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LAOGAI - PRISON NATION

Inside the China's Ruling System



A 2x52' series directed by
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YAMI₂
PRODUCTIONS



When 10 years ago Xi Jinping came to power, many thought he was going to usher in a new bright chapter.

Instead, he sent a million Uyghurs to prison camps, he sent thousands of protestors from Hong Kong to prison camps. And it's getting worse.

This is the laogai, the biggest prison system in history.

March 27, 2022 – all the residents of Shanghai, the biggest city in China, received a WeChat message asking them "to support, understand and cooperate with the city's epidemic prevention and control work". Public transport would be suspended, firms and factories must halt operations or work remotely. For more than two months the commercial capital of the country was locked down – all the residents were forced to stay at home, behind the lock doors of their apartments, daily Covid testing was set up for several millions. The control was deployed in hours after the decision was taken and everyone obeyed.

"What a symbol of the Chinese efficiency!" Chinese media declare. And they are right – it is a symbol and a proof of how efficient the repression machine is.

The authorities have simply transformed Shanghai for the time of Covid lockdown into a 21st century laogai.

October 2018 – Xi Jinping's China officially recognizes the existence of internment camps in the Xinjiang, the autonomous republic of the Uyghurs. Under the name of "transformation camps through education", China locks up between 1 and 1.8 million men, women and children in an archipelago of more than 1,200 camps, some with more than 10,000 inmates, for a targeted population of 22 million people.

According to the latest figures of the US State Department (to 3 million) Joe Biden called it an ongoing "genocide" while NGOs describe it as an "ethnocide" coupled with ethnic cleansing. We have found numerous documents, witnesses and visual proofs of ... giant

roundup, mass deportation, sterilizations of women, systematic torture, brainwashing and forced labor.

After his first inspection tour of Xinjiang since his accession to supreme power back in 2014, Xi set the tone. "We must show no mercy (...) This is a people's war (...) We must use the weapons of dictatorship!" This internal speech, like dozens of others, was revealed by the New York Times in 2019, 403 pages of Chinese internal documents leaked from the Party summit, by top level officials opposed to Xi's line. This invaluable source known as the "Xinjiang papers," will allow us to lift the curtain on Chinese power and describe in detail the CCP's strategy for controlling the people of China.

Shortly after 2014 and Xi's coming to power, this multiculturalism was decreed a "threat to national unity" after two attacks in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, and Kunming in Yunnan. "Cultural assimilation" has become a priority. Chen Quanguo, the man who sinicized Tibet, was sent to Xinjiang. Chen summed up his technique in one sentence in an internal Party speech: "to round up everyone who should be rounded up". A former military man, Chen thinks big, violent and industrial. Islam must be totally eradicated, of course in the public space but first and foremost in the head of each individual.

The Chinese president has not invented anything, it's Xi Jinping's version of the chairman Mao playbook. He only adapted, digitalized and rationalized a method at the heart of the general system of total repression. Laogai is in the heart of it.

The laogai is a concentration camp system that has only two equivalents in the history of humanity: the Soviet gulag and the Nazi camps. Like its Soviet model, from which it was inspired, the Chinese gulag is a planned political space, immense, varied, densely populated, integrated into the economy, part of the social landscape, and very strongly organized.

From its official creation in 1949 until the mid-1990s, the laogai locked up over 50 million Chinese. Researchers agree on the figure of 20 million deaths (from cold, hunger, disease, summary executions). The last two decades show that the number of detainees has never fallen under 8 million.

The laogai is at the heart of the CCP's system of control over its people. One cannot understand the exceptional longevity of the Chinese model, the domination of 1.4 billion people by a single party, without placing widespread surveillance at the center of the national narrative, and the resulting sanction: deportation to the laogai.

In the fall of 2022, the CCP will open its 20th Congress, as it does every five years. This is the highest authority of the CCP, the one that appoints the leaders and determines the line to follow for the next five years. Xi Jinping is expected to run for a third term, possibly renewable indefinitely. He will remain the supreme leader of a China that has become the world's leading power. His ambition seems limitless and laogai will still be a key part of his policy.

73 years after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the regime will be able to display its triumph. 73 years after the creation of the USSR in 1990, the system was collapsing, the Soviet empire was dissolving. It is true that the gulag had long since withered away, unlike the laogai and the system of generalized surveillance is as strong as ever.

The strength of the CCP lies in its ability to reinvent and refine its concentration camp in order to obtain the permanent submission of the people it rules.

It seems necessary for us to show, on the occasion of what will be a strong media moment, that China is the greatest totalitarian power of all times.





To tell the story of the genesis of the laogai and its evolution until today is to tell the political history of China and the CCP, its oppression towards Chinese civil society, the way this same civil society tries to resist, and sometimes to free itself from such a hold. At a time when China is trying to impose itself as a counter-model to Western liberalism, and when it meets a real echo in the world, it is time to expose what underpins this counter-model: the control of the thoughts and behaviors of each individual.

Laogai is a unique system in the world because the ambition of Chinese totalitarianism differs from other totalitarian systems: the goal of deportation is to achieve "thought reform". *LAO* and *gai* mean "work" and "reform" in Chinese, so reform through work. It is not a question of exterminating like the Nazis, or of structuring mass elimination like under Stalin. It is certainly necessary to "clean up" civil society, by demanding quotas of arrests in each targeted social group (5% of landowners and rich peasants in the countryside, for example, or 5% of right- wingers in the universities, chosen arbitrarily). But the goal explains the method: it is a question of obtaining the total enslavement of the human being, by "correcting" his thought, by "reforming" him, by making him a "new man". Forced labor is only one element of the brainwashing technique among others. A claim, not of facade as in the USSR, but real and more and more sophisticated, not on a reduced scale (as a sect would do) but massive. For a purpose that is not religious (as under the Inquisition) but political.

The Chinese concentration camp system has been constantly transformed, adapting to the needs of power and the objectives of the Party, unlike the Soviet system where the gulag did not survive as it was after the death of Stalin. Re-education of thought has evolved in its techniques, its violence, its sadism and its effectiveness. Each leader has contributed to it.

We will tell you the fascinating and horrifying story of how the system of surveillance and repression was invented, set up, how it has developed and improved through the decades of the Chinese Communist Party rule. We will reveal the depth and nature of Chinese totalitarianism. The waves of repression that regularly fill the laogai tell us about the great fears - and therefore the vulnerabilities - that mobilize the summit of power: every part of Chinese society has been, at some point, the target of the security apparatus.

Thus, the structuring of the filmic narrative is easy. Starting from the present time – the Communist party dealing with Covid – we will go back to the origins of the laogai and follow its evolution at the rhythm of the great political caesuras of contemporary China, each period having its share of purges, accumulating one on top of the other, and sparing no sector of Chinese society, including within the CCP, the army or the State apparatus.

We will show another face of the laogai, the one that directly concerns all of us: hundreds of multinationals based in Xinjiang rent and use the Uyghur deportees. The products that the prisoners make are sold in Europe under brands as prestigious as BMW or Louis Vuitton. Human rights activists demand the governments to ban any business between Western companies and Chinese subcontractors that use this "labor force". Germany is preparing a new law to come into effect in early 2023.



THE STORY

One of our contributors told us on camera:

all the Chinese people are so brainwashed by the Government that they wouldn't dare to say the truth because their life is going to be threatened.

Shanghai in April 2022 or Xinjiang in 2021 would be an introduction to what the country is today.

The Chinese authorities apply laogai methods to the whole country to achieve their announced goal – zero Covid.

Behind what we know about the tragedy of the Uyghurs and Muslim minorities, we will tell how the deportation of a million individuals requires an organization with its hierarchy, its complexity, its planning, its logistics, its purpose. We will show that this ultra-sophisticated system is the result of more than 70 years of expertise and know-how, consubstantial to the regime.

The birth of the system (from 1938 to 1949): everything began when the CCP established itself in the midst of the civil war and gained territory. It was initiated into Stalinist methods and, after the "long march", organized its internal apparatus of repression based on the Chekist system, which was quickly Maoized for the control of the countryside. This is when the techniques of "re-education" were invented.

The formative years of the archipelago (between 1951 and 1957), from the seizure of power in Beijing in 1949 to the de-Stalinization attempt, "The Hundred Flowers" in 1957. Five years were enough to create the archipelago of laogai, where the Nazis took eight years, the Bolsheviks fifteen years. After five years the machine was ultra-efficient and at the same time generated a cascade of problems, which forced the "Hundred Flowers". This attempt to encourage freedom of speech lasted less than two years and ended into repression. At the center of decision and execution: the Ministry of Security, under the command of Luo Ruiqing, "the Chinese Dzerjinsky". This was the time when the waves of repression were so big that the range of concentration camps had to be diversified: alongside the laogai ("reform through work") appeared the laojiao, "re-education through work", three years of confinement that did not even require a trial.

20 years of political turmoil (from 1958 to 1976) from the Great Leap Forward in 1958 to the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976 and the death of Mao. This is the craziest period in the history of the People's Republic. The years of generalized coercion of the Great Leap Forward

did not only result in an economic, ecological and health catastrophe, with its 40 million deaths in four years (mainly from famine). The creation of the "people's communes" allows the generalized surveillance of all by all, in a paramilitary organization of daily life. The CCP lost its organizational and dogmatic unity: the time of intrigues at the top launched the purges, the Sino-Soviet conflict amplified the crisis. The laogai is on the verge of explosion, its leaders are, like everyone else, swept away by the storm.

Mao took over with the Cultural Revolution (1966), which was certainly less deadly than the period of the Great Leap, but triggered an atmosphere of generalized terror. The method is chaos, the system of surveillance and repression is reached, then reorganized and redeployed. We will see that the rivalries between Red Guards stimulate fratricidal struggles within the Ministry of Security, where accounts are settled with pistols in the corridors... In turn, each faction is eliminated: the rightists, then the revisionists, the leftists, then "the counter-revolutionaries", then "the official left", the "bastards" (families and dependents of the purged) and soon entire social categories (the "young red guards" who fought "the cadres and intellectuals", "stinking of the 9th category", find themselves at the end of the 1960s together in the laogai...), with, to crown it all, the army against the Security...

The 1970s were the years of the dissemination of confinement, which went hand in hand with the degradation of the control of the minds: it was impossible to find the slightest logic in politics, only violence gave a semblance of unity to the whole system.

The era of Deng Xiaoping (from 1978 to 1989) is a real thaw, Deng himself was a victim of the purges. The return of the deported former Red Guards and the rehabilitation of the "rightists" marked a new era. But unlike the post-Stalin era, when the Gulag was being eroded and dissidents were being hunted, Deng reinvented the laogai. Under his directives signed in 1983, each camp was transformed into a company, each camp director into a boss who had to make the system profitable. The laogai was a tool dedicated to infrastructure, mining or agricultural work. It became a key instrument of the Chinese economy. It is still used for the production of raw materials (mineral extraction, cotton, asbestos) but also for the production of basic goods, manufactured products and high technology. Everything which requires an abundant workforce and can be exported. Little by little, the objective of "rectification of thought" accompanied a mercantile vision of deportation: profitability allowed the perpetuation of the system of domination and subjugation. The laogai has become a place of absolute exploitation, the "reformation of minds" replaced by pure and simple slavery. Each camp director can now "rent out" his detainees to the big companies, then to the multinationals that are setting up shop.

The post-Tiananmen period (from 1989 to 2012) puts the question of the supremacy of the CCP back at the center of obsessions. The student revolt in 1989 made it obvious to the

regime that the slightest opening towards the rule of law meant its death in the short term. The demise of the Soviet Union in the wake of Perestroika only confirms the CCP's determination to revive the practice of terror on a large scale. The man hunts were aimed at eliminating dissent, but soon a new threat terrorized the pinnacle of power: the quest for spirituality embodied in the development of Falun Gong, an organization promoting the practice of qigong (slow gymnastics and meditation with a moralistic and apocalyptic background). A reorganization of the repressive system is entrusted to a new structure, the 610 Office, under the direction of the man who would modernize the entire surveillance system in China: Zhou Yongkang, head of public security and former CEO of oil giant CNPC. His turn would come in 2014.

The laogai is once again overflowing and benefits from the complicity of the largest multinationals. In the early 2000s, the export of goods produced at the laogai exceeded 10 billion euros. Even if the prisoners remain a workforce used for large-scale works, it is now BMW and Volkswagen, Uniqlo and H&M, Samsung and Apple, Louis Vuitton and Decathlon among hundreds of others that rent detainees via Chinese subcontractors.

The revival of ethnic cleansing (from 2012 to now) and the creation of "black prisons" for intellectuals and dissidents. The CCP was panicked by the Arab revolutions. It has renewed itself since Xi came to power: the ideological matrix is now nationalistic and expansionist. The surveillance system uses the latest technologies, Artificial Intelligence and digital data storage, as well as propaganda, which is becoming an entertainment industry. The CCP integrates complex data into its surveillance system, which is basically violent, combining legal, legislative, media and digital work with brute force and classical coercion techniques. The engulfment of Hong Kong took only six years. Numerous accounts have highlighted a parallel system of confinement, the "black prisons" reserved for intellectuals and political dissidents, but also for petitioners for special treatment. For the masses, they are often the antechamber of the laogai. The cleansing of Xinjiang after Tibet completes the work of total domination over 1.4 billion people.

We can include in this construction incisions on the two regimes that pushed the logic of laogai to the extreme: Kampuchea during the Khmer Rouge era and North Korea.

It is this project and its history that we want to tell. The point of view is relevant, spectacular and accessible to the widest possible audience. It allows us to understand the China of today, the true nature of its regime, the reactions of Chinese civil society, its level of submission and revolt, its relationship to power, but also the passive complicity of the West, and Europe in particular. Despite knowing how the biggest brands have produced in China for 30 years, Western countries are delighted to import thousands of products manufactured in the camps.

PRODUCTION NOTE

We plan to deliver the series just before the crucial event in Chinese politics - in the fall of 2022, the announced coronation of Xi Jinping during the 20th Congress of the CCP.

It is not reasonable to consider a serious shooting in China today – anyone who accepts to tell the truth about laogai would run a serious risk of being arrested and sent to laogai.

We have been able to film former prisoners outside the country. The famous artist Ai Weiwei, the most important dissident (Chinese Soljenitsine) Wei Jingseng, leaders of the Tiananmen events, survivors of campaigns of 1956-1962 and the repressions of the Cultural revolution and the most recent Uyghur and Tibet victims shared with us their personal stories.

A large selection of film archives help to bring our viewers inside the repression machine:

- The Chinese authorities have alternated between two attitudes, from the beginning: total secrecy for the foreigners, edifying propaganda for the Chinese. Each period is, as in the Soviet archives, illustrated by official films praising the "good" re-education, the effectiveness of the method. Regularly, public executions, in full stadiums or next to graves, are captured to "give the masses something to think about". The official texts are abundant, from the hand of Mao himself, and then from his successors. The use of revolutionary violence is not a taboo within the CCP. Its codification is official.
- Russian archives are full of rare documents from the 1940s and 1950s to 1962.
- Since the return of the former Red Guards from deportation, after the death of Mao, dissident networks have been documenting the Chinese concentration camp world. Photos, drawings, maps, videos, biographies of the most important leaders, are centralized by these networks in the United States as well as in Asia, but also in Paris and Europe. They are fully accessible to us.
- In 1992, ARTE broadcast one of the first thematic evenings in its history, *Clandestine in China*. Among the material, we brought back from China, a 52' dedicated to the laogai contained strong sequences we shot around camps after the 1989 massacre, with hidden camera confrontations between torturing prison guards and a former prisoner.
- In addition to dissidents, the post-1989 repressions targeted religious organizations (mainly Falun Gong, but also the Catholic Church), which have their own documentation centers.
- The Sinicization of the Tibet Autonomous Region, and now the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, brings new images, in an "ethnic cleansing" version of the problem.

- Several Chinese documentary filmmakers have, since the 1990s, produced leading works, mostly semi-confidential, including Hu Jie, Ai Xiaoming, Xiaolu Guo, and Xu Xing, and of course the work of Wang Bing, notably *The Gap* and the hundred or so interviews he collected with the victims of the laogai.

Visual and emotional dimension of the series relies in part on the original drawings made specially for our series by a Chinese artist.

The two authors of the film represent simply the best possible casting we could get. We prefer to keep their names secret until the end of the production.

We asked a world-renowned historian on contemporary China to be co-author of the project. He is a great storyteller, familiar with the mysteries of Chinese power, intimate with dissidents of all generations, a friend of the most advanced Chinese documentary filmmakers, and the author of numerous reference books. He likes to put his relevance and knowledge at the service of cinematographic stories.

The director is a multi-award winner (Emmy Awards, BAFTA) and has been collaborating with Brian Lapping for many years. In addition to her recognized talent, she has a great knowledge of contemporary China, is familiar with the world of the Comintern, knows the thinking of the Chinese leaders for having rubbed shoulders in Moscow with many children of the Chinese nomenklatura, themselves victims of the regime's repeated purges. She has already filmed an investigative documentary in China and knows the difficulties that await us.

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