



CORI Research Analysis

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Country: China

Issues: Falun Gong; What is the structure and hierarchy of FLG and how does it operate?
Does FLG engage in systematic advocacy or activities to 'clarify the truth' about the FLG? Is it an obligation for some or all practitioners, and how is it done? How does the 1999 ban on the FLG impact on any such activities?

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1. The Structure and practices of Falun Gong

● What is the structure and hierarchy of FLG and how does it operate?

According to the United States Department of State (USDOS) International Religious Freedom Report 2009, "Falun Gong is a self-described spiritual discipline that is Buddhist in nature".¹ The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reports that it was founded in 1992 by Li Hongzhi, who is referred to as the "Master" and currently lives in exile in the United States.² USDOS states that "Falun Gong combines the meditation techniques and physical exercises of qigong (a traditional Chinese exercise discipline) with the teachings of its founder Li Hongzhi."³

According to the Falun Dafa website, the discipline is known as both Falun Gong and Falun Dafa (or just Dafa), and both terms can be used interchangeably.⁴ 'Falun Gong' translates as 'Practice of the Law Wheel' or 'Law Wheel Qigong', while 'Falun Dafa' translates as 'Great Way of the Law Wheel'.⁵ According to the Falun Dafa website the

¹ US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2009, China (includes Tibet, Hong Kong, Macau), October 26, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127268.htm>, accessed 8 August 2010.

² BBC News, China says Falun Gong ban 'works', 22 July 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/8162342.stm>, accessed 8 August 2010.

³ US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2009, China (includes Tibet, Hong Kong, Macau), October 26, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127268.htm>, accessed 8 August 2010.

⁴ Falun Dafa Website, undated, <http://www.falundafa.org>, accessed 8 August 2010.

⁵ Falun Dafa Website, undated, <http://www.falundafa.org>, accessed 8 August 2010.

practice “has an ancient history” and “is a high-level cultivation practice guided by the characteristics of the universe – Truthfulness, Benevolence, and Forbearance.”⁶

UK daily newspaper, The Guardian reports that the practice is “[w]ithout any real formal leadership structure and no role of membership as such, adherents of the religion, founded by Li Hongzhi in 1992, follow so-called traditional qigong practices for both spiritual and physical development as detailed in Falun Gong’s literature. Without formal rituals of worship, its central tenets are truthfulness, forbearance and compassion.”⁷

The Falun Dafa website states that “practitioners cultivate themselves while living normally in the complex environment of secular society. People of all nationalities, races, socio-economic backgrounds, gender, ages, occupations, and different faiths are welcome to practice, and do so entirely of their own free will, at their own pace, and for as long as they choose,” adding that “people of any faith tradition are welcome to learn Falun Dafa. Whether someone decides to focus exclusively on the practice of Falun Dafa at some point is always a personal choice.”⁸ The exercises are contained in Falun Gong literature and according to the same source, “all Falun Dafa books are available to read online and download free of charge. They are also held in many major libraries. All Falun Dafa workshops, exercise sessions, and related events are always free of charge.”⁹

The BBC states that “Falun Gong is a highly visible Buddhist revival movement that had spread across class and educational lines throughout the 1990s”.¹⁰ The Falun Dafa website states that by 1998 “at least 70 million had taken up the practice in China alone.”¹¹

According to The Guardian Falun Gong,

“came to be regarded as a threat to the Chinese state after 10,000 of its practitioners staged a silent protest at the Communist party’s headquarters in April 1999 to complain about attacks on its members, a move that led to its banning two months later. Accused of being an unregistered religion, spreading superstition and defrauding people, official organisations – crucially – attempted to suggest it was a politically motivated organisation, suggesting the real motive for the crackdown: the perceived threat it posed to the Communist party by its massive appeal.”¹²

The BBC reports that since the 1999 protest the Chinese government has referred to Falun Gong as an “evil cult”.¹³ The Guardian reports that Falun Gong was “accused of being an unregistered religion, spreading superstition and defrauding people, official organisations – crucially – attempted to suggest it was a politically motivated organisation, suggesting the real motive for the crackdown: the perceived threat it posed to the Communist party by its massive appeal.”¹⁴

⁶ Falun Dafa Website, undated, <http://www.falundafa.org>, accessed 8 August 2010.

⁷ The Guardian, China’s Falun Gong crackdown: ‘The persecution is almost underground’, 18 July 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jul/18/china-falun-gong-crackdown>, accessed 8 August 2010.

⁸ Falun Dafa Website, undated, <http://www.falundafa.org>, accessed 8 August 2010.

⁹ Falun Dafa Website, undated, <http://www.falundafa.org>, accessed 8 August 2010.

¹⁰ BBC News, China says Falun Gong ban ‘works’, 22 July 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/8162342.stm>, accessed 8 August 2010.

¹¹ Falun Dafa Website, undated, <http://www.falundafa.org>, accessed 8 August 2010.

¹² The Guardian, China’s Falun Gong crackdown: ‘The persecution is almost underground’, 18 July 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jul/18/china-falun-gong-crackdown>, accessed 8 August 2010

¹³ BBC News, China says Falun Gong ban ‘works’, 22 July 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/8162342.stm>, accessed 8 August 2010.

¹⁴ The Guardian, China’s Falun Gong crackdown: ‘The persecution is almost underground’, 18 July 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jul/18/china-falun-gong-crackdown>, accessed 8 August 2010.

• Does FLG engage in systematic advocacy or activities to ‘clarify the truth’ about the FLG? Is it an obligation for some or all practitioners, and how is it done? How does the 1999 ban on the FLG impact on any such activities?

The Falun Dafa Information Centre (FDIC) website presents itself as “both the official press office for Falun Gong as well as a primary resource for information about the human rights abuses Falun Gong practitioners face at the hands of the Chinese Communist regime”.¹⁵ According to the FDIC, as a result of the harassment and persecution faced by Falun Gong practitioners, as well as the concern for the wellbeing of those in China, members and organisations overseas adopted a response “referred to collectively in Falun Gong parlance as “clarifying the truth” (i.e., about what’s happening), or “jiangqing zhenxiang” in Chinese”.¹⁶ According to FDIC the approach includes various public activities in the West and Asia including the distribution of information materials, raising awareness on human rights violations in China and organising protests.¹⁷

“Among the most notable of these is perhaps the creative array of public activities. In New York City, for example, a year long awareness drive saw hundreds of volunteers doing torture re-enactments on the sidewalks of crowded streets, handing out newspapers and various flyers, staging marches, gathering signatures, holding vigils, and outreach in the schools, among other events.”¹⁸

Clearwisdom.net, a website promoting Falun Dafa states that,

“Because of the persecution in China and the unrelenting hate campaign carried out by China's state-controlled media, Falun Gong practitioners have been actively “clarifying the truth” -- explaining to the public the facts about Falun Gong and exposing the persecution. Truth clarification activities include face-to-face conversations with people, posting notices and posters, handing out flyers, and hanging banners. Outside of China, where Falun Gong is freely practiced, practitioners further expose the persecution through anti-torture reenactments, art exhibits, Internet websites, books, magazines, newspapers, movies and letter writing. The goal of clarifying the truth is to help people understand Falun Gong, to dispel the lies of the communist regime in China and to raise public support to end the persecution. (Variations: “clarifying the truth”, “truth clarifying”, “truth-clarifying”, “truth clarification”, “truth-clarification”, “clarifying the facts”, “clarified the truth”, and “clarified the facts”).”¹⁹

Reuters reported that after the 1999 ban, “there are occasional signs of low-key activity by practitioners in mainland China. A woman passing out Falun Gong leaflets in Japan in July [2008] said her family practises quietly at home in Shandong without trouble.”²⁰ According

¹⁵ Falun Dafa Information Centre, Our Mission, 8 June 2008, <http://www.faluninfo.net/category/10/>, accessed 8 August 2010.

¹⁶ Falun Dafa Information Centre, Falun Gong: Life Under Persecution, 17 May 2008, <http://www.faluninfo.net/topic/29/>, accessed 8 August 2010.

¹⁷ Falun Dafa Information Centre, Falun Gong: Life Under Persecution, 17 May 2008, <http://www.faluninfo.net/topic/29/>, accessed 8 August 2010.

¹⁸ Falun Dafa Information Centre, Falun Gong: Life Under Persecution, 17 May 2008, <http://www.faluninfo.net/topic/29/>, accessed 8 August 2010.

¹⁹ Clearwisdom, Glossary, undated, <http://clearwisdom.net/html/glossary.html#clarifying-the-truth>, accessed 8 August 2010

²⁰ Reuters, Falun Gong fights on decade after Chinese ban, 23 April 2009, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/idUKTRE53M1U220090423?sp=true>, accessed 8 August 2010.

to the Falun Dafa Information Centre, the main consequence of the ban was that its practices have been driven underground, hampering public practice and even private gatherings and online discussions.²¹ The same source added that “[this has effectively meant that networks of relations have shrunk and taken on new configurations; community has been reconfigured on a more local, and perhaps personal, scale. Little study has been done on what exactly this means for the Falun Gong identity.”²² According to the FDIC a consequence of the ban has led to greater internet activity,

“One ironic, if unlikely, change is that China’s Falun Gong contingent has had to become more international even as it becomes less public; the central community of adherents is now a virtual one, i.e., one online, in the form of a website (Minghui.org) that is hosted in West. But even the viability of this community is not ensured without great effort; just to access Falun Gong websites requires sophisticated technology, owing to the Communist Party’s internet censorship.”²³

The FDIC further reports the rise of a resistance movement to counter the Chinese governments perceived propaganda,

“One feature of this effort involves trying to undo the effects of repeated waves of pervasive, acerbic, government produced propaganda. The Falun Gong have labored to get reliable and fair information about their practice into the hands of fellow citizens. This has assumed a variety of forms, such as doing mailings; clandestinely posting informational flyers; sending emails; making phone calls; handing out leaflets in crowded markets; frequenting online chatrooms, and so on.

A second feature is to try to expose more broadly human rights violations being perpetrated by China’s communist regime. This assumes many of the same forms as above (and often, indeed, the two efforts overlap) as well as gathering and disseminating information overseas. Posting the details of police abuse on international websites and getting it into the hands of human rights groups can act as a powerful deterrent locally. Postings can also appear on lampposts, billboards, and most any other amenable surface locally in China. Another effective approach has been to place phone calls to labor camps and prisons, where abuses are most severe, and directly confront those accountable.”²⁴

New Zealand newspaper the Sunday Star Times reports that,

“Displeased by the challenge,[the 1999 protest] the government responded with a brutal campaign, vilifying the movement as a dangerous, anti-Chinese doomsday cult.

Powerless to fight back in China, the global Falun Gong community has mobilised in a concerted, centralised effort to draw attention to their plight and agitate against

²¹ Falun Dafa Information Centre, Falun Gong: Life Under Persecution, 17 May 2008, <http://www.faluninfo.net/topic/29/>, accessed 8 August 2010.

²² Falun Dafa Information Centre, Falun Gong: Life Under Persecution, 17 May 2008, <http://www.faluninfo.net/topic/29/>, accessed 8 August 2010.

²³ Falun Dafa Information Centre, Falun Gong: Life Under Persecution, 17 May 2008, <http://www.faluninfo.net/topic/29/>, accessed 8 August 2010.

²⁴ Falun Dafa Information Centre, Falun Gong: Life Under Persecution, 17 May 2008, <http://www.faluninfo.net/topic/29/>, accessed 8 August 2010.

the Communist regime; it has engaged in a proxy war of information through an interconnected set of front organisations established to influence public opinion.”²⁵

The Sunday Star Times reports that the New York based newspaper the Epoch Times is associated with Falun Gong and is used to advance its causes.²⁶ The Sunday Star Times and FACTS.org report that the Divine Performing Arts troupe (also known as Shen Yun Performing Arts), reported to have toured in New Zealand, US, Britain, Canada and Australia, is also associated with Falun Gong incorporates political themes and has used “heavy-handed propaganda.”²⁷

According to the USDOS, “prior to the Government's 1999 ban on Falun Gong, it estimated that there were 70 million adherents; the Government subsequently adjusted the number of adherents to approximately 2 million. Falun Gong sources estimate that tens of millions continue to practice privately”.²⁸

In 2009 UK daily newspaper The Telegraph reported a lawyer representing Falun Gong members as stating that “[t]here are still huge numbers of Falun Gong members in China, in the tens of millions.”²⁹ Another lawyer told the Telegraph that “[t]here are more people sticking to their beliefs. Many people have been thrown in prison several times, but they do not give up.” The Telegraph further reports that

“He added that there had been a particular period of pressure ahead of last year's Olympic games, but that there had been a slight relaxation this year.

He said, however, that anyone publicly admitting to following the movement would place himself in extreme danger and almost certainly rule out being able to find any future employment.”³⁰

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²⁵ Sunday Star Times, The gospel truth: Falun Gong, 2 March 2008, available from http://www.rickross.com/reference/falun_gong/falun339.html, accessed 8 August 2010

²⁶ Sunday Star Times, The gospel truth: Falun Gong, 2 March 2008, available from http://www.rickross.com/reference/falun_gong/falun339.html, accessed 8 August 2010

²⁷ Sunday Star Times, The gospel truth: Falun Gong, 2 March 2008, available from http://www.rickross.com/reference/falun_gong/falun339.html, accessed 8 August 2010

²⁸ US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2009, China (includes Tibet, Hong Kong, Macau), October 26, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127268.htm>, accessed 8 August 2010.

²⁹ The Daily Telegraph, Falun Gong ‘growing in china despite 10 year ban, 24 April 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/5213629/Falun-Gong-growing-in-China-despite-10-year-ban.html>, accessed 8 August 2010

³⁰ The Daily Telegraph, Falun Gong ‘growing in china despite 10 year ban, 24 April 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/5213629/Falun-Gong-growing-in-China-despite-10-year-ban.html>, accessed 8 August 2010

Sunday Star Times

The Guardian

The Telegraph

United Nations Special Rapporteur on Religious Freedom or Belief

US Department of State

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom