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Juvenile Delinquency in China: Editor's Introduction

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Editor's Introduction:

It is clear that juvenile delinquency is now recognized as an important social issue within the People's Republic of China. The documents in this volume chronicle widely shared views concerning causal factors and treatment considerations from a variety of perspectives, only some of which are strictly educational. Indeed, the family, work unit, relevant public security organs as well as the school all have been delegated some responsibility for the prevention of juvenile delinquency. This being the case, it can be argued that the information presented here is illustrative of the strengths and weaknesses of a growing literature with a social science orientation, which addresses itself to the articulation and eventual solution of problems of youth in a general sense.

A number of conclusions can be drawn concerning the nature of this research. First, some educational issues that have received widespread recognition on their own accord have been given specific expression with reference to delinquency causation. The nefarious effects of ability grouping within elementary and secondary schools (Zhao Ren) and the need for improved sex education counseling on the part of parents as well as schools (Luo Dahua; Zhao Jian and Lin Qingshan) are two issues that fall under this category. Their actual role in preventing delinquency may be difficult to justify on an empirical basis; nonetheless, their association with delinquency behavior highlights their significance as legitimate social concerns to a wider audience.

One additionally notes the existence of traditional cultural predilections which have influenced the Chinese analysis of juvenile delinquency. Claims that correlate the growth of deviance with poor parental role modeling (Zhao Jian and Lin Qingshan; Zhao Ren) or the inability of adolescents to distinguish right from wrong (Luo Dahua) include assumptions concerning human behavior, learning theory, and moral absolutism that have distinctly traditional nuances, as does the urging for the exercise of greater social control on the part of schools (Gao Shuqiao; Zhao Ren), reformatory and public security facilities (Gao Shuqiao; Wang Lesheng), and parents (Gao Shuqiao; Mo Guanghan et al.; Zhao Jian and Lin Qingshan). It is interesting to note that Gao Shuqiao's evidence correlating a positive relationship between negative environmental factors involving social control and the occurrence of juvenile delinquency is at variance with Whyte and Parish's data, based upon refugee interviewing conducted in the late 1970s, which suggested that "there is no evidence . . . that neighborhoods (or time periods) with more vigorous deterrence efforts are characterized by lower crime rates."¹

If the Chinese analysis of juvenile delinquency appears to be both generalized and conventional, it is also often contradictory and imprecise. Scholars have disagreed as to the age when delinquency is most prominent. Gao Shuqiao, Zhao Jian and Lin Qingshan, Li Jucai et al., and Mo Guanghan et al. argue, for example, that the phenomenon expresses itself most frequently during adolescence. Wang Lesheng, however, claims that the typical age of delinquents has risen in recent years, to the point whereby 25-30 year olds can be legitimately categorized as juvenile delinquents.

Extending the age range in such a fashion preserves the widespread conviction that the Cultural Revolution era bears a great deal of responsibility for setting precedents which have encouraged contemporary behaviors (Wang Lesheng). There appears to be a more definitive connection between the age of the offender and the frequency of violent crime, both of which have risen in recent years (Xu Jian).

Evidence concerning the characteristics and structure of delinquents' families is again contradictory. Scholars disagree as to whether middle, last born, or only children are more susceptible to engaging in deviance, the degree of susceptibility of children of single parents or two working parents, and the extent to which family impoverishment contributes to delinquency (Gao Shuqiao; Mo Guanghan et al.; Zhao Jian and Lin Qingshan; Zhao Ren). The expression of deviance on the part of cadre children is a specific problem that is being given increased attention (Zhao Jian and Lin Qingshan).

Certainly educational factors such as truancy, poor grades, and generally unproductive educational experiences play an important role in contributing to delinquency (Gao Shuqiao). Yet the picture is not altogether clear in this case either. Xu Jian's example of the gang leader in Jiangsu who studied law and detective work as a means of obtaining proper criminal qualifications suggests that Chinese scholars recognize that educational achievement need not be inherently virtuous, and criminality does not restrict itself to any one category of student.

Wang Lesheng and Cui Nanshan demonstrate that contextual imprecision with respect to delinquency research is as evident in the legal domain as it is in other areas. The creation of definitional constructs such as the "criminal group" (Wang Lesheng) and the "hoodlum clique" (Cui Nanshan) illustrates the difficulty legal scholars face in distinguishing motivation, behavior, and individual culpability when crimes are committed by groups with varying degrees of premeditation. Because the organizational structure of those groups is looser than that of the typical criminal syndicate, and youth begin to join such enclaves in their late teens, their formation is associated with juvenile delinquency in a general sense.

It should not be surprising that institutional treatments have received both support (Zhao Ren) and criticism (Gao Shuqiao) according to their perceived effectiveness. In the spring of 1983 I visited two of the institutions cited in these documents, the work-study class of the Guangzhou Diesel Engine Plant (Mo Guanghan et al.) and the Guangdong Juvenile Reformatory Institute (Li Jucai et al.); both were representative of the range of institutions devoted to offender rehabilitation: work-study schools or classes, juvenile reformatories, and re-education and reform through labor camps. Together these institutions loosely correspond to remunerative-coercive and normative-coercive institutional types (the work-study school and class schemes cater to youth whose crimes are considered less serious and thus tend to demonstrate more remunerative coercive responses than their counterparts).

It is important to note that policies vary considerably from institution to institution, especially with respect to the allowable age range of the resident youth (anywhere from 11 to 23 according to Mo Guanghan et al. and Li Jucai et al.) and the extent to which gender segregation is practiced. Separate work-study factory classes are operated for male and

female delinquents in Guangzhou, for example, even though they coexist with the Guangdong Juvenile Reformatory Institute, which houses offenders of both sexes in the same setting.

Definitional ambiguity and procedural inconsistency can be expected in a society that has only recently begun to make distinctions between political and social deviance, distinctions which are by no means hard and fast. Associating delinquency with the Cultural Revolution and with pernicious Western influence (Wang Lesheng), for instance, carries overt political connotations, as does the linking of political crime-be it through hijacking, kidnapping, or bombing of a government installation-with more common forms of juvenile delinquency.

As delinquency research matures, an attempt to put forward social analysis that is comparatively straightforward and objective is apparent. Veiled criticisms of the excesses of the anticrime campaign of 1983, as expressed by Wang Lesheng and Xu Jian, echo reports published in the West, which express dissatisfaction with the coercive and procedurally inconsistent nature of that campaign.³ In addition, some of the survey data collected for this volume demonstrate a basic concern for addressing issues of statistical significance, validity, and reliability (see especially Gao Shuqiao). Nonetheless, one must treat the attitudinal responses solicited from delinquents themselves or the judgments concerning their emotional stability gathered by their reformatory supervisors (Li Jucai et al.) with a certain degree of skepticism. The extent to which the neutrality of data collection instruments can ever be guaranteed is difficult to ascertain. One would expect that the sobering realization that social phenomena such as juvenile delinquency will not fade away into the immediate future will give rise to analytical frameworks that are more varied and sophisticated than is evident at present. In the meantime, current research efforts in the field are substantive and give promise for more penetrating and detailed analyses in the future. It is for this reason that they warrant our close scrutiny.

Notes:

1. Martin King Whyte and William L. Parish, *Urban life in Contemporary China* (Chicago, 1984), p. 264.

2. See Irving Epstein, "Children's Rights and Juvenile Correctional Institutions in the People's Republic of China," *Comparative Education Review* (August 1986), and "Reformatory Education in Chinese Society," *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* (Fall 1986).

3. See Amnesty International Report: 1984 (London, 1984), pp. 216-17, and China: *Violations of Human Rights* (London, 1984), pp. 54-55.