



The article that lead to a [Pulitzer Prize](#)

By: Ian Johnson/Wall St Journal

October 2, 2000

BEIJING -- Her six-year-old son in tow, Zhang Xueling trudges through the heavy heat of an early summer morning toward the Chinese government's Petitions and Appeals Office. Memory, as much as the heat, weighs on her.

Four months earlier, her mother, Chen Zixiu, "wanted to come here and protest that Falun Dafa was good," Ms. Zhang says. "But she died trying, so now I'm here on her behalf."
zhang xueling

Ms. Chen had hoped to convince the government that it had unjustly banned Falun Dafa, a spiritual movement that the 58-year-old had joined a few years ago. The trip ended in her arrest, torture and death, documented in an April article in this newspaper. In May, the United Nations Committee Against Torture took up the matter and later criticized China for failing to rein in police abuses. Then, in September, the U.S. State Department cited Ms. Chen's death as a prime example of China's human-rights abuses. Officials at all levels of the Chinese government have refused to comment on Ms. Chen's death.

But on this hot June morning, all that Ms. Chen's 32-year-old daughter wants is her mother's death certificate.

In China, when someone dies, police normally issue a death certificate to the family, upon request. The police officers who witnesses say killed Ms. Zhang's mother on Feb. 21 insist that she died of a heart attack in a hospital. Ms. Zhang hopes that by issuing the death certificate, police will be forced to admit that her mother died in their custody. That, in theory, should trigger an internal investigation and, she hopes, bring her mother's killers to justice.

But Ms. Zhang is beginning to learn how hard it is not only to obtain justice, but merely to seek it, in a country where the most powerful organization, the Communist Party, is above the law. Ms. Zhang hurries toward the Petition and Appeals Office, passing groups of people who, like her, are availing themselves of their right to petition for redress of wrongs at the hands of

government. It's a tradition that goes back centuries, and that the party has maintained as a social safety valve. One bedraggled peasant crouches over a sheaf of paper, moving his pen in the air, trying to remember how to write the word "expropriate." His clan has been trying for 14 years to recover land that they say was taken illegally by officials.

The building's entrance is in an alley and watched carefully by a dozen plainclothes police with shifty stares and mobile phones. Security agents at the entrance to the alley ask approaching petitioners if they are Falun Dafa adherents. They turn back those who say they are. Ms. Zhang, though, can truthfully say that she isn't an adherent and that her problem is a simple case of police abuse. She is let in.

Two hours later she comes out, shaking her head. "They said it's a criminal case and should be handled by the Public Security Bureau," she says, walking along a garbage-filled canal. "That's my next stop," she adds, and then disappears into a subway station.

A short, stout woman with a round face, bobbed hair and direct eyes, Ms. Zhang was once the sort of person who floated easily through reform-era China. She worked as a clerk at a department store in Weifang, her prosperous hometown of 1.3 million people in eastern China's Shandong province, and took accounting classes in her spare time. She married, had a son and went back to work as a bookkeeper. Later, after neighbors praised her skill in arranging a few marriages, she took advantage of the growing freedom in China to work as a matchmaker -- a profession that the Communist Party forbade during the first 30 years of its rule but that has reappeared over the past two decades of reform.

Then, three years ago, her mother, a retired factory worker, joined Falun Dafa, a fast-growing spiritual movement that derives loosely from Taoism and Buddhism and promises salvation and supernatural powers to its followers. For more than an hour each morning, Ms. Chen practiced the group's regimen of slow-motion calisthenics -- called Falun Gong -- which are designed, in accordance with traditional Chinese medicine, to channel energy through the body.

Ms. Zhang was initially supportive of her mother. But she sided with the government when, perceiving a political threat in Falun Dafa, Beijing in July of last year banned the movement. She reiterated to her mother the government's reasoning: Founder Li Hongzhi, who now lives in exile in the U.S., was untrustworthy because, the government said, he had changed his birthdate to match that of the Buddha. She also worried about government reports that 1,500 adherents had died because they had rejected modern medicine in favor of exercise.

But as the crackdown became more brutal late last year, with police detaining thousands of adherents, Ms. Zhang began for the first time in her life to question the government. Beijing claimed that Mr. Li enriched himself on the backs of his followers, but the Falun Dafa adherents Ms. Zhang knew had spent no more than a few dollars on books or instructional videos. Far from being suicidal or superstitious fanatics, her mother's Falun Dafa circle was made up of well-balanced people who didn't reject modern medicine.

She kept these doubts to herself -- until Feb. 21. A few months earlier, in December, Ms. Chen had traveled to Beijing to protest against its ban on the group. She was arrested and sent home.

When she tried to go to Beijing again in February, police imprisoned her without charge. Officials demanded that she recant her faith. She refused, was beaten unconscious and, on Feb.21, died, according to prison inmates and family members.

Local officials told Ms. Zhang that her mother had died of a heart attack. The day after Ms. Chen's death, Ms. Zhang and her brother were allowed to see the body, bruised and battered and laid out in traditional mourning garb in a local hospital. The hospital issued a report that day saying Ms. Chen died of natural causes. The hospital won't comment further.

Ms. Zhang and her brother couldn't find a lawyer who would take their case. Then, on March 17, Ms. Zhang received a letter from the hospital saying the body, held in refrigeration as the threat of litigation loomed, would be cremated that day. Ms. Zhang never saw her mother's body again.

Ms. Zhang couldn't let her mother's death go at that. "I felt that something wasn't right, and that they were hiding something," she says.

She sent letters to the State Council, the highest body of civilian power in China, and to local media, asking for copies of her mother's death certificate. Both groups ignored her. The police didn't; Ms. Zhang calculates that by late April, when she was finally sentenced to 15 days in prison for "distorting facts and disturbing social order," she had been interrogated by police for 107 hours in numerous sessions over several weeks.

The detention was a turning point. "I was thrown in with common criminals and could finally see the injustice that my mother had suffered," Ms. Zhang says. "I decided to learn everything I could and challenge the authorities using their own language."

Upon her release, she stopped working as a matchmaker to devote herself full time to pressing her mother's case. She bought handbooks on the law and learned how to make official requests for documents and how to appeal refusals. Her husband, a carpenter, supported her throughout.

The work brought Ms. Zhang into close contact with Falun Dafa adherents, whose underground network came in handy when she took her appeal up through the hierarchy of the bureaucracy. Disciples view Ms. Zhang's mother as a martyr -- one of more than 50 people the organization says have died in the past year in the government crackdown -- and local adherents were happy to put up Ms. Zhang in their homes. They also told her where to find the appeals offices, which the government keeps unmarked and unlisted in the phone directory.

"Only they could really understand the frustrations I had and the hurdles I had to face everyday," she says.

Her efforts centered on the death certificate. Officials said the cremation took place on March 17. Immediately afterward, she had applied for a death certificate from police and from the crematorium, but had been rebuffed. She now decided to go through more formal channels, filing written requests for the certificate.

She spent most of May shuttling between offices of the Public Security Bureau in her hometown. Officials at the district office told her that they couldn't release the death certificate and that she should appeal to the higher-level bureau that controls the municipality. That bureau referred her back to the district office, arguing that the lower-level office had to furnish a copy of records before the higher-level office could act. Back at the district office, Ms. Zhang was told the higher-level office didn't need the records because senior officials had been present when the corpse was inspected and were already familiar with the situation. (Officials at all levels refused to be interviewed for this article.)

Frustrated, Ms. Zhang decided in early June to bypass the squabbling officials in Weifang by appealing to officials in the provincial capital, Jinan. Her goal now was to push the provincial procurator's office, which acts like a prosecutor's office in the U.S., to file criminal charges against the Public Security Bureau for failing to release the death certificate.

But the procurator's office, which works closely with security forces, told her to file a civil lawsuit. When she approached lawyers, however, they told her the Ministry of Justice had issued a directive to all lawyers advising them not to accept cases related to Falun Dafa. Stymied again, she headed for Beijing and the Petitions and Appeals Office.

So on that hot June day, Ms. Zhang emerges from the subway and heads to the Public Security Bureau, as the Petitions and Appeals Office had advised. It's the morning of June 19, and she arrives to find that visiting hours are already over. The adrenaline that has kept her going the past few days slowly ebbs. Her son scampers away, hoping his mother will follow.

Ms. Zhang takes a deep breath and determines to visit one more place before giving up. Beijing is dotted with several lesser petitions offices that belong to various minor ministries. Maybe just one of them, she figures, can help. Nearby is the petition office of the All-China Women's Federation, a government-run organization that is supposed to look after the interests of China's 650 million women. She doubts that it has much power, but grabs her son by the hand and heads over.

After losing her way in the maze of alleys that make up Beijing's old city, she finally finds the unmarked office. A woman looks up from behind her desk and asks Ms. Zhang to explain her case. The woman listens carefully to Ms. Zhang, nodding her head and sighing. Then she pushes her glasses up on the bridge of her nose and speaks carefully: "Rule of law is still rudimentary right now. This case will be hard to solve, but you have to go back to the Public Security Bureau."

The answer is blunt, but it is the first civil reply Ms. Zhang has received from the dozens of bureaucrats she has approached. Her courage builds. She gathers her son and heads out into the heat, vowing to return to the Public Security Bureau in the afternoon.

At 2 p.m. she walks up once again to the unmarked door. Her son, who cries at the sight of uniformed police, has fallen asleep. Ms. Zhang carries him slung over her shoulder as she enters.

An hour later, she emerges, her face beaming. She carries a letter sealed by the Public Security Bureau that she suspects contains orders for the local security bureaus to give her the death certificate. She shakes her head in amazement. "I don't know," she says, letting her son down gently to the ground as he wakes up. "Maybe I can finally get an answer."

Back in Weifang two days later, she is at the local office of the Public Security Bureau. When an official there opens the letter, she glimpses the brief order: "Handle this case in writing" -- in other words, give a written response. Ms. Zhang is ecstatic.

But then, days pass without reply. She returns again and again to the local bureau until finally someone in the office tells her that police won't issue the death certificate. She isn't sure if this is because the body actually wasn't ever cremated -- the crematorium might have feared being charged with destroying evidence -- or simply because the police are ignoring the written orders from Beijing. In any case, her joy gives way to resignation as she begins to realize that she probably never will lay eyes on her mother's death certificate.

The experience has changed her: Where she once agreed with the government that the maintenance of order is paramount, she now supports civil disobedience for a just cause. She begins to write down her thoughts. The process of petitioning "enabled me to meet people being treated unfairly and to listen to the ridiculous things that happened to them," Ms. Zhang writes in an unpublished essay. "Apart from Falun Gong practitioners, who are taken away by the public security, less than 10% of those [other] petitioners expect to have their problem settled. Most petitioners only get a chance to exchange their complaints with each other and end up with empty pockets."

By late August, she still hasn't received a response from the local security bureau. She heads back to Beijing, hoping at least to have her 15-day detention expunged from her records. She remembers that while in jail, the only people who were decent to her were Falun Dafa prisoners. In recent weeks, she has started to learn about the group's teachings and to practice Falun Gong herself.

"I used to be a materialist and believed that everything in life could be gained from hard work," she says, heading back from a fruitless trip to the Supreme Court to the house of a fellow believer. "But Falun Dafa makes more sense. At its root are three principles: truthfulness, compassion and tolerance. If we adhere to these, isn't that a deeper meaning to life?"

Ms. Zhang has exhausted all legal channels, and figures that even clearing her record will be impossible. Increasingly, she takes solace in her beliefs, and turns her attention to her son, a reminder of the grandmother who was so fond of him.

He starts school in September, and Ms. Zhang worries about the government textbooks that he will start reading, with their heavy emphasis on patriotism and nationalism. She has decided to start teaching him the principles of Falun Dafa. "I teach him that when someone hits him, it's the person who hit him who is wrong," she says. "His grandmother had this belief. I have it now, and so will he."



Chen Zixiu and her grand kids. (screenshot From Minghui)