

**UCLA**

**Economic, Social and Legal Issues in China's Transition to a Market Economy**

**Title**

The April 25 Incident and Its Implications: A Study of the Buddhist Cult "Falun Gong" vis-a-vis the CCP's Ideological Education Work Among the Youth in a Period of Dramatic Economic Reforms

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4cm0b3rb>

**Author**

Xiao, Hongyan

**Publication Date**

2000-12-28

**9. The April 25 Incident and Its Implications**  
**A Study of the Buddhist Cult “Falun Gong” vis-à-vis the**  
**CCP’s Ideological Education Work Among the Youth in A Period of Dramatic Economic**  
**Reforms**

Hongyan Xiao  
Political Science Department  
University of Southern California  
VKC 327 Los Angeles, CA 90089-0044  
Phone: (909) 941-7861  
E-mail: [hxiao@scf.usc.edu](mailto:hxiao@scf.usc.edu)

**Acknowledgments**

The author expresses special thanks to the following people for their generous help and comments: George Oakley Totten III, Yunxiang Yan, Randall Peerenboom, Richard Baum, and Jose de la Torre.

**Introduction**

On April 25, 1999, over ten thousand Falun Gong practitioners gathered at Xinhuaamen, the main entrance to Zhongnanhai, to protest the governmental charge that Falun Gong was a superstitious cult that preached an evil thinking. Wang Zhaoguo, a politburo member of the CCP, delivered a special speech on behalf of the CCP, in which he claimed that the April 25 Incident was the most severe political event since the June 4 Tiananmen Incident of 1989.

The April 25 protest was not an isolated incident organized by Falun Gong. First of all, the protesters outside the Zhongnanhai compound were not merely local Beijing residents. Some of them came from Hebei, Tianjin, Shandong, Liaoning and Inner Mongolia. Prior to the April 25 Incident, Falun Gong groups had organized over 300 protests in various places across China. In May, 1998, for example, over one thousand Falun Gong people gathered and laid siege the Beijing TV Station. Only two days prior to the April 25 Incident, six thousand gathered at the Physical Education Institute of the Tianjin Teachers’ University, and about half of them eventually marched to the City Hall of Tianjin.<sup>1</sup>

How did Falun Gong strike such a deep chord in so many Chinese people and find such a fertile ground for recruitment? This paper studies the nature of Falun Gong, and attempts to address issues concerning the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) ideological work on the

---

<sup>1</sup> RMRB, July 23, 1999, p. 2.

Chinese youth, and crisis of faith among the Chinese people brought forth by economic reforms in recent years. The hypothesis is: the CCP's reemphasis on ideological education only aggravates the crisis of faith among the youth because the ideological work idealized by the CCP pushes for one direction, but the realities experienced by the youth push for a different direction. This has also allowed alternative values, such as Falun Gong, to fill the void left open by the decline of the CCP's official ideology.

### **Master Li and His Falun Gong**

Like any doomsday cult, the Falun Gong has its own apocalyptic prophecy, and like every cult leader, Li Hongzhi, the founder of Falun Gong also claims to have supernatural powers and promises of miracles. His prophecy is that the earth will explode in twenty to thirty years. One of his alleged supernatural powers is levitation, and flying at will in the universe. His most attractive promises of miracle is that he can copy his "wheel of the law" into other people's abdomens, and thereafter they will be able to acquire the cosmic energy to salvage their souls. Once the wheel of the law is proliferated into his followers, they will become immune to diseases. For health-conscious Chinese people, who equate longevity with eudaemonia, the cure-all message has struck a deep chord in the heart of millions of them.

In order to elevate the Falun Gong status, Master Li<sup>2</sup> had to falsify his personal records. First, he told his early followers that he began to practice the skills and tricks at the age of eight. And soon after, he relied on his own disciples, such as Li Jingchao, Liu Yuqing, Liu Fengcai and Song Bingchen, to consecrate Falun Gong. One of things they did was to design a standard photo of Master Li sitting in meditation with a nimbus surrounding his head. He also came up with an ingenious idea, which eventually added authority to his Falun Gong: he changed his birth date from July 7, 1952 to May 13, 1951. May 13, 1951 was not an unusual date for the Chinese

---

<sup>2</sup> Li's full name is Li Hongzhi, was born on July 7, 1952, in Gongzhuling City in the Northeast of Jilin Province. He grew up in Changchun, the capital city of Jilin. His education did not go beyond the junior high level. From 1970 to 1978, Li first worked at a horse farm owned by the PLA's General Logistics Department in Inner Mongolia, and from 1978 to 1982, Li joined the service staff at the hotel run by the Jilin Forest Police Division. He was discharged from military service and was employed by the security department attached to the Changchun Grain and Oil Company, where he worked till 1991, when he quit the job to be fully engaged in the *qigong* activities. He established the Falun Gong Research Institute in Beijing in 1992, and within a few years he gathered around him people from all walks of life, including senior CCP leaders, rank and file party members, professionals, intellectuals, and college students. This is a phenomenon unseen in the PRC's fifty years of history, and in terms of the scope of its penetration, it is comparable to the Bailian Jiao (White Lotus Sect), which originated in the Song Dynasty, survived the Yuan and Ming Dynasties, and lasted to the middle of the Qing Dynasty.

Buddhists because that day on the Chinese lunar calendar was April 8, which is believed to be the day Siddhartha Gautma was born. With this make-believe identification, Li claimed that he was Sakyamuni incarnate.<sup>3</sup>

More people became spellbound or fell into a deep trance (*zouhuo rumo*). These victims included a top college graduate from the Nanjing University, who enrolled as a doctoral program student in the theoretical physics department at the prestigious Chinese Academy of Science. He was also a Falun Gong devotee. In 1998, after three years of practicing, he became more serious about achieving a higher stage, and sat in meditation without taking any food or water. Finally both his health and study deteriorated, and eventually he had to quit the studies.<sup>4</sup>

Whether the Falun Gong was a religious group is of extreme importance for the CCP, because the CCP's Constitution "protects" the freedom of religious beliefs. By virtue of categorizing the Falun Gong as a cult, the CCP has untied the hands and can crack down any activity associated with the Falun Gong, including even peaceful sit-ins. The CCP's genuine worry, however, is not only the political opposition and challenge that the Falun Gong staged, but also "an evil" message it conveyed to the people that divine power has supremacy over humanity. Li made a bold declaration: "There is no way out using only man's own effort." Man must seek supernatural power, and the Falun Gong was the answer. The April 25 Incident, in the eyes of the top CCP leadership, was symbolic of the emergence of an alternative political force.

The Students' protests in the Tiananmen Square ten years ago only revealed their resentment toward official corruption—a popular sentiment that temporarily united the college students and some other people limited to the large cities. In contrast, the Falun Gong, which had literally penetrated every corner and every layer of Chinese society, not only had repetitively staged open opposition, but potentially could bring forth a replacement for the CCP's discredited ideology.

Falun Gong had a very effective organizational method. Falun Gong, which based its highest authority, the Research Institute of the Great Law of Falun in Beijing, had a pyramidal four-level structure. Under the research institute, there were the general training stations, which were

---

<sup>3</sup> Pan Yufang, a close friend of Lu Shuzhen, Master Li's mother, was the nurse who delivered Li Hongzhi. Pan, now eighty years old, recently came out to testify that Xiao Laizi (or Little Comer, Li Hongzhi's nickname) had nothing unusual at birth and no auspicious signs accompanied his birth, unlike the legend that at the birth of the Buddha flowers exuded fragrance, birds sang celestial songs and cranes danced in the sky dotted with colored clouds. As a matter of fact, his mother suffered dystocia and the doctor had to apply large doses of oxytocic to hasten her parturition. See People's Daily about the report on Li's birth, July 29, 1999, p. 4.

established in provinces or large cities. And each general training station oversaw many branches, and each branch organized the practicing sites, often located in public parks and gardens.

In addition to a well-organized structure, there was another important way of control. That was the daily study of *Falun Gong Xiulian Dafa*, written by Li Hongzhi himself. It required a minimum of two hours of daily reading, often accompanied by “mental and physical cleansing,” which meant sitting in meditation and even starvation (fasting). Its secret is elongation and repetition.

But there was a more important factor that made possible the fast spreading of this health-improving group based on a hodgepodge of Buddhism, Daoism and Master Li’s own absurdities. That is the ideological void left open by the CCP’s own obsolete doctrines. The CCP itself has recently admitted the laxity of its ideological work and the dire situation of crisis of faith in China.<sup>5</sup> One of the most fundamental social changes in China brought by reforms is mobility. Deng Xiaoping’s rural reforms began with the commercialization of the farmland by introducing the village, township enterprises (VTEs) into the countryside. China’s floating population, unleashed by rural reforms, has become the main carrier of information linking the urban and rural regions. These migrants have strong sentiments toward people who come from their own places; they also bring with them a strong “localism” which creates social networks among them. These networks are a double-edged sword: helping develop commercial relations that promote the intercourse between the urban and rural areas but also facilitating the recruitment of *laoxiang* (people from the same hometown) who act together readily to commit crimes. In Beijing, for example, criminals are often caught in groups with a distinctive localism, some of which are best known as Anhui Bang (gangsters from the Anhui province), Zhejiang Bang, and Dongbei Bang, and so on. Pockets of gangsters, however, are not a genuine threat to the rule of the CCP. The real threat comes from those socially marginalized people, whom the CCP calls “black societies” (*heishehui*), which always function outside the jurisdiction of the government. The Falun Gong, to some extent, carries some characteristics of such groups. In the public arena, they organized people to do skills and tricks to improve health. But secretly, they organized over three hundred protests across the nation.

---

<sup>4</sup> RMRB, August 12, 1999, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> RMRB, August 5, 1999, p. 1.

### **Changes of Attitudes Among Chinese Youth and the Irrelevance of the Ideological Work**

As for the Chinese youth today, their dreams for democracy were smashed by the brutal June 4 Massacre one decade ago, together with their enthusiasm for social change. Most of them have become drifters without high ideals. They refocused their attention toward personal drives: study abroad or make money: “Enter into the sea” (*xiahai*). However, this cannot take away their feelings of frustration and alienation. They become vulnerable to unorthodox ideas, in which they can find solace. The intellectuals have lost “independent personality.”<sup>6</sup>

In March 1995, the CYD conducted a survey on college students nationwide. The target students came from twenty-nine schools from twenty-one cities. The theme of the survey was the job assignments for the graduating students. From the places that the students wanted to work, we can find out that the students also were influenced by the “worship of money.” 71.7% wish to work in the coastal SEZs, where the pay is much higher than the rest of the areas. In sheer contrast, only seven students volunteered to work in the rural areas, where the living conditions were arduous. The figure for those who wanted to go to study abroad (8.8%) was much higher than the figure for those who were willing to go to work in the far regions of China (1.3%).<sup>7</sup> There was a huge gap between where the government wanted them to go and where they actually wanted to go. To use the commentary of the CYD, “in the eyes of the “favored” (college students), the remote places of the foreign countries are even closer than the remote regions of our own country.”<sup>8</sup>

From the survey data published in January 1995, we can also learn that young people were very concerned about three problems that have accompanied the CCP’s economic reforms. The problems were the moral decline, embezzlement and corruption, and the deterioration of public order. Toward the question “How do you evaluate the degree of the embezzlement and corruption in the society?,” 39.76% answered “very serious”; 49.56% answer “relatively serious”; only a total less than 11% did not see it as a problem (9.01% answer “just as common”;

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, Chapter Three: Chinese Young Intellectuals: Lonely Democracy Fighters,” pp. 83-164.

<sup>7</sup> CYD, April 13, 1995, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

1.28% answer “not too serious”; and 0.39% answered “very light”).<sup>9</sup> This means that a total 89.32% believed that the phenomena of embezzlement and corruption had developed to a serious degree. Moreover, young people showed little confidence in the CCP’s handling of the anti-corruption endeavors. To the question “Are you satisfied with the government’s anti-corruption work?”, only 2.92% answered “very satisfactory” and 11.73% answered “relatively satisfactory.” And those who did not feel that the government’s anti-corruption work was satisfactory had a high 53.72%.<sup>10</sup> The category of embezzlement and corruption is ranked number one on the most hated social phenomena list.<sup>11</sup>

Since the early 1990s, the polarization of the society has also been a constant concern for the young people. 61.5% believed that the gap between the rich and the poor was “big”; 28.2% believe that the gap was “relatively big”. That means that almost 90% recognized the problem of the polarization. 70.2% believe that the gap was still widening.<sup>12</sup>

The gap between the rich and the poor may become the most destabilizing factor in the society. Fan Gang, a young economist from the CASS, points out that the problems, such as the polarization of the society, are quite normal for a society in transition, but if this problem is long-lasting, then socialism will no longer exist. The general principle, according to Fan, should be a choice that prevents both absolute egalitarianism and the polarization of the society. Otherwise, the true purpose of the reforms and the construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics will be violated.<sup>13</sup>

Politically speaking, corruption and social polarization have also undermined the legitimacy of the CCP. Because the superiority of socialism over capitalism claimed by the CCP is nonexistent in the eyes of the Chinese youth. According to the PPP (Purchasing Power Parity) surveys conducted by the People’s University, the Gini coefficient of China’s urban and rural income per family was 0.434 in 1994, higher than the Gini coefficient in the Western countries.<sup>14</sup> Li Qiang, a

---

<sup>9</sup> CYD, January 21, 1995, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> CYD, June 5, 1998, p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> CYD, April 28, 1995, p. 8.

well known sociologist from the People's University in Beijing, has said that it is a strong emphasis in the Chinese culture that "people are not troubled by paucity but by uneven distribution of wealth." Therefore, the further development of such a tendency will not be in the interest of the country as a whole.<sup>15</sup> Fan Gang even believes that it is time to "soak the rich" for a solution.

Three significant changes in attitudes and behaviors of youth, as a consequence of regime policies, have taken place in the 1990s. First, western cultural products, movies, exchange study programs, sports, media broadcasting and publications, etc., have internationalized the life of Chinese youth. Second, the CCP has successfully launched its propaganda in patriotism, which, according to Stanley Rosen, a specialist in Chinese youth, has been effective in supplanting the discredited official ideology. Third, political apathy has been directed toward self-interest among the young, which has led to both political and economic consequences. "One political consequence has been a change in the nature of Party recruitment. Economically, state-sponsored policies have contributed greatly to the increasing use and acceptance of money as means to enhance one's status and pursue upward mobility."<sup>16</sup> One revealing point in the surveys on "crisis of faith" is that an absolute majority of respondents (64.72%) agreed with the statement that "A person's belief system is his/her own affairs." The CCP has consistently preached that its high communist ideals are the common goal of all the people. However, only a meager 18.86% believed that a belief system was not just an individual decision, but also a question of what the society needed.<sup>17</sup>

### **Conclusion: The Chinese Political Character, Civil Society and Implications**

"Civil society" has been intensely debated over the implications of reforms in China. Chinese political culture and the Party's intolerance are two of the main inhibitive forces for the (re)emergence of a civil society in China. In the Western culture, participation itself assumes a

---

<sup>14</sup> Liu Binyan and Perry Link wrote a book review of He Qinglian's book. See "A Great Leap Backward?," *New York Times*, p. 19. They also made some explanations on the Gini Coefficient used to measure income disparity: A coefficient of 0.3 or less indicates substantial equality; 0.3 to 0.4 indicates acceptable normality; and 0.4 or higher is considered too large. 0.6 or higher is predictive social unrest.

<sup>15</sup> The CYD, April 28, 1995, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Rosen, Stanley, "Chinese Youth in 1990s," presented in April, 1999 at the Conference entitled "Memory, Modernity and the Millennium: Contemporary Chinese Culture" held at the University of British Columbia.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

contest between the interests of private citizens and the interests of the rulers, and means a challenge of authority. In other words, conflict or contradiction is deemed as a natural relationship between citizenry and state. But in China, due to the paternalistic nature of the party rule of the CCP, the relationship between the ruling and the ruled is disguised as “harmony” and the ruling party assumes a superior position: “In the case of the Chinese political culture, the ideal of the omnipotence of authority has been passed from generation to generation by the imperative of filial piety, the rule that absolute obedience and unquestioning deference shall be shown to one’s elders and more particular to one’s father.”<sup>18</sup> Such political culture has cultivated a submissive mentality in the people, because the leadership believes that their participation is political activity but what they actually seek are “only the comforts of conformity and security of social belonging.”<sup>19</sup>

Submissiveness often reflects an external coerce, which is a traditional characteristic of the Chinese culture. Respecting authority is actually fear of authority. As a consequence, it dissuades people from calling a spade a spade. Instead, they “point at a deer and call it a horse (*zhilu weima*).”<sup>20</sup> Submissive conformity can pay a high price. Once they believe in something, they become uncritical and do not challenge the “authority” however absurd it can become. Submissive conformity develops a natural disregard of absurdities. The CCP, just like Confucianists in the past, has persistently believed that the leaders should be guided by ethical imperatives and ideological prescriptions, and has steadfastly tried to idealize its leadership by extolling the collective spirit that the CCP’s interests represent the interests of all the Chinese.<sup>21</sup> Ironically, the rampant corruption that runs deep inside the CCP leadership has alienated many Chinese people, especially the youth.

This time the CCP has scored a victory: under persuasion or coercion, or a combination of the two, Falun Gong organizations at all levels in various places of China have collapsed. But at the time the CCP savors its victories, the top Party leadership should have learned two things. First,

---

<sup>18</sup> Pye, Lucian, W., *The Mandarin and the Cadre*, Center for Chinese Studies, the University of Michigan, 1988, p. 138.

<sup>19</sup> —, “Participation and Authority: A Comparative Perception” in *The Citizen and Politics: A Comparative Perspective*, ed. by Sidney Verba and Lucian W. Pye; Greylock Publishers, 1978, p. 96.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, Arthur Henderson, *Chinese Characteristics*, New York: Revell, 1894; pp. 65-73.

<sup>21</sup> Pye, Lucian W., *The Dynamics of Chinese Politics*, Oelgeschlager, Gunn & Hain (Cambridge), 1981, pp. 1-37.

the fact that people, including its party members, are hesitant to expose their true feelings under duress does not mean that they are devoid of inner feelings, and that the stigmatization of the absurdities of the “pseudo science” of the Falun Gong does not necessarily advocate Marxism. Simply put, the crisis of faith still remains to be a problem for the CCP. Secondly, the overexposure of the Master Li’s avarice toward material gains will eventually backfire. People will soon realize that at least Master Li has “mixed his labor with his products” in making a fortune, and the most egregious people, after all, are those among the CCP’s own ranks, who batten on graft. With the gap between the rich and the poor steadily widening, people will still find comfort in the Master’s promise that everyone has an equal chance to achieve nirvana.

As we have found out, Master Li is a human being after all. He takes medication and gets shots when he himself becomes ill, but he asks his followers to merely practice his Falun Gong skills and tricks because his *dafa* is supposed to cure all diseases. However, as a cute doggerel from the Beijing streets has it: The CCP has also become sick, and its ideological prescriptions have become ineffectual. But, the CCP forces the Chinese people to take its described medicine.<sup>22</sup> Master Li has, nonetheless, provided the estranged Chinese with an alternative description.

**Abbreviations:**

CASS: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

CCP: The Chinese Communist Party

CYD: China Youth Daily

Dafa: Falun gong xiulian dafa (The Law of Practicing Falun Gong)

PLA: People’s Liberation Army

PRC: People’s Republic of China

RMRB: Renmin ribao (The People’s Daily)

SEZs: Special Economic Zones

SOEs: State-Owned Enterprises

VTEs: Village and Township Enterprises

---

<sup>22</sup> This has been paraphrased. The original line is: The CCP has contracted illness, but forces the common people to swallow the medicine.