

by **Leeshai Lemish**

A paper presented at **The 2009 CESNUR Conference, Salt Lake City, Utah, June 11-13, 2009**

---

source: [https://www.cesnur.org/2009/slc\\_lemish.htm](https://www.cesnur.org/2009/slc_lemish.htm)

### **Introduction**

“Which is the world’s largest group of prisoners of conscience – that is, peopled jailed for their beliefs or views?” Few educated media consumers in the West know the correct answer. It is Falun Gong adherents jailed in China; and it’s not even close.

Various calculations by human rights organizations, recently corroborated by a study conducted by Ethan Gutmann and I over the last two years, estimate that the number of Falun Gong practitioners currently jailed in China is at least as high as 200,000, possibly much higher. The number of Tibetan prisoners of conscience believed to be jailed, according to a Tibetan representative we interviewed in Taipei, is roughly 5,000. There is a growing, unknown number, of House Christians jailed in the People’s Republic, but they are still far behind the Falun Gong figures.

Why do so few people, including academics, know of this fact and what role have media played in shaping public perceptions of Falun Gong? These are some of the questions this paper sets out to investigate.

It turns out that one can be a regular reader of the *New York Times*, for instance, and never hear about Falun Gong. Others may be under the impression that the “crackdown on Falun Gong” was something that took place a decade ago, and is no longer an issue. And yet others may immediately think of Falun Gong as being some weird, wacky group, its victims of persecution perhaps not so worthy of our sympathy. All these perceptions are rooted in the media coverage patterns detailed below.

### **Debates**

There has been an ongoing debate between religious elites and believers on the one hand, and religion journalists on the other about the fairness and accuracy with which religions are depicted in media. The former group claims that religions and their followers are regularly portrayed in negative terms, without the contextualization necessary for readers to understand the beliefs and behaviors discussed. The latter contend that coverage is only fair, balanced, and accurate.

A similar debate is taking place with regards to press coverage of Falun Gong. On the one hand, Falun Gong adherents and supporters claim Western media coverage has been unfair in it’s portrayal of the group and the persecution it faces – that media downplay documented atrocities, often belittle the group and its beliefs, and give too much credence to unsubstantiated claims emanating from Beijing. Journalists I have spoken to, on the other hand, claim that they are only being objective in allowing both parties to the conflict an equal opportunity to present their views, and that their coverage of Falun Gong is balanced and accurate.

Coverage of Falun Gong, therefore, is an important case study in the larger overall debate over how Western media report on religions, and new religious groups in particular. It is also an important case study because the stakes are so high, considering how many people’s lives are involved. Indeed, my research has found that Western press coverage often bears concrete consequences for the conditions of persecuted Falun Gong practitioners in China.

### **Falun Gong overview**

Since Falun Gong is still a little-known and often misunderstood group, some background is necessary. This paper does not set out to describe in detail Falun Gong’s doctrine or history. A series of four short articles I wrote on the subject can be found with the *New Statesman* ([http://www.newstatesman.com/writers/leeshai\\_lemish](http://www.newstatesman.com/writers/leeshai_lemish)), all of Falun Gong’s teachings are posted on [www.FalunDafa.org](http://www.FalunDafa.org), and a detailed chronology of Falun Gong’s growth, and the reasons for the campaign against it can be found at [www.FalunInfo.net](http://www.FalunInfo.net). What follows, then, is an expeditious outline.

Falun Gong is a mind-body discipline introduced by Mr. Li Hongzhi in China in 1992. This introduction came at the tail end of what is known as China’s “qigong boom,” a proliferation during the 70s and 80s of qigong practices that, like tai chi, often involve energy circulation, meditation, and breathing exercises. At the boom’s peak, parks throughout

China were brimming at dawn with some 200 million enthusiasts practicing various forms of *qigong*, often in large groups.

Falun Gong immediately differentiated itself from many other *qigong* forms by not including breathing exercises, being always free of charge, and, most significantly, placing primary emphasis on the spiritual cultivation of one's character; the energy-based exercises are seen as secondary to one's moral elevation.

In daily life, practicing Falun Gong means performing *qigong*-like exercises, often in the morning - in groups in the park or alone at home. It also means regular reading of Falun Gong's main teaching - *Zhuan Falun*. These teachings guide practitioners to align one's actions, speech, and thoughts with three key tenets - "Truthfulness-Compassion-Tolerance." Practitioners strive to constantly "look inward" to find one's spiritual shortcomings and hidden attachments, such as combativeness, fear, jealousy, and various desires.

In this sense one could argue that Falun Gong includes many ideas found in traditional Buddhist and Taoist practices. As one adherent explained it to me, a Falun Gong practitioner seeks to bring the same kind of sacred commitment to spiritual elevation that a monk or a nun has to daily life in the secular world, without departing from it to seclusion. That is, one uses the trials and tribulations of life (be it at work, school, or in the family) as opportunities for spiritual growth.

By 1998 and 1999, an estimated 70-100 million people practiced Falun Gong, mostly in China. An important point is that this was a **Chinese government figure** (see, for example: <http://faluninfo.net/article/517/?cid=5>). Falun Gong itself had no membership list and, while the estimate seemed roughly accurate, had no idea exactly how many practitioners there were, especially given that people had varying degrees of commitment to the practice. Although after launching the campaign against Falun Gong in 1999 the Chinese government changed its earlier figure to a much smaller one, there is little doubt that the number of dedicated Falun Gong practitioners in China the late 90s was in the tens of millions.

With the exception of two articles, Falun Gong's growth and popularity were completely ignored by the Western press. When, in 1999, Falun Gong suddenly became the Chinese government's public enemy number one, the Western press had no idea what was going on. As one journalist told my colleague Ethan Gutmann, "we've simply been caught with our pants down."

### **The campaign to "exterminate" Falun Gong**

In July 1999, the Chinese Communist Party launched a campaign to wipe out Falun Gong. Immediately, many Chinese, like the late famous writer Liu Binyan, compared the crusade's scale and fury to the Cultural Revolution. Soon Falun Gong practitioners were labeled dangerous "cultists," members of an "anti-society, anti-humanity, anti-science evil cult organization," to be more precise. The campaign quickly gushed down to every level of society; orders were passed down via work units, schools, neighborhood and village committees - Falun Gong had to be immediately wiped out.

As the official state news agency Xinhua put it: "The whole country has formed a situation in which the 'Falun Gong' cult is being chased by all like rats running across the street [...] We must exterminate the cult, and the evil must be totally eradicated" (2003).

Early on, the campaign involved mass arrests and the stuffing of tens of thousands into large stadiums. Falun Gong adherents gathered to publicly remonstrate by meditating on Tiananmen Square. They were, typically, instantly pounced on and beaten to the ground by plainclothes police, then dragged into police vans and jailed.

Hundreds of thousands of Falun Gong adherents have been through China's "reform through-labor" camp system. A remnant of the Maoist era, the labor camp system in China is vast. Anyone can be picked off the street without an arrest warrant and administratively sentenced without trial to up to three years in a labor camp. At the end of the period, the individual can be released or sent to a temporary detention center and then almost immediately picked up and sent back to a labor camp again.

The arrests and torture have two primary aims: First, to stop protests and distribution of underground leaflets, emails, and other forms of spreading counter-narratives about Falun Gong that challenge the Party's line and expose acts of persecution. The second goal is to "transform" the Falun Gong practitioner, a form of forced conversion - from Falun Gong adherent to something that approximates an abiding atheist.

The following excerpt from the *Washington Post* is one of the few investigative articles to provide such first-hand accounts. It represents a typical experience:

*Ouyang was arrested again in April after going to Tiananmen Square to show his support for Falun Gong. This time, he said, police methodically reduced him to an “obedient thing” over 10 days of torture. At a police station in western Beijing, Ouyang was stripped and interrogated for five hours. “If I responded incorrectly, that is if I didn’t say, ‘Yes,’ they shocked me with the electric truncheon,” he said.*

*Then, he was transferred to a labor camp in Beijing’s western suburbs. There, the guards ordered him to stand facing a wall. If he moved, they shocked him. If he fell down from fatigue, they shocked him. Each morning, he had five minutes to eat and relieve himself. “If I didn’t make it, I went in my pants,” he said. “And they shocked me for that, too.” By the sixth day, Ouyang said, he couldn’t see straight from staring at plaster three inches from his face. His knees buckled, prompting more shocks and beatings. He gave in to the guards’ demands.*

*For the next three days, Ouyang denounced Li’s teachings, shouting into the wall. Officers continued to shock him about the body and he soiled himself regularly. Finally, on the 10th day, Ouyang’s repudiation of the group was deemed sufficiently sincere. He was taken before a group of Falun Gong inmates and rejected the group one more time as a video camera rolled. Ouyang left jail and entered the brainwashing classes. Twenty days later after debating Falun Gong for 16 hours a day, he “graduated.”*

Interviews Gutmann and I conducted with refugees just out of China provide a range of harrowing accounts. Li Heping in London told us of how, when he refused to transform, he was injected with an unknown drug that sent him into eight days of hallucinations, during which he died one brutal death after another – eaten by a pool of poisonous snakes, crushed to death by huge beasts, burned alive... Lan Lihua in Bangkok told us of being stuffed in a gunnysack and driven secretly at night to a torture chamber in an isolated mountain cave, where electric truncheons were used on all body parts. Nearly each of the survivors we interviewed told of how the regime had broken their family – forced divorces, not being allowed to see dying parents, and separation from children.

In detention, if Falun Gong prisoners hunger strike in protest, they are force-fed saline solutions, urine, and sometimes corn porridge through a rubber tube inserted up into the nasal channel and then down into the esophagus. When carried out improperly, as is often the case in labor camps where criminal inmates and guards are part of administrating the forced-feeding, the pumped substance enters the lung and can kill the hunger striker.

According to the Falun Dafa Information Center, over 3,200 Falun Gong practitioners have been killed by the campaign, mostly from torture; the center estimates that, considering how difficult getting information out of China can be, a more accurate figure is at least ten times higher. Amnesty International and the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on Torture have reported many cases as well.

A separate element of the campaign that, as we shall see in a moment, had a tremendous impact on Western media, was the propaganda blitz that accompanied it. Literally overnight, China’s media went into an anti-Falun Gong frenzy, with 300-400 articles attacking Falun Gong appearing in each of the main state-run papers over the first month of the campaign alone. Primetime saw television sets throughout the country replaying supposed exposés about the group; not a single divergent view could be found in Chinese media.

Finally, it’s worth noting that the campaign continues. In 2008, Falun Gong was a central target in pre-Olympic “cleanup” measures, and the Summer Games were used as an apparent excuse for locking up adherents long term. According to the Infocenter’s incomplete statistics, at least 8,000 Falun Gong practitioners were arrested in the months leading to the Olympics.

### **Why the campaign?**

To many journalists both inside and outside China in 1999, this seemed like a sudden, bizarre campaign; the world’s largest communist state going after a group of meditators, many of them elderly. The campaign was already in full gear before journalists had a chance to provide an analysis of why it was taking place. Yet, this is an important question if we wish to understand the media coverage patterns below.

We can start by first ruling out two explanations. First, the decision to launch the campaign was not based on an investigative evaluation of the nature of Falun Gong and its practices. In fact, in 1998, when the campaign was still brewing, the Public Security Bureau conducted an investigation into Falun Gong aimed at compiling incriminating

evidence that would justify banning the practice, but the investigation came up empty. Ironically, a separate study conducted at the same time found that as Chinese people were becoming healthier through their practice, Falun Gong reduced the burden on the Chinese health care system.

Nor was the campaign based in rule of law. As Bryan Edelman and James Richardson (2003) have argued: “The decisions concerning Falun Gong seem to have been made hastily and without acting within official guidelines.” Studies by Human Rights Watch and others have similarly concluded that the law was used *ex-post facto* to grant a veneer of legitimacy to an illegal campaign.

Analyses often attribute the campaign to a large gathering of Falun Gong practitioners at the political heart of Beijing on April 25, 1999. But this argument is missing the point. The April 25 protest, or “appeal” as Falun Gong practitioners generally prefer calling it, was by all accounts entirely peaceful. More significantly, it came after three years of increasing official oppression – including critique in state-run media, the banning of publication of Falun Gong books, and harassment of Falun Gong coordinators. Rather than a catalyst for persecution, I would argue the incident should be viewed as Falun Gong’s attempt to avoid the persecution that followed; an effort that Beijing then turned around and used an excuse to justify the campaign that came three months later.

The campaign cannot be de-contextualized from the Chinese Communist Party’s history of political and religious persecution. During its 60 years in power, the Party has repeatedly targeted various groups – from landlords to religious believers to academics to democracy activists. These campaigns have often involved public executions, torture, even cannibalism. Estimates of the total death toll resulting from the Party’s political campaigns in China range from 40 to 80 million people.

Second, in the late 90s the Party was suffering from a legitimacy crisis in the post-Tiananmen era and a deep lack of security in its power, so much so that a group of meditators appeared to be terrifying.

While the campaign’s origins are complex, I find that three factors, when combined, capture much of the explanation:

1. The numbers’ factor – Falun Gong just got too big too fast. At some point someone in the Party realized this was a large, independent group outside the Party’s direct control, and thus a threat. This was particularly the case once the number of practitioners equaled or surpassed the number of Party members (some were even members of both).
2. The perceived ideological threat factor – While five religions are recognized in China, their leadership is under the Party’s control and the groups are fairly obedient, having all experienced persecution in earlier campaigns. Falun Gong practitioners have their own ideological view of the world, one that is markedly different from the Party’s. Marxist materialism is key to the Party’s indoctrination system, and for the Party, material carrots and sticks are, in the post-Mao era, key to controlling the population. Along comes Falun Gong with a theist view of the world, one which believes that material gain in this world is not life’s ultimate goal, that bad deeds incur retribution, and that being virtuous ultimately receives greater rewards. Such a group, the Party realized, would not be easy to control. A group with conviction-based courage to take a principled stance at great personal risk, a group that cannot be bought off, was thus deemed a threat. If one were to be cynical about it, it could also be argued that while Falun Gong teaches truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance, the Party for decades has relied on misinformation, violence, and “struggle” to maintain power.
3. The individual factor – Finally, one wonders what would have happened if, instead of Jiang Zemin, a different cadre would have headed the Communist Party at the time. It has been widely reported that Jiang, who came to power largely because of his support for the militant stance against the students in 1989, was personally “obsessed with,” even “jealous” of Falun Gong. He made the campaign a personal crusade and overruled other Party leaders, including his premier at the time, Zhu Rongji, who took an accommodating stance toward Falun Gong. By the time Hu Jintao’s leadership came to power, the campaign had already been under way for over three years, and the Party had too much at stake to back down.

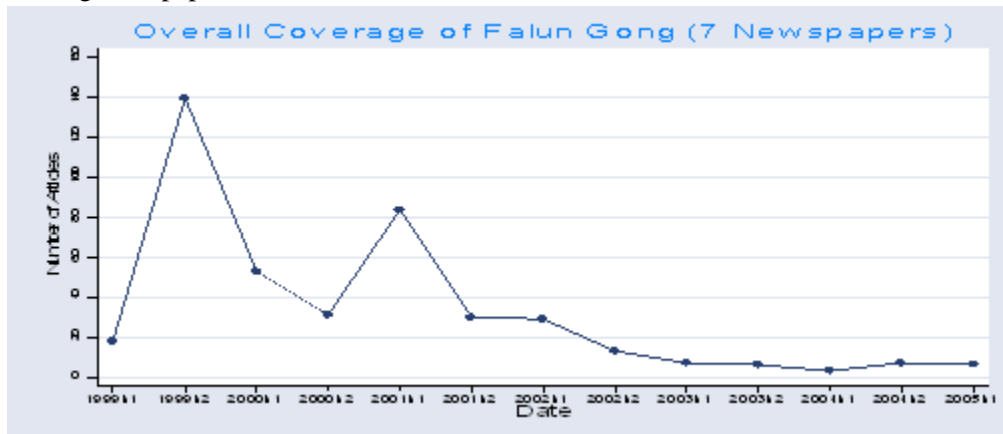
## How was all this reported in the Western press?

To study the ways in which this was covered in the Western press, I analyzed 1,852 articles on Falun Gong from 1999 to 2007 in seven English-language newspapers (*NY Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *LA Times*, *USA Today*, *London Guardian*, *The Australian* ) and three wire services (The Associated Press, Reuters, Agence France-Presse). The articles were examined using basic media studies quantitative analysis techniques that identified key words, sources of news as they appeared in the headlines and opening sentences, and the number of articles over time. What follows are a few of the key findings.

### Findings

**(1) - Compassion fatigue: Coverage of Falun Gong has decreased as the torture and killing of adherents have increased.**

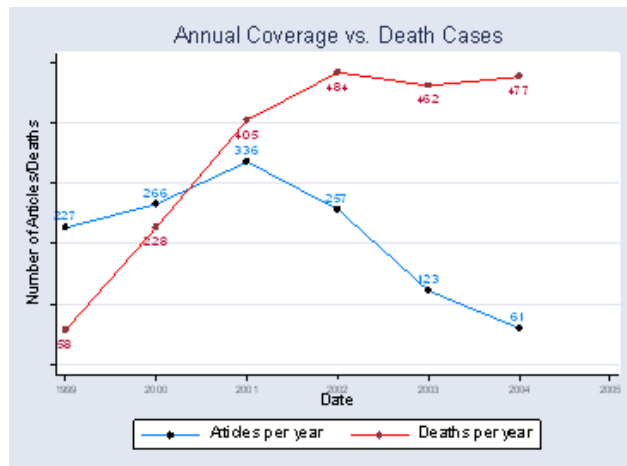
This first graph shows the total number of news articles per half year about Falun Gong that appeared in the seven leading newspapers examined.



As we can see, while there was relatively strong interest in the story when it first emerged, Western press gradually began ignoring it as time went by. This was not, however, because the campaign had eased. On the contrary, the persecution was escalating as the press was turning away.

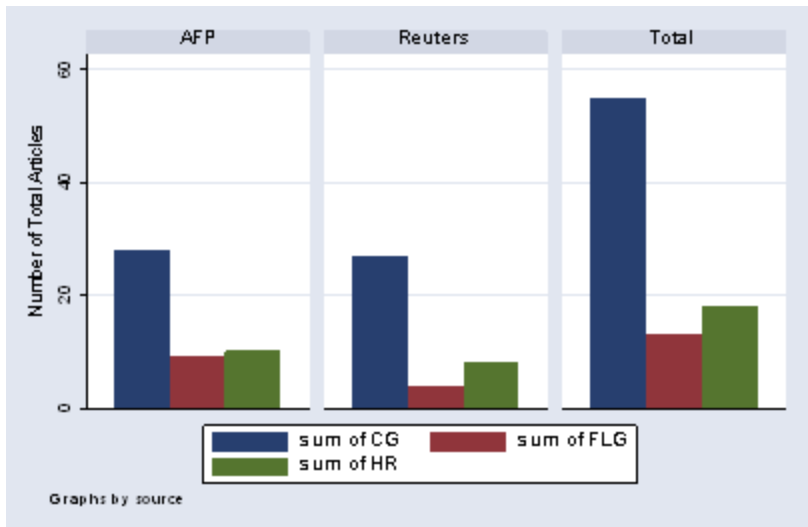
This graph shows, in blue, the number of Associated

Press articles per year that mentioned Falun Gong at least once. In red, are the number of documented deaths of Falun Gong practitioners (according to [www.faluninfo.net](http://www.faluninfo.net)) as a result of the campaign. Similar patterns were found in each of the media studied.



As we can see, at the same time that the documented number of Falun Gong practitioners' deaths from torture in custody increased, the number of articles in the Western press (in this case, in the Associated Press) rapidly decreased.

**(2) - The CCP has been more influential than Falun Gong or human rights organizations in determining what gets reported and how it is framed.**



This study asked: What were the sources of news that sparked articles about Falun Gong? To determine this, the sources as identified in the headline or lead sentence of an article were examined. If an article headline was: “Falun Gong Infocenter: Three more practitioners tortured to death,” the article would be categorized as having been sparked by Falun Gong. If it instead read: “Xinhua news says Falun Gong crushed,” the article would be identified as being sparked by the Chinese government.

The following graph shows the number of articles in which the Chinese government (CG), Falun Gong (FLG), and human rights organizations

(HR), respectively, were each cited as the main source of information in the headlines or opening paragraphs of AFP and Reuters releases.

As we can see, an article about Falun Gong is more than twice as likely to be sparked by, and often framed around public statements or actions by the Chinese government, than by those of Falun Gong or human rights organizations. This is not because Falun Gong failed to provide material for the media. The Infocenter has put out regular press releases since 1999, and I have attended press events organized by Falun Gong practitioners in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington to which not a single journalist showed up.

**(3) - Western press has been adopting pejorative, loaded terms to describe Falun Gong, terms often rooted in Chinese state propaganda.**

For example, in AFP and Reuters articles, the CCP’s “evil cult” label for Falun Gong appears in most pieces (78%). To the wires’ credit, the term is almost always attributed to the CCP, as in: “The Chinese government considers Falun Gong an evil cult.” This was not the case in other media outlets. Newspapers like the *New York Times* often dropped the “evil” and still referred to Falun Gong as a “cult,” this time directly using the journalist’s own voice. Such labels even appeared in headlines. Yet there was no discussion of why Falun Gong should be labeled as such, whether such a term was accurate, or what the source of this label was.

In fact, the term that the CCP uses in Chinese to discredit Falun Gong translates more accurately as “heterodox religion.” But, apparently with an eye toward influencing opinions in the West, in its English discourse on Falun Gong, the CCP chose the term “evil cult” instead, with all its negative connotations. The CCP has tried to compare Falun Gong to Aum Shinrikyo, the People’s Temple, the Branch Davidians, and other groups popularly identified in the West as destructive cults. If the unquestioning reproduction of this term by Western journalists is any indication, the label was one of the CCP’s most brilliant PR moves.

Journalists have told me that they aim to write “balanced” pieces about Falun Gong in which both sides get a fair chance to air their views. Leaving aside, for the moment, the question of whether such a goal is ethically or journalistically responsible when human rights atrocities are involved, I examined whether journalists were able to achieve such a balance. To do this, I studied how often each of the sides was given a chance to respond to the other side’s accusations. The study found that when journalists cite the CCP’s primary accusation - that adherents have died from refusing medicine or suicide (thus justifying the ban), Falun Gong gets to respond 17.9% of the time. When journalists cite Falun Gong’s main accusation – that adherents are being tortured to death, the CCP gets to respond 50.2% of the time. That is, journalists are nearly three times more likely to give the CCP a chance to defend itself.

It is also worth noting that the CCP’s claims about Falun Gong adherents posing danger to themselves have not been corroborated by any external source, and at least in several cases the claims appear quite dubious. The torture and killing claims, on the other hand, have been well-documented by multiple human rights organizations as well as annual State Department and United Nations reports. Journalists, however, almost never identify the CCP’s claim as not having

been independently confirmed; but when citing claims that Falun Gong practitioners are being tortured, they regularly add the caveat that such claims are “alleged” and could not be verified.

### **Analysis - familiar patterns**

At first glance, this study’s findings might appear quite shocking. Western media turned away from the story just as the human rights abuses were increasing, and continued to ignore the persecution even as torture and killing spiraled out of control. Moreover, the perpetrator, in this case the Chinese Communist Party, was most often the one dictating what gets reported, and also influenced the language with which the very group it is persecuting is described.

Yet from the perspective of media studies literature, these findings are not surprising. Studies have long shown that governmental sources are given much more credence than community-based groups, and that government actions or statements are considered more newsworthy. This study also corroborates previous findings concerning the difficulty media have in reporting human rights abuses and distant suffering, often manifesting as “compassion fatigue” and lack of contextualization (see, for example, a 2002 report by the International Council on Human Rights Policy).

For our purposes here, as a case study of how new religions are treated in the Western press, this study also corroborates previous findings. First, it supports the findings of Stuart A. Wright (1997) that “news stories on unpopular or marginal religions frequently are predicated on unsubstantiated allegations or government actions based on faulty or weak evidence.” This we saw in the Western press’ unqualified reproduction of the CCP’s various claims about Falun Gong aimed at justifying its campaign to wipe out the group.

The study further supports the findings of Harvey Hill, John Hickman, and Joel McLendon (2001) that “new religious movements are consistently described in pejorative language.” Thus the more esoteric practices of a long-established religion might be described in terms such as “traditionalist,” while those of a new group will be depicted, and in the case of Falun Gong sometimes directly labeled, as “weird,” “bizarre,” and “wacky.”

The most notable example is the questionable use of the word “cult” to describe Falun Gong. Regardless of how scholars of religions may use the term (and in this case scholars of religions were not consulted and their opinions were rarely cited by journalists), there is little doubt that the term, as popularly used, carries very negative connotations. Yet is it accurate in this case?

Falun Gong is a large group with tens of millions of practitioners, people who hold ordinary jobs of all varieties, have families and maintain “normal” lives. There is no isolation from society and Falun Gong involves no financial or property commitment or restrictions. Perhaps most importantly, Falun Gong has no history of violence, even after a decade under persecution.

Both John Dart (1997) and Judith M. Buddenbaum (1998) have warned of the media’s casual use of this term, and its negative, often violent connotations. The labeling of Falun Gong originated with the CCP and Western media often swallowed the bait and, in effect, played the role of assisting the CCP in discrediting and marginalizing the group internationally, casting it with a label that, once affixed, is difficult to remove.

### **Specific factors**

In Falun Gong’s case, several additional factors contributed to this phenomenon, and are worth considering briefly:

1. Unfamiliarity with Chinese traditions of self-cultivation systems. It is sufficiently challenging for Western journalists to grapple with the beliefs of new religious groups emerging from the Judeo-Christian traditions, but Falun Gong emerged from an unfamiliar Chinese tradition of self-cultivation. Few journalists knew much about qigong and its various practices and phenomena, even less were they familiar with Taoist hygiene disciplines, or Buddhist energy-transformation concepts. Within the context of these traditions, including practices like Tibetan Buddhism, Falun Gong’s doctrine and metaphysical descriptions are hardly eccentric.
2. CCP obstruction and access difficulty. One of the most concrete challenges for journalists working in China has been obstruction by the Communist Party’s security apparatuses. Journalist, like Rupert Wingfield-Hayes of the BBC, have been followed, detained, and even physically assaulted for pursuing the Falun Gong story.

Journalists have no access to labor camps, jails, or detention centers except for rare guided tours to Potemkin camps. A conscientious journalist may further have serious qualms about meeting with Falun Gong practitioners in China, given the risk to the interviewees' lives such meetings pose. There are too many examples of practitioners who were jailed, even tortured and killed, for speaking with foreign reporters or human rights workers.

3. Self-censorship. Media professionals are well aware that Falun Gong is one of the most taboo and sensitive subjects in China today. Journalists have told me they have a "black-out" policy of not touching Falun Gong news. Reporters and editors may choose to stay away from pursuing the Falun Gong story due to personal considerations, including losing access to government functions, being harassed, or having their visa revoked. At a corporate level, media conglomerates are seeking access to the Chinese market, wish to see their websites unblocked in the mainland and to develop cooperation projects. They know that one story about Falun Gong can have their magazines removed from Chinese newsstands (as in the case of *Time*) or they might be taken off the air (as happened to the BBC).

In spite of these difficulties, a handful of journalists – like Ian Johnson of the *Wall Street Journal* and Philip Pan of the *Washington Post* - have repeatedly shown that quality investigative reporting into the story is, if difficult, possible.

### **Conclusion**

So what does all this mean? For Falun Gong, under circumstances of persecution, these media coverage patterns have real human costs. Labor camp survivors have told me they noticed a real correlation between the degree to which the persecution they faced was exposed overseas and the treatment they received. Some have described all of a sudden being treated better in detention, being transferred to a better cell and no longer being tortured. Only after they were released did they realize that the change took place at exactly the same time that their case was publicized abroad.

Perhaps a more concrete example is that of asylum seekers. Falun Gong refugees are seeking political asylum around the world. Yet several countries, like Canada, the U.K., and Australia have nearly deported practitioners back to China, saying they do not believe these people face serious risk of persecution. One can imagine that if immigration workers and judges have not seen any reports about the persecution of Falun Gong in years, they might easily imagine danger no longer exists. In several such cases, practitioners have indeed been repatriated; upon arrival in China, they were immediately sent to a labor camp to be tortured again.

For the Chinese Communist Party, their campaign has been a lesson in international PR. Unlike the Cultural Revolution era during the 60s and 70s, today's CCP cares about its international image. During the period in which Falun Gong practitioners have been persecuted in China, Party leaders have successfully sought access to international organizations like WTO and won trophies like the Olympics and red carpet treatment in foreign capitals. They care about hiding atrocities and wish to justify domestic policies to foreign audiences. Through the campaign against Falun Gong, Beijing has learned that foreign media can be manipulated.

For the general public, the lesson is that when it comes to new religious groups, not only can official government sources not be trusted, but we must be skeptical of mainstream media as well.