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Breathing's Easier Than Believing

The success of Falun Gong in China rests on the failure of communism

THE MASS ARRESTS OF FALUN GONG FOLLOWERS IN CHINA and the burning of all books published by the sect cannot be dismissed as just another manifestation of Beijing's paranoia against any threat—real or imagined—to its power. For once, the communist leadership's insecurity is well-founded. While these particular practitioners of *qigong*, or breathing exercises, may not have the lungs to blow the Communist Party's house down, their embrace of spirituality marks a clear rejection of communist beliefs based on atheism and materialism.

Falun Gong's dramatic rise in the less than seven years since its founding has been breathtaking. The government claims the group has 2 million adherents; they implausibly claim 100 million people practice the "Law of the Wheel Breathing Exercise." Whichever statistic is more accurate, the arrests attest that the numbers are large enough to alarm Beijing.

More than numbers, the power of the message is impressive. The Chinese leadership got its first demonstration of that power on April 25, when 10,000 followers—mostly ordinary, middle-aged Chinese—appeared before the Zhongnanhai compound, the seat of communist power. They were there to register a silent protest against alleged mistreatment by the government and the media.

Not that anybody could mistake "Master Li" Hongzhi, Falun Gong's leader, for someone who could topple the communist regime. His inflated ego—he claims his system is more powerful than *qigong*, Buddhism and Taoism combined—is not matched by a messianic charisma that can lead to mass rebellion. His writings are mostly science fiction. But when he deals with issues of daily morality, he talks in a simple folksy manner that appeals to the masses, who have for too many years been subjected to meaningless communist jargon. Li, possibly without realizing it himself, has become the healer of wounded souls, millions of them.

This is reason enough to make the residents of Zhongnanhai panic. Chinese history is replete with examples of grassroots movements—initially based on faith healing and led by semi-educated people—growing into powerful tidal waves and toppling dynasties. These forces, without exception, emerged in response to prolonged crises caused by economic deprivation and by imperial injustice, moral decay and abuse of power. No wonder Beijing considers Falun Gong a serious threat.

It is no secret that behind China's strong economic-growth numbers lies a deeply troubled country lacking the anchor of traditional morals. In the 50 years of communist rule, nearly every basic Chinese value has been savagely trampled on. In the past, family members often had to denounce each other for self-preservation. These days, nobody knows what is precious in life and what to believe anymore—except money.

Falun Gong mixes *qigong* and Chinese mythologies to offer an escape hatch for a society in a moral black hole. Beyond Master Li's supernatural verbiage lies the reassuring assertion that truth, dignity, energy and health can be found within each individual—and that the path to bliss lies in Li's meditative breathing exercises. Many Chinese find this simple, forceful message fulfills a psychic need, unlike the mind-numbing clichés of communism.

The Beijing leadership faces a credibility crisis. Everyone knows China is headed toward capitalism, but the leaders say no, "it is only the primary stage of socialist development leading to communism." Everyone knows the one-party system breeds corruption, but the leaders insist it is better for China than anything else on the planet. What are Chinese people to do? Ten years ago, the students gathered at Tiananmen Square tried to tell their rulers that China needed more freedom. Now, the common people who make up Falun Gong's membership are telling them that their communist values are meaningless and false.

How will Beijing respond? The leaders have the means and the will to smash any group they perceive as a threat to their position. But not even they can one day arrest or even kill the millions of Chinese who want fundamental change. The dissolution

of communism in China is not a matter of whether but of when. The challenge for Beijing is to start thinking of ways to prevent the country from falling into Russia-like chaos when communist rule finally ends. In the 1980s, the late Chiang Ching-kuo, son of Chiang Kai-shek, transformed Taiwan from a ruthless dictatorship into democracy in probably the smoothest such transition in history. It is a case worthy of careful study by Beijing's leaders. If they wish to go down in history as true patriots and statesmen, they can spend their time more productively by managing China's inevitable evolution into a liberal democratic society based on private ownership than by jailing the followers of Falun Gong. ■



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