

Laogai Museum: A Window into China's Human Rights Disaster
Submitted by Zhang, Laogai Research Foundation
on Tue, 04/30/2013 - 14:25

The Laogai Museum, located at the intersection of 20th Street and S Street in Dupont Circle, Washington, DC, is the only museum in the world dedicated to exposing human rights abuses during the reign of the Chinese Communist Party. Harry Wu, a world-renowned human rights activist, founded the museum in 2008. Since relocating to its current address in 2010, the museum has attracted more and more tourists due to its increasing influence and popularity among the American public, as well as its easily accessible location. Tourists also enjoy the benefit of listening to Mr. Harry Wu provide a first-hand account of the brutal reality of the laogai, which he endured for 19 years in various labor camps. At a time when the tide of civilization begins to sweep through Mainland China, the world needs to gain a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the extent of human rights abuses perpetrated by the Chinese Communist Party. This article summarizes the extensive human rights abuses committed by the Party through describing the displays and exhibitions at the Laogai Museum. It is our hope that those who come to Washington, DC will take time to visit the museum in order to gain a better understanding of human rights atrocities that have occurred under the six decades of communist rule.

At the entrance to the museum hangs a portrait of Mr. Harry Wu, the founder of the Laogai Museum, containing biographical information. Mr. Wu was sent to Laogai simply because of his family background and a few unimportant political comments. He was incarcerated from 1960 until 1979 in various laogai camps in different parts of China. In the mid 1980s, he came to the United States and began to engage in human rights activism aimed at exposing the Chinese laogai. To gather first-hand information about the laogai, he secretly returned to China to collect materials and information directly from various laogai camps. Mr. Wu's tireless activism made him the world's leading advocate and authority on China's laogai system. In light of his personal experience in the laogai and relentless activism, Mr. Wu is uniquely suited to serve as the founder of the Laogai Museum. Each and every display and exhibition at the museum reflects Mr. Wu's insights and personal experiences regarding China's laogai system. As a result, the Laogai Museum not only contains a collection of historical records, biographies, and legal archives, but also the lively accounts of laogai inmates, all of which impart poignant historical lessons.

Upon entry into the museum, a visitor will notice a red Chinese map hanging in the reception area on which clusters of red spots dot the countryside, indicating the locations of laogai camps. One's initial impressions would be that China is indeed a nation of laogai, with thousands of laogai camps dispersed throughout the country. There is no doubt that this map conveys a simple and clear message: The laogai is an integral part of the repressive machine of the Chinese communist regime. Above the laogai map are some explanatory words: The laogai: (in China) a system of labour camps, many of whose inmates are political dissidents—*Oxford English Dictionary*. As it turns out, largely as a result of the relentless efforts of Harry Wu, the term *Laogai* has been included in the Oxford Dictionary and become part of the English vocabulary. It is noteworthy that the word laogai has not only been added to the English Dictionary, but also to the French, German, Italian and Spanish dictionaries, providing the international community with a testimony to the ongoing human rights abuse committed by the Chinese communist regime.

Walking to the right of the reception area leads the visitor to a conspicuous display of various sources of human rights disasters similar to the Chinese laogai camps: the Soviet gulag, the German concentration camps, and the killing fields of the Cambodian Communist Party. It is worth pointing out that although the Soviet gulag served as the prototype of the Chinese laogai, the number of victims of the Chinese laogai far exceeds those of the Soviet gulag.

The following exhibits highlight eras during which the Chinese Communist Party committed horrendous human rights abuses after taking power in 1949: the rise of Mao Zedong (1949-1956), eliminating "class enemies" (1956-1958), the great leap forward (1958-1960), the cultural revolution (1966-1976), the post-Mao era (1976-1989), the Tiananmen massacre (1989) and China today (1989-present).

The following statistics, inscribed on the wall of the museum, directly and powerfully expose the

brutality of the Chinese communist regime:

- 40-50,000,000 people jailed since 1949
- 27 years – Mao in power
- 65,000,000 unnatural deaths under Chinese Communist Party
- 7,731,000 victims during the Cultural Revolution
- 30-50,000,000 citizens died in famine of 1957-1961
- 2,620,000—official number of people arrested, imprisoned or killed from 1949 to 1954

Around the corner on the right is a brief history of human rights under Chinese communist rule from 1949 to 2009. The exhibit describes human rights atrocities that occurred in particular years. From these brief accounts, it is easy for one to see that although the specific conditions might vary from year to year, the ruthlessness and savagery of the Chinese Communist Party has remained the same. Along the opposite wall is an exhibition of the specific tools and methods of repression employed by the Party, including “laogai” (Reform through Labor), “laojiao” (Reeducation through labor), mandatory job placement, and other forms of arbitrary detention. The exhibit includes a brief description of the notorious Qincheng Prison, which reflects the unique role and function of the jail in maintaining the power of the Party. Taken as a whole, the exhibit contains general descriptions of the laogai system and other repressive tools the Party uses to maintain political stability.

More importantly, this exhibit contains the following informative and startling statistics depicting the brutal reality of the laogai system:

- Approx. 1,000 known laogai camps
- 3-5,000,000 people in laogai camps at any given time
- Over 50 offenses punishable by death
- 500,000 people in arbitrary detention at any given time
- 5,000 estimated executions in 2009
- 40% of those convicted sentenced to over five years imprisonment or death
- 99% defendants charged with “endangering state security” found guilty

Prominently featured in the middle of the museum, two opposite-facing glittering walls of glass list the names of current and former laogai inmates. This area is called the Memorial Wall for the Laogai Victims. Each name on these walls represents a real laogai inmate, an actual being. At different points of time, each one has been persecuted and “reformed” under the same laogai regime. Among them are both deceased laogai inmates and current political prisoners living in today’s China. Such people include Bao Tong, Hu Shigen, Fu Guoyong, Gao Hongming, Hu Jia, and Jin Haike. In light of the pervasive, overbearing power of the laogai system, it is easy to imagine that the names listed on the Memorial Walls are just the tip of the iceberg. Nevertheless, the two small walls still hint at the scale of the persecution inflicted by the Chinese laogai.

Alongside the Memorial Wall is the “Crime Wall,” on which various crimes are displayed. Each crime also includes a corresponding alleged “criminal,” along with a portrait and prison sentence. The crimes listed on the walls are many and varied: divulging state secrets, treason, attempt to divide the country, possession of firearms, rebellion, inciting the subversion of state regime, stealing and digging ancient tombs, divulging military secrets, subversion, organizing anti-revolutionary clique, anti-revolutionary propaganda, espionage, organizing terrorist activities. Some crimes sound like political statements rather than legal verdicts. For example, offenses include anti-revolutionary conduct, extreme rightist, venomously attacking Chairman Mao, historical anti-revolutionary, current anti-revolutionary, and smearing leaders. Many crimes led to death sentences, while some were more “leniently” granted lengthy jail terms. Some people were even sentenced without first being convicted. All this is testament to the ruthlessness and savagery of the laogai system.

The museum has a replica of a confinement cell at a laogai camp, which serves a vivid example and symbol of the means and tools of repression used by the Chinese Laogai system. The original confinement cell was located at the Tuanhe Farm in the suburbs of Beijing. Mr. Wu, the founder of both Laogai Research Foundation and the Laogai Museum, was once held in such a cell. This reproduction of Wu’s confinement cell was designed in accordance with the exact dimensions of the

original, providing visitors with glimpse into the reality of life inside a Chinese prison. The cell was only high enough for an inmate to sit up, but not for him/her to stand up or walk. Looking at this replica, it is not hard to imagine the suffering one would endure while confined in such a narrow space. Solitary confinement, however, is just one form of torture used at the Chinese laogai camps. Other, more difficult to depict methods of torture described in the museum include electric shocks, standing on chairs, handcuffed/tied up to the back, sleep deprivation, tied-up hands and feet, beatings, forced intake of hot water, brainwashing, mental mistreatment, nail extraction, cigarette burnings, genital disfigurement, psychological intimidation, rape or sexual assault, verbal abuse, handcuffing and feet fettering for prolonged periods of time, and so on. It is fair to say that the Chinese Communist Party is pretty creative in devising methods of torture.

The museum also features a series of portraits of some particularly famous laogai inmates. Among them are Wang Guangmei, wife of China's former president Liu Shaoqi, Hu Feng, a writer affiliated with the Chinese communist system, Wei Jingsheng, the famous Chinese democracy activist, and Zhang Yidong, a famous rightist. Alongside these portraits are brief descriptions providing information regarding the date of arrest, term of sentence, and charges leveled against the criminal depicted in the portrait. Also on display at the museum are two special categories of political prisoners at laogai. One category consists of political prisoners who were publicly executed, such as Zhang Zhixin, Lin Zhao, Wang Shenyong, Li Jiulian, Zhang Chunyuan, Yu Luohe, and Shirali (Uyghur). Their portraits are displayed along with the portraits of execution grounds in China. The juxtaposition of executed political prisoners alongside actual execution grounds provides a particularly powerful and shocking illustration of the brutal reality of criminal justice in China. The other category is comprised of laogai survivors, including Qi Jiazhen, Frenchman Jean Pasqualini, and the four young men of the New Youth Society.

The daily life of laogai inmates is also featured at the museum. Items owned or used by laogai inmates are on display for museum visitors. The most attention-grabbing item is a coat with hundreds of patches sewn onto it. The sight is wrenching. Other items include shoulder poles used for laboring, prison garbs and shoes, sheets, and a book of songs that one inmate had hidden for safe keeping. Former laogai inmates donated some of the items to the Laogai Museum. Here you can also get a brief glimpse into the living conditions at laogai camps. Their sleeping space was very crowded, food was in short supply, and the medical and sanitary conditions were horrendous. In addition to arduously laboring, they were also forced to attend study class. Furthermore, the cadres in charge of managing the camps often encouraged inmates to attack each other, a tactic employed to discourage a sense of unity among inmates.

The last section of the museum is dedicated to human rights issues of special importance to the Laogai Museum. First is the issue of religious oppression. This area includes portraits hung on the walls picturing people sent to laogai for holding religious beliefs. These portraits depict Catholics like Cai Shifang, Gong Pinmei, and Fan Xueyan, as well as Protestants like Shi Weihai, Alimujiang Yimiti, Yang Lirong, and Wang Xiaoguang. In the area devoted to the issue of minority rights, the persecuted political prisoners on display include Rebiya Kadeer, Ismail Semed (these two are Uyghurs), Ngawang Sangdrol, Dhondup Wangchen and Karma Sandrup (these three are Tibetans) and Hada (Mongolian).

Organ harvesting, trafficking, and transplantation are also featured in this section. In addition to ordinary folks, such as Zhao Wei and Wan Qichao in Xinyang, Henan province, many executed political prisoners have fallen victim to this outrageous practice. The case of Zhong Haiyuan serves as a stark example of this inhumane practice. Zhong had been handed a death sentence due to his calls for the rehabilitation of Li Jiulian and for removing Hua Guofeng from power (then general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party). On April 30, 1978, before he was executed, his kidney was transplanted to a pilot related to a high-ranking official. Moreover, his corpse was taken to No. 92 Hospital of Field Army for dissection. These acts are simply incomprehensible, and it is no exaggeration to claim that they are worthy of the wrath of both man and God.

In addition to serving as a tool of political repression to maintain the one-party dictatorship, the laogai system has also acquired another important function: to make money for the camps and administrators. Prodded by economic incentives, the laogai administrative organs at each level turn their greedy eyes towards those laogai inmates who can provide high-intensity labor for free. As a result, various kinds of laogai enterprises, factories, and farms have emerged. The products made by

laogai inmates gradually make their way into the international markets, and the labor provided by inmates has become one important factor supporting the overall export competitiveness of Chinese products. Laogai products are the epitome of inhumanely produced exports often condemned by the international community. This reality has prompted Harry Wu, the founder of the Laogai Museum, to carefully and diligently collect laogai products exported to the US market over the years. The laogai export products on exhibition in the museum include toys, tools, clips, clothes, shoes, hats, handbags, mineral water, instruments, etc. A look into this section of the museum reveals the full scope of products manufactured in Chinese laogai camps. We can reasonably conclude that the productive capacity of laogai inmates laboring in extremely poor and unsafe working and living conditions has helped generate the wealth and power of modern China.

The last special exhibition in the museum is dedicated to freedom of speech and Internet policing. The Chinese Communist Party has now become the biggest enemy to free expression on the Internet. The Party has not only created formidable firewalls and an extensive network of Internet policemen and commentators within China; authorities have also penetrated foreign cyberspace through state-sponsored attacks. As such, Chinese dissidents like Shi Tao are not the only victims of the Party's Internet policemen and oppression. Rather, Chinese authorities have also hacked the US political, business, and academic community. In this regard, Mr. Harry Wu again demonstrated foresight through his decision to file a lawsuit against the American company Cisco Systems, which has provided the Party with technical assistance related to Internet monitoring. At a press conference in June 2011, Mr. Harry Wu formally announced that he had filed a complaint against Cisco in US federal Court. The photo of Mr. Wu making this announcement at the museum captures a historically important event in the fight for freedom in China.

The monitoring and suppression of the Internet in China is an integral part of the Party's broader cultural and ideological regime. The Party's longstanding, unyielding ideological agenda has stifled freedom of expression in China, making freedom of speech and the ability to freely receive information a distant dream beyond reach of ordinary Chinese people. Even worse, the Party has severely persecuted those persons who have tried to freely express their opinions and convey information. The personal portraits on exhibition at the museum feature some of these freedom pioneers: Shi Tao, Liu Xianbin, Chen Xi, Chen Wei, Gou Zhongshan as well as Liu Xiaobo, the democracy activist and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate. It is particularly noteworthy that the "evidence" cited in the Chinese Communist Party's most recent conviction of Mr. Liu Xiaobo includes three articles that Mr. Liu had published on *Observe China*, a website founded by Mr. Harry Wu. With Mr. Liu Xiaobo still imprisoned in a Chinese jail, his portrait at the museum serves as a constant reminder of the tyrannical nature of the Party.

The oppressive nature of the Party serves as a running theme throughout the exhibits on display in the museum. It is important for people to keep record of atrocities that have occurred during the reign of the Chinese Communist Party. The exhibits on display at the Laogai Museum serve as a visual representation of our slogan that we "have no right to forget" because we believe in "the strength to remember." The museum is a monument to our obligation to remember the past, and we firmly believe that the collective strength to remember will guide the Chinese people in their struggle for human rights and democracy.