

Psychiatric Abuse of Falun Gong Practitioners in China

Sunny Y. Lu, MD, PhD, and Viviana B. Galli, MD

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Robin Munro's landmark study, "Judicial Psychiatry in China and its Political Abuses,"¹ published in the spring of 2000 is the best guide we have to understanding this problem, and its publication first drew sustained, worldwide attention to the abuses of forensic psychiatry in China in general and of Falun Gong practitioners in particular. The government's control of the media and an embargo on any information regarding these practices make it an extremely difficult task to verify the true scope and detail of the abuse of psychiatry in China. A few months before the publication of Munro's report, Falun Gong practitioner (and a permanent resident of the United States) Dr. Teng Chunyan managed to smuggle out of China pictures documenting the use of Chinese mental hospitals to torture Falun Gong practitioners. Her efforts resulted in some media coverage outside China²; but, unfortunately, media interest in the facts she brought to light was short-lived. Upon her return to China, she was arrested and sentenced to three years in a labor camp, where she is reported to be undergoing regular abuse. Building on the heroic attempt by Dr. Teng and on Robin Munro's study, the Falun Dafa Information Center, in April 2001, issued a *Special Report on Psychiatric Abuses Against Falun Gong in China*,³ which documents 153 separate cases of torture (some cases involving numerous victims) in Chinese mental hospitals, based mainly on reports via e-mail by victims or eyewitnesses.

Dr. Lu is Clinical Assistant Professor of Psychiatry in the Substance Abuse Program, Department of Psychiatry, University of Cincinnati, OH. Dr. Galli is Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist and Medical Consultant at the Substance Abuse Center, Blanchfield Army Community Hospital, Fort Campbell, KY. The views expressed in this article do not represent any group or association. Address correspondence to: Sunny Lu, MD, PhD, Department of Psychiatry, 311 Martin Luther King Drive, Cincinnati, OH 45219. E-mail: lusy@email.uc.edu

Since September 1999, the police, often working in conjunction with the practitioners' work units and families, have forced mentally healthy Falun Gong practitioners into psychiatric facilities. Commitment requires no formal legal procedure. Members of the 6-10 Office⁴—an extraconstitutional body created for the sole purpose of terrorizing Falun Gong—the local police, or even the security forces of local factories can arbitrarily commit Falun Gong practitioners. Human rights groups now estimate that there are 1,000 Falun Gong practitioners being held against their will in mental hospitals. The actual number is very likely many times higher. The lengths of these detentions range from a few days to 1.5 years. The perversion of mental health facilities for the purpose of the torture of Falun Gong practitioners is widespread. At least 57 hospitals in 36 cities are known to be involved in the illegal detention of practitioners, with some of them located in major cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, and Wuhan. At least 6 of the 320 documented deaths caused by official mistreatment have been the result of abuse of psychiatric treatment.³ Why are these massive human rights violations occurring at a time when China is opening up to the international economic market and Western communities? What is it about Falun Gong that causes the Chinese government to invest so much in such a wide-scale campaign? Is this simply a political issue?

Falun Gong had not always been the object of the enmity of the Chinese government. Li Hongzhi began teaching Falun Gong in China in 1992. This practice is a traditional form of *qigong* whose practitioners cultivate body, mind, and spirit. They perform five simple meditative exercises and live according to the principles of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance. The practice can have extraordinary effects

on health. Practitioners typically report recovering from even very serious illness, with greater health benefits accruing the longer they practice. They also report important psychiatric benefits, including significantly reduced stress, better relations with family members and fellow employees, and a greater sense of well-being.⁵ Li Hongzhi and Falun Gong were recognized for health improvement three separate times in 1993 by a foundation connected with the Chinese Public Security Bureau, and also in 1993, Falun Gong was recognized by the Chinese government as the “Star *Qigong* School.”⁶ Until the persecution began, newspaper articles, whose coverage had to remain within the limits approved by the government, often praised Falun Gong, noting the tremendous savings to the government owing to the health benefits gained by its practitioners. As late as 1999, a Chinese official told *U.S. News and World Report* that Premier Zhu Rongji was “very happy” with the money saved the Chinese government due to the practice of “Falun Gong and other types of *qigong*” by 100 million people.⁷

Why, then, did the government decide to begin persecuting Falun Gong? The answer typically given by commentators on China suggests that the Communist Party leadership could not tolerate the sheer number of people practicing Falun Gong. In 1999, a government study estimated this number at more than 70 million, whereas the Party itself numbered only 56 million. Among the practitioners of Falun Gong are tens of thousands of party members, including some very high-ranking ones; important officials in the military and security apparatuses; and leading scientists, engineers, and intellectuals. In principle, the party does not tolerate anything in society that is independent of the party. Falun Gong is not only independent of the party, it also offers a set of spiritual principles independent of the state. After 50 years of communism and especially after the 10-year Cultural Revolution, with its horrifying and destructive effects, the communist ideology is losing ground. Falun Dafa is rooted in ancient Chinese culture. It has revived positive values and beliefs and has rapidly gained people’s hearts. The party began persecuting it out of fear of such a large group that it could not control. They could not control the hearts and minds of practitioners.

This analysis is plausible, but in fact much of the leadership of the party does not appear to view Falun Gong as a threat. CNN’s China correspondent Willy

Wo-Lap Lam⁸ reported earlier this year regarding the persecution of Falun Gong, “It is no secret that several Politburo members thought that Jiang Zemin had used the wrong tactics. They ranged from moderates such as Premier Zhu Rongji, Vice President Hu Jintao, and head of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference Li Ruihuan to conservatives such as National People’s Congress Chairman Li Peng. . . . Li Ruihuan and Zhu Rongji were both said to favor a conciliatory approach to Falun Gong.” Willy Wo-Lap Lam quotes a party veteran as saying that “by unleashing a Mao-style movement, Jiang is forcing senior cadres to pledge allegiance to his line. This will boost Jiang’s authority—and may give him enough momentum to enable him to dictate events at the pivotal 16th Communist Party Congress next year.”⁸ In other words, Jiang began persecuting Falun Gong as a way of asserting his own power within the Communist Party.

Jiang Zemin unleashed terror on the practitioners of Falun Gong late at night on July 19, 1999, and by October 30 declared Falun Gong illegal, enabling even harsher “legal” penalties. According to sources inside China, he has stated that “no measures are too excessive” to wipe out Falun Gong.⁹ Beatings, a long list of tortures, sexual humiliation and rape, sleep deprivation, and forced labor are all used. Since July 1999, 320 practitioners are confirmed to have died in police custody; sources inside the government place the number at more than 1,000. At this time, at least 20,000 are being held in forced labor camps, and at least 100,000 in other forms of detention.³ The government has ordered that all practitioners be brainwashed, and brainwashing centers have been set up throughout China to accomplish this. Practitioners stand to lose their jobs, pensions, apartments or houses, and places in schools or universities; property may be confiscated; and heavy fines are imposed.³ This terror has been vigorously condemned by Amnesty International,¹⁰ Human Rights Watch,¹¹ other human rights organizations, Freedom House,¹² the U.S. Congress,¹³ and leading politicians in the United States and around the world.¹⁴

The goal of this terror is to force every practitioner to sign a statement renouncing and condemning Falun Gong. The torture in mental hospitals is an integral part of the overall campaign of terror. The mental hospitals are used partly to detain practitioners and prevent them from going to Beijing to appeal. By committing practitioners, the authorities

send the message to the population at large that there must indeed be something wrong with Falun Gong. The government also counts on the people's drawing the conclusion that, no matter what the case is with Falun Gong, one would have to be insane to try to oppose the government's will as Falun Gong has tried to do. Tragically, many families have committed their loved ones, and many employers have committed their trusted employees, on the assumption that those committed would be treated more gently in the hospitals than in jail or labor camp. Only later have families and employers discovered the brutal torture that has caused severe physical and mental disabilities among those who have been committed. Practitioners who have triumphed over the hideous abuse they receive in the jail or labor camps are committed finally to break them.

These involuntary incarcerations violate all international standards for admission criteria.¹⁵ The practitioners were mentally normal and stable when they were first taken to the psychiatric facilities (except for cases in which practitioners were admitted from other forms of detention and exhibited symptoms due to the trauma of previous torture; their precarious health on admission does not protect them from further torture). They include physicians, nurses, an associate professor, a judge, a computer engineer, military personnel, police officers, teachers, and others. They are known to have functioned at high professional levels in society before incarceration.^{3,16} Diagnoses used are obsessive-compulsive disorder, *qigong*-induced mental disorder, obsessive psychosis, or a mental problem induced by superstition or wizardry. Some hospitals, knowing these persons have no mental illness, are not willing to take them, but the government, often through the police, applies pressure to force the psychiatrists to admit practitioners to the facilities. They are involuntarily admitted because they practice Falun Gong exercises, pass out flyers, refuse to sign a pledge to renounce Falun Gong, write petition letters to expose the abuse of psychiatry, go on hunger strikes in the labor camps, or appeal to the government. Others are admitted because detention sentences have expired or the detainees have not been successfully "transformed" in the brainwashing classes. Some have been told that they were admitted, not because they had a mental problem, but because they had a so-called "political problem"—that is, because they appealed to the government to lift the ban of Falun Gong.³

Medications are sometimes forcefully administered through nasogastric tubes to torture and punish practitioners for not cooperating with the authorities in denouncing Falun Gong. If the practitioners continue to perform the exercises in the hospital or refuse to renounce their beliefs, medication dosages are increased as much as five to six times the initial dose until the "patient" loses the ability to move or communicate. Toxic effects from perphenazine, chlorpromazine, fluphenazine, haloperidol decanoate, sulpiride, fluorohydroxypiperidine, and other unknown substances, cause loss of memory, severe headache, fainting, extreme weakness, muscle stiffness and rigidity, protrusion of the tongue and other dystonic reactions, uncontrollable tremors, nausea, vomiting, seizures, and loss of consciousness.³ Some of the severe cases resemble neuroleptic malignant syndrome. Physical torture is also commonplace, especially when practitioners refuse to take medications and continue practicing the exercises in the hospitals. Similar to the mistreatment the practitioners receive in jails and prisons, they are tortured by being tightly bound with ropes in very painful positions, beaten and shocked with electric batons, deprived of food or sleep, force fed through gastric tubing, and shocked with high voltage through acupuncture needles. Some medical staff members show no remorse or compassion, saying such things as, "Aren't you practicing Falun Gong? Let us see, which is stronger, Falun Gong or our medicines?"³

The criteria for discharge is met when the practitioners stop performing the exercises, or if they sign a pledge to renounce Falun Gong or sign another pledge never to go to Beijing to appeal. Families are denied visitation rights and, in addition, they are forced to pay the expenses for the "treatments" provided.¹⁷ In the more unfortunate cases, practitioners have been discharged because they were dying as a result of the abuse. The brutal torture and forced administration of antipsychotic drugs in the mental hospitals has led to at least six reported deaths. Two cases are provided as examples.³

Su Gang was a 32-year-old computer engineer working at the Qi-Lu Oil Chemical Company. Mr. Su was in good health and had no mental illness. He had been repeatedly detained by the security department of his workplace for refusing to renounce Falun Gong. *The Washington Post* reported:

After traveling to Beijing on April 25th 2000 to protest the ban on Falun Gong, he was arrested again, on May 23rd. His em-

ployer, a state-run petrochemical company, approved commitment papers that authorized the police to admit him to a mental hospital. According to Mr. Su's father, the doctors injected Mr. Su twice a day with an unknown substance. When Mr. Su emerged a week later, he could not eat or move his limbs normally.¹⁸

On June 10, the previously healthy young man died.^{3,18}

In the second case, Ms. Lu Hongfeng, 37 years old, was the vice principal of the Number 1 Elementary School of Lingwu City, Ningxia Province. She was fired after she signed an open letter to the provincial assembly urging a stop to the persecution of Falun Gong in the spring of 2000. Her husband Qin Yuhuan, Chair of the Communist Party Committee at the Number 1 Construction Company in Lingwu City, beat Lu and forced her out of their home on May 6. On June 7, he had her bound to a bed in the inpatient department of Lingwu Mental Hospital. She was held for more than 50 days. Dr. Yong (a doctor from that hospital) said that Lu was forced to take 24 tablets of an unknown medicine imported from Germany, an ordinary dose (1 tablet) of which causes people to lose consciousness for three days. She returned home in late July 2000 in precarious condition after the abuse in the mental hospital. Lu died on September 6, 2000.

Evidence of the abuse of psychiatry in China dates back to 1950 (Ref. 2, p 15). Using mental hospitals as places of government-directed torture in China had been in a steady decline in the 1990s,¹ but the government of Jiang Zemin resurrected this practice as part of a comprehensive and brutal campaign to "eradicate" Falun Gong. The political abuse of psychiatry by the Soviet Union was aimed at political dissenters and nonconformists, but Falun Gong practitioners are neither political nor nonconformists. Dr. Abraham Halpern stated, "It is vitally important for human rights groups, together with psychiatric associations, to organize against the pernicious practices of police agencies in China lest the horrors that prevailed in the Soviet Union in the 1970's and 1980's are reincarnated in China."¹⁹

The facts speak for themselves. However, in fear that the truth will be revealed and the lies and cover-up exposed, the Chinese government uses extreme measures to block any investigations. These include threatening or bribing family members, cremating the victim's body without forensic examination, and detaining anybody who knows the true

story or who tries to reveal the truth to the Western media, while censoring the Internet and restricting the access of the Western media.^{20,21} China has also blocked attempts at investigation by international organizations such as Amnesty International. Meanwhile, many foreign journalists who have attempted to investigate these matters (or, in some cases, merely cover Falun Gong) in the past year have been detained, harassed, and had their licenses revoked and in some cases have even been deported from China.²²⁻²⁴ The Chinese government has not responded to the World Psychiatry Association's request to send international experts to investigate psychiatric abuse in China.

The misuse and manipulation of psychiatry by the government of China threatens the integrity of psychiatrists everywhere. The medical staff and pharmacopoeia used in China are particularly valued, because they enable the persecutors to attack directly the will, the mind, and the spirit of practitioners. All torture seeks to get at the soul or spirit through the body. The torturer wants to find in the screams of the victim a testimony to his own power. Fear and obedience are what the torturer wants. In particular, he wants the victim to come to believe what the torturer wants him to believe, to accept as true whatever the torturer says the truth to be. All torture is horrible, but the torture going on in China's mental hospitals, nonetheless, has a special horror about it. Our duty to our own conscience, to our profession, and to our fellow human beings could not be clearer. We must do all in our power to bring the horror of the perversion of psychiatry in China to an immediate end.

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