

Document 20.5: Excerpt from *Oracle Bones* by Peter Hessler, describing a nonviolent demonstration by Falun Gong followers in Tiananmen Square, Beijing

In the early 1990s, a new form of qigong (traditional breathing and meditation exercises) began under the leadership of Li Hongzhi. Li named it Falun Gong. Besides the exercises, Falun Gong includes points of faith and Buddhist and Daoist symbols, giving it religious overtones. Followers strive for “high-level cultivation...guided by the characteristics of the universe: truthfulness, benevolence, and forbearance.”¹ Li Hongzhi lectured about Falun Gong across China, and millions joined the spiritual movement, often practicing the exercises together in public parks. By the late 1990s, Chinese media began to criticize the practice. In response, believers staged peaceful protests. In 1999, the government became aware of how well organized Falun Gong had become, and on July 22 banned the Falun Gong, calling it an evil cult. Suppression of the spiritual group has been relentless. Despite the often brutal government action, hundreds of thousands Chinese people continue to practice Falun Gong.²

[A] small man directly in front of us drops into the lotus position. Shouts, commands, people running: a half-dozen plainclothes cops. By the time they force the man to his feet, a van is already speeding toward us from a far corner of [Tiananmen] Square. The protestor says nothing. He is about thirty-five years old, and he wears simple peasant clothes of blue cotton. His limbs go slack; they carry him into the van. Sheets have been tied over the windows so nobody can see inside...

[A few minutes later] a middle-aged woman tries to unfurl a banner in front of the flagpole. A plainclothes man tackles her hard. The next protestor is also a woman. She stands to the right of the flagpole and puts both arms over her head; two men run over and force her arms down....

¹ “Introduction to Falun Dafa” (another name for Falun Gong) on *Falun Dafa* website <http://www.falundafa.org/eng/home.html>

² U.S. Department of State Report on International Religious Freedom, 2005.

Suddenly, there is a commotion at the flagpole. A dozen at once: men and women, shouting slogans, raising their arms. Another banner. The plainclothes men rush over; punches are thrown; people cry out. A man falls to the ground and gets kicked. Kicked again. Kicked again. One by one, the demonstrators are dragged away.

At the end, a child stands there alone. She is about seven years old, and probably she came with her mother or father, but all the adults have already been forced into the van. The girl wears a green sweater, with matching ribbons in her hair. She hangs her head as the cops march her to the vehicle.

Source: Hessler, Peter. *Oracle Bones: A Journey Between China's Past and Present*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006. 126–128.