

Falun Gong

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The Falun Gong movement (or *Falun Dafa*) began in 1992 in northeast China where Master Li Hongzhi taught about the healing and health benefits of the ancient Chinese practice of Qigong.¹ When he first developed the practice of Falun Gong, he was a government-registered teacher of Qigong. Li drew from the teachings of classical religious traditions –Taoism and Buddhism in particular – to construct a system of beliefs and practices that focus on the cultivation of compassion and virtue in pursuit of human wholeness. He incorporated much of that teaching in his own work and emphasised 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 was released 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. However, China, as a totalitarian state, considers any unofficial and unauthorised organisation to be a threat to the one-party state. With Falun Gong’s commitment to truthfulness, perhaps it would begin denouncing the rampant corruption across the country. Such thoughts triggered Beijing to start a propaganda campaign against Falun Gong in 1999. It shut off Internet access for websites that mentioned Falun Gong and denounced Falun Gong as a ‘heretical organisation’ and a menace to social stability.

¹ “Falun Gong,” World Religious Spirituality, accessed June 2020.
<https://worldrels.org/2012/04/04/falun-gong2/>.

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

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

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 70 million adherents. Today, some sources estimate that tens of millions continue to practice Falun Gong in China despite experiencing harsh persecution.

Hundreds of thousands are estimated to practice Falun Gong outside of China in over 70 countries worldwide. Li often lectures at conferences of Falun Gong Experience Sharing. In May 2017, he led a conference in Brooklyn, New York, US that was attended by 10,000 practitioners from 58 countries.

Teachings

Falun Gong traces its roots to practices that reach far into Chinese history. These techniques focus on the transformation of the individual through the cultivation of *qi*, the life force that is believed to permeate 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 nurture virtue and find spiritual resources for overcoming difficulties and positively influencing society.

Li Hongzhi 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 expands on. 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.

CHINA: Reasons for the Persecution of Falun Gong Practitioners

In July 2018, the US government estimated the total population of China to be 1.4 billion. According to a February 2017 estimate by the international NGO Freedom House, there are 7-20 million Falun Gong practitioners in China.²

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 in the 1980s, and Falun Gong was admitted as a sub-branch in 1992.

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

The turn of the 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 the same, but the Falun Gong proved to be the most organised and frequently successful campaigners. However, this strength made them particularly susceptible to government repression.

On 25 April 1999, the week after a demonstration was broken up by police, about 10,000 protesters sat quietly outside of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) 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 22 July 1999, Falun Gong was banned in China as an ‘illegal organisation’ and was designated as a ‘*xie jiao*’.³

² For more religious statistics, see U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Report on international Religious Freedom: China 2018*. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china-includes-tibet-xinjiang-hong-kong-and-macau/>.

³ The expression of *xie jiao* is far from clear. It is incorrectly translated in English into ‘evil cult,’ but in fact it means ‘heterodox teachings’. This notion was born in the Ming period. What teachings were ‘heterodox’ was determined by the Emperor, and lists of *xie jiao* were based on both theological and political grounds. For

During the three months prior to the ban, authorities established the ‘6-10 Office’ with the sole mission of cracking down on this movement. It was alleged that Falun Gong had overstepped the boundaries of religious freedom, and thus a plan was adopted for its dissolution and the ‘transformation’ of its followers. The appellation 6-10 refers 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 every administrative level in the CCP and all other political and judicial systems. It also had jurisdiction in all Chinese cities, villages, governmental agencies, institutions, and schools. Its duties have since expanded to include other ‘heretical cult organisations’.

The office began ‘detoxifying’ CCP members that had become partial to Falun Gong, either as 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 discredited the group as a whole in the minds of many Chinese citizens.

Practitioners are often confronted in their workplaces 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 charge. If charges are pressed, they are usually under Article 300 of the criminal code, which prohibits the formation of ‘superstitious sects, secret

example, Christianity as a whole was classified as a *xie jiao* in 1725, but taken off the list in 1842, due to Western political and military pressure. Nowadays, the list of *xie jiao* (<https://bitterwinter.org/what-is-a-xie-jiao/>) includes any movement that the Chinese government considers hostile to the CCP. Being active in a *xie jiao* is punished with severe jail penalties under [Article 300](https://bitterwinter.org/Vocabulary/article-300/) of the Penal Code (<https://bitterwinter.org/Vocabulary/article-300/>).

societies and weird religious organisations’. Sentences range between three and seven years of imprisonment but may be 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.⁴

Repeated accusations have also been made against the Chinese government of systematically killing prisoners for the purpose of selling their organs on the transplant market for a high profit. 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 researchers, David Kilgour and David Matas, conducted an investigation of widely circulated stories that Chinese authorities had been responsible for ‘large-scale organ seizures from unwilling Falun Gong practitioners’ to supply the Chinese transplant trade.⁵ China has consistently denied this charge, but Kilgour and Matas discovered 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 CCP and have become some of the most ardent critics of the Chinese government.

Some analysts have suggested that the persecution of the Falun Gong movement 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 perceived as dangerous.

Falun Gong Practitioners in Prison in China

⁴ “Violent Suppression of Falun Gong: Falun Dafa Persecution,” FalunInfo, May 10, 2020. <https://faluninfo.net/violent-suppression-of-100-million-people/>.

⁵ Matas, David, and Kelgour, David “Kilgour & Matas Report,” The International Coalition to End Transplant Abuse in China, accessed June 22, 2020. <https://endtransplantabuse.org/kilgour-matas-report/>.

The Falun Gong movement is one of the world's most persecuted religious / spiritual denominations by a single country. For years, their website minghui.org⁶ has documented thousands of cases of arrests, imprisonments, disappearances, torture, killings, and organ harvesting.

Falung Gong practitioners behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 June 2020, HRWF documented **over 1,400 cases** of detained Falun Gong practitioners in its Prisoners' Database.⁷ However, this number only represents the tip of the iceberg of Falun Gong practitioners that are behind bars.⁸ According to [minghui's](http://minghui.org) well documented reports,⁹ 2,014 Falun Gong practitioners were arrested in the first half of 2019 for practicing the movement's meditation exercises or distributing literature about their beliefs.

Most of the Falun Gong practitioners in HRWF's Prisoners' Database were sentenced to between three and seven years in prison, but some individuals received sentences as long as 17 years.

According to the American Dui Hua Foundation,¹⁰ which analysed the statistics of the Supreme People's Court (SPC) of China, more than 40,000 people were prosecuted under Article 300 (see below) between 1998 and 2016. Only 96 individuals were acquitted. Most of the sentenced believers were Falun Gong practitioners and members of The Church of Almighty God. Additionally, Dui Hua stresses that those statistics do not include cases of extra-judicial detention and others that remained out of the radar of the SPC.¹¹

Articles of the Penal Code

⁶ English version: "Accounts of Persecution: Falun Dafa," [Minghui.org](http://minghui.org), accessed June 2020.

<http://en.minghui.org/cc/10/>.

⁷ Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned Falun Gong Practitioners, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database/>.

⁸ Falun Gong's website <http://en.minghui.org> publishes a high number of cases of persecution every day. HRWF only documents individual cases which have the date of arrest and the duration of the sentence available: this amounts to approximately one out of every 50 cases of arrests and detention documented by [Minghui](http://minghui.org). This is a clear indication that the over 1,400 cases contained in HRWF's Prisoners' Database reflects only a small portion of the actual number of cases.

⁹ "Minghui Report: 2,014 Falun Gong Practitioners Arrested for Their Faith in First Half of 2019," [Minghui.org](http://minghui.org), accessed June 22, 2020. <http://en.minghui.org/html/articles/2019/7/21/178520.html>.

¹⁰ Dui Hua, is a San Francisco-based non-profit humanitarian organisation that seeks clemency and better treatment for at-risk detainees through the promotion of universally recognised human rights in a well-informed, mutually respectful dialogue with China (*Dui hua*, is pinyin for the Chinese word meaning 'dialogue'). Focusing on political and religious prisoners, juvenile justice, women in prison, and criminal justice and death penalty reform, Dui Hua's work rests on the premise that positive change is realised through constructive relationships and exchange.

¹¹ Dui Hua, Detailed court statistics on article 300, Part I, 28 May 2020. Dui Hua, Detailed court statistics on article 300, Part II, 4 June 2020.

<https://www.duihuahrjournal.org/2020/05/detailed-court-statistics-on-article-300.html>.

Falun Gong practitioners are usually sentenced under **Article 300**¹² of the Chinese Criminal Code,¹³ which was published in 1997 and amended in 2015. It criminalises any activities by members within groups identified as a ‘*xie jiao*’,¹⁴ which means ‘heterodox teachings’. Since Falun Gong is considered a ‘*xie jiao*’ by the Chinese authorities, all practitioners face a prison term of three to seven years.

Typical accusations against practitioners who are sentenced to prison are: subverting state power, distributing information about Falun Gong, practising Falun Gong, undermining law enforcement, and spreading information about Falun Gong.

International advocacy

During the Universal Periodic Review of China at the **United Nations** in March 2018, many civil society actors submitted reports that highlighted the ongoing persecution and detention of Falun Gong practitioners.¹⁵

Also, in a resolution about the situation of religious and ethnic minorities in China on 18 April 2019, the **European Parliament** ‘[called] for the immediate release of arbitrarily detained people, prisoners of conscience, including practitioners of Falun Gong and for a stop to be put to enforced disappearances’.¹⁶

In its 2020 Report, the **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom** (USCIRF) recommended that the US Department of State:

- re-designate China as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) ‘for engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations’;
- impose targeted sanctions on Chinese government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals’ assets and/or barring their entry into the US under human

¹² Introvigne, Massimo “Article 300: CCP’s Secret Weapon of Religious Persecution,” Bitter Winter, April 9, 2020. <https://bitterwinter.org/article-300-ccps-secret-weapon-of-religious-persecution/>, and, Respinti, Marco and Introvigne, Massimo, *The Journal of CESNUR* (Volume 3, Issue 5), September-October 2019. http://cesnur.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/tjoc_3_5_full_issue.pdf.

¹³ The Dui Hua Foundation, *The Dui Hua Foundation’s submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review of China of China 2018*, March 2018.

¹⁴ Introvigne, Massimo, “What Is A Xie Jiao?” Bitter Winter, August 9, 2018. <https://bitterwinter.org/what-is-a-xie-jiao/>.

¹⁵ Universal Periodic Review, *NGO submissions on China, Review on November 6, 2018*, 2018. <https://www.upr-info.org/en/review/China/Session-31---November-2018/Civil-society-and-other-submissions#top>. Some of these civil society actors included: Amnesty International, the Society for Threatened Peoples, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

¹⁶ European Parliament, Resolution on China, notably the situation of religious and ethnic minorities (2019/2690(RSP)) April 18, 2019. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-8-2019-0422_EN.html.

rights related financial and visa authorities, citing specific religious freedom violations;

- and publicly express concerns about Beijing hosting the 2022 Winter Olympic Games and state that US government officials will not attend the games if the Chinese government's crackdown on religious freedom continues.¹⁷

CASE STUDIES

Denied medical parole despite cancer progressively worsening

Lan Lihua was arrested on 6 November 2018 for handing out calendars with information about Falun Gong. During her pre-trial detention, she developed breast cancer. She was still forced to stand trial on 5 May 2019 and was sentenced to three years and ten months imprisonment. She has been denied medical parole by prison authorities because she refuses to renounce Falun Gong.

On 17 March 2020, a guard contacted her family with a demand of a 5,000-yuan (approximately 645 EUR) deposit for Lan Lihua to go to a doctor's appointment. Her family was finally allowed to speak with her on the phone, and Lan Lihua informed them that she is very sick and believes her cancer has spread to her lungs and lymph nodes. Her family requested to go to the hospital with her, but their request was denied.¹⁸

Husband vainly attempts to prosecute nine police officers who tortured and sexually assaulted his wife

On 25 July 2019, **Che Jinxia** was arrested for practising Falun Gong and, as of 12 March 2020, has been held in a detention centre despite her case being refused for trial due to insufficient evidence. When she was arrested, she was tortured for 18 hours and sexually assaulted by the police. As a result, she had head swelling and immobility in one of her fingers. She has been refused medical care throughout the duration of her detention.

Her husband filed complaints of police brutality against the nine perpetrators to several government agencies but was then threatened by the police himself. They took the evidence he had and all copies of his lawsuits against them, and then threatened to prevent his son from being able to find work.

¹⁷ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Examination of Anti-Semitism in the OSCE Region*. https://www.uscirtf.gov/sites/default/files/China_0.pdf.

¹⁸ "Imprisoned Woman with Metastatic Breast Cancer Denied Medical Parole," Minghui.org, March 25, 2020, accessed March 2020. <http://en.minghui.org/html/articles/2020/3/25/183773.html>.

Other government agencies have responded to her husband's formal complaints with threats of suing him. Che Jinxia's father also went to the authorities to hold these police officers accountable but was told that 'all cases related to Falun Gong were rejected'.¹⁹

Zhang Qinghua tortured by other inmates on guards' orders

In November 2016, **Zhang Qinghua** was arrested for disseminating materials about Falun Gong. This over 60-year-old practitioner was sentenced on 9 January 2017 to three years imprisonment at Liaoning Women's Prison.

There, she has endured horrific physical and mental abuse by other inmates who were incentivised by prison authorities promising them shortened prison terms if they torture Falun Gong practitioners. During her detention, other inmates have beaten her, attempted to suffocate her with a plastic bag, force-fed her, and exposed her to the cold for extended periods of time. The guards encouraged this and at one point froze her monetary funds, making it impossible for her to buy necessities such as food or soap.

All of this was done with the explicit goal of forcing her to stop practising Falun Gong. It is unknown whether she was freed on her release date.²⁰

Conclusions

The severe repression of Falun Gong by the Chinese government has not shown any sign of slowing. Indeed, the 2015 National Security Law has further tightened control on illegal 'xie jiao' 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 exists in Beijing's corridors of power.

¹⁹ "Husband Threatened by Police Officers Who Had Tortured His Wife," Minghui.org, March 12, 2020, accessed April 2020. <http://en.minghui.org/html/articles/2020/3/12/183606.html>.

²⁰ "Guards' Order Inmates to Torture a Woman in Her 60s," Minghui.org, December 20, 2019, accessed April 2020. <http://en.minghui.org/html/articles/2019/12/20/181165.html>.