
CHRONIC OFFENDERS IN CHINA*

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Using survey data from a sample of inmates in the city of Tianjin, this paper investigates the applicability of the concept of chronic offenders in China. Three general questions are addressed. First, in light of the historically low crime rates, is there an identifiable chronic offending group in Chinese society? Second, if there is such a group of chronic offenders, is this group characteristically violent? Third, does this group exhibit similar or different patterns of recidivism in comparison with other offenders? The results reveal a complex pattern. When attention focuses on violations that elicit severe sanctioning (court action), there is no evidence of a chronic offending group. However, when administrative sanctions by the police are included in the examination, a chronic offender group can be discerned. This Chinese chronic offender group is relatively small in size, but, as in the U.S., these offenders are more likely than others to be involved in violent offending. These chronic offenders are also more likely than other offenders to progress from nonviolent to violent offending after initial contact with the criminal justice system.

In 1972, Marvin E. Wolfgang, Thorsten Sellin, and Robert Figlio published a landmark study entitled *Delinquency in a Birth Cohort*. In this study, Wolfgang and his associates discovered the existence of a "chronic offender" group. This was a small group of offenders who had been arrested five times or more and who were responsible for most crimes, especially for serious crimes such as homicide, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. The behavior of these chronic offenders has a much greater impact on the amount of crime in society than that of any other group of offenders. Therefore the discovery of such a group has very important implications for theory and policy making.

Several studies of chronic offenders have been conducted in the United States (Shannon, 1988; Tremblay et al., 1991; White, Moffitt, Earls, Robins, & Silva, 1990; Wolfgang, Thornberry, & Figlio, 1987). However, investigations of chronic offenders in other cultural settings have been rare, and all are in Western countries. None has explored an Eastern culture such as China. This is an unfortunate omission in the research literature because there are fundamental social and cultural differences between the United States and China. How these differences influence crime can perhaps be best reflected in the features of a chronic offender group. In fact, because China has historically reported very low

*The data for this analysis were collected in collaboration with the Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences. The authors gratefully acknowledge the Academy's assistance and in particular the assistance of Mr. Wang Hui, president of the academy, and Mr. Zhou Lu, director of the Center for Studies of Crime.

crime rates, the question of whether the very concept of a chronic offender can be applied in China is an important issue.

The present research explores three general questions. First, is there a chronic offender group in China? Second, if there is such a group, are its members characteristically violent? Third, do chronic offenders exhibit patterns of recidivism similar to or different from other offenders after initial contact with the criminal justice system? Specifically, are chronic offenders more likely than others to progress from nonviolent to violent offending?

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND THE LITERATURE

Using official records, Wolfgang and his colleagues studied a cohort of 9,945 boys who had been born in Philadelphia in 1945. They found that chronic offenders accounted for 18 percent of all delinquents and for 6.3 percent of the total sample of 9,945 boys. Yet these chronic offenders were responsible for a disproportionate share of the crimes, especially the serious and violent crimes. Wolfgang and his associates also found a remarkable characteristic of chronic offenders: Arrest and court experience increased their future offending (Wolfgang et al., 1972).

In 1983, Wolfgang and his associates published a new cohort study. They selected a larger birth cohort, born in Philadelphia in 1958, and followed its members through their maturity. Again, the findings indicated that the chronic offenders accounted for most offenses, especially the serious crimes. Similar to the 1945 cohort study, the new study indicated that the more often a chronic offender was arrested the more likely he or she was to be arrested again (Tracy & Figlio, 1982; Wolfgang, 1983). Other studies in the U.S. have supported Wolfgang's pioneering findings (Shannon, 1988; White et al., 1990; Wolfgang et al., 1987).

The discovery of the "chronic offender" has had a profound influence on criminological research and criminal justice policy in the U.S. For example, it suggests that there may be stable underlying criminogenic traits that lead to the continuity of criminal behavior. This idea has led to a number of studies emphasizing the stability of personal traits (Ellis, 1987; Loeber, 1982; Olweus, 1979; Wilson & Herrnstein, 1985). For example, in *Crime and Human Nature* (1985), Wilson and Herrnstein argued that personal traits such as genetic makeup, intelligence, and body build outweigh the importance of social factors as predictors of criminal involvement.

The study of chronic offenders has also contributed to the emergence of developmental and life course theories. These theories are concerned with the forces that control the direction of a criminal career and predict its onset, termination, escalation, and decline. They generally hold that factors that influence offending behavior change over different stages of an offender's life

cycle (Laub & Sampson, 1988, 1991, 1993; Loeber & LeBlanc, 1990; Loeber, Southamer-Loeber, Van Kammen, & Farrington, 1991; Patterson, Crosby, & Vuchinich, 1992; Sampson & Laub, 1992, 1993). Recent work by Laub and Sampson indicates that marriage and employment can be turning points in offenders' criminal careers. Offenders are more likely to cease their antisocial behaviors if they are given support through marriage and employment (Laub & Sampson, 1991, 1993). Getting married and getting a job evidently deflect persons away from a trajectory of chronic offending.

The discovery of the chronic offender has also had an important influence on criminal justice policy. The chronic offender has become a central focus of numerous programs. At every stage of the criminal justice process, identification of chronic offenders has become an important basis for decision making. From initial police dispositions to later decisions about prosecution, pretrial actions, sentencing, probation, and parole, special policies have been developed for chronic offenders (Martin, 1986). A current example of policies designed to control chronic offenders is the national trend to develop sentencing guidelines designed to incapacitate repeat offenders (e.g., "three strikes and you're out").

A theoretically important question is whether the existence of chronic offenders is universal. Can the concept of the chronic offender be applied to other cultures? Is there always some group of chronic offenders who are responsible for most crimes? Are there any different characteristics of chronic offenders under different sociocultural contexts? Answers to these questions will greatly enhance our understanding of chronic offenders and their control.

This kind of question has to be answered by empirical investigations on chronic offenders in different cultures and societies. Despite the importance of the subject, very few studies on chronic offenders have been done in other countries to date. One such study was the Stockholm cohort project in Sweden (Wikstrom, 1990). Another influential project was undertaken by Donald West and David Farrington (1977) in London. Both of these studies arrived at conclusions similar to those of Wolfgang and his associates in the United States. They found that a small group of chronic offenders was responsible for a high percentage of crimes and that punishment from the criminal justice system did little to deter their criminal behavior; rather, punishment escalated their criminal offending.

An investigation of chronic offenders in China will be particularly enlightening because Chinese society differs from Western countries with respect to many social, cultural, and political features. A major feature of crime in China is a pattern of very low reported crime rates and recidivism rates. For example, in 1986 the recorded murder rate per 100,000 people in China was 1.1, compared with 8.6 for the United States. The rape rate was 3.7 in China compared with 37.5 in the U.S. The serious assault rate was 1.7 compared with 346.1 in the U.S. The robbery rate was 1.2 compared with 225.1 in the U.S. Finally, the

theft rate in China was 40.5 compared with 5,087.8 in the U.S. (Rojek, 1995, p. 239).

Along with recent economic reforms, crime rates in China have increased rapidly (Rojek, 1989, 1995). This has caused great concern among the citizens and the government. A major response to the increase in crime is the government's attempts to crack down (Palmer, 1996). The *Law Yearbook of China*, the official source for Chinese crime data, indicates that it is property crimes that are escalating, not violent offenses, which have not significantly increased since 1981 (Press of Law Yearbook of China, 1990-1995; Rojek, 1995). But even the most recent rates are still extraordinarily low in comparison with those of Western countries such as the United States (Rojek, 1995). This is also true for recidivism rates. The Chinese government reported that the recidivism rate for 1994 was between 6 percent and 8 percent (PRC State Department, 1995). In comparison, it is widely accepted that the rate of adult recidivism in the United States is approximately 60 percent (Greenfeld, 1985). Although these data are subject to the limitations associated with official statistics, the general conclusion that crime rates have been relatively low in China is beyond question.

Recently, Wolfgang has led a large-scale study in Wuhan, a major city in China (National Institute of Justice, 1995). The study is based on an analysis of a birth cohort, a group of people who were all born in 1973 in the Wuchang district of Wuhan city. The research is reported to use an approach similar to that applied in Wolfgang's groundbreaking study of delinquency in the 1945 Philadelphia birth cohort. The Wuchang district of Wuhan has a population of 722,600. The large research team searched police records and followed up with visits to schools and "neighborhood committees." The study found that of the 5,341 people born in the Wuchang district in 1973 fewer than 2 percent had a record of delinquency by age 17. The researchers were able to identify a very small group of 81 delinquents. They reported that the level of delinquency was far lower than what had been found in studies in the West, including those conducted in Philadelphia, Racine (Wisconsin), Stockholm, and London, which generally identified a rate of about 30 percent. This finding is generally consistent with the reported low crime rates in China. The study is planned to continue through the year 2000 and will extend to the entire city of Wuhan, which has a population of more than 3.4 million. How many of these 81 identified delinquents are chronic offenders? The Wuhan study has not found a chronic offender group, which Wolfgang defined in his groundbreaking Philadelphia 1945 birth cohort study as delinquents who had been arrested five times or more (National Institute of Justice, 1995).

So far, research in China on the subject of chronic offenders is quite limited. In light of the fact that the crime rates and recidivism rates are very low, even considering recent increases, only a very small portion of the population can be said to have committed a criminal offense. The key to studying chronic offenders in China must be to first answer the question whether a chronic offender group

exists in China. If it does, how can we identify its members? These questions have to be answered in combination with a discussion of the distinctive features of the Chinese system of criminal justice.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE IN CHINA

In the Chinese criminal justice system, lawbreaking acts are generally divided into two categories depending on their seriousness: general lawbreaking acts (*yi ban wei fa*) and serious lawbreaking acts (*yian zhong wei fa*). The latter are also called criminal lawbreaking acts. The 10th article of the Chinese Criminal Law (National People's Congress of PRC, 1979) stipulates that any act that endangers state sovereignty and territorial integrity, jeopardizes the regime of the dictatorship of the proletariat, undermines socialist revolution and socialist construction, disrupts public order, encroaches upon the property of the whole people or the property collectively owned by the laboring masses, encroaches the legitimate property owned by private citizens, or infringes upon the personal, democratic, and other rights of the citizens, or any other act that endangers society and is punishable according to law, is an offense. However, if the offense is judged to be nonserious by the police, it will not be considered a crime.

In China, then, not all lawbreaking is understood as "crime." For an act to be criminal it must damage the social order, it must be prohibited by the criminal law, it must reach a certain level of seriousness, and it must be punishable by the criminal law. A person who has committed such an act will be prosecuted, tried, and sentenced by the court according to the criminal law. But a general lawbreaking act (*yi ban wei fa*) of lesser seriousness is not considered a criminal act.

An important point to emphasize here is that people who commit a general lawbreaking act (*yi ban wei fa*) are not punished by the courts. However, they may be punished by the police according to the *Regulation of the People's Republic of China for Security Administration Punishment* (Chinese Ministry of Public Security, 1986) and the *Tentative Rules for Reeducation Through Labor* (Lao Jiao) (Chinese Ministry of Public Security, 1982), which are the two major administrative punishment regulations for less serious law violations. Administrative punishment need not be approved by the courts, and it is typically imposed by the police.

The nature of the punishment administered by the police varies considerably depending on the precise basis for the punishment. Punishment based on the *Regulation of the People's Republic of China for Security Administration Punishment* is relatively mild. It encompasses warnings, fines of no more than 200 Chinese dollars (*yuan*), and administrative detention of no more than 15 days. In contrast, punishment based on the *Tentative Rules for Reeducation Through Labor* (Lao Jiao) is more severe. It is decided by the Board for Reeducation

Through Labor and is carried out by the police. In practice, the decision is mostly made by the police. The punishment of Lao Jiao consists of confinement for a period of one to three years in a secure facility called a "station for reeducation through labor"—a labor camp. Although sentence to a station for reeducation through labor (Lao Jiao) results in confinement in a labor camp, it is legally different from a "criminal sentence." A criminal sentence by a court sends the offender to a prison or reformatory (Lao Gai) for confined punishment, whereas sentence to reeducation through labor (Lao Jiao) does not go through the criminal procedures; it is considered an administrative punishment.

In practice, the distinction between a crime and an administrative disposition is much more blurred than it appears in the law. This is related to the considerable discretionary power afforded the police. The perception of the severity of the offense by the police can vary vastly depending on the situational factors involved in the case. Offenses that reach a level of severity consistent with the formal definition of a crime might nevertheless be handled as administrative offenses if this handling is viewed by the police as more appropriate. In this way, criminal procedures can be avoided. This is often considered a better way to correct an offender's behavior. This practice is justified by the Chinese culture's firm belief in rehabilitation. It also leads to lower official crime rates (Bracey, 1996; Yang, 1994).

This distinction between court and police processing is directly relevant to any effort to identify "chronic offenders" in China because it bears upon the very conceptualization of offending. Offending might be conceptualized in broad terms to encompass all lawbreaking acts that place the offender at risk of significant sanctions imposed by the state; according to this approach, persons will be counted as offenders if they have been processed by either the police or the courts. This is an expansive view of offending because it includes lawbreaking that is not "criminal" in the Chinese sense of involving court intervention but is "criminal" in the Anglo-American sense of placing the offender at risk of state-imposed confinement. A more restrictive approach to the conceptualization of offending is to consider only lawbreaking acts that involve sanctions that are criminal in the Chinese sense of being court-imposed. In the absence of any definitive rationale for preferring one approach over the other, both will be considered in the present analysis of chronic offending.

DATA AND METHODS

In collaboration with the Tianjin Academy of Social Sciences, data were obtained from a survey of inmates in the city of Tianjin that was conducted by the academy in the fall of 1991. A systematic sample of 1,063 inmates was selected from all inmates sentenced to prison in 1991 in Tianjin (including both reeducation through labor and reform through labor sentences). The selected

inmates completed a questionnaire with the assistance of a trained member of the research staff. Assisting respondents is a common practice in survey research in China because many respondents have low educational levels and most have little experience with questionnaires. The extent to which this common practice may lead to biased responses is unknown at present.

It was not the primary purpose of the Tianjin study to investigate chronic offenders, and as a result the questions asked in the survey do not provide direct and complete information for the present research. Nevertheless, the questionnaire included a number of items that are useful for investigating the notion of chronic offenders in the Chinese setting. Considering the general difficulties in studying crime in China, these data provide a rare opportunity.

For addressing the question of the existence of a chronic offending group, one item in the Tianjin survey is particularly useful. The item asked for information on the number of times the respondent had been punished by legal authority. The specific question was, "So far, how many times have you been punished (including this time) by legal authority? 1. total ____ times punished by police; 2. total ____ times sentenced by courts." The answers were coded into two variables: times punished by police and times sentenced by courts.

We are thus able to estimate the total number of punishments received by these inmates and the number of punishments of different types, police-administered and court-adjudicated. Note that, in contrast with the work of Wolfgang and his associates, the present study uses punishments rather than arrests to measure offending. Chronic offenders are operationalized in two ways reflecting the different conceptualizations of offending discussed above. First, the total number of court sentences are estimated and those offenders who have received five or more sentences are identified. Second, the total number of punishments of either type are estimated and those with five or more punishments are identified. The extent of the chronic offending can be calculated by taking the number classified as chronic and dividing by the total number of offenders. The "criminal productivity" of this group can be estimated by summing the number of punishments received by chronic offenders and dividing by the total number of punishments received by all respondents.

Our second question concerns the propensity of chronic offenders to commit violent crimes. The most direct way to address this question would be to examine the proportion of violent offenses committed by the chronic offenders. Unfortunately, the survey did not solicit information on the nature of all punishments (i.e., the kinds of crimes that resulted in punishments). Hence it is not possible to estimate the total number of punishments for violent offenses. Two variables can be used to characterize the type of offending. One questionnaire item asked the offenders, "What is the crime you committed this time (the most recent time)?" The item provided 28 different response categories; these can be combined to create a dummy variable for "violent current offense"

(1 = violent; 0 = nonviolent). The questionnaire also asked those who had been punished before by the police and courts, "Have you committed other crimes besides your first offense and this offense (the most recent offense)? If you did, what were the types of offenses and how many times?" Offenses named in response to this item can also be classified as violent or nonviolent. The answers to this question can be combined with those for "violent current offense" to create another dummy variable labeled "any violent offense." To assess whether chronic offenders are characteristically violent, the relationship between offender status (chronic vs. nonchronic) and each of these measures of violent offending was examined.

The final issue concerns the impact of official punishments on offenders. Given the cross-sectional nature of the survey, it was not possible to trace the offending histories of the inmates over time. We can, however, construct a measure of a recidivist profile, i.e., the progression from nonviolent to violent offenses. By combining information about first offense and current offense for recidivists, a dummy variable representing increased violence can be created. Offenders who were first punished for a nonviolent offense but who subsequently committed a violent offense can be classified as "progressively violent." Offenders who were first punished for a nonviolent offense and who did not subsequently commit a violent offense can be classified as "not progressively violent." We can then explore whether chronic offenders are more likely than nonchronic offenders to be progressively violent in their pattern of recidivism.

In the analysis of the relationships between chronic offending status and violent patterns of offending, the following sociodemographic background factors were controlled for: age, personal income, education, gender, and ethnicity. Age was measured in years. Income was measured by a question, "What is your average monthly income (in Chinese yuan), including all sources of income?" Education was measured in terms of five categories: "illiterate," "elementary school graduate," "middle school graduate," "high school graduate," and "college graduate." Four dummy variables were used to represent the different educational categories, with "college graduate" serving as the reference category. Gender was a dummy variable scored in the direction of male. Finally, two ethnic categories were distinguished: "Han" versus "other." Logistic regression was used to estimate multivariate relationships given the dichotomous nature of the dependent variables (Hanushek & Jackson, 1977).

RESULTS

We begin with the analysis of court sentencing. Table 1 reports the distribution of court sentences by the number of sentences received by inmates. Almost two thirds of the respondents (64 percent) did not receive any court sentence but were detained under administrative punishment. Among those who did receive a court

sentence, 219 offenders had received a single sentence, 141 offenders had received 2 sentences (producing a total of 282 sentences), 17 offenders had received 3 sentences (yielding 51 sentences), 1 offender had received 4 sentences, and 1 offender had received 7 sentences. The total number of sentences was 563 given to 379 offenders. According to these data, only one person out of 379 sentenced inmates (0.26 percent) satisfies the restrictive criterion for chronic offending, i.e., five or more court sentences. There is thus no "group" that fits this definition of a chronic offender. Even examining those who had been sentenced three times or more, we find only 19 persons, who constitute 5 percent of the total of sentenced offenders (19 out of 379 persons).

Table 1

Distribution of Court Sentences

Number of sentences	Frequency	Percentage	Total counts
Never sentenced by courts	684	64.3	684
Sentenced by courts			
1 time	219	20.6	219
2 times	141	13.3	282
3 times	17	1.6	51
4 times	1	0.1	4
7 times	1	0.1	7
Total	379	35.7	563
Grand total	1,063	100.0	

Next we consider the more expansive view of offending and examine punishment by any legal authority, including the police as well as the courts. Recall that punishment by the police includes both minor punishment and the Lao Jiao, that is, confinement in a reeducation camp for up to three years. The advantage of using punishment by any legal authority is that it does not exclude sentencing, which is by American standards a serious punishment. The disadvantage is that it also includes many offenses that resulted in minor sanctions such as a small fine by the police.

Table 2 reports the distribution of any legal punishment. The sample of 1,063 offenders received a total of 2,207 legal punishments. There were 80 persons who had committed 5 or more offenses; they constituted 7.5 percent of the total offender population. The total number of punishments received by this group was 585, which was 26.51 percent of the total punishments. Thus, with the use of the expansive criterion of offending, the results are more similar to research on chronic offenders in the U.S., although the relative size of the group and their criminal productivity appear to be less pronounced than that of their American counterparts.

Table 2**Distribution of All Offenses**

Value	Frequency	Percentage	Offense counts
Nonchronic offenders			
1 time	674	63.4	674
2 times	73	6.9	146
3 times	142	13.4	426
4 times	94	8.8	376
Total	983	92.5	1,622
Chronic offenders			
5 times	37	3.5	185
6 times	18	1.7	108
7 times	9	0.8	63
8 times	7	0.7	56
10 times	1	0.1	10
11 times	1	0.1	11
12 times	1	0.1	12
13 times	1	0.1	13
21 times	3	0.3	63
31 times	1	0.1	31
33 times	1	0.1	33
Total	80	7.5	585
Grand total	1,063	100.0	2,207
Grand percentage for chronic offenders (total/grand total)	7.5%		26.51%

Are members of the chronic offending group, defined in terms of any legal punishment, characteristically violent? Table 3 reports logistic regression results examining the effect of chronic status on the probability of committing violent offenses. In Table 3, model 1 uses the dummy variable "violent current offense" as the dependent variable and model 2 uses the dummy variable "any violent offense" as the dependent variable.

Table 3 shows a significant relationship between chronic offending status and commission of a violent current offense. The logistic regression coefficient for chronic offender status is 0.648; $\exp(B) = 1.91$. These results indicate that the odds of committing a current violent offense are about two times as great for chronic offenders as for other offenders. The results in Table 3, model 2, reveal an even stronger effect of chronic offending status on the measure of any violent offense. The coefficient for chronic status is 1.865; $\exp(B) = 6.46$. The odds of having committed any violent offense are more than six times as great for chronic offenders as for other offenders. Once again, the effect is statistically significant.

Table 3

Logistic Regression Analyses

Variables	Current violent offense Model 1		Other violent offense Model 2		Progressive violence Model 3	
	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)	B	Exp(B)
Chronic status	0.648*	1.912	1.865*	6.455	0.852*	2.345
Control variables						
Age	-0.038*	0.963	0.015	1.015	-0.144*	.866
Personal income	-0.000	1.000	0.000	1.000	0.000	1.000
Education						
Illiterate	1.101	3.006	5.290	198.248	3.138	23.050
Elementary school	1.305	3.687	4.694	109.235	4.387	80.423
Middle school	1.021	2.775	5.422	226.362	3.937	51.244
High school	0.542	1.719	4.615	101.032	3.728	41.603
Gender	0.545	1.724	5.129	168.766	3.934	51.116
Race	-0.822*	0.440	-0.772	0.462	-0.756	0.470
Constant	-0.948		-13.204		-5.502	
Model chi-square	36.84*		35.63**		34.39**	
df	9		9		9	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .0001$.

The only significant effects on violent offending for control variables were for age and race. Young inmates and minorities were significantly more likely to report a violent current offense. The odds of violent offending were much higher for males than for females, but gender effects were not significant. This probably reflects the highly restricted variation in the gender composition of the sample. Approximately 2 percent of the respondents (22 out of 1,063) were female.

Our final concern is with the recidivist patterns for the different types of offenders. In Table 3, model 3, are reported the results of the logistic regression examining whether the chronic offenders were more likely than other recidivists to be progressively violent. The results indicate that this is indeed the case. With the demographic variables controlled for, chronic offender status increased the odds of being progressively violent by a factor of 2.3. The effect of chronic offender status is statistically significant. Age was also a significant predictor, with younger offenders being more likely to have progressed to violence.

CONCLUSION

The importance of investigating the applicability of Western concepts and theories to other cultures is not difficult to recognize. A central purpose of comparative research is to examine the scope of our understanding of human

behavior and to extend it to different settings. It seems natural and logical for Western criminologists to try to apply established Western theories and concepts directly to different cultures and to test for their applicability. However, we should expect difficulties because of the differences between societies and cultures, especially when the comparison is between Western and non-Western cultures where the contrasts are profound.

Since it was first proposed by Marvin Wolfgang and his associates, the concept of the chronic offender has had a major influence on criminological research and criminal justice policy in the United States. Is this concept applicable to China? Does a chronic offender group with characteristics similar to those of their Western counterparts exist in China? Answers to these questions are critical not only for research on chronic offenders in China but also for research that attempts to extend Western criminological theory and concepts to the Chinese setting. They are also critical for understanding the extent to which we can adopt some successful criminal justice policies and programs from other societies. If there were no chronic offender group, many of our theories and much research would not be relevant to the Chinese setting. There would be fundamental differences between Western and Chinese criminology and fundamental differences between Chinese and Western justice policy.

We have found that when a narrow definition of a criminal offense is adopted (judicial conviction) there is no Chinese "group" that fits the standard definition of chronic offender. Only when the concept of offending is conceptualized in broader terms to encompass any significant sanctions imposed by the state can a chronic offender group in China be discerned. This finding indicates that an understanding of the Chinese criminal justice system is important for the examination of crime and delinquency in China. We must modify our chronic offender definition to fit the Chinese setting.

This finding is less surprising when it is understood in the context of the vast differences in culture and in criminal justice systems between the West and China. The Chinese idea of social control and the general attitudes toward offenders have deep roots in China's traditional culture, the most well known of which are the philosophical thoughts of Confucius (Dutton, 1992; Troyer & Rojek, 1989; Zhang et al., 1996). Confucius and his followers were highly skeptical about formal law. They believed that all human beings are born with an equal potential for moral growth, that all thoughts and behaviors are changeable in response to proper education, and that all offenders can therefore potentially be rehabilitated through reeducation and reform (Jolley, 1994; Zhang et al., 1996). These ideas have been assimilated by contemporary Chinese communists. The leader Mao never believed in formal law. The informal model of social control was the dominant form of social control in Mao's era (Leng & Chiu, 1985). After Mao died, Deng started a new era of reform and China began to emphasize and rebuild its legal system in response to the needs of economic development, but informal

mechanisms continued to provide the foundations for crime control (Leng & Chiu, 1985; Troyer, 1989).

The Chinese criminal justice system is built around the idea of educating, reforming, and rehabilitating offenders. The informal emphasis can be seen in every aspect of the system. The formal, adversarial nature of the Western system is avoided as much as possible. For example, confession is encouraged and is significantly rewarded, there is no presumption of innocence or right to remain silent, and lawyers play a very minimal role (Jolley, 1994; Troyer, 1989). The emphasis is to avoid a formal criminal process, to encourage the handling of offenses and offenders informally, and to use administrative measures rather than send offenders to court. Police are afforded great discretionary power in this regard. All of these procedures are intended to facilitate reeducating and reforming offenders. These features of the system help explain why there are no "chronic offenders" to be found when only court-processed criminal offenses are considered. The presence of a chronic group appears only when administrative punishments are included in the examination.

We have further examined the characteristics of chronic offenders in China (using an expansive definition) to answer two other important questions. Are chronic offenders characteristically violent? Are chronic offenders more likely than other recidivists to be progressively violent? The results from logistic regression analyses indicate that chronic offenders show significant differences in their likelihood of being violent and of being progressively violent. These findings show that chronic offenders in China share some characteristics with their Western counterparts.

This research carries important implications for the study of crime and delinquency in China. The results indicate that criminological research must be highly sensitive to the larger Chinese society. The most salient features of crime in China are the extremely low official crime and recidivism rates in comparison to those of the United States. This fact must be the starting point for any fruitful theoretical thinking and research on China. On the practical side, because of the lower crime rates, we should expect that a large-scale general population survey may end up with very few cases of criminal offenders, fewer repeat offenders, and even fewer chronic offenders. Both "yi ban wei fa" (i.e., general lawbreaking acts, which are punishable by police and administrative measures) and criminal offense data should be collected for a complete picture.

With respect to theory, we must familiarize ourselves with the features of the Chinese legal system and its processes. Not only do we need to collect data on the concepts conventionally used in Western literature but we should also collect relevant data that reflect the Chinese society. Western concepts may need to be modified, if not rejected. Ultimately, we need to interpret the facts about crime within a Chinese theoretical framework based on the Chinese understanding of law and social control.

We close with an acknowledgment that our findings must be interpreted cautiously. China is a large country with more than 80 percent of the population living in rural areas. As is true in other countries, crime rates in China are much lower in rural areas than in cities. Although this may lead us to reason that we have even less chance to find chronic offenders based on criminal court punishment in rural communities, the present data cannot offer any direct proof of this claim because the data are from an urban center. Further investigation in rural areas is needed in order to provide us with better knowledge on chronic offenders in China.

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