

WEEK 8, 2023

THE EPOCH TIMES

CHINA INSIDER

A Chinese spy
balloon flies over
Billings, Mont., on
Feb. 1, 2023.



INSIDE CHINA'S MILITARY BALLOON PROGRAM

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RYAN SEELBACH/U.S. NAVY/HANDOUT VIA REUTERS



U.S. Navy sailors sort material recovered in the Atlantic Ocean from a Chinese spy balloon shot down by the U.S. Air Force off the coast of South Carolina, on Feb. 10, 2023.

CHINESE REGIME

'Silent Killer'

Inside China's Military Balloon Program

EVA FU

Years before a gigantic white spy balloon from China captured America's attention, a top Chinese aerospace scientist was keenly tracking the path of an unmanned airship making its way across the globe.

On a real-time map, the white blimp appeared as a blinking red dot, although in real life its size was formidable, weighing several tons and measuring 328 feet (100 meters) in length—about 80 feet longer than a Boeing 747-8, one of the largest passenger aircraft in the world.

"Look, here's America," the vessel's chief architect, Wu Zhe, told the state-run newspaper Nanfang Daily. He excitedly pointed to a red line marking the airship's journey at about 65,000 feet in the air, noting that in 2019, that flight was setting a world record.

Named "Cloud Chaser," the airship had been flying for just shy of a month over three oceans and three continents, including what appears to be Florida. At the time of Wu's interview in August, the airship was hovering above the Pacific Ocean, days away from completing its mission.

Wu, a veteran aerospace researcher, has played a key role in advancing the Chinese regime in what it describes as the "near space" race, referring to the layer of the atmosphere sitting between 12 and 62 miles above the earth. This region, which is too high for jets but too low for satellites, had been deemed ripe for exploitation in the regime's bid to achieve military dominance.

Despite having existed for decades, the regime's military balloon program came into the spotlight recently when the United States shot down a high-altitude surveillance balloon that drifted across the country for a week and hovered above multiple sensitive U.S. military sites. That balloon, the size of three buses, was smaller than Cloud Chaser.

The U.S. and Canadian militaries have since taken down three flying objects over North American airspace, although President Joe Biden on Feb. 16 said those are likely linked to private companies.

Wu is turning 66 this month. He has ties to at least four of the six Chinese entities Washington recently sanctioned for supporting Beijing's sprawling military balloon program, which the U.S. administration said has reached over 40 countries on five continents.

As a specialist in aircraft design, Wu has helped develop the Chinese regime's homegrown fighter jets and stealth tech-

Democratic countries are bound by law from infringing other nations' airspace.

Su Tze-yun, director, Institute for National Defense and Security Research



"If you're flying a balloon that is 100,000 feet up in the air, you've got... visibility on the ground of hundreds and hundreds of miles over several states, because it's up so high," said Art Thompson, co-founder of California aerospace company Sage Cheshire Aerospace.

SAMIRA BOUADOU/THE EPOCH TIMES

nology during his more than three decades in the aerospace field, taking home at least one award for his contribution to the military.

He was the vice president at Beihang University in Beijing, a prestigious state-run aeronautics school, until he voluntarily gave up the title for teaching and research in 2004, and he once served on the scientific advisory committee for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) General Armaments Department, a now-dissolved agency in charge of equipping the Chinese military.

Public records show that Wu is well-connected in the aerospace field, with stakes in many aviation firms. He is the chairman of Beijing-based Eagles Men Aviation Science, one of the six firms that, along with its branch in Shanxi, Washington has named as culprits in the balloon sanctions.

Both Beihang and the Harbin Institute of Technology, Wu's alma mater and dubbed "China's MIT," are on a U.S. trade blacklist, the former for aiding China's military rocket and unmanned air vehicle systems, and the latter for using U.S. technology to support Chinese missile programs.

'Silent Killer'

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has long vied for dominance in near space, which Chinese scientists see as a region for a variety of applications, from high-altitude balloons to hypersonic missiles.

From high above, there's a wealth of information that an aerostat, equipped with an electronic surveillance system, can intercept and turn into an intelligence asset.

"If you're flying a balloon that is 100,000 feet up in the air, you've got... visibility on the ground of hundreds and hundreds of miles over several states, because it's up so high," said Art Thompson, co-founder of California aerospace company Sage Cheshire Aerospace. During his three decades in the aerospace industry, Thompson has worked on the B-2 stealth bomber and was technical director for the Red Bull Stratos project that broke the record for the highest balloon flight and the largest manned balloon.

"Whether it's phone data, radio data, transmissions from aircraft, as to what the airplanes are, who owns it, all that data is available," Thompson said.

As early as the 1970s, efforts were underway at the state-run Chinese Academy of Sciences to explore high-altitude balloons, according to a state media report. Lacking

the aid of computers, Chinese researchers drew inspiration from German and Japanese aerospace books and cut up newspapers to piece together prototypes.

The result was a helium balloon with an aluminum basket, altogether about the size of a typical hot air balloon. The team triumphantly named it HAPI and flew it into the stratosphere in 1983 to observe signals from a neutron star.

For the Chinese military, there's high strategic value in aerostats, a technology that was in use as early as the late 1700s by the French as lookouts. Compared to airplanes or satellites, balloons are cheaper and easier to maneuver, can carry heavier payloads and cover a wider area, and are harder to detect, two regular columnists wrote in a 2021 article for PLA Daily, the Chinese military's official newspaper. They consume less energy, allowing them to loiter in a target area for an extended period.

And critically, they are often not caught by radars, so they can easily evade an enemy's air defense system or be classified as UFOs. Indeed, that appears to have occurred. Biden administration officials said they were able to retroactively detect three Chinese spy balloons that traveled over the United States during the Trump administration, and another after Biden took office.

Both Taiwan and Japan have since identified several suspected Chinese balloon incursions in recent years and are now threatening to shoot down any suspected objects in their airspace.

Chinese military researchers have also touted the utility of these balloons during combat. Newspaper articles and research papers have pored over balloons' potential to screen for missiles, planes, and warships in lower space, serve as a medium for wartime communications, drop weapons to attack enemies, conduct electromagnetic interference, and deliver food or military supplies over a long distance.

"In the future, balloon platforms may become like submarines in the deep sea: a silent killer that invokes terror," the Chinese military columnists wrote in the PLA Daily article.

Such statements are not hyperbolic, according to Thompson. Paradoxically, the slow pace of a balloon, when used well, is in fact its strength.

"It's virtually invisible on radar," said Thompson. While people may be concerned about an intercontinental missile flying over, which would take several minutes, a balloon could transport one dis-

creetly without being detected.

"Now when you decide to release that missile, it doesn't take several minutes—it takes only a matter of seconds," he added. "We can't respond fast enough... It would hit us before we'd know what happened."

"It's a scary scenario. It's funny that one of the oldest technologies is potentially also very dangerous."

A Thriving Industry

Chinese scientists have made great strides in near-space technology since HAPI's launch. In 2017, they sent a yellow-spotted river turtle 68,900 feet over the northwestern Xinjiang region, marking the first time an aerostat was able to bring a live animal into the stratosphere.

The following year, a high-altitude balloon dropped three hypersonic missiles in the Gobi Desert in Inner Mongolia. Last year, a balloon brought a rocket more than 82,000 feet above the earth, making China the first country experimenting with such techniques, according to state media reports.

While the Chinese regime claimed the spy balloon was a civilian airship used for meteorological purposes, meteorological officials in China have a history of collaboration with the military.

Meteorological officials under the PLA in 2013 coordinated with local meteorological bureaus to host a three-city military drill, according to state media outlet Xinhua. Such cooperation appeared to have deepened in the following years after CCP leader Xi Jinping ordered a major overhaul of the military. In 2017, the director of the China Meteorological Administration, the country's national weather service, met with officials in the military and vowed to make a priority of "military-civil fusion," a term for the regime's aggressive national strategy to harness private sector innovations for military use.

The manufacturing of balloons has also flourished in the meantime.

Zhuzhou Rubber Research & Design Institute in China's south-central Hunan Province, a subsidiary of state agrochemical giant ChemChina—which is on a U.S. blacklist over its ties to the military—is a dedicated supplier for the national weather bureau, producing three-quarters of the balloons it uses in nationwide weather stations, according to state media reports.

The company, sometimes described as a "made-in-China hidden champion," was millions in debt in the early 2000s until it entered the balloon manufacturing game. It went on to become a leader in the industry, playing a chief role in formulating China's national standard for weather balloons, and has around 30 patents under its name, a local government website shows.

In September 2017, Zhuzhou Rubber invested 30 million yuan (\$4.38 million) in a key provincial-level lab for near-space sounding balloon research that it said aims to provide "security for national defenses on the near space front."

It won a proclamation from the PLA's General Armaments Department for designing a balloon for the return of Chang'e 5, the spacecraft used for China's fifth lunar exploration mission, which was undertaken in 2020.

In March 2022, the China Ordnance Industry Experiment and Testing Institute—whose parent company, state-owned Norinco, is a major weapons producer for the Chinese military—inquired into prices for obtaining hundreds of sounding balloons from the firm, according to a tender



China tested hypersonic glide vehicles dropped from a balloon in 2018, according to Chinese state broadcaster CCTV.

bid on a Hunan provincial government site. It is unclear whether the institute made a bid after the tender.

The company's website has become inaccessible since the recent spy balloon incident.

For the Chinese, these balloons are inexpensive tools for testing components for military equipment, Thompson said.

"They may be looking at as a particular piece of electronics that they want to put in a missile: is it going to hold up to the temperatures and altitude, or is it going to transmit," he said. "So they might take that component that later is going to go on a piece of weaponry, and fly it to the altitude under a balloon to see how it handles it."

'China Speed'

Zhuzhou Rubber is but one player in the field. Dongguan Lingkong Remote Sensing Technology has claimed dozens of patents related to stratospheric aircraft, including a maneuverable stratospheric balloon and lightweight high-strength aerostat material. Wu is the statutory auditor of Dongguan Lingkong and the director of Beihang University's Dongguan city research institute, which owns the company.

China Electronics Technology Group Corp. (CETC), a massive state-owned enterprise whose 48th research institute was hit with U.S. sanctions in the aftermath of the balloon incident, once credited itself for helping China bridge the technological gap in aerostats.

In 2010, the company showcased a large white blimp. Through its high-definition surveillance gear that scans the ground nonstop, it could spot details of objects as small as a book over an area of more than a hundred square miles, according to a Chinese state media report republished on the State Administration of Science website.

Their latest, the JY-400 balloon that CETC's 38th research institute unveiled in 2021, can meet both civilian and military needs, with the capacity to carry payloads for detecting missiles and eavesdropping on and interfering with communications, Chinese media reports said. The reports cited Russian media expressing surprise at seeing their country outcompeted by China at a breathtaking pace, dubbing it "China speed."

Thompson was struck by the JY-400 balloon's visual resemblance to a U.S. military design, called the "Joint Land Attack Cruise

Missile Defense Elevated Netted Sensor System."

That system was an Army program designed in 1998 by Raytheon that provides 360-degree surveillance to track low-flying cruise missiles, unmanned aircraft, and other threats. The dirigible had a synthetic aperture radar attached to its bottom. The U.S. Army began investing in it in the 2010s but ultimately discontinued funding in 2017, two years after one of the program's two blimps broke loose and caused massive power outages in Pennsylvania.

Putting the two side by side, "you'd think they're made by the same company," Thompson said, noting that the only difference is one has the Chinese writing on it.

Thompson said it's possible that the Chinese copied the designs of U.S. airships and adjusted certain parts, like the materials and size, to suit its needs.

Raytheon and CETC didn't immediately respond to queries from The Epoch Times.

Wu's Cloud Chaser airship was launched near Hainan, the island province that lies in the southern tip of China that U.S. officials have identified as a base for the Chinese surveillance balloon operations.

Considering China's vast espionage program, those sanctioned by the United States represent only the "tip of the iceberg," said Su Tze-yun, director of the Institute for National Defense and Security Research in Taiwan.

But challenges abound for Western nations seeking to blunt the covert operation. The regime, as Su noted, could easily use front companies as a cover to steal or import Western technologies while attracting little notice.

Under the civil-military fusion strategy, every private company could be indirectly supporting the regime's military development, making it harder to draw the line and impose punishment. But that at least heightens the need to block Chinese entities from acquiring U.S. firms, he said.

While Western countries are also developing balloon technology, what differentiates the actions is China's authoritarianism, according to Su.

"Democratic countries are bound by law from infringing other nations' airspace," he told The Epoch Times. "This is why the same technology, once it's in the hands of the Chinese Communist Party, would become a threat."

Luo Ya and Dorothy Li contributed to this report.

FB/HANDOUT VIA REUTERS



Courtesy of the FBI

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

European Human Rights Court Rules Russia's Ban on Falun Gong Materials Is Illegal

EVA FU

Russia's ban on materials relating to the spiritual practice Falun Gong is unlawful, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has ruled.

The ECHR stated in its Jan. 31 ruling that Russia's ban—imposed on four Falun Gong informational materials, including the practice's main book, "Zhuan Falun"—violated the freedom of expression protection in the European Convention on Human Rights, "interpreted in the light of" the right of religious freedom that's also in the charter.

The ban was issued in August 2008 at the time of the Beijing Summer Olympics. A district court in Krasnodar in southwestern Russia designated certain materials related to the spiritual practice—"Zhuan Falun"; two pamphlets that introduced the practice and promote a worldwide Olympic torch protest meant to highlight Beijing's human rights abuses targeting the faith; and an investigative report on the Chinese regime's state-led forced organ harvesting—as "extremist."

Forced organ harvesting is part of an expansive persecution campaign, perpetrated since 1999 by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), that's aimed at eradicating Falun Gong.

The spiritual practice involves a set of moral teachings explained in "Zhuan Falun," with truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance as its core principles, as well as five meditative exercises. By 1999, an estimated 70 million to 100 million people were practicing Falun Gong. Viewing the practice's popularity as a threat to the Party's power, then-leader Jiang Zemin ordered a brutal nationwide campaign of suppression that continues to today.

The Russian ban on publishing and disseminating the Falun Gong materials "amounts to 'interference by a public authority' with the applicants' right to freedom of expression," the ECHR ruled, in response to a complaint filed by two Russian nationals, Mikhail Vladimirovich Sinitsyn and Sergey Nikolayevich Alekhin, both of whom are Falun Gong adherents.

The court found that Russian legal authorities, in their 2008 decision and subsequent hearings, didn't conduct a legal analysis of the publications' texts and

didn't substantiate the claimed harms of disseminating the materials.

The Russian courts "failed to assess the necessity of banning the publications with regard to the context in which they were published, their nature and wording, and their possible harmful effect," the Jan. 31 judgment stated.

"Moreover, the courts did not even mention, let alone discuss at any length, the effect of the ban on the applicants' rights under Articles 9 and 10 of the Convention ... thus failing to weigh their rights against the public interest," it added, citing the sections protecting freedom of expression and speech.

The ECHR ordered Russian authorities to pay the two plaintiffs 7,500 euros (\$7,984) each as compensation and a combined 3,096 euros (\$3,296) for any costs and expenses related to the case, along with any applicable taxes.

Russia withdrew from the Council of Europe—the continent's leading human rights watchdog, which includes the ECHR—in mid-March last year amid the Ukraine war and has refused to comply with any of the European human rights court's judgments issued afterward. It officially ceased being part of the European Convention on Human Rights in September.

We recognize Moscow is not the CCP and still think Russian authorities can right their course and not do the CCP's bidding in suppressing religious freedom.

Levi Browde, executive director, Falun Dafa Information Center

However, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers stated that it would consider all applications filed before Russia's official withdrawal from the human rights body and monitor the implementation of its decisions. The complaint at issue was filed in 2012, well before Russia's departure.

Levi Browde, executive director of the Falun Dafa Information Center, welcomed the European court decision, adding that he hopes to "remind the Russian authorities that it never works out to collaborate with the CCP."



The European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, eastern France, on Feb. 7, 2019.



Falun Dafa practitioners demonstrate its exercises in Kislovodsk, Russia, on Sept. 15, 2019.

"However, we recognize Moscow is not the CCP and still think Russian authorities can right their course and not do the CCP's bidding in suppressing religious freedom," he told The Epoch Times.

David Matas, a Canadian human rights lawyer and co-author of the report that was banned by the Russian court, said the ruling reflects the governance model of Russia and China, where citizens are entitled to freedom of speech in name only.

At the time of the initial Russia court judgment 15 years ago, Matas had wondered why the Russian authorities "would engage in such a travesty," since the accusation was "so far off the mark."

"Birds of a feather stick together," he told The Epoch Times in an email. "What the government of Russia has to offer the government of China is repression in Russia of reports of gross violation of human rights in China," in particular "the report of the mass killing of practitioners of Falun Gong for their organs."

While he doubts that Russia will abide by the ruling, Matas described the European court judgment as "a voice of sanity in the face of Russian and Chinese governmental madness."

"One can only hope that the voice will resonate," he said.

The restrictive environment in Russia has been a point of U.S. concern. In July 2021, after a Russian court upheld a ban on the Khakassia regional branch of Falun Gong, the State Department issued a statement expressing deep concerns over the act of repression.

"Russian authorities harass, fine, and imprison Falun Gong practitioners for such simple acts as meditating and possessing spiritual texts," department spokesman Ned Price said. "We urge the Russian government to end its practice of misusing the 'extremist' designation as a way to restrict human rights and fundamental freedoms."

"We continue to call on Russia to respect the right of freedom of religion or belief for all, including Falun Gong practitioners and members of other religious minority groups in Russia simply seeking to exercise their beliefs peacefully."

In Russia, Falun Gong adherents continue to face pressure for adhering to their beliefs.

In November 2022, the city prosecutor's office in central Russia's Mezhdurechensk filed a lawsuit seeking to ban several Falun Gong publications. The court ruled in favor of the adherents in December, but prosecutors appealed on Feb. 2. A hearing at the Kemerovo Regional Court is scheduled for March 2.



People walk down a street next to a local market in Wuhan, in China's central Hubei Province, on Jan. 23, 2023.

OPINION

Large-Scale Protests in Wuhan Pose Unprecedented Threat to the CCP

ZHANG TIANLIANG

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has now entered a period of instability.

On Feb. 15, about 20,000 senior citizens gathered outside Zhongshan Park in Wuhan to protest against the CCP's "health care reform." This was the second mass gathering of seniors in the city. The first protest occurred on Feb. 8. One elderly man was beaten to the ground when the authorities arrived to block the road. Protesters chanted, "Down with the oppressive government."

Another large-scale protest against "health care reform" took place in Dalian city, Liaoning Province.

It seems the people now have more courage to stand up to China's dictatorship. Last year's "white paper movement" forced CCP leader Xi Jinping to abandon his zero-COVID policy. From New Year's Day to the Chinese New Year (Jan. 22 to Feb. 1), people all over the country completely ignored the CCP's ban on fireworks, and the CCP's police couldn't do anything about it.

One detail that many people have overlooked is that the Feb. 15 protest was scheduled on Feb. 8 and publicly announced online. The CCP had a full week to prepare and suppress the protest, but the number of protesters was still double that of Feb. 8's protest.

As early as 1998, former CCP leader Jiang Zemin came up with the policy of "nipping all instabilities in the bud." This policy has been enforced for more than 20 years. But why did it fail this time? Let me start with a brief introduction to "health care reform," and then explain why this puts the CCP in a dilemma.

The protests started when the retirees found that the monthly deposit in their public health care accounts had been cut by about two-thirds. The explanation from Beijing was that the money had been diverted into a pool, meaning that those in need could reimburse a portion of their medical expenses from this pool, which amounts to the government managing the money for them. While this may sound like a good idea, in reality, the Chinese public harbors a deep distrust of the regime.

According to Voice of America, although China's GDP is the second largest in the world, its social security spending is only about 3 percent of its GDP, which is the lowest in the world. The elite, including senior officials at the provincial level and above, reportedly account for about 80 percent of health care spending, without making any contributions.

The protests started when the retirees found that the monthly deposit in their public health care accounts had been cut by about two-thirds.

This results in serious inequalities in health care resources between the government and the people, especially the rural population, who received nearly no benefit from this health care system.

Thus, China's medical insurance is not about "robbing the rich to help the poor," but "robbing the poor to help the rich." The public believes that once their money enters the pool, it will most likely be misappropriated by the CCP's top cadres, so it's better to keep it in their own accounts and available at their own disposal.

Why is the CCP carrying out "health care reform" at this time?

It's possible that local governments are running out of money. According to a Feb. 15 Reuters report, Chinese provinces spent at least 352 billion yuan (about \$51 billion) in 2022 to deal with the recent wave of COVID-19 infections, increasing the pressure on provincial finances amid the economic slowdown.

China's local finances are now riddled with holes. The zero-COVID policy, including lockdowns, has depleted local government savings. The economic downturn has caused China's real estate market to wither, and the property sector is the most important source of local revenue. Local debts at all levels have come to 65 trillion yuan (about \$9 trillion)—far beyond the ability of local governments to repay.

All these heavy financial pressures have forced local government officials to take pay cuts ranging from 20 percent to 40 percent. At the same time, local governments are required to share about half of the cost of health care coverage with the central government. Therefore, local governments have no choice but to cut health care spending.

It's surprising that the Feb. 15 protest, announced a week in advance, was not suppressed by local authorities. This is also related to the depletion of local

finances. The CCP's "stability maintenance forces" (police, intelligence, public opinion monitoring, grassroots organizations at all levels, and so on) spend more in a year than the military, and 90 percent of this spending is borne by local coffers. When there is no money in the local treasury, the stability maintenance force is also weakened. Moreover, the parents of these police officers are also the victims of this "health care reform."

The CCP has been hoping to exchange economic development for popular support. But as the macroeconomic situation deteriorates, the CCP is rapidly losing the support of the people. Protests like the one in Wuhan will become more and more frequent in the future.

The Wuhan protests pose an unprecedented threat to the CCP and put it in a dilemma. The cost of repression is too high, as the "health care reform" affects the lives of 2 million retirees in Wuhan. The policy, which is to be implemented nationwide, will affect hundreds of millions of elderly people. For the CCP, to suppress hundreds of millions of people with 1 million police officers is just implausible.

On the other hand, a compromise by the CCP in Wuhan would also create two serious problems. First, the CCP doesn't have the money; second, if the CCP compromises, it sends a signal to the people that their protest is effective. Therefore, when the people feel that their other rights are being compromised, they will come out to protest again. If this trend continues, and public opinion always prevails, China will become a democratic society. People will inevitably ask for political freedom, and the CCP's dictatorship will come to an end.

It is difficult to predict the outcome of the Wuhan protests, but we have to remember that the theme of the protests is not the most important thing. What's important is the protest itself because it is a process of gradually removing the fear of the CCP from the people's hearts. And fear is the most important pillar to maintaining the CCP's rule. When this pillar collapses, the CCP's regime is in great danger.

Views expressed in this article are the opinions of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Epoch Times.

Dr. Zhang Tianliang is a professor at Fei Tian College and the librettist for Shen Yun Performing Arts operas. He is a prolific writer, historian, film producer, screenwriter, and thinker. He co-authored several books on communism that have been translated into over 20 languages. He is the founder of NPO Tianliang Alliance.



Falun Dafa practitioners joined a parade held during a festival in Angarsk, Russia, on May 25, 2019.



An elderly woman is carrying a boy along a street in Beijing on May 11, 2020.



Pang Xun.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

30-Year-Old Chinese Radio Host Dies in Prison After Being Jailed for His Belief

Family of detained Falun Gong practitioner suspect foul play

DOROTHY LI

His lips were streaked with dried blood. His chest was covered with bruises and scars, his legs battered.

Footage of a 30-year-old man's corpse, recently circulated on Twitter and confirmed by The Epoch Times, offered a glimpse of what had happened to him in a Chinese jail cell. (Warning: viewers may find this footage disturbing)

Pang Xun, a Falun Gong practitioner, died in the early morning of Dec. 2, 2022, while serving a prison sentence for his belief in southwestern China, according to a person close to the man. Pang was arrested in July 2020 for his faith in Falun Gong, the person added.

Relatives of Pang, a radio host, are demanding authorities of the prison in Leshan city of Sichuan Province to explain the cause of their loved one's death and allow them to conduct an independent autopsy, according to the person, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of the communist regime's retaliation.

The prison's officials attributed the young man's death to hyperthyroidism, a condition where the thyroid gland produces too many hormones, the person said. The Leshan prison couldn't be reached for comment despite repeated calls.

But given the many bruises covering Pang's body, that claim appears to have convinced nobody.

"My friend was beaten to death in the Chinese Communist Party's prison. He was Pang Xun, 30, a very sunny and handsome young man," a user recently said on Twitter, with a video of Pang's body.

"He was detained because he practiced Falun Gong.... this is by no means a reason for the Chinese Communist Party to kill him!"

Falun Gong, also known as Falun Dafa, is a spiritual practice consisting of moral teachings based on the principles of truthfulness, compassion, and forbearance, along with a set of meditative exercises. Since its introduction in China in 1992, the practice has attracted individuals from all walks of life—from high-

ranking officials to rural villagers—leading to an estimated 70 million to 100 million adherents across the country by the end of the decade.

Its surging popularity, however, was deemed by the communist regime as a threat to its control over society. In 1999, then-Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader Jiang Zemin ordered a sweeping campaign to eradicate Falun Gong, resulting in millions of practitioners being thrown in detention facilities, where they are brainwashed, tortured, or even killed for their organs.

Sudden Death and Autopsy Demands

After more than two decades of persecution, the abuses have not abated. Last year, at least 7,331 Falun Gong adherents were harassed, arrested, or detained in various facilities, leading to 172 deaths, according to Minghui, a U.S.-based website dedicated to documenting the persecution of Falun Gong. But that figure is likely only the tip of the iceberg, given the heavy censorship in China.

At around 8 a.m. local time on Dec. 2, 2022, Pang's parents received a call: their imprisoned son was in critical condition, the person recounted.

But less than two hours later, as Pang's relatives were rushing to the Sichuan prison that is over 500 miles from their home in Hunan Province, they were informed Pang had died, the person said.

With this sudden death, Pang's relatives and friends became suspicious, given Pang was in good health before his imprisonment.

"Pang Xun must have been beaten because massive bruises were visible during the last visit," the person recounted how Peng looked during a visit to the prison six months before his death.

Pang's family personally asked a forensic odontologist from Beijing to accompany them to the prison. But on Dec. 3, when they finally arrived in Leshan city, the prison authorities refused to allow the odontologist to see Pang's body, the person said.

Moreover, officials told them that Pang must

Pang Xun must have been beaten because massive bruises were visible during the last visit.

Source

be cremated in 10 days, the person added.

Pang's parents and aunt, who managed to examine Pang's remains, were stunned to find a large number of sores on his chest, shoulder, back, waist, and legs. "Pang Xun's body, just as the video shows, was covered with bruises," the person said.

"Of course, the families would demand an explanation," the source said. Pang's relatives wouldn't cremate Pang before they got an independent autopsy, the person said, adding they have sought help from human rights lawyers.

Pang Xun

Pang worked as a host at Sichuan Radio And Host, a local radio station, after graduating from the Communication University of China, the country's top broadcasting college.

"He is very pure and sunny," said the person, who knew Pang from college. The person emphasized that Pang was unlike what the CCP's propaganda had claimed.

The CCP launched a far-reaching propaganda campaign aimed at demonizing Falun Gong and enlisting the Chinese public's support for the persecution. The disinformation was typically spread through the education system and state media.

To counteract the regime's pervasive smear efforts, Falun Gong practitioners formed a massive grassroots resistance effort to expose the persecution of the spiritual practice. The peaceful resistance involves distributing informational materials about the practice and the persecution and speaking directly to citizens.

In July 2020, when Pang was putting up informational posters with another Falun Gong practitioner, an elderly lady, the police spotted them through surveillance cameras, the person said.

On July 27, Pang was arrested, according to the person and a report on Minghui.

Pang was later sentenced to five years in prison and was sent to Leshan's Jiazhou Prison, one of the country's most brutal prisons for Falun Gong adherents, the report said.

Previous reports on the website painted a portrait of appalling conditions at Jiazhou Prison. Former prisoners of conscience said they were frequently beaten, suffered electronic shocks, forced to stand over 12 hours a day for several days, and given less than 15 seconds to consume meals. The guards would also spray pepper water into their noses and eyes and stop them from washing their faces afterward.

On Feb. 12, a close friend of Pang shared on Twitter photos of the young man teaching children in a class. "He is the simplest and kindest person I know," he said.

"Sadly, his young life forever ended in early December, in the CCP prison," he said. Pang's ordeal ignited outrage online. "It's tragic. [The CCP] treats people like dirt. Who dares to be sure that this kind of tragedy will not happen to us? The more I think about it, the more scared I get," a Twitter user said.

Gu Xiaohua contributed to this report.

HUMAN RIGHTS

US Commission Urges China to Release Citizen Journalist Who Reported on COVID

DOROTHY LI

A Chinese citizen journalist who chronicled desperate scenes from Wuhan at the onset of the pandemic has now been detained for over three years.

On Feb. 9, the U.S. Congress and the Congressional-Executive Commission on China called on the Chinese regime to immediately release the man, Fang Bin.

"Fang Bin, a citizen journalist and #FalunGong practitioner, was detained 3 years ago today for reporting on the #COVID19 outbreak. The Chairs seek his immediate release and the release of all those detained for reporting on the COVID-19 outbreak in China," the panel said on Twitter.

The communist regime has aggressively suppressed information related to COVID and downplayed the severity of outbreaks since the first infection emerged in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019.

Many Chinese citizens who sought to report unfiltered information about the pandemic—including doctors, citizen journalists, scholars, and business people—have been targeted by the regime and have ended up in jail cells.

Fang Bin, a traditional clothes salesman in Wuhan, began filming his trips to hospitals around the locked-down city and posting the videos online in late January 2020. The scenes showed long lines outside hospitals, patients clinging to life, and distraught family members.

In one widely circulated video, Fang counts eight body bags in a van parked outside a hospital. "So many dead," he says with a sigh. "This is too many." Fang then walks into a room in the hospital, where doctors are seen working around a patient who had apparently just died.

"Who is he?" Fang asks the man. "My father," the man cries. "He's gone," Fang says, after speaking to the doctors.

That evening, around half a dozen masked men in hazmat suits knocked on his door, demanding to take his temperature. Fang, who recorded the incident, said his temperature was normal and asked them to come back with an inspection warrant. The men forced their way into his house, confiscated his electronic devices, and took him to a police station. There, police questioned him about his videos, Fang later recounted.

Less than two weeks later, Fang went missing. His friends told The Epoch Times that Fang had been detained.

Since then, there has been no information on his condition.

This has prompted concerns, particularly in light of Fang's adherence to Falun Gong, which has been the object of a brutal persecution campaign by the communist regime. During the past two decades, mil-



Xu Na, in an undated photo taken in China.

ions of adherents of the ancient practice—which emphasizes truth, compassion, and tolerance—have been thrown into various detention facilities, where they have been brainwashed, tortured, or even killed for their organs.

Fang's current whereabouts are unclear. In November of 2021, a local official told The Epoch Times that Fang had been detained at Wuhan's Jiang'an Detention Center. But in January, a staff member of the detention facility who answered the phone said no one by that name was being held at the institution.

In one widely circulated video, Fang counts eight body bags in a van parked outside a hospital.

Detained Citizen Journalists

Fang is not the only Chinese citizen who remains in detention facilities after offering the outside world a first-hand glimpse of the early COVID-19 situation in the country.

Zhang Zhan, a former lawyer turned journalist, is serving a four-year jail term. In early 2020, Zhang traveled to Wuhan from Shanghai and recorded the lives of citizens at the pandemic's epicenter during an initial lockdown. She detailed her visits and interviews in hospitals, quarantine centers, and the Wuhan Institute of Virology in dozens of videos uploaded to YouTube. The shaky cellphone videos challenged authorities' narratives.

She was later convicted of "picking quarrels and stirring up trouble," a charge often used to prosecute dissidents and whistleblowers, and was sentenced to four years in prison.

The most recent case was that of Xu Na, a still-life painter and Falun Gong practitioner who had photographed the effects of the pandemic during its early stages and shared those images with the Chinese-language edition of The Epoch Times. Xu was sentenced to eight years in prison last January.

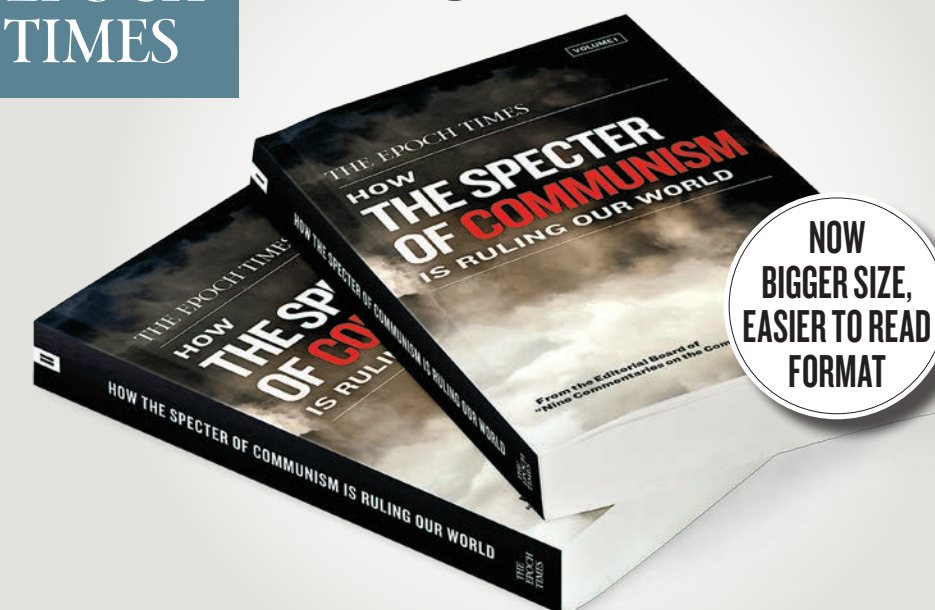
Eva Fu and Cathy He contributed to this report.



A pro-democracy activist (C) from HK Alliance holds a placard of missing citizen journalist Fang Bin as she protests outside the Chinese liaison office in Hong Kong on Feb. 19, 2020.

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Falun Gong practitioners take part in a candlelight vigil commemorating the 20th anniversary of the persecution of Falun Gong in China, on the West Lawn of Capitol Hill on July 18, 2019.

SAMIRA BOUQUO/ THE EPOCH TIMES

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