

Silent summer

An American student at the 'MIT of China' discovers Falun Gong in 1999

By MATTHEW KUTOLOWSKI

I was staring at a notice tacked up on a tree, in an eerily quiet park in Beijing.

It was July 22, 1999, and Falun Gong was now officially illegal.

I was witness to the beginnings of a state-orchestrated campaign that would have done Mao proud, a program the likes of which China hadn't seen in the ten years since the Tiananmen Massacre.

"Falun Gong has been banned by the People's Republic of China," the notice declared in official diction.

"It is hereby illegal to gather to practice or propagate the teachings of Falun Gong, just as it is to disseminate any literature or materials that do similarly." I read on, but the words soon failed to register.

Shock set in as I tried to fathom that the way of life, if not very identity, of my friends and acquaintances had just been outlawed. Literally, overnight.

I looked in vain for my closest associates at Tsinghua University. Huang Kui and Jun were nowhere to be found. Nor were Zhao Ming or the others.

I could not find them. Nor could I find out much of anything about what was happening.

STATE-CONTROLLED MEDIA

BLITZ AND BOOK BURNINGS

Sure, there was news aplenty about Falun Gong's banning. But it was little more than thinly-veiled diatribes, eerily the same in every state-controlled publication. All pretenses to objectivity were cast to the wind in favor of the official mandate to discredit Falun Gong. The portrayals of adherents as irrational, cultish, and dangerous would later pave the way to officially sanctioned violence.

At the end of one month, the (un-aptly named) People's Daily alone had run 347 articles criticizing Falun Gong. The airwaves, for their part, were saturated with starchy news anchors reading barbed scripts parroting the same tune. On the street, everyone was talking about the ban.

The one voice that wasn't present was that of Falun Gong themselves.

That was the idea of course, as planned by the Party-state apparatus. To silence the likes of which China hadn't seen in the ten years since the Tiananmen Massacre. "Falun Gong has been banned by the People's Republic of China," the notice declared in official diction.

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regimented "political study" and "patriotic education" could for the Party. It had won the hearts of the people.

Such being the case, the ban on Falun Gong was implemented with startling intensity.

SURVEILLANCE, ARRESTS, EXECUTIONS

Some adherents were swiftly arrested and removed from site, particularly those who might be "influential" in the public's eye. Some were pressured to the margins, as was the case for many Tsinghua students; dozens were kicked out of school. Others had to go underground to avoid arrest.

I myself became subject to surveillance. Regularly I would spot undercover police following me, or even filming me. One individual revealed that my phone was tapped and my emails were being read. One well-placed source said that executions had begun.

What was to be a year-long stay thus ended after two months. I reluctantly forfeited the fellowship I had won and returned home. It was no longer safe to be in Beijing.

I never did find my closest Falun Gong friends again that summer, before leaving. Only two years later would I learn what had become of them. Two, Kui and Jun, had been arrested, a news story told, and sentenced to five and seven years in prison. Jun had committed the "crime" of printing an informational leaflet about Falun Gong from the Internet. Kui had tried to form an independent newspaper. That paper was in fact the Epoch Times.

Both friends, I later learned, were subjected to torture while in custody. One has not been heard from to this day. The other recently escaped China, and is trying to put his life back together in the U.S.

Zhao Ming, meanwhile, was sent to a labor camp on the outskirts of Beijing, where he was brutally tormented with electric batons for months.

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE

While I had traveled to Beijing the summer of '99 primarily for language training and out of socio-historical interest in Chinese physical culture, I left with a very different, and rather complicated, view of today's China.

My experiences with Falun Gong, and the remarkable oppression it met, have led me to rethink much about China and its state of being.

What is one to make of a ruling entity that so arbitrarily wields power, even to the point of attempting to legislate the inner, private, spiritual life of its citizens? And on what footing is a nation to enter the future if it is so insecure, or undecided, about its past?

I also believe we continue to see the fallout of all this, albeit in less obvious ways. Before leaving China, I often asked myself what would become of this nation when its leaders arrest and torture citizens who embrace values like honesty and kindness? What happens when you criminalize being a good person?

The litany of contaminated goods fiascoes (such as melamine in baby formula) issuing forth from China has provided a sad answer. I doubt China's rulers have made the connection. They're probably too busy silencing their critics.

Though I haven't been back to Tsinghua for some time, I'm told the park remains largely unchanged. And silent.

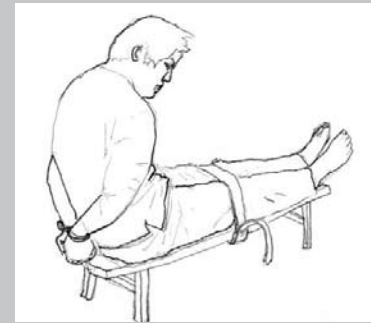
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Part II

Torture methods

Falun Gong practitioners have been subjected to all manner of torture methods that the communist regime has spent decades refining. Below are depicted just a few of these inhumane techniques.

Tiger bench



The practitioner is tied to a narrow wooden or iron bench. They suffer great pain as bricks are positioned under the feet causing the legs to be hyperextended.

Objects forced into fingers



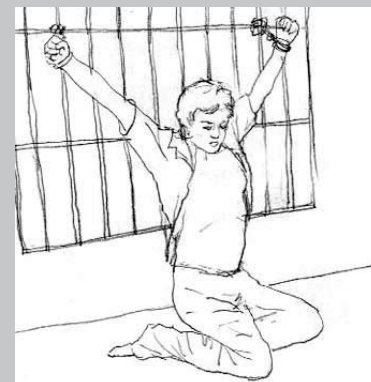
Objects such as bamboo sticks, needles, or nails are inserted, or hammered in, under the fingernails, or pierced through the fingertips.

Forced feeding



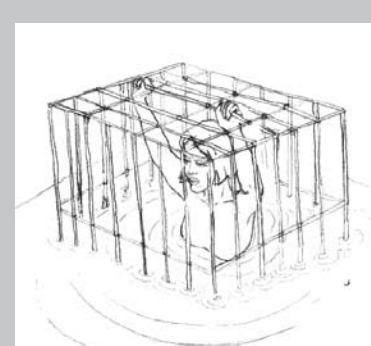
Unsanitary rubber tubes are shoved into a practitioners nose and down the stomach, often rupturing or damaging tissue; sometimes the tube enters the lungs. Detainees are often fed irritants such as highly concentrated salt water, hot pepper oil, boiling water, detergent, or even human feces.

Handcuffed and beaten



Practitioners are handcuffed to cell bars and then beaten. This often results in deep cuts on the wrists, and broken bones.

Water dungeon



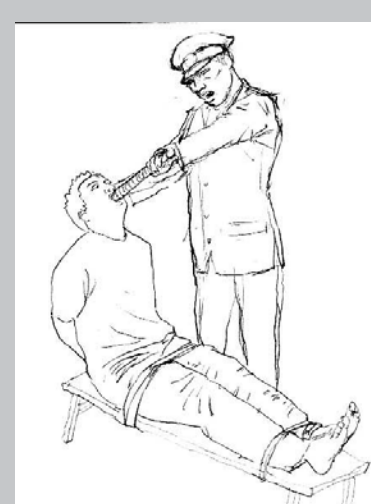
The practitioner is standing in a pool of filthy water while handcuffed to a wire cage for days on end.

Biting by animals



Practitioners are exposed to animals such as dogs, snakes, and insects that may cause physical harm.

Electric baton shocks



The practitioner is abused—sometimes over a few hours—by up to a dozen electric shocks to the face, including the eyes, genitals, nipples, and other sensitive body parts.

From Peking University to labour camp

By MARY SILVER

Epoch Times Staff

In July 2008, Beijing was rife with extremes—of pride and rage, of professed political stability and underlying social unrest.

Jin Min was pedaling a bicycle home along a street in Zhong Guan Cun—a busy and hustling area in Haidian District, Beijing, known as China's Silicon Valley. She and her husband had a small home there. It is where China's two most prestigious universities, Peking University and Tsinghua University, are located. To enter these two universities, one needs to score in the top 0.03 percentile among close to 10 million students who take the National College Entrance Examination. Jin Min graduated from Peking University with a degree in economics. Her husband studied architectural engineering at Tsinghua University.

Her eyes were filled with busy colors and images—of gigantic banners, slogans, balloons, and red icons, all professing national pride in hosting the Olympics. Her mind was on a different world beneath the surface of China's much vaunted "Peaceful Rise to Great Power Status."

From a letter smuggled out of Xin An Labor Camp and word of mouth from the Tian He Labor Camp, she had learned that some of her friends had been transferred out of Beijing. The labor camps had run out of space to hold the newly arrested Falun Gong practitioners.

To prepare for a "stable" Olympics, the Chinese Communist Party issued the order to "strike hard at hostile forces at home and abroad, such as ethnic separatists... and 'heretical organizations' like the Falun Gong."

The heavy-handed strike led to deaths. One of them was Min's Beida alumni, Yu Zhou, 42, a popular folk singer. Yu was arrested with his wife Xu Na, a poet and painter, on their way home from a performance by his band. Eleven days after their arrest, Yu died in

police custody.

Min was worried about her friends in the labor camps. She knew the "strike hard" also applied to those already incarcerated—increased torture and harsher treatment.

She knew it because she had been a prisoner before.

Jin Min was arrested in June 2001 with her husband when they were placing information pamphlets about Falun Gong in bicycle baskets in a residential area on Tsinghua Campus. Two plainclothes police caught them and took them to Zhong Guan Cun Police Station. The couple were asked to curse Falun Gong's founder and promise not to practice it any more. The police told them if they followed the order, they would be released. If not, they would be sentenced.

The couple refused. Both were sent to labor camps.

"Practicing Falun Gong is my right," Jin Min said. "I want freedom and don't want to be jailed. But what kind of freedom is it if you have to give up your unalienable rights for it?"

Min was sent to a women's labor camp and her husband was sent to a men's one. More than 90 percent of inmates in the labor camps were Falun Gong practitioners.

In her year and half of imprisonment, Jin Min experienced and witnessed various kinds of abuse: beating, electric shocks, slave labor, sleep deprivation, violent brainwashing, humiliation, and complete isolation from family.

She was up before dawn and made to work on disposable chopsticks until midnight. Three meager meals were served. The meal was usually a steamed bun with a bowl of soup—water with cabbage leaves. To get the meal, inmate were made to chant the following "My name is so and so. I am detained here because of my misconduct. Please give me some food."

Min also knitted luxury wool gloves. The guards told them, "Be careful of your work. These are

luxury products to be exported to Europe."

During the first six months of imprisonment, Jin Min's parents, both doctors of traditional Chinese medicine, had no information about where their daughter was. All they knew was she had been arrested as a Falun Gong practitioner. Having experienced and witnessed the torture and tragedies of the Cultural Revolution, when millions of intellectuals were persecuted to mental collapse and even to death, Jin Min's parents almost broke down.

They asked friends, colleagues, and acquaintances to help search for Jin Min. They spent money and effort to get to speak to Party officials - people whom they thought had the power to influence their daughter's fate. They spoke to a People's Congress Representative. The answer was the same—nothing can be done.

"We could save your daughter even if she were a criminal sentenced to death penalty. But since she is Falun Gong, we can do nothing about it. The handling of Falun Gong is beyond our control—they don't follow normal judicial process. It is directly handled by the 610 Office," one government official told Min's parents.

Established by the former Chinese Communist Party head Jiang Zemin, the 610 Office—named after the date of its creation on June 10, 1999—is an extrajudicial police task force responsible for carrying out the mission of eliminating Falun Gong.

Min was released from the labor camp on October 7, 2002.

After she was freed, she began to try to rescue her friends from the camp. Min contacted Li Heping, one of China's most prominent rights lawyers. Li took up some high-profile cases on behalf of victims of human rights abuses and pressed for accountability from the Party.

After phone conversations, Min realized her phone was tapped and noticed police cars parked at

her apartment building day and night.

She learned Li had been beaten, kidnapped, and placed under surveillance by the Public Security Bureau.

Urged by her parents to escape the great risk and danger in China, Jin Min arrived in Pittsburgh with her parents on April 23, 2009. She is now staying with her sister, also a medical doctor. She is on a visitor's visa, borrowed time. She is applying for asylum to stay in the safety of the U.S. Here she can freely practice Falun Gong exercises in a park without fear of being jailed.

The tale of Jin Min is one of many stories happening to millions of ordinary Chinese citizens. They want to lead a quiet and private life. Many distance themselves from politics, only to find themselves cast into an unavoidable battle with the world's largest and most deadly totalitarian regime.

Asked if she regretted foregoing freedom, fortune, and prosperity in China, Jing Min said, "No. What's the point of having 'prosperity' when you don't even have basic human rights?"

Dr. Frank Xie, a China expert who teaches at Drexel University's Business School said, "Min's answer filled a critical gap in the West in the past two decades - trade, investment and doing business with the Party will inevitably bring freedom and democracy to the Chinese people. Twenty years have passed, this inevitable result never happens - Chinese people are paying more for the fight of their rights. The ten-year persecution of Falun Gong is a perfect example."

Jin Min is continuing the fight for it, in the peaceful way characteristic of Falun Gong. She joined thousands of her fellow practitioners in Washington D.C. last weekend for a series of public events to commemorate ten years of sacrifice by Falun Gong.