

## Losing to the Laogai

### How Buying From China Furthers An Atrocity

What would make you think twice before buying an item that is made in China? Would the numerous safety issues stop you? Pundits and scientists warn of the dangers of buying Chinese goods: high levels of lead in the paint of toys and jewelry, levels of mercury in baby formula, and hidden asbestos in drywall. Yet, despite these hazards, I believe that the question of buying from China is not only one of safety, but one of morality. Although low-cost Chinese goods are the staple of the American consumer market, I wish to persuade you that these products should be avoided due to the brutally lucrative Laogai system through which the goods are produced. To do this, I will first explain the **abuse** of the Laogai system and why it is inherently corrupt. Then I will help you understand the **atrocities** of supporting the system, and finally, offer an **answer** that combats the Chinese corruption and helps bring the Laogai to an end.

I wish to first draw your attention to **the Abuse of the Laogai System**. What is the Chinese Laogai, and how does it work? Merriam-Webster's dictionary explains: "The term "Laogai" comes from the two Chinese words "lao," meaning labor, and "gai," meaning reform, hence the overall meaning of "labor through reform.""<sup>1</sup> The Chinese Communist Party, or CCP, created the Laogai not only to systematically repress and reform the thoughts of citizens, but also to serve as a free labor supply. Imagine you are a Chinese citizen living in China, eking out a meager survival for you and your family. As you sit down to dinner one evening, officers from

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<sup>1</sup> Laogai.org, citing Merriam-Webster's 2012 Unabridged Dictionary

the People's Armed Police, China's police force, enter your home, rifle through your belongings, and take you into custody. En route to the holding cell, the officers inform you that your trial is already scheduled: you will meet the judge and your sentence tomorrow. Your crime? You have been a disloyal citizen. Your pastoring of several house churches and your possession of subversive material, namely the Bible and a few "liberal" Western books is grounds enough to be sentenced to a decade in prison. Of course, if the police had not charged you with these crimes, there would have been another "crime" you committed, since the Laogai is always hungry for workers. You are convicted immediately the next morning after a sham trial; adhering to the 99% conviction rate of the Chinese judicial system.<sup>2</sup> Your pre-determined sentence is ten years in prison. You are frog-marched out of the courtroom and driven away in a police van to one of the estimated 1,300 Laogai prison facilities.<sup>3</sup> When you arrive, your clothes are taken away, and you are given a coat, a pair of rubber shoes, a pair of latex gloves, and a number: 9342. You are now one of the 6.8 million people registered in the Laogai system, as estimated by the Laogai Research Foundation.<sup>4</sup>

When prisoners, be they murderers, thieves, or simply political and theological dissenters, enter the Laogai facilities, they are forced to work. Now, this is not the light-duty, recompensing, community service that prisoners in the United States are made to perform; the Laogai is a 14-hours-a-day, 7 days-a-week, brutal slavery under inhumane guards, and even more inhumane conditions. Han Guan Chang, former governor of six Laogai facilities recounts,

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<sup>2</sup> Laogai.org, *Laogai Factsheet*, 2011

<sup>3</sup> Laogai.org, [http://laogai.org/our\\_work/laogai](http://laogai.org/our_work/laogai)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

“There was torture that went on. There were beatings. If the prisoners tried to starve themselves, the guards would force feed them. We didn’t feed them much: only a daily diet of watery corn and sorghum gruel, and a monthly allowance of three ounces of cooking oil.”<sup>5</sup> On this pittance of food the prisoners work shifts of fourteen or more hours a day. Former prisoner Tong Li explains the consequences of refusing to work: “At that time I was beaten by a group of inmates instructed by the police guards in the labor camp. My food rations were minimal. Guards punished unmet quotas with beatings and withheld rations.”<sup>6</sup>

Depending upon the region prisoners will produce anything from shoes in Northeastern China, to electronics in Southeastern China, to foodstuffs, such as tea leaves, wine grapes, and fish at Laogai farms spread across all of China.<sup>7</sup> Even one survivor, who does not give his name for security reasons, recalls that one day he discovered he was packaging plastic bags for the gift shops in the Smithsonian National Gallery of Art.<sup>8</sup> The Laogai camps produce these Chinese exports under horrific circumstances. Survivor and now stateside activist, Harry Wu notes in his book *Laogai: The Chinese Gulag* that the facilities have almost no safety procedures or protection for the workers. He recalls accounts of workers who were tanning hides simply standing naked in the vats of caustic chemicals.<sup>9</sup> In factories that polish metal, the air that the workers breathe is almost solidified by the amount of aluminum dust left in the air by poor

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<sup>5</sup> SBS/Dateline Interview of Han Guan Chang, Journeyman Pictures 2007, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fq7wrw\\_XpTg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fq7wrw_XpTg)

<sup>6</sup> Ramin Pejan, “Laogai: ‘Reform through Labor’ in China,” American University Human Rights Brief, 2000

<sup>7</sup> Hongda Harry Wu, *Laogai: The Chinese Gulag*, Westview Press 1992

<sup>8</sup> Laogai Survivor, “Forced Labor,” [http://buyhard.net46.net/forced\\_labour](http://buyhard.net46.net/forced_labour)

<sup>9</sup> Hongda Harry Wu, *Laogai: The Chinese Gulag*, Westview Press 1992

ventilation. Utterly abused, these prisoners work under conditions identical to the Nazi concentration camps.

For these prisoner slaves, the hope of ever leaving the system is non-existent. Sentences are often extended by months and years for minor infractions. Unfortunately however, the sentence does not often have to be extended as many workers die within the first four years. Of the estimated 50 million prisoners who have passed through the Laogai gates since their institution in 1959, Harry Wu estimates that 60% have died or have been executed. Executions are also common as the Chinese government capitalizes on the lucrative organ donation market, often killing healthy prisoners for organ harvesting. Even if the prisoner's sentence does end, the released citizen is often given "Special Work Placement," in factories and conditions identical to the Laogai. The horrors of the Laogai are numerous, the atrocities innumerable. Yet, we continue to unknowingly propagate this problem by purchasing the cheap goods that are made in China with the blood, sweat, and tears of fellow, often innocent human beings.

This leads to the second aspect I wish to draw your attention to: **the Atrocity**, or, the issue that buying from China creates. But first, let me explain that anything marked "Made in China," is actually "Made in Prison." The Laogai has thousands of camps, factories, and farms that produce goods, toys, and electronics. Each factory produces finished products, as well as the components for many other consumer items. As Harry Wu notes, when you buy Chinese, chances are that Laogai workers have made either the entire product or at least 60% of the components.<sup>10</sup> It is safe to say that if you buy Chinese, you buy Laogai.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Now I say that it is an atrocity to buy goods made in China because I believe that it is a real, and serious moral issue. Laogai Research Foundation estimates that Chinese Government makes a 90% profit off of Laogai-made goods. The workers are unpaid and ill-fed and the factories are unsafe and poorly kept. When we buy Chinese goods, we give the communist government a profit from the abuse of humans. China realizes that Americans wish to buy items that are inexpensive. The only way for them to manufacture such extremely inexpensive items is through the Laogai system where labor is free and workers are fettered. American University's Human Rights Brief sums up the consequences of the growing demand for cheap products: "The extremely cheap cost of labor in the *Laogai* system creates a very low-priced, competitive product to export, providing the [People's Republic of China] additional incentive to continue its use of the *Laogai* system."<sup>11</sup> Through the purchase of Chinese products, we only further the violence of the Laogai.

Why has this issue not been previously addressed? China, realizing the implications if the abuses of the Laogai were known internationally, keeps the entire system labeled under misnomers. The Human Rights Brief notes: "Each *Laogai* camp has both a camp name and a public name. For example, one known facility called the Shanghai Municipal Prison is also called the Shanghai Printing, Stationery Factory." Never does China refer directly to these facilities as the "Laogai," making any organized effort against the system as a whole extremely difficult. However, though China attempts to muddy the waters surrounding the brutal system, one thing is for certain: if the demand for Chinese products does not cease, the evil of the Laogai

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<sup>11</sup> Ramin Pejan, "Laogai: 'Reform through Labor' in China," American University Human Rights Brief, 2000

will only continue to expand.

So how can we solve this? How can we stop this 21<sup>st</sup> century slavery? This is the third aspect I wish to address, that of **the Answer**. Now, I realize that avoiding China-made goods seems a daunting task when so much of the available merchandise is Made in China. But steering clear of Chinese products can be easier than you think. The act requires just two simple steps: one, read the labels on the objects you purchase; and two, buy from stores or online companies, such as [BuyAmerican.com](http://BuyAmerican.com) or [MadeInUSAWarehouse.com](http://MadeInUSAWarehouse.com), that sell only American-made goods. Avoiding Chinese-made merchandise requires the realization that every cent we spend in China's favor is another cent that encourages the atrocities of the system.

I realize that American-made, or Taiwan-made goods are sometimes more expensive, however, I beg you to consider the situation. Let buying from China become a moral issue for you: an issue in which the truth must be stood for at all costs. If you wish to go beyond simply boycotting Chinese goods, there are also numerous petitions on the internet asking for signatures to encourage international action against the brutal Laogai system. Some of these petitions can be found on [Laogai.org](http://Laogai.org), a website formed by the Laogai Research Foundation.

The Laogai system is a real and daunting threat to the very humanity and existence of the Chinese people. Every time we purchase a Chinese product, we only serve to further the atrocities of this brutal institution. Let us reveal to the world the true nature of China's Laogai System.

Let us remember, and act.

