

CIVIL SERVICE

Zhang Dakuan

Prison Warden

“I hope the prison will remember my name.”

Zhang Dakuan, fifty-one, was born in Beijing, and lives with his wife in an apartment. As one of the cadres (equivalent to warders) in Beijing Prison, he assists the warden in the most difficult job in the prison: prisoner discipline. The 2,000 prisoners are divided into twelve teams. The chief of each team is in charge of production in the prison factory; the political instructor in each team has the job of reforming the prisoners, i.e., getting them to mend their ways and to abide by the law. Zhang Dakuan is the political instructor of the fifth team. He has worked in the Beijing Prison for sixteen years.

Although he is in his fifties and grey hairs have appeared, he still is full of vigor, with his sparkling sharp eyes. He has broad shoulders and holds himself erect. But, as the interview shows, his attitude both towards life and to the prisoners under his charge is full of contradictions.

Don't assume that I'm always as mild and amiable as I'm now. I'm different with prisoners. No sternness, no respect, I like to say. But cadres shouldn't always show an “iron face” to prisoners. Even tough cadres are those reforming and prisoners those being reformed, the former should let the latter feel that they're being taken care of and helped.

I often think it was a mistake for me to enter this field because originally I wasn't suited to the job. Before I started working as a warden, I worked in a factory. In 1962, the police force started recruiting workers for what they called “special tasks.” The factory recommended me to apply for the examinations. My parents said it would be too dangerous for me. But my factory chief advised them I should do it because Party members should serve the country without hesitation. (I had joined the

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Communist Party in 1958.) As for me, I wanted a job that appealed to my imagination. I was one of the three selected out of 6,000 workers.

But, unfortunately, I wasn't sent to be trained or assigned to do the job I had been wanted. Instead, I was appointed to work in a reform-through-labor factory (for juvenile delinquents) near Beijing.

All the public security bodies, procuratorial offices and people's courts were disbanded during the "cultural revolution." I and other cadres in the factory were sent for "reeducation" on a farm in the mountain area. I worked there for four years before I came to Beijing Prison in 1972. Since then, I've had my present job, which I don't like but have to do it well.

Prisoners are disgusting, especially habitual offenders. However, as cadres, we have to respect them and treat them as if we were their parents, doctors, or teachers. Doing it well isn't an easy thing. As a political instructor of the team, I've to take my responsibilities seriously.

To be strict with prisoners, cadres should first of all have strict team discipline. I've nine colleagues in my team, who supervise 140 prisoners. Cadres work as a collective: they cannot influence or reform prisoners if they themselves aren't united. I always say to other team members: "You can have a heated argument about work in the office, but not in front of the prisoners."

A cadre should be sure of what's wrong and what's right, what should be criticized and what should be praised. He'd be clear-headed. Generally speaking, I always try my best to help prisoners solve their problems, provided I can do within prison regulations. Keeping promises is the basis of trust.

Cadres should be observant. This is to prevent "accidents" happening that we'd have known about beforehand. Prisoners are like dry wood that can burst into fire with only a tiny spark. If a bloody accident happens, the instructor'll be given a disciplinary warning. One day, two prisoners in my team quarreled because one of them had broken the regulation about smoking in corridor. One threatened to have a "talk" with the other that evening. On hearing about their talk, I knew it was a dangerous situation, so I talked to them both. A fight was thus avoided.

But some prisoners are difficult to deal with. Most of this type are "repeat offenders" who are familiar with the prison system and have

experience resisting the “reform” methods. On the “reform-through-labor” farm, they give the cadres lots of headaches. In prison, however, we’ve ways to deal with them. Last year, for example, eight young prisoners were sent to jail. Before they came here, we found out they were a gang of criminals. We divided them into different teams, thus preventing them from further contacts.

Of course, helping prisoners calls for patience and care. When a prisoner talks back to a cadre, the cadre should keep calm—maybe the prisoner acted as he did because he was fretting over something at the time. Dealing with such things at the height of someone’s anger may only make things worse. As far as I’m concerned, we’ve to be assertive without being cruel. If we criticize a prisoner wrongly once, the others will think we don’t treat them with due respect.

My wife often says to me that I’ve gradually caught the “professional disease.” She complains that I’ve got used to raising my voice and glowering at people as if to say: “You should listen to me.” I don’t think it’s as serious as she says, but I have taken it as a warning.

Since I’ve been there in the Beijing Prison, there have been no disturbances nor escapes from my team, and no one has committed suicide. Last year, twenty-eight prisoners had their terms reduced, ranging from half a year to three years. Mitigation of sentences is based on reports submitted to the Beijing Reform Bureau by team chiefs. Because of this, prisoners are afraid of me and respect me.

The prisoners have had more freedom since 1980. In the past, they’d only do political study and labor. Now they can watch TV programs at least three nights a week and see movies in the yard in summer. On holidays, we sometimes allow prisoners, especially young married prisoners, to live at home for one or two days. The prison also provides prisoners with opportunities to study and work either in the plastics factory or in the classrooms. Skilled prisoners can become teachers.

The hardest working cadres are those who work in the teams, as opposed to those in offices. As for me, I get up at 5:30, do the roll call of prisoners, and then take the latter to work. During the daytime, I do an inspection tour in the corridors, talk to prisoners in their spare time, or have meetings with my colleagues. I go home at 10:00 p.m. I’ve spent

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so many Spring Festivals (Chinese lunar New Year) working that I've forgotten how many. I've become accustomed to my job. It's not boring.

My wife's retired. All three of my children have married and moved away from home. I don't have to worry about them anymore and can devote all my energies to work. However, my wife sometimes complains: "You shouldn't work in a jail. You go out early and come back late, leaving me alone at home. I've no one to talk to." Despite her complaints, she's never held me back.

Nevertheless, not everything's gone my way. Higher officials here are very strict and don't like cadres doing things on their own initiative. But I don't like working that way. I always do what I want and never acknowledge their seniority. Moreover, I like to speak frankly and shoot my mouth off which gives an impression that I look down upon them. Therefore, they think it's difficult for me to accept their leadership. In the annual appraisal of the "advanced worker" (which is a system commonly used in China to honor workers), I was always eliminated in the final rounds even though many people nominated me. I don't take it seriously. It doesn't matter me too much whether I get this honor or not. I'll be happy as long as I try my best to do my job well.

I've been an instructor for nearly fifteen years. During this time, I've never gotten a promotion. That's because I was born into a worker's family and didn't have formal secondary school education. Nowadays those promoted to leadership positions are young people. However, I haven't had my salary raised for twenty years: it's still 110 yuan a month (US\$30). You might think it would be a great disappointment for me. But compared to my exile in 1968, it's great. At that time, I worked on a farm a long way from Beijing, leaving my wife and one-year-old son at home. They were badly off. We weren't allowed to go back home then. Risking reprisals, I used to bike more than 20 kilometers from the farm to home after work every day, and then back the next morning. Inevitably, I was publicly criticized by farm chiefs. Besides being physically exhausted much of the time, I was also under mental stress. We were then treated just as the "five sinister elements"—landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, criminals, and rightists—as if we were prisoners. But this, I think, has been my only setback.

My philosophy is avoiding having mistakes happen, which is more important than stacking up a lot of achievements.

Sometimes I like to develop new ideas in work. For example, I once suggested a hundred-point system in the team in order to make it easier to restrain prisoners. Points were given according to prisoners' behavior at work, the quality of their products, and their daily routine tasks. This system produced good results. I submitted a report to the prison authorities asking for it to be widely implemented, but they neglected my report. Yet a prison in Zhejiang Province heard about it, implemented it, and was lauded by the Ministry of Justice. I felt, naturally, sorry that the authorities hadn't let me...

What makes me most happy? When I learn that a prisoner from my team who has left prison has made a contribution to society. Ma Bozhong, one of the former prisoners in my team, left prison in 1982. Now he's director of a boiler factory in Beijing, and has frequent business contacts with the prison factory.

My life now is leisurely and carefree. I've a small garden in jail looked after by a prisoner. In my spare time I play table-tennis and go. Several years ago I won third place in the table-tennis match held by Beijing Reform Bureau. I still have a few years before retiring, though I haven't yet planned what I'll do then. The only thing I wish now is to make no mistakes in my work during my remaining years at the prison. And what else? I hope the prison will remember my name.

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