

Written Statement for Congressional-Executive Commission on China Hearing  
Falun Gong: Review and Update

**The Origins and Long-Term Consequences of the  
Communist Party's Campaign against Falun Gong**

Tuesday, December 18, 2012

Sarah Cook  
Senior Research Analyst for East Asia  
Freedom House

Good morning Chairman Smith, Co-Chairman Brown, members of the commission, ladies and gentleman in the audience. Thank you for convening this hearing and for inviting me to participate. I have been asked to address the origins of the Communist Party's campaign against Falun Gong and in my brief time, I will do my best to cover this complex topic.

Today, Chinese citizens who practice Falun Gong live under constant threat of abduction and torture. The name of the practice, its founder Mr. Li Hongzhi, and a wide assortment of homonyms are among the most censored terms on the Chinese internet. Any mention in state-run media or by Chinese diplomats is inevitably couched in demonizing labels.

But this was not always the case. Throughout the early and mid-1990s, Falun Gong, its practitioners, and its founder were often the subjects of awards, positive media coverage, and government support. From 1992 to 1994, Mr. Li toured the country giving lectures and seminars to introduce the practice under the auspices of the state-run qigong association.<sup>1</sup> State media reports from that period laud the benefits of Falun Gong practice and show Falun Gong practitioners receiving "healthy citizen awards." In an occurrence almost unimaginable today, Mr. Li gave a lecture at the Chinese embassy in Paris in 1995, at the government's invitation.<sup>2</sup>

As word spread, Chinese from every strata of society—doctors, farmers, workers, soldiers, some of them Communist Party members—began taking up the practice. Sites of daily exercise groups in Beijing, for instance, included professors from the prestigious Tsinghua University or employees of state media like Xinhua or China Central Television. Though students of Falun Gong would gather in groups to practice its meditative exercises, many saw the discipline as a personal rather than collective endeavor to enhance their health, mental well being, and spiritual wisdom. There were no signs of a political agenda or even criticism of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as one sees in Falun Gong literature after the persecution

---

<sup>1</sup> David Ownby, *Falun Gong and the Future of China*, Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Penny, "The Religion of Falun Gong," (University of Chicago Press, 2012).

began. By 1999, according to government sources, Western media reports, and Falun Gong witnesses, tens of millions of people were practicing.<sup>3</sup>

### **So what went wrong?**

The answer lies in a combination of ideological fears, institutional factors, and an individual leader's fateful decision.

Falun Gong is a spiritual practice whose key features are qigong exercises and teachings reminiscent of Buddhist and Taoist traditions that have been an essential dimension of Chinese culture for thousands of years. It inevitably encourages ways of thinking outside the boundaries of Party doctrines. Yet for decades, the Party has systematically sought to suppress independent thought, be it in the form of religious faith or political expression. It displays a low tolerance for groups or individuals who place any authority, spiritual or otherwise, above their allegiance to the Party. For persecuted Tibetans, this authority is the Dalai Lama; for persecuted human rights lawyers, it is the law; for persecuted Falun Gong adherents, it is the dedication to spiritual teachings centered on the values of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance.

Falun Gong's emphasis on these three values as part of its theistic worldview appears to have especially attracted the Party's ire. The concepts seemed to conflict with Marxism and other ideas that have been a source of legitimacy for the CCP's authoritarian rule—like materialism, political struggle, and nationalism.<sup>4</sup> The spread of Falun Gong began to be seen as a fundamental challenge to the Party's authority. Xinhua hinted at this in one of its articles in 1999 after the ban: "In fact, the so-called 'truth, kindness and tolerance' principle preached by Li Hongzhi has nothing in common with the socialist ethical and cultural progress we are striving to achieve."

Perhaps even more than free thinking, the Communist Party feels threatened by independent civil society entities and collective organization.<sup>5</sup> As the popularity of qigong practices, and among them Falun Gong, grew in the mid-1990s, the Party attempted to insert itself into their activities and bring them under its control. In 1996, after the state-run qigong association with which Falun Gong was linked instructed the establishment of Party branches among its followers and wished to

---

<sup>3</sup> Seth Faison, "In Beijing: A Roar of Silent Protestors," *New York Times*, April 27, 1999; Joseph Kahn, "Notoriety Now for Movement's Leader," *New York Times*, April 27, 1999; Renee Schoff, "Growing group poses a dilemma for China," *Associated Press*, April 26, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Vivienne Shue. "Legitimacy Crisis in China?." In Peter Hays Gries and Stanley Rosen (eds.), *State and Society in 21st-century China. Crisis, Contention, and Legitimation*. New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> King, Gary, Pan, Jennifer, and Roberts, Molly. In Press. How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression. *American Political Science Review*, July 2012  
<http://gking.harvard.edu/publications/how-censorship-china-allows-government-criticism-silences-collective-expression>.

profit from Falun Gong, Li Hongzhi parted ways with the association.<sup>6</sup> He intended for Falun Gong to be a personal practice without formal membership and shared free of charge. As it continued to spread in society, Falun Gong's spiritual independence was coupled with a loosely knit network of meditation practice sites and "assistance centers" sprinkled throughout the country.

From 1996 to 1999, many in the government and the party held favorable views of Falun Gong and publicly cited its benefits for health and even social stability.<sup>7</sup> But as Falun Gong's popularity and independence from Party control grew, several top cadres began viewing it as a threat. This translated into repression that showed first signs in 1996. The publication of Falun Gong books by state printing presses was banned shortly after their being listed as bestsellers. Attempts to register under various government organizations were denied. Sporadic articles began appearing in state-run news outlets smearing Falun Gong. Security agents began monitoring practitioners and occasionally dispersing outdoor meditation sessions.<sup>8</sup>

In April 1999, the escalating harassment culminated in several dozen practitioners being beaten and arrested in Tianjin. Those calling for their release were told that the orders had come from Beijing. On April 25, over 10,000 adherents gathered quietly outside the national petitions office in Beijing, adjacent to the Zhongnanhai government compound, asking for an end to abuses and recognition of their right to practice.

Some observers have pointed to this incident as taking Party leaders by surprise and triggering the suppression that followed.<sup>9</sup> Such an interpretation is flawed, however, when one considers that it was escalating harassment led by central officials—including then-security tsar Luo Gan—that sparked the appeal in the first place.<sup>10</sup>

Rather, the event was pivotal because of how individual Party leaders responded to it. Premier Zhu Rongji took an appeasing stance toward Falun Gong.<sup>11</sup> He was prepared to resolve the grievances. He met with several of the petitioners' representatives. The practitioners in Tianjin were released and those in Beijing went home.

But then-Party Secretary Jiang Zemin overruled Zhu's conciliatory approach, calling Falun Gong a serious challenge to the regime's authority, "something unprecedented

---

<sup>6</sup> Noah Porter, "Falun Gong in the United States: An Ethnographic Study," 2003

<sup>7</sup> "An opiate of the masses?," U.S. News and World Report, February 22, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> David Palmer. "Qigong Fever: Body, Science and Utopia in China." New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007

<sup>9</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Dangerous Meditation: China's Campaign Against Falungong," January 2002, <http://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/2002/china/>.

<sup>10</sup> James Tong, "Revenge of the Forbidden City," Oxford University Press (2009). In his account of the April 25 appeal, Ethan Gutmann takes his analysis a step further, concluding that it had been a set-up to create an excuse for a crackdown. Ethan Gutmann, An Occurrence on Fuyou Street, *National Review* 13 July 2009

<sup>11</sup> Zong Hairen, *Zhu Rongji zai 1999* (Zhu Rongji in 1999) (Carle Place, N.Y.: Mirror Books, 2001).

in the country since its founding 50 years ago.”<sup>12</sup> In a circular dated June 7, Jiang issued his fateful order to “disintegrate” Falun Gong.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, several experts have attributed the campaign to Jiang’s personal jealousy deriving from the sincere enthusiasm Falun Gong inspired at a time when he perceived his own standing in the eyes of the Chinese public as weak.<sup>14</sup>

Whatever the specific events of the late 1990s, however, the repression of Falun Gong in China cannot be viewed in a vacuum. Rather, it is one episode within the Communist Party’s long history of arbitrarily suppressing the basic rights of Chinese citizens, including via political campaigns launched against perceived “enemies.” The party’s tactics have become more subtle and sophisticated in recent decades. But the underlying principle and institutional dynamic remains the same: the decision of what is approved or forbidden is made arbitrarily by Party leaders and the institutions—like an independent judiciary—that might curb their excesses are kept within the Party’s realm of influence. This is the case with the daily censorship directives issued by the propaganda department and applies equally to spiritual movements.

Thus, once Jiang made the decision and asserted his will over other members of the Politburo Standing Committee, there was little to stop what came next. Over the following months, Jiang and leaders like Luo began making preparations for a campaign to wipe out Falun Gong. Lacking legal authority and fearing the popularity of Falun Gong even among members of the security forces, Jiang created a special Party leadership group and related extralegal, plainclothes security force to lead the fight. Established on June 10, 1999, it came to be known as the 6-10 Office.<sup>15</sup>

In July 1999, a full-scale campaign reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution was launched. The full weight of the CCP’s repressive apparatus was turned on Falun Gong. Demonizing propaganda flooded the airwaves. Thousands of people were rounded up. Millions were forced to sign pledges to stop practicing.

Zhao Ming, a former Falun Gong prisoner of conscience and the subject of international rescue campaigns, explained the dynamics as: “the Party’s machinery of persecution was there - Jiang pushed the button.”<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Jiang reportedly made at a high-level meeting in April 1999, extracted from the book “Zhu Rongji in 1999,” cited in excerpts published in the Hong Kong Economic Journal, September 18, 2001.

<sup>13</sup> “Comrade Jiang Zemin’s speech at the meeting of the Political Bureau of the CCCCPC regarding speeding up dealing with and settling the problem of ‘Falun Gong’,” June 7, 1999. <http://beijingspring.com/bj2/2001/60/2003727210907.htm>

<sup>14</sup> Willy Wo-Lap Lam, “China’s sect suppression carries a high price,” CNN, Feb 9 2001

<sup>15</sup> Sarah Cook and Leeshai Lemish, “The 6-10 Office: Policing the Chinese Spirit,” *China Brief*, Jamestown Foundation, September 16, 2011: [http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=38411&cHash=2dff246d80ffd78112de97e280ce9725](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/chinabrief/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=38411&cHash=2dff246d80ffd78112de97e280ce9725).

<sup>16</sup> Leeshai Lemish, “Why is Falun Gong Banned?” *The New Statesman*, August 19, 2008, <http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-faith-column/2008/08/falun-gong-party-chinese>

One more point deserves clarification. The CCP and Chinese officials typically assert that Falun Gong needed to be banned because it is an “evil cult” that was having a nefarious influence on society. The claims have not held up to scrutiny when investigated in China, nor when one considers Falun Gong’s spread in other parts of the world, including democratic Taiwan. As importantly, in the context of the current discussion, it was only several months after Jiang initiated the campaign that a resolution was passed punishing involvement with “heretical organizations” and that the Party’s propaganda apparatus zeroed in on a slightly manipulated English translation of the Chinese term *xiejiao* to claim that Falun Gong was an “evil cult.”<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, today, media reports about Falun Gong often erroneously state that “Falun Gong was banned as an ‘evil cult,’” with little further explanation. In fact, the label came later and as noted above, the reasons behind it had little to do with anything “evil” about Falun Gong. By using this incomplete reference, media inadvertently repeat the Party line and may plant the thought in readers’ minds that a repressive campaign that has turned millions of lives upside down might be justified.

### **A decision with long-term consequences**

When Jiang ordered that Falun Gong be targeted, he had not anticipated that its practitioners would not relent easily. Though some renounced the practice under pressure, many resumed upon release or withstood “transformation” even in the face of torture. Over time, the Party escalated its tactics, enhancing the sophistication of its propaganda and encouraging the use of violence.<sup>18</sup> Freedom House’s publications—alongside those of Amnesty International, the United Nations Rapporteurs, and the CECC itself—have recorded the ongoing rights abuses suffered by those who practice Falun Gong in China. These include large-scale detentions, widespread surveillance, extreme torture, deaths in custody, and the sentencing of practitioners to long prison terms following unfair trials or to “reeducation through labor” camps by bureaucratic fiat. The abuses continue 13 years and two leadership changes after Jiang’s initial decision, pointing to an entrenchment of the repression.

The result is that the Party now finds itself trapped. If it backs down, it would have to admit to a mistake that ruined millions of lives and tore apart families. If it stays the course, then with each day that passes, another Falun Gong practitioner is abducted, another judge imprisons an innocent person, another police officer learns he can torture with impunity. The effect on the rule of law and the Party’s legitimacy is corrosive.

Meanwhile, so long as the campaign continues, it not only affects Falun Gong practitioners and their families. The tactics and strategies developed to suppress one group in China can be quickly and easily applied to others. From vague legal provisions, to “black jails,” to certain torture and “transformation” methods, human

---

<sup>17</sup> Amnesty International, “China: The crackdown on Falun Gong and other so-called ‘heretical organizations,’” 23 March 2000

<sup>18</sup> John Pomfret and Philip P. Pan. “Torture is Breaking Falun Gong.” Washington Post, 5 August 2001.

rights lawyers and others have remarked on how elements first used against Falun Gong practitioners have since been applied to other victim groups, including the lawyers themselves.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, the entities created to target Falun Gong can be expanded or used as models. The 610 Office's operations have long stretched beyond its core task of wiping out Falun Gong. Since 2003, their targets have also included 28 other small spiritual groups and qigong organizations.<sup>20</sup> *The Economist* reported in June that a few members of blind activist Chen Guangcheng's entourage of secret police were from the 610 Office.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, the agency may be serving as a model for the Party's broader "stability maintenance" initiatives.<sup>22</sup>

The intractable nature of the CCP's campaign against Falun Gong presents unique challenges for advocates, policymakers, and victims. Tools available when dealing with other large-scale human rights violations in China are not feasible. The openness and occasional compromise that Chinese officials display when dealing with workers' rights, discrimination against Hepatitis B patients, or even the one-child policy, are non-existent when it comes to Falun Gong. But in their interactions with regimes such as the CCP's, democratic governments must not let the authoritarians dictate the agenda. It is precisely because victims of the Falun Gong campaign have so few avenues of recourse within the system that international solidarity, exposure of abuses, and pressure on their behalf are even more vital. For these reason, since 1999, Freedom House has consistently tracked the campaign in its publications, called for the release of illegally detained practitioners, and participated in annual rallies calling for an end to abuses against them.

In this context, we would offer the following recommendations to members of Congress and the Obama administration:

1. **Meet with former Falun Gong prisoners of conscience or the family of imprisoned practitioners residing in the United States:** It is difficult and dangerous for U.S. officials to meet such individuals inside China. But as is evident from some of the witnesses testifying here today, there is a sporadic stream of Falun Gong practitioners coming from China with first-hand information on what is happening inside and outside of detention facilities. U.S. diplomats preparing for their departure to China or officials participating in human rights discussions with their Chinese counterparts should periodically meet with such individuals.

---

<sup>19</sup> Gao Zhisheng, "Dark Night, Dark Hood and Kidnapping by Dark Mafia," translated and published by Human Rights in China, February 8, 2009, [http://hrichina.org/public/PDFs/PressReleases/2009.02.08\\_Gao\\_Zhisheng\\_account\\_ENG.pdf](http://hrichina.org/public/PDFs/PressReleases/2009.02.08_Gao_Zhisheng_account_ENG.pdf); Teng Biao, "A Hole to Bury You," *Wall Street Journal*, December 28, 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203731004576045152244293970.html>

<sup>20</sup> Hao's testimony before the European Parliament.

<sup>21</sup> "Guarding the Guardians," *The Economist*, June 30, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/node/21557760>.

<sup>22</sup> Cook and Lemish.

2. **Continue to lobby for the release of individual prisoners of conscience:** Former prisoners of conscience whom I have interviewed and who were the subject of international appeal campaigns—including Falun Gong practitioners—have repeatedly testified to the noticeably less harsh treatment they received compared to their fellow, more internationally anonymous, detainees.
3. **Support initiatives to independently research the dynamics of the campaign:** Central to the ability to advocate on behalf of individuals and to gauge the full scale of abuses targeting groups like Falun Gong is the capacity to verify individual cases of religious prisoners and thoroughly investigate deaths in custody, including allegations of forced organ removals. Despite the sensitivity of the issue and difficulty in obtaining information about Falun Gong prisoners, there are avenues for doing so. Increased support, including funding, for groups taking the initiative to conduct such research could translate into real protection for members of this persecuted minority.
4. **Take proactive measures to ensure that American companies, citizens, and institutions are not deliberately or inadvertently enabling or condoning abuses:** Over the past year, reports have emerged of incidents that point to the pitfalls of engaging in close economic, educational, and medical relationships with China at a time when the CCP is carrying out a campaign like the one against Falun Gong. These have ranged from a U.S. company allegedly supplying surveillance capabilities to Chinese security agencies, to discriminatory policies regarding teachers assigned to Confucius Institutes, to concerns that medical journals are accepting papers with data drawn from abusive organ transplant policies. Measures could be taken to improve accountability in these sectors that involve U.S. citizens and institutions.
5. **Remain vigilant in the face of Chinese official pressure to self-censor outside of China:** Although this is not the focus of today's discussion, pressure to self-censor beyond China's borders is a daily reality for government officials, journalists, and event organizers when it comes to Falun Gong—similar to Tibetans, Uighurs, and other victim groups whose persecution the regime is sensitive about. It is critical that those of us outside China resist such pressures and remain vigilant in protecting the right to free expression for all, including those whose voices are systematically silenced within China.