Research Report

The Emergence of Labour Camps in Shandong Province, 1942–1950*

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ABSTRACT This article analyses the emergence of labour camps in the CCP base area of Shandong province from 1942 to 1950. By using original archival material, it provides a detailed understanding of the concrete workings of the penal system in a specific region, thus giving flesh and bone to the more general story of the prison in China. It also shows that in response to military instability, organizational problems and scarce resources, the local CCP in Shandong abandoned the idea of using prisons (*jiansuo*) to confine convicts much earlier than the Yan'an authorities, moving towards a system of mobile labour teams and camps dispersed throughout the countryside which displayed many of the key hallmarks of the post-1949 *laogai*. Local authorities continued to place faith in a penal philosophy of reformation (*ganhua*) which was shared by nationalists and communists, but shifted the moral space where reformation should be carried out from the prison to the labour camp, thus introducing a major break in the history of confinement in 20th-century China.

Scholarship on the history of the *laogai* – or reform through labour camps – in the People's Republic of China is generally based either on an analysis of official documents or on information gathered from former prisoners.[1] The major difficulty encountered in research on the *laogai* is the lack of more substantial empirical evidence, as internal documents and archives produced by prison administrations, public security bureaus or other security departments have so far remained beyond the reach of historians.[2] A similar difficulty characterizes research on the history of crime and punishment in CCP-controlled areas before 1949. Patricia Griffin's remarkable book on the communist treatment of counter-revolutionaries from 1924 to 1949 relied mainly on documents seized by the Kuomintang in campaigns against the communists in the 1930s.[3] Her book included a pioneering chapter on prison management, which was

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1. See Michael Dutton, *Policing and Punishment in China: From Patriarchy to "the People"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Jean-Luc Domenach, *L'archipel oublié* (Paris: Fayard, 1992); Harry Wu, *Laogai: The Chinese Gulag* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992); James D. Seymour and Richard Anderson, *New Ghosts, Old Ghosts: Prisons and Labor Reform Camps in China* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1997).

2. However, see Frank Dikötter, "Crime and punishment in post-liberation China: the prisoners of a Beijing gaol in the 1950s," *The China Quarterly*, No. 149 (March 1997), pp. 147–159.

3. Patricia E. Griffin, *The Chinese Communist Treatment of Counterrevolutionaries, 1924–1949* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

based predominantly on a 1946 report from the Taihang Administrative Office.[4] Although her work was published almost a quarter of a century ago, more recent publications from mainland China have continued to rely on similar evidence, thus patching together a small number of official reports from very different regions and periods to reconstruct a penal history which is heavily centred on the base area around Yan'an.[5] The official reports and newspaper items used by historians, moreover, tend to be more normative than descriptive: they may reflect official prison policy in Yan'an but provide precious little evidence on actual penal practices. This research report, in contrast, is based on archival material pertaining directly to penal administration in Shandong from 1942 to 1950.[6] The use of original source material enables a much more detailed understanding of the concrete workings of labour camps in a specific region, thus giving flesh and bone to the more general story of the prison in China and providing a first building block towards a more nuanced and authoritative history of the *laogai* in the PRC.

On the basis of fresh evidence, moreover, it is argued that penal policy in Shandong evolved primarily in response to military instability, local constraints and practical problems: direct references to penal ideas and practices from the Soviet Union only appeared at the end of the 1940s. The pragmatic policies pursued by judicial authorities in Shandong reflected a broader shift of the local party towards the concentration of human resources and organizational structures in a decade marked by war.[7] Contrary to Yan'an, the base area in Shandong was blockaded, invaded and in some places conquered by the Japanese (1941–42) or the Kuomintang (1946–47). As a consequence of these rapidly shifting military situations, no fixed spaces of confinement divided into cells and referred to as "prisons" (*jiansuo* or *jianyu*) in both communist areas and nationalist territory appeared in the Shandong base area: instead, highly mobile "instruction teams" (*xunyudui*) during the war were followed by relatively independent "penal education camps" (*jiaoyusuo*) or "education through labour camps" (*laojiaosuo*) dispersed in small teams throughout

4. She initially published this chapter as an article; see Patricia Griffin, "Prison management in the Kiangsi and Yenan periods," *The China Quarterly*, No. 58 (June 1974), pp. 310–331.

5. Zhang Xipo and Han Yanlong, *Zhongguo geming fazhi shi* (*The History of the Revolutionary Law System in China*) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1987).

6. I have used the Shandong Provincial Archives, Jinan, series C23, which encompass the *quanzong* G1 to G52 of the "revolutionary period"; I also consulted a collection of selected archives published by the local party and available in the Shandong Provincial Archives (*Shandong geming lishi ziliao xuanbian* (Jinan: Shandong sheng dang'anguan, 1980–87), hereafter SDLS), as well as judicial periodicals and handbooks from the region preserved in the archives of the Investigation Bureau, Taipei. Shandong province was divided into several *gongshu*, which I translate as "districts," which in turn were divided into *zhuanshu*, or "sub-districts," the next administrative unit being the *xian*, or "county."

7. This shift in policy has been analysed by Elise Anne DeVido, "The making of the communist party-state in Shandong province, 1927–1952," Harvard University, PhD thesis, 1995, a useful study which relies on published PRC documents; see also Elise Anne DeVido, "Wartime mobilisation in the Shandong base area," in Feng Chongyi and David S.G. Goodman (eds.), *North China at War, 1937–1945: The Social Ecology of Revolution* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

the countryside. The local CCP in Shandong thus abandoned the prison much earlier than the Yan'an authorities, moving towards a system of labour camps which displayed many of the key hallmarks of the post-1949 *laogai*, based on "reform through labour" in economically self-sufficient camps. They continued to place faith in a penal philosophy of repentance and reformation (*ganhua*) which first appeared during the late Qing and was shared by nationalists and communists, but shifted the moral space where reformation should be carried out from the prison to the labour camp, introducing a major break in the history of confinement in 20th-century China.[8]

From Instruction Teams to Labour Camps

The custodial sentence only appeared in China after the abolishment of traditional penalties, including corporal punishment, during the first decade of the 20th century. As the custodial sentence became the most common form of punishment, the number of prisons drastically increased in order to accommodate a rising tide of inmates. During the republican period (1911–1949), county magistrates, city mayors, provincial governors and central governments, with varying degrees of success, pursued an extensive programme of prison building in line with modern penal principles current in Europe. Modernizing elites viewed the reformation of criminals as an integral part of a much larger project of national regeneration in which social cohesion, economic development and state power could only be obtained by moulding obedient subjects. Based on the idea of reformation, the custodial sentence was, on the one hand, part of a global movement towards penal reform and, on the other, a local reconfiguration of a more traditional faith in the transformative capacity of education. In resonance with the Mencian view of human nature as inherently good and extremely malleable, the notion of reformation sustained the belief that criminals could achieve individual self-improvement with proper institutional guidance.[9]

The prison was also adopted by the CCP, who replicated to a very large extent the penal philosophy of reformation through education as well as the more general penal terminology created by the prison reformers since the late Qing. The primary function of prisons during the Jiangxi Soviet (1924–33), however, was the incapacitation of political enemies, although poor security and inadequate sanitation subverted even this relatively straightforward goal from the very start. Scarce resources also limited the scope of imprisonment, and prisons were gradually forced to take on a productive purpose: the high costs of incarceration, it was thought, could be reduced by putting prisoners to work. As a result of the United Front policy during the Yan'an period (1934–44), the emphasis was finally shifted towards the reformative function of prisons: education should be

8. On reformation (*ganhua*) and the prison in modern China, see Frank Dikötter, *Crime, Punishment and the Prison in Modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

9. A comparison of communist prisons with the Kuomintang prison system is clearly beyond the scope of this article, although a detailed study of the latter can be found in *ibid.*

primary and punishment secondary, as prisoners should be "reformed" (*zixin*) to become disciplined members of a communist society. In line with these new policies, all sentenced criminals had to spend time in detention centres (*kanshousuo*) or prisons (*jiansuo*) where they would have the opportunity to reform through labour: true repentance would lead to early release, while the sentence of the obstinate prisoner could be increased. After 1941, a number of border areas and administrative areas thus established prisons to house convicted felons, although reports on their management show that new penal policies were not implemented until 1944 and 1945, as sanitary conditions and the health of prisoners continued to be neglected in many places.[10]

Prisons, however, did not play a major part in the penal practices pursued in Shandong before 1949. More detailed evidence from the base area of that province shows that beating, cursing and corruption were rampant in spaces of confinement in the early 1940s, in particular as the base camps suffered from sustained mop-up operations by the Japanese in 1941 and 1942: as tens of thousands of troops were thrown at the communists, an already frail penal sector fell into further disarray. In February 1942, Li Yu, a key figure in the Shandong base area, complained that judicial departments confused civil and criminal cases, did not distinguish between light and heavy offences, indiscriminately used confinement and fettered or shackled prisoners without due reason, while guards humiliated and randomly insulted or beat convicts, thus impeding the goal of reformation, denying the spirit of the law and contravening their human rights. He recommended that suspects for light offences be released on bail while convicted prisoners should not be fettered, with the exception of violent, escape-prone or suicidal ones; education, rather than punishment, should be stressed.[11]

As the war with Japan progressed, however, local authorities were confronted with a growing number of prisoners. Harsh penalties imposed on a variety of common crimes further caused the prison population to swell: in 1943, for instance, temporary regulations imposed long prison sentences and the death penalty to manufacturers, planters, transporters and traders of opium and narcotic products.[12] Similarly severe penalties were promulgated the same month for the abduction of women.[13] In the absence of reliable sources on this early period, it may be speculated that the local authorities lacked the necessary training and adequate resources

10. Griffin, *The Chinese Communist Treatment of Counterrevolutionaries*, pp. 109–116.

11. "Shandong sheng zhanshi gongzuo tuixing weiyuanhui guanyu lixing baoshi jianshao jiya renfan yu gaishan fanren daiyu de xunling" ("Orders concerning the use of bail, the reduction in confinement and the improvement in the treatment of prisoners by the Shandong Wartime Work Promotion Committee"), SDLS, August 1942, Vol. 8, pp. 474–75.

12. "Shandong sheng jinyan zhizui zanxing tiaoli" ("Shandong province temporary regulations on the prohibition of opium"), 2 April 1943, SDLS, Vol. 9, pp. 423–24; "Shandong sheng jindu zhizui zanxing tiaoli" ("Shandong province temporary regulations on the prohibition of narcotics"), 2 April 1943, SDLS, Vol. 9, pp. 424–25.

13. "Shandong sheng zhangonghui duiyu zhizhi qiangjie guafu de xunling" ("Order on the suppression of female abduction in Shandong province"), April 1943, SDLS, Vol. 9, pp. 458–59.

to cope with a large prison population: mass executions of serious cases and early release of light offenders could alleviate the pressure on scarce prison facilities. In October 1944, for instance, directives were issued to "strenuously avoid" the confinement of criminals, given the "practical constraints" under which judicial departments had to operate: fines or other "methods of reformation" (*ganhua fangfa*) were to be considered as more viable alternatives.[14] Two months later, at the Shandong Second Administrative Conference in December 1944, several shortcomings in judicial administration were noticed, including the random killing of suspects and the indiscriminate use of imprisonment and torture in a number of counties. It was proposed that these practices be radically eliminated, the principal task of guards in detention houses being the education of prisoners.[15]

As confinement seemed to generate a whole series of problems which judicial authorities were unable to contain, the use of prisoners in labour teams in the countryside offered an appealing alternative. The case of Rongcheng county, in Jiaodong, was notable, as prisoners were employed on a farm to reclaim wasteland. In the wake of this experiment, the Jiaodong authorities decided to establish "penal instruction teams" (*tuxing fanren xunyudui*) for prisoners throughout the district, which roughly covered the peninsula to the east of the province: political prisoners who could not be entrusted to their villages were to be reformed through labour in these teams.[16] Cao Manzhi observed that the practice of sending convicted criminals back to perform hard labour in their own village (*huicun laoyi*) had been useful in times of guerilla warfare, but had led to an increasingly lax attitude which undermined the need to reform prisoners (*gaizao fanren*) and had alienated the local villagers who did not comprehend why criminals were treated leniently. Since May 1944, several counties had successfully experimented with instruction teams: as the liberated areas were under the firm control of the party, the concentration (*jizhong*) of prisoners no longer presented major obstacles and the use of instruction teams was to be expanded in order to reform the rising numbers of prisoners of war. Teams were established at the county level under the control of judicial departments (*sifake*), 11 to 12 prisoners forming a small team (*xiaodui*), three teams constituting a squad (*fendui*). Each team selected a leader who should have a positive attitude towards work and be ideologically reliable; a cook was also chosen from each team. Female prisoners were sent to local factories when their numbers were insufficient to form a team. Convicted prisoners who had not yet completed a sentence of at least one year which could not properly be

14. "Xiuzheng gaijin sifa gongzuo gangyao" ("Essentials of revisions and improvements in judicial work"), 10 October 1944, SDLS, Vol. 13, pp. 75–76.

15. "Shandong sheng di'erci xingzheng huiyi sifa zuzhi zongjie baogao" ("Summary report on judicial organization by the Shandong Province Second Administrative Conference"), December 1944, SDLS, Vol. 13, pp. 316–334.

16. "Shandong sheng di'erci xingzheng huiyi sifa zuzhi zongjie baogao" ("Summary report on judicial organization by the Shandong Province Second Administrative Conference"), December 1944, SDLS, Vol. 13, pp. 316–334.

carried out in their villages should be assembled and incorporated into the instruction teams, where ideological reform and productive labour should be equally emphasized. Three to five hours a day should be spent on education, political reform being essential but "cultural education" (*wenhua jiaoyu*) also being considered important. Model prisoners (*mofan de fanren*) should be selected, and incentives such as parole or reduced sentences were to nudge prisoners towards full reform. Initially, the costs of the instruction teams were carried by the government, although prisoners were enjoined to become economically self-sufficient as soon as possible. They had to provide their own clothes, shoes and blankets, except in cases of hardship, such as when families had cut off all links with the convicts. After Japan surrendered in the summer of 1945, the Jiaodong authorities decided to expand the use of these teams further in order to cope with increasing numbers of prisoners of war.[17]

Similar developments also characterized other districts in the Shandong base area. In the Binhai district, encompassing the coastal region south of Qingdao, social instability caused by war led local cadres to neglect the education of prisoners, and some counties like Zouping were unable to provide armed guards, while others maltreated male prisoners and abused women in custody. Despite these practical constraints on the use of confinement, the prison population swelled in the wake of the CCP's military expansion. In 1945, the region detained an estimated 1,876 prisoners, who lived in conditions described as "intolerably odious" (*elie bukan*); 277 escaped, including 23 from Zouping county.[18] The dispersed (*fensan*) nature of penal policy was blamed for poor security, dismal sanitary conditions and frequent abuse, and the Binhai authorities ordered that counties establish detention houses (*kanshousuo*) for suspects awaiting trial, and education camps (*jiaoyusuo*) for convicted criminals: by concentrating existing resources, better education and labour facilities could be provided for the prisoners.[19]

The use of instruction teams was embraced by the provincial authorities, who recommended in the spring of 1946 that prisoners be sent to work as small groups (*xiaozu*) in the villages under the supervision of the local militia. They were required to build small prison cells and achieve economic self-sufficiency by their labour.[20] Efforts to build up a new penal structure on the basis of instruction teams, however, were severely disrupted by Kuomintang attacks on the base area in the spring of 1947, leading to the disbandment or destruction of numerous camps, some even releasing their prisoners.[21] Moreover, two years after the instruction

17. G31/1/694/14, "Shandong sheng Jiaodong qu xingzheng gongshu guanyu chengli jianquan tuxingfan xunyudui de zhishi" ("Instructions on setting up a healthy education team for prisoners in the Jiaodong district"), 31 October 1945.

18. *Bohai sifa gongzuo tongxun* (*News on Judicial Work in Bohai*) (Bohai: Bohai xingshu yin, 1945), p. 12.

19. G38/1/297/5, "Binhai xingshu guanyu gaizao laojiao fanren gei Jiaonan gong'anju xunling" ("Order to the Jiaonan public security by the Binhai district regarding the reformation of prisoners"), 25 October 1949.

20. *Sifa huibian* (*Judicial Compendium*), Shandong, August 1946, p. 13.

21 G4/1/155/2, "Tuxing fanren jiaoyu jigou tongyi shezhi yijian" ("Views on the unified establishment of labour camps"), 1948.

teams were set up in Jiaodong, an investigation showed that lack of proper supervision by an insufficient number of trained cadres accounted for the poor achievements of the prisoners. It was noted that prisoners came from a variety of social backgrounds and that the teaching methods did not address their particular needs. Work was too dispersed and needed to be concentrated (*jizhong*) in order to become more effective. Once again, concrete problems pointed towards a greater concentration of prisoners, as large camps were seen to be better equipped to heighten productivity and improve education.[22]

A vision of large labour camps which would operate in economic self-sufficiency in the countryside was also shaped by a lenient policy towards political prisoners and the conquest of large areas formerly under Kuomintang control. Li Yu, head of the Shandong provincial government, stated that serious traitors, collaborators, saboteurs, spies and bandits should be executed, but local leaders and reactionary landlords should be allowed "to perform meritorious services to atone for their crimes" (*ligong shuzui*) if they wished to repent fully and renew themselves (*huiguo zixin*).[23] The use of mass executions against political enemies combined with the lenient treatment of light offenders is illustrated in an official history of the Shandong base area, which estimated that over 5,000 counter-revolutionary bandits had infiltrated the region by the end of 1948; the following year, over 2,000 were "exterminated," nearly a thousand were arrested and 1,670 were registered for having expressed "repentance" (*huiguo*), which presumably meant a term in a labour camp.[24]

As large territories formerly under Kuomintang control fell to the CCP, the sheer number of political prisoners forced judicial authorities to abandon instruction teams and develop penal education camps (*fanren jiaoyusuo*). Each district should run one or more camps, which took into custody long-term prisoners from counties under their jurisdiction. Similar camps were established at the county level for prisoners on short sentences. Moreover, prisoners who had been allowed to return to their villages (*huicun*) should be investigated and the recalcitrant ones reincarcerated for the rest of their sentences. Penal education centres were requested to collaborate with local militias and army units to guard the prisoners, and were instructed to use old or abandoned sites such as temples or factories. The food and clothing was provided on the basis of economic self-sufficiency, labour having both educational and productive purposes. Prisoners could be used by local authorities to participate in public works such as road maintenance or dyke construction. They were divided into small groups (*xiaozu*) with an elected head who was responsible for study (*xuexi*) and production (*shengchan*). The principle of

22. G31/1/703/41, "Zenyang gaijin xunyu gongzuo" ("How to improve instruction work"), 1947.

23. "Shandong sheng zhengfu bugao" ("Notice of the Shandong provincial government"), February 1947, SDLS, Vol. 18, pp. 300–301.

24. *Shandong sheng lijie zhengfu shizheng* (*The Administration of all Previous Governments in Shandong Province*), pp. 205 and 220.

lesser eligibility was used, as the treatment of prisoners should be slightly below the living standards of ordinary workers, although they should be appropriately fed and clothed. The existing skills of prisoners should be deployed, and they had to contribute to the local economy rather than work independently. The revenue generated from prison labour was used to maintain the camps, although a small fraction could be used as a bonus (*fenhong*) to be saved for the prisoner on leaving the camp. A system of rewards and punishments was adopted, including reduction of sentence (*jianxing*) and parole (*jiashi*), in order to encourage repentance.[25] The next section looks in greater detail at the workings of labour camps.

The Organisation of Labour Camp

Precious little evidence is available about the exact size of the prison population under communist control before 1949. Archival material, however, shows that in the Shandong base area over 11,000 individuals were held in custody in May and June 1949, not including several thousand "professional thieves" from the big cities. Jiaodong and Luzhongnan districts each had a camp for 2,000 to 3,000 prisoners, while places like Zibo and Qingdao had camps for 1,000. Petty thieves from the cities were sent to the Bohai camp.[26] More detailed breakdowns indicate the relative importance of different categories of prisoners, showing that common prisoners were as important as the political ones. In Binhai, for instance, Public Security forces in nine counties held 447 prisoners in custody in September 1949, leading to a total of 3,640 prisoners handled by the police since the beginning of the year. The latest batch of prisoners included 186 "suspects" (*xianyi*), 35 "landlord troops" (*huanxiangtuan*), seven individuals who had violated police regulations (*weijing*), 51 thieves and bandits (*daofei*), 69 murderers, and three traitors (*pantu*); the majority were sentenced to hard labour in camps.[27]

While archival material from labour camps cannot form the basis of a systematic analysis of sentencing policies, they nevertheless provide impressionistic evidence about prison terms. The local party in the Shandong base area adopted a policy of leniency in 1948–49, as the majority of prisoners were condemned to terms of less than three years. In Taishan, for instance, the camp had 59 prisoners condemned to one year, 119 to between one and three years, 51 to between three and five years, and 37 to between five and ten years.[28] Details of roughly 200 prisoners in the camp in Yimeng, Luzhongnan district, were listed in a special chart, providing their names, sex, age, social status (*chushen*

25. "Tuxing fanren jiaoyu jigou tongyi shezhi yijian" ("Suggestions about the unification of the labour camp structure"), 1948, SDLS, Vol. 21, pp. 517–520.

26. G4/1/299/16, "Shandong sheng renmin zhengfu guanyu banli laojiao de zhishi" ("The people's government of Shandong province issues orders related to the administration of labour camps"), 1949.

27. G10/1/269/1, "Binhai zhuanqu gong'anju gexian jiya fanren shijian tongjibiao" ("Statistics on prisoners held in custody in various counties of the Binhai district by the Public Security Bureau"), 30 September 1949.

28. G38/1/324/10, "Taishan zhuanshu jiaoyusuo jiu yuefen gongzuo huibao" ("Report for September from the education camp of the Taishan sub-district"), 15 December 1949.

chengfen), type of crime, length of sentence, start and end of sentence, and special comments. Only half were KMT supporters, including spies (sentenced to between three and five years) and heads of defence units (two to five years), while common prisoners included landlords (12 years), murderers (seven to eight years) and petty thieves (one year). Liu Naigui, for instance, was classified as a "middle peasant": he had purposefully injured himself (*zishang*) and was given six months, while Feng Baozhen, a landlord, was a thief sentenced to ten years. The majority of prisoners were sentenced to between one and three years.[29] On the other hand, a short sentence was not necessarily indicative of a lenient approach, as prisoners could be sent to the front-line to carry out dangerous work. The Qinghe camp received a total of 1,290 prisoners in 1948, of which 361 were in the camp at the beginning of 1949; no prisoners were released, as almost 700 were sent to the front-line instead, the remaining having escaped or died.[30]

A more detailed account of the organization of labour camps appears in the archives of the Jiaodong district, where 19 education camps at the level of the sub-district (*zhuanshu*), the county (*xian*) and the city (Yantai) took care of convicted criminals. Each of the four sub-district camps had a director, four teachers (one for every 200 prisoners), an accountant, an administrator, a cook and a liaison man, as well as 24 guards. At the county level, each camp had a director, a secretary and an administrator, the district boasting a total of 78 cadres in total to look after more than 2,000 inmates, excluding guards. The "cultural level" of cadres at the county level was described as very low, not a few being illiterate and of relatively poor "political quality." All the camps used civilian houses or old public structures such as temples and guilds. None had achieved economic self-sufficiency, as the economic infrastructure was either inadequate or had been destroyed by Kuomintang advances in 1947, a difficult year followed by famine caused by crop failures. In most camps prisoners saw their rations diminish from 12 to four ounces, while 40 prisoners from several camps had lacked food for several months. The district administration agreed to an emergency loan, and in early 1950, prisoners were back to a ration of 12 ounces a day, made up mainly of dried sweet potatoes and a few vegetables. Their health suffered as a consequence of malnutrition, and sick prisoners on short sentences were allowed to return home as the camps had insufficient medical facilities to look after them. Others were sent to the local hospital; despite these measures, some camps reported up to three deaths a month. Clothes, following regulations, had to be provided by the prisoners themselves. During the winter of 1949 the central administration provided poor prisoners without relatives with 78 old jackets, although some inmates in

29. G38/1/329/8, "Erzhuanshu fanren jiaoyusuo shang bannian fanren tongjibiao" ("Statistics on the education camp in the sub-districts for the past half year"), 8 September 1949.

30. G42/1/249/7, "Qinghe zhuanshu gong'anju laojiaosuo yinian zhi gongzuo qingkuang" ("The conditions of labour during the last year in the labour camp of the Qinghe sub-district"), 8 January 1949.

the Nanhai camp were still without cotton-padded clothes in March 1950.[31]

Hunger and cold also undermined the health of prisoners in other districts. In a report from the Taishan camp in Luzhongnan, local officials noted that most of the prisoners suffered from the cold winter, as their families were either too far away or too poor to send clothes; many inmates had neither cotton-padded clothes nor shoes. Hunger was widespread in the camp.[32] In an account of her imprisonment by the CCP in the Shandong base area from September 1947 onwards, Marie Ina Bergeron recalls how she was part of a group of 1,000 prisoners who were dispersed in small teams of ten to 15 in the countryside. The food was basic, often based on slices of dough (*pianpian*) and a bowl of hot water. When prisoners were made to till the fields, they often used the opportunity to fill their pockets with weeds like dandelion which were eaten in the evening, while lucky prisoners caught frogs to supplement their diet.[33] Poor health not only inflated the death rate during periods of famine: in the eyes of the authorities, sick prisoners hampered production efforts. By the end of 1949, a special order was passed on disease and death in labour camps, and advice on the treatment of the sick was circulated in the hope of curbing death rates. In the Bohai camp alone, 31 prisoners had died in the autumn of 1949, while infectious diseases also spread unchecked.[34]

Escape was rarely a viable option. While prisoners were often left without adequate supervision during the early 1940s, the emerging system of labour camps was specifically designed to concentrate human resources and improve surveillance. In contrast to the early 1940s, few escapes or riots were reported. The Qinghe camp, for instance, noted that escapes were initially a security problem, but had ceased since Xue Changhai had been executed after an unsuccessful escape attempt. With the arrival of prisoners of war, the camp authorities reported that only minor acts of "sabotage" (*pohuai*) had marred the discipline of the camp. Zhao Lanwei, for instance, had openly defied authority by refusing to participate in a movement of wartime mobilization: the guards pounced on him, tied him up and locked him away in an isolation cell.[35] In general, strict rules and tight surveillance from the camp guards and the local population made escapes extremely difficult, although conditions could vary considerably from one camp to another: for example, 31 prisoners out of 301 escaped from the Taishan camp in 1949.[36] Every aspect of life

31. G31/1/729/1, "Guanyu jiansuo qingkuang de baogao" ("Report on conditions in prisons"), March 1950.

32. G38/1/324/10.

33. Marie Ina Bergeron, *Lettres à Yeou-Wen* (Paris: Mame, 1973), pp. 59, 75, 84, 108 and 173.

34. G10/1/249/7, "Bohai xingzhengqu gong'anju guanyu jianshao laojiaosuo fanren bingwang tongling" ("Order from the Public Security Bureau of the Bohai district on the decrease of disease and death of prisoners in labour camps"), 30 November 1949.

35. G42/1/249/7.

36. G38/1/324/6, "Taishan zhuanshu fanren jiaoyusuo quannian jieshou ji chuli fanren tongjibiao" ("Yearly statistics on prisoners from the labour camp of the Taishan sub-district"), 15 December 1949.

was supervised in minute detail, including the use of the toilet at night, when prisoners had to pass the watchtower and announce in a loud and clear voice "reporting to visit the latrine." Five minutes were allowed for urinating, and no more than seven minutes should be spent on defaecating. In daytime, prisoners were only to relieve themselves during periods of rest. Punishment awaited those who dawdled, as ten minutes of rest was deducted on the first infringement, the entire noon pause the second time, while grinding work was imposed next. Smoking and making noise were prohibited in the dormitories, as were private conversations between inmates.[37]

Life in the camp was dedicated primarily to labour, which was thought to have an educative as well as an economic function. Agricultural work was the principal occupation of prisoners in the Jiaodong district: the prisoners of the Binbei camp alone reclaimed 800 *mu* of wasteland and planted wheat in 1949. In regions lacking uncultivated land, land rental and substitute cultivation (*zugeng daigeng*) was used instead. The Binbei camp also discovered deposits of fluorite minerals which were mined to support 300 prisoners. Despite these efforts, the famine of 1948 severely hindered agricultural work and the handicraft industry was pursued as an alternative, including the manufacture of rope, oil, salt and bricks: in the Beihai camp, 36 prisoners operated three grinders day and night to polish rice for the neighbouring farmers, while five inmates produced baskets and other utensils. A further ten made shoes, and one was assigned to the manufacture of rope. Half a dozen female inmates operated sowing machines. Prisoners could also be transferred to work on public utilities: over 100 inmates thus contributed to the maintenance of the river system, while 200 were recruited to install telephone cables from Laiyang to Weifang. The local authorities admitted that "errors" had been committed in 1948–49 as prisoners were allowed to become involved in commercial activities: in the camp of Huangxian, for instance, a shop was entirely operated by inmates, who invested and managed the assets without proper supervision, an experience which was terminated after several of the prisoners absconded.[38] In the Tai'an camp in Luzhongnan district, 15 prisoners were escorted in cars for a two-week trip to transport salted fish to Donghai, which made a considerable profit for a camp of just over 300 inmates. Another 16 made bean cakes, while a brick kiln and a textile factory confirmed the move away from agriculture towards handicraft industry.[39]

In the Bohai district, which covered the area along the coast north of Jinan, the first labour camp was opened in March 1948, local authorities proclaiming that it should be a hospital, a school and a factory all at once in order to achieve the goal of reform through education. Organized into

37. G10/1/255/2, "Bohai xingshu laojiaosuo guanjiao fanren gezhong zhidu" ("Various systems for the supervision of prisoners in the labour camp of the Bohai district"), 8 December 1949.

38. G31/1/729/1.

39. G38/1/324/8, "Shi yuefen gongzuo zongjie baogao" ("Summary report on work during October"), 18 October 1949.

four squadrons (*zhongdui*), prisoners constructed over 200 simple houses as well as an iron chimney.[40] Growing from a mere 500 prisoners to over 1,700 in 1949, the camp had 11 production units (*shengchan danwei*), including a power plant, a carpentry, an ironwork factory, a noodle factory, a textile factory, a vermicelli factory, a brick factory, a cement factory, an embroidery factory, a factory producing shoes and uniforms, and a construction unit, contributing over 77,000 items a year. Camp authorities boasted that 154 different products were fabricated by prison labour.[41] Inmates also made pickles and *wotou* buns.[42] The camp became economically self-sufficient in 1949, as over 800,000 *jin* of coarse food grain were produced, the total assets of the camp being valued at an equivalent of nearly 2 million *jin*. Subtracting loans and the cost of electricity, the camp reported a net yearly profit of almost one million *jin*.[43]

Incentives were used to promote the productivity of prisoners. The Bohai camp had a system of punishments and rewards which was designed to take into account five items, namely "achievements in production" (*shengchan chengji*), "discipline at work" (*laodong jilü*), "discipline in behaviour" (*xingdong jilü*), "discipline in studies" (*xuexi jilü*) and "discipline in hygiene" (*weisheng jilü*). A mark system was used in which individuals achieving over 100 points were recompensed, while those below par were punished. The five rewards included removal of punishments (*quxiao chufen*), removal of restraining devices (*quxiao xingju*), praise (*biaoyang*), material incentives (*wuzhi jiangli*) or early release (*jianxing*), while punishments ranged from suspension of pauses between work (*tingzhi xiuxi*), suspension of visits, a warning (*jinggao*), a demerit (*jiguo*), entering a hard labour team (*ru yanggongdui*), the use of restraining devices (*dai xingju*) and solitary confinement (*jinbi*) to increase of the sentence (*zengxing*).[44] Exemplary workers could retain 5 per cent or more of their contribution as a bonus; in the Xihai camp, some prisoners were able to earn 500–600 *yuan* a month.[45]

As Patricia Griffin has underlined, limited resources rather than legal provisions probably accounted for restraints on the use of long periods of detention.[46] This is further illustrated by the use of early release, which helped circumvent the problem of shortages and created an incentive for prisoners to reform. In the Bohai camp, for instance, 1,712 prisoners, including a mere 27 women, were held by the end of 1949. In its yearly report, the Bureau of Public Security noted that 566 prisoners had left,

40. G42/1/235/5, "Bohai laojiaosuo diyi zhongdui jilu" ("Record of the first squadron of the labour camp of Bohai district").

41. G34/1/500/6, "Bohai gong'anju 1949 nian laojiaosuo gongzuo baogao" ("Report by the Public Security Bureau of work in the labour camp of Bohai district for 1949"), 1949.

42. G34/1/488/5, "Bohai si zhuanshu fanren jiaoyusuo shengchan tongjibiao" ("Statistics on products made by prisoners of the education camp of the four sub-districts of Bohai"), 1950.

43. G42/1/235/3, "Bohai laojiaosuo yinianlai de gongzuo jianbao" ("Brief report on labour in the Bohai camp during the last year"), January 1950.

44. G10/1/255/2.

45. G31/1/729/1.

46. Griffin, *The Chinese Communist Treatment of Counterrevolutionaries*, pp. 118.

while 998 had been given a reward, leading to one case of release on parole and 58 reduced sentences.[47] An example was Zhang Wanhe, aged 29 and originally from Ningjin county. A hooligan from poor peasant origins, he had been convicted to serve a three-year sentence in prison for dealing in narcotics. He was eager to contribute to production after entering the labour camp and had enrolled to become a bricklayer. Despite the spring gales in 1948, he had erected a 70-foot high chimney for the electricity plant and tirelessly contributed to the project, which was finished five days ahead of schedule, thus saving a considerable amount of labour. Twice he obtained a reduction of sentence and had demonstrated through his work that he had genuinely reformed. Despite obtaining permission to be released, he refused to leave the camp and preferred to continue working as a tiler.[48]

Education was also considered to be paramount by the prison authorities. Regulations in the Bohai camp determined that two to four hours would be spent on political and cultural education.[49] Political readings could take place several times a day, while group discussions under the supervision of a guard were organized in the evening. In many cases, however, the rhetoric of thought reform gave way to the reality of economic survival, and most camps appear to have stressed productive activities at the expense of political indoctrination. Reviewing thought reform in the Jiaodong district camps, Liu Zhulin noted that the educational achievements of prisoners varied greatly, as camp authorities failed to address their diverse backgrounds.[50] Another report acknowledged that cadres neglected the education of inmates, as legal departments which formally supervised the camps were too busy with administrative tasks and were insufficiently familiar with the needs of the prisoners; most camps, moreover, were located 20 to 30 *li* away from these administrative centres.[51] Nevertheless, archival evidence also shows that camp leaders were keen to use incentives in order to secure greater productivity and political reliability from prisoners. Leniency, in short, was not only a policy imposed from above, but a pragmatic tool deployed by cadres in order to obtain greater motivation from prisoners. In several cases, camp leaders asked permission to reduce overly harsh sentences imposed during periods of political purges. In one case, a labour camp detained two disabled soldiers who had been sentenced to life for indecent behaviour; their attitude had been appropriate since entering the camp and it was suggested that their sentence be reduced to a set number of years. A further nine elderly or handicapped prisoners had been sentenced to long prison terms in 1943–44, and authorization was requested to rectify

47. G34/1/500/6.
48. *Ibid*.
49. G34/1/495/9, "Bohai qu laodong jiaoyusuo zuzhi tiaoli" ("Regulations of the labour camp in Bohai district"), March 1948.
50. G31/1/703/41, "Jiaodong xingshu Liu Zhulin: 'Zenyang gaijin xunyu gongzuo"' ("Liu Zhulin from the Jiaodong district: 'How to improve educational work"'), 1947.
51. G31/1/729/1.

the original judgement, as thought reform was difficult to implement without proper incentives.[52]

Conclusion

Labour camps emerged in the Shandong base area in response to military instability, concrete organizational problems and scarce resources. Prisoners were sent back to their villages in the early 1940s to be controlled by cadres and the "masses," a practice which was marred by inadequate supervision and frequent abuse. Instruction teams (*xunyudui*) first appeared in 1944 in efforts to group prisoners and concentrate scarce resources. With the sudden growth in the number of prisoners after Japan's surrender in 1945, these teams gradually developed into labour camps (*laojiaosuo*) where the production movement was designed to remedy the shortage of supplies by promoting economic self-sufficiency. Labour was also believed to inculcate industrious habits in prisoners and contribute to thought reform. These camps were relatively small in size and relied on local facilities, as both economic shortages and military attacks during the civil war impeded the emergence of more permanent penal structures. In early 1949, however, some labour camps like the one in Bohai started developing more elaborate facilities to enhance the productive efforts of a growing prison population, as threats from the Kuomintang receded and vast areas came under the control of the CCP. By the time that news about penal experiments in Manchuria reached Shandong, labour camps were already a permanent feature of the judicial system. Central authorities circulated a report by the end of 1949 describing how vice-president Lin Biao had used Soviet advisers in Manchuria to approve the establishment of several labour teams in the mines of Gongchangling and Benxi, as existing prisons were incapable of dealing with a mounting number of prisoners; by this time, however, large labour camps containing up to 2,000 prisoners each were already well established in Shandong.[53]

In contrast to the three provinces in Manchuria, moreover, the CCP in Shandong had little experience in taking over the large cities in which most modern prisons were located. After communist forces conquered Weihaiwei, Qingdao and Jinan, problems appeared as soon as Kuomintang prisons came under communist control. An investigation of the prison attached to the Bureau of Public Security in Weihaiwei, for instance, showed that two teams of 25 guards were all guilty in 1949 of regularly beating prisoners, some being banged on the head with pipes before being locked up in an isolation cell. On one occasion, a guard escorting a suspect to the police bureau became so impatient that he hit his leg with a rifle; unable to walk, the prisoner was beaten to death with a hand-grenade. No medical care or suitable food was provided to

52. G42/1/240/2 "Laojiaosuo de gongzuo zongjie" ("Summary report on work in labour camps"), 1949.

53. G4/1/334/9, Zhongyang renmin zhengfu sifabu, "Guanyu Dongbei yuzheng gongzuo de xin changshi de jieshao de tongbao" ("Circular introducing new experiments in prison work from the north-east"), 15 December 1949.

prisoners, one mentally disturbed woman being allowed to hang herself in the cell. As the inspector observed, all the guards were soldiers accustomed to the rigours of warfare.[54] Similar problems appeared after the prison in Jinan was taken over: a report in the summer of 1949 showed that it posed a security threat, as political prisoners were able to act in collusion to make their confessions tally and information circulated easily from cell to cell. Several other prisons existed in the city, but all had been taken over by schools and factories; large numbers of prisoners were sent instead to the existing labour camps in the countryside, a practice which would become official policy with the foundation of the People's Republic later in 1949.[55]

54. G40/1/109/18, "Weihai shi gong'anju 1949 nian kanya gongzuo baogao" ("1949 report on the guarding of detained suspects in the Bureau for Public Security of Weihai city"), 1949.

55. G10/1/193/18, "Guanyu gong'anju yu fayuan de jianyu wenti" ("About the problems related to the prison of the Public Security Bureau and the local court"), 30 August 1949.