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[Home](#)

> [Research Program](#)

> Responses to Information Requests

Responses to Information Requests

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14 October 2015

CHN105282.E

China: Treatment of Falun Gong practitioners by state authorities; whether state authorities treat Falun Gong leaders differently than other Falun Gong practitioners (2013-September 2015)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Overview

Freedom House describes Falun Gong as a "spiritual practice whose key features are qigong exercises and teachings reminiscent of Buddhist and Taoist traditions" (18 Dec. 2012). Amnesty International (AI) similarly describes Falun Gong as a "spiritual movement founded in the early 1990s in China with links to Buddhism and traditional Chinese self-cultivation practices" (Dec. 2013, 14). According to the Falun Dafa Information Center (FDIC), the official press office of the Falun Gong movement (FDIC 8 June 2008), Falun Gong was the largest spiritual group in China with close to 100 million practitioners before it was banned in 1999 (ibid. 9 Apr. 2015). AI indicates however, that the number of Falun Gong practitioners was estimated to be 40 million before the state banned the movement (AI Dec. 2013, 14).

Sources indicate that the Chinese government began a campaign against Falun Gong practitioners in July 1999 (ibid.; Noakes and Ford July 2015, 4; FDIC 9 Apr. 2015), which sources describe as a "crackdown" (ibid.; FDIC 9 Apr. 2015) or "campaign to eliminate" the practice (Noakes and Ford July 2015). According to an article published in the journal *China Quarterly* by Stephen Noakes, a lecturer in Chinese Politics at the University of Auckland who specializes in Chinese politics and foreign policy (University of Auckland n.d.), and Caylan Ford, an independent human rights consultant, book burnings of Falun Gong material were held in cities across China at the onset of the government campaign against the Falun Gong movement and public arrests "became a daily occurrence" (Noakes and Ford July 2015, 4). For further information about the history of Falun Gong and the early government action against it, see Response to Information Request CHN33180.

2. Treatment of Falun Gong Practitioners

AI reports that the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) "vilifies the [Falun Gong] group as an 'evil cult'" or "'heretical sect'" (AI Dec. 2013, 14). Sources report that Falun Gong is banned (Arutz Sheva 21 July 2015; AI Dec. 2013, 14), as an "'illegal'" group (ibid.). According to a July 2015 article published by Arutz Sheva, an Israeli news website, Falun Gong practitioners are "arrested and tortured" (21 July 2015). Similarly, Freedom House reports that members of spiritual groups including Falun Gong "face harassment, imprisonment, and torture" (28 Jan. 2015). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, the founder and President of China Aid, a US-based Christian international human rights organization which seeks to "expose religious freedom and human rights abuse" in China (China Aid n.d.), stated that "Falun Gong believers are still subject to persecution in China by ... state authorities if they are found [to be] practicing members" and that adherents are "subject to various ... penalties from prolonged 'brain transformation class' to criminal prosecution" (ibid. 26 Aug. 2015). The 2015 article by Noakes and Ford also indicates that "[p]arty

officials continue to devote significant resources to the struggle against Falun Gong, launching nationwide campaigns to enhance surveillance and propaganda work and to detain and coercively re-educate its practitioners" (July 2015, 2).

2.1 610 Office

AI states that the Chinese government established the "610 Office" to "crack down" on the Falun Gong and other "heretical cults" (AI Dec. 2013, 14). The US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report for 2013* states that the Chinese government continues to employ "610 offices" "to eliminate the Falun Gong movement and to address 'evil cults'" (US 28 July 2014, 4). For more information on the "610 Office," see Response to Information Request CHN103769.

3. Detention and Treatment in Detention

Sources report that Falun Gong practitioners are detained by state authorities due to their beliefs (US 28 July 2014, 9; *The Edmonton Sun* 25 July 2015; Freedom House 28 Jan. 2015). Freedom House indicates that Falun Gong "adherents continued to suffer large-scale detention in extralegal centers for forced conversion or sentencing to long prison terms during 2014" (ibid.). According to Friends of Falun Gong USA (FOFG), a US-based non-profit organization founded in 2000 with a mission to "support the freedom of belief of persons who practice Falun Gong" (FOFG n.d.), the Falun Gong represent "the largest number of prisoners of conscience in China" (ibid. 24 Aug. 2015). The FDIC states that Falun Gong practitioners are detained "in each of China's provinces in jails, labor camps, brainwashing centers, and schools" (FDIC 9 Apr. 2015). The same source states that detainees have been subjected to "torture," including but not limited to, electric shock, burning with hot irons, prying finger nails with bamboo shoots, rape and sexual torture (FDIC 9 Apr. 2015).

Chinese Human Rights Defenders (CHRD), a coalition of Chinese and international human rights NGOs with a mission to promote human rights and strengthen grassroots activism in China (CHRD n.d.), reports that Falun Gong practitioners are sometimes placed in "temporary detention facilities" used to "enforce... government policies or punish... dissent" and are not provided with "due process review" (ibid. Oct. 2014, 2). According to the article written by Noakes and Ford, Falun Gong adherents, "who once comprised a plurality of *laojiao* [labour camp] detainees, are now being sent in greater numbers to prisons or to specialized re-education centres overseen by the 610 Office" (July 2015, 7). AI similarly indicates that Falun Gong practitioners constituted between 33 and 100 percent of individuals imprisoned in some of China's re-education through labour (RTL) camps (AI Dec. 2013, 14); many of those imprisoned in RTL camps have subsequently been re-detained by the 610 Office and sent to "brainwashing centres," detention centres or prisons (ibid., 36). According to the US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2014*, Falun Gong adherents have also been committed to mental health facilities and "involuntarily subjected to psychiatric treatment for political reasons" (US 25 June 2015, 6).

Minghui, a Falun Gong-affiliated website and volunteer organization dedicated to reporting on the Falun Gong community globally, with a focus on China (Minghui n.d.), states that police arrested 1,187 Falun Gong practitioners in July 2015 (ibid. 25 Aug. 2015). Of those arrested, 126 practitioners were sent to brainwashing centres and 55 were sentenced to prison terms (ibid.). Minghui further reports that between January and June 2015, 182 Falun Gong practitioners were arrested in Beijing; another 12 individuals were harassed in their homes but not arrested while 5 have been reported missing (ibid. 8 Aug. 2015). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

Sources from 2014 and 2015 state that Falun Gong detainees are subjected to "brainwashing" or ideological "transformation" (China Aid 26 Aug. 2015; US 28 July 2014, 7; FDIC 9 Apr. 2015). According to the FDIC, this process is reported to involve sleep deprivation, threats, and being forced to watch videos vilifying Falun Gong (ibid.).

According to the article by Noakes and Ford, the government of China launched a re-education campaign against the Falun Gong known as "the 2013-2015 final battle on education and transformation," which was advertised on government and party websites in every province of China (July 2015, 8). AI similarly states that the campaign launched in 2013 seeks to "educate and transform" Falun Gong practitioners deemed to be "stubborn and obsessed," and sets "transformation" quotas of up to 100 percent of the number of Falun Gong practitioners in a given district (AI Dec. 2013, 14). Noakes and Ford quote the Yunyang County Chongqing Municipal People's Government as stating that authorities "enter villages, households, schools, businesses, and Party cells in search of Falun Gong practitioners to transform" (Noakes and Ford July 2015, 8). The article also reports that the plan promotes "re-education centres" as the main venue for "transformation work" while "some documents also call for close cooperation with the judiciary to sentence practitioners to prison" (ibid.).

4. Treatment of Lawyers and Access to Legal Assistance

Sources report on cases of human rights lawyers being detained, including those representing Falun Gong practitioners (*The Guardian* 13 July 2015; *Financial Times* 12 July 2015). UK-based daily newspaper the *Guardian* reports that in July 2015, 106 human rights lawyers and activists were "detained and questioned" in a country-wide "crackdown," including one lawyer who defended Falun Gong practitioners (13 July 2015). Similarly reporting on the "crackdown," the *Financial Times*, a global business news organization and newspaper, states that there was a "co-ordinated nationwide sweep" of human rights defenders, including some lawyers who defended Falun Gong practitioners, during which 77 people were "summoned, arrested, questioned, or detained" (*Financial Times* 12 July 2015).

Sources in 2014 note that Gao Zhisheng, a prominent Chinese human rights lawyer who represented Falun Gong practitioners, was detained and tortured by Chinese authorities before his release in 2014 (*The Times* 16 Aug. 2014; *The Daily Telegraph* 15 Aug. 2014). UK-based daily newspaper the *Daily Telegraph* reports that he was left "basically unintelligible" after being detained and mistreated by authorities for three years (ibid.).

Sources also report that in 2014, a group of human rights lawyers were arrested and allegedly tortured by authorities during their detention (US 25 June 2015, 6; CHRD Mar. 2015, 21). According to CHRD, four lawyers were attempting to visit their Falun Gong clients in a "black jail" detention facility when they were detained (ibid.). *Country Reports* 2014 states that 3 lawyers were among 11 persons sentenced to administrative detention for "using cult activities to endanger society" after being caught investigating illegal detention facilities for Falun Gong practitioners (25 June 2014, 6).

According to *Country Reports* 2014, authorities suspended or revoked the licenses of lawyers to stop them from taking "sensitive cases" including those involving Falun Gong practitioners (US 25 June 2015, 17). The same source states that some lawyers "declined to represent defendants in politically sensitive cases, and such defendants frequently found it difficult to find an attorney" (ibid.). CHRD similarly reports that throughout 2014, there were "a large number of incidents involving authorities denying lawyers' access to their clients" (Mar. 2015, 21).

5. Organ Harvesting

According to the FDIC, Chinese hospital employees have reported that organs are harvested from living Falun Gong adherents and sold to party officials or other wealthy individuals within China and abroad (FDIC 9 Apr. 2015). The source further indicates that Falun Gong practitioners have been "killed by the thousands so that their organs can be used for on-demand transplants" (ibid.). According to FOFG, there is an industry in China based on the sale of human organs and "[l]arge numbers of living Falun Gong practitioners are killed, and their organs sold for profit by the Chinese Communist Party" (24 Aug. 2015). The *Edmonton Sun* quotes a Falun Gong activist as stating that "over 60,000 Falun Gong practitioners have been murdered by state officials so their vital organs could be sold through state run hospitals" (25 July 2015). Corroborating information about organ harvesting of Falun Gong practitioners between 2012 and 2015 by non-Falun Gong sources could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

6. Censorship and Propaganda Campaign Against Falun Gong

Sources indicate that Falun Gong media and informational material is banned in the PRC (FDIC 9 Apr. 2015; Noakes and Ford July 2015, 10). The FDIC states that since 1999, books detailing Falun Gong practices have been burned and websites blocked (9 Apr. 2015). Freedom House likewise indicates that Falun Gong and its founder, Mr. Li Hongzhi, are "among the most censored terms on the Chinese Internet" (Freedom House 18 Dec. 2012). Drawing on local government documents from 2012, Noakes and Ford state that in the first half of 2012, the 610 Office launched "a comprehensive new initiative to 'clean up' Falun Gong literature (Noakes and Ford July 2015, 9). According to the article, documents posted on party websites in Guangdong, Heilongjiang, and Yunnan describe the mobilization of neighbourhood committees to "engage in regular patrols to take down Falun Gong messages plastered on billboards, light posts, telephone poles, and telephone booths (ibid.). Noakes and Ford report that a document from the Communist Party circulated within municipal party offices in Laiyang, Shandong stated that the "desired effect" of the initiative was to "render Falun Gong practitioners 'like rats running across the street that everyone shouts to smash; don't leave them any space'" (ibid.).

A 2015 article by the FDIC indicates that individuals have been put in jail "for posting evidence of torture online or even downloading articles about Falun Gong" (9 Apr. 2015). Noakes and Ford similarly report that individuals found to be in possession of Falun Gong literature "face severe repercussions, including being sent ... to *laojiao* camps, re-education centres, or sentenced to prison" (July 2015, 10).

A 2015 article by the FDIC describes a campaign launched by the government as an "aggressive propaganda blitz" against the Falun Gong faith in an effort to brand its adherents as "dangerous, deviant, and abnormal" (9 Apr. 2015). Freedom House similarly indicates that any mention of the Falun Gong in state-run media is accompanied by "demonizing labels" (Freedom House 18 Dec. 2012). According to the FDIC, the Ministry of Propaganda launched "numerous publications, radio and TV shows, and even plays, comic books, and exhibitions meant to criminalize Falun Gong" (9 Apr. 2015).

According to the article by Noakes and Ford, "[a]uthorities continue to press citizens at the local levels or within schools and workplaces to participate in education sessions," which present the Falun Gong as an enemy of the state (Noakes and Ford July 2014, 12-13). The article further reports that government directives "required neighbourhood committees to hold study sessions to 'unify their thinking' on the importance of the anti-Falun Gong work" (ibid., 9). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to the US *International Religious Freedom Report for 2013*, authorities "instructed neighbourhood communities to report Falun Gong members to officials and offered monetary rewards to citizens" for reporting individuals (US 28 July 2014, 9). Similarly, Noakes and Ford state that in order to mobilize the public's support for anti-propaganda its work, the 610 Office "mandates a responsibility system backed by financial rewards and punishments," such as for providing information leading to the arrest of Falun Gong practitioners (July 2014, 9).

7. Treatment of Falun Gong Leaders

According to the founder and President of China Aid, Falun Gong leaders are "usually treated differently" than general practitioners (China Aid 26 Aug. 2015). The source reported that if one is deemed a leader and is still active in promoting Falun Gong ideology, they will likely face criminal prosecution (ibid.). Conversely, according to the source, general practitioners may avoid receiving a criminal sentence if they undergo "intensive, sometimes torturous brainwashing" and recant their beliefs (ibid.). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

For additional information on the treatment of Falun Gong practitioners by authorities from 2010 to 2013, see Response to Information Request CHN104580.E.

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 for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Human Rights Journal; Human Rights Watch; Idaho Statesman; Legal Monitor Worldwide; Los Angeles Daily News; Radio Free Asia; United States – Congressional-Executive Commission on China; United States Institute of Peace; Winnipeg Free Press.

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[Top of Page](#)

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