



PREMIUM REPORTS

The Real Story of Shen Yun and Falun Gong—An Interview With Mr. Li Hongzhi

The Falun Gong founder talks about how he guides people in spiritual practice; the early days in China; and his role in Shen Yun.

Mr. Li Hongzhi, the founder of Falun Gong, speaks at a Falun Gong conference at Barclays Center in the Brooklyn borough of New York City on May 13, 2014. Dai Bing/The Epoch Times

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By **Eva Fu, Allen Zeng** | January 13, 2025 Updated: January 13, 2025

Two decades ago, a forested mountain ridge in upstate New York was home to nothing but a small cabin and a big dream.

It is now known as Dragon Springs, consisting of a campus and the headquarters of Shen Yun Performing Arts, a classical Chinese dance company that performs for a global audience of more than a million people each year, showcasing a China that existed before communism.

Behind their efforts to forge the elite performing arts company—which has grown to become a cultural force that performs at the world’s most prominent venues—is their belief in Falun Gong.

Mr. Li Hongzhi is the founder of Falun Gong, a spiritual practice that grew so popular in communist-controlled China that the regime has tried to eradicate it since 1999. In response, Falun Gong practitioners have made nonstop efforts in China and abroad to raise awareness about the persecution, including through cultural and religious nonprofits such as Shen Yun.

Mr. Li now designs costumes for Shen Yun, writes lyrics, composes music, and oversees the entire artistic vision of the show, to help revive 5,000 years of traditional Chinese culture that's all but lost in China. Shen Yun also depicts the present-day brutality of the communist regime.

As the CCP turned against Falun Gong in the late 1990s, Mr. Li was the subject of extensive smear campaigns in China designed to turn the public against him and the popular practice. In the United States, where he and many Falun Gong practitioners found refuge, some of the same tropes the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) used against Mr. Li back then are now appearing in the media.

Driving the narrative is The New York Times, which in recent months has published nine articles attacking Falun Gong and Shen Yun. One of its most recent articles fixated on Shen Yun's cash reserves of \$266 million and implied, without evidence, that it benefits Mr. Li.

Mr. Li said he isn't involved in Shen Yun's finances and doesn't accept compensation for his role as artistic director for Shen Yun.

"No one gives me a cent; I'm unpaid," Mr. Li said in a rare interview, held at Dragon Springs with Sound of Hope Radio, a Chinese-language nonprofit radio network.

Mr. Li said his focus is on the spiritual elevation of Falun Gong practitioners, including those who have set up companies in the United States as part of their effort to counter the persecution.



Shen Yun dancers perform on stage during a show. Courtesy of Shen Yun

The organizations include newspapers such as The Epoch Times, television stations such as NTD News, radio networks like Sound of Hope, websites, internet circumvention tools, and schools.

While these companies' founding members are Falun Gong practitioners, Mr. Li says he's not involved, aside from urging practitioners to elevate their character through spiritual practice.

“Their operations, staffing, and finances aren't something I intervene in, so I don't really know about how they are run,” he said.

“I must allow them to walk their own path; that's part of their spiritual journey. If I keep intervening, it's like tearing down the bridges and roads along their path. So, I don't manage any of those things—my focus is solely on the practitioners' spiritual practice.”



Falun Gong practitioners participate in a group exercise in Guangzhou, Guangdong province, China, in 1998.
minghui.org

Mr. Li takes pride in the spirit of frugality. This virtue has taken Shen Yun far since the hardscrabble years and seen them grow into a global influence. Less visible is the long list of bills they have to pay from day to day: talents to train, expensive production equipment to acquire, new costumes to make each year, and salaries to pay.

Premium Picks



A Glimpse Into the Daily Life and Work of Falun Gong's Founder



Attacks on Falun Gong Reveal CCP Influence in America



Post-US Election, CCP Intensifies Campaign Against Falun Gong in United States

These high costs are one of the reasons Shen Yun keeps cash reserves, the company's president, Zhou Yu, said.

The COVID-19 pandemic taught them to be financially prepared in case of any emergency; they managed to stay afloat through the pandemic, and keep all their staff, despite not performing for 1 1/2 years. The company has affirmed it has "every intention" to do the same if need be in the future.

The funds also serve another significant purpose: "to prepare for the time when Shen Yun can go to China when change occurs in the country," said Zhou.

"We are currently preparing for performances in China by cultivating talent and reserving funds."

Communist China is still hostile to Shen Yun. It is, however, the company's dream to take China's 5,000 years of traditional culture back to its homeland.



Shen Yun dancers rehearse a classical Chinese dance routine at their facility in Orange County, N.Y., in this file photo. Courtesy of Shen Yun

The Beginnings

When Mr. Li brought Falun Gong to the public in 1992, China was going through a major shift. The Party's atheist communist ideals and series of deadly political campaigns—from the decade-long Cultural Revolution to the Tiananmen Square massacre—had shaken the Chinese people to the core.

Qigong, an ancient energy system that integrates body postures and mindfulness, rose to fill the spiritual hole in a population that for thousands of years had based their beliefs on Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism.

In one 1992 seminar in the northeastern Chinese city of Changchun, 40-year-old Mr. Li awed the crowd by explaining spiritual concepts in layman terms that had long confounded even ardent qigong

enthusiasts. Soon, they were renting venues for him, eager to hear him talk in greater depth and in a more formal setting.

In the two years that followed, Mr. Li delivered 54 seminars that averaged nine days each, across the nation. An estimated 60,000 people attended. Those attendees passed on the practice to friends and family; the friends and family passed it along further; and it rapidly spread all over the country, person-to-person.



(Clockwise from top Left) Mr. Li Hongzhi teaches people the practice's five meditative exercises in Chicago, in this file photo. Mr. Li Hongzhi gives a seminar in Wuhan, Hubei province, China, in 1993. Falun Gong practitioners welcome Mr. Li at the Port of Dalian in Shandong province, China, on July 1, 1994. Mr. Li accepts proclamations issued in his honor by the Illinois governor, the Illinois state treasurer, and the mayor of Chicago, in 1999. Minghui

Truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance are the guiding principles of Falun Gong, which also encompasses a set of meditative exercises. Practitioners are taught to apply these simple concepts in all aspects

of their lives to improve their character. This is described as their personal cultivation.

In 1994, Jin Chengquan attended one of the last lecture series in his home province of Jilin.

Then 20, Jin remembered being struck by Mr. Li saying that “matter and mind are one and the same.” It made sense to him then that improving one’s inner self could bring about physical benefits.

“It’s like opening me up to a different world,” he told The Epoch Times.

‘Your Influence in China Is Too Great’

Unassuming, punctual, patient: These are the words several early lecture attendees used in describing Mr. Li to The Epoch Times.

Traveling across China to deliver his lectures wasn’t a life of luxury. Longtime volunteer assistant Mi Ruijing recalled noticing signs of wear on Mr. Li’s clothes and shoes, and Ye Hao, a retired senior Chinese police official who traveled with Mr. Li, said Mr. Li hand-washed his clothes and hung them up to dry each night.

He said their meals on those trips were often ramen topped with the cheapest type of sausage.

The lectures often sold out quickly, and stadiums sometimes opened up additional space to accommodate the capacity.

生命的节日

《中国青年报》1998年8月28日

——98中国沈阳亚洲体育节中华传统养生健身活动周开幕式巡礼

天遂人愿，越过了阴雨连绵的时节，沈阳人以难得的晴空朗日与明媚的心绪，迎来了被誉为亚洲体坛狂欢节的98中国沈阳——亚洲体育节。8月20日上午9时，在沈阳市人民体育场内，由亚洲体育联合会主办、沈阳市人民政府承办的亚洲体育节，以挖掘、推广、弘扬古老而神奇的民族精英——气功健身方法，强身健体、开智生慧、延年益寿，造福当

亚洲人民之间的体育文化互融为目的，以养生健身活动体育节的序幕。
 委主任、亚洲体育节组委会体育总局武术中心气功部主研会理事长管谦、辽宁省气人大大常委会主任赵石、中国等领导出席了开幕式。韩国、家的养生健身爱好者也到会。张富御为大会致开幕词。健身文化是生命科学的重要涉入生命科学的领域开拓进1国古文化的精深玄奥。以及

生命的节日
 ——98中国沈阳——亚洲体育节中华传统养生健身活动周开幕式巡礼

沈阳人民体育场内，亚洲体育节开幕式正在隆重举行。数千名观众聚集在体育场内，共同见证这一盛事。开幕式上，亚洲体育节组委会主任、体育总局武术中心气功部主研会理事长管谦、辽宁省气人大大常委会主任赵石、中国等领导出席了开幕式。韩国、家的养生健身爱好者也到会。张富御为大会致开幕词。健身文化是生命科学的重要涉入生命科学的领域开拓进1国古文化的精深玄奥。以及

老少皆炼法轮功

《羊城晚报》1998年11月10日

1998年11月10日 星期二
 羊城晚报
 YANGCHENG WANBAO



老少皆练法轮功

8日早上，广东省体委武术协会有关领导到广州烈士陵园等处，观看了5000法轮功爱好者的盛大晨练活动。练习者来自各行各业，年龄最大的93岁(左下)，最小的仅两岁(上图)。

据介绍，目前，广东省有近25万人修炼此功法。在练功现场，体委的同志询问了几位法轮功的受益者，他们的修炼故事非常感人。有一位叫林婉英的女士介绍说，她是广州皮革道有限公司统计员，原患高位瘫痪，全身70%部位麻木失灵，大小便失禁。修炼了法轮功以后，不久便可以站立，尔后又可以行走。是她现在的样子红光满面，练功的劲作灵活自如。

法轮功强身健体不收钱，义务敬功。
 孙彦 晓明 摄影报道

法轮功修心健身走俏羊城
 三千学员勤修苦练此不疲

大學校園設練功點
 教授學生自發練功

熱點
 專題

法輪功
 不少病患者深受其益

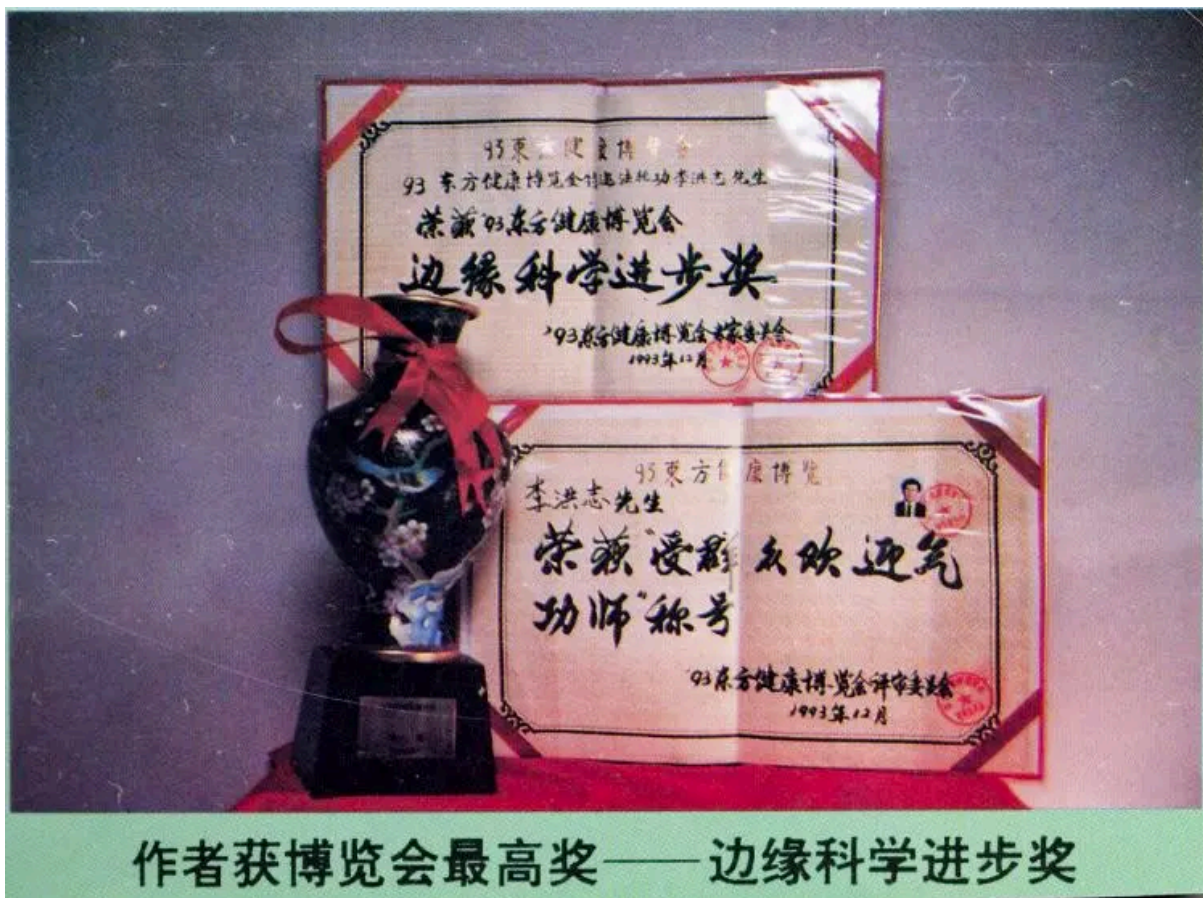
新開張

法輪功祛病效果明顯

Notwithstanding the acclaim, Mr. Li charged a low entry fee of a few dozen yuan, less than \$10 for new students, and half price for repeat attendees, barely enough to cover costs. The emphasis wasn't on making money but on teaching how to hone one's character. Attendees took it to heart, and the culture within the lectures transformed rapidly. After the first day, many stopped vying for front-row seats. People gave up tickets or ceded the best spots to first-timers and returned lost jewelry or wallets to staffers, who used a loudspeaker to find the owners.

The lecture series was ultimately transcribed and made into a book, which became the main text of Falun Gong, called "Zhuan Falun," or "Turning the Law Wheel." The book made the best-seller list in Beijing multiple times. The Chinese Embassy in France invited Mr. Li to Paris in 1995 for his first overseas lecture. And Chinese state media publicized the healing effects of Falun Gong and how practitioners had uplifted society.

Official estimates put the number of Falun Gong practitioners in China at between 70 million and 100 million in China in the late 1990s.



作者获博览会最高奖——边缘科学进步奖

Awards and certificates that Mr. Li won at the Oriental Health Expo in Beijing in 1993.
Minghui

Top CCP officials were taking notice of the burgeoning popularity with unease.

In 1996, a department director in the State Council invited Mr. Li to dine with her.

“At that time, I was often invited out to eat by people who were hoping to be healed,” Mr. Li said in the interview.

“After we sat down, the official was straightforward with me, saying, ‘Teacher Li, your influence in China has become too great. You need to leave the country.’”

Knowing the CCP’s history well, Mr. Li understood the implied threat and saw no other choice if he wanted to keep practitioners safe under a ruthless atheist regime. He applied for a priority visa on account of extraordinary ability and in 1998 emigrated to the United States.



(Left) Two Chinese police officers arrest a Falun Gong practitioner on Tiananmen Square in Beijing on Jan. 10, 2000. (Right) Chinese police detain a Falun Gong practitioner on Tiananmen Square in Beijing, in this file photo. Chien-Min Chung/AP Photo, Minghui

Within a year, the Chinese regime launched an all-out campaign to crush Falun Gong, locking up practitioners in labor camps, psychiatric facilities, and prisons in a bid to force them to renounce their faith.

At the same time, Chinese spies were after Mr. Li in the United States. He spent roughly a year on the road moving constantly so they wouldn't be able to find him.

Eventually, some Falun Gong practitioners bought and donated a patch of land in upstate New York. There, a group of volunteers painstakingly built Dragon Springs, a complex designed in the architectural style of China's ancient Tang Dynasty, and the headquarters of Shen Yun.

Gradually, the community grew and became a haven for people fleeing the brutality in communist China. Children who had lost their parents to torture in China became some of Shen Yun's earliest performers.

"We Falun Gong practitioners are essentially refugees in the United States," Zhou said. While other arts groups may rely heavily on corporate donations or government funding, Shen Yun has had to be self-reliant.

"Major American companies, fearing the CCP, have also refrained from sponsoring us. We are surviving the challenges through our own efforts," Zhou said.

Chinese officials constantly [try to silence](#) Falun Gong and obstruct Shen Yun's performances globally, threatening and intimidating theaters, sponsors, government representatives, and any other entities working with Shen Yun.



A curtain call of a Shen Yun show at the Providence Performing Arts Center in Providence, R.I., on Feb. 6, 2016.
Evan Ning/Epoch Times

Shen Yun’s tour bus tires have been slashed, and the company regularly receives death threats, bomb threats, and mass shooting threats that have been traced by U.S. authorities to China. The company documents these incidents on its website, under a [section](#) called “Challenges We Face.”

In 2022, Chinese leader Xi Jinping [escalated](#) this sabotage campaign to a new level, instructing perpetrators to launder disinformation via Western media and social media and manipulate the U.S. judiciary system against Falun Gong. Details of the 2022 secret meeting were first reported by The Epoch Times in December and were provided by Yuan Hongbing, a Chinese legal scholar living in exile in Australia who has maintained connections within the Chinese regime’s top political circles.

Despite the ongoing attacks and suppression, Shen Yun says it remains committed to its mission: “to showcase the beauty, majesty, and spirituality of China’s 5,000-year-old civilization.”

Shen Yun plays a role in the effort to “give voice to victims’ stories” and save lives, the company said in a statement.

“We cherish this country, and are grateful for the liberty it provides.”

Allen Zeng is the editor-in-chief at Sound of Hope Radio, a Chinese-language radio network, a YouTube show host, and a columnist at The Epoch Times.

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