Privatizing terror

Former political prisoner Harry Wu believes that in China, totalitarianism and free markets are not incompatible. BY MARK WILLIAMS

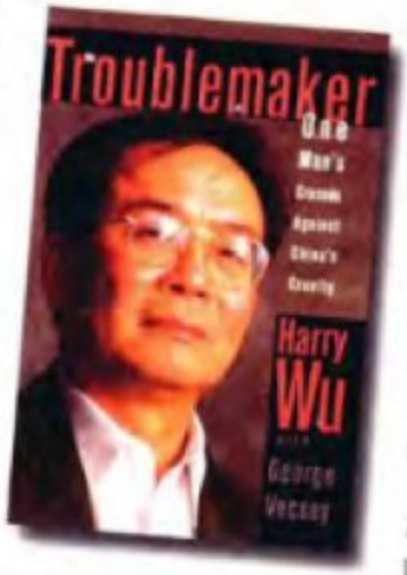
Troublemaker: One Man's Crusade Against China's Cruelty
By Harry Wu
New York: Times Books
$25, 328 pages

If human suffering emitted any quantifiable energy or left any residue, then vast regions of our planet—those where great masses of people have been consumed in collectivization programs, gulags, or killing fields—would radiate, Chernobyl-like. But human pain does not necessarily leave any trace.

Harry Wu's goal is to record, and thus make meaningful, the 19 years he suffered in the Chinese labor reform camps, or *laogai*, and to preserve the memories of fellow inmates who didn't survive.

Mr. Wu backed into his role of witness. Born Wu Hongda in 1937, as a Beijing student he injudiciously embraced the Hundred Flowers movement of 1956–57, when the Chinese Communist Party proclaimed a new tolerance of heterodox political opinion. Mr. Wu criticized the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising and in 1960 was sentenced to "reëducation through labor." When he was released in 1979, he found that his family had been destroyed by Mao's Cultural Revolution. In 1983, Mr. Wu saw 45 convicts publicly executed outside a provincial city. "I began seeking more information about mass executions," he writes in *Troublemaker*. Such executions, he learned, were a monthly event in every province in China: "Multiply 2,300 municipalities by an average of 20 executions a month and multiply that number by 12. . . ." Mr. Wu determined to leave the country, and by the end of 1985, he had wrangled a visa to come to UC Berkeley as a visiting student in geoscience.

In America, Mr. Wu may have thought he was beginning an existence unconnected with the laogai. But he was maddened by how effectively China's rulers had suppressed any knowledge of what he calls "the largest concentration camp system in human history." He began to speak out and in 1992 published *Laogai: The Chinese Gulag*. It was austerely unemotional—a scholarly work whose aim was to provide irrefutable proof of the existence and extent of the reform camps. But the book had its submerged drama: its appendixes included a recent photograph of the author standing outside Tuanhe Farm, where he was once imprisoned, and the afterword told readers that in the summer of 1991, after his text had been set for printing, he had twice reëntered the People's Republic.



In 1994, by then Harry Wu and an American citizen, the author embarked on the popular crusade that has made him famous, publishing *Bitter Winds: A Memoir of My Years in China's Gulag*. He became a man who could find common cause with both the AFL-CIO and the conservative Hoover Institution, who would go on *60 Minutes* and *The Charlie Rose Show*, who would write with the help of a ghostwriter who previously collaborated with Loretta Lynn and Barbara Mandrell—whatever it took to build popular outrage about China's atrocities.

Vox populi

Troublemaker, Mr. Wu's latest book, is his most demotic yet. As a literary document, it is without scruples. Mr. Wu's arrest inside China in 1995—when he was charged with spying, subjected to a mock trial, forced to give a mock confession, and deported in time for Hillary Clinton's visit to Beijing for the United Nations Conference on Women—serves as a counterpoint to the story of the rest of Mr. Wu's life, till it seems only the cheap sound track is missing.

In a fairly typical section, Mr. Wu describes himself as "the immigrant trying to make himself understood. This is who I am. I have just arrived. I want to tell you about the camps in China." Long stretches of *Troublemaker*, it must be said, are poorly written by almost any standard. One offended reviewer of the book warned Mr. Wu of the dangers of diluting his moral message for the mass media. But fastidious distaste for the mass media is a luxury that Mr. Wu cannot afford. He "cannot forget," and he wants to make sure that we don't either.

Human capital

Here, briefly, are the facts of China's camps. The total number of prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps was approximately 13 million. The Soviets' camps contained probably 13 million to 20 million. But in the last 40 years, perhaps 50 million people have been sentenced to the Chinese labor camps, and 16 million to 20 million are still confined. Moreover, while from the 1950s to the 1970s the Chinese modeled their system on the Soviet gulag, they have since far surpassed their mentors in making slave labor profitable. The largest of today's laogai are the size of multinational corporations—and nearly as profitable. Under Deng

Xiaoping, the camps have effectively been privatized as their commandants distribute profits among themselves and their employees after paying the state its cut. Among the creepier benefits of the profit motive: surgical vans that wait as prisoners are executed, then rush away with harvested organs.

China, after all, has no demographic deficit. Historically, the world's most densely populated civilization has also enjoyed its longest tradition of successful autocracy: the major dynasties remain unrivaled in terms of the size of the state they ruled and the efficacy of the Confucian philosophy that codified all human relations within their borders. The Chinese Communist Party merely assumed the role of the imperial administration. Today, China's dissidents analyze the party's potential fall in the context of the ancient pattern of dynastic decline accompanied by peasant rebellion. Deng, when he explained the decision to unleash the army in Tiananmen Square, was also thinking in these terms: "As soon as civil war breaks out, there will be rivers of blood. . . . local warlords will spring up everywhere, production will plummet, communications will be severed. . . . " In China, the word for chaos, *luan*, carries far greater resonance than its English equivalent, for luan at its worst means utter disaster. The Chinese government maintains order but does not conceal that a certain number of people may suffer and die: a government monopoly everyone must accept.

No correlation

"Capitalism must never be equated with democracy," Mr. Wu writes in *Troublemaker.* "This is a very American belief—that making money produces freedom and justice and equality. . . . My homeland is mired in thousands of years of rule by one bully at a time, whether you call him emperor or chairman." Mr. Wu doesn't believe China's economic growth means that the country will eventually enjoy a free marketplace of ideas. He doesn't believe China's newfound capitalism and participation in global markets means it is on the road to full democracy. Why not?

Try this. Bay Networks, a producer of hardware to direct Internet traffic, is a partner in the China Internet Corporation, a Beijing-backed project to create a China-size Web that will exist separately from our own, largely American, World Wide Web. Globalstar, a satellite telecom network, has signed a contract with China for 1998, when Globalstar's system will bounce calls off its satellites and back down to choke points in China, where security forces can monitor lines and pinpoint mobile phone users.

Mr. Wu suggests that a new form of social order, some pitiless hybrid of totalitarianism and capitalism, is emerging in his homeland. And given the facts, whatever extreme experience may have prejudiced his views, who would say that he is wrong?

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