



Bless you prison, bless
you for being in my life.
For there, lying upon
the rotting prison straw,
I came to realise that
the object of life is not
prosperity as we are
made to believe, but the
maturity of the human
soul.

Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn,
The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956

Bless You, Prison

Experiences of Detention in
China

With these words, Soviet star dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn exalted the transformative role of the gulag—where he had been imprisoned for eight years—in reconfiguring his soul. Just like his account of life in the labour camps played a fundamental role in shaping public perceptions of the Soviet labour camps, our views of the Chinese detention system are also widely shaped by the writings and testimonies of former political prisoners, whether victims of the mass campaigns of the Mao era or more recent crackdowns against dissident voices. Reading these accounts, detention easily assumes the tragic connotations of martyrdom, and detainees come to be surrounded by a halo of heroism. But what about those uncountable prisoners who are detained for common

crimes or less-noble causes? What about the reality of murderers, thieves, drug addicts, and prostitutes? Is prison a blessing for them too?

This issue of the *Made in China Journal* aims to provide a more balanced account of Chinese experiences of detention by examining situations as diverse as education camps in Xinjiang, forced detox camps for drug addicts, involuntary hospitalisation of people with mental health problems, the contested legacies of labour camps from the Maoist past, and the latest reforms in the fields of Chinese criminal justice. Such grim analyses are also key to understanding the upheavals that are currently taking place in Hong Kong. We should not forget that the popular mobilisations of these past months began in response to attempts by the Hong Kong authorities to pass an

extradition bill that would have established a new case-by-case model to transfer fugitives to any jurisdiction that the former British colony lacks a formal agreement with, including mainland China. Reading the accounts included in this issue of the journal, it is not difficult to understand why this became a flashpoint.

In the special section, **Tobias Smith** reflects on the trickiness of any comparison that aims to assess the harshness of China's criminal justice in relative terms. **Fu Hualing** asks what kind of progress the Chinese authorities have made after four decades of legal reform in controlling their power to detain, reducing its arbitrariness, and making the repressive arm of the state legally accountable. **Michael Caster** looks into the disturbing institutionalisation of arbitrary and secret detention, as epitomised in the recently-established 'residential surveillance at a designated location' and *liuzhi* systems. **Guo Zhiyuan** analyses progress and shortcomings in the new laws and regulations aimed at protecting people with mental health problems from arbitrary deprivation of their freedom. **Darren Byler** examines the broader shift in policing and detention in Xinjiang, and highlights how this is linked to similar changes in counterinsurgency around the world. **Giulia Zoccatelli** digs deep into the history, the logic, and the functioning of China's anti-drugs camps through the testimonies of doctors and former drug addicts. Finally, **Børge Bakken** argues for the importance of criminological research rather than legalistic discussion in debates about the Chinese legal system.

The issue includes op-eds on the mass protests in Hong Kong by **Anita Chan** and **Kaxton Siu**; on how the situation in Hong Kong has been perceived by Chinese communities abroad by **Daphne Zhao**, **Shan Windscrip**, and **JS Chen** and **K. Shen**; and on the problematic nature of the narrow cultural assumptions underpinning the documentary *American Factory* by **Hong Zhang**. In the China columns section, **Ryan Mitchell** deconstructs the political myth of 'brainwashing', tracing the history of the term from the late nineteenth century to the

discussions of today. **Yi Xiaocuo** illustrates how the Chinese authorities are facilitating new waves of Han influx from Inner China to settle as farmers, civil servants, jail guards, police officers, and teachers. Furthermore, the issue features a forum on the challenges of doing fieldwork in China today, with contributions by **Sam Berlin**, **Yifan Cai**, **Tyler Harlan**, and **Wenjing Jiang**. In the Window on Asia section, **Claudio Sopranzetti** examines the role of the middle classes in the Thai elections of 2019, and in the cultural section **Zeng Jinyan** talks with director **Ai Xiaoming** about her documentary *Jiabianguo Elegy: The Life and Death of Rightists*, a heartbreaking testimony on the reality of a labour camp in the late 1950s.

We wrap up the issue with a conversation with **Miriam Driessen** about *Tales of Hope, Tastes of Bitterness*, her new book on Chinese road construction workers in Ethiopia. ■

The Editors