COMMUNITY AND POLICING STRATEGIES: A CHINESE APPROACH TO CRIME CONTROL

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This article explores the functions of community, an important institution of social control in China. The specific control functions are grounded in a unique macro-control system, which is totally different from that typical of Western Countries. Policing strategies depends strongly on mass participation. Informal social control is particularly significant as it appears to play a more important role in controlling and preventing crime in Chinese society than in the Western world. Also, this article discusses strength and weakness of the Chinese approach to control of crime.

Keywords: Community; Policing strategy; Social control; Neighborhood; Committee

Appeals to community for crime control and prevention is becoming more and more conspicuous all over the world today. Just as Dennis Rosenbaum states: “We are entering the heyday of community crime prevention. Never before has the notion of citizen involvement in crime prevention received such widespread support from law enforcement, the media, the general public, the federal government, and even the academic community” (1987: 103). In China, the comprehensive strategies, which imply that, under the guidance of the central government, the whole society is fully mobilized to take all kinds of measures to prevent crimes and reform criminals so as to maintain a peaceful social order, place a greater emphasis on functions of community in social control and socialization of people.

The terms “social control” and “community” are used so frequently today that they are often assumed that everyone means the same thing when using them. Yet definitions of social control and community differ widely in meanings and contents. “Social control (both as a concept and a notion) is currently interpreted in different ways in different academic disciplines, and is utilized for a variety of purposes” (Wardak, 2000: 15). As in other countries, there are quite big differences within criminological literature in China. Generally speaking, however, in China, “social control” is considered as a generic term for responding to nonconformity, including both the formal and informal ways society has developed to help ensure conformity to social norms. The Chinese perspective of social control seems consistent with Kimball Young’s view that the aims of social control are “to bring about conformity, solidarity, and continuity of a particular group or society” (Young, 1942: 898). However, due to different cultures and traditions, Chinese society has developed very specific models
of social control because the specific control functions are grounded in a unique macro-control system, which is totally different from that typical of Western Countries. “Community” in the Western world “is both a signifier and referent around which complex and contradictory effects, meanings and definitional struggles coalesce” (Crawford, 1995: 98), but in China it is principally defined in geographical terms. It is usually defined as an area in which a bounded territory is named and identified by residents. The number of households and people in a community fluctuates, depending on different factors within a community, such as residential areas, businesses, factories, markets, hotels and so on.

Based on the tradition of management of social conflict through a combination of popular mediation and discipline sanctions applied through an administrative rather than an adjudicative process, emphasizing on importance of community in crime control and prevention has been a characteristic of the Chinese social control system. Assisting the government in maintaining social order is both responsibility and willingness of a community. On the one hand, Community, organized as an informal institution of social control, has become both an arm of higher-level control and a means by which the community can manage and solve its own affairs on the spot. Therefore, community, is charged with the responsibility of mobilizing residents to respond to the government’s call for observance of laws, leading the residents in maintaining social order and public security, and settling disputes among residents. On the other hand, not only does the Chinese belief that society is both a cause and a victim of crime confer on society the right and duty to be involved in such matters, but also the deep-seated interdependency and communitarianism in Chinese society and culture are also conductive to the public support and enthusiasm for dealing with any problems affecting the community. This in turn helps build interpersonal ties and retain a considerable sense of community. Therefore, the social control in China is maintained by “the capacity of society’s members to understand one another and to act in concert in achieving common goals through common rules of behavior” (Johnson, 1983: 152–153). Chinese people do not mind only their own business; they prefer to handle deviant problems in their neighborhood rather than hand them over to professionals. As a result, almost all members of the society seem to have become active controllers of crime instead of silent observers.

The strong emphasis on a communal existence, with powerful neighborhood committees, produces throughout the country a social control net that is much different from that present in Western countries. Although the pendulum is swinging from popular justice toward a more formal justice system, reaction to deviant behavior is still largely shaped by local sentiment. The organization of neighborhoods is grounded in mass participation through a network of committees. These popular justice institutions, such as the mediation committee and public security committee, are both proactive and reactive in identifying potentially troublesome social situations, preventing crime, resolving conflicts and dealing with offensive behavior.

THE FUNCTIONS OF COMMUNITY

The Public Security Committee

The public security committees, formed by elections at the grass-roots level, almost in every community, are considered to be instrumental in maintaining and improving
public order and constitute a link between police and the masses. Most commonly, these committees are composed of local cadres and interested persons of the neighborhood, including retired people. The common criteria are ideological correctness and positive personality qualities, however, knowledge and ability to handle public affairs are more and more emphasized. In Western literature, these low level people’s committees tend to be viewed as informal forms of control, but, in reality, they are constituted in China as quite formal institutions of social control. They are officially set up and integrated into the operation of the formal agencies. Therefore, they may be regarded as the first level of the government structure which certainly has a great impact on the nature of local crime.

The task of the public security committees is to assist police in matters of social order, under the leadership of the local police. They are empowered to monitor and examine potential problems of social order, block opportunities for crime and be the first response point when matters are brought to their attention. They cultivate “activists” (jiji fengzi) to assist them with their onerous tasks and organize “residents’ teams of protection” (lianfangdui) for guard and patrol duty. For example, they are supposed to be on the look out for illegal behavior and suspicious persons. Once they find suspicious people or activity in the neighborhood, they report to the police. The police may bring individuals who do not have a proper identification or do not provide a satisfactory justification for their presence to the local police station and interrogate them. Unlike Western values, both the traditional Chinese philosophy and socialist ideology conceive the individual to be primarily a member of a network of groups, give priority to duty over privacy, and favor external intervention in personal affairs (Li, 1979: 225). Peers, friends and immediate neighbors have little compunction about taking action when deviance suspected. Since the informer is not an object of disdain as in the West, the public security committees are effective in mobilizing residents in cooperation with the local police.

In order to carry out the comprehensive strategies, the entire social control system has been mobilized in the name of “legal education”. This includes training the masses to understand specific behavior standards and ways of operation of the social control system and mobilizing and organizing people to fulfill the task of social control. As a part of this effort, neighborhood committees often organize local residents to attend neighborhood meetings and they regularly warn residents to be vigilant against disorder. Individuals who commit deviant acts may be targeted for criticism at neighborhood meetings. Serious crimes are likely to bring referrals for criminal processing.

In general, the public security committees administer many social control activities and play a very important role in keeping the social order. They are in fact the main channels to get to the masses in maintaining social order and bridges between the police agencies and the masses. Of course, they are not limited to seeking out and responding to incidents of criminal behavior. They also handle many domestic problems (e.g., drinking, fighting, noise, etc.), inter-family squabbles, etc. Under this circumstance, no individual can easily escape the social pressure to conform to the proper code of conduct which is based on the tradition of more than 2000 years and the communist ideology.

The public security committee established by the Qinghe Street of Heping district, Tianjin has been said to be a successful model because it led to seven ‘crime free’ years in an area previously renowned for its high rates of crime. Among routine activities of this committee are: patrolling the neighborhood, checking on local security and ensuring that the neighborhood life is run in an orderly manner. They are also
charged with the task of organizing educational programs for the young people of the district. They organize youths into small groups and give lectures on the law and morals. Additionally, they send youths to local factories and farms to work alongside the laborers. This combination of small group activities centering upon both education and labor was designed to counter the emergence of youth crime and to strengthen the ideological commitment of the young to the socialist legality (Dong and Sun, 1991: 81–83).

The economic reform that started in 1978 has weakened community bonds, however, the reforms in policing strategies have led to the strengthening rather than weakening of mass-line style policing. The mass-line organizations still constitute the basis of contemporary community policing and are vehicles of self-policing which deemphasizes bureaucratic features and the professionalization of policing. Chinese government has exerted greater effort to ensure that social order is maintained. Not only has the number of police officers and resources been increased but also the neighborhood security organizations have been re-emphasized. Between 1986 and 1989, there has been a 10.8% increase in the number of public security committees in cities and a 10.8% increase in membership (or 92,576 people). Other public security organizations also show the same trend. For example, the number of small public security groups in cities and towns grew by 20.4% (or 80,549) over this period. In 1991, urban and rural communities have formed 1.17 million public security committees, whose 12 million members were responsible for organizing local residents to maintain social order (Wang Zhongfang, 1989; The Law yearbook of China – 1991, 1992). By 1997, the number of public security committees reached 1.67 million with a total of 17.2 million people. Besides, there were innumerable small public security groups or residents’ teams of protection. (Liu, 1998: 237).

**The Mediation Committee**

At the neighborhood level, the mediation committee is another main factor in the functioning of the Chinese legal system and social control system. The unusual importance of mediation may be one of the most striking aspects of the social control of China. To the Chinese, law is not an ideal mechanism for solving social disputes. Chinese have traditionally favored mediation and compromise over litigation. The Chinese have long believed that behavior which is directed by moral values is far superior to behavior which is coerced by laws and fear of punishment (Li, 1978). Therefore, in traditional and even contemporary China, involvement in the courts is an experience to be tried to avoid although there are been dramatic increase in civil as well as other cases in Chinese courts in recent years. Based on Chinese traditional values, mediation has been emphasized in Chinese society. The 1982 Constitution of the People’s Republic of China and the Regulation on People Mediation Organization give explicit recognition to the existence of the mediation committee. Article 111 of the Constitution provides:

The relationship between the residents’ and villagers’ committees and the grassroots organs of state power is prescribed by law.

The residents’ and villagers’ committees establish committees for people’s mediation, public security and public health affairs, deal with public affairs in their areas, mediate civil disputes, help maintain public order and convey residents’ opinions and demands and make suggestions to the people’s government. (quoted from the English translation of the 1982 Constitution of the PRC)
The term “mediation” here refers to the range of methods by which parties seek to resolve, by an extrajudicial process, a civil dispute or dispose a minor criminal matter without imposing binding decision. It also is a means by which justice is provided at the lowest level – the neighborhood. Mediation committees, which is composed of 7–11 members, operate at the neighborhood level. The membership of mediation committees is established on the basis of popular local elections and includes mainly the local cadres and some volunteers. Terms of service are for three years with re-election permissible. The basic qualification for running in these elections is ideological correctness, level of law and policy and positive interest in helping with neighborhood mediation.

The mediation committee serves the purpose of both settling civil disputes and disposing some kinds of deviant cases, such as minor theft, simple assault and fighting, educating the people about the law and consequences of disobedience, strengthening social harmony and maintaining social order. In the process of mediation, the mediators may not only establish communication between parties but may define the issues, decide fact and recommend the terms of a settlement. They even may make a tentative or advisory decision. However, mediation is optional. People are free to utilize the courts to solve their disputes. Moreover, if any of the disputants is dissatisfied with the outcome of the mediation process, the case may still be taken to the courts. The coexistence of the out-of-court mediation system and legal system is not in conflict, they “are being carefully aligned to preserve the broad-based involvement of mediation committees (with increased legal awareness) and to build a professionalized legal institution (heavily dependent on an effective out-of-door control system)...the relationship between the two is largely cooperative, mostly because their functions at this time are complementary” (Clark, 1989: 67).

Regarding other deviant cases, such as assault or petty theft, mediators dispose the cases through the use of help-education and reparations to the victim. They do not label individuals as criminal and have no authority to inflict criminal punishment. The police may be invited by the committee to offer advice and help, but they are not a formal part of mediation. They do not formally charge a person with an offense at the mediation committee level. To most Chinese minds, the minor offenses brought to mediation are hardly proper for formal punishment. The corrective actions such as restitution of the property, public criticism, or full payment for damage inflicted are considered to be sufficient when coupled with the remedial actions mentioned above. Surveys (Jiang Bo and Dai Yisheng, 1990) conducted in some provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions show that criminal cases resulting from aggravated civil disputes constitute a large part of criminal offences. In some places, cases of intentional homicide resulting from civil disputes made up to 80% of all cases of homicide. Mediation among people is believed to play an important part in reducing such crimes. As Yang Yonglin, the former Vice Minister of Justice, said: “When a mediator discovers a problem he has an obligation to go to those people. I believe if this were not done the problems would get larger” (Delegation Journal, 1983: 31). The principle of mediation is to intervene at the first stage of trouble. This is believed to be a proactive measure of crime prevention. Using persuasion-education and mediation to handle disputes among people is still a firm policy. The basic method is to conduct energetic political and legal education and propagandize law and discipline, thereby heightening their political–legal awareness and preventing or reducing the occurrence of disputes. Of course, different methods and forms of mediation may be adopted to
correspond to the different nature of disputes. Yet, at present, most civil disputes between individuals are still settled by extrajudicial mediation. According to the statistics, in 1987, there were 980,325 mediation committees and a total of 6,205,813 mediators in China (Jing Bo and Dai Yisheng, 1990). By 1994, there were 1,009,407 mediation committees with a total of 9,766,519 mediators (The Law Yearbook of China – 1994, 1995: 1080). These mediation committees settled over 52.39 million cases of civil disputes from 1985–1993 (The Law Yearbook of China – 1993, 1994: 1047).

In general, emphasizing informal and community-based models of conflict-resolution appears to contribute to preserving traditional values. The use of community as the vehicle of government control as exemplified in the public security committees and mediation committees is very obvious. In the contemporary Chinese society, such social institutions, although less conspicuous and apparent, have survived as the key site of education and control. They exercise the great intervening influence in a person’s relation with the state and society in general. Therefore, they are still believed to be effective in preventing crime while at the same time supporting the formal criminal justice system.

The System of Household Registration

As a means of policing and social control, the system of community-based household registration has had very long history in China. After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Chinese government established the “hukou” system, an administrative system of household registration (HRS). According to “The Regulations on Household Registration in the People’s Republic of China”, issued on January 9, 1958, the goal of the household registration system was to “maintain social order, to protect the citizens' rights and interests, and serve socialist construction.” This system is very important for keeping under control all citizens of a city, not just criminal transgressors, because its functions go far beyond ordinary public security and control of criminal deviance. Any urban resident who wishes to obtain a regular job, school admission at all levels, housing, passport or marriage certificate, or (from the early 1950s to the early 1980s) rationed food and clothing must have valid household registration. It is the basic identification instrument of every urban citizen throughout his or her life.

While functioning as an important structure of policing and social control, the hukou carries out the vital task of controlling the movement of the population so as to maintain a sense of stability. In particular, it acts to forestall the occurrence of large-scale migration of the rural population into the cities. Because China has an enormous agrarian population, its land resources are insufficient. The existence of surplus rural labor is thus inevitable. Disparities also exist between the levels of economic development in the cities and countryside. Apart from political and economic considerations, unchecked rural–urban migration can be hazardous to social order and public security. Therefore, hukou is one of the main instruments of controlling both deviance and migration.

The household registration system is administered by gong’an organs (police). A neighborhood police station is established in every community. Since the early 1950s, each neighborhood police station has to have a “household registration section” (huji ke). The census police officer in a neighborhood station is responsible for all
families living in the defined geographical area. He or she will record births, deaths and movement of people into and out of this area. A person wishing to move out of an area, or take a trip to the frontier areas must obtain permission, usually in the form of a certificate, from the local police station. A person moving into or visiting a neighborhood for a certain time must register with the police, too.

Since 1978, the economic reform has brought about tremendous economic growth and development. The rate of urbanization has been on the rise since then. Modernization and industrialization have attracted the surplus laborers to move from rural areas to the cities. With the breakdown of the system of the people’s commune, the new rural responsibility system has created millions of surplus peasants in the countryside. They are moving to the cities to seek employment. For example, in 1985, the number of temporary residents in Beijing was 0.66 million which constituted 12.6% of all residents (Beijing Wanbao, 1985). By 1994, the floating population of Beijing reached 3 millions (Du, 1997: 153). In reality, the problems Beijing faces are now common to all Chinese cities. For example, in 1993, the floating population of Shanghai and Guangzhou respectively was 2.81 millions and 2.5 millions (Du, 1997: 153). At the same time, state enterprise reforms in the cities have made many urban workers redundant. Some of them migrate to other cities in search of work. To recapitulate, the combined forces of the urban pull and rural push triggered off an unprecedented wave of spontaneous migration in China at the time when rationalization and marketization of employment policies reduced demand for labor.

Migrants offer a source of cheap labor supply to enterprises in the cities. They, however, also contribute to both the planning problems, related to such areas as transportation, housing, provision of public utilities and pollution, and the law and order problems, such as increased crime and reduced ability to monitor and control the movement of people. They venture into the cities seeking better paid jobs and an improved standard of living. Many, however, experience disappointment and dissatisfaction. When job opportunities are not forthcoming or when the harsh working environment becomes intolerable, some migrants may turn to crime. At the same time, conflicts often occur between migrants from different provinces owing to their diverse background. There is a greater tendency to resort to violence to settle their disputes as a result of the frustration and pressure they experience. Reports of migrants being culprits of social disorder and other delinquent acts are common. The floating population was considered a disabling force in cities. The records of courts in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou show that criminal cases involved outsiders respectively reached 46.2%, 59.7% and 63% of all criminal cases in 1994 (Wang, 1994: 36; Zhang, 1995: 17).

The increasingly level of labor mobility and the rise of free markets greatly undermined the effect of the hukou and its ability to monitor and contain the movement of the population. The hukou, once an effective and important mode of controlling the movement of the population, has proved to be inadequate and ineffective to serve its principal task of keeping rural people from the cities. The hukou control methods, developed for a stable population, have been jeopardized with the breakdown in the effectiveness of the system of household registration. By 1984–85, measures of urban reform and management were called for. As a part of this effort, a supplementary system of issuing Personal Identity Cards (shenfenzheng) was established in 1985 by the Law on Regulations Governing the Personal Identity Card of the People's Republic of China. According to the Regulations, all adult citizens (18 or over) were
issued with personal identity cards to establish their citizen status. This system was mainly designed to overcome problems such as the inability of people to establish their identity by an official document when they moved away from their place of household registration. The Personal Identity Card is, to some degree, a modification of the *hukou* rather than a substitute for it. It only takes over the nonterritorially based policing functions of the register, while the *hukou* is still used as an important reference in addition to the Personal Identity Card. The Personal Identity Card system is, in essence, a system of registration by which the movement of population is monitored, policed and managed. This system offers a simpler and more direct means of policing the migrants. At present, this system has been fully implemented all over the country, and travel without the Personal Identity Card is impossible.

It is thus clear that difference modes and systems of household registration have been implemented in contemporary China. These systems have always been constructed upon and organized around the household and the community. The internal order and relations of the family and community were thus linked to the order and stability of the state. Apart from providing a structure for promoting mutual aid and support in the community, the registration systems have, to a greater or lesser degree, featured the masses as a means of policing by obligating households to mutually check on one another. “The restrictive registration system works as effectively as it does not only due to the vigilance of the police but because so many of the necessities of life in urban areas are bureaucratically controlled and require urban household registrations (at a minimum) in order for one to have access to them” (Whyte, 1988: 265–266).

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY POLICE

To the Chinese mind, police and judicial organs are essential, but they are not deemed sufficient to rely on them alone. In fact, there is a very low police to population ratio. In China, there were 1.2 million professional police and 600,000 armed police in 1990. The ratio of about one police officer for every 1,400 people (Li Qiwei and Chui Xiaofang, 1991) is well below the standard found in various Western societies or around one officer for every 500 people (“A New Perspective”, 1991). In China, policing policy is to rely on the “mass line”, a product of the early Chinese communists’ faith in the innate wisdom of the masses, which means that the people are mobilized as part of a board-based comprehensive system of social control. Therefore, the so-called mass-line organizations, such as the public security committees, are considered to be the main channel to the masses. It is the reliance upon and coordination with these committees that is described in current police parlance as “the mass-line in policing” (“An outline”, 1985: 85).

As those in many other countries, the Chinese police have realized that good cooperation of the public is crucial to successful crime control and prevention. Without the support and cooperation of the people, the police cannot function. The dependence on mass support and cooperation, combined with the Chinese belief that it is right and necessary to intervene early before minor offences grow into serious crimes, may constitute a unique Chinese policing style. This policing style also promotes establishment of good relationship between the police and residents because “the vast majority of citizen–police interaction takes place at the neighborhood level. These neighborhood police have the opportunity to build durable relationships with
the people of their area, provide needed services to the ill and the elderly, and have the greatest opportunity to display the therapeutic, conciliatory, and compensatory styles that lend to garner more goodwill than does the penal approach” (Bracey, 1989: 139). Putting the mass line into operation is primarily the responsibility of the police. Therefore, the police, specifically those working in neighborhood police stations always work closely with local government and other social institutions and take economic, educational, administrative and legal measures in order to maintain public order. This mandate can be interpreted as calling on the police to prevent crime by responding to many situations in an alternative, non-penal manner (Bracey, 1989: 134). For example, while the police participate directly in the early social-education intervention, they are not concerned with law and punishment as such, but rather with helping juvenile offenders become law-abiding and useful citizens. Therefore, the characteristic Chinese mode of police response is largely non-penal. In such a way, the police system in China is more attuned to a model of public service rather than a model of law enforcement found in the Western world. Decentralization of police organization and reorientation of police roles certainly reduce the gap between the police and the public.

For many people in countries with a heritage of individual rights and civil liberties, the Chinese police may play too many roles compared to the police in their own countries. Moreover, some of the roles may be perceived as not being police business. Indeed, in Western countries, police intervention is mostly limited to situations where they believe that an offence has been committed and an arrest should be made. Otherwise, the intervention may be considered inappropriate. In China, due to the requirements of the comprehensive strategies and the belief of early intervention, the police are expected to respond to minor juvenile offences in the early stage and actively participate in early social-educational intervention to act in concert with the relevant mass groups. They not only provide community surveillance, but also conduct many education programs at the neighborhood level, such as distributing legal materials and educating the residents in the neighborhood about laws and rights; holding community meetings to discuss justice and social problems; preparing messages involving legal and crime prevention matters and persuading residents of the necessity of rules for public security and individual protection; and visiting offenders and their families to determine what the problem is, seek solutions outside of the criminal justice system and help them solve such problems as employment. Some of these functions may sound similar to those implied by the community policing model in the West, but in the Chinese context they involve more direct ideological work and a greater emphasis on penetrating the daily life of the communities policed. This is partly because “a community consensus would have been reached concerning both the question of guilt and the issue of the severity of the sanction. This consensus would strongly influence and constrain the actions by the police” (Li, 1978: 69).

However, China is changing. With development of economy, the population becomes more mobile. This situation, undoubtedly, affects the local sense of community and reduces ability of social control of community. Therefore, the police in China have adopted some new methods of maintaining social order. In some cases, for example, the police station in neighborhood community may sign a contract with local groups, such as businesses, factories and schools, in order to carry out the so-called economic insurance responsibility system (jingji chengbao zerenzhi) through which economic inducements and penalties are allotted depending on the
level of social order in a certain area. The intervention by the police is believed to be able to put a greater pressure on local social groups and residents and strengthen social order. Whyte and Parish (1984) supported the argument that the influence of the low-level neighborhood committees is strengthened by their association with the police. The extent and the diversity of activity performed by the Chinese police indicate that community policing functions as the link between the legal professionals and the general public. Also, they reflect the need to include the public in controlling crime. Depending on the mass participation can help to launch a many-pronged attack on crime involving re-education, mediation, opportunity removal, resource mobilization, targeting the roots of crime, and problem-solving. It is thus clear that the Chinese police both a prime force in law enforcement and play an important role in the elaborate system of informal social control.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

After 1949, in order to keep peaceful social order, the Chinese government quickly re-established the social control system. The multiple mechanisms for social control built into the urban neighborhood structure illustrate great concern the Chinese government has for social order. The control mechanism is intended to ensure, as much as possible, that the whole society has no “dead corners”, that is areas where criminals have no place to hide. Besides centralized control systems, such as a hierarchical Communist Party, state control over the mass media and an extensive police system, a highly penetrating grass-roots organizational network plays an important role in promoting tight social control and orderly behavior in Chinese society. This network of groups must strengthen the pervasive net of social control, reinforce social cohesiveness and discourage rather than encourage crime.

The Chinese crime control does not just work from the top down through the formal criminal justice system but, and above all, from the bottom up. It relies strongly on mass participation. The functions of neighborhood committees, including public security committee and mediation committee and even community policing all illustrate this principle. They function as a bridge between the governmental organizations and the general public and intervene at the first sign of possible trouble. The heavy emphasis is clearly on informal rather than formal methods of social control and on prevention rather than rehabilitation. The Chinese experience suggests that many disputes can be handled informally, probably with greater satisfaction on the part of the involved parties. The smaller the deviation and the earlier it is treated, the more confident one can be of success. If follows that the most efficacious treatment results from an early intervention, while the offender is young and the offences are trivial. The result is an extensive, proactive social control apparatus. Mass involvement in controlling crime and reforming criminals may be one of the most striking aspects of the Chinese policing strategies that differentiate it from the Western models. Probably it is because of the Chinese unique perspective of social control that attracts Western people John Clark points out: “We are intrigued by the unfamiliar coexistence of such a highly centralized government supported by a legendary bureaucracy and hierarchical social structure, side by side with a world-renowned heavy reliance on informal or people’s control of conflict and unacceptable behavior” (1989: 57).
However, the theory and practice of Chinese social control indicate that it is not a completely informal system; rather it is formally invested in less formal structures – in mass groups more than in traditional social institutions. For example, some local neighborhood groups, such as public security committees and mediation committees are legitimized and often trained by local justice organs or police agencies. Formal agencies make informal groups the locus of social control. Therefore, the term “informal” as it used here a different meaning from that common in the West. From a strict point of view, it should be considered to be a specific form between “formal” and “informal”, which may be more properly called “quasi-formal”. Because “informal” institutions do not form a part of the formal criminal justice system, but they are established based on certain legal regulations. As Ronald Troyer states: “While these residents’ committees and residents’ small groups are often referred to as ‘mass organizations,’ they are not volunteer associations in the U.S. sense; they are government organized and controlled entities” (1989: 27). Therefore, these committees “in no sense represent voluntary associations in the way this term is understood in the west” (Whyte, 1988: 270). The term “informal” is used to highlight their reliance on volunteers and mass support. “Informal” social control is particularly significant as it appears to play a much more important role in controlling and preventing crime in Chinese society than in the Western world. In such a way, the Chinese social control system appears to reflect Chinese cultural characteristics.

The Chinese social control system has endured for more than 2000 years. Despite the passage of time and the progress of science and technology, ideas and practices associated with the Confucian tradition generally continue to influence Chinese thinking and behavior. This is not to say that modern China is just an extension of the old, traditional society. Rather, there are some cultural continuities. Nowadays, Chinese authorities are formalizing a new social control system. This system emphasizes both informal control by masses and the formal control by criminal justice organs. Besides strengthening the existing mechanisms, there is a massive effort to develop new laws and regulations and strengthen the criminal justice system. The criminal justice system constitutes a key element of the social control system, but it appears to be more of a last resort. Therefore, as a feasible and appealing solution, mass participation in crime prevention will continue to exist and develop in China. The community is still used as the main basis for social control because Chinese society, on the one hand, has not developed other forms of social control that would operate effectively and stably in the absence of community control, on the other hand, the population and size of China may make the state become overloaded and be unable to fulfil its own responsibility.

The actual situations of the Chinese social control system today indicates that the Chinese government is making full use of two different models of social control to mould and control individual conduct: a formal one based on the establishment of a codified set of laws that defines legal and illegal conduct and is enforced by a formal judicial agency; and an informal one based on community association by the way of socialization enforced by social pressures. They exist side by side in a combination of harmony and competition. As Jerome Krase and Edward Sagarin point out: “There is evidently little conflict between two systems; and if informal control is still widely used, it is not because formal systems have broken down, but because they (the formal) can be more effective with the tools and even the facade of the informal” (1980: 222).
In emphasizing the importance of Chinese informal social control, we should not lose sight of the fact that there are also some limitations in this model. Firstly, whether or not a deviance or dispute is relatively trivial, the public’s informal involvement may not only suppress the individual’s expression and lead to a loss of privacy but also bring about a certain degree of damaging stigma. Secondly, much power in Chinese society is de facto given to the general public. The extensive participation of the public throughout the entire process of shaping conduct and controlling deviancy minimizes the function of formal legal control within Chinese society and engenders the lack of trained personnel and institutionalized means of carrying out legal work. This system provides insufficient protection for an individual against unfair group actions as well as inadequate means of restraining improper official actions. Thirdly, appeals to neighborhood committees in preventing and controlling crime may raise political questions about both the extent of the state’s responsibility for the citizens’ safety and about its effectiveness and legitimacy in the area of crime control. Although community policing may be considered to be a tool for expanding the authority of the local governmental control structure over the network of neighborhoods along the vertical axis, the Chinese model gives a greater responsibility to individuals and collectivities and a lesser responsibility to the state in controlling crime. Therefore, this situation appears to carry with it its own tensions and contradictions. Moreover, the semi-official role allotted to the neighborhood committees legitimates intense surveillance in society and promotes subordination to the dominant state ideology.

Although in the Western countries today, “community has become identified as the principal site around which legitimization is being sought for a new relationship between state and the public (Crawford, 1995: 102), Western sociological and criminological literature on crime seems to customarily focus on specialized, formal agencies, such as police and courts. Undoubtedly, formal institutions are very important, however, informal institutions should not be overlooked. Otherwise, biased results may be produced. Such would certainly be the case for Chinese society today, for embedded within complex organizations are many informal institutions, such as neighborhood committees, established to perform control, mobilization, and other important functions.

In conclusion, in my opinion, the parallel development of formal and informal mechanisms of social control is the best way to approach crime. The formal system provides more trained personnel to deal with more complicated problems and more effective protection for the basic rights of citizens. However, it may provide an excuse for not involving the community in maintaining order by relegating this function to the police and judicial agencies. Without the active involvement of other social institutions in addressing crime problems, the formal system may not gain broad enough community support to guarantee conformity and may be perceived as arbitrary and removed from the society. Moreover, it has become too costly and complex to rely on as the primary method of maintaining public order and resolving disputes.

This is only an exploratory study of a limited scope. For the sake of clarity and emphasis, I have mostly focused on an idealized version of community policing strategies in Chinese society. Consequently, many issues remain unexamined and unanswered. Undoubtedly, there are discrepancies between the Chinese informal social control system in its ideal form and the manner in which it in fact operates. I believe, however, that even if I do not analyse in detail how the mechanism of informal social
control works in practice, it still offers some valuable insights into the philosophical and ideological underpinnings of that modes of informal social control and community policing in Chinese society.

References


