

Managing Political Opposition Groups in China: Explaining the Continuing Anti-Falun Gong Campaign

Stephen Noakes^{*} and Caylan Ford[†]

Abstract

In this article, we seek to explain the persistence of the Communist Party's campaign to suppress the Falun Gong religious movement. We argue that the unrecoverable investment of more than a decade's worth of suppression work, compounded by the ineffectiveness of these efforts (as evinced in official documents and by the continuation of resistance activities), limits the state's ability to halt its campaign against Falun Gong. Our findings shed light on some of the Chinese state's current strategies for the management and control of domestic opposition groups, and challenge the view of the Party as adaptable and highly capable of reform from within.

Keywords: Chinese Communist Party; Falun Gong; opposition; resistance; human rights

For a group once branded the most serious challenge to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since the June 1989 democracy uprising,¹ the status and activities of the Falun Gong religious movement have received surprisingly little attention from scholars in recent years. Much has been written about the group's rise in the context of China's reform and religious reawakening on the heels of Maoism, and about the Party-led crackdown in July 1999 that led to charges of torture and deaths numbering in the thousands.² A small amount of research, dubbed "advocacy anthropology,"³ has also spoken to Falun Gong's disposition as a global religious movement, its mobilization strategies, and its tenacity in sustaining demonstrations against the CCP in cities around the world. In general, however, the group has received little coverage since the mid-2000s, when the official campaign against the group in China is widely thought to have concluded with a decisive victory in the state's favour.

^{*} University of Auckland. Email: s.noakes@auckland.ac.nz (corresponding author).

[†] Independent human rights consultant, Ottawa.

¹ Zong 2002, 66.

² Chang 2004; Ownby 2008; Tong 2009; Wong 1999.

³ Porter 2003.

Only very recently have there been any attempts to ascertain the post-2005 status of Falun Gong in China. Writing in 2012, James Tong found that there remains a clandestine community of Falun Gong practitioners on the Chinese mainland who, despite the party-state's efforts to eradicate them, persist in producing and disseminating Falun Gong materials with help from practitioners based overseas. This finding – coupled with the observation that central Party authorities and media entities no longer issue regular public denunciations of the group – led Tong to suggest that the Chinese state may be satisfied with the mere “emasculatation” of Falun Gong, and lacks the willingness to eliminate the group fully.⁴

Our research suggests another possibility. Making use of a variety of state and Party documents, as well as Falun Gong sources and human rights reports, we find that central Party officials continue to devote significant resources to the struggle against Falun Gong, launching nationwide campaigns to enhance surveillance and propaganda work and to detain and coercively re-educate its practitioners. Authorities have become more discreet in the way they disseminate directives, however, necessitating that researchers adapt their methods. For instance, our study draws heavily on government documents issued at or below the municipal level. By cross-referencing local-level directives from geographically disparate regions, we identify several nationally coordinated anti-Falun Gong initiatives. Documents pertaining to each of these initiatives appear concurrently across the country and employ highly consistent language, yet very few were publicly announced at the national level.

To explain why the party-state persists in pursuing a costly and arguably unwinnable political campaign, we draw upon the concept of path dependence as defined by Margaret Levi: “Once a country or region has started down a track, the costs of reversal are very high. There will be other choice points, but the entrenchments of certain institutional arrangements obstruct an easy reversal of the initial choice.”⁵ Borrowing from the discipline of economics, Paul Pierson describes this process as one governed by “increasing returns,” in which “the probability of further steps along the same path increases with each step down that path.” In other words, “the costs of exit – of switching to some previously plausible alternative – rise.”⁶

In the context of the CCP's struggle against Falun Gong, we argue that such a significant investment of state resources in a campaign to eliminate what it deemed to be a grave and potentially fatal threat to regime legitimacy, compounded by the apparent ineffectiveness of these efforts, has produced sufficient institutionalization of the suppression campaign to make the costs of its reversal or sudden conclusion unacceptably high. From the perspective of a self-interested CCP, walking away from the campaign would mean swallowing the costs sunk in

4 Tong 2012.

5 Levi 1997, 28.

6 Pierson 2000, 252.

its prosecution and, worse, leave the issue of a declared threat to public order, an overriding and well-documented preoccupation of the Party, unresolved.⁷ Faced with the prospect of such a lose–lose scenario, the Chinese leaders implicated in the campaign have concluded that their best option is to press on.

In making this claim, we expand the scholarly literature on the disposition of Falun Gong internationally. We also offer a window into contemporary regime strategies for the management of organized domestic opposition, particularly with regard to the use of propaganda tools and their influence on social attitudes both inside and outside the Party. Finally, our analysis suggests limitations in the Party's capacity for self-reform, adding to the debate on adaptation and atrophy within the CCP.⁸

Following a brief comment on our handling of data, we provide a synopsis of the origins and evolution of the anti-Falun Gong campaign. The remaining sections are arranged as a test of the path-dependence argument, breaking the evidence into two halves. In the first half, we detail the state's ongoing efforts to suppress Falun Gong, demonstrating the breadth and depth of its commitment to fighting the group, as well as its methods of doing so. In the second, we present evidence on the efficacy of the suppression efforts as measured by continued participation in Falun Gong and trends in official and popular attitudes towards the suppression. The scores on both accounts point to the continuity of the anti-Falun Gong campaign as being preferable to its conclusion from the standpoint of a utility-optimizing CCP.

A Note on the Method

Scholarly research on Falun Gong has always been complicated by a shortage of evidence from independent third parties. Many accounts of Falun Gong's history, development and suppression come from either practitioners themselves or from the media or agents of the party-state that, in the post-1999 context, are especially problematic. Authoritative sources are few, and with fieldwork on Falun Gong being all but impossible within China, scholars are largely left parsing official documents and data supplied on Falun Gong websites. In this paper, we rely on both in equal measure, using a technique Ian Lustick has called "triangulation" to produce the most neutral and value-free social scientific analysis possible from disparate records.⁹

While there are many instances where the narratives and representations emanating from Falun Gong sources and Party documents are irreconcilable, there is also considerable agreement on the question of Falun Gong's status today. Our data indicates a consensus that Falun Gong exists on the mainland and that its elimination remains a priority for the CCP. All data are available publicly.

7 Fewsmith 2007; Tanner 2004.

8 Shambaugh 2008; Dickson 2004.

9 Lustick 1996, 616.

China's Campaign against Falun Gong: Escalation and Entrenchment

The Chinese Communist Party's campaign to eliminate Falun Gong was among the largest mass political mobilizations in China in decades. Formally launched by Jiang Zemin 江泽民 in July 1999, it marshalled the full weight of China's security, propaganda and judicial apparatus. In scenes broadly reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution, Chinese newspapers and television broadcasts were filled with daily invectives proclaiming Falun Gong's "theism" a threat to the socialist cause.¹⁰ Book burnings were held in cities across China, and public arrests became a daily occurrence. Lawyers and judicial authorities were instructed to adhere closely to the direction set by the political leadership, and within months, tens of thousands of people were detained.¹¹ At the helm of the campaign to "disintegrate" Falun Gong was a powerful, Party-led security apparatus known as the "610" Office, headed by security czar Luo Gan 罗干.¹²

Falun Gong practitioners responded to the crackdown by picketing government offices at successively higher levels. When local authorities proved unreceptive to their remonstrations, the practitioners took their cause to Beijing, hoping to explain that they posed no threat and appealing for a reversal of the campaign. Throughout 2000, a core contingent of Falun Gong faithful continued to protest in the capital, with dozens being arrested daily.¹³ In the words of a *Wall Street Journal* correspondent, it was "arguably the most sustained challenge to authority in 50 years of Communist rule."¹⁴

Falun Gong's tenacity, and the government's response to the practice, was taken by many observers as evidence of a regime in crisis, bereft of both moral authority and effective coercive capabilities.¹⁵ David Ownby, among the world's more noted experts on Falun Gong, specifically invoked the biblical narrative of David and Goliath to describe Falun Gong's challenge to regime stability.¹⁶ In the same vein, many scholars drew parallels between Falun Gong and the religious redemptive societies that toppled powerful dynasties in China's past, such as the White Lotus and Yellow Turbans.¹⁷ As one observer put it at the time, "China's current leaders are undoubtedly aware of the movement's historical significance, and may even see it as a harbinger of their own downfall."¹⁸ Speaking to Western journalists, Party insiders moreover described the anti-Falun Gong campaign as misguided, taking it as evidence that the leadership had lost touch with the people.¹⁹

10 See Jiang Zemin's letter to Party cadres on the evening of 25 April 1999, available in *Beijing zhichun* 2001.

11 Amnesty International 2001.

12 Cook and Lemish 2011.

13 Johnson 2000.

14 Ibid.

15 Shue 2004; Leung 2002, 768–770; Chan 2004, 674–77.

16 Ownby 2008.

17 Ibid., 23–44; Perry 2002, xvii.

18 Schechter 2000, 19.

19 Pomfret 1999; Lam 2001.

Rather than entertain a reversal of the suppression campaign, the Party leadership chose to dig in. Facing mounting criticism at home and abroad, Jiang convened a rare “central work conference” in February 2001 – the first such meeting since 1988 – and called on the assembled Party officials to unify their thinking and redouble their efforts to eliminate Falun Gong.²⁰ By mid-year, authorities were sanctioning the “systematic use of violence” to force Falun Gong practitioners to renounce their beliefs.²¹ Even the private practice of Falun Gong became grounds for detention in labour camps, transformation centres or prisons.²² The elimination of Falun Gong was described as a national priority in the Tenth Five-year Plan,²³ and at the 16th Party Congress the Politburo Standing Committee was expanded to accommodate both Li Changchun 李长春, who was responsible for propaganda, and Luo Gan, head of the 610 Office and Political and Legislative Affairs Committee. By 2002, Falun Gong protests in Tiananmen Square had all but ceased, and the government proclaimed victory in the struggle. Whatever remained of Falun Gong was driven deep underground, and references to the practice were muted in both international and domestic media.²⁴

These developments gave rise to another type of scholarship focused on the ease with which domestic security forces crushed Falun Gong as a testament to CCP resilience. Those of this view contend that the original claims about the movement’s revolutionary potential were overblown, and suggest that the party-state can still act to thwart perceived threats to its legitimacy and rule, even after decades of decentralization of power and without a strong, unifying ideology. James Tong’s 2009 work is a prime exemplar of this school of thought, and underscores the ability of the Chinese state to quell not just Falun Gong but also social disruptions to its rule more broadly.²⁵ Similarly, Bruce Gilley writes that, “[t]oday, more than a decade since its irruption into China’s politics in 1999, [Falun Gong] has been thoroughly defeated without so much as a wobble to the system.”²⁶ Østergaard concurs: “the state seems, contrary to some expectations, to have won the conflict.”²⁷ The challenge Falun Gong represented to Party supremacy was “little more than the hyperbole or wishful thinking of the humanist West,” argues another scholar.²⁸

Yet, as we demonstrate in the following paragraphs, the party-state continues to invest resources in combatting Falun Gong in a variety of ways, including through the launching of regular, nationally coordinated campaigns. As far back as

20 Eckholm and Rosenthal 2001.

21 Pomfret and Pan 2001.

22 Hutzler 2001.

23 Zhu 2001.

24 Tong reports a steep decline in the frequency of attacks on Falun Gong in the official media after Hu Jintao took office in 2002. See Tong 2009, 90.

25 Tong 2009.

26 Gilley 2011, 518.

27 Østergaard 2004, 221.

28 Noakes 2010, 354.

September 1999 and continuing to this day, a high proportion of anti-Falun Gong directives describe the anti-Falun Gong “struggle” (*douzheng* 斗争) as a “long, arduous and complex” political campaign, one that is coordinated in a top-down manner by the Party central.²⁹ In September 2007, Zhou Yongkang 周永康 ordered a nationwide “strike-hard” initiative against “overseas and hostile domestic forces, including Falun Gong” ahead of the 17th National Party Congress and Beijing Olympic Games. This resulted in several thousand arrests. The “6521 Project” followed in 2009 as part of an effort to quell dissent around sensitive anniversaries. The project was reportedly helmed by Zhou Yongkang and Xi Jinping 习近平, and was accompanied by a renewed emphasis on the role of neighbourhood committees and grassroots informants to assist in the identification of practitioners.³⁰ The Central Committee on the Comprehensive Management of Public Security urges the security agencies to “closely watch out for and strike hard” against Falun Gong as part of its annual management directives, although details of specific initiatives are seldom publicized at the central level.³¹

More recent directives issued by local officials also indicate that their anti-Falun Gong activities are being conducted based on instructions emanating from the “national, provincial, and municipal” Party authorities, or that they are following the requirements of the CCP Central Committee.³² This applies to campaigns calling for the intensified surveillance of Falun Gong practitioners, grassroots propaganda and “clean up” activities, as well as concerted re-education efforts.

Aspects of the Continuing Suppression of Falun Gong

Detention in prisons, labour camps and re-education centres

Third-party sources, including prominent human rights NGOs, investigative journalists and foreign governments, have given insights into the number of Falun Gong practitioners recently incarcerated. On the basis of several such interviews with ex-detainees, Human Rights Watch reported in 2005 that a majority of those

29 A representative sampling of this language can be found in Jinan City Shunyu Road Subdistrict Office. 2012. “Shunzhong shequ: kaizhang quanmian qing jiao falun gong fanxuanpin huodong” (Launch of a comprehensive clean-up of Falun Gong reactionary propaganda), 28 March, http://syl.shizhong.gov.cn/art/2012/3/28/art_4380_44559.html. Accessed 27 July 2014; Kunming City Land Resource Bureau. 2011. “Yiliang xian guotu ziyuan ju renzhen zuohao 2011 nian fangfan he chuli xiejiao zuzhi gongzuo” (Yiliang County Land Resource Bureau earnestly implements the 2011 work to guard against and dispose of evil religious organizations), 21 October, http://kmland.km.gov.cn/view.asp?id=4617&frist_lanmu=88. Accessed 27 July 2014.

30 Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2009.

31 Central Committee for Comprehensive Management of Public Security. 2009. “Zhongyang zong zhi wei fabu 2009 nian quanguo shehui zhi'an zonghe zhili gongzuo yaodian” (2009 main points for the comprehensive management of national social stability), 4 February, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64114/64136/88838/8749433.html>. Accessed 27 July 2014.

32 For example, see Nanyang City Planning Bureau. 2014. “Guanyu dui falun gong xiejiao ren yuan modi paicha gongzuo de tongzhi” (Notice of work to investigate the true situation regarding the number of Falun Gong cult persons), 13 June, http://nygh.nanyang.gov.cn/structure/ghxwj/content_158678_1.htm. Accessed 27 July 2014.

held in the re-education through labour (*laodong jiaoyang* 劳动教养, or *laojiao* 劳教 hereafter) facilities it investigated were Falun Gong practitioners, who also received the longest sentences and worst treatment.³³ Similar testimonies from former prisoners were published in a 2009 report from Chinese Human Rights Defenders: more than half of the 13 former detainees interviewed in that study remarked on the number and treatment of Falun Gong practitioners, with one noting that they represented “the largest group” in the camp and were singled out for punishment.³⁴ In 2008, the Beijing Women’s Labour Camp reported a total of approximately 840 detainees, 700 of whom were Falun Gong practitioners.³⁵ These figures held up three years later, when a recently released petitioner told *Deutsche-Presse Agentur* that two-thirds of detainees in her section of the same camp were Falun Gong practitioners.³⁶ In a December 2013 report on the *laojiao* system, Amnesty International reported that Falun Gong detainees accounted for “on average from one third to in some cases 100 per cent of the total population” of the camps studied.³⁷

Until recently, the *laojiao* system featured prominently in Chinese government documents as the punishment of choice for Falun Gong practitioners who had not yet recanted their beliefs. Use of the *laojiao* system declined precipitously under the new administration of Xi Jinping, however, with some camps either closing down or being renamed as prisons, drug rehabilitation sites or “legal education” centres.³⁸ The Falun Gong adherents, who once comprised a plurality of *laojiao* detainees, are now being sent in greater numbers to prisons or to specialized re-education centres overseen by the 610 Office. Falun Gong sources recorded just 14 practitioners receiving labour camp sentences in the first half of 2013, compared to 445 who were sentenced to prison terms, and 2,101 more who were reportedly abducted by security agents and were awaiting trial.³⁹

Transformation and conversion work

The ideological transformation of Falun Gong practitioners is a central preoccupation of Party authorities. In prisons, *laojiao* camps, and in the 610 Office’s re-education centres, guards are expected to force recalcitrant practitioners to renounce their beliefs and sign “guarantee statements” promising not to have any future contact with Falun Gong. Transformation quotas are issued from the central levels and disseminated to local authorities, who are incentivized to use any means necessary to achieve these targets, including coercive tactics such as beatings, forced-feeding, sleep deprivation, and shocks with electric truncheons.⁴⁰

33 Human Rights Watch 2005, 58.

34 Chinese Human Rights Defenders 2009, 19–20.

35 Lemish 2008.

36 Smith 2011.

37 Amnesty International 2013, 14.

38 A plan for the eventual outright abolition of *laojiao* featured prominently in the Third Plenum Decision, announced in November 2013. See Amnesty International 2013.

39 Falun Dafa Information Center 2013; Dui Hua Foundation 2015.

40 Pomfret and Pan 2001.

One such transformation initiative began in 2010 under the direction of Politburo Standing Committee member, Zhou Yongkang.⁴¹ Designed to span three years, the plan set targets for each locale, specifying the ratio of registered practitioners to be transformed and requiring authorities to force practitioners into re-education sessions run by the 610 Office. These sessions typically lasted days or weeks, and were sometimes held in civilian establishments such as schools, hotels and temples. If the practitioner refused to renounce, they could be sentenced to *laojiao* camp or prison. Documents outlining the campaign appeared on local Party and government websites in nearly every province.⁴² One such typical directive, from the Laodian township 老店, set transformation targets at 75 per cent and stipulated that “relapses” must be kept to less than 8 per cent. In the document, Party officials laid out a responsibility system that would enlist practitioners’ families, friends, co-workers and community groups into the transformation process. All able-bodied Falun Gong adherents were to be taken to re-education centres, and those who were too old or infirm would instead be “conquered” within their own homes by grassroots Party organizations.⁴³

After what must have been underwhelming results in the 2010–12 transformation drive, another nationwide campaign was launched in 2013. Directives relating to the “2013–2015 final battle on education and transformation,” which appeared on government and Party websites in every province, follow a familiar script: transformation quotas are typically set at between 60 and 95 per cent, and authorities must once again enter villages, households, schools, businesses and Party cells in search of Falun Gong practitioners to transform.⁴⁴ Re-education centres are to be the primary venue for the transformation work, although some documents also call for close cooperation with the judiciary to sentence practitioners to prison and, when necessary, to prevent “sabotage” by human rights lawyers.⁴⁵

Crackdowns on Falun Gong literature

610 Offices continue to launch regular, nationwide campaigns to crack down on the proliferation of Falun Gong informational literature. As a point of reference

41 Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2011.

42 Ibid.

43 Chinese Communist Party Laodian Committee 2010.

44 Yunyang County Chongqing Municipal People’s Government. 2013. “Guanyu yinfā kāizhān wú xiéjiào chuāngjiàn hé sān nián jiàoyù zhuānhuà juézhan huódòng (2013–2015)” (On the launch of no cult creation and three year transformation and education activities (2013–2015)), 7 June, <http://zfx.yunyang.gov.cn/newShow.aspx?id=13920>. Accessed 1 November 2013.

45 Hefei, Luyang District People’s Government Office. 2013. “Guanyu yinfā ‘sānxiàokǒu jiédào 2013–2015 nián duì falun gong renyuan jiàoyù zhuānhuà juézhan gōngzuò shìshì fāng’ān’ de tōngzhī” (Notice on the issuance of the Sanxiaokou Street 2013–2015 Falun Gong education battle plan), 16 August, <http://zwgk.hefei.gov.cn/zwgk/public/spage.xp?doAction=view&indexno=002990962/2013-0000030>. Accessed 1 November 2013.

concerning the scale of these efforts, authorities reported confiscating 4.62 million pieces of Falun Gong literature in 2005.⁴⁶ In the first half of 2012, the 610 Office launched a comprehensive new initiative to “clean up” Falun Gong literature. Nearly identical documents available on Party websites in such geographically disparate regions as Guangdong, Heilongjiang and Yunnan describe mobilizing neighbourhood committees to engage in regular patrols to take down Falun Gong messages plastered on billboards, light posts, telephone poles, and telephone booths.⁴⁷ One notice from Weifang 潍坊 city called for twice-daily patrols.⁴⁸ Another from Qingdao 青岛 prescribed 24-hour vigilance against Falun Gong posters and pamphleteering ahead of the Party congress.⁴⁹ The desired effect of these crackdowns, according to a document from the CCP municipal offices in Laiyang 莱阳, Shandong, is to render Falun Gong practitioners “like rats running across the street that everyone shouts out to smash; don’t leave them any space.”⁵⁰

Many directives also required neighbourhood committees to hold study sessions to “unify their thinking” on the importance of the anti-Falun Gong work, and “step up publicity efforts” to win public opinion in the campaign. For example, the notice in Weifang exhorted cadres and members of the public to “fully understand the long-term, acute, and complex nature and great significance of the clean-up activities and the struggle against [Falun Gong]” and urged them to “overcome the paralysis of thought, and truly understand [that] the struggle has always been an important long-term political task.”⁵¹

In order to mobilize the public in support of its anti-propaganda initiatives, the 610 Office mandates a responsibility system backed by financial rewards and punishments. For example, as part of the Olympic preparations in Beijing in late 2007, authorities offered 500,000 yuan for leads on Falun Gong plans to interfere with the games.⁵² In 2008, authorities in Xuanwei 宣威 city, Yunnan province, offered a reward of 10,000 yuan for information leading to the

46 Sui and Qu 2006.

47 Wangu Town Communist Party Office. 2012. “Wangu zhen kaizhan zhuanxiang zingdong qingli he shoujiao ‘Falun gong’ fanxuanpin” (Wangu Town to carry out special operations work focused on cleaning up and collecting “Falun Gong” reactionary propaganda), 13 February, http://wangu.hnhx.gov.cn/news_content.jsp?urltype=news.NewsContentUrl&wbtreeid=1004&wbnewsid=1195. Accessed 31 July 2012; Jinan Municipal People’s Government. 2012. “Guanyu fangfan daji ‘falun gong’ fandong xuanchuan huodong de tonggao” (Notice to be on guard against and attack “Falun Gong” reactionary propaganda activities), February, <http://www.changqing.gov.cn/news/2012/02/12504.htm>. Accessed 31 July 2012.

48 Weifang City Beihai Road Neighbourhood Office 2012.

49 Qingdao, Laoshan District Neighbourhood Office. 2012. “Zhonghan jiedao kaizhan qingli qingcha ‘falun gong’ fanxuanpin huodong” (Zhonghan street launches clean-up and investigation of “Falun Gong” propaganda activities), 6 June, <http://www.laoshan.gov.cn/n206250/n713396/n718198/n719001/13743488.html>. Accessed 31 July 2012.

50 Laiyang City. 2012. “Shicheng guandadui si cuo bingju, qianghua dui ‘falun gong fanxuanpin’ de qingli zhengzhi” (City management unit strengthens measures to clean up “Falun Gong propaganda materials” and enact punishments), 5 March, <http://www.laiyang.gov.cn/a/zixunzhongxin/chengjian/20120305/6553.html>. Accessed 31 July 2012.

51 Weifang City Beihai Road Neighbourhood Office 2012.

52 Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2008, 91–92.

successful arrest of any Falun Gong practitioners distributing what they called “reactionary propaganda.”⁵³ In Jiaonan 胶南, Shandong province, a March 2012 notice offered 5,000–10,000 yuan to citizens assisting public security agencies in the discovery of Falun Gong’s underground printing sites.⁵⁴

Threat of financial punishment is also wielded over local officials in order to ensure compliance with the campaigns. In February 2012, authorities in Tanghe 唐河 county, Henan province, laid out a schedule of punitive fines. A notice published on the local government website stipulated that inspection teams should go door-to-door in search of Falun Gong materials. For every three items of literature found, fines of 50 yuan would be levied against the head of village security.⁵⁵

Those found in possession of Falun Gong literature face severe repercussions, including being sent administratively to *laojiao* camps, re-education centres, or sentenced to prison. Dozens of examples of these sentences are published weekly on both overseas Falun Gong and Chinese government websites. One report published on the website of Jilin province’s forestry bureau recounts how, on the morning of 14 May 2012, Falun Gong “reactionary propaganda” had been found in bicycle baskets. Public security agents searched the neighbourhood and discovered two elderly women, aged 67 and 73, distributing pamphlets and DVDs about the persecution of Falun Gong followers. Following a raid of their homes that turned up more copies of the literature, the women were subject to administrative sentencing.⁵⁶ In December 2012, a court in Lipu 荔浦, Guangxi, sentenced 38-year-old medical doctor Qiu Zhijun 丘志军 to four years in prison for using home computing and printing equipment to produce hundreds of Falun Gong DVDs, pamphlets and books.⁵⁷ In Hunan’s Zhuzhou 株洲 county, a 42-year-old factory worker named Zeng Haiqi 曾海其 was taken into custody in May 2010 when police found him talking about Falun Gong in public. According to court documents, Zeng was in possession of “32 Falun Gong CDs, 133 Falun Gong brochures, 2 Falun Gong books, and 55 Falun Gong

53 Xuanwei City People’s Government Shuanglong Subdistrict Office. 2008. “Guanyu yinfa ‘shuanglong jiedao fangfan he daji ‘falun gong’ zhuanxiang xingdong shishi fang’an’ de tongzhi” (Shuanglong sub-district special operation implementation plan for guarding against and striking against “Falun Gong”), 4 June.

54 Jiaonan Municipal CCP Office. 2012. “Guanyu qingli qingcha ‘Falun gong’ fanxuanpin de gongkaxin” (Open letter concerning the clean-up and investigation of “Falun Gong” reactionary propaganda materials), 27 March, <http://www.jiaonan.gov.cn/n35782/n35828/c226740/content.html>. Accessed 31 July 2012.

55 Tanghe County People’s Government. 2012. “Zhangdian zhen kaizhan zhuanxiang xingdong qingli he shoujiao ‘Falun gong’ fanxuanpin” (Zhangdian town carries out special operations to control and collect “Falun Gong” reactionary propaganda), 20 February, http://www.hnrco.gov.cn/new_view.asp?id=30504. Accessed 31 July 2012.

56 Jilin Forestry Administration Public Security Bureau. 2012. “Jilin sheng daxing gou senlin gong’an ju chahuo liang ming falun gong renyuan” (Jilin Daxinggou Forest Public Security Bureau seized two Falun Gong members), 12 June, <http://www.forestry.gov.cn/portal/sлга/s/2560/content-547888.html>. Accessed 31 July 2012.

57 Guanxi Lawyers Network. 2012. “Chuanbo ‘falun gong’ xinxi bei pan si nian” (Sentenced to four years for disseminating “Falun Gong” information), 5 December, <http://www.gx.jcy.cn/article.php?articleid=26983>. Accessed 1 November 2013.

leaflets.”⁵⁸ He was sentenced to six years in prison, where Falun Gong sources say he was beaten, shocked with electric batons, and force-fed by the guards. Zeng died in custody less than three years into his sentence.⁵⁹

Electronic surveillance and censorship

Efforts to suppress information about Falun Gong in China are not limited to printed material. A court document from March 2013 details the case against a 25-year-old from Shaanxi who was sentenced to prison for using the internet to download and disseminate information on Falun Gong. Tracing his QQ chat account number, authorities found that he had distributed approximately 800 copies of articles on Falun Gong.⁶⁰ A similar case unfolded in Yunnan in May 2013, when a Falun Gong practitioner, surnamed Dong, was sentenced to three years in prison for using QQ to promote a “Falun Gong reactionary website.”⁶¹

Research into China’s internet censorship practices confirms the importance assigned to Falun Gong. In 2005, researchers from the University of Toronto, the University of Cambridge and Harvard University found that terms related to Falun Gong were among the most heavily censored on the Chinese internet.⁶² Another study released in 2008 found that the Chinese version of Skype, TOM-Skype, had been monitoring and archiving thousands of private chat conversations containing politically sensitive words. Next only to “communist” and “Communist Party,” conversations where users referred to Falun Gong, or its founder Li Hongzhi 李洪志, were the most frequently captured, totalling 7,229 (references to democracy, by contrast, occurred in 270 conversations).⁶³ The Green Dam Youth Escort, a software program that authorities sought to mandate for all Chinese computers in 2009 (ostensibly to block pornography) was analysed and found by researchers from the University of Michigan to contain a special library of tens of thousands of filtered terms, nearly all of them related to Falun Gong.⁶⁴

Satellite dishes and radio signals are also targeted in the campaign against Falun Gong. In March 2009, the State Administration for Industry and

58 Zhuzhou County People’s Court. 2013. “Zeng Haiqi liyong xiejiao zuzhi pohuai falü shishi” (Zeng Haiqi committed the crime of using an heretical organization to undermine the implementation of the law), 25 July, <http://zxxy.chinacourt.org/public/paperview.php?id=578674>. Accessed 1 November 2013.

59 Minghui.org. 2013. “Mr. Zeng Haiqi dies from torture at Jinshi Prison,” 6 May, <http://en.minghui.org/html/articles/2013/5/6/139241.html>. Accessed 1 November 2013.

60 Dongguan City First People’s Court. 2013. “Zai ‘falun gong’ xing shen zhong, beigao dang ting renzui” (Defendant admits crimes in court, in trial of “Falun Gong” criminal case), 14 March, <http://dyfy.dg.gov.cn/xwzx/gzdt/2013/03/14165008579.html>. Accessed 1 November 2013.

61 Tonghai County People’s Court, Yuxi City. 2013. “Tonghai fayuan shenjie yiqi sheji ‘falun gong’ xing-shi anjian” (Tonghai court concludes investigation of “Falun Gong” criminal case), 24 May, <http://www.thfy.gov.cn/show.asp?id=1247>. Accessed 1 November 2013.

62 OpenNet Initiative 2005.

63 Hartley 2008.

64 Wolchok, Yao and Halderman 2009.

Commerce issued a document detailing its success in suppressing illegal satellite dishes capable of receiving international television broadcasts. The document boasted that taskforces in 18 provinces dealt with illegal vendors and seized 4,089 television sets, 7,375 satellite dishes, 7,547 antennae, and over 11,000 other pieces of equipment. The purpose of the crackdown, as described in the document, was to guard against foreign reactionary propaganda and Falun Gong, whose American devotees operate a 24-hour satellite television station that frequently reports on human rights issues in China.⁶⁵ In 2012, there was a renewal of efforts to crack down on satellite receivers, with many official directives again citing Falun Gong-related broadcasts as the impetus behind the campaign.⁶⁶ In addition to removing unauthorized satellite receivers from homes, authorities also prosecute those found installing them.⁶⁷ A police sweep in Dalian city on 6 July 2012 netted 79 Falun Gong practitioners who had been installing satellite dishes. At least ten were sent to *laojiao* facilities, and 13 more were held for criminal sentencing.

Chinese authorities regularly counsel citizens not to “look at, listen to, or believe” the Falun Gong information they may encounter. In 2009, for example, a document titled “How to oppose and resist evil religions” appeared on hundreds of websites across China, including those of local governments, universities and news outlets. The document advises citizens on the appropriate protocol in the event that they encounter literature, phone calls or DVDs about Falun Gong. It reminds citizens that, “it is imperative to immediately report it, and assist the public security office to stop such behaviour.”⁶⁸ Additional guidance of this nature is provided on assorted Party and government websites, such as one from Luzhai 鹿寨 county in Guangxi, which not only warns against “straying” onto Falun Gong websites or tuning into its radio or television broadcasts, but also places the onus on ordinary citizens to ensure that their relatives living abroad do likewise and refrain from participating in Falun Gong-affiliated events or organizations.⁶⁹

Propaganda and grassroots mobilization

Public outreach is just as integral as censorship. Authorities continue to press citizens at the local levels or within schools and workplaces to participate in education

65 State Administration for Industry and Commerce. 2009. “Tongji fenxi fabu: 2008 nian gongpin jiaoyi zhifa jiben qingkuang” (Statistical analysis: 2008 basic conditions of fair trade law enforcement), 20 March, http://www.saic.gov.cn/xzgzgzyt/tjzl/200903/t20090320_28266.html. Accessed 29 March 2011.

66 Luan County People’s Government. 2013. “Luanxian guangbo dianshitai fangfan ‘falun gong’ deng xie-jiao zuzhi weifa chabo yingji yu’an” (Contingency plans to prevent “Falun Gong” illegal broadcasts), 31 December, <http://luanxianinfo.tangshan.gov.cn/index.do?templet=content&id=%7BCA62B966-FFFF-FFFF-EB08000002F4%7D&cid=106%20299>. Accessed 1 November 2013.

67 Freedom House 2013.

68 Bayannur CCP Office. N.d. “Ruhe fandui he dizhi xiejiao” (How to oppose and resist evil religion), <http://www.bynrjgdj.gov.cn/news/html/?323.html>. Accessed 31 July 2012.

69 Luzhai County Government. 2012. “Gongzhong yingdui xiejiao falun gong fanxuan shentou ‘ba zhao’” (“Eight methods” for the public to respond to the infiltration of Falun Gong evil religion reactionary propaganda), 5 June, <http://zsz.luzhai.gov.cn/html/2012/06/1809.html>. Access 31 July 2012.

sessions to guard against apathy in the ongoing anti-Falun Gong struggle. A November 2011 report published on the local government website of Shihezi 石河子 city, Xinjiang, described how all cadres in the work unit had signed pledges against Falun Gong and that they attended meetings every Friday to strengthen their resolve against the group.⁷⁰ The political and legislative affairs committees of various provinces urge families to sign “commitment cards” vowing not to support Falun Gong. In Jingtai 景泰 county, Gansu, a staff of 390 “comprehensive management” workers mobilize the masses in the struggle. Its 2012 initiatives included screenings of anti-Falun Gong films, distributing literature and printing 8,000 commitment cards to be signed by families who promise to reject the “evil religion.”⁷¹ In Anhui province, the political and legislative affairs committee organized a signature drive soliciting rejections of Falun Gong, ordering staff to go door-to-door and urge citizens to sign commitment cards denouncing the group.⁷² One January 2012 document from Guiyang described the family unit as the public’s “first line of defence” against Falun Gong, and recommended mobilizing “hundreds of thousands of families to participate in the fight” and sign the commitment cards.⁷³

In September 2013, the Political-Legal Affairs Committee and Ministry of Justice jointly launched a “rule of law knowledge” campaign, during which all Chinese citizens were enjoined to complete an online quiz about Falun Gong’s “crimes” for the chance to win up to 5,000 yuan in prize money. Local governments mobilized members of the public and Party organizations to participate. The government of Dezhou 德州, Shandong, stipulated that “departments at all levels should organize Party members, public security, judicial and administrative police, the state-owned enterprise cadres, grassroots cadres and the masses,” and mandated that no fewer than 80 per cent of justice department employees and 85 per cent of police personnel must complete the quiz.⁷⁴ This heavily publicized campaign reportedly drew 8.5 million participants nationwide in two months.⁷⁵

70 Xinjiang Land and Resource Bureau. 2011. “Guotu ju zhigong renqing ‘falun gong’ benzhi, xiejiao guangpan bei jishi xiaohui” (Land bureau employees recognize the nature of the “Falun Gong” evil religion and promptly destroyed disc), 16 November, http://www.btgt.gov.cn/sonweb/web_324/article.asp?id=21458. Accessed 6 May 2012.

71 Jingtai County People’s Government. 2012. “Xiang zhengfu fanxiejiao gongzuo jinzhan baogao” (Township report on the progress of anti-evil religion work), 22 March, <http://www.tiaoshan.gov.cn/z/ShowArticle.asp?ArticleID=778>. Accessed 31 July 2012.

72 Comprehensive Management Office of Wuhu City, Anhui Province. 2012. “Dizhi ‘falun gong,’ goujian hexie, cong wo zuo qi” (Boycott “Falun Gong,” building a harmonious society, starting with me), 19 April, <http://www.yjq.gov.cn/show.aspx?id=13914&cid=846>. Accessed 31 July 2012.

73 Guiyang Municipal Science and Technology Association. 2012. “Chuangxin jizhi jianghua cuoshi laogu weihu jiceng wending de di yi dao fangxian” (Innovative measures to safeguard firmly the stability of grassroots frontline defence), 13 January, <http://www.gykp.gov.cn/gyskx/4541320572784607232/20120315/326458.html>. Accessed 31 July 2012.

74 Dezhou Administrative Service Centre. 2013. “Dezhou shi fanxiejiao fazhi zhishi jingsai huodong gongzuo fang’an” (Notice regarding the Dezhou anti-cult rule of law knowledge contest work plan), 25 September, <http://zwfw.dezhou.gov.cn/n880654/n898442/c10466280/content.html>. Accessed 31 July 2014.

75 Xinhua News Agency 2013.

Schools and workplaces

Party organizations similarly organize anti-Falun Gong activities for grade school students under the direction of the central leadership. In Shannan 山南 township, for instance, students are made to watch recordings of Falun Gong practitioners recanting their faith following the transformation process.⁷⁶ Haotou 濠头 township in Rucheng 汝城 county organized an event in October 2013 for thousands of primary school students and teachers to denounce Falun Gong.⁷⁷ In June 2013, primary schools in Shandong province posted online directives outlining plans to strengthen anti-Falun Gong education through signature campaigns, film screenings, postings on bulletin boards, lectures and essay assignments.⁷⁸

Post-secondary institutions across the country – from agricultural universities to law schools to fine arts programmes – require students to prove that they have adopted the “correct attitude” on Falun Gong as a condition of admission. Some require signed assurances procured from the security agencies or Party offices of the *hukou* 户口 (household registration) in which the prospective student is registered.⁷⁹ For public security colleges, the requirements are even more stringent: an unreformed Falun Gong practitioner in the family is grounds for exclusion.⁸⁰ A job posting for the Shenyang Regional Air Force, dated March 2013, explains that recruits must first be loyal to the motherland and support the Party’s basic line, and have no record of participation in “illegal social groups and organizations, especially Falun Gong.” All other criteria related to health, age and educational attainments are secondary to these stipulations.⁸¹

These requirements are not limited to military and public security fields: individuals seeking employment in the public sector, judiciary and civil service must also demonstrate the correct attitude. Young men and women hoping to find work with the Wenzhou 温州 municipal public security bureau must, above

76 Shannan Town Committee. 2012. “Shannan zhen: kaixue fanxie jingshi jiaoyu de yi ke” (Shannan town: commencing the first lesson of the anti-evil religion instruction), 10 February, http://shannan.ahfeixi.gov.cn/include/news_view.php?ID=573&ty=1. Accessed 31 July 2012.

77 Rucheng County. 2013. “Haotou xiang kaizhan ‘chuang wu xiejiao xiaoyuan’ qian ren qianming huodong” (Haotou township holds a “cult-free campus” thousand-signature activity), 15 October, <http://www.fxj.hunan.gov.cn/Article/jedat/201310/25472.html>. Accessed 1 November 2013.

78 Chuang Wei Qu Chengguan Elementary School. 2013. “Guanyu shenru zuo hao xiaoyuan fanxiejiao jingshi jiaoyu huodong de shishi fang’an” (Notice on the implementation of in-depth educational programmes against evil religions), 17 June, <http://wjzxx.sd.108800.cn/SQLXXTWEB/webtemplates/spwtc/ArticleInfo/ArticleShow.aspx?ChannelID=TTIVWHhjbmljK3c9&NewID=dm9sK2pJbJF0UG89#>. Accessed 1 November 2013.

79 Harbin Institute of Technology. 2012. “Baowei bu zhengshen xuzhi” (Notice on political background), 8 October, <http://bwc.hit.edu.cn/news/Showzn.asp?id=2326>. Accessed 31 July 2012.

80 China Higher Education Student Information Network. 2013. “Liaoning: gong’an yuan xiao he bufen zhengfa yuan xiao baokao xuzhi” (Liaoning: instructions to applicants of police colleges and law schools), 13 June, <http://gaokao.chsi.com.cn/gkxx/zc/ss/201306/20130613/432180030.html>. Accessed 1 November 2013.

81 School of Materials and Metallurgy. 2013. “Jiuye xinxi: Shenyang junqu kongjun tuijian baoming” (Employment information: conditions for recommendation to the Shenyang military region air force), 3 March, <http://www.smm.neu.edu.cn/article/651>. Accessed 1 November 2013.

all, be “handsome, healthy, reliable, and must not practise Falun Gong.”⁸² The website of the State Administration for Industry and Commerce notes that prospective trademark review and adjudication support staff must also have no record of participation in Falun Gong.⁸³ Even changing one’s *hukou* registration required proof of the correct attitude on Falun Gong (and, occasionally, on the 4 June Tiananmen incident as well).⁸⁴

Measuring the Impacts of State Suppression

Membership

Gauging the number of Falun Gong adherents in China has never been easy: the practice rejects formal membership and keeps no rosters or lists of participants. Complicating the task in the context of persecution is that Falun Gong adherents in China actively discourage any efforts to assess the number of practitioners in a given area, lest the information fall into the hands of security agencies.

Nevertheless, assorted government and Party documents published online offer glimpses into the number of known practitioners and the scale of surveillance against them. In the Wuling 武陵 district of Changde 常德 city, the Party’s political and legislative affairs committee boasted in 2008 of having over 600 practitioners under surveillance. In June 2009, officials in Jiujiang 九江 city, Jiangxi, reported having 829 Falun Gong practitioners under surveillance.⁸⁵ A December 2006 speech circulated on a popular website and credited to Liu Yuxiang 刘玉祥, CCP secretary for Zaozhuang 枣庄 city, Shandong, claimed that the number of practitioners identified in Shandong province was 310,000.⁸⁶

In 2009, Falun Gong’s main Chinese website, Minghui.org, published estimates that tens of millions of people continued to practise in China. This figure was produced by counting the number of mainland Chinese internet connections (roughly 200,000 of them) that regularly access, download and submit information to the website. Because visiting Minghui.org generally requires access to a personal computer and secure proxy servers, a single connection is often shared between dozens or hundreds of people. According to Minghui’s calculations, this

82 Wenzhou Municipal Public Security Bureau. 2013. “2013 nian Wenzhou shi jingji jishu kaifa qu gong’an fen de zhaopin qishi” (Wenzhou city public security bureau job opportunities), 8 July, <http://www.wzga.gov.cn/system/2013/07/08/011316527.shtml>. Accessed 1 November 2013.

83 State Administration for Industry and Commerce of the People’s Republic of China. 2013. “Tongda shangbiao fuwu zhongxin zhaopin gonggao” (Tongda Trademark Service Centre job announcement), 5 June, http://www.saic.gov.cn/zwgk/zyfb/zkxx/201306/t20130604_135401.html. Accessed 1 November 2013.

84 This requirement is a frequent source of complaints to local governments. See Wuxi Public Security Online. 2013. “87 nian chusheng de ren wei shenme yao tigong meiyou canyu liusi huo falun gong de zhengjiu” (Why does someone born in ‘87 need to provide proof of not participating in June 4th incident or Falun Gong), 19 April, http://www.wxga.gov.cn/default.php?mod=c&s=ss6efd120&t_id=f8fb46c4ef_18138. Accessed 1 November 2013.

85 Congressional-Executive Commission on China 2009, 120–26.

86 Wenmi jiayuan 2006.

would support an estimate of millions of practitioners with ongoing connections to the rest of the community.⁸⁷ Also in 2009, Beijing rights lawyer Han Zhiguang 韩志广 told *The Daily Telegraph* that the population of Falun Gong in China was in the tens of millions and, notably, was growing. “We do not know the exact number,” he said, “but one thing is certain: it is expanding.”⁸⁸

The observation that Falun Gong continues to attract new practitioners is consistent with evidence from both government and Falun Gong sources.⁸⁹ On an almost daily basis, Minghui publishes the first-person conversion stories of new practitioners, detailing how the practice improves marriages, cures illnesses, or provides moral purpose and direction. 610 Office and government literature also contains implicit acknowledgements of Falun Gong’s growth and prescribes measures for handling new converts.⁹⁰

In addition to new practitioners, government and Falun Gong sources alike suggest that it is common for many individuals to return to the practice after leaving it or being transformed in custody. As of August 2012, Minghui had logged over 480,000 “solemn statements” from practitioners retracting previous denunciations of Falun Gong reportedly made under duress.⁹¹ This phenomenon is frequently addressed in official documents as well, and authorities attempt to enforce quotas limiting the rate of Falun Gong “relapses.” In August 2010, a national 610 Office-affiliated organization acknowledged the poor quality of transformation work, noting how large numbers of practitioners who denounced the practice in detention returned to it upon their release: “The education and conversion work has encountered a new series of problems, the work is increasingly difficult, the cycle is getting longer and longer, the relapse rate is increasing and the education and conversion process is facing a new test ... some local transformation centres are facing difficulties, even closing down.”⁹² In Laodian, officials stated: “there are still a considerable number of stubborn and obsessed [Falun Gong] members ... the stubborn and obsessed members are more and more difficult to transform, and relapse after transformation is increasingly prevalent ... [Falun Gong] is fighting with us to win over the masses, and the struggle to win people’s hearts is still very intense.”⁹³

87 Minghui.org. 2009. “As the tenth anniversary of the Minghui website draws near, editors answer readers’ questions,” 22 April, <http://en.minghui.org/emh/articles/2009/4/22/106718p.html>. Accessed 15 May 2015.

88 Moore 2009.

89 The distinct but related issue of how Falun Gong maintains its resilience amid crisis conditions through the internal deployment of ideology is addressed in Chan 2012.

90 Organization Department of the CCP Guizhou Provincial Committee. 2012. “Banzhu xiang 2012 nian–2014 nian jiaoyu zhuanhua gongjian shishi fang’an” (Banzhu county 2012–2014 transformation-through-re-education assault implementation plan), 16 April, <http://www.gzjcdj.gov.cn/wcqx/detailnew.jsp?id=679027>. Accessed 31 July 2012.

91 For a representative sample of statements, see Minghui.org. 2012. “55 ren shengming congxin kaishi xiulian” (55 people declare their intention to resume cultivation), 22 April, <http://www.minghui.org/mh/articles/2014/2/21/55%E4%BA%BA%E5%A3%B0%E6%98%8E%E4%BB%8E%E6%96%B0%E5%BC%80%E5%A7%8B%E4%BF%AE%E7%82%BC-287942.html>. Accessed 5 June 2012.

92 China Anti-Cult Association 2010.

93 Chinese Communist Party Laodian Committee 2010.

Ongoing resistance activities – “Clarifying the truth” (jiang zhenxiang 讲真相)

Much Falun Gong resistance activity targets the Chinese public and aims to counteract the official propaganda. For example, covert “material sites” established across the country have been continuously active since the July 1999 crackdown. Like a Chinese *samizdat*, these sites produce literature and DVDs containing reports of human rights abuses and torture suffered in custody, accounts of Falun Gong’s status abroad and stories of the health and other benefits derived through practising Falun Gong. Pamphlets, books, DVDs and posters are left on doorsteps and in bicycle baskets, distributed to neighbours and in markets, or are posted in public locations, typically under cover of night. Messages and slogans are also written or printed on bank notes, conveying the values of “truth, compassion and tolerance” or calling for an end to the persecution.⁹⁴

Resistance efforts within China continue to be buoyed by support from the diaspora practitioners abroad. As a result of serendipitous emigration patterns in the 1990s, many Falun Gong practitioners in North America hold advanced degrees, with most having emigrated as graduate students after 1989.⁹⁵ Among them are computer scientists who, beginning in 2000, engineered censorship-circumvention software to allow their compatriots in China to evade government controls and relay reports of persecution out of the country.⁹⁶ Diaspora practitioners run websites to publicize reports of human rights abuses and to disseminate Falun Gong scriptures. They have also established a Chinese-language shortwave radio station, newspaper, and 24-hour satellite television station viewable online or with black market satellite dishes.

For the first time, in late 2004, practitioners went on the offensive by directly challenging the legitimacy and mandate of the CCP. Nowhere was this challenge laid out more explicitly than in the publication of a book-length series of editorials entitled *Jiuping gongchandang* 九评共产党 (*Nine Commentaries on the Communist Party*).⁹⁷ The series outlines the Party’s history from the Yan’an 延安 rectification to contemporary times, presenting the ravages of Party rule and leaving no room for exculpations. One chapter is devoted to describing the persecution of Falun Gong, framing it as part of a continuum of political campaigns under the Party. Rather than calling for institutional reforms or representative democracy, however, the treatise offers readers a moral vision, challenging them to “examine whether our cowardice and compromise have made us accomplices in many tragedies that could have been avoided.”⁹⁸ The book’s publishers also encourage citizens to issue *tuidang* 退党 (withdrawal from the Party) statements, symbolically severing their affiliations with the Party, youth league, or

94 Anderlini 2011.

95 Porter 2003.

96 Lake 2009; Beiser 2010.

97 Epoch Times 2004.

98 Ibid., xx.

young pioneers as a form of catharsis and a way to clear the conscience.⁹⁹ As of 2011, hundreds of millions of copies of *Jiuping gongchandang* are thought to have made their way into China via mail, fax and email, and Chinese adherents in the mainland have made the document a centrepiece in the corpus of truth-clarification literature.¹⁰⁰

Attitudes towards the continuing anti-Falun Gong campaign

In some regions at least, the Party appears to be losing the hearts and minds battle. A recent document from Tonglu 桐庐 county in Zhejiang province describes the measures being taken by the neighbourhood committee to “effectively prevent Falun Gong’s current ideological resurgence,” and “resolutely curb its current expansion.”¹⁰¹ In Cili 慈利, a 2013 circular warned of “an endless stream of social conflicts” in rural areas that demanded increased vigilance by security maintenance personnel. “In recent years, evil religious activities are frequent in rural areas,” it says. Falun Gong and other “evil religions” are “experiencing a resurgence, using the vast rural areas to engage in political infiltration and disseminate anti-Party propaganda.”¹⁰²

These developments are apparently having a deleterious effect on the morale of Party officials. “Some of our comrades, especially leading comrades, have an inadequate understanding of the long-term nature of this struggle and educational transformation,” reads one official document.¹⁰³ It also states that “Comrades engaged in the education and conversion [of Falun Gong adherents] work long hours and perform arduous tasks, leading to weariness.” The same document suggests that Falun Gong has been leveraging the “complex domestic and international situation” to persuade people of the Party’s weaknesses and argue for the need for a “peaceful transition” away from one-party rule. The document urges a rectification of this situation, stating: “the competition against Falun Gong is the principal means of competition for the hearts and minds of the masses ... whether or not we perform the education and conversion work well is a test of the Party’s advanced nature and ability to govern.”¹⁰⁴ Rather than recommitting themselves to the campaign, however, local authorities in some regions are experiencing a kind of persecution fatigue. In 2009, for instance, an official with the Chengdu police department complained to US diplomatic staff that some 200 orders were received annually to crack down on Falun Gong,

99 Ibid., 312.

100 Ford 2011, 95.

101 Tonglu County People’s Government Information Centre. 2013. “Wo jiedao ‘falun gong’ renyuan jiaoyu zhuanhua xuexiban kai ban” (My street’s “Falun Gong” transformative learning education class opening), 29 May, http://www.tonglu.gov.cn/issue/root/sub/tjjd_tjjd/tjjd_tjjd_bmdt/20130529/40288abc3ec5d417013cef7c61b00aba/index.shtml. Accessed 1 November 2013.

102 Organization Department of the Cili County CCP. 2013. “Ruhe zuohao dangqian nongcun de wending gongzuo” (How to do stability maintenance work well in rural areas), 15 October, http://www.cldj.com.cn/cldj/News_View.asp?NewsID=7622. Accessed 16 November 2013.

103 China Anti-Cult Association 2010.

104 Ibid.

and said with exasperation that it was all a “formalism [sic] and a big waste of time!” – not because Falun Gong had been vanquished, but rather because combatting it was futile.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

Following the initial period of state suppression, Falun Gong was widely believed to have been destroyed in China. We have shown that Falun Gong not only survives on the Chinese mainland but that its continued presence there remains a matter of grave concern to the Party, which has sustained a comprehensive and wide-reaching campaign aimed at the destruction of Falun Gong. This campaign incorporates strategies such as detention in prisons, labour camps and re-education facilities, programmatic transformation efforts, extensive anti-Falun Gong literature sweeps, an assortment of electronic surveillance and censorship techniques, and systematic exclusion from education and employment opportunities. The conclusion of this campaign, we argue, is ironically made less likely by its costliness and by the fact that it has not yielded the desired effect. Having framed its struggle against Falun Gong as a matter of life or death, the party-state became deeply invested in its success. Yet, as government and Falun Gong sources both attest, the movement remains politically engaged on the Chinese mainland, with significant external support, and may even be growing despite the state’s best efforts. Thus, the fight against Falun Gong may be viewed within the security establishment as being too expensive yet producing too little for the state to simply walk away.

A key implication of this argument is that the party-state may be limited in its capacity for reform from within, and subject to systematic, societal or even self-made constraints. Had the CCP central leadership elected to do so, it might have reversed course ahead of the 16th Party Congress, before the use of violence and torture was standardized, or before Falun Gong was galvanized into a true political opposition movement in late 2004. Instead, the choice to continue pursuing the campaign raised the pressure on the state to produce the desired result and made backing out much more difficult than it would have been years earlier. Considering the ambitiousness of the CCP’s current reform agenda, the suggestion of limitations on that agenda imposed by circumstances of its own design is troubling for the Party indeed. Were the path-dependence argument found to be more broadly applicable, the result may be a series of halting half-measures in areas of law and policy in dire need of rejuvenation that undermine the efforts of the Party to restore its legitimacy and preserve its rule. The decision taken at the Third Plenum in November 2013 to abolish the *laojiao* system, which would see the Maoist-era system of administrative justice effectively replaced by black jails and other alternative detention facilities, provides just one example of how

105 US Consulate in Chengdu. 2009. “A Falungong alert, but anniversary passes quietly,” Wikileaks, 17 August, <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/08/09CHENGDU154.html#>. Accessed 15 May 2015.

superficial, cosmetic changes, taken without effectively dealing with the attached legacies, nullify any genuine benefit to the rule of law.

Indeed, the ongoing effort to suppress Falun Gong suggests that human rights and the rule of law have not advanced as far or as quickly in the post-Tiananmen era as we might imagine. The Chinese party-state's behaviour towards Falun Gong in particular serves as a poignant reminder that such reforms are often arduous, protracted and non-linear processes.

摘要: 本文试图解释中国共产党对法轮功宗教团体镇压的持续性。我们认为,这场十多年的镇压活动作为一笔不可回收的沉淀成本,加之镇压行为本身的低效性(一如官方文件以及法轮功的反抗活动所示),限制了政府制止这场运动的能力。我们的研究结果揭示了当下的中国政权在管理和控制国内反对派团体时所使用的策略,并试图挑战如下观点:中国共产党具备适应性,并有从内部进行自我改良的强大能力。

关键词: 中国共产党; 法轮功; 反对派; 抗议; 人权

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