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Criminological Research in Contemporary China

Challenges and Lessons Learned From a Large-Scale Criminal Victimization Survey

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This article discusses research experience gained from a large-scale survey of criminal victimization recently conducted in Tianjin, China. The authors review some of the more important challenges that arose in the research, their responses to these challenges, and lessons learned that might be beneficial to other scholars who are interested in conducting criminological research in China. Their experience underscores the importance of understanding the Chinese political, cultural, and academic context, and the utility of collaborating with experienced and knowledgeable colleagues "on site." Although there are some special difficulties and barriers, their project demonstrates the feasibility of original criminological data collection in China.

Keywords: *criminological research; challenges; lessons; China*

Pre-reform China had enjoyed very low crime rates and had earned a reputation of being a crime-free society (Fairbank, 1987; Rojek, 1996). However, since the country embarked on modernization through economic reform and the open-door policy in the late 1970s, the Chinese have been experiencing surging crime waves and growing public alarm about crime (Liu, 2004, 2005, 2006; Liu & Messner, 2001). According to official statistics, from 1978 to 2003, homicide rates more than doubled, rape increased 30%, and assault increased 7.5 times. Property crimes have also risen substantially. Robbery grew by 4.5 times, and larceny increased 8 times.

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Fraud, only reported up to 2002, went up almost 14 times. Grand larceny (3,000 yuan or more), for which data were only published up to 1999, increased 90 times (Law Yearbooks of China, 1979-2003). Thus, similar to the experience of other nations, an unfortunate cost of modernization in China has evidently been higher risks of criminal victimization (Shelley, 1981, 1986).

Researchers interested in studying crime in China confront special difficulties and barriers because of its unique political and social systems (Johnson, 1986; Liang & Lu, 2006; Peerenboom, 2001; Troyer, Clark, & Rojek, 1989). Traditionally, criminological research and data have been considered highly sensitive because Chinese authorities have believed that crime should not be part of a socialist society. The authorities have feared that publicizing and revealing crime information would damage the country's image and would be a source of "international embarrassment" (Bennett, 2004, p. 12). As a consequence, similar to other socialist countries (Robertson, 2006), official crime statistics were not published in the past. Although this socialist tradition has been changing since China implemented the open-door policy, the barriers for crime research are still formidable (Liang & Lu, 2006). Crime research methodologies such as self-report surveys of crime and criminal victimization have been developed and used in Western societies where democracy, individualism, freedom of speech, and protection of privacy prevail. The application of such methodologies in China is problematic because Chinese society has different social and cultural conditions, such as the traditional emphasis on collectivism and respect for authorities (Bracey, 1989; Dutton, 1992; L. Zhang et al., 1996).

The purpose of this article is to share our experiences from a recent survey of criminal victimization conducted in a large Chinese city, Tianjin. We discuss some of the unusual challenges associated with implementing a victimization survey within the setting of Chinese society and our efforts to deal with these challenges. We conclude with a summary of the lessons that we have learned, which may be valuable for other researchers and scholars interested in comparative studies of crime in China.

Research Context

Comparative criminological research is not new. Since the late 1960s and the early 1970s, criminologists have conducted comparative studies of crime and criminal justice (e.g., Bayley, 1969, 1976; Clifford, 1978; DeFleur, 1969; Friday, 1971; Miller, 1978). However, major advances in this kind of research have occurred only in recent years (see Bennett, 2004, and Howard, Newman, & Pridemore, 2000, for detailed reviews). As Robertson (2006) has observed, the growth has been promoted by "both negative and positive occurrences" (p. 137). Negative occurrences refer to the significant increase in transnational crime problems such as terrorism, drug/human trafficking, and smuggling. The positive factors involve increasing access to data for conducting comparative crime research in countries that had prohibited such research

in the past, such as China and states of the former Soviet Union. In 2004, Bennett predicts that "the continued globalization of business, economics, politics, and cultures will create a demand for global criminology and criminal justice research" (p. 18).

Victim surveys are viewed as an important method for collecting information about crime and building criminological theories (Cantor & Lynch, 2000). Since the late 1960s, the National Crime Victimization Surveys (NCVS, originally referred to as the National Crime Surveys) in the United States and the British Crime Surveys (BCS) have yielded rich data and have demonstrated the utility of victim surveys for understanding crime and social reactions to crime (Cantor & Lynch, 2000; Gottfredson, 1984; Mayhew & Elliott, 1990; Mayhew & Hough, 1983). It is unfortunate that the implementation of victim surveys in China has been quite limited.

One notable effort to enhance the coverage of victimization surveys in general is the International Crime Victim Survey (ICVS) sponsored by the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute. The ICVS entails the implementation of a standardized survey in participating countries (Nieuwbeerta, 2002). Since 1989, more than 140 surveys have been completed in more than 70 different countries. Beijing, China, was one of the sites during the 1992-1994 ICVS survey round. The ICVS Beijing survey was cosponsored by the China Department of Justice (CDJ) and conducted by the CDJ Research Institute on Crime Prevention. It randomly selected a sample of 2,000 residents from the urban districts of Beijing. Researchers from the CDJ Institute conducted face-to-face interviews in households using the ICVS standard questionnaire that had been translated into Chinese.

Although the ICVS Beijing survey demonstrates the feasibility of using the victim survey methodology in the Chinese context and provides illuminating descriptive data, its utility is limited in several important respects. First, the questionnaire contains very few theoretically informed items that can be used to assess the applicability and generalizability of well-established criminological theories across different countries. Second, the standardized instrument does not allow researchers to develop variables that reflect the unique social and cultural characteristics of the country surveyed. These variables may be critical for understanding the country's crime situation and for modifying established theories or developing new theories. Finally, the Beijing survey was conducted at a relatively early stage of the economic reforms and may not reflect the conditions of the "new China" of today. Our research represents an effort to update and extend the earlier work on criminal victimization in China conducted as part of the ICVS project to allow for better assessments of the scope of conditions of Western criminological theories and to enhance our general understanding of crime in China.

The Tianjin Survey

The Tianjin survey was funded by the National Science Foundation and conducted in 2004. Tianjin is one of the four largest municipalities of the People's

Republic of China.[1] As a municipality, Tianjin has provincial-level status and is directly under the central government. It is the third largest city in mainland China. Tianjin is located along the Hai He River. Its ports, some distance away, are located on the Bohai Gulf of the Pacific Ocean. The Tianjin municipality borders Heibei province to the north, south, and west, the municipality of Beijing in a small portion to the northwest, and the Bohai Gulf to the east. At the end of 2004, the population of the Tianjin municipality was 10.24 million, of which 9.33 million were holders of Tianjin *hukou* (permanent residence). Among Tianjin permanent residents, 5.56 million were urban, and 3.76 million were rural.

The survey entailed a multistage cluster sampling design. Tianjin has 15 administrative districts and three counties. The sample was drawn from the 6 traditional districts located in the central urban area of the municipality. They include Heping, Nankai, Hongxiao, Hexi, Hebei, and Hedong districts. Each district has approximately 6 to 10 city-street offices. We first randomly selected 2 city-street offices from each of the selected districts, yielding a total of 12 city-street offices.

Among the 12 selected city-street offices are 2 large offices that include a relatively large number of neighborhood committees. Five neighborhood committees were randomly selected from each of these large city-street offices, and four neighborhood committees were randomly drawn from each of the remaining 10 city-street offices. A total of 50 neighborhood committees was thus obtained through a combination of purposive and random selection. Members of the research team met the supervisor in each of the selected neighborhood committees to explain the purpose and importance of the survey, the financial sources of the survey, and compensation for costs associated with administration. Upon securing agreement for assistance, the research team requested a complete list of households in that neighborhood.

Fifty-one households were selected for the survey in each of the 50 selected neighborhoods in hopes of reaching the target of 2,500 households. Using the household roster provided by the neighborhood committee in each selected neighborhood, the research team conducted systematic sampling. A starting point was randomly determined and every eighth household from each neighborhood was selected until the specified number of households was obtained. The research team defined a criterion date to select a specific respondent from a selected household with more than one person aged 18 years or older. The individual with a birthday closest to the criterion date was chosen to be the respondent.

Data were collected through anonymous, self-administered questionnaires at convenient sites within the neighborhood (e.g., recreational areas). With the assistance of the neighborhood committees, the research team contacted the respondents to schedule the questionnaire administration. A total of 2,474 valid questionnaires was obtained, which represents a response rate of 97%. This response rate might appear to be suspiciously high, but the ICVS survey in Beijing was also able to get cooperation from virtually all selected households (Zhu, Lixian, Jialun, Jianan, & Lu, 1995).

The theoretical underpinnings for the survey are routine activities/lifestyle theories and neo-social disorganization theory, modified and elaborated to reflect characteristics of the Chinese context. The overarching objective is to draw on recent developments in Western crime research to conduct analyses of the individual, household, and neighborhood determinants of victimization. Such analyses allow us to compare the protective and risk factors of criminal victimization in China and in the United States using the standard measures and to examine the effects of the variables that capture unique features of Chinese society.

Research Challenges and Responses

We organize our discussion of research challenges and responses with reference to four basic concerns: gaining access to the research site, designing the survey (sampling and instrument construction), protecting human subjects, and ensuring data quality.

Gaining Access to the Research Site

As noted above, crime has been a sensitive topic in China, and the Chinese government has been reluctant to release detailed information about levels of crime. In addition, public officials and many citizens are often suspicious of the intentions of foreigners. It is thus hard to imagine any realistic scenario wherein Western researchers would successfully implement an original data collection project dealing with crime in China without the support and cooperation of local contacts.

The first step in our effort to gain access to the research site was to cultivate a close relationship with an experienced researcher in Tianjin—Zhou Lu, the director of the Crime Research Center at the Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences (TASS). Director Zhou had extensive research experience. In contrast with many Chinese criminologists, he had engaged in a considerable amount of empirical work, often based on original survey data. His research portfolio included consecutive surveys of prison inmates in Tianjin every 2 years since 1991. These studies not only provided Director Zhou with a good deal of technical expertise; he also had developed contacts with many officials in the Tianjin government and the Tianjin police department.

Building on a longstanding personal relationship between one of us and Director Zhou, we had been able to publish several coauthored articles based on the prisoner data in Western journals (Liu et al., 1998; L. Zhang & Liu, 2004; L. Zhang, Messner, & Lu, 1999; L. Zhang, Messner, Lu, & Deng, 1997; L. Zhang, Messner, et al., 2000; L. Zhang, Welte, Wieczorek, & Messner, 2000; L. Zhang et al., 1996). We accordingly approached Director Zhou and invited him to collaborate on the proposed victimization survey. He was eager to accept our invitation, but scholars 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 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.

To get our project off the ground, two of us traveled to Tianjin prior to the development of a grant proposal to meet with Director Zhou and other senior officials of TASS. We engaged in some preliminary planning for the survey, but the main function of the visit was to convince the authorities that our research was worthwhile and legitimate. With respect to the latter, 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. We worked out a formal "Statement of the Principles of Research Collaboration" that clearly defined the nature and purpose of the collaboration. The document was signed by the vice president of TASS and the vice president for research at the University at Albany, State University of New York, thereby making an organizational connection that gave our Chinese collaborators confidence in the project. With the formal backing of TASS and with Director Zhou's good relationships with Tianjin officials, we were able to get approval from the Tianjin government to conduct the survey. This approval was essential for gaining the cooperation of the leaders of the neighborhood committees, who provided the household registries from which respondents were selected.

It is important to recognize that the development of trust and personal connections requires sensitivity to customs. In addition to our initial visit to Tianjin to craft the collaborative agreement, we traveled there several times during the research phases. During these visits, we met not only with members of the research team but also with the top officials at TASS. We always exchanged gifts during these visits and attended ceremonial dinners. When writing the grant proposal, we budgeted travel funds for the vice president of TASS and Director Zhou to visit the United States for meetings with us. These visits were important not only to provide an opportunity for substantive discussions about the research but also to reciprocate the hospitality that they had shown us.

We encountered some special difficulties in processing payments. Normally, providers of services associated with the administration of a survey (e.g., obtaining household lists, printing questionnaires) submit invoices to be reimbursed for expenses. However, it was unrealistic for us to expect the Tianjin Academy to assume some of the heavy costs associated with the survey on their own. We developed a payment system whereby the research tasks were divided into distinct phases. We provided an advance payment for each phase, after which Director Zhou submitted a written account of the expenditure of funds. Upon our certification that the research tasks had been performed adequately, the next payment was released.

Designing the Survey

The basic principles of survey research presumably remain the same regardless of the social context, but some procedures and techniques that can be readily used in

Western countries may not work in China. Researchers may thus be required to make acceptable compromises between the ideal and the feasible. In our study, the survey design entailed the identification and selection of households and neighborhoods. Ideally, we would have liked to stratify Tianjin neighborhoods along socioeconomic dimensions using census data, as researchers commonly do in the United States. It is unfortunate that China has no such detailed census data. The smallest units of census are city districts. We thus had to compromise to make the survey feasible. We relied on the Chinese research team's experience, knowledge, and judgment at an early stage of the sampling (city districts) in an attempt to ensure the inclusion of a diverse array of city-street offices and neighborhoods. Descriptive statistics of our data indicate that the sampled neighborhoods do indeed vary along theoretically relevant social structural dimensions, suggesting that the purposive component of the sampling was a fruitful compromise.

In the development of the original survey instrument, we relied heavily on past criminal victimization surveys in the West. Question wording for a large number of theoretically relevant variables was readily available. The original questionnaire was written in English, but it obviously had to be translated into Chinese. Although two of us are native Chinese, both have been living outside China for more than 10 years. China has experienced tremendous change during these years. To ensure that the questions were readable and appropriate, we worked closely with our collaborators on the translation. We went back and forth more than 20 times to reach agreement on the questions. In some cases, difficulties revolved around a particular word or phrasing. In other cases, the adequacy of an item was open to question. For example, we originally planned to include a variable indicating the respondents' official political ("cadre") status, anticipating that this might be an important status characteristic, given the political situation in China. Our collaborators raised multiple concerns about the item. They felt that the variable might not, in fact, be as important as anticipated given the transition in China. In addition, the question might be politically sensitive and possibly jeopardize approval from the Tianjin government. As a consequence, we deleted the question. Following standard practices, we used the method of back translation (Behling & Law, 2000) to enhance confidence in the Chinese version of the instrument.

Protecting Human Subjects

The issue of protecting human subjects posed a number of challenges, in both the Chinese and U.S. settings. China does not have formal legislation for the protection of human subjects in research and established institutional mechanisms to ensure such protection. To minimize the risk of harm and to satisfy requirements for federally supported research, we provided training on the protection of human subjects to our Chinese collaborators similar to that offered in the United States. Specifically, we translated standard training materials and assisted TASS in the creation of its own Institutional Review Board (IRB). Our principal collaborator, Zhou Lu, was designated as the human protections administrator for the institution. He supervised the training

of members of the Tianjin research team and tested them to confirm their mastery of the relevant materials. During our on-site visits, our Chinese collaborators exhibited an awareness of and appreciation for the importance of the protection of human subjects.

We established standard protocols to secure IRB approval in the United States. Members of the research team were presented with a script for recruiting respondents that contained the following: (a) an explanation of the nature and purposes of the study, (b) notification that the study had been approved by the Tianjin city government, (c) assurances that participation in the survey was voluntary, that the responses would be treated confidentially, that the respondent could refuse to answer any question, and that no significant risks were anticipated, and (d) an explanation of the estimated time commitment for completing the survey (approximately 1 hour) and of compensation (40 yuan). Much of this text was also printed as an introduction to the questionnaire itself.

In the course of securing IRB approval, we discovered that some procedures that are quite practical in the United States are not easily implemented in the Chinese context. For example, we initially proposed and received IRB approval to guarantee confidentiality by having a respondent place the completed questionnaire in an envelope and seal the envelope. When the time for administration of the survey arrived, our collaborators informed us that envelopes are relatively expensive in China and that to follow the approved procedure would make the costs exceed the budget. We thus devised an alternative strategy wherein respondents placed completed questionnaires in a box with a slit in it, which was then transmitted unopened to TASS and kept in a secure place under the supervision of Director Zhou.

Our Chinese collaborators also had concerns about "protections," but these applied to the society at large. As noted above, the Chinese are very concerned that survey research not be used to tarnish the image of the nation, especially by foreigners. Our "Statement of the Principles of Research Collaboration," referred to above, in some sense served an analogous function about protections in the Chinese context to Western IRB protocols.

Ensuring Data Quality

Ensuring the validity of responses to a survey is a paramount concern in any survey research project, but the Chinese context poses some distinctive obstacles. The self-report methodology for victimization surveys has been developed in a Western sociocultural setting characterized by individual autonomy and freedom to express personal opinions and views. Such independence and freedom of expression may have a significant effect on the quality of the data collected. In contrast, collectivism has traditionally been the essence of the Chinese culture. In this cultural context, an individual is encouraged to conform to the society, community, group, or family. It is generally not desirable to express opinions or beliefs openly that are contrary to

those of other members of the social collectives (J. Zhang & Shavitt, 2003). These cultural traits are potentially problematic for survey research because they may make Chinese respondents reluctant to share their own viewpoints. They may be inclined to express what others in their groups and communities believe. To the extent that this is the case, the basic assumption of surveys that respondents are willing to report their own views and opinions may be suspect.

In an attempt to minimize the effect of this cultural trait, we included text on the questionnaire assuring respondents that the answers would be treated confidentially and would only be used for purposes of the research, as explained above. We also requested that our Chinese research team emphasize confidentiality before administering the questionnaires. They also made sure that respondents did not converse with one another when filling out the questionnaires. Of course, we cannot dismiss the possibility that responses are biased by the collectivistic cultural values of the society, and we call for systematic inquiry into the validity of victimization surveys in the Chinese context.

Another feature of Chinese society that posed a potential problem is the lack of a self-consciously scientific tradition in social research. The notion of "doing science" in the study of social phenomena has not been firmly established, especially in criminology. Studies of crime and criminal justice that have appeared in Chinese professional journals and books usually involve general discussions or speculations without a sound theoretical framework and empirical analysis (Zhou & Cong, 2001). Such traditional practices foster a somewhat cavalier approach to the importance of conforming to rigorous scholarly standards and procedures. As a consequence, researchers must make conscientious efforts to ensure the strict enforcement of academic standards and research protocols when surveys are conducted in this Chinese context. For our project, we could not regularly travel to China to oversee the survey implementation in person.

Accordingly, we took several steps to facilitate quality control. We first clearly laid out a detailed framework and enumeration of procedures for each step of the survey implementation (e.g., sampling and survey administration) when we met with our collaborators in China. Second, we repeatedly explained and emphasized the importance of meeting scientific standards. Our repeated message was, "Please do not relax or loosen the specified protocols without discussion with us and an acceptable justification." Third, we maintained regular contact with our principal collaborator, Director Zhou, by e-mail and phone, and asked him to keep a written record of all important survey activities. For example, we requested that a record be kept of the reason for any replacement of a respondent, if necessary, and the specific procedure used. Finally, we asked our principal collaborator to write a report after the research team had completed each phase of the survey. These requests were all honored, enhancing our confidence in the resulting data. Indeed, the quality of the accounting that we received from Director Zhou was uniformly high.

Conclusions: Lessons Learned

Contemporary China provides a strategic setting for criminological research because the country has experienced profound social changes and rising levels of crime since the country implemented economic reform and an open-door policy in the late 1970s. However, formal, systematic studies are rare in the field of crime and criminal justice due to an array of political, social, and cultural barriers. Our survey project demonstrates the feasibility of conducting such studies in China despite the significant barriers.

From our experience, the fruitful execution of criminological research in China is contingent on several factors. The first one is an understanding of the Chinese political, social, and cultural systems. Such understanding involves broad knowledge ranging from familiarity with the political/administrative and social structures of Chinese society to awareness of its traditions of social research. Although some of this knowledge can be acquired from afar, local expertise is likely to be invaluable for success. In addition, the importance of extensive contacts with officials and others in the research environment cannot be overstated. Our experience underscores the benefits of linking up with experienced and fully engaged collaborators on-site.

Another key factor to success is flexibility on the part of all participants in the research project. In the course of collaborations involving researchers from the United States and China, the participants will come from different academic backgrounds and will bring different scholarly practices, regulations, and customs. Flexibility and compromise are thus necessary to achieve success. From our Western vantage point, we had to make adjustments in sampling procedures, instrument design, and other research-related issues; our compliance officers had to agree to modify normal IRB protocols; and our finance people had to agree to unusual payment options. From the Chinese side, the Tianjin Academy people had to be willing to conform to a number of requirements that would not normally apply to their research.

Finally, as other proponents of comparative studies have noted (e.g., Bennett, 2004), mutual trust and respect are critical for effective collaboration. Disagreements and even conflict are likely to occur in the course of research. To handle these situations effectively, the researchers must be convinced of the "good faith" of others and be willing to compromise as need be. These compromises are most easily arrived at among scholars who have a genuine respect for the role and contributions of all involved. We developed such respect for our Tianjin collaborators and tried to communicate this to them in no uncertain terms.

In sum, we hope that our experience with the Tianjin victimization survey will be useful to foreign researchers from abroad as well as for Chinese domestic scholars who wish to conduct studies of crime in China. Many of the specific issues and problems encountered by researchers will undoubtedly differ for different projects (Liang & Lu, 2006). Nevertheless, we expect that research on crime in China will become even more feasible as the nation becomes more open. We encourage our Western and

Chinese colleagues to pursue vigorously the emerging and exciting opportunities for criminological research in China.

Note

1. The following description of Tianjin is taken from the online version of Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tianjin).

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