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What is Falun Gong?

China's government calls it an "evil cult"

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WALK into Chinatown in any big Western city, and on the main street you are likely to find a row of seated meditators, their legs crossed and backs straight. Seemingly innocuous, they could easily pass for participants in a yoga class. In fact, the meditators are practising a prescribed set of exercises from Falun Gong, a spiritual discipline which China banned in 1999 and calls an "evil cult". Along

with Tibetans, Uighur Muslims, democracy activists and pro-independence Taiwanese, Falun Gong practitioners round off the "five poisons"—risks which the Chinese government has acknowledged as posing the biggest threat to its rule. What is Falun Gong?

Falun Gong, which means "law wheel practice" in Chinese, is a set of meditation exercises and texts that preach the virtues of truth, benevolence and forbearance. It was founded in north-east China in 1992 by Li Hongzhi, a former trumpet player. Falun Gong draws on China's long tradition of *qigong*, a regimen of controlled breathing and gentle physical movements. But unlike other *qigong*-inspired disciplines that sprouted up in the 1990s, typically claiming nothing more than health benefits for practitioners, Falun Gong avows a path to salvation for the faithful. Adherents would try to gain enlightenment by reading the works of "Master Li", who is said to be able to walk through walls and levitate. By the



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