

# The Perfect Example of Political Propaganda: The Chinese Government's Persecution against Falun Gong

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## Introduction

Today, China has opened up to the world: its economy is flourishing thanks to adapting to “capitalism”; exchanges between the nation and foreign countries in all kinds of fields, ranging from academia to culture, are taking place; and it indeed seems like the communists are not able to maintain their system as closed and controlled as it was during Mao's era. At least it appears to be so. However, the violent repression of the peaceful meditation practice of Falun Dafa, also called Falun Gong, in China shows once again that appearances are deceptive.

[Falun Gong](#) is an ancient Chinese meditation practice based on the universal principles of “Truthfulness, Compassion, and Tolerance” which Falun Gong practitioners try to incorporate into their daily lives. Falun Gong enjoyed great popularity in China before the crackdown and the Chinese government strongly supported Falun Gong in the first seven years since its introduction in China in 1992. Today, Falun Gong is still appreciated worldwide in over 60 countries and has been honored with over one thousand recognitions and governmental awards throughout the world. Since the crackdown in July 1999, tens of thousands of Chinese citizens have been detained for practicing Falun Gong, sent to labor camps without trials, locked up in mental hospitals; millions more have become homeless and jobless or expelled from schools; at least 2400 deaths through police torture have been confirmed by May 2005.

The Chinese government's oppression of Falun Gong is characterized by a “worldwide” propaganda campaign. In fact, the fabrication of news (unfortunately disseminated verbatim by Western media) and the manipulation of public opinion are two crucial parts of the Chinese authorities' action against Falun Gong besides torture which have enabled the persecution to *begin, continue* and even *escalate*. In this research paper, a study of this media propaganda war will be conducted based on Ellul's theory of total propaganda and Popper's view of closed systems. I will attempt to shed light on the intention and goal behind the persecution, the methods Chinese authorities have used in this media propaganda war – on the one hand to censor and restrict Falun Gong while on the other hand to promote their own ideals and opinions – and the effectiveness and consequences of this total propaganda in which media play the most important role in prefabricating facts and manipulating public opinion against Falun Gong.

## Reasons for the Persecution

Shortly before the crackdown in July 1999 the Chinese government carried out a survey revealing that there were 70 to 100 million people from all walks practicing Falun Gong all over China. According to the February 1999 issue of *U.S. News & World Report*, Falun Gong had become “the largest voluntary organization in China, larger even than the Communist party” (Fang, p. 45) that had in total *only* 60 million members (*Historical, social and political analysis of the reasons behind the persecution of Falun Gong in China*, n.d.). Falun Gong's quickly growing popularity was apparent, which caused fear in the Communist Party whose leaders distrust and are suspicious of any large groups, being afraid of losing power over their people – they are afraid that Falun Gong is fighting with them for people. As Roderick MacFarquar, a senior China scholar at Harvard University, illustrates, “The Party cannot allow the existence of a rival mass organization with control over the hearts and souls of the ordinary people – and exposing their own ideological vacuum” (as cited in Schechter, 2001a, p. 76). Ann Noonan's concluding statement in her article published online by *The National Review* leaves a striking impression (2001): “It is wrenching to think that all it took to reinvigorate Beijing's propaganda machine was a few simple breathing exercises. China's war on the Falun Gong revitalizes Mao's dream: to let no aspect of Chinese society escape the party's grasp.”

Furthermore, as today “China's focus has been shifted from political campaigning to economic and

technological developments” (Zhou, n.d.), the government officials who are experts in political propaganda and ideological battles have lost the opportunities for political advancement. To gain political power they will have to engender political unrest to provide them with a “cause” and Falun Gong seemed to be just what was needed. To gain politically, party officials made Falun Gong a scapegoat: defaming propaganda against Falun Gong begun in June 1996 and escalated to the mobilization of police and the use of physical violence in Tianjin on April 23, 1999. The development and escalation of the Falun Gong persecution actually happened over a period of three or four years (Zhou, n.d.).

By focusing the nation’s attention on Falun Gong, the Chinese authorities doubtlessly divert attention from far more vital crises inside the country such as an increase in corruption, the widening rich-poor divide and an upsurge in unrest tied to unemployment (Schechter, 2001a). On top of that, the then-president of China Jiang Zemin was suspicious that there might be a hidden “mastermind” behind Falun Gong. On April 25, 1999, over ten thousand Falun Gong practitioners held a peaceful gathering at Zhongnanhai, the China’s State Council Appeal Office, to appeal to the Central Government for the release of the Falun Gong practitioners arbitrarily detained by police in Tianjin over the previous two days. China’s Premier Zhu Rongji personally came out to meet with the practitioners and resolved the situation peacefully. However, this April 25th incident made the then-president Jiang Zemin suspicious that there were people inside the Party plotting and directing behind the scenes, especially since Falun Gong had attracted many indigenous Party members. Jiang made it clear that he suspected “the incident indicated foes within the Party were aligning against him” (Zhou, n.d.) who were using Falun Gong as a tool. His fear of encountering political rivals was large enough for him to initiate the crackdown on Falun Gong. “By insisting on harsh repression, Jiang could accomplish two ends: demonstrate his ability to bend the Party to his will and eliminate what he considered a potential threat to his rule and his legacy” (Spiegel, 2002, p. 88). Jiang hence equated his ability to eradicate Falun Gong with his ability to remain in power and gave the order to use any means to transform Falun Gong practitioners and to eradicate Falun Gong. In CNN’s senior China analyst Willy Wo-Lap Lam words (2001), “The revival of Maoist norms – including using para-military forces against an apparently non-violent . . . group, and promoting unthinking loyalty to the president – would seem to indicate Jiang and company are putting their vested interests before the reforms”.

So far, the government’s accusation of Falun Gong ranges from organizing illegal gatherings to an evil cult threatening social and political stability. These accusations include forcefully occupying parks, promoting superstition, hindering the nation’s modernization and scientific advancements, harming people’s health or brainwashing people causing deaths and murder through the philosophy it promotes, leaking state secrets, conspiring with foreigners. As Princeton professor Perry Link explained in *The Asian Wall Street Journal*,

A key problem here is that the regime’s language sometimes has nothing to do with truth or falsehood. When necessary, even the nativist Falun Gong movement can be called a ‘tool of the foreigners.’ What matters in such rhetoric is only raw effect: “Will it work? Can it stroke nationalism, that trump card of regimes that have non other to play? (as cited in Schechter, 2001a, pp. 15-16)

Since the crackdown in July 1999, a propaganda war attacking Falun Gong has been waged. Chinese TV, radio, and print media have repetitiously been broadcasting stories discrediting Falun Gong, its practitioners and its founder, while Internet access to outside news sources, including Falun Gong websites, is blocked from within China. This propaganda penetrates through every aspect of people’s lives indoctrinating everyone from employees to students to “show a correct attitude” towards Falun Gong (The anatomy of Jiang’s genocide, 2004, pp. 26-27) and confirms Ellul’s description of propaganda being total (1964, p. 9):

The propagandist must utilize all of the technical means at his disposal – the press, radio, TV, movies, posters, meetings, door-to-door canvassing . . . . There is no propaganda as long as one makes use, in sporadic fashion and at random, of a newspaper article here, a poster . . . there, organizes a few meetings . . . writes a few slogans on walls; that is not propaganda.

## **Complete Blockade of Communication and Information**

Prior to officially outlawing Falun Gong on July 22, 1999, the Chinese government already took a number of measures against Falun Gong. As we will see, these actions show that the government has been carefully planning the execution of the crackdown in order to create an environment in which the persecution would be facilitated.

The first article critiquing Falun Gong was published in 1996 by *Guangming Daily*, a state-run newspaper, followed by a mounting series of denouncing reports yet to come, and the probably most striking step of restricting Falun Gong before the crackdown was the Chinese News Publications Office's banning of all Falun Gong publications on July 24, 1996 (Schechter, 2001a, p. 28; Spiegel, 2002, p. 9). Since then, Falun Gong publications have not only been banned but millions of books and tapes have been burned, crushed or shredded publicly – in James D. Seymour's words -- an act worthy of Mao Zedong and the first emperor Qin Shi Huangdi at their worst (as cited in Schechter, 2001a). Six months after the ban, the police agencies reportedly launched a nationwide investigation on Falun Gong, but it was closed for the same reason as another official investigation in 1998 was put to an end. The investigations solely proved that Falun Gong “only benefits and does no harm to the Politburo and the nation” (Schechter, 2001a, p. 28). Apparently, some leaders have been looking for a reason to crack down on Falun Gong, but could not find enough evidence nor make up a convincing statement to do so. The mass appeal in April 25, 1999, seemed to be just what could finally be used against Falun Gong. Nevertheless, we have to be aware that the censorship of all Falun Gong publications three years prior to the official crackdown was an important and deliberate action in the government's calculation. Once the official crackdown was launched, a lack of information had already been created and there was no way for people to verify the government's claims about Falun Gong.

Furthermore, the surveillance of Falun Gong practitioners before the crackdown – they had their phones tapped and were followed (Schechter, 2001a) – was a means of communication control as well which has extended to surveillance of practitioners' families, friends and relatives in the course of the persecution. As Human Rights Watch reports, “China does not allow independent monitors in prisons and reeducation camps and has made it too dangerous for family members, friends, or [even] workmates to speak with journalists or other outsiders except under controlled conditions” (Spiegel, 2002, p. 3). Not only has the Chinese government put restriction on its citizens, it also harasses and intimidates foreign journalists in relation to their news reporting on the repression of Falun Gong. Foreign journalists who attended a news conference that Falun Gong practitioners organized covertly in Beijing on Oct. 28, 1999 were accused of being engaging in “illegal reporting” by the Foreign Ministry. Journalists from a number of news organizations, including Reuters, *The New York Times* and the Associated Press, were questioned at length by police, obliged to sign a “confession of wrongdoing” and had their work and residence papers temporarily confiscated and several of them were put under police surveillance (Amnesty International, 2000).

After April 25, 1999, arbitrary arrests and detention of Falun Gong practitioners have become the norm in everyday China (Spiegel, 2002) and since July 22, 1999, with the government's outlawing Falun Gong, practicing Falun Gong has even become illegal in private which resulted in police invading homes of practitioners and forcefully arresting them putting them into prisons or labor camps. Large rewards promised for information leading to the arrest of Falun Gong practitioners – presumably financed by the heavy fines being extracted from the underlings – encourage even ordinary people to participate in tightly controlling the meditation group turning all people of society into willing informants (Schechter, 2001a). The violent repression has resulted in peaceful demonstrations all over China in particular mounting in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, all being cracked down violently. Those who have tried to give out information on the repression have been arrested and jailed for leaking state secrets. They have received prison sentences or long terms of detention for speaking about the repression which includes giving out information over the Internet (Spiegel, 2002; Amnesty International, 2000).

## **Media Propaganda War**

Since Jiang Zemin started persecuting Falun Gong in July 1999, a media propaganda war has been

wielded in which all Chinese media are involved. According to the World Organization to Investigate the Persecution of Falun Gong (WOIPFG), the most influential propaganda reports are first published on top-level national media such as China Central Television (CCTV), Xinhua News Agency, *Chinese Daily*, Chinese News Agency, *Guangming Daily*, *Liberation Army News*, and *Chinese Youth News*. These reports are then republished and rebroadcast in all local media: “Deceptive propaganda, coupled with coercion and incentives, enable the regime to engage all levels of society in accepting or even directly participating in the persecution” (WOIPFG, 2004, p. 69). In order to understand what a crucial role the Chinese media play in this propaganda campaign, let us first have a brief overview of the overall role of media in China.

How media function in China, under Chinese communism, differs a lot from their role in Western democracies. The media, under Chinese communism, are regarded as an essential political instrument responsible for educating the masses, disseminating and promoting the Communist Party’s ideology. The communist media model is characterized by media being totally controlled by the Communist Party and government and entirely at the service of the communist system and ideology (Hong, 2002). Hence, the function of media is to ensure allegiance to the party and to induce not only correct thinking but also correct behaving. However, in today’s China where there exists a growing tendency toward commercialization and privatization, the role and function of media are often said to be shifting (Lynch, 1966): indeed, the property-rights reforms starting in the 1990s had an effect on state-owned enterprises, including the media industry. However, these reforms were not set to change China into a democratic country, but to serve the Chinese Communist Party’s political needs in a new international and domestic environment. The reforms have not made media firms become fully privatized – they still officially belong to the state – but granted them or more accurately speaking forced them to have economic autonomy. As Yanmin Yu says, “While all media institutions have to ‘enjoy’ the economic autonomy and financial freedom, the political control of media still only belongs to the Party alone” (as cited in Hong, 2002). In a nutshell, we thus can say that media in China advocate support of the state, not challenge to the state.

According to China’s former president Jiang Zemin, media are not the master of themselves and thus they cannot decide their own fate, actions, and directions (as cited in Hong, 2002). Indeed, media in China are still under tight and absolute control of the regime and are a political and ideological tool of the Communist Party; their fundamental purpose is still to serve the needs of the government, not the needs of society and people; “The freedom of speech, the right to know, and the transparency of government work and public affairs, are all subject to the needs, willingness or mercy of the Party” (Hong, 2002). In the face of internal and external factors – China has opened up to the West and is and has to be concerned about its image in order to appear attractive to foreign investors – the ruling authorities have hidden the totalitarian nature of their regime under apparently democratic and progressive reforms.

## **Media as Tools of Brainwashing**

After the crackdown on July 22, 1999, the Chinese government launched a massive propaganda campaign to denounce the practice of Falun Gong and since then, the state media and government officials have repeatedly publicized the government’s accusations against the group. For example, at a news conference on November 4, 1999, Ye Xiaowen, Director of the Bureau of Religious Affairs of the State Council, said that “Falun Gong had brainwashed and bilked followers, caused more than 1,400 deaths, and threatened both social and political stability.” “Further emphasizing that Falun Gong was a political threat, he added: ‘any threat to the people and to society is a threat to the Communist Party and the government’” (Amnesty International 2000, p. 5). Another important part of the government’s propaganda campaign has been publicizing statements from people claiming to be former Falun Gong practitioners who denounce Falun Gong, speak of the damage the practice has brought to Chinese society, praise the government for its firm action against the movement, and eventually show their deepest gratitude towards the government’s saving them from being brainwashed by the “evil” cult (Amnesty International, 2000). Other commonly used methods by Chinese media to manipulate public opinion against Falun Gong have been quoting out of the context of Falun Gong books and practitioners’ statements about Falun Gong; using rumors and false witnesses; falsely attributing crimes to Falun Gong; covering up the persecution (e.g., by reporting about victims who have been tortured to death by police as having committed suicide as a result of the evil nature of Falun Gong or by informing the public about how

the government tries to rescue practitioners by “re-educating” them in labor camps); and fabricating news (WOIPFG, 2004). So far, all kinds of media have been produced ranging from news reports, “scientific” articles, interviews, TV shows, VCDs to books and even TV series for achieving the following purposes: delegitimizing Falun Gong as an “evil cult”; discrediting Li Hongzhi, the founder of Falun Gong; ridiculing Li Hongzhi’s teachings; to prove Falun Gong’s immanent threat to society; unmasking Li Hongzhi as a criminal; showing that international criticisms of China’s handling of Falun Gong are hypocritical as the critics are using Falun Gong merely as a tool to achieve their own ends; proving that Falun Gong has harmed citizens; and that Falun Gong’s organization threatens China (Schechter, 2001a; WOIPFG, 2004). Lets us now have a look at the self-immolation case, the perfect example of the Chinese media’s brainwashing.

## **The Self-Immolation Case**

On January 23, 2001, five people were reported to have set themselves on fire in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, China. The Chinese state-controlled Xinhua News Agency, known as the Chinese government’s mouthpiece, immediately published a report on the incident in which it claimed that the five people were Falun Gong practitioners committing suicide and it broadcast its report of the incident to the whole world within two hours of the time of occurrence. This quick response time was in stark contrast to the way news is usually handled in China, where lower-level officials report to their superiors and so on until the top officials allow the news to be published. The video footage of the incident that the Chinese government television station CCTV (Chinese Central Television) broadcast shows harrowing close-up shots said to be taken from nearby surveillance cameras and the screening of a slow-motion, stop-action version of this footage showing the five supposedly Falun Gong people burning themselves to death has been broadcast repeatedly. However, the unusual quick response time along with many other suspicious points – such as the question of how close-up shots can be taken from surveillance cameras – made the Western media skeptical about this report. After investigations by *The Washington Post* among other Western media and the International Educational Development (IED), the whole event has been confirmed to be a staged event arranged by CCTV with the purpose of discrediting Falun Gong and to justify the Chinese government’s violent crackdown on Falun Gong. The self-immolation is the most notorious staged event that has been fabricated in order to turn public opinion against Falun Gong. Let us now have a closer look at the video footage that was repeatedly broadcast throughout China and beyond.

Among the five people setting themselves on fire was a 12-year-old girl named Liu Siying. The video showed her as being severely burned, lying on a stretcher, her face and lips charred black while whimpering after her mother. She seemed somehow to be thoroughly filmed before being transported to the hospital. Her picture was repeatedly shown on TV and her tragedy of being told by her mother that setting oneself on fire enables one to reach the “heavenly kingdom” has outraged all China. Apparently, the “Chinese authorities used the tragedy of the twelve-year-old [victim] as an opportunity to stress their concern for children and to educate youngsters to the alleged evils of [Falun Gong]” (Spiegel, 2002, p. 34). Another rather odd instance is that in the interview broadcast along with the footage the child was able to speak and even sing after having undergone a tracheotomy! Also, “one of the CNN producers on the scene, just 50 feet away, says she did not even see a child there” (Schechter, 2001b). On March 21, 2001, the girl suddenly died after appearing very lively and being deemed ready to leave the hospital to go home (WOIPFG, 2004).

Her mother, Liu Chunling, was said to have died in the Tiananmen fire – the only person who died on the scene. Looking carefully at the video of the self-immolation, one can, however, discover that she did not die from the fire but was murdered by an unknown person; as Charles A. Radin noticed in his article, “Falun Gong Appeals for Help: Vigils Held on Eve of UN China Vote,” published on April 18, 2001 in *The Boston Globe* that “the most striking part of [the] presentation was the screening of a slow-motion, stop-action version of [the] videotape that the Chinese government says shows Falun Gong members burning themselves to death . . . . The government has broadcast the film repeatedly. In the slowed version, it appears that Liu Chunling . . . collapsed not from the flames but from being bludgeoned by a man in a military overcoat.”

When the government was asked how the surveillance cameras could videotape the incident in such a

detail, several Chinese state-run newspapers said that the footage had been confiscated from CNN people who were on spot. Yet Eason Jordan, CNN's chief news executive and president for newsgathering, said the footage used in the Chinese television reports could not have come from CNN because the CNN cameraman, who was on the scene together with a producer, was arrested almost immediately after the incident began (Pan, 2001b). Furthermore, the close-up shots shown on Chinese television appear to have been taken without any interference from police. In some, the camera is clearly within police barricades and positioned directly above the burn victims. In addition, footage from overhead surveillance cameras in Tiananmen Square appears to show a man using a small handheld video camera to film the whole event, not a large TV news camera (Pan, 2001b).

Were the five people setting themselves on fire really Falun Gong practitioners? When the Xinhua News Agency first released the story of the self-immolation, reported to be Falun Gong practitioners, world media agencies simply adopted the story verbatim. However, any requests made to interview Liu Siying and the three other survivors, all having serious burns, were denied. An official from Kaifeng, a city about 350 miles south of Beijing where the five victims came from, said only CCTV and Xinhua News Agency were permitted to speak to their relatives and their colleagues. Later on, Philip Pan from *The Washington Post* found out that the young girl's mother, who died in the fire, was known to suffer from psychological problems. Her neighbors said that she hit her mother and daughter and worked in a nightclub to support her life. "None ever saw her practice Falun Gong" (Pan, 2001a).

There exist more inconsistencies in the video footage. According to Xinhua News Agency, when first one of the five people set himself afire in Tiananmen Square, the patrolling police "dashed over to him with four fire extinguishers and put out the flames within a minute" (Schechter, 2001b). "The police had clearly been at the ready with fire extinguishers" (Noonan, 2001). However, policemen patrolling on Tiananmen Square do not normally carry fire extinguishers with them and the location where the people had set themselves afire was at least a twenty-minute roundtrip from the nearest building – the People's Great Hall. "If they were to have dashed over there to get the equipment, it would have been too late" (Schechter, 2001b). Another scene in the film is also rather bizarre. The man who first set himself afire poured gasoline from a green plastic bottle over himself. He then put the bottle between his legs while sitting on the ground setting himself afire. However, after the fire on him had been extinguished, the bottle still seemed to be fully intact.

Aroused by the apparent inconsistencies, some journalists went behind the self-immolation incident and challenged the state's version. As mentioned above, Philip Pan from *The Washington Post* did research on the five people setting themselves on fire and found no evidence that they were Falun Gong practitioners. Ian Johnson, a Beijing based reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*, who won the 2001 Dow Jones' Pulitzer Prize in International Reporting for his revealing stories about victims of the Chinese government's brutal suppression of the Falun Gong movement (Pulitzer Prizes, n.d.), became suspicious by the speed with which the self-immolation was covered. During the first 18 months of persecution, China did not provide the foreign press any photos or video of Falun Gong protests. Suddenly the state-run media had a full report in English ready to be released worldwide (Schechter, 2001b). All these inconsistencies mentioned above lead to the same conclusion: all investigators – *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Boston Globe*, *National Review*, Media Channel, including the International Education Development (IED) – agree that the supposed self-immolation incident was staged by the government to "prove" that Falun Gong brainwashes its practitioners to commit suicide and has therefore to be banned as a threat to the nation. IED made a statement at the 53<sup>rd</sup> UN session describing China's violent assault on Falun Gong practitioners as state terrorism and that the self-immolation "was staged by the government." However, the findings and discovery of the incident being staged have not been carried in full anywhere in mainstream Western media and in the tightly controlled communication environment of China, people have not been able to hear about it at all.

The staged self-immolation incident in Tiananmen Square on Jan. 23 marked a turning point in the Falun Gong crisis. The crackdown on Falun Gong has benefited from a turn in public opinion against Falun Gong since the self-immolation incident. A 12-year-old girl and her mother died, and the party made the incident the centerpiece of its campaign to discredit Falun Gong. By repeatedly broadcasting images of the girl's burning body and interviews with the other survived saying they believed self-immolation would

lead them to paradise, the government convinced many Chinese that Falun Gong was an “evil cult.” “As Chinese society turned against Falun Gong, pressure on practitioners to abandon their beliefs increased, and it became easier for the government to use violence against those who did not” (Pomfret & Pan, 2001).

## **Extension Overseas: The Chinese Government’s Unique Export**

*“We need to deliver the voice of the Party and the government to everyone’s home, deliver the voice of China to every place in the world.”*

Ding Guangen, minister of the China Ministry of Propaganda, in the opening ceremony of the First Session Meeting of the Sixth Council Committee of Chinese Reporters Association, Oct. 26, 1999 (WOIPFG, 2004, p. 392)

The propaganda campaign the Chinese government launched against Falun Gong has, in fact, been taking place simultaneously in China and overseas from the very beginning. Jiang Zemin changed the way the Chinese Communist Party used to propagate – behind closed doors – and has been trying to involve Western officials and Western media from the beginning of the persecution in an attempt to gain their support to legitimize the persecution as well as alleviate the international pressure (WOIPFG, 2004): Jiang Zemin personally disseminated the propaganda message when he visited six countries in 1999 – he declared that Falun Gong was an “evil cult” during an interview with the French newspaper *Le Figaro* – and in his speech on the National Overseas Propaganda Work Meeting in 1999 he said that China has to do research on future propaganda strategy in order to do a better job in the foreign propaganda area.

As Guo Jingzhe, a chief editor in China Radio International, commented on the overseas propaganda work in his article “Pay Attention to the Art of Propaganda and Stress on the Effectiveness of Propaganda,” when they translated their reports about banning Falun Gong used in their domestic propaganda verbatim into English to release worldwide, it was difficult for foreigners to understand and accept, but when they later clearly stated that Falun Gong was an evil-cult in their overseas propaganda, the foreigners immediately understood and accepted it. He, thus, concluded that this helped them to win support from the international society (WOIPFG, 2004). Indeed, if Mr. Li Hongzhi is the archetypal doomsday cult leader and his followers deluded, superstitious victims of sophisticated psychological coercion, then any measures taken by the government would seem to be justifiable in the eyes of the Western world. According to Stephen D. O’Leary, bestowing on Falun Gong a strong cult image alluding to the Western ideas of a doomsday cult is clearly “an attempt of the Chinese government to seek sympathy and empathy from Western countries, particularly from America, where Li now resides” (as cited in Schechter, 2001a, p. 210). In reports such as the self-immolation incident or the Zhejiang beggar murder case the media have been trying to perform exactly that of framing Falun Gong and they have performed quite well.

Looking at the United States, the U.S. census 2000 data reveals that the Chinese American population has been dramatically growing over the last ten years and these people’s dependence on Chinese language media is heavy as more than 60% of them profess that their English skills are limited. Feeling the necessity of scrutinizing the nature and content of Chinese-language media in the United States, the Jamestown Foundation, an independent non-profit organization in the United States, published an article entitled “How China’s Government is Attempting to Control Chinese Media in America” in its November 21, 2001, issue of China Brief in which shocking findings are revealed: Beijing’s Communist government has been quite successfully controlling and influencing the Chinese media in the U.S. penetrating US markets with misinformation and propaganda by using strategies like directly controlling newspapers, television stations, and radio stations through complete ownership or owning major shares; using economic ties to influence independent media who have business relations with China; purchasing broadcast time and advertising space (or more) from existing independent media; providing free and ready-made programming by the Chinese government; deploying government personnel to work in independent media, achieving influence from within.

The article published by the Jamestown Foundation assumes long-term negative effects caused by this infiltration of political propaganda and points to already noticeable symptoms: startlingly apathetic

responses to the September 11 tragedies, strong anti-American sentiments (especially notable among the Mainland Chinese communities in the United States) amidst the EP-3 affair and the Belgrade Embassy Bombing, and fierce, even violent antagonism towards the Falun Gong on U.S. soil all seem very telling (Mei, 2001). The evoked sentiments seem to be strong as the incident on June 23, 2003, might indicate when Falun Gong practitioners were attacked outside a Chinese restaurant in New York City by local United States-based individuals with reported ties to the Chinese government (H. Con. Res. 304). While China continues expanding its propaganda on a much larger scale - AOL Time Warner have closed a major deal with the Beijing government that would bring CCTV programming to the United States via Time Warner's cable operations – “the U.S. government, by comparison, continues to have broadcasting rights in China flatly denied” (Mei, 2001). Its Radio Free Asia and Voice of America radio networks are constantly jammed. Similarly, all major Western newspapers are banned in China and their websites blocked.

In the meanwhile, the attitude of Western government and media towards the Chinese Communist government has not been too encouraging: self-censorship and alignment with China out of commercial interest seem to be the common behavior. “Media mogul Rupert Murdoch dropped BBC from one of his satellites over China for that very reason” (Schechter, 2001a, p. 92) and the talk the Viacom chief Sumner Redstone held on September 28, 1999, in the midst of the Falun Gong crackdown, well illustrates the conscious decision by media executives to downplay stories that upset the Chinese government. “The media, he said, should report the truth but avoid being ‘unnecessarily offensive’ to foreign governments” (Schechter, 2001a, p. 93). He further elaborates that “As they expand their global reach, media companies must be aware of the politics and attitudes of the governments where we operate . . . Journalistic integrity must prevail in the final analysis. But that doesn’t mean that journalistic integrity should be exercised in a way that is unnecessarily offensive to the countries in which you operate.” (as cited in Schechter, 2001a, p. 93)

The same goes for most Western countries doing business with China. They continue to put their business interests before human rights concerns, refusing to link trade with human rights. With \$155 billion in foreign reserves, China gains the upper hand as more and more Western countries have become dependent on China’s exports and manufactured goods. Though policymakers have issued resolutions condemning the persecution, they have been hesitant in acting. As Schechter correctly observes in his book *Falun Gong’s Challenge to China: Spiritual Practice or “Evil Cult”?*, “We have seen how pressure from the White House has pushed the peace process forward in the Middle East and Northern Ireland. But why not China? It appears that money, not morality, remains the central concern of governments on both sides of the globe” (p. 107).

## Light of Hope

*“I knew if I would simply write a letter denouncing Falun Gong, I would be released. But if it’s wrong to believe in ‘Truthfulness-Compassion-Forbearance,’ what hope does humanity have? This persecution is forcing people to choose between their lives and their conscience ... I chose my conscience because I knew that when upstanding men and women renounce good, virtuous beliefs under pressure, something much greater than us dies.”*

Wang Yuzhi, a Falun Gong practitioner who suffered beatings and torture for nine months while imprisoned in China (as cited in Zhang, 2004, p. 10)

The Chinese government vowed to eradicate Falun Gong within the first three months of the crackdown and, in the face of its scope and brutality, many indeed believed Falun Gong would not resist for too long. However, the reality proved to be exactly the opposite. The crackdown has been going on for over five years. According to journalist Liu and he acknowledges very correctly, the scale on which the Chinese Communist Party mobilized the propaganda apparatus across the country to attack and denounce Falun Gong has been comparable to the “great struggle sessions” of the Cultural Revolution and the threats, detentions, and criminal prosecutions directed towards Falun Gong was no different to the persecution in the Cultural Revolution either (as cited in Schechter, 2001a). Indeed, CCP’s propaganda war against Falun Gong represents today’s perfect example of what Ellul (1965) would label a total propaganda

intending to reach, encircle and invade the whole man and all men. Not only have all forms of media been utilized but, alongside the mass media of communication propaganda, censorship has been employed, legal texts and legislation proposed and put in force and an ideological indoctrination and brainwashing through educational methods is persistently applied permeating all aspects of society. But, this time, unlike in the past, CCP has even much more sophisticated tools at its service such as the Internet, cable and satellite TV offering an incredible easy way to reach a mass audience even beyond its national border and, with many Western countries depending on its market, CCP is enjoying a leeway that has never been greater, further facilitating its export of ideology into overseas markets. In addition, Chinese embassies around the world have taken on the task of monitoring and weakening international support for Falun Gong (Spiegel, 2002). It is fair to say that the full panoply of psychological and physical weapons is being used against Falun Gong practitioners but, to everyone's surprise, Falun Gong practitioners have not been crushed and have not ceased their peaceful protest inside China. In fact, Falun Gong has become the first social organization that the Party dictatorship has been unable to crush in fifty years (as cited in Schechter, 2001a).

Ever since the crackdown started, practitioners throughout China have persistently appealed to the government in the form of peaceful protest by meditating or unfurling banners with simple statements like "Falun Dafa is good" (Spiegel, 2002; Amnesty International, 2000). Although police have been crushing down on the protests violently arresting the demonstrators and sending them to labor and re-education camps where they face torture leading to death, Falun Gong practitioners have not ceased their protests against the regime's treatment of Falun Gong and continue defending their rights tenaciously and always non-violently. Within China, practitioners have, in particular, mounted protests in the capital city of China in order to raise awareness on a national and international level; they use mass mailings and handouts to clarify the truth, countering the ubiquitous official version of Falun Gong as an "evil cult"; and have also managed to post large posters and banners in major thoroughfares with statements like "Falun Dafa is good," "Truth-Compassion-Tolerance is good," "Stop the Persecution of Falun Gong," et al (Spiegel, 2002). As Daniel Schechter, journalist and Emmy Award-winning broadcaster, writes (2001a, p. 110), "Practitioners may be peaceful, but they are not passive. In this way their campaign has aspects in common with Gandhi's civil disobedience movement in India and the non-violent civil rights activism led by Martin Luther King Jr. in the American South".

What does the bold persistence of Falun Gong practitioners tell us? We obviously cannot deny the effectiveness of the Chinese government's propaganda against Falun Gong. By tightly controlling the information environment while rigorously implementing Mao's principle of "appropriate education" making people's survival dependent on their showing of a correct behavior, the Chinese government has surely been successfully "making the people act in accord with the government's wishes" (Ellul, 1965, p. 283). By carrying out anti-cult education campaigns at schools, the government must as well have been successfully indoctrinating children the conception it wants them to hold, namely that of Falun Gong as an evil cult, in order to justify and legitimize its repression against Falun Gong. However, the unexpected bold resistance of practitioners standing up for their personal beliefs has far-reaching significance. When Ellul talks about total propaganda, he emphasizes that it has to "[surround] the individual without pause from morning to night, from childhood to old age, in all that he reads, sees, hears, without giving him repose, a moment to pause, think, catch his breath" (1965, p. 280). However, Falun Gong has managed to remain visible even after more than five years of severe crackdown by a powerful state apparatus. Although Falun Gong practitioners have not been able to convey their message under ideal condition, they still continue their effort to get heard by getting around the tight Internet blockage, distributing flyers and leaflets, overriding television broadcasts, i.e. hacking into the cable TV systems to broadcast programs that reveal the truth behind the persecution such as the self-immolation incident, etc. ([Falun Dafa Information Center](#); Amnesty International, 2000; Spiegel, 2002). The uncompromising courage and perseverance of Falun Gong practitioners in the face of oppression may not break down the total net of the Chinese government's propaganda in one day. However, the government's propaganda will lose effect on those people practitioners have been able to reach so far.

Most importantly, like many non-violent movements before, Falun Gong's persistence and courage pose a threat to delegitimize a repressive government (Schechter, 2001a). The Chinese Communist Party's overreaction to Falun Gong might in the end backfire since by cracking down on peaceful meditators it

does not contribute to a solution of its real social problems it is facing right now but, in fact, creates even more social instability than before. With its ban, the Chinese government has actually forcefully politicized Falun Gong, a completely non-political meditation practice, and by becoming more and more repressive in the face of Falun Gong's uncompromising resistance extending its propaganda campaign even overseas, the Chinese government forces Falun Gong to speak out on an international level. Outside China, Falun Gong practitioners from over 40 countries have been showing solidarity with their fellow practitioners in China. Since its growing popularity all over the world, Falun Gong is no longer just a China-based movement and in the face of increasing violence, overseas practitioners have been further mobilized to oppose the ongoing persecution in China.

In the face of economic prosperity amid mounting social tensions and injustice, ordinary people are put under pressure to struggle for their rights against the Communist Party leviathan, calling for the greater freedom, clean government and rule of law that the party promises but never delivers (Chanda, 2004). The ruling members of the Communist Party have always been attempting to maintain a status of legitimacy and unquestionable power. They were successful in doing so in the past when they kept the society closed where all aspects of life were rigidly regulated by the party and where everyone knew how s/he had to act in order to survive (Popper, 1966). However, due to Mao's failed policies his successor Deng decided to carry out economic reforms opening up China's economic market to foreign investors. This decision brought new chances and challenges to the country as, in today's China, with economic reforms, an open-market economy, raising living-standards, improving education, albeit only in the cities, Chinese citizens now have the financial means and also more time to travel, to think and to determine their own lives. It is *rational reflection* that makes the difference between closed and open society (Popper, 1966). As Popper states in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, once people start to think and act independently, "once we begin to rely upon our reason, and to use our powers of criticism," there is no return back to a state of implicit submission (1966, pp. 200-201).

Amid mounting social injustice in China, there is good reason to believe that Falun Gong practitioners' demanding for their rights is echoing throughout the Chinese society. John Gittings, a veteran Guardian China-watcher, observes, "Falun Gong reflects a grassroots mood in China of greater assertiveness: interest groups, whether they be peasants complaining of corruption or laid-off workers seeking benefits they've been denied, are more prepared to protest" (Schechter, 2001a, p. 74). On the morning after the April 25 anniversary, *The Asian Wall Street Journal* tipped its editorial hat to Falun Gong. "Chinese society is changing quickly," noted the editorial, "and more and more people will follow the example of the Falun Dafa practitioners and demand their rights . . . [These practitioners] are the vanguard of change. This was the true import of yesterday's anniversary, carrying with it a bright light of hope" (Schechter, 2001a, p. 114). Indeed, the ongoing peaceful resistance of Falun Gong in the face of the brutal repression gives us a new faith in man, in equalitarian justice and in human reason – the faith of the open society (Popper, 1966, p. 189).

## Notes

See *Governmental awards and recognition of Falun Dafa from China and the world*. (2003). Retrieved November 2, 2003, from Clearwisdom Net: [http://www.clearwisdom.net/emh/special\\_column/recognition.html# china](http://www.clearwisdom.net/emh/special_column/recognition.html# china)

Several Chinese students I know well eye witnessed tens of thousands of people filling up public spaces in Beijing in the morning to practice Falun Gong together everyday before the crackdown.

That Chinese officials are used to this kind of tactic can be seen from the accidental NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia on May 7, 1999 (*Historical, social and political analysis of the reasons behind the persecution of Falun Gong in China*, n.d.): China's state-run media used this incident to spur Chinese nationalism by charging that America did the bombing intentionally with the purpose of harming China. The non-discerning public believed it.

According to the Chinese government survey, a high percentage of practitioners are highly educated intellectuals and officials from the Party, the government agencies and the army including high-level military and intelligence officers, and reportedly even the wives of Cabinet Ministers (Schechter, 2001a).

He Zuoxiu – the scientist who launched the initial public attacks on Falun Gong – even claimed that the spiritual practice is financed by the US Congress and, believe it or not, Chinese students studying in America consider He's assertion to be possible if not entirely true.

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Already before and of course after the crackdown, police throughout China have ransacked homes of practitioners, confiscating books, videotapes, and posters. On October 21, 1999, a total of 7.8 million books and 4.9 million videotapes were confiscated in the Chinese cities of Wuhan and Jinan alone and the army and the police have rounded up many practitioners, even forcing them into detention in stadiums (Schechter, 2001a).

In early June, police held several busloads of practitioners in a local stadium for a day in Beijing; later in June, some 3,000 officers cleared out practice sites on Changan Avenue, Beijing's major thoroughfare, and vowed to clean up all public practice sites in the city; on July 20, 1999, security officers throughout China quietly detained seventy purportedly Falun Gong leaders after midnight and altogether, about 50,000 practitioners were said to be detained in the Beijing area alone (Schechter, 2001a)

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Throughout China, not only have the Chinese media launched an around-the-clock orchestration against Falun Gong, but local government authorities have also been carrying out 'study and education' programs to purge their provinces of Falun Gong which can take the form of reading newspapers, listening to radio programs and watching television, "as well as having office cadres visit villagers and farmers at home to explain 'in simple terms the harm of Falun Gong to them'" (Amnesty International, 2000, p. 5).

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On June 26, 2003, sixteen beggars were reported to have found to be murdered with poison in Changnan County, Wenzhou City, Zhejiang Province. Later on, Xinhua News Agency issued an article reporting that the murder case had been solved and that the alleged suspect Chen Fuzhao was identified by the police as a Falun Gong practitioner who was reported to have confessed that he killed the beggars in order to reach a higher level in his practice of Falun Gong.

"The Jamestown Foundation's mission is to inform and educate policy makers and the broader policy community about events and trends in those societies which are strategically or tactically important to the United States and which frequently restrict access to such information. Utilizing indigenous and primary sources, Jamestown's material is delivered without political bias, filter or agenda. It is often the only source of information which should be, but is not always, available through official or intelligence channels, especially in regard to Eurasia and terrorism" ([The Jamestown Foundation](#)).

According to the Jamestown Foundation article, *World Journal*, an independently run daily publication and one of the six branch-newspapers of the *United Daily News* (UDN)--Taiwan's most influential newspaper, is feeling pressure from China while trying to develop business ties with Mainland China. "For example, Chinese Consulates in both New York and San Francisco have pressured World Journal's local offices to not publish ads related to Falun Gong. The New York office has already acquiesced in full, and the San Francisco office has in part; it still prints Falun Gong ads, but with them appearing on the paper's least-viewed page 90 percent of the time." (Mei, 2001) *World Journal* is the most widely read Chinese-language newspaper in North America, and claims a circulation of 300,000 in the United States.

For example, "employees at Ming Pao's New York office have told sources that their 'true boss' is none other than the Chinese Consulate [in New York], and that they are obligated to do whatever the Consulate asks" (Mei, 2001). *Ming Pao* has a circulation of 115,000 and is distributed mainly on the east coast of the United States.

H. Con. Res. 304 expressing the sense of the House of Congress regarding oppression by the Government of the People's Republic of China of Falun Gong in the United States and in China was introduced by Representative Ros-Lehtinen on October 16, 2003. The International Relations Committee agreed to seek consideration under suspension of the rules, by unanimous consent on June 24, 2004.

Exceptions exist such as the brave engagements of the *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Ian Johnson, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on the persecution against Falun Gong and the commendable support of the Canadian government leading to successful rescue of numerous Falun Gong practitioners ([Falun Dafa Information Center](#) and [Friends of Falun Gong](#)). However, these are, unfortunately, remarkable exceptions to the rule.

"Liu Binyan established a tradition of investigative reporting when he worked for *People's Daily* in the 1980s. Twice expelled from the CCP, he now lives in the United States, and continues his journalistic work. He is currently working on a book presenting his perspective on Chinese history" (Schechter, 2001a, p. 207).

The Chinese government applied the new regulations retroactively, violating well-established international criminal justice standards against *ex post facto* laws (Spiegel, 2002).

CCP uses Internet to its own ends by blocking off all undesirable information and making only those contents available to its citizens that conforms to its own ideology.

The Chinese government, not satisfied with persecuting Falun Gong in China, has, for example, urged local U.S. officials to shun or even persecute practitioners in America. The approach is made variously by letter, phone call or personal visit from a Chinese official based at China's Washington embassy or one of its numerous consulates. It tends to combine gross disinformation with scare tactics and, in some cases, slyly implied diplomatic and commercial pressure (WOIPFG, 2004).

For example, nearly a thousand practitioners from all over Europe, Asia and North America turned out in Geneva to appeal to the UN Human Rights Commission in March 2000 and since then, many of them again turned out for the UN meetings in the subsequent years. Throughout the world, Falun Gong practitioners have arranged press conferences and rallies in major cities, organized marches and motorized processions, orchestrated hunger strikes and issued numerous press releases. They have been maintaining Falun Gong websites documenting China's human rights abuses against Falun Gong (Spiegel, 2002). Most recently, practitioners have been giving out flyers and newspapers revealing the persecution in China all over Manhattan, NY. Both inside and outside China, Falun Gong practitioners are trying to get the word out about the treatment of Falun Gong practitioners to arouse solidarity, to stimulate public and press interest and government concern in order to stop the severe human rights abuses against Falun Gong in China.

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