

China's Unhappy Police

ABSTRACT

Facing heavy caseloads, administrative drudgery, and low pay, China's street-level police are frustrated. Front-line officers from six cities report that discontent encourages shirking, corruption, and waste. Grievances and feelings of powerlessness have not been reduced by recent reforms, and give us cause to rethink the image of police as effective arms of a highly securitized state.

KEYWORDS: police frustration, street-level bureaucrats, Ministry of Public Security, police reform, stability maintenance, China

OVER THE LAST 30 YEARS, China's police force has expanded and professionalized. Street-level officers are now better paid, receive more training, and have access to higher-tech equipment. But these improvements have failed to translate into much satisfaction on the ground. From patrol cops to detectives, many front-line police feel frustrated. Officers in cities and rural areas alike say they are saddled with heavy workloads and reporting requirements that make it difficult to focus on tasks they find worthwhile. Their complaints come at a time when the Ministry of Public Security is seeking to boost morale by soliciting input from ground-level cops and developing better protocols for handling crime and protest. With an internal security budget exceeding that devoted to national defense,¹ the Ministry certainly has the resources to address job dissatisfaction. Why then are front-line officers so unhappy?

SUZANNE E. SCOGGINS is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA. KEVIN J. O'BRIEN is the Bedford Professor of Asian Studies and a Professor of Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley. He is also the Director of Berkeley's Institute of East Asian Studies and the Haas Professor of Asian Studies. Emails: <sscoggins@clarku.edu>, <kobrien@berkeley.edu>.

1. "Report on China's Central, Local Budgets," *China Daily*, March 19, 2013, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013npc/2013-03/19/content_16321155.htm>. On where that money goes and the burden it places on local governments in poorer areas, see Xie Yue, "Rising Central Spending on Public Security and the Dilemma Facing Grassroots Officials in China," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 2 (2013), pp. 79–109.

Asian Survey, Vol. 56, Number 2, pp. 225–242. ISSN 0004-4687, electronic ISSN 1533-838X. © 2016 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: 10.1525/AS.2016.56.2.225.

Police frustration is not new. Ever since the constabulary was turned into a modern police force in the early 1900s, officers have complained about long hours, exhausting patrol work, and insufficient manpower. In the Republican era (1912–1949), police turnover was high, as overworked and underpaid officers labored to bring order to increasingly lawless cities.² Police discontent continued after 1949, when an undermanned force was instructed to root out counter-revolutionaries on top of apprehending run-of-the-mill criminals.³ The current reform era has led to less emphasis on political crimes and more on conventional law enforcement,⁴ but front-line police continue to grumble about low salaries, poor working conditions, and being situated on the bottom rung of one of the smaller (per capita) forces in the world.⁵ Moreover, police work of late has not been made easier by rising crime rates⁶ and a citizenry wary of officers known to beat suspects,⁷ take bribes,⁸ and engage in illegal activities.⁹ Keeping order in China

2. Frederic Wakeman, Jr., *Policing Shanghai: 1927–1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 165–168.

3. Michael Dutton, *Policing Chinese Politics: A History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 144–150. The Cultural Revolution must be distinguished from the rest of the Maoist period. From 1966 to 1969, political turmoil unseated most of the Public Security Bureau's leadership, and police presence on the ground crumbled as officers learned that little could protect them from the Red Guards. See Dutton's pp. 217–232 for a discussion of military control over the police during the Cultural Revolution.

4. Susan Trevaskes, *Policing Serious Crime in China: From "Strike Hard" to "Kill Fewer"* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 6; Dutton, *Policing Chinese Politics*, pp. 251–262.

5. China no longer publicizes the size of its police force, but media estimates place the number at around two million—Kathrin Hille, "China's Police Ill-Equipped to Combat Unrest," *Financial Times*, February 5, 2012, <<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/526b2508-4d49-11e1-8741-00144feabdc0.html>>. Moreover, the force is unevenly distributed and is especially sparse in the countryside—Xie, "Rising Central Spending."

6. Borge Bakken, *Crime, Punishment, and Policing in China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), pp. 64–99.

7. It is not uncommon for the press to publish stories on police brutality, particularly when the beatings result in death. For a well-known 2008 case of a young suspect's fatal beating in Harbin, see "Haerbin 6 jingcha shexian dasi nan qingnian an" [6 Harbin police allegedly kill young man], *Netease*, October 11, 2008, <<http://news.163.com/special/0001135D/jingchadaren.html>>.

8. Although most bribes go unreported, accounts sometimes surface in the press—"Jingcha shou 9 wan huilu fangzou xingan yifan: cheng yin falü yishi bugou" [Police accept 90,000 yuan in bribes to release suspects, said the suspects' knowledge of law is lacking] *Nanfang Dushi Bao* [*Southern Metropolis Daily*], September 7, 2013, <<http://news.sohu.com/20130907/n386087346.shtml>>.

9. Reports of police acting above the law are sometimes covered by the media and range from hit-and-run incidents to helping offspring gain university admission through improper means—"Liaoning fumeng xian jingche shuang ren taoyi an siji bei yifa juliu" [Police car driver in Liaoning Fumeng County hit-and-run case detained according to the law] *Xinhua*, April 17, 2013, <<http://news>

remains a thankless task, making it not so different from day-to-day policing elsewhere.¹⁰

The structure of the police bureaucracy does front-line officers few favors. Policing is governed from the top down, and many officials in Beijing and provincial capitals are far removed from the realities of ground-level life. The National People's Congress establishes the policy agenda, and the Ministry of Public Security formulates rules and programs that are transmitted to provincial public security bureaus that oversee municipal or county departments and stations. Both central and provincial authorities offer training programs and conduct investigations into local compliance, but resources are always stretched thin owing to manpower shortages and the Ministry's responsibility for a range of tasks, including border patrol, drug enforcement, and prison administration. This leaves front-line police with limited support and few avenues to provide feedback when policies do not fit local conditions or make life on the ground difficult.

The trials of street-level officers have only worsened in recent years as they face new demands and reforms that tie their hands. Older cops complain bitterly about procedural changes that make it harder to conduct investigations and interrogate suspects. Officers of all ages lament a 1994 rule that forbids their carrying guns (except under extraordinary circumstances) and often attribute some of their limited authority to being under-armed.¹¹ Police

.xinhuanet.com/legal/2013-04/17/c_115428978.htm>; "Hunan longhui gonganju zhengwei nüer maomingdingti shang daxue" [Hunan Longhui police commissioner's daughter uses an imposter to attend university] *Zhongguo Qingnian Bao* [*China Youth Daily*], May 5, 2009, <<http://news.163.com/09/0505/08/58HMPUF500011229.html>>. [Ed. note: For an interesting comparison, see Patrick Gorman's discussion of the Li Gang incident in his essay on "flesh searches" in this issue of *Asian Survey*.]

10. On police frustration elsewhere, see William Ker Muir Jr., *Police: Streetcorner Politicians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); Setsuo Miyazawa, *Policing in Japan: A Study on Making Crime* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Lauren McCarthy, "Local-Level Law Enforcement: Muscovites and Their Uchastkovyi," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 30, nos. 2/3 (2014), pp. 195–222; Wojciech Cebulak, "Fairness, Job Frustration, and Moral Dilemmas in Policing That Impact Police Effectiveness," *Journal of Police and Criminal Psychology* 16, no. 2 (2001), pp. 48–57. Police in other areas, particularly Latin America, may have it worse than their Chinese counterparts. See Yanilda Gonzalez, "State Building on the Ground: Police Reform and Participatory Security in Latin America" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2014) for a description of ill-compensated police in Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia who routinely face violent attacks from citizens and enjoy little support from their superiors. In Argentina, officers' rights are often violated to the point that some police find themselves serving jail time for minor violations such as being late to work.

11. Some patrol units were authorized to begin carrying guns in 2014—"Weaponized," *The Economist*, October 18, 2014, <<http://www.economist.com/news/china/21625818-most-chinese-police-have-long-gone-without-firearms-wake-terrorist-incidents>>.

are also unhappy about stepped-up reporting requirements. Chinese street cops, like those in many countries, are frustrated by the number, length, and complexity of the reports they must file with their superiors and the Ministry. Beset with busywork and pinned to their desks, officers argue they have insufficient time to attend to more important tasks, such as conducting investigations. Finally, attacks on police have increased in both violence and frequency, undercutting the belief held by many officers that police are respected and, when needed, feared by the public.

The struggles of front-line police bring us deep into the world of China's "street-level bureaucrats."¹² But unlike the public service workers in Lipsky's original formulation,¹³ or the cops, teachers, and counselors in Maynard-Moody's more recent account,¹⁴ the men and women who don police uniforms in China lack both the opportunity and the inclination to exercise the discretion employed by street-level bureaucrats elsewhere. By and large, they have few chances to innovate, and their low morale makes it difficult for them to care much about case resolution or pushing for larger changes that would improve public order. Instead, most Chinese police strain under time, funding, and staffing constraints and a system that many believe is stacked against them. The dissatisfaction that results leads to diminished effectiveness on the ground, apathy, shirking, and worse. Their stories show how coercive power in one highly hierarchical, authoritarian system can dissipate long before it reaches the street. Their experiences also reveal fault lines in state–society relations precisely at the point where lawful authority meets unlawful behavior, perhaps the most basic responsibility of any government, democratic or otherwise.

Police discontent thus raises questions about street-level bureaucracy in an authoritarian regime and casts a fresh light on China's "stability maintenance" (*weiwen*) and crime-fighting efforts. Much of the existing literature on reform-era policing focuses on higher-level concerns, such as protest

12. Other street-level bureaucrats in China who deal directly with local residents include the urban and administrative law enforcement agency officials (*chengguan*), auxiliary police forces (*xiejing*), tax collectors (*tuowu*), village committee members (*cunweihui*), and neighborhood committee members (*juweihui*), to name a few. These people provide services and enforce local and central rules and may or may not enjoy public servant (*gongwuyuan*) status.

13. Michael Lipsky, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1980).

14. Steven Williams Maynard-Moody, *Cops, Teachers, Counselors: Stories from the Front Lines of Public Service* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

control,¹⁵ strike-hard campaigns,¹⁶ leadership selection,¹⁷ and structural reform.¹⁸ These studies provide insight into domestic security policy and its consequences but reveal less about the lives of men and women on the ground. Who is aggrieved and why? How does widespread discontent impact the ability of street-level officers to do their jobs? Finally, what, if anything, is the Ministry of Public Security doing to reduce police frustration?

DOING RESEARCH ON CHINA'S STREET-LEVEL POLICE

We know little about what police officers think and feel because, like many individuals in China's security apparatus, they are hard to reach.¹⁹ Although the country opened its doors to social science research over 30 years ago, concerns about secrecy continue to limit access to people in sensitive lines of work. Even today, many officers refuse to discuss their day-to-day life, while others have no qualms about explaining the difficulties they face. Scholars have achieved some success in penetrating the world of ground-level police, and have taught us about the psychological stress officers feel,²⁰ their treatment of prostitutes,²¹ and the tight relationship between local businesses and the police,²² but research on the lived experience of street cops remains scarce.

15. Murray Scot Tanner, "China Rethinks Unrest," *Washington Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (2004), pp. 137–156; Murray Scot Tanner, "Campaign-Style Policing in China and its Critics," in *Crime, Punishment, and Policing in China*, ed. Borge Bakken (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), pp. 171–188; Xie Yue, "The Political Logic of *Weiwu* in Contemporary China," *Issues and Studies* 48, no. 3 (2012), pp. 1–41.

16. Trevaskes, *Policing Serious Crime in China*; Murray Scot Tanner, "State Coercion and the Balance of Awe: The 1983–1986 'Stern Blows' Anti-Crime Campaign," *China Journal* 44 (2000), pp. 93–125.

17. Wang Yuhua, "Empowering the Police: How the Chinese Communist Party Manages Its Coercive Leaders," *China Quarterly* 219 (2014), pp. 625–648.

18. Kam C. Wong, *Police Reform in China* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2011); Fu Hualing, "Zhou Yongkang and the Recent Police Reform in China," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 38, no. 2 (2005), pp. 241–253; Dutton, *Policing Chinese Politics*, pp. 247–300.

19. On similar difficulties in reaching veterans, see Neil J. Diamant and Kevin J. O'Brien, "Veterans' Political Activism in China," *Modern China* 41, no. 3 (May 2015), pp. 278–312.

20. Wang Xiaohai, "Psychological Empowerment of Frontline Police Officers in Response to Social Service Role Strain in China," *Asian Criminology* 10, no. 2 (September 2015), pp. 209–229; Peng Wentao, "Jingcha zhiye yali fenxi ji yingdui cuoshi jianyi" [The analysis of pressures on police officers and relevant recommendations], *Gongan Yanjiu* [Policing Studies] 4 (2009), pp. 58–60.

21. Margaret Boittin, "The Whore, the Hostess, and the Honey: Policing, Health, Business and the Regulation of Prostitution in China" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2015).

22. Xu Jianhua, "Authoritarian Policing with Chinese Characteristics: A Case Study of Motorcycle Bans in the Pearl River Delta," *Crime, Law and Social Change* 61, no. 4 (May 2014), pp. 439–460.

Fortunately, access is improving, especially for those who have ties to the security world. Using her prior experience teaching English to police officers in Beijing as a calling card, the first author spent 21 months getting to know a number of street cops and learning about their work. From September 2010 to January 2013 she used snowball sampling to set up 59 open-ended interviews with 31 officers in Hunan, Hebei, and Shaanxi Provinces and in Beijing, which has province status. The age and experience level of the interviewees ranged from new hires in their mid-20s to recent retirees in their late 50s. All but six were men. About half were low-ranking patrol officers or entry-level station workers, while the others held mid-level positions such as detective or patrol leader and had some supervisory responsibilities. She also interviewed one station chief and one assistant station chief. Meetings always took place in social settings, often with a mutual contact present. Second or third interviews, when possible, were typically more informative as officers warmed to the idea of recounting their experiences and frustrations to a foreign researcher. As is common with people near the bottom of a hierarchy, a sympathetic ear and the opportunity to explain “how hard it is to be me” often led interviewees to open up and be more forthcoming as time passed and trust was established.²³

Interviews with ground-level cops offer insight into an under-studied aspect of Chinese policing: how it feels to be an officer on the street, knocking on doors, filling out reports, and sitting in a patrol car for hours on end. Police officers are one of the more visible faces of the state, but most of what we know about them comes from the citizen side of the state–society equation. Lacking the perspective of police themselves, we are left with a partial view of policing that ignores the men and women behind the uniform. Sitting down with street-level officers to learn what they have to say rounds out the story and gives us entry into the frustrations they experience and the cross-pressures they encounter.

WHO IS DISSATISFIED? WHY?

Front-line policing in China is somewhat different from policing in many industrialized countries. Unlike typical beat cops, who go out on patrol and

23. On this interviewing technique, see Kevin J. O'Brien, “Discovery, Research (Re)design, and Theory Building,” in *Doing Fieldwork in China*, ed. Maria Heimer and Stig Thøgersen (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), pp. 27–41.

perform duties like responding to service calls and making arrests, Chinese police are rooted in the *paichusuo* (local police station), where they depend on neighborhood cooperation and social relationships to prevent crime and resolve disputes. This method of social control is an integral feature of Chinese policing and has been compared with community policing in the West.²⁴ Full-fledged patrol officers did not emerge in China until the 1980s, when crime rates started rising and government leaders felt the need to increase the visibility of police on the streets.²⁵

These days, front-line policing encompasses a wide range of activities and officers. *Paichusuo* at the county and municipal district levels are the hubs of police activity, and workers stationed there must answer calls from the public, conduct investigations, maintain the household registration (*hukou*) system, and complete administrative tasks such as filing reports. In a small county *paichusuo*, a handful of officers might share some of these tasks, but in larger cities there is more job differentiation. *Xunjing* (patrol officers), *jiaojing* (traffic police), and *xiejing* (auxiliary police) are the police that residents most often encounter on urban streets, though other officers at a typical station also have some contact with the public.²⁶

Many grievances are common to nearly all police. Heavy caseloads, administrative drudgery, and low pay affect every street-level cop. Resource limitations are the source of some of their biggest problems. One young officer summed up his job by saying, "The work is hard and the pay is too low. At the *paichusuo* I sometimes go 36 hours without rest. . . . My girlfriend wishes I had never become a policeman."²⁷ Complaints of this sort seldom go away as the years pass and were echoed by other police. One man nearing retirement pointed out, "We get paid more as senior officers in a district

24. Chen Xiaoming, "Community and Policy Strategies: A Chinese Approach to Crime Control," *Policing and Society* 12, no. 1 (2002), pp. 1–13.

25. For detailed descriptions of this shift in social control tactics see Allan Jiao, "Community Policing and Community Mutuality: A Comparative Analysis of American and Chinese Police Reforms," *Police Studies* 18, nos. 3/4 (1995), p. 73; Fu Hualing, "Patrol Police: A Recent Development in the People's Republic of China," *Police Studies* 13 (1990), pp. 111–117.

26. *Xiejing* are not officially police, but they nevertheless serve as front-line security officers, as do *chengguan* (urban administrative and law enforcement agency officials). Though both *xiejing* and *chengguan* are important for maintaining social order, in this article we address only the discontent of *zhengshi* (official) front-line police who possess a police number and rank (*jinghao*, *jingxian*) or are under contract to work as patrol officers.

27. Interview with a district station junior officer, Shaanxi, 2012.

station, but it's still less [than people our age in other professions]. We are also more exhausted [by our work]."²⁸

If some gripes are universal, others reflect disappointing experiences and dashed expectations that arise at certain stages of an officer's career. Facing piles of tedious, repetitive work, young police report that life on the force is not what they anticipated. Fresh recruits in their early 20s typically start out full of hope, imagining that they are taking positions as brave law enforcers who will command prestige, get to wear a sharp uniform, and maybe, if they are lucky, fire a gun. They tend to be aware of the long hours and dangers of the job, but few are prepared for the monotony of street-level policing.²⁹ When on patrol, they often spend hours parked on street corners with little to do.

Instead of fighting crime, many also find themselves occupied with matters unrelated to law enforcement. Members of the public often do not know what falls within their job description, and officers say they must respond to every phone request, no matter how insignificant. This means that street-level cops may be summoned to find lost cows in the middle of the night,³⁰ search for missing dogs, or retrieve forgotten QQ numbers (login information for a popular social network).³¹ Despite their being called on to fix a host of community problems, young police complain that they have far less authority than they expected. "I can tell someone on the street to stop," explained one officer, "but they don't care. They just start arguing with me." Even their dreams of firing a gun are seldom met. Although most stations have access to an armory that can be opened when weapons are needed,³² none of our younger interviewees had ever been sent out armed. Bored, unappreciated, and with few assignments as stimulating as conducting a raid or responding to a protest, excitement about the job soon fades as young police adjust to the daily grind of life on the force.

When officers reach the middle stage of their careers, grievances shift toward a lack of control at work. Many cops in their 30s or 40s are disenchanted because they expected more power to go along with growing supervisory duties,

28. Interview with a district station senior officer, Shaanxi, 2012.

29. Interview with a district station patrol squad leader, Hebei, 2012.

30. Interview with a mid-level officer recalling his early days on the force at a county station, Hunan, 2012.

31. Interview with a district station junior officer, Shaanxi, 2012.

32. Interview with a city station detective, Hebei, 2011.

and they are frustrated that they cannot initiate changes that would ease their jobs and make the station function better. One captain of a district patrol squad explained how little influence he had over staffing decisions: "There are too many men in the station house, and I don't have enough people to send out on patrol. . . . It's not fair, but men in the desk jobs have connections. There's nothing I can do to change it."³³ Furthermore, he said he needed the ability to decide when his squad could carry firearms, but that requesting this was pointless; excepting extraordinary circumstances, his men had to respond to potentially dangerous calls unarmed. Another middle-aged officer who serves as a supervisor in a district station placed the blame for his powerlessness squarely on his superiors.³⁴ Because the leaders of his station are all political appointees transferred from other work units, he felt he could not go to them with suggestions about procedural reforms that would improve police effectiveness. He explained: "We know what needs to be changed, but [the leaders] don't listen. They have no [policing] experience and are afraid to make changes."

As officers enter their 50s and the final stage of a career, the focus of grievances shifts once more as they come face to face with problems arising from efforts to professionalize Chinese policing. Accustomed to low pay and a middling position in the station bureaucracy, some older cops feel demoralized by their declining relevance and find it difficult to keep up with new practices, such as using computers on patrol. Others, more willing to change, are irritated by the assumption that they are too old to embrace innovative policing techniques. They may also experience age discrimination. One older officer complained: "A lot of the training in the last three to five years is geared toward learning new technologies. It's only for the young men. If you're over 50, they don't want to train you. We old guys get left behind."³⁵

On the street, lack of respect continues to grate, and is heightened by memories of a more glorious past. Older officers are the ones who most often relate a familiar piece of police lore: "In the 1980s, one officer could catch 10 bad guys simply by walking into a restaurant and yelling 'Halt!' These days, it takes 10 of us to catch a single criminal."³⁶ Although the story varies in the telling, the point remains the same: street-level police no longer enjoy the

33. Interview with a district station patrol squad leader, Hebei, 2012.

34. Interview with an internal inspections officer, Hunan, 2012.

35. Interview with two district station officers, Shaanxi, 2012.

36. Interview with a city station detective, Hebei, 2011.

authority they once had. This sense of powerlessness applies to all officers, but it strikes veteran cops hardest because it reminds them of days when they were significant figures in the neighborhood. As policing becomes more technocratic and less respected by the general public, many older officers feel old-fashioned and out of touch well before they reach retirement.³⁷

DISCONTENT AND ITS INFLUENCE ON POLICE EFFECTIVENESS

Unhappy officers find it hard to care about their work. Although we expected to see examples of ground-level innovation that increased police effectiveness,³⁸ attempts to question interviewees about this were usually met with blank stares or derision. Some mid-level officers, like the supervisor who blamed inexperienced leaders for problems at his station, had started with high hopes, only to give up on improving operations. For the majority of street-level cops, finding a way to do their jobs better is not something they think much about. One officer explained that local police are too poorly trained and apathetic to be concerned with boosting productivity.³⁹ “Officers don’t want any cases where they have to collect evidence,” he said. “They don’t know how to do it and they don’t want to learn.” Moreover, when assignments are onerous, officers often try to slide by and only meet the bare minimum expected of them, such as filling quotas for traffic stops or issuing citations, and then move on to other tasks as quickly as possible.⁴⁰ For street-level cops who are just trying to make it through the day, there are few reasons to worry about solving complicated cases or improving call response.

Like unhappy employees everywhere, discontented officers look for ways to avoid work. Some shirking is easy to observe. Parked patrol cars filled with dozing officers are a common sight on Chinese street corners. But most shirking occurs in the station house. Although none of our respondents admitted to evading their responsibilities, some commented on goldbricking

37. Interview with four older city station officers, Hebei, 2010.

38. Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth J. Perry, *Mao’s Invisible Hand: The Political Foundations of Adaptive Governance in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

39. Interview with a district station junior officer, Shaanxi, 2012.

40. On the difficulties police officers face when enforcing the widely ignored ban on motorized rickshaws in Guangzhou, see Xu Jianhua, “Microfoundation of Violence toward Police in Guangzhou: A Situational Exclusion Perspective” (working paper). Xu shows that officers pursue less experienced drivers, have to move quickly when confiscating vehicles, and work in small teams during the daytime to minimize the risk of confrontation and personal injury.

by their co-workers. "The old guys do what they like," explained one officer. "They don't care about new rules [forbidding government workers from drinking alcohol during lunchtime]. They just close their office door after lunch and go to sleep."⁴¹ While officers may prefer lunchtime boozing over afternoon work for any number of reasons, a group of older cops cited the stress that comes with the job when asked about their midday imbibing.⁴² "Drinking is the only pleasure we police have," said one, as the others roared in agreement and continued enjoying just the sort of alcohol-infused banquet they had been told to eschew.

Shirking can also take on more creative forms. "Protocols are not specific and some police make use of that," explained one young officer.⁴³ "One day I went to bust up a small hair salon,⁴⁴ and when the boss fled, I ran a long way until I finally caught him. My colleagues laughed at me and said I was crazy [to chase the man]. We get paid so little and procedures don't say what to do when criminals run." Whether shirking involves interpreting protocols to permit inaction or outright avoidance of work, many unhappy police fail to throw themselves into investigations and apprehending criminals, citing dissatisfaction as a justification. This type of shirking strains resources, lengthens response time, and is evidenced by unmotivated cops who would rather stand around than take action.

Disgruntled cops shirk; they also exploit their access to money and to people who want something. Police unhappiness, and in particular dissatisfaction over low salaries, is a major source of corruption. Although graft, bribe-taking, and extortion are well documented in the Chinese media and academic studies,⁴⁵ few respondents, for obvious reasons, were willing to discuss them. Nevertheless, one interviewee nearing retirement spoke freely of the gifts he had received over his 30-year career as a patrolman and then a detective.⁴⁶ His wife, overhearing the conversation, half-jokingly complained: "He's too honest. His colleagues accepted far more! We wouldn't have been so poor back then if he was truly corrupt!" Higher-ranking officers and Ministry

41. Interview with a mid-level district officer, Hunan, 2009.

42. Interview with eight older officers in a city station, Hebei, 2009.

43. Interview with a young district officer, Shaanxi, 2012.

44. Hair salons are often fronts for houses of prostitution.

45. See e.g. "Jingcha shou 9 wan huilu fangzou xingan yifan" [Police accept 90,000 yuan in bribes to release suspects]; Boittin, "The Whore, the Hostess, and the Honey"; Elaine Jeffreys, "Exposing Police Corruption: China's Virgin Prostitutes Cases," *China Journal* 63 (2010), pp. 127–152.

46. Interview with a city station detective, Hebei, 2011.

officials commonly attribute corruption to the low moral character of street-level cops,⁴⁷ but studies of police elsewhere treat it as group behavior, with individuals acting for systemic reasons, not in spite of them.⁴⁸ Indeed, research on police corruption suggests that some of the same job characteristics that make officers unhappy also motivate them to take bribes. Economic models of police corruption show that bribe-taking is reduced when salaries are increased and come to exceed the revenue derived from fines.⁴⁹

Beyond shirking and corruption, unhappiness also drives police to do things that are harmless enough on their own but cause problems when they become too common. The patrol captain who spoke of his frustration with getting men out of the office was not describing an isolated incident. The realities of life on patrol lead most street-level police to seek out office positions at the first opportunity. Although working all day in the station does not necessarily make an unhappy officer happy, it is a step up, since these positions pay about the same,⁵⁰ require less overtime, and lack the dangers of patrol work. “Everyone wants to be in the office,” explained a mid-level supervisor, “but there isn’t enough work for so many people.”⁵¹ This phenomenon of too many “office officers” diminishes police effectiveness by distorting how manpower is allocated. “The problem is very serious,” noted a cadre from the Hunan provincial bureau of public security: “Each *paichusuo* should have five full-time workers, but many only have two or three responding to calls. The rest stay in the office and do nothing.”⁵² Too many office officers also undermines station capabilities because the most experienced beat cops are not on the streets; others who know the territory less well and have fewer long-standing relationships with residents are. Nowadays, patrol cops tend to be young and green, just waiting for the chance to leave the street behind. “Their lack of experience makes it hard for them to do a good job,” lamented one assistant station chief.⁵³

47. Interview with a district station chief, Beijing, 2013; interview with a provincial ministry officer, Hunan, 2012.

48. Maurice Punch, “Police Corruption and Its Prevention,” *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research* 8, no. 3 (2000), pp. 301–324.

49. Gary S. Becker and George J. Stigler, “Law Enforcement, Malfeasance, and Compensation of Enforcers,” *Journal of Legal Studies* 3, no. 1 (1974), pp. 1–18.

50. Interview with a ministry official, Beijing, 2012.

51. Interview with a mid-level supervisor in a district station, Hunan, 2012.

52. Interview with a provincial ministry officer, Hunan, 2012.

53. Interview with an assistant station chief, Hunan, 2012.

ADDRESSING DISCONTENT

Dissatisfaction on the ground is no secret. Street-level officers have been known to speak anonymously to journalists about their frustrations,⁵⁴ and police journals regularly publish articles about the pressures cops face.⁵⁵ A recent video entertainment special produced by the Ministry of Public Security's public affairs department acknowledged the difficulties of front-line police by opening with a rousing song in which the refrain, "You work hard!" (*Nimen xinku la!*), was repeated 24 times.⁵⁶ Even a department-level official in the Ministry confirmed the costs of police dissatisfaction, while a colleague sitting nearby nodded in agreement: "[Ground-level police] complain about many things, such as low salaries, dangerous work, and performance checks that require a lot of preparation. . . . These worries hurt their work."⁵⁷

Beyond concerns about job performance, the Ministry is worried that dissatisfaction and the conditions that create it can contribute to serious health problems. Officers struggling with long overtime shifts and other physical stresses common to the job may face exhaustion, compromised immune systems, and in rare cases a condition called "death by overwork" (*guo lao si*). Police and officials have been more open about discussing officer health problems in recent years, and in 2006 the Ministry brought attention to the issue by dedicating the annual International Police Day to improving physical and mental health.⁵⁸

54. See e.g. Wang Xiangming, Yang Tao, and Ye Feng, "Jingcha bu gaoxing, you kunnan, buneng quan zhao wo, wo bushi chaoren" [Police unhappy, face difficulties, do not come to me for everything, I'm not superman], *Southern Metropolis Daily*, April 18, 2009, <http://epaper.oeccc.com/H/html/2009-04/18/content_764080.htm>.

55. See e.g. Peng, "Jingcha zhiye yali fenxi ji yingdui cuoshi jianyi" [The analysis of pressures on police officers and relevant recommendations].

56. The song, which also featured female dancers in pink tutus and tiny hats, male dancers in stylized white police uniforms, a background slideshow of police in action, and a bubble machine, was shown to front-line officers around the country—"Yilu zhenqing: gonganbu 'gongan wenhua jiceng xing' wenyi xiaofendui zhuanchang huibao yanchu" [True feelings through the journey: The Ministry of Public Security's 'grassroots public security culture' arts squad special report performance], 2012. For more information on this group, see <<http://www.mps.gov.cn/n16/n983040/n2475799/index.html>>, accessed December 5, 2014.

57. Interview, Hunan, 2012.

58. "Jintian shi 'guoji jingcha ri' guanzhu minjing shenxin jiankang" [Today is "International Police Day" calls attention to police mental and health well-being], *Xinhua*, March 13, 2006, <<http://news.163.com/06/0314/11/2C61FV76001124T.html>>.

When addressing health issues, both Ministry and local leaders focus on increasing the physical strength and stamina of ground-level police. Concrete steps to improve officer well-being include the institutionalization of “fitness training compliance standards” (*jingcha tiyu duanlian dabiao biaoazhun*), implementation of exercise programs, and requirements that recruits be more physically fit when they take up the job.⁵⁹ Other reforms also indirectly address the health of officers, such as rules forbidding lunchtime drinking and a more stringent policy recently enacted in Beijing that even cracks down on alcohol consumption outside the home.⁶⁰

Though most efforts to improve the health of officers focus on raising physical fitness, reports of emotional duress and suicide⁶¹ have driven some public security bureaus to devise programs that address the psychological challenges officers confront. Municipal bureaus in the cities of Xiamen, Chengdu, Nanjing, and Shenzhen have conducted officer satisfaction surveys and opened hotlines for troubled police.⁶² Guangdong’s bureau made headlines in 2003 when it required that all officers involved in shootings or other violent incidents see a psychologist within 48 hours.⁶³ In Jiangsu, street-level police attend training classes to help them develop coping mechanisms for managing workplace stress.⁶⁴ Following the lead of Guangdong and Jiangsu, other provinces, including Hunan and Shaanxi, collect data through online, anonymous surveys and have plans to follow up with helplines and mental health training.⁶⁵ At the national level, the Ministry provides counseling to officers across China, but these services are seldom used, owing to poor

59. Wang Haiyuan, “Jingcha jiankang zhuangkang yu jianshen duanlian xianzhuang de fenxi yanjiu” [Analysis of the health and physical exercise of the police], *Gongyanyanjiu* [Policing Studies] 5, no. 115 (2009), pp. 98–102.

60. “Beijing gonganju shishi jinjiuling: jingcha guanbing jiating yiwai jinzhi hejiu” [Beijing Public Security Bureau implements prohibition: alcohol is now prohibited outside the home], *Sina*, January 24, 2014, <<http://dailynews.sina.com/gb/chn/chnlocal/phoenixtv/20140124/00005400666.html>>.

61. Han Haikuo, “Jingcha sisha qian biaoqian ji xinli ganyu” [Psychological intervention and police behavior before suicide], *Gansu Jingcha Zhiye Xueyuan Xuebao* [Journal of Gansu Police Vocational College] 10 (2012), pp. 55–59; Hu Wannian, “Jingcha xinli jiankang wenti de chengyin jiqi yingdui zhice” [Causes and policy regarding police mental health problems], *Gongan Yanjiu* [Policing Studies] 3 (2009), pp. 59–64.

62. “Alarm Bells for Cops Battling with Mental Anguish,” *China Daily*, January 21, 2005, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-01/21/content_411120.htm>.

63. Jane Cai, “Guangdong Police Who Kill or Injure Obligated to Get Counseling,” *South China Morning Post*, August 4, 2003, p. 4.

64. “Alarm Bells.”

65. Interview with a provincial bureau officer, Hunan, 2012.

publicity and reluctance to seek help. “Most officers do not know they can see a psychologist,” explained a provincial public security official in Hunan, “which is bad because many do not know how to deal with workplace stress.”⁶⁶

But even if cops use them, psychological services are not likely to ease police discontent much. One older officer chuckled when asked about the benefits of having therapists to turn to. He said that today’s recruits “have university degrees but are too soft.”⁶⁷ Backtracking a bit, he continued: “Maybe it will help some cops, but what most of us want is more money and respect.” When it comes to addressing the causes of discontent, the Ministry and local bureaus are making headway, but not enough to make a difference for most officers.

Boosting the budgets of city and rural stations would ease many grievances, but efforts to lift funding rarely translate into more money in police pockets or more officers on the ground. Financial reforms begun in 2003 were designed to increase cash flow to ground-level stations by making counties contribute a higher percentage of their budget to public security; however, reports of station expenditures in four provinces (Guangdong, Jiangsu, Qinghai, and Ningxia) show that much of this money is used to pay down debts, not to support operations.⁶⁸ Although stations in richer locales may be thriving because of local government outlays—Guangzhou’s officers pull in a widely admired RMB 10,000 (US\$ 1,600) monthly and have some of the best equipment in China—almost everywhere else lags Guangzhou, with poorer areas the farthest behind. Even the large influx of “stability maintenance” funds over the last decade has not helped much. Officers in Hunan, Shaanxi, and Hebei report that this infusion is too little to cover basic *weiwen* tasks like house arrests, let alone hiking salaries or adding officers to the force.⁶⁹ At best, station leaders use part of this money to hire unofficial auxiliary police, adding a new underclass of low-paid, untrained security workers who many regular cops believe create more problems than they solve.⁷⁰

66. Interview with a provincial bureau officer, Hunan, 2012.

67. Interview with a city station detective, Hebei, 2013.

68. Xie, “Rising Central Spending.”

69. Interviews with a city station detective, Hebei, 2012; a mid-level officer, Hunan, 2012; a provincial bureau officer, Hunan, 2012; and a mid-level officer, Shaanxi, 2012.

70. In interviews, officers often complained about *xiejing*, whose numbers are growing as local stations turn to them for cheap labor. *Xiejing* are believed to be giving police a bad name because of their frequent involvement in beatings and mishandled disputes.

Other grievances are not likely to be addressed because the Ministry (and the reforms it is spearheading) is their source. This reflects a gap in perceptions between top leaders and street-level cops over how police power should be exercised. Where officers see respect and authority when they reminisce about one officer catching 10 criminals, Ministry leaders perceive a potential for abuse of authority that needs to be curtailed. One senior official from the Beijing municipal police force explained the Ministry's view: "In those days, the police had a lot of power because there were no real laws. . . . Police could do whatever they wanted, but this was bad for the country. Now, the law is more important than individuals. . . . It doesn't matter if it takes more men to do the job."⁷¹ Time and again, Ministry officials spoke of the importance of law as a means for controlling officers on the streets. "Local police should not act on their own," explained one mid-ranking Ministry cadre, "their job is to implement the laws passed by the People's Congress."⁷² Toward this end, the Ministry has initiated reforms that increase reporting requirements for officers who might otherwise ignore procedures and regulations, and has disarmed most cops out of fear they might lose their weapons or discharge them recklessly. These changes greatly frustrate officers on the ground but reflect a growing commitment to curbing street-level autonomy. Unless these reforms are reversed, and there are no signs of that, police are likely to keep grumbling.

VARIATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Though widespread, dissatisfaction is not an issue for every cop at every station or at every level. The cities where officers were interviewed were all middle-of-the-road in economic development, and location and wealth might make a difference for satisfaction rates. In rich provinces such as Guangdong, high salaries and ample resources may lead to less discontent. Dissatisfaction may also decline when front-line officers reach leadership positions. Owing to an inability to access them, only two such individuals were interviewed, and neither revealed their personal feelings about their job. Finally, some street-level police remain unfazed by the stress, and a few interviewees said they were content in their position. One officer explained,

71. Interview, Beijing, 2013.

72. Interview, Beijing, 2012.

"The job has many problems, but I don't mind. I've wanted to be a cop since I was a young boy. It's my duty."⁷³

Where it is present, dissatisfaction may vary along dimensions that we were not able to explore. Well-paid officers in populous, crime-ridden Guangzhou may have different grievances from poorly paid ones in remote, low-crime cities in Inner Mongolia. Dissatisfaction may also be more severe and have greater consequences in poorer areas, where officers are overworked and have little time for the shirking described by the cops we interviewed. Moreover, different types of police may experience dissatisfaction differently. We have focused on grievances voiced by ordinary cops; there remains much to be learned about the challenges faced by specialized forces (such as SWAT teams and traffic cops), auxiliary police, and police bureaucrats who work at higher levels and the Ministry.⁷⁴ One way to examine variation by type of job is to analyze how other officers' grievances reflect or diverge from the sources of frustration identified among front-line police. Lack of resources, monotonous work, limited supervisory powers, and consequences of professionalization may or may not create dissatisfaction for other officers, insofar as some types of police are more likely to be bothered by certain grievances than others. Auxiliary officers, for example, may be more affected by lack of resources and monotonous work than by limitations on their ability to supervise others. Furthermore, they may have additional concerns that are not an issue for official police.

With the vast majority of our interviewees expressing unhappiness and the Ministry taking steps to manage dissatisfaction, there is good reason to believe that ground-level discontent is rife, if not universal. Beyond the problems that unhappiness creates for police effectiveness, these findings raise questions about the impact dissatisfaction can have on the job performance of other government workers. Are other street-level bureaucrats equally unhappy? One potential group for further study is the *chengguan* (urban administrative and law enforcement agency officials),⁷⁵ who are poorly compensated and known across

73. Interview with a district city station officer, Shaanxi, 2012.

74. The first author addresses frustrations experienced by ministry officials in her Ph.D. dissertation on the police bureaucracy in China.

75. The *chengguan* are even less studied than the police in China, though a few recent works touch on the jurisdiction of *chengguan* and their activities: Gary Sigley, "From Revolution to Government, from Contradictions to Harmony: Urban Community Policing in Post-Deng China," in *Policing Cities: Urban Securitization and Regulation in a 21st Century World*, ed. Randy Lippert and Kevin Walby (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 29–42; Xu, "Authoritarian Policing."

China for their thuggish reputation, willingness to take bribes, and frequent confrontations with the public.⁷⁶ These officers are likely even more dissatisfied with their work than police, and their grievances may be exacerbating their contentious relationship with residents and compromising their ability to carry out their duties. Similarly, grass-roots tax collectors and family planning workers are engaged in trying and universally disliked tasks, and their attitudes toward their occupation should tell us more about the hardships of front-line work. Further research is needed on the grievances of China's street-level bureaucrats and the consequences of job dissatisfaction for state–society relations, security enforcement, and service provision.

Finally, plunging into the world of street-level police helps us see why cops are often seen as lazy and corrupt, and gives us cause to rethink the image of officers as tools of a highly securitized state, quashing protests at every turn. China is often thought of as a well-funded and tightly organized security state, with a full palette of formal and informal agencies to maintain social order. Front-line police are only one part of that apparatus, but their unhappiness and weak job performance suggest a certain brittleness that may signal problems elsewhere. Since 1989, the Party has proven quite adept at managing or at least suppressing social unrest, but dissatisfaction and mismanagement in the lower levels of the security state speak to abiding weaknesses that merit more attention. What ground-level agents of state power have to say matters. As our interviews reveal, the life of a front-line cop is filled with uncertainty, hardship, and feelings of powerlessness.⁷⁷ Their accounts, self-serving as they may be, show them in a new light: as overburdened, under-armed, and unhappy men and women trying to make the most of a difficult job.

76. An attack in Hunan by *chengguan* officials resulted in the death of a watermelon seller and sparked local protests that made headlines around the world—Chris Luo, “Fury as Hunan Watermelon Seller is ‘Beaten to Death by Chengguan,’” *South China Morning Post*, July 18, 2013, <<http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1285309/watermelon-vendors-death-triggers-overnight-protest-hunan>>. Later that same year, 18 *chengguan* officers in Xiamen were severely burned after being doused with sulfuric acid by angry residents. Jeremy Blum, “Eighteen *Chengguan* Officers Hospitalized after Acid Attack,” *South China Morning Post*, October 13, 2013, <<http://www.scmp.com/news/china-insider/article/1334519/eighteen-chengguan-officers-hospitalised-after-acid-attack>>.

77. On other seemingly well-placed individuals (work unit leaders drawn into demolition work, retired military officers) who feel powerless, or even see themselves as members of a “weak and vulnerable group” (*ruoshi qunti*) see Kevin J. O’Brien and Yanhua Deng, “The Reach of the State: Work Units, Family Ties and ‘Harmonious Demolition,’” *The China Journal* 74 (July 2015), pp. 1–17, and Kevin J. O’Brien and Neil J. Diamant, “Contentious Veterans: China’s Retired Officers Speak Out,” in *Armed Forces and Society* 41:3 (July 2015), 563–581.