

Testimony for the Congressional Executive Commission on China

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I would first like to thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement, and more importantly, for your efforts to shed light on this topic. My name is Caylan Ford, I am a practitioner of Falun Gong, and also a volunteer analyst and editor with the Falun Dafa Information Center. Today I would like to speak to the question of how Falun Gong perceives the persecution in China today, both in terms of its origins and its meanings, as well as the forces that will contribute to its eventual end. I should add the caveat that all Falun Gong practitioners have their own interpretations and understandings of these questions, but I will do my best to illuminate broad collective understandings.

I'll first address the causes of the suppression in China. This is an issue that defies easy comprehension. Journalists, scholars, and other observers have offered a number of compelling explanations to help account for why the Chinese Communist Party viewed the peaceful and apolitical Falun Gong as such a threat. The size of the practice is the first thing that comes to mind. By 1999, widely cited government estimates put the number of Falun Gong practitioners in China in excess of 70 million people. That's larger than the membership of the Communist Party at the time, and it's likely the largest independent civil society group in the history of the PRC.

Second, Falun Gong existed outside of official sanction; in March of 1996, because Falun Gong refused to charge money for the practice and wished to exercise autonomy over its activities, it withdrew from the state-run Qigong Research Association. Subsequent attempts to register with the government in another form were rebuffed, and so Falun Gong was, for three years, a vast popular religion with no oversight by the state. Third, some of the personalities involved - namely Luo Gan and then-Party chief Jiang Zemin - were uniquely suspicious or jealous of Falun Gong's popularity, and as Willy Lam suggested in 2001, Jiang may have intended the suppression to be a means of consolidating personal power.

There are other explanations as well that place the crackdown against Falun Gong in the context of broader cycles of "fang and shou" (relaxation and tightening) in Chinese politics. That is, after a remarkable period of tolerance toward qigong practices in the 1990s, the Communist Party again sought to reign in the influence and autonomy of these groups.

All of these explanations likely contain some truth. Yet even taken together, they cannot account for the ferocity with which the suppression of Falun Gong has been pursued. For that, one must look to the very foundations of the Communist Party's rule, and understand how Falun Gong's spiritual message, however benign, undermined the sources of the Communist Party's legitimacy.

The PRC, in a sense, a kind of theocracy, only its religion is a

secular one. The Party's mandate to rule derives from its claim to possess exclusive knowledge of certain Truths. The Marxist/Leninist ideology, including its vision of history and definitions of progress, serve as the ideological basis for Communist Party rule. That no one really believes in Marxism in contemporary China does not make this less so; it only means that the Party's ideological standing is more tenuous than in past decades, and its eagerness to suppress others may be more acute.

Falun Gong, and other independent religious groups, challenges the Party's ability to command faith and allegiance. The Communist Party believes in the primacy of human agency. Falun Gong believes that human agency is subordinate to divine authority. Where Mao Zedong spoke of struggling against the heavens, Falun Gong reconnects with a traditional Chinese aspiration to live in harmony with the Dao. Where Communism explains human behavior as a function of material determinism, Falun Gong's beliefs hold that human beings are innately good, that they are driven by conscience and compassion. And where the Party has sought to enhance its legitimacy over the last two decades by fostering economic growth, Falun Gong stresses that virtue is the source of true value.

For approximately one week immediately following the ban on Falun Gong, carefully crafted editorials in Xinhua and the People's Daily which explained the ban focused on Falun Gong's moral philosophy. An editorial appearing in Xinhua on July 27, 1999, proclaimed that " '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. "

Another wrote that "Marxist dialectic materialism and historical materialism represent the world outlook and methodology of the proletariat, and . . . the scientific theories of Marxism established on the basis of this worldview should serve as the spiritual pillar of communists. Falun Dafa as created by Li Hongzhi preaches idealism and theism...and thus is absolutely contradictory to the fundamental theories and principles of Marxism." And so on.

These editorials lasted little more than a week before eventually giving way to more incendiary attacks. But while they lasted, they provided a candid glimpse at why the Party viewed why Falun Gong with such trepidation. It is not because Falun Gong practitioners sought political power (they didn't), nor was it merely because of their size or independence from the state. Rather, Falun Gong offered a compelling moral philosophy, rooted in China's spiritual traditions, that was seen by Jiang Zemin as undermining the already faltering appeal of the party's ideology, and that cast the Party's moral deficiencies in stark relief.

And so, because China's rulers believed themselves to be at odds with the principles of truth, compassion, and tolerance and with the theistic spiritual orientation of Falun Gong, they have pursued its adherents with incredible resolve.

Understanding this dynamic can help answer another important question: why have so many Chinese Falun Gong adherents - tens of

millions, by some estimates - persisted in exercising their faith when confronted with the full force of China's persecutory apparatus bearing down on them? Why don't they simply denounce Falun Gong? The objective of the imprisonment and the violence, after all, is forced religious conversion; if adherents recant, they are freed from detention. If they don't, they are held extrajudicially and subjected to painful punishment. And yet the choice for millions of Falun Gong adherents has been to persist in spite of the threats; to continue practicing Falun Gong, and in many cases to risk their lives in order to tell their compatriots about the persecution and the practice.

To be clear, Falun Gong practitioners don't invite martyrdom. They seek not to be tortured; they want out of labor camps. But given the choice between recanting their faith or being tortured, most still choose the latter. What motivates them?

The answer has already been alluded to. Falun Gong is suppressed because the Party fears that if people believe in divine authority, if they seek moral and personal inspiration from a religious belief system, then the Party loses control. The Communist Party dictates that a person's life belongs to the cause of Communism; a person possessed of a spiritual faith, by contrast, believes that life originates with and is connected to something which transcends this physical existence. They are thus far more impervious to control or coercion with threats, violence, with material incentives; they are their own people, their hearts and minds not the property or subject of the state.

Falun Gong's capacity to resist elimination in China lies precisely in its belief, one shared by all religions, that life goes on in the hereafter, and that the state in which you exist in the next life is connected to how you choose to live in this one. Falun Gong's faith holds that the virtues of Truth, Compassion, and Tolerance describe the intrinsic nature of the universe itself; that they are eternal and undying. And if a person seeks to live in line with these principles, they are connecting to something far greater than themselves. If a person lives a life of honesty, of courage, of compassion and justice, then in that act alone they forge something that is everlasting; they achieve a kind of immortality.

To observers who do not believe in an afterlife, who are pure pragmatists, Falun Gong's response to persecution as folly. But even if you don't believe in a life hereafter, there is still something to be said for living a life devoted to principles, or to believing that maybe virtue is its own reward. Posterity seldom remembers pragmatists. The great figures of history are men possessed of principles who made immense personal sacrifices in defense of justice. Were they pragmatists, people who put their own immediate interests ahead of principles, we would not know their names, nor would we be able to enjoy their legacy.

This explains why Falun Gong adherents have resisted suppression in China, and why they have not folded in labor camps and under threat of violence. The same rationale also explains *how* Falun Gong has responded to the persecution.

At some point in the last decade, you have likely encountered some manifestation of Falun Gong's response to persecution: the silent vigils of meditation kept outside Chinese embassies or consulates, the appeals of a young woman whose sister is held in a labor camp in China, or the rallies and marches meant to raise awareness of persecution in China. You have likely heard about the media outlets that some Falun Gong adherents started to provide an alternative to Chinese state-run television and newspaper, or about how software developed by American Falun Gong practitioners is now used to circumvent government censorship of the Internet from China to Iran, Syria to Burma.

Some of these activities - and especially Falun Gong practitioners' efforts to encourage people to denounce their affiliations to the Communist Party - bear distinctly political overtones. This has given rise to the belief in some circles that the Falun Gong community has become a political force in China, or even that it seeks power for itself.

But look more closely at Falun Gong's resistance and you find that it lacks the qualities of a true political movement. While most Falun Gong adherents believe that good government should be one that respects freedom of speech, of press, rule of law and that institutionalizes a separation of church and state, few of us would be likely to describe the solution to our suppression in China as lying in institutional or political change. Falun Gong has never sought to prescribe what China's government (or any other government) should look like. Its adherents do not covet political power or influence, and they do not participate in debates on other social or political issues. To put it plainly, Falun Gong adherents ascribe relatively little importance to political institutions in general.

When the persecution began, Falun Gong initially responded somewhat incredulously, believing that the authorities had simply made a mistake. These were people who based their self-identity on being law-abiding, peaceful people, and they believed that if they simply explained themselves, the suppression on Falun Gong would be lifted.

Adherents' response was characteristic of what political scientist Kevin O'Brien describes as China's "rightful resisters": people who did not want to challenge the government, but instead wanted it to uphold its own laws and protect existing social contracts. These are people who, rather than going underground to engage in subversion, sought the government's attention and made appeals to its institutions and leaders in good faith. To that end, Falun Gong practitioners from across the country traveled to local petitioning offices where they hoped to explain why Falun Gong was no threat to the government and request that their rights be restored. It did not turn out well. The local appeal offices became gateways to labor camps and prisons.

Practitioners soon began looking beyond their local government offices and toward Beijing, calling for dialogue, reconciliation, and understanding. Yet the results were no better. On any given day from late 1999 to early 2001, hundreds of Falun Gong

adherents from around the country would turn up on Tiananmen Square to stage silent protests, to meditate, or to unfurl banners proclaiming Falun Dafa's goodness and innocence. They referred to these demonstrations never as protests, but as "appeals," implying that they still held out hope that the leadership would change its mind. Nonetheless, they were met with brutal reprisals, and the violence and the scale of the suppression only escalated.

In late 2001, and continuing to this day, Falun Gong adherents shifted focus. The Communist Party was committed to its course, but perhaps the people of China could be persuaded. If the people refused to be complicit, there would be no police willing to arrest practitioners, no teachers willing to turn in their students (or vice versa), no judges willing to be compromised. Denied any voice in the official media, the daily protests on Tiananmen Square gave way to autonomous underground printing houses in nearly every county and district in the country—China's equivalent of the Soviet Samizdat, one could say. From their living rooms, adherents would establish secure Internet connections, access websites outside China using proxy servers, download usually censored literature on the persecution of Falun Gong, and use it to produce homemade leaflets which they would distribute by nightfall. Falun Gong adherents living outside China worked to give scale to these efforts, creating censorship-circumvention software, launching Chinese-language radio and satellite television, and so on. The belief guiding these efforts is that all people are inherently good; that if they can merely know the truth, their consciences will steer them toward justice.

But persuading Chinese citizens to not be complicit in the persecution is a difficult task. Decades of political campaigns have the Chinese citizenry that the best course of action is to lay low, to keep one's head down, to follow orders, lest they also be targeted. Falun Gong's challenge is to convince people to put justice, and for the possibility of a better future ahead of their short-term interests. The best way we know to do that, from our own experiences in labor camps and detention centers, is to appeal to people's connection to eternal truths and virtues; to things which are lasting, and greater than any one of us.

And so, while the efforts to encourage renunciation from the Communist Party may appear politically driven, look closer and you will find that the message is not that Falun Gong should be in power, or that democratic revolution should be fomented. The message is that virtue and integrity — the cornerstones of China's Confucian and Buddhist traditions — must return to China. The message is that China's greatness, and the value of the Chinese people, lies precisely in the value that its culture places on moral courage, on compassion, and on justice.

I began by addressing how we understand the origins of the persecution against Falun Gong in China, and I will conclude by sharing how we hope it might end. If you ask a Falun Gong practitioner in China what they would do if freedom of belief were afforded to them, they will probably tell you that they'd like to go back to practicing meditation in the parks in the

morning. They don't want political power, even after all that has transpired. And the way we hope to bring this about is by convincing the people of China that their greatness as a country and as a people is not based on their money, or their power projection. Their value comes from the fact that they are a people of justice and compassion. They are a people who will not stand by passively as their neighbors are imprisoned and tortured, and are a people who can sacrifice short-term interests in defense of what is right. In our best-case scenario, the persecution will end when the Chinese people decide that they are better than this.