

Banished to the Great
Northern Wilderness
Political Exile and Re-education
in Mao's China

NING WANG



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Introduction

*Countless hearts,
Prisons for countless wronged souls.
Theirs is the fate
Of convicts in a primeval forest.
Axes and saws to cut the year-rings of life.
O, the endless ploughing in the fields!
Ploughshare to crush their shining youth.
The suffering is great, very great,
But there are no sighs, no groans.*

—Tang Qi

A train winds its way through the silent, snow-laden forest, bearing its weary burden to the Great Northern Wilderness. The year is 1958; the cargo, the human collateral of yet another Maoist campaign. Over half a million Chinese, mostly intellectuals, suddenly became “rightists,” “ultra-rightists,” and “counter-revolutionaries” under the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957 and 1958. The governing Chinese Communist Party (CCP, or the Party) grossly mistreated these individuals, meting out prison sentences, forced manual labour, and, in many cases, banishment to the countryside or distant frontier regions. For some, nearly a quarter of a century passed before they were allowed to return home and pick up the broken fragments of their lives; many others died of starvation, disease,

and overwork, sometimes leaving behind sick and uncared for young children. Tang Qi's poem captures the essence of the massive banishment of political offenders to the labour reform centres in China's northeastern borderlands, known as *Beidahuang* – the Great Northern Wilderness. Their experiences, together with the unique labour reform regime, form an important chapter in the global history of concentration camps in the twentieth century.¹

The Anti-Rightist Campaign has long attracted academic attention throughout the world, but the post-campaign experiences of those persecuted (including their banishment) has not received proportionate treatment by either Chinese or Western historians.² My research aims to examine the operation of political banishment in the post-1957 period; to show how political offenders exiled from Beijing fared, collectively and individually, in the Great Northern Wilderness; and to investigate the behavioural patterns and the psychological world of the Chinese intellectuals in exile. I also explore the techniques of physical and psychological control that state agents employed at the local level in exile communities as well as some of their efforts to “remould” the exiles.

Conventional wisdom mostly presents Chinese intellectuals as victims, CCP labour camp policy as oppressive, ideological remoulding as powerful and effective, and so on. Whereas I do not dispute that this was often the case, I argue that political exiles to the Great Northern Wilderness were not necessarily real or even potential opponents of Mao's government; rather, they were often “loyal dissidents” and faithful followers of the CCP. Some of them were receptive to ideological remoulding and worked hard to achieve self-redemption. This struggle for redemption was self-imposed and was significantly compounded by mental and physical distress. In addition to Party politics (e.g., the desire to reform state enemies), the conditions in the camps (e.g., modes of manipulation, temperament of camp managers, etc.) also contributed to the suffering of exiles. We shall see both admirable resistance and subversion of state efforts to subdue these exiles on the one hand, and regrettable infighting and service to those same dark forces on the other. While these people were, indeed, victims of a Maoist political campaign, some of them were also victims of (and victimized) their fellow exiles.

Although this research focuses on what happened in the Beidahuang borderlands in the 1950s and 1960s, its findings may show us a way of analyzing the experiences of political exiles in Mao's China as a whole. Standing at the intersection of Maoist persecution, banishment, and the ideological remoulding of Chinese intellectuals, and contributing to a

nuanced understanding of China's labour camps, banishment, and the ruling style of the CCP, my research seeks to complicate the picture of Chinese intellectuals in general and the exile community in particular.

Why focus on those banished from Beijing? And why focus on Beidahuang? There are four reasons. First, the northeastern borderland, with its difficult natural environment and isolated geographical location, was long regarded by China's imperial rulers as an ideal place to banish various offenders. The CCP government followed suit, raising banishment to a new height in terms of both the exiles involved and the exile settlements established. Second, the mass persecution in Beijing in 1957–58 coincided with an ambitious state program of land reclamation in the northeast, so the tragic experiences of the purged were exacerbated by a government that, in the pursuit of economic growth, wanted to use them as cheap labour. Third, the political exiles from Beijing were among China's best-educated elite, therefore an examination of their experiences in one of the country's harshest regions will help illuminate the fates of Chinese intellectuals in the Mao era.³ Finally, the political exiles from Beijing, many of whom were journalists and writers, have left a wealth of valuable memoirs and other biographical materials. Official sources (untapped archives, local histories, gazetteers, etc.) are also quite satisfactory.

Readers should bear in mind that the stories about Beidahuang cannot be considered to be typical of banishment in the Mao era. Hundreds of labour camps existed in China, in the interior and on the frontier, and informal labour reform settlements were numerous. Each of them had different stories to tell about its inmates and their experiences. Such diversity and complexity can only be appreciated through rich and varied case studies. I am convinced that the experiences of the persecuted Chinese in exile and the actual operation of various labour camps/settlements can only be understood through such case studies – each specified according to time, group, and locale.

POLITICAL EXILES IN BEIDAHUANG:
A GENERAL PICTURE AND CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS

The term “political exiles” refers to those banished by the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) for political reasons, although the CCP denies the existence of political offenders or political prisoners. In particular, the term refers to “rightists” (including “ultra-rightists”)

and “counter-revolutionaries” who were sent to various labour reform centres in Beidahuang.

Beidahuang, or the Great Northern Wilderness, generally refers to the northern borderland of northeast China (Manchuria). Although far from well defined (see Chapter 2), Beidahuang was widely agreed to be the geographical region north of Harbin and Mount Yilehuli, extending to the Russian border and encompassing the Three River Plain (bounded by the Amur, Ussuri, and Sungari Rivers) and the Mudan River Plain. Although arable land was abundant and soil fertile, its frigid northern climate, primitive physical conditions, and distance from China proper made it an undesirable place for human habitation. Within Beidahuang, four counties – Mishan, Hulin, Baoqing, and Raohe – as well as the area east of Lake Xingkai are particularly relevant to this work as the army farms and labour camps located there received a large number of exiles.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the political offenders banished to Beidahuang could be roughly broken down into the following categories:

(1) Beijing rightists on the army farms

With the conclusion of the Anti-Rightist Campaign in 1958, more than fourteen hundred rightists from various government agencies, press media, research institutes, and military units in Beijing were sent to army farms in the name of “labour under supervision” (*jiandu laodong*), or “tempering through labour” (*laodong duanlian*). According to incomplete statistics, their ages ranged from seventeen to fifty-four.⁴ Their former occupations ranged from research assistants and scientists to writers and artists, from junior office clerks to Party officials and veteran revolutionaries. In Beidahuang, they worked on the same farms with demobilized soldiers and convicted criminals under the surveillance of demobilized military officers. The majority of them stayed there for close to three years. In the early 1960s, massive deaths from starvation propelled the central government to return them to less physically difficult areas (such as Beijing and Hebei).

(2) Counter-revolutionaries in the labour reform (*laogai*) camps of Xingkaihu⁵

Many of those accused of being counter-revolutionaries during the Anti-Rightist Campaign, if sentenced, were sent to Xingkaihu labour reform camps. Their numbers, by conservative estimation, amount to around two thousand. These people included university students, young teachers, scientists, and government employees as well as those who were considered to have been historically disloyal to the CCP and to have

committed new offences in 1957. The major difference between them and the rightists sent to the army farms was that they had voiced relatively strident criticisms of the Party and/or tried to flee China to avoid arrest. As well, those who were at first labelled rightists but denied their guilt or appealed for redress invited harsher penalties and, thus, were elevated to counter-revolutionary status. Most people in this category who were rounded up in Beijing were sent to Xingkaihu (the focus of Chapter 3), but some were sent to other labour farms in northern or northeastern China.

(3) Ultra-rightists (*jìyóu pài*) in the labour re-education (*lǎojiào*) camps of Xingkaihu

Ultra-rightists were those at the top of the rightist scale. They were considered to have committed serious offences, and thus the punishment they received was more severe than that meted out to other rightists. For some, family background and overseas connections, in addition to their criticisms of the Party, contributed to their arrest. Although they did not receive a formal trial and thus, due to the Party's "leniency," were not subject to term-sentencing, they were still seen to be in need of being disciplined by the police. Labour re-education camps were thus considered to be appropriate places for them to go. A considerable number of them were arrested in universities, colleges, and research institutes. In Xingkaihu, they were distributed into four labour re-education camps.

These three types of political outcasts constituted the majority of the anti-rightist victims banished from Beijing to Beidahuang. They were deployed as agricultural labourers, lumber workers, construction workers, and so on. They were valuable forced labour in the great wilderness. Their banishment and enslavement coincided with the most serious famine (1959–62) in modern Chinese history. Their food supplies were low, and this was compounded by demanding labour, lack of medical care, and physical abuse. The death rate was high, in some camps up to 20 to 30 percent. Discussions of their suffering – hardship, hunger, death, escape, physical abuse, and psychological torment – and the politics of this suffering form the bulk of this book.⁶

One of the fundamental questions with which China specialists are confronted concerns how to define rightists. Are they political dissidents who posed real threats to the governing party and, thus, logically invited harsh treatment? If the answer is negative, or the number of dissidents was insignificant, this leads to a second question: How does one explain the

mass persecution? In Chapter 1, I argue that, although some intellectuals were labelled rightists because of their sharp criticism of Party policies and cadre officials (for their abuse of power) or because of their advocacy of greater intellectual freedom, many others were so labelled due to factional conflicts, personal animosity, grudges, and/or the mishandling of interpersonal relations. Furthermore, labelling quotas set by higher authorities forced local Party chiefs to frame innocent people. I suggest that, although the CCP launched the Anti-Rightist Campaign to punish opponents of the state, intellectuals and officials took advantage of it to attack their peers and competitors.

It is important to look at the role of daily politics in Maoist persecution. In authoritarian states, daily politics, generally understood as the way a person manages relations with the state, its agents, and other individuals, is central to one's life. In the PRC context, as Party bosses and heads of work units had the power to interpret state policies and to determine a person's fortune, those individuals who did not truly display dissent but simply failed to adequately manage their relations with these power holders, inevitably suffered in politically motivated campaigns. While they were the *de facto* victims of daily politics and were sacrificed to the machinations of state crackdowns, state ideology (e.g., the theory of class struggle) provided legitimacy to such crackdowns. Correspondingly, forced "labour reform" and banishment, the purpose of which was seemingly to ensure the ideological renewal of offenders, often ended up transforming how these individuals handled daily politics – that is, how they altered their behaviour and attitude when dealing with lower-level state agents in order to improve their lots.

In Chapter 2, I focus on the experience of Beijing rightists on the army farms of Beidahuang. Some rightists, not silenced by the Anti-Rightist Campaign, continued to articulate their criticisms and expressed abhorrence of Beidahuang; many others, however, were willing to be sent down in order to ease the political pressure placed upon them or to display their commitment to self-redemption. Heavily indoctrinated by Party norms or overwhelmed by the mass condemnation in 1957, a considerable number of the persecuted admitted their "crimes" and their need to go through labour reform to cleanse their "reactionary" minds and to achieve spiritual growth through trial and tribulation. Despite the official rhetoric pertaining to "thought reform," however, they were essentially used as forced labour on the army farms. Some farms exercised specific regimens in order to make their "thought work" effective, but others reduced political indoctrination (if such existed) to rebukes and

psychological abuse. Life on these farms was generally difficult, but experiences varied depending on location and camp managers. Personal connections with influential officials were important for the rightists, even in banishment, and their former prestige and expertise often made their lives easier.

In Chapter 3, I examine the life experiences of counter-revolutionaries and ultra-rightists in the Xingkaihu labour reform complex. I argue that it was the mass persecution of the 1950s and the subsequent shortage of prison facilities that prompted the boom of labour camps in the northeast, including the establishment of Xingkaihu, a colony directly administered by the Beijing Public Security Bureau. In Xingkaihu, student inmates who were mentally or ideologically unyielding were more assertive than others in articulating their opinions, resisting thought reform, and refusing to entirely submit to camp cadres. Their Xingkaihu experience, including their access to officially allowed readings, heightened their dissidence and prompted them to move from a position of “loyal opposition” to the Party to real alienation. The CCP practice of mixing political prisoners with criminal prisoners in labour camps turned out to be quite insidious, enabling the police to use the latter to monitor and discipline the former. I also discuss various remoulding techniques used in Xingkaihu as well as the relationships among camp officials, political inmates, and criminal inmates.

Analysis of the physical suffering – hunger, death, physical abuse, and suicide – of the exiles constitutes the major part of Chapter 4. I demonstrate that, although the adventurous Great Leap Forward (GLF) and the subsequent great famine formed the general background of the camp experience, the hyper-activism of labour camp authorities (e.g., submitting excessive amounts of grain to state granaries, setting high production targets, etc.) and their self-profiteering manoeuvres led to severe food shortages and heavy workloads for the exiles, which, in turn, led to a massive death toll. The impact of local politics upon the actual lives of these exiles was no less severe than was the impact of high politics. I also show how the dignity and moral integrity of intellectuals were damaged. Due to difficult life conditions, reprehensible behaviour (such as stealing and fighting) became commonplace in the daily lives of political exiles, exacerbating the physical abuse meted out by camp authorities. Intellectuals were forced by circumstances in which they found themselves to make some very difficult moral compromises.

In Chapter 5, I tap into the psychological world and behavioural patterns of political exiles. I show that many of them, especially the rightists,

still identified with Party ideology and accepted the notion of ideological remoulding through labour; many worked hard in order to show repentance and achieve self-redemption. Some, although not all, of the political exiles transformed the Party's ideological battle into self-affliction.

Chapter 5's most important theme is the ultra-activism of the exile community. Both on the army farms and in the Xingkaihu labour camp complex, some of the intellectual inmates attacked others in order to advance themselves and to show their loyalty to the authorities. They reported and denounced their fellow inmates and used trivial issues to launch scathing attacks. This was a matter not only of personality but also of survival: incriminating others was a strategy of self-protection. Those who succeeded in creating good images of themselves were often assigned lighter work and were even appointed as group leaders and entrusted to monitor others. Those deemed to be politically backward or to have poor work performances suffered not only at the hands of labour camp cadres but also at the hands of their fellow inmates. Some of the victims of political persecution turned into perpetrators.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the suspension of banishment to the Great Northern Wilderness and the post-banishment experiences of political exiles. I show that the mass deaths in the borderlands and countryside prompted the central government to evacuate rightists. In the early 1960s, the majority of Beijing rightists were allowed to leave the army farms, and the ultra-rightists in Xingkaihu were also transferred to the interior. These ex-inmates, however, still bore the stigma foisted upon them as a result of consciously designed state policies; consequently, they were discriminated against and were unable to resume their normal lives until they were finally rehabilitated in the post-Mao political thaw.

PUNITIVE EXILE IN A COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The CCP's deployment of convicts to labour camps had deep roots: it did not start with the Party's takeover of China. In 1932, the redemption-through-labour reformatories (*laodong ganhua yuan*) were formally instituted in the Jiangxi Soviet base area to "redeem" prisoners through persuasion while forcing them to engage in economic production. The inmates were mostly counter-revolutionary elements from such ideologically reprehensible backgrounds as the landlord, rich peasant, and capitalist; however, poor peasants and hired labourers who had committed crimes were also incarcerated there. This was the forerunner of the modern *laogai*

system.⁷ In the 1940s, as Frank Dikötter shows, certain local communists, such as those in Shandong Province, abandoned the concept of using prisons to confine convicts and, in order to confront the organizational problems and scarce resources caused by the unstable military situation, moved instead towards a system of mobile labour teams and camps that were dispersed throughout the countryside. This practice later spread to other communist areas and was adopted by CCP headquarters at Yan'an.⁸

Nevertheless, exiling offenders to cultural and economic peripheries or moving undesirable elements to rural locations is not the invention of the Chinese communists; rather, it is a centuries-old form of punishment used by various states in the East and in the West. Well-known cases include the British deportation of convicts to Australia, the French expulsion of offenders to “Devil’s Island” in French Guiana, the Russian banishment of Decembrists to Siberia, the labour camp regimes (Gulags) across the Stalinist Soviet Union, and the Taiwanese internment of convicts on Green Island, to name but few. The motives for these practices ranged from the removal of disruptive elements to the rehabilitation of offenders, from the colonization of frontiers to the assimilation of ethnic minorities. In this book, I focus on the internal and external influences on the CCP’s post-1949 operation of banishment, among which the imperial state’s practice of *liufang*, the Guomindang’s employment of convict labour in agricultural colonies, and the Soviet Gulag are of special relevance.

In China, the practice of banishing political and criminal offenders to frontiers is of ancient origin. Starting as early as the Qin dynasty (3rd century BCE), imperial rulers have been deporting convicts, disgraced officials, and those in political disfavour to border locations or insalubrious mountain regions in Yunnan, Guangxi, Guangdong, and Hainan to perform military service or manual labour in such state programs as land reclamation, road construction, and/or river projects. This is the practice of *liufang*.⁹ In the eighteenth century, the Qing court successively used Manchuria (the Northeast) and Xinjiang (the Northwest) as banishment destinations. In the early years, the offenders banished to Manchuria were mostly common criminals (such as robbers, counterfeiters, and smugglers) as well as lesser figures who had participated in popular rebellions. “Traditionally, such crimes ranked among the most serious.” “Many of these exiles had originally been sentenced to death but had had their sentences commuted.”¹⁰ Disgraced scholars and officials as well as their families were also banished. In 1759, after the Qing’s conquest of what is now Xinjiang, tens of thousands of criminals and the disfavoured were sent there as labourers and managerial personnel.¹¹

The extent to which the PRC banishments drew upon the imperial legacy warrants interrogation. Both sent offenders away from the main centres of China and made extensive use of exiles as a source of labour for state projects. The CCP claim that it treats the guilty with leniency and its alleged stress on ideological remoulding resembles the imperial focus on benevolent rule and moral regeneration.¹² If we consider the fact that the leadership of the CCP, especially Party chairman Mao Zedong, was familiar with imperial history and ruling tactics, it is reasonable to presume that the imperial style of banishment influenced the CCP style. Mao was known to habitually flaunt his knowledge of Chinese history on important occasions, gushing about “making the past serve the present (*gu wei jin yong*).” However, there were clear distinctions between the CCP form of banishment and that of its imperial predecessors. Qing exiles in Xinjiang, for instance, were provided with enough food and were allocated sufficient farmland to support themselves, whereas PRC exiles were often threatened with hunger while almost all their agricultural produce flowed to state barns. In the Qing’s Manchurian frontiers, ideological and physical control were flexible, and literati exiles were granted various job options, working as teachers, river patrollers, and postal workers. Some were even allowed to conduct business: banished scholars were employed as secretaries or assistants to local officials, their learning and expertise highly appreciated.¹³ In the PRC period, however, political exiles, many of whom were well schooled, were subjected to strict physical control in the labour camps and were nearly exclusively used as manual labourers. Only a small portion of them were recruited part time for local magazines, art troupes, and so on after performing a period of physical labour. Compared with their counterparts in the imperial period, the PRC exiles were treated with little respect by camp cadres and fared even worse in the borderlands.

In the twentieth century, the Guomindang (GMD, or Nationalist) government also used convict labour in state-run projects. According to Frank Dikötter, during the Japanese War, in order to deal with financial crisis the GMD’s Ministry of Justice ushered in the practice of employing prisoners to reclaim wasteland in Sichuan, Guizhou, and Guangxi. A number of agricultural colonies were established in remote and inhospitable areas, where prisoners were sent to support themselves by cultivating land and to receive moral instruction.¹⁴ But the projects encountered a lot of “practical administrative difficulties.” For instance, the output of the farmlands was not sufficient for the prisoners’ own sustenance, many of those sent to the colonies were too old or sick to work in the fields,

prisoners were difficult to supervise out in the open, and the projects were plagued by shortages of funds. For these reasons, the GMD's agricultural convict colonies "were never developed in any systematic way."¹⁵ This probably taught the CCP to strengthen its administration and physical control over inmates as well as to reclaim relatively fertile land.

It should be noted that the CCP banished a fairly large number of political prisoners, including those who had previously served the GMD and those who had criticized the CCP. Those who committed criminal offences were considered less dangerous to the state than were those who committed political offences. In this respect, the Mao's China was more similar to the Soviet Union than to Imperial China.

The Soviet practice of sending offenders to exile settlements and labour camps has been intensively researched over decades. It is held that this practice originated in the Tsarist banishment of offenders to Siberia and to the deserted island of Sakhalin. In October 1922, the Soviet government set up a permanent exile commission to deal with "socially dangerous persons and active members of anti-Soviet parties."¹⁶ The Gulag thus developed as a formidable exile and labour reform regime that interned a variety of people, from rich peasants and common criminals to counter-revolutionary offenders. According to a socialist principle propounded by Vladimir Lenin – namely, "he who does not work shall not eat" – in 1929, the Soviet government established an elaborate system of exile and imprisonment in conjunction with forced labour, in which the *zeks* (inmates of forced labour camps) had to earn what was needed to feed and clothe themselves and to increase national production.¹⁷ Upon the proclamation of the PRC, the CCP government, driven to borrow wholesale from the Soviet experience, enthusiastically followed the Soviet model of combining exile and forced labour. Mao Zedong and military commander-in-chief Zhu De both actively advocated learning from the Soviets about setting up labour camp facilities and using convict labourers for state projects. Soviet advisers were invited to share their counsel on matters such as prison construction, prison rules, and inmate administration.¹⁸

Distinctions between the Soviet system and the CCP system can be identified, however. In the Gulag, political offenders were kept separate from criminal offenders: "Camps were for more 'socially dangerous elements' such as political offenders, while colonies had more common criminals."¹⁹ But the CCP system typically put political offenders among the criminal and made use of the latter to monitor and discipline the former. When Gulag authorities administered the construction of railways,

canals, and roads, their disciplining of inmate labourers was relatively lax and the number of escapes large. By contrast, in the early PRC period, as I show in the case of Beidahuang, labour farms/camps were built in remote, isolated regions, disciplinary and preventive measures were strong, and the chance of escape limited.²⁰ Furthermore, as Harry Wu notes, “the purpose of the Soviet labor camps is suppression and punishment – not the systematic, complete ‘thought reform’ emphasized by the PRC camps.”²¹ The available sources on the Soviet camps (such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago* and Anne Applebaum’s *Gulag: A History*) all point to the fact that Gulag administrations rarely forced inmates into political study sessions or compelled them to preach, to listen to propaganda, or to write self-criticism. In Mao’s China, however, indoctrination sessions were usually taken seriously, and thought reports were required from all inmates. Last, some Chinese ex-prisoners believe, based on their own experience and their knowledge of Soviet cases, that the treatment they received in the Chinese labour camps was worse than the treatment that prisoners received in the Soviet Gulag.²² Comparing the labour camp regimes in the two major communist states shows that, although the Soviets exerted significant influence upon the Chinese labour reform system, and banishment in both countries was an important way of economizing state resources, the Chinese practices reflect the CCP’s unique, and probably more sophisticated, approach to dealing with the socially and politically disfavoured. The CCP leadership was also more ambitious than was the Soviet leadership with regard to controlling and “reconfiguring” inmates’ minds.

HISTORIOGRAPHIC CONSIDERATIONS

On the whole, China scholars in the English-speaking world have paid a great deal of attention to communist politics, the political campaigns and purges in the Mao era, and the relationships between intellectuals and the state. The works of Roderick MacFarquhar, Frederick Teiwes, Merle Goldman, Jonathan Spence, Timothy Cheek, and nearly all general treatments of PRC political history pay considerable attention to investigating the causes and the implementation of the 1957 persecution and its impact on China and Chinese intellectuals. It seems, however, that the studies of intellectuals under communism have been integrated into a discussion of grand political history – how intellectuals were involved in,

and committed to, China's political changes; how their life trajectories were affected by these changes; and how their fortunes were inextricably intertwined with the course of twentieth-century China. In this process, the individual experiences of persecuted intellectuals, including those sent to labour camps or other exile settlements, have received little focused treatment but, rather, are incorporated into the general account of the long history of the social catastrophes and human tragedies associated with the CCP rule.

In Western scholarship that touches on the persecuted, the limelight often falls on a limited number of famous writers, scholars, and scientists. Ding Ling, Fei Xiaotong, Liu Binyan, and Fang Lizhi, for instance, are given special attention due to their literary fame and scholarly achievements or to their reputations as political dissidents and human rights campaigners.²³ What awaits further investigation is the post-1957 experiences of a broader spectrum of rightists – including lesser known professionals, media workers, schoolteachers, students, and government employees – in terms of how they suffered during the campaign, how they survived or perished in the exile settlements, and how their mental life evolved. It is through exploring their stories, supplemented by various archival sources, that we gain a more nuanced understanding of the complex world of those who suffered during the Anti-Rightist Campaign and subsequent banishment.

Another important issue is the PRC labour camp. Fuelled by a growing interest in this, Western scholarship and narratives have been flourishing for the past two decades, beginning with Jean-Luc Domenach's comprehensive and well-researched account of Chinese labour camps and Harry Wu's painstaking work disclosing the vast system of labour farms and factories that produced a wide range of goods for export.²⁴ These are echoed by some of the finest pieces of scholarly work, such as that by Philip Williams and Yenna Wu, James Seymour and Richard Anderson, Kate Saunders, and others.²⁵ The most gripping Chinese narrative so far is the collection of interviews, *Gaobie Jiabiangou* (with its English version *Women from Shanghai*), gathered by Yang Xianhui, who spent many years of his life searching for stories of camp survivors and assembling them into a captivating work on rightists who suffered and perished in a dreadful northwestern labour re-education camp. Both Harry Wu and Bao Ruo-Wang (Jean Pasqualini) enrich us with stories of their personal experiences in the different camps of northern China. These works range from the daily routine in the labour camps to heart-wrenching human

suffering, from brainwashing to physical abuse, from individual stories to collective experiences. Nevertheless, virtually all of them omit a specific group of rightists that was banished from Beijing to the harsh north-eastern borderlands, and none of them investigate an alternative labour reform regime – the little known army farms that interned countless political outcasts. Nor do they adequately address the internecine strife and complex psychological world of the banished intellectuals.²⁶ All of this leaves room for, and necessitates, this book.