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Kenny Wu / Reuters

Marching for the believers: Taiwanese adherents of the Falun Gong movement mourn those they say died in Chinese custody

# China's Growing Holy War

The test of wills with Falun Gong is getting more violent—and spreading abroad

By Mahlon Meyer

NEWSWEEK INTERNATIONAL

Feb. 5 issue — As night falls over the working-class district of Yau Ma Tei in Hong Kong, the bustling streets become silent and murky. Inside a second-floor tenement, two dozen Falun Gong practitioners sit closely together, chanting from their handbooks.

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**The group claims to have 70 million members on the mainland, and an additional 30 million followers in the rest of the world.**

SEATED AGAINST THE wall, a lone man does not chant. He is a tall, thin Chinese northerner with a pockmarked face. As new members enter the room, he glances up nervously, as if to register their faces. Two years ago, he joined the group of Hong Kong believers. Yet in almost every way, he is unlike them. Some of the men and women in the group have spent time in prison, or have been tortured. All of them are eager to talk. He never speaks. Recently, some practitioners saw him entering the offices of the central government in Hong Kong. Others note with dread that he lingers until the end of every session, as if to mark down all that is said. “We all believe he’s a secret agent,” says one of the Falun Gong members later that night. “But our teacher says not to turn away anyone, even if he comes to destroy us.”

The Chinese government is out to destroy Falun Gong, a fast-growing spiritual movement that blends elements of Buddhism, Taoism and traditional Chinese morality. The group claims to have 70 million members on the mainland, and an additional 30 million followers in the rest of the world. Beijing describes the group as an “evil cult” with subversive intentions, and has stepped up its violent crackdown. According to Falun Gong, Beijing has killed more than 100 followers over the last two years and thrown tens of thousands of members into prison camps and psychiatric hospitals. The Chinese government disputes those figures—but there is no denying that the conflict between the two sides has devolved into an increasingly desperate war of wills. That seemed apparent last week when five protesters—thought to be Falun Gong followers, although the group’s leadership contends they weren’t—set themselves on fire in Tiananmen Square. One of the demonstrators died, the other four are in the hospital. According to a source in Hong Kong with knowledge of Chinese policy, hard-line Chinese leaders now consider Falun Gong the country’s No. 1 threat—more serious than independence activists in Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang.

## THE STRUGGLE SPREADS

With neither side inclined to back down, the struggle is spreading to other parts of Asia. Under siege on the mainland, Falun Gong is taking its recruitment and public relations campaigns to Taiwan, Macau, Singapore and especially Hong Kong, where followers held a massive gathering two weeks ago to publicize their plight. Beijing is countering by pressuring governments in the region—most of which have invested heavily in China—to avoid offering sanctuary to its enemy. The issue threatens to become an early flash point in relations between China and the Bush administration. Last week Secretary of State Colin Powell, in his first meeting with Chinese Ambassador Li Zhaoxing, decried the assaults on Falun Gong and called for the freeing of its members held in Chinese prisons and labor camps. “The message the secretary delivered was one of tolerance and rule of law,” said a State Department spokesman. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao shot back that any U.S. criticism of China’s handling of the group would have dire bilateral consequences.

As the war escalates, some China watchers now suggest that, as happened with student protesters in 1989, the communist leadership is beginning to split over how deal with Falun Gong. According to the Hong Kong source, Jiang Zemin is fearful of Falun Gong because the movement has caught hold within the Communist Party ranks. “So many party members believe in Falun Gong that [he] wants to scare them,” says the source. Frank Lu, director of the Human Rights Information Center in Hong Kong, asserts some Communist Party officials are uncomfortable with Jiang’s fierce crackdown. “Falun Gong is showing that it’s not afraid of death, not afraid of anything,” Lu says. “That must scare the party.”

Outside of mainland China, Falun Gong finds what it desires most—freedom of assembly and speech, and the group is using those liberties to appeal for an end to the persecution. At recent conferences in Taiwan and Hong Kong, attended by thousands, the group held parades, candlelight vigils and “experience-sharing” sessions.

### ‘WE ARE THE MOUTH SCREAMING’

Followers carried large photographs of members who’d been assaulted or killed by Chinese authorities. “This is how they beat up our practitioners,” said Mei Zhang, 41, a recent Chinese immigrant to Australia, who took part in the Hong Kong conference earlier this month. She was holding a photograph of a middle-aged Chinese practitioner whose legs were red and bloated from torture. Standing in front of Beijing’s government office in Hong Kong, Falun Gong members from



12 countries held aloft a large banner condemning China for killing followers. Says Falun Gong's Hong Kong spokeswoman Sophie Xiao: "Our brothers and sisters inside the mainland are the suffering body. We are the mouth screaming."

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Lu says that for oppressed Falun Gong members on the mainland, Hong Kong has become a promised land. To them, the former British colony's separate legal system and autonomous government seem to offer protection from Beijing's witch hunt. In fact, dozens of mainland Falun Gong members made risky journeys to the Hong Kong conference to share their experiences (sidebar). "All the 20 million people in Guangzhou can see Hong Kong television," Lu says. "They will wonder why, just across the river, Falun Gong can be practiced freely. The impact will be huge."

Maybe. Hong Kong's government is under intense pressure from Beijing to prevent the group from gaining a strong foothold on the territory. "Numerous facts have shown that 'Falun Gong's' organization and activities in Hong Kong are undergoing a change in quality," said an editorial in a pro-Beijing newspaper in Hong Kong last week. "What is more serious is that the 'Hong Kong Falun Buddhist Society' has stretched out its hands farther and farther." According to several eyewitnesses, Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa flew into a rage recently when democrats said they were planning to publicly praise his administration for allowing Falun Gong to hold meetings. "I will not allow Hong Kong to become a base for subverting the central government," he said, slamming his fist on a table.

### **SINGAPORE'S DILEMMA**

Beijing is twisting arms elsewhere in the region, too. Last month Macau deported 40 Falun Gong activists who'd arrived to protest a visit by Jiang to mark the first anniversary of its handover. The protesters accused Macau of receiving intelligence from Beijing, in violation of its autonomy, and revealing their identities. Singapore, which has long cultivated business interests in China, faces a serious dilemma. On New Year's Eve, 100 Falun Gong activists demonstrated in Singapore against the group's persecution in China. Police arrested 15 protest leaders, including 12 Chinese nationals. But the court has yet to charge them. "Singapore is caught between its traditional toughness toward controversial sects and a need

to not be seen leaning too close to the Chinese line,” said a commentary in the New Straits Times.

Taiwan must walk a tightrope of its own. With more than 10,000 practitioners, according to the group, it could soon become the leading center for Falun Gong outside China. That can only worsen its already tense relationship with China. Last December 3,000 yellow-clad practitioners stood in formation on the grounds of the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial, forming the three Chinese characters representing the group’s underlying principles: “Truthfulness, Goodness, Forbearance.” Falun Gong doesn’t want to get involved in Taiwan’s independence struggle with Beijing, so Li Hongzhi, the group’s exiled founder, canceled his planned trip to the rally. But Taiwan’s Vice President Annette Lu, whom Beijing sees as a radical independence supporter, made an appearance—and offered her good will.

While scrambling to mobilize support outside of China, Falun Gong members on the mainland have become increasingly defiant. Each day several followers demonstrate in Tiananmen Square and other public places. They are quickly arrested. Beijing seized on last week’s immolations in Tiananmen to buttress its assertion that Falun Gong practitioners have been cruelly brainwashed. “The [Chinese] people have expressed their deep concern over the cult’s harmful effects on families, the health of Falun Gong members themselves and the country’s social stability,” the government news agency said recently. Falun Gong groups denied that the Tiananmen protesters were associated with them. Hong Kong spokesperson Xiao explained that Falun Gong prohibits all forms of violence. “We strictly forbid killing, and we’d never commit suicide,” she said. But Li Hongzhi, who now lives in New York, wrote in a recent message to followers that the principle of forbearance may not always be appropriate in the struggle. Some suggest that he was encouraging practitioners to actively resist those who, he wrote, “had already lost their human nature.”

## **MORAL JUSTIFICATION**

For most of its history, China has tried to justify its rule as a form of moral guidance. Falun Gong practitioners, in their own way, are carrying on that tradition. The group’s teaching “represents the pearls and the gems of Chinese traditions that were lost during the turmoil in Chinese history,” says Hui Kwok-hung, a Hong Kong government engineer. Adds Sharon Xu, a 25-year-old practitioner from Shanghai, who studies in New York. “Mao was all about solving the particular problems of the time. This movement helps us to understand the meaning

of life.”

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For all their faith, the Falun Gong movement is entering a period of uncertainty. To the Communist Party, the group is a growing threat to China's social harmony, and so must be squashed. Falun Gong members insist they've been dragged into a nasty war they want no part of. The result, sometimes, is paranoia. During a rally in

Hong Kong, a tall, muscular Chinese man with a buzz cut seems to be everywhere, listening in on every conversation. Some Falun Gong participants move edgily away from him, worried he could be another secret agent. That would not be surprising. In this intensifying struggle for hearts and minds, both sides are deadly serious.

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