



# Citizen Provoking Behavior and Police Attitudes Toward the Use of Force: A Scenario-Based Study in China

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## Abstract

Drawing upon data collected from a survey of police officers in China, this study aims to understand the impact that citizens' provoking behavior has on police attitudes toward the use of force. It examines whether officers' views on the use of force vary depending on citizens' provoking behavior during police-citizen encounters. Descriptive data shows a minority of officers do not view the use of force described in three scenarios as inappropriate. Results of the Wilcoxon signed-rank test demonstrate statistically significant differences in officers' responses to each set of the three scenarios. This study's findings provide empirical evidence for Chinese police authorities to consider when developing policy and training protocols to contain the use of force by police. Research limitations and suggestions for future studies are discussed as well.

**Keywords** Police attitudes · Use of force · Citizen provoking behavior

## Introduction

Police use of force has been an important research topic since the 1970s (Brandl and Stroshine 2012). Numerous inquiries over the years have contributed to understanding how and why police officers use force (Terrill and Mastrofski 2002). Prior research has examined a wide range of factors to predict the use of force by police, including demographic characteristics of police officers and citizens, police-citizen encounters, police organizations, and the communities where the officers work. These studies have demonstrated citizens' provoking demeanor as consistent and predominant precursors to the force used by the police. For example, studies demonstrate that the strongest predictor of police use of force occurs when a suspect resists or flees from the police during an arrest (Brandl and Stroshine 2012; Lee et al. 2010; Morgan et al. 2020; Terrill et al. 2008).

These studies have overwhelmingly focused on police officers' use of force. However, studies have not extensively examined how factors during police-citizen encounters influence police attitudes regarding the use of force.

Few studies have incorporated suspect demeanor as a predictor of police attitudes concerning the use of force (e.g., Phillips 2010). Scholars have recognized the importance of studying police attitudes toward the use of force. "Not only do these attitudes play a role in determining the use of force by police, but the attitudes held by police officers can also function as a barometer of changes in police use of force" (Lester 1995, p. 180). Research on police attitudes regarding the use of force would significantly advance people's understanding of this subject. Furthermore, this research could lead to the implementation of effective measures to reduce police use of force. This study aims to contribute to the literature on the use of force by focusing on how citizens' provoking behavior during police-citizen encounters impacts police attitudes toward the use of force.

In recent years, high-profile incidents involving police use of force in China have gone viral on social media. For example, a mother was pinned to the ground by a police officer who attempted to take her son to police station for a dispute her son had with a security guard. The officer stepped on her hair while awaiting backup and, a few hours later, the mother died in police custody due to neck broken (China Daily 2015). A woman argued with a police officer over a parking ticket, and the officer pushed both the woman and the infant in her arms to the ground (The New York Times 2017). A young man who fiercely resisted arrest for allegedly soliciting sex services died as a result of the

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officers' excessive use of force (China Daily 2016). These incidents prompted a public outcry concerning police brutality and immorality. Additionally, these incidents raised troubling questions about the limits of police authority regarding the use of force. Debates on social media indicated that some police officers viewed the use of force in those incidents as appropriate. They expressed sympathy for the officers involved who were subjected to disciplinary punishment due to their excessive use of force. Little research has been conducted in China to examine officers' perspectives on the use of force systematically. Not much is known about whether Chinese police officers would agree the force used in those incidents was proper. Furthermore, it is not known whether police officers would support punishing an officer for using inappropriate force. This study explores patterns of officers' views on the use of force and determines whether their views vary depending on citizens' provoking behavior during police-citizen encounters.

## Literature Review

### Situational Factors and Police Use of Force

Researchers have employed various theoretical approaches to explain police use of force. Despite many factors, prior research has suggested that situational factors—what happened during the police-citizen encounter—seem to have the greatest impact on whether force is used (Bayley and Garofalo 1989; Bolger 2015; Garner et al. 2002; Hickman et al. 2008; Terrill and Mastrofski 2002; Worden 1989). The situational approach to police use of force claims that officers' behavior during a police-citizen encounter is influenced by characteristics of the immediate situation, such as the nature of the problem, the attributes and actions of citizens, and the contextual variables (Worden 1989). The use of force is more likely to occur during police-citizen encounters involving serious offenses (e.g., Bolger 2015) or arrests related to a violent crime (e.g., Garner et al. 1995, 1996; Worden 1995). The use of force by police is also associated with a range of citizen attributes, such as being under the influence of drugs or alcohol or possessing a weapon (Bayley and Garofalo 1989; Engel et al. 2000; Reiss 1968; Worden 1995).

A review of the literature suggests that the most prominent situational factor consistently found in relation to the use of force by police is citizens' provoking behavior—challenging police authority. Challenging police authority can be perceived as either disrespect, resistance, or both (Terrill and Mastrofski 2002). Examples of challenging police authority include resisting arrest, fleeing from police, ripping up a traffic ticket, directing profanity at an officer, and physically attacking an officer. A significant number

of studies have found that citizens who challenge police authority face a greater risk of receiving excessive force (Bayley and Garofalo 1989; Bolger 2015; Engel et al. 2000; Garner et al. 2002; Hickman et al. 2008; Reiss 1968; Terrill et al. 2008; Terrill and Mastrofski 2002; Worden 1995). Fleeing from an officer is one of the strongest predictors of police use of force (Brandl and Strohshine 2012; Hickman et al. 2008; Terrill et al. 2008), and the resulting application of force is acceptable to some officers (Phillips 2010; Phillips and Sobol 2011; Terrill and Mastrofski 2002). The odds of police using force increase significantly when a suspect displays an antagonistic demeanor or resistance (Garner et al. 2002; Lee et al. 2010; Morgan et al. 2020). Greater variation in police use of force is explained by the suspects' provoking behavior, including resistance and attempting to get away from the police (Hickman et al. 2008). Morgan et al. (2020) found that suspects who engaged in fierce resistance were nearly ten times more likely to be subjected to force and six times more likely to receive potentially lethal force. Morrow et al.'s (2018) study indicates that resistance, non-compliant demeanors, and disrespect are the three most robust predictors of police use of force among juvenile arrests. Garner et al. (2002) reviewed studies which used diverse samples, measures, and methodology to examine police use of force. The review found that only a few characteristics of theoretical and policy-related interest were identified as being associated with police use of force, including the role of the suspect's resistance (e.g., possessing or using a weapon or fighting with officers), the suspect's demeanor (e.g., disrespect or antagonism toward the police), and the suspect's race. However, a suspect's resistance and demeanor have been demonstrated to be relatively stronger predictors of police use of force than a suspect's race.

### Citizens' Provoking Behavior and Officers' Perspective on the Use of Force

The capacity to use force is the defining characteristic of the police (Bittner 1970). Since force used by police represents a very serious intrusion of citizens' liberty and life, people have significant concerns regarding legitimate motives and appropriate circumstances for which an officer may use force. Tedeschi and Felson's (1994) social interactionist theory provides a theoretical framework for why police officers resort to coercive force when they encounter resistance or disrespect from citizens. This theory suggests that people engage in coercive behavior for three reasons: to produce compliance, save face, or achieve retributive justice. Drawing upon this theory, Terrill (2005) has identified three motivations for the police to use force: to gain control, achieve justice, and protect identities. While pointing out that gaining control or citizen compliance is the only purpose for police use of force, he notes that police officers

are socialized to “maintain the edge” not only to establish control, but also to ensure proper respect. Whether or not to use force is also related to officers’ assessment of citizens’ behavior from both legal and moral perspectives. Citizens committed crime or involved in norm-violating behaviors are at higher risk of receiving undue force. Therefore, one might expect an officer to resort to force to achieve compliance when a citizen resists arrest, to protect police authority when a citizen displays disrespect or defiance, or to achieve retributive justice when a citizen verbally or physically assaults an officer or commits a heinous crime. Nevertheless, not all the motivations constitute legitimate reasons for officers to apply force to non-compliant or unruly citizens. Using force to punish citizens because they fail to show deference to police authority does not constitute legal justification for force (Terrill and Mastrofski 2002). It is not the role of the police to punish suspects who challenge police authority or commit a heinous crime (Kleinig 2014). The police are not justified in using force to achieve justice or protect social identities unless such goals fall within the scope of ensuring control (Terrill 2005).

Therefore, police officers may only use force to achieve citizen compliance or to protect the safety of the public or the officers themselves. However, the police often view disobedience as resistance to the generally accepted social norms (Alpert et al. 2004), disrespectful citizens as defiant of the institution that the officer represents (Toch 1995), and flight from an officer as defiance of police authority (Skolnick and Fyfe 1993). Consequently, police officers may justify the use of force when it is applied to protect police authority or achieve retributive justice.

Literature concerning police attitudes toward the use of force suggests that police officers desire to punish or “teach a lesson” when a suspect challenges police authority by resisting or showing disrespect. Prior studies have also revealed that inappropriate use of force is acceptable to some police officers, although most officers view it as serious unethical behavior (see Micucci and Gomme 2005; Paoline and Terrill 2011; Phillips 2010; Phillips and Sobol 2011; Weisburd et al. 2000). Carter (1985) surveyed 95 police officers in Texas and found that almost two-thirds believed that excessive force could be used for self-defense and retaliation. Roughly 23% stated that excessive force was necessary to demonstrate police authority. Micucci and Gomme (2005) employed various scenarios involving power abuse by the police to investigate officers’ opinions about using inappropriate force. One scenario asked officers to rate the seriousness of an officer punching a suspect who was under control as a punishment for fleeing and resisting. Although over two-thirds of those surveyed rated the violence as high on the seriousness scale, a small but significant proportion of the sample did not view this sort of excessive force as serious. Drawn upon surveys of over 2000 patrol officers

across eight police agencies, Paoline and Terrill (2011) examined patrol officers’ attitudes concerning the types of force they believe are appropriate when dealing with non-compliant citizens. While they found that “the majority of street-level officers are quite conservative in their views as to what is and what is not reasonable force” (p. 186), a few officers believed that hard-handed techniques and weapons were appropriate for citizens who did not physically exert resistance.

A review of extant research suggests that officers’ views on the use of force vary depending on the situational factors of a police-citizen encounter. Specifically, the contextual characteristics of police-citizen encounters, including a citizen’s attitude and behavior, are predictors of how officers perceive the force used by another officer. An officer is more likely to view the use of force as appropriate if the circumstances involve a citizen challenging police authority (Carter 1985; Phillips 2010), a suspect committing a heinous crime (The Independent Commission 1991), or an officer being assaulted by a citizen (Brown 1984; Carter 1985; Paoline and Terrill 2011; Weisburg et al. 2000). There is also an association between police officers’ support of physical force and a suspect fleeing from an officer (Phillips 2010; Phillips and Sobol 2011).

Indeed, these studies support the supposition that situational factors strongly influence officers’ attitudes toward the use of force. Officers tend to support or tolerate another officer’s use of force if that officer feels obligated to protect police authority or achieve retributive justice. In contrast to Western countries, where a significant number of studies have investigated the use of force by police, China has few studies on this topic. According to China’s Operational Procedures for Police Officers to Stop Crime in Progress (referred to as the “Operational Procedures” hereafter), a police officer may use reasonable force upon encountering resistance by a non-compliant citizen. However, the level of force must be proportional to the level of resistance. Officers are banned from using force when the citizen displays no resistance or upon ceasing resistance. The use of force must be proportional and incremental, and the use of excessive force is prohibited (Li 2013). The legal doctrines regulating the use of force by the police in China do not seem different from those frequently discussed in the English-based literature (Liu and Zhang 2021).

These legal doctrines, which are composed within the framework of law by lawyers, are often at odds with the view of police officers who work on the street (Atherley and Hickman 2014). When Chinese police officers encounter citizen resistance or face challenges from non-compliant citizens, do they believe they can use force to uphold police authority or achieve retributive justice? Are their attitudes toward the use of force contingent on citizens’ demeanor during police-citizen encounters? Due to the scarcity of research on police use of force in China, answers to those questions are almost non-existent. Based on survey data

from over 900 police officers in China, this study attempts to fill a gap in the literature. This study examines the following questions: (1) Do police officers in China view the use of force applied to residents who have challenged police authority as appropriate? (2) Do officers' views on the use of force vary depending on how a citizen challenges police authority? Drawing upon findings of prior research on the use of force by police, this study assumes that situational factors during police-citizen encounters play a prominent role in shaping officers' attitudes regarding the use of force. Specifically, this study hypothesizes the following: (1) Only a minority of police officers would support using force against citizens who challenge police authority. (2) How officers view the use of force varies significantly depending on citizens' provoking behavior.

## Methodology

### Survey Instrument, Sample, and Measurement

Data for this study are drawn from a survey of Chinese police officers conducted in 2018.

The survey instrument was designed to obtain information on officers' backgrounds and work-related characteristics. It also incorporated three hypothetical scenarios involving police using inappropriate force toward citizens who challenged police authority in various ways. Scenario 1 involves a woman who received a ticket for a parking violation. She argued with the officer and physically blocked the officer's way to his cruiser. She made no attempt to attack the officer when the officer pushed her to the ground. Scenario 2 describes a police-citizen encounter involving a suspect who allegedly solicited sex services at a massage parlor. Police officers attempted to arrest him when he walked out of the massage parlor. The suspect fled, and officers chased and wrestled him. After he was subdued, officers beat him out of anger. In Scenario 3, a driver was pulled over by a police officer for running a red light. The officer asked her to present a driver's license and vehicle registration. Instead of complying with the officer's request, she directed profane language toward the officer, after which the officer struck her in the face with his fist. Descriptions of the three scenarios are included in the [Appendix](#).

Following each scenario are statements measuring officers' attitudes toward the use of force. Respondents were asked to rate the appropriateness of force and whether the involved officer should be punished for using force. Respondents indicated their responses on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Respondents also had an opportunity to provide open-ended comments for each scenario. This section was designed to allow officers to express their opinions about the use of

force and provide any further comments not covered in the questionnaire.

The survey instrument was originally designed in English and then translated to Chinese without a back translation. It was pre-tested by two police officers in order to catch survey items that respondents did not understand or the options they wanted were not available. The survey was revised based on their feedback. All responses were anonymous. Informed consent was obtained, requiring respondents to indicate that they had read a description of the study and agreed to participate in it before proceeding to the survey.

A snowball sampling method was employed to recruit as many officers as possible to participate in the survey. The investigator of this study contacted police officers and administrators (referred to as "direct contacts" hereafter) with whom they had personal relationships. The investigator informed the direct contacts about the study's purpose and recruitment procedures. Direct contacts disseminated the questionnaire to other officers. An internet version of the questionnaire was created through an online survey platform. The survey was shared via WeChat, a popular Chinese social media application, with police officers who expressed an interest in participating in the survey. A total of 923 responses were received. However, after deleting responses with missing values on a few survey items, the actual number of officers included in this analysis was 905.

The targeted population of the survey included both rank-and-file police officers and supervisors. While respondents came from 26 provinces in China, about 70% of responses were concentrated in two provinces. The officers recruited for this study were assigned to various duties, including patrol officers, public order officers, and criminal investigators. The officers who responded had the following characteristics: 90% were male officers, and 76% were 45 years of age or younger. Over three-quarters of the respondents attended a 4-year college, and some of them also attended a graduate school. Most respondents were frontline officers without supervisory responsibilities. Table 1 shows the descriptive data regarding officers' characteristics.

### Analytic Strategies

I used descriptive data of the officers' responses to the two statements regarding the use of force to analyze officer opinions about the appropriateness of using force and whether the involved officer should be punished. I then performed the Wilcoxon signed-rank test to analyze whether there was a statistically significant difference in officers' responses to

**Table 1** Descriptive statistics for variables ( $N=905$ )

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
<b>Officer characteristics</b>				
Age	19	60	30.07	8.54
Gender <sup>a</sup>	0	1	0.89	0.31
Education <sup>b</sup>	1	3	1.83	0.52
Assignment <sup>c</sup>	0	1	0.77	0.42
Rank and file <sup>d</sup>	0	1	0.8	0.4
<b>Officer attitudes</b>				
<b>Proper force</b>				
Scenario 1	1	5	2.55	1.08
Scenario 2	1	5	1.74	0.8
Scenario 3	1	5	2.43	1.03
<b>Punishment</b>				
Scenario 1	1	5	2.57	1.1
Scenario 2	1	5	3.75	0.84
Scenario 3	1	5	3.36	0.99

<sup>a</sup>0 = female, 1 = male

<sup>b</sup>1 = 2-year college, 2 = 4-year college, 3 = graduate school

<sup>c</sup>0 = non-line officer, 1 = front-line officer

<sup>d</sup>0 = supervisor, 1 = non-supervisor

these two statements in each set of scenarios.<sup>1</sup> The qualitative data, officers' open-ended comments to each of the scenarios, were also analyzed to provide additional insights into the variation of police responses to the three scenarios.

## Results

The first set of analyses examines patterns of officer attitudes toward the use of force. Table 2 shows the frequency and the percentage of distributions of officer responses concerning the two statements on the use of force. The mean values of responses vary across the three scenarios (2.55, 1.74, and 2.43 for scenarios 1, 2, and 3, respectively). They are all below the mid-point of the scale, suggesting that most respondents viewed the use of force as inappropriate. However, scenario 2 received more "inappropriate" ratings than scenario 1. Specifically, 92% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that the force was used properly in scenario 2, while the corresponding percentages for scenarios 1 and 3 were 63.7% and 70.3%, respectively.

In terms of whether the involved officer should be punished for the use of force, the number of officers who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement was overwhelmingly

greater for scenario 2 (79.5%) and scenario 3 (60.8%) compared to scenario 1 (26.1%). The mean value for scenario 1 (2.57) was lower than the mid-point, while the mean values for scenarios 2 and 3 were higher than the mid-point (3.75 and 3.36, respectively). Over half of responding officers disagreed or strongly disagreed that the involved officer in scenario 1 should be punished (51.5%), while the corresponding percentage for scenarios 2 and 3 was 8.9% and 19.5%, respectively.

Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were calculated to investigate how officers' attitudes toward the use of force vary depending on citizens' behavior and whether the variance in officer responses to the three scenarios reached a statistically significant level. Values and significant levels are given in Table 3. Regarding whether force was used properly, the results indicate that officers rated the force used in scenario 2 as less appropriate than in scenario 1 (mean rank of 260.7 vs. mean rank of 214.45) and the force used in scenario 3 as less appropriate than in scenario 1 (mean rank of 212.61 vs. mean rank of 192.68). When scenario 2 and scenario 3 were compared, the force used in scenario 2 was viewed as less appropriate than in scenario 3 (mean rank of 234.48 vs. mean rank of 214.24).

In terms of whether the involved officer should be punished for using force, the Wilcoxon signed-rank tests showed that respondents demonstrated greater support for punishing the officer in scenario 2 than in scenario 1 (mean rank of 314.43 vs. mean rank of 231.73) and also greater support for

<sup>1</sup> The Wilcoxon signed-rank test does not assume variables have normal distribution.

**Table 2** Frequency and percentage distributions of dependent variables (N = 905)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Strongly agree
<b>Proper force</b>					
Scenario 1	94 (10.4%)	482 (53.3%)	115 (12.7%)	161 (17.8%)	52 (5.8%)
Scenario 2	367 (40.6%)	465 (51.4%)	31 (3.4%)	26 (2.9%)	15 (1.7%)
Scenario 3	98 (10.8%)	538 (59.5%)	108 (11.9%)	105 (11.6%)	55 (6.1%)
Total	559 (20.6%)	1485 (54.8%)	254 (9.4%)	292 (10.8%)	122 (4.5%)
<b>Punishment</b>					
Scenario 1	171 (18.9%)	295 (32.6%)	202 (22.3%)	223 (24.7%)	13 (1.4%)
Scenario 2	35 (3.9%)	45 (5%)	115 (12.7%)	628 (69.5%)	81 (9%)
Scenario 3	69 (7.6%)	108 (11.9%)	177 (19.6%)	529 (58.5%)	21 (2.3%)
Total	275 (10.1%)	448 (16.5%)	494 (18.2%)	1380 (50.9%)	115 (4.2%)

punishing the officer in scenario 3 than in scenario 1 (mean rank of 279.61 vs. mean rank of 233.7). A comparison of scenarios 2 and 3 indicate that officers gave more support to punishing the officer in scenario 2 than in scenario 3 (mean rank of 171.32 vs. mean rank of 160.73). The Wilcoxon signed-rank tests also indicate that the observed attitudinal discrepancy between each set of two scenarios reached a statistically significant level for all pairs. The test results suggest that officers' ratings about the appropriateness of force and whether the involved officer should be punished vary significantly among the three scenarios.

In terms of the qualitative data, the three scenarios received 106 commentary responses. Thirty respondents commented on scenario 2: Three officers expressed support for the use of force, but most officers commented that an officer should not use force when a suspect stops resisting or becomes under control. Some officers explicitly stated that "What the officer did was a violation of the law"; "The involved officer abused police power for personal

animosity"; and "The officer should not beat the suspect to vent anger."

Twenty officers provided comments for scenario 3. Most respondents blamed the involved officer for using excessive force, yet three of them supported the use of force. One of the comments read: "What the officer did is appropriate; it protects police authority." Another officer said, "He deserved it! Beat him to death," implying that the victim is blameworthy for directing profanity toward the officer, and justice is served by beating him up.

Fifty-six respondents commented on scenario 1. In contrast to the other two scenarios, more respondents demonstrated support for the use of force in this scenario. Thirteen respondents viewed the use of force as appropriate, and of those, seven mentioned that the officer used force properly because the victim obstructed the police from enforcing the law. One respondent stated that "police should not tolerate any citizen's interference with law enforcement activities." Clearly, what the victim did is perceived as defiant of police

**Table 3** Summary of Wilcoxon signed-rank test results (N = 905)

	Negative ranks			Positive ranks			Ties	Test statistics	
	<i>N</i>	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	<i>N</i>	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	<i>N</i>	<i>Z</i>	Asymp. sig.
Appropriateness									
Scenario 2-scenario 1	472	260.7	123,048.5	41	214.45	8792.5	395	− 17.493 <sup>a</sup>	0.000*
Scenario 3-scenario 1	231	212.62	49,116	176	192.68	33,912	498	− 3.281 <sup>a</sup>	0.001*
Scenario 3-scenario 2	34	214.24	7284	431	234.48	101,061	440	− 16.727 <sup>b</sup>	0.000*
Punishment									
Scenario 2-scenario 1	22	231.73	5098	600	314.43	188,655	283	− 20.828 <sup>b</sup>	0.000*
Scenario 3-scenario 1	61	233.7	14,255.5	487	279.61	136,171	357	− 16.289 <sup>b</sup>	0.000*
Scenario 3-scenario 2	280	171.32	47,968.5	58	160.73	9322.5	567	− 11.098 <sup>a</sup>	0.000*

<sup>a</sup>Based on positive rank

<sup>b</sup>Based on negative rank

\*Significant



authority, and the officer's actions to confront the challenge with force are justified.

In conclusion, respondents view the force used in scenario 1 as the most appropriate and the force used in scenario 2 as the least appropriate. Similarly, respondents demonstrated the strongest support for punishing the officer in scenario 2 and the least support in scenario 1. These findings support the hypothesis of this study that officers' views on the use of force vary depending on the circumstances surrounding police-citizen encounters. Citizen provoking demeanors, namely challenging police authority, play a significant role in shaping officers' attitudes toward the use of force.

## Discussion

This study drew upon data collected from police officers in China to examine how citizens' provoking behaviors influence police attitudes toward the use of force. The use of force described in each of the three scenarios is inappropriate. When respondents were asked to assess whether the force used was inappropriate and whether the involved officer should be punished for using force, they were expected to confirm that, for each scenario, the force was not used properly and the involved officer should be punished. However, the results present quite a different picture and therefore deserve discussion.

First, descriptive data for this study show noticeable discrepancies in officers' attitudes toward the use of force among the three scenarios. Although most officers disapprove of the use of force, a small portion of officers view the use of force in each scenario as appropriate, and the number of officers who do not support punishing an officer for using excessive force is even greater. This reflects prior studies, which suggest that although most officers view the use of inappropriate force as serious unethical behavior, the number of officers who view it as acceptable is significant (see Micucci and Gomme 2005; Paoline and Terrill 2011; Weisburd et al. 2000).

Second, this study suggests that police attitudes toward the use of force vary depending on how a citizen behaves during police-public encounters. This study also demonstrates that Chinese police officers may use force for purposes other than achieving citizen compliance. Given the impact of the use of force on human rights and police-public relations, an officer is expected to use force as a last resort and only to a necessary degree under the circumstances (McDonald et al. 2003). Using force for other problematic motivations is inappropriate, such as seeking revenge, punishing citizens, or teaching them a lesson (Kleinig 2014). Disrespect is an extra-legal factor for the application of force (Terrill and Mastrofski 2002). However, this study has found

that Chinese police officers do not view the use of force as inappropriate when it is applied with inappropriate purpose.

Scenario 2 involves an officer using unnecessary force on a suspect who had stopped resisting the officer after attempting to flee. The suspect did not display any provoking behavior at the time that force was being used. The number of officers who agreed or strongly agreed that the force used in this scenario was inappropriate was greater than that in the other two scenarios, suggesting that most officers understand that the use of force is not necessary when resistance is not present. However, when citizens' provoking behavior is present, officers may view the use of force as appropriate for the purpose of protecting police authority or achieving street justice. The misconception about police coercive force is further evidenced by the qualitative data obtained from the open-ended section of the questionnaire. Indeed, this study suggests that a minority of officers believe that protecting police authority or achieving retributive justice constitutes a legitimate reason for applying force to non-compliant or disrespectful citizens. This is not surprising given what another study found—45% of Chinese police officers agreed or strongly agreed that a police officer may use any level of force to deal with resistance displayed by a citizen (Liu and Zhang 2021). Chinese police officers' aggressive approach to non-compliant citizens has resulted from the traditional view of police as a "knife handle" for the Chinese Communist Party to consolidate power and stabilize society. Nevertheless, insufficient training on police use of force may contribute to the misunderstandings surrounding the purpose of using force against non-compliant or disrespectful citizens.

Training has long been considered essential in controlling police use of force (Brandl and Strohshine 2012) and received increasing attention from the top police administration in China. The Ministry of Public Security has launched nationwide training programs periodically in the last decade (AP 2004; Boxun News 2014; The Ministry of Public Security 2014). However, prior research has found that training on the use of force is not necessarily a topic in the curriculum. The training's availability, duration, and content vary significantly depending on the available budget and the extent to which government officials and police administrators deem the training urgent and important (Liu and Zhang 2021). Without sufficient and effective training, officers may not be sure what level of force is appropriate or what maneuver is effective and lawful when they encounter non-compliant suspects. Chinese police officers have disclosed that they need pragmatic and hands-on training concerning the use of force to deal with volatile police-public encounters (Liu and Zhang 2021).

Thus, this study provides empirical evidence for the Chinese police authorities to consider when developing police training programs. It is imperative for the Chinese police

authorities to enhance police training and make training on the use of force a mandatory subject. The training curriculum should incorporate instruction on laws and regulations regarding police use of force. Additionally, training should integrate the purpose of police use of force.

## Conclusion

While this study's findings have expanded the current knowledge about Chinese officers' opinions on the use of force, this study has some limitations. The research was conducted with a convenient sample. Therefore, the results may not be generalized to the law enforcement population in China. Additionally, because police officers voluntarily participated in this survey and no identifiable information was solicited, it is possible that officers were not completely honest in their survey responses.

Despite its limitations, this study contributes to the literature on police use of force in several ways. First, it focuses on police attitudes toward the use of force, an area with little empirical examination. There has been substantial research on the use of force by police officers. However, few empirical studies have focused on police opinions about this behavior (Paoline and Terrill 2011; Phillips 2010; Phillips and Sobol 2011). By focusing on the effect of citizens' provoking behavior on police attitudes toward the use of force, this study shows a conspicuous impact of situational factors on police attitudes toward the use of force. Second, two measures, each tapping into different dimensions of police attitudes toward the use of force, were used to gauge police attitudes about force. Due to code of silence, police officers may not support punishing fellow officers for using excessive force. By incorporating officers' opinions about whether an officer should be punished for abusing police power into the survey, this study not only improves the validity of the measurement of police attitudes toward the use of force, but also helps us understand the varying dimensions of police attitudes toward the use of force. Third, this study provides insight into police attitudes toward the use of force in China, which has rarely been a topic of research. This study casts light on the relationship between situational factors and police attitudes toward the use of force in China.

This study suggests that police use of force remains a problem that needs to be addressed in China. It lends empirical support to what prior studies have found about patterns of police attitudes toward the use of force. The attitudinal discrepancy in officers' responses to the three scenarios is aligned with a study by Phillips (2010), which suggests that officers' opinions on the use of force are influenced by one of the police-citizen encounter characteristics—challenging police authority. Future research may benefit from explanations incorporating situational factors in explaining the

variance of police attitudes toward the use of force. Various factors at the police-citizen encounter level, such as possession of weapons, the seriousness of offenses, the influence of substances, drunkenness, and the number of bystanders, might account for variance in officers' opinions about the use of force. Future research may consider the impact of encounter-level factors on police attitudes toward the use of force and therefore help police administrators improve police training and reduce police use of force.

## Appendix

### Scenario 1

Ms. Lee ran toward her car parked on a street section with a yellow line when she saw a police officer placing a parking ticket on the windshield. She argued with the officer and asked him to dismiss the ticket. The officer ignored her request and walked toward his cruiser. Ms. Lee advanced toward him. When Ms. Lee blocked his way to his cruiser, the officer pushed her to the ground.

### Scenario 2

Responding to an informant tip that sexual services were provided in a massage parlor, police officers went to the massage parlor. When they arrived, a man was on his way out. When officers tried to stop and question him, the man turned around and fled. Officers chased him for a few seconds and apprehended him by tackling him and wrestling him to the ground. The man resisted fiercely, trying to flee. Eventually, the man was subdued, handcuffed, and brought to the police station. On the way to the police station, an officer was still mad at the man and kicked him in the stomach and punched him in the face.

### Scenario 3

A driver was pulled over by a police officer for running a red light. The officer requested the driver to present her driver's license and other documents. The driver insisted she did not run a red light and refused to turn over her driver's license. She directed profanity at the officer. The officer became furious, punched her in the face, and handcuffed her.

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## Declarations

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.



**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

**Conflict of Interest** The author declares no competing interests.

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