

California State University Channel Islands

Selective Liberty

Human Rights, the United States, China, and Falun Gong

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11-17-2015

There have been many nuances of diplomatic relations between the People’s Republic of China and the United State of America since the two nations began their normalization efforts forty years ago, yet no item creates a black mark on the relationship quite like the issue of human rights. For a nation which espouses liberty as one of its founding principles and champions the cause of freedom throughout the world, the United States’ policy toward addressing human rights violations in China is unequivocally lacking. The varying degrees to which violations occur is too broad to fit within the scope of this essay, and so this essay will examine the persecution of the Falun Gong and the reaction of the United States.

At this point, many lay readers are likely asking themselves “what is Falun Gong?” Falun Gong – also referred to as Falun Dafa – is a spiritual organization founded by Li Hongzhi in China’s Shandong province. The organization was one of many that developed during the *qigong* movement that spread throughout China in the early 1990s promoting healthy lifestyles through meditation and breathing exercises. Unlike other *qigong* practitioners which focused on the health aspects of their movements, Li incorporated spiritual teachings into Falun Gong. Chief among these founding principles are the tenants of *Zhen, Shan, Ren* (Truthfulness, Compassion, Forbearance), and the belief that one’s *gong*, or moral virtue, is achieved through the transformation of *xingxing* (positive energy achieved through good deeds) and *karma* (negative energy) via meditation.¹ Li has also discussed more controversial aspects such as the ability to levitate, healing powers, and corruption of mankind by extraterrestrial beings.²

¹ “Brief Introduction to Falun Dafa,” Falun Dafa, accessed November 12, 2015 <http://en.falundafa.org/introduction.html> and Janice Casil, “Falun Gong and China’s Human Rights Violations,” *Peace Review* 16, no. 2 (June 2004), 225 accessed November 16, 2016 <http://summit.csuci.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=13971985&site=ehost-live>.

² William Dowell, “Interview with Li Hongzhi,” *Time* (May 10, 1999), accessed November 12, 2015 <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2053761,00.html>.

It is important to note that the Falun Gong rose to prominence in China following the unrest of the 1989 student protests that culminated with the mass demonstration and subsequent crackdown in Tiananmen Square. This event is crucial for understanding the Chinese reaction to Falun Gong as the organization gained popularity. The event is also a crucial element for understanding the evolving foreign relations policy of the United States in regards to China.

Prior to the June 4th incident, the relationship between the United States and the People's Republic of China had been predominantly a military cooperative effort geared toward combating the threat posed by the Soviet Union. In the words of James Mann, "Nixon and Kissinger envisioned a strategic effort to balance China and the Soviet Union against one another in hopes of producing more moderate behavior by each of them."³ In each subsequent administration from Nixon through Reagan, issues regarding human rights were consistently ignored or overlooked as a strategic necessity.

As the crackdown against the student protests in Tiananmen Square unfolded, this outmoded Cold War philosophy would place American diplomacy in a precarious position. Many in the government were taken by surprise that the Chinese government would use force against peaceful protests. As television news programs aired the atrocities for the American public, the government was forced to confront an angry citizenry who abhorred such blatant human rights violations of one of our so-called allies.⁴ The United States' policy toward China would be reinvented, just as Chinese domestic policy underwent changes of its own.

³ James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, From Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Random House, 2000), 370.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 190-193.

In China, crackdowns took place not just against the student democratic groups, but toward any organization which the state perceived as a threat or challenge to its authority. While the state originally permitted Falun Gong as a sanctioned organization because of the health benefits of *qigong* practice, by the mid-to-late 1990s party officials also began to take note of Falun Gong's theological teachings. These lessons challenged the traditional communist dogma China instilled in its citizenry by promoting a higher power than the state, by claiming that the individual had the ability to improve one's self, and by recognizing Li Hongzhi as the organization's leader. As a result the Chinese authorities refused to continue to sanction Falun Gong. By 1999 the organization had an estimated 100 million followers in China, further adding to the government's discomfort. The situation reached a tipping point when on April 25, 1999 when Falun Gong members gathered in front of the Zhongnanhai Party Headquarters in Tiananmen Square to protest the treatment toward the group –imprisoning some of the leaders on political grounds—as well as to request the group regain state recognition.⁵

To Chinese authorities this was a step too far, and the perception could not be any worse for Falun Gong. The imagery of protests on Tiananmen Square immediately invoked reflections on the June 4th movement. Such antirevolutionary sentiment was only further supported by the fact that Falun Gong originated within the Shandong province, historically a hotbed of unrest and revolt (including the Boxer Rebellion). The party had learned its lesson in '89 and retribution toward Falun Gong would come swiftly. By July the Chinese propaganda machine was in full swing denouncing the lessons of Falun Gong as antirevolutionary and divergent to China's socialist principles.⁶ President Jiang Zemin declared the group the largest threat to the state since

⁵ Casil, 226.

⁶ Stephen Noakes and Caylan Ford, "Managing Political Opposition Groups in China: Explaining the Continuing Anti-Falun Gong Campaign," *The China Quarterly* 223 (September 2015), 662. Accessed November 15, 2015 <http://search.proquest.com.summit.csuci.edu:2048/docview/1709262412/fulltext?accountid=7284>.

student democracy movement. By October, Falun Gong was officially outlawed and many of the organization's leaders and key members had been arrested.

Following the 1989 crackdown in Tiananmen the reaction in the United States was swift. President Bush immediately suspended military aid to China, but the relationship between the two countries had already been shifting from one of an anti-Soviet military cooperation to a relationship driven by business and economics. As a result the administration took steps to deter China where it hurt most: foreign lending. The United States immediately ceased all lending to China, encouraged other industrialized nations to do the same, and opposed any further lending to China by the World Bank.⁷ The Congress would also utilize its own leverage, requiring an annual vote on whether or not to renew China's Most Favored Nation trade status.

As the years passed, attention slowly drifted away from China's human rights violations. Foreign lending quickly returned to pre-Tiananmen levels, and despite little to no improvement by the Chinese in regards to human rights, the Congress regularly extended Most Favored Nation benefits. Additionally, the Clinton administration would also end the United States' support for an annual resolution at the United Nations that, if passed, would officially condemn China for its human rights violations.⁸ The result was clear: economic interests would take precedence in the relationship between China and the United States. Pennsylvania representative Richard Schulze summarized it best: "We are talking about human rights. The way I read your statement –you correct me if I'm wrong—the hell with human rights, we are worried about making a buck."⁹

⁷ Mann, 196-198.

⁸ Ibid., 362-363.

⁹ Mann, 108.

This message was received loud and clear in Beijing. The hardline stance against Falun Gong occurred after the United States had shown that reaction to hardline policies would be superficial and temporary. Furthermore, the anti-Falun Gong policies were adopted after the world community ceased to bring up the annual human rights condemnation in the United Nations. With one the largest and quickest expanding economies in the world, major powers like the United States had indicated they were willing to look the other way in the name of profit.

The suppression of Falun Gong continues unabated to this day. Falun Gong members are arrested on a regular basis. Once in custody, members can expect to face beatings, sleep deprivation, stress positioning, electric shock to sensitive areas of the body, and gang rape.¹⁰ “They said to me ‘We will make living worse for you than dying,’” recalled Dr. Charles Lee, a Falun Gong practitioner and activist. “Some people mention the concept of ‘the genocide of the soul’ – they kill your soul. They let you become a nobody.”¹¹ An independent study published in 2007 came to the chilling conclusion that since 1999 the Chinese government have put to death a large but unknown number of Falun Gong prisoners of conscience. Their vital organs, including kidneys, livers, corneas and hearts, were seized involuntarily for sale at high prices... How many of the victims were first convicted of any offence,

¹⁰ James W. Tong, *Revenge of the Forbidden City: Repression of the Fulangong in China, 1999-2005* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 122-128. Accessed via Google Books November 16, 2015
https://books.google.com/books?id=PyxCVRB-De8C&pg=PT2&lpg=PT2&dq=james+tong+revenge+of+the+forbidden+city&source=bl&ots=PBWLTP_duG&sig=Dlk1C_q1DUieqBiHQfXyMDqbakI&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CFIQ6AEwDGoVChMImZy596CZyQIVkS6ICh1bYwpf#v=onepage&q=james%20tong%20revenge%20of%20the%20forbidden%20city&f=false.

¹¹ Jay Nordlinger, “Prisoner of the PRC: A Falun Gong practitioner,” *National Review* 58, no. 7 (April 2006), 28. Accessed November 11, 2015
<http://summit.csuci.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ulh&AN=20457446&site=ehost-live>.

serious or otherwise, in legitimate courts, we are unable to estimate because such information appears to be unavailable.¹²

Yet despite such horrendous evidence, the response of the United States has been resounding silence. “Most Americans know little to nothing about China’s assault on the Falun Gong,” wrote U.S. Commission of Religious Freedom chairwoman Katrina Lantos Swett. “We know more about Tibetan Buddhists and unregistered Christian groups or pro-democracy and free speech advocates,” but few Americans know of the atrocities against the Falun Gong.¹³

The continued persecution of the Falun Gong is a direct result of the longstanding policy of the United States to look the other way in regards to human rights violations in China. Originating out of a perceived necessity not to create any consternation that might jeopardize the military cooperation against the Soviet Union during the Cold War, the policy shifted away from strategic concerns in the early ‘90s, turning increasingly toward economic interests. With so many American businesses relying upon Chinese markets and Chinese goods, elected officials became increasingly less likely to take a hard stance out of fear of the economic repercussions that might result. Failure to address the on-going human rights violations of the Falun Gong have led the United States to become complicit in actions which are best described as crimes against humanity.

¹² David Matas and David Kilgor, *Bloody Harvest: Revised Report into Allegations of Organ Harvesting of Falun Gong Practitioners in China* (January 31, 2007), 58. Accessed November 11, 2015 <http://organharvestinvestigation.net/>.

¹³ Katrina Lantos Swett and Mary Ann Glendon, “U.S. should press China over Falun Gong,” *CNN* (July 23, 2013) accessed November 12, 2015 <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2013/07/23/u-s-should-press-china-over-falun-gong/>.

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