

# CRS Report for Congress

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## China and “Falun Gong”

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### Summary

The “Falun Gong” movement has produced the largest and most protracted public demonstrations in China since the democracy movement of 1989. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) government, fearful of a political challenge and the spread of social unrest, outlawed Falun Gong in July 1999. Despite a massive government campaign against them and harsh punishments meted out to many followers, Falun Gong members continued to stage demonstrations for over two years. Falun Gong supporters have also interrupted television programming in several PRC cities and broadcast their own images. In the last few years, the movement has been largely suppressed in China while it has thrived in overseas Chinese communities. On October 4, 2004, the House of Representatives agreed to H.Con.Res. 304, which called upon the PRC government to cease persecution of Falun Gong practitioners in China and stop harassment of Falun Gong members in the United States.

### Basic Descriptions and Major Events

**What Is “Falun Gong”?** “Falun Gong,” also known as “Falun Dafa,”<sup>1</sup> combines an exercise regimen with meditation and mystical tenets. The practice and beliefs are derived from *qigong*, a set of movements that stimulate the flow of *qi* — vital energies or “life forces” — throughout the body, and Buddhist and Daoist concepts. Falun Gong upholds three main virtues — truthfulness, compassion, and forbearance (*zhen-shan-ren*) — and warns against materialism and “moral degeneration.”<sup>2</sup> Practitioners claim that by controlling the “wheel of dharma,” which revolves in the body, one can cure a wide range of medical ailments and diseases. They believe that by practicing Falun Gong, they may

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<sup>1</sup> The literal meanings of “Falun Gong” and “Falun Dafa,” respectively, are “law wheel exercise” and “great way of the law wheel.”

<sup>2</sup> According to Falun Dafa, examples of moral degeneration include rock music, drug addiction, and homosexuality.

achieve physical well-being, emotional tranquility, moral virtue, and an understanding of the cosmos or higher level of existence.<sup>3</sup>

Some observers maintain that Falun Gong resembles a cult and refer to the unquestioning support of its founder, Master Li Hongzhi, belief in supernatural powers, and apocalyptic visions. The PRC government charges that Falun Dafa has disrupted social order and contributed to the deaths of hundreds of Chinese by discouraging medical treatment and causing or exacerbating mental disorders leading to violent acts. Followers counter that the practice is voluntary and that levels of faith and involvement vary with the individual practitioner. They also emphasize that Falun Gong is not a religion — there is no worship of a deity, all-inclusive system of beliefs, church or temple, or formal hierarchy.

**Organization.** Adherents of Falun Gong often characterize their objectives as personal and limited in scope, claiming that they have no political agenda beyond protecting the constitutional rights of practitioners and that they receive little direction from Master Li.<sup>4</sup> According to some analysts, however, the movement was well organized before the crackdown in 1999. After the government banned Falun Gong, a more fluid, underground network, aided by the Internet, pagers, and pay phones, carried on for over two years.<sup>5</sup>

**Membership.** During the mid-1990s, Falun Gong acquired a large and diverse following, with estimates ranging from 3 to 70 million members, including several thousand practitioners in the United States.<sup>6</sup> In China, Falun Gong attracted many retired persons as well as factory workers, farmers, state enterprise managers, entrepreneurs, intellectuals, and students. The practice's claimed healing powers became especially attractive as economic reforms caused many citizens to lose medical benefits and services. In addition, Falun Gong reportedly was embraced by many retired and active Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and government cadres and military officials and personnel. Then Vice-President Hu Jintao stated that of 2.1 million known members of the Falun Gong group, one-third belonged to the CCP.<sup>7</sup>

**Falun Gong's Spiritual Leader.** Li Hongzhi ("Master Li"), a former Grain Bureau clerk, developed Falun Gong in the late 1980s, when *qigong* began to gain

<sup>3</sup> See [<http://www.falundafa.org>] and [<http://www.faluninfo.net>] See also Li Hongzhi, *Falun Gong* (rev. ed.) (Gloucester, MA: Fair Winds Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Li was reportedly en route from Hong Kong to Australia when the April 1999 demonstrations broke out and denies that he instigated them.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Johnson, "Brother Li Love: In China, the Survival of Falun Dafa Rests on Beepers and Faith," *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 25, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> One estimate put the number of adherents in China at "several million" members. See Craig S. Smith, "Sect Clings to the Web in the Face of Beijing's Ban," *New York Times*, July 5, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> The practice reportedly enjoyed a strong following among soldiers and officers in some northeastern cities while the PRC Navy published copies of *Zhuan Falun*. According to one source, there were 4,000-5,000 Falun Gong "sympathizers" in the PLA air force. See David Murphy, "Losing Battle," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Feb. 15, 2001. See also John Pomfret, "China Takes Measured Steps Against Sect," *Washington Post*, Aug. 6, 1999.

popularity in China. In 1992, Li explained his ideas in a book, *Zhuan Falun*. Falun Gong was incorporated into an official organization, the Chinese Qigong Association, in 1993 but separated from it by 1996.<sup>8</sup> Around this time, Li reportedly left China. Since 1999, Li, who lives with his family outside New York City, has remained in seclusion. He has reportedly made occasional, unannounced appearances at Falun Gong gatherings. On January 20, 2004, Master Li was interviewed on a local Chinese television station in New York City. Some reports suggest that Li Hongzhi has directed his followers from behind the scenes and that his public statements are interpreted by many Falun Gong practitioners as instructions.

**The 1999 Demonstrations and PRC Government Response.** On April 25, 1999, an estimated 10,000 to 30,000 Falun Gong practitioners from around China gathered in Beijing to protest the PRC government's growing restrictions on their activities. Some adherents presented an open letter to the Party leadership at its residential compound, *Zhongnanhai*, demanding official recognition and their constitutional rights to free speech, press, and assembly. Between May and June 1999, Party leaders were reportedly split on whether to ban Falun Gong and conveyed contradictory messages.<sup>9</sup> Premier Zhu Rongji reportedly met with a delegation of practitioners and told them that they would not be punished. By contrast, President Jiang Zemin was said to be shocked by the affront to Party authority and ordered the crackdown. Jiang was also angered by the apparent ease with which U.S. officials had granted Li Hongzhi a visa and feared U.S. involvement in the movement. The government produced circulars forbidding Party members from practicing Falun Gong. Security forces collected the names of instructors, infiltrated exercise classes, and closed book stalls selling Falun Dafa literature. Tensions escalated as followers engaged in 18 major demonstrations, including occupying a government building in the city of Nanchang and demonstrating in front of China Central Television Station in Beijing.

The official crackdown began on July 21, 1999, when Falun Gong was outlawed and an arrest warrant was issued for Li Hongzhi.<sup>10</sup> On October 30, 1999, China's National People's Congress promulgated an "anti-cult" law, effective retroactively, to suppress not only the Falun Gong movement but also thousands of religious sects across the country. However, Ye Xiaowen, director of the State Bureau of Religious Affairs, stated that police would not interfere with people who practiced alone in their own homes.<sup>11</sup> In Beijing alone, public security officers closed 67 teaching stations and 1,627 practice

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<sup>8</sup> Reports differ on which group, Falun Gong or the Qigong Association, initiated the split.

<sup>9</sup> Vivien Pik-Kwan Chan, "Sect Ban Rumour Not True — Beijing," *South China Morning Post*, June 15, 1999; John Pomfret, "Jiang Caught in Middle on Standoff," *Washington Post*, Apr. 8, 2001.

<sup>10</sup> However, in November 1999, Ye Xiaowen, director of the State Bureau of Religious Affairs, stated that police would not interfere with people who practiced alone in their own homes. Matt Forney, "Beijing Says Changes in Economy Helped Spur Falun Dafa's Growth," *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 5, 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Matt Forney, "Beijing Says Changes in Economy Helped Spur Falun Dafa's Growth," *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 5, 1999.

sites.<sup>12</sup> The state reportedly detained and questioned over 30,000 followers nationwide, releasing the vast majority of them after they promised to quit or identified group organizers.

PRC prosecutors charged Falun Gong leaders with various crimes, including “leaking state secrets to foreigners,” “organizing superstitious sects,” disrupting public order, obstructing justice, engaging in unlawful assembly and publication, tax evasion, and manslaughter. Between 150 and 450 group leaders and other members were tried and sentenced to prison terms of up to 18-20 years. Estimates of those who have spent time in detention or “labor reeducation” range from 10,000 to 100,000 persons.<sup>13</sup> Human rights organizations claim that several hundred adherents have died in custody from torture, abuse, and neglect. Many other followers were suspended or expelled from school or demoted or dismissed from their jobs.

**Following the Crackdown.** It took the PRC government over two years to subdue the Falun Gong organization. Between July 1999 and October 2000, Falun Gong adherents continued to journey to Beijing and staged several large demonstrations (involving several hundred to over a thousand persons) — many protesters were sent home repeatedly or evaded the police. At first, the enforcement of government decrees, such as those requiring universities, employers, and neighborhood committees to extract signed repudiations of Falun Gong, was often lax. Many local public security bureaus lacked the capacity or will to detain, let alone reform, adherents.<sup>14</sup> However, the central government soon began to penalize provincial governments for not preventing Falun Gong followers from traveling to the capital. The provincial governments in turn shifted the responsibility of containing the movement to local authorities, some of whom employed brutal methods of suppression, especially toward those who refused to renounce Falun Gong. The largest memberships and severest human rights abuses have been reported in China’s northeastern provinces, where unemployment is relatively high.<sup>15</sup> Many followers are believed to be still practicing in their homes or meeting secretly. The U.S. State Department reported that there are still hundreds of thousands of practitioners

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<sup>12</sup> Before the crackdown, there were approximately 39 “teaching centers,” 1,900 “instruction centers” and 28,000 practice sites nationwide. See John Pomfret and Michael Laris, “China Expands Sect Crackdown,” *Washington Post*, July 25, 1999; and John Wong and William T. Liu, *The Mystery of Falun Gong* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co. and Singapore University Press, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> “Labor re-education” is a form of “administrative punishment” for non-criminal acts (such as “disrupting public order”) that lasts between one and three years and does not require a trial. See Craig S. Smith, “Sect Clings to the Web in the Face of Beijing’s Ban,” *New York Times*, July 5, 2001; Mary Beth Sheridan, “Falun Gong Protests on the Mall,” *Washington Post*, July 20, 2001.

<sup>14</sup> See John Pomfret, “China’s Steadfast Sect,” *Washington Post*, Aug. 23, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Ian Johnson, “Death Trap: How One Chinese City Resorted to Atrocities to Control Falun Dafa,” *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 26, 2000; Charles Hutzler, “Falun Gong Feels Effect of China’s Tighter Grip,” *Asian Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 26, 2001; John Pomfret and Philip Pan, “Torture Is Breaking Falun Gong,” *Washington Post*, Aug. 5, 2001; “China’s Heilongjiang Records Highest Falun Gong Death Toll,” *BBC*, Dec. 6, 2003.

in China, while the repression of religious sects and cults remains a top priority of the PRC government.<sup>16</sup>

In 2002, Falun Gong members interrupted television programming in several large Chinese cities and broadcast their own images, possibly with the aid of sources outside China in some cases.<sup>17</sup> PRC courts sentenced 27 practitioners to prison terms of 4 to 20 years for carrying out these actions. In 2003, Falun Gong backers reportedly disrupted Sino Satellite television signals. In November 2004, Hong Kong-based Asia Satellite reported that a 12-minute Falun Gong program overrode its own signals broadcast into mainland China. On May 19, 2003, U.S. citizen Charles Li was sentenced to three years in prison for “intending to sabotage” Chinese television broadcasts.

## Falun Gong Activities in Hong Kong

Practicing Falun Gong is permitted in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) and local members, which number an estimated 500, frequently stage protests against PRC policies toward Falun Gong on the mainland. The HKSAR government occasionally bars entry to foreign Falun Gong adherents. In November 2004, a Hong Kong appeals court reversed convictions for “obstructing a public place” against sixteen Falun Gong members who had participated in a demonstration in March 2002. The judges ruled that the defendants had been exercising their right to demonstrate. In December 2004, Hong Kong authorities denied entry to one of the protesters, Jenny Lee, who is a citizen of New Zealand and who had flown to Hong Kong to visit her son. In November 2004, dozens of Falun Gong supporters demonstrated at Hong Kong’s government headquarters, demanding the release of four local practitioners jailed in the PRC mainland.

## Falun Gong Activities in the United States

There are several thousand Falun Gong practitioners in the United States. On behalf of Falun Gong members in China, U.S. adherents have filed several class action lawsuits in federal courts against PRC leaders alleging violations of the Torture Victim Protection and Alien Tort Claims acts and other “crimes against humanity.”<sup>18</sup> In September 2003, a U.S. District Court judge in Chicago dismissed a lawsuit filed against former PRC President Jiang Zemin, on the basis of lack of jurisdiction and sovereign immunity. In December 2004, a U.S. District Court in San Francisco ruled that Beijing Party Secretary and former Beijing mayor Liu Qi violated U.S., international, and PRC law for his role in violating the human rights of Falun Gong practitioners.<sup>19</sup> Falun Gong plaintiffs have

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<sup>16</sup> Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *International Religious Freedom Report 2004 — China* (Sept. 2004).

<sup>17</sup> The satellite interference may have originated overseas. The Taiwanese government has denied any involvement.

<sup>18</sup> Under U.S. law, foreigners accused of crimes against humanity or violations of international law can be sued in federal court by U.S. citizens or aliens in the United States. The accused individual must be served a civil complaint in the United States.

<sup>19</sup> Liu was served with legal papers in 2002 in San Francisco while en route to the Salt Lake City (continued...)

also filed lawsuits in federal courts claiming that the PRC Embassy and consulates have been responsible for dozens of isolated incidents of physical and verbal harassment, eavesdropping, and destruction of property of Falun Gong adherents and supporters in the United States.

## Implications for Chinese Politics

The Chinese government reportedly referred to Falun Gong as “the most serious threat to stability in 50 years of [Chinese] communist history.” The practice’s popularity in China’s northeast and other economically depressed areas was especially worrisome to the Party because of the fear that “religious fever” combined with economic unrest could spark widespread political protests. However, there has been little indication that the state’s attacks on Falun Gong have become a rallying cry for other disaffected social groups. On the one hand, the crackdown and suppression of Falun Gong deepened anti-government sentiment among not only adherents but also non-adherents, including many intellectuals. On the other hand, many Chinese remained indifferent or even critical toward the movement and its leader, Li Hongzhi, arguing that Li exploited vulnerable people and caused their suffering by exaggerating the healing powers of Falun Gong and by encouraging followers to exercise “forebearance” by refusing to recant.<sup>20</sup> The January-February 2001 self-immolations of six persons widely believed to be Falun Gong members was exploited by the official media, further alienating many PRC citizens.

## U.S. Government Actions

On March 12, 2003, 83 Members of Congress signed a letter sponsored by Representative Anna Eshoo, which called upon the PRC government to “do everything possible to ensure Charles Li’s safety and effect his immediate release.” According to the State Department, U.S. consular officials have visited or spoken to Mr. Li almost weekly since his arrest and have monitored his condition and treatment. On October 4, 2004, the House of Representatives agreed to H.Con.Res. 304, which called upon the PRC government to cease persecution of religious and Falun Gong practitioners in China and stop harassment of Falun Gong members in the United States. For six consecutive years (1999-2004), the U.S. Department of State has designated China a “country of particular concern” for “particularly severe violations of religious freedom,” including its persecution of Falun Gong. An ongoing ban on the export of crime control and detection instruments and equipment to China satisfies the requirements of P.L. 105-292, the Freedom from Religious Persecution Act of 1998, which authorizes the President to impose sanctions upon countries that violate religious freedom.

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<sup>19</sup> (...continued)

Winter Olympics. The Court ruled that Liu appeared to have violated Chinese law and was thus not entitled to sovereign immunity. The plaintiffs did not receive damages but hope to bar Liu from visiting the United States again. Vanessa Hua, “Beijing Official Liable in Falun Gong Case,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, Dec. 24, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> See “Master Li Hongzhi’s Lecture at the Great Lakes Conference in North America, Dec. 9, 2000.” See also John Pomfret, “A Foe Rattles Beijing from Abroad,” *Washington Post*, Mar. 9, 2001; and Ian Johnson, “As Crackdown Grows, Falun Gong’s Faithful Face a New Pressure,” *Wall Street Journal*, Mar. 27, 2001.