



Doing criminological ethnography in China: Opportunities and challenges

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Abstract

This article reflects on the emerging criminological research enterprise in China. We provide a brief overview on the nature of criminological knowledge production in China, particularly in relation to practical and political constraints. We contend that while there are distinct challenges associated with doing criminology in China, there are also new possibilities for alternative methodologies and critical analyses to push the boundaries of administrative criminology. Through the example of a study of migrants and motorcycle taxi driving in a Chinese city, we argue that an ethnography of the periphery can facilitate our understanding of the nuances of the social and cultural construction of the migrant crime problem, bringing to the foreground globally as well as locally relevant tensions, fragmented realities and hybridized identities.

Keywords

China, ethnography, migrants, policing

Introduction

In this final article of the Special Issue, we join in a dialogue with a mainland-Chinese scholar, Jianhua Xu, to examine more closely some of the key themes raised in our Introduction. In particular, we reflect on the cultural specificities of doing criminology in a hitherto peripheral site of knowledge production and the challenges of doing ethnographic research in one of the most rapidly changing locales in Asia. Given

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its geo-political history and recent developments, the People's Republic of China exemplifies not only the challenges but new opportunities for investigating and theorizing beyond the northern terrain.

Although China has been a late-comer to global comparative criminology, there has been significant advancement in recent years with varying influences from the 'North'. The expansion of criminology is reflected in the establishment of the Chinese Society of Criminology in 1992, the development of undergraduate and postgraduate education in some universities, the emergence of numerous journals dedicated to crime and control in China and the growing interest about crime in China from the international scholarly community (Hebenton and Jou, 2010; Pearson, 2002). There are also broader efforts by scholars from different intellectual backgrounds to break away from the traditional 'East–West binary structure' in knowledge production, use societies in Asia rather than the North as points of 'inter-referencing' and 'to open up a different way of rethinking the characteristics of our own' (Chen, 2010: 241–244). In this context, doing criminological ethnography offers a promising pathway to examine what Chen (2010: 242–245) has described as 'real energies and contradictions on the ground ... multiply our perspectives and enrich our subjectivity'. Drawing from the personal research experiences of Xu, we will illustrate some of the global and local tensions and hybridized identities apparent in doing ethnography on migrant city dwellers in China.

The nature of criminology in China: constraints and politics of the research enterprise

As we have described in the Editorial, criminologists must, by virtue of the sensitive nature of crime and social control, contend with the politics of gaining access and trust with either the study population or the gatekeepers of the data. While administrative criminology's emphasis on transparency and accountability in the North may make these issues seem less daunting there, such practical realities are of paramount importance in the South. These methodological realities manifest themselves in culturally defined ways and shape the nature of the research enterprise. Nowhere is this more apparent than in China.

It was not until the 1980s, with the open door policy in China, that the ban on social sciences research was lifted and studies were gradually able to begin anew. During this early period, Chinese academics generally lacked the skills and experience in doing empirical research. Field survey research was initially prohibited, including sociological surveys that involved co-operation between Chinese and foreign academic institutions (Wong, 2002). As a result, one approach that emerged and continues to the present focuses on legislation and policy debates on controlling crime (Jin, 2012; Wang, 2006). This perspective, often informed by legal studies, tends to be constrained by a lack of empirical evidence and sociological imagination. As Zhang (2011: 83) puts it, studies of crime and criminal justice in China usually involve 'general discussions or speculations without a sound theoretical framework and empirical analysis'.

Criminologists continue to encounter at least two main obstacles to conducting research in China. The first difficulty relates to a conservative political environment. There is no right to public information (Wong, 2002); crime data in particular remain 'highly sensitive

because Chinese authorities have believed that crime should not be part of a socialist society' (Zhang et al., 2007a: 111). Scholars run the risk of political intervention when collecting crime data and may even be charged with revealing state secrets if they possess 'sensitive' information. For instance, one Chinese-origin-US-based historian was arrested for 'stealing state secrets' during the course of his research on the Cultural Revolution (Kimmel, 2008). According to Zhang et al. (2007a: 117), many state authorities hold the view that 'revealing crime information would damage the country's image' and have regarded criminological research as a potential weapon to 'tarnish the image of the nation'. Western scholars face particular difficulties in conducting field research, as 'public officials and many citizens are often suspicious of the intentions of foreigners' (Zhang et al., 2007a: 114). Consequently, most western scholars have had to rely on documentary and archival research for critical analyses about the state definitions of 'crime' and the punishment of 'criminals' on topics such as policing (Bakken, 2000; Tanner and Green, 2007), 'hard strike' campaigns (*yanda*) (Dutton, 2000; Trevaskes, 2010) and, more recently, the death penalty debate (Bakken, 2011; Hood and Hoyle, 2009).

The second, related, difficulty in criminological knowledge production relates to the distinctive cultural context of negotiating access and collecting data. In China, where there is heavy emphasis on 'collectivism' and 'respect for authorities', respondents may be under pressure to answer questions to maintain personal ties, to follow orders from a superior or to perform socially expected behaviour (Liang and Lu, 2006: 159; Zhang et al., 2007a: 111). A number of scholars have reflected on the need to rely on personal connections (*guanxi*) to gain research access to offenders, victims, police, courts or prisons. As Liang and Lu (2006: 163) argued, personal connections may be particularly useful if they hold 'powerful positions' but they are also 'time-consuming and economically costly'. In their Tianjin victimization survey, Zhang et al. (2007a: 115–118) noted the practical difficulties of implementing research ethics protocols which may be taken for granted in the North (for example, the use of sealed envelopes to protect confidentiality in questionnaire surveys) and the long process of cultivating 'trust' and establishing 'good relationships' with key researchers and officials at various levels (for example, through exchanging gifts and attending ceremonial dinners):

(S)cholars in China are not 'free agents' able to make person-to-person arrangements in the manner that we are in the West. The proposed research would have to be conducted under the auspices of TASS [Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences] and thus would need organizational approval from the relevant officials. Therefore, it is necessary to convince the authorities to agree to collaborative arrangements. These authorities would be taking a political risk and would assume responsibility for any problems that might arise due to the collaboration ... TASS officials were concerned, in particular, that the data be used only for scientific purposes and not be used to discredit the Chinese government or the Chinese people ... This approval was essential for gaining the cooperation of the leaders of the neighbourhood committees, who provided the household registries from which respondents were selected.

Despite these challenges, it seems that the criminological research enterprise is cautiously but slowly gaining vibrancy in China. Since the economic reforms in the 1980s, increasing numbers of Chinese scholars have studied criminology and criminal justice in

the USA, UK, Australia and Hong Kong (Ross and Dai, 2011). These Chinese scholars trained outside the mainland enjoy a hybrid semi-foreigner, semi-Chinese identity that, to some extent, facilitates their primary data collection as 'insiders'. These scholars and their collaborators play an important role in promoting criminological research, particularly with surveys, in areas such as victimization, policing, punishment and human trafficking (Liu, 2005; Lu et al., 2006; Messner et al., 2007; Zhang et al., 2007b; Zhang and Chin, 2002; Zhong and Broadhurst, 2007) and in carving out new spaces for ethnographic studies and critical analyses.

Tensions, fragmented realities and hybridized identities

In his article in this issue, Alistair Fraser challenges us to look closer at the tensions, fragmented realities and hybridized identities within, across and beyond the borders of the North. We draw here from Xu's ethnographic research to examine the intersection of these three dimensions in the context of crime and control in China.

Migration and crime represents one arena in which all three dimensions intersect and interlock globally, regionally and locally. These dimensions, apparent in the North, are ever present in other locales, including China. How these dimensions interlock and manifest themselves, however, are culturally marked in time and space. In contemporary China, problems around internal migration are foremost on the political agenda and in public perceptions and fears of everyday life. Although estimates vary, the National Population and Family Planning Commission's 2012 report indicates that the number of people migrating mainly from rural villages to urban areas has reached an unprecedented height at 230 million, accounting for 17 per cent of China's 1.3 billion population and more than 50 per cent of the population living in urban areas (eChinacities, 2012). Internal migrants have been described as China's 'floating population' due to their movement across the country in search of work and living outside of their official household registered address (*hukou*).

Although the floating population is hailed as a source of low-cost, disciplined labour in China's fast track to capitalism and state-driven process of economic globalization, this group has faced uphill battles to acquire health, legal, social security and educational rights in the urban areas. Less than 10 per cent of them have secured residency cards and citizenship rights and consequently negotiate makeshift living arrangements. Internal migrants are at the intersection of a host of public fears about criminality, immorality and urban disorder and tend to bear the brunt of a variety of exclusionary and punitive practices. As Jones (2005: 201) suggests, police roundups and anti-crime campaigns have become 'normalised' measures of controlling a mix of unwanted populations in urban China: street children, runaways, the mentally ill, unemployed migrants, petitioners, beggars and 'others whom the police regarded as aimlessly wandering around the country, being in the wrong place'.

As a former police officer, Xu was well aware of the presence of the migrant population living in the city where he worked and eventually located his study. He, in fact, saw them through multiple lenses, as someone from a similar rural background who had become an urban citizen, and with a personal stake in the welfare of many relatives, friends and former classmates who had migrated to urban areas. He was also an urban official tasked with

assuaging residents' fears about the migrant presence in the city. Through the police lens, he shared the public's view that regarded Chinese rural-to-urban migrant workers as 'trouble-makers' and a dangerous 'criminal class' (Ma, 2001; Wang, 2002).

Against the background of these tensions and self-awareness, Xu was puzzled by the emergence and public concern in the city over robberies committed by motorcycle taxi drivers. According to media reports and police discussions, the incidence of motorcycle robberies was escalating in various urban locales throughout China, particularly in major cities attracting China's floating population of migrant workers. Migrant motorcycle taxi drivers were typically regarded as reckless drivers prone to traffic accidents and, with their rapid form of transport, largely perceived as responsible for snatching people's belongings such as necklaces, earrings, mobile phones and handbags. Public anxieties were so widespread in the Pearl River Delta that authorities in several cities like Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Dongguan, implemented control policies which banned all motorcycles or non-local licence motorcycles from the streets (Xu, 2012).

What became clear from the emergence of this 'new' crime and ensuing policies was the brewing tensions in relationships between various urban dwellers. From a personal standpoint, Xu was reliant as a commuter on this cheap and efficient form of transport. He was not alone in this reliance. Many city dwellers relied on migrant motorcycle taxi drivers who provided a cheaper rate than local resident drivers. But this relationship between consumer and service provider was paradoxical and tension filled. Although migrant motorcycle drivers provided a service integral to daily life, they were simultaneously feared and loathed. Public fears of the 'migrant taxi driver' as a distinct category led to calls for action and heightened tensions and distrust. This was clearly the case for Xu who, as a consumer of migrant motorcycle taxis and as a representative of the authorities, found his immediate encounters often strained. On one occasion, a migrant driver noticed that he was meticulously inspecting his licence. Interpreting this inspection as distrust, the morally angered migrant taxi driver shouted abuse at him.

Alongside the tensions between consumers and drivers, and drivers and authorities, conflicts also surfaced on other fronts, especially in regards to the implementation of the non-local motorcycle ban. Relations between migrant and local taxi drivers became increasingly volatile as the service market was now differentially controlled. The non-local motorcycle ban policy was perceived to be highly unfair by many migrant taxi drivers as it deprived them of their legitimate means of livelihood. It meant they could only work at night when few police officers were on duty, which in turn put them at higher risk of victimization of street crime than their local counterparts.

These layers of tension-filled relationships, fragmented encounters and hybrid identities came to light through a two-step research process. For the first step, to study the differential risks of victimization between migrant and local motorcycle taxi drivers, two data sets needed to be compared. One was the percentage of migrant workers among all victims; the other was the percentage of migrant workers among all drivers. The former set of data could only be obtained from police statistics, while the latter was not available since there was no formal organization representing the motorcycle taxi industry in China. With local knowledge of the motorcycle licensing system and the different categories of licence plate based on provincial registration, Xu was able to determine the percentage of migrant workers among all motorcycle taxi drivers through a systematic structured observation of motorcycle licence plates in various research sites.

Four observation sites—a public square, a hospital and two bus stations—were selected as these were typical sites where taxi drivers waited for their customers. Systematic counting was conducted of the number of motorcycle taxi drivers who were waiting for clients at the hour from 7.00 in the morning to midnight. Over a two-week observational period, estimates were determined of the different working times of migrant and local drivers and their percentage among all drivers. From these observations, it appeared that the ban had created a precarious space for migrant taxi drivers, who, to avoid arrest, could offer their services only during ‘off hours’, often late at night, subjecting them to dangerous encounters with potential robbers and with little legal recourse (Xu, 2009).

The second step of in-depth interviewing followed from this observational work. As a former police officer, Xu worked as a volunteer handing out crime prevention leaflets and provided an avenue for natural discussions about motorcycle drivers’ perspectives, experiences and strategies to prevent victimization. His long-term presence in the places where drivers were waiting for clients and regular use of their taxis also reassured them he was not an undercover police officer or a journalist but a researcher, while his rural background greatly shortened their social distance in informal and formal interviews. As one migrant driver described his experiences of policing under the motorcycle ban policy,

Working in a factory (*dagong*) is very tedious. Driving a motorcycle taxi is freer. But the police will arrest non-local license motorcycles. I have been fined about 2,000 yuan in the past. Once, I was arrested by police and fined 200 yuan for having a non-local license, 200 yuan for having no crash helmet, 200 yuan for taking more than one person (*chaozai*). Altogether, it is 600 yuan. This didn’t include taking the motorcycle fee (*tuoche fei*), 45 yuan; parking fee, 5 yuan per day. Normally, a motorcycle will be detained for 15 days and parking fee is 75 yuan. All in all, it was 720 yuan. I have been caught five or six times. Most of the time, I was fined 200 yuan for my non-local license.

(Xu, 2009: 505)

In addition to interviews with the drivers, good *guanxi* with local authorities enabled access to police records of victimization of motorcycle taxis in the research sites. Police records included detailed information about the victims, such as gender, age, household registration (*hukou*) and information about the case such as crime time, crime place, economic loss and level of physical injury of victims. With the data of victims’ *hukou*, calculations could be made of the disproportionately high risk of victimization of migrant drivers. Yet these figures only reflect a partial picture. The actual risk of victimization of migrant workers might be much higher than official statistics, as migrant drivers would be reluctant to report their victimization to the police because of their lack of trust towards the police and the precarious nature of their work and status in the city. Sometimes even if their cases were reported, they may not be recorded and handled accordingly. The following narrative from a 46-year-old migrant driver ‘Uncle Dong’ reflects the frustrations many feel when reporting crime to the police:

Once I took two girls from the square. When we came to a crossroad, a truck was changing directions. I slowed down (my motorcycle), but one of the girls said her feet got hurt and she called seven or eight hooligans to beat me up. It was close to Huafeng police station. When the police came out, all of them ran away. I was beaten heavily and could not even stand up. The police did not chase those hooligans ... Later that night, I found those who beat me up in front of an internet café, so I went to the police station and asked the police to catch them. The police were unwilling to go. They asked me if I could recognize them. I said 'Yes, I could definitely recognize them.' Then, the police said if they denied (the offence), what should they do? This is how the police replied! Police officers are local people, when local people beat us up, the police will definitely support them. Here we have no way out if we are beaten up.

(Interview in 2008)

Uncle Dong's experience is a poignant reminder of the tensions and fleeting realities of urban relations and rapid social change and the migrant workers' dual experiences of over-policing as deviants and under-policing as victims in contemporary China. While authorities appear to have responded to the public's heightened fear with the implementation of a motorcycle ban policy, the unintended effect has been to further heighten the tensions within society and demarcate the migrant city dwellers as deviant 'Others' despite their phenomenal presence and circulation throughout the country.

Concluding remarks

The founder of the Chicago School of Sociology, Robert Park, once instructed his students to 'go and get the seat of your pants dirty in real research' (cited in McKinney, 1966: 71). This may be easier said than done, particularly in China where crime remains a highly sensitive topic. Our example of doing criminological ethnography on migrant taxi drivers illustrates some of the key challenges and opportunities of 'telling stories' about marginal(ized) populations and the multiple layers of tensions and contradictions in the social relations and practices associated with mobility and its control in the China periphery. More importantly, it highlights the potential of alternative ways of thinking and researching about Asia, or what Chen (2010: 244–250) has described as 'Asia as method'—to adopt the main object of dialogue which is at once 'local ... transborder, regional, and even intercontinental', use other Asian societies as points of reference, focus on historical and cultural processes of hybridization, decolonization and deimperialization that produce diverse forms of modernity, and to perform a 'self-analysis' through multiplying our perspectives and frames of reference. Indeed, the potential contribution of culturally and locally grounded knowledge and Asian inter-referencing becomes clear if we consider this study of the policing of migrant taxi drivers and city dwellers without official *hukou* in China alongside Jeff Martin's ethnography of the way the *hukou*-based policing system translates traditional virtues into policeable objects of modern administration in Taiwan (this issue). Seen in this light, the task of Asian studies or Asian criminology is not only to understand different parts of Asia but also to enable a renewed understanding of the self, the Other and the global.

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