

Banned in China, Falun Gong

FOLLOWERS ENDANGER THEIR LIVES IN THE EAST, WHILE THE PRACTICE IS FINDING A GROWING BASE IN PHILADELPHIA



A Falun Gong group practices atop the steps of the Philadelphia Art Museum. The group usually practices in Rittenhouse Square.

Falun Gong, a spiritual practice that features slow exercises and meditation, has swept the globe rapidly in a mere eight years of existence. With more than 100 million adherents worldwide, Falun Gong — also known as Falun Dafa — is highly regarded for its physical and spiritual benefits.

In 1999, more than 70 million people in China alone practiced Falun Gong, which has no formal organization and whose volunteers give classes for free.

But, according to Danny Schechter's book "Falun Gong's Challenge to China," the

Chinese government sees it as a cult, a threat to the communist nation's very fabric.

IN 1999 — just months before a 50th birthday celebration for the People's Republic of China in Beijing's Tiananmen Square — President Jiang Zemin banned Falun Gong and called for founder Li Hongzhi to be recalled from exile in the United States and arrested as soon as possible.

A regime that had reportedly supported Falun Gong because it helped reduce health care

costs turned on a dime and started to imprison — and even torture — adherents who resist-

ed "re-education" efforts.

Despite the Chinese government's frantic efforts to suppress and eventually purge Falun Gong from the Chinese population, a few adherents snuck into Tiananmen Square just a few hours before the start of the Republic's massive birthday celebration. But, unlike the pro-Democracy protesters of 1989, they were non-political and only wanted to be left alone.

THE CHINESE government was anticipating Muslim terrorists and political protesters in Tiananmen Square for the Oct. 1 birthday celebration, but it perceived a real threat from the

practitioners of Falun Gong. The practitioners held a peaceful vigil that day.

The standoff between the Chinese government and Falun Gong's adherents is the latest example of China's long history of conflict between politics and religion, said practitioner Shiyu Zhou, an assistant professor of computer and information science at the University of Pennsylvania.

Just what is Falun Gong? What makes it so appealing to its legions of adherents? And how can a spiritual practice that adherents believe makes them better people be considered such a threat?

LI HONGZHI founded Falun Gong in Northeastern China in 1992. He taught in China until 1995 and started teaching in Sweden that same year. He came to New York City and Houston, Texas, in 1996 and reportedly lives in exile in the New York borough of Queens.

According to a pamphlet on the practice, Falun Gong is an ancient form of "Qigong" (pronounced "chee-gong"), a method of "refining" the body and mind through slow, gentle exercises. It's similar to tai-chi, but differs in that its teachings emphasize "self-cultivation," or self-improvement.

"KEY TO the practice are the principles of Truthfulness, Compassion and Tolerance — the fundamental nature of the universe," the booklet says. "Through studying these principles, along with the exercises, practitioners strive to become better people by cultivating themselves according to the nature of the universe."

Jingduan Yang, a resident in psychiatry at Thomas Jefferson

University Hospital, pointed out that Falun Gong is unique in that, unlike ancient practices such as Zen Buddhism, its founder is still alive and still writing about it. That gives practitioners "the truth," unspoiled by misinterpretations of spiritual texts, he said.

FALUN GONG is also attractive to many because it can be practiced for any length of time, from just a few minutes to about an hour, Yang said. Practitioners can exercise alone but prefer to meet in groups.

Though it's said to help people overcome addictions to alcohol, tobacco and other substances, doctors don't actively promote or prescribe Falun Gong, Yang said. Still, he recommends it to some patients.

Though the health effects are a "side benefit," Yang said people who seek Falun Gong aren't encouraged to use it as a medical treatment because they can become emotionally attached to it, which would undermine its spiritual benefits.

PRACTITIONER Matt Kutolowski, director of the writing program at Swarthmore College, noted that Americorps, the federal government's domestic counterpart to the Peace Corps, recently had Falun Gong workshops for its medical staff.

Kutolowski's wife, Emily, said that just a few weeks of practicing Falun Gong eliminated her chronic back pain and let her play lacrosse and other sports. She also credited the practice for helping her deal with stress.

"A lot of it was stress," she stated. "In general, though, my health has improved. The dentist even told me my gums

Gong finds home in U.S.

looked better."

TERRI MORSE of Media, Delaware County, gives Falun Gong classes and said the practice helped her defeat the dreaded Lyme disease, which attacks the joints, nervous system and other parts of the body. Suffering from aches, stiffness and low energy, she tried herbal medicine, "which just skimmed the surface," she said.

"If there was going to be any change, it was going to be on a much deeper level," Morse said. "I started to live by these principles (truthfulness, compassion and tolerance). I had always intellectualized, but I learned how to incorporate them into my everyday life and relationships."

Morse said she has no more symptoms of Lyme disease and that she can now sit on the floor for seated exercise, whereas before, sitting on the floor would hurt and she would need help getting up.

FALUN GONG also helps reverse the negative effects of aging, Morse said, noting that most practitioners in China, at least, are middle-aged women.

Zhou said the Chinese government endorsed Falun Gong because many of its officials practiced it and because the positive health effects saved the government money on prescription drugs and other health programs.

The trouble began, Zhou said, when the government wanted to "institutionalize" the practice, profit from it and use it as a tool for spreading propaganda. Li Hongzhi resisted the government's efforts to appropriate Falun Gong, he said,

METROFACTS/ FALUN GONG WEB SITES AND LINKS

- www.mindspring.com/~falun/home1.html
 - www.voicesofchinese.org/falun/surveypt.shtml (opinions of the Chinese on the practice)
 - www.gospel.com.net/apologues/ticsindex/foz.html (a skeptic's take on Falun Gong)
 - www.let.leidenuniv.nl/bth/falun.htm (an academic paper)
- For Falun Gong instructions and online books, click onto:
- www.amazon.com (also find the excerpt from "Falun Gong's Challenge to China")
 - www.barnesandnoble.com
 - www.falundafa.org
- For more information, e-mail: info@faluninfo.net, call 1-888-842-4797, fax 650-558-5960 or write to the Falun Dafa Information Center, 331 West 57th St., Suite 409, New York, NY 10019.

adding that the government resented the practice because it has no organization and charges no fees for classes or literature.

Chinese leaders went so far as to accuse Hongzhi of undermining the government and social order, Zhou said.

THE GOVERNMENT'S crackdown is symptomatic of China's longtime history of suppressing religious and spiritual practices that promote individual thought. Falun Gong's strong popularity is borne out by images of adherents flocking to city parks in the mornings to do exercises — a picture that is threatening to officials of the communist government, Zhou said.

"China has never tolerated

large groups out of their control," he said. "They resent any group that gathers in any large number."

(The Chinese government banned Zhong Gong, another Qigong movement, in February 2000. Ironically, a Chinese newspaper reported that Jiang had consulted a Zhong Gong master to cure arthritis and back problems.)

Since 1999, according to a fact sheet released by the Falun Dafa Information Center in New York, the Chinese government has detained or arrested some 50,000 adherents, sent more than 10,000 to forced labor camps without trial, illegally imprisoned more than 1,000 in mental hospitals and tortured more than 130 to death.

THE CHINESE government reportedly extended its crackdown against forbidden groups last year by burning "house churches," or those in which clandestine Christian services are held, Yang said.

These abuses are evoking outrage from governments and human rights groups around the world and in the United States. In November 1999, the U.S. Congress passed a joint resolution condemning Chinese oppression and, one month later, President Clinton issued a statement denouncing the crackdown on Falun Gong.

"Its [the government's] targets are not political dissidents, and their practices and beliefs are unfamiliar to us," Clinton said. "But the principle still surely must be the same: freedom of conscience and freedom of association."

ALL TEXT BY MATT HASSON

Family fears for son's welfare in Chinese jail

Published reports in the New York Times, Washington Post, Time magazine and other international media only go so far in illustrating the physical and emotional torture, imprisonment, forced labor and other horrors of the Chinese government's crackdown on Falun Gong.

But at Swarthmore College recently, a Chinese couple gave a first-hand account of their son's imprisonment at the hands of Chinese officials.

Ning Fang Chen, a flautist, and her husband, Rhutang Chen, a cellist, are retired members of China's Central Philharmonic Orchestra. They described the experience of their son, Gong, who has been in a forced labor camp since last June. Gong, 29, a company manager, hasn't been seen or heard from since December.

Appeal to government

It began in 1999 when Gong and thousands of other Falun Gong adherents went to the Chinese government's Appeal Bureau in Beijing to protest the crackdown. Gong, like his fellow petitioners, wanted to tell government officials about the positive physical and spiritual effects of Falun Gong and defend founder Li Hongzhi against accusations of charging money for classes and literature.

Gong was arrested and detained for 30 days, after which his parents went to the

Appeal Bureau to register their protest. They saw police arrest many practitioners before they could even enter the office.

Police crackdown

In June 2000, police broke into the Chens' house, ransacked it and arrested Gong for no apparent cause. The Chens have never received an explanation.

"The police wanted to charge him with a crime," said an angry Ning Fang Chen, who also was questioned. She and her husband didn't hear from Gong for four days. Later, Gong was sent to the Tuan He Labor Camp, but, again, officials gave no reason for his imprisonment.

The Chens said that every practitioner who was imprisoned was told to repent or show regret for practicing Falun Gong, to pledge never again to practice it and to inform government officials about fellow practitioners.

Prisoner mistreatment

Gong, who would not comply with these demands, was deprived of sleep for several consecutive days and, after December, wasn't allowed to have visitors. Before, visits had been permitted once a month.

The Chens voiced hope that the U.S. government and international human rights organizations will be able to help Gong and thousands of other Falun Gong practitioners — including a few U.S. citizens — leave prison.

Exercises believed to bring about physical, spiritual well-being

Falun Gong comprises five exercises that are believed to have profound physical, mental and spiritual benefits.

The exercises incorporate slow movement and meditation, with little impact on bones, joints and muscles. Four of the exercises are done standing, one sitting.

Five Falun Gong practitioners, led by instructor Terri Morse of Media, Delaware County, demonstrated four of the exercises at Swarthmore College recently. Practitioners Matt Kutolowski, director of Swarthmore College's writing program, and Jingduan Yang, a resident in psychiatry at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, narrated the demonstration, which was done to a recording of a teacher giving instructions in Chinese.

The first, called "Buddha Showing a Thousand Hands," features slow stretching motions with the feet planted firmly and the eyes closed.

"It's intended to open all of the

energy channels in the body," Kutolowski said. "The movements are very specific but very gentle and easy to learn. It's a form of technology, refining the body. We call it 'cultivation of mind and body.'"

'Purify' the body

The group then demonstrated "Penetrating the Two Cosmic Extremes," the third of the five exercises, which is designed to "purify" the body.

"During this, the mind is clear and relaxed," Kutolowski narrated.

"There's no concentration on anything specific, no breath control. It's a very clear and natural state of mind. One doesn't have that sense of a workout that we have in the West."

The "Falun Heavenly Circuit Exercise," similar to Yoga and Tai Chi, is supposed to "rectify all abnormal conditions in the body" and "circulate energy widely." Then, sitting on the floor, the group did "Way of Strengthening

Divine Powers," which "refines both body and mind through deep meditation" and "strengthens divine powers and energy potency."

Practitioners sit in the "full Lotus position," both feet tucked above the thighs, to "adjust" the body and make it "supple."

Exercises involve some meditation but practitioners don't go into a trance; they're aware of everything they do, Kutolowski said.

'Rejuvenating' experience

One doesn't have to be in prime physical condition — or young — to practice Falun Gong, Yang said, adding that older adherents find it "rejuvenating."

"People found out that their stress level is dramatically reduced and then find themselves to be energized," he said. "If you talk to any Falun Gong practitioner, you'll find that no matter what they did before, they're in better harmony with the world around them and live healthier lives."



Ying Tang of Willow Grove practices the Great Heavenly Circuit exercise during a session at Kohler Park in Horsham. The exercise enables the energy of the human body to circulate over large areas, practitioners believe.



Allen Wu, right, and Lijian Wen practice the double hand movement of Falun Gong exercise three, "Penetrating Two Cosmic Extremes," at Kohler Park in Horsham Township.