

# A Burning Faith in the Master: Interpreting the 1.23 Incident

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**Abstract:** Falun Gong (FLG) is a qi gong group that entered into conflict with the Chinese state around the turn of the century, and gradually transformed into a political movement. Qi gong, in turn, is an ancient system of exercises that have been compared with yoga, though qi gong exercises more closely resemble the gentle, meditative movements of Tai Chi. Falun Gong was founded in the People's Republic of China (PRC) by Li Hongzhi (LHZ) in 1992, in the latter part of what has been termed the qi gong “boom.” As the leadership of the PRC became increasingly critical of the traditional folk religion and superstition that was emerging within some of the qi gong groups, Li Hongzhi and his family emigrated to the United States. From the safety of his new country of residence, LHZ directed his Chinese followers to become increasingly belligerent, eventually staging a mass demonstration in front of government offices in Beijing on 25 April 1999. The movement was subsequently banned.

**Keywords:** Falun Gong, Li Hongzhi, qi gong, suicide, self-immolation, 1.23 incident

It is in fact time to let go of your last attachments. As cultivators, you already know that you should . . . let go of all worldly attachments, including the attachment to the human body. Dafa disciples [must rid themselves] of all ordinary human attachments, including the attachment to their human lives, in order to reach the realms of higher beings.

—Li Hongzhi, From “Eliminate Your Last Attachment(s)”

One of the most dramatic events in this ongoing conflict was the self-immolation of five practitioners out of a group of seven—which included a talented young music student as well as a twelve-year-old girl—on the 23rd

of January 2001 (subsequently referred to as the “1.23 Incident”), which was the date of Chinese New Year’s Eve in that particular year.<sup>1</sup> These followers chose Tiananmen Square as the site of their protest against the government’s crackdown on FLG, a crackdown that had begun in earnest in 1999, following earlier protests in Tiananmen Square. Though security services doused the flames in short order, one practitioner died in the square and four were seriously burnt (one of the latter burn victims subsequently died).

According to the surviving self-immolators, this tragic event was set in motion by a dream reported by a fellow practitioner, Liu Yunfang. The following account is compiled from several different sources (e.g., *Kaiwind* 2007; Liu 2012; Wang 2015 [2003]):

I dreamt that I traveled to Beijing. After arriving, and just before I walked onto Tiananmen Square, I drank a lot of gasoline, and poured gasoline on my body. Although I had brought along a lighter and matches, I also fixed an auto-ignition device on my arm (setting it for three minutes) for fear that the police might take away the lighter and matches. When I finally went into Tiananmen Square, the police immediately stopped me because of the strong smell of gasoline. Although the police stopped me from igniting the gasoline myself, the timing instrument set my body on fire, and the policemen had to let go of me. There was gasoline both in my stomach and on my body. When I spoke, gasoline spurted out of my mouth. And when I turned around with my mouth open, a big circle of fire enclosed me. The gasoline on my body also fell downward to the ground and the fire spread, forming a sea of fire around me. I talked about the merit of Falun Gong and how to practice it, and recited Li Hongzhi’s scripture. When finished, the fire got stronger and stronger. Then from amidst the fire, there emerged a shining Buddha. It was a Buddha just sitting there with Buddha light shining around him! At the time, I subconsciously thought that this was master Li Hongzhi, and that my self-immolation would prove that the “Dafa” was true!<sup>2</sup>

Liu also felt that Li Hongzhi (LHZ; FLG’s founder-leader) was spiritually communicating with him, requesting that he gather together other FLG practitioners for the purpose of carrying out a group self-immolation in Tiananmen Square. After the core group had been assembled, they decided to carry out their self-immolations on New Year’s Eve. They chose this particular day because the legend behind Chinese New Year is that a terrifying mythical

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<sup>1</sup>The beginning of each new year is determined by the day of the new moon; thus the date varies from year to year.

<sup>2</sup>In this context, both “Dafa” and “Fa” are rough translations of the Sanskrit term “Dharma,” a complex term that can mean “religion,” “teaching,” the “truth,” the spiritual order of the universe etc.

beast, Nian, who consumed livestock and human beings (including children), was driven away by villagers using the three things that Nian feared—the color red, loud noises and fire.

By the time of the chosen day, there were seven protesters—Liu Yunfang, Wang Jindong, Liu and Baorong—and two mother-daughter pairs: Hao Huijun and Chen Guo, and Liu Chunling and Liu Siying. These practitioners split into several groups and made their way into the square with Sprite bottles filled with gasoline that were hanging from their arms, underneath their armpits. They also carried two razor blades for slashing open the bottles and two lighters (in case one failed) to start a fire. They had pre-agreed that they would all begin setting themselves ablaze at the same time, 2:30 pm. Out of the original seven people, Liu Yunfang and Liu Baorong were stopped before they could set themselves alight. According to Liu Yunfang's account:

I used the blade to cut open the bottle, and gasoline poured out onto my body. Dropping the blade, I immediately took the lighter . . . , but there were several police on the spot to stop me. It made me disappointed, and I was desperately struggling, loudly shouting: "Falun Dafa is good!" "Truthfulness good and forbearance!" In less than 10 minutes, the police had put me into a car, and I was sent to the Beijing Detention Center. (Liu 2012)

Over the years, Tiananmen Square had been a favorite place for protesters of various kinds, including FLG practitioners, to demonstrate. As a consequence, there were numerous security personnel, both uniformed and non-uniformed, spread out around the square that day—a fact that undoubtedly saved the lives of most of the self-immolators. Several years after the event, Wang Jindong, one of the organizers, composed a substantial description of his own experience. Because it conveys a concrete sense of the incident, his account is worth quoting at length:

No matter what other people would do, I [felt that I] must complete my task to defend Falun Dafa. When I got to the northeastern side of the monument, I found four policemen in plain clothes who then walked toward me with their eyes staring at me. I felt it would be too late if I did not take action. I used the blade I had prepared in my hand to cut through the clothes and slice the bottle, and then I threw away the blade and took out the lighter with my left hand. At that moment, the policemen hurried towards me. They saw I was holding a lighter, but it seemed as if they had no idea of what I was about to do. They were stunned. When they were ten steps away from me, I struck the lighter. The fire instantly devoured me. . . . Being suffocated by the flames, I heard nothing but the whirr of the flame, but I thought my mission was about to be fulfilled.

At that moment, the policemen used something to put out the fire. (Later I learned from the video footage that it was a fire extinguishing blanket.) I refused, twice. However, some other policemen managed to put out the fire with extinguishers. Greatly disappointed, I stood up and shouted, “Truthfulness, Compassion and Tolerance is the law of the universe; the law deserves to be respected by all people in the world. The Master [LHZ] is the supreme Buddha of the universe!” When the police were about to drive their car over to pick me up, we suddenly heard someone shout, “There is fire over there!” One of the police remained to take care of me, while the others rushed toward the places where my fellow practitioners had set themselves on fire. I kept on shouting slogans. Within ten minutes the police had driven their car to me. They then put me in the police car and sent me to a hospital. (Wang 2015 [2003])

Falun Gong quickly distanced itself from the event. With twenty-four hours of its occurrence, FLG issued a press release which asserted that Chinese authorities had orchestrated the self-immolations as a way of framing the organization. New Tang Dynasty TV, an enterprise created by FLG followers, also eventually produced a widely-distributed video, *False Fire*, which seemingly supported the claim that the event was faked. The government, for its part, initially

attempted to quash news of the event, even though Western journalists had been present and had recorded it; the tape was immediately confiscated by authorities. But soon the government realized they could use this as an opportunity to muster opposition to Falun Gong. A week after the incident had occurred state television broadcast some footage showing the twelve-year old daughter of one of the practitioners, rolling around in agony. The government framed the deaths as ‘cultic suicide,’ and discredited them as a form of protest. (Farley 2014a, 222–223)

Though there were accusations that the directive to immolate themselves came directly from Li Hongzhi, there are other possibilities, given the mostly decentralized structure of the movement at the ground level.<sup>3</sup> There was also a spate of FLG suicides or attempted suicides in China at around the same time as the Tiananmen Square event—suicides to which few observers have called attention. Finally, there are certain aspects of suicide in Chinese culture that can be brought to bear on the interpretation of this tragedy.

The initial purpose of this essay is to assess the plausibility of conflicting interpretations of the 1.23 Incident. Naturally, the two major parties to the controversy which form the background for this incident—namely the FLG

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<sup>3</sup>The question of FLG’s organizational structure is thoroughly addressed in Tong (2002).

organization vs. the government of the People's Republic of China dismiss each other's perspectives as self-evidently false. Specifically, PRC authorities consider that FLG's defenders have been duped by FLG propaganda, while FLG supporters "summarily dismiss everyone" who gives serious consideration to the Chinese position "as either being on Beijing's payroll or mindless zombies, and every single piece of accusation against them as Beijing-backed propaganda" (Yue 2017).

Because I anticipate that many readers of this essay will be Westerners—inclined to automatically defend the human rights of "innocent" FLG practitioners as "self-evidently" the correct position which any well-meaning person should take—let me preface my remarks by referring the reader to another essay in which I discuss why PRC authorities came to perceive FLG as a threat to the social order, as well as the esoteric theory of karma that motivates practitioners to "deliberately seek" (Palmer 2001, 17) being brutalized and even martyred.<sup>4</sup>

The intention of my earlier essay was not to completely absolve Chinese authorities of all responsibility for the conflict, but rather to argue (1) that there were at least two sides to the controversy, and (2) that the image of FLG as an innocent, "passive and victimized group that needs to be 'saved'" (Liu 2005, 14) was a conscious creation of the FLG organization, designed to evoke support from non-PRC audiences. In another essay, co-authored with Nicole S. Ruskell,<sup>5</sup> we analyzed the specific strategies by which FLG has been able to successfully promote this image to the world outside of China.<sup>6</sup>

The two basic opposing viewpoints were established almost immediately in the aftermath of the incident; these were: (1) the self-immolations were directly ordered by Li Hongzhi vs. (2) the immolations were staged by the PRC for propaganda purposes. The first of these interpretations of events was provided to the CNN reporters who were present in Tiananmen Square at the time: To quote from the initial CNN report:

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<sup>4</sup>Lewis 2016. In this regard, also refer to Palmer 2003.

<sup>5</sup>Lewis and Ruskell 2016.

<sup>6</sup>FLG has been able to influence other media via its extensive presence on the web (Yu 2009, 132), through its direct press releases and through its own media. Falun Gong has also been able to propagate its point of view indirectly, through other, non-FLG sources, which creates the impression of multiple sources for the same narrative. Thus, for example, "The press often quote Amnesty International, but Amnesty's reports are not independently verified, and mainly come from Falun Gong sources" (Kavan 2005). Additionally, FLG followers and/or sympathizers de facto control the relevant webpages in Wikipedia, a standard source for journalists operating under tight deadlines (Bell and Boas 2003, 287). On this last point, refer, e.g., to Sheng Jiang (2015) and *Wikipedia*, Colipon/Falun Gong.

A CNN producer and cameraman saw a person sit down on a pavement, pour gasoline on his clothes and set himself on fire. Flames shot high into the air against a backdrop of a gray Chinese New Year's Eve afternoon with piles of snow packed onto the square. Police ran to the flames and extinguished them within minutes, as security personnel rushed to the area near Peoples' Heroes Monument at the square's center. As military police apprehended the crew and physically restrained them, the crew witnessed four more people immolating themselves. They raised their hands above their heads and staggered slowly about, flames tearing through their clothing . . . .

Police issued the CNN crew a statement after their detention on Tiananmen Square confirming that one person had died and four were injured. Police said another person had been detained on the scene with two flasks of gasoline. According to the statement, the Falun Gong followers had burned themselves under the direction of Li Hongzhi, leader of the "evil cult." (MacKinnon 2001b)

Falun Gong's official response appeared so quickly that it was able to be included in a second CNN report the very next day:

Falun Gong issued a statement saying: "This so-called suicide attempt on Tiananman Square has nothing to do with Falun Gong practitioners because the teachings of Falun Gong prohibit any form of killing. Mr. Li Hongzhi, the founder of the practice, has explicitly stated that suicide is a sin." . . .

The statement accused China's state-run news agency Xinhua, which also identified the burn victims as Falun Gong members, of lying. It said the Xinhua report was "yet another attempt by (China) to defame the practice of Falun Gong" and called on international media and human rights groups to investigate. The statement did not offer its own explanation of the incident. (MacKinnon 2001a)

However, the FLG organization eventually developed a sophisticated and detailed interpretation of the incident, asserting that it was a propaganda event staged by PRC authorities, as laid out in subsequent FLG publications (e.g., He 2014a; 2014b; 2014c) and in the New Tang Dynasty TV documentary, *False Fire* (<http://www.falsefire.com>). For their part, Chinese authorities began a renewed media campaign—renewing the initial campaign that had originally been set in motion in 1999, following the official banning of FLG:

Television images of emotionally charged hospital scenes of self-immolation victims, particularly the repeated (contrasting) images of the young college student and the primary school girl before and after the incident, worked to dispel any initial doubt, indifference or even antagonism that many people had towards the state-led media campaign against Falun Gong. (Yu 2009, 128)

Charges and counter-charges regarding the interpretation of this event have repeatedly been hurled back and forth between FLG and PRC authorities over the past sixteen years. A full analysis of these accusations would go beyond the task I have set myself in the present paper. Instead, I will restrict myself to discussing what I regard as strong points made by each side of this controversy regarding the details of the 1.23 Incident, and then put forward evidence to support an alternate interpretation of the event. First, let us examine FLG's critical analysis of one particular point.

Liu Siying, the twelve-year-old girl who was set on fire by her practitioner-mother during the incident, was subsequently treated in Jishuitan Hospital and lived for another two and a half months, until her death on 17 March 2001. None of her relatives were allowed to visit her during this time, and the only reporters allowed to interview her were from the Xinhua News Agency, China's official news agency, and from CCTV (China Central Television), another state-owned enterprise. Falun Gong spokespeople have called attention to the fact that Liu Siying was fully covered in gauze and that the CCTV reporter who interviewed her for a special televised program on the 1.23 Incident was not wearing a sterile mask or other protective clothing, further asserting that these would have been standard practices in burn wards. Though the latter point about standard practices can be disputed (a function of the severity and of how long it has been since the patient was burnt), the careful isolation of Liu Siying and the apparent effort to disguise her identity when she (or someone else posing as Liu) was interviewed by CCTV makes FLG's counter-interpretation seem plausible. Video footage had been shot of Liu Siying in flames while screaming for her mother during the incident, and that footage was subsequently used as a core icon in the TV campaign against FLG. Thus it would have made sense for government authorities to have tried to manipulate every aspect of what the public knew about this young girl.

To get a sense of what I regard as the less compelling aspects of FLG's analysis of the event, we can consider a sample detail in FLG's discussion of Wang Jindong, one of the individuals who planned the self-immolations. Wang has been a central figure in the war of words over the proper interpretation of the 1.23 Incident (he passed away a number of years ago). Though he remained faithful to Li Hongzhi for some time following his self-immolation attempt, Wang eventually rejected FLG, and subsequently authored a moderately lengthy statement in which he described the background leading up to the incident, his actions on the day of the self-immolations, and his subsequent reflections. The video recording of Wang setting himself on fire as well as his later statements have been subjected to minute analysis and criticism by FLG followers, who, echoing the organization's original response, have even denied



that the individual in the video was ever a member. For example, FLG analysts call attention to the shoes worn by the individual identified as Wang Jindong, asserting that they were the same as those worn by uniformed policemen—a coincidence easily explained by Wang as a gift from a former employer (on this point, refer to his 2015 [2003] statement).

For interpreting the 1.23 Incident, I tend not to be very interested in these details. Rather, I find myself instead focusing on a statement attributed to Wang Jindong which makes an extremely compelling point—whether or not Wang was the actual author of this statement:

Could the government arrange the 12-year-old student? Could the government buy over the two mothers and two daughters? I would like to ask the rumor makers, would you allow your family to self-immolate [even] if you were given 100 million Yuan? (Wang 2015 [2003])

The general point being made here is obvious: If the 1.23 self-immolators were not FLG followers, then what could have motivated them to set themselves on fire? And however much one was being paid, could any mother have doused her daughter with gasoline and then set her alight?

Let me add that Wang's statement came vividly to mind when I met Chen Guo, the young music student who set herself on fire along with her mother on that fateful day. Chen Guo struck me as quite sweet. Unfortunately, her face was a "blotchy mass of grafted skin with no nose and no ears" (Page 2002). Knowing she was formerly a talented musician (who, as a young girl, had already won international acclaim for her mastery of the pipa, a traditional stringed instrument), I was forcibly struck by the depth of her tragedy when, upon leaving her house, I started to shake her hand—only to remember that that she had lost both hands in the incident. Her explanation for why she and her fellow self-immolators had made their extreme sacrifice?—"We wanted to strengthen the force of FLG" (Page 2002).

This spirit of devotion contrasts sharply with the tone of FLG's initial press release, which bluntly denied that any of its members were involved in the incident:

This so-called suicide attempt on Tiananmen Square has nothing to do with Falun Gong practitioners because the teachings of Falun Gong prohibit any form of killing. Mr. Li Hongzhi, the founder of the practice, has explicitly stated that suicide is a sin. (Quoted in Schauble 2001)

It seems that by redefining the self-immolators as non-practitioners, the FLG felt they could deny any connection of the suicides with FLG. However, over and above the question of what could have motivated non-practitioners (as FLG originally claimed) to set themselves and their children on fire, there



is alternative evidence that the self-immolators were all followers. Thus, for example, with the exception of twelve-year-old Liu Siying, all of the self-immolators “had protested Beijing’s actions against FLG in Tiananmen Square previously, according to the Hong Kong-based Information Center for Human Rights and Democracy” (Pan 2001). (And note that this information center is not under the control of PRC authorities.)

It should also be noted that being abandoned by the FLG organization did not seem to discourage other practitioners from following in the Tiananmen Square protesters’ footsteps. These additional suicides are compelling evidence (1) that other followers independently interpreted Li Hongzhi’s call to action as a call to make the ultimate sacrifice, and (2) that while one might be able to make a convincing case that PRC authorities staged the 1.23 Incident, it is highly unlikely that authorities staged multiple suicide events all over China—events that were neither videotaped nor later featured in Chinese news media:

[On 16 February 2001,] Another member of the banned Falun Gong spiritual group committed suicide by setting himself on fire. . . . [S]tate television showed police officers covering the body with a sheet and quoted a witness as saying, “He poured gasoline over his head, lit it, and burst into flames.” The news agency identified the dead man as Tan Yihui, a shoe shiner from Hunan province, in central China. It said Mr. Tan, 25, was dead by the time the police arrived and extinguished the fire. . . . Officials said they discovered a six-page suicide note nearby that identified him as a member of Falun Gong and that said he wished to “forget about life and death and achieve perfection in Paradise.” (Rosenthal 2001)

The self-immolations continued when on July 1, Luo Guili set himself alight in a city square in Nanning in southern China. Barely nineteen years old, he died the following day of severe burns and heart and lung failure. (Farley 2014a, 223)

[O]n June 29 [of the same year], 16 Falun Gong followers in a labor camp in Harbin attempted mass suicide by hanging themselves with ropes fashioned from bedsheets. Ten of them, all women, died. [Additionally,] eleven sect members in a reeducation center had undertaken mass suicide and three died from the attempt. (Chang 2004, 28)

There were also numerous cases of practitioners committing suicide by throwing themselves off of buildings (Wang 2015 [2003]; Li 2014). I should add that in October of 2016 I had a conversation with a former deputy provincial leader of FLG who told me that at least eleven of her former associates killed themselves by leaping from rooftops.

Regarding the labor camp and reeducation center suicides, FLG’s response was that these followers had been tortured to death and that “the camp had

labeled their deaths suicide to cover up its crime” (Smith 2001). As was previously noted, in most disputes between Falun Gong and the Chinese government every major accusation is matched by a counter-accusation. However, in this case, I would argue that neither Chinese authorities nor the FLG organization were the immediate causes of these various suicides and attempted suicides. Rather, the fact that they were carried out in no discernable pattern seems to indicate that they were not undertaken under the specific direction of either Li Hongzhi or the Chinese state.

At the individual practitioner level, there generally seems to be little or no direction from the FLG leadership, though there are exceptions to this general pattern; e.g., I have spoken with former practitioners who report having been directed to participate in specific demonstrations—such as the Zhongnanhai demonstration in 1999—by FLG leaders. In fact, the lack of such governance from the top has allowed schisms to develop under local leadership (e.g., Thornton 2003, 264; Bell and Boas 2003, 282). Rather,

In light of the Chinese government’s persecution of Falun Gong, founder Li Hongzhi had fashioned an apocalyptic ideology to motivate his disciples to instigate and participate in civil disobedience. [However,] Would-be activists were not formally invited to become a member of an activist team. There were no formal instructions on how to dissent. [Instead,] Civil disobedience actions were planned at local meetings. (Farley 2014a, 224)

This does not, however, mean—as Li disingenuously has claimed (and as he explicitly instructs his followers to tell outsiders)—that, “Falungong has no organization, but follows the formless nature of the Great Tao” (Palmer 2007, 264). Rather, the FLG organization has people at all levels functioning as leaders (Lewis and Ruskell 2017; Zhao 2003, 216). And in contrast to the assertion that the founder was never in day-to-day control of the movement, LHZ could mobilize thousands of practitioners, seemingly overnight, for massive demonstrations in China prior to the crackdown (Palmer 2007, 252).

In the case of the 1.23 Incident, however, it was most probable that a group of ground-level practitioners organized and carried out the self-immolations—or at least this was the scenario given in Wang Jindong’s and Liu Yunfang’s accounts, and in interviews with other survivors, as reported by Reuters:

The victims said they had been inspired to burn themselves, though not specifically instructed, by Falun Gong leader, Li Hongzhi, who lives in exile in the United States and publishes teachings mainly via the Internet. . . . “We decided burning ourselves was the best way,” said Chen, who also lost both her hands. “It was totally due to our own will. We were not forced by anyone.”

Survivors made similar assertions to Chinese journalists, such as those that appeared in Chinese sources, including the *People's Daily*:

Her face scarred with massive skin grafts and her hands missing, Chen Guo recalls the events which led her to set herself on fire in Beijing's Tiananmen Square more than a year ago.

"I remember Li Hongzhi . . . published a lecture entitled 'Beyond Tolerance' and after reading it, we decided not to wait any longer," Chen said. "We felt we must strengthen the force of Falun Gong in a special way and at that time we thought of self-immolation." . . .

[Wang Jindong added that,] "We went to Tiananmen square on January 23, 2001. I was one of the main organizers and I burned myself first."

"We went there just wanting to attain the 'all-round fulfillment' claimed by Li Hongzhi," he said. (*People's Daily* 2002)

As a background for understanding the motivations of these protesters, it should be understood that,

Mr. Li's cryptic exhortations to followers on the Falun Gong Web site [had] grown increasingly strident, chastising those people who cannot endure torture or even death in defense of his cosmology, which holds that Falun Gong is engaged in a struggle with evil beings for the redemption or destruction of the universe. "Even if a Dafa cultivator truly casts off his human skin during the persecution, what awaits him is still consummation [and a]ny fear is itself a barrier that prevents you from reaching consummation," Mr. Li wrote. (Smith 2001)

The apocalyptic teachings of Li Hongzhi could well have precipitated the self-immolations through a veiled call to civil disobedience and the promise of salvation for martyrs. Li teaches that the 'Ending Period of Catastrophe' is almost here, that contemporary society is degenerate and will be purged. The only ones who will be saved are those who are genuine Falun Gong practitioners. Li called Jiang Zemin, then president of the People's Republic of China, "the highest representative of the evil force in the human world" who is being manipulated by higher beings to persecute the Falun Gong. According to Li, only when the evil is eliminated can practitioners return home through Consummation to the Falun Dafa paradise. (Farley 2014a, 224–225)

LHZ's essay mentioned by Chen Guo, the title of which is sometimes alternately translated as "Beyond the Limits of Forbearance," paints a vivid portrait of the evil currently threatening to overrun humanity, instructing his followers that they should not continue simply to passively forebear the advance of evil beings (especially those who persecute FLG):

Forbearance (*ren*) is not cowardice, much less is it resigning oneself to adversity. . . . [Additionally, f]orbearance is absolutely not the limitless

giving of free rein, which allows those evil beings who no longer have any human nature or righteous thoughts to do evil without limit. . . . If the evil has already reached the point where it is unsaveable and unkeepable, then various measures at different levels can be used to stop it and eradicate it. . . . [T]he way the evil beings are currently performing shows that they are now completely without human nature and without righteous thoughts. Such evil's persecution of the Fa can thus no longer be tolerated. (Li 2001)

This is, of course, an overt call to action. However, as I have already indicated, there were no specific directions given for exactly how one should respond to this call. But why would the protesters (both the Tiananmen Square practitioners and other, later practitioners) choose martyrdom as their way of responding to the suppression of FLG? It turns out that LHZ has both praised and encouraged martyrdom.

Thus, for example, at a gathering in Montreal in May 2001 that was attended by sociologist of religion Susan Palmer,

[Li Hongzhi] congratulated the martyrs of Tiananmen Square [seemingly referring, not to the 1.23 protesters, but to other protesters who had made the ultimate sacrifice] who have “consummated their own majestic positions” and presumably earned a posthumous enlightenment, or a crown of martyrdom: “Whether they are imprisoned or lose their human lives for persevering in Dafa cultivation, they achieve Consummation.” (Palmer 2003, 356)

Palmer discusses the philosophy of karma and martyrdom behind these protests, and rightly notes that, “While Western politicians, journalists and human rights groups respond to social justice arguments, for the practitioners themselves, it is spiritual and apocalyptic expectations that fuel their civil disobedience” (Palmer 2003, 349).

Although Li Hongzhi made the remarks cited above by Palmer almost five months following the 1.23 Incident, he had articulated the same or similar ideas prior to 23 January 2001. Refer, for example, to his 5 July 1998 letter to Jian Xiaojun in which he asserted that a group of practitioners who died in an automobile accident in Hainan on a mission to spread Falun Gong had “obtained consummation” (Li 1998, reproduced in *Kaiwind* 2006). This would at least partly explain the many suicides of FLG members that took place prior to 22 July 1999, the date on which FLG was formally banned in the PRC (e.g., *China News* 2001).

It is, of course, difficult to assess how many of these people were disturbed individuals who just coincidentally happened to be practitioners. However, I think it fair to infer that at least some of these persons viewed their actions as being congruent with Li Hongzhi's teachings, perhaps believing that they

too would “obtain consummation” like the practitioners who died in the automobile accident while on their mission to spread FLG.

It should also be noted that Li Hongzhi himself never condemned followers who committed suicide in FLG’s name. And while the rate of practitioner suicides slowed down within a few years following the 1.23 Incident, followers sporadically continued take their own lives. For example,

On December 17, 2006, Zhang [Dongmei] telephoned her friend in another city: “My husband and I have been doing man-woman dual cultivation for a quite long period and our karma has been totally removed. Since our undertakings are completed, the day of Consummation is approaching.” But her friend failed to fully understand her words and consequently, didn’t pay much attention to it. However, three days later, the couple, following some eminent monks in the film, carried some gasoline to a remote place around the village, piled lumbers in the shape of lotus and set themselves ablaze for “Consummation,” together with their beloved son Xiao Hu. When the villagers followed the flames to the scene, the couple had already died, and their son rolled down from the lumber stack because of the burning pain, with his head seriously burnt. After all-round rescue, the boy’s life was saved. Neighbors were all deeply grieved to learn the sad news. (Cheng 2017)

If we want a broader understanding of the FLG suicides, it should first be noted that suicide as a form of political protest has taken place in a wide variety of different societies (Fierke 2013; Graitl 2014), including in traditional and contemporary China (Yu 2012; Lee and Kleinman 2003), with self-immolation being especially popular because it is so dramatic that it tends to leave a greater impression on onlookers (Biggs 2005; Hedges 2015). Secondly, there is a long tradition of self-immolation in Chinese Buddhism (Jan 1965; Benn 2007) and, despite criticisms that they are not “really” Buddhist (Lao 2012), LHZ nevertheless claims that FLG belongs to the Buddhist tradition. (Though I should immediately add that pre-modern Buddhist self-immolations were not political protests, but were rather conceived as a “gift of the body.”)

While there are plenty of precedents for Buddhist self-sacrifice in the Jataka Tales, it is chapter twenty-three of the Lotus Sutra—an important Mahayana Buddhist scripture—that provides the primary reference for later religious self-immolations. In this particular chapter, Sakyamuni tells the story of the bodhisattva Medicine King who, after anointing himself and his robes with fragrant oils and even drinking some of the oils, sets himself on fire. His body subsequently burns for 1200 years. He is then praised by numerous celestial beings and is reborn into a more fortunate realm, where he makes additional sacrifices (Benn 2009, 108–112). While there are discussions

of self-immolations in other sutras, none has been as influential as the one described in the Lotus Sutra.

Though historically there was a history of conflict between self-sacrificing Buddhists and the state (e.g., refer to chapter three of Benn 2007), the contemporary deployment of self-immolation as political protest by Buddhists seems to have begun with Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation in Vietnam on 11 June 1963 (Biggs 2005, 173–175). Thich Quang Duc's dramatic self-sacrifice was intended to call world attention to the plight of Vietnamese Buddhists who were being persecuted by the dictatorship of Ngo Dinh Diem (Diem was a practicing Catholic). The event took place at a busy intersection in Saigon, where reporters had been invited to witness the self-immolation.

We should also note that there has been a fair amount written by scholars about religious suicide—and about suicide more generally—in the Chinese tradition, over and above suicides by Chinese Buddhists. I was, for instance, particularly impressed by Jimmy Yu's *Sanctity and Self-Inflicted Violence in Chinese Religions, 1500–1700* (2012). The final chapter in Elizabeth Perry and Mark Selden's edited volume, *Chinese Society* (2003) is "Suicide as resistance in Chinese society." The authors of this last piece, Sing Lee and Arthur Kleinman, quote a dissertation in which the author asserts that "suicide is a hallmark of Chinese culture" (291). I have also recently been trying to learn elements of the Chinese language. In one text on learning to read Chinese, *Chineasy: The New Way to Read Chinese* (Hsueh 2014), the author observes that the traditional character for fire looks like "a person waving their arms, saying, 'Help! I'm on fire!'" (28).

The point I am making here is that there is a long tradition of suicide—particularly self-immolation—that is deeply embedded as a form of protest in China. The self-immolation of monks in Chinese Buddhism is part of this tradition, but is only one influence on that pattern. In other words, it is not that FLG practitioners were directly influenced by Buddhist self-immolation but, rather, that Buddhism has contributed to a larger idea of suicide/self-immolation as a form of protest that in turn influenced practitioners. Of course, none of this absolves Li Hongzhi of his share of the blame. His writings and pronouncements were clearly the proximate cause of the tragedy.

To restate this point: I have recounted these various precedents—from suicides undertaken as forms of political protest to religious suicides in Buddhist texts—NOT to say that any particular set of events or any particular text directly influenced the Tiananmen Square protestors or the other practitioners who took their own lives. Rather, I am simply pointing out that protestors' decisions to self-immolate did not arise in a vacuum, and that there were numerous historical and contemporary examples of suicide as a

form of resistance, both in China and elsewhere, that could have suggested self-immolation as an appropriate form of protest. When combined with Li Hongzhi's apocalyptic vision and his urgent but non-specific call to action, it is not difficult to see how these practitioners could draw the conclusion that they should go ahead and make the ultimate sacrifice to "defend the Fa."

To summarize, in this article, I revisited the controversy over the Tiananmen Square self-immolators, drawing from both primary and secondary material. However, rather than dwelling on the claims and counter-claims put forward by the Chinese government and the FLG organization, I shifted my primary research focus to other factors that could shed light on this event. My conclusion was that rather than a PRC plot or an action directly ordered by the FLG organization, it seems more likely that this was a demonstration planned and executed by local practitioners—though directly inspired by a combination of Li Hongzhi's violent apocalyptic vision, his call to non-specific action against the Chinese government, and examples of prior religious suicides and protest suicides.

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