Some were locked up in their offices and visited by a steady stream of cadres and political instructors determined to break down all resistance and win the argument. In every case the admission of guilt was added to the person's dossier, which would follow him for the rest of his life.

More vulnerable were classes of people the regime perceived as threats to social order and drains on its resources. They were called 'lumpenproletariat' in Marxist parlance, but 'parasites' and 'trash' by the cadres who had to deal with them: paupers, beggars, pickpockets and prostitutes, but also the millions of refugees and the unemployed who had come to seek shelter in the cities during the civil war. Many urban residents, who craved a return to social order after the chaotic years of civil war, welcomed these measures. Some, however, feared that the cities might be emptied.[22]

In Beijing, the communist troops charged with taking over the prisons found most of them empty. To save food and heat, the municipal authorities had ordered the large-scale release of inmates a few months earlier. On the streets of the capital, some beggars thought that they were quite literally 'liberated': they roved the streets killing dogs, smashing windows and blackmailing shopowners, with some of them managing to make the equivalent of 8 to 10 kilos of grain a day. Rickshaw pullers, on the other hand, took 'liberation' as a licence to flout the traffic regulations, causing mayhem on the streets. Thousands of them were rounded up and confined in makeshift camps on the outskirts of the city. By the end of 1949, some 4,600 vagrants languished in re-education centres and government reformatories.[23]

Like everybody else, they were asked to reflect on their sins, study the new orthodoxy and learn a different trade. Many made the best of their internment, but others sank into depression, despite all the propaganda about their 'liberation'. As one report noted, 'because they feel so miserable and unhappy they feign madness, act crazy and attempt to run away. There are even some small children who cry all the time, begging to be allowed to go home.' A few refused to be re-educated. Liu Guoliao, enrolled in a training course for vagrants, was a proud man, stubbornly proclaiming, 'My head is made of steel, bones and cement. It is beyond reform.'[24]

Conditions in the reformatories were often dreadful. Abuse was rife. In the western suburbs of Beijing, guards stole food and clothing and regularly beat the people they were meant to reform. As a detailed investigation brought to light, some of the children in detention were sodomised. The nurses could be careless, sometimes even brutal, particularly when using syringes. People died every month, the death rate being especially high among the elderly.[25]

In Shanghai too, thousands of thieves, vagrants and rickshaw pullers were arrested and sent to labour camps. Arrests came in waves. In a mere three days in December 1949 more than 5,000 beggars and pickpockets were arrested and deported to custody centres. Many were selected for re-education and sent to training units, but large numbers also ended up in prison. In Tilanqiao, as Ward Road Gaol was now known, by May 1951 over 3,000 undesirable elements had been imprisoned or sent to labour camps in the countryside. Several dozen were executed or died in custody.[26]

People who eked out a living as pedlars and hawkers were also cleared from the streets. In republican China, all manner of goods were delivered to the door, usually carried in baskets, swung from shoulder poles or carted on wheelbarrows, occasionally in donkey panniers. Each hawker had his own peculiar chant or mechanical rattle to advertise his wares. Vendors and itinerant traders also stood on pavement corners, offering every possible item from local fruit and vegetables, cloth, crockery, baskets, coal, meat, toys, sweets and nuts to soap, socks, handkerchiefs and towels.[27]

Within months they were rounded up, questioned and sent back to their home villages. A few were allowed to remain, but prohibited from roaming the streets. Open-air markets were organised where they were assigned stalls to sell their wares. One such market in Tianjin was on a tract of wasteland. A vast marquee built with bamboo went up in two days, and in another day the whole place was walled and roofed with matting. Pitches were marked out and tables and benches appeared. A funfair was organised to attract buyers, as jugglers, tightrope walkers, actors and singers kept the market packed. But the sights and sounds of hawkers trading their goods from door to door largely belonged to the past.[28]

Brothels were closed. In Beijing they were raided by 2,400 police officers on 21 November 1949. Over a thousand women and several hundred

owners, procurers and pimps were arrested at a stroke. The re-education camps were already so crowded that the women were locked up in a cluster of decommissioned brothels on Hanjiatan, in the very heart of the city's erstwhile red-light district. They too were put to work and made to attend study sessions examining the evils of feudalism as well as vocational training classes. In order to make a clean break with the past, they were taken to large assembly halls where they had to denounce their former employers, who were often standing on the platform wearing shackles.[29]

Similar scenarios were enacted elsewhere. Between October 1949 and January 1950, Suzhou, Bengbu, Nanjing, Hangzhou and Tianjin, among other cities, stamped out prostitution. In Shanghai a more gradual approach was adopted: the brothels were slowly starved of customers by increasingly stringent regulations. First banquets, gambling, soliciting and rowdy behaviour were prohibited, then all past contracts between the women and the owners were declared void. The police applied relentless pressure, using an inventory compiled by the previous regime listing the address and registration number of each known brothel. Every time one of the 930 or so establishments closed, the address was struck from the list. Several brothel keepers were executed as a warning to others. News of their execution was printed in bold with black borders. Many owners voluntarily handed over the premises, often for lack of customers. Some returned to their home villages, others became tailors, cigarette sellers or even freight hauliers.

Many of the women were sent to a re-education camp. Here, as elsewhere in the country, they were made to follow a strict penal schedule, spending much of their time in study sessions denouncing the mistreatment they had suffered under the old regime. But few conformed to the image of the contrite prostitute projected by propaganda. A fair number were restive and quarrelsome, while a few insulted or physically assaulted the cadres in charge of their re-education. They denounced the manual labour they were forced to perform as a new form of exploitation, apparently unhappy to spend their days locked away, sewing olive-green shirts for the soldiers of the People's Liberation Army. Cao Manzhi, one of the cadres in charge of the whole operation, later admitted that even those inmates who came from low-class brothels did not like being interned and

missed their life as prostitutes. But most settled down once they realised that resistance was futile. The majority were sent back to inland areas. Brothels that had managed to survive were finally raided on 25 November 1951. Even at that stage some of the women attacked the cadres in charge of the arrests.[30]

Prostitution was soon proclaimed to be an evil of the past. But in Beijing alone 350 women, some of them only recently released from re-education camps, were soon plying their trade again. Only a handful did so because they could not make a living otherwise. Some pretended to be students or housewives, accompanied by small children and mothers-in-law for cover. A few even wore party uniforms and carried badges. They stood in the doorways openly soliciting customers: 'Come in for a cup of tea!' In other cities too, prostitution went underground. As hundreds of thousands of desperate refugees fled the countryside after liberation, women continued to sell sex in the cities. In Shanghai hundreds of them were arrested in 1952, the women becoming more adept at hiding their activities with every new sweep. In the following years the authorities would adopt much more draconian measures to stamp out vice.[31]

If disposing of vagrants and prostitutes was a challenge, handling the several million refugees, disbanded soldiers and unemployed in the cities represented an even bigger task. In batch after batch, they too were sent back to the countryside, which became the great dumping ground for all undesirable elements. But few wanted to leave the cities where they had rebuilt their lives, however precarious. In Shanghai only one in ten agreed to be repatriated to a village.[32]

In Nanjing an even smaller fraction co-operated. Some steadfastly refused to be resettled, and objected to the military approach used in the dispersal plan. But despite all their objections, a third of a million people – equivalent to a quarter of the population – were sent away from the old regime's capital. The majority were dispatched to Shandong, Anhui and northern Jiangsu, but some ended up working on reclamation projects. More than 14,000 undesirables, mainly beggars, were destined for 'production training camps'.[33]

According to the party line, people were supposed to have a home village, but in reality many had been away for decades and had no relatives