

BITTER HARVEST

China's 'Organ Donation' Nightmare

Ethan Gutmann

When Wang Lijun made his break for the US consulate in Chengdu on the night of February 6th, he was in a unique position to reveal a series of damaging stories about his superior, Bo Xilai: Bo's familial connection to the suspected murder of British businessman Neil Heywood, siphoning of Chongqing's public funds, and shakedowns of local criminal and triad elements. As former head of the Chongqing Public Security Bureau, Wang also knew that Bo, as Chongqing party secretary, had engaged in surveillance of Politburo members, potentially implying that Bo and other players aligned with Jiang Zemin's faction—most prominently, Zhou Yongkang, secretary of the powerful Political and Legislative Affairs Committee (PLAC)—were thinking about seizing power. Faced with the complexity of China's leadership transition crisis, most Western editors played up the *Sopranos* aspect of the sordid tale, fixing on the alleged Heywood murder, essentially the same interpretation being relentlessly pushed by the Chinese Communist Party-controlled media, and allowed an even more sinister story to slip by virtually unnoticed. On March 23rd, China's vice minister of health, Huang Jiefu, publicly declared the country's intention

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to end “organ donations” from executed prisoners. Yet the euphemism didn’t conceal the reality, for on the night of February 6th, Wang was in a unique position to reveal one more story—specifically, how the party has

been harvesting the organs of their political enemies for years.

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Wang’s rise, paralleling that of his patron Bo Xilai, goes back to the early years of the last decade and the northeastern Chinese province of Liaoning. As governor there, Bo gained a reputation for decisive, ruthless leadership, a standard route to the Politburo. As his protégé, Wang directed the Public Security

Bureau of Jinzhou and ran a medical entity, opaquely identified as the “Jinzhou City Public Security Bureau On-site Psychological Research Center.” It was here, according to an official Chinese account of a medical innovation award ceremony held in 2006, that Wang oversaw “several thousand intensive on-site cases” of organ transplantation.

These were not relatives sparing an extra kidney for a loved one. It was surgery to remove any physical part that carried retail potential from individuals selected by the state. Transplanted into new recipients, foreign and Chinese alike, a kidney could go for \$60,000, a liver \$90,000, with hearts, lungs, and corneas fetching what might be termed a seasonal price. Judging by the photographs in which he is shown clad in scrubs, lecturing surgeons while a patient lies on a gurney, Wang was a hands-on manager. In his acceptance speech, Wang explained that he found the act of transplant followed by lethal injection to be “soul stirring.”

Who were the victims of this “surgical procedure”? The 2006 account sheds no light on this question, but it’s no longer a fool’s errand to try to answer it. Cumulative evidence has been building for six years and the first medical witnesses have recently forsaken the anonymity of their exile to speak about the organ industry in their former homeland. In February 2012, the World Organization to Investigate the Persecution of Falun

Gong (WOIPFG) found the Wang awards ceremony hidden in plain sight on multiple Chinese websites and has just revealed a new investigation into the harvesting of prisoners of conscience that sheds light on the Politburo's culpability as a central player. To fully understand the party's vulnerability to these charges, it is necessary to briefly trace the development of organ harvesting over the last three decades.

According to extensive documentation compiled by Harry Wu, the preeminent dissident scholar of China's labor camps, and the Laogai Research Foundation, the Chinese state began harvesting the organs of death-row criminals—those charged with murder, rape, and other capital crimes—on an ad hoc basis in the early 1980s. It was a simple procedure: a legal execution was followed by a military doctor harvesting the kidneys, often in makeshift conditions. By the early 1990s, according to my interviews with medical personnel, the infrastructure evolved and these procedures became widespread. One doctor, who spoke anonymously because he still practices in China, vividly described a scene in 1992—an execution ground near the city of Guangzhou filled with specialized white vans from every major hospital in the region. Confined to the medical van, his surgical task, to remove the liver and the kidneys from a man who had just been executed by a shot through the heart, was technically simple but emotionally complicated by the mark of a wire around the man's neck, indicating that the police had forcibly prevented this particular man from speaking up in court.

In 1994, Nijat Abudureyimu was a policeman in a specialized Xinjiang unit that focused on political prisoners. His first hint that the routine procedure of harvesting had begun a macabre evolution came from a fellow policeman, who happened to overhear screams coming from one of the harvesting vans. A Uighur surgeon from the same region, Dr. Enver Tohti, recalls an execution ground in 1995: a prisoner shot in the chest, not to kill, but to send the body into deep shock, minimizing the squirming and contractions that could make harvesting problematic. Under his supervisor's watchful eye, Tohti performed a live surgical extraction of the man's liver and kidneys. Tohti's account was confirmed by Abudureyimu's discussions with his unit's head surgeon in 1996. In short, live organ harvesting was pioneered by 1994 and was a significant medical practice

throughout at least one Chinese province by 1996.

Following the Ghulja Incident of 1997—a Muslim demonstration followed by a massive government crackdown throughout Xinjiang—a Uighur nurse, who also spoke anonymously but has agreed to testify before the US Congress if ever called, claims that, along with euthanizing of Uighur babies, the first harvesting of organs from a Uighur political demonstrator occurred about six months following the crackdown. That timing matches the interview with a young doctor (who has also agreed to testify) who was ordered to begin blood-testing prisoners in the political wing of an Urumqi prison on behalf of highly placed party officials in search of viable organs. These political prisoners were not on death row, so a major legal and ethical barrier had quietly been breached. According to the young doctor, in 1998 the practice of harvesting organs from political prisoners accelerated, with military hospitals leading the way. Then the trail goes cold, and witness testimony or documentation referring to harvesting from prisoners of conscience disappears for several years.

Through the efforts of two Canadian human rights lawyers, David Kilgour and David Matas, WOIPFG, and my extensive interviews with refugees—former prisoners, labor-camp personnel, and security insiders—we can collectively reconstruct the next decade of organ harvesting in detail.

In July 1999, state security launched a full-scale crackdown on the seventy-million-strong Buddhist revival movement known as Falun Gong. While the group was expected to be eliminated in only three months, its members' nonviolent resistance to "transformation"—being forced to publicly denounce the organization's spiritual practice—was far greater than expected. The network of detention centers, labor camps, psychiatric centers, and "black jails" constituting the "Laogai System" contained a total of three to five million people; by the end of 2000, Falun Gong, very briefly, made up almost half of the detainees. Falun Gong would decrease to fifteen to twenty percent of all inmates (approximately half a million to a million Falun Gong at any given time), but only after the party authorized the use of extreme measures—torture, force-feeding, systematic rape, destruction of families, liberal application of psychoactive drugs, and a number of outright murders. The assault gave birth to a new Falun Gong archetype: the hard-core "non-transformable," many of whom refused to surrender their names to the authorities. Approximately fifteen percent of all incarcerated Falun Gong fell into this category.

In the autumn of 2001, party concern over creating too many public martyrs overcame remaining inhibitions and military doctors were deployed to examine Falun Gong prisoners with a special emphasis on retail organs, such as corneas. With even less pretense given to the appearance of

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conducting comprehensive physicals, organ testing on a mass scale, including on a presently unknown number of Tibetans and House Christian sects such as “Eastern Lightning,” began in autumn 2002.

The Canadian human rights activists Kilgour and Matas observe that Falun

Gong representation in the Laogai System matches accelerating transplant numbers in China. These numbers in turn show that more than forty thousand more organs were harvested by 2005 than ordinary criminals executed. According to my own interviews with “non-transformable” refugees, from 2000 to 2007, approximately sixty-five thousand Falun Gong went under the knife.

Whether Falun Gong organ harvesting continued past 2007 or expanded into the House Christian community is still being discussed. But there is widespread agreement that Falun Gong harvesting peaked in 2006 or 2007, after public exposure from WOIPFG and *Epoch Times*, and the subsequent Kilgour-Matas report, forced a premature closeout. There may be another factor; a respected Taiwanese surgeon confessed to me, with raw angst, that his aging Taiwanese patients were regular recipients of Falun Gong organs on the mainland and that his mainland colleagues had informed him that the practice of killing Falun Gong for their organs would be put on hold during the Beijing Olympics.

To return to Wang Lijun’s award ceremony in 2006: Were the operations for which he was honored performed while the donor was still alive? Given the timing and the emphasis on preventing rejection by the new hosts, the likely answer is yes, although Wang appears to have preferred a lethal-injection method to finish things off. Were the operations performed exclusively on death-row prisoners—murderers, rapists, and the like—as the Chinese claimed in their March announcement? Given the

context, that's extremely unlikely; refugees from the Laogai System have consistently pointed to Liaoning Province, including locations such as Yida, Sujiatun, and in particular Dalian, as the epicenter of Falun Gong harvesting. It is also germane that both Bo and Wang built a large measure of their political power on the repression of Falun Gong—as did Politburo Standing Committee member Zhou Yongkang.

Four years ago, WOIPFG volunteers posing as party investigators called top Chinese officials in an attempt to confirm Falun Gong harvesting. Severely hampered by not having access to a secure line and operating without the shield of an actual official inquiry, it was the investigative equivalent of a crank call, and WOIPFG received only passive confirmation. Every official contacted eventually realized that it was wildly inappropriate to be discussing harvesting on an unsecured line with a potential imposter.

In April 2012, WOIPFG tried again—and the tone changed. One investigator, posing as a PLAC functionary, led Li Changchun, Politburo member and China's propaganda point man, into a discussion of using "Bo Xilai's involvement in murdering and removing organs from Falun Gong practitioners to convict Bo, right at this time." Li responded: "Zhou Yongkang is in charge of this specifically. He knows it."

The investigator also poses as a "Special Team" member "for the Bo Xilai case within the Committee for Disciplinary Inspection" when speaking with Tang Junjie, former PLAC secretary of Liaoning Province. Asked point-blank, "What kind of directions did Bo give regarding removing organs from Falun Gong practitioners?" Tang replies: "I was asked to take care of this task. Party central is actually taking care of this. The impact was quite big after the union. He [Bo] was involved quite positively, yeah it seemed quite positive. At that time we mainly talked about it during the meetings within the Standing Committee." After implicating himself, the Politburo, Bo, and the Liaoning Standing Committee, Tang then panics—"Where are you located? The fact that you are asking me about this is a bit... Where are you from?"—and hangs up.

After Wang Lijun made it into the US consulate, Bo Xilai, having traced the cell phone that Wang Lijun carelessly brought along, surrounded the consulate with police cars (according to unconfirmed reports, Bo

also attempted to mobilize armored fighting vehicles, as a further demonstration of his power). On March 15th, Bo was fired from his Chongqing post. Four days later, the Chinese microblogs were rife with rumors of police movements and armored vehicles on the streets in Beijing. The following day, certain blocked Web searches suddenly became available on the search engine Baidu—most notably those pertaining to the phrase “live harvest” and “Wang Lijun live harvest.” Three days later, Huang Jiefu, China’s vice minister of health, made his anodyne public declaration of intent to end organ donations from executed prisoners within three to five years.

In fact, the Chinese medical establishment had floated the general approach in the November 2011 issue of the *Lancet*. The article, titled “A Pilot Programme of Organ Donation after Cardiac Death in China,” reads as a maddeningly vague apologia for China’s unethical transplant environment (prisoners of conscience are never mentioned), a series of promissory notes to do better, and some baseline harvesting figures. Rather than a genuine tabulation, the numbers were clearly improvised to show a dramatic diminishing of prisoners being harvested as a percentage of transplants. Predictably, the authors preemptively reject any independent verification by foreign medical observers.

On March 23rd, when the admission was made about “organ donation,” that taboo held: there was no mention of political and religious prisoners, not in the Chinese state press, not even in the Western free press. Everyone understands which lines can be crossed and which cannot. And the penalty is clear: Beijing recently booted Al Jazeera English out of the country for investigating labor camps.

The default interpretation of these events is that the Communist Party has made a collective decision to sponge away organ harvesting and bury any remaining evidence of what has occurred over the last fifteen years with an opaque announcement that something that had never before been fully acknowledged is now being stopped. That shift is driven by fear. The lesser fear is that China’s global medical ambitions will be tainted, particularly in the lucrative pharmaceutical and medical testing industry. The greater fear—exacerbated by WOIPFG’s release of the Wang documents on February 15th—is that the party’s historic crime will be laid bare before the world, and worse, before the Chinese people, upending the leadership transition. For the long-term survival of the party then, the harvesting issue must be closed. All the factors are in place: a pseudo airing of the issue that avoids the main subject (in this case, the *Lancet* article

and Huang's declaration), a truncated game of chicken between factions (played out with armored vehicles and on the Internet), a couple of scapegoats (Bo, Wang, and potentially Zhou) to deflect responsibility from the party leadership as a whole, and, waiting in the wings, the architect of the Falun Gong repression, presently dying and ready to absorb any excess guilt (in the standard formulation, Jiang Zemin could be declared to be seventy percent right and thirty percent wrong).

Yet there is a Chinese dissident group that favors a different, more positive interpretation. Their evidence is Premier Wen Jiabao's consistent exhortations to reform the party, to turn China toward a democratic path, and to sincerely apologize for the party's mistakes. Outsiders might see this as ineffectual posturing, but insiders read it—particularly the apologies—as a meaningful wink: Wen knows the full extent of party crimes and is prepared to prosecute.

The group that believes this, oddly enough, is Falun Gong. When Huang Jiefu made his March statement about organ transplants, euphoria swept through the Falun Gong community. Among those who have relatives, friends, and comrades incarcerated throughout China, it was hoped, and fervently desired, that Beijing's decision to air the issue would ultimately lead to a full reckoning of the history of organ harvesting.

Wen and individual Chinese doctors, such as Huang, may be sincere in their desire to reform the system. Yet a few good intentions cannot sponge away history, or its implications for the party. Respected Western medical journals may be too polite or simply too naive to reject a laughable attempt at obfuscation propaganda. But there are people—in and out of China—who know that a crime against humanity has occurred and that the full truth must out. ☉