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# Trajectory of Women's Advancement in Policing: A Comparative Study Between China and the United States

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## Abstract

With a comparative lens, this article explores the trajectory of women's advancement in policing in China and the United States (US), two major countries, one in the Global South and the other in the Northern part of the world. The article describes the rich history of women police in the US and China and compares the development of women policing in these two jurisdictions, which are sharply contrasting in many respects. Starting from the model of women's stage-by-stage integration into policing developed in the Northern contexts, we examine women's evolution in police and their local conditions in the two systems. Framed in Southern Criminology and Southern Theory, we conclude that the US model of sexual integration does not apply to China, where traditional cultural norms continue to reinforce women's gendered roles in policing. More generally, the progress of women is unlikely, nor necessary, to share the same trajectory everywhere.

**Keywords:** China; comparative criminal justice; policing; Southern Criminology; United States; women police

## Introduction

Research into the career paths of British, European and American policewomen (e.g., Brown 1997; Brown and Heidensohn 2000; Schulz 1995) has in recent years been augmented by studies on women policing in countries in the Global South (Carrington et al. 2020; Chu and Abdulla 2014; Hautzinger 2020; Jassal 2020; Jardine 2020; Natarajan 2008; Strobl 2010), including jurisdictions of Greater China (e.g., Chan and Ho 2017; Chu 2013). In the Northern world—comprising the developed countries in Western Europe and North America—Jennifer Brown (1997) developed a model that describes six sequential stages of women's integration into policing, including entry, separate restricted development, integration, take-off, reform and tip-over. It was believed that at the final stage—when numbers of women in policing reach the 'tip-over' point—women would play a fuller part throughout the spectrum of police work, achieve a higher rank in greater numbers and have a greater impact on mainstream policing (Brown 1997). In Northern countries, for example, the United States (US), the development of policewomen fit comfortably into the template, but not so for that of their counterparts in Southern societies, such as the progress of women in the People's Police in China.

This article compares the advancement of women policing in the US—the archetype of Northern countries—and the People's Republic of China (PRC)—a Southern nation—to illustrate the impact of diverse historical, socio-political and cultural factors on social phenomena, such as women's roles and overall position in policing. The article also touches upon global divisions in



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political, economic and cultural powers on knowledge production (Carrington, Hogg and Sozzo 2016; Connell 2007). We acknowledge that the Global North–South divide and the affiliation of some countries in the international community—in our case, China—are not without complications.

In popular discourses, ‘Global South’ tends to be related to underdeveloped or economically disadvantaged nations and is often used interchangeably with ‘the third world’ or ‘developing countries’. Thus, the rapid rise of China may cast serious doubts on its membership in this group of nations. The *Journal of Global South Studies* (2022)—a specialist academic journal—includes countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and part of Oceania in the Global South. The Global South is recognised to be ‘a relational category’ (Berger 2021: 2001) and ‘a metaphor for human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism at the global level’ (de Sousa Santos 2012: 51). Accordingly, the concept has been applied in the context of global knowledge production (Connell 2007) and, appositely, some wealthier and whiter nations such as Australia are placed in the Southern world (see Carrington, Hogg and Sozzo 2016). Likewise, China is a ‘newly rich’ member in the global village but, essentially, a Southern society.

The article is organised as follows. After the scene-setting, the article examines the overall contexts in which police operate in the US and China. Next, it uses Brown’s (1997) model as a starting point to trace the entry and evolution of women at various stages in these two police systems. This approach allows convergence and divergence in the development of women’s position in the People’s Police and the US police to surface. Then, the article proceeds to make sense of the findings. Through comparative analysis, it illustrates that the Northern model fits the stages of the sexual integration of policing in the US but is unlikely to apply to China. Thus, it makes a case for Southern Criminology and Southern Theory (Carrington, Hogg and Sozzo 2016; Connell 2007) in challenging existing, dominating theories and in knowledge making. The article’s contributions to the field and limitations are also provided in the final section.

## **Social, Gender and Policing Settings in China and the US**

China is a socialist state that has had a one-party polity since 1949. It adopted a market economy in the late 1970s and is now the second largest economy in the world, but it remains a society deeply rooted in Confucian and patriarchal traditions (Bailey 2012; Jacques 2009; Kaku 2015). As discussed earlier, China is a Southern country in Asia. The US is a capitalist country that has had a ‘Western’ democracy since the late eighteenth century. It began industrialising in the late nineteenth century and is now the largest economy in the world; it is a Northern society with a European intellectual heritage.

From a cultural perspective, China is a largely homogenous culture, with the nationality of Han Chinese representing more than 90 per cent of the population, and the vast majority of its 55 ethnic minorities live in several autonomous regions in the country (The Chinese Government 2022). In contrast, the US is a culturally diverse society with multiple racial and ethnic identities. Jiao (2001: 159) argued that ‘the homogeneity of Chinese culture has made it possible for the Chinese government to identify certain widely accepted moral principles and rule by the Confucian ideology of moral order’. Confucian teaching supports an authoritarian government and informs ‘Chinese democracy’, which is always likely to prioritise state sovereignty over individuals’ interests and rights (Brahm 1996; Jacques 2009). Under Confucianism, the behaviour of the state is akin to that of a parent ‘who always lays down clear rules regarding the behaviour of their offspring and requires them to be obeyed’ (Jacques 2009: 287). In the US, however, the elected government ‘is believed to be a natural extension of the will of the people’ and functions within a legal framework (Jiao 2001: 159). As a legal person, like individuals, the government may be held accountable for law-breaking.

Regarding women, in the US, as in other Northern societies, feminist movements were initiated by women, succeeded in bringing women’s status and rights to the centre of public debate and are an ongoing process (Kent 2012). Conversely, in China, the start of women’s emancipation was associated with ‘elite men’ and a small group of ‘elite women’ (Edwards 2008). Overall, in mainland China, the women’s liberation movements have been led by and for the purposes of the dominant political parties (Bailey 2012; Wu 2010). In this context, it is hard to cultivate feminist groups or individuals who advocate for women’s rights and interests and challenge the state gender politics.

As to policing, the Chinese police have long adopted a centralised structure, while the police in the US are more decentralised. Accordingly, the People’s Police are characterised by strong political control and standardised recruitment and training (Wong 2012), and officers are required by law to show loyalty to the Party-state (Shen 2022a), whereas the US police operate under the municipal government and receive little direct political interference or mandated standardisation (Jiao 2001). Hence, there are organisational and policy differences across territories in the US, where gender policing seems to be fairly consistent. In US policing policy shifts often occur at the local levels, whereas in China, they have to be top-down. It is in these social, gender and policing settings that we examine and compare the progress of women police in the US and China. Our discussion in the

following section is broken up into two subsections: first, we compare and contrast the trajectories of women's development in policing in the entry and pre-integration phases; next, we discuss women's journeys to fuller engagement in mainstream policing and where they are now in the integration and post-integration stages.

## **The Development of Women Police in the US and China**

When applying the established, Northern model of integration, women in the US and China shared some experiences at the early stages in the police profession, despite differing local circumstances and diverging policing practices.

### ***The Entry and Pre-integration Phases of Women Policing: Some Shared Roots***

Schulz (1995) offered an overview of how US women were introduced into policing and their early development in the US police. She wrote that women were hired by US police departments at the beginning of the twentieth century as part of the reaction to women becoming more visible in public places. The advocates for women police—reformist women and a few men—were concerned that men would accost working-class women, but they also feared that women would use their new freedoms to engage in prostitution. Policewomen, they said, would use their authority to undertake protective and preventive work, assisting but also controlling women and wayward children.

The policewomen were like their advocates—educated, upper middle class women native to the US—who believed in separate spheres for men and women in the workplace. Although these women sought acceptance from the police establishment and local government officials, they did not seek equality. Believing women to be morally superior to men, they had no interest in emulating male officers, and they eschewed the trappings of policing. In fact, they looked down upon the generally uneducated, often immigrant policemen, and, adhering to the prevailing philosophy of gender separatism, they stressed their differences from, rather than their similarities to, policemen (Schulz 1995).

Concerns about women in public places, particularly at public amusements, fairs, expositions and train stations, led Portland, Oregon, to hire Lola Baldwin in 1905 to oversee women's behaviour at the Lewis and Clark Exposition. Her success led the city's police department to retain her in 1908 to lead a Women's Protective Division, where she and her female staff provided services to and oversight of women and assisted policemen in investigations involving women and juveniles (Schulz 1995). They eschewed the title 'policewomen', preferring to be described as 'municipal mothers' (Myers 1995). This title reflected the women's roles, including enforcing laws at places of amusement, searching for missing persons and providing social-service information to women.

In 1910, when the Los Angeles Police Department appointed Alice Stebbins Wells as a sworn policewoman, her duties were similar to Baldwin's. She also discouraged arcades and movie theatres from displaying 'suggestive or evil' pictures and ensured that minors were not admitted without a parent or guardian. Policewomen everywhere enforced women's behaviour; in the train station in Newark, New Jersey, a policewoman forced young girls into the rest room to remove makeup from their faces, according to an issue of the National Police Journal in 1919 (Schulz 1995).

To remain unobtrusive and to reinforce their maternal imagery, the US women worked in plain clothes; and plain clothes also reflected their social class biases. They disdained the uniforms worn by British policewomen—outfits that they considered overly masculine and unattractive (Owings 1925). Cities with more than one policewoman generally organised them into all-female units, known as 'women's bureaus', reinforcing their separate sphere in the police department and in the larger society. In some departments, the separation was physical; the women's bureaus were located away from police headquarters or precincts, often sharing space with social-service providers. The policewomen's training, if any, was segregated from policemen. Although the women were better educated than the men, they were generally paid less. Women remained apart from male officers unless they assisted male officers in interviewing women or children, whether the women or children were victims, witnesses or suspects. Quotas, which remained in effect until the early 1960s, generally limited women to no more than two or three per cent of sworn officers.

By the 1930s, some of the rigid separations were breaking down. Some departments began to issue uniforms and firearms to policewomen. The uniforms were feminised versions of men's uniforms, with skirts rather than trousers, stylish caps and little ties at the neck. In 1934, New York City's policewomen started to be issued firearms and participated in pistol practice with policemen. The women carried their revolvers, smaller than those issued to men, in a specially designed shoulder pocketbook (Heimer 2018). A later style of bag contained a built-in holster for a .38 revolver, a medium red lipstick, a compact and a red plastic rouge case. Similar bags, without the cosmetics but with a built-in holster, were available for years. When working in

street clothes, policewomen were required to adhere to a ‘ladylike’ dress code (Patton 1989; Seelye 2021). Despite the gender-specific roles and positions, women began integrating into mainstream policing.

Turning to China, Shen (2020) provided a brief account of the history of Chinese women police, including their entry and early development. In China, women police were introduced primarily to respond to policing needs. At the beginning of the twentieth century, with women’s growing participation in public and social life, females were increasingly involved in criminality (Chen 1933); this era also saw China experiencing enormous political and social instability, where women and children were particularly vulnerable, and some desperately needed police attention. At the same time, policemen often felt inconvenient when handling female suspects, victims and women in need (Zhejiang Provincial Police Bureau 1937). As a result, women were first hired by the Shanghai police in the Republic of China in 1929 as ‘female inspectors’ (*nü-jian-cha-yuan*), primarily to search female passengers and luggage in public places. They were later employed nationwide as ‘female police’ (*nü-jing*) in 1931, although the policewomen then appeared only in a smattering of major cities (Shen 2020).

In the early days, females could be recruited to be policewomen and usually given a short initial training course within the local forces, in which they partook as police trainees. Other women—typically young daughters of wealthy families—might be enrolled in police academies as student probationers to receive formal policing education. Despite physical sex separation, these women were provided similar knowledge education and skills training to their male counterparts, including shooting, driving, cycling, martial arts and crime investigation (Editorial Committee 1967). The training they received matched the reality that females were expected to carry out outdoor policing duties. Both policewomen and female student probationers wore police uniforms that were similar to men’s uniforms. Interestingly, the female student probationers were said to look more confident than the policewomen on duty in the streets (Jiang 2011), perhaps owing to their privileged upbringing and ‘elite’ education.

Policewomen were divided into two job classifications. Women who performed outdoor duties, known as *wai-qin* (literally ‘external operators’), were involved in searching women and some indoor premises, door-to-door household registration inquiry, undercover work and assisting policemen in investigating cases involving women (Zhejiang Provincial Police Bureau 1937). *Wai-qin*’s roles also included helping needy women and children (Huang and Li 2006) and policing behaviour against ‘social decency’, such as prostitution, sexual harassment against women, sexual misconduct in public places, foot-binding and hair perming (which were then recognised as deviance). The other policewomen, known as *nei-qin* (literally, ‘internal operators’), performed indoor, primarily clerical, administrative and supplementary roles, although they could be deployed to exercise outdoor duties when there was a shortage of female *wai-qin*. Notably, it was the female police academy entrants—graduated student probationers and, essentially, educated young women with privileged social backgrounds—who were assigned office work once joining the police, while policewomen of average and lower-class families typically performed outdoor policing activities. Thus, women’s office roles were associated with education and higher professional status.

Compared with policemen, policewomen were engaged in a small fraction of police work that was thought appropriate for women. An official guideline explicitly provided that ‘it may be difficult for females to perform operational police work’, but ‘policewomen may be asked to assist policemen in crime investigations, where necessary’ (Sun 2014: 68). Surprisingly, despite being a small minority, performing limited roles, typically at low rank and rarely being police ‘officers’ (Gong and Wang 2013), the policewomen were highly recognised for the roles they played (see Zhejiang Provincial Police Bureau 1937). It seems that at the entry stage, several characteristics of women in policing in China mirrored their counterparts in the US, although there were noticeable differences between them, to which we will return.

### ***The Integration and Post-integration Phases: Divergent Evolution of Women Policing in the US and China***

In the US, by the 1950s—roughly the start of the restricted development and integration stages of the integration model (Brown 1997)—the second generation of policewomen began to plant the seeds that would grow into unisex policing. For middle-class careerists, rather than benevolent ladies, concerns were not so much about helping the less fortunate but mainly about helping themselves. Although not demanding total equality, they wanted more varied assignments and more respect (Schulz 1995). Many women, particularly veterans, chafed at their differential treatment. Mildred Shannon (1980) recalled that in her recruit class of women WWII military veterans, instructors presumed that they did not know how to march in formation and that there was ‘little equality’, but there were many ‘signals of separation’. Some women, generally older than Shannon’s cohort, were trying to bridge the gap between policemen and policewomen but also between the older and younger policewomen who no longer viewed separate spheres as providing opportunity but as a trap.

As the women edged away from their traditional roles, many police departments’ annual reports featured cover-page photos of attractive policewomen pointing their revolvers at the camera. Others featured uniformed policewomen marching smartly or patrolling beaches and public amusements while interacting with school-aged children, reinforcing that, even in uniform,

policewomen's sphere continued to be women and children. At the time, the media expressed incredulity at women expanding their roles and constantly reinforced their gendered identity. The article titles provide clues to the content: 'Some cops have lovely legs' (Saturday Evening Post 1949); 'New York's finest: Female division' (Chasan 1955); and 'Crime busters in skirts' (Readers Digest 1957). It took well over a generation for women to move beyond their gendered roles and change the media and public perceptions of women policing.

According to Schulz (1995), the climate was about to change; in September 1968, Betty Blankenship and Elizabeth Coffal reminded their chief in Indianapolis, Indiana, of a pledge he had earlier made to the policewomen that if he ever became chief, he would assign them to general patrol duties. When he honoured that pledge, the policewomen strapped gun belts to their waists, entered a marked police car and answered general police calls. Subsequently, other cities also began similar 'patrol experiments'. However, not all policewomen wanted to be the equals of policemen; some female officers with administrative assignments that provided equal pay with male officers but did not require outdoor or shift work were quite content with their limited roles.

However, regardless of the women's wants, they were overtaken by social and political changes in the late 1960s and into the 1970s, when US policing was in a state of upheaval. Rising crime rates, urban riots and racial, anti-draft and Vietnam War protests led to debates on the hyper-masculine image of the police as crimefighters. It was argued, inter alia, that little patrolling involved crimefighting and that aggressive patrol created tension and hostility in communities. Such debates opened a door for women to argue that if patrol was less about fighting crime and more about helping people and providing service, there was no reason they could not do it as well as men. In 1972, Congress passed an amendment to the *Civil Rights Act 1964*, prohibiting state and local agencies from job discrimination based on sex. Police departments were required to hire women on an equal basis with men—a move that would ultimately bring an end to separate spheres.

Money also played a role. Laws enacted or amended between 1968 and 1973 imposed non-discriminatory mandates that could result in the loss of funds if a department discriminated against women. These laws provided the basis for the women demanding a greater role in policing. They also undercut policewomen who were content with their separate sphere or would have preferred only a partially integrated status. Even if a few of the women would have preferred to remain 'policeWOMEN' (Martin 1979), equal opportunity laws forbade it.

Yet, even with federal law and funding requirements on their side, the women integrationists faced distrust from male colleagues, police administrators and particularly push-back from policemen's wives. Often at the urging of their spouses or police unions, but also reflecting a traditional view of the separation of the sexes, the policemen's wives were among the fiercest opponents against women as patrol partners for their husbands, alleging women officers would endanger their husbands' safety because of their small size and inability to provide backup in an emergency. There was also a sense that wives were concerned about their husbands working so closely with women for eight or ten hours, particularly in the confines of a small police car (Schulz 1995).

Policewomen were forced to take legal action against their departments. The number and scope of the lawsuits filed by policewomen are testament to institutional and societal resistance to change. In leaving behind their sphere, women litigated almost all facets of their work environment, including hiring, training, promotion requirements and opportunities, appropriate uniforms and policies surrounding pregnancy and child-rearing. While many women who fought their departments saw their careers side-tracked, in 1985, Penny Harrington was appointed the police chief of Portland, Oregon, by the mayor (Harrington 1999), becoming the first woman to lead a major US police department.

Changes in social norms at the 'integration stage' of women policing were aided and hampered by the media. Although the early women on patrol attracted vast local media attention, so did protests against their new assignments, and even as women rose through the ranks, the media were unable to leave behind stereotypes based on sex and gender. Some continued to focus on women's traditional roles, for example, 'Sheriff mom' (Schmitt 1996); others sexualised women, for example, 'Goddess with a gun' (Palo Alto Weekly 2003). At the post-integration stage today, women make up about 13.1 per cent of the overall police population in the US (Duffin 2021), and less attention is paid to their sex.

In China, initially, women policing developed unevenly across the country (Shen 2020), and their progress in the Republic of China was severely disrupted by the Japanese invasion and, subsequently, the Communist uprisings in the late-1930s through the 1940s (Chan and Ho 2017). The next phase of gender policing began in New China, the early years following the founding of the PRC in 1949. The People's Police attempted to bring women into mainstream policing; all-women traffic police units were introduced, and gender segregation was maintained.

The Hanjiang Female Traffic Police Unit in Wuhan, Hubei province, was the first all-women traffic police unit. It began operating on 8 March—International Women’s Day—in 1958 (Zhao 2011). *Women of China*, a government-sponsored women’s magazine, used a photo of a female traffic police officer on its cover that year. As part of the campaign promoting women in New China, the initiative was praised by a top political leader of the central government, leading to all-women traffic police units mushrooming in other large cities, including Beijing, the capital of China.

Yet, there were institutional efforts to project young female police officers’ professional and private lives. According to the Beijing Women Police Association (2009), the city’s traffic police department had stringent rules preventing men and women from contacting each other. Policewomen were prohibited from dating and getting married within the first two and three years, respectively, of their deployment. Police leaders did not want the young, newly trained female officers to be distracted by marriage, pregnancy, child-bearing and any other family duty, maybe because of the belief that women’s family roles would have a ‘detrimental’ effect on the collective interests of the police. For the police managers, given the considerable amount of nationwide attention to the capital’s all-female traffic police unit, this gender policing initiative could not be seen to fail (Shen 2022a). The Confucianism-influenced authoritarian leadership here, as a parent and a regulator, exercised its legitimate power to control the women in both public and private spheres.

Like their male colleagues, the female traffic police operated on the roads. Although they made every effort to overcome the ‘women’s problems’ in exercising their policing duties, the female officers commonly developed arthritis, varicose veins, hysteroptosis and irregular menstruation, which, according to the then-director of the Beijing Women’s Association, showed that traffic policing was too strenuous for women (Beijing Women Police Association 2009). The view was accepted at the top level of political leadership, leading to the dissolution of the all-women traffic police unit in Beijing in October 1960. Other female-only units were also short-lived when the women were deemed unable to cope with the physical demands of outdoor order maintenance and enforcement work (Zhou 2013).

Ironically, as the physical segregation between policemen and policewomen faded, policewomen’s roles became less varied than those of the women who had come before them. Today, female Chinese police officers are assigned primarily to indoor administrative, service-oriented and support duties and are rarely involved in mainstream policing with policemen as mutual partners. Women officers do not typically work on shifts or outside ‘usual’ working hours, but, like the earlier policewomen, they are on-call to assist policemen. In a mostly male institution, female police officers generally receive and willingly accept the differential, compassionate treatment. Currently, women make up about 14.3 per cent of the People’s Police (Xinhua News 2021), close to the 15 per cent female quota in the national police recruitment strategy (Zhou 2013).

It is worth noting that in China, the state determines how women should position themselves in policing and broader social settings. Some reflection on women police at the earlier stages helps illustrate the point. In the Republic of China, gender equality was said to be the general principle of the police (Jiang 2010). In an official document, it was stated that male and female police must be treated equally, although women’s biological characteristics must be taken into consideration in their deployment (Huang and Li 2006); in Shanghai, both male and female police were entitled housing allowances, free medical care and other employment-related benefits (Jiang 2011). Behind the ‘gender equality’ policy, though, women were invisible or passive when their roles and overall position in policing were determined for them.

The same rhetoric and similar gender practices were carried over to the PRC, where gender equality is proclaimed to be a state policy; within the police, female and male officers at the same salary band (based on a combination of factors, including qualifications, tenure, police rank and seniority) receive the same pay and benefits, which are higher than the already generous emolument for civil servants in other professions (Shen 2022b). In China, police enjoy high occupational prestige (Yang 2017). Police officers, especially female officers, cherish their uniforms—the feeling they refer to as the ‘police uniform sentiment’ (Shen 2022a).

As in the previous regime, in the PRC, it is the state and its agencies that decide and do what they believe is best for women, identify what they consider to be women’s needs and act on what they assume to be women’s problems (Kaku 2015; Shen 2017). One example in policing is that, apropos of the Beijing all-women traffic police unit, the police leadership instructed that policewomen should have their long hair shortened for their own safety. This instruction led to an outcry among the young female officers because, traditionally, the removal of pigtailed for a young woman was hugely significant and only done after her marriage. However, despite their overwhelming reluctance, the policewomen obeyed the order; as promised, the police funded those who preferred to have their shortened hair permed (Beijing Women Police Association 2009).

Overall, women are promoted as an integral part of the People’s Police and are dubbed ‘police flowers’ because of their perceived femininity and differing roles. Considered a compliment, the sobriquet is customarily used in police promotional

materials and the official and popular media, in which photos of young, usually good-looking female officers in uniform frequently appear. Notably, policewomen often happily accept the dub (Shen 2022a), which, from a Northern liberal feminist viewpoint, might be considered a gendered limitation to women's duties or prestige in the police.

Similar to Heidensohn's (1992) 'gentle touch stage', female officers are used as the 'soft power' of the Chinese police (see Su 2020), and perhaps the all-women police units exist for the same purpose. On the *Chinese Police Daily* online ([www.cpd.com.cn](http://www.cpd.com.cn)), the official media outlet of the Ministry of Public Security, female officers are praised, and all-women police units receive frequent news coverage. On this police-owned media platform, recent examples include the Handan female traffic police unit, members of which have been described as 'working hard' and called the 'most beautiful police flowers' by local citizens. The gendered, emblematic utilisation of women in policing resonates with the official rhetoric and construction of gender equality. Because it gives respect to policewomen, rather than devalues them, it is not questioned.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This article explores the trajectories of women's development in policing in China and the US. Our findings suggest that while Chinese women entered the once male-only organisation about two decades after their US counterparts, women police in the two nations share some common roots. Initially, in both systems, women were subject to female quotas that restricted their entry into policing; they were separated from men and performed only a small fraction of police work but gradually blended with males in the mixed-sex police environment. Despite the commonalities at the pre-integration stages, the progress of women police in the two jurisdictions differs remarkably.

The article has shown that in the US, women were encouraged and supported by middle-class careerists, the equal rights legislation and its implementation—for example, the use of funding as a countermeasure to curb gender discrimination within local police forces—and, to an extent, the media. With this support, pioneering individual women played an active role who, according to Martin (1980), were 'breaking' into and 'entering' law enforcement, and they strove for integration into a male world that was alien and often hostile to them (Freedman 1979). In contrast, women in China were invited to the police primarily to satisfy a policing need. Relatedly, compared with their US counterparts, the Chinese policewomen then had a larger role in mainstream police work, including outdoor law enforcement and order maintenance, and they were less limited to working with women and juveniles. Intriguingly, unlike in the US, there have been no individual pioneers leading or influencing women in Chinese policing.

Although physical sex segregation finally disappeared in both policing systems, a major turning point in the US occurred after WWII, when female careerists, unlike their benevolent predecessors, fought for a wider range of assignments to expand their opportunities and integrate further into mainstream policing. In China, a new phase of women's integration started at the outset of the PRC when all-women traffic police units were introduced. Viewed as an attempt of the state to bring females into mainstream police work, it failed. The failure reinforced the gendered division of roles. Since then, women have been quietly removed from the frontline, operational policing, which has been left almost entirely to men. At the integration stage of Brown's (1997) model, women policing in the US and China began to head in different directions.

As we have shown, female representation in policing in China is statistically higher than in the US, but, from a Northern perspective, women may have progressed little in the Chinese police and are de facto secondary players, given their roles. Indeed, women police in China exercise less varied duties than their predecessors and counterparts in the North, and in mainstream policing, their tasks are limited to assisting male officers when called. Despite unprecedented socio-economic changes in China in the past few decades, there has been little shift in gender policy in policing and wider society. In contrast, US policewomen, while still a minority, have achieved virtually full integration in law enforcement after a nearly 60-year battle (Rabe-Hemp 2009) and as a result of dramatic shake-ups in policing and society. Several structural reasons explain the different trajectories of women police's evolution in the US and China.

First of the reasons is, of course, the differing social conditions from which women's roles and position in policing cannot be separated. In the US—a Western democracy in the Global North—it was initially the white, upper middle class women who took the initiative and first entered the police world; their demands and agenda reflected their era and social class. By emphasising the differences between women and men, they effectively employed separate spheres as a strategy to support female institution building (see Freedman 1979) and established themselves in a previously male-only institution. It was women themselves (those with different life experiences) who subsequently rejected this self-segregation by the 1950s.

Chinese women, passive members of the feudal society in the 1930s, were invited and placed in policing where it was thought appropriate for females. Neither gender segregation nor its removal involved the women and their desires. In China, how



women should be organised in the police is not considered a rights issue (Shen 2022a); the Party-state leads individuals to believe that their rights are not born but determined under the collective interests of the people (Brahm 1996), which the Party-state ultimately defines. Thus, unlike in the US, individual female activists and women's voices are missing in the advancement of women police in the Southern, state-centred democracy.

Second, as our findings show, traditional social norms have affected gender policing in both countries. In the US, social changes in the mid-twentieth century led policewomen to forgo female differential treatment while claiming full police powers. The masculine nature of policing was first questioned, and then the police faced legal and moral challenges where women's opportunities were restricted. As a result, policewomen started to take a fuller spectrum of police work. Likewise, Chinese society has also changed, especially following the economic reforms. Nevertheless, social changes differ in the two contrasting cultural settings. In China, while women have become increasingly independent, self-reliant and confident, traditional gender norms have survived all changes in recent decades (Bailey 2012; Dong 2021; Shen 2017). The male-centred police culture and gendered practice in policing are sustained (see Chen 2016). Accordingly, female officers commonly accept their existing treatment and overall position in the police organisation; they appreciate male protection and air little demand for expansion of women's roles in police work (Shen 2022a, b).

Third, and relatedly, in both societies, women and their progression in policing have been viewed through the prism of gender. The difference, though, is that the sexist attitude towards women police is no longer in fashion in mainstream US society, while in China, policewomen remain 'police flowers'. The varying attitudes to gender are perhaps best exemplified by police uniform sentiment here. In the US, women's full integration into police work has been concurrent with dramatic shifts in gender norms, illustrated by the changes in policewomen's uniforms: from no uniform to highly feminised police attire and, finally, practical female police wear, equipment and firearms. In China, policewomen have worn uniforms since they were first introduced into policing. According to the *Regulation on the Administration of the People's Public Security Police Uniform Wearing 2008*, with several exceptions, women, like men, are required to work in uniform. In official and popular media, uniformed policewomen are frequently presented to give an 'eye-catching, exquisite sight' (China-Underground 2016). In New China, female officers in the all-women police units were a convenient subject for the newly established regime to demonstrate women's advances under their governance; in the post-Mao era, women, policewomen included, are the object of the male gaze (Evans 2000). What has not changed is sexism, which continues to permeate Chinese society, business and politics (Myers 2021).

There are further structural differences between the two policing systems. Although both have the constitution and laws enshrining gender equality, women's constrained roles and opportunities are identified as gender inequality in the US. The rights legislation in the US has empowered women to challenge gendered injustices within the police and in society. In addition to the laws and legal action, the localised nature of US policing has given women the opportunity to force departmental reforms, adding momentum to the expansion of policewomen's roles; individual, enlightened leaders have also contributed to reform. All of the factors together have forced the male-dominated profession to equalise opportunities for women. In China, since women's roles and overall position in policing are accepted, there is little need to challenge the existing gender policy and practice. Even if an individual female officer suffers from a gender-related grievance, litigation is unlikely to be an option because of loyalties as police are tied to the Party-state, and police officers are obliged to uphold public policy (Shen 2020, 2022a). Since the Chinese police organisation is highly centralised, policy shifts—if they occur—will have to come from the top.

Moreover, and fundamentally, the role of the state shapes women's development in policing and society at large. In China, influenced by Confucianism, the government has a paternalistic role, and individuals see themselves in a relationship of dependency (Jacques 2009). Accordingly, the government has been the determiner, directing society and individuals about what is appropriate behaviour for men and women. Conversely, as a Western or Northern society, the US is driven by individualism, where an overwhelming belief is that there are limits to what a government can achieve (Jacques 2009; Kaku 2015). As this article has shown, compared with government in China, the state is far less visible in US women's evolution in policing.

Our findings in this comparative study compel us to ponder the sameness–difference narratives and what exactly gender equality means to women in policing. In China, as we have discussed, females' biological characteristics have been considered since the introduction of women police, and policing is featured to be incompatible with female bodies, femininity and women's social functioning. With the division of roles by gender, women have developed separately from men in the world of policing. In the US, where sexual integration is a rights issue, hence a matter of democracy, sex differences have rarely been considered in women's claim for full integration. In a judgment, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the renowned former US Supreme Court

judge who passed away in 2020, once rejected the idea of using ‘inherent differences’ between men and women as an excuse for the denigration of either sex but acknowledged the ‘enduring’ physical sex differences (Saffer 2013).

We posit that if we accept that most men are physically stronger than women and that many women assume female social (family) responsibilities, there is nothing wrong with recognising gender differences and calling for structural support for female police officers to allow ‘an equal playing field’ (Laverick et al. 2019). While accepting gender differences, we firmly reject the idea that either sex is weaker, less capable or inferior. In line with others (Cunningham 2021; Laverick and Cain 2015; Laverick et al. 2019), we argue that women’s roles should be valued by considering their gendered characteristics—physical and social—and how policing styles may develop to maximise women’s potential (Onyango and Natarajan 2021).

This article makes several contributions to the field. First, although there are relatively ample historical overviews of women policing in the US, only a handful of studies focus on the subject in China. By comparing policing in the US and China, this article offers the journal’s readers a shrewd account of women in Chinese policing that may otherwise not be readily available due to the scarcity of information. It has certainly added insight from an international and comparative perspective to the body of women and policing literature.

Second, the article presents a comparative study which, to our knowledge, is the first to compare gender policing in the US and China—two societies contrasting sharply in many respects. This comparison has brought our attention to contextual differences in the Global North and South, to socio-political, historical and cultural conditions in knowledge production and to Southern Criminology and Southern Theory. Consequently, rather than ‘applying’ the established Northern theories, we have shown the need to be more receptive to ‘alternative’ models of gender policing. In the US, women’s equal roles can be achieved, while in China—one of the ‘traditional societies’ in the Global South—‘gender roles are ascribed’ and women’s advancement depends even more on changes in society (Natarajan 2008) and the call of the state (Strobl 2010). In the Global North, such as the US, the media can exercise influence on shifting social norms, while in China—a Southern one-party state that strives to preserve its own values (Brahm 1996)—the media play a limited role in directing social moves.

Third, the article’s comparative analysis has enabled us to stress two types of differences: sex differences and differences between individuals in either sex group. For the former, we argue that women’s and men’s gendered characteristics must be considered to ensure fairness and equality for women (and men) and to maximise individuals’ capacities; for the latter, the article has indicated that women are not a homogeneous group or a ‘universal category’ (Mohanty 1984). While in both Northern and Southern societies, life has been and may continue to be difficult for women (Cunningham and Ramshaw 2020), individual women in whichever jurisdictions make individual choices when facing opportunities and obstacles. Through a comparative lens, this article offers additional Southern ingredients to the breadth of gender policing literature, which historically has had a Northern focus.

Further, this article contributes to comparative gender, policing and criminal justice studies by illustrating that while women police may share some common roots, they may head in different directions to achieve gender equality as a proclaimed common goal. Thus, it supports others calling for researchers to remain mindful of the differences in international comparisons (e.g., Cunningham 2021). More practically, the academic endeavour of comparative criminal justice requires a detailed and in-depth understanding of the system, processes, players involved and the societies that form the backdrop to the matter under investigation (Pakes 2010). We, as female gender policing scholars of who one is of Chinese origin and the other is a native US national and who have both served as police officers in their own home countries, are in a unique position to jointly undertake the endeavour to compare women police in the two divergent systems. In addition to shedding new light on women police’s collective and differing experiences, our insightful and comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the women, policing and societies of these settings have enabled us to be wary of ethnocentrism. We appreciate the equal value of both Northern and Southern experiences, which we have evaluated without prejudice. This comparative analysis has led us to conclude that certain notions, policy devices and practical measures may not be transferable across borders, given dissimilar or sometimes idiosyncratic local circumstances.

Along with its contributions, the research this article rests upon does have a limitation. Admittedly, our analytical and critical possibilities are constrained by the secondary analysis of existing material, which is plentiful and from which we have selected only a small number of examples as illustrations to help us argue our major points. Concerning the limited publishing space, we have purposively, albeit reluctantly, left out some otherwise interesting details to save room for discussion. The contents we chose, nonetheless, have allowed us to make meaningful rather than like-for-like comparisons, substantiate our argument and draw reasoned conclusions. Likewise, considering the word limit, and also as much has been done to offer well-argued critiques of Brown’s six-stage model (e.g., Rabe-Hemp and Garcia 2020), we have omitted this important endeavour, but eloquently, the article’s discussion confirms the evaluation and analysis in the past research.

Returning to the trajectory of women's development in policing, where this article began, our comparative study in China and the US tells us that women police's roles may change, women policing may progress (Brown and Silvestri 2020; Schuck 2020), stabilise or stay still (Shen 2022a), or possibly regress (Strobl 2010). Globally, female policing may develop in different motions, at different paces (see Carrington et al. 2000; Hautzinger 2020; Natarajan 2008; Onyango and Natarajan 2021; Strobl 2010), and the trajectories of women policing may be shaped by conditions occurring outside policing. What is clear is that the US model of the sexual integration of policing, which adheres to the stages defined in the Northern world, does not apply to policing in Southern countries such as China. It is highly unlikely that China's 'police flowers' will become shoulder-to-shoulder partners of policemen—as their US female counterparts have done—without major social changes engendering a radically different outlook towards themselves and their careers. And yet, is it necessary that Chinese women police mirror women police in the US or any other place?

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