

China's Reform Narrative on Transplant Abuse: Does It Stand Up to Scrutiny?
February 20, 2018
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The CCP's Reform Narrative

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DENIAL, REFORM, GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

Over the course of nearly three decades of international criticism of China's organ-procurement practices, the official government response has evolved from denial, to reform, and most recently to a global leadership narrative.

Organ procurement from executed prisoners is considered per se a human rights abuse, because there can be no assurance that a prisoner's consent is free and voluntary.

In China's case, criticism of its use of prisoners as the source of organs began in the 1990s, including Congressional hearings in 1995 and 2001.

The Chinese government's response to all this was either to ignore it, or to deny it. After the 2001 hearing, the foreign ministry condemned the testimony as "sensational lies and vicious slander." The spokeswoman went on to say, "The major source of organs comes from voluntary donations."

Starting around 2000, when China's transplant surgeries greatly expanded, reports began surfacing about the use of organs from Falun Gong detainees. It is important to note that these were not death-row prisoners, but prisoners of conscience, in administration detention. The most comprehensive investigation was the major 2006 report by David Kilgour and David Matas.

Some administrative and regulatory reforms were already underway in China in the mid-2000s, but the government's response to criticism continued in denial mode. A spokesman denounced the Kilgour-Matas report as "smears," "based on rumours and false allegations." At the same time, many of the online sources of evidence spotlighted by the report were suddenly altered, or disappeared entirely. For example, hospital websites advertising 2-week waiting times for organs were scrubbed across the country.

When international pressure continued through the mid-2000s, the official narrative for external consumption shifted. The government openly admitted that it had no voluntary donation system, surgeons admitted that over 90% of organs were from prisoners, and reforms accelerated, including a new transplantation law in 2007.

Three years later, in 2010, the government finally announced the creation of a national voluntary donor registration system. Its stated purpose was to end reliance on prisoners' organs.

Finally, in late 2014, Huang Jiefu, the former Deputy Minister of Health, announced that "starting from Jan 1, 2015, all the organs needed in transplants will come solely from voluntary

donations.” The *China Daily* headline was: “China to scrap organ harvesting from executed prisoners.” Amazingly, the article contradicted the headline. It quoted Huang as saying, “Prisoners are still among the qualified candidates for donations, but their organs will be registered in the computerized system instead of being used for private trades.”

This reform narrative has turned out to be a winner for China’s transplant industry.

International media coverage echo the state media headlines about the 2015 reform, but fail to note the semantic trick, as it’s been called, of re-classifying prisoners’ organs as “voluntary donations.”

International medical bodies have done the same. They welcomed the creation of a donor registration system, and skipped over the admission that China’s billion-dollar transplant industry was built on prisoners’ organs.

Chinese officials were again invited to international medical conferences.

International experts also began again attending meetings in China. At a conference in Kunming in August 2017, officials of three major international institutions praised China’s reforms, notably the World Health Organization, the Transplantation Society, and the Pontifical Academy of Sciences.

Over the past 6 months, in fact, the *reform* narrative has been kicked up a notch, and is shaping up to be what might be called a *global leadership* narrative.

Transplant officials have begun to adopt the slogans associated with the Party’s changing global ambitions under Xi Jinping. I’ll give two examples:

In August 2017, Huang Jiefu published a piece in an international medical journal under the title, "[The “Chinese Mode” of organ donation and transplantation.](#)” He says, “China has demonstrated the eye-catching “Chinese Mode” to the world.” He concludes, China “will be ... making a due contribution to the development of world organ transplant as a political power.”

The second example is a China Daily headline from January 31, 2018: [Belt and Road nations offered organ donation guidance.](#) “China will share its successful experience and cooperate with nations involved with the Belt and Road Initiative, to help them establish organ donation systems.”

In sum, after more than two decades of denial, the government’s current position is that it stopped the abuse on January 1, 2015. On the strength of that reform narrative, world medical bodies have shifted from pressure to praise. And now in Xi Jinping’s second term, the Chinese transplant industry has begun claiming global leadership.