



Perceptions of police: an empirical study of Chinese college students

Perceptions of
police

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine Chinese college students' perceptions of police.

Design/methodology/approach – Using survey data collected from over 400 college students in two cities, the study empirically analyzes the global and specific perceptions of police among Chinese college students and factors that accounted for the variation in Chinese college students' evaluations of police. The study incorporates a broader range of explanatory variables to explain Chinese college students' attitudes toward the police, including demographic characteristics, crime and criminal justice experience, perceptions of quality of life, and locality. The study reviews research on public perceptions of police published in Chinese academic journals.

Findings – College students' global satisfaction with police as well as their specific evaluations of police fairness, effectiveness, and integrity were significantly related to their crime and criminal justice experience, perceived quality of life, and locality. Students' background characteristics only had a weak effect on attitudes toward police.

Research limitations/implications – More empirical research is warranted to gauge the extent of Chinese satisfaction with police and police performance. Future research should continue incorporating crime and criminal justice factors into analysis.

Practical implications – Findings of the study provide Chinese police administrators with useful references and directions to improve police-community relations.

Originality/value – This study represents one of the few attempts to empirically assess Chinese citizens' perceptions of police. It examines not just Chinese college students' global satisfaction with the police, but also their more specific views of various areas of police performance including fairness, effectiveness, and integrity.

Keywords Police, Students, Perception, China

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

We, the people, give police power and legitimacy. It is thus imperative for police practitioners and scholars to learn about the public's perceptions and expectations of the police and police services and use this information as important references to measure police effectiveness and guide police reforms. A substantial amount of research has been conducted in the USA over the past several decades to examine public attitudes toward the police. Very little, however, is known about Chinese perceptions of the police, an area of knowledge valuable for three main reasons. First,



in today's highly globalized world, China cannot be ignored in terms of a more complete picture of citizen evaluations of the police since the country owns one-fifth of the world's total population and its influence on the rest of the world grows fast. Second, China has lower degrees of economic development and political democratization compared to the USA, which provides an ideal setting to test whether theoretical explanations of attitudes toward the police developed largely based on conditions in a capitalist, democratic society can be applied to a socialist, less democratic society. Third, China has undergone rapid and fundamental social changes during the past 30 years, which provides a rare opportunity to examine whether citizens who live in a changing society perceive their police differently from their counterparts in more stable societies.

The purpose of this study is to investigate empirically the extent and correlates of Chinese college students' satisfaction with their police. Two specific questions guide this research:

- (1) What are the global and specific perceptions of the police among Chinese college students?
- (2) What are the factors that account for the variation in Chinese college students' perceptions of the police?

To date, only a small number of studies have empirically explored Chinese attitudes toward the police (Cao and Hou, 2001; Wu and Sun, 2009; Xu, 1999; Xu and Chen, 1995; Yu and Gao, 2001; Zhu *et al.*, 1995). As pioneers, these studies shed useful light on the topic, yet suffered two major limitations. First, although the concept of the perception of police has been recognized as a rather complex, multi-dimensional one (Stoutland, 2001), these studies tended to ignore the measurement of the dependent variable by merely using one single item to measure citizen perception of the police (see Cao and Hou, 2001; Wu and Sun, 2009). This is problematic, since the public might have a quite high overall support for the police as an institution, but not so much when it comes to ratings of individual police organizations, practices, or policies (Cox and Falkenberg, 1987; Hurst and Frank, 2000). Second, previous studies on Chinese perceptions of the police either did not examine factors that may influence such perceptions (see Lin and Xie, 1988; Xu, 1999; Xu and Chen, 1995; Yu and Gao, 2001; Zhu *et al.*, 1995) or only employed a limited number of demographic and attitudinal variables to explain such perceptions (e.g. Cao and Hou, 2001; Wu and Sun, 2009). This study attempts to address these concerns.

Using survey data collected from college students in multiple universities in two Chinese cities, this study represents an improvement over past studies in three areas. First, it examines not just Chinese college students' global satisfaction with the police, but also their more specific views of various areas of police performance including fairness, effectiveness, and integrity. Second, this study incorporates a broader range of explanatory variables to explain Chinese college students' attitudes toward the police, including demographic characteristics, crime and criminal justice experience, perceptions of quality of life, and locality. Finally, this study reviews research on public perceptions of the police published in Chinese academic journals. Thoroughly searching through several nationwide databases maintained in China, this study collected a small number of Chinese empirical studies on the topics of police-community relation in general and public perceptions of the police in particular and included them in the review (see Xu, 1999; Xu and Chen, 1995; Yu and Gao, 2001).

Literature review

This section first reviews the effects of three groups of factors that have been identified by previous research as predictive of public views of the police in and outside of the USA:

- (1) individual demographic;
- (2) experiential factors; and
- (3) attitudinal factors.

Then this section moves to review findings concerning the extent and correlates of Chinese satisfaction with the police.

Factors that shape public perceptions of police

Demographic characteristics. Demographic characteristics, such as race, gender, age, and class, are among the most commonly studied factors. While race has been one of the most consistent predictors of perceptions of the police with racial/ethnic minorities having less positive attitudes toward the police (for a comprehensive review, see Brown and Benedict, 2002; Wu *et al.*, 2009), the review of the effect of race is not included since race is not considered in this study.

Gender has been found by most previous studies as only weakly related to citizen perceptions of the police (e.g. Benedict *et al.*, 2000; Chermak *et al.*, 2001; Huang and Vaughn, 1996; Jesilow *et al.*, 1995; Sampson and Jeglum-Bartusch, 1998). While some studies found gender effects in evaluations of police performance, the results were quite divergent: some reported that females held more favorable attitudes than did males (Apple and O'Brien, 1983; Cao *et al.*, 1996; Huebner *et al.*, 2004; Taylor *et al.*, 2001; Weitzer and Tuch, 2002), but a few others showed opposite patterns (e.g. Correia *et al.*, 1996; Hurst and Frank, 2000). Cao *et al.* (1996) argued that it was reasonable to expect that females thought more positively about the police, as women tended to have less antagonistic contacts with the police than did men.

It has been widely observed that younger citizens tend to have less favorable views of the police than older citizens (e.g. Bridenball and Jesilow, 2008; Dunham and Alpert, 1988; Hurst and Frank, 2000; Murty *et al.*, 1990; Sullivan *et al.*, 1987; Weitzer and Tuch, 2002; Wu *et al.*, 2009). Only a few studies found little support for this relationship (Davis, 1990; Decker, 1981; Parker *et al.*, 1995), or that this relationship was unstable or inconsistent (Correia *et al.*, 1996; Smith and Hawkins, 1973). Some researchers even argued that age was a stronger predictor of attitudes than race, gender, and socialization (Peek *et al.*, 1981; Wilson, 1985). To explain the less positive attitudes toward the police held by youth, two patterns are relevant:

- (1) police have more frequent contacts with young people (Walker, 1992); and
- (2) frequent contacts lead to more conflict and hostile interaction between youth and the police (Bittner, 1990; Walker, 1992).

In addition, Gaines *et al.* (1994) suggested that younger people were more freedom-oriented whereas elderly were more safety-oriented. As such, young people were more likely to engage in risky behaviors while less likely to request services as did elderly citizens and accordingly were more likely to have negative or involuntary police contacts.

A number of empirical studies supported a link between social class and perceptions of the police, with people with lower socioeconomic status (SES) more likely to have less positive views of the police than the more affluent (e.g. Cao *et al.*, 1996; Huang and Vaughn, 1996; Percy, 1980; Sampson and Jeglum-Bartusch, 1998; Smith *et al.*, 1991). It is argued that while people in lower social classes are more likely to be the subjects of police control actions, members of high SES tiers are more inclined to receive service from the police, rely on the police to serve their interests, and even manipulate the police to protect their assumed rights and privileges (Black, 1971; Black and Reiss, 1970; Friedrich, 1980; Reiss, 1971; Sun and Payne, 2004; Sun *et al.*, 2008). A few studies, however, found no such significant effects of class (Alpert and Dunham, 1988; Apple and O'Brien, 1983; Davis, 1990; Frank *et al.*, 1996; Henderson *et al.*, 1997; Sims *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, some researchers found that people with higher income and educational attainment actually viewed the police less positively than those with lower income and educational attainment (e.g. Murphy and Worrall, 1999; Peak *et al.*, 1992; Percy, 1986; Weitzer and Tuch, 1999).

While the effect of educational attainment has been considered in previous studies often through the construction of a class or SES factor, it is less known about the effects of the type of education (as opposed to level of education) on perceptions of the police (Brown and Benedict, 2002). Specifically, different college majors may influence the association between education and perceptions of the police. For example, Brown and Benedict (2002) hypothesized that students who majored in the liberal arts and social sciences would view police more critically than those majoring in a business-related or technical area of study, partially due to their varied ideologies (liberalism versus conservatism) resulting from different academic training. This study thus takes the initiative to test empirically the relationship between college major and attitudes toward the police.

Crime and criminal justice experiences. The effects of direct police contact have attracted much scholarly attention. Carter (1985) revealed that citizen satisfaction decreased as the number of police-citizen contacts increased regardless of the nature of the contacts. Beyond mere contacts, however, most studies showed that the effects of police-citizen contacts on attitudes toward the police varied upon two main factors:

- (1) the type of contact; and
- (2) the performance of police on the scene.

It was found by some studies that citizens who underwent involuntary contacts were less likely than those who had voluntary contacts to hold positive attitudes toward the police (Bordua and Tiftt, 1971; Dean, 1980). Meanwhile, other studies supported a simple correlation that satisfactory police-citizen encounters led to overall satisfaction with police, and vice versa. For instance, one study showed that regardless of whether a contact was voluntary or not, unfair or unsatisfactory treatment decreased the probability of positive assessment of the police (Correia *et al.*, 1996). As such, the actions and performance of officers on the scene are critical. Factors such as police response time (Carter, 1985; Percy, 1980; Priest and Carter, 1999), police taking time to explain their courses of action (Furstenberg and Wellford, 1973), and police protecting procedural fairness during police-citizen encounters (Correia *et al.*, 1996; Cox and White, 1988; Engel, 2005; Frank *et al.*, 2005; Skogan, 2005; Thurman and Reisig, 1996; Tyler, 2005) were all found to be important predictors of citizen satisfaction with the police.

Personal contact with the police is not necessarily a condition on evaluations of the police. The majority of the public does not have any direct experience with the police, but learn about police through indirect, vicarious experience of family members and friends. Unfortunately, empirical investigation on the impact of vicarious experience on perceptions of the police is limited. An exception is Rosenbaum *et al.*'s (2005) study, which found that both positive and negative vicarious experience with the police influenced citizens' views of the police, with positive vicarious experience contributing to less negative views of the police and negative vicarious experience leading to more negative views of the police. Positive vicarious experience, unexpectedly, played a more salient role in changing attitudes toward the police than did negative vicarious experience.

Experience with crime and fear of crime are often found predictive of citizen perceptions of the police because police are the primary social agencies responsible for crime control and public safety. By and large, it was found that victimization was inclined to increase unfavorable attitudes toward the police (Homant *et al.*, 1984; Koenig, 1980; Wu *et al.*, 2009). Cao *et al.* (1996) found that recent victimization and fear of crime had a greater impact on citizens' confidence in police than any of their demographic variables (but see Jackson and Sunshine, 2007). The effects of fear of crime, however, were less certain. Some researchers found that fear of crime exerted a significantly negative effect on confidence in the police (Cao *et al.*, 1996), while others found that fear of crime or threat of criminal victimization did not explain much of the attitudes toward the police (Skogan, 1978; Smith and Hawkins, 1973; Zevitz and Rettammel, 1990).

Another factor that deserves more attention is media influence, as most people derive their knowledge about criminal justice from media consumption (Surette, 2007). The exposure to different types of crime shows (e.g. police drama, reality show, and crime solving) and news consumptions (e.g. networks, local TV stations, magazines) were found to have varied effects on viewers' confidence in the police (Dowler and Zawilski, 2007; Eschholz *et al.*, 2002). Particularly, news coverage of police misconduct was observed to have a consistent, negative effect on attitudes toward the police. News report of police brutality or corruption could increase the public's negative sentiments toward the police, and such influence was especially salient during or right after news coverage of these misconduct incidents (Kaminski and Jefferis, 1998; Sigleman *et al.*, 1997, Tuch and Weitzer, 1997; Weitzer, 2002). In addition, the frequency of exposure to news report of police misconduct had a particularly strong effect on citizens' views of the police and could significantly increase citizens' beliefs in the frequency of police misconduct (Weitzer and Tuch, 2004, 2006).

Quality of life. Public perceptions of the police are also found to be closely related to the feelings of quality of life in general (Cao and Hou, 2001; Cao *et al.*, 1998; Frank *et al.*, 1996; Reisig and Parks, 2000; Wu and Sun, 2009). Dowler and Sparks (2008) found that perceived quality of life was the most important predictor of satisfaction with the police, and the effect of perceived neighborhood conditions was much more substantial than that of race. Similarly, Reisig and Parks (2000) found that residents' perception of neighborhood quality of life, including level of crime, physical decay, and social disorder, exerted the greatest influence on their satisfaction with the police. In addition, empirical evidence showed that personal happiness was a significant predictor of confidence in the police in Japan, Taiwan, and the USA (Cao and Stack, 2005; Cao *et al.*, 1998; Cao and Dai, 2006).

Chinese perceptions of the police

As mentioned earlier, empirical investigation on Chinese perceptions of the police has been sparse. Vastly different data collection methods being used, the existing studies seem to uncover a similar pattern that Chinese citizens, by and large, hold a generally positive view of the police. For example, based on data from the *Asian Barometer* survey conducted in 2003, Wu and Sun (2009) found that about three-quarters of respondents from eight Chinese cities reported that they trusted the police a lot or to a certain degree. Four city-wide studies yielded similar results. First, based on data from UN's *International Victim Survey*, conducted in Beijing in 1994, Zhu *et al.* (1995) reported that a majority of Chinese residents in Beijing (82.9 percent) felt that their police did a good job in controlling crime. Second, based on survey data from 120 residents in Liaoning, Xu and Chen (1995) found that 70 percent of their respondents were very satisfied or satisfied with the police as a whole. Third, Yu and Gao (2001) distributed surveys to 480 residents in Hangzhou and documented that about 70 percent of their respondents were satisfied with police performance in crime solving, 86 percent agreed that police handled cases in a "fair" or "largely fair" way, and 75 percent agreed that police did a good job in comprehensive security management. Fourth, Xu (1999) collected survey data from 194 Hangzhou residents and found that the majority of the respondents (83 percent) were willing to ask the police for help, and about 90 percent of the respondents who asked the police for help reported that they were basically satisfied with the services police provided.

Comparatively speaking, however, Chinese citizens seem to think less positively of the police than their American counterparts. Based on data from the *World Values Survey* in 1991, Cao and Hou (2001) found that Chinese confidence in the police was lower than that of Americans. An early study documented a lower rating of police prestige by residents in Beijing than Americans, Japanese and Taiwanese (Lin and Xie, 1988), which might reflect a less positive view of the police as an occupation held by Chinese.

In terms of factors that are related to Chinese perceptions of the police, some preliminary patterns are identified. Regarding demographic variables, age has been found to be a significant predictor. Younger Chinese citizens had lower levels of trust in the police than older citizens (Wu and Sun, 2009). Traditional indicators of social class, such as educational background, level of income, and employment status, were found to have no significant effect on public trust in the police (Wu and Sun, 2009) or confidence in the police (Cao and Hou, 2001). In terms of experiential factors, one study found that experience of crime reporting was associated with low levels of satisfaction with the police (Zhu *et al.*, 1995). The majority of Chinese citizens in that study who had reported a crime to police (57.5 percent) expressed dissatisfaction with the way police handled their reported crime. Attitudinal predictors seem to have a strong explanatory power in Chinese perceptions of the police. For example, it was found that Chinese citizens who were less likely to accept criminal behavior, were more likely to trust the social system and had higher levels of satisfaction with life, tended to have higher levels of confidence in the police (Cao and Hou, 2001). It was also found that when Chinese citizens were less positive about the competence and integrity of the government, more worried about public safety, crime, and corruption, and less satisfied with their quality of life, they were more likely to have low trust in the police (Wu and Sun, 2009). Clearly, more empirical research is needed to understand the correlates of Chinese perceptions of the police, especially those crime- and criminal justice-related experience factors.

Methods

Data source and sample

Survey data were collected from two Chinese cities during the summer and fall of 2008. The first city is a large, cosmopolitan city in Northern China (hereafter the Northern city) and the second is a small, more homogeneous coastal city in Southeast China (hereafter the Southeast city). In the Northern city, data were collected from two universities, both being large, high-ranking institutions with students originally from different areas of the country. In the Southeast city, data were collected from one medium-size, middle-ranking university with the majority of students being local, in-province. The sampling strategies used in both cities were convenience and snowball samplings. Considering the highly restricted nature of public information in China and the limited resources that the researchers had, a random sampling of students in these universities was impossible. Efforts, however, were made to obtain a sample that had enough variance and representation of the diversity on the demographic makeup and discipline of the students in these institutions.

The first avenue for survey distribution was through dormitory rooms. Most Chinese college students lived in on-campus dorms. One of the researchers went to dozens of dorm rooms in the two universities in the Northern city at evenings when students were most likely to be there, introduced herself, explained the project, and asked the students if they were willing to participate in the study. If the students agreed to fill out the survey, the researcher would return to the room in about half an hour to collect the completed survey. Considering that students were assigned to dorm buildings based on their grade, major, and gender, samples were drawn from different dorm buildings.

The second avenue to reach potential respondents was through classes. The researchers obtained support and assistance from their friends who were faculty members in these universities. The survey was distributed to and collected from students through faculty members or researchers themselves at the beginning of the class. Either way, students were encouraged to ask questions if they had any. Students were also assured that their participation would be completely voluntary and non-participation would not bring any negative consequence to their performance in these classes. Students who declined to participate were thanked for considering to participate and asked to wait quietly while fellow classmates completed the questionnaire.

The last channel to recruit respondents was through personal connections. Based on snowball sampling techniques, one of the researchers asked her friends who were students in these universities to introduce her and this project to their friends and in this way had more students participate. This sampling strategy proved to be helpful in recruiting students from different majors and grades. In addition, being referred to the research project by friends or classmates that the respondents knew and trusted upon gave them more comfort to reveal true opinions.

All participants were informed through written text on the cover page of the questionnaire and verbal directions about the issues of voluntariness, anonymity, and confidentiality. Participants were told that they could withdraw from the study at any time or skip any questions as they wanted. Participants were also reminded not to write their names anywhere on the questionnaires because the researchers did not want to know who they were. All completed surveys were taken back to the USA, kept in locked cabinets in the researchers' offices, and destroyed after one year. The researchers were the only ones who had the access to the completed questionnaires.

A total of 500 surveys were collected. Cases with missing data were dropped from the analysis, resulting in a final sample of 421 students. There were virtually no differences between respondents included in and excluded from the sample, and exclusion did not confound results in any significant way. In the final sample, 296 students were from the Northern city, and the remaining 125 were from the Southeast city. Approximately 59 percent of the students were female and 41 percent were male. The age of the respondents ranged from 17 to 38, with an average of 21.4 years. In terms of year in college, the largest proportion of respondents was freshmen (26.8 percent), followed by sophomore (26.4 percent), postgraduate (21.9 percent), junior (21.1 percent) and senior (3.8 percent). About 41.3 percent of the students were law and medical school majors, 26.1 percent were in natural sciences or engineering, 18.1 percent were in business and economics, 14.0 percent were in social sciences, arts or humanities, and another 0.5 percent identified themselves as in “other” majors. When it came to students’ SES, measured by three variables – i.e. father’s education, mother’s education, and household income – the majority of the students seemed not have an economically advantaged family background. Respectively, 38 percent and 50 percent of the students reported that their father or mother had only middle school education or lower. Over half of the respondents (52 percent) reported that their total household income per month was less than 3,000 RMB (*renminbi* or *yuan*, the Chinese currency; around \$450).

Dependent variables

This study included four dependent variables. They measured four dimensions of Chinese college students’ perceptions of the police, i.e. global satisfaction, and specific evaluations of police fairness, effectiveness, and integrity. The first dependent variable, global satisfaction with the police, was measured by a single item asking respondents in general how satisfied they were with the police officers who served their areas. The response categories included 1 = very dissatisfied, 2 = dissatisfied, 3 = satisfied and 4 = very satisfied.

The second dependent variable, perception of police fairness, was measured by a scale of two items. The respondents were asked if they agreed that “Police treat wealthy people better than poor people” and that “Police treat local people better than non-local people”. The design of the second question was unique. Different from the USA, China has a household registration system which poses a strict control on domestic population mobility. Whether or not a person is a local resident (versus a floating person) could become a salient feature of living experience of that person. Responses to these questions ranged from 1 = strongly agree to 4 = strongly disagree; thus, a higher score indicated a more positive view of police fairness. The scale had a Cronbach’s α of 0.70, suggesting an acceptable internal consistency.

The third dependent variable, perception of police effectiveness, was an additive scale of five items that asked respondents whether they agreed that local police “respond quickly to calls for help and assistance”, “do a good job in solving crime”, “do a good job in preventing crime”, “do a good job in responding to crime victims”, and “are able to maintain order on the streets in the neighborhood”. Response categories ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. A higher score on the scale represented a more favorable view of police effectiveness. The scale had a Cronbach’s α of 0.79, suggesting a good reliability.

The last dependent variable, perception of police integrity, was constructed by an additive scale comprised of three items. The respondents were asked whether they agreed that “local police are honest”, “local police are corrupt”, and “local police often abuse their power”. Responses to these questions ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree. The items about police corruption and abuse of power were reverse coded, so for all three items, the higher the score was, the higher rating the respondents gave to police integrity. The Cronbach’s α was 0.69, suggesting an acceptable reliability.

Independent variables

Three groups of independent variables were examined in this study:

- (1) individual demographic characteristics;
- (2) experience with crime and criminal justice; and
- (3) perception of quality of life.

City effect was controlled. First, demographic variables included gender, age, class, and college major. Gender was a dichotomized variable (0 = male; 1 = female) and age was measured in years. The factor of class was constructed by three items:

- (1) father’s highest level of education;
- (2) mother’s highest level of education; and
- (3) average household income per month.

Both father’s and mother’s education were measured in categories ranging from 1 = illiteracy to 7 = graduate degrees. The household (parents) income per month consisted of ten categories ranging from 1 = less than 1,000 RMB to 10 = 20,000 RMB and above. These three items loaded highly on the factor of class, with factor loadings between 0.75 and 0.90. The factor had an eigenvalue of 2.17 and explained 72 percent of the variance across the items. College major was coded as a dummy variable, with 1 representing disciplines in liberal arts and social sciences and 0 representing disciplines in natural sciences, engineering, and business.

The second group, experience with crime and criminal justice, consisted of five variables. The first variable, personal contact with the police, was tapped by asking the respondents if they had been in contact with the local police for any reason in the past 12 months (0 = no; 1 = yes). The second variable, vicarious experience with the police, was measured by asking the respondents if they had any of their family members, relatives, or close friends be in contact with the local police for any reason in the past 12 months (0 = no; 1 = yes). The third variable was experience of victimization, measured by asking the respondents if they had been a crime victim during the past three years (0 = no; 1 = yes). The fourth variable, fear of crime, was an additive scale summing the responses to one general question asking “How fearful are you about crime in your area?” (answers ranged from 1 = not at all fearful to 4 = very fearful) and two more specific questions asking how often they worried about becoming victim of violent crimes and property crimes respectively (answers ranged from 1 = never to 4 = frequently). The Cronbach’s α for the scale was 0.70. The last experiential factor was media exposure to police misconduct, measured by asking the respondents how often they heard or read (on the radio, television, internet or in the newspapers) about

incidents of police misconduct (such as police use of excessive force, verbal abuse, corruptions, and so on) that occurred somewhere in the nation. The responses ranged from 1 = never to 4 = often.

The third group of independent variables included one variable, i.e. perceived quality of life, which was measured by asking respondents how satisfied they were with the quality of their lives. The responses included four categories from 1 = very dissatisfied to 4 = very satisfied. Lastly, the potential city effect was controlled (0 = the Southeast city; 1 = the Northern city). It should be noted that preliminary data analysis showed that there was no university effect across the two institutions in the Northern city[1]. Thus the university effect was not controlled. Table I displays the descriptive statistics for all variables used in this study.

Analysis

To address the first question about Chinese college students' global and specific perceptions of the police, frequency distributions and descriptive statistics were used. To answer the second question concerning correlates of Chinese college students' perceptions of the police, both ordinal logistic regression and ordinary least squares regression were used. Specifically, ordinal logistic regression was employed to examine one of the dependent variables, global satisfaction with police, which was an ordered categorical variable. The assumption of parallel lines across all levels of the dependent variable for ordinal regression was tested, and the result supported the assumption. The intercorrelations among the independent variables were examined

	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
<i>Dependent variables</i>				
Global satisfaction	2.51	0.65	1.00	4.00
Fairness	3.76	1.41	2.00	8.00
Effectiveness	12.03	2.72	5.00	20.00
Integrity	6.83	1.81	3.00	12.00
<i>Independent and control variables</i>				
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>				
Female	0.59	0.49	0.00	1.00
Age	21.35	2.65	17.00	38.00
Class	0.00	1.00	-1.92	2.55
Liberal arts and social sciences	0.55	0.50	0.00	1.00
<i>Crime and criminal justice experience</i>				
Personal police contact	0.16	0.37	0.00	1.00
Family/friends police contact	0.18	0.38	0.00	1.00
Crime victim	0.24	0.43	0.00	1.00
Fear of crime	7.82	1.86	3.00	12.00
Media exposure	3.02	0.65	1.00	4.00
<i>Quality of life</i>				
Perceived quality of life	2.68	0.64	1.00	4.00
<i>Locality</i>				
The northern city	0.70	0.46	0.00	1.00

Note: n = 421

Table I.
Descriptive statistics for
variables

and none of the correlation coefficients exceeded 0.55. Meanwhile, ordinary least square regression was employed to examine the other three dependent variables, perceptions of fairness, effectiveness and integrity, all of which were continuous variables. For each of the ordinary least square regression, variance inflation factors (VIF) were checked and the results confirmed that multicollinearity was not a concern. The histograms of standardized residual and the normal probability tests (graphs not shown) indicated that the normality of residual errors were not a problem, and by plotting studentized residuals against each independent variable, heterogeneity and non-linearity were found not problems.

Results

Global and specific perceptions of police

How do Chinese college students view their local police? Table II presents the frequency distributions and descriptive statistics of the items that were used to measure college students' global satisfaction with the police and specific satisfaction with police fairness, effectiveness, and integrity. To start with, over half of the sample students expressed a positive view toward the police in general. Specifically, 1.4 percent of the respondents reported that they were "very satisfied" with local police, and 55.1 percent were "satisfied". The rest of the respondents reported that they were either dissatisfied (36.1 percent) or very dissatisfied (7.4 percent) with their local police.

Regarding assessment of specific areas of police performance, the foremost attitudinal pattern observed was that specific attitudes toward the police among Chinese college students were much less positive than their global attitudes. First, the perception of unequal treatment by the police based on citizens' social class or local residency was widespread. Respectively, 84 percent and 80 percent of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that "Police treat wealthy people better than

Dimensions and items	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	Mean	SD
<i>Global satisfaction</i> ^a						
Satisfied with police in general (percent)	7.4	36.1	55.1	1.4	2.50	0.65
<i>Police fairness</i> ^b						
Wealthy treated better than poor (percent)	40.1	43.9	10.5	5.5	1.81	0.83
Local treated better than non-local (percent)	29.0	50.6	17.1	3.3	1.95	0.77
<i>Police effectiveness</i> ^c						
Respond quickly to calls (percent)	12.4	43.9	36.1	7.6	2.39	0.80
Good job in solving crime (percent)	11.6	43.7	39.4	5.2	2.38	0.76
Good job in preventing crime (percent)	15.9	51.3	29.0	3.8	2.21	0.75
Good job in responding to victims (percent)	7.6	48.7	40.4	3.3	2.39	0.68
Able to maintain order on streets (percent)	5.5	30.9	56.5	7.1	2.65	0.69
<i>Police integrity</i> ^c						
Honest	13.1	44.9	37.3	4.8	2.34	0.76
Not corrupt	15.9	46.1	33.3	4.8	2.27	0.78
Not often abuse power	16.2	49.6	29.9	4.3	2.22	0.76

Notes: ^a(1) Very dissatisfied, (2) Dissatisfied, (3) Satisfied, (4) Very satisfied. ^b(1) Strongly agree, (2) Agree, (3) Disagree, (4) Strongly disagree. ^c(1) Strongly disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Agree, (4) Strongly agree. *n* = 421

Table II. Percentage distributions of perceptions of police performance

poor people” and “Police treat local people better than non-local people”. Second, Chinese college students had a mixed view on police effectiveness. One performance area – order maintenance – appeared to be most satisfactory among students. Around 64 percent of the respondents agreed that police were able to maintain order on streets in the area. Evaluations of other performance areas, however, were less optimistic. Merely 44 percent of the respondents agreed that police did a good job in responding to crime victims. A similar percentage of respondents agreed that police responded quickly to calls for help and assistance. The ratings on police ability to prevent crime were especially low – less than 33 percent of the respondents agreed that police did a good job in preventing crime. Third, Chinese college students consistently expressed low confidence in police integrity. Less than half of the respondents agreed that local police were honest (42 percent). Meanwhile, over 60 percent of the respondents thought that local police were corrupt (62 percent) and often abused their power (66 percent).

Factors that shape perceptions of police

What factors are predictive of Chinese college students’ perceptions of the police? Table III presents the results of the multivariate regression models for students’ global satisfaction with the police and specific views of police fairness, effectiveness, and integrity. In the global satisfaction model (ordinal logistic regression results shown in the first panel of Table III), one demographic characteristic, i.e. gender, exerted a significant effect on students’ attitudes toward the police. Female college students were more likely to be satisfied with the police than males. The log odds of satisfaction with the police increased 0.47 units from men to women. Two of the experiential factors –

Variables	Global satisfaction ^a		Fairness ^b		Effectiveness ^b		Integrity ^b	
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>B</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>B</i>	SE
<i>Demographic characteristics</i>								
Female	0.47 *	0.23	0.23	0.15	0.19	0.28	0.10	0.18
Age	0.04	0.04	0.00	0.03	0.03	0.05	-0.04	0.03
Class	0.22	0.12	0.13	0.08	0.21	0.15	0.04	0.10
Liberal arts and social sciences	-0.23	0.25	0.19	0.16	-0.82 **	0.30	-0.35	0.20
<i>Experiential factors</i>								
Personal police contact	0.06	0.30	0.40 *	0.20	0.24	0.37	0.10	0.25
Family/friends police contact	0.08	0.28	-0.17	0.18	0.31	0.34	0.28	0.23
Crime victim	-0.57 *	0.25	-0.12	0.17	-1.20 ***	0.32	-0.33	0.21
Fear of crime	-0.06	0.06	-0.13 ***	0.04	-0.11	0.07	-0.16 ***	0.05
Media exposure	-0.93 ***	0.17	-0.47 ***	0.11	-0.89 ***	0.20	-0.66 ***	0.13
<i>Quality of life factor</i>								
Perceived quality of life	0.63 ***	0.17	0.02	0.11	0.58 **	0.21	0.33 *	0.14
<i>Locality</i>								
The northern city	0.90 **	0.29	-0.52 **	0.19	-0.26	0.36	-0.15	0.24
<i>R</i> ²	0.25		0.11		0.16		0.16	

Notes: ^aOrdered logit estimates. ^bOLS estimates. **p* ≤ 0.05; ***p* ≤ 0.01; ****p* ≤ 0.001; *n* = 421

Table III.
Multivariate regression
summary

i.e. victimization and media exposure – also shaped students' overall view of the police. Both the experience of being a crime victim and frequent exposure to media reports of police misconduct lowered the odds of overall satisfaction with the police. The effect of quality of life was also noticeable. For a one-unit increase in students' satisfaction with their life quality, a 0.63-unit increase was expected in the log odds of their global satisfaction with the police. Finally, locality was important. Students in the Northern city, compared to their Southeast counterparts, expected a 0.90-unit increase in the log odds scale pertaining to their satisfaction with the police.

The second panel in Table III shows the ordinary least squares regression results for the police fairness model. Among the independent variables, three had significant effects on the outcome variable, all of which being experiential variables. Respondents who had recent personal contacts with police tended to agree that the police gave equal treatment to citizens, regardless of citizens' social class and local residency. Meanwhile, fear of crime was found to be negatively related to respondents' view of police fairness. Those who had a higher level of fear of crime had a lower level of satisfaction with police fairness. Finally, media exposure to police misconduct was negatively associated with students' perception of police fairness. Respondents who were exposed to more media depictions of police misconduct tended to rate police fairness significantly lower. Finally, locality made a difference. Students in the Northern city thought less positively of police fairness than did those in the Southeast city. The explanatory power of the independent variables in the fairness model was relatively weak, indicated by an R^2 of 0.11.

Looking at the effectiveness model, students' evaluation was significantly related to four factors:

- (1) college major;
- (2) victimization;
- (3) media exposure; and
- (4) perceived quality of life.

College students who majored in liberal arts and social sciences were found to hold a more critical view of police effectiveness than those who majored in sciences, engineering, and business. Not surprisingly, crime victims rated police effectiveness significantly lower than those who did not have recent victimization. Meanwhile, respondents who experienced more media coverage of police misconduct rated police effectiveness lower than those exposed to less media coverage of police misconduct. Finally, respondents who perceived their quality of life positively tended to perceive police performance in crime control, order maintenance, and service provision positively. About 16 percent of the variation in Chinese college students' perception of police effectiveness was accounted for by the explanatory variables.

The last panel of Table III displays the results from the integrity model. Three independent variables were significant predictors of students' view of police integrity:

- (1) fear of crime;
- (2) media exposure; and
- (3) perceived quality of life.

The more fearful the respondents were about crime and the more exposed they were to media coverage of police misconduct, the less favorable views they held about the integrity of the local police. On the other hand, the more satisfied the respondents were with their quality of life, the more positive they were about police integrity. The independent and control variables together explained approximately 16 percent of the variation in Chinese college students' perception of police integrity.

Discussion

Several interesting findings emerged from this study. First, the perceptions of the police among Chinese college students cannot simply be described as largely "positive" or "negative", or "satisfied" or "dissatisfied", because their perceptions are heavily conditioned on which areas of police performance that are examined. This study found that while over half of the students expressed a global satisfaction with the police, they held substantially less positive views of police fairness, effectiveness, and integrity. In fact, the vast majority of the respondents did not believe that their local police treated wealthy and poor citizens equally, or local and non-local residents equally. Similarly, a majority of respondents did not consider their local police as honest, upright, or ethical, and over half of the respondents had doubts regarding the police's ability to effectively respond to crime, solve crime, prevent crime, or handle crime victims.

Compared to previous research (e.g. Wu and Sun, 2009; Xu and Chen, 1995; Yu and Gao, 2001), this study seems to paint a much more gloomy picture of Chinese perceptions of the police. It is possible that college students (the sample of this study) indeed evaluate the police more critically than the general public (samples of previous studies). For one thing, college students tend to be young, and previous research has shown that younger people are more likely than older people to view police negatively. Also, college students tend to be more liberal and might be more accepting of ideas such as regulation of police power and protection of human rights. There are, however, two other possibilities. First, previous studies such as that of Wu and Sun (2009) did not use multiple items to capture the multifaceted nature of public perceptions of the police. It is possible that if they did, they might have reached a similar result – that Chinese citizens viewed specific areas of police performance more negatively than their global view of the police. Second, previous studies conducted by Chinese police officers (e.g. Xu and Chen, 1995; Yu and Gao, 2001) might not follow a rigorous research procedure. Particularly, principles of voluntariness, anonymity and confidentiality might not be as well implemented as in this study, and thus respondents may not feel comfortable enough to freely express their opinions or might inflate their positive assessment of the police. Given all these possibilities, it is clear that more empirical research is warranted to gauge the extent of Chinese satisfaction with the police and police performance.

Second, crime and criminal justice experiences appear to be quite predictive of Chinese college students' evaluations of the police. With the exception of family/friend contacts with police, each of the other experiential factors was closely related to at least one attitudinal model, with media exposure significant in all four models and victimization and fear of crime in two models. This finding is in line with results from most studies conducted in the USA, which found that victimization, fear of crime, and media exposure were important predictors of citizen perceptions of the police (e.g. Cao *et al.*, 1996; Homant *et al.*, 1984; Koenig, 1980; Weitzer and Tuch, 2004; Wu *et al.*, 2009). This finding confirms the inadequacy of previous research on Chinese attitudes toward the police, since none of

them have considered this line of variables. Future research on this topic clearly should continue incorporating crime and criminal justice factors into analysis.

Finally, regarding perceptions of quality of life and locality matter in explaining Chinese college students' perceptions of the police, it is not surprising to see a positive connection between perceived quality of life and evaluations of police performance. This finding is consistent with results from previous research based on both Chinese and American data (Cao and Hou, 2001; Cao *et al.*, 1998; Dowler and Sparks, 2008; Frank *et al.*, 1996; Reisig and Parks, 2000; Wu and Sun, 2009). What is intriguing is the effect of locality. While students in the Northern city were more likely than those in the Southeast city to have higher global satisfaction with the police, they had lower satisfaction with police fairness.

This seemingly contradictory result might reflect the variations in the two cities, the police who serve the cities, and the students who live in the cities. On one hand, police in the large Northern city overall tend to have a stronger education and training background than those in the small Southeast city. This might contribute to a higher professionalism and better service provided by the Northern city police, which could lead to more positive overall feedback from the public. On the other hand, to explain the less favorable views of police fairness held by students in the Northern city, we might need to take into consideration the fact that students in the Northern city are mostly non-local, while students in the Southeast city are mostly local. It is reasonable to expect that people who are in the residential minority group (i.e. non-locals) would have a higher level of sensitiveness to differential treatment by the criminal justice system based on citizens' residential status than people who are residential majorities (i.e. locals). This reasoning is in line with the group position thesis in the USA. The thesis posits that an individual's view of the police reflects the collective sentiments of the group that he/she belongs to, and minorities as a group tend to perceive police as protecting the majority group's interests and controlling their own group, and thus hold less favorable views of the police (Blumer, 1958; Bobo and Hutchings, 1996; Bobo and Tuan, 2006; Weitzer and Tuch, 2006). Applying this argument to China, where residential mobility is highly controlled, residential majorities are more likely to perceive police as critical and scarce resources with which their interests and superiority are ensured, while residential minorities are more likely to perceive police as controlling themselves unfairly. More empirical data are needed to either support or refute these speculations.

Before discussing policy implications, several limitations associated with this study should be noted. First, the findings from this study have a limited generalizability because data were collected from a small number of universities, and within each university a non-probability sampling method was used. Although the universities in the two cities have substantial variations (e.g. north versus south, high-ranking versus middle ranking, and national versus regional), they could not represent sufficiently the diverse nature of all Chinese universities. As such, we believe that our findings can be most appropriately generalized to college students who study in similar types of institutions in the same geographical areas. Future research should therefore recruit more students from universities with different characteristics in different geographical areas (e.g. smaller colleges in rural China).

Second, some of the measures in this study may not adequately reflect the complex connections between individual experiences and perceptions of police performance. For

example, the variable “contact with police” was measured by a single item asking whether students had had a recent encounter with the police. A better measure should include more information such as the reason for the contact (e.g. traffic violation versus asking officers for information), type of contact (e.g. voluntary versus involuntary), and police performance during the contact (e.g. polite versus rude) to untangle the link between contact with police and satisfaction with police. Similarly, the measurement of the variable “quality of life” could be improved by tapping into citizens’ perceptions of various aspects of quality of life.

Thirdly, due to the cross-sectional nature of this study, causal inference is difficult to make. Like most other studies on attitudes toward the police, this study could only provide a “snapshot” of Chinese college students’ perceptions of the police and the characteristics associated with such perceptions at a specific point in time. Future research could collect observational data through methods such as police “ride-alongs” and document the causal relationship between factors, such as resident-police interactions and citizen perceptions of the police.

The findings of this research bear some important implications for policy. It is found in this study that experiential factors, rather than individual background characteristics, are significant predictors of college students’ evaluations of the police. As such, efforts should be made to generate more positive experiences for the public, including college students. This may be easier said than done in a society where citizens often complain about the absence of integrity and accountability of the police while police officers frequently raise concerns about a lack of respect for law and authority by citizens. Nevertheless, it is never too late to seek effective ways to cultivate such positive experiences. To improve citizens’ understanding of the police and foster better police-community relations, Chinese police administrators should consider implementing useful programs and practices, such as citizen police academy, school resource officers, and citizen ride-along programs, which have been widely used by American police departments. These activities can be designed to specifically target college students and can be actively promoted on police departments’ websites and in the public media.

Another area that is worthy of consideration is improving the image of the police through the media. The key is not to influence the portrait of police officers and their activities reported by the state-owned newspapers and television stations, since the official media seldom carries negative news regarding the police. Instead, attention should be paid to information that is available on the internet, which has become the primary source of reference for many educated and young Chinese citizens. Political leaders and police administrators need to act swiftly to refute any rumors or incorrect information about illegal or corrupt police behavior posted on the internet and, even more importantly, to admit wrongdoing and take responsibility if any violations of law or policies by officers or departments are confirmed.

Police departments can also take advantage of the power of the internet to enhance the quality of their services by, for example, allowing citizens to apply for various licenses and household registration, pay traffic fines, report crimes, and make complaints online. Providing quality services to citizens can serve as a starting point to improve citizens’ perceptions of the police. Eventually, the establishment of an open and accountable police force that serves and protects the interests of the people rather

than political and party leaders and wealthy businessmen has to be the ultimate goal in the hearts and minds of all police officers and administrators.

Note

1. Specifically, cross-tabulation was used to examine potential university-level variation in college students' global satisfaction with the police, and mean comparison was used to compare the average levels of positive assessment of police fairness, effectiveness, and integrity between students in the two universities.

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