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Following His Leader

On Falun Gong, Hong Kong's boss once again unthinkingly apes Beijing

WILL HONG KONG FOLLOW BEIJING'S LEAD AND BAN Falun Gong? The territory's leaders are sending out mixed signals. Last week, Sir Donald Tsang, head of Hong Kong's civil service, appeared to assert that the government would not outlaw the group. But his words were carefully ambiguous. And just days earlier, his boss, Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa, stood up before the territory's Legislative Council and declared: "There is no doubt Falun Gong is an evil cult." That statement has been broadly interpreted as a precursor for a tough anticult bill. And if such a bill is submitted, the legislature, packed with people who follow Beijing's dictates, will surely pass it, which would further damage the "One Country, Two Systems" principle through which Hong Kong is constitutionally meant to operate under its own political, economic and social systems.

Despite Tung's role as Hong Kong's top representative, when it comes to matters on which Beijing has pronounced judgment, he consistently toes the party line. In his statement, he said Hong Kong does not need new legislation "at this point" but added: "We must monitor Falun Gong very carefully." Once again, Tung seems to think patriotic behavior means echoing the wishes of China's President Jiang Zemin, who wants Falun Gong quashed. The anticult arguments that Tung and his senior officials have advanced

are forced and fallacious. Tung has said the self-immolation in Tiananmen Square of "cultists" who Beijing says are Falun Gong followers reminds him of Jonestown, 1978. A senior member of his Cabinet associated Falun Gong with Japan's Aum Shinrikyo sect, whose leaders unleashed a deadly gas attack in 1995 in a Tokyo subway, killing 12 people.

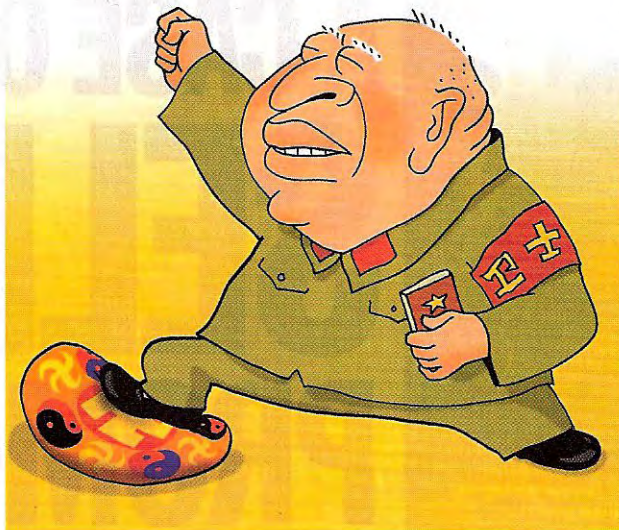
What similarity is there between Falun Gong and Jonestown or Aum Shinrikyo? Almost none. What happened in Jonestown was mass murder, not suicide: Jim Jones misled his followers into drinking poison and 913 died. As for Aum Shinrikyo, a Japanese court has refused the government's request to ban the sect though it has handed down death sentences to two leaders found guilty of the gas attack. The court made the distinction between violators of existing laws and citizens' constitutional freedom to practice faith, however unpopular those beliefs may be to others. To link Falun Gong with these groups is to incite hate.

Self-immolation is a shocking act. The motivation is of-

ten complex, not subject to simplistic generalization. Take the case of Thich Quang Duc. In Saigon, on June 11, 1963, the venerable 73-year-old Buddhist monk sat down in a busy intersection and had two monks pour gasoline over him. Thich lit a match, clasped his hands in prayer and burned himself to death. The horrifying dignity of his protest against government persecution stunned the world. Other monks followed in subsequent self-immolations, protesting against persistent religious suppression by the minority Catholic government in a nation with a long Buddhist past.

Would Tung have called Buddhists "evil cultists" because some monks had committed self-immolation? Would he have banned Buddhism? Before answering, he and his supporters would do well to ponder the following. Communism is as alien to China as Catholicism was to Vietnam—

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both are European in origin. By contrast, Falun Gong's teachings, however simplistic and superstitious, are rooted in three ancient Chinese traditions: Qigong, Taoism and Buddhism. Those in China who still profess to believe in communism are as small a minority as Catholics were in Vietnam. Perhaps a few Falun Gong followers did burn themselves to death, thinking they could fly to the Promised Land. But they are not murderers; meanwhile, in its 51-year history ruling China, the Communist Party has been responsible for the

death of tens of millions of innocent citizens, including its own supporters. Perhaps the evil cult is Jiang's own party.

Why does Jiang consider Falun Gong such a threat to China? It is because the country's leaders no longer have any convictions to cling to and are therefore insecure about their legitimacy. They talk communist but act capitalist. "Flash the left indicator, turn to the right," is a popular mainland quip on hypocrisy in high places.

In my view, Deng Xiaoping promoted the One Country, Two Systems formula to allow China to become more like Hong Kong, not the other way around. If Tung, out of a misplaced sense of patriotism, enacts anticult legislation to please Beijing's leaders, he will be doing his country a disservice. Tsang's remarks suggest moderation but even he left open the possibility of a future ban. "We are not legislating," he said last week, a statement that covers just the present, meaning the government might shift tack at any time. That would please the ignorant and the sycophants in China and Hong Kong. ■