

Mike Steketee: Diplomacy transplant  
OPINION  
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EVERY now and then, uncomfortable realities intrude on the serious business of making money in China. At a news conference in Canberra this week following the 10th Australia-China human rights dialogue, the questions immediately turned to Falun Gong, the spiritual movement with tens of thousands of followers who have disappeared, been rounded up in labour camps, tortured and in some cases killed.

Foreign Affairs Department deputy secretary and head of the Australian delegation David Ritchie wanted to point out that Australia was very serious about preserving the dignity of Chinese diplomats in Australia - a reference to Chinese complaints about Falun Gong protests outside the Chinese embassy and consulates.

Assistant Foreign Minister and Chinese delegation head Cui Tiankai thought Ritchie had made "a good point". There was no mention of the dignities impaired by the brutal repression of Chinese citizens who refuse to renounce unauthorised beliefs. Nor of those of the followers of Falun Gong in Australia who continue to be spied on and harassed. Under further questioning, Ritchie confirmed that Australia had raised allegations that organs were removed from Falun Gong followers in China and sold to people needing transplants. He said the reports were very serious but added that "we think the evidence is not necessarily there".

That provided an opening for Cui to narrow the focus to a particular hospital in northeast China, where he said diplomats and foreign correspondents in China had visited and found "no evidence at all". Moments later, he was assuring Australian journalists that the Chinese media "have full freedom to write whatever they like - within the scope of the law, of course".

The tone of the news conference gives some insight into the pressure Australia brings to bear on China's appalling human rights record: very little. The idea that Falun Gong practitioners are "harvested" to fit in with the demand from overseas patients for fresh hearts, livers, kidneys and corneas almost defies belief. As a Canadian investigation which reported three weeks ago said: "The allegations, if true, would represent a grotesque form of evil which, despite all the depravations humanity has seen, would be new to this planet."

The report does not provide conclusive proof. But on the basis of accumulated circumstantial evidence, it does argue that the allegations are true. "We believe that there has been and continues today to be large-scale organ seizures from unwilling Falun Gong practitioners," it says.

Though asked to conduct the inquiry by supporters of Falun Gong, the authors did not receive any money for their work and seem otherwise credible. David Kilgour was a crown prosecutor before becoming a federal MP, though one with an independent streak, resigning from the Conservatives to join the Liberals and then sitting as an independent before leaving politics this year. His co-author is David Matas, an immigration, refugee and international human rights lawyer. They have accepted an invitation from the

Edmund Rice Centre, the social justice and human rights body that has decided to investigate the organ harvesting claims, to visit Australia.

The authors base their conclusion on a series of findings. The Chinese have acknowledged that they take organs from executed prisoners, though few take seriously their claim that they do it only with consent. Most people in China object on cultural grounds to donating organs, meaning there are very few family donors. The report finds there were 41,500 more transplants from 2000 to 2005 than can be explained by prisoner executions or family donations. There was a sharp increase in transplants from 2000, the year after the persecution of Falun Gong began and many of its followers disappeared. Falun Gong practitioners in detention are systematically blood-tested, a prerequisite for organ transplants. Chinese hospital websites have been advertising waiting times for transplants of a few weeks at most, compared to 32.5 months for a kidney in Canada in 2003.

The report quotes prices from a Chinese website ranging from \$US30,000 (\$39,000) for a cornea transplant to \$US150,000-\$US170,000 for a lung, making it a very lucrative trade. Most of the recipients come from overseas, including Australia. One of the authors listened to recordings of phone calls made from the US and Canada in which Chinese officials say they use fresh organs from Falun Gong practitioners.

The report is not the final word on these extraordinary claims. There have been estimates of 8000-10,000 executions a year in China - much higher than the figures used in the report. This would offer another explanation for the source of most of the organs, though not necessarily that they were voluntarily donated. As well, Brisbane transplant surgeon Stephen Lynch points out that the report does not take into account that more than one organ can be taken from a body.

Lynch remains to be convinced about the claims, pointing to the lack of substantiated cases of organ removal from Falun Gong practitioners. But he also tells Inquirer: "I am extremely concerned about the findings of the (Canadian) report - horrified." He adds that since new laws were introduced in China on July 1, there has been a significant fall in available organs, for which one explanation is that organs no longer are being taken from people without their consent, possibly including Falun Gong practitioners.

"The position of the transplant societies, including the international one, has not changed and that is that the practice of using executed prisoners for organ donors is abhorrent and so is the notion of transplant tourism."

If China has indeed moved to restrict organ harvesting, it suggests that publicity and the threat of more of it has been more effective in improving human rights than the quiet diplomacy that it has persuaded many Western governments to adopt. Ritchie this week defended the value of the annual human rights dialogues, saying that raising issues directly at a senior level in China "is better than sitting back and yelling at them". He says Australia has given China a list of individual cases.

The trouble is that there is very little evidence of results. After representations from his brother living in Australia, the Foreign Affairs Department on four occasions, including in several of the dialogues, raised the case of Ouyang Ming, a Falun Gong practitioner. On one occasion the Chinese told the Australians they could not identify people on the list, including Ouyang. He died in 2003 after being tortured over several years in labour camps.

Visiting fellow at the Australian National University's Centre for International and Public Law, Ann Kent, says a Chinese precondition to holding the dialogues was the Howard Government's agreement in 1997 to stop co-sponsoring resolutions in the UN Human Rights Commission critical of China's human rights. "Basically, Australia and China have agreed they will compartmentalise this part of their relationship - to cut off human rights from Australian foreign policy generally," Kent says.

The critical weakness she identifies is the lack of accountability through any formal public reporting. As she told a parliamentary inquiry in 2004, "it is this very lack of transparency and accountability in the Chinese Government that the Australian Government is arguably attempting to redress by means of its dialogue. If Australia is not prepared to be transparent and accountable itself, what kind of message does this send our dialogue partners? At the very least it gives rise to the suspicion that form rather than substance and pragmatism rather than principle are now Australia's defining priorities." China is sensitive about its international image as the 2008 Olympics approach. Some yelling may not go astray.