor room already had a comprehensive record and data on the Falun Gong practitioners," he says. "These things are not something that can be done and collected in just one or two years." According to a former district-level official □ call him Minister X □ the party's decision to eliminate Falun Gong, and its preparation for that task, happened long before any ban was made public. It was discussed explicitly in party meetings. Jiang Zemin could not resolve the tension that followed the Tiananmen slaughter except by creating a new target, and Falun Gong was it. At least one source claims a communiqué to this effect was being circulated in Qinghua University as early as 1998. No real evidence has emerged that Zhu Rongji, or any other party leader, put up any serious opposition to that decision then, or indeed at any other time. Minister X, for his part, was told to stop granting business licenses to practitioners. April 25, then, was simply the unfolding of an elaborate bait-and-switch, with Falun Gong as the patsy.

Perhaps that term could just as well be applied to the West. It's been ten years. Did the party really mean to kill so many? Perhaps not. It is prone to believing its rhetoric.

So are Western reporters. The party will not fire itself, and it is time for the West to engage the reality of China. A post-Communist civil society in China will include a role for Falun Gong, and we should better understand the real history of the movement. For today, it's enough to dispel at least one myth that feeds the misplaced idea that the West has no business commenting on an obscure family quarrel. Falun Gong did not start this war. The Chinese Communist party did. And the party should be held fully accountable for the results.

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