China: Re-education Camps

Camps were essentially prisons in which detainees were forced to work.

During the Chinese Cultural Revolution the Communist Party built and utilized what were referred to as re-education camps. These camps were essentially prisons in which the detainees were forced to work. Those sent to the camps were often teachers, doctors, thinkers, writers, or politicians whose views were either considered “counter-revolutionary” or who were simply denounced by members of the Red Guard for any number of reasons. Communist Party thought of the time was that anyone who was against the Revolution—a category which included most intellectuals—was considered bourgeois, and therefore time spent doing tough labor in the camps would provide them the empathy for the common worker that they were surely lacking. In addition, many political opponents were sent to the camps, including Deng Xiaoping himself, who was interned three times and would eventually become the leader of the Chinese Communist Party.

The camps had a significant effect on China during and after the Revolution. So many university and primary school teachers were sent to the camps that the Chinese educational system almost ground to a complete stop. Illiteracy rates skyrocketed after the Revolution, especially in rural areas, and many schools had to rely on certain gifted students to take over the work of their absent teachers.

Many of these camps were closed after the death of Mao Zedong and the end of the Cultural Revolution, and many intellectuals and politicians were politically and socially rehabilitated. However, the impact on China as a whole was long-lasting, and contributed to the post-Mao belief that the Cultural Revolution itself was a large mistake. Further, the camps have become synonymous outside of China with the inequities of Communism, and are considered a symbol, along with Tiananmen Square and other events, of the turbulence that the Cultural Revolution caused. The camps have become known through the works of many prominent Chinese writers who were interned there, such as *.

China still employs the use of re-education camps today, although in a different capacity. The modern camps are referred to as Laojiao, and are reserved for petty criminals, such as thieves. However, the method of indictment remains the same as it was in the 1950s, when the system was first created by the Communist Party. Sentencing to re-education camps are handed down directly by police, with no court involvement. They are rarely available for judicial review, and even then, not until after the sentence has been partly served. The Laojiao are explicitly named and condemned in the “08 Charter,” which was originally signed by a group of 303 Chinese intellectuals but which has since grown to include over 8,100 signatures.