While the history of the prison has become increasingly fashionable in the wake of Michel Foucault’s work, most research has tended to focus on Europe and the United States. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that prison reform should be viewed as a global phenomenon, as the penitentiary project was embraced by the world from Rio de Janeiro to Tokyo. As ideas on confinement moved across borders, they were adjusted to specific local conditions: inculturation, rather than acculturation, characterized a penal regime that was inflected in a multiplicity of ways by different modernizing elites. Captured in the overarching rationale based on the idea of humane punishment, the prison was multivalent, capable of being adapted in a variety of mutually incompatible environments, ranging from the bauge, in Vietnam, to the cellular prison in China or the concentration camps in South Africa.

In colonial contexts, prisons were part of the ‘civilizing mission’, as existing penal practices, which were often based on physical punishment, were viewed as ‘barbaric’ and ‘uncivilized’. However, the transfer of penal discourse and penitentiary institutions was not a one-way process: diversity rather than uniformity characterized the use of the custodial sentence in a variety of colonial contexts, as prisons both changed and adapted to existing notions of crime and punishment. Confinement, in short, acquired specific cultural meanings and social dimensions which long outlived the colonial context. Rather than assigning a passive role to Africa and Asia, historians should point at the acts of resistance or appropriation which actively transformed the penitentiary project. A comparative approach to the history of the prison highlights the extent to which common knowledge was appropriated and transformed in colonial contexts, while the introduction of a new Criminal Code after the disaster of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, the compilation of new legal codes as well as reform of the judicial system became a priority. Traditional penalties such as dismemberment, amputation, or the concentration camps in South Africa. As things on confinement moved across borders, they were adjusted to specific local conditions: inculturation, rather than acculturation, characterized a penal regime that was inflected in a multiplicity of ways by different modernizing elites. Captured in the overarching rationale based on the idea of humane punishment, the prison was multivalent, capable of being adapted in a variety of mutually incompatible environments, ranging from the bauge, in Vietnam, to the cellular prison in China or the concentration camps in South Africa.

Cultures of Confinement

By Frank Dikötter

Making matchboxes in a Beijing prison

While the history of the prison has become increasingly fashionable in the wake of Michel Foucault’s work, most research has tended to focus on Europe and the United States. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that prison reform should be viewed as a global phenomenon, as the penitentiary project was embraced by the world from Rio de Janeiro to Tokyo. As ideas on confinement moved across borders, they were adjusted to specific local conditions: inculturation, rather than acculturation, characterized a penal regime that was inflected in a multiplicity of ways by different modernizing elites. Captured in the overarching rationale based on the idea of humane punishment, the prison was multivalent, capable of being adapted in a variety of mutually incompatible environments, ranging from the bauge, in Vietnam, to the cellular prison in China or the concentration camps in South Africa.

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