

Research on Geography of Crime and Social Change -in Transitional China since the Economic Reform

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Keywords: Crime; Social change; Criminogenic; Economic reform; Crime-mediating

Abstract. It is believed from Western studies that, social changes during the transition have significant impacts on crime change. However, whether the western well developed theories can fit into our Chinese society? How to identify the real criminogenic and crime-mediating conditions in China? Moreover, from a geographical perspective, were there any consistent relationships between crime and socioeconomic conditions over different geographical scales? This article tries to answer the questions by analyse the literature on geography of crime and social change, as well as its practical possibility to fit into the Chinese society, and arrived at the following points: (1) when introducing the Western well-developed criminological theories into Chinese society, some measures need to be adjusted to Chinese features and scale effects; (2) it is better to discuss their influence on crimes case by case, taking into consideration of the spatial and temporal scales, as well as the specific target's features; (3) both scale-down and scale-up research are necessary, because only through such a comprehensive framework, can it reflect the real situation in China, and further act as an instrument for effective crime control and prevention.

Introduction

This study is proposed against the background of rapid social change in China since 1978, when the Reform and Opening-up policy was launched. Since then, tremendous changes have been experienced in China's demography, economy, social order, culture, politics and legal system. These changes are believed to have had significant impacts on crime levels and types in the following three decades. Research on the links between economic reform and crime in China has mostly been undertaken by sociologists and criminologists [1-3], comparatively, research in this field from a geographical perspective is lacking. It further provides the opportunity to test theories that have been developed in western countries in the context of China.

Social changes and crime change in China since the Economic Reform

As economic reforms have been implemented, massive and protracted social change has transformed China from an underdeveloped nation into a growing economic power, with obvious consequences in every aspects of social life. A dramatic economic upsurge has been stimulated in the past three decades, and the introduction of a market economy has encouraged reform of national enterprises and the introduction of foreign capital. This has led to a rapid shift from state-owned to

private enterprise accompanied by an ever-larger class of entrepreneurs. These newly emerged elites are able to enjoy a high standard of living owing to their high level salaries. At the other end of the social hierarchy, a new urban poverty stratum is emerging from laid off and retired labour, as well as disadvantaged people (e.g. migrants). These two extremes aggravate the inequality in urban areas. The mass migrations, redundant workers and reduced employment opportunities have played together to worsen the urban unemployment situation, and further aggravate inequality, which has unambiguously risen in China ever since 1987.

Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes collectivism, family, shame, informal codes of conduct, and respect for authority [4,5]. Since the economic reform, the invasion by Western culture in technology, films, fast food, literature and, most importantly ideas, has challenged traditional beliefs. Now “getting rich” has become an important goal in modern Chinese society, and the advocating slogan “To be rich is glorious” motivates the way people behave towards economic interests. Traditional morals have given way to a series of money-based bonus systems [6].

Since the implementation of economic reform and the open-door policy in the late 1970s, crime has been on the increase in China [2-3, 7]. According to statistics, by the start of the 21st century, the relatively high level of criminal offences had levelled off at over 4 million per year - a figure approximately 80 times the rates observed in the 1950s and 1960s. Crime rates in pre-reform China were on average less than 10 per thousand population, and this low level had earned China a reputation for being a low crime society. Main crimes in China are categorized into acquisitive crimes (robbery, fraud, abduction, and smuggling) and expressive crimes (homicide, assault, and rape), and it is argued that in the past 30 years, acquisitive crimes and assault constitute the bulk of offences. Theft of various properties was top of the list for offences. In addition to the rise in common types of crime, corruption has become a growing concern to the Chinese public and the government. Violent crimes are thought to be attributed to increased opportunities and targets brought about by urbanization and migration.

Empirical studies into the geography of crime during periods of social change

It was not until the early 1980s that the geography of crime emerged as a distinct sub-discipline of geography, and geographers became directly involved with criminological research, which have been pioneered by research conducted in western industrialized nations, such as America, Britain and Australia [8,9]. These studies have examined the spatial patterns of crimes using environmental approaches, and have analyzed the ecological association between crime and a variety of socioeconomic and demographic conditions from the perspective of “environmental criminology” [10], which over time has merged with the more general field of the geography of crime. Environmental criminology studies criminal activity and victimization, and how space impacts on offenders and victims [11] from four dimensions: the law, the offender, the target, and the place. According to the environmental perspective, criminal events must be understood as confluences of offenders, victims or criminal targets, and laws in specific settings at particular times and places [12]. Crimes concentrate around crime opportunities and other environmental features that facilitate criminal activity.

The crime opportunities mentioned above are taken as necessary conditions helping to translate criminal inclinations into criminal actions. Three theories, referred to as new opportunity theories, are important: (1) routine activity theory, which states that a crime occurs when a motivated offender converges in space and time with a suitable crime target in the absence of a capable guardian against crime, crime will tend to occur in predictable locations defined by the intersection of crime opportunities and an offender’s awareness space; (2) Crime pattern theory [13] telling us

about the interactions between residents and their environment in local areas. The “paths” people take in their daily activities, the “nodes” where people travel to and from, and the “edges” of areas where people live, work or enjoy entertainment, are the main concepts of the theory and carry crime opportunities; and (3) Rational choice theory [14] focuses on the offender’s decision making and emphasizes the person-situation interaction.

However, as suggested, crime can form very different patterns at different scales of analysis, and environmental criminologists are less concerned with aggregate crime trends, while the geography of crime focus on the aggregation of micro-level patterns and processes. It took particular interest in the importance of spatial structures, environmental associations, and the special qualities of place [15]. It was rooted in cartographic reports of officials and statisticians, demonstrating that crime patterns were uneven regionally. The modern geography of crime not only inherits these traditions in a critical way, but also explores a wider range of methodological and conceptual concerns. For example, traditional research focused on regional variations in different types of crime and of justice; while modern research pays more attention to criminal definition, and the relationships between socioeconomic indicators and crime. It has also been substantiated by new theories focusing on identifying crime patterns, exploring the relationships between crime and environmental or socioeconomic characteristics, assessing the effectiveness of policing and crime reduction programs.

There is a specific literature on the geography of crime during periods of great social and economic change. Crime has been acknowledged as an inevitable by-product of social change ever since Emile Durkheim’s classic studies [16], which explored the increased levels of crime as a result of anomie in societies undergoing profound social transition. Demographic-socioeconomic factors, such as the divorce rate and urbanization are all expected to affect the crime rate. Shaw and McKay’s social disorganization theory [17] argues that neighbourhoods with greater residential instability, lower socioeconomic status, and more ethnic heterogeneity are more likely to experience crime, because of the absence of social cohesion and social control [18,19]. Theories relate crime closely to economic, socio economic-demographic variables, and factors that may affect an individual’s propensity to commit crime, such as poverty, income inequality, cultural and family background, level of education, age, gender and urbanization [20, 21].

Academic research into crime in China began in the late 1920s, but it was then interrupted by the civil war and the Japanese invasion in the 1940s. Since Reform and Opening-up in 1979, it has been revitalized in response to the rise in criminal behaviours associated with social and economic change. Government administered research was rare, due to the difficulty in interpreting the large volume of underreported data. Studies exploring the relationships between crime rates and possible criminogenic factors have been mainly descriptive. Many scholars in sociology and criminology have done research into Chinese criminology, both in terms of theory and crime prevention strategies, such as work into the causes and prevention of crime [22], as well as typologies of crime. Among these empirical studies, the identification of factors associated with crime has focused on the incongruity between market economy developments and government regulation, which results in urbanized communities becoming important breeding grounds for crime.

Drawing upon the above illustrations of social change and crime, it is easy to arrive at the conclusion that crime is a barometer of broader social conditions, in that the society that has experienced profound social change over a short period of time, may experience particularly high rates of crime above the “normal” level. In other words, crime change is a reflection of rapidly changing contextual conditions and is inextricably connected with the society in which it exists. Some of those factors widely used in western studies can be transferred directly into Chinese

studies, but there are still some other factors that do not fit into Chinese society's reality, because either they are not measured or they are not relevant. Considering China's social reality, and based on the foregoing review of the literature, the variables utilized in China society are categorized into several different dimensions, and listed in Table 1.

Table 1 Crime-related conditions in China

Dimension	Variable
Demography	Population density, Urbanization, Natural population growth rate, Divorce rate
Economy	Proportion of GDP from industry, Proportion of GDP from services, GDP per capita, Value of exports per capita
Social stability	Unemployment rate, <i>Gini</i> coefficient, Ratio of urban rural income, Average income per capita
Social harmony	Expenditure on civil affairs per capita, Prosecution ratio, Proportion of people in poverty, Investment in public fixed assets per capita, Ratio of administrative expenditure to public expenditure
Mobility	Length of railways per capita, Length of highways per capita, Passenger traffic per capita, Net migration rate
Social Improvement & Citizen Welfare	General consumer price index, Engel urban index, Engel rural index, Number of doctors per 10,000 persons
Culture	Public libraries per capita, Proportion of people with junior middle school attendance, Proportion of students enrolled in higher education, Number of municipal cultural centres per capita, Value of foreign capital utilized
Geography	Annual average temperature, Annual average precipitation, Crime "spillover" from surrounding areas

Conclusions and Discussions

Economic reform has stimulated economic development and migration, creating an unprecedented rise in the living standards of the Chinese people [2], widened the inequality gap and driven reforms in the political and legal systems. These changes are partly attributed to the strong emphasis on and promotion of the idea that "it is good to be rich". In such an environment, many people are tempted to "get rich quick" by whatever means available, even if it involves criminal behaviours, which can be seen in soaring crime levels.

It is indicated that some conditions have consistent influences on crime as hypothesized, regardless of temporal or spatial scale. However, it would be unduly hasty to arrive at any definite conclusions on a variable's effect on crime in China without thinking about the preconditions, e.g. their spatial and temporal scales, their specific locations and features as well as the particular crime. In conclusion it is essential to be careful before applying any western-developed criminological theory to Chinese society. We conclude by drawing attention to some of the limitations of this work as well as the directions for future work. It seems that more work needs to be done due to the limits of data, methodology, and theory adaptability.

An ideal framework for future empirical research, based on this literature review, should encompass both scale-down and scale-up designs, from national to provincial, city and neighborhood scales, which help to make the research on the geography of crime in China more integrated. However, these limitations and challenges also provide opportunities for future research. As China continues to open up to the world to an ever-greater extent and keeps up the fast pace of

development, more and more researchers will be attracted to do study on China's crime and social change.

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