

THOMAS NELSON

***The Slaughter: Mass Killings, Organ Harvestings,
and China's Secret Solution to Its Dissident Problem***
by Ethan Gutmann

A Review by Thomas Nelson

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Little has been written on the alleged organ harvesting of Falun Gong practitioners, but the few studies that do exist are visceral, horrifying and intriguing, all at the same time. In his book *The Slaughter*, Ethan Gutmann builds on the existing research of the Matas-Kilgour report to determine if, and at what scale, organs are being illegally harvested from Falun Gong members.

Because of the lack of evidence, no serious academic study has been carried out. The few resources available include Gutmann's book and a 2006 report from David Matas and David Kilgour, two Canadian human rights researchers who conducted the original investigation into organ harvesting.¹ Though he was not involved with the Matas-Kilgour report, Gutmann frequently references the text, particularly in the book's appendix where he delves into his methodology.

Facing these challenges, Gutmann pieces together a case using interviews with survivors and refugees, as well as what little information has been reported by Chinese media. There is no literature to review, no theories that he can test, no data to analyze. Gutmann's book is, quite simply, an extended report on the harvesting of organs that he and many others believe to be happening in China. However, the in-depth nature of his interviews and his strong understanding of the history of the Falun Gong movement and its practitioners allow *The Slaughter* to transcend being a mere report.

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The book reads almost as a fiction novel, the opening chapter giving it the feeling of a macabre murder mystery. Main and supporting characters are introduced throughout, with their timelines weaving together from time to time as some activists serve coinciding prison terms in the same jails. As its name implies, however, *The Slaughter* is not for the squeamish. In fact, the story is so appalling and the writing so compelling that the reader would much rather believe that it actually is fiction.

Despite Gutmann's masterful presentation, he wrote *The Slaughter* with a mission. In order to prove the government-sanctioned organ harvesting of Falun Gong political prisoners, both Gutmann's book and the Kilgour-Matas report rely on the same methodology. Their evidence is compiled using a combination of interviews with former prisoners of Chinese detention centers, calls to hospitals across China to inquire about the availability of organs for transplant, and basic arithmetic involving prison statistics, Falun Gong practitioner estimates and official organ transplant records. The closest thing to a smoking gun is the multiple instances of Chinese doctors claiming that their organs come from Falun Gong practitioners.

However, transplant doctors may have a couple reasons to claim Falun Gong practitioners as the origin of their organs, perhaps falsely. First, Falun Gong practitioners neither smoke nor drink, and are known for being extremely healthy. An organ coming from a healthy individual is much more desirable, and if the doctor could convince patients that his or her source is healthy, they are more likely to decide on the transplant. Second, the Chinese government has carried out a campaign to convince the general public that Falun Gong is a cult and its practitioners a menace to society. The average Chinese citizen may not feel guilty about taking organs from these dangerous individuals, especially when the organ is going to make a "good" citizen healthy again. It is important to keep in mind that the organ transplant business in China is highly lucrative, and financial incentives could also lead doctors to lie.

The simplest but least rigorous evidence that both *The Slaughter* and the Kilgour-Matas report presents boils down to basic arithmetic. Chinese

sources indicate that roughly 60,000 organ transplants occurred in the country between 2000 and 2005, the most intense period of Falun Gong persecution and imprisonment. Using trends from previous years, Kilgour and Matas estimate that approximately 18,500 transplants occurred from legitimate sources – family members, brain-dead donors, etc. This leaves another 41,500 organ transplants unaccounted -- a discrepancy left unexplained by the Chinese government. Kilgour, Matas and Gutmann all assert that through simple deduction, the organs must be coming from political prisoners, and in particular, Falun Gong practitioners.

Conducting research about dissidents and oppressed minorities in China is highly challenging, because it is a living issue and highly sensitive for the Chinese government. Efforts to conduct in-country research are highly restricted, if allowed at all. Interviews with refugees are also difficult, as only a few are able to leave China and many are still under the surveillance of Chinese officials in their new homes. Their political activity, though sanctioned and legal wherever they may currently live, can have repercussions on their families and loved ones back in China. It becomes even more challenging to report the truth for an illegal activity such as organ harvesting, as the Chinese government reportedly goes to great lengths to ensure that its tracks are covered and there is as little evidence as possible.

Thus, another challenge to both Gutmann's book and the Kilgour-Matas report is the interview process. As stated above, they are limited as to whom they can speak with about the matter in China, and thus many of their interviews occur with refugees in countries such as Canada or Thailand. These interviewees are people who left China because of their political views, many of whom were detained and tortured. They, perhaps justifiably, hold grudges against the Chinese government and would not say anything to paint it in a favorable light. As a reader, however, it is challenging to feel indifferent when the survivors of China's black prison tell the stories of their detainment. Their descriptions of the torture and humiliation they underwent are vivid, and throughout the book I found it difficult to maintain a scientific separation from the events and experiences they described.

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Despite these challenges, I finished the book convinced that these atrocities are being carried out. Gutmann's logic, though simple, is difficult to rebut without alternative explanations for conflicting numbers of organ transplants. As someone unfamiliar with the Falun Gong movement and its history, I also found *The Slaughter* to be an unbiased introduction to the spiritual discipline. Though Gutmann makes no obvious efforts to endorse the Falun Gong movement, I finished feeling sympathetic to its practitioners.

In this modern age, information about atrocities and violations of human rights is readily available. Videos, photos, audio and first-hand accounts can be and are disseminated globally. That makes Falun Gong organ harvesting an anomaly, a quiet crisis with no definitive evidence. Can it take its place among the other human rights crises of the day, including refugee camps, mass censorship, and persecution? This year, there is a bill -- House Resolution 281 -- that is being introduced in the U.S. Congress that would condemn China's practice of forced organ harvesting. In 2008, Kilgour and Matas testified for the United Nations about their research. But can states and organizations take legal action against the People's Republic of China on less-than-certain evidence?

It is an unverifiable tragedy, and one that will not receive attention until the Chinese government destroys the barriers to information it has constructed which, barring major shifts in Chinese government policy, is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future. I would recommend this book to anyone with an interest in human rights, particularly in China. Many tragedies can be found today in news headlines, but organ harvesting of Falun Gong practitioners is one that I fear will be relegated to the history books. My hope is that *The Slaughter* will draw attention to the issue, and in turn put pressure on China to change their treatment of prisoners of conscience.

Gutmann, Ethan, The Slaughter: Mass Killings, Organ Harvestings, and China's Secret Solution to Its Dissident Problem. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2014.

Endnotes

¹ David Matas and David Kilgour, “Report Into Allegations of Organ Harvesting of Falun Gong Practitioners in China,” Coalition to Investigate the Persecution of Falun Gong in China, 2006, <http://www.david-kilgour.com/2006/Kilgour-Matas-organ-harvesting-rpt-July6-eng.pdf>