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Researching Chinese Female Offenders: The Methodology

Abstract: This chapter describes the methodological issues in this study. It explains challenges faced and how I overcame them, as well as ethical considerations and my personal reflections. It also provides an overview of the Chinese penal system to contextualise later discussions. My experience shows that conducting empirical studies into law, crime, and criminal justice in China, although fraught with obstacles, is possible. My personal emotions during the research process have motivated me to write this book and hopefully will continue to inspire my future research.

This research aims to examine women’s pathways into criminal offending, their gender role, and gender relation in criminality. A further objective is to investigate the impact of the profound socioeconomic changes on female offenders in a transnational society. Thus, my research questions about Chinese female offenders demand ‘insights, empathy and understanding’ (Thomas, 2013), which can be best addressed through qualitative research, as qualitative data offers insights into social phenomenon and the underlying processes of social interaction (Layder, 2013). However, empirical research into crime, criminal law, and criminal justice faces a number of challenges in China. I start this chapter with some original observations.

Doing empirical research in China: challenges and ethical considerations

Difficulties conducting empirical research in China into crime-related matters have long been acknowledged (Cohen, 1970; Jou et al., 2014; Liang & Lu, 2006; Sun & Wu, 2009; Zhang et al., 2007), and gaining access to respondents is particularly challenging (see Curran, 2014; Heimer & Thogersen, 2006; Shen, 2005; Turner, 2010; Wang, 2014; Zhong, 2009). Although the conditions are improving, obstacles encountered by social science researchers more than 40 years ago (see Cohen, 1970) largely remain.

China has different intellectual traditions from many western countries. Historically, social issues, such as crime, are studied mainly from philosophical and moralistic perspectives (Curran, 2014). It is commonly acknowledged that Chinese criminological scholars tend to ‘favour conceptual analysis over empirical research’ (Liu & Jiang, 2011: 494), and traditionally methodology is not an important issue in social science research. Admittedly, in recent years, the Chinese academic communities have started to pay attention to methodological advancements. However, there are still challenges for empirical researchers.

The first obstacle that I encountered is political sensitivities. Crime information is generally regarded as a state secret in China (Zhong, 2009). It is not difficult to understand that in the political context of an authoritarian country, crime, as a form of social conflict and a measure of public governance, cannot be revealed without censorship (Shen, 2005). Following a research seminar which I was invited to present at a Chinese