



Measuring police role orientations in China: An exploratory study

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Abstract

This study aims to measure role orientations of Chinese police officers and explore how some demographic and work-related variables may influence their perceptions. Using survey data collected from 382 Chinese police officers training in a Chinese police university, this research empirically described police perceptions of their role of crime fighting and community service and examined the associations with demographic and work-related variables. Results suggest that most respondents believe that crime control is the most important responsibility of the police but half of the respondents also consider assisting citizens to be as important as crime control. Officers working in higher levels of police departments tend to be less characterized by a crime fighting mentality. However, some demographic and work-related variables were found to have only marginal influence upon police role orientations.

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1. Introduction

Sociologists have long been interested in police perceptions which could be associated with their behaviour and performance. Of the important occupational outlooks that influence police

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work, their perceptions about what they are for, namely, their role orientations have attracted much academic attention (Brooks et al., 1993; Millie, 2014; Paoline, 2001, 2004; Perrott and Taylor, 1995; Rumbaut and Egon, 1979; Sun, 2003; Sun et al., 2009). How police officers perceive their functions is especially vital in an era characterized by philosophical and strategic transfer toward a problem-solving-oriented and service-oriented style of policing. In the United States, the transition toward community policing can be traced back to the 1980s, on the basis of more than three decades of police research and practice that involves various efforts to enhance police-community relations, crime prevention, and the effectiveness of police performance (Roberg et al., 2009). In China, community policing was officially launched by the Ministry of Public Security in 2002 in order to initiate the reform of police toward a better solution to crime control and citizen support (Zhong, 2009). The main components of community policing include better citizen participation and police-community cooperation, proactive problem-solving, increased police accountability to community, and decentralized police authority (Karp, 2000; Rosenbaum, 1988). One of the most striking obstacles to the implementation of community policing is the influence of traditional police subculture (Skolnick and Bayley, 1988). Traditional police subculture suggested in the Western literature entails a strong preference for the role of crime fighting, a sense of mission and a tendency to use aggressive policing tactics (Cochran and Bromley, 2003). Crime fighting is given high priority and regarded as the real police work in the police culture, while other police functions such as order maintenance and community service are considered secondary or even a waste of time (Klockars, 1985; Paoline, 2003, 2004; Paoline et al., 2000; Rumbaut and Egon, 1979; Sparrow et al., 1990; Walker and Katz, 2005; Westley, 1970; Wilson, 1968). Whether there is a widespread support to the crime fighter image suggested in the Western literature among Chinese police officers remains in lack of a scientific answer based on empirical studies. It is undoubtable that the support from police practitioners will directly determine whether or to what extent the transfer could be successful. While empirical inquiries of police attitudes have become one of the basic scientific sources that policy implications for police reform rely on, few reliable studies could be identified in the context of Chinese policing. As Kam C. Wong pointed out, the knowledge about Chinese policing is 'sketchy, spotty, and superficial' and what is more needed is 'reliable data than critical opinions' (Wong, 2009, pp. 1,9).

The reasons for the lack of empirical studies in the field of policing may be explained from the following two points. First, policing scholars in China tend to make discussions on the basis of their own judgement or experience; they are also willing to make prescriptive guidelines for police practices rather than making descriptive inquiries through empirical studies (Zhang, 2010, p. 70). Second, foreign scholars who are interested in Chinese policing often encounter many obstacles to conduct empirical studies in China. The difficulties foreign researchers may face include language barrier, cultural differences, and access to research participants (Liang and Lu, 2006; Wong, 2007). Therefore, this study aims to fill the gap by adding an empirical inquiry of police perceptions in the context of China to the growing knowledge about policing. Academically, this study extends our understanding on police perceptions in Oriental China. In English-based literature, police role orientations in China have never been empirically explored. There are only a small number of studies that have investigated role orientations of police cadets in a Chinese police college (Cuvelier et al., 2015; Sun et al., 2009; Sun et al., 2010). However, police cadets are not police officers who have entered police force and have done police work though they have received some policing-related education and training. As Loyens pointed out, most of our knowledge about police cultural perceptions is based on studies conducted in English-speaking countries (Loyens, 2009). It is therefore

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