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# Cultural Trauma Construction of the Necropolitical Jiabiangou Laojiao Camp

Yenna Wu\*

## ABSTRACT

The first eighteen years of the twenty-first century witnessed a group of newly produced, fact-based narratives and films focusing on the Jiabiangou *laojiao* (reeducation-through-labor) camp (1957-61). While uncovering the buried memories of the Jiabiangou tragedy, these works also help to evoke and define, and thus construct, the "cultural trauma" experienced by the falsely accused "Rightist" inmates, who suffered tremendous losses due to such Chinese Communist Party-manufactured disasters as the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957-58) and the Great Leap Forward Famine (1958-62). This article suggests that in writing from the perspective of ordinary victims, these works also serve as an unofficial counterhistory to fill in the gaping holes and help correct the falsehoods in the dominant top-down official history. The article maintains that despite the Communist regime's attempt to portray the lao jiao camps in positive transformative terms, these works confirm how the Jiabiangou camp (along with its Mingshui annex) actually turned into a "necropolitical" site of slow violence, mass starvation and death. The article further proposes that, given the PRC government's increasing censorship at home and abroad in recent years, concerned global scholars and citizens should take responsibility to ensure these narratives are told and studied. Taiwan, in particular, can play a critical role in helping to expose and preserve knowledge of this cultural trauma and to draw additional global attention and cooperation to this endeavor.

**Keywords:** cultural trauma, Jiabiangou labor camp, lao jiao (reeducation-through-labor), Anti-Rightist Campaign, Great Famine, biopolitics, necropolitics

## INTRODUCTION

In a 1988 interview, the literary critic Li Tuo complained that the ex-inmate writer Zhang Xianliang (1936-2014) grossly understated the actual

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suffering from hunger by Chinese labor camp inmates in his 1984 novella *Lühuashu*:

"It only shows the double standard between what we know and what we write. . . The man in that story suffered? Yes, he suffered. But he still did eat. And he could write. He even had a woman's love. You think that was the worst of labor reform? Nonsense! I know a man who went to a camp that held thousands. He and only six others came back. Seven out of thousands. But nobody writes about that."<sup>1</sup>

Li Tuo was right in charging Zhang for failing to expose truthfully the pain of inmates' hunger in his novella. In his romantic prison fiction, Zhang might have refrained from a full disclosure of this topic due to political, aesthetic, or commercial/marketing considerations. Nevertheless, to do Zhang justice, he did explore the psychological anguish of some intellectual prisoners when undergoing the enforced process of "remolding" (*gaizao*) through hard labor.<sup>2</sup>

Zhang Xianliang later vindicated himself of Li's charge by publishing his prison camp memoir *Wode putishu* (1994).<sup>3</sup> Presumably "annotating," explicating, and supplementing his brief diary entries written in a Ningxia prison camp from July 11 to December 20, 1960, Zhang offers many reminiscences and reflections that divulge his and other inmates' suffering during the famine.<sup>4</sup> Apparently he was more willing to reveal the cruel reality of hunger and hard labor in a non-fictional genre like a memoir than in the genre of romantic fiction. Zhang also criticizes Mao Zedong and his absurd policies directly or indirectly. At one point Zhang recalls a Muslim fellow inmate's "counterrevolutionary" view about Mao's regime using hunger to control people: "Only by making the people endure hunger can you make them submit to you, worship you."<sup>5</sup> However, Zhang's labor camp in Ningxia was not as deadly as the one mentioned in Li Tuo's quote above. Near the end of the memoir, Zhang recollects how, unable to endure hunger any longer, in January 1961 he escaped to the outside; yet, discovering that the starvation outside his camp was far worse, he ended up returning to his camp voluntarily—at least he could have a little food there.<sup>6</sup>

In comparison to Zhang Xianliang's camp in Ningxia, the Jiabiangou *laojiao* (reeducation-through-labor) camp in the desert area of Jiuquan, Gansu, was much more horrible. In the first eighteen years of the twenty-first century, the Jiabiangou camp tragedy became the focus of a group of newly produced, often fact-based, narratives and films. We find memoirs from ex-inmates such as He Fengming's (1932- ) *Jingli: wode 1957 nian*, in which she

recounts her husband Jinghang's (1922-20) *Xunzhao jiayuan*.<sup>7</sup> N by non-ex-inmate w anhui's (1946- ) nin *wenxue* (Shanghai I publications, *Gaobie* Gansu-based writer tion, we find, for ex in the 1980s, record survivors he interv Jiabiangou include 2010), Ai Xiaoming umentary film, *Jiabi* (2017); and Wang l *linghun*, 2018).

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1 Quoted in Perry Link, *The Uses of Literature: Life in the Socialist Chinese Literary System* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 145-46. Link interviewed Li Tuo on November 24, 1988, in Beijing. An English version of Zhang's *Lühuashu* was published under the title, *Mimosa* (San Francisco: China Books, 1985).

2 See Yenna Wu, "Traumatic 'Remolding' and Its Ethical Implications in Three of Zhang Xianliang's Novels," in *Remolding and Resistance among Writers of the Chinese Prison Camp: Disciplined and Published*, ed. Philip F. Williams and Yenna Wu (London: Routledge, 2006), 27-67.

3 Zhang Xianliang, *Wode putishu* [My bodhi tree] (Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1994). Martha Avery translated Part One and Part Two of this book into English in two books: *Grass Soup* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1995) and *My Bodhi Tree* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1996).

4 Jeffrey C. Kinkley, "Labor-camp Fiction as Conversion Literature: Zhang Xianliang and Ōoka Shōhei," in Williams and Wu, *Remolding and Resistance*, 68-100; Yenna Wu, "Surviving Traumatic Captivity, Arriving at Wisdom: An Aesthetics of Resistance in Chinese Prison Camp Memoir," in *Human Rights, Suffering, and Aesthetics in Political Prison Literature*, ed. Yenna Wu and Simona Livescu (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 47-86, especially 71-80.

5 Zhang Xianliang, *Wode putishu*, 100; Zhang Xianliang, *Grass Soup*, 179.

6 Zhang Xianliang, *My Bodhi Tree*, translated by Martha Avery (London: Minerva, 1997), 217-20.

7 He Fengming, *Jin chubanshe*, 2006); Li Jin youxian gongsi, 2003). ( PRC— Gao Ertai, *Xunzha* she, 2004)—then in a ful INK yinke wenxue sheng

8 Seven of Yang Xia Xianhui *zhong duan pian*: dle- and short-length sto published in Yang's *Gaob* she, 2003) and later in *Ji* she, 2008). Zhao Xu, *Fe* Co., 2013).

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recounts her husband's death in Jiabiangou; the persecuted Christian Li Jinghang's (1922-2016) *Meng'en licheng*, and the artist Gao Ertai's (1931- ) *Xunzhao jia yuan*.<sup>7</sup> Notable works among the group also include productions by non-ex-inmate writers and directors. In fictional genre, we find Yang Xianhui's (1946- ) nineteen short stories, first published in the journal *Shanghai wenxue* (Shanghai literature) in 2000-2003 and later fully collected in two publications, *Gaobie Jiabiangou* (2003) and *Jiabiangou jishi* (2008), as well as Gansu-based writer Zhao Xu's (1954- ) novel *Fengxue Jiabiangou*.<sup>8</sup> In non-fiction, we find, for example, that Zhao Xu, who began investigating the tragedy in the 1980s, records the testimonial accounts and some brief memoirs of the survivors he interviewed in *Jiabiangou can'an fangtanlu*.<sup>9</sup> Film productions on Jiabiangou include Wang Bing's (1967- ) feature film *Jiabiangou* (*The Ditch*; 2010), Ai Xiaoming's (1953- ) five-part interview-based 409-minute-long documentary film, *Jiabiangou jishi* or *Jiabiangou Elegy: Life and Death of the Rightists* (2017); and Wang Bing's 495-minute-long documentary film *Dead Souls* (*Si linghun*, 2018).

Together, these works uncover the buried memories of the Jiabiangou tragedy, and explore and investigate truths about the labor camp from the perspectives of ordinary individual victims. Recovering historically truthful memories from the ground up, they serve as an unofficial counterhistory to fill in the gaping holes and help correct the falsehoods in the dominant top-down official history. Moreover, these works help to evoke and define, and thus construct, the geopolitically-specific "cultural trauma" experienced by the falsely accused "Rightist" inmates, who suffered tremendous losses due to such Chinese Communist Party (CCP)-manufactured disasters as the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957-58) and the Great Leap Forward Famine (1958-62).

Drawing information mostly from survivors' testimonial accounts, I suggest that these works help interrogate and correct misconceptions about the Anti-Rightist Campaign created by the PRC authorities' dominating discourse and censorship. Furthermore, I maintain that despite the CCP regime's attempts to portray the lao jiao camps in constructively transformative terms, these works help reveal how the Jiabiangou camp, especially its Mingshui annex, actually turned from a supposedly positively biopolitical learning environment into a "necropolitical" site of slow violence, mass starvation and death.

The PRC government has been blocking grassroots efforts to investigate this tragedy, memorialize the victims, and reveal the cultural trauma it created. Given the regime's increasing censorship at home and abroad in recent years, the traumatic claims of Jiabiangou victims have encountered even

7. He Fengming, *Jingli: wode 1957 nian* [Experience: my 1957] (Lanzhou: Dunhuang wenyi chubanshe, 2006); Li Jinghang, *Meng'en licheng* [Blessed journey] (Hong Kong: Tianma tushu youxian gongsi, 2003). Gao Ertai's memoir was first published in a censored version in the PRC—Gao Ertai, *Xunzhao jia yuan* [In search of my homeland] (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 2004)—then in a full version published in Taiwan—Gao Ertai, *Xunzhao jia yuan* (Xinbei Shi: INK yinke wenxue shenghuo zazhi chubanshe youxian gongsi, 2009).

8. Seven of Yang Xianhui's nineteen stories were first published in his *Jiabiangou jishi: Yang Xianhui zhong duan pian xiaoshuo ji* [Accounts of Jiabiangou: a collection of Yang Xianhui's middle- and short-length stories] (Tianjin: Tianjin guji chubanshe, 2002). All nineteen stories were published in Yang's *Gaobie Jiabiangou* [Farewell, Jiabiangou] (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 2003) and later in *Jiabiangou jishi* [Accounts of Jiabiangou] (Guangzhou: Huacheng chubanshe, 2008). Zhao Xu, *Fengxue Jiabiangou* [Blizzardly Jiabiangou] (Taipei: Showwe Information Co., 2013).

9. Zhao Xu, *Jiabiangou can'an fangtanlu* [Interviews with the survivors of the tragedy at Jiabiangou] (Washington, DC: The Laogai Research Foundation, 2008).

more obstruction in reaching wider audiences in China and abroad. I propose that concerned global scholars and citizens take responsibility to ensure these stories are told and studied. Taiwan, in particular, can play a critical role in helping to expose and preserve knowledge of this cultural trauma and to draw additional global attention to this endeavor.

#### THE JIABIANGOU LAOJIAO CAMP

A multitude of innocent people, many from the urban educated class, were falsely labeled "Rightists" during the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957-58) and confined in laojiao ("reeducation-through-[forced, hard] labor") camps, and many perished from hard labor, hunger and mistreatment during the Great Famine (1958-62). Among them, well over three thousand Rightists were enslaved in the Jiabiangou labor camp ("Jiabiangou Farm") and later also the Mingshui camp ("Farm") in Gansu Province from October 1957 to January 1961.<sup>10</sup>

Of all the labor camps in China's northwest Gansu Province, Jiabiangou (in Jiuquan County) was the most horrific. First, located in the Gobi Desert, Jiabiangou was a windy, sandy, arid, and harsh area where the soil was too alkaline for cultivation and there was little water for irrigation or human consumption. While demanding especially heavy-duty labor, the "Farm" could hardly produce enough to sustain so many inmates. When their grain ration was reduced again and again after the Great Leap Forward started in 1958, the inmates began to starve. Yet they were forbidden from telling the truth to anyone outside or seeking aid.

Second, as He Fengming notes, Gansu's Laogai Bureau intentionally chose Jiabiangou—previously a laogai camp notorious for its harsh conditions—to be the only laojiao camp in Gansu to incarcerate mainly Rightists. According to her, most of the labor camps' leaders and guards—mainly from worker-peasant (*gongnong*) backgrounds—were not very well educated, and believed the government propaganda about the Rightists being vicious "anti-CCP, anti-socialist," "counterrevolutionary" elements. Since Jiabiangou incarcerated mainly Rightist laojiao inmates (unlike other camps in Gansu), the camp personnel regarded them as heinous criminals deserving of the most severe punishment, and therefore treated them inhumanely.<sup>11</sup> When a deputy bureau chief asked Zhangye region's CCP secretary An Zhen if it was proper for the Rightists in Jiabiangou to suffer so much, An Zhen replied, "If

10 Zhao Xu states that among the people sent to Jiabiangou, there were "Rightists," "Counterrevolutionaries," "Bad elements (*huai fenzi*)," "anti-party/anti-socialists," "offenders in corruption," and "elements who violated law and discipline." See Zhao Xu, "Gansu Jiuquan Jiabiangou laojiao nongchang" [The Jiabiangou reeducation-through-labor farm in Jiuquan, Gansu], in Zhao Xu, *Jiabiangou can'an fangtanlu*, 13. However, in this paper I refer to Jiabiangou inmates mostly as Rightists, following the practice of the writers and scholars who have written about Jiabiangou. The historian Ding Shu includes "anti-party/anti-socialists" and "bad elements" (criminalized due to their "Rightist" speeches) in his total count of those who were "capped" and punished owing to the Anti-Rightist Campaign. See Ding Shu, "Fanyou yundong zhong paifa le yibai bashiwan ding maozi" [The 1.8 million caps issued amid the Anti-Rightist Campaign], in Ding Shu, ed., *Wushinian hou chongping 'fanyou': Zhongguo dangdai zhishi fenzi de mingyun* [Critiquing the "Anti-Rightist Campaign" after fifty years: the fate of Chinese intellectuals] (Hong Kong: Tianyuan shuwu, 2007), 203.

11 He Fengming, *Jingli*, 56; and Sebastian Veg, "Testimony, History and Ethics: From the Memory of Jiabiangou Prison Camp to a Reappraisal of the Anti-Rightist Movement in Present-Day China," *The China Quarterly* 218 (June 2014): 525. Veg notes He Fengming's assertion that "the choice of Jiabiangou, and later Mingshui, reveals an intention on the part of the authorities to 'exterminate intellectuals.'"

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it were during Stalin's time, all of these people would have been executed. We let them come for labor-remolding—that is, giving them the best way out." The leadership thus set the tone from the beginning, condemning the Rightists to suffer from hard labor in Gansu's harshest camp.<sup>12</sup>

Third, although the health of all inmates seriously declined and quite a few had already perished by summer 1960, the majority of the remaining inmates, about two thousand-plus, were forced to move to Mingshui (in Gaotai County) in late September 1960, supposedly to cultivate the barren desert into farmland. The conditions in Mingshui were far worse than in Jiabiangou. As there were no camp facilities, the debilitated inmates had to dig caves in the sides of gullies or underground for their lodging and did not have proper shelter or heating to withstand the freezing cold. Meanwhile, their already low food ration was reduced further to twelve catties (about 15.6 pounds) of unhusked grain per person per month.<sup>13</sup> Suffering from extreme starvation and cold, many died and their bodies were not properly buried. In January 1961, when most of the inmates were finally allowed to return home temporarily, only a few hundred survived.

Exactly how many were incarcerated at Jiabiangou and Mingshui, and how many died by January 1961? According to the statistics in a CCP Gansu provincial committee's classified document, the number of the Rightists, counterrevolutionaries, and other "bad" elements sent to Jiabiangou totaled 2369.<sup>14</sup> The writer Yang Xianhui, in his "Xiezu shouji (dai ba)," provides two sets of inconsistent figures. At first, Yang mentions that some former Rightist inmates told him, "beginning from October 1957," the Jiabiangou Farm "incarcerated 3000 Rightists," and in December 1960, "only several hundred remained alive."<sup>15</sup> But then, Yang switches to official figures, saying that "a total of 2400-odd people underwent reeducation-through-labor" at Jiabiangou; in September 1960, most of the inmates were transferred to Mingshui to cultivate the land; and in December 1960, there were "1100 people"—emaciated survivors—in Jiabiangou.<sup>16</sup> Based on the unofficial figures Yang obtained from the ex-inmates, we can estimate around 2500 out of 3000 inmates perished in Jiabiangou. By contrast, the official figures reported by Yang indicate that only about 1300 out of 2400 inmates died there.

Using newly opened provincial party archives, the historian Frank Dikötter wrote:

"In Jiabiangou, . . . the first batch of 2300 prisoners arrived in December 1957. By the time the inmates were moved to another farm in September 1960, a thousand had died in abject conditions. This was followed by a further 640 deaths in November and December, when the camp was finally closed down in the wake of Zhang Zhongliang's fall from power."<sup>17</sup>

The death toll as reported by Dikötter would be 1640 out of 2300—a higher rate than that of "1300 out of 2400," the official figures reported by Yang Xianhui. Nevertheless, Dikötter is aware of the general limitations of using

12 He Fengming, *Jingli*, 58-59.

13 Zhao Xu, "Gansu Jiuquan Jiabiangou laojiao nongchang," 17.

14 The figure 2369 appears in the classified document, "Gansu shengwei Ganfa (64) #60," cited in Zhao Xu, "Gansu Jiuquan Jiabiangou laojiao nongchang," 13.

15 Yang Xianhui, "Xiezu shouji (dai ba)" [Notes on writing—a postscript], in Yang Xianhui, *Jiabiangou*, 355.

16 Ibid., 356.

17 Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962* (New York: Walker & Co., 2010), 289; see also p. 398, note 8, in which Dikötter refers only to Yang Xianhui's official figures

CCP archives for sources. He declares at one point, "In short, the entire record of the Maoist era, as reflected in official and internally published sources, is a skillful exercise in obfuscation and, as such, an inadequate basis for historical research."<sup>18</sup>

According to Zhao Xu, a total of over 3500 Rightists were incarcerated in the Jiabangou camp from October 1957 to early 1961. Zhao based his estimates on the reports of two surviving ex-inmates La Jinhua and Si Jicai, who had seen relevant documents in Jiabangou on different occasions. Zhao indicates that the Jiabangou camp leadership as well as the CCP Gansu provincial committee at that time deliberately undercounted the number of inmates and the number of dead, while grossly inflating the survival rate to fifty percent, in order to deceive people and dodge the blame.<sup>19</sup> In fact, by January 1961, fewer than three hundred from Mingshui survived.<sup>20</sup> The number of survivors from Jiabangou, Mingshui, and the Shitangou mine, plus escapees, totaled a bit over five hundred.<sup>21</sup> This equals at most a fifteen percent survival rate.

Furthermore, local officials not only falsely claimed that half of the inmates survived, but also tried to cover up the reasons for the mass deaths. As witnessed and reported by a survivor Wang Zhi, camp authorities had deceased inmates' files fabricated in order to attribute their deaths to various types of diseases, thereby erasing the real cause of their deaths—mainly starvation and hunger-related problems.<sup>22</sup> Due to the official cover-up, after the closure of the Jiabangou labor camp in October 1961, the truth of this tragedy was buried and the camp forgotten.<sup>23</sup>

The authorities have continued to repress this memory even now, and have refused to let the survivors or their families commemorate the deceased victims publicly at Jiabangou. They have also developed Jiabangou into a resort village. Nevertheless, a few dedicated surviving victims and family members worked hard to build a small graveyard and erect a tombstone for the deceased at Jiabangou in October 2013. In the preface to his 2014 book, Zhao Xu excitedly mentioned that a tombstone for the Jiabangou victims was finally erected, and it would also serve as the tombstone for the numerous intellectuals who were persecuted to death due to the Anti-Rightist Campaign.<sup>24</sup> However, as reported by Ai Xiaoming, both the tombstone and the graveyard were destroyed in November 2013 by the local authorities. One of the postcards made by Ai Xiaoming in memory of Jiabangou victims includes a picture of the tombstone and the dates of its erection and destruction. Ai's film *Jiabangou Elegy* documents the difficult process of this endeavor as well as the authorities' continuing prohibition of any memorial service at Jiabangou. In fact, the film opens with Ai's secret recording of armed police

18 Ibid., 341-44. The quote is from p. 344.

19 Zhao Xu, "Gansu Jiuquan Jiabangou nongchang" [The Jiabangou camp in Jiuquan, Gansu], in Zhao Xu, *Fanyou yundong Jiabangou can'an xingcunzhe zhengyan* [Testimonies of the survivors of the Anti-Rightist Campaign's Jiabangou tragedy] (Taipei: Xinrui wenchuang, 2014), 28.

20 According to Si Jicai, an ex-inmate, no more than 300 survived Mingshui. See Zhao Xu, *Jiabangou can'an fangtanlu*, 405.

21 Zhao Xu, "Gansu Jiuquan Jiabangou nongchang," 33.

22 Ibid., 28-29.

23 Yang Xianhui, "Xiezuo shouji," 356.

24 Zhao Xu, "Lishi buhui wangji: zixu" [History cannot forget: preface] in Zhao Xu, *Fanyou yundong*, 15.

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27 Alexander, "For

28 Ibid., 12-15.

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blocking Ai and some survivors from entering Jiabiangou to perform a memorial ceremony for the deceased on Tomb Sweeping Day in 2014.<sup>25</sup>

#### CONSTRUCTING THE CULTURAL TRAUMA OF THE JIABIANGOU LAOJIAO CAMP

According to cultural sociologist Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their identity in fundamental and irreversible ways."<sup>26</sup> The "construction" of such instances of cultural trauma begins when the "carrier groups" (Max Weber's term), the "collective agents of the trauma process," make "group representations" or articulate their "claims" in the public sphere. Using speech act theory to define the trauma process, Alexander distinguishes the "speaker" (the carrier group), "audience" (the public), and "situation." The goal of the carrier group is "persuasively to project the trauma claim to the audience-public." When successful, the audience for the "traumatic claim" can be broadened from "the members of this originating collectivity" to "include other publics within the 'society at large.'"<sup>27</sup> Alexander identifies four critical representations that are "essential to the creation of a new master narrative": "the nature of the pain," "the nature of the victim," "relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience," and "attribution of responsibility."<sup>28</sup>

Perceived from this theoretical framework, Yang Xianhui, a non-ex-inmate writer, should be counted among the first to represent the pain of the Jiabiangou victims and to project the Jiabiangou "trauma claim" to the audience-public in China. Employing much fictional guise and refraining from criticizing the central authorities so as to avoid censorship, Yang managed to publish nineteen semi-fictional "stories" between 2000 and 2003 about the experiences of a number of Jiabiangou inmates in the then relatively liberal *Shanghai wenxue*. These stories re-construct erased traces and times, while detailing certain inmates' lived experiences, sufferings, escapes, deaths, or survivals. Yang depicts the drastic degeneration of the Rightists' bodies and morals due to extreme deprivation, hard labor, and mistreatment by camp personnel.<sup>29</sup> The readers impacted emotionally by the stories included not only some members of the "originating collectivity" but also other publics. All nineteen stories were later published in two complete editions.<sup>30</sup> The publication in 2009 of an English translation of thirteen stories further spread the trauma claim to an international audience.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Ai Xiaoming, *Jiabiangou jishi* (*Jiabiangou Elegy: Life and Death of the Rightists*), 2017, episode 1.

<sup>26</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," in Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka, *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1. Note Xu Ben has proposed the construction of the cultural trauma of the "Rightists," using some of Yang Xianhui's Jiabiangou stories as an example. See Xu Ben, "Wushinianhou de fanyou chuangshang jiyi" [Remembering the trauma of the Anti-Rightist Campaign fifty years later], in Ding Shu, ed., *Wushinian hou chongping "fanyou,"* 405-408.

<sup>27</sup> Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," 11-12.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 12-15.

<sup>29</sup> See also the discussion of Yang Xianhui's stories in Veg, "Testimony, History and Ethics."

<sup>30</sup> Yang Xianhui, *Gaobie Jiabiangou* (2003) and *Jiabiangou jishi* (2008).

<sup>31</sup> Yang Xianhui, *Woman from Shanghai: Tales of Survival from a Chinese Labor Camp*, translated by Wen Huang (New York: Anchor Books, 2009). This translation abridged and revised the original Chinese text.



However, due to the fictionalization process, the victims' pain represented in Yang Xianhui's stories might be questioned and the projected trauma claim somewhat weakened. In comparison, victim testimonies and memoirs strike the readers as more authentic, credible, and less ambivalent. For example, Zhao Xu's collection of victim testimonies projects a strong trauma claim through survivor accounts of the injustice and suffering they endured. Rejected by Gansu's major publishing company in 1994 and other PRC publishers, Zhao's collection of the accounts of fifty-nine individuals with their real names and photos was eventually published by The Laogai Research Foundation in the U.S. in 2008.<sup>32</sup> Yet, it was only through its expanded, updated, and newly edited version published in Taiwan in 2014—which includes accounts of seventy individuals—that the trauma claims began to reach more overseas Chinese as well as some Chinese in the PRC.<sup>33</sup>

Though of a younger generation, Zhao Xu has played a key role in seeking out the members of the "originating collectivity," identifying individual victims, and enabling them to become the "collective agents of the trauma process," make meaningful "group representations," articulate (albeit in a relatively limited fashion) their authentic "claims" in the public sphere, and even identify the perpetrators. His dedication to finding the truth was partially motivated by personal reasons—a dozen of his family and clan members were wrongly condemned as Rightists, and his great uncle starved to death in Jiabiangou. Beginning his investigation in 1985, Zhao found that some survivors refused to be interviewed or were too afraid to talk, and some of the survivors' families and children worried about being implicated. Despite these obstacles, Zhao succeeded in taking the lead to empower victims, help them organize a "carrier group," and initiate exploration about the "attribution of responsibility."

Furthermore, certain survivors were courageous enough to pen their memoirs, and the detailed narrations of what they experienced and witnessed in Jiabiangou contributed immensely to cultural trauma construction. Li Jinghang's (1922-2016) memoir, *Meng'en licheng*, published in Hong Kong in 2003, is a good example.<sup>34</sup> Crediting his survival to God, Li explained he wrote the memoir to console the deceased victims and their surviving families, and to preserve "historical truth." Li wrote extensively about how camp cadres bullied and enslaved the inmates, and he castigated Gansu's ultra-leftist CCP leaders for condemning so many innocent people to barren lands for hard labor and starvation. He also expressed hope that all the people in the world would read his book. By no means as critical as Li's memoir, the artist Gao Ertai's (1935-) memoir, *Xunzhao jiayuan*, adds to trauma construction the different experiences and perspectives of an atypical ex-inmate. Residing in the U.S. since 1993, Gao Ertai first published his memoir, in a censored form, in China in 2004.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the memoir's publication in the PRC at least enabled the projection of a trauma claim to a mainland audience to some degree. Only in the edition published in Taiwan in 2009, though, can we find a complete, uncensored version that contains criticism of the CCP.<sup>36</sup>

32 Zhao Xu, *Jiabiangou can'an fangtanlu*.

33 Zhao Xu, *Fanyou yundong*.

34 Li Jinghang, *Meng'en licheng* (2003). Unable to acquire this book, I found Li's text online. <http://www.jidujiao.com/shuku/files/article/fulltext/0/675.html> (accessed February 21, 2017).

35 Gao Ertai, *Xunzhao jiayuan* (2004).

36 Gao Ertai, *Xunzhao jiayuan* (2009).

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Part of his memoir from the 2004 censored edition has also been translated into English.<sup>37</sup> The Taiwan edition and the English translation help disseminate this traumatic memory to overseas Chinese and to English readers.

The visual and sound effects created by the films on Jiabiangou are especially direct and powerful in projecting the "trauma claim" to the audience-public. Co-produced in Hong Kong, France and Belgium, Wang Bing's (1967-) feature film *Jiabiangou* (*The Ditch*, 2010) is based partially on some of Yang Xianhui's stories and partially on his own interviews of certain survivors, and focuses only on Mingshui after October 1, 1960. Ai Xiaoming's (1953-) five-part documentary film, *Jiabiangou Elegy* (2017), consists primarily of videotaped interviews of survivors, deceased victims' families, camp cadres, and authors, thereby providing various perspectives. Wang Bing's documentary film *Dead Souls* (*Si linghun*, 2018) emphasizes the individual accounts of the survivors he interviewed. Both documentaries strongly articulate the victims' sufferings and include the attribution of responsibility.

Initiated by these works, the processes of fact-finding, investigation, and construction of cultural trauma are still on-going. For example, in a number of accounts, the survivors blamed Mao and the CCP leadership for launching the Anti-Rightist Campaign, and Gansu province's ultra-leftist CCP secretary Zhang Zhongliang and Zhangye region's CCP secretary An Zhen for condemning so many people in Gansu as Rightists to suffer and die.<sup>38</sup> These survivor accounts sometimes also name the individuals that framed or informed against them, or falsely accused them of being Rightists. However, some survivors find it difficult to attribute responsibility because they actually had no inkling as to why they were sent to Jiabiangou and who were responsible.<sup>39</sup>

The order to start sending laoiao inmates in Jiabiangou and Mingshui back home in late December 1960 and January 1961 also draws considerable attention. Most survivors believe that the Party Central somehow heard about many inmates dying from starvation and so sent people quickly to their rescue. A survivor, Gao Xuwu (formerly an engineering mechanic in Zhangye region's Water Conservancy Bureau), for example, states, "Near the end of December 1960, Party Central sent people to rescue the remaining inmates and send them back home—thus we survived by a fluke."<sup>40</sup> Most survivors also credit their release in late 1960 to January 1961 to Qian Ying, the new Minister of Internal Affairs at that time. While the credit for saving lives at Jiabiangou should absolutely go to Qian Ying, it was in fact not the Party Central that dispatched Qian Ying to Jiabiangou. Si Jicai, an ex-inmate with insider knowledge, reports his and his fellow inmate Guan Jinwen's coincidental encounter with Qian Ying, and claims convincingly,

"It was a pure accident for Qian Ying to discover the inmates in Jiabiangou. It was not a case of Qian Ying rushing directly to Jiabiangou. Gansu province [leadership] had all along kept the conditions in Jiabiangou and other laoiao camps incarcerating Rightists absolutely secret."<sup>41</sup>

37 Er Tai Gao, *In Search of My Homeland: A Memoir of a Chinese Labor Camp*, translated by Robert Dorsett and David Pollard (New York: Ecco Press, 2009).

38 Zhao Xu, *Jiabiangou can'an fangtanlu*, 27.

39 Quite a few survivors attribute their survival to their families, especially their wives, who saved their limited food ration in order to bring some food to their beloved in Jiabiangou. See Zhao Xu, *Jiabiangou can'an fangtanlu*.

40 Ibid., 63.

41 Ibid., 404.

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Being released at that time did not mean the end of the Rightists' ordeal. As Gao Xuewu says, some of the survivors were again persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, "and so, those who are still alive now number fewer than a hundred."<sup>42</sup>

Ai Xiaoming's documentary *Jiabianguo Elegy* further brings the audience's attention to contemporary issues as she reveals the survivors' solidarity and activism in claim-making and commemoration. For example, in Episode 5, at a small, informal gathering of ex-Rightists, Zou Shimin, a female doctor in Lanzhou and a survivor, openly requests that the Party Central "make a public apology in the name of the state to those who suffered in the Anti-Rightist Campaign," provide financial compensations for former victims and their families and descendants, set up a memorial so as to "commemorate the deceased and also to warn future generations that such an era should be gone forever," etc. Unfortunately, as Ai Xiaoming and others have shown, the CCP government has continued to cover up the truth and obstruct the construction of cultural trauma by Jiabianguo victims and sympathizers. Nevertheless, such "group representations" and testimonials from Zhao Xu, Ai Xiaoming, and Wang Bing provide a platform for the victims, sympathizers, or activists to exercise their discursive agency and employ strategies to promote bottom-up commemoration of Jiabianguo.

#### INTERROGATING AND CORRECTING MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE ANTI-RIGHTIST CAMPAIGN

Information from survivor testimonials and other related accounts greatly help to interrogate and correct misrepresentations about the Anti-Rightist Campaign created by the PRC authorities' dominating discourse and censorship. Of course, well before these survivors and activists published their memoirs or made documentaries, many historians in democratic countries as well as in the PRC had uncovered the historical truth about the Anti-Rightist Campaign.<sup>43</sup> Many Chinese people also do not believe the official narrative, even if they might not admit it publicly. James C. Scott's distinction between "public transcripts" and "hidden transcripts" is useful here. In his definition, "hidden transcripts" refer to the "discourse that takes place 'off stage,' beyond direct observation by powerholders."<sup>44</sup> Counterhistory in the form of "hidden transcripts" never really disappears. However, it risks being suppressed and erased by the PRC's increasing censorship. These works on Jiabianguo thus help reinforce historical scholarship and the counterhistory in continuing to resist, interrogate, and correct the misrepresentations about the Anti-Rightist Campaign promoted by PRC authorities.

Most Jiabianguo survivors who were interviewed in various accounts felt they were wronged. They felt betrayed at least on two counts. First, though innocent and mostly loyal and obedient to the CCP, they were falsely accused of being Rightists or guilty because some innocuous remarks or minor criticisms were taken as anti-CCP. Often, they were wronged or framed by super-

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Ye Yonglie, *Fan youpai shimo* [The whole story of the Anti-Rightist Campaign] (Xining: Qinghai renmin chubanshe, 1995); Shen Zhihua, *Chuzai shizilukou de xuanze: 1956-1957 nian de Zhongguo* [Decision at the crossroads: China in 1956-1957] (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2013); Frank Dikötter, *The Tragedy of Liberation: A History of the Chinese Revolution 1945-1957* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 4.

<sup>45</sup> Yang Jisheng et during the Great Famin account of China's grea 2, 903. Frank Dikötter

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visors or colleagues, or by their units that needed to fill quotas for Rightists set for them by higher authorities. Some were even sent to Jiabiangou though they were not accused of any wrong-doing. Second, many of them were at first told by their supervisors that laoiao would focus on learning and remodeling, would be a good learning experience for them, and would not take more than half a year or one year, after which they would be able to return to their work and positions. What actually happened was quite the opposite.

The tragedy of the Jiabiangou labor camp was caused by the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Great Leap Forward Famine (1958-62)—two of the PRC's taboo topics. The PRC official position on the Anti-Rightist Campaign has been that it was "entirely correct and necessary." As for the Great Famine in which over forty million people died, PRC history refers to it only briefly as "three years' natural disasters."<sup>45</sup> The CCP official discourse has set the tone in how the historical events must be presented, and all the public mass media, schools, institutions, and work units have to toe the same line. Many older people who had been victimized and know some truth about these disasters often still fear to speak out, while a good number of the younger generations have been inculcated to believe the official history to be true. Of course, the younger generations are far from a monolithic entity, and quite a few do not believe the official version. Yet the PRC authorities' strict control and censorship impede the people and scholars inside China from engaging in public discussion and active research on the true causes of the Anti-Rightist Campaign.

An official CCP document, "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China," issued in 1981, presents charges against "a handful of bourgeois Rightists" who "seized the opportunity" during the rectification campaign to "mount a wild attack against the Party and the nascent socialist system in an attempt to replace the leadership of the Communist Party." Claiming that it was "therefore entirely correct and necessary to launch a resolute counter-attack," the document justifies the Anti-Rightist Campaign of 1957-58 as the Party's defending itself and the state against the "wild attack" from Rightists, thus clearly acquitting the CCP of any blame. Deng Xiaoping, who was after all one of the major perpetrators of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, was in charge of the drafting of this document and would surely not admit fault. Nevertheless, as Deng urgently needed the assistance of intellectuals in modernizing China at that time, this document did acknowledge that "the scope of this struggle was made far too broad and a number of intellectuals, patriotic people and Party cadres were unjustifiably labelled 'Rightists', with unfortunate consequences."<sup>46</sup> In other words, the Party's only fault was making the scope of the Anti-Rightist Campaign too broad.

How broad was its scope? The official figure given for number of "Rightists" identified by August 1959 was 450,000. It was only in 1978 when Hu Yaobang began to "correct" or redress unjust and wronged cases did the CCP

45 Yang Jisheng estimates 36 million people died unnaturally from starvation and torture during the Great Famine. See his *Mubei—Zhongguo liushi niandai dajihuang jishi* [Tombstone: an account of China's great famine in the 1960s], 2 volumes (Hong Kong: Tiandi tushu, 2008), vol. 2, 903. Frank Dikötter estimates 45 million unnatural deaths in his *Mao's Great Famine*.

46 "Resolution on Certain Questions in the History of Our Party Since the Founding of the People's Republic of China," 1981, Chinese Communism Subject Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/cpc/history/01.htm>.

administration realize how many more people were falsely labeled "Rightists"; in their final counting, they found up to ~~550,287~~ people were wrongly labeled "Rightists," and so they revised the figure to 550,000.<sup>47</sup> In fact, according to the historian Ding Shu's research, the official figure of 550,000 is still inaccurately low. The actual figure of those wrongly labeled and persecuted as various types of "Rightists" in 1957-58 should be revised upwards to 1.8 million.<sup>48</sup> All of these people were accused, extra-judicially, of being anti-CCP, anti-socialist Rightists, counterrevolutionaries, and so forth. The extra-legal, often ad-hoc and arbitrary nature of the charges against them meant that many of them never understood why they were accused and sent to labor camps. After being punished in labor camps for over twenty years, a number of them were shocked to discover that they did not even have a "wronged case" to be corrected, since there were from the beginning no "Rightist" charges in their files.

Official narratives have continued to minimize—or even avoid mentioning—the significance of the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Rightists' suffering. Ding Shu notes that a major chronicle of the first fifty years of the PRC (*Gongheguo wushinian dashiji*), compiled in 1999 by the China news agency (Zhongguo xinwenshe) contains only a very brief account of the Anti-Rightist Campaign. After citing an internally circulated directive by Mao and a *People's Daily* editorial on June 8, 1957, it simply notes,

"then, a campaign [*douzhen*, "fight" or "struggle"] to counterattack the bourgeois Rightists' attacks was launched nationwide. At the end of the summer of 1958, the Anti-Rightist Campaign was concluded. In 1959-1964, following the directives of the Party Central and Chairman Mao, [the CCP] removed most Rightists' labels in five batches."<sup>49</sup>

This misleading account fails to state the true cause or explain the actual happenings, and grossly understates the scope, length, and intensity, of the violent persecution that occurred. As Ding indicates, the Anti-Rightist Campaign is recounted as if it were a "just" counterattack, and as if the Rightist "criminals" were soon pardoned.<sup>50</sup> Nothing could be further from the truth. There were actually no "bourgeois Rightists' [wild] attacks," as alleged by Mao and the CCP. A total of over 1.8 million people were unjustly punished, and their families implicated. And numerous Rightists would not have their Rightist labels removed—i.e., be exonerated or "rehabilitated"—until 1978, after many of them had been incarcerated in labor camps for 20 years or more, or had even died.

While official narratives continue to insist that Mao started the Anti-Rightist Campaign as a good faith effort to counter unjustified attacks on the Party, a number of historians or former victims have argued that Mao's real motivation in urging people, especially non-CCP members, to criticize the CCP (especially during the Rectification Campaign [*zhengfeng yundong*] in the spring of 1957) was to trick them into speaking out and thereby unwittingly exposing themselves—i.e., "to lure the snakes out of their holes."<sup>51</sup>

Ding Shu's careful different wordings, Little did people reveal his plot to about his plan to let as much havoc as possible open, and to "settle" those who yearned for freedom schools of thought headed snake-bodies. Ding Shu, Mao played "ants" out so as to let 1957, when talking "Let them attack!... wreak havoc... let them lure the enemies into the net."<sup>54</sup>

By contrast, when in a few talks in May, parading verbiage was to be modest and simply promised that "those those who hear the Due to such public to speak out. None "wild attacks against

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47 Ding Shu, "Fanyou yundong," 194.

48 Ibid., 203.

49 Quoted in Ding Shu, "Lun 'yangmou'" [On "open conspiracy"], in Ding Shu, ed., *Wushinian hou chongping "fanyou,"* 119.

50 Quoted in Ibid., 119.

51 See, for example, Li Shenzhi, "Yinshe chudong kao" [On "luring the snakes out of their holes"], in Ding Shu, ed., *Wushinian hou chongping "fanyou,"* 108-18; and Ding Shu, *Yangmou: Fanyoupai yundong shimo* [Open conspiracy: the complete story of the Anti-Rightist Campaign] (Hong Kong: Kaifang chubanshe, 2007).

52 See the speech

53 See the speech

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55 Ibid., 99-100.

56 Yidi Wu, "Bloc Politics in China, 1957"

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Ding Shu's carefully documented study discloses that Mao in fact adopted different wordings, tones, and attitudes when targeting different audiences. Little did people realize that as early as January 1957 Mao had already revealed his plot to a select group of provincial Party secretaries: he talked about his plan to let the "ants" crawl out of their holes, let [Rightists] wreak as much havoc as possible, let the areas infected with "pus and bacteria" burst open, and to "settle accounts with them" (referring to the "bourgeois" Rightists who yearned for freedom and democracy) later. He said, "letting a hundred schools of thought contend is good for us, because it will let those ox-headed snake-bodied demons and bastards all come out."<sup>52</sup> As argued by Ding Shu, Mao planned to use the Hundred Flowers Campaign to lure the "ants" out so as to exterminate them all.<sup>53</sup> In a Hangzhou meeting in April 1957, when talking to high-ranking officials, Mao again referred to his plot, "Let them attack! . . . let all the ox demons and snake spirits (*niugui sheshen*) wreak havoc. . . let them castigate the CCP for a few months. . . this is not to 'lure the enemies in deep,' but to make them 'hurl themselves voluntarily into the net.'"<sup>54</sup>

By contrast, when speaking to lower-level cadres and non-Party members in a few talks in March 1957, Mao hid his brutal intentions and avoided disparaging verbiage while adopting a gentle attitude and discourse. Pretending to be modest and sincere in urging them to criticize the government, he even promised that "those who speak out will not be charged with a crime, while those who hear the criticism shall be warned" (*yanzhe wuzui, wenzhe zujie*).<sup>55</sup> Due to such public encouragement and promises, many people finally dared to speak out. Nonetheless, their criticism never amounted to the level of "wild attacks against the Party," as claimed by the CCP leadership.

In her study of student activism in China in 1957, Yidi Wu wrote that "almost all students and other intellectuals were not attempting to replace the Party leadership," and that the Anti-Rightist Campaign was "a misjudgment on the part of the authorities, and overkill against people who mostly trusted and supported the Party."<sup>56</sup> One might push her conclusion further to argue that *none* of the students and intellectuals was "attempting to replace the Party leadership," *none* of them broke the law, and *all* of them were innocent; and that the Anti-Rightist Campaign should not have been launched at all. Disagreeing with Yidi Wu's assertion about "a misjudgment on the part of the authorities," I agree with scholars such as Ding Shu and Li Shenzhi in regarding the Rectification Campaign and the subsequent Anti-Rightist Campaign as Mao's premeditated scheme to quash his imaginary enemies by encouraging them into actions that could be misconstrued as proving anti-Party sentiments.

Mao not only schemed to lure his imagined antagonists out and crush them, but also arbitrarily assumed that there must be at least five percent of "Rightists" hiding in each organization and work unit. On other occasions, Mao even cavalierly raised the percentage to ten or twenty percent for some non-CCP organizations.<sup>57</sup> As a result, different levels of Party officials and

52 See the speeches quoted in Ding Shu, *Yangmou*, 97-99.

53 See the speeches quoted in *Ibid.*, 101-102.

54 See the speeches quoted in *Ibid.*, 99.

55 *Ibid.*, 99-100.

56 Yidi Wu, "Blooming, Contending, and Staying Silent: Student Activism and Campus Politics in China, 1957" (PhD dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 2017), 259.

57 Ding Shu, "Fanyou yundong," 194.

committee secretaries in various organizations scrambled to meet or supersede the five percent target due to the fear of being punished, the need to obey the Party line and demonstrate loyalty to the CCP, and the desire for advancement, among other reasons. For example, quite a few universities "caught" well over five percent Rightist teachers and students, as reported by their Party committee secretaries.<sup>58</sup>

Non-official sources such as Jiabiangou survivors' memoirs, testimonial accounts, and interviews provide us with ample evidence of the traumatic experiences endured by many innocent people during this period. These accounts reveal how they were deceived by Mao's promise during the Rectification Campaign, and how they fell into the trap set by Mao and the CCP authorities. Contrary to the official master-narrative that exempts the CCP from blame, the non-official Jiabiangou narratives expose the Anti-Rightist Campaign to be an autocratic and arbitrary scheme and an exercise in regime brutality that extra-judicially punished 1.8 million people and deprived them of their civil and basic human rights.

A few sample cases of Jiabiangou survivors illustrate these points. During the "mingfang" (free airing of views) period in 1957, Sun Shu, a college student at a veterinarian school, was perplexed by an "abnormal" phenomenon: the three CCP groups in his class were mobilizing other people to voice their criticisms loudly, yet they themselves did not voice their views at all. "Why is it that ordinarily the CCP members would lead the way, but this time they do not take the lead, but only rally others to voice their views?" So Sun wrote an essay about his observation.<sup>59</sup> Although Sun was unaware of Mao's scheme "to lure the snakes out of their holes," his observation corroborates the unofficial argument about Mao's conspiracy. Though not attacking the CCP or socialism, Sun Shu's innocuous essay later became one of the pieces of "criminal" evidence used against him. His family's historical and class background (his father was formerly a KMT member who had worked in the Nationalist government before 1949 and one of his uncles was in Taiwan) also contributed to Sun's "criminal" evidence.<sup>60</sup> From Sun's account, we find that the percentage of falsely charged students was much higher than five percent: nine of the fifty students in Sun's class, and four of the seven students in Sun's dormitory room, were also labeled as Rightists.<sup>61</sup>

The case of Min Huiping demonstrates how even a truthful observation made casually to a friend could be distorted into a slander against the CCP. Min was working at a construction company in Lanzhou.

One day in 1958, I suddenly received a letter from home, saying that my mother was ill. I requested leave and hurried home. Returning to my village, I was shocked to find it very desolate and completely changed from the past when it was bustling with activities and people. Entering my home, I found that all the pots, door locks, and miscellaneous iron wares were gone. Moreover, there was not one single grain left in the house, as all the grains were submitted to the brigade and production team.

Min told one of her friends about it, and her friend quickly informed against her. Min observes,

At that time we were not allowed to say people were starving, and we were absolutely forbidden to say that people died from starvation. In socialism, the situation is forever

completely excellent  
izing socialism.<sup>62</sup>

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58 Ibid., 194-96.

59 Zhao Xu, *Jiabiangou can'an fangtanlu*, 99. Sun Shu's essay was entitled "Yihu xunchang de zhenjing" [The extraordinary calm].

60 Zhao Xu, *Jiabiangou can'an fangtanlu*, 99.

61 Ibid., 99.

62 Ibid., 219.

63 Ibid., 266.

64 Ibid., 343.

65 Ibid., 89-90.

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67 Zhao Xu, *Jiabiangou*

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Min's company then labeled her as Rightist, using her to make their quota, and sent her to Jiabangou for lao jiao. This case also reveals how the CCP's divide-and-conquer tactic led to ordinary people's betrayal of their friends and families.

Unlike Sun Shu or Min Huiping, Wang Zhi never voiced any opinion about the CCP and had always obeyed the Party. A writer in the army troupe in Lanzhou military region, Wang was too busy working to express any opinion during the period of "free airing of views" in 1957. However, in the spring of 1958, due to the need to fill their quota of Rightists, the army used a play Wang wrote to frame Wang for being a Rightist, and sent him to Jiabangou. Wang said that only the best of the troupe—those who were good at writing and performing—were condemned as Rightists, while the mediocre ones escaped persecution.<sup>63</sup>

We find a similar case in Zhao Tiemin. A graduate from Peking University's mathematics department, Zhao Tiemin volunteered to "support the Great Northwest" in 1951 and went to teach at a high school in Tianshui, Gansu. He was labeled a Rightist simply because his school needed to submit one more Rightist in order to meet their quota.<sup>64</sup>

Lower-ranking local officials who were upright, conscientious, and loyal could be condemned as Rightists simply because they inadvertently offended a Party secretary. At twenty-three years of age, Qi Luji was serving as deputy county mayor of Jinta county when they received the notification telling the cadres to participate in the Rectification Campaign. At those meetings, these low-level officials were urged to express their opinions about the CCP. Qi initially did not want to say anything, but, inspired by another official, he decided to help the CCP rectify itself. Qi then spoke at a meeting, addressing the county committee CCP secretary Gao Jinguang, and raised a number of suggestions to correct some malpractices in the county.<sup>65</sup> In Ai Xiaoming's *Jiabangou Elegy*, Qi Luji recalls,

We freely aired our views for 15 days. Then people felt that something was wrong: every day comments were recorded, and the records were sealed. Why did they seal the records when we were only commenting casually? . . . so people gradually stopped speaking out.<sup>66</sup>

This observation again divulged Mao's scheme at work. Later, when the period of "free airing of views" ended, and the Anti-Rightist Campaign started, Qi was denounced and beaten at struggle sessions. When Qi protested, declaring, "What I said was all true," Gao Jinguang replied, "When you attacked me, you're rebelling against the Party. Rebelling against the Party is rebelling against socialism." Trying to force Qi to confess falsely to being a "counterrevolutionary," they had Qi struggled against for seventy-three days, often deprived of rest. Qi observed, "they wanted you to collapse completely in body and spirit."<sup>67</sup>

62 Ibid., 219.

63 Ibid., 266.

64 Ibid., 343.

65 Ibid., 89-90.

66 See Episode One in Ai Xiaoming, *Jiabangou jishi*.

67 Zhao Xu, *Jiabangou can'an fangtanlu*, 90.



FROM BIOPOLITICS TO NECROPOLITICS: JIABANGOU AND  
MINGSHUI LAOJIAO CAMPS

In his essay "Society Must Be Defended," Michel Foucault argued that in the nineteenth century "sovereignty's old right—to take life or let live" was "complemented by a new right"—"the right to make live and to let die."<sup>68</sup> Foucault claimed that the "disciplinary technology of labor"—including surveillance, hierarchies, inspections, etc.—was "established at the end of the seventeenth century, and in the course of the eighteenth," while a new technology of power, a "nondisciplinary" power, emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century, and used the disciplinary technology by "embedding itself in existing disciplinary techniques."<sup>69</sup> The new nondisciplinary power was "applied not to man-as-body but to the living man, to man-as-living-being," directed "not at man-as-body but at man-as-species," and is "a 'biopolitics' of the human race."<sup>70</sup> This biopolitics involves such processes as the birth rate, mortality rate, etc., together with "related economic and political problems."<sup>71</sup> Other scholars have continued to develop Foucault's use of the term "biopolitics," despite his problematic periodization.

As interpreted by Achille Mbembe, in Foucault's formulation, "biopower appears to function through dividing people into those who must live and those who must die," and it divides the population into "subgroups," and into "the ones and the others."<sup>72</sup> Contending that "contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death (necropolitics) profoundly reconfigure the relations among resistance, sacrifice, and terror," and finding the notion of biopower "insufficient to account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death," Mbembe proposes the notion of "necropolitics and necropower" to "account for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*."<sup>73</sup> Using the plantation as an example, Mbembe suggests that "the slave condition results from a triple loss: loss of a 'home,' loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status"; and the triple loss is identical with absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether).<sup>74</sup>

The totalitarian Mao regime wielded arbitrary state biopower and biopolitics to control people's lives and divide people into "those who must live and those who must die." Many Rightists were arbitrarily chosen, branded and grouped as "the others" (*linglei*; or, "the blacklisted"), and condemned as the enemies of the people. As such, they were isolated from, and abhorred and hated by, the rest of the population. Resembling the slave in Mbembe's example to some extent, the Rightist incarcerated in the labor camp suffers from the "loss of a 'home,' loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status," and "social death." Worse still, for many Rightists who used

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68. Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76*, translated by David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 241.

69. Ibid., 241-42.

70. Ibid., 242-43.

71. Ibid., 243.

72. Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," translated by Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 16-17.

73. Ibid., 39-40.

74. Ibid., 21.

75. Sergei Prozorov, *Global, Local, Political*

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to be well-educated intellectuals and respected professionals, to be confined in the camps, treated as criminals and slave laborers, and deprived of most basic necessities for living, meant that they lost their former social status and identity as well as fundamental human dignity and right to survive. Subjugated by the state power over death (necropolitics), the Rightists in the camp were "subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*."

The biopolitics and necropolitics of Maoism resonate to some extent with those of Stalinism. Noting how Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Roberto Esposito ignored the experience of Stalinist totalitarianism, Sergei Prozorov insightfully argues:

As a project of positive transformation of all social life along the lines of Marxist-Leninist ideology, Stalinism exemplifies the biopolitical presupposition about the amenability of the biological existence of populations to transformation in governmental practices. The well-known slogans about the constitution of the "New Soviet Man" and the "Soviet people" as a new "historical community of human beings" clearly indicate the positive, literally constructive character of the Soviet biopolitical project. At the same time, the actual experience of the construction of socialism, from the terrorist drive of the collectivization to the anti-Semitic purge, . . . has been remarkably destructive, annihilating the very lives that were to be transformed into something new. Stalinism thus appears to be a case of an extremely productive biopolitics that turned into an equally extreme thanatopolitics.<sup>75</sup>

As in Stalinism, Maoist "great enterprises" such as transforming the Chinese into "new socialist people," remolding the Rightists and other "counter-revolutionaries" into productive citizens through hard labor, and the Great Leap Forward Campaign, turned out to be destructive. In the context of laojiao camps, specifically Jiabiangou, the initial Maoist promise of a "productive biopolitics" apparently turned into an "extreme thanatopolitics."

Just as in the case of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, many scholars have by now discovered the reality of the Mao-era labor camps and countered the PRC official narratives about them. Many Chinese people also do not believe the official version, despite being inculcated to toe the Party line. In this regard, these Jiabiangou testimonials corroborate the new knowledge obtained by scholars, in hindsight, on the Mao-era laojiao camps. They remind us of the need to preserve historical truth and take a clear stand against deceptive Party lines. At the same time, these individual memories take us back to 1957–58, when these ordinary people were caught up in an unprecedented turmoil that was rapidly evolving. These texts vividly reveal the victims' initial ignorance and confusion, later shock and sense of betrayal, as well as their traumatic experiences and utter despair in the end.

Many Rightists were at first told that their laojiao term would be relatively benign and short, or they were not told that they were being sent to the camps for laojiao at all. Laojiao is an abbreviation for "laodong jiaoyang," which literally means "to be taught and nurtured through labor." Commonly translated as "reeducation through labor," the laojiao system was not established until August 3, 1957, after the Anti-Rightist Campaign had started. It was through an ad hoc administrative order, not a legal process, that a "troublemaker"—presumably someone who committed a minor offense—was sent to a labor camp for laojiao. As such, laojiao differed from laogai (*laodong gaizao* or "remolding through labor"), which was established on August 26,

<sup>75</sup> Sergei Prozorov, "Living Ideas and Dead Bodies: The Biopolitics of Stalinism," *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 38, no. 3 (2013), 209.

1954, to incarcerate and punish criminals convicted through some sort of legal procedure.<sup>76</sup>

According to the "Resolution" issued by the State Council on August 3, 1957, the purpose of *laojiao* was to remold those without regular occupations, counterrevolutionaries and anti-socialist reactionaries guilty of minor offenses, disobedient troublemakers, etc., into the "new people who support themselves by their own labor" (*zishi qili de xinren*).<sup>77</sup> Intended primarily to help allegedly lazy and unproductive elements to become diligent, productive physical laborers, *laojiao* was, by this definition, a much milder form of discipline than *laogai*. The *laojiao* program should combine both "labor production" and "political education." When a "reeducatee" performs well during the *laojiao* period, he or she could be permitted to find his or her own employment.<sup>78</sup> In other words, he or she could easily return to his or her family and society. As such, *laojiao* appears to promise a relatively "productive biopolitics."

Many victims of the labor camps were originally led to take this description of *laojiao* at face value. One protagonist in Yang Xianhui's interview-based stories, Li Xiangnian, who was sent to Jiabiangou in September 1958, first believed what the leadership said, and assumed that "after a few months' physical labor (*duanlian*, 'to forge'), you would return to your original work," and that "*laojiao* would last at most half a year or one year." But after toiling for one year and several more months, he could not endure it anymore and decided to escape.<sup>79</sup> In the case of Sun Shu, his teachers told him,

Because you did not obey the Party's instruction, you committed this error. Now, in order to save you, the Party is giving you another chance. The Party will group all of you together to study, labor, and remold your thought. Each day you will study for half a day and labor for half a day. Of course, studying is the primary task, while laboring is secondary. After remolding your thought through studying for a year or half a year, you can then return.

Sun agreed to go to the Jiabiangou Farm to "study." "But they did not clearly tell me that I was going there to be 'reeducated through labor' (*laodong jiaoyang*)." He reminisced, "Our generation trusted the organization and the Party completely." Unaware that they were going for *laojiao*, Sun and some of his classmates left for Jiabiangou "cheerfully."<sup>80</sup> The mathematics teacher Zhao Tiemin also recounts how he was fooled by his leader and how ignorant he was about where he would be sent and what awaited him there:

At that time the school leader asked to talk with me. He said, "Haven't you always wanted to go down to the countryside for 'forging'? Now there's a nice place. After you go there for half a year, you can come back and still be a teacher here. How about that?" I thought this was great, since I could still return. . . Therefore I resolutely requested to go

76 See also Wu Hongda, *Zhongguo de Gulage—dalu laogai dui ji nugong chanpin zhenxiang* [The Chinese gulag: the true story of the mainland's remolding-through-labor brigades and slave labor products] (Taipei: Shibao wenhua, 1992), 14; Philip F. Williams and Yenna Wu, *The Great Wall of Confinement: The Chinese Prison Camp Through Contemporary Fiction and Reportage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 2, 72-73; Klaus Mühlhahn, *Criminal Justice in China: A History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 215-17; Veg, "Testimony, History and Ethics," 523.

77 See the August 3, 1957 Resolution, "Guanyu laodong jiaoyang wenti de jue ding," in Zhao Xu, *Jiabiangou can'an fangtanlu*, 428-29.

78 Ibid., 429.

79 Yang Xianhui, "Li Xiangnian de aiqing gushi" [Li Xiangnian's love story], in Yang Xianhui, *Jiabiangou jishi* (2008), 58.

80 Zhao Xu, *Jiabiangou can'an fangtanlu*, 100.

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to that nice place. As soon as possible.<sup>81</sup>

Much to the shock turned out to be a turning hell. The camp conditions, harsh treatment, ing, harsh treatment of convicts. Upon their arrival, they were searched, and their personal items were confiscated, which they were no longer allowed to have. The meager meals that they had to eat, "studying," if at all. In the end, they became dispirited, intimidated inmates' meals if they were sons. Together with the inmates' already low

As disclosed by it, the grain ration was reduced surreptitiously, defecating, robbing, and foraging for anything, rats, lizards, and even insects. Accounts frequently because the inmates had no seeds, and had no cooking utensils, for eating unsanitary food. The number contracted: prolonged starvation, starvation and hunger.

Driven by hunger, not but resort to stealing another labor camp. Weak and starved, he obeyed cadre orders, from stealing.<sup>82</sup> By the time his husband had died, she lost all self-respect. She was living that he abide by the "butcher knife" that he fought and informed. Fengming lamented honest and pure soul.

These accounts of the inmates spiraled that after October 1, Great Leap Forward encouraged the inner

81 Ibid., 343.

82 He Fengming, *Ji*

83 Ibid., 302.

84 Ibid., 254-55.

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to that nice place. And, before leaving, I kept urging my organization to let me go there as soon as possible.<sup>81</sup>

Much to the shock of these unwitting Rightists, the promised "nice place" turned out to be a terrible lao jiao camp that would eventually become a living hell. The camp cadres and guards subjected the Rightists to the humiliating, harsh treatment normally expected in a laogai camp for criminal convicts. Upon their arrival at Jiabiangou, the Rightists and their belongings were searched, and their money, savings books, valuables, and forbidden personal items were confiscated. Most of them were forced to do hard labor—which they were not used to—for long hours, while going hungry due to meager meals that had hardly any protein, oil, or fat. There was little time for "studying," if at all. Deprived of resources for personal hygiene and grooming, they became dirty and infested with lice. The camp cadres and guards scolded, intimidated, and punished the inmates at will. They would dock the inmates' meals if the latter failed to finish the work quota or for other reasons. Together with the kitchen workers, they also routinely stole from the inmates' already low food ration.

As disclosed by individual narratives and testimonial accounts, when the grain ration was reduced again and again, many inmates begged for food or surreptitiously defied camp injunctions and engaged in private trading, stealing, robbing, and foraging in order to survive. The hungry inmates went out foraging for anything they could eat: weeds, tree leaves, weed seeds, worms, rats, lizards, and even potentially poisonous toads and other creatures. These accounts frequently mention constipation as an extremely serious problem, because the inmates ate such indigestible items as grain husks and weed seeds, and had no oil in their diet. While many contracted dysentery from eating unsanitary "food," some died from constipation or poisoning. A good number contracted and died from edema—the swelling of the body due to prolonged starvation—or cirrhosis of the liver. Most deaths were caused by starvation and hunger-related problems.

Driven by hunger, even some law-abiding and upright intellectuals could not but resort to stealing. In her memoir, He Fengming (an ex-inmate in another labor camp) deeply regretted that, because she did not know how weak and starved her husband Wang Jingchao had become, she urged him to obey cadre orders, to "maintain a high level of self-respect" and to refrain from stealing.<sup>82</sup> By the time she rushed to Jiabiangou, she found out her husband had died. She wished she had urged him to focus on survival instead of self-respect. She also blamed the camp's "remolding" process—demanding that he abide by its strict regulations and obey orders—for being "the butcher knife" that killed him.<sup>83</sup> Noting how the Rightists in her own camp fought and informed against one another for self-interest and survival, He Fengming lamented, "Everything here has seriously distorted our originally honest and pure souls!"<sup>84</sup>

These accounts also reveal different pivotal stages when the conditions of the inmates spiraled downward rapidly. For example, Wang Yongxing recalls that after October 1, 1958, the inmates started to feel hungry. However, the Great Leap Forward Campaign was in full swing, and the camp leadership encouraged the inmates to compete with one another in laboring hard in

81 Ibid., 343.

82 He Fengming, *Jingli*, 270.

83 Ibid., 302.

84 Ibid., 254-55.

order to have their Rightists' labels removed sooner. Feverish laboring and over-exhaustion soon ruined many inmates' health. After spring ploughing in 1959, the grain ration was reduced to twenty-four catties per person per month, and inmates started to die from hunger.<sup>85</sup>

Zhao Zhenfang remembers that in the beginning, the food ration, though limited, could still keep them alive; however, at the end of 1958, Party Central sent out directives announcing that the state would no longer provide for labor camp prisoners. Instead they must support themselves (*ziji zizhu*, "rely on one's productivity to satisfy one's needs"). "Therefore, the inmates at Jiabiangou started to starve, and as the situation grew worse later, they began to die *en masse*."<sup>86</sup> Zhao Tiemin recalls that in 1959 they had to start eating very thin gruel (because there was not enough grain to make hardtack with). "The wheat there grew so short, and there were only two or three grains on each ear. How could we be self-sufficient?" After spring ploughing in 1959, the inmates started to die.<sup>87</sup>

Another influential date, October 1, 1959, marked the turning point for many Rightists. Initially believing in the promise of early release, quite a few inmates labored extremely hard—and seriously weakened their own health—in hopes that their excellent performance (*biaoxian*) would be rewarded with an early return to their families and former positions. Yet their hopes and dreams were utterly dashed, as recounted by Li Xiangnian:

"When the Rightists first went to Jiabiangou, no one attempted escape. Most of them were devoted to the CCP, hoping that they could work through labor-remolding and eventually have their Rightist labels removed, be released from laojiao, return home and strive for a good future. However, at the big assembly on National Day (October 1) in 1959, in the entire camp only three inmates had their Rightist labels removed and been released from laojiao, and even these three must stay and work at Jiabiangou camp, earning 24 yuan per month. Therefore, people realized that 'reeducation through labor to remold thought' (*laodong jiaoyang gaizao sixiang*) was nothing but lies and deception; in actuality, all the inmates were given life sentences, and there was no end to their remolding-through-labor. All the people felt hopeless. Subsequently, more people began to take risks in desperation and attempt to escape."<sup>88</sup>

Wang Yongxing reports that, initially expecting the removal of five hundred Rightists' labels on October 1, 1959, the inmates were devastated when they found out only three Rightists' labels were removed.<sup>89</sup> As they could see no end in sight, the inmates became aware that their situation was worse than that of a laogai prisoner. A laogai prisoner only needed to serve a set term (as specified in the verdict), had a higher grain quota than the laojiao inmates in Jiabiangou, and would not need to labor overtime, since the laogai camp had to follow government regulations and stipulated schedules.

After his escape, Li Xiangnian ran out of money and started stealing. He was finally arrested and sentenced to six years of laogai. Li did not regret escaping from Jiabiangou or being sentenced to laogai: "Had I not escaped, I would have died of starvation in Jiabiangou." A number of Jiabiangou inmates (who were originally residents in Gansu) had received roasted flour or crackers from their families, but they still died during the latter half of 1960. Li's family never sent him any food or money, yet because he was at another prison during those worst months, he was able to survive.<sup>90</sup>

85 Zhao Xu, *Jiabiangou can'an fangtanlu*, 125-26.

86 Ibid., 342.

87 Ibid., 344.

88 Yang Xianhui, "Li Xiangnian," 63.

89 Zhao Xu, *Jiabiangou can'an fangtanlu*, 126.

90 Yang Xianhui, "Li Xiangnian," 76.

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91 Zhao Xu, *Jiabiangou can'an fangtanlu*, 126.

92 Ibid., 62-63.

93 Ibid., 63.

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The critical event that precipitated the most horrendous catastrophe was the forced relocation of over 2000 Jiabiangou inmates to Mingshui in late September/early October 1960. When their grain ration was reduced to about seven ounces a day, many started to die. Gao Xuewu recounts the inmates' extraordinary sufferings as follows:

"Over 2000 people were transferred from Jiabiangou to Mingshui. Lacking housing and food, and pressed by hunger and cold in the icy, snowy environment, these laojiao inmates were on their last legs. The endless laojiao as well as the starvation, diseases, and hard labor made them gradually become disappointed, pessimistic, and degraded. Jiabiangou's laojiao inmates wore ragged, threadbare clothes in all sorts of colors. Their faces were swollen [due to edema] and their eyes were shrunken to slits. . . they appeared to be neither humans nor ghosts. . . [one wonders] what kind of walking dead this group was. In November 1960, over a dozen people died each day. In December, heavy snow fell continuously and it was freezing-cold. Each inmate had a ration of less than four ounces of unhusked grain and had no oil in the diet. The long-suffering, starved inmates began to die *en masse*. Each dead body weighed only about 20-30 catties—nothing but skin and bones left."<sup>91</sup>

By December 23, 24, and 25, the number of the dead had increased so much, and even "the inmates of the burial group no longer had any strength to bury the dead." "Death permeated Mingshui. In utter despair, people were waiting for the arrival of the last moment. Some of those who could still move began to flee, and the guards obviously relaxed their control somewhat."<sup>92</sup>

At that stage, the inmates had lost all hope. Yet a number of them continued to seek out resources—even if unethical—for survival. For some, cannibalism was the only recourse left: ". . . some people went out stealthily to cut off and eat the internal organs and the flesh of the buttock of the corpses. Usually two or three inmates would go together to dig out the corpse, cut open the belly, and slice off the flesh."<sup>93</sup> A former Jiabiangou cadre, Zhu Zhaonan, claims to have discovered the first case of cannibalism in Jiabiangou. In mid-November 1959 he found a laojiao prisoner cooking human thigh flesh, heart and liver in a basin; after he reported the case, the prisoner was charged, sentenced, and transferred to a laogai camp to serve out his term.<sup>94</sup> However, by December 1960, cannibalism seemed to have become commonplace in Mingshui.

Starvation, combined with the freezing cold, desperation and hopelessness, led to massive deaths at the last stage. Despite the CCP's claim of laojiao camps' positive transformative nature, Jiabiangou (including the Mingshui) camp had never approached the supposedly constructive, productive biopolitical ideal, but had in reality degenerated into a necropolitical site of slow violence, mass starvation and death. As a "death camp," Jiabiangou became the Auschwitz of Chinese Rightists.

#### TAIWAN'S ROLE IN GLOBAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE JIABIANGOU CULTURAL TRAUMA

Unlike the well-studied and well-memorialized Holocaust, the Jiabiangou tragedy was uncovered only after being buried and forgotten for decades. In attempting to investigate the truth and reconstruct the memory of the tragedy, most writers and filmmakers encountered obstruction from CCP authorities. Even after six decades, the PRC government still refuses to acknowledge

91 Zhao Xu, *Jiabiangou can'an fangtanlu*, 62.

92 Ibid., 62-63.

93 Ibid., 63.

94 Ibid., 25.

its fault in creating such atrocious disasters as the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Great Famine, still covers up and distorts the historical truths about these disasters, and still suppresses investigations and exposures of the truth in the construction of the cultural trauma.

As the CCP has been suppressing and distorting the truth about past and contemporary CCP-made disasters in order to reduce criticism at home and abroad, it is therefore the duty of concerned China scholars outside the PRC to continue investigating and uncovering historical truths, especially from grassroots' perspectives, and thus to contribute to the construction of the cultural trauma experienced by Chinese victims of these disasters. Arguing that "truth is the strongest weapon America has in the battle of ideas and information that we are finally engaging China in," Joseph Bosco suggests that Taiwan and the United States, "inform the Chinese people on such topics as what happened in Tiananmen Square in 1989, and what is happening now . . . in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong, and in Beijing's support of North Korea."<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, as the PRC has recently stepped up efforts to "export censorship abroad that seeks to manipulate or force other peoples to accept their master narratives and officially sanitized or fabricated history," all concerned scholars and citizens should be particularly vigilant and should participate in the "cooperative democratic truth campaign" proposed by Bosco in order to resist such censorship.<sup>96</sup>

The current PRC regime's stringent censorship is a major reason for the recent novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak to spread so widely in China and develop into a global emergency, causing so many to suffer and die. The officials in Wuhan were merely following the CCP authoritarian system's routine practice when they suppressed news of the coronavirus outbreak in early January and silenced the doctor Li Wenliang, who warned other medics about the new virus.<sup>97</sup> Local officials would not have dared report such bad news to the public before obtaining permission from the Central authorities. Li Wenliang, who died from COVID-19 on February 7, 2020, was not the only whistle-blower suppressed by the authorities. The PRC government's failure to be transparent and control the outbreak efficiently at its earliest stage thus led to a national and global emergency. It is therefore imperative for all other countries to participate in the "cooperative democratic truth campaign" and pressure the PRC into telling the truth and being transparent and accountable.

Taiwan is uniquely positioned to take the lead in certain areas of this "truth campaign." Due to the PRC's intensified censorship at home and in Hong Kong, Taiwan has emerged as a major publisher and distributor of banned Chinese-language materials revealing the truths about such CCP-manufactured and masked disasters as the Jiabiangou tragedy and the Great Famine. For example, Zhao Xu chose to publish in Taiwan an expanded and updated version of his collection of victims' accounts as well as his novels on

Jiabiangou and the study of the Great Famine banned in the PRC.

With its freedom of access not only to historical materials but also to the Internet, Taiwan has provided access to the capability to give a voice to their discursive agency.

While some mainlanders who have suffered from the Great Famine have argued that the revelation of the truth about the victims of the Anti-Rightist Campaign, especially harshly by the Kuomintang or KMT, is necessary for the victims and their families to achieve closure, the victims in Taiwan would argue that the result of such tragedies is the loss of their families.

Second, the authorities in Taiwan should restore the historical truth to the innocent victims of the disasters. The victims of the disasters were not only in Taiwan, but also in mainland China. The victims, their descendants, and the authorities on both sides of the Strait should "incorporate" their

Third, in helping to restore the truth about its own human rights violations, Taiwan should draw attention to its own role in the international community. The PRC continues to come much more to the attention of the WHO into coming to Taiwan to request to have its own health system put under further escalation since Taiwan's preliminary 11, 2020. China is proaching Taiwan,

95 See Joseph Bosco's comments in June Teufel Dreyer, "Roundtable on Sharp Power, Soft Power, and the Challenge of Democracy: A Report from the 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Association for Chinese Studies," *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 25, no. 2 (October 2015): 150.

96 Yenna Wu, "Recognizing and Resisting China's Evolving Sharp Power," *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 26, no. 2 (October 2019): 148.

97 See the report on Li Wenliang in Stephanie Hegarty, "The Chinese doctor who tried to warn others about coronavirus," February 3, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-51364382>.

98 Zhao Xu, *Feng chuang* (2013).

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Jiabiangu and the Great Famine.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, Yang Jisheng's monumental study of the Great Famine, *Mubei—Zhongguo liushi niandai dajihuang jishi*, is banned in the PRC, but is readily available in Taiwan.

With its freedom of press, media, and the Internet, Taiwan provides easy access not only to publications but also to film productions on Jiabiangu. For example, the DVD of Wang Bing's film *Jiabiangu* (*The Ditch*, 2010; banned in the PRC) can be purchased in Taiwan. Ai Xiaoming's *Jiabiangu Elegy* and Wang Bing's *Dead Souls* can be viewed in Taiwan and other democracies through YouTube, whereas the PRC bans both works in any format. In providing access to these publications and films, Taiwan has demonstrated its capability to give cultural trauma claimants a free environment to exercise their discursive agency, which is denied to them in the PRC.

While some may wonder whether the tragedies of Jiabiangu and the Great Famine have any relevance to the people in current Taiwan at all, I would argue that Taiwan has a stake in supporting the understanding and revelation of the cultural trauma arising from these events. First, numerous victims of the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Great Famine were persecuted especially harshly because they had relatives and friends residing in Taiwan or other overseas countries, or had previously served in the Nationalists (Kuomintang or KMT) government. Many "mainlanders" in Taiwan have relatives or family friends who suffered or died during the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the Great Famine on mainland China. Similar to the surviving victims and victims' families, relatives, and friends in the PRC, these people in Taiwan would also wish to understand the full extent of the victimization that resulted from, the true causes of, and the perpetrators responsible for such tragedies.

Second, the authors and filmmakers mentioned above apparently wish to restore the historical truth of these disasters, bring some justice and consolation to the innocent victims and their relatives and friends, and draw moral lessons from the disasters so as to keep them from recurring. Even though the disasters were caused by the CCP, not by the then KMT government in Taiwan, Taiwan can still, on humanitarian and human rights grounds, help the victims, their descendants, and the "carrier groups" of cultural trauma on both sides of the Strait uncover the historical truth behind such trauma and "incorporate" their lessons into "collective identity."<sup>99</sup>

Third, in helping with this significant endeavor, Taiwan can highlight its own human rights advocacy and values of freedom, and in doing so draw attention to its sovereignty and distinction from the PRC. The need to stress to the international community that Taiwan is not a part of China has become much more urgent lately. Even with the serious coronavirus outbreak, the PRC continues—erroneously and despite Taiwan's protests—to pressure the WHO into counting Taiwan as a part of China and thus denying Taiwan's request to have its representatives attend the forums on coronavirus, thereby putting Taiwan and its 23.6 million people in danger. Meanwhile, the PRC has further escalated its military threats and political pressure on Taiwan since Taiwan's president Tsai Ing-wen won re-election by a landslide on January 11, 2020. Chinese PLA Air Force jets have stepped up their flights approaching Taiwan, even at times crossing the Strait's median line, prompting

98 Zhao Xu, *Fengxue Jiabiangu*; Zhao Xu, *Da ji'e* (The mass starvation) (Taipei: Xinrui wenchuang, 2013).

99 See also the discussion in Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," 26.



Taiwan's air force to "rush to intercept and give verbal warnings to leave" and President Tsai to urge China to "focus on controlling the spread of the virus rather than threatening Taiwan."<sup>100</sup> By taking up this human rights endeavor, Taiwan can enhance its international visibility and viability, and garner more countries' recognition and support.

While being well-positioned and capable of pursuing this "truth campaign," Taiwan must transcend internal partisan politics and ideological differences, vigorously defend its sovereignty and democratic values, and resist PRC efforts to threaten, pressure, or lure Taiwan's media and intellectuals to self-censor. Engaging in this timely endeavor would also highlight Taiwan's achievement in confronting and reconciling past injustices such as the 2.28 Incident. In this regard, Taiwan serves as an inspiring exemplary for the PRC, if the PRC government ever becomes willing to acknowledge its responsibility and to right past wrongs.

Taiwan and other democracies can do much more in creating amenable "situations" and space for more speakers to articulate trauma claims publicly and reach a wider audience. Concerned intellectuals, governments, and non-governmental human rights groups can work together to encourage more publications, creative work, film and media productions, and academic research into historical truths and components of cultural trauma, incorporate the topic into education and mass media, and raise the awareness of the general public. Furthermore, Taiwan and other democracies can actively engage in informative and discursive exchanges and cooperation with concerned scholars and overseas Chinese communities in other countries, and disseminate their truthful narratives and research results to wider audiences globally (including mainland Chinese who study or travel abroad).

#### CONCLUSION

The corpus of fact-based narratives and films focusing on the Jiabiangou lao jiao camp have unearthed the long-buried memories of the tragedy and have disclosed many details of inmates' lived experiences, sufferings, hunger, escapes, and deaths. Recounting the drastic degeneration of the inmates' bodies and morals due to extreme deprivation, hard labor, and cadre mistreatment, these works also reveal certain inmates' persistence and strategies to survive. They initiated the on-going process of fact-finding and investigation that lead to the construction and acknowledgement of cultural trauma, not just for themselves but for Chinese society more broadly.

Recovering truthful memories from the perspectives of ordinary individual survivors, these works serve as unofficial counterhistory to supplement and, more importantly, to help correct the falsehoods in the dominant top-down official history. These works help interrogate and correct misrepresentations about the Anti-Rightist Campaign created by the PRC authorities' dominating discourse and censorship. Moreover, despite the CCP regime's claim about lao jiao camps' constructively transformative nature, these works expose how the Jiabiangou (including the Mingshui) camp actually turned from a promised positive biopolitical learning environment into a necropolitical site of slow violence, mass starvation and death.

100 Ben Blanchard and Yimou Lee, "Taiwan again scrambles jets to intercept Chinese planes, tensions spike," February 9, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-taiwan-china-defence/taiwan-again-scrambles-jets-to-intercept-chinese-planes-tensions-spike-idUSKBN2030AE>.

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Many scholars have obtained insightful knowledge on the Anti-Rightist Campaign and the laojiao camps, and rejected the PRC authorities' falsified and sanitized history. A great number of Chinese in the PRC also do not believe their government's master narratives. However, through inculcation, intimidation, economic lures, and other means, PRC authorities have been relatively successful in making a multitude of people toe the Party line. The issue at stake is that over time historically truthful memories about the Jiabianguo tragedy or the Great Famine will fade, thereby giving a chance for the CCP's line to become more dominant.

Grassroots efforts to disclose and investigate the Jiabianguo tragedy, memorialize the victims, and construct the cultural trauma of the laojiao camps have often been obstructed by PRC authorities. The regime's increasing censorship at home and abroad in recent years has made it even more difficult to project the victims' traumatic claim to a wider audience in China and abroad. Thus it is important for concerned global scholars and citizens to take responsibility to ensure these stories are told and studied.

Taiwan, in particular, can play a critical role in this endeavor. Taiwan can actively collaborate with the other democracies in constructing the cultural trauma of these tragedies. Investigating the historical truths of these calamities and generating a new master narrative will expose the lies, erasures, and distortions in the PRC's official discourse on this part of history. In providing press freedom and discursive agency to the writers, filmmakers, and researchers who suffer under PRC's censorship, and offering some rights and justice to the victims and their descendants through this cultural trauma construction, Taiwan will highlight its attractiveness as an exemplary human rights champion and further distinguish itself from the authoritarian PRC government, thereby raising its international visibility and viability.