A Systematic Suppression of 100 Million People

How Falun Gong practitioners became China's—if not the world's—largest group of prisoners of conscience

It began in the middle of the night, July 20, 1999. Across China under the veil of darkness, police dragged hundreds of ordinary people from their beds. Many would be taken to holding centers and jails, others beaten, and some would die from torture.

What had they done? Nothing more than to practice Falun Gong, a traditional form of Chinese exercise and meditation that had grown immensely popular.

Police were acting on directives from the top, from Communist Party head Jiang Zemin, who ordered the group crushed. By most accounts, Jiang was resentful of the popular practice—its believers numbering 100 million—and wished to make a show of power.

Two days later, on July 22, Falun Gong was banned across the land, marking the official beginning of a violent campaign in China that has continued for more than a decade and cast tens of millions of apolitical citizens as enemies of the state.

Jiang declared that "no means are too excessive" in the drive to "eradicate Falun Gong." To date, over 3,500 deaths have been documented, most owing to torture in police custody. Hundreds of thousands more languish in China's prisons and labor camps, unlawfully held captive. Physical abuse, rape, and forced labor are routine. Permeating every facet of society, the persecution is marked by its scope and vigor.

Georges-Henri Beauthier, a human rights attorney who prosecuted Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet and perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide, has called the campaign a "horrific form of genocide."

The following are prominent features of the suppression.

Propaganda & hate campaigns

Many millions of dollars have been put into saturating China's TV news, airwaves, and press with defamatory propaganda. The intention is twofold: to distort and demonise Falun Gong so as to turn the public against it; and to mask the Communist Party's human rights abuses by depicting the suppression as humane, beneficent, and necessary for "social order."

> *China's regime has 'systematically attempted to eradicate the practice and those who follow it... through organized brain-washing, torture, and murder.'*
>
> *United States Congress*

The extent is hard for those in the West to imagine. Schoolchildren are forced to study hateful fabrications in textbooks; college entrance exams contain questions criticizing Falun Gong; workplaces hold mandatory "study sessions." And while state-run media are not as active as a decade ago in airing an endless barrage of vilifying coverage, the residual effects of those reports remain instilled in many a Chinese mind.

Information control

China's regime has gone further than just controlling media portrayals of Falun Gong. All books, audiotapes, videos, flyers, and items that cast Falun Gong in a positive light are banned.

Non-propaganda websites so much as mentioning Falun Gong are blocked. Posts to Chinese microblogging sites are systematically deleted. People known to practice Falun Gong have their phones tapped, their email monitored.

Those voicing disagreement with the Party's anti-Falun Gong campaign meet with a harsh response—some have been sent to prison for over 10 years just for visiting banned Falun Gong websites and printing their contents.

Bending the law

The legal system offers little protection. Questionable laws were created to retroactively punish Falun Gong practitioners. Communist Party committees manipulate judges to send practitioners to prison after sham trials.

Most of the time, the authorities don't even bother to put up a façade of legality. Police abduct practitioners from their homes—8,000 were detained in just the run-up to the Beijing Olympics. Many of them were sent to forced labor camps by bureaucratic fiat.

Labor "re-education" camps

These "re-education" camps—China's answer to the Soviet gulag—are the main holding grounds for Falun Gong practitioners. In some cases, a single camp will hold hundreds.

Under inhumane conditions, victims are forced to do heavy labor for upwards of 18 hours a day. Those who collapse, fail to meet quotas, or don't comply are typically beaten, tortured, or starved. Hundreds have died in these camps.

SILENCED: Illegal arrests, censorship, and violence against women are just three of the many tactics employed by Chinese authorities.

Coercion and brainwashing

The "re-education" part of the experience refers to the effort to force "renunciations" of Falun Gong. But the victims are not limited to just those taken to the camps. All practitioners are targeted with brainwashing meant to destroy a person's very identity and reprogram his or her mind. Those who refuse to part with their beliefs are threatened with the loss of their jobs, pensions, homes—and freedom.

In 2010, the Party reinvigorated these efforts, launching a three-year campaign that has seen thousands across the country taken to special brainwashing classes, often held at hotels, retirement homes, and even Buddhist Temples. Once in custody, they are tortured and deprived of sleep until they relent.

Violence against women

One of the most disturbing aspects of the campaign is the how often female practitioners are sexually abused—including being shocked with electric batons on their breasts and even raped by guards. Several women have had their pregnancies violently terminated by authorities who sought to imprison them longer.

Living on the edge

There is much more, untold, that we do not know. Sizable evidence of forcible organ harvesting from Falun Gong prisoners has emerged (*see "Organ Harvesting," page 9*), but the full scale of the crimes is yet to be known.

Meanwhile, tens of millions of lives suffer damage not likely soon to be mended. Many hang in a delicate balance, one knock at the door away from illegal incarceration; one day away from another violent interrogation; one blow or electric shock away from death. Though the political dynamics in China are chaotic and changing, the campaign against Falun Gong continues to this day.

Yet amidst so much darkness, hope remains. It is nestled in the hearts of a determined people. Strengthened by their beliefs, they continue to endure, to resist, and to call for our help.

Let us answer.

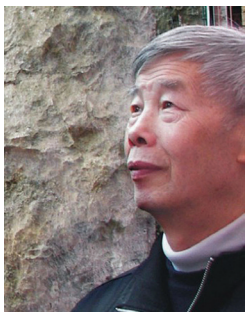
Key Numbers of the Persecution

- **100 million** people were practicing Falun Gong when the persecution began in 1999.
- **Millions** of Chinese people have since been abducted, imprisoned, tortured, fired from jobs, expelled from school or forced into homeless because they practice Falun Gong.
- **450,000—1,000,000** Falun Gong practitioners are illegally held in labor camps, prisons, and detention centers at any given time—the largest group of prisoners of conscience in China, if not the world.
- **Over 80,000** cases of torture have been recorded.
- **Thousands** have been killed.

Victims Young and Old

42-year-old Yu Zhou was a popular folk musician from Beijing. On January 26, 2008, he and his wife were detained by police on their way home because they had Falun Gong materials in their bag. Within eleven days of his arrest, Yu Zhou was tortured to death. His wife, Xu Na, was sentenced to three years in prison.

Sun Min, 39, was abducted by police from her home afer her husband had been detained for distributing DVDs exposing human rights abuses against Falun Gong practitioners. The couple was interrogated and within hours, Ms. Sun was dead. Sources in China say her body had marks from electric batons and blows from a heavy object.



Mr. Xie Deqing, 69, was detained on April 29, 2009 and held at the Xinjin Brainwashing Center, suffering physical abuse. He emerged 20 days later, emaciated and incontinent. He remained largely unconscious, waking briefly to complain of pains and being injected with unknown drugs while detained. He died four days later.