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## International Herald Tribune - China vs. Falun Gong

After Four Years of Repression, It's Time to Let Go  
July 22, 2003

By John Li

BETHLEHEM, Pennsylvania Four years ago, on the night of July 20, 1999, a campaign was started across China to round up citizens practicing Falun Gong, a spiritual movement just rising in the West. From the rust belts of Manchuria to the boomtowns bordering Hong Kong, tens of thousands were jailed in the darkness of that night.

Four years later, the campaign continues, now with a confirmed death toll of 748, all of whom died in police custody. Falun Gong has become an embarrassment for China, marring the global infatuation with its booming markets and cheap labor has been a stigma growing larger and larger. The persecution serves as a reminder that the hulking monster behind the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen massacre is still very much alive.

No one would have predicted the stunning resilience and tenacity of the movement four years ago, when it was targeted by China's then-leader, Jiang Zemin, as the biggest threat from within. No dissent movement had managed more than four days of resistance before. The pro-democracy movement in 1989, when a million people gathered openly, was crushed within a day and remains marginalized to this day.

As China's top leader, Jiang demonstrated an unusual penchant for showmanship and flamboyance on the world stage, and it is widely suspected that the popularity of Falun Gong touched a raw nerve. This came to a head when thousands of Falun Gong practitioners gathered peacefully in downtown Beijing on April 25, 1999 to seek official recognition.

Initially, the Chinese government had been mild and conciliatory toward the Falun Gong. In fact, Falun Gong was promoted overseas by Chinese embassies and consulates. A friend of mine once told me that his first experience with a Falun Gong conference, in March 1998, included lodging at a branch of the Xinhua News Agency in Queens under the aegis of the Chinese consulate in New York.

Then, on Jiang's whim, everyone - including then-premier Zhu Rongji - had to do an about-face. Jiang's ego and obsession created a vendetta that not even his fellow Politburo members could stop.

The campaign bore the marks of earlier political upheavals: media attacks; book burnings; show trials; monitoring by grassroots Communist committees; supra-governmental outfits-the so-called "610 offices" - that answered to nobody but Jiang himself, and, above all, ceaseless conspiracies and deceptions to turn the Chinese people against Falun Gong.

Against the backdrop of China's robust economic growth and unprecedented opening to the outside, the campaign against Falun Gong appears out of sync. But it is real and lethal. A Wall Street Journal article by Ian Johnson, who won the 2001 Pulitzer Prize, documented the demise of Zixiu Chen, a 58-year-old Falun Gong practitioner from Weifang, Shandong Province. She died mangled and bruised within three days of her detention in the local "610" office.

In October 2001, Yuxi Sun, the spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, announced that China had found anthrax in a letter sent by Falun Gong practitioners abroad. Sun retracted the outlandish claim several days later as a "technical error," and was promptly sent off to Afghanistan.

Falun Gong efforts at peaceful dissent at public venues have waned following the Tiananmen self-immolation. Instead, safer and more effective approaches have been employed to let the Chinese public know the truth about Falun Gong. Most notable among them have been repeated attempts to tap into TV signals and efforts at mass distribution of informational flyers and CD's.

At the same time, a number of public appeals by practitioners from outside China at Tiananmen help perpetuate the public image of the movement.

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The persecution of Falun Gong has caused China to carry huge political costs without any conceivable benefits. Four years into the Chinese campaign to wipe out the Falun Gong, the movement has stood its ground, thanks to extraordinary sacrifices and endurance of its followers. In these same four years, we have seen the departure of Jiang; the warning alarm of the SARS epidemic, which demanded more accountability and transparency from the Chinese leadership, and the overwhelming power of people's yearning for freedom as exemplified in the 500,000-strong demonstration on July 1st in Hong Kong.

The time has come for the Chinese leadership to come to terms with the Falun Gong. All the movement asks is to be left alone. The cost of reversing Jiang's verdict, now that he is fading from China's political landscape, is minimal. The new leadership need only stop doing what it should not be doing.

John Li is a freelance writer on China and U.S.-Chinese relations.