

The Cult of Falun Gong

How this Group Raises Big Money Using a Dance Troupe and its Own Victimhood

BY DAVID SILVERMAN

THE CHINESE SECT KNOWN AS FALUN GONG (ALSO known as Falun Dafa) has grown dramatically in recent years using a novel fund-raising technique—dance. While other communal religious groups support themselves selling produce or clothing, Falun Gong uses a high-tech, high-volume dance company known as Shen Yun, with several troupes performing to huge audiences across the world, funding the survival and growth of the group and increasing the wealth of the founder, all while convincing their audiences they are supporting a worthwhile cause.

A cult is defined as “a religion or sect considered to be false, unorthodox, or extremist, with members often living outside of conventional society under the direction of a charismatic leader.”¹ The cult of Falun Gong is built around the rambling and sometimes-racist musings of a man named Li Hongzi, and has become widespread and accepted in America and across the world. While it claims on the surface to be about wellness and happiness, Falun Gong has all the stereotypical components of a malevolent authoritarian group including magic, lies, a supernatural savior, the threat of a coming doom, and other standard fare of modern cults,² with the added bonus component of victimhood.

The sect revolves around Li, who displays many of the traits of a “dangerous cult leader” as defined by *Psychology Today*, including possessing “the answers and solutions to world problems” and “using ‘magical’ answers or solutions to problems.”³ To that end, Li is said to have supernatural powers which he can transfer to others by placing literal, undetectable, interdimensional wheels in the abdomens of his elite practitioners (those who have paid lots of money for his courses and training). This allows them to heal others and even to levitate (somehow never filmed).⁴

They are persecuted in China, and Falun Gong exploits the Western memory of the Cold War and anti-Communist feeling to garner sympathy. Claiming to be an innocent Tai-Chi-like club who the “evil Chinese government” wants to destroy,

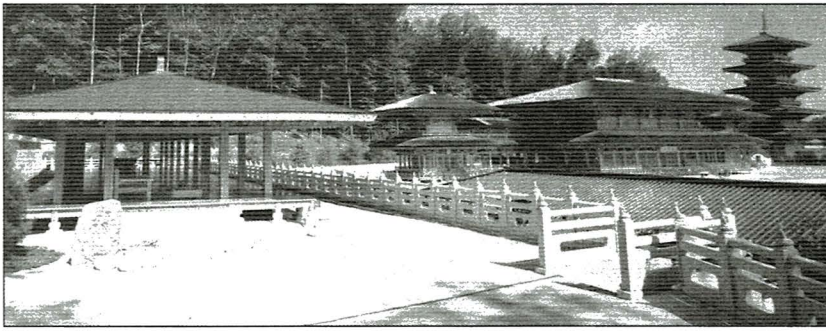
they raise money and support from unsuspecting Americans seeking to do good.⁵

Shen Yun is a dance exposition that tours the world under the guise of beauty, expression, and saving traditional Chinese culture. Founded in 2007, Shen Yun has expanded wildly, and is expected to perform in 81 cities across four continents in 2019.⁶ However, just as Falun Gong lures people in with pity and harmless-seeming exercise to hide its authorian aspects, so Shen Yun lures people in with dance and beauty as a cover for propaganda speeches and melodramas that promote Falun Gong.

Most performers are Falun Gong members who live in secluded compounds (think Branch Davidians), one of which is in upstate New York. Shen Yun is not marketed or known as a tool of Falun Gong, but it is most definitely a vehicle for publicity, sympathy, and most importantly, income for the group.

I attended a show and interviewed a number of people including past members of the orchestra to get a feel about what’s going on behind the Shen Yun curtain. All of the people I interviewed requested anonymity due to fear of reprisals and repercussions, so all the names in this article are fictional.

My first contact was with a man named “John,” a musician who first raised my awareness that Shen Yun is just a vehicle for Falun Gong. He was approached by the Shen Yun Orchestra and given a surprising offer: a high paying job with the caveat that he had to be open to joining Falun Gong and living on their compound. “When you look at what they’re offering—\$40-50 thousand per year, that’s an amazing, unbelievable job. People will move across the world for an orchestra job paying that much.” He continued “so how are they having trouble filling these seats if musicians don’t have to pay rent... they take care of everything if you just move there?” He did some research to look for other musicians who joined the company and saw disturbing trends on their Facebook posts: “I had an audition, I won the audition, I’m taking the job,” and then they’d just disappear. Their pages became nothing but messages



The luxurious grounds and Chinese influenced architecture at the upstate New York retreat. Photo Credit: "Jack."

from family and friends asking "Are you okay?, What happened to you?, Where have you been?" This is when he decided not to take the job.

John decided to look into the finances of the organization. "They spend an incredible amount of money on advertising." According to their 2016 IRS Form 990, the New York troupe alone earned \$3.8 million in gross revenue, and spent \$2.26 million on advertising and promotion, with just over \$1 million allocated to "performance expenses" and only \$550,000 allocated to performer pay,⁷ which is curious given the high salaries reportedly offered to new recruits.

John looked into the group even further: "Growing up in a cult isn't fun—it's psychological torture.... Plenty of evils are carried out by mainstream religions, but with these cults they use predatory practices to entice desperate people into living in inescapable, dangerous, miserable situations." He continued, "Falun Gong claims to heal broken bones and other health issues, but they deny real care to its people who desperately need it." He speculated that China may be "persecuting" Falun Gong on behalf of the people they injure, and indeed, the Chinese government, according to CNN, "accuses the sect of leading more than 1,600 followers to their deaths by encouraging them to eschew modern medical care and deluding them into suicidal acts."⁸

"Jack", my second interviewee, was a part of the extended team that created and built the compound itself, located "near nowhere" in upstate New York. Jack made it clear that everyone was very nice to him on the compound, though people were clearly doing so to get his help. His main question for me was "why are you looking into these people?" because he had no idea that this was a religious cult. He was generous enough to provide this picture of the compound when it was first built, complete with a "guard tower." It is the meant to be the "Chinese equivalent of gorgeous luxury."

My third interviewee, "Lisa", was very specific about her request for anonymity: "I don't know how

crazy these people are so maybe don't mention the actual instrument I auditioned on," she continued, "My fear may be a little over the top. I imagine nothing would happen, but they're weird—they're a cultish organization, so erring on the side of safety is probably a good idea." She mentioned that she had heard no examples of retribution but was still afraid of what they might do if they found out about this interview.

Lisa applied for the job as a member of the orchestra and was taken to the compound for a tour. She said the compound is "Impressive with amazing-looking pagodas—you would never know such a place existed" from the outside of the grounds. "You actually live there," she was told, "You share your dorm-like room...you don't get to bring much with you, you give up most of your material possessions to live a simple life on this compound." It was unclear what happened if you were married. She didn't get the impression that anyone was held against their will, but "just by the nature of being in a place" where you are forced to conform to their religious practices, secluded in the middle of nowhere, people are cut off to a significant extent. "If you join Shen Yun Orchestra you are forced to participate in all Falun Gong exercises." She said that they make it sound like yoga, but the fact that "you have to get up at [a specific] time and participate is wacky." Lisa didn't join the orchestra.

Aaron did, for three months, and as one of the only African American people in the orchestra, he had quite an interesting experience.

Like Lisa, Aaron was given a tour of the compound, which "looks like modern America and ancient China at the same time." He remembers that once admitted through the main gate, one had to drive "for a while" before arriving at the actual buildings. There were three main temples in which nobody was allowed, and barracks for people to live in, with 12 bunk beds in each building. Most of the people were Chinese, and many spoke only Mandarin, so communication was difficult. Everyone woke up at 7:00 am and had breakfast together, mostly traditional Chinese fare. Worship and

meditation were held three times a day and were mandatory. Worship, eating, and practice took most of the day, six days a week.

"Master Li" lived at the compound and was seen every day surrounded by disciples and bodyguards. He spoke frequently, and his tapes and lectures were played regularly.

That's where the racism came in.

According to Master Li, "anyone born through an interracial marriage is an abomination," Aaron remembers. "Dark skin was unholy; anyone with dark skin was like an ape." He asked his conductor about the idea that "adding anything dark is a sin of wickedness of society." The conductor countered that there was no racism, but according to Aaron "the conversation was clearly racist." Most of the people he spoke with about his issue were clearly indoctrinated, so they would insist that phrases like "interracial marriage is an abomination" wasn't racist.

"That's when I knew it was time to go."

Today, Aaron laughs when he sees the billboards advertising Shen Yun and thinks "Wow, I was a part of a cult for three months of my life." He says, "a textbook cult."

Having done all the interviews for this article, I had to see the event itself.

The ticket was nearly \$200 for a third balcony seat, so the admission would have been overpriced for just the (frankly beautiful) dance performance that is advertised. But interspersed between the dances were dramas about how the Chinese government is persecuting, torturing, and killing innocent Falun Gong participants who just want to meditate in peace and presentations that linked Falun Gong, its victimhood, and its founder Master Li to the Divine, to God, and to the supernatural. One story was about a young couple in love, torn apart as the evil Chinese government beats and arrests the man because he practices Falun Gong. In prison, they demand he renounce it, but he refuses, and as penalty they remove his eyes, and dump him in the city, where his faith in Falun Gong returns his sight.

The conflict between Falun Gong and the Chinese Government is well known. As Falun Gong grew to upwards of 70 million people in a religion-like organization led by one person, and when that leader defied government control and staged large public protests, the government felt its authority threatened. "The seemingly harmless sight of middle-aged people exercising in the park began to look like a threat" and the crackdown began.⁹ You will never be allowed to forget this during the program.

Between the dance and drama, program MCs

come out to remind the audience yet another time about the evil of the Chinese empire, the complete innocence of the Falun Gong cult, and the senseless violent persecution they endure in China.

In the dramatic final scene, a huge tidal wave is set to destroy the city, but Master Li steps on stage, waves his hands, and sends the water back into the ocean, as those interdimensional wheels fly around in the sky. The spotlight shines on Li, unmistakably cast as a supernatural savior of mankind. Dancers gather near him to celebrate, holding a sign that reads "Falun Dafa is Good," and the curtain falls.

This is the way cults work. They isolate their members to indoctrinate them, and often their only connection to the outside world is what ever they do to raise money. Here we have a stereotypical cult, with a stereotypical supernatural leader, and a stereotypical facade of kindness and harmlessness presented to the outside world. However, while some cults raise money by manufacturing or farming, this one uses art and dance, bolstered by high advertising budgets to support themselves.

For millennia, religion has used art to promote itself. Huge Gothic churches, massive stained-glass windows, beautiful epic paintings, and majestic music have been used to inspire faith and legitimize the indoctrination levied on adherents. Art implies dedication and helps increase the size of the group, helping to legitimize the belief system in the eyes of both believers and nonbelievers alike. There is nothing wrong with enjoying beautiful art for what it is. However, when art is disguised, when it is presented as secular, only to be used as a cover to preach about religion, it becomes dishonest and insidious.

Shen Yun is an enjoyable, but unspectacular show, geared toward making money and generating support for a huge, rich, international super-cult—a cult much larger than most have ever imagined. If you go to see it, you may enjoy the show just you would enjoy a beautiful Gothic church, but know who and what you're supporting, and be prepared for an unbelievable sob story and a hefty price tag. **S**

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