

REVIEW ARTICLE CONCERNING THE ORIGIN OF THE PLASTINATED BODIES  
USED IN EXHIBITIONS

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COLOMBIA  
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## ABSTRACT

The exhibitions on embalmed human bodies have become very popular throughout the world due to the educational and research aims they generate. Amongst these, the most well-known are: “Bodies: The Exhibition”, “Body Worlds”, and “Our Body: The Universe Within.”

Over the years, different methods have been developed to conserve the human body after death and all with distinct purposes: research, religious, educational, or lucrative. One of the most recent processes for cadaver preservation is called plastination, developed in 1977 by the German anatomist Gunther von Hagens. This method manages to: replace body fluids for polymers, inhibit progressive tissue degeneration, and improve its preservation.

However, when the German magazine, Der Spiegel, published in 2004 an investigative report about the origins of these plastinated bodies and suggested that most of them were from prisoners of conscience (people incarcerated for their beliefs, ideas, or ethnicity), a great controversy began to unleash around human rights violation, illegal organ trafficking, and corruption<sup>i</sup>. But the exhibitions’ organizers claim that the specimens were either donated or attained through medical schools and Chinese universities<sup>ii</sup>. Unfortunately, some evidence suggests otherwise: they could actually be from prisoners of conscience that were executed for their organs and body without giving any sort of consent<sup>iii</sup>.

Not only are there ethical doubts concerning the plastination industry in China, but in recent years, growing evidence about forced organ harvesting of prisoners of conscience in China led the European Parliament to approve a resolution this past eleventh of December 2013 that expressed, "...its deep concern over the persistent and credible reports of systematic, state-sanctioned organ harvesting from non-consenting prisoners of conscience in the People's Republic of China, including from large numbers of Falun Gong practitioners imprisoned for their religious beliefs, as well as from members of other religious and ethnic minority groups<sup>iv</sup>."

Additional reports have mentioned that not only were the organ extirpated without consent from Falun Gong practitioners, but also from Tibetans, Uighurs (ethnic minority group), and Christians<sup>v</sup>. Furthermore, the corpses were sold to plastination factories in China for the body expositions known worldwide<sup>vi</sup>.

This document's objective is to collect the evidence available that supports the process that handles the bodies' preparation, their origins, a brief history about the concept of organ donation in China, and some issues associated with violation of human rights.

## INTRODUCTION

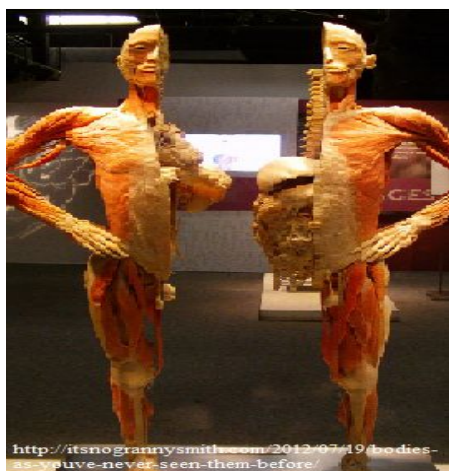
One cannot deny the popularity or the educational outreach that these exhibitions possess worldwide. Even with the advances that are enjoyed in this century, the human body still continues to be a mysterious phenomenon that does not seem to stop amazing modern medicine and all other applied sciences. These exhibitions are able to preserve the structure of the body demonstrating everyday postures that connects with the observer. However, all acts that intend to educate humankind should consider the ethical practice of the entire process. Many investigations from organizations and international media express serious doubts concerning violations of human dignity against the bodies exposed today.

The content of this document is a compilation of information from articles and regulations that expose suspicions about the lack of consent from the donors and the origin of their bodies. It also wishes to generate awareness of this issue to the general population. It should be clarified that there is no intention of judging the moral value of these exhibitions or the plastination method. The objective is only to spread more information about the controversy behind the origin of the bodies.

## THE PLASTINATION PROCESS

In order to dissect and completely plastinate a human body about 1500 hours of work is required<sup>vii</sup>, or approximately a year, just to replace the body fluids for chemical substances (polymers) that permit its conservation. It has a series of phases: fixation, dehydration, impregnation, and hardening<sup>viii</sup>, and it requires that no more than two days have passed after death<sup>ix</sup>. To do this, factories have been established to develop a serial process to handle many cadavers simultaneously.

**Image 1 y 2.** Left side: body displayed in Bodies: The Exhibition. Right side: one of the bodies displayed in Bodies: The Universe Within.



The first factory of plastination on a large scale, Von Hagens Plastination Co. Ltd., was founded in 1999 in the city of Dalian in China by Gunther von Hagens,

according to an article in The New York Times “China Turns Out Mummified Bodies for Displays<sup>x</sup>.” Sui Hongjin, former student of Hagens in Germany, became the first link for Hagens with China and later became his general manager for the company. In 2003, Sui Hongjin expresses to Oriental Perspective that Hagens had no intention of celebrating the expositions in China because he had not received many benefits, but rather Hagens only wanted to turn China into a base for production because the cost of manual labor and raw material were a lot lower in China<sup>xi</sup>.

Nowadays approximately ten plastination factories have been established in China and provide bodies for the exhibitions, universities, and medical schools<sup>xii</sup>.

**Image 3.** On a plastinated body called “The kneeling lady” for Body Worlds exhibition.



**Image 4.** Gunther van Hagens in a photo with one of his specimens for the Body Worlds exhibition.





According to WOIPFG, Sui Hongjin exported about 1000 samples of Chinese plastinated bodies to the United States and Europe to be showed in exhibitions<sup>xiii</sup>.

**Image 5.** Plastination Factory workers in China prepare specimens for the Body Worlds exhibition.



**Image 6.** Factory workers at the Dalian Hoffen Bio-Technique Co. Ltd., Dr. Sui Hongjin's company since 2004.



## HIGH DEMAND OF BODIES IN CHINA

The official website of "Our Body: The Universe Within" states, "The specimens in the exhibition were provided by various accredited Chinese universities, medical schools, medical institutions, research centers and laboratories to further the goals of the Anatomical Sciences & Technologies Foundation which are to promote educational and medical research of the human body<sup>xiv</sup>."

In their FAQ section the official website responds to whether people gave consent to use their bodies by saying, "Acceptance of corpses (via donation by will or donation by the relatives) by the Chinese medical schools is the principle source of obtaining materials for medical anatomy and educational purposes<sup>xv</sup>."

They also state, "In China, all donors (or their immediate family members) are clearly told that the donated bodies will be used for medical research and educational purpose. Meanwhile, they are also guaranteed that all of their personal information will be treated as confidential<sup>xvi</sup>."

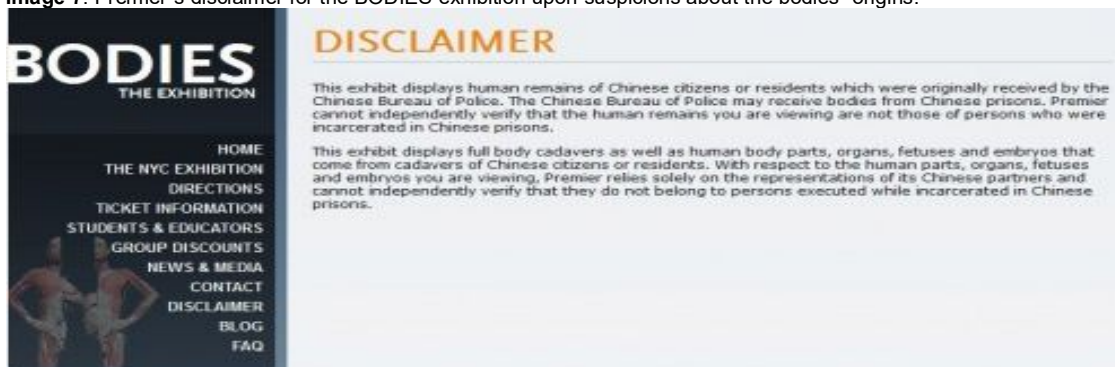
On October 21, 2003, Hagens wrote in an email, "So far, we have not yet received any donated body from China<sup>xvii</sup>."

But evidence suggests that in fact very few, if any body, was donated. In August 2012, Sui Hongjin told Southern Metropolis that none of our plastinated human cadaver specimens were donated<sup>xviii</sup>.

"On Aug. 17, 2012, Gunter Von Hagens' son told Deutsche Welle that until then they had received one Chinese cadaver<sup>xix</sup>."

Meanwhile, the official website of Premier, "BODIES: The Exhibition" organizers, published a disclaimer in 2008 that stated, "This exhibit displays human remains of Chinese citizens or residents which were originally received by the Chinese Bureau of Police. The Chinese Bureau of Police may receive bodies from Chinese prisons. Premier cannot independently verify that the human remains you are viewing are not people who were incarcerated in Chinese prisons. This exhibit displays full body cadavers as well as human body parts, organs, fetuses, and embryos that come from cadavers of Chinese citizens or residents. With respect to the human parts, organs, fetuses, and embryos you are viewing, Premier relies on the representations of its Chinese partners and cannot independently verify that they do not belong to persons executed while incarcerated in Chinese prisons<sup>xx</sup>."

**Image 7.** Premier's disclaimer for the BODIES exhibition upon suspicions about the bodies' origins.



Currently this disclaimer no longer appears on the official website, yet photos of it have been preserved.

Finally, the claim that most bodies are donated has another discrepancy: Chinese culture. The Chinese do not believe in donating their organs or donating body parts. The Spanish daily newspaper, *El País*, in the article, "China dejará de utilizar órganos de prisioneros ejecutados para trasplantes explica" (China will stop using organs from executed prisoners for transplants) explained that the Chinese show much disapproval in organ donation due to cultural and social reasons; many believe they will reincarnate after death, so they rather keep the body intact when incinerated or buried; others mistrust the authorities or refuse to give their organs to a fully commercialized health care system<sup>xxi</sup>."

## THE ORIGIN OF THE BODIES

According to Amnesty International, out of all the number of death sentences and executions in 2008 worldwide, only in China at least 1,718 people were executed

and 7,003 were sentenced to death, yet these figures are estimates because actual figures could be undoubtedly higher<sup>xxii</sup>.

Moreover, the WOIPFG's investigative report on the origin of the plastinated bodies in China reported that the "Autopsy Regulations", issued by the Ministry of Health on February 22, 1979 and ratified by the Ministry of Public Security, stipulates that if a human body is not claimed for at least 30 days it will be considered an "unclaimed body" and can be used for autopsy studies in medical schools. Medical schools must obtain permits from the appropriate agencies or from the Office of Public Safety to use the bodies<sup>xxiii</sup>.

In its report, Der Spiegel informed that some of the bodies used in Hagens' plastination factory had "bullet holes in the head," which suggests that they were bodies of executed prisoners<sup>xxiv</sup>.

However, this information only describes the context of the cadaver and not where the person came from. Prisoners in China are not only occupying state prisons, they are also found in labor camps, according to the article "A Plea From Chinese Labor Camp Also Reached Austria" from The Epoch Times newspaper<sup>xxv</sup>.

**Image 8.** Forced labor camps in Masanjia, China. Photo taken from The Epoch Times, 2013.



**Image 9.** Forced labor camp in Chaoyanggou, Changchun, now turned into a drug rehabilitation center. Photograph taken from The Epoch Times, 2013.



One hypothesis is that most of the bodies used for plastination were prisoners of conscience executed in China. In other words, they were imprisoned and physically restricted because of their political views, religious beliefs, ethnic origin, sex, color, language, national or social origin, property, birth, sexual orientation or other status, and never used violence or advocated<sup>xxvi</sup>.

The vast majority of prisoners, both in labor camps and in Chinese prisons, are prisoners of conscience. These include pro-democratic activists, human rights defenders, Falun Gong and Tibetans, Christians, and Uighurs<sup>xxvii</sup>.

On the other hand, the Human Rights report of 2009 from the U.S. State Department says that it is estimated that Falun Gong practitioners constitute at least half of the prisoners officially registered in Chinese labor camps<sup>xxviii</sup>.

David Kilgour and David Matas, Canadian human rights lawyers, say that many Falun Gong practitioners were never registered properly because they refused to give their names; many were imprisoned without trial<sup>xxix</sup>.

In their book on organ harvesting in the state of China, former Canadian Secretary of State for Asia-Pacific, David Kilgour, and Canadian human rights lawyer, David Matas, wrote, "To protect their families and avoid the hostility of the people in their locality, many detained Falun Gong declined to identify themselves. The result was a large Falun Gong prison population whose identities the authorities did not know. As well, no one who knew them knew where they were. Though this refusal to identify themselves was done for protection purposes, it may have had the opposite effect. It is easier to victimize a person whose whereabouts is unknown to

family members than a person whose location the family knows. This population is a remarkably undefended group of people, even by Chinese standards<sup>xxix</sup>.”

**Image 10.** Protests in Sydney, Australia against forced organ harvesting of Falun Gong practitioners in China, 2012.



According to human rights report, the ban on Falun Gong in China counts for at least half of the arrests of prisoners of conscience. The European Parliament, in its motion for a resolution on organ harvesting in China reported, “...in July 1999 the Chinese Communist Party launched an intensive nationwide wave of persecution, designed to eradicate the spiritual practice of Falun Gong and leading to the arrest and detention of hundreds of thousands of Falun Gong practitioners<sup>xxx</sup>.”

### THE BO XILAI AND GU KAILAI CASE

Bo Xilai was the governor of the province where the city of Dalian is located and where the factories of plastination have been established. An article in The Epoch Times reported that according to a source who is familiarized with the matter said Bo Xilai and Gu Kailai supplied the factories with Falun Gong practitioners’ bodies<sup>xxxi</sup>. The Epoch Times has no information on whether Hagens or his employees knew if they received bodies of Falun Gong practitioners<sup>xxxi</sup>.

**Imagen 11 y 12.** Left side: Bo Xilai with his wife con su Gu Kalai. Right side: Bo Xilai condemned for life for corruption, 2013.





Additionally, in the article called “Nuevas pruebas involucran a Gu Kailai en la venta de cadáveres de prisioneros “ (New evidence involves Gu Kailai in selling corpses of prisoners) reported that one source told The Epoch Times that Gu benefitted from the plastinated bodies while her husband was mayor of Dalian<sup>xxxii</sup>. The source also added that in 2012, “Bo was stripped of his position as a member of the Communist Party and accused of corruption and nepotism<sup>xxxii</sup>.”

The article published in 2004 by Der Spiegel published in 2004, mentioned before, also stated that around Hagens’ factory in Dalian there were three forced labor camps and prisons; these were the “ Provincial Jail Number 3 ” and “Re-educational camp through labor (in Dalian), and the famous “Yaojia Detention Center ( Dalian)” where political prisoners have been detained<sup>xxxiii</sup>. Bo took the lead in building and expanding prisons and labor camps on a large scale in the province of Liaoning, including: Dalian Prison, Nanguanling Prison, Jinzhou Prison, Wafangdian Prison, Zhoushuizi labor camp, and Yaojia Detention Center<sup>xxxiv</sup>. Bo also expanded the Masanjia labor camp in Shenyang City, making it the largest prison in China, as stated in The Epoch Times<sup>xxxiv</sup>.

In August 2012 The Epoch Times said that Gu had found that there were two ways of making money from detained practitioners: organs could be removed and used for transplants in hospitals in Liaoning, and bodies could be sold to plastination factories<sup>xxxv</sup>.

Former governor Bo Xilai was tried for crimes against humanity in more than ten countries, according to The Epoch Times<sup>xxxvi</sup>.

## INFORMED CONSENT

To try to prevent more horrific acts that were experienced in the twentieth century against humanity for the benefit of scientific knowledge, in 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in 1964 the Declaration of Helsinki, and in 2002 the Guidelines International Ethical for Biomedical Research have been created. Based on these documents, all medical and scientific research must ensure the integrity and dignity of every human being.

For purposes of this article, only some key points of these documents will be mentioned- things that the plastination industry ignored. For example, articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaim the right to freedom of consciousness, freedom of opinion, thought and or belief and the right to be informed, respectively<sup>xxxvii</sup>. The cadavers from prisoners of conscience apparently were victims of a violation against these two articles.

In the Declaration of Helsinki informed consent is a duty that was not fully met with the donors for plastination because the corpses came from executed prisoners, nothing assures that the imprisoned individual voluntarily donated his or her body or understood the conditions their bodies would be used after death; that even the researchers and scientists of the project had a clear ethical basis, or that they had the consent to manipulate subject's information<sup>xxxviii</sup>.

Finally, the International Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical Research states that all research should be governed under three principles: respect for persons, beneficence and justice. These principles state that everyone has the right to autonomy or protecting himself or herself from harm and abuse, all research should work towards the welfare of the subjects that are part of the investigation, and it is forbidden to inflict harm to the subject at any time of the research<sup>xxxix</sup>.

It also mentions that the sponsors of the research are equally responsible as the scientists because both must ensure the rights of the subject be abided by the laws of ethics, and must meet the requirements according to the host country<sup>xl</sup>.



## CONCLUSION

The compilation of information that mentioned the origin of plastinated bodies suggests that they have a past of human dignity violation. Therefore, it is important to disseminate this information and allow the public to have a broader concept about the exhibitions and the industry of Plastination in China.

Thus, all can be summarized as follows:

- Thousands of bodies have been plastinated for exhibitions and sold for educational purposes to medical schools worldwide.
- Most of these bodies belonged to Chinese residents, as stated by the official web pages of the exhibits.
- There are serious doubts about whether most of the bodies were donated directly and with informed consent for Plastination. Due to cultural and traditional reasons, the Chinese are unwilling to donate organs and body parts. Further statements by some of the owners of the first plastination's factories claim that it was **difficult** to get donated bodies.

- Since it appears that most of the bodies are not from voluntary donation, the remaining sources of cadavers are from unclaimed bodies or of executed prisoners in China.
- It is contradicting the fact that there would be an abundance of cadavers available for plastination seeing that 1) a body requires two days after death in order to start the process of plastination and 2) the rules of autopsy in China state that a body can be donated only within 30 days after his or her death .
- Evidence about organ harvesting from executed prisoners in China led the European Parliament to pass a resolution proposes a stop to these acts.
- The majority of prisoners of conscience in China are Tibetans, Falun Gong practitioners, and Uighurs (ethnic minority).
- Evidence suggests that Bo Xilai and Gu Kailai were involved in organ harvesting from imprisoned Falun Gong practitioners and selling their bodies to plastination factories.
- There are serious doubts whether an informed consent was in a pressure-free environment that meets international standards of medical research on human beings.

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