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1981-1991, translated from Chinese into French by
Hervé Denès with a preface by Jean-Jacques
Gandini**

Paris, L'Esprit frappeur/Dagorno 2002, 204 pp.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Translated from the French original by Jonathan Hall

- 1 Lau Sanching's testimony of his ten years in the *laogai*, China's gulag, belongs to a genre with a firm pedigree, since it is related to both the monstrous and the inexplicable: how can a man who has done nothing except express a political difference find himself spending ten years of his life behind prison bars? The author is no Solzhenitsyn, for his tale lacks the strength and literary quality of his famous precursor, but he makes no such claims. He repeats on several occasions that in 1981 he was more or less uneducated, and that he has never read so much as during his ten years of imprisonment. But it is precisely the absence of literary pretensions and stylistic effects that makes his tale all the more interesting, and gives us a complete portrayal of the still too little known world of the Chinese prison system, a world whose population numbers remain a matter for conjecture; according to the source one chooses to believe, there are currently three, four or five million prisoners in the People's Republic of China.
- 2 Lau Sanching is a native of Hong Kong, and as a student he was influenced by the Trotskyist tendency with the first Chinese democratic movement in 1978-1979. He was

convinced of the need to aid the families of known militants like Wang Xizhe and He Qiu, and was brave enough to make 14 journeys into the southern province of Guangdong before being arrested and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment. He tells us how the fate of his fellow prisoners changed over those ten years. In the first period after 1981, the iron discipline which had reigned throughout the Cultural Revolution began to fall apart. Little by little, the disorder which spread throughout China following its brutal opening to the outside world, began to permeate the prisons. Soon, from 1982 to 1983, the situation was one of total anarchy. The prisoners organised themselves into gangs, mutinied, fought, stole, and attacked the guards so frequently that the latter were forced to move about in groups, so as to avoid being beaten up by the inmates. Outside the prisons, the campaign against bourgeois liberalism was launched, followed by the next, against spiritual pollution. These gave rise to one of the harshest waves of executions to take place in Deng Xiaoping's China, the so-called "strike hard" campaign, meaning the imposition of heavy sentences after summary proceedings. Within the prisons, the authorities were given a free hand to treat the smallest infraction as a major crime, which incurred capital punishment.

- 3 Lau Sanching scrupulously limits himself to reporting what he actually witnessed, he never extrapolates from his experience to what might have happened throughout the country, and he does not hazard a guess as to overall numbers. But one can imagine that the number of executions at that time must have risen well above ten thousand a year, since over several months the spectacle of prisoners executed with a bullet to the back of the head in the prison yard became completely commonplace. Despite his reticence, the author portrays the intense anxiety experienced by those who escaped this fate, which then gave way to a new form of punishment: the more rebellious prisoners were forced to drag the bodies away after execution. Lau writes: "According to their accounts, the disposal of the bodies was easy to recount, but absolutely horrible to carry out. I can well believe it. After undergoing this terrifying experience, one of the bearers, called Lin Shuxiang, was so disturbed that he was sent off to the northwest".
- 4 Deportation progressively replaced execution as a punishment, and the Cantonese, who were used to a warm and humid climate, soon found themselves sent in droves to the desert regions of Qinghai and Xinjiang where the climate variations are extreme. Many did not survive, but most had left willingly in the hope of encountering a milder fate in those distant "state farms".
- 5 1986 was a turning point, as the penetration of the market economy into the prison universe completely overturned established norms. Gone were the long political education sessions. Gone too were the rare moments of leisure or physical training. In their place, in with production! Prison directors became veritable company managers, accepting contracts and receiving touring businessmen, some even from overseas, and they began to see their charges in a new light. They were now a pliable labour force which could be exploited at will, but which must nonetheless be fed sufficiently to maintain productivity. Prisoners were sometimes forced to ask their families to send them the vitamins necessary to keep up the hellish 12 hours' work a day imposed by their bosses.
- 6 Lau Sanching's strength of character in surviving all these ordeals showed in the way he doggedly refused to admit that he had committed any crime at all. In this he was like all the other dissidents who met with a similar fate, such as Lin Xiling, Wei Jingsheng,

Xu Wenli, Harry Wu, Sun Weibang and Liu Qing. These men and women who have fallen victim to the Chinese dictatorship share a phenomenal power of resistance, and this will ensure that, come what may, they will not yield an inch. Believing that demanding democracy for their country is not a crime, they will continue to refuse to give way in the face of threats, torture or blandishments which might lead them to disgrace themselves. Lau Sanching admits that he was driven nearly mad by the pressures, particularly from his own family members who were themselves under pressure from the Chinese authorities, and he recognises that his behaviour in prison was often rather incoherent. But this makes the precision of his account, the abundance of the incidents he reports, and the clarity of his views on what he calls the Country of Lies, all the more remarkable.