

## “Remolding” and the Chinese Labor-Camp Novel

### INTRODUCTION: CONCEPTS OF TRANSFORMATION

Concepts of social transformation have played a central role in the realm of official Chinese discourse over the past four decades. “Revolution” (*ko-ming* 革命) became the Chinese Communist Party (C.C.P.) regime’s favorite way of characterizing itself during the three decades of nationwide rule under Mao. During the Dengist fourth decade, “revolution” came to be greatly overshadowed by “reform” (*kai-ko* 改革). The two terms have been almost mutually exclusive: any piece of writing drawing heavily on one is apt to make little or no use of the other.<sup>1</sup>

Spanning both the Maoist and Dengist periods is the least acclaimed but most enduring of the “three r’s” of social transformation, “remolding” (*kai-tsao* 改造). Seemingly immune to the vicissitudes of time that have caused the terms “revolution” and “reform” to veer wildly in and out of circulation, “remolding” has remained frequent in official discourse throughout the entire history of the People’s Republic of China (P.R.C.). *Kai-tsao* embodies a personal, affective dimension usually lacking in “reform” and “revolution,” which instead focus on relatively impersonal social collectives. The personal impact of “remolding” is evident everywhere: most P.R.C. individuals with a modicum of education, whether within or outside the mammoth labor-camp system, have been exhorted or warned at some point in their lives to “remold” their thinking and behavior. This pressure on the individual to remold himself has reached its apogee in the “remolding through labor” prison-camp brigades (*lao-tung kai-tsao tui* 勞動改造隊 or *lao-kai tui* 勞改隊); ex-inmates like Chang Hsien-liang 張賢亮 who have written novels based on their experiences in the camps have emerged as among the most informative on the concept of “remolding” as a tool of sociopolitical coercion.

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<sup>1</sup> At one end of the spectrum, Mao Tse-tung’s writings from the latter half of the 1960s harp continuously on “revolution” while practically never mentioning “reform.” In contrast, Deng Xiaoping’s first two protégés in the post of Party general secretary, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, had very little to say about “revolution” except in a derogatory sense, as in their denunciations of the Cultural Revolution; talk of “reform,” on the other hand, fills their writings and speeches.

## THE ORIGINS OF "REMOLDING"

The term *kai-tsao* originally functioned as a verb that takes inanimate things rather than humans as its object. In describing programmatic transformations of the populace, on the other hand, premodern thinkers resorted to quite different formulations, such as "renovating the people" (*hsin-min* 新民) or "civilizing the masses through education" (*chiao-hua* 教化), neither of which carried *kai-tsao*'s connotations of blunt instrumentality.<sup>2</sup> Insofar as Confucius refused to consider himself a mere tool of the powerful, and since he deemed it a cardinal transgression to treat others in a manner that he himself would not wish to be treated, it stands to reason that he and his philosophical descendants would have generally avoided conceptual formulations in which people were to be treated as things and not as human beings.

The late-Ch'ing influx of Social Darwinism and other Western ideas about social engineering played a key role in weakening traditional resistance to instrumental transformation of the individual or group, or what would soon be known as "remolding." As James Pusey has argued, prominent Western-influenced social critics from that period laid much of the early groundwork for Mao Tse-tung's calls for "thought remolding" (*ssu-hsiang kai-tsao* 思想改造): anticipating the post-1949 concept of brain-washing, Liang Ch'i-ch'ao 梁啟超 argued in 1906 that China's successful entry into the modern world depended upon the popular masses' remaking their cultural habits through a "mind cleansing" (*hsin-li hsi-li* 心理洗滌). In a similar vein, Sun Yat-sen advocated the institution of "psychological reconstruction" (*hsin-li chien-she* 心理建設) for revamping what he saw as the hopelessly atomized Chinese citizen, a mere grain of incohesive sand in a shifting social dune.<sup>3</sup>

The ideological system of Marxism-Leninism completed the task of building atop these early-twentieth-century underpinnings for remolding the traditional ways of the supposedly hidebound Chinese citizenry. Marx's brand of economic determinism argued that human thought and culture amounted to nothing more than a superstructure that reflected more fundamental economic relations. Restructure those economic relations by

<sup>2</sup> David Finkelstein notes that *kai-tsao* connotes "a more thoroughgoing overhaul" than the Chinese Nationalists' term for criminal rehabilitation, *chiao-hua*; see "The Language of Communist China's Criminal Law," in Jerome Alan Cohen, ed., *Contemporary Chinese Law: Research Problems and Perspectives* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1970), p. 193. I am also indebted to Peter Bol's description of premodern uses of the term *chiao-hua* given at my Fairbank Seminar lecture at Harvard in 1991.

<sup>3</sup> James Pusey, *China and Charles Darwin* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1983), p. 455.

nationalizing all private means of production, he claimed, and workers' exploitation and alienation would disappear, ushering in a brave new millennium of justice and a withering away of the state. Still, these visionary flights did not prevent Marx from stepping back onto firm ground now and then to confront the inevitability of all-too-human resistance to social engineering on a grand scale. What if some of those former capitalists or landowners were to get into mischief, and yearn to resume their pre-revolutionary ways of merciless exploitation?

For these stubborn misfits in the grand new noncapitalist order to come, Marx had a simple answer. In 1875, he argued in his *Critique of the Gotha Program* that there was only one way to make benevolent citizens of the coming socialist order out of the deviants who might crowd its jails: force these prisoners to engage in "productive labor" under the purportedly non-exploitative relations of socialist production.<sup>4</sup> According to his model, once the social deviants within the new society acquired a productive place within the nonalienating relations of production under socialism, they would naturally be transformed into nonexploitative and law-abiding socialist citizens. This proposition assumed that class-based injustices lay at the root of all crime in presocialist societies.

Half a century passed before Marx's brief recommendation to transform criminals through labor into new socialist men could be implemented on a significant scale. In the 1920s, Lenin's security chief, Felix Dzerzhinsky, proved instrumental in making forced convict-labor an integral component of early Soviet prison regimens, such as the Gulag's first camp system on the far northern Solovetsky Islands. Little more than twenty years went by before Dzerzhinsky became the idol of the P.R.C.'s first security chief, Lo Jui-ch'ing 羅瑞卿, who shared his Soviet forerunner's belief that iron-fisted repression was a necessary first stage in building the classless society of the future.<sup>5</sup> Shortly after the founding of the P.R.C., Mao Tse-tung and Lo Jui-ch'ing drew heavily on early-1930s Stalinist statutes for their creation of the *lao-kai*, China's prison-camp system for remolding detainees through forced labor.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Towards the end of the "Critique of the Gotha Program," Marx argues that socialists should not "deprive criminals of their sole means of betterment, productive labor." See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, ed. Lewis S. Feuer (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1959), p. 131. Alexander Solzhenitsyn also mentions this often overlooked passage in *The Gulag Archipelago: Two*, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 143.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Faligot and Remi Kauffer, *The Chinese Secret Service*, trans. Christine Donougher (London: Headline, 1989), p. 345.

<sup>6</sup> See Harry Hongda Wu, "The Labor Reform Camps in the P.R.C.," in Ramon H. Myers, ed., *Two Societies in Opposition: The Republic of China and the People's Republic of China — After*

Even now, no less than during the formative days of the C.C.P. party-state, the great majority of prisoners under C.C.P. rule take part in forced labor. Indeed, forced labor played a key role in C.C.P. criminal justice from the very dawn of the Maoist party-state.<sup>7</sup> Beginning with the Kiangsi Soviet period in the early 1930s, forced labor quickly achieved ascendancy as the most common form of criminal punishment in C.C.P.-controlled upland regions.<sup>8</sup> However, the terminology used for this early C.C.P. forced labor was not the speciously therapeutic *lao-kai*, but instead matter-of-fact formulations for requisitioned or forced labor like *k'u-i* 苦役 and *lao-i* 勞役.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the ungilded term *lao-i* held on under C.C.P. rule until the early 1950s, when it gave way to the newly coined *lao-kai* and *lao-chiao* 勞教.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from blurring the harsh realities of this mode of criminal punishment by conflating it with convict therapy or rehabilitation, the post-1949 term *lao-kai* superseded its predecessors in another important way. It was

*Forty Years* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1991), pp. 75–93. The P.R.C. camp system was not identical to its Soviet predecessor; it tended to be more cost-effective, and its administrators more vigorous (often to the point of ruthlessness) in carrying out ideological indoctrination among inmates. In a comparative study of forced-labor prison systems as of 1955, Richard K. Carlton found Poland's camps the least repressive and the P.R.C.'s even harsher than the Soviet gulag; see *Forced Labor in the "People's Democracies"* (New York: Mid-European Studies Center, 1955), p. 37. Fang Lizhi 方勵之 notes that while the identities of Soviet political prisoners have been known and tracked by international human rights organizations, even reasonably complete name lists of P.R.C. political prisoners have never been compiled due to government secrecy and intimidation tactics; see *Bringing Down the Great Wall: Writings in Science, Culture, and Democracy in China*, ed. James H. Williams (New York: Knopf, 1991), p. 212.

<sup>7</sup> According to Carlton, forced labor was something that accompanied practically "every Communist assumption of power," though there have been considerable variations, ranging from relative insignificance in postwar Poland to major importance in the U.S.S.R. and the P.R.C. See Carlton, *Forced Labor*, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia E. Griffin explains the rationale behind forced labor's ascendancy in the Kiangsi Soviet in *The Chinese Communist Treatment of Counterrevolutionaries, 1924–49* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1976), p. 123.

<sup>9</sup> The word *i* 役 was a common term in premodern China that referred to various kinds of obligatory and unremunerated labor service, including both *corvée* and convict labor. Griffin notes the use of *k'u-i* (*ibid.*, p. 111), *lao-i* (p. 55), and *k'u-kung* 苦工 (pp. 34, 37) in the Kiangsi Soviet. By the late 1930s in the Shensi-Kansu-Ningsia border region, *lao-i* seems to have emerged as the predominant C.C.P. term for convict labor; see Ch'i Li 齊禮, *Shen-Kan-Ning pien-ch'u shih-lu* 陝甘寧邊區實錄 (Yenan?: Chieh-fang she, 1939), p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> According to Chou Kuo-chao 周國朝, *lao-i* was hooked onto *kai-tsao* as late as 1952 in P.R.C. statutes, but the former term soon vanished from the nation's legal codes as *lao-tung kai-tsao* became solidly entrenched (especially in its short form, *lao-kai*). See Chou et al., eds., *Fa-hsleh tz'u-tien* 法學辭典 (Shanghai: Shanghai tz'u-shu ch'u-p'an-she, 1985), pp. 408–9. *Lao-chiao* is short for *lao-tung chiao-yang* 勞動教養; usually translated as "reeducation through labor," it is more accurately rendered as "reupbringing through labor," since the term *chiao-yang* here connotes correction undertaken at the most elementary level of the prisoners' belief systems and daily habits. *Chiao-yang* here refers to the paternalistic upbringing and nurturing of juveniles—and thus the treatment of adults as feckless juveniles—rather than the "education" of adults capable of thinking critically on their own.

free from connotations of limited sentencing, that is, comparatively short-term punishment for less serious types of crime.<sup>11</sup> After all, convict labor sentences in premodern China, sometimes referred to as *lao-i*, were nearly always limited to a maximum of three years, and were considerably less daunting than the more severe punishments of banishment and execution; in contrast, *lao-kai* sentences are often for life, and have rarely spanned fewer than five years in duration.<sup>12</sup>

As important as remolding has been in the handling of P.R.C. criminal and political offenders, such an important concept as *kai-tsao* could not be limited merely to deviants—all adult citizens have been urged now and then to remold their thinking (*kai-tsao ssu-hsiang* 改造思想). Mao Tse-tung did not wait until taking control over all of China in 1949 to begin exhorting the citizenry at large to remold their thinking: he was already making such demands in Yenan by 1941. During the 1930s and 1940s, however, the Maoist notion of "remolding" was aimed mainly at the ordinary citizen's thinking, and had not yet been linked with a prison regimen of forced labor.

#### LAO-KAI AS A P.R.C. SOCIO-ECONOMIC INSTITUTION

The current P.R.C. camp population of several million inmates dwarfs the number of forced-labor inmates at any one time serving terms of three years or less in imperial China's salt mines and frontier settlements.<sup>13</sup> Aside

<sup>11</sup> Chou Kuo-chao comments that in the 1940s *lao-i* connoted the imposition of a less heavy sentence for a less serious type of crime (*Fa-hsleh tz'u-tien*, p. 408). A camp story from the 1990s bears out the connotations of leniency associated with *lao-i*: prisoners assigned the relatively cushy job of cook are referred to as *lao-i fan* 勞役犯; see Ch'iu Feng 丘峰, "Chui-pu chih yeh" 追捕之夜, *Tien-shih tien-ying wen-hsieh* 電視電影文學 5 (1990), p. 62. I am grateful to Jeffrey Kinkley for calling this work of fiction to my attention.

<sup>12</sup> The fifteen-year term handed down to a non-violent "counterrevolutionary" like Wei Ching-sheng 魏京生, however severe by international standards, is not out of line with the P.R.C.'s record in punishing both ordinary criminals and political prisoners.

<sup>13</sup> Several million is a rather conservative estimate for the inmate population in China's prison camps. Harry Hongda Wu argues for a figure of from 16 to 21 million inmates, though he includes in this total the approximately 10 million *chiao-yeh* 就業 or "job-placed" prisoners who, while technically free citizens, often have little alternative but to live and work on the outskirts of camps after their terms have expired; see his "Labor Reform Camps," pp. 75–93. Although official P.R.C. sources have remained tight-lipped on this situation since 1949, the *People's Daily* and other official state organs have repeatedly claimed that the *lao-kai ch'u* 勞教局, or Bureau of Remolding Through Labor, employs 300,000 camp administrators and guards—a figure that does not include the large number of young militia and labor-service draftees whose job it is to help guard the camps (*Jen-min jih-pao* 人民日報, [December 11, 1988, p. 1; December 13, 1988, p. 4]). Since a 1983 labor-camp guard manual claims that approximately nine camp personnel are needed for every hundred inmates, one

from the expanded range of activities defined as deviant since 1949, a key reason for the enormous expansion of convict labor under the C.C.P. has been the spread of state ownership to practically every nook of the economy. Whereas in premodern times the state owned and operated only a few economic activities, such as the salt and iron trades, the P.R.C. state owns nearly all means of production. Camp convicts in the P.R.C. currently produce over 200 different commodities through the *lao-kai* enterprises.<sup>14</sup>

*Lao-kai* enterprises produce a significant percentage of China's yearly output of certain commodities. In 1983 camp enterprises produced one-third of China's tea.<sup>15</sup> In Yunnan province during 1985, *lao-kai* enterprises produced nine-tenths of the province's diesel engines, a quarter of its coal, and half of its steel works.<sup>16</sup> Through the sale of such products, the Chinese government makes its prison system pay for itself, covering all costs for the "salaries, bonuses, welfare benefits, health insurance, uniforms, and other necessities" of the camp administrators and guards.<sup>17</sup> During the Deng Xiaoping era, the export of prison products has brought the government sizable amounts of foreign exchange.<sup>18</sup> One might have expected that with Deng's turn from totalistic central planning to a more market-based, export-oriented mixed economy, the same factors that have reduced the cost-effectiveness of prison labor in other industrialized nations would have had the same effect in China. Yet far from weakening the role of convict labor in the Chinese economy, the shift to consumer industries has intensified the desire of camp administrators to make the most efficient use possible of

can safely assume that a camp administration of several hundred thousand personnel would be in charge of a total camp inmate population of several million. See *Lao-kai kung-tso* 勞改工作 (Peking: Ch'ün-chung ch'u-p'an-she, 1983), p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> As Paul Heng-chao Ch'en has shown, Yüan-dynasty convicts sentenced to forced labor terms of up to three years (t'ü 徒) were in many cases sent away from their home regions to salt mines or iron foundries; this system continued with few changes under the Ming. See Ch'en, *Chinese Legal Tradition Under the Mongols: The Code of 1291 as Reconstructed* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1979), p. 48. Regarding the number of products manufactured by the labor-camp enterprises, see the description of Peking's mid-August 1988 trade fair held to display these items in Steven W. Mosher, *Made in the Chinese Laogai: China's Use of Prisoners to Produce Goods for Export* (Montclair: Claremont Institute, 1990), p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> Wu Hung-ta 吳宏達 [Harry Wu], "Mai lao-kai-fan te chiu ho lao-kai-fan te ch'a" 買勞改犯的酒喝勞改犯的茶, *Chiu-shih nien-tai* 九十年代 8 (1990), p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Ning Ch'ao 寧超, ed., *Yunnan nien-chien, 1986* 雲南年鑑 (Canton: Hsin-hua shu-tien, 1986), p. 112.

<sup>17</sup> Harry Wu, "Labor Reform Camps," p. 80. Wu adds that most of the P.R.C. camp walls and buildings have been erected with convict labor.

<sup>18</sup> See Ting Pang-hua, "Thoughts on Developing a Foreign-Oriented Economy in Labor Remolding Enterprises," trans. in *News from Asia Watch* (April 19, 1991), pp. 8-11. Mosher supplies a list of P.R.C. camp-produced commodities that are also imported to the U.S. in *Made in the Chinese Gulag*, p. 15.

the cheap, mobile, and deferential work force at their disposal. In the absence of a political force within the P.R.C. that would seriously address the human costs of this lucrative exploitation of convict labor, there is every reason to believe that China's leadership will continue to follow the dictates of economic expediency and keep the camp enterprises running at full throttle for as long as possible.

#### THE ROLE OF THE CAMPS IN STIFLING DISSENT

Although scaling back the camp enterprises might require concomitant belt-tightening in the regime's budgetary planning, it would probably not present a threat to the C.C.P.'s monopoly on power. From the party leadership's point of view, however, it would be risky to discard the function of the camps as a deterrent to activity that could be construed as political or social opposition. Activists for democracy like Liu Ch'ing 劉青 who have openly, if peaceably, challenged the party's political monopoly have often been sentenced to labor camps through a process of arbitrary administrative formalities.<sup>19</sup>

Several Chinese prison-camp novels from the 1980s illustrate the consequences of extended internment. In Chang Hsien-liang's highly acclaimed novel, *Half of Man Is Woman* (*Nan-jen te i-pan shih nü-jen* 男人的一半是女人, 1985), the still youthful inmate protagonist has lapsed into a state of sexual impotence due to years of emotionally internalized vilification, a semi-starvation diet, the imperative to repress personal emotions and instincts, and the mind-numbing grind of heavy manual labor.<sup>20</sup> His sexual dysfunction resonates with numerous accounts of this malady concerning Western concentration camps, and suggests a partial erosion of the self that continues well beyond the penal term.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See Liu Ch'ing, "Prison Memoirs," ed. Stanley Rosen and James Seymour, in *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology* 15.1-2 (1982-83), pp. 25-36, 113-22. In November 1979, Liu Ch'ing had helped organize the unsanctioned sale of transcripts to the recent trial of Wei Ching-sheng, and had gone to the local police station in order to argue for the release of some of his fellow vendors. In a Kafkaesque twist, the police began to interrogate him, and refused to let him leave the station.

<sup>20</sup> Chang Hsien-liang, *Nan-jen te i-pan shih nü-jen*, in *Chang Hsien-liang hsüan-chi* 張賢亮選集, vol. 3, pp. 399-618. Translated into English by Martha Avery as *Half of Man Is Woman* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986).

<sup>21</sup> Regarding the problem of sexual dysfunction in camp inmates, see Anatoly Marchenko, trans. Michael Scammell, *My Testimony* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1969), p. 171; and Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart: Autonomy in a Mass Age* (New York: Avon, 1971), pp. 195-197. Jeffrey Kinkley analyzes the same point in his article contained above in this issue of *Asia Major*.

From the C.C.P. leadership's perspective, it is hard to imagine a more expedient manner of handling dissenters than to break their wills, to make them feel fortunate to emerge from the camps in good enough health to enjoy merely the mundane pleasures of home and hearth. A scene in Chang Hsien-liang's 1983 novel *Mimosa* (*Lü-hua-shu* 綠化樹) portrays how the camp regimen has squelched the protagonist's ambitions to make an impact on his society. In his state of moral exhaustion, he sympathizes with a simpleton in one of Pushkin's verses whose sole aims in life were a well-stocked cupboard and a wife to take care of him: "Having gone through four years of harsh collective forced labor, plus hunger of such intensity as to give me a brush with death, various sorts of impractical ambitions . . . were all dumped into the great ocean to the east."<sup>22</sup>

Inmates and ex-inmates are always vulnerable to capricious re-sentencing. In *Mimosa*, a carter's term is immediately lengthened by a year when he accidentally flicks a cadre passenger with his horsewhip.<sup>23</sup> As Wang An-i's 王安憶 reportage shows, even former inmates who have been assured immunity from prosecution if they cooperate with police sometimes find themselves sent back to camp for the maximum term that regulations allow.<sup>24</sup> It is little wonder that the wife of a former political prisoner urges her husband to maintain the lowest possible profile in the school where he has resumed teaching after a two-decade hiatus in the camps. In a 1979 story by Chang Hsien-liang entitled "Colors Stand Out More under a Heavy Frost" ("Shuang chung se yü nung" 霜重色愈濃), the teacher insists on restoring Confucius and Mencius to the school curricula, from which they

<sup>22</sup> Chang Hsien-liang, *Lü-hua-shu*, in *Chang hsien-chi*, vol. 3, pp. 161-338, quoted from pp. 220-21. Translated into English by Gladys Yang as *Mimosa* (Peking: Panda Books, 1985). Among the ideals of the multi-novel protagonist Chang Yung-lin 章永璘 that were destroyed through years of harsh treatment was his originally tolerant view of women's sexual mores. Chang preferred not to probe his lover Ma Ying-hua's 馬櫻花 past amorous liaisons in *Mimosa*, but in the next novel in the series, *Half of Man Is Woman*, he vitriolically upbraids his wife Huang Hsiang-chiu 黃香久 again and again for merely once having given in to secretary Ts'ao's 曹書記 sexual advances. He thus blows Huang's transgressions all out of proportion while keeping his anger at secretary Ts'ao bottled up within his private thoughts—after all, nagging one's spouse is safe enough, but venting one's anger at a party secretary could be terribly dangerous. This is not to say that Chang should have confronted the party secretary and gotten another term in the camps, but that he was unfairly using Huang Hsiang-chiu to vent his grievances against the political system responsible for his impotence.

<sup>23</sup> *Chang hsien-chi*, vol. 3, p. 260.

<sup>24</sup> Wang An-i and Tsung Fu-hsien 宗福先, "Feng-shu-ling liu-jih Pai-mao-ling nü lao-chiao tui ts'ai-fang chi-shih" 楓樹嶺六日白茅嶺女勞教隊採訪紀實, *Ta ch'ang nei-wai* 大籬內外 4 (1988), pp. 3-9, esp. p. 7.

have long since been deleted as "feudal remnants."<sup>25</sup> His wife counters that this same kind of outspokenness in challenging the school authorities had earned him a "rightist" label back in 1957. Times may have changed after Mao's passing, but a reversion to the witch-hunt atmosphere of the past was always possible.

The passivity and helplessness of the ordinary P.R.C. citizen when confronted by vengeful or insecure officials with broad discretionary powers comes across in the teacher's somber reflections: "The home and everything else we've built up here could totally slip through our fingers overnight, and I'd have to go back inside that cramped and squat adobe hut."<sup>26</sup> Articulated fears of this type contribute much to our understanding of how the institution of the labor camp can intimidate the average P.R.C. adult into a state of wary passivity.

#### CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE RUSTICATED INMATE

The confidence with which a person in a repressive society can hold onto views that are at variance with government policies or dogmas often resides in the possibility of forming associations with individuals of similar bent. To the extent that a government permits such informal grassroots networks to thrive, civil society exists.

Scholars have speculated about the presence or absence of civil society in post-Mao China.<sup>27</sup> Claims for such a presence in the P.R.C. turn out to be less far-fetched than one might suppose at first glance, particularly if we adopt the broad Rousseauian definition of civil society as an assemblage of self-governing political and pressure groups free from direct control by the state apparatus. In the spring of 1989, for example, the rapid flowering of independent, unofficial civil organizations throughout China exposed a startling array of fissures and cracks in the imposing wall of the C.C.P. regimentation of society.<sup>28</sup> What has emerged is a mixed picture. On the one hand, as Andrew Walder has noted, the P.R.C. party-state's control mechanisms

<sup>25</sup> *Chang hsien-chi*, vol. 1, pp. 44-73.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>27</sup> Yü Ying-shih, "The Question of Civil Society in Modern China," paper presented at the Symposium on Human Rights in China, Columbia University, January 18, 1991; Fang Li-chih, "China's Despair and China's Hope," trans. Perry Link, *New York Review of Books* (February 2, 1989), pp. 3-4.

<sup>28</sup> Lawrence Sullivan, "The Emergence of Civil Society in China, Spring 1989," in Tony Saich, ed., *The Chinese People's Movement: Perspectives on Spring 1989* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1990), pp. 126-44.

have exercised a hold over the workplace and neighborhood more effectively than had the pre-1989 Eastern European communist regimes.<sup>29</sup>

Myron Cohen's research on folk religious practices and the division of family property in the rural Ch'eng-tu plain suggests, on the other hand, that the party-state's attempts to reshape actual (as opposed to prescribed) grassroots cultural practices have largely failed. For example, peasants tend simply to feign compliance or lie low during periodic Maoist crackdowns on "religious superstition," and then resume their traditional cultural practices once the meddling functionaries finally get distracted by a new directive or policy shift.<sup>30</sup>

Walder's and Cohen's views represent two contrasting images of the C.C.P.'s relationship with the society and culture under its rule. From Walder's perspective, the party is a giant but agile octopus with its tentacles reaching into practically every nook and cranny of the social structure. Faced with the presence of overpowering and ubiquitous state tentacles, the citizenry has developed an astonishing capacity for conformity and submissiveness before authority, a passivity more entrenched than its equivalent in the Soviet Union, or any other European Communist state.<sup>31</sup> This perspective presents civil society as having practically no space in which to sprout, much less grow and spread.

From Cohen's contrasting perspective, non-Maoist peasant culture has had the resilience to withstand repeated party-state attacks on its cultural heritage. Like a tough insect species impossible to eradicate once and for all, peasant cultural traditions can migrate underground in the face of official pesticide attacks, resurfacing at a time when the dust clouds of conflict have settled. According to this view, the party bears a resemblance to a functionary without a flyswatter who rises from his torpor now and then to flail wildly at an agile housefly, which always warily evades his blows. The fly will then return to going about its business without paying much heed to the decrees and orders of the functionary, who periodically loses his temper over such insolence and re-initiates the endless cycle of clampdown and laxity (*shou* 收 and *fang* 放).

<sup>29</sup> This is the key theme running through Andrew Walder's *Communist Neo-Traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* (Berkeley: U. of California P., 1986).

<sup>30</sup> Myron Cohen, "Report from Two Szechwan Villages," paper presented at New England Seminar, Harvard University, February 7, 1991. Cohen notes that intolerance for peasant sociocultural traditions is not limited to party cadres; urban intellectuals, including many with dissident leanings, tend to scorn folk culture as almost hopelessly "backward" and in need of a complete overhaul.

<sup>31</sup> The possible exception would be Albania, whose proportion of the rural majority to the urban minority approaches that of China.

The literary image of a cadre's swat that necessitates evasive measures and yet can never destroy its weak but agile target once and for all comes from the exoneration scene in Chang Hsien-liang's story "Ling yü jou" 靈與肉 ("Body and Soul"), a well-known work written just before his series of novels set in labor camps.<sup>32</sup> After having muddled through two decades of punishment as a rightist thought criminal, the protagonist Hsü Ling-chün 許靈均 has just been read the party's formal declaration of his total exoneration. Although the stony-faced apparatchik who reads the statement has long viewed political prisoners merely as objects of class struggle, Hsü's shoulders begin to heave with sobs of gratitude. He takes the initiative to reach across the desktop and shake hands with the cadre, a functionary no different from the ones who arbitrarily flung him into the labor camps in the first place.

Some critics have, understandably, found this passage demeaning, and have suggested that only a slavish dolt could make such an inappropriate show of gratitude.<sup>33</sup> Unless the reader fathoms the tacit comparison of Hsü to the agile housefly that has eluded the cadre's swats, this scene could be interpreted as a groveling hosanna to the wisdom of C.C.P. leaders. It would see the leaders' deeply flawed policies as merely temporary aberrations. What this sort of reading overlooks, though, is that the protagonist's intense sense of relief and gratitude stems mainly from the removal of an external bureaucratic threat that has long interfered with his integration into the rural social order he has come to cherish. His sense of belonging in the countryside has hardly any connection with Maoist ideology per se; the harsh Maoist purges merely function as the catalyst that has thrust the city-bred protagonist into an alien pastoral environment, whose rough charms soon come to captivate him. Formerly an urbanite, he becomes transformed in the countryside, but not at all remolded (*kai-tsao*) in the Maoist sense. What actually brings about his non-Maoist rustication is the admiration and fondness that grows out of his long-term interaction with traditional-minded

<sup>32</sup> *Chang hsüan-chi*, vol. 1, p. 152.

<sup>33</sup> The Shanghai essayist Tang Pen 湯本 singled out the exoneration scene for particular derision in "I-ko hun-hun e-e te jen p'ing hsiao-shuo Ling yü jou te chu-jen-kung Hsü Ling-chün te hsing-hsiang" 一個渾渾噩噩的人評小說靈與肉的主人公許靈均的形象, *Shuo-fang* 朔方 1981.4, pp. 55-58, esp. p. 57. As one might expect, Tang Pen did not consider the cadre's failure to kill the fly as relevant to the relationship between the party and nonparty cultural forces; from his standpoint, it just did not seem significant enough to mention. A similar one-sided appraisal of Hsü Ling-chün's attachment to rural folk traditions as "backward" may be consulted in Sun Hsü-lun 孫敘倫 and Ch'en Tung-fang 陳同方, "I-ko chi-hsing te ling-hun p'ing Ling yü jou te chu-jen-kung Hsü Ling-chün" 一個畸形的靈魂評靈與肉的主人公許靈均, *Shuo-fang* 1981.5, pp. 74-77.

provincials. For instance, Hsü's rustic wife Hsiu-chih 秀芝 wins his admiration when she courageously ignores warnings from the cadres about the taint of capitalism that would arise from raising fowl in her courtyard. The way she stands firm in the face of cadre threats reminds him of how vigorous reeds and grasses often manage to push their way up out of the ground through narrow cracks between paving stones.

In contrast to true rustics like Hsiu-chih of "Body and Soul" and Ma Ying-hua of *Mimosa*, rural cadres tend to represent outsiders in Chang Hsien-liang's vision of life in the countryside. Aside from a few exceptions like brigade leader Wang 王隊長 and Lo Tsung-ch'i 羅宗祺 in *Half of Man Is Woman*, cadres have all the ponderous and sterile qualities of the paving stones that try in vain to block the natural growth of local flora. In fact, on the few occasions in which Chang's inmate characters make use of official cadre terminology, ironic overtones are generally present. For instance, when some inmates in *Half of Man Is Woman* jokingly urge a fellow prisoner to tell them something about the intimate side of his marital life, they brandish the slogan so often repeated in Maoist interrogations: "Come out with it and we'll be easy on you; hold back and you'll have a tough time" (*t'an-pai ts'ung-k'uan, k'ang-chü ts'ung-yen* 坦白從寬抗拒從嚴). On the other hand, no such irony may be found in inmate phraseology that carries traditional pieties, such as the reverence for ancestors still expressed throughout most rural areas: in the novel *Mimosa*, when a famished inmate happens to find something edible by foraging, he is likely to say, "So my ancestors are watching out for me" (*tsu-tsung yu ling* 祖宗有靈).<sup>54</sup> Therefore, even though Hsü Ling-chün and other protagonists of Chang Hsien-liang sometimes betray a pronounced deference to party authority, they define themselves in terms and images associated with the non-Maoist folk culture of the countryside. This capacity for oppositional self-definition at the grass-roots level suggests that at least the cultural foundations for civil society already exist; the problem is that except for temporary relaxations of control, such as 1988 and early 1989, the party-state has prevented much of anything significant from being constructed atop this foundation.

<sup>54</sup> Chang *hsüan-chi*, vol. 3, p. 165. Some camp administrators have come to realize that the old "Maospeak" exhortations to take the correct side in class struggle no longer yield many results when admonishing prisoners to behave themselves. A late-1980s commandant's speech rich in references to traditional pieties says at one place: "You must keep in mind that you're still part of the yellow-skinned race; in your daily lives and work, you've got to do right by your family and ancestors (*tsu-tsung*"); see Liu Yün-keng 劉雲耕, "Chih ta-ch'iang nei te jen-men" 致大牆內的人們, *Ta-ch'iang nei-wai* 5 (1989), p. 3.

## ORAL DISCOURSE AND THE AVOIDANCE OF MAOIST JARGON

Since narratives from folk cultural environments typically adopt oral styles of discourse rather than written ones, we might expect Chang Hsien-liang's novels about rusticated camp inmates to bear the contours of orality. Indeed, all of the protagonist Chang Yung-lin's fantasies and daydreams in *Half of Man is Woman* eschew the written mode of interior monologue and instead take the form of oral dialogue: Karl Marx, Chuang Tzu 莊子, Sung Chiang 宋江, and other figments of his imagination engage him in speculative dialogues. Admittedly, Chang Yung-lin turns to imaginary dialogues partly out of necessity: the rustic men and women whose way of life he values lack the educational background needed for these cerebral discussions. On the other hand, he is more apt to avoid his fellow exiles from the city as confirmed or potential stool pigeons than confide in them as fellow connoisseurs of ideas. It is no coincidence that Chang Yung-lin feels most secure at the state farm when handling a work project in the company of the brigade's mute: here at last is somebody totally incapable of informing on him.

Aside from the novel's couching of speculative discourse in dialogue form, much of the oral flavor of *Half of Man Is Woman* stems from the use of songs and doggerel, especially a raucous inmate's song about *kai-tsao*. The location of the latter term within the context of doggerel is crucial. In fact, indexes of word usage show a split between oral discourse and the Maoist-stultified written language in the P.R.C. period. Samples from oral and performing literature (plays, *hsiang-sheng* 相聲, and the like) were compared with an equivalent body of party tracts. No occurrences of *kai-tsao* appeared in the oral works, as compared with 200 occurrences in the Maoist tracts (a third sample of fiction yielded twelve occurrences, presumably attributable to influences from the Maoist style).<sup>55</sup>

Chang Hsien-liang's esteem for *lao-tung* 勞動 comes through in novel after novel, but he cannot bring himself to talk about *kai-tsao* with a straight face, on the rather rare occasions on which he does actually use the term. After all, "remolding" is a doctrinaire notion Mao Tse-tung borrowed at least in part from the Stalinists, who seem to have coined it in order to prettify the harsh prison regimen of the Solovetsky camp complex during

<sup>55</sup> Wang Huan 王還 et al., eds., *Hsien-tai Han-yü p'in-lü ts'u-tien* 現代漢語頻率辭典 (Peking: Pei-ching yü-yen hsieh-yüan ch'u-pan-she, 1986), p. 113.

the 1920s.<sup>36</sup> In its sense of coercing a person to undergo a total transformation of worldview and self-image, the term lacks validity and significance at the grassroots level in rural China; *kai-tsao* never seems to appear in conversations between any of Chang Hsien-liang's characters who were born and raised in the countryside.

Chang Hsien-liang's relegation of *kai-tsao* to the occasional ironic or playful passage in his novels seems to have anticipated the critic Li T'o's 李陀 hope that P.R.C. fiction will become more original by the conscious avoidance of Maoist clichés and *i-fu* 提法 (party phraseology).<sup>37</sup> Overall, Chang Hsien-liang's novels have elevated the spontaneous and unregulated quality of the spoken word over the specious authoritativeness of state-regulated written discourse. As an author who spent the better part of two decades in labor camps, Chang is aware of the sinister coercive implications of a term like *kai-tsao*. He uses the term only in contexts where coercion is present or implied. This sensitivity to politically loaded terms is something all too rare among even the more distinguished intellectuals on the P.R.C. literary scene.<sup>38</sup>

#### LAO-KAI AS A MICROCOSM OF A REGIMENTED SOCIALIST STATE

But perhaps it should not surprise us that a term like *kai-tsao* has come into general use throughout P.R.C. society. One of the major contributions of *ta-ch'iang wen-hsüeh* 大牆文學, or the literature of labor camps, is that prison-camp life reflects P.R.C. culture as a whole.

As an institution, the labor camp would seem to have little in common with the larger society on the outside, at least at first glance. *Lao-kai* prisoners receive a tiny allowance rather than wages for their labor. Usually shaven-headed, they are required to wear baggy black or dark blue dungarees, and are issued identification numbers to be used in lieu of their names.<sup>39</sup> Inmates receive Spartan rations of coarse, starchy food. A plethora

<sup>36</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: Two*, p. 67.

<sup>37</sup> Li T'o discusses the troubling cultural inheritance of the "Maoist literary style" (*Mao wen-t'i* 毛文體) in "Chin-t'ien' te i-i" 今天的意義, *Chin-t'ien* 今天 1 (1990), p. 71.

<sup>38</sup> For example, a recent book by Liu Tsai-fu 劉再復 and Lin Kang 林崗 has called for "remolding" Chinese culture itself, while Wang Meng 王蒙 has written of the necessity to "remold" the "uncivilized customs and habits" in P.R.C. society. Liu Tsai-fu and Lin Kang, *Ch'uan-t'ung yü Chung-huo-jen* 傳統與中國人 (Hong Kong: San-lien shu-tien, 1988), p. 17.

<sup>39</sup> Although *lao-kai* inmates receive no remuneration for their labor, and thus are forced into a way of life akin to slavery, *lao-chiao* inmates receive approximately 20% of the wages a free citizen on the outside would get for the same job. Inmates released from *lao-kai* or *lao-*

of regulations and a ring of walls severely limit their contact with the outside world. They may be held incommunicado indefinitely, even from their families, at the discretion of prison officials or party higher-ups.

Nevertheless, striking parallels between the camp regimen and the outside social order exist. Throughout the P.R.C.'s history, party cadres have periodically put intense pressure on both citizens and camp inmates to take public stands in the ritualistic denunciation of some hapless individual or group. The skeptical cadre Lo Tsung-ch'i of *Half of Man Is Woman* sighs over the cyclical pattern of these ubiquitous purges, describing them as "purge somebody now, and it'll be your turn to get purged by others later on."<sup>40</sup> The only qualitative difference between the camps and the outside in this regard is the higher level of coercion applied to inmates as opposed to ordinary citizens.<sup>41</sup> The *lao-kai* inmate Shih Tsai 石在 fears for his life as the storm clouds of an impending purge gather in the 1980 novel *Passionate Words from a Village Gulag* (*T'u-lao ch'ing-hua* 土牢情話);<sup>42</sup> the situation is much less tense for his counterpart in *Mimosa*, a released inmate assigned to work on a state farm, who is merely thrown back into confinement when the purges of the 1960s sweep him up in their path.

China's dossier system mirrors the record-keeping activities by the camp administrators; every adult citizen is presumed at least potentially guilty of criminal behavior, and incriminating statements of all sorts about even a person who has never been charged with any crime are routinely added to his or her dossier. In *Half of Man Is Woman*, Chang Yung-lin's resentment upon seeing secretary Ts'ao go through both his and his wife Huang Hsiang-chiu's dossiers no doubt differs little from the frustrations an ordinary citizen would experience when an important decision about housing or other job benefits is based on statements in his dossier that he will never be allowed to see.<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps the most disturbing parallel of all is the party's prioritization of production over the quality of life in both the camps and the outside. In

*chiao* but denied a transfer of their residence permits away from the locale must often accept an assigned job (*ch'iu-yeh*) in the vicinity of the camp; they receive about half of the ordinary pay rate for a given job. The bulk of Chang Yung-lin's experiences in *Mimosa* and *Half of Man Is Woman* occur after he has made the transition from *lao-kai* to *ch'iu-yeh* status.

<sup>40</sup> *Chang hsüan-chi*, vol. 3, p. 477.

<sup>41</sup> An unusually frank P.R.C. account of the intensity and gratuitous quality of physical violence inflicted by many guards on submissive prison inmates may be found in Li Shih-ch'iang 李世強, "Tsui-shih wang-nien chiao" 罪室忘年交, *Chung-hua ying-chieh* 中華英烈 3 (1988), pp. 29-36. The guards in this prison usually used gestures instead of words in communicating with the inmates, and would beat any prisoner who failed to respond promptly to these gestures; see cap. p. 30.

<sup>42</sup> *Chang hsüan-chi*, vol. 2, pp. 3-89. <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 455.

order to keep the camp system economically self-supporting, remolding the attitudes of camp inmates is often less important than the prison administrators' more basic goals of exploiting cheap labor. The situation outside the camps is often little better, as Chang Yung-lin observes after his transfer to the state farm in *Half of Man Is Woman*. There a local cadre's concern over a broken-down sheep pen leads Chang to realize that the well-being of sheep, because of their place in the production plan, took precedence over the well-being of human beings:

Sheep mattered more than people. If you were to tell the cadres that some production brigade member's house had gotten ruined, they'd just say they were sorry, but there was no way the production brigade could send somebody over to fix it. But with sheep it was different: even though the busy part of the agricultural season had begun, the secretary still agreed to dispatching a woman to come over and help fix the pen.<sup>44</sup>

#### LITERARY AMBIVALENCE TOWARD THE CAMP EXPERIENCE

By documenting the uneasy parallels between life inside and outside the camps, writers like Chang Hsien-liang have provided urban Chinese readers with insights into their own society that they would be unlikely to get through other channels. Still, the imaginative side of these partially testimonial Chinese camp novels enables the reader to grasp their conclusions in more imagistic and memorable terms. Instead of simply stating that the Chinese camp regimen attempts to foster a child-like obedience to party-state authority, *Half of Man Is Woman* portrays a doomed marriage between ex-inmates no longer fully adult, an impotent male virgin and a barren young woman. Other works, like Ts'ung Wei-hsi's 從維熙 *Faraway White Sail* (*Yüan ch'ü te pai-fan* 遠去的白帆), evoke the primitivism of preagricultural hunting-and-gathering cultures by depictions of foraging inmates. Such writings implicitly challenge the regime's claims about the "progressive" nature of the party-state in its presumed historical role.<sup>45</sup> Still others go on to challenge the crucial concept of remolding itself. Chang Hsien-liang's banned 1989 novel *Getting Used to Dying* (*Hsi-kuan ssu-wang* 習慣死亡) sardonically describes the fully remolded citizen as somebody too compliant

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 447.

<sup>45</sup> Ts'ung Wei-hsi, "Yüan-ch'ü ti pai-fan," *Ts'ung Wei-hsi chi 從維熙集* (Fuchou: Hai-hsia wen-i ch'u-pan-she, 1986), pp. 196, 210, 220.

in the face of authority to hold any of the local cadres accountable for their policy decisions.<sup>46</sup> What begins to take shape here is a critique of the assumptions about human nature built into the very concept of remolding: namely, that the human individual has little value in and of itself, but achieves its worth as malleable clay within the all-powerful hands of the party-state.

Nevertheless, a positive side of the camp experience also emerges from these novels and accounts. Ex-inmate authors occasionally achieve more penetrating insights into both the tenacity and weakness of human character than would have been possible under circumstances less trying. For example, the newly released inmate living just outside his former camp in Chang Hsien-liang's novel *Mimosa* does not feel accepted as an insider by the local populace until he stands up to an aggressive local worker in a ritualistic test of strength and will. This former urbanite suddenly feels much more in touch with the "rural masses" than he ever had while drilled with the party's abstract and vague slogans about the wonders of manual labor and learning from the peasants. His growing intimacy with an untutored but resourceful village woman also rekindles a sense of self-worth and familial togetherness that had become badly eroded during his years in the camps. This novel illustrates how the policy of prison-camp remolding often fails to produce docility, but instead urban intellectuals strengthened by rustication. More by accident than design, those prison-camp writers of the 1980s who were first purged from their urban posts during the late 1950s may have developed as deep an appreciation for rural Chinese culture as any recent generation of China's writers. The painful failure of remolding at the hands of communist cadres often set the stage for the ex-inmate to recover a sense of belonging and worth amidst ordinary villagers immersed in traditional ethics and a folk cultural heritage.

<sup>46</sup> Chang Hsien-liang, *Hsi-kuan ssu-wang* (Taipei: Yüan shen ch'u-pan-she, 1989), p. 255.