



The 610 Office: Policing the Chinese Spirit

Publication: China Brief Volume: 11 Issue: 17

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September 16, 2011 04:28 PM Age: 9 years

Numerous official websites from the past six months—in Beijing, Qingdao, Shandong, and Jiangsu among others—mention the 610 Office, an entity engaged in efforts to “carry out comprehensive investigations,” strengthen “transformation,” and prevent unwanted incidents (Pingyin.gov.cn, September 5; Jsrm.gov.cn, August 15; Laoshan.gov.cn, April 2011). A June 2011 article in a reputable Chinese magazine briefly referenced the 610 Office as a key component of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) “stability-preservation work” (Caijing, June 6). What is the 610 Office? How and why did it come to exist? Why is it carrying out measures ostensibly under the purview of the Ministry of Public Security?

The answers to these questions point to the establishment of a CCP-based, rather than a state-based, security organization, as well as a revival of the use of security agencies to enforce ideological compliance. Moreover, the 610 Office signifies a systemic arrangement by CCP leaders to avoid the reach of legal reforms when dealing with a perceived existential threat to their power. The willingness and ability of CCP leaders to take such actions has implications not only for how we understand the trajectory of rule of law development in China, but also for how we might anticipate the regime responding to present and future threats to its security.

The 610 Office’s beginnings lie partly in the CCP’s tradition of “leading groups.” Since 1958, the CCP has used leading small groups (lingdao xiaozu) to coordinate and guide action on various issue areas. They are typically secretive, arbitrarily created and dissolved, and headed by members of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee. In 2008, Alice Miller counted eight such “primary” leading groups in operation, their responsibilities ranging from foreign affairs to economics, with subsidiary entities



Gao Zhisheng, a lawyer who has tried to raise awareness of the 610 Office.

running down the Party's system and State Council offices to execute policy ("The CCP Central Committee's Leading Small Groups," China Leadership Monitor, September 2, 2008).

There is however another key leading group strikingly out of character with the broad focus of each of the other leading groups: "The Leading Small Group for Preventing and Handling the Problem of Heretical Organizations" (zhongyang fangfan he chuli xiejiao wenti lingdao xiaozu). Originally called "The Leading Small Group for Handling the Falun Gong Issue" (falun gong wenti lingdao xiaozu), the name change suggests its activity has expanded since 1999 (Lstdww.gov.cn, August 10, 2011; Gxbobai.gov.cn, April 2010). Though Falun Gong remains the primary focus, its targets now include house church Christians, Buddhists and other religious or spiritual groups, and it has been renamed accordingly.

The 610 Office was formed concurrently as this leading group's implementing body and is named after the date of its creation: June 10, 1999. "Six-ten" functions outside the state system without any official standing. At its core, the 610 Office is a plainclothes CCP-based extra-ministerial security force focused on suppressing the Falun Gong spiritual group. The leading group sets the policy direction,

which the 610 Office executes.

After featuring briefly in news articles in 2000, the 610 Office has since garnered only occasional international attention, leading to a common misperception that it is defunct. Recent evidence—including eyewitness accounts, official online documents, United Nations reports, and Congressional-Executive Commission on China (CECC) analysis—however, all points to an agency that remains active nationwide at all levels of Chinese governance. It was particularly involved in crackdowns surrounding the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai (Hnebp.edu.cn, November 6, 2008; Xzqs.gov.cn, June 23, 2010). Today, based on extrapolating from district-level numbers on local government websites, we estimate it retains at least 15,000 officers.

The 610 Office is Born

This office's story begins on June 7, 1999, when then-Party Secretary General Jiang Zemin called a special Politburo meeting. Jiang was determined to resolve what he perceived as a serious challenge to the regime's authority, "something unprecedented in the country since its founding 50 years ago" that "did not occur even during the Cultural Revolution"—a group of meditators who practice Falun Gong [1].

According to government sources, Western media reports, and Falun Gong witnesses, tens of millions of Chinese—from peasants to young professionals to military officers—were practicing the discipline at the time. With so many individuals dedicated to spiritual self-fulfillment independent of Party control or ideology, several top cadres began viewing Falun Gong as a threat (Associated Press, April 26, 1999; New York Times, April 27, 1999).

This translated into repression that showed first signs in 1996, and escalated to beatings and arrests in Tianjin in April 1999. On April 25, over 10,000 adherents of the meditative religious movement gathered outside the national petitions office in Beijing, adjacent to the Zhongnanhai government compound, asking for an end to abuses. According to the memoirs collection, Zhu Rongji in 1999, Premier Zhu took an appeasing stance toward Falun Gong and was prepared to resolve the grievances before Jiang intervened [2].

In a June 7 directive, Jiang ordered the creation of a special leading group within the Party's Central Committee to "swiftly handle and solve the 'Falun Gong problem'." He ordered that the team, placed under the responsibility of Politburo Standing Committee member Li Lanqing, "should immediately organize forces" and "get fully prepared for the work of disintegrating [Falun Gong]" [3].

A few days later, the CCP also established an office to handle day-to-day operations. This office was internally named 610, or "liu yao ling" for its June 10 creation. No legislation was passed establishing it. No provisions formally outlined its mandate. This extralegal flexibility has proved critical in recent years, as its responsibilities have expanded.

Given that the CCP already had control over a range of security agencies and military forces, forming yet another entity seems unnecessary. Several factors may have contributed to Jiang's decision:

- Numbering in the tens of millions, Falun Gong practitioners included many individuals within the military and security establishment. This contributed to a sense that Falun Gong had quietly infiltrated the CCP and state apparatus. Jiang may have felt the need to create a trusted network of security agents to counter Falun Gong's influence.
- Given the task's scale, Jiang needed an entity that would act quickly and forcefully with no holds barred. He may not have envisioned that twelve years later millions would still be practicing with new believers joining and the 610 Office seemingly permanent.
- The creation of a new leading group quickly sent a signal down CCP ranks that countering Falun Gong was a new priority.
- Given that the entire anti-Falun Gong campaign functioned outside Chinese law, Jiang needed a security force that could operate outside the existing legal system and its potential restrictions [4].

Over the following months, 610 Office branches were created throughout China and a chain of command emerged, closely linked to the Political-Legal Committee (PLC) structure. Hao Fengjun, a former 610 Office official selected from the Tianjin Public Security Bureau, stated that the office's orders come directly from the Party's top echelons, then trickle down to cities and neighborhoods [5]. Much of this structure overlaps with the CCP's Political-Legal Committee (PLC). For example, after Li Lanqing retired in 2003, Jiang's confidant and politburo member Luo Gan took over the leading group overseeing the 610 Office, while also heading the PLC. In 2007, Zhou Yongkang replaced him as head of both the leading group and the PLC.

Hao's description of a nationwide network of 610 Office branches closely linked to the PLC apparatus is corroborated by a range of official sources. An online search reveals scores of recent references, pointing to the existence of active branches even in small cities and districts of Jiangxi, Guangdong, Zhejiang, and Shandong. A website of the Leiyang Municipal Party Committee in Hunan Province states its local 610 branch "reports to and is under the supervision of the municipal Party Committee's Political-Legal Committee," and is located in the Party Committee's office building (Leiyang.gov.cn, December 12, 2008).

Functions of the 610 Office

The 610 Office has two main functions: coordinating personnel at state institutions to assist in fulfilling the office's mandate and directly conducting operations against Falun Gong and other forbidden spiritual groups. The first coordination role can involve pressuring staff from state bodies to act according to the 610 Office's wishes, even when these run counter to their legal authority. Several lawyers who have defended Falun Gong practitioners report 610 Office personnel subverting the

ability of judges and prison wardens to carry out their duties as outlined by Chinese law. Attorney Jiang Tianyong says compromised judges decide Falun Gong cases without recourse to Chinese legal standards but, instead, based on extrajudicial intervention from the 610 Office (Radio Free Asia, April 13, 2010). Meanwhile, Gao Zhisheng, Guo Guoting, and Wang Yajun have reported 610 Office interference in their efforts to meet with clients held in labor camps, prisons and detention centers (“Lawyer Barred from Representing Client by “6-10” Agents,” Human Rights in China, September 10, 2010).

Second, the 610 Office also has an immediate role in executing the leading group’s policies. In the process, the 610 Office appears largely exempt from even the basics of China’s judicial and legal reforms, often employing methods that are technically illegal under Chinese law. Various credible sources describe 610 Office agents directly participating in extrajudicial killings, torture, sexual assault, and illegal confiscation of property. For example, the 2009 report of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial Killings cited 610 Office involvement in pre-Olympic cases of Falun Gong deaths in custody [6]. Other Chinese dissidents and activists have detailed extra-legal detentions and torture on a scale and severity that appear to go beyond commonly-cited abuses in the law enforcement system. [7].

Reviving Thought Reform

610 Office activities also differ from those carried out under other leading groups in that its mandate does not relate to policy areas, like foreign affairs or economic reform. Rather, it targets Chinese citizens for thought reform.

Millions of Falun Gong practitioners place their moral teachings, revolving around Truthfulness-Compassion-Tolerance, as their spiritual compass. CCP leaders arbitrarily deemed these beliefs “heretical” in 1999 and “transformation” quickly became a key aim of 610 Office operations. Like “patriotic education” tactics used in Tibet, the purpose of this ideological reprogramming is to break the will of subjects by coercing them—reportedly including physical and psychiatric torture, sleep deprivation and manipulation of family members—to renounce Falun Gong, profess loyalty to the CCP, and ultimately participate in the forced conversion of others (Washington Post, August 5, 2001) [8].

Today, this objective remains fundamental to 610 operations, a testament to the Party’s difficulty crushing a decentralized groups of dedicated believers. In March, an analysis of local 610 Office-related references on official websites indicated that the Central 610 Office launched a renewed campaign to “transform” Falun Gong practitioners nationwide scheduled to last from 2010 to 2012 (Congressional-Executive Commission on China, March 22).

The 610 Office’s transformation work—like other aspects of the campaign against Falun Gong, such as the extensive use of labor camps and nationwide propaganda—is a throwback to Maoist-era practices. In the 1980s, reformers pushed for entities like the Ministry of Public Security to get out of

the business of “resolving ideological questions” (People’s Daily, April 5, 1979). The rise of the 610 Office however suggests a retrogression of the security apparatus to address thought crimes.

Conclusion

The 610 Office’s operations long ago expanded beyond its core task of wiping out Falun Gong. Testifying before the European Parliament, Hao Fengjun said that in April 2003 Party leaders ordered the 610 Office to dispose of 28 other “heretical organizations” and “harmful qigong organizations” [9]. The broadened functions remain in effect today as local government websites detail 610 Office investigations of other spiritual groups (See, for example, Hlong.gov.cn, May 2009).

The expanded mandate points to the entrenchment of the 610 Office in the CCP apparatus. What began as a temporary leading small group and task force has become a permanent fixture. It also highlights how 610 Office’s existence undermines rule of law—whatever official state policy towards religion might be, this entity operates at the direction of a small group of CCP leaders with no official standing.

Such conclusions take on even greater significance at a time when the 610 Office may be serving as a model for new CCP initiatives. Since 2008, official reports, speeches and circulars have referenced a novel set of CCP “leading groups” maintaining stability. Reportedly, branches of the Office of Maintaining Stability “are being set up in every district and major street” in rich coastal cities. They are charged with “ferreting out ‘anti-CCP elements’” (Wall Street Journal, December 9, 2009).

Multiple official sources indicate that these new entities and the 610 Office are working closely together. In at least one district in Guangdong’s Foshan City, for example, the 610 Office and the “leading group office for maintaining stability” were listed side-by-side in an online description of the local PLC’s internal functioning and staff (Chongchuan.gov.cn, June 7, 2010). In some localities, staff and even the leadership of the two entities seem to overlap. A March 2010 notice from Zhejiang’s Pingyang County government states that the same person was appointed to direct both 610 Office and the local stability maintenance office.

The rise of the 610 Office and stability maintenance offices suggests a sense among CCP leaders that existing internal security services, like the Ministry of Public Security and the Ministry of State Security, are not satisfactorily effective. That these officials are increasingly relying on more arbitrary, extra-legal, and personalized security forces to protect their hold on power does not only bode badly for China’s human rights record. It also threatens the stability of internal CCP politics should 610 Office work become politicized—just as counterespionage was corrupted prior to Reform and Opening—amid the jockeying for power ahead of and beyond the upcoming 18th Party Congress.

Notes:

1. Jiang reportedly made at a high-level meeting in April 1999, extracted from the book “Zhu Rongji

in 1999,” cited in excerpts published in the Hong Kong Economic Journal, September 18, 2001.

2. Zong Hairen, Zhu Rongji zai 1999 [Zhu Rongji in 1999], Carle Place, N.Y.: Mirror Books, 2001.

3. “Comrade Jiang Zemin’s speech at the meeting of the Political Bureau of the CCCC regarding speeding up dealing with and settling the problem of ‘Falun Gong,’” June 7, 1999. <http://beijingspring.com/bj2/2001/60/2003727210907.htm> (<http://beijingspring.com/bj2/2001/60/2003727210907.htm>)

4. Yiyang Xia, “The illegality of China’s Falun Gong crackdown—and today’s rule of law repercussions,” Written Statement for European Parliament Hearing on China, in particular the situation of Human Rights Defenders, July 11, 2011, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/droi/dv/506_yiyangxia_/506_yiyangxia_en.pdf (https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/droi/dv/506_yiyangxia_/506_yiyangxia_en.pdf)

5. Hao Fengjun, signed statement on file with the authors, November 8, 2005.

6. Philip Alston, “Report of the Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions,” May 29, 2009, A/HRC/11/2/Add.1, pp.66-67. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/11session/A.HRC.11.2.Add.1.pdf> (<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/11session/A.HRC.11.2.Add.1.pdf>).

7. Ethan Gutmann Interview with Fang Siyi, Bangkok, July 1, 2008; Gao Zhisheng, A China More Just: My Fight as a Rights Lawyer in the World’s Largest Communist State, San Diego, CA: Broad Press USA, 2007. Gao also wrote an open letter in 2005 to CCP leaders, presenting his investigation of 610 Office operations in northeastern China.

8. Interviews conducted by Ethan Gutmann and Leeshai Lemish in London (August 2007) and Bangkok (July 2008).

9. Hao Fengjun testimony before the European Parliament, “Seminar on Human Rights in China,” October 19, 2005.

[The authors thank Yiyang Xia, Senior Director of Research and Policy at the Human Rights Law Foundation, for his research assistance.]



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