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Extended Response to Information Request

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26 November 1999

China: Falun Dafa (Falun Gong, Falungong); history, details of practice, organizational structures; treatment of practitioners; laws and practice regarding other non-recognized practices and religions

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

This Extended Response provides information current to 16 November 1999 regarding Falun Dafa (Falun Gong, Falungong), including general background, information regarding specific events in April, July and October 1999, and information concerning China's laws and practice regarding other non-recognized practices and religions. The terms Falun Dafa, Falungong and Falun Gong are used interchangeably in the sources to refer to both the practice and the movement. However, Falun Dafa practitioners prefer the term Falun Dafa, which refers to the overall practice and philosophy (*Newsroom* 30 Apr. 1999). Falun Dafa literally means "Great Way of the Wheel of Dharma" (CRS 10 Sept. 1999, 1) or "Law Wheel Great Law," according to an Ottawa Falun Dafa Website (n.d.). Falungong (Falun Gong) literally means "Law Wheel Exercise" (CRS 10 Sept. 1999, 1); according to the Ottawa Falun Dafa Website, Falun Gong means "Law Wheel Cultivation Energy" (n.d.).

General background

Several sources describe Falun Dafa as a syncretic practice, incorporating elements of Taoism, Buddhism and *qigong* (a traditional martial arts practice), and combining physical movements and meditation (CRS 10 Sept. 1999, 1; United States 9 Sept. 1999; BBC 22 July 1999a; CESNUR n.d.). According to the Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), the principal Falun Dafa Website (among many) is <http://falundafa.org> (n.d.). According to an "Introduction of Falun Dafa" on that principal Website:

Falun Dafa is an advanced system of cultivation and practice introduced by Master Li Hongzhi. Since its introduction in 1992, Falun Dafa has attracted more than 100 million people over the world. In addition to being a powerful mechanism for healing, stress relief and health improvements, Falun Dafa is different from other qigong techniques in having a higher objective of cultivation and practice towards enlightenment. It is complete with its own system of principles and empirical techniques.

The foundation of Falun Dafa consists of a body of fundamental knowledge essential for the task of undertaking proper cultivation towards higher stages of attainment. It comprises Master Li's teachings collected in a number of books, the most important of which being *Zhuan Falun* (Revolving the Law Wheel); and *China Falun Gong* is a good summary of principle and exercise recommended for the beginners. Much of the teachings are highly classified knowledge that are hitherto imparted exclusively from master to trusted disciples since antiquity in China.

Falun Dafa has a set of five exercises specially designed to complement one's cultivation. Three of the exercises involve physical movements and maneuvers while the other two exercises require remaining still for extended periods of time. The exercises are exceptionally powerful and effective even though they are simple and easy to learn (n.d.).

Falun Dafa practitioners refer to Falun Dafa as a cultivation practice, denying that it is a religion or a cult (Falun Dafa, n.d.; *Newsroom* 30 Apr. 1999). Central to the practice are the cultivation of the Xinxing ("mind

nature") and the values of Zhen (truthfulness), Shan (benevolence) and Ren (forebearance) (CESNUR n.d.; Falun Dafa n.d.; CRS 10 Sept. 1999, 1).

Sources date the modern introduction of Falun Dafa to 1992 (Falun Dafa n.d.; CRS 10 Sept. 1999, 2; AFP 25 Apr. 1999; BBC 28 Apr. 1999). According to the principal Falun Dafa Website, Falun Dafa was initially registered with the Qigong Research Society of China (n.d.). In a report entitled "Falun Gong 101", the CESNUR states that the "semi-official National Qi Gong Federation has never been seriously disturbed by the regime" (n.d.). However, the principal Falun Dafa Website states that,

It soon became clear that Falun Dafa's goal of "*genuinely guiding people to higher dimensions*" was different from the other Qigong schools, which were focussing on healing illnesses and keeping fit, as well as displaying supernormal powers at exhibitions. And so in 1996, Master Li Hongzhi withdrew Falun Dafa from that Society [italics in original] (n.d.).

The Website's report states that the Chinese authorities refused to allow Falun Dafa to register under any category, thus leaving it without any legal status (ibid.). According to the BBC, the book *Zhuan Falun* was banned in 1996 (28 Apr. 1999).

It is unclear how many Falun Dafa practitioners exist in China. According to the United States Department of State *Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999*, the Chinese government places the number at 2.1 million, whereas Falun Gong practitioners themselves estimate that there are 100 million practitioners (9 Sept. 1999). According to the CESNUR, the issue of estimating the number of practitioners is complicated by the manner in which persons begin to practice Falun Dafa:

'[M]embership' may not be an entirely applicable concept. In fact, although the movement recommends a nine-day introduction course and frequent contacts with local centers, it also states that everybody can simply start practising Falun Gong by following the instructions from one of the many books, cassettes and websites ... quickly available in a variety of languages. The possibility of such a self-initiation, without a master and a lengthy discipline, is at the core of the criticism by other Qi Gong groups against Li and his movement (n.d.; see also Falun Dafa n.d.).

Information concerning the organizational structure associated with Falun Dafa is scarce among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate. In a telephone interview with the Research Directorate, Gail Rachlin, a public relations volunteer and spokesperson for Falun Dafa in New York, stated that activities are coordinated locally by volunteer contact persons who communicate with each other informally (9 Nov. 1999). According to Ms. Rachlin, there are no membership lists, membership cards or other formal structures associated with Falun Dafa (ibid.). According to a report produced by the United States Congressional Research Service (CRS):

Adherents of Falun Gong reveal little about their organizational structure. Followers characterize their objectives as individual and limited in scope. Practitioners engage in the exercises for personal purposes and have no political agenda beyond protecting constitutional rights. Followers assert that the group lacks a hierarchical chain of command and has no routine procedures for coordinating activities.

...

Nonetheless, the size of the demonstrations and the speed with which followers were mobilized in April 1999 indicate that an informal but well-knit and effective network of dedicated leaders and followers had developed. The Research Society of Falun Dafa and exercise instructors may have provided leadership while Falun Gong publications and the Internet enabled group members to communicate. Chinese government, military and public security officials who practiced Falun Gong may have provided crucial support in initially preventing or delaying government actions against the following. The sale of books and audio-visual products may have generated funds for movement activities. The Chinese government has referred to the Research Society of Falun Dafa as the nerve center of the movement and the Haidian district of Beijing as its headquarters (CRS 10 Sept. 1999, 4).

Chinese state media have claimed that Falun Dafa practitioners are highly organized. A *China Daily* report, citing a person alleged to have been the head of the "Falun Gong general training center in Zhengzhou (Henan province)" states that:

[Falun Dafa has] a strict organizational system, with the Beijing-based Falun Dafa Research Society as its top governing body. It set up general training centers, sub-stations and exercise spots in provinces

and municipalities (10 Aug. 1999).

Similarly, according to a *Beijing Review* report of a commentary from the *People's Daily*:

Falun Gong is a tightly organized cult, not the insistence of Li Hongzhi that Falun Gong has no organization, and that 'practitioners gather together spontaneously'. Falun Gong's supreme organ in China is the Falun Dafa Research Society (FDRS) in Beijing. Under FDRS, there were 39 general stations, 1,900 instruction centers and 28,263 group exercise venues that controlled a total of 2.1 million practitioners (8 Nov. 1999).

A *Renmin Ribao* report of 1 November 1999 contains detailed information purportedly exposing the infrastructure of the Falun Dafa Research Society and of the national and local level organization.

The Protest of 25 April 1999

Falun Dafa first attained international notice after an April 1999 protest in Beijing, the largest since the Tiananmen Square demonstrations of May and June 1989 (BBC 25 Apr. 1999; AFP 25 Apr. 1999; *ibid.* 6 Jun. 1999). According to *China Daily*, protests by Falun Dafa against media organizations critical of Falun Dafa had previously occurred in Shandong province in April 1998 and in Beijing in May 1998 (6 Aug. 1999).

According to reports, the protest in Beijing on 25 April 1999 was triggered by the detention of up to 50 Falun Dafa practitioners in Tianjin the previous day who had been protesting a media report critical of Falun Dafa (AFP 25 Apr. 1999; Rachlin 9 Nov. 1999). The 10,000 protesters in Beijing reportedly came from all over China and stood or meditated in silence, carrying no banners, in a two kilometre line around the north and west boundaries of the Zhongnanhai compound, "the seat of power of China's central government" (AFP 25 Apr. 1999). The police were restrained in their response to the Beijing protestors and "politely asked them to disperse" (*ibid.*; see also BBC 26 Apr. 1999). According to Ms. Rachlin, the Tianjin protest was a spontaneous reaction to the critical report and had not been planned through any formal organizational structure (9 Nov. 1999).

Some of the protesting Falun Dafa practitioners, including "high ranking Party, state and military officials" were apparently able to meet with Premier Zhu Rongji, who was described as sympathetic to their grievances (CRS 10 Sept. 1999, 2, 5).

However, during the following months the Chinese authorities "conveyed contradictory messages" regarding the status of Falun Dafa practice (*ibid.*, 2-3). In early June it was reported that three busloads of practitioners had been rounded up in Beijing and briefly detained in a sports stadium and that Falungong practice sites were being disrupted by the authorities (AFP 7 June 1999). Later in June, a statement from the Central Committee General Office and Complaints Bureau of the Communist Party of China, sought to reassure Falun Dafa practitioners, emphasizing that "[g]overnments at all levels have never banned any kind of normal health improving exercise" (Xinhua 14 June 1999). During this period Falun Dafa practitioners reportedly continued to demonstrate against media that were critical of the group, including a protest in Beijing on 6 July 1999 (*China Daily* 6 Aug. 1999), in the city of Nanchang, Jiangxi province in early July (BBC 10 July 1999) and in the city of Weifang, Shandong province on 14 and 15 July (AFP 18 July 1999).

The First Crackdown: July 1999

According to the Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China, police in several provinces had detained at least seventy Falun Dafa "leaders" as of 20 July 1999 (AFP 20 July 1999; BBC 20 July 1999). Among those detained was Li Chang, one of the practitioners who had met with Chinese leaders in April, as well as two other "senior members," Ji Liewu and Tang Xuehua (AFP 20 July 1999). These arrests sparked demonstrations in several cities, leading to further arrests (*ibid.*; *ibid.* 21 July 1999a). On 21 July 1999, the Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China, reportedly stated that at least 30,000 Falun Dafa practitioners had been detained, including 10,000 in Beijing (AFP 21 July 1999b). AFP reported that in Beijing practitioners were being detained in sports stadiums under armed police guard (22 July 1999).

An official announcement of the decision of the Ministry of Civil Affairs banning Falun Dafa was carried on Xinhua and broadcast on state television on 22 July 1999 (BBC 22 July 1999). The announcement stated that "the Falun Dafa Institute, and the Falun Gong organisation under its manipulation, is an unlawful organisation that has to be outlawed," following which a number of specific restrictions are listed (*ibid.*). The complete text of the notice is electronically attached to this Extended Response.

Both Human Rights Watch (22 July 1999) and Amnesty International (23 July 1999) condemned the crackdown.

On 23 July 1999, it was reported that the authorities had released persons detained in the sports stadiums in Beijing (AFP). However, a subsequent report indicates that some persons detained at the various sports stadiums were not released until 26 July 1999 (AFP 26 July 1999a).

Also on 23 July 1999, a Vice Minister of Civil Affairs, Li Baoku, stated publicly that ordinary Falun Dafa practitioners would not be punished, provided they severed ties to the banned organization and did not participate in Falun Dafa activities (Xinhua 23 July 1999; *China Daily* 24 July 1999). This position was repeated in early August, in a report that emphasized the need to distinguish between "the ordinary practitioners and the core organizers and propagandists" (BBC 2 Aug. 1999). Chinese authorities further stated that *qigong* groups that abide by the law were not affected by the ban (*China Daily* 24 July 1999). However, on 16 October 1999, it was reported that all Chinese civil servants "belonging" to Falun Dafa had been ordered to leave it "or face demotion or dismissal" (BBC 16 Oct. 1999).

Another aspect of the crackdown was the increased appearance in mainstream Chinese state media of articles critical of Falun Dafa, including Xinhua commentaries denouncing the practise as superstition (ibid. 22 July 1999a), and articles characterizing it as mentally and physically dangerous and attacking the credibility of founder Li Hongzhi (ibid. 23 July 1999a; *Renmin Ribao* 11 Aug. 1999). It was also reported that the provincial governments and other state organizations including academic (ibid. 24 July 1999) and religious organizations had publicly stated their support for the ban (Xinhua 1 Aug. 1999; ibid. 2 Aug. 1999).

A third aspect of the crackdown was the widespread confiscation and destruction of Falun Dafa materials, including books and audio and video tapes (ibid. 28 July 1999; BBC 28 July 1999).

Further detentions were reported in September 1999 in advance of the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic (BBC 19 Sept. 1999). It was also reported in mid-September that, according to the Ministry of Public Security, the official ban on Falun Dafa had been expanded; however, no details of the expansion were provided (Xinhua 17 Sept. 1999). Also in September, the BBC, citing the Information Centre of Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China, reported that 10 publishers of Falun Dafa materials would be prosecuted on charges of conducting illegal business in advance of trials of the "leading members" (23 Sept. 1999). AFP, also citing the Information Centre, reported that thousands of Falun Dafa practitioners had been arrested and that at least 300 were still in custody as of 30 September 1999 (11 Oct. 1999).

In October 1999 it was reported that a Falun Dafa practitioner had died in custody, a death that Falun Dafa members attributed to torture (BBC 11 Oct. 1999; AFP 11 Oct. 1999). This was also the conclusion of an Amnesty International report (22 Oct. 1999, 2-3). However, a Beijing newspaper reported that she had died of heart failure and that an autopsy had revealed no abnormalities other than a heart condition (*Zhongguo Xinwen She* 15 Oct. 1999; see also ABC 8 Nov. 1999). Later the same month it was reported that two practitioners had died by leaping from trains in attempts to escape police custody (AFP 27 Oct. 1999).

The Second Crackdown: October 1999

On 25 October 1999, the BBC, citing Xinhua, reported that 13 Falun Dafa leaders had been charged with "illegally obtaining state secrets" and publishing them on the Internet. Several days later it was reported that up to 30 people could face similar charges and that a former official of the Hubei provincial government had been formally charged (AFP 28 Oct. 1999b)

From 21 to 28 October 1999, Falun Dafa practitioners, carrying no signs or banners, began a silent protest in Tiananmen Square outside the Great Hall of the People where a draft resolution against cults was under discussion, dozens of protestors were taken away by police and detained (Hong Kong Alliance 1 Nov. 1999; BBC 25 Oct. 1999; ibid. 26 Oct. 1999; ibid. 28 Oct. 1999a; AFP 26 Oct. 1999).

As the legislators deliberated, Falun Dafa was labelled a cult in state media for the first time; it had previously been described merely as an illegal organization, (BBC 28 Oct. 1999b; AFP 28 Oct. 1999a; *China Daily* 28 Oct. 1999). Also at this time, Falun Dafa practitioners in Beijing held a clandestine press conference, appealing for international assistance (BBC 28 Oct. 1999a; Hong Kong Alliance 1 Nov. 1999).

On 30 October 1999, the resolution banning cults, the "Decision of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on Banning Heretical Cult Organizations, and Preventing and Punishing Cult Activities," was passed (BBC 30 Oct. 1999). The text of this resolution is electronically attached to this Extended Response as is the "Explanation of the Supreme People's Court and Supreme People's Procuratorate Concerning Laws Applicable to Handling Cases of Organizing and Employing Heretical Cult Organizations to Commit Crimes." According to

Xinhua, the resolutions would allow the people's courts "to integrate severe punishment with lenient treatment" and "severely punish an extremely small number of criminal elements" (19 Nov. 1999). However, according to an AFP report, the National People's Congress resolution "greatly widened the scope of police and judicial powers to crack down on the group, with the government indicating that the decision can be used retroactively to prosecute Falungong actions before the July 22 ban" (8 Nov. 1999). As an example, the report cites the case of three persons from Jilin province charged with printing and distributing Falun Dafa materials between February 1992 and October 1998.

One day after the resolution was passed, four Falun Dafa "leaders", Li Chang, Wang Zhiwen, Ji Liewu and Yao Jie, who were believed to have been in custody since July, were formally charged with "stealing and leaking state secrets and organizing a cult" (BBC 31 Oct. 1999). According to Xinhua the four were "key members of the Research Society of Falun Dafa" and were charged under Article 300 of the *Criminal Law* and other provisions (Xinhua 31 Oct. 1999). On 3 November 1999 the first charges were laid under the new resolution, against four Falun Dafa practitioners charged with organizing an illegal gathering in Haikou, Hainan province (BBC 3 Nov. 1999; AFP 6 Nov. 1999; *ibid.* 8 Nov. 1999). On 12 November 1999 the leader of the Haikou group was convicted of "using an evil cult to violate the law" and of escaping from police custody and sentenced to twelve years in prison (BBC 12 Nov. 1999; see also Xinhua 12 Nov. 1999). Others convicted at the same time were sentenced to between two and seven years (*ibid.*). Chinese authorities announced that charges had been laid against 111 Falun Dafa practitioners, a figure that does not include persons sentenced administratively, such as persons sentenced to reeducation through labour (*laodong jiaoyang*) (*ibid.* 8 Nov. 1999; ABC 8 Nov. 1999; HRW 9 Nov. 1999). It also reported in early November 1999 that Falun Dafa practitioners had been sentenced without trial to reeducation through labour for up to three years in Hebei and Jilin provinces (AFP 6 Nov. 1999; see also *ibid.* 7 Nov. 1999).

According to a spokesperson for the State Council, nearly 1,000 Falun Dafa demonstrators had been taken into custody by police in Beijing in late October and early November 1999 (ABC 8 Nov. 1999). According to the spokesman, the detainees were given lectures on the "evils" of Falun Dafa, following which most were sent back to their home provinces, although officials admitted that up to 60 per cent of those sent back returned to Beijing to rejoin the protest (*ibid.*).

On 16 November 1999 it was reported that the Falun Dafa protestors in Beijing had for the first time attempted to display a banner in a protest that coincided with the visit of United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan (BBC 16 Nov. 1999). Forty protestors were taken into custody by police, who also detained several foreign journalists (*ibid.*).

As was the case in July, Amnesty International (28 Oct. 1999) and Human Rights Watch (9 Nov. 1999) condemned the crackdown, providing details of arrests, detentions and ill treatment of Falun Dafa practitioners.

China's laws and practice regarding other non-recognized practices

There are historical precedents for the current crackdown against Falun Dafa and other movements, dating from the 19th century Taiping and Boxer rebellions (AFP 26 Apr. 1999; *Newsroom* 30 Apr. 1999). In fact, concurrent with the crackdown on Falun Dafa, other non-recognized practices, including religious practices, have also received the attention of the Chinese authorities. Less than a week after the April 1999 demonstration by Falun Dafa practitioners outside the Zhongnanhai compound in Beijing, an AFP report, which included a reference to a report in the *China Youth Daily*, provided a summary of the prosecution of cult leaders, including the 1995 execution of the founder of the "Peiliwang - Heavenly Kingdom of the Resurrected King" sect and the impending retrial of founders of the "Zhu Shen Jiao - Supreme Spirit" sect on charges of rape (AFP 30 Apr. 1999). The following month police in Chongqing detained 71 followers of the "Disciple Sect" on suspicion of having plotted to assassinate a local official (*ibid.* 24 May 1999). It was also reported in August 1999 that police were monitoring another *qigong*-based group, the "Xiang Gong," a group that was reportedly officially registered with the Qigong Association (AFP 14 Aug. 1999). Immediately after the passage of the resolution banning cults, leaders of two other movements, the "Way of Compassion" in Hubei province and the "National Way" were arrested (BBC 2 Nov. 1999).

In spite of these measures and those taken against Falun Dafa, other "mystical groups" are reportedly continuing to recruit members, according to an AFP report that lists a number of *qigong*-derived practices (26 July 1999b).

For information concerning Falun Dafa in Fujian province, current to October 1999, please refer to CHN33002.EX of 8 October 1999. For information concerning Falun Dafa in Liaoning province, current to November 1999, please refer to CHN32861.E of 23 November 1999. Both Responses are available in the Regional Documentation Centres, the REFINFO database and the IRB's Website at <<http://www.irb.gc.ca>>. This Response

was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum.

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