



A Watershed Moment

■ **There are many** watershed moments in modern Chinese history. The May fourth movement of 1919, the Communist Party's defeat of the Nationalists, the Cultural Revolution, and the Tiananmen Square Massacre all come to mind.

The persecution of Falun Gong launched in 1999 is likewise one of these pivotal moments, one whose legacy continues to shape China's political, legal, and moral landscape to this day.

Expansion of the reeducation-through-labor system

In 1998, the official number of detainees in China's re-education-through-labor system was 230,000. After a single year of the campaign against Falun Gong, that number had swelled to 310,000.

By 2007, there were 400,000 people detained without due process in 310 RTL camps. And by 2012, official statistics indicated the number of camps had reached 351.

The expansion of the RTL system from 1999 onward is directly attributable to the campaign against Falun Gong. Numerous camps, including the Beijing Women's Labor Camp, were established in response to the campaign in order to accommodate a surging number of Falun Gong detainees, all of them imprisoned without due process.

A recent study by Amnesty International found that Falun Gong comprised between one third to 100 percent of detainees in specific camps. (The RTL system was officially disbanded in 2014, but prisons and black jails have taken its place).

Retrenchment in rule of law

Despite setbacks that followed the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre, Chinese leaders sought to professionalize the legal system and move toward rule of law throughout the 1990s.

In 1999 much of this progress was lost. Judicial authorities and lawyers were instructed that it was their "political duty" to "severely punish" Falun Gong adherents—irrespective of any considerations of guilt or innocence. The campaign marked the revival of state instrumentalism in the legal profession, whereby the courts were wielded by party authorities to serve policy, rather than legal, objectives.

By the mid-2000s, a small contingent of lawyers had begun advocating for Falun Gong and challenging the legal basis for the persecution. Authorities responded by issuing policy statements demanding that lawyers demonstrate loyalty to the party, lest they face disbarment or worse.

Since then, dozens of rights lawyers have been denied legal licenses, disbarred, beaten, or imprisoned. Many say it was due to their advocacy on behalf of Falun Gong.

Expansion of the domestic security apparatus

In order to coordinate the campaign against Falun Gong, the party established an extralegal, party-led security agency called the 610 Office. It operated in close coordination with the party's Political and Legislative Affairs Committee (PLAC)—a widely feared organization that commands the courts, police, and a variety of other state and party organs.

This domestic security apparatus ballooned since the persecution of Falun Gong began. In order to ensure the continuity of the campaign, outgoing party leader Jiang Zemin promoted the leader of the PLAC (and, by extension, the 610 Office) to sit on the nine-member Politburo Standing Committee. By hyping the Falun Gong “threat,” the security agencies under party control were able to greatly expand their power. Within a few years, the domestic security budget grew to exceed China's total declared military spending.

Advent of Internet censorship

The persecution of Falun Gong was China's first mass campaign in the Internet era. Fittingly, repression of the group became the driving force in China's censorship efforts. Buoyed by western companies who sold them surveillance and censorship equipment for the express purpose of catching Falun Gong, the state security apparatus honed their aggressive cyber tactics on Falun Gong before branching out into international deployment against governments and corporations.

In response, Falun Gong practitioners led the charge in developing the first major censorship circumvention tools, some of which remain the standard for dissidents around the world, playing an important role in movements as far afield as the Middle East and Africa.

"The government's campaign against the Falun Gong has required tens of thousands of these officials who presumably would otherwise be engaged in crime control, to be drawn into the task of not only monitoring, but controlling, the thoughts and beliefs of the country's citizens."

— *Amnesty International, December, 2013*

The moral choice

Falun Gong represented an alternative vision for China. Here was a group of people who valued the cultivation of virtue over money worship, who promoted harmony with nature; and self-reflection and moral rectitude as an alternative to crime and punishment.

In launching the persecution, the Party explicitly rejected this vision. Editorials denounced Falun Gong's values of truth, compassion and tolerance as having “nothing in common” with the materialist ethic of the Party. In refusing to permit such values, the Party did not simply choose to eliminate a popular meditation practice; it locked China in a culture consumed with materialism, the pursuit of profit, corruption, and a lack of collective values.

“According to former inmates, roughly half of Masanjia (labor camp)'s population is made up of Falun Gong practitioners or members of underground churches.”

“All agreed that the worst abuse was directed at Falun Gong members who refused to renounce their faith. ”

— *The New York Times: Behind Cry for Help From China Labor Camp, June 11, 2013*