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**So Just What is "Shen Yun"?**  
***A Chinese Dance Troupe, or Something Else?***

By Tal Davis

Perhaps you have seen the colorful billboards on roadsides, posters in shops, or professionally produced ads on television promoting "Shen Yun, China Before Communism." The ads feature scenes of dancers doing dazzling jumps before huge pictures of Chinese art on a large stage. (See their ads here:

<https://www.shenyunperformingarts.org/news/view/article/e/9Dk71yh0584/shen-yun-2023-begins.html> )

The ads promise an incredible show of traditional Chinese music, dance, and art from the 5,000 years before the beginning of the Chinese communist revolution. Shen Yun means "the beauty of divine beings dancing" or "the rhythm of a divine spirit" or, more simply, "God's melody." Since 2006 as many as six performing companies have toured nearly a hundred USA cities and in numerous other countries. Reportedly the ads have drawn thousands to the performances to see what they assume is merely a well done form of performance art. (Jia Tolentino, The New Yorker, March 19, 2019

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/stepping-into-the-uncanny-unsettling-world-of-shen-yun> )

But is that all it is? When people attend the shows they are often surprised to see that there is much more to the content of the program than just music and dance. It turns into what amounts to a crusade for a strange religious movement and an anti-communist political campaign. What is not said in the ads and posters is that Shen Yun is a

production of a Chinese religious movement called Falun Gong (AKA: Falun Dafa). That movement was started in the early 1990s by Li Hongzhi (b. July, 1952), a Chinese practitioner of qigong ("discipline of the vital breath"). Qigong is a form of Buddhism that used certain exercise techniques to manipulate the body's qi (energy force) to bring about better physical and mental health.

In 1994, Li published a book titled *Zhuan falun* ("The Revolving Dharma Wheel") which described various unique methods of exercise and meditation he had created. His new movement grew rapidly in China, which caused great alarm to the ruling Chinese Communist Party. In 1996, Li moved to the United States and soon became a citizen. His movement continued to grow worldwide, and he even claimed to have over 100 million followers by the end of the century. In 1999 the Chinese government declared Falun Gong illegal, banned Li's books, and began to restrict its followers from meeting and practicing their exercise routines. In response Li founded the Shen Yun dance company, started an international newspaper, and opened a Chinese language radio and TV network to spread anti-communist messages to the mainland. His headquarters is located on a large estate north of New York City. (Dray Brown, Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Li-Hongzhi> )

So what exactly does Falun Gong or Falun Dafa teach and believe? On the surface it appears to be nothing more than a harmless form of ritualistic exercise done in small groups. You may have seen examples on some television shows of people doing it in city parks. But, like what is usually true of most movements with

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a Far Eastern Thought worldview, such as yoga or transcendental meditation, there is an underlying philosophical or religious belief system that is attached to it. In this case, it is a sort of mixture of ancient Buddhism and modern New Age ideas. The claim is that by practicing Li's teachings, the true nature of reality of the Dafa will become better understood as he or she progresses. Here is how Li describes it in one of his books:

"If a human being is to understand the mysteries of the universe, space-time, and the human body, he must take up cultivation of a true Way (Dafa - A Chinese Buddhist term that can be translated as 'Great Way,' 'Great Law,' or 'Great Teaching.' It is used as shorthand for the practice's full name, Falun Dafa. The term also appears historically in the names of certain Chinese spiritual practices) and achieve true enlightenment, raising his plane of being. Through cultivation, his moral character will elevate, and once he has learned to discern what is truly good from evil, and virtue from vice, and he goes beyond the human plane, he will see and gain access to the realities of the universe as well as the lives of other planes and dimensions." (Hongzhi Li, *Zhuan Falun*, 2015, [2018 English Edition] [https://en.falundafa.org/eng/zfl\\_2018\\_0.html](https://en.falundafa.org/eng/zfl_2018_0.html))

The growth process involves learning to use one's "inner eye," discovering the power of clairvoyance, rising above the material realm, reworking one's karma, and understanding reincarnation, etc. These are all typical subjects of Far Eastern Thought religions and the New Age Movement. There are also hints in Li's writings that he believes intelligent beings exist on other planets and have visited the earth. He also says that while medical

treatment is not prohibited, it is suggested that those who are advanced in their Dafa growth do not need medicine for physical cures. (Lindsey Medenwaldt, "Falun Gong: How the West was Won" Christian Research Institute, Jul 15, 2021. <https://www.equip.org/articles/falun-gong-how-the-west-was-won/>)

So what should be our attitude as Christians to the Shen Yun dance shows and more broadly to the Falun Gong/Dafa movement. We would suggest several things. First, in regards to the Shen Yun programs, Christians may want to attend the shows just for their entertainment value. Reviews of their elaborate performances have been generally positive. However, we must keep in mind the religious and political underpinnings of the presentations. The proceeds from the programs go to support the Falun Gong organization of Hongzhi Li which is a non-profit company. How much of the money goes to Li himself we do not know.

Also, the shows are designed as propaganda to promote the beliefs of Falun Gong, and even recruit new followers. They also intend to emphasize the persecution of their movement at the hands of the Chinese communist government and to eventually bring it down. Obviously, Christians should be discerning concerning the first purpose and recognize the incompatibility of Falun Gong's Far Eastern Thought worldview with the Christian worldview. And, while we may be sympathetic to the fate of Falun Gong people in China, and with their goal of combating Chinese communism, we need to be careful not to be drawn unwittingly into promoting or supporting something equally unchristian in the process.

In any case, if we encounter people who are followers of Falun Gong it is incumbent upon us to share the gospel of Christ with them. Given that most of

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them are Asians who have immigrated to America, they will probably already have a Far Eastern Worldview and a background in Buddhism. Some, however, may be Americans who have begun to practice Falun Gong as an exercise program and are slowly learning the more spiritual aspects of it. Whatever the situation, it will be necessary to discern the basic worldview of the individuals in order to establish relationships with

them and determine how best to tell them about the gospel of Jesus. Our new book, *Shattering the Truth Mirage*, provides the right steps to take to accomplish that goal with Falun Gong people, or any other religious movement. Order it here:

[https://leadershipbooks.com/collecti- ons/vide-press/products/shattering- the-truth- mirage?\\_pos=1&\\_sid=4e80ca4f2&\\_ ss=r&variant=45132267716922](https://leadershipbooks.com/collecti- ons/vide-press/products/shattering- the-truth- mirage?_pos=1&_sid=4e80ca4f2&_ ss=r&variant=45132267716922)

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