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SINOSPHERE

Angry Claims and Furious Denials Over Organ Transplants in China

By Didi Kirsten Tatlow

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HONG KONG — Eyes flashing, lips curled in operatic scorn, a middle-aged woman holding a placard reading “Evil Cult Falun Gong!” ordered me off the sidewalk outside Hong Kong’s convention center, where organ transplant specialists from around the world were gathered.

“Go away!” she shouted. “You’re no good!”

My crime? After interviewing her as she stood with a group called the Anti-Cult Association, she had spotted me interviewing a woman at a competing demonstration of practitioners of Falun Gong, a meditation and exercise-based spiritual practice that the Chinese government outlawed as a cult in 1999, jailing many practitioners. The Anti-Cult Association says it is a civil society organization, but its aims closely reflect the Chinese government’s.

Falun Gong adherents say that after the movement was banned, many were blood-typed in detention, and thousands became a secret source of organs for human transplants. The Chinese government and the Anti-Cult Association, which, according to its website, promotes “Confucian thinking and science,” deny this.

A demonstrator protesting against Falun Gong, whose followers were holding their own rally (in the background) outside the Transplantation Society meeting in Hong Kong on Aug. 18. Bobby Yip/Reuters

The searing debate over forced organ extraction is not new. For about 15 years it has raged, between the Chinese government and its supporters and Falun Gong practitioners and investigators. But as hundreds of the world's leading transplant surgeons, including from China, gathered at the Transplantation Society's biennial meeting in Hong Kong this week and last, the issue seemed more explosive than ever — perhaps because the meeting was on Chinese soil for the first time, bringing the debate closer to home.

The accusations of forced organ extraction were "ridiculous," Huang Jiefu, a former deputy health minister who is in charge of overhauling China's organ donation system, said in a speech. The Chinese government says that it switched from a system dependent on executed prisoners to one based on voluntary, nonprisoner donations on Jan. 1, 2015.

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"I'm in stress," Dr. Huang said of the accusations. "I couldn't sleep well enough at night."

"There is wild speculation" of "100,000 transplants per year from executed prisoners in China," he added, possibly conflating the issues of using organs from prisoners convicted of capital crimes and organs from prisoners of conscience.

Some investigators and Falun Gong adherents say that their compiled data from individual hospitals shows at least 60,000 organ transplants a year, about six times the official total of about 10,000 last year, and that the difference is made up by forced organ extractions from prisoners of conscience.

In a cafe at the convention center, David Matas and David Kilgour, who first published a report on the issue in 2006, said they were familiar with the widespread skepticism, even hostility, not just from the Chinese government but from many outside China, including the news media. (An update to their book, "Bloody Harvest," this time with Ethan Gutmann, author of "The Slaughter," came out this year.)

The statistics cited by investigators and Falun Gong practitioners are overwhelming, they agreed. And, by definition, the victims are dead, and cannot speak.

"Nameless, voiceless," said Mr. Kilgour, a former member of the Canadian Parliament.

Many Falun Gong adherents have also alienated people with claims tinged with hysteria, a byproduct of the urgency of the topic and an "in-your-face" propagandistic style widespread in China, they said.

“The Falun Gong community, they don’t read the reports” of human rights organizations, said Mr. Matas, a rights lawyer. “They don’t talk the human rights language, and they’re disorganized. Everybody does what they want,” undercutting their credibility, he said.

What if, one day, the allegations were proved to be true, as accusations of Nazi genocide against the Jews were? How would the Chinese government deal with it then?

“Probably they would say this is an aberration, the responsibility of a few people,” Mr. Matas said.

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