

Transnational Repression and the Arts: Communist China and a Dance Company

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Abstract

The paper addresses the issue of transnational repression in the arts through a case study. The specific focus is Chinese Communist Party (CCP)/ Government of China transnational repression of the dance company Shen Yun Performing Arts and the National Arts Centre of Ottawa, Canada. Shen Yun Performing Arts is a classical Chinese dance company, founded in 2006 by volunteers from the community of practitioners of the spiritually based set of exercises Falun Gong. Falun Gong is a blending and updating of ancient Chinese spiritual and exercise traditions, started in 1992. With the initial encouragement of the Chinese Government, the population of practitioners in China grew by 1999 to 100 million, a number which so alarmed the CCP that the Party reversed course and decided on the repression of the practice. Though the Falun Gong community was initially apolitical, its repression created understandably an opposition to that repression within the community which found its way into some of Shen Yun Performing Arts dance pieces. The dance depiction criticizing CCP regression of Falun Gong in turn generated CCP transnational repression against the dance company. This transnational repression took the form of Chinese embassy and consulate diplomatic initiatives, bomb threats against dance performance venues, lawfare and media generated disinformation. The paper sets out details of this transnational repression and the reaction of the National Arts Centre to that repression. The paper concludes with recommendations.

Keywords: transnational repression, China, a dance company

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Introduction

This paper addresses transnational repression, discrimination, censorship and unfairness in the arts through a case study. The focus is Chinese Communist Party (CCP)/ Government of China transnational repression of Shen Yun Performing Arts and its impact on the National Arts Centre in Ottawa, Canada.

Shen Yun is a classical Chinese dance company, founded in 2006 by volunteers from the community of Falun Gong practitioners. Falun Gong is a blending and updating of ancient Chinese spiritual and exercise traditions, started in 1992 and repressed by the CCP internally since 1999 and externally in a systematic way since 2000.

Chinese Transnational Repression

The success of this dance company, as well as other Falun Gong practitioner initiatives abroad, prompted the CCP/ State in 2022 to re-evaluate its policy of transnational repression of Falun Gong.

The President of China, Xi Jinping, addressed the Political and Legal Affairs Commission of the CCP in October, 2022, shortly prior to the 20th National Party Congress. A leaked report of the meeting sets out these statements of President Xi to the members of the Commission:

During the Jiang Zemin era and Hu Jintao era, the suppression of Falun Gong abroad was a failure. The crackdown and suppression overseas failed. So, what did Xi Jinping see as the specific manifestation of this failure?

That Falun Gong was not eliminated, not eradicated by the CCP internationally. Instead, media organisations founded by Falun Gong practitioners and cultural groups have become highly active in the international community. Not only in the Chinese-speaking community internationally, but also in the English-speaking community. 'They have developed into the CCP's most prominent opposition force,' these were Xi Jinping's words. ...

Regarding the specific action plan, Xi Jinping gave instructions to have 'one focus, two basic directions'. This 'one focus', according to what this source has disclosed, stated by Xi Jinping refers to targeting the founder of Falun Gong and his family. ...

What are the 'two basic directions'? One is public opinion warfare and the other is legal warfare.

As for the so-called public opinion warfare, which includes demanding the CCP's official organisations should mention Falun Gong less. The public opinion attacks on Falun Gong should rely mainly on some media and self-media whose viewpoints about the CCP are more ambiguous. They are the ones to launch public opinion attacks on Falun Gong. This would be more effective. ...

What about the lawfare? It's all about exploiting the litigation systems of the United States, Taiwan, and some other countries. To use their judicial systems to launch attacks on Falun Gong through lawfare. (Yuan, 2025)

Public Opinion Warfare and the New York Times

In 2024 and 2025, the New York Times published at least eleven articles and one podcast critical of Shen Yun, all the while maintaining silence on the mass killing of Falun Gong practitioners for their organs. The Times ignored several milestones on these mass killings, spanning almost two decades. From an objective perspective, each of these milestones was of far greater journalistic interest and significance than the concerns about the dance company presented in the Times publications.

These milestones included:

- a) the release of reports, books, and investigative findings by the late Hon. David Kilgour, Ethan Gutmann and me in 2006, 2007, 2009, 2014 and 2016;
- b) a US House of Representatives resolution adopted in June 2016 condemning state sanctioned forced organ harvesting in China of prisoners of conscience;
- c) a 2020 judgment from The China Tribunal, a people's tribunal determining that the mass killing of Falun Gong practitioners, for their organs has occurred beyond a reasonable doubt;
- d) the expression of alarm and concern in 2021 by twelve UN human rights experts about the evidence of forced organ harvesting in China with prisoner of conscience victims;
- e) ethical conclusions in April 2022 by medical professionals;
- f) a European Union Parliament resolution adopted in May 2022 expressing serious concerns about the reports of persistent, systematic, inhumane and state-sanctioned organ harvesting from Falun Gong practitioners and other minorities in China;
- g) the release of at least five documentaries on this topic from 2013 to 2023; and
- h) the passage of the Falun Gong Protection Act by the US House of Representatives in May 2025.

A former China based news reporter for the Times provided an insider's account of the Times' editorial stance towards the topic of Falun Gong, in her written submissions to the China Tribunal,

it was my impression the New York Times, my employer at the time, was not pleased that I was pursuing these stories, and after initially tolerating my efforts made it impossible for me to continue. [...] More broadly, I conducted several conversations in person or by email with senior editors but essentially my requests to continue this line of investigation – for which I'd need time – were ignored. [...] Another editor commented, when I tried to broaden the investigation from death row prisoners to prisoners of conscience [...] that people who believed that prisoner of conscience organs were being used were on 'the outer fringes of advocacy' – that is, not rational. The usual arguments were presented, for example that Falungong are irrational and unreliable, and so on. It was clear to me the issue was unwelcome. [...] (Tatlow, 2019)

Lawfare

The second strategy set out in the Xi Jinping leaked address on how to repress Falun Gong abroad was to use foreign judicial systems through lawfare. Two examples are two pending lawsuits against Shen Yun by former dancers complaining about working conditions, pay and the age at which they worked, a decade ago. These two lawsuits, commenced on November 24, 2024 and April 18, 2025, received immediate, dedicated coverage by the New York Times, suggesting a degree of coordination between the plaintiffs and the Times reporters.

Although the Times conferred extensive coverage on the complaints, their allegations were rejected by a petition from the employees and performers of Shen Yun, which collected 1,557 signatures, including 791 family members. The Times reporting did not mention the petition. On August 26, 2024, updated on January 2, 2025, the Falun Dafa Information Centre published information showing close ties between the complainants in the Shen Yun lawsuits and the Chinese regime:

- (a) At least three of the six former Shen Yun performers interviewed, photographed and quoted in a Times' August 2024 article have ties to the Beijing Dance Academy, a Chinese state-funded organization functioning under the direction of the CCP.
- (b) Three of the six interviewees have travelled to China to work with the Beijing Dance Academy, while one of the interviewees runs a Taiwan based dance studio that collaborates with a Beijing Dance Academy teacher. For more than a year after leaving Shen Yun, this interviewee maintained positive communications with Fei Tian College, which trains dancers for Shen Yun, only to adopt a diametrically opposite narrative after developing ties with the Beijing Dance Academy. The Times' reporters were warned of these possible conflicts of interest, but noted none in their articles about Shen Yun.
- (c) The father of Nicole Hong, a recurring writer of the New York Times Shen Yun articles, has apparent affiliations with the CCP United Front Organization.
- (d) Soon after the initial New York Times articles about Shen Yun came out, a YouTuber known to be CCP-backed stated on X, on August 18, 2024:

'I was the one who introduced people [former performers] to the New York Times, especially for the initial interviews.' At least three of the Times' six core interviewees had previously appeared on his YouTube channel. Several of them were also simultaneously recruiting potential interviewees for both his channel and the Times' reporters, according to communications from former Shen Yun performers who they contacted. This pattern continued with subsequent Times' reporting. (Falun Dafa Information Center, 2025)

NAC Chinese Embassy Contacts

There have been significant contacts between the National Arts Centre and the Chinese Embassy in Canada in the period leading to the Centre's decision to cancel Shen Yun. Several of these contacts are set out in a disclosure obtained through an Access to Information request.

The Chinese Ambassador visited the National Arts Centre on August 21st, 2024 and posted the visit on the Embassy website. The posting said:

Ambassador Wang said that China and Canada have maintained good exchanges and cooperation in the field of culture and art, and that China has cooperated with NAC in organizing Chinese New Year concerts for many times, which have been widely welcomed by the Canadian audience. China is willing to deepen cooperation with NAC and organize activities diverse in formats and rich in content to promote exchanges and mutual learning between culture and art sectors of the two countries and enhance mutual understanding and friendship between the two peoples.

President Deacon stressed that NAC is willing to strengthen exchanges and cooperation in the field of culture and art with the Chinese side. (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Canada, 2025)

The Ambassador invited Christopher Deacon, then President and Chief Executive Officer of the National Arts Centre, and Nelson Mcdougall, Managing Director of NAC Orchestra for dinner on October 15th, 2024 at the official residence of the Embassy.

Given the Party's imperative in shutting down Shen Yun, a strong inference is that the Embassy has asked the National Arts Centre not to offer a venue for Shen Yun performances and justified that request with fabricated, propagandistic charges against the dance company. While there is no public paper trail to that effect, the Chinese embassy in Canada would not have been doing the work assigned to them by the CCP as their primary task if such a request had not been made.

The China Tribunal wrote in 2020 that "Any person or organisation that interacts in any substantial way with the PRC – the People's Republic of China –... should recognise that ... they are interacting with a criminal state." The National Arts Centre, in its interactions with the Chinese Embassy, has to date shown no recognition of this fact.

The NAC Staff Venue Refusal

In October 2024, National Arts Centre staff told representatives of the Falun Dafa Association of Ottawa that confirmation of the dates for Shen Yun 2026 would be forthcoming in a couple of weeks. However, that never happened.

Internal emails of NAC staff disclosed through the Access to Information request were revealing. An internal e-mail from Heather Gibson, Executive Producer, Popular Music and Variety, to Christopher Deacon, Chief Executive Officer of the National Arts Centre dated January 13, 2025, disclosed through the Access to Information request, stated in part, "in light of the allegations that continue to surface about the organization at the least, I would recommend we sit 2026 out and let these allegations conclude before determining if we will continue with them."

Christopher Deacon, in a reply e-mail the same day, stated in part:

I see this as a programming decision, to be made at your discretion. If ... you have concerns with respect to protecting the reputation of the NAC, I think you would be justified in proceeding as you propose. I have no objection. However, it's your call.

Heather Gibson then wrote back to Christopher Deacon, again the same day, an e-mail which states in part:

I appreciate and respect that but it's not going to be (only) me who is dealing with the potential issues this may cause in media, phone calling campaigns, meeting requests to your office, etc. ... it [is] difficult to conceive of this as a programming decision alone. If I'm hearing from you that you ..., will stand behind this decision, then I will move forward.

Christopher Deacon then replied to Heather Gibson, still on January 13th, "I will support your decision. Thanks, Heather."

The National Arts Centre notified orally a representative of the Falun Dafa Association of Ottawa on June 29, 2024, that the Centre had decided not to rent to Shen Yun in 2026. No explanation or reason was given.

Members of the Falun Dafa Association of Ottawa met with Christopher Deacon in July 2025. They reported that Christopher Deacon attributed the failure to book the venue for the dance company to a lack of available dates.

Christopher Deacon did not offer to the dance company any dates for 2027. The statement of Christopher Deacon looks disingenuous in light of the internal e-mail from Mr. Deacon to Heather Gibson on January 13, 2025 that the decision on giving dates to the dance company was hers to make and accepted that her refusal to give dates could be based on concerns about the allegations made against the dance company.

Richard An and I wrote to the Chair of the Board of the Centre asking the Board on January 17, 2026 to instruct the Centre to change its decision to refuse to host Shen Yun. Annabelle Cloutier, the current President and Chief Executive Officer of the Centre, wrote back to us on January 25th 2026 stating:

The National Arts Centre first communicated its decision not to rent Southam Hall to Shen Yun Performing Arts for the 2026 season to representatives of the Falun Dafa Association on June 28, 2025.

The National Arts Centre's management and staff then met with Falun Dafa representatives on multiple occasions, including in July and September 2025, regarding the decision.

As previously communicated to Falun Dafa, I write as a courtesy to reiterate that the National Arts Centre will not be reconsidering its decision. This is a private commercial decision within the discretion of National Arts Centre management, made without input from the Board of Trustees. It was made for reasons which have been communicated to Falun Dafa and of which they are well aware.

With respect to the allegations in your letter regarding foreign state influence, we reiterate that the National Arts Centre's decisions on artistic programming and venue rentals are made independently by the National Arts Centre, without external influence.

The Centre is not a private enterprise. It is a Government of Canada entity. The Government of Canada places the National Arts Centre on its list of Crown corporations.

The National Arts Centre was created by statute enacted by the Parliament of Canada, the National Arts Centre Act. Its board of directors is appointed by the Government of Canada at the highest level, the Governor in Council. It is by the Auditor General of Canada. The Centre is required to report annually to the Parliament of Canada. No object of the Centre, set out in its statute, is commercial; its objects state rather that the Centre is "to develop the performing arts."

It would be inappropriate even for a private enterprise to refuse to engage with perceived opposition to the CCP/ Government on the basis that it would be more profitable to engage with CCP/ Government entities. Whether that is so or not, for a public entity to act in that way is contrary to the public interest.

No written reasons for the decision made have been given to anyone for the decision to refuse booking dates to Shen Yun. This is a decision without written communicated reasons.

There is a reference in the e-mail from the CEO of the Centre to meetings with representatives of the Falun Dafa Association after the decision was made. There were at those meetings, concerns raised by the Centre which representatives of the Ottawa Falun Dafa Association who were at the meetings fully answered in writing subsequent to the meetings. If those concerns were real reasons for the decision, fairness would have required disclosure of the concerns in writing before the decision was made with an opportunity to respond, followed by a decision in writing which either accepted the responses or explained why the responses were unsatisfactory. However, that did not happen in this case.

The assertion of the CEO that the decision of the Centre was made without external influence fails to take account of the forms transnational repression can take. Transnational repression does not always take place directly. It can also take place indirectly.

One reason for the refusal to book dates Shen Yun, as one can see from the internal e-mails of the Centre made available through an Access to Information request, was “allegations” made against Shen Yun. The record shows that the decision to refuse dates to Shen Yun was influenced by these allegations. Yet, there was no assessment made by the Centre whether these allegations were the result of transnational repression. It is my assessment that they were. The Centre expressed no disagreement with that assessment.

An Assessment

If one looks at this history in its entirety, it appears that the refusal of the National Arts Centre to give dates in 2026 to the dance company was based on the allegations levelled against the company. The reference by Centre Executive Producer Heather Gibson to allegations was presumably a reference to the New York Times articles and podcast about Shen Yun, the republishing of these articles by other media, as well as to the lawsuits mentioned above.

Suspension of judgment is appropriate for media allegations. The media is diverse. The complaints of a small number of disgruntled former employees in a large enterprise, even when reported by the media, is not going to be representative of the enterprise as a whole. As well, when it comes to the New York Times, there is hard evidence from a former reporter, Didi Kirsten Tatlow, of a pro-CCP/ anti-Falun Gong bias in the Times editorial team.

Generally, it would be a mistake to take a side on litigation before the litigation is resolved. The point of litigation is to resolve disputes. For the National Arts Centre to take a position against Shen Yun simply because allegations have been made in litigation in process is unfair to Shen Yun. Unless and until allegations have been established in fair legal proceedings, it would be wrong for the National Arts Centre to assume that the allegations are true or act as if they were true.

The information available through the Access to Information request gives no indication that the Centre engaged in an assessment of the role played by the CCP’s transnational repression policy against Falun Gong and Shen Yun, behind the allegations that concerned the Centre. Neutrality for the Centre in the face of allegations would be to carry on with Shen Yun to allow bookings as had happened in the past until the allegations were resolved. To refuse bookings based on allegations means that at least some credence is given to the allegations.

The phrase “the allegations that continue to surface” in the e-mail from Heather Gibson makes that point. The mere repetition of allegations, to the National Arts Centre management, gives them

weight. This reasoning plays into the totalitarian playbook. Repeat a lie often enough, loud enough, and it will be believed.

The CCP and the Government of China offer a bed of nails to its critics. To those who keep on good terms with the CCP/ Government of China, it is the opposite, the red carpet treatment.

One can presume, or at least hope, that the National Arts Centre would not deny a venue to Shen Yun simply because of the cost of security arrangements or because of the incentive of benefits from cooperation with the CCP/ Government of China. However, these factors became other reasons for what was done once the New York Times articles become a convenient cover for them.

Christopher Deacon suggested that Heather Gibson was acting out of a concern to protect the reputation of the National Arts Centre. Whether or not this was the true motivation, for the National Arts Centre to become a vehicle for CCP transnational repression objectively has the opposite effect, harming the reputation of the Centre. The Centre's decision to refuse Shen Yun's rental request sets the Centre apart from the rest of the prominent performing art venues around the world which have scheduled Shen Yun to perform in 2026.

Reputation is not a neutral concept. The same behaviour can lower reputation in some eyes and raise it in others.

The refusal of the National Arts Centre to give Shen Yun booking dates may raise the reputation of the Centre in the eyes of the CCP and those unfamiliar with its strategies and tactics of transnational repression. Yet, it lowers the reputation of the Centre in the eyes of the victims of the Party and those familiar with its strategies and tactics of transnational repression. In principle, the reputation of the Centre in the eyes of the victims or the informed should matter more than their reputation in the eyes of the victimizer or the uninformed.

Transnational Repression and the Government of Canada

The issue of transnational repression is a larger issue than the issue of booking dates at the National Arts Centre for Shen Yun Performing Arts. Moreover, transnational repression is a different form of foreign interference than interference with democratic processes and institutions.

The Canadian Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions issued its final report in January 2025. The Inquiry Commissioner, in her final report, stated:

The Commission's work has also shown that transnational repression is a genuine scourge. I did not examine this phenomenon in depth since this form of foreign interference goes well beyond the democratic processes and institutions my mandate tasked me with examining. But what I have learned about it is sufficient for me to sound the alarm that the government must take this seriously and consider ways to address it. (Report Summary, 2025, p. 6)

Yet, that did not happen with the National Arts Centre. The National Arts Centre did not take the threat of transnational repression seriously.

The Centre, on the contrary, took seriously and acted upon allegations against Shen Yun without any assessment whether those allegations were the result of transnational repression. The Centre showed no awareness of the existence of the phenomenon of indirect repression.

The Centre gave, at least orally, as a concern about Shen Yun booking, the cost of increased security. Yet, there was no indication of appreciation that those costs were the results of bomb threats and that these threats were themselves a form of transnational repression.

The statement of the Centre that the refusal to book was a “private commercial decision” manifests an overly narrow focus. Because the Centre is a Crown corporation, not all of its decisions can be considered from a private, commercial perspective.

The claim that the decision was commercial raises this question. Was the Centre asserting that more money is to be made from cultural exchanges with the CCP/ State than from hosting Shen Yun? If so, that sort of trade off – money for censorship – from a public interest perspective, should be unacceptable.

The Financial Administration Act provides “The Governor in Council may, on the recommendation of the appropriate Minister, give a directive to any parent Crown corporation, if the Governor in Council is of the opinion that it is in the public interest to do so.”

The National Arts Centre, mistakenly, appeared motivated by a fear of reputational harm if they were to continue to host Shen Yun, in light of the allegations made against the dance company. Be that as it may, because the National Arts Centre is a Crown corporation subject to Governor in Council directive, the Government of Canada has to consider its own reputation. For the Government of Canada, doing something on this issue would have consequences. So would doing nothing. Doing nothing in the face of apparent accommodation by a Crown corporation to transnational repression would send a message which the Government of Canada should not want to give.

To avoid the appearance of accommodating transnational repression, it is in the public interest for the Government to work with the Centre to reverse their decision to refuse bookings to Shen Yun. Should that effort fail, the Governor in Council should direct the National Arts Centre to provide its next available dates to Shen Yun.

Discrimination Against Falun Gong

The National Arts Centre refusal to host Shen Yun Performing Arts is wrong for three reasons. The refusal was the acting out of CCP/ State transnational repression of the Falun Gong global community; it was discrimination against those who practice and believe in Falun Gong; and it was procedurally unfair to Shen Yun Performing Arts.

Discrimination can occur either overtly or by impact. Adverse impact discrimination or constructive discrimination is still discrimination even though nothing is said expressly defaming the affected group. With the National Arts Centre, that is what we see.

The National Arts Centre has pointed to no other identity group being treated the way the Falun Gong community has been treated through the denial of a venue to Shen Yun Performing Arts. Nor, I suggest, could they do so. That refusal, though apparently the result of transnational repression, is improper as discriminatory whether it is the result of transnational repression or not.

Conclusion

The fact that Shen Yun performances, though artistically extraordinary, convey a message of which the Chinese Government/ Communist Party disapproves should not be a reason to refuse a venue. If one puts that disapproval aside, the reality is that hosting Shen Yun fits squarely within the mandate and mission of the National Arts Centre to showcase the performing arts.

Transnational repression does not become acceptable simply because it is done indirectly, through intermediaries. Seeing through indirect transnational repression may require more insight, diligence and determination, than noting direct transnational repression. Yet, the effort necessary to react against indirect transnational repression is one that must be made.

If there had been no New York Times articles or lawsuits against Shen Yun, the National Arts Centre may well not have acceded to a Chinese Embassy request to deny their venue to Shen Yun. The National Arts Centre reaction should be the same even when the Chinese Government/ Communist Party pursues its political agenda against Shen Yun and Falun Gong indirectly, through friendly media, lawfare and bomb threats. The Chinese Government/ Communist Party should not be allowed to do indirectly what it would not be allowed to do directly.

Denying Shen Yun a venue means taking the side of the perpetrators against the victims, the side of the CCP/ Government of China against the Falun Gong community, who form the backbone of Shen Yun. The Government of Canada should see through the veil used by the Chinese Government/ Communist Party to disguise their transnational repression efforts directed against Shen Yun and arrange for the Centre to continue to offer bookings to the Shen Yun Performing Arts.

The CCP's transnational repression of Falun Gong is not merely a topic of academic interest. The repression exerts pressure globally on the daily lives of those outside China who run afoul of what the Communist Party perceives to be their interests.

The transnational repression of Falun Gong and Shen Yun is not only an attack on a spiritually based practice and a dance company. The repression threatens artistic freedom, freedom of expression, inclusivity and a commitment to protect marginalized communities, upon which liberty and democracy depend.

The National Arts Centre, the pre-eminent arts centre of Canada, has been an important steward of these values. The final decision on this matter will either embolden transnational repression or preserve the continued flourishing of the arts.

The Falun Gong community has been a staunch defender against the Chinese totalitarian regime for two and half decades. They are deeply committed to telling the truth, including the truth about the CCP and their own victimization by the Party. Shen Yun Performing Arts is a crystallization of this effort.

The New York Times has become the most prominent vehicle of the CCP's transnational repression against Falun Gong. Its perceived independence from the CCP and its prestige renders its attacks against Shen Yun and Falun Gong exceptionally potent, in a way that no CCP propaganda can replicate.

Shen Yun has performed in the major cities and arts centres of Canada for almost 20 years. The Government of Canada should arrange for the National Arts Centre to grant its stage to these performers, and not become a stone in the road of transnational repression paved by the CCP regime. To do this would be contrary to the values of human rights and diversity, as well as the mandate of the National Arts Centre to present and showcase the best of cultures.

The behaviour of the National Arts Centre needs course correction. The Government of Canada should not tarnish its own reputation, as well as the reputation of the Centre by letting remain the refusal of the Centre to provide a venue to Shen Yun Performing Arts.

The Government of Canada brings to the matters raised here a broader perspective and experience than the National Arts Centre has. The Government of Canada is well aware of the phenomenon of transnational repression, in all its various forms. The Government of Canada is more informed on the issues and more sensitive to the need to react against the phenomenon of transnational repression than the Centre. One can say that this so also about the need to respect procedural fairness.

On the subjects of both transnational repression and procedural fairness, the relative expertise lies with the Government and not the Centre. When there are failures of appreciation of the Centre on both transnational repression and procedural fairness combined, it is appropriate, even necessary, for the Government to intervene.

More generally, arts venues need to react against the phenomenon of transnational repression effected indirectly as well as directly. The Government of Canada should arrange for the National Arts Centre to reverse course. The Centre should not continue to be, as it has been to date, an example of what not to do.

In the annals of transnational repression, the CCP efforts to stifle Shen Yun are far from unique. The arts can not immunize themselves from transnational repression unless they swallow a large dose of awareness, appreciation and understanding of the transnational repression phenomenon.

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