

Falun Gong

The Falun Gong movement (or *Falun Dafa*) began in 1992 in north-eastern China, where Master Li Hongzhi presented teachings on the healing and health benefits of the ancient Chinese practice of Qigong. When he first revealed his way of thinking he was a government-registered teacher of Qigong. Li appealed to the teachings of classical religious traditions – to Taoism and Buddhism in particular – to construct in Falun Gong a system of beliefs and practices which focus on the cultivation of compassion and virtue in pursuit of human wholeness. He incorporated much of that teaching in his own work but also emphasized moral values and the development of character. He focused on three tenets: truthfulness, compassion and forbearance.

In the 1990s, Li travelled across China, giving classes in Falun Gong to audiences ranging from a few hundred to several thousand. Li's first book appeared in 1993 and his first teaching video in 1994. His reputation spread with astonishing speed. By 1999, the government estimated the number of Falun Gong practitioners at 70 million.

At that time Falun Gong was not politically controversial but China, as a totalitarian state, considers any unofficial and unauthorized organization a menace. It could develop as a parallel power within the one-party state. With its commitment to truthfulness, it could begin denouncing the rampant corruption across the country. Such thoughts triggered Beijing to start a propaganda campaign against Falun Gong in 1999. It closed down Internet access to websites that mentioned Falun Gong and denounced Falun Gong as a “heretical organization,” and a threat to social stability.

When those initial measures failed to stunt the movement, the government imprisoned hundreds of thousands of practitioners, subjecting them to forced labor and sometimes torture.

By the late 1990s, Li's movement had spread to most Chinese cities and to overseas centres in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and the United States. Li Hongzhi left China in 1995 to give lectures to large crowds in several major cities around the world. In 1996, he settled in New York, where the Falun Gong movement has established a global media presence through its newspaper, website *Epoch Times*, and *New Tang Dynasty* Television station.

As there are no formalised membership records maintained by Falun Gong, only rough estimates are available for the numbers of practitioners worldwide. At the peak of its popularity in China, there were an estimated seventy million adherents. Inside China today, some sources estimate that tens of millions continue to practice Falun Gong in spite of harsh persecution. Hundreds of thousands are estimated to practice it outside China in over seventy countries worldwide. Li often lectures at conferences of Falun Gong Experience Sharing. In May 2017, in Brooklyn, he led a conference of 10,000 practitioners from fifty-eight countries.

Teachings

Falun Gong traces its roots to practices that reach far into Chinese antiquity. These techniques focus on the transformation of the individual through the cultivation of *qi*, the life force that permeates the universe. Master Li's teachings focus on letting go of negative attachments, cultivating virtue, and countering harmful karma. Through one's own intentional effort and everyday experiences, practitioners can increase in virtue and find spiritual resources for surmounting difficulties and positively influencing society.

Li teaches that the aim of the founders of world religions, such as Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity, sought not to establish religions per se but to 'guide cultivation techniques,' which Falun Gong continues and surpasses in depth. Master Li is presented as a Buddha figure that has come to guide humanity in this age of social degradation towards enlightenment and peace.

It is not uncommon for Falun Gong practitioners to meet regularly for group exercises, the study of Master Li's teachings, and to discuss their experiences.

Controversies

Chinese policy on religion is governed by the State Administration for Religious Affairs, which requires all religious groups and venues to affiliate with a government-approved association. The Qigong movement was considered distinct from religion and beneficial to society. The China Qigong Research Society (CQRS) was established, and Falun Gong was admitted as a sub-branch.

Despite this initial involvement, Master Li declined later requests to strengthen state ties through the formation of a Falun Gong patriotic organisation. Under mounting pressure to do so, Falun Gong withdrew from the CQRS in 1996.

The turn of the new century brought growing scepticism regarding Qigong and related practices in China, which the state media increasingly reported as superstitious and harmful to practitioners and society. Falun Gong adherents mobilised to peacefully petition for media sources to retract their criticism of the movement. Other practitioners of Qigong-related groups did likewise; however, the Falun Gong proved to be the most organised and frequently successful campaigners, making them particularly susceptible to government repression.

On 25th April 1999, the week after a demonstration was broken up by police, some 10,000 protesters sat quietly outside of the Chinese Communist Party headquarters in Beijing to call for an end to the harassment of Falun Gong and the release of Falun Gong detainees. Representatives of the group met with the Chinese Premier, Zhu Rongji, and demonstrators dispersed the following day.

On 22nd July 1999, Falun Gong was banned in China as an ‘illegal organisation’ and an ‘evil cult.’

In the three months prior to the ban, the Central Committee had established the ‘6-10 Office’ with the sole mission of cracking down on the movement. Falun Gong was said to have overstepped the boundaries of religious freedom, and a plan was adopted for its dissolution and the ‘transformation’ of its followers. The appellation 6-10 made reference to the date of the agency’s creation.

The 6-10 Office was given powers well beyond what is authorised under the Chinese Constitution. Its authority reached to every administrative level in the Party and all other political and judicial systems. It also reached all Chinese cities, villages, governmental agencies, institutions, and schools. Its duties have since expanded to include other ‘heretical cult organisations.’

The office began ‘detoxifying’ party members that had become partial to Falun Gong, either practitioners themselves or merely sympathisers. Numerous arrests were made of suspected Falun Gong leaders. In the first month after the ban, an aggressive media campaign criticised the group in state-run newspapers and on television.

In January 2000, several individuals attempted to commit suicide by self-immolation in Tiananmen Square, a practice that has been employed by Tibetan Buddhist to protest the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Two of them subsequently died. The state media reported that they were Falun Gong practitioners. Falun Gong spokespersons overseas denied that the protesters could be authentic members of their movement since their principles uphold the sanctity of life. Regardless, wide media reporting of this incident contributed to discredit the group in the minds of many Chinese citizens.

Practitioners are often confronted in their workplace and targeted in academic settings. School books denounce the movement, students can be expelled for practicing Falun Gong or for being related to someone who does, and questions regarding Falun Gong have reportedly appeared in college entrance examinations.

Since the ban, numerous followers have been imprisoned. Independent sources have confirmed tens of thousands of arrests, while acknowledging that the actual amount is likely to be much higher. Practitioners are often detained without any official charges, although when declared, they are usually brought under Article 300 of the criminal code, which prohibits the formation of ‘superstitious sects, secret societies and weird religious organisations.’ Sentences are between three and seven years imprisonment, even longer in ‘especially serious’ circumstances. It is not uncommon for Falun Gong practitioners to be sentenced with little to no legal representation and many trials are held in secret.

Considerable alarm has risen over Falun Gong prisoners held in ‘black jails’, drug rehabilitation centres, and ‘brainwashing centres,’ which fall directly under the authority of the 6-10 Office.

The Falun Dafa Information Centre has documented over 63,000 cases in which re-education has included hard labour, physical beatings, sexual abuse, psychological trauma and psychiatric and physical torture.

Accusations have also been made against the government of China for systematically participating in the killing of prisoners for the purpose of selling their organs for high profit on the transplant market. In fact, the organ transplant trade has been booming in China since the beginning of the Falun Gong suppression in 1999.

In 2006, two Canadian human rights authors, David Kilgour and David Matas, conducted an investigation of widely believed stories that Chinese authorities had been responsible for “large-scale organ seizures from unwilling Falun Gong practitioners” to supply the Chinese implant trade. China has consistently denied this charge but Kilgour and Matas discovered among other facts that the authorities could not, or would not, explain the source of some 41,500 organs transplanted by Chinese surgeons. For years, Falun Gong practitioners have been denouncing this practice. They have engaged in an international propaganda war with the Chinese Communist Party and have become some of the most ardent critics of the Chinese government.

Some analysts have suggested that the persecution of Falun Gong is part ideological and part political. As a metaphysical system, Falun Gong is a direct affront to the communist-atheist ideology of the Chinese state. It is also political in that the movement, although posing no substantial threat to the Chinese government, lies nonetheless outside the control of the communist centralised system and is therefore suspect and perceived as dangerous.

Falun Gong Practitioners in Prison

The Falun Gong movement is the world’s most persecuted religious/ spiritual denomination by a single country. For years, their website minghui.org¹ has been documenting thousands of cases of arrest, imprisonment, disappearance, torture, killing, and organ harvesting.

China is the only country where Falun Gong practitioners are perceived as a threat by the state, repressed and put in prison.

Human Rights Without Frontiers has documented over 1200 cases (more than twice the amount of cases recorded during 2016) of detained Falun Gong practitioners in our Prisoners’ List (See <http://hrwf.eu/forb-and-blasphemy-prisoners-list/>). The usual sentence is between three and seven years, but in certain circumstances individuals have received sentences as long as twelve or seventeen years.

¹ English version: <http://en.minghui.org/cc/10/>

Ye Jianguo arrested five times and sentenced to more than eleven years in prison

Ye Jianguo was sentenced to 11½ years in prison by the Jiayang District Court in 2013 for his affiliation with Falun Gong. In Jiazhou Prison, the guards have attempted to re-educate him by forcing him to listen to and read materials defaming Falun Gong. They ordered him to write statements denouncing his belief.

Since 1999, he had been arrested at least five times.

He was first arrested by officers from the Longchang County 6-10 Office in May 2005. His legs and hands were shackled in detention for five months before being sentenced to forced labour for five years.

On 25 August 2009, officers from the Longchang Domestic Security Division and agents from the Dayanggou Community Committee ransacked his home. Ye Jianguo was then consigned to the Neijiang Brainwashing Centre for two months.

On 30th October 2010, he was arrested and taken to the Daziran Brainwashing Center in Neijing City. He managed to escape two weeks later.

On 4th July 2011, he was arrested by Jiangyou Domestic Security Division officers. He developed a serious heart condition as a result of his sufferings and was transported to Jiangyou City People's Hospital.

He was arrested again in July 2012 and taken to the Erehu Brainwashing Center, where he suffered sleep deprivation, shackling and eventually died in custody.

Twin sisters arrested and imprisoned in Xinjiang for five years

Twin sisters Wang Wen and Wang Jing from Changji City in Xinjiang Autonomous Region were arrested on 6th March 2015 for practicing Falun Gong. The 51-year-old sisters both work as accountants.

Wang Jing was tried on 13th October and Wang Wen on 6th November. The prosecutor alleged that Wang Jing had sent text messages promoting Falun Gong. She told the judge that practicing Falun Gong is not a crime. Her lawyer disputed the evidence against Wang Jing, for the prosecution could not provide a key piece of evidence: the SIM card that Ms. Wang Jing allegedly used to send the messages.

Despite the holes in the evidence, Wang Wen was detained in Liudaowan Detention Center in Urumqi City and Wang Jing in Changji Detention Center.

This has not been the first time the sisters have faced sanctions for their belief in Falun Gong. In 2003 officers from the Changji 6-10 Office had sent them to re-education classes, where various torture methods are used to force practitioners into renouncing their beliefs. Wang Wen was also

sentenced in 2010 to fifteen days in detention after she had talked to a security guard about Falun Gong.

The twins' elder sister, Gong Xiaojuan, a former mathematics teacher at Changji Teachers' University, was sentenced to five years in prison in 2015 for practicing Falun Gong.

Li Kai: Sentenced to 3 ½ years and harassed by the police

Li Kai has been arrested several times in the last five years for practicing Falun Gong. Most recently, in July 2015, he was watching TV at home when a group of police officers broke in and took him away. Less than two months later, he was sentenced to 3 ½ years in prison for refusing to give up his Falun Gong spiritual practice.

The police refused to disclose where Mr. Li was detained, despite repeated requests from his family. The court did not notify the family of his two hearings in September 2015.

Gao Qinmei: 4 years in prison and family visits denied

As of 31st December 2017, Ms. Gao Qinmei has already spent a total of eight years in prison. As a practitioner of Falun Gong, she has been constantly harassed, arrested, detained and sent to prison several times throughout her life. During her most recent court trial, in July 2013, she was sentenced to **four years in prison** and was sent to Shanghai Women's Prison. Visits from her family have been repeatedly denied.

Liang Baofan: 4 years in prison and pressure to renounce his faith

Mr. Liang Baofan, a 52-year-old man, was arrested on 17th June 2015, and sentenced to four years in prison during a secret trial that took place on 4th March 2016. His family had no knowledge of his whereabouts until early 2017, when they discovered that he was held in Gongzhuling Prison in Jilin Province. Thereafter, his family tried on several occasions to visit him but were repeatedly denied access because he would refuse to renounce his belief in Falun Gong. It was not until September 2017 that his wife was allowed to visit him – for *five* minutes.

Four Falun Gong practitioners imprisoned for 3 years for “talking to people about the persecution of Falun Gong”

On 22nd April 2014, Mr. Wang Zhanqing, Ms. Wen Jie, Mr. Ma Weishan, and Mr. Kang Jingtai from Sanhe City, Hebei Province, were arrested for speaking about the harassment and oppression suffered by Falun Gong. Nineteen months after their arrest, they received the following sentences: Wang Zhanqing (six years in prison), Wen Jie and Ma Weishan (five years in prison) and Kang Jingtai (three years in prison, with three years of probation). All their appeals were dismissed on 13th May 2016.

Conclusions

The severe repression of Falun Gong by the Chinese government has not shown signs of slowing. Indeed, the 2015 National Security Law has further tightened control on illegal 'cult organisations,' contributing to the troubling state of human rights overall in China. Movements like Falun Gong carry an enormous appeal for the millions of Chinese citizens who have grown weary of their country's limitations on basic freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This is precisely the fear that persists in Beijing's corridors of power.