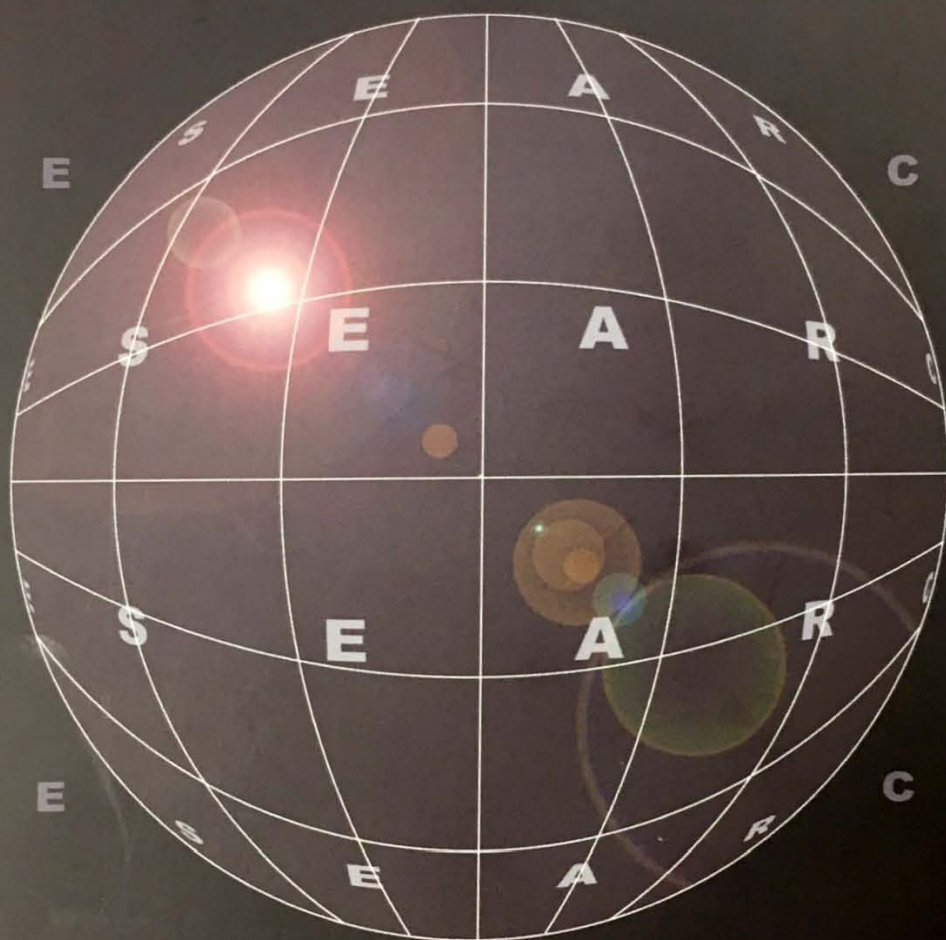


# ENGAGING WITH ETHICS IN INTERNATIONAL CRIMINOLOGICAL RESEARCH



Edited by  
**MICHAEL ADORJAN AND  
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ROUTLEDGE

**PART II**

**Trust and research with vulnerable populations 67**

- 4 A history of coercive practices: the abuse of consent  
in research involving prisoners and prisons in the  
United States 69  
*Mark Israel*
- 5 Indigenous peoples, research and ethics 87  
*Maggie Walter*
- 6 Ethics as witnessing: 'science', research ethics and  
victimization 106  
*Dale C. Spencer*

**PART III**

**Research on and with police 123**

- 7 Navigating research relationships: academia and criminal  
justice agencies 125  
*Erin Gibbs Van Brunschot*
- 8 Bridging the solitudes: a grounded look at how to create  
meaningful police–academic research partnerships 142  
*Rose Ricciardelli, Laura Huey, Hayley Crichton and Tracy Hardy*
- 9 Criminologizing everyday life and conducting  
policing ethnography in China 154  
*Jianhua Xu*

**PART IV**

**Emerging areas 173**

- 10 Carceral tours and missed opportunities: revisiting  
conceptual, ethical and pedagogical dilemmas 175  
*Justin Piché, Kevin Walby and Craig Minogue*
- 11 Illuminating the dark net: methods and ethics in cryptomarket  
research 192  
*James Martin*

# 9

## CRIMINOLOGIZING EVERYDAY LIFE AND CONDUCTING POLICING ETHNOGRAPHY IN CHINA

*Jianhua Xu*

### Introduction

In his recent book *Democratic Policing in a Changing World*, Peter Manning (2010) argues that recent policing researchers in democratic countries have come too close to the research subject. This policing scholarship often focuses on issues of “what works” and “what can the police do?” rather than examining the moral, political and social consequences of police action (ibid, p. 106). In this sense, some scholars argue that sociological inquiry into the discipline of policing in Western countries has become “sociology for policing” instead of “sociology of policing” (Loader 2011). If policing research in democratic countries is “too close” to its research subject, then policing research in authoritarian China is best described as an even more unilateral spokesperson for its research subject. In a review of articles in Chinese academic journals on policing, Lo (2010) points out that many research articles are simply “worshippers” and “flatterers” of the Chinese party-state’s ideology, with the content merely reflecting authors’ adherence to existing political lines and slogans. While some articles discuss some practical conditions of Chinese policing such as public relations or crime control (Chen 2015; Li 1998), a critical discourse is largely absent. In addition, policing research in China, like many other topics within the field of criminology, remains at the level of general discussion and speculation without a sound framework and empirical evidence (Zhang 2011, p. 83). In this chapter, based on my recent research on police/business and crime solicitation posters in Guangzhou, I reflect on the challenges and opportunities one faces in conducting policing research in China. In addition, I examine the ethical nature of these challenges and its relevance for policing research in other authoritarian countries.



## Challenges of and opportunities for policing research in China

Researchers have faced several challenges in studying policing in China. The first relates to the general difficulty of studying policing. In modern society, the police are one of a few government agencies legally authorized to use force. Further, the secret nature of much police work facilitates the formation of a conservative police culture which prevents police from sharing information about their work with the public and researchers (Manning 2004). Compared with those targeted by police, usually young, poor and underclass citizens, the police are in a position of power. And indeed, criminological research of the powerful is much more difficult to conduct than of the powerless (Lumsden & Winter 2014). Some scholars even argue that criminology, the umbrella discipline under which policing falls, has become a tool of social control due to its unbalanced selection of research targets, especially low status offenders (Jacques & Wright 2010). Chinese policing studies are not immune to this problem, and seldom question the philosophy, method and consequences of policing strategy (Lo 2010).

The second challenge of researching police is related to academic freedom in China. Although Chinese society has undergone unprecedented changes over the past three decades, China remains under one party rule; that of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which actively preempts any possible challenges to its rule. An independent and critical discourse of the cornerstone of the CCP's repressive force, the police, would be regarded as challenging the legitimacy of the party-state and is therefore actively suppressed. Critical researchers may suffer from various punishments, ranging from losing their jobs to being imprisoned, if they are regarded as posing a threat to the rule of the Communist party-state (Xu & Liu 2015).

After Xi Jinping took power in 2012, what limited academic freedom existed was further eroded and control over universities also strengthened. In 2013, the party-state launched a campaign to ban universities and media from talking about seven topics deemed to be "dangerous Western influences". The infamous "seven speak-nots" include universal values, freedom of speech, civil society, civil rights, the historical errors of the Chinese Communist Party, crony capitalism and judicial independence (Carlson 2013). In 2015, foreign textbooks were further banned from use in Chinese universities to stem infiltration of "Western values" (Chen & Zhuang 2015). If the visible hand of political control on academic freedom affects the production of knowledge on Chinese society in general and on policing in particular, the invisible hand of self-censorship affects Chinese policing research in a more subtle way. Researchers will avoid many 'sensitive' topics if they believe there is no chance to get their work published for political reasons. As such, these research topics certainly cannot garner financial support through grants, as the government controls most grants. Researchers must also be cautious in drawing their conclusions according to certain political lines. And indeed, my personal experience of reviewing Chinese journal articles on crime and policing is also illuminating. For

many academic journals, when they solicit my comments on submitted articles, the first criteria in the review form is "whether the article is politically correct or not", which means not being critical towards the government, and particularly not being critical towards the CCP. Although I can dismiss these instructions by indicating that articles are politically correct, other reviewers may act differently. In addition, the existence of this political criteria itself illuminates the lack of academic freedom in China, which greatly affects the formation of a critical analysis of policing among Chinese scholars.

The third difficulty for policing studies in China is scholars' lack of experience and skills in terms of conducting empirical studies. In the 1950s, soon after the CCP took power in China, all social science disciplines were banned from universities as a result of their alleged political incorrectness. It was not until the 1980s, when China started economic reform and opened up to the outside world, that the social science disciplines were re-established. The absence of social sciences for three decades deprived almost two generations of scholars of advancement in empirical studies, both theoretically and critically. During the last two decades, although Chinese scholars have started to catch up and develop their ability to conduct empirical research on topics such as the family, juveniles and migration, the legacy of a lack of training and experience in social science research still greatly limits the production of knowledge in policing. As a result, much research is based on unsupported speculation and without a theoretical framework, despite a few exceptions in recent years (Hu 2015).

Since the 1990s, due to the growing impact of China in the world and increasing interest in Chinese policing internationally, a small body of literature on Chinese policing began to emerge in the English-speaking world (Dai 2008). Although this body of research covers a wide range of topics and offers a critical examination that includes the philosophy and practice of Chinese policing (Bakken 2000, 2005; Dutton 2005; Fu 2005; Tanner 2005; Wong 2002; Xu 2012, 2014a), most researchers conduct studies using archival and secondary data. Empirical study of Chinese policing in the English-speaking world is also underdeveloped. While Chinese scholars have to face the problems of limited academic freedom and training in conducting empirical policing scholarship, the major challenge for international scholars is the problem of access to research participants. Scoggins (2014, p. 394) recently reflected on the challenges tied to her identity as an American scholar when conducting policing research in China and concluded that the most difficult part of the research was the recruitment of police for interview.

Facing these challenges, some international scholars resort to different strategies to conduct empirical studies on Chinese policing. On the one hand, some avoid studying police officers and policing strategies directly. Instead, they focus on people's perceptions of the police and analyze factors affecting different populations' trust in and satisfaction with the police (Sun et al. 2013; Wu & Sun 2009). However, given the difficulty of studying policing in general and the authoritarian nature of Chinese policing in particular, an independent and large-scale survey of police officers has yet to emerge.

On the other hand, some international scholars utilize their simultaneous insider and outsider identities to facilitate empirical data collection while avoiding political interference in publishing research findings. In recent decades an increasing number of Chinese scholars have obtained their PhD in sociology, criminology or political science in the US, the UK, Australia and Hong Kong.<sup>1</sup> These scholars enjoy a hybrid semi-foreigner and semi-Chinese identity, which facilitates their primary data collection in policing research (Xu et al. 2013). Their outsider identity helps avoid political intervention and self-censorship in publishing their research findings. For instance, based on published materials and fieldwork data from two Chinese cities, Wang Peng, a UK trained, Hong Kong-based Chinese scholar, explored how *Guanxi*, a Chinese version of personal connection, affected police corruption by facilitating the selling and buying of senior police positions and promoting formation of corrupt networks between the police and criminals (Wang 2014). Using archival material and interviews with police officers, Zhou Kai and Yan Xiaojun, two Hong Kong-based Chinese scholars, examined how local police used information strategies, persuasive strategies and coercive strategies to control protests and maintain social stability in a city of northern China (Zhou & Yan 2014). My previous ethnographic research into robbery of motorcycle taxi drivers in southern China also offered a critical analysis of how a discriminative motorcycle ban policy affected the working time of local and migrant drivers and, by extension, their differential risk of robbery (Xu 2009). Despite various challenges, these researchers opened new possibilities for conducting empirical research on Chinese policing, although scholars inside mainland China (including those returned from training overseas) may still face many difficulties in exploring these possibilities. In the next section, I will reflect on how my identity as both insider and outsider affects research design, data collection, publications and ethics involved in the process of researching the police in China.

### **Political sensitivity and the alternative way of entering the policing field in China**

The most challenging aspect of conducting policing ethnography in China is obtaining access to the police for fieldwork, given its conservative political environment towards policing research (Scoggins 2014). However, observation of police work is of vital importance to advance our understanding of policing. The founder of the Chicago School of Sociology, Robert Park, informed his students about the importance of fieldwork and first-hand observation:

You have been told to go grubbing in the library, thereby accumulating a mass of notes and liberal coating of grime. You have been told to choose problems wherever you can find musty stacks of routine records based on trivial schedules prepared by tired bureaucrats and filled out by reluctant applicants for fussy do-gooders or indifferent clerks. This is called "getting your hands

dirty in real research." Those who counsel you are wise and honorable; the reasons they offer are of great value. But one more thing is needful: first hand observation. Go and sit in the lounges of luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and the slum shakedowns, sit in the orchestra hall and in the Star and Garter burlesque. In short, gentlemen, go and get the seat of your pants dirty in real research. (cited in McKinney 1966, p. 71)

Almost one century later, in a speech at a British Society of Criminology lifetime awards ceremony, the British sociologist and criminologist Stanley Cohen reiterated the importance of getting "out there" in the field for researchers. Cohen counseled, "beware of the people ... who are always grabbing you to tell you ... how things work 'out there'. The criminological version of 'out there' is sitting in the back of a police van" (cited in Hall 2011).

Although 'sitting in the back of a police van' has been a long tradition for policing researchers in democratic societies (Black 1970; Martin 2007; Reiss 1971a), such a practice has not yet been possible in authoritarian China. However, my research experience reveals that there are also other possibilities in terms of conducting policing ethnography research by studying the traces left behind by police activity or the evidence of what the police fail to do in the public space. One of the strengths of ethnography is that it allows researchers to examine traces of human activity in their natural settings. Although many aspects of police work such as crime investigation and intelligence gathering are secretive and out of sight for the public, some police work, including traffic control, stop and check and the production of policing posters for crime prevention, must be conducted or shown in public spaces. These forms of publically performed police work provide possibilities for researchers to observe police behaviors directly or to study the behavior of police through observing the traces of police work indirectly. While directly observing law enforcement might be methodologically challenging, posing certain risks to researchers and being ethically complicated, studying the traces left behind by police activities raises no such concern. My research experience reveals that widely existing policing posters, banners as well as crime solicitation posters in urban China, provide a unique window through which to study various aspects of Chinese police and policing. Looking through this window, we can examine police business relations, commodification of policing, modernization of policing, police culture and the soft-authoritarian nature of policing in a rapidly changing China (Xu 2013, 2015).

### **Criminologizing the everyday life: insider/outsider identity and the selection of research subjects**

In his recent book, *Criminological Imagination*, Jock Young (2011, pp. 79–80) warns against three major problems existing in the current production of criminological



knowledge that severely restrict its imagination: (1) male, working-class crime is described as all criminality; (2) descriptions of crime in advanced industrial countries are used to describe crime in general; and (3) the Americanization of criminology. In order to regain its imagination, Young (2011, p. 222) calls for bringing currently marginalized ethnography back to criminology, and making critical ethnography the mainstream. Indeed, there is an increasing recognition of the need to develop criminological ethnography in non-Western societies (Fraser 2013), and to expand the vision of criminology in general and policing studies in particular by drawing inspiration from everyday life in non-Western contexts. Sociologists have long called for integration of research and their personal lives to make the latter a source of inspiration in knowledge production. The American sociologist C. Wright Mills instructed sociology students on the art of intellectual craftsmanship in his classic book, *The Sociological Imagination*:

The most admirable thinkers within the scholarly community you have chosen to join do not split their work from their lives ... what this means is that you must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it. (1959, pp. 195–196)

For me, police/business and crime solicitation posters are part of my everyday life experience and have also become a subject of criminological inquiry: a process of criminologizing everyday life (Felson & Santos 2010; Naughton 2014).

My identity as a semi-insider and semi-outsider in different cities contributed to the process of criminologizing everyday life. Over the past 15 years, I have been studying, working, living and conducting research in three different cities in southern China: Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Macau. Guangzhou is the capital of Guangdong, the richest province as a result of its leading role in China's economic reform since the 1980s. At the end of 2014, Guangzhou had a population of roughly 17 million, where half the populous included rural-to-urban migrant workers; Hong Kong had a population of 7 million and Macau 0.5 million. Hong Kong and Macau are Special Administrative Regions of the People's Republic of China, former colonies of the British and Portuguese, respectively. Under China's one-country two-systems policy, Hong Kong and Macau enjoy a highly autonomous position. Despite the increasing influence of mainland China and the political pressure of mainlandization in recent years (Lo 2012), Hong Kong and Macau still maintain very distinctive urban landscapes and cultures that differ from those of Guangzhou. Spending much time traveling and living in these three cities makes me aware of the sharp differences that exist in the use of urban space by the police for the purpose of crime prevention. While various types of policing posters and banners promoting crime prevention are omnipresent on the streets of Guangzhou, they are much less popular in Hong Kong and Macau. In addition, some posters and banners have uniquely Chinese characteristics, such as police/business posters and police slogan banners.



I was born and raised in mainland China, where I received a Master's degree and worked as a police officer (in Guangzhou) for five years before moving to Hong Kong, where I completed my PhD and postdoctoral work. Since 2013, I have been teaching in Macau while regularly visiting Hong Kong and Guangzhou. Across all these cities I enjoy both an insider and outsider identity. This status increases my sensitivity to the unique use of public space by Guangzhou police and facilitates the selection of police/business and crime solicitation banners as a research subject. These omnipresent police posters/banners and crime solicitation posters are part of everyday life for residents in Guangzhou but have never become the subject of criminological inquiry. Let me now examine how I adopted this alternative method to criminologize my life experience and study Chinese policing through systematically observing police/business and crime solicitation posters.

### **Systematic social observation of police/business and crime solicitation posters in Guangzhou**

Systematic social observation is the direct observation of social phenomena in their natural settings to generate quantitative variables for analysis. Although this method proves to be very useful in policing research (Reiss 1971a), compared with other research methods such as interviews and surveys, systematic social observation is underdeveloped. Observing public places, however, is one of the hallmarks of the Chicago School (Park & Burgess 1921), and direct observation is fundamental to the advancement of knowledge (Sampson & Raudenbush 1999; Taylor et al. 1985). Reiss (1971b) advocated systematic social observation as a key measurement strategy for natural social phenomena. In recent years there has been a renewed interest in applying this method with the assistance of new technology such as videotaping (Sampson & Raudenbush 1999) and Google Street View (Hwang & Sampson 2014). This method has seldom been used in studying Chinese policing except in one of my earlier research projects examining how policing affected differential risks of criminal victimization between migrant workers and local residents in China (Xu 2009). This method was further developed in my study of police/business and crime solicitation posters in Guangzhou.

Since 2009, I have been systematically collecting policing posters and banners in Guangzhou. Wherever I go, I take my professional camera or smart phone with camera function with me. I take pictures of anything related to crime and policing. I largely visit urban villages where most residents are rural-to-urban migrant workers. Urban villages, the Chinese version of urban slums, have also been regarded as the centre of "prostitution, gambling and drugs" and crime hotspots by the police (Xu 2014b). Interestingly, the public space of urban villages has become a contested space between the police and criminals. On the one hand, the police post numerous warning posters with the aim of crime prevention, such as listing typical tricks of tele-communication fraud and reminders to lock doors properly. On the other hand, urban villages are also hotspots of crime solicitation posters posted by

criminals on which information on various illegal activities is provided, such as the creation of fake documents and certificates, recruiting sex workers and selling sex, loan sharking, selling fake invoices, guns or stolen cars and motorcycles. There are 138 urban villages in Guangzhou and I have visited almost all of them on foot or by bicycle. In addition, police posters/banners also appear on main streets. On many occasions, I took different buses from starting terminals to end terminals and took pictures of various banners along the streets. During several Chinese New Year periods, my research assistants drove me around the city to take pictures of police banners/posters as the police were more likely to post various banners during this period. Besides blanket searches of police posters/banners and crime solicitation posters in urban villages where migrant workers are concentrated, I have also visited numerous neighborhoods where local residents live. Over the past six years, I have acquired a collection of over 20,000 pictures of police posters and banners as well as crime solicitation posters in Guangzhou. Undoubtedly, the police posters and banners provide evidence of what the police have done to promote crime prevention or political propaganda in the public space. Equally important, crime solicitation posters provide evidence of what the police fail to do as these are posted by criminals to solicit partners or victims. The widespread existence of these posters is a signal of public disorder and the "broken windows" of public space (Wilson & Kelling 1982). They also evidence the police failure to control crime.

### ***Police/business posters***

Police/business posters refer to posters on which commercial advertisements appear alongside police warnings (see Figures 9.1 and 9.2). The space occupied by business information and police warnings on these posters varies. On some, information from the police covers most of the space, while on others business advertisements dominate. Although I have yet to see any in Hong Kong and Macau, such posters are used widely in Guangzhou and my research suggests that nearly 100 different types of business have provided financial sponsorship for the police enabling them to produce these posters (Xu 2013). For many citizens in Guangzhou, these police/business posters are part of their everyday lives; they see posters on the streets, the walls in their neighborhoods and the doors to apartment buildings. Ordinary people, myself included, usually take the existence of these posters for granted and seldom question their rationale or the symbiotic relationship between businesses and the police embodied in their co-production. These posters are usually designed by the police yet are made and paid for by the businesses. The police post these posters, in the name of crime prevention, in a variety of locations, including inside banks, restaurants and gated communities. On the one hand, in the production of these police/business posters, a business can benefit from legitimately using public space for its advertisements without approval from other government departments, such as the Industrial and Commercial Administration Bureau and Urban Management Departments, which are supposed to regulate outdoor advertisements.





**FIGURE 9.1** A poster displayed in an urban village, on the left-hand side of which is an advertisement for the Mary Women's Hospital and on the right-hand side is a call for support for and cooperation with police work, with phone numbers for the local police services

Source: Author

The business can also benefit from expanding its advertising reach and cultivating good relations with the police, which are of vital importance to business success in China. On the other hand, the police can benefit from promoting crime prevention without paying for it.

Most importantly, on these posters, local police offer phone numbers of local police stations and encourage citizens to call them instead of the centralized police hotline at municipal police departments. In doing so, they can reduce the number of crimes recorded on the centralized police hotline system as these calls will be unknown to municipal police departments. Through manipulating crime statistics, the local police officers can receive better performance evaluations and increase their chances of career promotion. Individual police officers might also exploit this opportunity for their private interest. Although police/business posters can be regarded as a 'win-win' game by the police and the business, they also cause much concern regarding the symbiotic relationship between the two. My field research and interviews with citizens revealed that they worry about police impartiality in law enforcement given their receipt of financial support from businesses. This relationship thus damages the image of the police and reduces citizens' trust in them.





FIGURE 9.2 A poster on a wall, the upper part of which consists of police information reminding readers about the risks of theft and robbery and listing typical fraudulent tricks, and the lower part providing the hotline number for McDonald's 24-hour delivery service

Source: Author

While some may regard the production of police/business posters as only a local phenomenon, my research revealed that police at various levels, from community police officers, local police stations, district police bureaus to municipal police departments, are all involved in the creation of police/business posters. And indeed, receiving financial support from business has been a long tradition for the police in China. Not only the police, other government departments also receive regular financial support from private businesses. I argue that an understanding of police/business posters and the relationship between the two needs to be located in the symbiotic relationships between economic capital and political power in a wider context of crony capitalism in China (Xu 2013). If the police/business posters can



reflect the traces of police activities in public space, crime solicitation posters are evidence of what the police fail to do.

### *Crime solicitation posters*

Crime solicitation posters are made by criminals to promote their illegal activities in the public space (see Figures 9.3 and 9.4). They are signals of crime and public disorder. As with police posters, crime solicitation posters are displayed throughout in Guangzhou. In many places, crime solicitation posters appear beside police warning posters. In some extreme cases, crime solicitation posters might appear on top of police posters or police information boards (Figure 9.5). The obvious illegal activities displayed on crime solicitation posters are also part of citizens' everyday life in Guangzhou. These posters usually appear on bus stations, across street overpasses, on the ground of sidewalks and on walls of residential areas. In the past six years, I have identified 22 different types of crime solicitation posters in Guangzhou. The most common advertise the making of various fake documents/certificates such as passports, ID cards, student cards, English level test certificates, marriage certificates and health certificates. Other types of crime solicitation posters include those advertising loan-sharking, debt collection, phone spying, fake invoices, selling gas-pistols, stolen motorcycles and cars, and various frauds related to sex services, credit cards, medical insurance, driver licenses, and so on. These crime solicitation posters are spread unevenly throughout public spaces in Guangzhou. In Guangzhou, there are roughly three different types of residential community. The first is urban villages where most residents are migrant workers. The second is semi-gated former socialist



**FIGURE 9.3** Various posters, including those advertising loan shark and fake documentation services and those recruiting male and female sex workers

Source: Author



**真情求缘**  
**18665641677**

本广告由律师事务所代理，女士已交150万保证金，如有违约由律师事务所承担法律责任。工商号（30093133）公证号（0975059653）



张丽，29岁，身高1.65米，丰满迷人，夫富商，因意外失生育能力，为继庞大家业，经协商，特寻异地品正健康男士，圆我母亲梦，通话满意，速汇定金50万，飞你处见面，有孕重酬100万（本人亲谈，不诚勿扰）。

**18665641677**

FIGURE 9.4 A poster for 'women' who are "looking for men to get [them] pregnant" and offering a payment of 1.5 million RMB (a common fraudulent practice)

Source: Author

work unit residential areas containing mostly local residents. The third is gated residential areas where most residents are new, rich and middle class. Data from systematic social observation shows that, while crime solicitation posters are never displayed within gated communities, they are nine times more likely to appear in urban villages than in semi-gated communities (Xu 2015). Further research reveals that the main reason explaining the difference in number of crime solicitation posters displayed in migrant worker communities and local resident communities is the availability and level of private policing or security services. To help make sense of my observations, I relied on some interviews with police (see below), which revealed that public police are largely absent in controlling crime solicitation posters. The most frequently cited reason given by the police to justify this situation was that they were too busy to handle these minor offenses; others believed that the





**FIGURE 9.5** A poster displayed on the information board used by police services advertising the production of fake certificates

Source: Author

Urban Management Department should be responsible for them (Xu 2015). The failure of the police to control these self-evident crimes in the public space provides another window through which to examine how public and private policing affect the production of public disorder in urban China.

### Reflectivity and research ethics

Although examining the traces of police activities and evidence of what they fail to do in the public space provides a possible method for studying Chinese policing, the difficulty related to study policing in general and the conservative political environment in particular haunted the whole research process, which raises a number of ethical issues in my research.



The first ethical issue concerns relations between researchers and the police. In order to make sense of what I observed in the public space, it was necessary that I interviewed police and ascertained their point of view. For instance, why did the police and businesses cooperate in producing police/business posters? What are the pros and cons for both sides? Or what are the attitudes of police towards crime solicitation posters and how do they control them? Understanding these questions provides the basis for a critical examination of the nature of Chinese policing. However, access to the police is almost impossible without personal connections or *Guanxi*. Chinese police are particularly vigilant regarding the activities of scholars with overseas backgrounds, allegedly in case they leak state secrets. Although my former identity as a police officer in Guangzhou to some extent reduced such concerns, reluctance on the part of some officers to talk about these issues persisted; those who did talk to me, I could sense were doing me a great favor. Such favors have nothing to do with the significance of my research but result from our *Guanxi*. People expect to help each other when they are in such relations. However, as other scholars point out, maintaining a good level of *Guanxi* can be not only time-consuming but also costly (Zhang et al. 2007). For instance, I was once asked by a police officer I had interviewed to write a Master's thesis for him. On another occasion, one police scholar who facilitated the interview asked if I could add his name to my future publications. Although I declined these requests as they were clear violations of research integrity and represented academic corruption, my refusal may also be interpreted as an unwillingness to return a favor, as such practices are widespread throughout mainland China. In addition, police officers I interviewed expressed other concerns, ranging from potential personal trouble caused by talking about sensitive police issues with a scholar from overseas, to the potential tarnishing of the police's image when research findings are published internationally (Xu 2013). My promise of anonymity and maintaining a neutral stance in my writing cannot completely ease these concerns, which may affect my rapport with police and the possibility of cooperation with them in future research. Although institutional review boards have increasingly been regarded as posing many difficulties for ethnographic research in many countries (Cook & Hoas 2011; Hessler et al. 2011) – with some scholars even calling it the “murder of ethnography” in criminology (Hall 2011) – fortunately, the ethical review process for my research at the University of Macau was conducted smoothly.

The second ethical issue relates to the possible consequence of being a critical researcher on Chinese policing. Existing literature on research ethics has explored thoroughly the importance of protecting the research subject (Emanuel et al. 2000; Orb et al. 2001). Undoubtedly, any research should not intentionally cause harm to research subjects, and this is particularly the case when the research subjects are vulnerable populations such as juveniles, migrants, or the poor. If these ethical issues related to protecting vulnerable research subjects are a main concern in democratic countries, there is an added ethical dimension to conducting research in authoritarian societies. For instance, in China where academic freedom is not protected by law, critical researchers themselves may become vulnerable when facing



intervention by and even punishment from the government. When researchers run the risk of being punished by the government for political reasons, should they take the consequences of punishment such as losing their job or imprisonment of their family into consideration? Are they taking an ethical stance toward themselves and their families if they know they are running these risks? And to what extent should they worry about these risks? These questions also arise in my research. As a scholar based in Macau, academic freedom is largely protected. However, I have also been friendly reminded by various people that conducting critical research on Chinese policing may mean putting myself in a risky situation because I have to return to mainland China on a regular basis. Worrying about these risks will have an effect on various aspects of research. For instance, I may have to think twice about working on a more challenging topic, such as political and secret policing.

The third ethical issue concerns the publication of findings. Given the political sensitivity of policing research and censorship in academic publications, critical research on Chinese policing can hardly be published in academic journals in China. Scholars based overseas, myself included, who work on Chinese policing may also engage in self-censorship by not submitting articles to Chinese journals. Publication in English journals can not only escape the Chinese censorship regime, but also avoid drawing unfriendly attention from Chinese authorities.<sup>2</sup> However, publication in English also limits its influence among Chinese readers, as most universities do not have access to English journal databases in the social sciences and many scholars are inadequately proficient in English to read articles in it. Research findings can also not be published in the mass media without severe censorship from editors. I was invited by a mainland Chinese national newspaper to write an article on Chinese policing and thus submitted a draft to the managing editor. The editor apologized for the deletion of a particular section that he felt was too politically sensitive and remarked that, without this censorship, the editor in chief may have completely prevented the article's publication. Researchers have to face this dilemma of either accepting certain levels of censorship while publishing their articles or having their voice not heard at all.

## Conclusion

In the past three decades, a booming literature on policing studies has emerged. Most of this research focuses on Western countries where empirical research has a long tradition and academic freedom is protected. Empirical research on policing in China is extremely underdeveloped given its political sensitivity and conservative police culture. However, researchers also point out that, although challenging, a rapidly changing Chinese society also creates some room for scholars to maneuver and negotiate with their research subject (Scoggins 2014).

In this chapter, based on a decade of personal research experience on policing in China, I reflected on the possibility of expanding the researchers' 'toolkit' by criminologizing researchers' everyday life and systematically observing traces of police

activity on the street and evidence of what they fail to do in the public space. Criminologizing researchers' everyday lives could be especially useful in authoritarian countries where the police are hard to approach for research purposes. It can help to identify research questions and lay the foundation for further ethnographic inquiry on policing. And, indeed, every researcher has a biography that becomes an element in and aspect of the collection and analysis of data (Ragin et al. 2004, p. 15). Despite the advantages of drawing inspiration from lived experiences of studying Chinese policing, researchers still have to face and manage several ethical issues. These ethical issues are more pronounced in authoritarian countries. In democratic societies, relations between the researcher and the police could be less complicated. In China, the conservative police culture and political pressure mean that researchers have to rely on their Guanxi to gain access to the police. Relying on Guanxi could complicate research ethics as the police may have certain expectations of researchers. In democratic countries, the main ethical concern with regard to research is the protection of vulnerable research subjects (De Vries et al. 2004; Marshall 2003). While this concern also applies in China, researchers also have to deal with the problem of protecting themselves from political pressure and even punishment. In China, lack of academic freedom also limits researchers' choice of publication outlet. While publishing research findings in international English journals can avoid censorship by and unfriendly attention from Chinese authorities, it also limits its influence among Chinese readers. Researchers who focus on the police in other authoritarian countries may also encounter similar challenges to those I experienced in China. Criminologizing everyday life means that the dilemma of insider/outsider identity and the unique ethical issues facing researchers in China form an ongoing process through which scholars must advance, negotiate, and compromise in developing policing ethnography.

## Notes

- 1 Hong Kong, a former British colony, was handed over to China in 1997. Currently, Hong Kong and Macau are two Special Administrative Regions within the People's Republic of China.
  - 2 On the one hand, foreign languages present an obstacle for Party officials in terms of tracing critical publications, as their capacity to read in them is limited. On the other hand, publications in foreign languages have less impact on ordinary Chinese citizens, which reduces the party-state's motivation to censor them.
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