

Hearings on Religious Persecution in China: Erping Zhang Oral Testimony

March 16, 2000

(Note: These are unedited and uncorrected transcripts)

Mr. Chairman Rabbi David Saperstein, Commissioners, and my fellow witnesses:

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for holding this very important hearing, and I appreciate the chance to listen and learn from the experiences of the other panelists and those attending this conference.

I have been invited here today because Falun Gong (also called "Falun Dafa") was suddenly thrust upon the global stage a few months ago, and as volunteers, we practitioners of Falun Gong have had to think quickly to figure out how we can best help our fellow practitioners in China. I would like to give you a sketch of recent developments in China concerning the crackdown on Falun Gong, and, in the process, offer a sense of what Falun Gong is.

Since December 1999, the Chinese Government has started conducting show trials for Falun Gong practitioners, and it has handed out stiff sentences of up to 18 years in prison. It has been widely reported that over 35,000 people who peacefully appealed to the Beijing government have been arrested and at least 5,000 people have been sent to labor camps with no trial at all. It is indeed a sad state of affairs when no one is shocked or surprised by news that in this day and age, the Chinese authorities can still hold fake trials and deny these innocent people legal representation. Or that they can detain a woman for questioning and then torture her to death and then cremate the body to hide the evidence, as they did with Zhao Jinhua, a 42 year-old field farmer. Or, more recently, that they can keep practitioners in custody in psychiatric facilities, including mental hospitals and drug rehabilitation centers, and treat them with anti-psychotics, sedatives and electric shocks. Indeed, this is the kind of harsh reaction that we have even come to expect from the Chinese Government in the past few decades when it is faced with any kind of dissenting opinion. This is the face that China is presenting to the world right now, and as

someone who originally came from China, I am saddened that this great nation has come to this.

As part of the Chinese Government's nation-wide campaign against Falun Gong, the state-run media have flooded the printing presses and airwaves with fabrications about Mr. Li Hongzhi and Falun Gong in attempts to sway and miseducate their readers and audiences. Conversely, millions of legally published Falun Gong books, audiotapes, and videotapes have been confiscated and destroyed. To cover up its human rights violations committed at the expense of Falun Gong practitioners, the Chinese Government has taken steps to shut down Internet access and jam or wire-tap phone calls. Efforts have even extended overseas to North America. Recently, US News & World Report featured an investigation that has found XinAn Information Service Center in Beijing-China's secret police attacked the U.S. Transportation Department via a Falun Gong website in New York. Foreign journalists in China covering Falun Gong and the crackdown have been harassed and even threatened, and people reporting the facts to the outside have been severely reprimanded.

More and more, we are seeing what a gap there is between the people and the Chinese Communist Party. China has made tremendous strides in recent years economically, but more often than not, the party seems out of touch with the will of the people. The materialist and atheist foundations of Communist ideology can no longer satisfy the needs of a citizenry that has become more open to new ideas and closer to the traditional values. The haunting horrors of the Cultural Revolution and the brutality of the Tiananmen Incident also severely dampened the trust of the people. As we know here in the West, too, increased affluence alone does not always lead to happiness and fulfillment.

Now along comes a traditional spiritual discipline that attracts a following of tens of millions in just a few short years. In a society where corruption and distrust are rampant, Falun Gong stood out as something pure and good. It teaches people to hold themselves to the universal principles of Truthfulness, Compassion, and Forbearance, and shows them a path to greater peace and wisdom. People learned about it through word of mouth and showed up in the parks to learn the exercises for free. Better health was certainly part of the draw -when someone's health was vastly improved, his or her friends, family and neighbors were sure to notice. But it was the traditional spiritual and moral aspect that proved the greatest attraction for many. Though Falun Gong does not have worshipping, institution, rituals, etc., it does share the same goal as the great religions of the world: to create a better, spiritually-enlightened person.

It is faith in the principles expounded in the primary text of Falun Gong, Zhuan Falun (Turning of the Law Wheel), that has given so many the courage and conviction to continue to go to Tiananmen Square to peacefully appeal

to the government, knowing full well that c.: they will be arrested and probably beaten and tortured. Practitioners' noble conduct under the awful circumstance of the crackdown has demonstrated to the world what the Chinese people have known all along: Falun Gong-in its teacher, teachings, and practitioners-is thoroughly good.

One can imagine that Falun Gong must be a unique system to engender such strong faith in so many all over the world. This is not a faith that will go away, and I think the Chinese government is beginning to realize this. More and more Falun Gong practitioners are being forced to choose between practicing Falun Gong or keeping their jobs, pensions, education, housing or Party membership. And it is no small testament to the strength of the underlying virtues of this spiritual practice that so many are choosing Falun Gong. Many practitioners are deciding that without the freedom to practice their beliefs, they have nothing left to lose. Thus, they are willing to step forward, and it is unlikely that they will go underground.

In the short run, we have seen that the persecution has spread to other groups in China, including various traditional qigong practices and Christian groups, and we feel sorry that they may have to suffer some with us. In the long run, however, perhaps the staunch faith of Falun Gong practitioners in China will help to open up a whole new situation wherein the Chinese government will come to accept and learn to coexist with different belief systems. Such a fundamental shift could only have positive and far-reaching implications for everyone.

Both the Western media and the Chinese government have called Falun Gong the greatest threat to the Chinese Communist party in 50 years. Indirectly, this may be so, but it was never the intention of practitioners to challenge the system or the leaders of government. It is the Chinese government that politicizes and forces Falun Gong onto this international stage. Those who practice it are a large number of independent individuals who share common values and beliefs. As noted by Christian Science Monitor that being "a loosely organized movement of millions of Chinese, Falun Gong has no political agenda other than protect itself. Yet, the more it is suppressed, the stronger its faithful express their beliefs through peaceful, public witness." In one of his lectures in the United States, Mr. Li Hongzhi makes it very clear: "We do not get involved in politics."

The Washington

Post reported that the crackdown was initially undertaken "to demonstrate -and solidify -the power of the Chinese leadership." The Post went on to note, however, that "the longer the campaign goes on, and the more difficulty China's authorities have in corralling Falun Gong practitioners, the more the episode is exposing China's rulers' weaknesses, insecurities and internal divisions to audiences at home and abroad." The Post also cited Communist party sources as saying that "the standing committee of the Politburo did not unanimously endorse

the crackdown and that President Jiang Zemin alone decided that Falun Gong must be eliminated." If this is the case, then as the campaign continues and more and more resources go into trying to keep practitioners 0; down, it is at least conceivable that the suppression could lose more of its supporters inside of government offices, and outside, as well. Christian Science Monitor further points out: "The world can only watch as this giant nation plays out a drama between a government that is spiritually bankrupt and masses of people searching for greater meaning in life. Killing and jailing the brave followers of Falun Gong will solve nothing."

What

makes this scenario more plausible is the fact that Falun Gong is a home-grown faith that embodies many ancient traditional beliefs, so Chinese authorities cannot use the usual anti-Western sentiments to criticize it. And prior to the crackdown, many Party members, government officials, and members of the police force and military were also practitioners. Even if they were not practitioners themselves, there were many whose family members and friends were. The New York Times reported: "Behind closed doors in recent weeks many Chinese, from professors to cab drivers, have said the government has overreacted." There is one instance of a practitioner who was being beaten in prison when the policeman started to plead with her to stop practicing. He said that he knew that Falun Gong practitioners were good people; his own grandmother was a practitioner. It pained him that he was under orders to punish this woman when he did not see her as a criminal. All it takes is for someone to know a practitioner in person to see how benign the practice is, contrary to the horrific picture that the authorities have tried to paint.

On

February 17, 2000, the State Council's Press Office of the People's Republic of China released a white paper: 50 Years of Progress in China's Human Rights. It has six parts, yet nowhere is the ongoing and ever-deepening Falun Gong suppression even mentioned. It appears that history is now negotiable in China, something written to fit present agendas. The Chinese Government seeks to eradicate Falun Gong not only from the soil of China, but also from the pages of China's history.

A

recent report from China dated March 1st revealed an appalling story that a pregnant practitioner in Jiangxi Province was pressed by the authorities to have an abortion just because they decided to detain her for a longer term. She was told that had the child been delivered, more unwanted financial costs would have been incurred. In just this past week, word has just gotten out of yet another Falun Gong-related tragedy in China.

According to an Associated Press article dated Feb. 28, 2000:

Police

beat to death a Falun Gong follower unable to pay a fine. ...Authorities in the eastern city of Weihai detained Chen [Zixiu] Feb. 17, accusing the 60-year-old of heading to Beijing to join protests, and they demanded a [US]\$120 fine her family could not pay. On Feb. 20, a fellow detainee told her family that Chen was being beaten, and the next day, police notified them she was dead. 'The body the relatives saw was too horrible to look at. It was covered in purple and black bruises, the ears, nose and mouth had blood stains and the teeth were broken, , the [Hong Kong-based Information Center of Human Rights and Democratic Movement] said. 1

This and similar incidents repeat themselves across China on a daily basis, though often unknown to the outside world. Use of the term "progress" in relation to human rights in China (as in the title of China's official publication) seems more an ironic juxtaposition , and less a fitting description of China's decidedly uneven record on human rights. When met with a recent round of heavy criticism from around the world, including from United Nations Human Rights High Commissioner Mary Robinson, China has replied in formulaic fashion. A Chinese ministry spokesperson, Zhu Bangzao, offered the following response to the world:

It must be pointed out here that at present the human rights situation in China is at its best period and various fundamental rights of the Chinese people including the rights and freedom of speech, assembly and religious belief are fully guaranteed. The Chinese people are satisfied with this and this is also a fact acknowledged widely by the international community .2

Sadly, such grossly misleading claims suggest that there is still no end in sight to China's persecution of Falun Gong practitioners. Ironically, their only "crime" to the Chinese government is their attempt to exercise their rights to freedom of belief, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly, and these rights are enshrined in China's own Constitution, as well as guaranteed by the two key treaties that China signed in 1998 and 1997 respectively, namely the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The Chinese Government refuses to reconsider its unconscionable actions, instead forging ahead with new waves of persecution, covering up its tracks with propaganda disguised as official "news." The number of people arrested, detained, and tortured is growing daily without let up. Tens of millions of lives are at stake, making this issue of grave, immediate concern.

For religious freedom to take hold in China, a change will need to occur from the inside. As we all know, the Chinese leadership rarely responds gracefully to pressure from the international community. But perhaps over time, and with firm rebuke from other nations and institutions, it will see this campaign against Falun Gong is both unnecessary and un sustainable, something hurting

China and its people. We are pleased that President Clinton has forthrightly spoken out for the rights of Falun Gong practitioners in China, that the U.S. Congress has unanimously passed concurrent resolutions in the Senate and House, condemning China's inhumane treatment of Falun Gong practitioners, and that the European Parliament has passed a resolution criticizing China's human rights violations. We still maintain hope that the situation will come to a peaceful resolution through direct dialogue with the Chinese government, and we ask for continued public support in facilitating this.

Thank you. for your: attention and concern.

"Falun Gong Member Dies in Custody,» Associated Press, 2/28/00.

1 as quoted in "UN Human Rights Chief Laments 'Deterioration' in China," Agence France Press, 3/21/00.