

EDITORIAL

If China could have its way, memorials of the June 4, 1989 crackdown and Falun Gong would be relegated, once and for all, into the dustbin of history. But neither of these seems quite ready to fade into oblivion. This is not for the government's or the media's lack of trying.

This year, before the 12th anniversary of the June 4th massacre, some in the Hong Kong media, by design or by pressure, gave signs that after 12 years it was time to get on with life, and to bury the Tiananmen issue along with Tiananmen's dead. Numerous articles tried to get this point across. There was a recent opinion poll, they said, that revealed that only 40% of those polled were in favor of reversing Beijing's official verdict on Tiananmen. Most people, another article mentioned, had forgotten the incident by now. Many were too young to remember or to be touched by the event. Others were sure that very few people would turn up at Victoria Park for the annual candlelight memorial service. Some faulted the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movement in China that organizes the yearly commemoration, for being guilty of a "morbid obsession." Even the Chief Executive, Tung Chee hwa, advised the people to get rid of the "baggage." In 1999, a member of the Pro Beijing Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong denied that anyone had actually died in the June 4th crackdown. This was in spite of well-documented evidence, and seen on Television by people all over the world. Such an attitude is similar to those who would deny the holocaust or the Nanjing Massacre.

Some of those who were so sure that the event was slated for obscurity must have been dismayed when 48,000 people showed up at Victoria Park for the candlelight memorial service on June 4th. Something of the event still burns brightly in many hearts and minds.

It is important to remember this event, and Hong Kong, because of its unique position, has a special mission to China

relative to Tiananmen. The ghosts of Tiananmen would surely be laid to rest if Beijing admitted that the decision a few government officials made that fatal night was wrong. Forgiveness and closure could come with an admission of guilt and signs of repentance. Surely, an apology from Beijing would go a long way towards satisfying a sense of justice. It would also lessen the burden of sorrow for those who lost loved ones, and bring some comfort to those who remember. It certainly would improve China's image on the international scene, and it might even help China win the bid for the 2008 Olympics.

The Falun Gong spiritual movement is presenting China with a serious challenge. The regime sees Falun Gong as the biggest threat to its regime since the 1989 democracy demonstrations. To anyone looking on from the outside, this mindset seems bizarre.

It all started on April 25, 1999, when some 10,000 Falun Gong followers sat down around the government headquarters in Beijing. They had come to demand the right to practice their meditation and breathing exercises freely. The government was taken by surprise. How could such a large group arrive at the leaders' headquarters without being noticed? Was there some conspiracy in this? Were there high level cadres involved in the movement? Did this not violate their one allegiance to the government? The leaders panicked!

What is puzzling to the world outside is why China did not simply ignore the group and let them go on with their exercises that were harming no one, and were no doubt beneficial to the members' health. If they really wanted to get to the root of the problem, why did they not consider instead that the spiritual void left by 50 years of atheistic teachings needed to be filled?

As the Falun Gong practitioners continued to stage their peaceful protests, the government realized that it had underestimated their strength. It began to take drastic measures. By the end of July 1999, the Chinese government had outlawed the group, and by the end of the year, it had been declared it "an evil cult." Today, according to official statistics, some 50,000 Falun Gong members have been detained, and a number of its more obstinate members have been placed in mental institutions. According to the movement, more than 100 have died in detention.

Two years on, China is still fighting the battle of Falun Gong. Daily, Chinese radio and television as well as the *China Daily* lambastes Falun Gong as an evil cult. The *Beijing Review* continues its series (now #8) on the evils of the sect. And now pressure is being put on Hong Kong to outlaw the group although it has committed no crime, or posed no threat to public order.

Bishop Joseph Zen, the Coadjutor Bishop of Hong Kong, has aptly remarked that the issue here is not whether one agrees with Falun Gong's meditation practices or its various exercises. What is worrisome, the Bishop maintains, is for public officials in Hong Kong to brand Falun Gong as "an evil cult," without a clear definition of the term. "As a citizen who follows the events of the day, I feel the need to express my concern." Falun Gong has been accused of targeting the Beijing government. But, according to the Bishop, "There is quite a difference, between being critical of the government and being an evil cult." Bishop Zen worries that if criticism of the government can be equated with "being an evil cult," many groups may be in danger of being labeled "evil," e.g. the Catholic underground church in China or eventually even the Catholic Church in Hong Kong. "If Falun Gong is accused of causing disorder in Hong Kong society because of its peaceful protests," comments Bishop Zen, "then such a label can easily be applied tomorrow to the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission, to the diocese and many Christian bodies."

The Falun Gong issue is one of religious freedom which in Hong Kong is guaranteed by the Basic Law. Falun Gong is not an issue of one isolated group; it is of importance to everyone, because it touches at the heart of the right to believe and the freedom to exercise that belief.