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Women's Motivations for Becoming a Police Officer: A Chinese Case Study on Women in Policing

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a qualitative study that examines the reasons why women want to be a police officer in the mainland of the People's Republic of China. It aims to explore females' entry into the police organization, policewomen's occupational roles and positions, the perceived nature of policing and, to a lesser extent, local police culture. The article argues that China does not need a creative strategy to attract females to join the police. Instead, if structural changes are not possible for now, it needs to change mindset, to scrap the quota that restricts women's entry and allow female officers more choices and to be more actively engaged in mainstream policing if they so wish. Through the case study, the article accentuates variations in different social environments in comparative criminal justice studies and gender policing in particular. It thus also promotes Southern criminology and Southern Theory for contributions to knowledge production.



KEYWORDS

China; career aspirations; gender; policing; women

INTRODUCTION

A range of factors influences individuals' career aspirations, including gender, socio-economic status, educational level, parents' occupations, parental expectation (Domenico & Jones, 2007), as well as the commonly perceived nature of a profession, career seekers' personal attributes, goals and other motivators. Among these influences, gender is powerful (Osipow & Fitzgerald, 1996). In policing—an archetype of the traditionally male-dominated institutions—women are still underrepresented across the globe (Raba-Hemp & Garcia, 2020), and it is observed that recruiting female officers is a challenge facing police organizations (see, e.g., Aiello, 2020; Chu, 2018; Cordner & Cordner, 2011; Kim & Merlo, 2010; Rossler et al., 2020; Sebire, 2020). In mainland China, women take around 14.3% of the overall police population (*Xinhua News*, 2021) where, according to Western media commentators, opportunities for females seeking to “crack male professions,” such as the police, are constrained (*The New York Times*, 2021a). However, limited research focuses on women in Chinese policing, let alone inquiry into their motivations for becoming a police officer.

Elsewhere, in ample research, men and women may have similar reasons for entering law enforcement, which may be altruistic (e.g., desire to help others), practical and financial (e.g., pay and benefits, job security, availability of alternative career option), perceptive or imaginary nature of policing (e.g., crimefighting, adventure, excitement, fulfillment), esprit de corps (e.g., pride,

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occupational prestige, feeling good about the job) and influences of others (e.g., family and friends) (see, e.g., Ermer, 1978; Foley et al., 2008; Lester, 1983; Kim & Merlo, 2010; Moon & Hwang, 2004; Raganella & White, 2004; Tarng et al., 2001; White et al., 2010). For female officers, particularly influential factors include “opportunity to help others,” “pay and benefits” and “job security” (Raganella & White, 2004; Todak, 2017); they may place more emphasis on service aspects of police work (Lester, 1983); and a lack of other job alternatives has also been identified as a strong reason for women joining the police (Foley et al., 2008).

In Asian contexts, women in India may enter law enforcement mainly for financial security (Sahgal, 2007), whilst in Dubai, “helping others” and “excitement at work” were cited as two major factors for women seeking jobs in policing (Chu, 2018). In South Korea, female police cadets tended to be influenced by parents and the perceived nature of policing (Moon & Hwang, 2004) when considering choosing a police career, while policewomen noted intrinsic quality of the job—helping others, adventure and excitement—along with “good image of the job” as their top reasons (Kim & Merlo, 2010). A good collection of seminal publications has diligently provided critical literature review, such as Chu (2018), Gibbs (2019), Moon and Hwang (2004) and White et al. (2010), to name only a few. Thus, there is little reason here to repeat the important endeavor. In the global context, Elntib and Milincic (2021) recently argued that factors motivating women, and men, to become police officers are dynamic and diverse although the pertinent knowledge from China is constrained. Research is obviously needed to obtain empirical data to fill the void.

This article aims to examine the reasons why women want to be a police officer in the mainland of the People’s Republic of China (the PRC), to explore females’ entry into the police organization, policewomen’s occupational roles and positions, the perceived nature of policing and, to a lesser extent, local police culture. The article has five sections. Following the brief introduction, it offers an overview of Chinese women police, which sets the scene and provides the contextual background to help a better understanding of the empirical data. It then explains the methodology, including the limitations of the research. The next section presents the major findings, focusing on the socio-demographic and professional profiles of the female participants, the women’s routes into policing, and their accounts of why they chose a police career. The final section concludes the article which is hoped to further extend an international understanding of women in policing in general and women’s motivations for entering police work in particular.

The article argues that China does not need a creative strategy to attract females to join the police. Instead, if structural changes are not possible for now, it needs to change mindset, to scrap the quota that restricts women’s entry and allow female officers more choices and to be more actively engaged in mainstream policing if they so wish. Through the case study, the article accentuates variations in different social environments in comparative criminal justice studies and gender policing in particular. It thus also supports Southern criminology (Carrington et al., 2016) and Southern Theory (Connell, 2007) en bloc for contributions in knowledge production.

WOMEN IN THE CHINESE POLICE

Mainly for the policing need, women were first invited to join the police as policewomen (nü-jing) in the beginning of the 1930s in the Republic of China (Shen, 2020). As their counterparts in many other countries across the world (see, e.g., Brown & Heidensohn, 2000; Hautzinger, 2020; Strobl, 2020), female police were deployed to perform duties in relation to women and children, to provide support to policemen and to do office work. In the PRC, women are part of the People’s Police from the outset and usually recruited along with men although, more than 70 years since the founding of the People’s Republic, they are still a small minority in the once male-only organization. As of March 8, 2021, there were over 280,000 female police officers, among the country’s “two-million-strong police force” (*Xinhua News*, 2021).

Article 6 of the *People's Police Law* 1995 (thereafter, the *Police Law*) gives the public security police a wide range of duties comprising, inter alia, to prevent, detect and investigate crime, maintain public order and obstruct anti-social behavior. Within the police, women are typically assigned “feminine roles,” including low-end office jobs as administrators, secretaries and police “service window” (counter) officers, other indoor non-enforcement tasks, and supplementary activities in operational policing (Chen, 2016; Ling & Liu, 2002). That being said, there are a smattering of women who are active players or even take the lead in mainstream policing, making it appear that women are involved in all areas of police work, and men and women are equal partners (see Beijing Women Police Association, 2009; Huang, 2013; Ling & Liu, 2002). The fact is that, overall, crimefighting, law enforcement and public order maintenance are deemed to be men's fields of work (Shen, 2022).

It is not as if China does not have the constitution and laws that guarantee gender equality. Undeniably, with profound social changes, especially shifts in the reform era commencing the late 1970s, Chinese women today have more freedom, space and opportunities to break glass ceilings in many traditionally male-only professions and fields, including the police, military and the space programmes (see, e.g., *The New York Times* 2021b). However, in China, traditional gender norms, endorsed by the Party-state, have survived virtually all changes (Bailey, 2012; Wu, 2010). Relatedly, there is a considerable lack of gender consciousness in society, and even among female professionals (Shen, 2017). In this social setting, for Chen (2016), a major obstacle to female membership in the masculine world of policing is the lack of “appropriate” positions for women. Accordingly, females' underrepresentation and narrow scope of roles in police work are rarely considered gender discrimination against women to be questioned.

As women perform limited roles in mainstream policing, appearing to be insignificant players in the police profession, little academic attention has been paid to female police. Zheng Chen (2016), who quantitatively examined police subculture in China, touched upon gender and reported that being given mainly indoor assignments female officers' work orientations tend to be alike. Likewise, Chinese language literature indicated that policewomen, who are hardly deployed to perform outdoor operational duties, often accept commonly perceived gender differences, believe that women are physically, mentally and emotionally weaker and less durable than men and innately incapable of undertaking operational policing tasks. It was also contended that as family roles are undeniably career barriers for females, policewomen generally prefer office work and tend not to have clear goals for career advancement (Ling & Liu, 2002; Zhang et al., 2017). One explanation for this is that the current policy does not permit part-time work, nor flexible working hours, in the public sector, whilst 9–5 office jobs allow female professionals to better juggle work and family (Shen, 2017).

Furthermore, more recent research revealed that within the police, female officers—as a minority gender group in the male-dominated institution—tend to receive differential, compassionate treatment and enjoy certain female-only “privileges” (Shen, 2022). Women are not usually assigned to go patrol, respond to emergency calls, work on shifts or frequently work overtime; accepting male chivalry, nor are they very keen to do “men's jobs.” Nonetheless, the gendered practice is not without costs for policewomen who, consequently, are constrained promotional opportunities (Zhang et al., 2017).

In mainland China, police officers—men and women—are recruited from three major channels. Police recruits include predominately local police academy graduates who typically have had an undergraduate degree in policing, former military officers, and candidates who have succeeded the civil servant recruitment processes organized by the police. As part of the police reforms, the Ministry of Public Security has been “making every effort to recruit and retain university graduates as officers” (Wong, 2012, p. 108). As a result, educational status of frontline officers has been increasingly strengthened, with the majority of police officers holding at least a college degree (Chen, 2016). The *New York Times* (2021a) recently reported that in a prestigious police

academy, the lowest-scoring woman to get in did 40 points better than the lowest-scoring male applicant who was admitted (see also Womany, 2020). In the police academies, female probationers tend to perform better academically than their male counterparts (Shen, 2022). Clearly, the social landscape and gender practice of Chinese policing differ considerably from those in the Northern (Anglo-American) as well as some other Southern countries (see Reba-Hemp & Garcia 2020). Our readers may wonder who policewomen are in China and why females choose to become a police officer. The current study seeks answers to these questions.

METHODOLOGY

The empirical data of this study was part of a larger research project focusing on women police in mainland China (Shen, 2022), which adopted the mixed strategies to garner information, with qualitative interviewing as a primary method for original data collection. Ethical approval was obtained in Britain. As police are a recognizably hard-to-reach population for outsider researchers (see, e.g., Jardine, 2020; Young, 1991), gaining access to police officers in China was an incredibly painstaking process. Nevertheless, following lengthy negotiation with a number of key gatekeepers, through mainly my personal and semiprofessional networks as an outsider-insider researcher, who previously worked as a Chinese police officer and has, over the years, maintained connections with the legal and criminal justice communities in the country.

Even though I finally had access to the research sites, my reach to police officers was constrained. As a result, only convenience sampling was possible. The fieldwork was undertaken over the summer in 2019 in three provincial force areas, where I conducted 71 interviews with 51 police officers and 20 student probationers, including 28 policewomen and ten female police academy students, and two focus groups. The present study is based mainly on face-to-face interviews with 38 female participants: a sample of policewomen and policewomen-to-be. Police probationers were invited to this study because, generally, their contact with the occupational environment occurs at the police academy (Van Maanen, 1975) and, in China, police college students are virtually all allocated jobs upon completion of their courses. The reasons why female student probationers choose to enter the policing world should overlap largely with those of female officers.

Considering the aim of the study, qualitative methods were thought to be most appropriate for data collection and analysis, as qualitative research focuses on subjective meaning, reflections on individual experiences and exploratory insights into women's life stories (Hesse-Biber, 2007). In this study, qualitative interviewing was feasible. I conducted the interviews at a variety of venues, including an office in a policing environment that I was offered to use for a short period during the fieldwork, participants' own offices, the police units' meeting rooms, tea houses, cafés and outdoor convenient places. The interviews lasted between around 25 min to nearly three hours. On several occasions, the pre-planned, semi-structured interviewing went deeper with the woman officer and turned into a lengthy, in-depth interview.

The use of recording devices was not permissible. I therefore took down the interviews in shorthand in Chinese and word-processed the notes and simultaneously translated them into English on the same day of interviewing or at an earliest opportunity thereafter. This was to ensure that I was able to fill the gaps in the interview notes with fresh memory and also start to mark and annotate those repeated points. No data analysis software was used because in this study, manual coding was sufficient to enable the factors, influences and major themes relevant to the research questions to emerge; more importantly, it allowed participants' accounts to be presented as correctly, accurately and fully as possible. Throughout the research, I ensured and reassured participants my obligation of confidentiality. Measures were taken to guarantee anonymity to protect the identity of those who have facilitated this research and of the participants.

For this reason, I am unable to describe the research process in greater detail, and all names of participants and places in this article are pseudonyms.

As is the case with any research, this study has several limitations. First, China is a vast country known for enormous regional variations, it is impossible to generalize motivations of all females for becoming police officers in China. Findings presented in this article were drawn from 38 women and were about *their* experiences. Notably, the sample size should not be an issue here because this study was not intended to quantitatively investigate any trends, patterns or correlations in female policing. Rather, it sought to explore policewomen's inner world, especially their self-reflections on why they chose or were preparing to enter law enforcement. The participants in this study were *ordinary* females in the police world and with whom other women in policing should share similar perspectives. As they and their force areas are not atypical in any respect, there is no reason to doubt that the findings have wider value and applicability.

The second limitation is related to interviewing which is an interactive process and may involve "the presentation of self" (Goffman, 1959). In policing research focusing on gender, Rabe-Hemp (2009) warned us that female participants may "perform female officer" to confirm expectations associated with prescribed female police behavior. In China, police officers tend not to express views that go against public policy or challenge widely accepted social norms (Shen, 2020). Thus, the participants might have provided answers considered "mainstream" or in line with the rhetoric of the Party-state. This danger may be minimized for a researcher who was once one of the researched and could somehow read participants' "unmeant gestures" and uncover some of the factual nature of their situations (Goffman, 1959). In addition, questions about police officers' career inspirations and reasons for making employment choices—thoughts and ideas antedating their entry into policing—were unlikely to put the participants on their guard to feel necessary to "perform." All in all, the evidence gathered here can be tested in future larger scale studies using multiple research methods with even more representative samples. In the sections that follow, I report and discuss the major empirical findings.

PROFILES OF FEMALE PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR ENTRIES INTO POLICING

In the interviews, participants who were female officers were asked to provide their basic personal demographic and professional information which Table 1 exhibits. The ten female student probationers were of 21 or 22 years of age, unmarried, in Year 3 or 4 at a police college, all of whom had completed their work placements, at either the police stations or headquarters (police bureaus and sub-bureaus). They were anticipated to receive a degree on completion of their undergraduate studies and work as police officers in their local forces.

Ethnicity does not appear in Table 1, as in this sample all participants were *han* Chinese. This is not surprising, given that in China, more than 91% of the population are *han* (Chinese Government, 2021) and that none of the sample areas fall inside the ethnic minority populated regions. Except one, the female officers were under the age of 50, of whom the majority were in their thirties and forties. Considering the police recruitment practice, policewomen's overall status and mandatory retirement age (55 for ordinary female cadres), the female officers' age range here does not show irregularity.

As to civil status, all female participants reported to be heterosexual. Among 28 female officers, 22 were married of whom only one was not a mother at the time of the interview. Five women were single, of whom two were in stable intimate relationships, three were still looking to find a boyfriend, and all were looking to get married at some point. One woman was a single mother who divorced a policeman several years ago. The findings suggest that Chinese female police officers, as women in China at large, are expected to be married at an appropriate age and have children soon after marriage (To, 2015) and that as other professional women such as female judges

Table 1. Profiles of female officer participants ($n = 28$).

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Age		
20–29	4	14
30–39	15	54
40–49	8	29
50–55	1	3
Civil status		
Single	5	18
Married	22	79
0 child	[1]	–
1 child	[18]	–
2 children	[3]	–
Divorce	1	3
1 child	[1]	–
Education		
Police college	13	46
3 years	[3]	–
4 years	[10]	–
BA/LLB	4	14
MSc/LLM	3 ^a	11
PhD	8 ^b	29
Years of service		
1–5	10	36
6–10	6	21
11–20	7	25
21–30	4	14
30+	1	4
Police ranking ^c		
Jing-si		
3	3	12
2	6	21
1	2	7
Jing-du		
3	6	21
2	7	25
1	4	14

Notes: ^aOne officer in this sample studied an LLM in a police academy. ^bTwo officers in this sample completed their doctorates in the police academies. ^cPolice ranking from low to high.

(Shen, 2017), policewomen seem to conform to the traditional gender norms, gender role and gender expectations.

In Table 1, international readers may find female officers' the level of education astonishingly high: apart from three women who received only a three-year higher education at the police college, the others are all degree-holders, of whom three have a master's degree and eight hold a PhD. Two major reasons explain this. Generally, as aforementioned, Chinese police officers today are increasingly well educated, and it is not unusual to find policewomen with elite education because, as we shall see, females are subject to a small quota to get into the male-dominated organization. Especially, in this sample, six of the eight highly educated women were police academics, while the other two obtained their doctoral degrees from the police academies and were subsequently offered jobs in a large municipal police bureau, to enter which, for female candidates, an elite education was desirable.

As to females' entry into policing, the interviews suggest that the majority of the policewomen here were police academy graduates. Along with the 16 graduate entrants, one participant was a former army officer, and 11 women joined the police through the social recruitment process. Prior to the *Civil Servant Law* 2005, the entry requirements for public servants were rather rudimentary. Individuals then from all walks of life could become cadres of government offices—the courts, the procuratorates and the police—via “social recruitment” (Shen, 2017). Today, this route to public services has been legislated, and external candidates who want to become police officers must first pass the civil servant entry examination and also satisfy the specific criteria for the

Table 2. Influences of female participants who entered the policing world ($n = 38$).

Influences or motivations	Number of participants	Percentage (%)
Family (parental) influences	9	24
Materialistic considerations (job security, good pay, other employment related benefits, and regular and stable work pattern for women)	8	21
Lack of a better option/job availability	6	16
Childhood dreams/aspirations	4	10.5
Social capital motives (professional prestige, authority, power, status and respect that the public security police carry)	4	10.5
Influences of the police (college) recruitment events at school	2	5
Altruistic motives (helping others and making a contribution to society)	1	2.5
Missing information	4	10.5

police. In this sample, eight younger women joined the police through the revised social recruitment procedure.

Turning to policewomen's professional profile, the participants' service lengths ranged from under five years to over 30 years, and a half of them had been a police officer for ten years or longer. In Table 1, the women's policing ranks spread fairly evenly up to upper-middle levels which, overall, are not low compared with those of policemen (see Shen, 2022). The interview data gives details of participants' roles and positions in the police and shows that in this sample (which was not designed to be representative), unexpectedly, there was a good mix of female officers, team leaders and managers at the police stations, headquarters and police academies. Strikingly, though, in grassroots policing, nine female officers were *nei-qin* (literally, internal operators)—a job title typically connoted low-end office duties—including one officer assigned to community policing. Among ten women who were not grassroots officers, a half were *nei-qin* and the other half were in supervisory or managerial roles. Of nine women working in the police colleges, six were ordinary academic officers, one deputy departmental head, one subject group leader and one *nei-qin* who was a secretary to a (male) departmental leader.

In addition, the interviews indicate that females were not usually involved in mainstream policing, nor were they typically in leadership positions although they were not “junior officers” by the look of their police ranks. This reflects the fact that in China police ranking (up to the top level of *jing-du*) is not always meritorious as such and may be determined by a combination of factors, including educational qualification, police tenure and the level of officers' work units in the police organizational structure.

CAREER ASPIRATIONS AND MOTIVATIONS FOR BECOMING A POLICE OFFICER

Table 2 provides the empirical findings on reasons why women consider joining the police profession. It shows that nearly a quarter of the female participants entered the policing world mainly because of family influences. This top factor is followed by materialistic considerations, such as job security, salary and benefits, and a lack of alternative employment options.

Family (Parental) Influences

Nine participants, who were younger women officers and student probationers, reported that they were encouraged or even persuaded by their families to study in the police academies before leaving school, knowing that if they were enrolled at the police college, they would be working as a

police officer in the local force after graduation. The interviews reveal that female participants commonly had a parent or parents who had worked or were still working in the police or the military. This lends support to past research: in a US study, family influence was cited as an important factor for females to choose a police career (Ermer, 1978); in Taiwan, a context sharing the same cultural roots with mainland China, young people, especially females, tended to be influenced to choose a police career by their parents who often take into account external aspects of the employment, such as job security and social status (Tarng et al., 2001). The current study has similar findings, and the interviews further suggest that family influence was exerted in particular where a parent or parents had insider knowledge of the police, including gender practice in the male-dominated institution, as female probationer D-F-3 illustrated:

[M]y parents are police officers who wanted me to join the police. They were right. Now, every time when hearing my school friends studying at other universities are striving to enter the civil servant system ... I feel I am so lucky. We [police probationers] do not have that kind of worries.

D-F-3 was echoed by other participants, including S-F-1, a 26-year-old female officer in grass-roots policing, whose parents considered “policing jobs” “ideal” for women:

My father [an official in the local police] suggested that “... policing jobs are secure, stable, high-salaried, and women are looked after there ... [they are] ideal for girls.” ... I have never wanted to be a heroine ... I anticipated to be a *nei-qin* ... I am now a *nei-qin*. The role suits me ... I am very happy as I am.

In this narrative, the male police official’s advice was offered from a parent’s perspective to the daughter—the only child of the family, according to the participant—which, fathomably, focused merely on financial, materialistic and practical benefits of policing jobs for women. What is interesting is that in relation to gender, the male insider’s view alluded the reality of women police who, as aforementioned, generally receive differential, compassionate treatment and male protection at work. Gender practice in Chinese policing seems to differ from the “usual” image of policing, a point to which I will return.

Further to parental influences on young women who choose to be police officers, several points are worth noting. First, generally, parents play an important role in young people’s career choices in China (De Kloet & Fung, 2017). Internationally, younger officers are more likely to be influenced by family (Elntib & Milincic, 2021). Second, Chinese culture, shaped by Confucianism, emphasizes filial piety, under which children must obey their parents in many aspects in life including career choice (Tarng et al., 2001). Third, parents who have insights into the police profession seem to be particularly influential on young women, which allow them to make informed decisions; inevitably, the parents’ perceptions of the institution can shape their daughters’ expectations of women’s professional lives in policing. Expectations and motive fulfillment are associated with subsequent job satisfaction (Chu, 2018; White et al., 2010), as S-F-1 above illustrated. Relatedly, the empirical data signals a positive association between the extrinsic aspects of jobs (materialistic considerations e.g., pay, job security, and status) and police employment.

Materialistic Considerations

In international literature, materialistic considerations may motivate individuals to enter the police; across cultures, pay and job security seem to be important reasons for individuals—particularly influential motivators for females (Bridges, 1989)—to enter police work (see, e.g., Charles, 1982; Chu, 2018; Ermer, 1978; Foley et al., 2008; Lester, 1983; Moon & Hwang, 2004). This is confirmed in Table 2 in the current study.

In mainland China, civil servants form a large part of the middle-class population who typically own private housing, a family car(s), other consumer goods, as well as social recognition (Goodman, 2014). Generally, public servants are guaranteed job security and privileged pension schemes (Leung & Xu, 2015). In particular, the police organization, being a most powerful

government agency (Bakken, 2005), provides the kind of job security with which no other public sector organizations can compete (see Wu et al., 2009). In addition, police officers enjoy more generous remuneration, compared with civilian public servants (Deng, 2019). Overall, police employment does attract job seekers in China.

With regard to gender, within the police despite their different roles, male and female officers at the same salary band which is based on a combination of factors (including qualification, years of service, rank or seniority) receive the same pay (Shen, 2020). S-F-1, a police station *nei-qin* in a cosmopolitan city, explained that unlike policemen, policewomen were not closely monitored for their performance and thus did not usually work under pressure, but “our salary does not reflect our assignments ... I am paid over RMB 200,000 (approx. USD 31,400) annually. This is really good, compared with civil servants in any other profession.”

What may sound bizarre for readers who have limited knowledge of gender practice in Chinese policing is that “regular work pattern” was considered, by more than a quarter of the female participants, as a motivating factor and part of materialistic considerations for joining the police. Regular or stable work pattern does not fit with the stereotypical perception of policing, which is that police must work round the clock, frontline officers are subject to “odd” work routine, and police work comprises dynamic activities, hard-charging physical struggles and danger (e.g., Crank, 1990; Perez, 2011).

The finding here does, in fact, make sense, given that the “usual” images of police and police work are often based on assumptions that are not entirely true (Dick et al., 2013). In China, as explained earlier, operational police work—law enforcement, order maintenance and crimefighting—are largely, if not utterly, left with policemen who are *de facto* the kingpin of the People’s Police, men and women do not work shoulder-to-shoulder as mutual partners, and policewomen are essentially office workers in police uniform, although they may be called upon, when needed, to assist male officers (Shen, 2022). As “regular work pattern” is considered along with other extrinsic aspects of police employment in career decision-making, female police officers are unlikely to experience “reality shock” as newcomers in policing (cf. Van Maanen, 1975).

Job Availability

For six participants who were women in their late-twenties, early-thirties or slightly older, with a doctorate, when making career choice, a major determining factor was job availability. According to The Conversation (2017), around eight million students graduated from Chinese universities in 2017, which was more than double the number of their US counterparts who graduated the same year. More recent figures were similar: in 2019, China had around 7.6 million university graduates, among who around 3.95 million earned a bachelor’s degree and around 640,000 received postgraduate degrees (Statista, 2021). As the situation in Taiwan (Chu, 2018), the number of university graduates far exceeds the number of jobs, and thus degree holders often face fierce competitions when seeking employment (The Conversation, 2017). Accordingly, the police organization is an incomparable employer in the job markets. While female membership to this male-dominated club is finite, there is a thin gap for women with elite education or expertise to get in. The first part of the argument may be illustrated by D-F-7, a female student probationer:

My parents suggested that I should work hard to get into the police academy. It was uneasy. Our [local police] college’s qualifying score for girls is usually ten to 20 points higher than that for Tier 1 universities, and the difference can be as high as 50 to 60 points in some other places. By contrast, male students’ qualifying score could be ten to 20 points lower than that for Tier 2 universities. In my year, the success rate for females was six in every 100 [applicants].

This account is telling, but not surprising, and is consistent with the source materials presented earlier. For the second half of the claim, one support is that in November 2021, Jiangsu Police Institute (2021) were recruiting 21 officers. It required applicants for all of the poses

(including four roles in filing management, general clerical work, campus culture management and internal auditing, respectively) to have a postgraduate degree. Eligible candidates for 17 teaching positions, except the Physical Education post, must hold a doctoral degree. In October of the same year, Chengdu Public Security Bureau (2021) enlisted 74 officers for the municipal force area. On the recruitment website, only ten posts did not require applicants holding a university degree who, nonetheless, must be former soldiers of special military forces; and undergraduate degree holders could only apply for eight of the other 64 positions. It is worked out that more than three quarters of the new recruits have had at least a master's degree; strikingly, women were explicitly barred from applying for around 64% of the posts.

More generally, gender inequality is like “a dark cloud” hanging over the employment markets in China, where the majority of women in urban areas often take lower-paid jobs in lower-paid sectors of the economy (Jiang, 2004). Concurrently, there has been an increase in the “gender penalty” which refers to the “difference between men and women's income where they have the same experience and seniority, identical educational qualifications and hold the same position working in the same industry” (Goodman, 2014, p. 51). In the police organisation, however, as the gender equal pay policy has been implemented for some time in the public sector, on the surface there is no such a thing as gender pay gap. This was agreed by the participants. In this context, the highly educated female professionals here frequently aired their feeling of lacking career alternatives.

Childhood Aspirations and the Social Capital Motive

In Table 1, the top three reasons for females choosing a police career are followed by “childhood dreams or aspirations,” in line with the perception that the public security police carry prestige, authority, power, social status and homage. Previous research has long identified “childhood aspiration” as a reason for joining police work (e.g., Harris, 1973), “policing as a childhood dream” was one of the top reasons among females with a criminal justice degree (Gibbs, 2019), and young woman's early career aspirations are often shaped by their parents (Burlin, 1976). Similarly, here, U-F-2 who was brought up in a military family reflected that “I had dreamed to be an army or police officer since I was a little girl ... I always love the uniformed jobs.” It appears that women's childhood aspirations for becoming a police officer are associated with the occupational prestige of the police. Typically, police are portrayed as heroes (Perez, 2011); in China, police overall have a positive image (Jiao, 1995).

International research suggests that power, authority and professional prestige may come with policing (Elntib & Milincic, 2021). In New York, the US city, for example, policing was generally viewed as an honorable, respected and “widely sought-after profession” (Raganella & White, 2004). Earlier research found that women, as men, might prioritize social and spiritual capital motives—pride, fulfillment, personal challenge and opportunities for advancement—when making career decisions (see Bridges, 1989); more recently, US women were uniquely motivated to become police officers because of challenges in policing (Todak, 2017). In Korea, a different social context, intrinsic quality of police work (adventure and excitement) and positive image of the job were also commonly cited reasons for women entering law enforcement (Kim & Merlo, 2010; Moon & Hwang, 2004).

In the current study, “positive image” surfaced as an influential factor for women joining the policing world, which they might have acquired from their parents as well as official (and media) presentation of policing. However, the good image of police work seems to be gender-blurry and does not relate to what policewomen actually do. As pointed out earlier, the police organization is a most powerful government agency, and the public security police are given considerable discretion to perform a wide range of functions. In today's socio-political climate in China, police legitimacy or malpractice is hardly challenged (cf. Todak, 2017). The People's Police have

generally sustained a positive image, as N-F-1, a police station *nei-qin*, remarked, “being a police officer, you receive admiration and respect from your relatives, friends, neighbours . . .” This was echoed by the vast majority of the female participants who expressed their strong feelings in the police uniform which, they said, gives them “a sense of pride.” This positive feeling was dubbed the “police uniform sentiment,” despite that policewomen who, like policemen, are required to work in uniform do not usually conduct police work as policemen.

Influences of the Police Recruitment Events

In relation to police uniform, good image of the job is sometimes projected at the police promotional events and influences the recipients. D-F-1 was “amazed” by the alumni who were sent to her school to promote the local police college, “[they were] looking so great in police uniform . . . and looked very different from other young people, with very short hair, straight backs and cool mannerism . . .” To use media as part of the police recruitment strategy is not uncommon (see, e.g., Aiello, 2020), and in international literature individuals are influenced by media and friends to enter policing careers (Elntib & Milincic, 2021). Notably, for the Chinese police organization that is not stuck on a plateau facing obstacles to recruit female officers (cf. Corder & Corder, 2011; Gibbs, 2019), promoting the police college merely aims to attract suitable local male candidates and to train them to become officers in local forces. Drawing attention of female candidates may well be a side-product of the police promotional strategy, and some women may be enticed into policing by *only* its image.

Altruistic Motives

In the existing literature, altruistic motives are a common reason as well for females to consider a law enforcement career (e.g., Charles, 1982; Chu, 2018; Ermer, 1978; Raganella & White, 2004). This, however, was the major motivator for only one woman in the present study. Interestingly, a similar finding was recorded in Taiwan, where the police organization shares with the People’s Police the same origin, and it was revealed that just over one fifth of the 94 sample policewomen were motivated by the idea of helping others, whilst the vast majority of them reported job security as a major motivation for joining the police (Chu, 2018).

One reason why few female participants here noted altruistic motives may be that law enforcement, especially crimefighting, has been the emphasis in Chinese policing (Chen, 2016); although helping the general public is expected of police officers (Jiao, 1995, 2001; also the *Police Law*) it is not accentuated given that the maintenance of social stability (*wei-wen*) is currently the paramount priority of the police. More specifically, women’s scope of assignments may be too narrow to be considered allowing frequent opportunities to “actually help people.” Q-F-1, who held the highest leadership position among the female officers in this sample, underscored helping others and making a contribution to society as her major motives to choose a police career, and that the passion had continued to motivate her to go further forward. This seems in tune with an earlier study, suggesting that individuals’ commitment to work might have shaped before entering policing (Van Maanen, 1975).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article presents a case study on women’s motivations for becoming a police officer in mainland China. It has explored the key characteristics of gender practice in Chinese policing, including the gendered police recruitment, females’ roles and overall position in the People’s Police, the common perceptions of police work, and touched upon the mainstream police culture. In this study, with a few exceptions, female participants are, or soon would be, university degree-holders,

of whom the majority were graduates from or studying at the police academies; a sizeable number of sample female officers have received an elite education. However, the policewomen were either academic officers, or largely “office workers in police uniform” mainly performing administrative, clerical, supplementary and service-oriented duties. The finding casts doubt on the claim provided earlier that women appear in the full spectrum of police work in China. Moreover, the empirical data has allowed to profile the female participants as individuals, who are “ordinary” Chinese women and accept the traditional social and gender codes.

As to why women join the police, the most common reasons here are family (parental) influences, materialistic considerations and job availability. Females enter “police work” also because of childhood aspirations. These are consistent with international research, especially studies in similar cultural settings (Chu, 2018; Tarng et al., 2001). Generally, job security has become an appealing reason for choosing a police career in the current global socio-economic circumstances (Elntib & Milincic, 2021). To look more deeply, though, the influential factors cited by the female participants in the current study are mainly personal, economic, *esprit de corps*, or image-oriented. Few women became or would become police officers because of altruistic motives, nor because they considered policing exciting or themselves having ability to do the job (cf. Kim & Merlo, 2010). This finding was unanticipated, given that in China, police officers are expected to have a sense of responsibility to serve the people (Chen, 2016; Jiao, 2001), but is not incomprehensible if we consider women’s overall social conditions and what they do in policing. Several further points may be expounded.

First, the case study has provided an opportunity to take a glance at women’s status in the People’s Police. It has confirmed that police recruitment in China is gendered, and there are quotas to restrict the number of females (Zhou, 2013) who remain marginal in the police. Chinese policewomen are mainly involved in mundane office duties and are rarely responding officers to go out to patrol and “fight crime.” It is not only in China where female officers are largely confined to gender restricted, peripheral roles; this is, in fact, a shared experience of women police across the globe (Rabe-Hemp & Garcia, 2020), including their European counterparts at the early stages of women’s integration (Brown, 1997). As in many other places (e.g., Clinkinbeard et al., 2020), much emphasis is placed on the masculine nature of policing in China, along with the traditional gender expectations, and the perception of men as dominant players in policing seems to be unshakable.

What is unique in China, though, is that while not being mutual partners in law enforcement, in official and media discourses men and women enjoy equal status (e.g., Beijing Women Police Association, 2009). Due largely to a lack of gender consciousness in Chinese society and among professionals, the need for women in operational policing—apart from their emblematic value and mandatory presence under the procedural rules—is hardly appreciated by the state, the public, the police organization, policemen, and policewomen themselves. The reality is that female police do not expect and are not expected to work as male police officers.

Second, as the article has showed, Chinese women do not seem to join the police because they are interested in the law enforcement side of policing, but prestige of the profession may be a motivator. They seem to have learned good image of police jobs from family, official and media presentation of police and police work, to which childhood aspirations may be related, too. Indisputably, policing is an attractive profession in China, especially for women whose entry is constrained, but once in, they are privileged public servants and guaranteed the middle-class lifestyles with the generous police remuneration. It may be said that in many respects, women’s career choices and what they do in policing are governed jointly by Confucian values, especially parental influences, traditional *han* Chinese social norms, and the official gender discourse (Wu, 2010). This article is thus by no means to blame women. Instead, it brings to light China’s unique structural problems and questions the existing male-centred police profession in which women are encultured (Hautzinger, 2002).

Internationally, police forces tend to adopt recruitment strategies to communicate an attractive image to potential best candidates (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Similar ideas were proposed for Chinese policing (see Wu et al., 2009), but this may not be necessary given that in China policing is considered a highly alluring occupation and, as we know, the barrier for women is the discriminatory recruitment policy. Therefore, what is needed is not to improve strategies to attract female applicants (cf. Aiello, 2020; Gibbs, 2019; Kim & Merlo, 2010), but to remove the cap that maintains female (under)representation in the gendered institution, as proposed for women in Vietnamese policing (see Jardine, 2020). This is a difficult and virtually impossible step without first recognizing the need for females in mainstream policing, and improving working conditions for women should they choose to work shoulder-to-shoulder with policemen. Prior to that, the very start is to challenge gender stereotypes, all antiqued, male-centred assumptions and the perceived nature of policing.

Toward the end, it is now the time to reflect on the article's contributions to research. First, more directly, presenting an empirical study, the article expands the "database" of factors for individuals, especially females, joining the police and to advance international gender policing research by producing original knowledge from an under-researched territory to "inform generalization that comes from the established theoretical perspectives" (Chu, 2018, p. 916). Using the Chinese case study, it propounds that society must change first to be more receptive to new ideas, and then the police organization and individual officers may change with it.

Noticeably, the findings presented in this article, while sharing some commonalities with those in past research, are unique. It may be true everywhere that gendered expectations for behaviors explain women's career and role preferences (Rossler et al., 2020). China, however, has its own political, socio-economic and cultural specificity, where the role of the state, market, family, culture and traditions conjointly shapes women's work and employment (Cooke & Xiao, 2014); and individuals, the police institution and society are profoundly informed by the traditional norms. As their female counterparts in some other Southern societies (e.g., Hautzinger, 2020; Jardine, 2020; Strobl, 2020), Chinese women, including younger and professional women, are not keen to engage activities outside the sex roles (Shen, 2017). The women's choice, albeit for different reasons, is not unreasonable if we consider their respective social conditions and that women's "full integration"—sameness with men—does not necessarily equate with gender justice. The fact is that, once being men's equal under Mao's radical feminism, Chinese women experienced much pain rather than women's liberation (Hsiung, 2001). This article thus accepts "equity but different" (Natarajan, 2008) as a direction for changes truly in favor of women in China.

Secondly, the article makes a contribution to comparative criminal justice research. As it has illustrated, similar research may produce varied results in different social environments, and the same findings may have diverse implications for policy and practice, because of distinctive local structural characteristics. Policing cultures may vary, even between countries sharing the same philosophical inheritance (see Jardine, 2020; Shen, 2020), and policy transfer vis-à-vis criminal justice arrangements, such as how women policing should be organized, is uneasy because of "diffusely intermingled difference" (Sheptycki, 2005) across jurisdictions.

From a related yet slightly different (gender) perspective, this article echoes feminist scholars who argue against positioning women as a "universal category" that ignores women's diverse experiences across time, class, space, history, religion, economics, culture and other specificities (Mohanty, 1984). In regard to gender policing, countries in the Global North and the wealthier and whiter Southern nations such as Australia seem to share the same model of women's integration, whilst the development of women police in developing countries may have their own respective trajectories, shapes or patterns. Thus, talking of women in Kuwaiti policing, Strobl (2020) proposes a country-specific model that is more sensitive to the local political, social and gender dynamics, as an alternative to "the universalism" which relies heavily on Western, or Northern, style of gender policing. This takes us to the third contribution of the article.

Showing the impact of local variations in political and cultural power on the production of knowledge, this article supports Southern criminology (Carrington et al., 2016) and Southern Theory (Connell, 2007) as a whole, recognizing that some of the dominant, Northern assumptions may have little relevance for the territories of the “periphery.” It has also illustrated that an outsider-insider researcher—such as I, in the current study, being a British researcher of Chinese origin and a former female police officer in China—can be in a good position to produce something new that challenges the power of the established knowledge (Crean, 2018). Indeed, novel insights can come from the global periphery, which is capable of establishing standards parallel to those created in the Northern world. Based on the history and experience of Southern societies, new perspectives may emerge, and the existing, dominating theories may be modified and advanced (Carrington et al., 2016). We may then gain more comprehensive, accurate and inclusive human knowledge of social phenomena.

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