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Psychological and Behavioral Attributes of Juvenile Delinquents in thePeople's Republic of China

Irving Epstein, *Illinois Wesleyan University*

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Within the People's Republic of China, juvenile delinquency is now recognized as an important social issue. Marked differences in data collection techniques, age determinations and definitional constructs inhibit the capacity to form firm conclusions but anecdotal evidence suggests that incidences of delinquent behavior which have been experienced within the People's Republic are less frequent than is true of Western countries (*Beijing Review*), 1983; *Beijing Review*, 1985; *China Daily*, 1984; Whyte and Parish, 1984); yet the problem is still considered to possess domestic significance and is in fact growing in scope. For this reason alone, it warrants attention. Far more importantly though is the truism that by investigating specific attitudes toward social "losers," one identifies the process whereby social norms are constructed, defended and redefined.[1]

Scholars in the P.R.C. connect the existence of current delinquency behavior to their country's increasingly successful modernization drive, a conclusion which is supported by cross- cultural studies of criminal activity (Clinard and Abbott, 1973; Shelly, 1981). In addition, delinquency is largely an urban phenomenon, although the existence of clan conflict in rural areas has also been noted (Perry, 1985).

From a demographic perspective, the People's Republic is a relatively young country. Delinquency activity thus comprises a large percentage of all criminal behavior on the mainland (Ma Jie, 1981; Zhang Mingguang, 1980). It also seems clear that the joint offense is extremely prevalent within the P.R.C. Delinquents there are especially likely to associate with "bad elements" within their neighborhoods. In a survey of work-study school inmates for example, 64% of the acknowledged offenses were committed in a group (Zhao Wang, 1982) while in a survey comparing delinquent and non-delinquent population groups, 50.8% of the delinquents interviewed admitted that they enjoyed fighting and engaged in theft as a regular part of group activity (Gao Shuqiao, 1982).

Mainland scholars see the Cultural Revolution as a watershed era that distinctly contributed to the growth of current delinquency problems. To be sure, it is admitted that delinquency has existed at various times during the thirty odd years, as a residue of Kuomintang misrule during the early 1950's and as a result of economic hardship during the early 1960's. But the "ten years of chaos" associated with the Cultural Revolution is considered to be a special case.

During that time-frame, few governmental policies were viewed with as much popular antagonism as the "sent-down youth" program. Indeed, the surreptitious return of those youths who were sent down to their urban homes, without the benefit of ration and household registration cards, and without employment opportunity, is thought to have significantly contributed to theft and lawlessness during the late 1960's and 1970's (Bernstein, 1977).

Dr. Irving Epstein is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Higher and Adult Education and Foundations, University of Missouri-Columbia.

The lack of significant educational opportunity for middle school graduates is said to have additionally exacerbated disciplinary problems within schools (Unger, 1982), while a general breakdown in social order is said to have left youth without a sense of proper direction, contributing to their inability to distinguish between right and wrong (Lin Ying, 1980; Ma Jie, 1981; Zhai Bugao, 1981). Traditional authority figures such as parents and teachers were criticized and attacked; consequently interpersonal relationships within the family unit suffered. The claim that domestic violence increased dramatically during this era is not surprising (Fu Gaoxian and Xu Jian, 1981). A precedent for the current difficulties was thus set. However, as the Cultural Revolution recedes into an unpleasant historical memory, it becomes increasingly difficult directly to attribute current delinquency behaviors to Cultural Revolution policies on a unilateral basis.

Broad-based analyses of delinquency issues do little to answer fundamental questions concerning the delinquents themselves. In order to address these issues, a composite sketch of delinquency behavior will be drawn for the P.R.C. case.

At various times, mainland delinquents have been described as "blossoms in the dust" in need of assistance so that their "spiritual wounds" will be healed (*Population and Other Problems*, 1981; *Women of China*, 1981; Xu Yinglong, 1980; Zhou Zhen, 1979). On the other hand, less favorable characterizations have included their depiction as ignorant (*yumei*), muddle-headed (*hutu*), tyrannical (*chengba*), despicable (*xialu*), impetuous (*jizao*), crazy (*feng kuang*), vain (*xurong*), conceited (*zifei* or *kuang wang zida*), reckless (*lumang*), rotten (*fuxiu*) and savage or inhuman (*miejue renxing*) (*Faxue Zazhi*, 1980b; Gongqingtuan Shenxishen Weiyuanhui and Shenxi Gonganju, 1983; Luo Dahua, 1982; Su Changjun, 1983). So much for stereotypes.

These discrepancies can be explained in part by the nature of the committed offense, the possibility for character reformation being tied largely to the severity of the initial crime. The categorizations, of course, demonstrate the subjective imprecision with which delinquent behavior is labelled. Nonetheless, a relatively clear picture of life as a delinquent is easy to sketch.

The typical delinquent is 14 or 15 years old, has previously engaged in similar deviant activities, and is guilty of fighting, committing theft or robbery. Violent crimes such as murder or rape are acknowledged to occur, but on a less frequent basis. The delinquent is more likely to be male rather than female (although an increase in female gang activity has been noted in the press); it is more likely that the delinquent's parental socio-economic status is low, although a large minority of delinquents come from family backgrounds which are non-indigent.

Delinquents' fathers are more likely to gamble and drink than non-delinquents' fathers; some have themselves been incarcerated in prison or labor camps. There is additional evidence which suggests that delinquents are more likely to come from broken families than non-delinquents; they are often the youngest children within the household (Huang Guanghan et. al, 1985; Ji Shiren, 1982).

Parental discipline is inconsistent in that delinquents' parents tend to over-indulge and spoil their children initially, and then try to compensate by relying upon overly harsh disciplinary methods (Ji Shiren, 1982; Luo Dahua, 1982).

Three of the traits which are frequently used to describe delinquents

include their independent will, plasticity of personality and adherence to the cult of brotherhood. It is recognized that delinquents begin expressing deviant behavior during adolescence, a period of physical maturation and emotional change. In the midst of normal confusion concerning acceptance of appropriate identity and social role, delinquents are seen to flaunt authority and deliberately surpass the boundaries of social propriety (*Faxue Zazhi*, 1980a; Fu Gaoxian and Xu Jian, 1981; Luo Dahua, 1982).

Plasticity of personality refers to the fact that while their disposition appears to be hard on the outside, delinquents can easily feel emotionally shattered. Often they fly off the handle, expressing significant emotional instability (Fu Gaoxian and Xu Jian, 1981).

A belief in the efficacy of role modelling is a salient norm within Chinese culture. Authority figures such as parents are thus assessed a significant degree of blame for their children's failings. And, delinquent youth often plead moral ignorance in the commission of a crime on the basis of their unknowingly following inadequate role models. Such is the case with the cult of brotherhood mentality, especially prevalent among youth gangs. In this instance, youth will risk death if necessary in order to prove their depth of loyalty to the group. In succumbing to peer pressure, youth will be more inclined to worship false heroes, be they gang leaders or adult criminals, rather than pattern their behavior after appropriate role models (Guo Xiang and Ma Jingmaiao, 1981; Wen Jing, 1982). Alienated from their parents, with few established ties to acquaintances and friends, the security offered through gang participation makes such involvement quite enticing. Their behavior is thus paradoxical in that while delinquents may be strong-willed, they are at the same time extremely vulnerable to the whims of the larger group, the "sugar coated bullets" produced by western capitalism or the inadequate role model.

Delinquents are further seen as being vulnerable in terms of their intellectual ability which is comparatively low. Although Mainland scholars fail to distinguish between student aptitude and achievement, a clear message is presented, expressing the belief that delinquents are generally unintelligent. In a survey of 100 middle school graduates who were incarcerated in a re-education through labor camp for example, none of the inmates performed at a standard level. Indeed, 41% could not reach the fourth grade level (Su Changjun, 1983). In another survey of labor camp inmates, out of a total of 95 junior middle school graduates, 33 did not know when the Communist Party was founded, 71 did not know the Four Basic Principles, some failed to recognize the two largest rivers in China, and 40 did not know the temperature at which water turned to ice (Gongqingtuan shenxishen Weiyuanhui and Shenxi Gonganju, 1983).

Perhaps one reason why their achievement rates are low is the degree of truancy practiced by delinquent youth. Gao Shuqiao (1982) informs us that 82.4% of the delinquents surveyed admitted to occasional or frequent truancy. In another study, 310 out of 459 delinquents or 64.2% of the population group surveyed, admittedly experienced truancy and school discipline problems (Fang Bo, 1982). Gao Shiqiao (1982) indicates that a significant percentage of delinquents' parents are unaware of their children's truancy.

Certain school policies have received criticism for encouraging delinquent behavior at least overtly. The homogeneous grouping of students into class sections on the basis of ability and previous performance received vociferous criticism in the early 1980's for example. Teachers' attitudes toward students

have also been scrutinized. Typically, instructors teach in a traditional, unilateral manner (*pian mian jiaoyu*) and they ignore the needs of the slower student, giving them the "cold eye" (*leng yan*).

In one class of 27 slow students, for example, one fourth of the students turned to or were on the verge of turning to criminal activity (Zheng Hejun and Shen Jiyun, 1983). Another report stated that in one school, teachers ignored and reprimanded their poorer students, who were then scolded by their parents and were further teased by the better students in the school. In a separate instance, when one class section fell behind another, the slower students were criticized in front of the entire school (Cheng Yingfan and Zhao Haiyan, 1982; Jinanshi Jianchayuan, 1982).

Shaming, of course, occurs on an individual as well as collective basis. In one case, a Beijing middle-school female student accidentally committed an evil deed. The teacher made her stand in front of the class and noted, "the rock in the toilet is smelly and hard. Your life is still not as good." As a result, she became truant and then delinquent (Cheng Yingfan and Zhao Haiyan, 1982).

Teachers are criticized for their traditional instructional methods in the general sense as well. They are often too far removed on a personal basis to offer students guidance or preventative counseling so that students can resist indulging in materialistic, pleasure-seeking pursuits. They understand little as to what types of materials, be they books, films, music or other media forms are considered fashionable or why students are attracted to fundamentally unhealthy materials. A need for expanding sex education course work within schools has been expressed, although the traditional distance characterizing student-teacher relationships presents an admitted obstacle in successfully implementing that goal (Cheng Yingfan and Zhao Haiyan, 1982).

Students of all types often display their ignorance with respect to legal and moral knowledge. For delinquents though, the consequences are more severe. Schools serving all population groups are delegated a degree of blame in this area. In one Beijing class, for example, out of 55 non-delinquent students surveyed about their clarity of educational purpose, only 9 students chose the topic "to achieve the distant ideal of revolutionary thought" (*you yuanda geming lixiang*). To study and achieve was a goal which was generally chosen, although an expression of clarity of purpose was lacking. Thirty-seven students lacked a commitment to revolutionary ideals while nine students did not believe at all in the importance of study, wanting simply to get through in whatever way possible (Cheng Yingfan and Zhao Haiyan, 1982). In an investigation of unhealthy morality among girls, 85% of those surveyed lacked a sufficient moral concept, all exhibited a lower than ordinary degree of humaneness (*renqinghui*) and 85% pursued a mediocre life style (Zheng Hejun and Shen Jiyun, 1983). In another survey of 210 delinquents, the same authors reported that their education was of no interest whatsoever (Zheng Hejun and Shen Jiyun, 1983).

Unsuccessful in school, unhappy at home and facing the prospect of prolonged unemployment if not certain underemployment, delinquent youth often join youth gangs. In the early 1980's there were four basic types of gangs operating within the P.R.C., distinguished primarily by their type of organizational structure. The oversight or surveillance gang (*jianshi jui hexing*) was the loosest type, with no observable strong plan of action. Hubbub would frequently occur on a spontaneous basis as gang members would indulge in blind hero worship and engage in accidental criminal behavior.

A second organizational type was one with a fixed appearance. While still

loosely organized and non-secretive, a plan of action and some division of labor would be agreed upon at the spot of a particular crime, prior to its actual commission. This gang had a pre-determined, fixed leadership, although the number of those so designated would be relatively small. Because loyalty ties among regular members were relatively weak, many gang members would concurrently participate in the activities of another gang, or would leave to join another organization. Some might leave and engage in criminal behavior independently.

A third organizational type was the closed gang (*yan mi*). Membership roles were strictly regulated; many of its members would be considered hardened criminals. They would have certainly included older youth and adults with criminal records.

A fourth organizational type was the "chain of rings" gang (*lian huan tao shi*), where two or more existing gangs were joined together. Usually one structure would predominate over the other, forming a nucleus-satellite relationship. Here too, gang members were often hardened criminals (Guo Xiang and Ma Jingmiao, 1981).

The internal gang structure applicable in most cases has included a core leadership (the head and body), regular members, and those coerced into joining. Gang leaders usually have had previous criminal experience and they must be fearless, since they do make decisions which may result in violent outcomes. Usually, they refrain from personally participating in spontaneous or gratuitous violence, though.

Regular gang members do not occupy leadership positions but do participate in all gang activities and they help with the drafting of criminal plans or with the division of labor amongst other members. If a gang's leaders are captured or incapacitated, the new leadership has to be recruited quickly from this group. When the gang expands its operations, the contributions of the regular membership increase accordingly.

The third type of gang member is the younger member, coerced into participating in hooligan-type activities as a prerequisite for permanent membership. This type of youth will participate in the criminal activity but will not be involved in planning or division of labor responsibilities. Most juvenile gangs have centered around a common organizational purpose, be it larceny, burglary, hooliganism, assault, prostitution, etc. Organizational purposes do not exclude members from engaging in other criminal activities and gangs can change their sense of purpose (Guo Xiang and Ma Jingmiao, 1981). In the Summer of 1983, for example, a nationwide anti-crime campaign resulted in the mass roundup of a number of criminals, many of whom were delinquent youth (Amnesty International, 1984). Since then, gangs have become more rigid and secretive in an organizational sense (Xu Jian, 1984). It has also been reported that youth gangs in recent years have become more technologically sophisticated, engaging in economic crime and anti-revolutionary activity, such as hijacking and using explosives to destroy transportation and communication facilities (Xu Jian, 1984).

There have also been reports that the number of female youth gangs is increasing. Female delinquents, guilty of offenses such as theft and promiscuous sexual activity are fewer in number than their male counterparts, but their number have increased dramatically since 1982 (*Joint Publications Reference Service*, 1985a). A number of these offenders are children of cadres, who after being

incessantly spoiled, it is claimed, entice males into participating in licentious, promiscuous behavior (Guo Xiang and Ma Jingmiao, 1981; *Joint Publications Reference Service*, 1985a). Others have themselves been abused sexually and/or physically, and turn to a life of crime because of revenge motives or fatalistic attitudes (*Joint Publications Reference Service*, 1985a). It is admitted that female delinquents are harder to rehabilitate than their male counterparts because they see themselves as having been irreparably ruined (*po guan po shuai*) (*Yin Jiabao*, 1981).

As is the case with gangs in the West, male gang members may brag about their numerous sexual conquests, but they refrain from intruding upon established liaisons between females and other gang members.

What happens to delinquents who are incarcerated or institutionalized? While the range of penal institutions designed specifically for delinquent youth varies widely in terms of purpose as well as punishment technique, and includes the re-education through labor camps, the juvenile reformatory and the work-study school (or in a few cases, the work-study factory class), similarities in delinquents' attitudes have been chronicled (Epstein, 1986a).

Specifically, three stages of behavior are noticeable. During the initial stage of incarceration, youth express feelings of fear, pessimism and humiliation. They are afraid of being marked as social outcasts and are generally unrepentant. They blame society for their own errors and express widespread dissatisfaction.

During the second stage, while some youth confess and admit to personal culpability, others express doubt as to the potential for their own reformability. These habitual criminals react negatively when severely pressured to confess by staff cadres. Hostile attitudes expressed before sentencing are reinforced and these youth often become uncontrollable during this middle stage.

In the final stage, youth begin to evaluate their own achievements in reforming their character. They have acquired the preliminary ability to distinguish between good and evil and have begun to realize the social harm they have caused. While many would like to become useful members of society, others fear for their future and are afraid of being discriminated against by their families and by society at large. There is expressed worry concerning the lack of employment possibility or continued educational opportunity. Some fear for their own security and express anxiety over possibly going astray again. Others, who have incessantly committed minor mistakes, take a more carefree attitude, believing that if they fail successfully to reintegrate society, they can always return to the camp (Shen Jinchu, 1983).

It should be noted that penal institutions have been criticized for their lack of success in reforming criminals. The recidivism rates for various institutions differ although estimates as high as 33% were reported in labor camps in 1983 and 23% overall in 1980 (Fang Bo, 1982; *Qingnian Fanzui Yanjiu*, 1983). It has been admitted that cadres until 1981 extracted the forced confession from delinquents, a common practice within labor camps of all types; such "leftist" influences have since been supposedly curtailed, although it is acknowledged that youth form unhealthy friendships within the corrective institutions and often join gangs comprised of old acquaintances after their release (Jinanshi Jianchayuan, 1982; Qingnian Fanzui Yanjiu, 1983).

For correctional institutions of all types, youth are hierarchically grouped into progressively larger units, a process titled "collectivist education" (*jiti*

jiaoyu), where peer surveillance becomes an expected norm. Public demonstration of delinquents' successful character reformation is an additional expectation usually expressed through staged events such as mass street sweeping or public construction work (*Da Gongbao*, 1982; *Xinhua*, 1979).

Surveillance occurs after their release as well as during their institutionalization. Youth are expected to report to public security officers about the activity of their peers on a continual basis.

Delinquent fear concerning the possibility for successful social reintegration is often quite well-placed. In a Guangzhou work-study factory class visited by the author in 1983, 70% of the graduates were unemployed immediately after their release. A general tendency to marry quickly, so as to overcompensate for the fear of facing social stigma has also been acknowledged by P.R.C. scholars (Shandongsheng beishu laogai zhidui, 1983).

To a certain extent, the view of delinquent attitudes and behavior which has been sketched differs little from what we have come to expect in the West. The nature of the crimes committed, the specific attitudes expressed toward schooling, the acknowledged importance of the peer group and complementary mistrust of authority figures designated as being socially criminologists and sociologists involved in the study of deviance in North America.

Certainly our own rehabilitation efforts are not immune to criticism. What makes the mainland China case different is social and cultural context. In a society where social roles are inextricably linked to group affiliation, be it with family, work place, school or residence committee, where geographical and occupational mobility is limited and where guilt by association has been officially countenanced during various eras of P.R.C. history, a reliance upon informal social ostracism as a protection device for the "non- deviant" is both understandable and exceptionally pronounced (Bao Ruowang, 1973). It is interesting to note that banishment was a common punishment, regularly applied during the Qing dynasty (Bodde and Morris, 1967).

Given this context, it is not surprising that official characterizations of delinquent behavior reinforce the assumption that deviant youth are qualitatively different from their "normal" counterparts. To be sure, there is a difference between being labelled a "blossom in the dust" as opposed to a "poisonous weed," although the stigmatizing impact of both labels is quite emphatic. When one examines the explanations attributed to delinquency occurrence: poor family background, unstable personality, false hero worship, low intelligence, poor schooling, etc., within the context of officially approved remedies: removal from family, forced confession, continued surveillance after institutional release, commitments to rehabilitation efforts can be categorized as inconsistent at best and non-existent in a worst case. As was true of similar labelling efforts within the American context, the attribution of negative personality characteristics to delinquent youth serves to rationalize non-committal stances toward their eventual rehabilitation (Schlossman and Wallach, 1978). But why should a rehabilitation commitment be expected, given the nature of social stigma, often communicated on an informal basis, within the society at large?

Western scholarship which emphasizes the inconsistency and inexactitude with which society differentiates between deviance and normalcy, or which argues that becoming delinquent is not limited only to certain subcultures or individuals with identifiable personality and character traits, is not cited by

P.R.C. scholars involved in delinquency research. To be sure, the importance of socialization as a general process involved in role acquisition is acknowledged, as is the existence of adolescent subcultures. In the latter case, though, it has been argued that healthy and unhealthy subcultures have developed in part as a reaction to increased foreign contact, that the two types of subculture are markedly distinguishable and that they should not be confused (*Joint Publications Reference Service*, 1985b). Indeed, Mainland explanations for delinquency occurrence in the 1980's closely parallel those offered as early as 1962 with specific reference to pernicious influences of foreign contact, sexual promiscuity, poor parenting, etc. (*Union Research Service*, 1962). If such explanations appear rigid and the accompanying behavioral explanations seem wooden to a Western ear, one would do well to remember the audience for whom such research is published--an audience accustomed to evaluating moral character in absolutist rather than in relativist terms. The implications of these assumptions for delinquents and their relatives are thus quite clear.

It is interesting to note that in spite of their disparate political systems and differing experiences with modernization and developmental imperatives, perceptions of delinquents within both Taiwan and the P.R.C. are often similar; their judged failings are commonly described as are the reasons for their behavior (*Fanzui Zhuangkuang Jichi Fenxi*, 1981). In the Mainland case, though, there is more evidence that the power of informal sanction and stigma severely impedes rehabilitation efforts. Taiwan scholars, familiar with American research in the field (*Proceedings of the First Asian Conference on Juvenile Delinquency*, 1980), have been more willing to allow for the possibility that the boundaries between deviance and normalcy are less clear-cut than one might expect, at least in a theoretical sense. It should be stressed that practitioners in Taiwan often fail to comprehend the implications of such research (Epstein, 1986b). However, there is more acceptance of delinquency as an inevitable result of modernization within Taiwan than on the Mainland (Chow en Chou, 1980). One would thus expect that as modernization efforts continue to express themselves within the People's Republic of China, one will see a greater official as well as informal tolerance for the expression of deviance in that country.

FOOTNOTES

1. In 1983, during a visit to the Guangdong Juvenile Training Institute, the author was shown a new bus, purchased specifically for the purpose of transporting delinquents to public places where their "reformation" would be easily visible.

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