



Doing Time the Taiwanese Way

Local prisons are trying new approaches to help inmates reform.

BY CINDY SUI
PHOTOS BY CHANG SU-CHING

Mr. and Mrs. Lai's 24-year-old son was serving a 7-year term at Changhua Prison in central Taiwan for a robbery at knifepoint in which a man was injured. During the time he was at the medium-security facility, however, the couple say they saw striking changes in their son. "My son writes to me once a month now. He apologized to us for what he had done and told us not to visit so often if it tired us. I cried that day," Mr. Lai says. "I apologized to him for not paying more attention to him in the past. Our father and son relationship is better now. We can hug each other. He's more mature now. He even offers advice to other inmates." The young

man has since been transferred to a low-security facility due to his good behavior.

Taiwan has seen a big increase in the number of inmates in recent years, in part because of a growing drug abuse problem and more drug-related convictions. The prison population increased 18 percent in the past 10 years, from 56,474 in 2001 to 66,693 as of the end of July 2011. The number of prisoners is about the same as that of countries with much bigger overall populations like Japan, France, Germany or the United Kingdom. But instead of simply building more prisons like many countries opt to do, authorities have begun trying a different approach by promoting programs aimed at helping prisoners reform, thus reducing the chances of recidivism once they are released. One of the forces driving the reforms is the strong belief of Agency of

An inmate at Taipei Prison puts the finishing touches on a vase as part of an art class. The man's face has been obscured to protect his identity.



Corrections Director-General Wu Shyan-chang (吳憲璋) and a number of prison wardens that prisoners can be helped to return to society as useful members rather than always being viewed as a danger to citizens or burden on the state. "I want to bring them back. If I can use our influence to reform someone, I'm overjoyed," Wu says. Since 2003, the Agency of Corrections, which is in charge of Taiwan's 25 prisons and 24 detention centers, has worked to reduce recidivism by encouraging prisons to offer classes including arts, crafts and music.

Changhua Prison is perhaps Taiwan's most unique prison in this regard and has the largest variety of educational programs for inmates, including weekly classes in drumming taught by renowned performance group U-Theatre, classical Chinese instruments, traditional glove puppetry, calligraphy and lantern making. The prisoners have built a fish pond in which they raise koi and tend the bonsai plants nearby. Ornamental structures of brick and straw made by inmates dot the workshop and display areas.

In fact, the common areas do not seem like a prison as there are few guards around and the prisoners, dressed in white T-shirts, blue shorts and plastic flip-flops, move about freely during class time. It is hard to believe that the medium-security facility houses more than 2,600 inmates, including convicted murderers and rapists.

Most of Taiwan's prisons including Changhua also require inmates to do as many of the chores as possible, with tasks ranging from cooking their own meals to

cleaning, painting and other maintenance work. Prisoners also have the chance to put any specialized skills to use. For example, those with remodeling experience might help out with building repairs. While the work assists prisons in cutting expenses, it is also aimed at

and even dessert. More importantly, they are treated with some respect."

It is also common for Taiwan's inmates to be addressed as "students" and for wardens to spend Lunar New Year's Eve with them to show solidarity during what can be a difficult time for them. "Most of them come



Members of the drum troupe led by U-Theatre at Changhua Prison practice tai chi chuan as part of the group's training regime.

helping inmates feel useful and rehabilitating them. "This helps them feel that they're not useless, that they can still do good things," says Tai Shou-nan (戴壽南), the warden of Changhua Prison. "This gives them confidence. Once a person has confidence, there's less of a chance of them doing bad things."

Offering classes to inmates is part of a bigger effort in Taiwan to regard prisons and detention centers as more than places to keep convicts away from society, a typical view of such facilities from the 1950s to 1980s. "In the past, not only were inmates given little to eat, but they were scolded and sometimes beaten," Tai says. "Now they can take hot showers twice a week and are served meat, as well as fruit

from problematic families," Wu says. "By treating them this way and spending social resources on them, we hope they can feel the government and society care about them," he says. "This will help them reform."

On a day in June 2011 at Changhua Prison, about 15 inmates practiced two hours of drumming in the yard. They were taught by drumming instructor Ibau (伊苞) from Taiwan's famous U-Theatre. Despite the warm weather, the inmates practiced intently; first beating the drums slowly and eventually working into faster, more sophisticated

beats. Although the students only get one lesson a week, they improve rapidly because they have time to focus on learning and they practice in their cells, drumming on anything they can, according to Ibau.

One of the drummers, a 24-year-old man convicted of armed robbery who declined to give his name, says that while drumming might not be something he will do after he gets out, it has helped him. "It's given me confidence," he says. So far, U-Theatre has hired two former members of the prison troupe since their release. The men performed with the troupe at the Taipei International Flora Exposition in early 2011.

Ibau, who has traveled to the prison from Taipei weekly since the classes began in 2009, says she does not discriminate against her students because of their backgrounds. "They really don't want to be seen as prisoners. I tell them, 'Everyone has wrongdoings, but because you've done something wrong, you have to pay a price. Since we're fated to be together here, when you're drumming, wish the people listening to the drumming well. So you need to do a lot of homework, including drumming, reflecting, thinking, returning to your origins and not acting impulsively like in the past,'" she says. In fact, the self-discipline and meditation required of U-Theatre's Zen-style drumming is seen as a key element of the program, Ibau says.

The drum teacher says the prisoners learn fast, but there are challenges to teaching them because of their past. "They've lacked a lot [of love, nurturing and good guidance] in their life, so now we have to make up for that," Ibau says.

The prison drum troupe has already performed at other prisons



A showroom at Taipei Prison displays works by prisoners. The ceramics can be ordered for purchase.

in Taiwan and was part of an outdoor concert in Changhua County during the Lunar New Year holiday in February 2011. That event also showcased the skills of 2,011 inmates, who danced in unison before the Republic of China's Minister of Justice and other guests, including the inmates' family members. The performance set a world record for having the largest number of prisoners dancing at the same time, while a video of the dance posted on YouTube received 39,423 hits in its first week. "It's not only unusual in Taiwan, but in the world. To have inmates perform—it's a big

breakthrough," Wu says. "By giving them a stage, they have confidence and with confidence they can reform themselves ... It's very important that we help them find themselves."

Wu is credited with driving many of the changes to Taiwan's prison system, where the former warden has worked for 40 years. In 1985, he traveled to Japan to study the promotion of arts and cultural education for prisoners. In 1993, he began pushing for arts classes in Taiwan's prisons, with the first programs offered that year in painting, paper cutting, calligraphy and brickwork at what is now Tainan Juvenile Detention House in southern Taiwan.

One of the biggest differences in the programs he has implemented in Taiwan compared with those abroad is that local prisons make prisoners' creations available to the outside world. Work by inmates, such as baked goods, paintings, porcelain, calligraphy and sculptures are sold at an exhibition held about once a year as well as advertised on the website of the Ministry of Justice. At one exhibition in Taoyuan in 2011, sales of prisoner-made goods reached NT\$5.5 million (US\$183,000). The buyers knew the items were made by prisoners, but did not mind, Wu says. "European and US prisons are not like that. There are few such opportunities there," he says.

Wu put many of his reform ideas into practice at Changhua

Prison, where he served as a warden from 2006 to 2009. When he first arrived at the prison, there were already classes for making lanterns and straw figures. Wu then launched classes in sculpting, noodle making and playing traditional Chinese instruments, among others. The ideas were well received and current warden Tai Shou-nan carried the concept further when he took over at Changhua in mid-2009.

Maximum-Security Art

At Penghu Prison, a maximum-security facility that houses around 1,900 inmates, most of whom are drug offenders, the art classes feature sand art, stone and driftwood carving, paper cutting, calligraphy and landscape painting. "They only paint or make sand art of Penghu's scenery. They do this well even though they've never been allowed outside to see Penghu's beautiful landscape. They've only seen it in pictures," says Wu Chen-hung (吳承鴻), warden of Penghu Prison. The artworks have proven popular among visitors to Penghu seeking souvenirs.

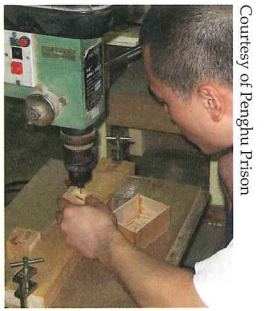
The jail also offers music lessons in flute playing and a choir, but perhaps its most unusual class is an essay writing workshop set up in 1997 by a journalist, a Penghu native. Inmates have since published several collections of essays, which include reflections on their lives, their time in prison and even what they think about the books they have

read. The prisoners donated all profits from sales of the volumes to charity.

Given the prison's location on the remote Penghu Archipelago, some 50 kilometers from Taiwan proper, few inmates get to see their families on a regular basis. The writing program helps them express their loneliness and other feelings, Wu says.

While the overall aim of educational opportunities for inmates is rehabilitation, there are also practical reasons for the reforms. Despite the rise in Taiwan's prison population, the number of prisons in Taiwan, and in some facilities the number of staff, has remained the same. There is simply no budget to build more prisons or hire more prison guards, officials say, which means that prisoners have to be managed in ways that alleviate behavioral problems and keep costs down.

Hsu Hua-fu (許華孚), a professor in the Department and Graduate Institute of Criminology at National Chung Cheng University in Chiayi County, southern Taiwan, says Taiwan's prisons are functioning at 15 to 20 percent over capacity. "Few prisons are built because of the lack of land and money, and local residents not wanting prisons to be built near their homes," Hsu says. Still, the prison expert says more



An inmate at Penghu Prison participates in a woodworking class. Educational opportunities are one of the changes aimed at helping prisoners reform.



Prisoners in the kitchen at Taipei Prison take a baking test in late 2011. Certificates earned in prison can help inmates find employment after their release.

such institutions are not the answer. In the long run, he says, Taiwan should adopt northern European models under which those convicted of non-violent crimes do community service or pay fines, rather than serve time. "I think if we keep building prisons, that won't solve the problems. Instead, it will create problems. Alternatives to incarceration are better, such as community service, fines, or probation."

In the meantime, overcrowding is a serious problem for Taiwan's prisons. A decade ago, inmates lived 10 to a cell, but the average now is 12 to 13 people per cell, according to Hsu and Wu. Group cells in Taiwan are usually either about 15 square meters or 25 square meters, while one or two person cells are about 8 square meters, Wu says. The director-general says that most inmates get about 2.3 square meters, although Hsu says the amount is actually a little less than that.

Changhua was built to handle 2,096 prisoners, but currently houses 2,649 "juvenile" inmates

from age 18 to 35. "We are prisons. We can't tell them 'The prison is full. Come back later. We can't take you now,'" Changhua Prison Warden Tai Shou-nan says. Taipei Prison, a medium-security prison located in Taoyuan County, northern Taiwan was built to house 2,705 prisoners, but currently holds 4,160 inmates. "It's very serious. Each cell has 10 to 20 inmates," Wu says.

Even though Taipei Prison houses a number of criminals who have been convicted of violent crimes as well as repeat offenders who have been sentenced to terms of 10 years or more, prison staff report few behavior problems among inmates, Wu says. One recent afternoon, prisoners in the art workshops painted and made pottery, while those in the kitchen baked bread. There were at least 20 inmates in each workroom, but no more than one or two guards present to watch each group. The low number of guards is similar to that for other prisons in Taiwan. Wu says that the ratio of guards to prisoners in

Taiwan is about 1 to 14, whereas for Japan, for example, it is 1 to 4.

Hsu says one of the reasons why so few guards are needed in Taiwan is because most prisoners are convicted of non-violent crimes. More than 70 percent of Taiwan's prisoners have committed drug-related crimes, mostly drug taking, or theft, he says. Still, the crowding situation means careful prison management has become increasingly important. For this reason, offering the inmates lessons in music and the arts also helps the staff, Tai says. "When the inmates are in a good mood, they behave better and that makes our work easier," the warden says.

Without a Hitch

A case in point is the Lunar New Year performance in 2011. With more than 2,000 inmates gathered outside at the same time, without chains or handcuffs, if problems had occurred it would have been difficult to control the situation, even with the 100 guards who were present, Tai says. The event went off without a hitch, however.

Human rights groups say there is still room for improvement. Inmates sleep on mattresses on the floor and cells do not

U-Theatre's Ibau, second right, leads a practice session for inmates at Changhua Prison in June 2011. Self-discipline and self-reflection are seen as key elements of the Zen-style drum program for prisoners.



Cindy Sui

have air conditioning. In summer, when the weather is hot and humid, the problem of overcrowding makes their living conditions even more difficult. "They eat alright, but the living conditions are something we can't resolve. Some prisons don't have good ventilation, so it gets very hot," Tai says. "In the summer, we remind our staff that inmates can easily get into fights because it's hot and they're in a bad mood when it's hot," he says.

On the other hand, one advantage of having many inmates in a cell is that it reduces the chances of sexual assault, Tai says, adding that such occurrences are very rare.

Some people, however, question the success of efforts to rehabilitate inmates. Lin Ren-de (林仁德), a staff member in charge of administration and planning at Taipei's Association for Victims Support, says classes are a good way to help prisoners lead a stable life inside prison, and might even spur them to change their way of thinking, but victims hope inmates will truly reflect on their misdeeds and try to compensate them and their families as much as they can. "If they've reformed, but haven't faced up to the wrongdoings of their past, they haven't really been corrected," Lin says.

Victims or their families receive part of the money from the sale of the goods made by prisoners. After deducting production costs, 50 percent of the profit goes to inmates, 25 percent goes to a fund for victims' families, and the remaining 25 percent goes to the prisons to help them supplement the cost of operations.

Taiwan's prisons are also more transparent now than in the past,

officials say. Cameras are installed throughout facilities, not only to prevent misbehavior by inmates, but also abuse by staff members. Thousands of volunteers, including members of the clergy, counselors, music instructors, singers, journalists and retired teachers, are also among the outsiders who are now welcomed in to local prisons to lend a hand.

Form of Crime Prevention

The volunteers are much needed as Taiwan's prisons employ few full-time counselors. One such group is the non-denominational Christian Prison Fellowship Taiwan, which is linked to Prison Fellowship International, a nongovernmental religious organization of more than 100 national prison fellowships. Ming C. Huang (黃明鎮), a pastor with the fellowship, says some 600 volunteers from the group offer counseling to inmates, which can act as a form of crime prevention as it helps inmates understand the impact of the crimes they have committed. "Some of them seek forgiveness from the victims' families and in some cases, the families forgive them," Huang says. He adds that counseling has supported some inmates to finish their high school studies in prison and others to go on to college after they are released.

Prison expert Hsu Hua-fu says Taiwan's 60 percent re-offense rate is still quite high, however. He notes that only about 10 percent of local prisoners have access to the arts programs. At remote Penghu Prison, for example, the limited number of teachers and volunteers available to lead classes means that only about 130 inmates have access to art

lessons and about 100 to the writing workshop each year. Agency of Corrections Director-General Wu Shyan-chang says the recidivism rate is relatively high because of the high number of drug offenders in jail. Even though inmates are denied drugs in prison, once they are released, they are tempted, he says. Nevertheless, prison officials and others say they see qualitative changes in many inmates, which are among the most satisfying results of the prison system reforms.

Inmates like Jerry (a nickname), who is serving time in Changhua Prison for drug use, are an example. "At that time, perhaps I had a lot of pressure and didn't have another channel to release the pressure so I started taking drugs. I was running my own used car shop," he says. The young man has used the time in prison to learn English by ordering magazines such as *Studio Classroom* and listening to their programs on the radio, so that he now peppers his speech with English words and phrases. He also takes music lessons in a traditional bamboo string instrument.

After he gets out, Jerry plans to put his life back together again. "Perhaps I will try to restart my used car business, starting with buying and selling used cars and see if I can keep the business going," he says.

Even if some prisoners commit another crime after they are released, prison officials and staff say that if they can reform even a few, their work is worthwhile. "We'll never give up [trying to reform prisoners]," Wu says. ■

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