

CRIMINALIZING DISSENT:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF
CHINESE AND CUBAN
REVOLUTIONARY REPRESSION,
1949-1979

By Cole Mitchell

Laogai Research Foundation
5 May 2014

Criminalizing Dissent: A Comparative Study of Chinese and Cuban Revolutionary
Repression, 1949-1979

Cole Mitchell

Laogai Research Foundation

5 May 2014

Preface and Introduction

It has been said that “No dictatorship can remain in power for so long without violating human rights, without persecutions, without political prisoners, without political prisons.”¹ History has certainly proved this theory. Regardless of political ideology, virtually every single-party state has required a penal structure specifically to incarcerate those with dissenting views. Whether it was the fascist regimes of Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy, or the communist regimes of Stalin’s Soviet Union and Mao’s China; criminalizing dissent has proven itself necessary to maintain power.

It is with that introduction that I proclaim the political neutrality of this study. Although this study will entertain only the lengths to which Communist China and Communist Cuba have gone in maintaining power, let it be known that ideological affiliation is not the primary reason why one-party states criminalize dissent.² Rather, one-party states criminalize dissent because their existence depends on it.

As alluded to above, this study will focus on the historical efforts that China and Cuba have undertaken to criminalize dissent. In doing so, this study will highlight the surprisingly parallel and interrelated histories of China and Cuba during their decades marked by a hyper-revolutionary culture. This study will also compare the forced-labor prison systems in China and Cuba that were established immediately after each country’s communist revolution and developed up to the international détente that began in the mid-1970s and was accelerated by Mao’s death and Jimmy Carter’s presidency.

¹ Armando Valladares, *Against All Hope*, (New York: Knopf Publishing, 1986), xiii.

² However, the form that systems of repression assume is often molded to fit the regime’s ideological goals.

The overriding goal of this study will be to place China and Cuba in the larger, and sparsely researched, narrative of one-party repression during the twentieth century. Although the Soviet gulag has been well documented, the forced-labor systems of other communist countries have garnered less attention. Although the Chinese gulag—the Laogai System—has recently been awarded a definition in the Oxford English Dictionary, the forced-labor system in Cuba still lurks in the shadows of international obscurity.

Perhaps a comparative study of the Laogai System and the Soviet gulag, a study that has already been undertaken, would have been a much simpler feat.³ Another angle in that discussion could have been explored, and perhaps that angle would have complemented the discussion. But too many countries have yet to receive scholarly attention for their systems of repression that bear an uncanny resemblance to other, more famous, systems of repression.

This study will be reined in by time period. Although Cuba and China continue to incarcerate political dissidents, and their histories did not end in the late-1970s, the more this study attempts to cover the less it covers effectively. Therefore, I have chosen to make this study historical.

In addition, this study will only focus on political imprisonment, as opposed to common imprisonment, in China and Cuba.⁴ Moreover, this study will not be encyclopedic, and it will not fully give justice to such a rich area of research; with that

³Sanne Deckwitz, "Gulag vs. Laogai: The Function of Forced Labour Camps in the Soviet Union and China," (MA thesis, Utrecht University, 2012), accessed April 14, 2014, <http://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/228062>.

⁴ I use "common" imprisonment to refer to the incarceration of people for non-political reasons (homicide, theft, etc...)

said, I hope this study will be a functional starting point for future research. Furthermore, let it be known that although this study is historical, political repression in China and Cuba continues to haunt the twenty-first century.

This study is also limited somewhat by sources. Although I owe much thanks to Chinese scholars such as Harry Wu, who has literally risked his life documenting the Laogai System, considerable evidence still remains behind the Bamboo Curtain. Similarly, although I owe much thanks to a multitude of Cuban dissidents who have come forth with their experiences as political prisoners, a certain veil of secrecy still hides some of the truth to Cuba's system of political incarceration. In fact, the sources explaining the intricacies of political incarceration in Cuba are far less prevalent than the sources available to scholars of the Laogai System.

It is also necessary to present and justify this study's methodology. This study will compare Chinese and Cuban systems of repression in their respective jars. Frankly, the two systems lend themselves to easy comparisons. By using the "comparative method," it becomes remarkably clear that these systems did not arise organically.⁵ Rather, there must have been significant discussion and collaboration amongst the Communist Bloc to create such equivalent systems of political incarceration. This discussion and collaboration has been documented in the case of the Soviet gulag and the Chinese Laogai System.⁶ Despite its resemblance to both the gulag and the Laogai System, and despite the public courtship and assistance of Cuba between the Soviet

⁵ Further information on the comparative method:

<https://www.english.upenn.edu/sites/www.english.upenn.edu/files/Seigel-BeyondCompare.pdf>

⁶ Specifically, the PRC noted that a Soviet consultant known simply as Stoyanov offered "suggestions" to Chinese leadership on the establishment of labor reform camps on June 22, 1951. Moreover, Liu Shaoqi commended the genius of the Soviet system of reform through labor on May 11, 1951:

<http://laogai.org/news/original-documents-laogai-museum-confirming-abuses>

Union and China, no direct evidence has arisen confirming the “transnational” relationship and positive correlation between Cuba’s labor reform system and that of the Soviet gulag or the Chinese Laogai System.⁷ Consequently, a transnational methodology—one that stresses the “linkages” and “motion” of historical actors and ideas across borders—is inappropriate for this study.⁸ However, whenever the political situations of China and Cuba allow for an opening of archives, I am confident a more fulfilling study with transnational dimensions can manifest itself.⁹

⁷ Further information on the transnational method:

<https://www.english.upenn.edu/sites/www.english.upenn.edu/files/Seigel-BeyondCompare.pdf>

⁸ Robert Vinson, *The Americans are Coming!* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012), 4-5.

⁹ Some developing scholarship has emerged regarding the transnational diplomatic relationship between China and Cuba. However, this scholarship is limited in its discussion of politically sensitive topics; it does not discuss the relationship that China and Cuba had regarding criminalizing dissent. To read some of this developing scholarship, consult Yinghong Cheng: <http://www.ucis.pitt.edu/ncta/pdffiles/ChengInColdWarStudiesArticle.pdf>.

Table of Contents

- 1) Historical Parallelism
 - a) China
 - b) Cuba
- 2) A Comparative Note on the Revolutionary Narrative
- 3) Laogai System
 - a) Definition
 - b) Composition
 - i) Laogai
 - ii) Laojiao
 - iii) Forced Job Placement
 - iv) Qincheng Prison
- 4) Cuban Prison System
 - a) Composition
 - i) Progressive Plan
 - ii) UMAP
 - iii) *Plantado* Incarceration
- 5) A Comparative Note on the Laogai System and the Cuban Prison System

1) Historical Parallelism

A) China: Political Power Grows Out of the Barrel of a Gun¹⁰

The Chinese Communist Revolution, like many revolutions, was marked by an incredible amount of violence. Twenty-two years prior to the Communist Revolution, in 1927, Mao wrote: “A revolution is not a dinner party... it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.”¹¹ True to his ideas, and in unprecedented fashion, Mao’s Revolution swiftly eliminated numerous factions that threatened the success of the Revolution. Institutionalizing his own “Red Terror,” Mao launched several campaigns to consolidate the Chinese Communist Party’s power in the wake of the Revolution.¹² Most notably, the 1949 Land Reform Campaign and the 1950 Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries assured the supremacy of the Party.

The core values of these political [campaigns] were submission to the leader, unity of thought, and elimination of dissent. For these reasons, all political campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s were characterized by the destruction of personal dignity and moral character. This resulted in the use of brutal methods of political struggle, and by the early 1950s China’s political environment was extremely tense and terrifying.¹³

The terror that characterized the first few years after the Revolution was seen most vividly in the struggle sessions and mass executions of counterrevolutionaries during the Land Reform campaign. The labeling of counterrevolutionaries was ambiguous and widespread. Landlords, rich peasants, Christians, bad-elements, reactionaries, bandits, capitalists, those suspected of ties with foreign governments, and

¹⁰ A popular quote from Chairman Mao Zedong

¹¹ Xing Lu, *Rhetoric of the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 15.

¹² Henceforth, the Chinese Communist Party will be referred to as “the Party”

¹³ Harry Wu, “Qincheng Prison,” (unpublished manuscript, Laogai Research Foundation, 2010), 68.

especially those with ties to the deposed Chinese Nationalist Government were considered “counterrevolutionaries.”¹⁴ Struggle Sessions were organized by Party officials where peasants and those in good-standing with the Party would actively participate in class struggle by publically humiliating and criticizing counterrevolutionaries. In practice, many condemned counterrevolutionaries were labeled as such by their peers out of personal grudge, with little or no evidence of wrongdoing.¹⁵ The scope of revolutionary condemnation during the Land Reform campaign and shortly thereafter was astonishing. According to Chinese historian Maurice Meisner, an estimated two million counterrevolutionaries were executed in the first three years of the Revolution, many of whom were former Nationalists. Although reliable figures are hard to come by, undoubtedly many of those executions were public spectacles.¹⁶ Additionally, some two million counterrevolutionaries were imprisoned.¹⁷

In addition to the widespread persecution during the Land Reform campaign, it was made clear during the first decade of the Revolution that Mao was pursuing a policy of cultural cleansing. Christians (especially Roman Catholics), those afforded a Western education, Uyghur Muslims from Xinjiang Province, and Tibetan Buddhists were targeted for communist indoctrination.¹⁸ Mao’s solution to culturally unifying China was labor reform within the Laogai System. Hordes of aforementioned cultural Others¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Lee Feigon, *Mao: A Reinterpretation*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publishing, 2003), 160.

¹⁶ Kam C. Wong, *Police Reform in China*, (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2012), 62.

¹⁷ Maurice Meisner, *Mao’s China and After*, (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 72.

¹⁸ Harry Wu, in discussion with the author, April 2014.

¹⁹ I use the capitalized form of “Other” in reference to Edward Said’s influential and pioneering scholarship on “Orientalism.” Whereas Said argued that “Other” was the prism through which the West has viewed the Orient through colonialism, I use the term more liberally. For this study, “Other” refers to the factions that Mao and Castro saw as against the Revolution because of their different cultural, ethnic, sexual, or religious allegiances.

found themselves enduring political indoctrination and laboring in the factories and farms of the Laogai System often for decades on end.

In 1957, Mao pushed yet another mass campaign: the Hundred Flowers Campaign. Intended to promote free thought that would lead to revolutionary betterment, the Hundred Flowers Campaign morphed into a smear campaign where intellectuals, dissidents, and average citizens felt safe to criticize the Party. Not long after the Hundred Flowers' critiques were shared, however, the Party came down hard on those whose critiques exposed them as "Rightists."²⁰ Upon discovery in the Hundred Flowers Campaign, some 520,000 of these Rightists, also known as "poisonous weeds," were unseated from their professional positions and many were imprisoned during the subsequent Anti-Rightist Movement of 1957-1959.²¹

By 1958, the Party launched the "Great Leap Forward." Believing it would drastically improve China's economy, the Party implemented ill-conceived agricultural and industrial policies. Additionally, the Party ordered the rapid collectivization of farms into burdensomely large communes. These policies precipitated mass famine, resulting in an estimated thirty to fifty million deaths.²²

The ideological roots of the Great Leap Forward laid in its "Maoist" diversion from orthodox Marxism. Mao, unlike Marx, believed that the peasant class would drive industrial growth.²³ Fields were often left fallow while peasants toiled to make steel from scrap metal in crude backyard furnaces. Naturally, the infrastructure built from the steel

²⁰ Philip Short, *Mao: A Life*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 470.

²¹ Philip Short, *Mao: A Life*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 470-471.

²² Frank Dikotter, *Mao's Great Famine*, (New York: Walker Publishing, 2010), 333.

²³ Meisner, 425.

produced in these backyard furnaces often fell to ruin within years of completion. In addition to backyard steel production, the Party unveiled “close planting” as its plan to greatly increase agricultural production. In effect, the Party ordered farmers to plant much more seed in any given area than the land could feasibly support. The Maoist logic behind this directive was that seeds “of the same class” showed a “revolutionary spirit” and thus would not compete for nutrients as capitalists competed in a free-market.²⁴ The results were disastrous; China’s crop output fell dramatically. Furthermore, local Party officials who feared retaliation from their superiors for falling short of expectations fabricated production reports to claim they met the Party’s impossible grain quotas. This dishonesty led Beijing to believe that grain quotas were indeed being met; thus, what little grain was harvested in China was exported.

By 1961, many of the policies of the Great Leap Forward had been abandoned and the Famine began to wane. With the consequences of expressing dissent made apparent during the Anti-Rightist Campaign, few spoke out in protest to the Great Leap Forward. Those who voiced opposition were immediately purged.

Not surprisingly, the Great Leap Forward and the resulting Great Famine damaged Mao politically. On the international front, supposed Soviet “revisionists,” led by head of state Nikita Khrushchev, criticized Mao’s unorthodox Leap.²⁵ Mao’s animosity towards the USSR, which had been building since Stalin’s death in 1953, manifested itself into paranoia that his Revolution might be compromised by Soviet revisionism and its influence within his inner circle. Domestically, Liu Shaoqi and other

²⁴ Dikotter, 39.

²⁵ Jiaqi Yan and Gao Gao, *Turbulent Decade*, (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 3. For more reading on the Sino-Soviet Split, consult Sergey Radchenko’s *Two Suns in the Heavens*.

revisionists within Mao's inner circle began advocating for a smoother transition to communism engendered in the USSR's more orthodox interpretation of Marxism.²⁶ Consequently, as Liu and others began threatening Mao's power, Mao enlisted the people to salvage his Revolution and image by deposing any capitalist-roaders and counterrevolutionaries. In August 1966, the Party, under the direction of Mao, launched the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.²⁷

The Cultural Revolution reinsured Mao's power through a cult of personality. For our purposes, however, the Cultural Revolution returned the societal repression characteristic of the early years of the Revolution. By stating that the goal of the Cultural Revolution was to "criticize," "crush," "repudiate," and "struggle against" those "taking the capitalist road," Mao launched an unprecedented decade of hyper-revolutionary sentiment that fostered extraordinary persecution and violence.²⁸

The Cultural Revolution has been described by the contradictory term "anarchic totalitarianism."²⁹ Its purpose and outcome was to uphold Mao's totalitarian state, yet its revolutionary processes were implemented through anarchic and extra-judicial terror. Mao enlisted idealistic and revolutionary youth, labeled them Red Guards, and authorized them to rebel against counterrevolutionary elements. In keeping with the Maoist proverb "Revolution is not a dinner party," Red Guards roamed China humiliating, looting, detaining, criticizing, beating, and executing suspected counterrevolutionaries.³⁰ Red Guards organized struggle sessions similar to those typical of the aforementioned

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Mao Zedong, "The Sixteen Points: Guidelines for the Great Proletarian Revolution," Columbia University, accessed April 14, 2014, http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/sixteen_points.pdf.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Jean-Louis Margolin, *Black Book of Communism*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 513.

³⁰ Margolin, 535.

Land Reform and Anti-Rightist Campaigns. Challenging the Red Guards terror was futile at best. “Anyone who made accusations was always right, since the accusations came with a barrage of quotations and sacrosanct slogans. As a rule, those were tried to defend themselves always ended up in deeper trouble....It mattered little whether the accusation had any basis; the important thing was that it be couched in correct political terms.”³¹

Although the social chaos caused by the Red Guards permeated all levels of government to some extent, the Laogai System was left relatively untouched.³² If anything, the extra-judicial punishment levied by the Red Guards was simply in addition to the “legal” imprisonment of counterrevolutionaries in Laogai camps. Chinese historian Jean-Louis Margolin likened the Red Guards to a “generation of jailers.”³³ All told, conservative estimates place the number of Chinese persecuted during the Cultural Revolution at thirty-six million and the number killed at three million.³⁴

At the Cultural Revolution’s apex, from its genesis in 1966 until 1968, Red Guards practically governed China. Realizing the urban power that Red Guards wielded and the chaos they promoted, Mao devised a plan to significantly curtail their power through exile. Under the guise of “reeducation,” Mao launched the Down to the Countryside Movement. From its inception in 1968, revolutionary youth, usually willingly, but sometimes forcefully, were sent to the countryside to labor alongside and learn from

³¹ Margolin, 532.

³² Margolin, 528.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, *Mao’s Last Revolution*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 262. Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2011), 569.

the peasantry.³⁵ In practice, the Down to the Countryside Movement was an extension of the Chinese penal system. Although not formally ostracized for wrongdoing, an entire generation of Chinese youth, whom scholars have labeled the “Lost Generation,” was relocated on “order from the central government” for labor reform.³⁶ Between 1968 and 1978, the “educated youth” sent-down numbered over sixteen million.³⁷

The repressive and hyper-revolutionary aura of the Cultural Revolution came to an end with Mao’s death in 1976. Shortly after Mao’s death, Deng Xiaoping, formerly criticized during the Cultural Revolution as a revisionist, rose to power.³⁸ Deng’s reforms brought social stability and economic progress that had been unknown to China in decades. Unlike the Soviet revisionist Nikita Khrushchev, whom Deng had been compared to during the Cultural Revolution, Deng did not formally denounce the brutal excesses of his predecessor. Although in 1978, consistent with his reformist policies, Deng ordered the release of “some 100,000 long-serving political prisoners.”³⁹ Despite releasing many political prisoners, Deng would not entertain meaningful reform of the Laogai System.

³⁵ Jiaqi Yan and Gao Gao, *Turbulent Decade*, (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 279.

Harry Wu, in discussion with the author, April 2014.

Filled with idealism and indoctrinated by Mao’s cult of personality, most Red Guards and Chinese youth willingly traveled great distances to resettle in China’s poor countryside. However, the stubborn youth who resisted the Down to the Countryside Movement and were not prosecuted as counterrevolutionaries and sent to Laogai camps because of it were nonetheless forcibly relocated to the countryside.

³⁶ Tracy You, “China’s ‘Lost Generation’ Recalls Hardships of Cultural Revolution,” CNN, accessed April 14, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/10/24/world/asia/china-lost-generation/>.

³⁷ Jiaqi Yan and Gao Gao, 279.

³⁸ Jiaqi Yan and Gao Gao, 488.

³⁹ International Workers Bulletin Editorial Board, “Deng Xiaoping and the Fate of the Chinese Revolution,” International Committee of the Fourth International, accessed April 14, 2014, <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/1997/03/deng-m12.html>.

B) Cuba: Inside the Revolution everything; outside the Revolution, nothing.⁴⁰

Much like China, Cuba before its Revolution was marked by poverty and political corruption. Fulgencio Batista, Cuba's head of state throughout the 1940s and 1950s, sowed the seeds for Revolution in Cuba. By January 1959, after years of guerilla warfare, Fidel Castro and certain communists in his inner circle, namely Raul Castro and Che Guevara, assumed power.⁴¹ Despite his connections to devout communists, Castro asserted his Revolution to be populist and nationalist in nature. However, after economic support from the Soviet Union, Castro announced the "socialist" character of the Revolution in 1961.⁴² Some scholars have suggested that Castro refused to immediately name an ideological foundation to his Revolution because doing so would have jeopardized his power by placing ideology over personality. By 1961, however, Castro had become "an untouchable figure."⁴³

In order to become untouchable, Castro utilized familiar techniques to crush dissent and consolidate his grip on power. "In the weeks after marching into Havana, the revolutionaries brought many of Batista's more prominent military and civilian leaders before revolutionary tribunals opened to the public and aired on national television."⁴⁴ Upon a guilty verdict, which was reached swiftly due to the revolutionary fervor, lack of due process, and spectacle nature of the tribunals, the *Batistianos* would be publically executed. The executions "took place in a carnival-like atmosphere."⁴⁵ Some 18,000 people gathered to "judge" former Batista commander Jesus Sosa Blanco

⁴⁰ A popular quote from Fidel Castro

⁴¹ Henceforth, "Castro" will refer to Fidel Castro, not Raul Castro.

⁴² Samuel Farber, *Cuba Since the Revolution of 1959*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011), 8.

⁴³ Farber, 11-12.

⁴⁴ Farber, 14.

⁴⁵ Margolin, 648.

at the Palace of Sports in Havana. Just before his public execution, Sosa Blanco remarked that the scene at the Palace was “worthy of ancient Rome.”⁴⁶ Some 600 of Batista’s supporters were “summarily executed” during a five-month period in 1959.⁴⁷ In addition to Batista’s supporters, Castro also oversaw the “liquidation” of more than 1,000 counterrevolutionaries in the first few years of the Revolution and more than 7,000 counterrevolutionaries throughout the 1960s.⁴⁸

For counterrevolutionaries lucky enough to escape executions, long-term prison sentences were the norm in the violent first several years of the Revolution. For criticizing the “mockery of justice” that characterized revolutionary tribunals, Jorge Valls was considered a threat the Revolution and consequently spent over twenty years in Cuban prisons as a political prisoner.⁴⁹ Similarly, for criticizing communism even before the Revolution had been officially designated as communist, Armando Valladares spent twenty-two years in Cuban prisons as a political prisoner.⁵⁰

As another tool of ensuring revolutionary unity, Fidel Castro oversaw the development of Committees to Defend the Revolution (CDRs). Fearing that his Revolution might be compromised by internal enemies, CDRs were organized in September 1960 at the grassroots level in an attempt to uncover and eliminate counterrevolutionaries within all facets of Cuban society. “Neighborhood blocks, factories, labor unions, and state farms” all organized into CDRs.⁵¹ In fact, at times of

⁴⁶ Margolin, 649.

⁴⁷ Margolin, 648.

⁴⁸ Margolin, 654

Margolin, 656.

⁴⁹ Jorge Valls, *Twenty Years and Forty Days*, (Washington: Americas Watch Committee, 1986), 5.

⁵⁰ Valladares, 5.

⁵¹ Thomas Leonard, *Castro and the Cuban Revolution*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 14.

supposed instability, “All Cubans were required to participate in CDRs, regardless of age or employment. Failure to do so was interpreted as unwillingness or resistance to being “integrated” into the revolutionary process, which carried serious educational and employment repercussions.”⁵² Through CDRs, Castro combined revolutionary zeal with Orwellian repression. The purpose of CDRs, according to Castro, was to combat “imperialism” with a “system of collective revolutionary vigilance, in which everyone knows who everyone is, what each person who lives on the block does, what relations he had with tyranny, to what he is dedicated, whom he meets, and what activities he follows.”⁵³ Unlike Mao’s Red Guards, however, CDRs rarely became anarchic, crazed, and difficult for Castro to control. Instead, a popular chant shouted by CDRs was “Whenever, wherever and whatever you wish! Commander-in-Chief, order us!”⁵⁴ CDRs also helped Castro construct a system of filing that required every workplace and school to keep files on their employees and students’ “political attitudes.”⁵⁵ From their founding in 1960, CDRs have been foundational to Castro’s grip on power and continue to function today as important facets of social control.

In yet another move aimed at quelling opposition while simultaneously promoting revolutionary spirit, Castro, influenced by Che Guevara, ordered the internal exile of much of Cuba’s youth.⁵⁶ In a campaign very similar to Mao’s Down to the Countryside

⁵² Leonard, 17.

⁵³ Farber, 17.

⁵⁴ Lillian Guerra, “Gender policing, homosexuality and the new patriarchy of the Cuban Revolution, 1965-70,” *Social History*, 35:3, 275.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Interestingly, Guevara was Mao’s biggest supporter within the Cuban Revolution. Guevara’s relationship with Mao is documented and without a doubt much of Guevara’s policies in Cuba derived from Maoist tenets. However, records detailing Mao and Guevara’s conversations with respect to curbing dissent are undeniably within inaccessible archives. These conversations and relationships between other Chinese and Cuban communists undeniably offer more insight into the parallel historical development of the two Revolutions. This next frontier,

Movement, Castro established *escuelas al campo* (countryside schools). “Less Urbanism, More Ruralism” became an official slogan of young revolutionaries by 1965.⁵⁷

Lillian Guerra detailed the history of the countryside schools:

By the mid-1960s, combining manual labor with mental work by performing unpaid, often grueling agricultural tasks under a hot sun while living in military-style barracks for months at a time became the most unifying experience for island youth from early adolescence to their mid-twenties. By 1967, the policy of sending middle school and high school students to study and work in the countryside became permanent: over 150,000 attended *escuelas al campo* in that year alone. [A] figure represent[ing] 84.68 percent of the total number enrolled [in Cuban schools.]⁵⁸

Castro’s control of Cuban life was total. In addition to the aforementioned countryside schools, Castro exercised significant control over the economy. After introducing sweeping land reform in 1959, Castro’s regime again became involved in the agricultural sector. Motivated by Che Guevara’s philosophy of the “New Man,” a philosophy that championed revolutionary selflessness, Castro’s regime promoted moral (as opposed to material) incentives for agricultural production. Additionally, Castro promoted revolutionary agricultural ideas that ran contrary to traditional agricultural practices. For example, Armando Valladares recalled Castro’s wayward ideas regarding Mango and Coffee production:

To the right were miles and miles of mango fields. That was Castro’s very own idea. Millions of pesos were spent on that plan, and it turned out to be a complete disaster. The land wasn’t right for that kind of crop, but none of the agronomists who were advising him dared [to] contradict the dictator. Only a few trees bore any fruit. Exactly the same thing had happened with that mad campaign of his for planting coffee inside the cities. In parks, in vacant lots, in private gardens and yards, and on balconies and terraces—you had to plant coffee trees anywhere there was a square yard of dirt....No

the transnational and diplomatic inquiry of the two Revolutionary periods, will offer an exciting methodology that simply cannot be currently undertaken given the present political situations of both countries.

⁵⁷ Guerra, 274.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

one ever drank a drop of coffee made from those plants. And the matter was never talked about again. It was considered taboo in Cuba.⁵⁹

As a consequence to Castro and Guevara's control of the agricultural sector, "Production of sugar, tobacco, vegetables, dairy products, poultry, beef, and pork dropped steadily during [the first several years of the Revolution.]"⁶⁰ Accordingly, by 1962, food rationing began.⁶¹

In light of the disappointing harvests and a supposed lack of revolutionary spirit throughout the first several years of the Revolution, Castro launched the "Revolutionary Offensive" in 1968. The Revolutionary Offensive "was a compression of Mao's Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution in its key goals: an unrealistic ten million tons of sugar production accompanied by a total social transformation to eliminate all vestiges of the "old Cuba" at both societal and individual levels."⁶² Ignoring other sectors of the Cuban economy, Castro proclaimed that the sugar harvest of 1970 would be "the harvest to end all harvests."⁶³ Additionally, Castro's Revolutionary Offensive entailed the closure of certain "bourgeois" businesses, the nationalization of Cuba's remaining privately owned businesses, and the reversal of observing Christmas as a federal holiday.⁶⁴

Although a record amount of sugar had been harvested in 1970, Castro's harvest goals for the Revolutionary Offensive had not been met. In a surprise move, Castro

⁵⁹ Valladares, 190.

⁶⁰ Leonard, 39.

⁶¹ Leonard, 37.

⁶² Yinghong Cheng, "Fidel Castro and 'China's Lesson for Cuba': A Chinese Perspective," *The China Quarterly*, No. 189 (Mar., 2007), 25.

⁶³ Leonard, 39.

⁶⁴ Farber, 23

Mark Kurlansky, *1968: The Year That Rocked the World*, (New York: Random House Inc., 2005,) 173.

admitted the Revolutionary Offensive's failure in meeting expectations and even offered to resign as head of state.⁶⁵ However, historians contend that Castro's offer of resignation was a ploy to garner popular support because all "his political opposition had been eliminated and the institutional means to replace him did not exist."⁶⁶

Since the establishment of the Revolution in 1959 generally, and in the wake of the Revolutionary Offensive particularly, Castro's Revolution has drawn comparisons to Stalin's Russia in its persecution of cultural outsiders.⁶⁷ Beginning with the closing of parochial schools in 1962, which, according to Castro, provided a "haven to counterrevolutionaries," Castro launched a cultural assault on Cuban society.⁶⁸ By 1965 the regime had established labor reform camps that principally targeted gays, Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, practitioners of Afro-Cuban traditions, and those with "political deficiencies."⁶⁹

Castro's regime continued its repression of cultural Others into the 1970s. Under the influence of *machismo*, a uniquely Latin glorification of masculinity, Castro particularly abhorred homosexuals.⁷⁰ Consequently, in April 1971, Castro oversaw the National Congress of Education and Culture "viciously" attack gay artists and

⁶⁵ Leonard, 40.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Farber, 23.

⁶⁸ Julia E. Sweig, *Cuba: What Everyone Needs to Know*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 63.

⁶⁹ Farber, 21.

Jose Luis Llovio-Mendez, *Insider*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 143.

⁷⁰For more on the *machismo* ideology and its influence on Fidel and his inner circle, consult Leycester Coltman's *The Real Fidel Castro*.

intellectuals and ban their presence abroad “whether in artistic, political, or diplomatic missions.”⁷¹

Also adopted in 1971, Castro announced an anti-loafing law. Intended to solidify a hard-working and selfless culture after the failed experiment of Guevara’s New Man moral incentive philosophy, Castro’s anti-loafing law “required that all men between 18 and 60 perform productive labor.”⁷² Modeled after the Soviet “anti-parasite” law, Castro’s anti-loafing law incriminated those who exhibited “anti-social behavior.”⁷³ Intentionally arbitrary, Castro’s anti-loafing law accomplished two things: it helped crush cultural dissent after the aforementioned labor camps of the 1960s were closed due to international outcry, and it codified Guevara’s initially voluntary philosophy of revolutionary selflessness.

In addition to the advent of anti-loafing legislation, until 1973 the revolutionary tribunal court system infamous for condemning *Batistianos* to death in the first few years of the Revolution continued to function as an institution to judge “counter-revolutionary offenses.”⁷⁴ In other words, even after the traces of the former regime had been eliminated in Cuba, Castro continued to use his revolutionary tribunals to ensure expedient trials of purported counterrevolutionaries. All told, one scholarly estimate places the number of counterrevolutionary executions between 7,000 and 10,000 and the number of political imprisonments at 30,000 in the first two decades of the Revolution.⁷⁵ In reference to Castro’s coercive efforts to culturally unify Cuba, Cubans

⁷¹ Farber, 23.

⁷² Leonard, 41.

⁷³ Jorge F. Perez-Lopez, *Cuba’s Second Economy*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 73.

⁷⁴ Valls, iv.

⁷⁵ Margolin, 656.

have come to know the fifteen-year period that began with the aforementioned construction of labor reform camps in 1965 as *Trinquenio Amargo* (the bitter fifteen-year period).⁷⁶

Eventually, the bitter fifteen-year period of Castro's systematic repression lessened. Several international events, most notably détente, secured the release of an unprecedented amount of Cuban political prisoners. "In September 1978, a release program was announced by the government bringing about the release of almost 4,000 political prisoners between December 1978 and the end of 1979."⁷⁷ Despite the widespread release of long-term political prisoners in the late 1970s, political imprisonment continued to be a crucial facet of Castro's efforts to crush dissent and culturally unify Cuba for decades to come. In fact, Cuba's new Penal Code of 1979 still condoned the death penalty for political criminals.⁷⁸

2) A Comparative Note on the Revolutionary Narrative

It is easy to underscore the differences in Cuba and China. China is geographically large and diverse country, with the largest population in the world. Even during the economic hardship and isolation under Mao, China's ability to influence the world economy, vis-à-vis other communist countries, was significant. Chinese Communism was uniquely influenced by several Maoist tenets. Most notably, human consciousness as the driving revolutionary force (as opposed to the Marxist material determinist philosophy); the peasantry as the driving force of the Revolution; the

⁷⁶ Farber, 23.

⁷⁷ Amnesty International, *Political Imprisonment in Cuba*, (London: Amnesty International, 1987), 3.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

necessity of violent class struggle; and a strong nationalist impulse for international Revolutionary leadership.⁷⁹

Cuba, on the other hand, is a rather small island, with a comparatively small population. Aside from sugar, its exports were limited and thus its ability to influence the world economy was limited. Cuban Communism, although initially influenced by Maoism through Che Guevara, primarily followed the Soviet line.

Yet for all of their differences, Cuban and Chinese revolutionary narratives are remarkably similar. Revolutionary themes of struggle, unity, paranoia, and repression captivated both countries. With that in mind, perhaps it might be beneficial to further analyze the parallelism between the establishment and maintenance of the one-party states in China and Cuba.

Upon winning their guerrilla struggles, both Revolutions implemented massive execution campaigns to rid their countries of the former order. Much has been written about the ideological foundation to such systematic violence, and much of it has settled on the idea that mass executions were conducted for three reasons; First, to exact revenge on the enemy that one has warred with for some time leading up to victory; Second, to prove to the masses that a new and liberating order has in fact been established in revolutionary fashion; And third, to eliminate political rivals. Although these three points are undoubtedly foundational, studying the repressive nature of the Chinese and Cuban single-party states with the advantage of historical perspective illuminates another reason for mass executions: to scare citizens who might consider

⁷⁹ Meisner, 41.

opposing the Revolution into submission. This contention is supported by the previously discussed “carnival” nature of Castro’s mass executions and the “parade” nature of mass executions in China. Harry Wu, a recently released political prisoner in 1983, recalled witnessing a Chinese public execution that certainly had not deviated much from typical executions during the first several years of Mao’s reign:

[I] heard a ‘parade’ outside the door—horns, loudspeakers, shouts, the rumbling of feet, grownups and children flocking down the street as if to a game or circus. We were told it was execution day, and half the city’s population of over half a million was turning out for the big event.... [Upon witnessing the executions] Many of the people that day reacted as if they had seen a great goal at a soccer match or a memorable performance in the concert hall.⁸⁰

Unless the only intention of public executions is to satisfy some pathological urge, there must be some other reason why governments such as Cuba under Castro or China under Mao made such a spectacle of their executions. To use a Chinese idiom, perhaps China and Cuba understood the value that killing “the chicken” has on “frightening the monkey.”⁸¹ In other words, both governments encouraged public executions because public displays of violence were effective tools to curb dissent. Yet that logic does not adequately explain why Chinese and Cubans voluntarily attended public executions as if they were benign parades or carnivals. In order to understand that voluntary attendance, one must understand the nature of the Chinese and Cuban revolutionary psychology. Two types of citizens attended public executions: genuine revolutionaries, and those who were too frightened not to attend. The first group sincerely believed that violence was the vehicle to a utopian society, and thus they literally cheered acts of

⁸⁰ Harry Wu, *Troublemaker*, (Washington: Laogai Research Foundation, 1996), 69-70.

⁸¹ Harry Wu, *Troublemaker*, (Washington: Laogai Research Foundation, 1996), 69.

violence. The second group feared that refusing to attend state spectacles, especially public executions, would bring suspicion and possible legal consequences.

Another similar revolutionary tactic that China and Cuba implemented during the first decades of their Revolutions was the mobilization of the citizenry into inter-societal struggle. China's emphasis on inter-societal struggle took place largely through a class dimension and in more of an incremental fashion; first in the Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries, then in the Anti-Rightist Movement, and finally during the Cultural Revolution. China's periodic campaigns that elevated class struggle were dependent on mass-mobilization. Launched through the use of propaganda, a culture predicated on a personality cult, and the relatively sophisticated membership network of the Party, campaigns grounded in mass-mobilization were highly effective.⁸² The product of inter-societal struggle on the Chinese citizenry was profound. Chinese citizens became highly class-conscious and were filled with a violent revolutionary zeal that led to palpable class warfare at various times during the Maoist era.

Whereas devastating inter-societal struggle in China engendered a sharp class dimension and was institutionalized through periodic campaigns, Cuban inter-societal struggle was decidedly less class-based and was more omnipresent throughout the first two decades of the Revolution. Take, for example, Cuba's institutionalized vehicles of struggle: the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution. CDRs were established throughout Cuba in September 1960, before the Revolution was labeled as socialist in nature. Born out of the initial populism and nationalism that Castro's Revolution initially

⁸² The campaigns were effective in the sense that they accomplished what Mao had intended for them to accomplish.

preached, CDRs were not constructed through a class lens for the purpose of class struggle. All Cubans, regardless of class, were incorporated into CDRs.⁸³ Forged at a time of considerable paranoia over US invasion, CDRs were tasked with rooting out potential foreign collaborators that hoped to thwart the Revolution from abroad.⁸⁴ After the US pledge not to invade Cuba in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the primary goal of CDRs shifted. CDRs eventually morphed into surveillance vehicles that reported counterrevolutionary suspicions to the state for the purpose of ensuring domestic unity, not reporting on suspected American spies and collaborators. Still, these reported suspicions had little to do with class background and more to do with practical threats that counterrevolutionary elements posed to state hegemony. In this sense, CDRs were much more Orwellian than their Chinese revolutionary counterparts: they affirmed state power and rarely digressed into anarchic violence like the Red Guards of the Cultural Revolution. The inter-societal struggle promoted by CDRs was ultimately facilitated by the state for the state's benefit.

Additionally, whereas China launched periodic mass-mobilization campaigns to promote inter-societal struggle, Cuban inter-societal struggle was much more regular. As far as continuity is concerned, CDRs were established in September 1960 and continue to function to this day. Moreover, Castro's Cuba never fully entrusted the Revolutionary direction to the masses as did Mao's China. Castro's repression followed a centralized approach where crackdown campaigns concluded in the state administering justice, not the masses.

⁸³ Farber, 17.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Another obvious comparison of both Revolutions lies in the desire of the dictator to combine revolutionary ideas with economic production. Thankfully for those concerned with humanity, Castro's Revolutionary Offensive did not produce unprecedented famine like Mao's Great Leap Forward. Nevertheless, both economic campaigns were made possible because a culture of repression had already been established in the preceding years; with the price of dissent made obvious throughout the first several years of both Revolutions, citizens were reluctant to criticize economic policy.

"Religion is the opium of the people," declared Karl Marx in 1843.⁸⁵ Even though Chinese Communism and Cuban Communism have deviated considerably from orthodox Marxism in other facets, Marxist aversion to religion provided the foundation for religious repression in both revolutionary narratives. In addition to Marxist ideology, religious repression had other motivations in China and Cuba. Most notably, paranoia over assembly and the worshipping of a deity instead of the personality cult were motivations to condemn religion.⁸⁶ At any rate, both Revolutions provide case studies to how Marxist religious aversion has applied to the communist one-party state.

Because Marx rarely wrote about sexuality, communist countries have defaulted to other doctrines and cultural interpretations of sexuality to determine the extent of sexual repression. As far as homosexuality is concerned, Castro and Mao's policies have differed considerably. Certainly Maoist China frowned upon homosexuality. In fact,

⁸⁵Anja Finger, *The Future of Religion: Toward a Reconciled Society*, (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2007), 153.

⁸⁶Also, Chinese aversion to religion was fueled by the Party's xenophobia and hatred of Western influence. Due to China's uneasy history with Western imperialism, Catholics and Protestants were particularly targeted by the Revolution.

homosexuality was officially illegal in the People's Republic up until 1997. But scholars have little evidence that homosexuality was diligently repressed in Mao's China.⁸⁷ In contrast, the Cuban homosexual community was imprisoned and generally ostracized more than any other perceived Other during the first two decades of the Cuban Revolution. As previously mentioned, much of this condemnation derives from Castro's own concerted effort to appear as a masculine, or *macho*, patriarch of the Revolution. Castro and his inner circle prided themselves on masculinity. Referred to as *los barbudos* (the bearded ones), Castro and his inner circle "loved guns and other symbols of masculinity....They despised men who were soft and gentle. They tended to associate artists, poets, and dancers with femininity."⁸⁸ In this instance, cultural repression was not undergone to preserve the one-party state or satisfy some greater ideological doctrine; rather, it was undergone simply to satisfy a personal ideology of hatred.

The ultra-repressive nature of both Revolutions eventually yielded to international developments. In a surprise move aimed at irritating the Soviet Union and creating a new world order, China began diplomatic talks with the United States in 1972. In addition to China, chief US diplomat Henry Kissinger began talks with Cuba in 1974. With the advent of further arms limitation talks in the 1970s between the United States and the Soviet Union, détente characterized the international stage. Moreover, the death of Mao in 1976 and the subsequent rise of reformer Deng Xiaoping added fuel to détente's fire. Finally, with the election of Jimmy Carter in 1976 and his subsequent

⁸⁷ Timothy B. Weston and Lionel M. Jensen, *China in and beyond the Headlines*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2012), 245.

⁸⁸ Leicester Coltman, *The Real Fidel Castro*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 189.

diplomatic policies that emphasized international human rights and increased discussion with the Communist Bloc, political imprisonment became a topic that China and Cuba addressed.

3) Laogai System

A) Definition⁸⁹

Named after the laogai prison, the original prison camp system established by Mao in the early 1950s, the term “Laogai System” is meant to convey the diverse criminal and administrative detention practices employed by the Party. As alluded to in this study’s introduction, the purpose underpinning the Laogai System is to maintain the Communist Party’s monopoly on power through detaining those deemed disruptive to social and political stability and transforming them to conform to socialist ideals by forcing them to labor and endure political indoctrination. As maintaining the political supremacy of the Communist Party through expediently administering justice serves as a core function of the Laogai System, trials, if conducted at all, fell short of Western standards. In addition to neutralizing potential sources of instability, the Laogai System has provided free prison labor to for the Party.

The Laogai System’s emphasis on indoctrination and forced labor is rooted in communist revolutionary ideology. After 1949, the Party abandoned traditional Chinese prisons in favor of the labor camp; outdoor agricultural colonies that could better accommodate the massive influx of prisoners following “liberation.” Rather than merely

⁸⁹ “Part 3, Section A” was wrote in collaboration with Nicholas Goodrich, a fellow Laogai Research Foundation colleague.

aiming to reduce recidivism, like most non-communist prison ideologies, Chinese Communists sought to transform labor camp inmates into “new socialist men.”

The Laogai System was also deeply rooted in communist revolutionary ideology aimed at building a classless society through using labor camps to overcome resistance from capitalists or landowners who may oppose the nationalization of the means of production. In 1875, Karl Marx proposed establishing institutions that would transform deviants into benevolent citizens by forcing them to engage in “productive labor” under “non-exploitative” conditions.⁹⁰ Felix Dzerzhinsky, Lenin’s security chief, implemented this concept in the 1920s by establishing the Gulag, the term used to describe the Soviet Union’s vast system of labor camps.⁹¹ As stated earlier in this study, the relationship between the Soviet Gulag and the Chinese Laogai System is positive; Soviet officials actively assisted Chinese officials in establishing the Laogai System.

The Laogai System was originally comprised of two types of labor camps: the laogai and the laojiao. The ‘laogai’ (reform through labor) labor camp was a form of criminal punishment established to punish convicted defendants, whereas the ‘laojiao’ (reeducation through labor) labor camps were a form of administrative punishment designed to incarcerate counterrevolutionaries, class enemies, and petty criminals without the time and evidentiary burdens of a trial. Whereas laogai sentences theoretically carried a fixed term, laojiao sentences during the Mao era were of indefinite

⁹⁰ Chayanich Thamparipattra, “Laogai Prison Labor Exportation Thesis,” (unpublished manuscript, Laogai Research Foundation, 2014), 1.

⁹¹ Ironically, and well documented by numerous historians, the gulag quickly became infamous for its “exploitive” conditions.

duration.⁹² Upon completing their prison time, many laogai and laoiao prisoners were subject to forced job placement. This quasi prison apparatus kept former laogai and laoiao prisoners under state control, often indefinitely, albeit with better treatment and benefits.

In addition to laogai and laoiao camps, and forced job placement sites, the Party has also maintained a “special prison” since 1960.⁹³ Unlike laogai and laoiao camps, in which political and common prisoners were intermixed, prisoners of Qincheng Prison were exclusively incarcerated for political reasons and were influential dissidents who posed a real threat to the Party’s hegemony. Opposing the supposed foundational goal of the Party’s prisons to transform criminals into “new socialist men” through labor, inmates at Qincheng Prison did not labor and were primarily kept in solitary confinement and tortured.⁹⁴

B) Composition

I) Laogai

⁹²As mentioned throughout the study, the Laogai System is still alive in China today. Although the Communist Party began to phase out forced job placement as early as 1980, and nominally ended the laogai labor camp in 1994 and the laoiao labor camp in 2013, the fundamental structure of the Laogai System remains intact: the Party still operates a network of prison factories for convicted criminals and administrative detention facilities for non-criminal offenders in which inmates are forced to perform arduous labor and undergo intense political indoctrination. Whereas the modern Chinese prison system simply replaced the laogai labor camp, the Party currently operates a number of different administrative detention facilities in which inmates are forced to labor and endure political indoctrination. Such facilities include legal education centers, drug rehabilitation centers, and custody and education centers. Moreover, Qincheng Prison, to this day, still operates as the foremost political prison in China.

⁹³ Harry Wu, “Qincheng Prison,” (unpublished manuscript, Laogai Research Foundation, 2010), 14.

⁹⁴ Some prisoners have reported that they were forced to labor while in prison. These prisoners were primarily POWs from the deposed Nationalist government. For other prisoners who did labor at Qincheng, the labor was light. For example, Jiang Qing, Mao’s wife, reportedly sewed dolls during her stay at Qincheng. Despite these isolated stories of labor, the vast majority of Qincheng’s prisoners did not labor.

Due to widespread persecutions during the 1949 Land Reform Campaign and the 1950 Campaign to Suppress Counterrevolutionaries, Mao worked quickly to establish a prison system in order to accommodate the influx of criminals. During the Third National Conference on Public Security in May 1951, Mao stated: "The large number of people who are serving their sentences is an enormous source of labor. In order to reform them, in order to solve the problem of the prisons [overcrowding], in order that these sentenced counterrevolutionaries will not just sit there and be fed for nothing, we should begin to organize our laogai work."⁹⁵ By 1954, laogai camps had been established throughout China. In keeping with Soviet gulag tradition, most laogai camps were located in isolated and barren regions of China, with prisoners laboring on public works projects. For example, "In Qinghai Province, laogai prisoners mainly worked on the clearance of wasteland, agricultural production, and the buildings of roads and railways."⁹⁶ Laogai prisoners were organized in military fashion for production; "Squadrons, battalions, companies, and so on" made up laogai camps.⁹⁷ Prisoners were not paid for their labor and had no civil rights. While common criminal and political criminals were intermixed in laogai camps, and reliable estimates are difficult to come by, one scholar estimated that by 1955 "80 percent of inmates" were political criminals.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Sanne Deckwitz, "Gulag vs. Laogai: The Function of Forced Labour Camps in the Soviet Union and China," (MA thesis, Utrecht University, 2012), accessed April 14, 2014, <http://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/228062>, 21.

⁹⁶ Sanne Deckwitz, "Gulag vs. Laogai: The Function of Forced Labour Camps in the Soviet Union and China," (MA thesis, Utrecht University, 2012), accessed April 14, 2014, <http://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/228062>, 22.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Margolin, 498.

Only those convicted of a crime could be imprisoned in laogai camps. Yet the revolutionary nature of the Chinese legal system during the Maoist era considered a litany of offenses criminal, and a conviction was usually reached without a formal trial. For instance, one “spy” was charged as such for “mentioning in a letter abroad that grain rations had fallen slightly in Shanghai during the Great Leap Forward... despite the fact that the figures had already been published in the official press and were known to all foreigners in town.”⁹⁹

Thought reform in laogai camps was significant. Usually for a period ranging anywhere from two weeks to three months, a typical laogai prisoner would be forced to read and discuss official Party publications, confess to his or her crimes, and participate in struggle sessions against oneself and others.¹⁰⁰ Once the Party cadre overseeing a prisoner deems his or her initial thought reform satisfactory, that prisoner would then be allowed to engage in physical labor. However, his or her “political study” sessions would still be a daily occurrence of camp life, albeit for a lesser amount of time.

Religious and cultural Others, if imprisoned, were usually formally convicted of being “active counterrevolutionaries” and sent to laogai camps. Kung Pin-Mei, a Roman Catholic bishop in Shanghai, was formally charged as an active counterrevolutionary in 1955 and subsequently imprisoned until 1988 for refusing to recognize the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association¹⁰¹ as the official organizational body of Catholics in China.¹⁰² Similarly, Tibetan Buddhists were usually formally charged as

⁹⁹ Margolin, 510.

¹⁰⁰ Harry Wu, *Laogai: The Chinese Gulag*, (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1992), 29-30.

¹⁰¹ CPCA acts as a supervisory body over the country’s Catholic population. It is the only state-approved Catholic Church in China.

¹⁰² Ramon Hawley Myers, *Two Societies in Opposition*, (Stanford: Hoover Press, 1991), 81-82.

counterrevolutionaries for their refusal to recognize Party dominion over their region, culture, language, and religion. Upon being charged, these Tibetans were subsequently sent to laogai camps. Although all prisoners received harsh treatment in laogai camps, cultural Others and especially pious prisoners, due to their defiant resistance to indoctrination that might compromise their religious convictions, received especially cruel treatment. Tibetan Buddhists, both culturally and religiously different than China's Han majority, were some of the worst-treated laogai prisoners during the Maoist era.

According to one congressional report:

Life in Tibet's prisons is characterized by unremittent labor, regular interrogation sessions in which the prisoner is beaten, ineffective medical care, borderline rations of black tea and barley and an ongoing death toll, resulting from the harsh conditions. Prisoners sleep on the floor, are chained at night and only have bedding if family members donate it.¹⁰³

II) Laojiao

In reference to the Checka, Lenin's secret police apparatus and primary vehicle of the Red Terror, Lenin proclaimed that the dictatorship of the proletariat should be "unrestricted by any laws."¹⁰⁴ In response to the mass influx of political criminals stemming from the Anti-Rightist Movement, and keeping with Lenin's revolutionary proclamation, a new form of detention was required in China. Established in August 1957, lao jiao's arbitrary nature functioned as a black hole for both common and political prisoners: without any trace of a trial, many were indefinitely imprisoned. Despite

¹⁰³U.S. House. Committee on Foreign Affairs, Human Rights in Tibet Hearing, October 14 1987, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1995, 84.

I say Tibetan Buddhists were religiously different that the Chinese Han majority because not only were Tibetans generally a more pious group than Han Chinese, but Tibetan Buddhism has different spiritual influences than Tibetan Buddhism. For all intents and purposes, Tibetan Buddhism and Han Buddhism are two fundamentally different religions.

¹⁰⁴ James Ryan, *Lenin's Terror*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 124.

laojiao's indefinite sentence length, which often led to decades of imprisonment for prisoners, lao jiao was originally supposed to be for "minor offenses."¹⁰⁵ According to the Party, lao jiao imprisonment was justified under four circumstances:

- 1) Those who do not engage in "proper employment" and those who behave like "hooligans."
- 2) "Counterrevolutionaries and anti-socialist reactionaries" whose crimes are minor and are thus not criminally [or formally] prosecuted.
- 3) Those who refuse to labor and thus "destroy discipline" and interfere with "public order."
- 4) Those who do not obey work assignments and whom repeated education fails to change.¹⁰⁶

Although lao jiao imprisonment was originally designed to lessen sentencing burdens for minor offenses that resulted in short prison stints, during Chairman Mao's tenure lao jiao imprisonment often meant several years. A familiar narrative of lao jiao imprisonment began during the Anti-Rightist Movement and ended approximately twenty years later with the ascension of Deng Xiaoping. Harry Wu's testimony of lao jiao sentencing and imprisonment was common during Maoist China:

Because I criticized the Soviet Union for invading Hungary during the Hundred Flowers Campaign, I was arrested on April 27, 1960 and charged as a counterrevolutionary rightist. The public security officer who arrested me took a piece of paper out of his pocket and intimidated me into signing it without even allowing me enough time to read it. I later learned that the paper I signed condemned me to indefinite incarceration in lao jiao. I labored in numerous camps; Qinghe Farm, Tuanhe Farm, Yanqing Steel Factory, and Wangzhuang Coal Mine. I farmed vegetables, cleared fields, tended to livestock, mined coal and iron. It wasn't until Mao died and Deng Xiaoping took power that my sentence was fully lifted and I was deemed reformed. All told, I labored for nineteen years.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Sanne Deckwitz, "Gulag vs. Laogai: The Function of Forced Labour Camps in the Soviet Union and China," (MA thesis, Utrecht University, 2012), accessed April 14, 2014, <http://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/228062>, 23.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Harry Wu, in discussion with the author, April 2014.

Just as in the laogai camps, prisoners in laojiao camps were organized in military fashion, were forced to labor, and were also forced to undergo thought reform. Blurring the distinction even further, many laojiao camps existed within laogai camps. Yet laojiao prisoners generally received better treatment than their laogai counterparts. Laojiao prisoners theoretically received some compensation for their labor, although most of that compensation was held back to pay for food and uniforms.¹⁰⁸

III) Forced Job Placement

An extension of laogai and laojiao, forced job placement was a critical facet of the Laogai System. Upon completion of their original sentence (in the case of laogai prisoners), or upon satisfactory reform (in the case of laojiao prisoners indefinitely imprisoned), prisoners would often be placed in a program known as jiuye, or forced job placement. Jiuye prisoners were certainly more privileged than laogai or laojiao prisoners.¹⁰⁹ Despite their elevated statuses, jiuye prisoners usually labored within laogai or laojiao camps, albeit for a small wage. Harry Wu, who was elevated to jiuye after serving nine years as a laojiao prisoner, recalled some of his experiences as a jiuye prisoner:

With a permit issued by the security guards, we could pass through the gates to the village below on our days off. We could sit together at mealtimes, talk casually among ourselves, and even interact with the mine's sixty women workers. We could write letters, receive visitors, request an annual trip home, and apply for permission to marry. But without a work certificate or grain coupons, we could not leave.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Margolin, 500.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Harry Wu, *Bitter Winds*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 1994), 233.

The end of the Mao era brought the end of forced job placement. By 1980, shortly after Deng's ascension, forced job placement became a historical facet of the Laogai System.

IV) Qincheng Prison

Qincheng Prison differed substantially from the other aforementioned criminal and administrative detention facilities within the Laogai System. Whereas incarceration in the laogai, at least theoretically, required trial; prisoners at Qincheng were never afforded a trial. Moreover, whereas incarceration in laojiao was purportedly for "minor" offenses; Qincheng, by its very nature, incarcerated only those who posed a grave threat to the Party. Harry Wu offered an intriguing take on Qincheng's exceptionality by asserting that "in the strictest sense," Qincheng "is not a prison at all." Rather, it is a hybrid between a prison and detention center.¹¹¹

As mentioned previously, prisoners of Qincheng were generally not forced to labor. This fact complicates, if not discredits, Mao's stated purpose of "reforming" prisoners through labor. Simply put, Qincheng Prison proves that, to at least some extent, Chinese Communist penal philosophy was not rooted in reform but rather the reinforcement of state control.

Prominent public figures that fell from graces with the Party comprised the majority of Qincheng's prisoner population. Take, for example, Sidney Rittenberg. American by birth, Sidney Rittenberg fought with the Chinese Communists during the Chinese Civil War. After initially enjoying a role in Mao's inner circle as an English

¹¹¹ Harry Wu, "Qincheng Prison," (unpublished manuscript, Laogai Research Foundation, 2010), 27.

translator, Rittenberg was accused of being a “spy” and “secret agent” in 1968 and sent to Qincheng Prison.¹¹² Typical of both incarceration during the Cultural Revolution and incarceration at Qincheng Prison, Rittenberg was never afforded a trial and only after months of imprisonment and interrogation was he made aware of his accusations.¹¹³ Although never physically tortured, Rittenberg was starved relentlessly during his nine year stint at Qincheng. Rittenberg, did, however, hear other prisoner’s experiences with torture and interrogation in adjacent cells. “One night I heard the sound of either fists or sticks on bare flesh. I couldn’t tell what the instrument was, but some of the blows went Splat....Then I heard a man’s voice yelling. ‘Oh, stop... I beg you, I beg you, stop. I don’t know anything. I’m telling you the truth. I didn’t betray the Party....I love our Great Leader, Chairman Mao. He is my savior. I have committed no crime.’”¹¹⁴ Despite not having to deal with the constant grind of intense labor, prisoners at Qincheng certainly were not treated with humanity during the Maoist era.¹¹⁵

4) Cuban Prison System

A) Composition

Much like the Laogai System, the Cuban prison system was multifaceted. It was comprised of a three-stage “Progressive Plan” that most prisoners entered into, a short-lived (1965-1968) labor camp system (known as Military Units to Aid Production, Spanish acronym UMAP), and a separate and particularly harsh prison system reserved for tenacious political prisoners (*plantados*). The Cuban prison system mixed common

¹¹² Harry Wu, “Qincheng Prison,” (unpublished manuscript, Laogai Research Foundation, 2010), 243.

¹¹³ Harry Wu, “Qincheng Prison,” (unpublished manuscript, Laogai Research Foundation, 2010), 6.

¹¹⁴ Sidney Rittenberg, *The Man Who Stayed Behind*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 393-394.

¹¹⁵ Interestingly, contemporary Qincheng Prison is decidedly more humane. Prisoners at Qincheng Prison, although not afforded fair trials for their charges, inhabit decent cells and are not tortured.

and political prisoners and was predicated on labor and indoctrination as the basis for reform. According to Cuban law, the purpose of the Cuban prison system is to instill “discipline” through labor, and provide “political education” for its prisoners.¹¹⁶

I) Progressive Plan

Although often tried by the previously discussed revolutionary tribunals which existed until 1973, Cuban political prisoners incarcerated under the Progressive Plan were theoretically given trials. The first stage of the Progressive Plan was known as the period of “maximum security.”¹¹⁷ Prisoners in this first stage were incarcerated within a traditional prison setting and were exposed to an intense program of political indoctrination. According to scholar Mark Hamm, political rehabilitation classes included several hours of readings of Marx, Soviet economic books, other books originating from the National Press of Cuba, and discussions of how best to defend Cuban Communism.¹¹⁸ Additionally, prisoners labored for six hours a day.

If a “reeducation officer” deemed a prisoner adequately reformed from their studies and labor, they may transition said prisoner from the first stage of the Progressive Plan to the second stage. The second stage of the Plan, known as the “medium security” stage, would be located on a farm.¹¹⁹ The farms generally housed 500 to 700 prisoners in military style barracks. Political education during this stage became subservient to labor. “Very similar to the Soviet corrective labor camps,”

¹¹⁶ Mark S. Hamm, “Political Rehabilitation in Cuban Prisons: The Plan Progresivo,” *Journal of Correctional Education*, Vol. 40, No. 2, (June 1989), 74.

¹¹⁷ Margolin, 660.

¹¹⁸ Hamm, 75-76.

¹¹⁹ Margolin, 660.

prisoners were required to labor for twelve to fifteen hours a day.¹²⁰ Much like the labor performed in the Soviet gulag and Chinese laogai camps, Cuban prison labor was generally agricultural and mining related. Depending on the prisoner's sentence, and their progression as judged by a reeducation officer, prisoners eventually progressed to the third stage of the Plan.

This third stage, called "minimal security," and often known as "open regime," was usually located on a construction site where prisoners lived under the supervision of the military.¹²¹ Prisoners of this third stage were afforded decent food, and multiple-day furloughs to visit family members. Unlike the farms, open regime sites were often located in urban areas, where prisoners felt less isolated and detached from society.

Unlike prisoner testimony that has emanated from the Soviet gulag and the Chinese laogai camps, prisoners of the Progressive Plan have rarely cited instances of physical abuse, withholding of medical treatment, and withholding of rations as forms of torture. For prisoners who willingly and eagerly reform themselves in accordance with the three-staged Plan, maltreatment is virtually unknown. However, for many prisoners who refuse to submit to the Plan on political grounds, maltreatment is rampant. The experience of these prisoners will be further discussed in part III.

II) UMAP

Separate from the Progressive Plan, UMAP camps were established in November 1965 to circumvent the trial burdens that were required for traditional incarceration within the Progressive Plan. Yet very similar to the second "farm" stage of

¹²⁰ Margolin, 660-661.

¹²¹ Ibid.

the Progressive Plan, UMAP prisoners labored in agricultural settings. Labor included “a variety of agricultural tasks, ranging from picking boniato (sweet potato), yucca, and fruit,” to cutting down trees, applying fertilizer, and weeding.¹²² The main agricultural task for UMAP prisoners, however, was planting and harvesting sugar cane.¹²³ Moreover, the vast majority of UMAP prisoners were not common criminals, but political dissidents and cultural Others.

Although UMAP camps bore an uncanny resemblance to other Cuban prison camps, the Cuban government masked their practical function as prison camps through military jargon. Termed “Military Units to Aid Production,” UMAP camps were comprised of those deemed unfit for conventional military service but were nonetheless drafted under the 1963 Obligatory Military Service law.¹²⁴ Not wanting to arm and train dissidents and cultural Others for obvious reasons, government officials forced prisoners to labor for upwards of 72 hours a week and offered them no conventional military training. Although UMAP camps fell under the jurisdiction of the Cuban military, they undoubtedly functioned as extensions to the Cuban Prison system. UMAP prisons were “surrounded by electrified barbed-wire,” and were similar to other Cuban prisons in their lack of hygiene, use of torture methods, ideological indoctrination, and forced labor.¹²⁵

Because the vast majority of UMAP prisoners were political dissidents and cultural Others, UMAP camps can best be described as Castro’s institutionalized effort

¹²²Joseph Tahbaz, “Demystifying las UMAP: The Politics of Sugar, Gender, and Religion in 1960s Cuba,” *Deleware Review of Latin American Studies*, accessed April 14, 2014, <http://www.udel.edu/LAS/Vol14-2Tahbaz.html>.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Maria C. Werlau, *Political Violence*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 149.

to solidify Revolutionary hegemony and to culturally cleanse Cuba. According to one scholar, UMAP prisoners were a diverse lot of undesirables:

Gay men, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, Episcopalians, practitioners of Santería, Abakuá members, Gideon members, those suspected of intending to flee the country, priests, artists, intellectuals, ideologically nonconforming university students, lesbians, los hippies, potheads, drug addicts, government officials accused of corruption, petty criminals, prostitutes, pimps, farmers who refused collectivization, persons who worked for themselves illegally, deadbeats, and anyone else considered 'anti-social' or 'counter-revolutionary.'¹²⁶

Although no one group held a majority in the camps, by far the largest group of UMAP prisoners were gay men. As discussed earlier, gay men were particularly hated by Fidel Castro because "their supposed femininity ran counter to the 'manhood' of a proper revolutionary."¹²⁷ For all of his personal aversion, however, Castro did believe that gay men could reform themselves into proper revolutionaries. According to Lieutenant Lavandeira, a UMAP official, gay men could be cured with "Marxist philosophy" and "hard labor" that would force them into "manly consciousness and gestures."¹²⁸ According to Joseph Tahbaz, a historian of the UMAP camps, "The UMAP was as much about political repression as it was about bigotry."¹²⁹

III) *Plantado* Incarceration

For those who refused to submit to the unrelenting labor and political indoctrination found in the Progressive Plan, an even harsher prison experience waited. These prisoners, referred to as *plantados* (loosely translated as those who stand firm, or

¹²⁶ Joseph Tahbaz, "Demystifying las UMAP: The Politics of Sugar, Gender, and Religion in 1960s Cuba," *Delaware Review of Latin American Studies*, accessed April 14, 2014, <http://www.udel.edu/LAS/Vol14-2Tahbaz.html>.

¹²⁷ Guerra, 271.

¹²⁸ Llovio-Mendez, 172.

¹²⁹ Joseph Tahbaz, "Demystifying las UMAP: The Politics of Sugar, Gender, and Religion in 1960s Cuba," *Delaware Review of Latin American Studies*, accessed April 14, 2014, <http://www.udel.edu/LAS/Vol14-2Tahbaz.html>.

stubborn ones), experienced the worst treatment of any prisoners in the Cuban prison system. According to Amnesty International, *plantados* were subjected to inadequate diets that led to malnutrition, frequent bouts of solitary confinement, the withholding of healthcare, the inability to correspond with the outside world, exposure to extreme temperatures, denial of water, denial of hygienic materials, and frequent beatings from prison officials.¹³⁰

A testament to their conscience and will, *plantados* refused to passively accept the criminal identity and inhumanity that the state forced upon them. The most readily-visible characteristic of *plantados* was their prison uniforms, or lack thereof. In an effort to blur the distinction between political criminals and common criminals, the Cuban government forced all prisoners to wear blue uniforms. Believing their charges to be unjust and their statuses fundamentally different than those of common criminals, *plantados* refused to wear the same blue uniforms as the rest of the prison population. As such, *plantados* were easily distinguished by the only article of clothing prison officials did allow them to wear, their underwear.¹³¹ *Plantados* exercised agency in other avenues of prison life as well. Although many died or endured terminal illnesses from its effects, *plantados* often engaged in hunger strikes for better treatment.

Unlike prisoners of the Progressive Plan and UMAP, *plantados* often did not labor.¹³² Because of their concerted efforts to be as unproductive for the Cuban government as possible, prison officials often resorted to simply solitarily confining

¹³⁰ Amnesty International, 3-9.

¹³¹ Andrea O'Reilly Herrera, *Remembering Cuba: Legacy of a Diaspora*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 168.

¹³² Valls, 52.

plantados and torturing them, instead of forcing them to labor. Armando Valladares, one of Cuba's most prominent *plantados*, described the quandary that forced labor posed for both *plantados* and prison officials:

The work assigned to us [that day] was fertilizing....As we advanced along the field, the cordon guards advanced with us. We prisoners always moved inside a large circumference of rifles, bayonets, and dogs, always on flat land stripped of trees, so that any escape would have been suicide. From the first day, it seems we all decided on a policy of passive resistance; we'd quietly sabotage whatever they ordered us to do.¹³³

In fact, labor reform for *plantados* only occurred on an isolated prison on the Isle of the Pines. According to Jorge Valls, a *plantado* forced to labor on the Isle of the Pines, "labor reform" for *plantados* was really just a pretext for "irrational brutality" and an avenue for prison officials to satisfy their sadistic urges:

From the beginning, guards had been trained to hate us. They were taught that we were murderers, traitors, capitalist exploiters, torturers from the past, CIA agents, and ten thousand things more. They were led to believe that any harm inflicted on us was an act of social justice....The corporals who guarded us were chosen because they were debauched or perverse. There was one who would beat the prisoners terribly, and then run to masturbate behind some bushes....Much has been published elsewhere about forced labor. It was simply a pretext for treating us badly.¹³⁴

For *plantados*, the expiration of their sentences did not necessarily constitute a release from prison. Re-sentencing of *plantados* who failed to cure their "rebellious attitudes" during their original sentences was common. Generally, *plantados* received one to four years of additional prison time without "formal judicial procedures."¹³⁵ In fact, prisoners were often "informed orally" of their extended prison sentences by prison

¹³³ Valladares, 190-191.

¹³⁴ Valls, 43-44.

¹³⁵ Amnesty International, 4.

guards.¹³⁶ For *plantados*, Lenin's proclamation that "rule unrestricted by any law" was all too apparent in the Cuban prison system.

5) A Comparative Note on the Laogai System and the Cuban Prison System

Both the Laogai System and the Cuban prison system lend themselves to comparison. If they did not, this study would be fruitless. Fundamentally, both systems have combined ideological indoctrination and forced-labor to "reform," or punish and thus suppress, dissidents. Yet for all of their similarities, the Laogai System and the Cuban prison system were unique in their own rights.

Perhaps the most interesting difference in the two systems, and their respective governments, was their responses to international condemnation. Maoist China prided itself on independence for most of Mao's tenure. Due to its complex and bitter relationship with the Soviet Union following the ascension of Khrushchev, and its ability to economically function independent of international pressure tactics, Maoist China was apathetic to international opinion. Consequently, China's grave human rights record, engendered in its Laogai System, was not forced to improve during Mao's tenure as Chairman.

As discussed previously, Cuba, unlike China, was a dependent country. Throughout the Cold War, Cuba generally followed a Soviet line to ensure a secure trade partner and nuclear protection. As such, Cuba's internal politics had to reflect well upon the Soviet Union and its international image.¹³⁷ Consequently, Cuba's human

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Tanya L. Saunders, *Black Genders and Sexualities*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 114.

rights record, and specifically its treatment of dissidents, had to be tamed, or at the very least, kept institutionally masked through other forms of “legitimate” incarceration. Subsequently, the UMAP camps of the mid-1960s, whose prisoners were tortured and comprised entirely of undesirable Others, were closed in 1968. In other words, following the precedent set by Khrushchev’s condemnation of Stalin’s “excesses” engendered in the gulag, Castro likewise condemned the UMAP camps, albeit several decades after their silent dismantling. In a 2010 interview, Castro admitted: “[In reference to UMAP camps] There were moments of great injustice, great injustice!”¹³⁸ It is clear that Cuba during the first decades of its Revolution, and seen most obviously with the dismantling of its UMAP camps, was a pawn of the Soviet Union.

Yet another difference in the two prison systems was their methods in creating cultural unity for their respective countries. For the Laogai System, cultural Others were usually formally tried as counterrevolutionaries and placed in laogai camps. For cultural Others who happened to also be important icons, such as Tibetan leader Phüntso Wangye, Qincheng Prison was the Party’s preferred method of incarceration.¹³⁹ The reason the Party, for the most part, formally tried and incarcerated cultural Others, as opposed to arbitrarily and administratively incarcerating them, is up for interpretation. Perhaps the Party believed that formally trying cultural Others would send a stronger message to the large Tibetan and Uyghur independence groups that existed in the

Thomas F. Anderson , *Everything in Its Place: The Life and Works of Virgilio Piñera*, (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 2006), 108.

¹³⁸ Shasta Darlington, "Castro admits 'injustice' for gays and lesbians during revolution," CNN, accessed April 14, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/americas/08/31/cuba.castro.gays/>.

¹³⁹ Harry Wu, “Qincheng Prison,” (unpublished manuscript, Laogai Research Foundation, 2010), 54.

Chinese far-West. At any rate, more research certainly needs to be undertaken in this field of inquiry.

On the contrary, Cuba preferred to incarcerate cultural Others arbitrarily and administratively through its UMAP camp system. Only once the UMAP camps were dismantled did Castro formally try cultural Others through revolutionary tribunals as counterrevolutionaries. Perhaps this reality is due to the fact that homosexuality (homosexuals were the predominant demographic in UMAP camps) was difficult to construe and justify as customarily criminal. Or, perhaps Cuba simply intended to hide its incarceration of cultural Others to the international world by creating prison camps masked in military camouflage. However, this contention does not fully address why, upon the closing of UMAP camps, the incarceration of cultural Others was still widespread. Again, more research certainly needs to be undertaken in this field of inquiry.

Although it might be easy to make a direct comparison of Qincheng prisoners and *plantados*, that comparison is incorrect on several fronts. First, Qincheng prisoners were usually national icons. In fact, Chairman Mao's own wife, Jiang Qing, was incarcerated in Qincheng Prison. *Plantados*, on the other hand, were generally common dissidents. Second, Qincheng prisoners were never formally convicted. *Plantados*, on the other hand, were initially formally convicted and only after refusing the Progressive Plan were they extra-judicially held past their sentence expirations. Third, Qincheng Prison's intrigue is furthered by its singularity. *Plantados*, on the other hand, were incarcerated in various Cuban prisons.

For all of their differences, however, Qincheng prisoners and *plantados* share one compelling similarity: both groups did not labor. As discussed previously, this reality illuminates the underlying motive of Chinese and Cuban political repression. Although both governments officially stressed their desire to make “new socialist men” out of all political and common criminals, when it came to influential or tenacious dissidents in the case of Qincheng prisoners and *plantados*, both governments abandoned their reform-through-labor ideologies in favor of traditional incarceration and torture.¹⁴⁰ Because, as this study contends, ensuring hegemony was more important to both governments than creating “new socialist men.”

Another fruitful comparative note that ought to be discussed rests on the issue of torture. Specifically, why was torture so prevalent in both systems? Certainly, at times, torture was conducted for personal or pathological reasons. For example, torture levied against prisoners often stemmed from petty grudges.¹⁴¹ Or, as discussed previously, many prison guards suffered from mental illness and thus tortured their prisoners to satisfy personal demons. Still, “because it [torture] was so widespread and systematic [throughout the Laogai System], it clearly was not the work alone of sadistic officials, but reflects state policy intended to punish, degrade, intimidate and humiliate the prisoners in an effort to root out political disloyalty.”¹⁴² Unlike Progressive Plan prisoners, *Plantados* and UMAP prisoners were likewise the recipients of widespread and systematic torture. One overwhelming issue that arises in the study of Chinese and Cuban incarceration is torture brought on by a Revolutionary culture. In keeping with the

¹⁴⁰ Harry Wu, *Bitter Winds*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 1994), 46.

¹⁴¹ Harry Wu, *Bitter Winds*, (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 1994), 204.

¹⁴² David Hawk, "The Hidden Gulag," Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, accessed April 14, 2014, http://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK_HiddenGulag2_Web_5-18.pdf.

Revolution's foundational adage, "Revolution is not a dinner party," Chinese prison guards became passionately savage. Similarly, in keeping with the Revolution's foundational adage, "Inside the Revolution everything; outside the Revolution, nothing," Cuban prison guards routinely justified torture as a sacred revolutionary act. Only through the lens of historical sympathy can the historian begin to understand such pervasive brutality. For generations prior to their Revolutions, both Chinese and Cubans had not only been desensitized to violence, but their Revolutions had promised utopia through violence.¹⁴³ Consequently, torture within both prison systems was a direct product of revolutionary culture.

Obviously China and Cuba went to great lengths to criminalize dissent. But perhaps one of the most interesting efforts that both countries made was in the social construction of the nation. Mao justified criminalization of dissent by creating a peculiar dichotomy cloaked in Marxist language: In order to enforce "the people's democratic dictatorship" one must "deprive the reactionaries [counterrevolutionaries] of the right to speak and let the people alone have that right."¹⁴⁴ According to Maoism and Castroism, society was comprised of only two groups: "the people" who supported the revolution, and counterrevolutionaries. Counterrevolutionaries thus became unhuman; not only Others, because that would imply difference within human parameters, but opposed to the people and therefore not people. Not surprisingly, this dynamic of understanding

¹⁴³ Both China and Cuba during the first half of the twentieth century were consumed with violence. Most notably for China, at least 15 million citizens perished during the Chinese Civil War and under Japanese occupation during the Second World War. For Cuba, a ruthless colonial presence that fostered colonial wars and Batista's exceedingly violent regime ensured Cuba's desensitization to violence during the twentieth century.

¹⁴⁴ Mao Zedong, "The People's Democratic Dictatorship," Fordham University, accessed April 14, 2014, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1949mao.html>.

counterrevolutionaries facilitated and justified inhumanity within the Laogai System and the Cuban prison system.

6) Afterword and Conclusion

Clearly criminalizing dissent has proven itself necessary in maintaining power. Whether under the guise of legal incarceration meant to “reform,” or extra-judicial incarceration meant to protect the fragility of the revolution, criminalizing dissent had taken many shapes in China and Cuba. In addition to the need to curb dissent, influences including traditional Marxism’s curative labor theory, precedence set by the Soviet gulag, and the economic incentive of “free” prison labor informed the development of prison labor systems in China and Cuba.¹⁴⁵

But for all of the attractive possibilities that prison labor camps offered to the construction and maintenance of the one-party state, they became taboo and eventually defunct in the country that afforded them international infamy. In light of international knowledge and condemnation of the gulag in 1950s following the *Gulag Archipelago*’s publication, Gorbachev’s *glasnost* policy which questioned political imprisonment in the 1980s, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and thus the Marxist-Leninist one-party model’s loss of international credibility, it is quite incredible that Chinese and Cuban systems of political imprisonment have flourished to this day. Yet, China and Cuba are not the only communist countries to have perpetuated the gulag’s legacy. In Vietnam, political prisoners have reported the Vietnamese prison system’s continued

¹⁴⁵ Chayanich Thamparipattra, “Laogai Prison Labor Exportation Thesis,” (unpublished manuscript, Laogai Research Foundation, 2014), 1.

I use “Marxism’s curative labor theory” not in reference to a specific treatise, but rather in reference to Marx’s general comments on labor and its role in reform.

reliance on unfair trials, political indoctrination, and forced labor camps as a means to crush dissent. Reminiscent of the gulag, Vietnamese political prisoners are forced to labor in “agricultural production, including potato or coffee farming; construction work...and other forms of manufacturing.”¹⁴⁶ Similarly, dissidents and their families are incarcerated in labor camps throughout North Korea.¹⁴⁷

Given these exceedingly parallel narratives of criminalized dissent, scholars must reevaluate the importance and intricacies of the gulag as it pertains to a larger history. Moreover, scholars must realize that the gulag did not become history in the 1950s, 1980s, or even in the 1990s; it has continued into the present, albeit exiled and exported from the borders of the former Soviet Union. It is this larger history, one with international dimensions, that offers exciting comparative inquiry to the ambitious scholar.

¹⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch, “World Report 2012: Vietnam,” accessed April 14, 2014, <http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2012/world-report-2012-vietnam>.

¹⁴⁷ David Hawk, “The Hidden Gulag,” Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, accessed April 14, 2014, http://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK_HiddenGulag2_Web_5-18.pdf.