LEGITIMIZATION IMPERATIVE: THE PRODUCTION OF CRIME STATISTICS IN GUANGZHOU, CHINA

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Although an authoritarian regime is often assumed to manipulate its various statistics for political needs and to maintain its legitimacy, we know little about how such manipulation is accomplished and under what circumstances. Using data collected from yearly published official crime reports, a unique source for crime victim surveys, interviews with the police and detailed ethnographic work in Guangzhou city, this paper demonstrates how the manufacturing of official crime statics serves to legitimize the authoritarian regime in China. In particular, I examine the myth of the 'great crime decline' in the first decade of 21st century when official crime statistics declined by more than two-thirds in the city and argue that the decrease is a result of statistical manipulation instead of a reflection of the actual crime situation. I argue that, compared with Western democracies, crime statistics should be more fully understood as part of a legitimization apparatus in China.

Key words: crime statistics, manipulation, legitimacy, China

Introduction

Official crime statistics, such as crimes recorded by the police, are socially constructed in all societies (Kitsuse and Cicourel 1963). In recent decades, with the popularity of crime victim surveys and the politicization of crime issues in elections, official crime statistics have been increasingly challenged by media, politicians and academics in Western countries (Best 2004; Maguire 2012). While some research has focused on how changes in the definition of crime, in citizens' reporting behaviour, or in police recording practices affect the crime statistics produced by a police department, other studies have explored the manipulation of crime statistics for various reasons, such as reducing police work or gaining better performance evaluations or more police resources (Loveday 2000; Eterno and Silverman 2012). The existing literature's discussion of the manipulation of the official crime statistics has been largely limited to Western countries where victimization survey data are available and media and academic freedom are protected. Similar research in authoritarian countries, such as China, is extremely limited, albeit there are a few exceptions (He 2014). Even less is known about how such manipulation is carried out and what the major factors are that come into play when crime statistics need to be 'adjusted' to suit the need of those in power.

Using the yearly published official crime statistics, a unique source for crime victim surveys, interviews with the police and detailed ethnographic work in geographical locations tied to various crime reports, this paper examines how official crime statistics are manipulated and for what reasons in Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong province in southern China with a population of 16–17 million. In particular, it examines the myth of the 'great crime decline' in the first decade of 21st century, when

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official crime statistics declined by more than two-thirds in the city and argues that the decrease was a result of statistical manipulation instead of a reflection of the 'actual' crime situation. While the manipulation of crime statistics has been largely explored as the rising influence of managerialism against the backdrop of neo-liberalism in Western democracies (Eterno and Silverman 2012: xiv), the handling of crime data in China serves an underexplored political mission to legitimize the rule of the Chinese Communist Party. Although crime statistics may also be used to increase the legitimacy of governance in Western countries, it happens to a much lesser extent as they can also derive legitimacy from other sources such as elections. Lack of a democratic procedure for its ruling power, the Chinese authoritarian regime mainly relies on performance such as economic development and crime control for its legitimacy. It is within this context that I argue that, compared with Western democracies, crime statistics should be more fully understood as part of a legitimization apparatus in China.

Factors Affecting the Production of Official Crime Statistics

Official crime statistics have been regarded as an official barometer of the 'moral health of a nation', signalling the government's failure or success in protecting its citizens, and serving as a criterion for allocating resources and monitoring police activities (Maguire 2012: 208). The production of official crime data is subject to the influences of several factors. The first relates to the definition and counting of crime in a particular society at a particular time. On the one hand, the definition of crime may change. Christie (2004) once provocatively argued that 'crime does not exist' and what exists in a society is certain behaviour although what is defined in certain ways certainly exists and has consequences. Whether or not these behaviours are regarded as crimes depends on many issues, such as culture, the power structure, collective conscience as argued by Durkheim (1982) or the capacity of criminal justice institutions to process deviance and crime (Erikson 1962; Kitsuse and Cicourel 1963). More particularly, they rest on the simple existence of a criminal law and a legal system—no more, no less. At different times, some forms of behaviour may be criminalized while others may be de-criminalized, and this expanding and shrinking of crime definitions could affect the production of official crime data. On the other hand, the rules for counting and classifying crimes may also change, leading to changes in the scope and pattern of official crime statistics. For instance, one offender may repeat similar criminal offences within a short period of time, which might be recorded as one offence in one place at a certain time or recorded as several offences in other places at a different time (Maguire 2012: 211). In addition, a criminal offence may also require a minimum level of economic loss or physical injury, so that an offence with harms under the level may not be recorded as a crime but as a misdemeanour in some societies (Kohler-Hausmann 2013) or violation of public administration rules in other societies (Yu and Zhang 1999). These minimum levels vary across times and places, which could also affect the production of official crime statistics.

The second factor affecting the production of official crime statistics is the public's willingness to report criminal behaviour. Generally speaking, if the public are more willing to report crimes to the police, there should be more crimes recorded by the police. On the contrary, if citizens are unwilling to report crimes to the police,

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the official crime rate may appear low, which has been viewed as one of the reasons for low crime rates in some immigrant communities in the United States (Davis and Erez 1998). Public reporting behaviour could be influenced by various reasons, including their recognition of some behaviour as a crime or at least as something troubling (Bittner 1974), the trust in the police, the tolerance of certain behaviour, the perceived seriousness of offences, the fear of retaliation, the time cost of reporting, the availability of mobile phones, sometimes simply the requirements to qualify for an insurance claims (Maguire 2012: 211). For instance, much ethnographic research has revealed that the low level of trust in the police commonly found in some ethnic minority communities has greatly reduced citizens' willingness to alert the police (Venkatesh 2008; Goffman 2009).

The third factor relates to the recording practices by the police. Throughout the world, the police inevitably retain certain discretionary power to decide whether cases reported or discovered by themselves should be recorded or not. There are many factors affecting the extent to which the police exercise their discretionary power in recording cases. Past research has revealed that the legal seriousness of a case, the victim's preference for police action, the relational distance between victims and offenders, the victim's social class status and deference towards the police can all affect police recording practices (Black 1970). The existence of a clear recording standard can also have an impact on police recording behaviour. For instance, the introduction of the National Crime Reporting Standard in the early 2000s significantly limited police discretion and improved the recording rate in the United Kingdom (Simmons *et al.* 2003). In addition, police recording practices can also be influenced by active campaigns during some periods to record certain crimes or not intervene for other crimes. Besides the above-mentioned factors, the police may also purposively manipulate crime statistics for various purposes.

Manipulation of Crime Data in a Global Context

Official crime statistics are likely to be manipulated as they tend to be used to allocate police resources or evaluate police performance. Past research indicated that some local police departments in the United Kingdom have actively elevated their crime rates by recording a large number of minor offences, such as stealing milk bottles from doorsteps, in order to garner more resources (Maguire 2012: 214). The phenomenon of upgrading offences, and creating crime waves to increase support for expanding police service was also widely observed in the United States (Kamisar 1972; Pepinsky 1976). More often than not, the police tend to record less crime in order to reduce workloads, receive better performance evaluation, or for political reasons. In New York City, under the increasing pressure of performance management, NYPD was found actively to manipulate its crime statistics to a desirable level in recent decades (Baer and Chambliss 1997; Manning 2001; Eterno and Silverman 2012). To prepare for the 1996 Olympic Games and change its violent image, the city of Atlanta radically under-reported crimes since the early 1990s by either downgrading violent crimes to non-violent ones or simply hiding them completely (Levitt and Dubner 2005: 88). When the US President Nixon made crime reduction an important task during his presidency, the police in Washington, DC responded by downgrading larceny above $50 to larceny

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below $50 as well as recording burglaries as malicious mischief or vandalism because the latter offences are not included in the Uniform Crime Reporting index (Seidman and Couzens 1974). In the United Kingdom, the manipulation of official crime data by 'cuffing' (recording less) and 'misclassification' has widely been observed (Young 1991; Loveday 1999; 2000). The similar practice of downward manipulation of crime data also took place in other Western countries, including Australia and France (Eterno and Silverman 2012: 97–104). Specifically, the police may adopt several approaches to manipulate official crime statistics. First, they may simply refuse to open files for the cases reported to them or discovered by themselves. Second, the police may record a series of crimes as a single event. Third, the police may downgrade felonies to minor offences or misdemeanours, as the latter may not be included in the crime index. Fourth, the police may also purposively discourage victims from reporting the crimes, either by making the reporting process difficult or having the victims feel discriminated against and re-victimized upon reporting crimes (Eterno and Silverman 2012: 27).

In the existing literature, the manipulation of crime data has been largely explored as the consequence of rising managerialism in Western societies (Eterno and Silverman 2012). Facing the increasing pressure of performance management, the police have continuously to demonstrate their competence and achievements in fighting against crime. Accordingly, one of the most direct ways of showing the success of police work is a declining crime rate although an *increasing* crime rate may be cited as a justification for claiming more resources and staff. Indeed, a declining crime rate for the police is somewhat like increasing profit for a business (Eterno and Silverman 2012: 13). Similar to the rising trend of commodification of policing (Loader 1999; Xu 2013), managerialism for police work is another consequence of neo-liberalism, which requires the police, just like many other public service sectors, to improve demonstrable efficiency and effectiveness (Loveday 2000). However, managerialism is clearly not the only reason. Politics plays an important role as evidenced by the manipulation of crime data in Washington, DC and the city of Atlanta mentioned above. Indeed, the production of official statistics in general and crime data in particular will inevitably be affected by politics in all societies although the level and mechanism of how politics comes into play vary.

Production of Official Statistics in China

The Chinese police, like their counterparts elsewhere around the world, have long been engaged in the manipulation of crime data. A national survey of police crime recording practices sponsored by the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) revealed the severe problem of under-recording in the 1980s (Yu and Zhang 1999). With the data collected from a random sample of over 300 police stations and their corresponding county/district bureaus in China, the research team found that 70–80 per cent of crimes reported to the police were not recorded. More specifically, in 1985, 1987 and 1988, the crime recording rate was as low as 32.6 per cent, 19.4 per cent and 30.6 per cent, respectively (Yu and Zhang 1999). Although the MPS warned local police departments to improve the accuracy of statistics, a follow-up study revealed that the nationwide crime recording rate, albeit improved, was still as low as 51.11 per cent and 59.3 per cent in 1989 and 1990 (Yu and Zhang 1999). In the existing literature, the manipulation of crime data

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has been largely understood as a consequence of a lack of resources for the Chinese police. On the one hand, the rapid increase of crimes along with China's dramatic transition from a planned to a market economy posed a big challenge for the police. The overall recorded crime numbers have risen nearly seven-fold in three decades, from nearly 0.9 million in 1981 to over six million in 2011 (Xu and Liu 2015).[1] In spite of these challenges, the Chinese police force is comparatively understaffed. In 2007, China had 1.6 million police officers (Xinhua 2007). The police–citizen ratio remains one of the lowest in the world, with 120 police officers per 100,000 population, far less than the world median of 300 per 100,000 (United Nations 2010). As a result, the police do not have enough personnel and resources for crime investigation. On the other hand, an understaffed police force has had to deal with a great deal of non-crime-related work. Since Chinese police are subject to control of local governments and their fundamental mission is to protect the power of the Chinese Communist Party (Bakken 2005b), they have to deal with many non-crime-related, but politically important tasks assigned by local governments, such as enforcing the one-child policy, protecting forced demolition operations and preventing petitioners from making their claims to upper level governments (Lee and Zhang 2013; Scoggins and O'Brien 2016). Dealing with this non-crime-related work further diminishes the police's resources for crime investigation. As a result, the police have had to resort to the manipulation of crime statistics in order to show a desirable case clearance rate, an important index for their performance evaluation. While this argument provides some insights into the reasons for the Chinese police's manipulation of crime data, it ignores an equally important, if not more important factor: politics. How does an authoritarian Chinese politics affect the production of crime data? Previous research on Chinese policing has implied that political campaigns may distort the official crime statistics as the police need to show the achievements from these campaigns (Bakken 2005a: 74–6). However, most of this research focused on the practice of the Chinese police in the 1980s and 1990s and none of it provided empirical data to examine local police experience in manipulating crime data. Since the 2000s, with the gradual decline of campaign-style policing[2] and the rise of community policing (Zhong and Broadhurst 2007), as well as the emerging professionalization and rule of law for the Chinese police, how current Chinese politics affects the production of crime data remains unexplored.

My argument does not extend only to crime data. The production of other official statistics may also be affected by politics in China. One notorious case is the GDP data. Although China's GDP has experienced an unprecedented increase in world history over the past three decades, the accuracy of GDP statistics has always been questioned internationally (Holz 2004). One clear piece of evidence of the manipulation of GDP is that for many years, the combined total GDP for China's provinces was around 10 per cent higher than the national total (The New York Times 2014). China leaders are also sceptical about the GDP statistics. Chinese Premier Le Keqiang once expressed his concern about the distorted GDP data and suggested that other indices such as electricity consumption, rail freight and loan distribution should be used to measure the Chinese economy (The New York Times 2014). Existing literature has also revealed that

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[1]Although the accuracy of these concrete numbers is questionable, the overall increase trend of crimes is undeniable.

[2]Campaign-style policing refers to the practice in which the police launch various campaigns for the targeted crimes in China since 1980s. During these campaigns, criminals are more harshly punished and due process is often ignored.

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the manipulation of GDP became more severe when local government officials sought promotion (Wallace 2014).

In Guangzhou, where this study was conducted, the official statistics from other government departments were also heavily affected by politics. For instance, the Family Planning Committee, the government department responsible for the one-child policy in Guangzhou, was found to be manipulating the birth control rates[3] and it was particularly the case when the new directors came into power. Due to China's strict one-child policy before 2016, the birth control rate became a very important performance evaluation index for local governments. There existed a regular cycle of the fall and rise in the birth control rate during the tenure of each director of the Family Planning Committee. When the new director took office, the birth control rate usually dropped to a low level. After that it would rise gradually until the end of their tenure. In doing so, the Family Planning Committee can display its competence in birth control. More specifically, when one whom I will call Director A took office in 1993, the birth control rate started to fall in 1992 (as the 1992 data were published in 1993) and fell further in 1993. Usually the fall of the birth control rate was rationalized in the name of recording more accurately. Thereafter, it started to rise gradually. When Director B took office in early 2000, the published birth control rate for that year immediately stopped increasing and fell by about 1 per cent and then fluctuated up and down around 1 per cent during his tenure. When Director C took office at the end of 2006, the published birth control rate again fell to 96 per cent and then increased a bit in the following two years and stabilized at nearly 97 per cent until 2011. In early 2013, the new Director D took office, and the published birth control rate dramatically fell by 7 per cent to the lowest level since 1996. After that, the birth control rate started to increase year by year.

In a nutshell, the production of official statistics in China, crime data included, is heavily affected by politics. The story of crime decline in Guangzhou provides us with a unique opportunity to examine the commonalities and differences between China and the rest of world. Although the crime decline has increasingly been explored in Western countries (Zimring 2007; Rosenfeld and Messner 2009), there are very few studies examining the local experience of how it plays out. Based on the data collected from Guangzhou, this research examines how the current politics shapes the production of crime statistics in China.

Research Questions, Data and Method

There existed a myth about the crime situation in Guangzhou. From 2000 to 2010, official crime statistics showed a dramatic decline in crime. There are two important features of the official story of that decline. The first is the *level* of crime reduction. Official statistics indicated that the number of crimes decreased by almost two-thirds within ten years—an admirable achievement if it was true. The second feature is that the crime decline has been continuous year by year. The main purpose of this paper is to unravel the myth of the 'great crime decline' in Guangzhou. More specifically, the following questions will be explored: (1) Whether the decline of official statistics in Guangzhou was the result of an actual decline in crime or the active police manipulation of data?

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[3]Birth control rate is an index measuring the percentage new birth not violating China's one-child policy.

(2) What factors affected the decline of crime or manipulation of official statistics? and (3) What factors, if any, were uniquely Chinese?

All data were collected from Guangzhou, the capital of Guangdong province in southern China. Guangzhou has a population of between 16 and 17 million, half of them comprising rural-to-urban migrant workers. Multiple strategies were employed when collecting data. The first set of data involved collecting official crime statistics in Guangzhou. Unlike their counterparts in the United Kingdom and the United States where systematic crime statistics are publicly available, most cities in China, Guangzhou included, do not publish their yearly detailed crime data as the crime situation has often been regarded as a state secret (Xu 2016). Nevertheless, two crime indices, including the number of overall crime cases and the number of solved cases, can be found in the *Guangzhou Statistical Yearbook*. I gathered these two variables from 1981 to 2014 for analysis.

The second set of data came from a crime victim survey in Guangzhou. Although yearly crime victim surveys have now become a standard alternative or complement to the police statistics for measuring the crime situation in the United States and the United Kingdom, such surveys are extremely underdeveloped in China. Using the city of Beijing as the sampling site, China only once participated in the International Crime Victim Survey organized by United Nation in 1994 (Zhu *et al.* 1995). Although some scholars also made efforts to conduct crime victim surveys in a particular city at a particular time (Zhang *et al.* 2007), systematic longitudinal crime victim surveys are rare in China. However, the Guangzhou Public Opinion Survey Center, a government sponsored semi-independent organization, conducted an annual survey of public security from 2002 to 2010 in Guangzhou. Using a random sampling strategy, the survey asked respondents by telephone about their personal experience of victimization in the previous year. A stratified sampling strategy was adopted in the survey. The sampling size in each district was decided by the share of the population in the surveyed district within the overall Guangzhou population. The overall sample size was about 1,000 each year. The respondents were asked if they had had an experience of being victimized by one of the following crimes: burglary, fraud, robbery, snatch theft, pickpocketing, blackmail, assault, intimidation, kidnapping, sex crime and assault with a weapon. Since the victim survey covered the most common crimes and used the same questionnaire each year, it can reasonably be taken to gauge crime trends in Guangzhou and provide an important alternative to the official crime statistics (referred as the victim survey thereafter).

The third part of the data came from in-depth semi-structured interviews with police in Guangzhou. Since 2009, I have interviewed over 50 police officers in Guangzhou on various issues such as the production of police/business posters, their crime control strategies and production of crime statistics. In this paper, I relied mainly on the data touching on their discussion about how they produced official crime data. The fourth set of data involved interviews with citizens in Guangzhou about their experience of victimization. I particularly focused on the citizens' experience of criminal victimization and their reactions towards victimization, such as their reporting practices and the reasons behind such behaviour. All in all, 37 citizens were interviewed. The fifth set of data came from my seven-year field observation on the streets in Guangzhou about how both criminals and the police use public space for crime and crime prevention. To understand the politics of the Chinese police, a

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content analysis of newspaper articles in *The Public Security Newspaper*, the only nation-wide police daily newspaper in China, was also conducted. Last but not least, I also draw from my one year working experience as a police officer in a local police station in Guangdong province back in 2005.

The Myth of the 'Great Crime Decline' in Guangzhou

Official police statistics in Guangzhou showed a dramatic decline in overall crimes in the first decade of the 21st century. The number of overall crimes decreased by 62 per cent, from 141,930 in 2000 to 53,738 in 2010 ([Figure 1](#)). More importantly, the official police statistics showed a continuous decline within this decade—except for a minor fluctuation in 2003. However, the crime picture depicted by the official statistics did not match the citizens' experience in Guangzhou nor did it explain the police's extraordinary measures to crack down on crime within this period. Almost all the 37 citizens interviewed in Guangzhou agreed that the years around 2005 probably were the most dangerous and none of them indicated that the years around 2000 were the period with the highest crime rate, which is what the official police statistics showed. As a migrant worker put it in 2010,

Now it is much better. It was particularly chaotic and dangerous a few years ago, like in 2006, you could get robbed in broad daylight. (Chen, a 38-year old female migrant worker from Hubei)

Chen's observation was also echoed by the police. Interviewed in 2011, one police officer said,
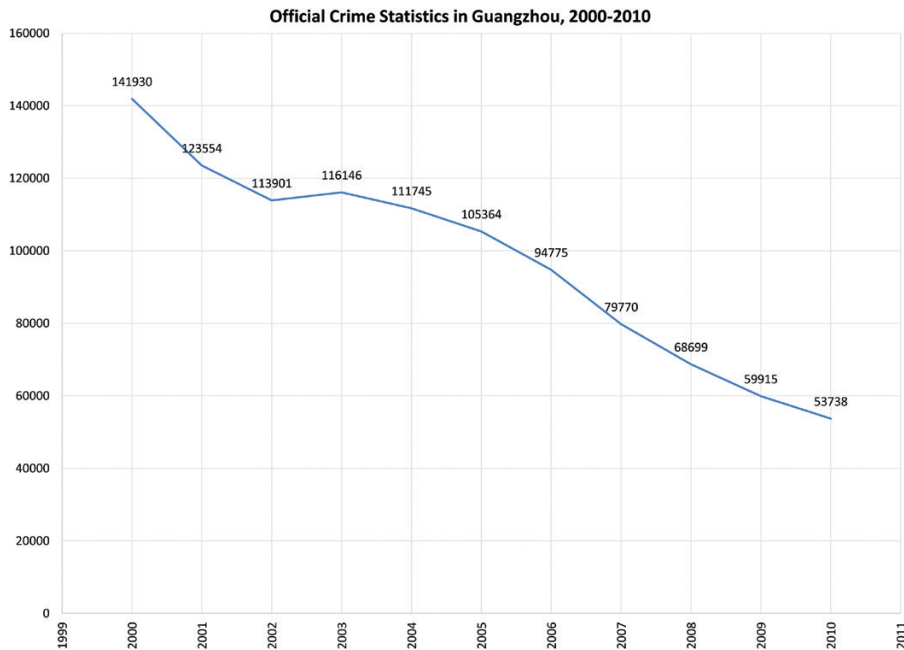

Fig. 1 Official crime statistics from the police in Guangzhou, 2000–10

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There were so many street robberies a few years ago. You could be knocked down on the street and get robbed. Now the situation has improved a lot. (Xiao, a police officer)

Consistent with the above observations, the victim survey data revealed that citizens' dissatisfaction with public security also reached its peak in 2005, with nearly 50 per cent of citizens expressing dissatisfaction with the public security situation. Facing a deteriorating crime situation in the mid-2000s, some radical measures were adopted by the police to crack down on crimes. After some offenders used motorcycles to flee after committing snatch theft and robbery, the Guangzhou police adopted the controversial strategy to ban all motorcycles from the city in 2007 (Xu 2012). Both the citizens' sense of safety and the police's aggressive measures to fight crimes indicate a different story about the crime situation from what the official statistics show.

Unravelling the Myth: The Manipulation of Official Statistics

The decline found in the official statistics might have been a result of a real decline of crimes. It might also have been due to many other causes such as changes in the definition of crimes, in citizens' reporting behaviour or in police recording behaviour (Maguire 2012). It is these alternatives that are examined in my attempt to explain the 'great crime decline' in Guangzhou.

First, changes in the definition of crimes may not be the cause. In China, crime is defined with both qualitative and quantitative dimensions. Behaviour is not be regarded as a crime but a public security case if it only violates law but does not meet the minimum level of seriousness. For instance, an assault is not treated as a crime but a public security case if the victim's level of injury does not reach the level of a slight wound.[4] By the same token, there must be a minimal level of economic loss before a theft is recorded as a crime and this minimal level changes from time to time. If the minimal level requirement increases in a certain year, there would be a sudden decline of overall crimes in the corresponding year as theft usually account to around 70 per cent of the overall official crime statistics (Law Yearbook of China 1987–2015). In Guangzhou, the minimal level of economic loss for a theft to be recorded as a crime increased to RMB 3,000 in 2013, but from 2000 to 2010, it remained unchanged at RMB 2,000.[5] Moreover, the official crime statistics show a continuous decline without a sudden breaking point. There was also no de-criminalization of crimes during this period. Therefore, the 'great crime decline' could not possibly be due to changes in the definition of crimes.

Second, there is also no evidence to suggest the decline was a result of a change in citizens' reporting behaviour. Reporting is related to trust in, expectations of and satisfaction with, the police (Sun *et al.* 2013). If there is a declining level of trust and satisfaction with the police in a certain period, citizens may become less likely to report their victimization to the police, and that may result in a decline of official crime statistics. However, the victim survey data in Guangzhou showed that citizens' satisfaction with police was *increasing* from 42.5 per cent in 2005 to 55.2 per cent in 2010. Increasing satisfaction with police may encourage rather than discourage citizens to report crimes

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[4]There are three levels of injury according to its severity: extra-slight, slight and heavy wound.
[5]100 RMB = just under £12 or $15 at 2017 prices.

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to the police. In addition, with the popularity of mobile phones—nearly everyone in Guangzhou has a mobile phone nowadays—people's reporting of crimes could be greatly facilitated. Both the citizens' increasing satisfaction with the police and easy access to mobile phones should lead to *more* reported crimes, causing an increase rather than decrease of official crime statistics. Therefore, the 'great crime decline' is unlikely to be the result of changes in citizens' reporting behaviour.

Third, the 'great crime decline' may also not be the result of a 'real' decline of crime. Although official police statistics showed that crime rates declined continuously from 1,581 per 100,000 in 2002 to 667 per 100,000 in 2010, the victim survey data showed that the victimization rates increased from 4,000 per 100,000 in 2002 to a peak of 13,100 per 100,000 in 2005 and then continuously declined to their lowest point of 6,300 per 100,000 in 2010 (Figure 2). In other words, from 2000 to 2010, while the victim survey demonstrated that crime rates *rose* by 58 per cent, the official police statistics indicated that crime rates *reduced* by 58 per cent, suggesting a conflict between two sources of crime data. Since victim surveys were conducted by the semi-independent Guangzhou Public Opinion Survey Center using the same questionnaire from year to year, the survey's overall crime trend could arguably be regarded as more reliable than official police statistics. Therefore, the 'great crime decline' in Guangzhou is doubtfully linked to the real crime reduction in the city, implying the possibility of data manipulation by the police.

The official crime statistics after 2010 also pointed to the severe manipulation of crime data from 2000 to 2010. After 2011, the official crime statistics skyrocketed. While the official crime number was as low as 53,738 in 2010, it doubled to 115,100 in
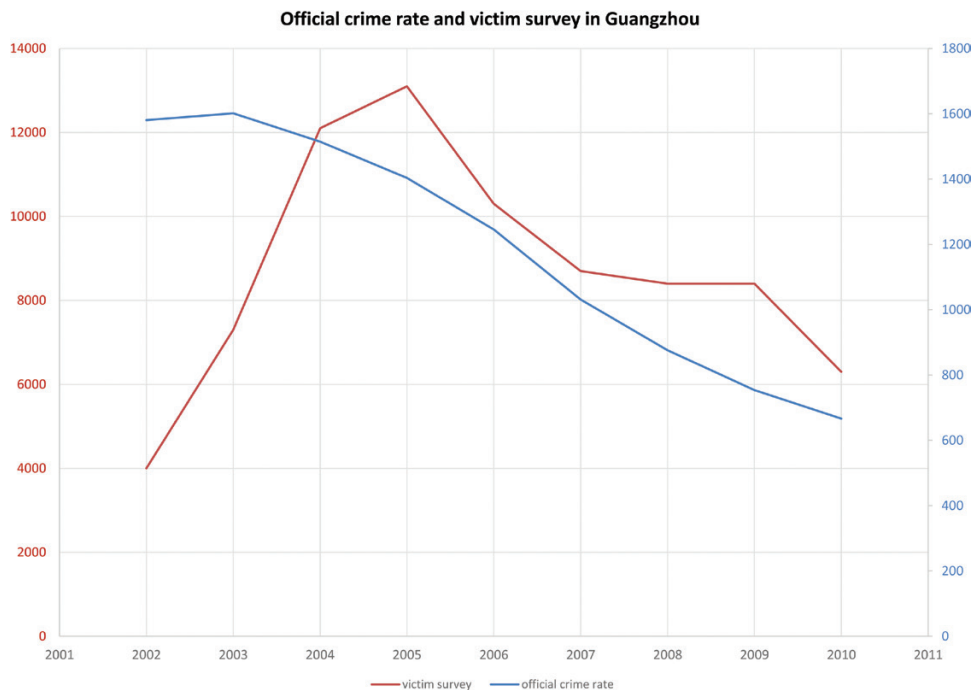

FIG. 2 Crime rate from the official police statistics and victim surveys in Guangzhou, 2002–10

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2012 and further increased two times to 240,600 in 2013. Within four years, the official crime number more than quadrupled (Figure 3). That sudden skyrocketing increase of official crime statistics has little to do with the rise of crimes in reality, but with a modification in police recording practices. After 2012, police started recording more crimes when the new police commissioner took office. In explaining this surge in official crime statistics, a senior police officer from Guangzhou Municipal Police Bureau made the following comments in 2013:

In the past, we have under-recorded crimes severely. Now the new police commissioner arrives, we are going to record it more accurately. (XZL, a senior police officer)

Another police officer revealed the source of the pressure as the mechanism of performance evaluation. He said:

There were 24 police stations in XX districts. Each station has its monthly quota for the number of recorded crimes, and they will be ranked within the district. The top three (in recording least crimes) will be praised, rewarded with bonuses, and the bottom three will get a yellow card and even a red card of warning. If there is no improvement next month, a supervision team will be sent down to monitor that station. (TH, a police officer)

The quota is usually based on the recorded crime cases from the previous year with a declining trend. There are different strategies to reduce recorded crimes and under-recording is one of them, a common practice in Guangzhou. A police officer from a local police station said:
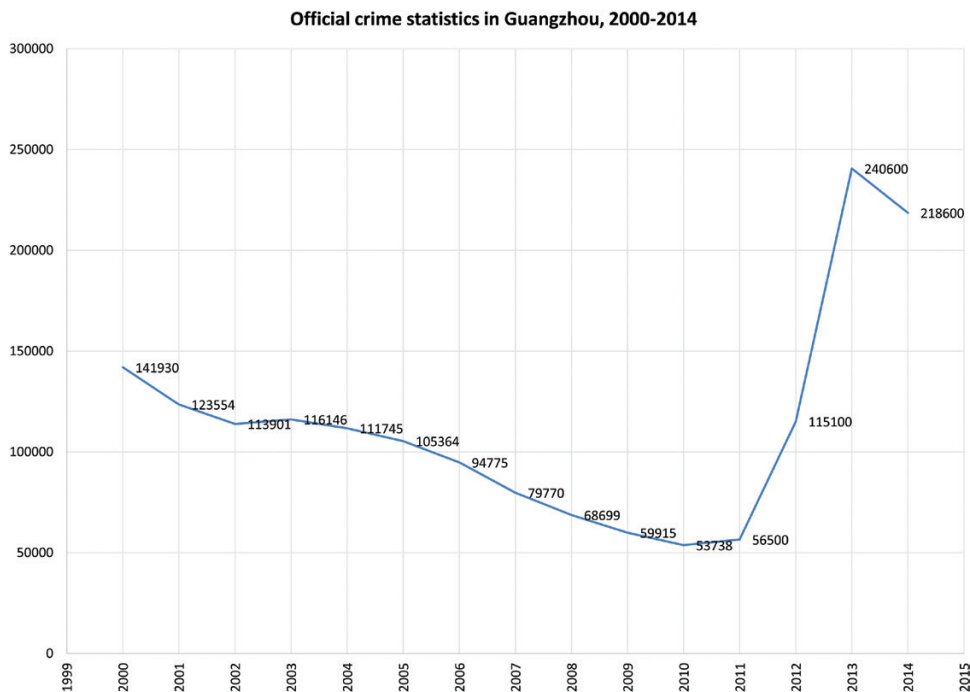

FIG. 3 Official crime statistics from the police in Guangzhou, 2000–14

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Whether to record a case or not depends on the quota we have. To be honest, if we record too many cases, our police chief at the local police station will have a difficult time. It will be very alarming if we record all cases which are up to case-recording criteria. (THL, a police officer)

In a nutshell, very little evidence existed to support the contention that the decline of crimes was a result of a real decrease, a change of definition of crimes, or a change in citizens' reporting behaviour. Instead, available data indicated that the 'great crime decline' in Guangzhou was largely due to something else—the police manipulation of official statistics. In the next section, I explore the reasons for the active manipulation of crime data in Guangzhou.

The Reasons for the Manipulation of Crime Data in Guangzhou

Performance evaluation

The severe manipulation of crime data in Guangzhou is first related to performance evaluation, the Chinese version of managerialism. In Guangzhou, the police were required to set the goal of achieving an increase of the number of arrested suspects, an increase in the case clearance rate and a decline in overall crime cases. This 'Two Increases and One Decline' (*liang sheng yi jiang* 两升一降) principle has become the guideline of police work and been promoted as an achievement in their annual reports. For instance, in their report on public security in 2006, the Guangzhou police described their achievement in the following manner:

We have kept the good trend of the decline of overall number of crimes, the increase of cleared-up cases and arrested suspects. Compared with the past year, crime has declined by 3.8 per cent in 2004. Compared with 2004, crime has further declined by 5.7 per cent in 2005. In 2005, the number of cleared-up cases and the number of arrested suspects have increased by 6 per cent and 5.3 per cent respectively. (Guangzhou Public Security Bureau 2006: 160)

And indeed, the official statistics have unceasingly shown a decline in the overall crime number and an increase in the clearance rate from 27.75 per cent in 2000 to 54.48 per cent in 2010 (Figure 4). The 'good trend' has been maintained all the way from 2000 to 2010.

In 2012, when the Guangdong provincial government launched a campaign to build a 'Safe Guangdong', an increase in the case clearance rate remained one of the top goals. These goals are delivered to the police in their daily life. For instance, my field observation data revealed that on the campus of a Police Academy in Guangzhou, where the police from the whole of Guangdong province get their basic and in-service training, the increase in the case clearance rate, together with other goals, became part of a long slogan and was posted on the campus wall.

Interviews with police officers revealed how performance evaluation affected the manipulation of crime data in practice. When asked to comment on the continuous decline of overall crime number since 2000, a local police officer said:

We are under great pressure. Our upper-level department needs to see the decline of crimes and the increase of case clearance rates year by year. (QL, a police officer)

To achieve the goal of 'Two Increases and One Decline', the police under-recorded crimes to serve the purpose of both decreasing of crime number and increasing of clearance rate. This is clearly expressed by a police scholar:
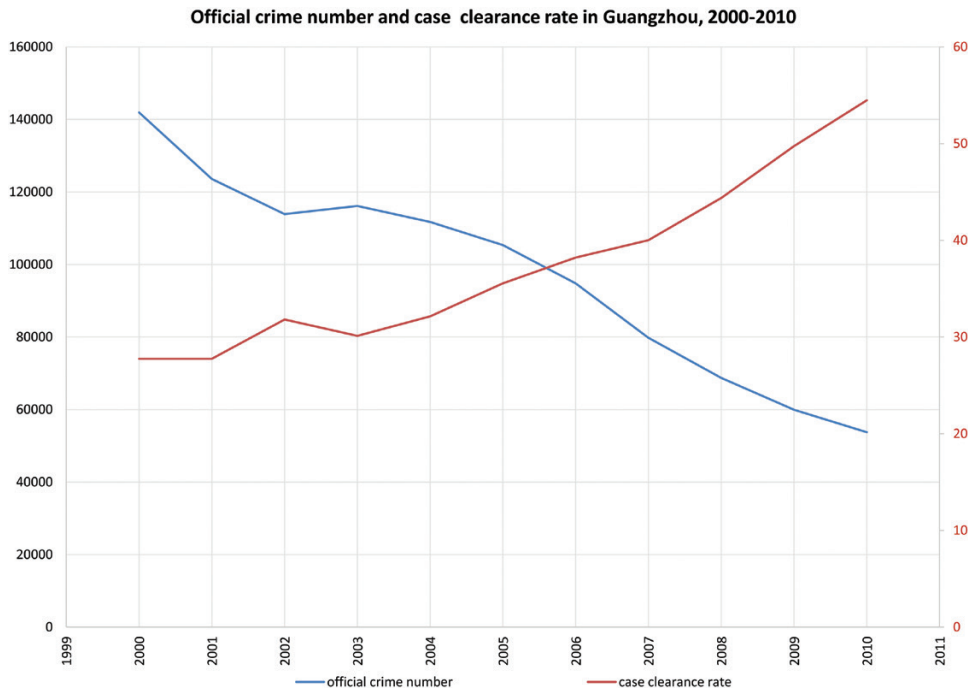
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Fɪɢ. 4 Official crime number and case clearance rate in Guangzhou, 2000–10

In the past, our under-recording problem was very serious as we emphasized the case clearance rate. We didn't record a case if we could not solve it. If I had ten cases and five were solved, then my clearance rate was fifty per cent. But if nine were solved, the case clearance rate was ninety per cent. (FGJ, a police scholar)

Sometimes the manipulation of clearance rates went beyond under-recording of crimes to include fabricating and distorting suspects' confessions:

The case clearance rate is also fake. (In order to improve it), sometimes when a suspect is arrested, we put other cases under his name, no matter whether these crimes are committed by him or not. (THL, a police officer)

The fabrication of suspects' confessions is not nonetheless unique in Guangzhou. When I worked as a police officer in a local police station in Guangdong province in 2005, I witnessed several occasions in which police officers asked suspects to sign a blank paper and later fabricated above that signature a confession to committing other crimes. Yet, while pressure from performance evaluation contributed to the manipulation of crime data in Guangzhou, the political mission to create a 'safe' city to welcome the 2010 Asian Games served as an additional source of pressure on the local police.

Creating a 'safe' city to welcome the 2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou

In 2004, Guangzhou was granted the right to host the Asian Games in 2010, and 'creating a safe city to welcome the Asian Games' became a top political mission. Facing a

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deteriorating crime situation, the police resorted to various strategies. For instance, to solve the rampant problem of motorcycle snatch theft—after establishing a plain clothes police team to crack down on this crime and introducing the death penalty for the offenders—the police finally banned all motorcycles from the city in 2007 rather than in 2013 as they had originally planned (Xu 2012). At the same time, the Guangzhou government set a new goal to achieve for recorded crimes. Zhang Guifang, the Party Secretary for the Political and Legal Committee of Guangzhou, who was in charge of the police, the court and the procuratorate, demanded that crimes should decline in September 2007. He said:

Guangzhou's crime number should be controlled to *around* 60,000 before the Asian Games in 2010, and should be stabilized at this level. This is a fixed requirement (*ying zhi biao* 硬指标). (Guangzhou Daily 2007)

When the year 2010 approached, the pressure to reduce the overall volume of crimes became even greater. In May 2009, the then Guangzhou CCP Party Secretary, Zhu Xiaodan, emphasized that 'In order to welcome the Asian Games next year, crime must be reduced by double digits' (Nang Fang Daily 2009). Earlier that year, Zhang Guifang reiterated his instruction that the goal for recorded crime should fall from '*around* 60,000' to an even stricter '*under* 60,000' (Information Times 2009). Under political pressure to welcome the Asian Games, the police magically achieved that goal of controlling the number of crimes to under 60,000. At the end of 2009, the official recorded crime was 59,915, only 85 less than the official goal set by the government of a city with well over 16 million inhabitants. Clearly, the official crime statistics were manipulated to meet the goal set by the government.

Since the total number of crimes reported through 110, the police hotline, was also used to evaluate the performance of each local police station, police officers from local stations encouraged citizens to call them directly instead. By so doing, the number of reported crimes would fall. During the Asian Games period, the pressure to under-report crimes was even applied to landlords who rented houses to rural-to-urban migrant workers, a group over-represented both in criminal offending and victimization (Zhong *et al.* 2017). In one community with a concentration of migrant workers, several notices were posted on walls by a landlord as below:

In order to follow the spirit of 'Welcome Asian Games and Build Harmony', according to the demand of Migrant Workers Management and Services Center of Dashi Street, all migrant workers living in Dashi street should not call '110' during the Asian Games. You will be fined RMB 500 for the first call, RMB 1,000 for the second one, and so on. (Southern Metropolis Daily 2010)

In another case, a notice was written and posted on the gate to a building:

The government requires you not to call 110 if you have a case. Please call ********. You will be fined RMB 20,000 if you call 110. (Southern Metropolis Daily 2011)

While the police may have worked extra hard to create a safe environment to welcome the 2010 Asian Games in Guangzhou, the political mission to reduce recorded crimes also motivated them to massage its crime statistics.

The regular rise and fall cycle under the tenure of new police commissioners

The 'great crime decline' in Guangzhou may also be viewed as a part of a regular cycle in the rise and fall of official crime statistics in Guangzhou. There exists an internal

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contradiction in sustaining the 'good trend' of 'Two Increases and One Decline' as the official crime statistics cannot decline forever to zero, and the case clearance rate cannot improve forever to 100 per cent. More importantly, there would be little room for the new police commissioners to improve their performance when they inherited crime data from their predecessors. To solve this dilemma, new police commissioners have had to resort to the strategy of increasing the recorded crimes to an unprecedented high level when they take office and then reduce them year by year during their tenure, a pattern similar to that observed in the manipulation of birth control rates by the Family Planning Committee in Guangzhou. They would thus get credit for improving the situation left by their predecessors. Before we witnessed the sudden increase in official crime statistics, a senior police officer from Guangzhou said in early 2012:

Every time when we have a new leader, he has new instructions for 'recording crime according to its real situation'. At the beginning of his tenure, he will loosen the criteria and try to record more cases. After that, he will reduce the number of cases gradually to show that the crime situation has been improved during his tenure. If crime is at a very low level at the very beginning of his tenure, how can he reduce it? We are always required to reduce reported crimes and increase the case clearance rate. Now that we have a new police commissioner, he will work on 'recording crime according to its real situation' again. (XZL, a senior police officer)

Figure 5 shows the official crime numbers during the tenure of different police commissioners in Guangzhou since 1978. For instance, after Commissioner B took office in 1991, the official crime statistics fluctuated a bit in the first half of his tenure and then continued to decrease to their lowest level of 43,411 when he stepped down in 1999. When Commissioner C took office in 1999, the official crime statistics immediately increased by over three-fold, escalating to 141,930 in 2000. After that, the official crime statistics kept declining until the end of his tenure in 2005. Again, Commissioner D inherited a 'good trend' of crime decline from Commissioner C and further maintained this 'good trend' until the end of his tenure in 2011. In 2011, the official crime statistics were as low as they were in the 1990s. Because of the political impact of the 2010 Asian Games, Commissioner D did not increase the official crime statistics when he took office. In 2012 when Commissioner E took office,
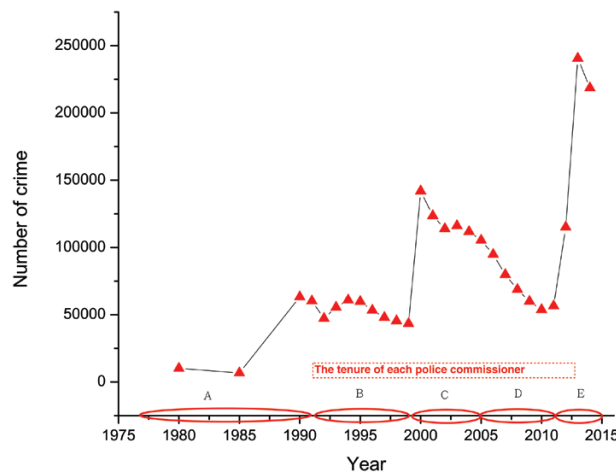

Fig. 5 The tenure of police commissioners in Guangzhou since 1978

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official crime statistics again immediately increased two-fold in that year and further doubled in 2013 to their peak level of 240,600, the highest in Guangzhou history. In 2014, the official crime number started declining, the same pattern as we observed before. The myth of the 'great crime decline' during 2000–10 was just part of a regular rise and fall of official crime statistics when new police commissioners took office.

Discussion: Manipulation with Chinese Characteristics

All in all, the manipulation of crime data in Guangzhou resulted mainly from an over-emphasis on increasing the case clearance rate and decreasing the crime rate under the pressure of creating a safe environment to welcome the 2010 Asian Games. The 'great crime decline' from 2000 to 2010 was also just a part of that 'man-made' cycle of rise and fall in the volume of crimes that corresponded largely to the tenure of different police commissioners. The question that remains unanswered is why the Chinese police need to show political success through crime data manipulation. Besides the impact of Chinese version of managerialism, how does the Chinese authoritarian regime affect the production of crime data?

Politics in command for police

In democratic counties, the police are supposedly politically neutral while in authoritarian countries the police are often used as a tool to protect the interest of a political party or government (Manning 2010; Xu 2014). In China, the ultimate goal of the police is to protect the power and privileges of the Chinese Communist Party (Bakken 2005b). For instance, when the police are newly recruited, they are required to take an oath to show loyalty to the Party: 'I swear to be loyal to the Party, to the country, to the people and to the law'. Loyalty to the Party comes first and rule of law comes last. Political correctness is the first priority for the police, and they are reminded of this political loyalty on daily basis. A content analysis of monthly articles published in *The People's Public Security Newspaper*, the daily newspaper published by the MPS, revealed that the discourse of 'regulating the police by politics' (*zheng zhi jian jing* 政治建警) is much larger than the discourse of 'regulating the police by law' (*yi fa zhi jing* 依法治警) (Figure 6). 'Regulating the police by politics' is not only promoted in the media, but also appears in slogans posted in public spaces, such as on the campus of a Police Academy in Guangzhou (Figure 7).

While the manipulation of crime statistics does exist in democratic countries, it happens in a different political environment where the police are supposedly politically neutral. The explicit political loyalty of the police to the Chinese Communist Party provides the additional pressure for the police to manage crime data as its performance in crime control is one of the main sources for its legitimacy.

Performance legitimacy and manipulation of crime data

There are three different sources for any political regime to gain legitimacy: ideology, legal-procedural and performance, but one source tends to dominate (Zhao 2000). In democratic countries, the regime can mainly claim its legitimacy from the rule of law
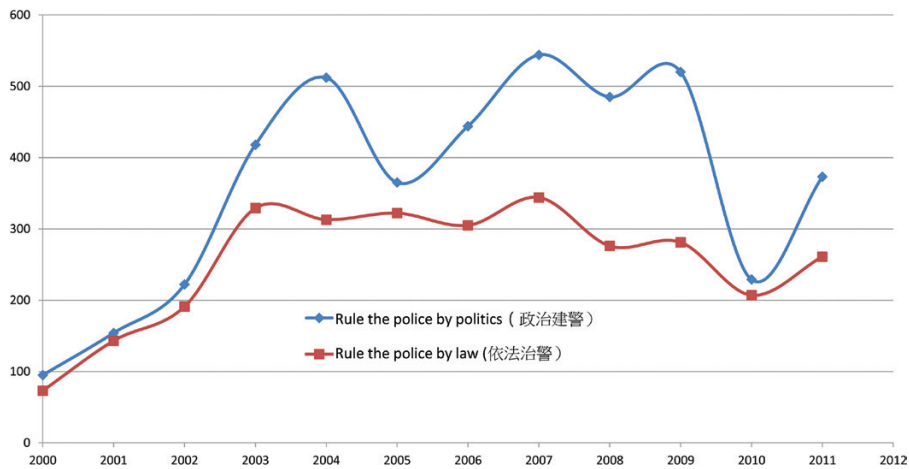
Fig. 6 Discourse of 'regulating the police by law' and 'regulating the police by politics' in *The People's Public Security Newspaper*

Fig. 7 A banner posted on campus of a Police Academy in Guangzhou. It reads 'Regulate the police by politics; build the police for the public; improve the police by practice; and control the police strictly'

and the electoral system. In socialist China, the party-state used to rely on ideology to legitimate its rule. Since the 1980s, it has increasingly drawn its legitimation from *performance*. While performance in economic development is important, its ability to control crimes is equally, if not more, important (Trevaskes 2007). In Guangzhou, crime control has been constantly deployed by the government to demonstrate how well it is

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doing. For instance, in its 2005 Annual Report of Economic and Social Development, the government claimed that:

Under the right leadership of the Municipal CCP Committee and government, citizens in Guangzhou use Deng Xiaoping's Thought and 'Three Represents' Theory[6] as the guide, comprehensively use Scientific Outlook on Development[7], carefully implement the policy of macro-control from the central government, and tie the adjustment of economic structure and pattern of growth. The economy has developed well; all-round achievement has been achieved in all social undertakings; comprehensive economic power has been strengthened; The 'Tenth Five Year Plan' has been fully accomplished; and our harmonious society has made new progress.

To provide evidence for those achievements, along with various statistics on social, economic and cultural development, it cited crime control:

We have strengthened the comprehensive management of public security. There were 105,000 recorded crimes, a 5.7 per cent drop compared to the past year; 37,000 crimes were solved, and case clearance rate increased by 3.4 per cent.

In its 2006 Report, the government continued to claim that it was highly competent in controlling crime:

We have recorded 94,800 crimes in 2006, a 10.1 per cent decline compared with previous year, and robbery and snatch theft cases declined by 29.1 per cent. 36,200 crimes were solved, while the case clearance rate increased by 2.7 per cent.

That decline in recorded crimes and increase of case clearance rates have been consistently used in the annual Reports from 2005 to 2011. However, when the new police commissioner took office and started recording more crimes after 2012, the Report only briefly mentioned the raw number of crimes and clearance rates without reporting the sharp increase of crimes and the dramatic decline of case clearance rates.

In sum, while the police in Western democracies may also actively manipulate crime statistics, the manipulation of crime data in China is peculiar to the police of an authoritarian state who are not politically neutral and where the government relies more on their performance in crime control than their counterparts in the West to legitimate its ruling power.

Conclusion

Crime has long been a sensitive topic in China as the communist regime used to believe that socialist China should be crime-free. Adopting a Marxist perspective, the party-state claimed to have eradicated crimes in socialist China because crime was regarded as the proletariat's resistance towards exploitation by the bourgeois class (Yin 1996: 48). Since the introduction of socialism, China claimed to have eradicated the bourgeois class, leaving, in theory, to no crime. Although that utopian perspective on crime has been gradually moderated since 1980s, and the Chinese party-state, and the police in particular, now hold a relatively liberal perspective on the nature of crime (Cao 2015), the legacy of a socialist ideology on crime still exerts an impact on police work, and the police production of crime data is one of them.

[6]Chinese former president Jiang Zemin's main political slogan.
[7]Chinese former president Hu Jintao's main political slogan.

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In this case study, I have examined how the manipulation of crime data in Guangzhou is not only tied to managerialism but also to a legitimization mandate from the ruling Chinese Communist Party. Local governments in Western democracies may also manipulate crime data to increase their legitimacy, but it happens to a much lesser extent as democratic regimes can enjoy a greater legal-procedural legitimacy while authoritarian regimes like China mainly rely on government's performance such as economic development and crime control for their sources of legitimacy. The understanding of crime data in China should therefore be located in the context of a management of all kinds of official data which flows from the need of the ruling party to maintain its legitimacy (Wu 2016). Similar practice for the police in other authoritarian countries may also be found. More research on local experience in these countries will greatly enrich our understanding on social construction of reality in general and how politics affects production of crime data in particular.

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