Think You Know About Falun Gong? Think Again ...

Four critical elements of the Falun Gong story reveal just how far China's Communist Party will go to crush its perceived enemies

Before picking up this newspaper, you most likely knew Falun Gong as a group of meditators that are being imprisoned and tortured in China. That's true, of course. But without understanding four critical points, it's difficult to fathom the lengths of deceit, manipulation, and violence that Party officials have gone to in their efforts to crush this peaceful group.

Whether you're new to the Falun Gong story or a veteran China watcher, one aspect or another of these four developments has likely already touched your life or will at some point. We offer these details to help you navigate the complex and confusing world of Communist Party propaganda and cover-ups.

1 Self-immolation Hoax on Tiananmen Square

On January 23, 2001, five people allegedly set themselves on fire in Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Within hours, state-run media were claiming that the self-immolators were Falun Gong practitioners.

For days, media aired grisly footage of the victims and blamed Falun Gong teachings for the tragedy. The problem is that a wealth of evidence suggests that the entire incident was staged—a sophisticated propaganda stunt contrived to demonize Falun Gong.

What were some of the questionable points?

- A *Washington Post* investigation found that two of the self-immolators had never practiced Falun Gong.
- An award-winning documentary showed, via slow-motion footage, that one of the immolators collapsed after being hit over the head, in fact, by a policeman.
- In the state-run media reports, a policeman stands next to an immolator, as if waiting for him to finish speaking. He then casually places a blanket over him to extinguish a non-existent flame, giving the scene an extremely staged feel.
- Falun Gong's teachings explicitly prohibit killing—including suicide—making it unlikely the immolators were actual practitioners. Quotes said by the immolators in state-run TV coverage were not, in fact, attributable to Falun Gong teachings.

But why would the CCP stage such an elaborate hoax?

With 100 million believers, Falun Gong was by 1999 a respected household name, making many Chinese hesitant to wholeheartedly support the Party's persecution of these people.

By staging the "self-immolation" and repeatedly airing the footage on state-run television, the Party led many Chinese who had sympathized with Falun Gong to now believe practitioners were crazy or even dangerous.

This in effect made it easier for the Party to abduct practitioners, take them for brainwashing, and torture them.

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WAITING FOR A CUE: In a poorly acted scene, a policeman stands waiting beside a supposed self-immolating Falun Gong practitioner. This is just one of dozens of suspicious points in this horrific scam.

LINING UP FOR JUSTICE: Falun Gong practitioners stand quietly in Beijing on April 25, 1999. This historic, peaceful appeal against escalating harassment was later re-characterized by state media as a "siege" in an attempt to justify the party's campaign of repression.

2 Peaceful Appeal Falsely Blamed for Persecution

It was April 25, 1999. Some 10–20,000 Chinese gathered early in the morning in Beijing, young and old. All were practitioners of Falun Gong.

They had come to China's central appeals office to ask the government to stop its escalating harassment and intimidation of practitioners—including the beating and arrest of over 40 in the nearby city of Tianjin the day before—and to allow them freedom to practice openly without threat.

Those assembled stood in an orderly line. Some meditated, others chatted quietly.

It was the largest and most peaceful protest in Beijing in years.

The Chinese premier came out to meet with Falun Gong representatives. That evening, the group's concerns were met and everyone went home.

The problem was, then-Party head Jiang Zemin had other plans. He soon ordered the establishment of the 6-10 Office (named for its June 10th creation)—a special Party police force tasked with overseeing the effort to wipe out Falun Gong. The following month, the massive persecution campaign was launched.

When the state-run media's propaganda apparatus went into full swing, the April 25th gathering was quickly re-cast. It was not depicted as the peaceful appeal that it was, but rather as Falun Gong "laying siege" to the central government compound. This account was used to portray Falun Gong as a provocative political group, and to justify the horrific persecution just unleashed.

This "blame-the-victim" framing of the persecution has spread beyond China's borders, and informs some reporting on Falun Gong. But in truth, the behind-the-scenes repression of Falun Gong had already been underway since 1996, and the large-scale persecution campaign was soon to be launched either way. The April 25 appeal became a convenient scapegoat. It was certainly not the cause.