

Editorial

“Why is Beijing afraid of this man?” was the caption on the cover of the August 9, 1999 Asian edition of *Newsweek*. The man, of course, was Master Li Hongzhi, the founder of the now outlawed quasi-religious sect, Falun Gong.

It is very difficult to fathom why any government would launch a major offensive against the Falun Gong, and describe it as a “serious ideological and political struggle”. But that is precisely how it was described by the official *People’s Daily*.

To any outsider, the movement with its regimen of exercises, and its strange concoction of elements taken from Buddhism, Taoism and qigong, may seem a bit bizarre. Some of the beliefs and practices of the founder may indeed be nothing more than sheer nonsense, but the force and extent of the government’s propaganda seem quite out of proportion to the supposed threat to the nation’s stability.

The founder and his millions of devotees insist that they have no interest whatsoever in politics. The founder maintains that the organization’s activities are designed to help people achieve “truth, benevolence and forbearance.” Truth, benevolence and forbearance were not among the “weapons” used to crush the movement. According to a Party member, President Jiang himself, following a special evening meeting held to decide how to cope with the problem, gave the order to crack down. As a result, police rounded up tens of thousands of Falun Gong followers and tightened up security nationwide. News reports estimated that at least 30,000 members had been detained with 10,000 arrested in Beijing alone. Most of these were detained for protesting the arrest of some of their senior members.

Chinese television and the official Xinhua News Agency started a media blitz to discredit Falun Gong’s founder and every aspect of his movement. Li Hongzhi was denounced as “an evil person who has an extremely disastrous effect on society.” Falun Gong was accused of engaging “in illegal activities, advocating superstition and spreading fallacies, hoodwinking people, inciting and creating disturbances, and jeopardizing stability.”

What can we make of this hype? Perhaps we should try to answer *Newsweek*’s question, “Why is Beijing afraid of this man?”

Is it because this little quasi-spiritual guru has unwittingly exposed a few chinks in the Party's rusting armor? How were the 10,000 Falun Gong followers who surrounded Zhongnanhai for sixteen hours on April 25, able to do so without previous government knowledge? How was this possible in a place whose government prides itself on its all-pervading security presence? Here was a group with extraordinary organizational skills surely, but what is so unnerving for the government is the surprising and devastating discovery that such a gathering might have been possible because many of the group's members actually include high-ranking Party and military officials. This set off the alarm that the Party no longer commanded total loyalty. Even high-ranking Party members could be faulted for divided loyalties.

More fundamental may be the question of how it is possible for a founder and an organization of such dubious credentials to suddenly command the respect and adherence of so many people in so short a time. According to reports Falun Gong was only founded in the early nineties.

The severity of the crackdown on Falun Gong, a group that would have gone along doing its own thing in most countries around the world without undue government interference, can only be explained by a fear on the part of authorities that such activities can actually weaken socialism in China.

Basically, the problem is that China suffers from a spiritual vacuum. The freedom of religious belief as permitted by the government has filled some of the void for millions of Buddhists, Taoists, Muslims, Catholics and Protestants who operate within the government's tight religious policy. There are millions of others, however whose beliefs compel them to operate beyond the government's pale. These live in constant fear of harassment and arrests. There are still others who have no legitimate spiritual outlet to help them face the tremendous changes that are taking place so rapidly in China today: massive lay-offs, unequal opportunities, corruption, materialism, an inadequate social welfare system, and other multiple social problems. These are Falun Gong people, easy prey to latch on to facile and even magical solutions. The real solution lies in the government allowing its citizens true freedom of religion that will fill the void and answer their longing for the transcendent and divine. (BAM)