Making Sense of Today's China

Why Falun Gong is the Missing Piece to the Puzzle

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Few outside China have much knowledge of it. Those who do, have a vague sense that it's old news. But if you truly grasp this issue, insight is shed on some of the most intractable paradoxes of present day China:

- **Why** does China still produce so many tainted products despite never-ending campaigns against corruption?

- **Why** is the Communist Party investing billions in internet censorship, surveillance cameras, and labor camps while schools and hospitals go without desperately needed resources?

- **Why** are China's leaders so reticent to loosen their grip over the judiciary and media, even at the cost of their credibility in the public's eyes?

The answer to this puzzle begins in 1992, exactly 20 years ago, in a humble schoolhouse in northeast China. That day, Mr. Li Hongzhi, the latest in a lineage of spiritual masters dating back thousands of years, gave his first public teaching of Falun Gong.

A force for good

Falun Gong was different from other *qigong* practices being taught. While it did include slow-moving energy exercises, it also involved something more—teachings that guided students on a path of moral self-improvement and discovery in their daily lives.

At the core of these teachings were three principles and the desire to align one's self with them in thought and action—Truthfulness, Compassion, and Tolerance (*Zhen* 真 *Shan* 善 *Ren* 忍).

The practice spread quickly by word of mouth, as people saw the lives of those around them changing. Sickly grandmothers transformed into the epitome of health. Couples nearing divorce saved their marriage. Within seven years, an estimated 100 million people had taken up Falun Gong.

The impact extended beyond the family circle. Policemen who learned Falun Gong would stop taking bribes, and workers would cease stealing from their factory. Though the country was still under the Communist Party's thumb, this critical mass was beginning to truly stabilize Chinese society.

A fateful decision

This trajectory dramatically reversed in July 1999, when then-Communist Party chief Jiang Zemin launched a campaign to eradicate Falun Gong from the face of China.

NOT JUST LATTÉS AND IPHONES: To truly know today's China, one has to look beyond the Starbucks and Apple stores to a brutal campaign that has turned right and wrong upside down.

Imagine an effort to eradicate a practice followed by 1 in every 12 citizens.

Jiang was jealous and fearful of how something outside the Party's control could inspire tens of millions of people, even if it was for the good of society. Experts at the time said the move was Jiang's personal decision, even obsession.

In going after Falun Gong, Jiang launched an assault on a core contingent of mainstream society. Imagine what was entailed by an effort to eradicate a practice followed by 1 in every 12 citizens.

Jiang needed massive propaganda campaigns to demonize Falun Gong. New labor camps and makeshift detention centers to hold the huge influx of detainees. An extralegal police task force to implement the plan. And an internet censorship apparatus to stop people from learning the truth about what was happening.

Repressing virtue, rewarding vice

Besides the human and financial cost of the campaign, it also tore at the moral fabric of Chinese society. As the words Truthfulness, Compassion, and Tolerance became taboo, upholding these values became difficult and dangerous—Falun Gong practitioner or not—amidst a ferocious atmosphere of lies, torture, and discrimination.

Officials who actively participated in the torture and killing of Falun Gong adherents were promoted. Family members were forced to turn against each other. Members of the public were offered cash rewards for turning in their neighbors.

Meanwhile, those who refused to collaborate or stood up against the campaign were fired, abducted, imprisoned, and sometimes killed. Even attorneys and honest government officials weren't spared.

Hundreds of thousands of hard-working, upright people from every profession and of every age were sent to labor camps for "re-education." It was a domestic brain drain—and moral crisis—of staggering proportions.

Here to stay

Despite all of Jiang's efforts, Falun Gong would not disappear. The ideas it espoused and the benefits it offered were too compelling to be erased—even under the relentless brutality of a well-oiled authoritarian machine.

Falun Gong practitioners persisted in their faith, with many resuming the practice after release from custody.

More than that, practitioners responded with a massive, innovative and nonviolent movement to encourage other Chinese to see through the Party's lies and brutality—as they pertained to Falun Gong, and beyond.

Homemade leaflets were made, DVDs were burned, banners were hung, tools to circumvent internet censorship were developed. *(See "Unlikely Heroes," page 15.)*

Today, after over a decade of oppression, some 20 to 40 million Falun Gong practitioners actively circulate information in China or send it abroad. In turn, investment in surveillance cameras and tracking equipment is skyrocketing in China as the Party redoubles its efforts to detain them.

Meanwhile, distorted promotion criteria bred lawlessness and corruption throughout society, from the food sector to the medical industry.

At a time when Chinese citizens are protesting daily for more accountability and freedom, Party leaders dare not loosen their grip. To do so, they fear, would lead to their crimes against Falun Gong being revealed and their best weapons—imprisonment, propaganda, and censorship—neutered.

For those outside China, these dynamics present a dilemma. Do we engage with the Communist Party powers that be in order to protect short-term interests and a superficial appearance of stability?

Or, do we resist the Party's co-optation tactics and do our utmost to preserve a force that offers the prospects of long-term hope, stability, and prosperity for China?

At this critical moment in history, China's future may seem unpredictable. But one thing is certain: one can't go wrong by standing up for the cause of Truthfulness, Compassion, and Tolerance.

Did You Know?

- By 1999, 100 million people in China were practicing Falun Gong, slowly stabilizing society
- The persecution unleashed against them that year reversed this trend, spawning corruption, torture, and a host of intractable problems that will remain unresolved until the campaign ends
- The Falun Gong story offers critical insight into events in China, including the recent infighting in the Communist Party's top ranks

UNEXPECTED MESSAGE: Residents of Jiamusi in northeast China awoke in July 2011 to find this banner reminding them: "Truthfulness, Compassion, Tolerance is good. Falun Dafa is good."